

The importance of wool to Southwestern Pennsylvania cannot be overstated. In the early 1800s, this region was an epicenter for sheep farming. By the time of the Civil War, Washington County led the nation in wool production, and sheep in the county outnumbered people 7 to 1. For a period in the 1870's, Washington County was the Nation's top producer of high-quality sheep's wool. This was primarily due to the introduction of merino sheep to the county by Dr. Francis J. LeMoynes, whose house is now a museum of the Washington County Historical Society. As well as being a doctor, abolitionist, and pioneer of cremation, Dr. LeMoynes was a leading figure in 19th century agricultural community who used his platform to promote this regions agrestic production nationally and internationally.

Wool is not just important to the regions past; it is still making an impact today. Washington County ranks 4th in the state for sheep sales. Wool from this region is being used in military uniforms, blankets, and other clothing items throughout the world. The region is also seeing a period of growth for the market in heritage sheep breads, both for their wool, but also for meat. Lamb is a great, high-quality protein source and demand is ever increasing. These markets are having a heightened regional economic impact.

As we look towards the future, sheep will continue to influence the region. Not only is it expected the demand for lamb to continue to grow, but new uses for wool are being explored. One of the most interesting is wool insulation. Fiberglass insulation has been the industry standard for nearly 80 years, but as we as nation look towards renewable products, wool insulation is beginning to take a step forward due to it being natural, organic and biodegradable. Studies are also beginning to show the grazing sheep increase carbon sequestration by up to 80%

The Running of Wools, a fun and unique experience where sheep take Main Street Washington by storm, is also meant to be an educational event. The Washington County Historical Society, in partnership with the Washington Downtown Business District Authority is using the event as a platform to educate the public on the past, present, and future of sheep in the region. And to create a sense of community around the agricultural heritage of the region.

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