

## Learning About the Charles Fish Barn, Farm, and Family

**Lesson 2:** Use four types of historical documents to understand how historians collect data to create an understanding of how people lived in the past. The documents focus on the Charles Fish family and farm in Hopewell Township in the early 1870s. The Charles Fish Barn now at Howell Living History Farm was the center of agricultural activity on the 140 acre farm.

### Goals:

To learn about the kind of farming that was done in Hopewell Township, Mercer County, New Jersey in the early 1870s at the time the Charles Fish Barn was the center of farming activity on the farm owned by Charles and Andrew Fish.

To help students appreciate how the saving and preservation of documents and structures is important in helping people understand the history of specific families and communities.

To help students understand that it is possible to learn about the histories of ordinary people, doing ordinary things in addition to the big events and famous people included in the history books. Everyone is a part of history and everyone, to some degree, is part of the historical record.

To help students understand that we can never know everything about the past, but that those records that are saved and preserved determine just how much of the past it is possible to learn about.

To help students understand that no single preserved document can give the full picture of a person's life and that it is important to consider a number of sources of information before writing about something in history.

For advanced students, to help students understand the limitations and questions of dependability concerning each type of document.

To help students understand that life is continually changing and the "snapshots" of individual documents are limited in that they reflect a moment in time and may not accurately reflect even averages of such things as number of horses on the farm. Comparing the 1870 and 1873 information on similar items shows this.

**Curriculum Links:** Social Studies, History, Geography, Economics, Math (adding up values of items, etc.)

### New Jersey State Education Standards:

This lesson can be used to help students in a range of grade levels develop the understandings and skills relating to the following standards.

**6.1:** All Students will utilize historical thinking, problem solving, and research skills to maximize their understanding of civics, history, geography, and economics.

(This lesson introduces students to documents containing data about 1870s farming in central New Jersey, requires collection and organization of data, and then interpretation of the data. Students must also consider what information is not given in the documents and why preservation of documents is important.)

**6.4:** All Students will demonstrate knowledge of United States and New Jersey history in order to understand the life and events in the past and how they relate to the present and future.

(This lesson helps students understand farming life, the predominant life-style at the time, in central New Jersey in the early 1870s. This can then be compared to life in the same area today and how structures like the Charles Fish Barn and places like Howell Living History Farm take on new, educational roles once their original roles in the life of families and the community are finished.)

**6.5:** All students will acquire an understanding of key economic principles.

(This lesson helps students understand how diversified farms of the early 1870s provided both food for the farm family and products to be sold to bring income to the family. It can be adapted to help students understand resources, such as land, and capital investment, such as in farm machinery, as factors in production and creating wealth.)

## Learning About the Charles Fish Barn, Farm, and Family

### Lesson Description:

In this lesson, students use information from four documents - the 1870 US Population Census, the 1870 US Agricultural Census, the 1873 Inventory of the Estate of Andrew Fish, and the 1875 Combination Atlas Map of Mercer County - to discover differences between what can be learned from individual documents and to combine information from several documents to create a picture of farm life in the early 1870s.

**Step 1:** Distribute to students the three page data collection chart and the page about the documents. The chart lists things about the family and farm that were recorded in four documents. Because those documents were saved and preserved, we can now learn about this one farm in Mercer County.

The 1870 Population Census gives information about the family and individuals living in the household with them.

The 1870 Agricultural Census gives information about the farm land and the animals, crops, and products it produced.

In 1873 the oldest brother and half-owner of the Fish Barn, Andrew, died and an inventory of his possessions was made so that his sister, Margaret, would know exactly what she had inherited from him, since he gave her his half of the farm in his will. This document has also been saved and preserved at the New Jersey State Archives.

The 1875 Combination Atlas Map of Mercer County shows the location and size of various landholdings of the Fish family in Hopewell Township.

If appropriate, explain to students how the information in these documents was obtained and what limitations exist related to the accuracy and interpretation of information they contain. The Census data was given by farmers to the census takers and there was little or no verification of the information. While census records contain much accurate and valuable information, a number of errors can be found. Some are errors made by the census takers in writing the information down and some errors were made by the person who gave information to the census taker either through honest mistake, faulty memory, or deliberate falsehood. The inventory data was made by several people with no vested interest in proving anything with it. The map was created by interviewing people, in a similar manner to the census. Names on the map do not necessarily indicate the person or family living at each spot. For example, the name of Charles Fish appears on the 98-acre farm west of Harbourton but we know that Joseph Fish, a young man raised by Charles, was living on it with his family. In this case the owner of the property is identified, not the occupant. This could only be known by checking other documents, in this case land deeds.

**Step 2:** The information from these documents has been transcribed or scanned from the original documents and placed on the Howell Living History Farm website at [www.howellfarm.org](http://www.howellfarm.org). Have students go to this website and click on the link to the information about the Fish family and farm. Then check the information for the years 1870 (for the population census, agricultural census, and 1875 map) and 1873 (for the inventory). For each item on the chart students should put a check in the column that indicates the source of the fact. Students will find that a few things are given in more than one document and this should be recorded. Students may begin to see patterns regarding the type of information to be found in each document and may begin to guess which document provided the information. They should be encouraged to see these patterns, but should also check out their guesses and not rely on them.

If students have difficulty with understanding any of the items on the data sheets, such as what a harrow does, they can be encouraged to look them up in an encyclopedia or to do an Internet search to find out. Essentially everything in terms of animals, crops, and tools can be seen at Howell Living History Farm.

**Step 3:** When the charts are complete, have students look at their completed charts and think about some, or all, of the questions on the worksheets in the student packet.

## Learning About the Charles Fish Barn, Farm, and Family

**Step 4:** Some teachers may want to include a culminating writing activity to help students understand how history is written using data from original source documents. Some possible writing assignments of varying complexity are given below and teachers may use, adapt, or develop their own.

1. Pick a topic from a couple of similar items on the data sheets that draw information from more than one of the sources and develop a sentence or two that describes one thing about this farm. For example, use the information on horses and their equipment. Or, the horses and the equipment or transportation they would pull.
2. Write a paragraph on this farm using data from at least three of the sources. The paragraph should be devoted to one main idea that is developed by the data you select. The paragraph can be about something you find interesting about the farm or that you feel tells something important about it.
3. Write short essay on this farm (2, 3, 4, etc. paragraphs) that focuses on one part of the farming activity. You can choose to write about the animals, the crops, the equipment, etc. But, your essay must have a specific focus and draw information from at least three of the sources.

After the lesson, students can be encouraged to continue learning about the Fish family and their barn through other information on the Howell Living History Farm website. They can also learn more about the Henry Phillips Barn at Howell Farm on the website and compare it to the Fish Barn. Students may wish to visit Howell Farm to see the Fish or Phillips barn and learn more about farming in the late 19th century. Many of the animals and crops learned about in this lesson can be seen and experienced in weekday school programs and Saturday events open to the public throughout the year. The style of farming demonstrated at Howell Farm is similar, and in some ways identical, to the farming done by the Fish family in the early 1870s.

It is also important for students to know that the census, map, and inventory materials they used are public documents that are available for anyone to use at the New Jersey State Archives in Trenton. Students may want to visit the website of the Archives (at [www.njarchives.org/links/archives.html](http://www.njarchives.org/links/archives.html)) to learn more about how that government agency is saving and preserving documents important to the history of New Jersey and making them available to people who want to learn more about the history of the state, its communities, and its families.