Ask a person for his or her astrological sign. Chances are, whether or not they believe one’s destiny is governed by the motion of stars, they can tell you immediately the particular sign under which they were born. For most of us, today, astrology is a minor amusement and a pseudo-science. For many of our agrarian ancestors, it was an important source of predicting weather and seasonal events. In the form of annual almanacs, the well-informed planter relied on the position of the sun, moon and constellations to help him manage his crops and livestock.

Although weather-calendars had been produced for more than twenty-three centuries, it was 2nd century Alexandrian astronomer, Ptolemy, who first organized and related celestial movements and solar events to weather, tides, and seasons. Planters’ almanacs, as we recognize them today, evolved during the Middle Ages to include charts of the movements of stars and solstices.

By the 16th and 17th centuries, almanacs embraced both natural and judicial uses of astrology to make predictions. Natural astrology concerned itself with predictions of weather, farming and disease based upon celestial movements. Judicial astrology was concerned with natal charts and more complex social matters. Judicial astrology still maintains a small presence in everyday culture as the daily horoscope published in many newspapers and magazines.

While judicial astrology, with their horoscopes, endured severe criticism from both Rome and Protestant reformers, natural astrology acquired a better acceptance among religious groups. Citing biblical passages, it was viewed by some as being in harmony with scripture.

*Genesis* 1:14 – Let there be lights in the firmament of heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years.

*Ecclesiastes* 3: 1,2 – To everything, there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:...a time to sow and a time to reap.

Almanacs were among the first publications produced by colonial presses. In his *Journal*, dated 1 March 1640, John Winthrop noted that the first thing printed at Cambridge (Harvard College) was “the freemen’s oath; the next was an almanac made for New England by Mr. William Peirce, mariner; the next was the Psalms.” Peirce’s almanac provided astronomical data, useful to mariners seeking to safely cross the Atlantic. There were several similar type of almanacs produced during the period of Puritan influence. However as deism and evangelism replaced the
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influence of early Puritans, the use of astrological data to predict weather and planting seasons began to rise in popularity in both America and Europe. By the middle of the 18th century, almanacs proved to be highly profitable enterprises ranking second only to the Bible in number of copies sold each year.⁵

The most famous of planter’s almanacs in America, however, began publication in 1732 under Benjamin Franklin. Poor Richard’s Almanack continued to be published by Franklin until 1757 when it was sold to a business partner. Between the years 1752 and 1766, Poor Richard’s boasted of about 10,000 copies sold annually. Franklin’s work, however, was not the leader. That distinction belonged to a Boston-based physician, Nathaniel Ames, whose almanacs sold between 50,000 and 60,000 annually.⁶

Even during the 18th century, the notion that heavenly bodies could influence events on earth was highly controversial. Franklin, himself, wrote satirically about such ideas while continuing to include astrological predictions within Poor Richard’s. The belief was so popular among the masses that few publishers risked omitting astrological signs and charts from their publications.⁷

The most successful almanac of all time began publication in New Hampshire in 1792. That first year, the publisher of the Old Farmer’s Almanack printed a modest 3,000 copies. By 1795, the Farmer’s Almanack boasted a circulation of 9,000 copies. Today, it continues publication printing more than a million copies annually.⁸

At the heart of these predictions were an annual zodiac calendar and a chart, commonly called “the zodiac man” or “man of signs.” The calendar indicated the position of the sun as it traveled through the twelve astrological signs each year. The moon, likewise, traveled through these same signs but on a shorter monthly cycle.

At least one day each month, the moon appeared in each of the twelve signs, for a period of two or three days. Farmers used both calendar and chart to determine what day to plant certain types of crop and to begin other farm-related tasks. Readers were advised that root crops, such as carrots, turnips and potatoes, produced the best yields when planted while the moon was in the sign of Capricorn. Above ground crops benefited from being planted while the moon was in Cancer.

Even human physiology and other aspects of agrarian life were said to be influenced by the cycle of the moon and stars. From the 16th century and forward, the “man of signs” appeared in most almanacs. The “man of signs” was a pictorial chart illustrating what signs controlled the various parts of the body. Among other claims, these almanacs asserted that infants and young farm animals could be weaned more easily when the moon was in the sign of Pisces. Readers were advised to can fruit and vegetables when the
moon is decreasing or moving toward new moon. “Even semiliterate readers could use the illustration to match astrally correct herbs with troublesome diseases and thus effect cures for themselves or others.”

For a few subscribers, at least, the almanac was more than a predictive tool. It also served as a place to journal events of a personal nature. South Carolina state legislator, Charles Jones Colcock Hutson (1842-1902) kept records of daily temperature and weather in his almanacs, along with reports of visitors and daily events.

Although the practice of using astrological signs for planting and farm husbandry has diminished, it has not disappeared. Even in the 21st century, there continues to be adherents to the practice.

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3 These two passages are among the frequently quoted by religious scholars of the day as argument favoring the use of the zodiac for agricultural purposes.


5 Ibid.

6 Ibid. Stowell estimated that, at one point, there were one almanac printed for every 100 colonists. How he determined that ratio is not known. Yet, when you consider that at the time 1790 U. S. Census there were approximately 600,000 households (3.8 million total population), 141,000 copies of just one publication in 1766 indicates the popularity and wide use of almanacs during that period.


9 op cit., Butler.

10 Stowell summarized from the 500 almanacs he studied that, while the Bible addressed the hereafter, the almanac addressed the here and now of daily life. The reader could agree or disagree with it, scribble on it according to whim. Hutson’s diaries can be found in the Colcock-Hutson Collection at the University of South Carolina Library at Columbia, South Carolina. For genealogists and family historians, if copies of almanacs survive in their family, they may be worth perusing.
Today, there are still several almanacs popularly published for gardeners that include zodiac predictions for farming and human physiology. The author became aware of continuing practice when her grandmother asked her to acquire a copy of *The Old Farmers Almanac* in 1979. Her grandmother wanted to know the best day to wean an infant in her care at the time.