

Agriculture and Society in Early America

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A PERUSAL of the last fifteen years of *Agricultural History*, this journal's American counterpart, would almost lead one to believe that agriculture in the colonial period never existed! Few articles on the period spanning nearly two centuries have appeared since papers from the 1967 Colonial Agriculture Symposium were published in 1969. A limited number of important studies have appeared elsewhere in a variety of forums, especially the leading period journal, *The William and Mary Quarterly*. The few agricultural historians dealing with the era apparently have decided to seek debate and recognition there, rather more than with the scholars writing in *Agricultural History* with its traditional stress on the nineteenth-century midwest and south. The Director of the Institute of Early American History and Culture, the *William and Mary Quarterly*'s publisher, has recently called for greater interest in practices of farmers on the land. Certainly what, how and when people did work on the land remains somewhat opaque. A recent overview of 'The Domestic Economy' has pointed to gaps and contentious issues.¹

Perhaps one reason for the relative neglect of agriculture has been a persistent sense among many that before 1790 or at least 1750 particularly in the northern colonies, little of

importance happened. Certainly, most farmers and their families carried on low-risk diversified production, much for home consumption using primitive tools in a kind of shifting cultivation, referred to below as extensive long fallow agriculture. By later standards, external markets were limited. Local and intraregional trade was modest. Aggregate growth was largely a consequence of the expansion of settlement inland, rather than by intensive convertible husbandry, urbanization, manufacturing, or agricultural production for overseas. The most highly commercialized areas, the Chesapeake and South Carolina, experienced little urbanization in the usual sense of concentrated non-agricultural populations. The rates of development (intensification) by nineteenth-century measures were minuscule if at all and almost too subtle to detect. But, while per capita growth was tiny, after the trying initial formative years, all colonies established a high material standard of living in world terms. Overall, production exceeded need, though the poor in cities and even some rural areas bore the brunt of unfair distribution.

This general statement obscures the intensity of recent debate on the social and economic context of farming. While it is true that actual practices of husbandry and production have received too little attention, much energy has been thrown into an argument on how 'modern' these farmers were. On the one side, some social historians have stressed familial and communitarian values and action and hence have tended to ignore the material, and have played down commercial activity. In the most recent studies, the question has not been so much

¹ Since the Symposium discussion, aside from reviews, only fourteen articles dealing with the period up to about 1790 have appeared in *Agricultural History*, averaging about one per year. This is not the base for debate! Indeed, a symposium on 'Science and Technology' in volume 54, 1980, did not include the colonial period. Thad W Tate, 'The Perception and Modification of the Natural Landscape: An Interpretation of Early American Agriculture and Forestry', Paper, Organization of American Historians, 1984. Richard B Sheridan, 'The Domestic Economy', in Jack P Greene and J R Pole (eds), *Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era*, Baltimore, 1984, pp 43-85. The several state and regional historical journals also should be consulted.

whether people traded or not, since it has been accepted that they did, but whether the quality of trading differed then from later 'capitalism'. Increasing recognition of a far greater degree of local trading of goods and labour than earlier scholars noted has brought this to the fore: were these interchanges within a reciprocal community model or within an abstract or at least external market mechanism? Probably the answer is both, though how much 'personal' or 'impersonal' remains problematic. Like some historians in Britain who have sought the grand transition from feudalism to capitalism within a narrow range of time, several in the United States have argued for a transition from the 'independent mode production' or the like (not feudalism, which never appeared firmly through institutions in America) to 'capitalism'. Historians, it seems, are anxious to find a decisive deep change and then initially through *mentalité* rather than institutionally. If 'America was not born free, rich, and modern', when did it become so? If 'far from turning into modern entrepreneurs, Puritan men became rural patriarchs in towns remarkable for their cohesion and stability', how did their descendants somehow become capitalists? Many brief periods have been put forward as the time of massive change in consciousness: 1680s, 1740s, 1790s and even 1830s. While it can be argued that in all these periods substantial changes did occur in certain regions, these writers beg the question of what conditions in prior periods set up changes. Surely 'before' there were some entrepreneurs and 'after' some who were not particularly economic.²

Perhaps clearer perspectives will be reached through assessing early American experience with British developments between 1600 and 1800. Debates on *how* American and British societies differed are only beginning — as indicated by a

conference in September 1985 bringing together scholars from both sides of the Atlantic in Williamsburg, Virginia. The long-term sense that America was 'new' and 'exceptional' is likely to be challenged at least to a considerable degree through such a process. Obviously differences will remain but perhaps the traditional isolationist stance of many Americans, including scholars, will be modified. Britain and Europe have to be seen as a context for events and processes in the New World, in the setting of political and military agendas and of a price system affecting all rural inhabitants of America.

