

Primary Source: James Evan's Seasons on a Farm ^[1]

In the days before industrialized agriculture, many families depended on what they could grow themselves to feed themselves. Many farmers kept -- and many do today -- diaries documenting the weather, planting schedules, and outcomes of their efforts across the seasons and years. One such diary is that of James Evans, a resident of Cumberland County who farmed in antebellum North Carolina. Below are excerpts of his diary ranging from 1851 to 1859.

1851

We had a hard frost on Friday March 21 1851 ice a plenty, in fact the [Sump](#) was froze hard we had to pour hot water in it to thaw it. Peach trees in full bloom. Friday night quite cloudy -- rained on Saturday & turned quite warm. We had a little frost on the 9 & 10 of Apr. 51 13 & 14 cool & cloudy -- on 15 we had considerable frost on the 22nd we had some frost, & on the 23rd we had a [hoary frost](#), weather quite dry, consequently [no serious injury](#) -- Aug 15 peaches & apples very plenty.

I gathered 2 [qts Scuppernong grapes](#) on Saturday the 23rd Aug 1851.

1853

We had a real snow storm on the 5 March 1853 -- A very heavy frost on the 16 & considerable on the 24. Heavy Frost Apr. 8 some frost 27 Apr.

We planted [Irish Potatoes](#) on Good Friday the 25 of March 1853 -- June 15 complete failure, drought. We [bedded slips](#) on the 30 of March, sprouted very well. First lit out 24 June. No rain in May till 24 June. Commenced planting corn Apr. 1 & finished on the 30 Apr. We planted New ground 12 & 13 May. Corn up awful bad, it being decidedly the drought & the coldest spring I ever saw -- Planted peas June 15 finished July 6. [Corn hilling Corn](#) July 1 finished July 20 1853 -- Corn getting [fodder](#). Aug. 22 Finished. Sept 22 First Frost -- Sept 20 quite considerable.

1854

We planted oats on the 13, 14, & 15 March. It being too wet to plant them sooner. We planted some 31 March. Corn cut July 4. Finish 7 1854. We planted Irish potatoes on the 14 Mar. June 20 very good! Dug them all July 27, Very good. We bedded slips on the 31 May -- Finished hilling July 15 -- Aug 1 They look very well Sept 1 -- proved good!

We com planting corn on the 1 day of April & finished on the 11 May -- It came up very badly & continued planting till June 8/54. Commenced planting peas June 12, Finished June 20, commenced hilling corn June 27, Finished July 26, 1854 -- Finished plowing 18, July -- Comm. Fodder Aug 21 -- Finished Sept 18, 1854. Entirely too wet till the 20 June -- corn suffered very much from July to 7, good season from 7 July to Sept.

Winter/spring 1857

Ellick died on the 8 of Dec 1856 -- 3 O'clock. A. M. Jan. 11, 12, 13,14, 15 & 16 clear & cold -- 17 Cloudy rainy -- 18 All powerful Snow Storm, wind high, desperate cold 19 & 20 clear & cold -- 21 very cloudy, snowed some 22, 23, & 24, clear & very cold, Snow hardly melted any -- 25, 26, 27 clear & cold -- 28 Cloudy, Drizzly, Snow melting very fast -- 29 Cloudy Drizzly, Snow nearly all gone. 20 quite cloudy but no rain, 31 Cloudy Rainy, some snow left yet -- Feb 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, & 8 clear, mild & perfectly Beautiful -- 9, 10, 11, & 12 quite cold 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 & 21, very warm - - it rained a little on the 16 -- 22, 23, 24, 25 clear & pleasant we had a good shower on the night of 25 - 26, 27, 28 somewhat cloudy, but mild. March quite cool & very cold. 3 remarkably cold, ice thick -- 4 moderate -- 5 quite rainy -- 6 & 7 cold -- 8 very cold & cloudy, snowed a little & Sleeted -- 9, 10, cold & cloudy, 11 quite rainy -- 12 clear & cold -- 13 rainy & sleeted some.

Summer 1857

It is the general belief that this had been by far the coldest, most disagreeable & backward spring we ever had. Mulberries are very Scarce, & have just commenced ripening -- my best corn is about 8 inches high -- generally about 4 --. I am not done seeding corn -- The weather is very dry & the corn is missing badly -- No potatoes set out, though the sprouts look well -- I have no oats -- but other peoples are about a foot high -- The prospect generally, is decidedly bad. But oh! The flower Garden is filled with the choicest roses, & all nature is perfumed with thin fragrance.

Fall 1857

First killing frost Oct 12 -- Tremendous frost & ice a plenty on the 22 [to] 24 Cloudy, drizzly -- finished gathering corn Oct 28 -- Dug ground peas Nov. 2. Turned out very well, few faulty ones. Dug Potatoes Nov. 2, 3, 4, 5, & 6, The first set out were tolerable good -- The 7, Nov & night after was the warmest weather I ever saw in Nov -- on the 8 it rained, & the 11 was clear & very cold -- Miss Wheeler came here on 11 -- Turnips very good (excellent) Misses Wheeler staid 10 days. [pd](#) her 1.50 -- It rained on the Evening of 19 Nov on the [20ags of ice](#) one foot long -- [black frost](#) plenty. Freezing in the Sun all day -- awful cold for season.

1859

We commenced hauling manure of the 18 Apr 1859 & Finished on the 28 -- We planted the Flat swamp piece on the 16 Apr & the New ground above it, on the 30 -- & The new ground on this, the ditch on the 3 May. 4 Planted first low land. 5 planted 2 low land & would have finished planting corn on the 7 but the ground was so dry & hard we had to stop -- we picked a qt of ripe Huckleberries on the 5 -- Corn plowing Corn on the 9 May -- We had a little Shower on the Evening of the 10 & I planted sugar corn, pop corn & water melon seed in the orchard on the 11 --

Primary Source Citation:

Diary of James Evans, 1851-1859. James Evans Papers, Collection #248, Southern Historical Collection.

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[Cumberland County](#) ^[3]
[daily life](#) ^[4]
[diaries](#) ^[5]
[farming](#) ^[6]
[history](#) ^[7]
[North Carolina](#) ^[8]
[North Carolina History](#) ^[9]
[Page](#) ^[10]
[Students](#) ^[11]
[Teachers](#) ^[12]
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July 26th 1854 - Finished plowing 18th
October Aug - 21st - Finished Sept: 1st
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[15]

Pages from James Evans diary documenting the spring and summer of 1854.

3 January 2018

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