

HISTORICAL MONEY EQUIVALENTS

18TH AND 19TH CENTURY WAGES

(OK, here's the real scholarly stuff with no pictures.)

It is difficult to document wages since comprehensive data was not collected in the United States until well into the 20th century. Several efforts to compile such statistics have been made, but these are complicated by the fact that evidence is fragmentary, that wages often included lodging and/or food, and that there were regional variations. Women and children were also in the labor force but paid less than men, as were free people of color. Slaves and farmers' family members were paid no wages, but received food, shelter and clothing. Of course there was no minimum wage.

The best index of American wages was compiled by Samuel H. Williamson, Professor of Economics, Emeritus, Miami University. Rather than actual dollar amounts, it is an index from 1774 to 2008, combining and expanding upon earlier works of what economists call real wages, which is buying power with the cost of living factored in. Based on a value of 1.00 for the year 1860, this index shows that real wages generally increased, with reductions during times of economic hardship particularly in the mid-to late 1800s, from a value of .33 in 1774 to 1.80 in 1914. After 1915 the inflationary effect of the First World War and its aftermath becomes apparent. For those who are interested in a more accurate method of converting historical values to today's money, this index is among a variety of tools available on the website www.measuringworth.com.

Other sources of wage data we have found

In the 18th century, a school teacher in Connecticut was paid £50 New England currency which was 133% of sterling, per year. Considered a low-paying job for an educated man, this would be about \$187 or 60 cents per day. We must remember that typically school did not continue all year except in the case of a private tutor, and there is no mention of room and board which was usually included, either of which would bring the daily wage closer to \$1. Connecticut ministers, certainly not unskilled, were paid £100 (\$375 or about \$1.20/day) plus the use of a farm to feed their families. Source: *Economy of Colonial America*, Edwin J. Perkins, Columbia University Press, 1988

In an advertisement in the *Independent Journal: or, the General Advertiser*, September 21, 1785, New York City, principal Journeyman Carpenters (semi-skilled) offered to work for nine shillings per day. [New York shillings were 8 to a dollar, making the wage \$1.12½ per day.]

Frenchman Moreau de St. Méry included several references to wages as well as prices in his book about traveling in the United States from 1793 to 1798.

“A workman by the day, in 1792, 1/2 dollar; at the end of 1792, 9/16 of a dollar; in 1793, 5/8 of a dollar, then 11/16; in June, 1794, 3/4 of a dollar.

Between 1792 and 1794 a workman's pay went from 1 dollar to 5/4 of a dollar. [\$1.25]

A sailor 1 dollar and 3/4 a day.

People paid by the day worked from six in the morning to eight; from nine to noon and from two to six. [9 hours]

A laundress or a person to iron costs 1/2 dollar a day. They must be given coffee and butter for breakfast, rum with dinner, and tea, butter and cheese for supper.”

“This rope-walk, established 1791 . . . employs forty people, who as a rule are paid three fourths of a dollar a day.”

“De Combatz suggested that he be my clerk for six months for a hundred and fifty dollars.”

“If an indentured servant who has been freed has enough ability to be a farm hand, he can earn one hundred dollars a year (six hundred francs), can have coffee and sugar every morning, tea and sugar every night.”

“. . . at harvest time the farm hand finds it necessary to go to his neighbors and . . . say: ‘. . . I hope that you will want to help me . . .’ The neighbor answers by promising this favor, for which he is paid a dollar a day in addition to food and grog whenever he wants it.”

Source: *Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey 1793-1798*, translated and edited by Kenneth Roberts and Anna M. Roberts, Doubleday and Company, Inc., Garden City, NY, 1947.

From the account book of a farmer, Benjamin P. Curtis, beginning in 1818. Labor charges appear for the following:

Hewing timber, \$1 per day

Miscellaneous carpentry, \$1 per day

Drawing stone, haying, chopping, 50 cents per day for men, 25 cents for boys

Shearing sheep, 3 cents each. [If one could shear three sheep an hour that would be 9 cents per hour and in a 10 hour day, 90 cents.]

From the account book of a farmer in Maine, Cornelius Thompson, beginning 1815:

Four days shaving shingles, \$4.00

To Charity Trufant for 16 weeks labor keeping house at 67 cents per week. [11 cents per day]

Boarding Cyrus B. Cox 10 weeks, \$12.50 [\$1.25 per week]

Source: Ray F. Pollard, *Schoharie County Historical Review*, May, 1956

If we assume the housekeeper above also got room and board worth \$1.25, plus her 67 cents, that's \$1.92 per week or 32 cents per day - for women's work.

From a book written by an Englishman who visited the U.S.

“... a good farm-labourer has *twenty-five pounds sterling a year* [\$121.25] and his board and lodging; and a *good* day-labourer has, upon average, *a dollar a day*. [emphasis original] A woman servant in a farm-house, has from forty to fifty dollars a year, or eleven pounds sterling. [Again, room and board are included.] These are the average of the wages throughout the country.”

Source: William Cobbett, *A Year's Residence in the United States of America*, Sherwood, Neeley and Jones, London, 1819

“Farm wages from the settlement of the colonies down almost to the Civil War ran about the same so far as can be told from the scant and fragmentary statements regarding them. The money wage was from 25 to 50 cents a day, depending on the work, and board with cider, rum or whiskey thrown in at times of heavy labor. Toward the middle of the nineteenth century farm wages began to creep up. In the 1850's farmers complained of the high wages demanded. Mowers of hay asked from 75 cents to \$1.00 a day...”