Quantitative analyses will not resolve these large problems. But over the past fifteen years or so, seemingly intractable data have yielded results through diligent numerical probing together with judgments based on qualitative material. Certainly we do know more about regional differences, population, production, consumption, trade and growth, even while some issues remain contentious.

Regions and population

From the tiny early seventeenth-century seaboard settlements, early Americans had spread over a vast area by the time of the war of independence: strung out along more than 1000 miles of the Atlantic seaboard from Maine (then still part of Massachusetts) to Georgia and contiguously up to 200 miles inland. Beyond the Appalachians, occupation of the Ohio Valley was beginning. In the eighteenth century a ten-fold increase in population was matched by a ten-fold expansion over the land. After some unsuccessful attempts, several colonies had been permanently established in the early seventeenth century by the English (Virginia 1607 and in New England from 1620 onward, Maryland (1634)), the Dutch (New Amsterdam in 1625, Hudson Valley, and the Delaware Valley — all taken by the British in 1664), the French (Port Royal 1607 and Quebec 1608), and the Swedes in the Delaware Valley. By the time Pennsylvania

² The quotations are from the most recent affirmation that the colonial era was different (at least in New England). Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and the New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s*, New York, 1984, p. 7.

was established in 1681, with the exception of Georgia, all of the thirteen colonies that collectively declared independence in 1776 had been partly, some even largely, settled. Besides, the sugar islands of the West Indies and Newfoundland cod were very important to the material needs of Britain. In turn, by 1775, the colonies together took the bulk of British exports.

By then, the population in what became the United States had risen to about 2.5 million (about a fifth or so black), or about a third of that of England and Wales, whereas in 1700 the 250,000 reached only about 5 per cent. (By 1800 the United States population would reach a level of about half of Britain's, 5.3 to 10.5 million.) Obviously, then, population growth in America was much faster than in Britain, but the ever-expanding area was much vaster than in the tight little island so that densities remained much lower. Even small Rhode Island did not exceed the more populous parts of England. As for urban populations, after the initial establishment of cities anchoring the lifelines to the metropolis, the urban population as a proportion fell until the late eighteenth century, when the pace of commerce and manufacturing quickened. By then, the points of original settlement had grown and most had coalesced well before this time.³

Because of the melding of the colonies, regionalizing the mainland is a complex task. From a strictly political/administrative perspective the lines were reasonably clear if often controversial; the colonies were discrete. But economic, social and cultural

dimensions complicate discussions. A gross distinction made in the mid-eighteenth century based on slavery and climate was North and South, then more finely, New England, the Middle Colonies, and Upper and Lower South. The relevance of the term 'Middle' especially is still being debated, though most economic discussions would stress the importance of New York and Philadelphia as centres, with East and West Jersey divided between the two. Also, New York's regional economic power gradually penetrated to the east as far as the Connecticut valley, undermining the notion of New England as a homogeneous region too. The South is divided into the Tidewater Chesapeake tobacco region of Virginia and Maryland, and the Lower South growing rice/indigo focused on Charleston and Savannah. North Carolina eventually shared something of both. But the backcountry of the Southern colonies from Maryland to Georgia took on a different quality, as much Pennsylvanian because of mixed agriculture as Southern. Slaves, who began to replace English indentured servants rapidly after 1680 on the tidewater, were less obvious in the backcountry. Further, after 1750 wheat production, strongly identified with Pennsylvania, penetrated not only the backcountry but the Chesapeake area. After 1780, when short-staple cotton production began to expand rapidly to the west in the Deep South, Virginia was transformed from a tobacco colony to a staple producer of wheat and slaves for King Cotton. These developments re-accentuated differences between north and south.⁴

