

# FFA GROUP TAKES EDUCATIONAL TOUR OF NEW ENGLAND STATES



**Above:** Students examine a lobster caught during the Maine Lobster Experience in Portland.

## By Ron Barry

When you're a school teacher, the summer break is an opportunity to refresh.

But if you teach agricultural sciences in a county that is 90% agricultural, your "refreshing" may look a little different than what is chosen by some of your colleagues.

For Haley Williams, who directs Crockett County High School's ag sciences program as well as advising the local chapter of the FFA (Future Farmers of America), she has always believed that the best way to learn is by doing "hands-on" applications of the things she teaches. And - being a curious sort - if you can find something on the fringes of ag science to be educated on, well... why not try to incorporate that too?

That's why Williams has enjoined CCHS as one of seven Tennessee chapters that participates annually in GoFFA, a group travels the United States (and occasionally internationally) to learn about production agriculture and its importance.

This summer, Williams and some of her students were among a 49-person contingent from Crockett County, Brighton, Cocke County, Cumberland County, Dyer County, Munford, and Paris to take a nine-day tour of the New England states and the northeastern seaboard which concluded last week.

The group spent the first day gathering up members from the seven chapters and driving across Tennessee, with the following day highlighted by an educational stop at Monticello, the Virginia home of Thomas Jefferson, for a brief history lesson of his impact on America, agriculture, and education.

By Day 3, the journey reached northern Virginia and Maryland. We'll turn the narration over to GoFFA's official descriptions of their adventures...

**Day 3:** Monday was full of excitement as we had the opportunity to learn a lot about very different aspects of agriculture, including oyster and clam growing and harvesting on Chincoteague Island (in Virginia). We also learned about the Assateague wild ponies that live on the island and how they put this little seaside town on the map. We finished out the day at the Old Mill Crab House in Delmar, Maryland to experience the Maryland blue crab dinner.

**Day 4:** Tuesday was full of Pennsylvania agriculture and activities. We started off the day at Dover Motor Speedway in Dover, Delaware, which hosts several NASCAR races. Our second was in Ronks, Pennsylvania for an Amish lunch experience to sample all of the wonderful food. We had the opportunity to learn about the Lancaster Amish community of Bird-in-Hand, Pennsylvania. There are over 44,000 Amish that live in this community who collectively gross over one billion dollars annually from agricultural products. We loved being able to shop around at the local Amish markets and observe all that agriculture had to offer in this community. We ended the day at Hershey Park learning all about chocolate and how Hershey came to be what it is today.

**Day 5:** Wednesday was full of history, good food, and our favorite of the day: blueberries. We began with a trip to Philadelphia to see Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell Center, and Betsy Ross's House. This was a great opportunity to learn about the past and celebrate America right before the Fourth of July Festivities begin. We got to enjoy and experience Reading Terminal Market - a very neat place to eat, shop, and enjoy so many different cultures and products. Most of us enjoyed a yummy Philly cheese steak sandwich, because when in Philly... Our next stop was to Haines Berry Farm, a fourth-generation operation in Pemberton, New Jersey. We were provided a brief history of how the farm came to be and took a tour of the packaging facility before heading to the fields to pick more than enough handfuls of farm-fresh blueberries. Haines Berry Farm grows over 500,000 pounds of fresh blueberries annually that are sold directly off the farm. People from all over the country come to pick their own blueberries, and Haines also sells to local grocery stores.

**Day 6:** On Thursday we checked off four more states - New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. We began at Lyman Orchards in Middlefield, Connecticut, an eighth-generation family farm operation that began in 1741. The orchard consists of 1100 acres of strawberries, honeyberries, raspberries, blackberries, peaches, pears, apples, and pumpkins. For five months of the year they run a pick-your-own enterprise. They also have a grocery store, golf course, and a retail pie business. They average 400,000 visitors a year. Our next stop was the University of Connecticut Dairy Farm Ice-Cream Shop, The UCONN Dairy Bar. This is truly a farm-to-table operation run by the university and students in the College of Agriculture here. The ice-cream was delicious. Next was the Wrights Dairy Farm and Bakery in North Smithfield, Rhode Island, which really chooses to focus on the value-added product of the dairy industry. They milk their herd of dairy cattle daily. The milk from the dairy is sent over the road into their bakery, where they make many different products and custom bakery items.



**Day 7:** Friday was what we have all been looking forward to, the Maine Lobster Experience. We traveled to Portland and chartered the Lucky Catch Cruises. We climbed into the lobster boats and set sail into Casco Bay to learn all about the daily routines of a Maine lobsterman. We were involved in hauling up the traps, re-baiting the traps, sexing the lobsters, and setting the traps back into the bay. Of the 3 boats, we caught over six lobsters and brought them over to Portland Lobster Company to be cooked. They were delicious.

**Day 8:** We started Saturday bright and early at The Green Mountain Sugar House in Ludlow, Vermont, a second-generation, family-run maple syrup operation. We learned about the syrup-making process, how to grade the different syrups, the tree-tapping process, and all it takes to bring delicious syrup from the trees to the table. Green Mountain Sugar House produces on average 6,500 gallons of maple syrup annually from over 1,400 trees covering over 300 acres. Next was in Hudson Falls, New York at the Argyle Cheese Farmer, where we learned about cheese curds and hard cheese processing. We observed the cheese room and processing facility where the cheese is made and packaged for sale. We tasted various cheeses to observe the quality and richness. We closed the day at Niagara Falls, voted the Eighth Wonder of the World by many. This experience was the cherry on top of this wonderful trip full of learning and excitement.

**Day 9:** Back to Tennessee.



**Left:** This Benjamin Franklin statue stands near Independence Hall in Philadelphia.

**Below:** There are blueberries a-plenty at Haines Berry Farm in New Jersey.



**Above:** The Green Mountain Sugar House in Vermont cranks out a boatload of maple syrup variations.

**Right:** A look at Thomas Jefferson's study inside Monticello, his Virginia home.



**Above:** The unique entrance to Dover Motor Speedway in Delaware.



**Above:** Amish farmers at work in Pennsylvania.