Source: Ulysses Prentice Hedrick, *A History of Agriculture in the State of New York*, 1933

The 1824 *Gazetteer of New York*, by H.G. Spafford, lists manufacturing laborers as follows:

Men, 6,409; Women, 927; Children, 2,423, a total of 9,759 workers. They were paid a total of \$1,327,309 annually. Assuming 310 working days in the year, this equals \$4,281 per day. Divided by 9,759 workers, the average manufacturing wage, including women and children, was about 44 cents per day. We can assume the men earned closer to \$1 and the children far less.

The 1836 *Gazetteer of New York*, by Thomas F. Gordon, lists 1203 persons employed in woollen [sic] manufactories in 1832, and paid a total of \$160,000 in wages. Assuming 310 working days, this averages 43 cents per day per worker. In this case we might guess that perhaps half the workers were women and children.

The Philadelphia *Public Ledger* newspaper, Volume 1, Number 1, March 25, 1836, describing its price of one cent per issue, explained, “. . . every laborer, at even the lowest rate of wages known in our great cities, can daily obtain, for the hundredth part of such wages, the mental luxury of a newspaper . . .”

Wage notations for miscellaneous carpentry and weaving in a rural New York state store ledger:

1843

July 4 - 9 ½ days \$9.50

July 24 - 16 ½ day \$16.50

1844

Mark Hoag - cash paid for weaving. 76 cents.

Source: *Business Ledger of James Dey, 1837-1854, Brown's Hollow, Town of Root, Montgomery County. Private Collection of John Wilkinson, via Tricia Shaw, Schoharie Crossing State Park.*

A farm near the Erie Canal supplied labor for maintenance and construction work on the canal as well as other local labor between 1841 and 1869. Wage entries for canal work were above average, ranging from \$1.25 per day for menial labor, to \$3.25 for carpentry and building a bridge. Other jobs paid 50 cents for farm work, 62 cents for shoveling, \$1.00 for “running stone” and other unspecified work, up to \$2.00 for work including a team of horses or mules or “at the barn.”

Source: *Wemp Farm account book via Tricia Shaw, Schoharie Crossing State Park.*

In 1890, laborers in NY city earned \$6 to \$9 per week. Divided by a 6-day work week, \$1 to \$1.50 per day. In Chicago, laborers earned \$5.50 to \$9 per week.

Source: *The Century Book of Facts*, H.W. Rouff, 1908, Springfield, MA, from the website of the Rosson House Museum, Phoenix, AZ.

The Rosson House Museum website also shows NYS Department of Labor statistics for laborers in 1996 as \$190 to \$279 per week which, divided by a 5 day week, is \$38 to \$55.80 per day.

At the turn of the 20th century, two high society women, in an effort to learn about working conditions of the laboring classes, took factory jobs then wrote about their experiences. All these workers were doing piece-work. They were guaranteed a certain minimum wage, but were actually paid according to the number of pieces of acceptable quality they finished. First, talking to female workers in a Pittsburgh factory:

““How much do you make?” ‘From 90 cents to \$1.05. I’m doing piece-work. I get seven-eighths of a cent for every dozen bottles I fill. I have to fill eight dozen to make seven cents. Downstairs in the corking-room you can make as high as \$1.15 to \$1.20. They won’t let you make any more than that.””

“The boy at the corking-table . . . was fourteen and he made from \$1 to \$1.20 a day.”

“ . . . the men of the factory. There are two hundred of them. They are paid from \$1.35 up to \$3 a day.

Their wages begin above the highest limit given to women.”

Interviewing for a job in a clothing factory in Perry, New York, the manager offered a position,

“ . . . shirt finishing, at 30 cents a day and all I could make. I said, ‘Thirty cents is too little.’ Mr.

Norse’s answer was ‘ . . . I will guarantee you seventy-five cents a day for the first two weeks and all you can make over it is yours.’”

Photograph captions of shoe factory workers in Lynn, Massachusetts:

“A very expert ‘vamper,’ an Irish girl, earning from \$10 to \$14 a week.”

“Miss P., an experienced ‘gummer’ on vamp linings . . . makes \$8 or \$9 a week. The new hand makes from \$2.50 to \$3 a week at the same work.”

Source: The Woman Who Toils, by Mrs. John Van Vorst and Marie Van Vorst, Doubleday, Page and Company, New York, 1903.

According to Robert A. Margo, Professor of Economics at Vanderbilt University, real wages, calculated by combining salary and price indexes, rose an average of between 1% and 1.2% per year during the 19th century for a total increase of 270-330%.

Source: The Cambridge Economic History of the United States, Volume 2. Edited by Stanley L. Engerman and Robert E. Gallman, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

This is in line with the post-Revolutionary segment of Professor Williamson’s index, cited above. It means that if a worker was earning \$1 per day in 1800 and was theoretically still working at the same job in 1900, he’d have the real wage buying power of about \$3 per day. But since the cost of goods fell dramatically during this time due to the Industrial Revolution, it may be safe to assume that the actual salary increase was half that amount, to maybe \$2 per day.

Therefore, it is a reasonable assumption that the wages and wage equivalents for unskilled white male labor in the US, averaged over the 200 years between 1715 and 1914, was about \$1 per day.