³ US Bureau of Census, *The Statistical History of the United States for Colonial Times to the Present (Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970)*, New York 1976, Series Z. Jim Potter, 'Demographic Development and Family Structure' and Richard S. Dunn, 'Servants and Slaves: The Recruitment and Employment of Labor', in Greene and Pole, *op cit*, pp 123-94. Robert V. Wells, *Revolutions in Americans' Lives: A Demographic Perspective on the History of Americans, Their Families, and Their Society*, Westport, Conn, 1982. But recently, 'The Population of the United States 1790: a Symposium' in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 41, 1984, pp 85-135, calls into question the accuracy of the 1790 census and therefore by extension estimates of earlier population levels, particularly of national origins.

⁴ Robert D. Mitchell, 'The Formation of Early American Cultural Regions: an Interpretation', in James R. Gibson (ed), *European Settlement and Development in North America: Essays on Geographical Change in Honour and Memory of Andrew Hill Clark*, Toronto, 1978, pp 66-90 and 'American Origins and Regional Institutions: the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 73, 1983, pp 404-20. Douglas Greenberg, 'The Middle Colonies in Recent American Historiography', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 36, 1979, pp 396-427 (hereafter *WMQ*, all 3rd series). Robert J. Gough, 'The Myth of the Middle Colonies', *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 107, 1983, pp 393-416. James Lemon, 'Spatial Order: Households in Local Communities and Regions', in Greene and Pole, *op cit*, pp 86-122.

Thus, critically analysing the regions leads one into more complicated patterns, indeed, so much so that the notion 'culture hearth', promoted by cultural geographers, is hard to maintain: they can obscure and hinder assessment. Nonetheless, time-honoured regional categories, such as the Home Counties and the Midlands, are hard to displace and probably never will be.⁵

Settlement and local communities

The occupation of the New World by Europeans was of epic proportions. Whatever compelled Englishmen and others to cross the Atlantic—whether by the build-up of population after the Black Death and so the colonization of frontiers within Britain and Europe, the Reformation, the secularization of monasteries in England, nationalism, the rapid increase of capital in the form of gold and silver from what became Latin America or other grand forces—led to a new and vaster frontier. The farming populations followed in the wake of adventurers seeking quick returns: the farmers could obviously not gain as much, but they established enduring societies.

The new frontier expanded at the expense of the indigenous peoples, who came to suffer the indignity of being called Indians after a people half way around the world. Not only that, the various Indian nations slowly at first but inexorably lost their homelands. Even before permanent settlers touched land, European diseases had taken a devastating toll. Recent estimates raising the native population north of the Rio Grande by a factor of ten to ten million (or more speculatively to nearly twenty million) just before contact obviously suggest an even greater decimation by disease than hitherto assumed. That only 10 to 20 per cent remained undoubtedly made the task of settling far easier than it would have been with all native populations intact. The settlers saw the land as essentially there for

the taking. Many Indian old fields were present when the English arrived in Virginia and Massachusetts. The natives were demoralized even further by the white man's insistence on holding the land in freehold by individuals and working it by households rather than by communities, no matter how radically sectarian. Although the natives continued to trade with one another and with Europeans, indeed increasingly so as Europeans sought furs, they could not quite bring themselves to accept goods in monetary terms. Even their wars were not based on territories or the defeat of the enemy, but on symbolic status. But they did contribute the great gifts of maize, beans, squash, pumpkins and by the early eighteenth century via Europe the potato, all, except the last, better adapted to the hot summers than some European crops.⁶

The settling of Europeans undertaken by various agencies such as companies and proprietors resulted in somewhat different modes of settlement, but fundamentally all were based in private ownership. In New England, while the fishing ports initially were largely made up of males, rural settlement was mostly composed of fairly comfortable nuclear families, with very few servants, from East Anglia and some other English regions. By contrast, the Virginia Company and its agents gathered up the wandering surplus males of the West Country from the streets of Bristol and shipped them to the Chesapeake. Until a more vigorous economy and a slower growing population in England were better able to absorb the poor later in the seventeenth century, these men provided the bulk of the labour there. For most in the early years it was a short-lived experience. After 1680 slaves came to replace servants though not totally in Virginia, Maryland and South

⁵ Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1973.

