

## ***Humans and Honey Bees: A Long-term Relationship***

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The human relationship to the Western or European honey bee, or *apis mellifera*, goes back through history to ancient times. The honey bee, one of 20,000 bee species, was not native to the Americas before European colonization and probably originated in Asia. Prehistoric rock art in South Africa, Asia, Australia, and Europe shows images of bees and hives.

When wandering people in early history found a hive in the wild in inaccessible places or trees, the hive was often destroyed during the process of harvesting the honey and the people were exposed to painful bee stings. Around 8000 BC hunter-gatherer groups began to settle in the Middle East and, as agriculture grew, bees settled in human-made discarded baskets, etc., but these early hives and the bees also were often destroyed in the collection of the honey. Learning that smoke calmed the bees during honey collection, people began to protect the bee hive and in the Middle Ages in Europe bee forests emerged, owned mostly by the Church or by aristocracy. The beekeepers often carved the trees in human or animal shapes. Beekeeping became part of the economy and the law, and at the signing of the Magna Carta in England in 1215, the people were granted the produce of the forest such as honey and beeswax. The invention of the printing press in 1440 in Western Europe made beekeeping books widely available. The honey bee was brought with the settlers to North America in 1622, to North Carolina in 1697, and reached the west coast of America 231 years later.

Through the course of history, due to the honey bee's economic benefits of honey and pollination, the honey bee spread beyond its natural range across the world. In the 18-19th centuries many improvements with beehives led to movable frames in hives where the frame could be

removed without enraging and harming the bees; this helped turn bee-keeping into a full-scale industry. The European honey bee became North Carolina's official state insect in 1973.

Honey is now used as foodstuffs, but ancient cultures also used honey for healing and preservation, embalming, as taxes, or as offerings to gods. Honey does not spoil and has been found in ancient burial sites. Ancient Romans and Greeks used beeswax for jewelry and sculpture and beeswax was and is presently used in candle making. Mead, a honey wine made from honey, water and yeast, has been made in Europe, Africa, and Asia since ancient times.

Bees have been a part of myth and philosophy and have had a sacred significance in cultures throughout time by both Christian and pagan groups. Bees throughout history have symbolized cooperation, industriousness, commerce and have served as political, economic, organizational, and group models. The word "bee" has been used to denote industrious activities such as a "quilting or sewing bee." During the Civil War the Collins family from Edenton bought the home in Hillsborough now known as the historic Burwell School site and moved here to escape the turmoil and upheaval in coastal NC during the war. The Collins family home was referred to as the "Bee Hive" at this time due to the family bringing a large number of residents and activities to the home during their occupancy. Bees and honey are present in modern literature such as A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* series.

Modern laws concerning bees and honey are largely about combatting disease. Bees are vital to our environment as pollinators to our food and flower gardens. Since 2006 bees have suffered from colony collapse disorder and threats from climate change, mites and parasites, disease, pesticides, and poor management practices. **How can we help our honey bees and other pollinators?** Plant bee friendly flowers,

don't use harmful pesticides, build a bee habitat, support local beekeepers, sponsor a hive, protect swarms, spread bee awareness, or start your own hive.