⁶ James Axtell, *The Europeans and the Indians: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America*, New York, 1981. Henry F Dobyns, *The Number Become Thinned: Native American Population Dynamics in Eastern North America*, Knoxville, 1983, argues for the higher population level. Daniel K Richter, 'War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience', *WMQ*, 40, 1983, pp 528–59.

Carolina. The sexes gradually became demographically balanced. The Middle Colonies were largely settled by families. In Pennsylvania many Scottish and Germans (most in families) came under indentures. One recent measured estimate suggests that half of whites coming to British North America (including the Caribbean) — about 350,000 — between 1580 and 1775 arrived as servants. About 257,000 slaves reached the mainland by 1780, only about a sixth of those hauled to the West Indies. But West Africans on the mainland had a far greater chance of survival: by 1775, they had nearly doubled to 575,000 whereas on the sugar islands they added up to only a quarter of those brought over.⁷

A majority of settlers occupied enclosed farms as nuclear families under fee-simple tenure. Collective ownership and management were rare. This is not surprising. In England by 1600 just under a half of the land had been enclosed, by 1700 nearly three-quarters. In America the process was instantaneous or nearly so. The long-term trend in a socially-stickier Britain could much more easily be achieved in America. This could hardly be otherwise after John Winthrop, Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Company, promised late in 1629 just before the great migration: 'every adventurer to enjoye his freedom and lande, and to trade in any commoditye at his pleasure', even while enjoining these individualists to live in harmony. If the leaders were allowed independent action then others took the opportunity too. In fact, even before then, the Pilgrims of Plymouth had dispersed from their village and abandoned communally-managed agriculture: 'to have compelled would have been thought a great

tiranie and oppression'. In 1640 the General Court of Massachusetts repealed an unenforceable 1635 law requiring farmsteads to be located within a half mile of the meeting house. In practice, it took some years to enclose holdings by fences, while blazes on trees or stone monuments marked metes between bounds. (Fencing of cultivated fields to keep out wild and domestic animals was, of course, urgent.) Those relatively few places with home lots and/or open fields and common pastures eventually experienced dispersion. Yet it is to New England where scholars have looked for strong community life among the Puritans.⁸

In New England, the distribution of land by local officials often continued by lot, though often considering the degree of affluence, moral uprightness, and need of settlers. The leaders of some towns (the equivalent of parishes or townships) more than others seem to have maintained greater control by giving land in sequential allotments. Where this resulted in scattered patches of land, considerable pressure built up for trading to consolidate holdings. Holdings would seem to have been irregular, except along rivers, notably the Connecticut, where orderly long lots were surveyed. The French practised the same along the St Lawrence, the Detroit and lower Mississippi rivers.⁹

Speculators controlled some of the settling, as in the whole of eastern Connecticut. A dozen large entrepreneurs with capital were among the first 'adventurers'. At least in the case of Springfield, on the Connecticut River, William Pynchon and then his son John even

⁷ Daniel Vickers, 'The First Whalemens of Nantucket', *ibid.*, pp 560–83. David G Allen, *In English Ways: The Movement of Societies and the Transferral of English Local Laws and Custom to Massachusetts Bay in the Seventeenth Century*, Chapel Hill, 1981. James Horn, 'Servant Emigration to the Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century', in Thad Tate and David Ammerman (eds), *The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century: Essays on Anglo-American Society*, Chapel Hill, 1979, pp 51–95. Dunn, *op cit.* David W Galenson, *White Servitude: An Economic Analysis*, New York, 1981.

⁸ J R Wordie, 'The Chronology of English Enclosures, 1500–1914', *Econ Hist Rev.* 2nd ser. XXXVI, 1983, pp 483–505. Massachusetts Historical Society, *Winthrop Papers*, 5 vols, Boston, 1929–1947, vol 2, p 176. Darrett B Rutman, *The Husbandman of Plymouth: Farms and Villages in the Old Colony, 1620–1692*, Boston, 1967. John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony*, New York, 1970. Joseph Wood, 'Village and Community in Early Colonial New England', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 8, 1982, pp 333–46. Lemon, 'Spatial Order', *op cit.*, p 92.

⁹ Philip J Greven, Jr, *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts*, Ithaca, NY, 1970. Bruce C Daniels, *The Connecticut Town*, Middletown, Conn, 1979.

set up a fur-trading 'company town' where up to half the men were tenant-clients. Whether this was exceptional or not remains to be seen. Quite a contrasting picture at Dedham not far from Boston, with a greater amount of poorer land, has been presented. A more egalitarian pattern of resident freeholders seemed to hold. In commercially-minded Essex County north of Boston well-endowed settlers leased land to tenants, most of whom came after the great migration to Massachusetts tapered off after 1640. If in the seventeenth century servants numbered less than 5 per cent in rural Essex, tenants may have run as high as a quarter. Leaseholding followed 'the most modern of English practice' — written contracts unencumbered by manorial complications. Some leases were developmental, that is, tenants were required to improve properties, often with some measure of compensation. Many of their sons would become independent freeholders in newly settled areas, fewer near home. Although for over a decade Dedham has prevailed as the stronger image of local seventeenth-century New England, a more diverse pattern is beginning to emerge.¹⁰

In other colonies distribution and ownership system varied somewhat, though within a fee-simple framework. In Virginia, initially, large entrepreneurs settled the less affluent largely through a head right system whereby they acquired 50 acres for every settler they brought over. Surviving servants themselves received 50 acres. Maryland was similar. By the eighteenth century speculators organized settlers, though people often went in groups to new areas. As elsewhere, overlapping initial surveys often led to the courts. More broadly, the litigiousness of the English found a ready

home in America for lawyers, a reality persisting there to the present perhaps even more than in other English-speaking countries. Tenancy among whites, though they still composed a minority, became widespread, many living in permanently mean circumstances as on Maryland's proprietary lands. The attempt to organize the Georgia colony of 1730 on communal lines failed quickly.¹¹

In Pennsylvania William Penn, the proprietor, sold land assigned by his land office to 'First Purchasers' and companies in England who in turn speculated by organizing migrants to settle. During the first twenty years, while Penn's plea to settle in villages went unheeded, an orderly generally contiguous pattern of settlement occurred. Settlers moved into regular, already laid out, mostly rectangular townships and holdings. This geometric pattern presaged the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century federal survey template for rapid settlement of the trans-Appalachian West. But from 1700 to 1785 settlement was the responsibility of speculators or their agents, and then often of nuclear households or groups. Complaints were frequent of individuals squatting without title. By 1735 one of the Penns' surveyors was mystified by the archaic prescription of settling: 'I . . . observe that Lands are to be laid out according to the method of townships, to which method I am . . . [a] stranger.' The townships were set up *after* settlement rather than before. As a result, the spatial pattern of lots became much less orderly as the first individuals

¹⁰ Stephen Innes, *Labor in a New Land: Economy and Society in Seventeenth-Century Springfield*, Princeton, 1983. Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years, Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736*, New York, 1970. Allen, *op cit*. Daniel Vickers, 'Fathers and Sons: Farm Labor in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630-1675', *WMQ*, forthcoming. Lucy Simler, 'Tenancy in Eighteenth-Century Chester: The Best Poor Man's County', *WMQ*, forthcoming.

¹¹ Kevin P. Kelly, "'In Dispers'd Plantations': Settlement Patterns in Seventeenth-Century Surry County, Virginia", in Tate and Ammerman (eds), *op cit*, pp 183-205. Robert D. Mitchell, *Commercialism and Frontier: Perspectives on the Early Shenandoah Valley*, Charlottesville, Va, 1977, chapter 3. Gregory A. Stiverson, *Poverty in a Land of Plenty: Tenancy in Eighteenth-Century Maryland*, Baltimore, 1977. Carville V. Earle, *The Evolution of a Tidewater Settlement System: All Hallow's Parish, Maryland, 1650-1783*, Chicago, 1975. Harry Roy Merrens, *Colonial North Carolina in the Eighteenth Century: A Study in Historical Geography*, Chapel Hill, 1964. Peter O. Wacker, *Land and People: A Cultural Geography of Preindustrial New Jersey: Origins and Settlement Patterns*, New Brunswick, NJ, 1975. D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: a Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, I, *Atlantic America, 1492-1800*, New Haven, 1986.

coming into a new area surveyed the best land usually with access to a stream. Township lines frequently followed topographic features rather more than arbitrary lines as earlier. As elsewhere hiving off from older settlements often occurred in groups, frequently of the same religious congregation. Many Pennsylvanians were soon off to the valley of Virginia, because speculators and the large holdings of other settlers prevented denser settlement.¹²

Tenancy was frequent in the Middle Colonies particularly on the better lands. During the latter part of the eighteenth century in southeastern Pennsylvania, according to tax lists, nearly a third of householders were tenants at any one time. Recent work suggests even higher levels of non-landholders unrecorded by tax collectors. Aside from single freemen, those without land were composed of a few substantial tenant farmers with considerable security, smallholders who had to sell their labour, and married 'inmates' living in with householders. The last — non-householders — only came to be recorded in tax lists about 1750, though court records are revealing some earlier. New analyses of Pennsylvania (and Massachusetts) also suggest a good deal of bioccupational activity or by-employment, such as weaving and cabinet-making among most residents very early, probably from the beginning of settlement. Perhaps only a small minority were exclusively farmers. In New York's Hudson Valley tenancy was widespread on the few huge patroons (estates) of Dutch and English landlords. There it was generally a benign institution. Overall, given the availability of land even if by no means free, few landlords could enforce rack-renting, no more than they could in the nineteenth-century mid-west. On the other hand, the minority of poor tenants with little land contributed to more concentrated milling and factory

operations beginning in the late eighteenth century. Still, that wages were persistently higher than in England, suggests that labour was relatively scarce (a long-held view), yet also that it was sought vigorously, notably at times of sowing, harvesting and threshing (a frequently unrecognized view).¹³

Over such a vast area, holdings varied considerably in size — from tiny plots to vast speculative tracts. But what is striking in Pennsylvania at least was the limit put on partitioning as reflected in population densities and recorded by probate courts. Recent work confirms earlier analyses that most of the first settlers took up 300 to 500 acres. These were then split into 80 to 125 acres for the second generation (whether by gift before death or by will). Most of the third generation would have to go off to the frontier, though often to land earlier bought by their fathers or grandfathers. In a real sense, land was banked for future generations, though often it was rented out in areas accessible to markets. It is indeed interesting that the populations of townships in southeastern Pennsylvania levelled off notably after 1760. Besides, neighbours appointed by county probate courts were reluctant to 'spoil the whole' through partition after a certain level. This clearly social concern has been referred to as a sign of the 'lineal family', that is, that parents were preoccupied with handing on property to their children. (While it has sometimes been argued that in New England, partitioning occurred to a great degree, population densities in 1790 would appear to have been no higher there than in Pennsylvania.) These procedures help to explain why over the long run population increases were matched by an equal proportion of land — as noted earlier, about a ten-fold increase of both between 1700 and 1775. It also helps to explain the

¹² James T Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania*, Baltimore, 1972, New York, 1976, chapters 2, 4. Mitchell, *Commercialism and Frontier*, *op cit.*

¹³ Lemon, *Best Poor Man's Country*. Simler, *op cit.* Eric Nellis, 'Labor and Community in Massachusetts Bay: 1630-1660', *Labor History*, 18, 1977, pp 538-42. Sung Bok Kim, *Landlords and Tenant in Colonial New York: Manorial Society, 1664-1775*, Chapel Hill, 1978. Paul W Gates, *Landlords and Tenants on the Prairie Frontier: Studies in American Land Policy*, Ithaca, NY, 1973.

relatively large proportion of holdings remaining in forest in older settled areas and, as we will see, the relatively low intensity of agriculture up to about 1790.¹⁴

Although settlement was dispersed, local communities were formed, overseen by counties. If varied they were recognizably like those in England such as Terling in Essex. Despite varied English origins, much has been made of localities in early New England organized into municipalities known as towns and congruent with the religious congregation worshipping in a central meeting house. Most scholars have characterized civil life as quiet and orderly during the first two generations, with élite selectmen exercising a minimal civil authority. By the eighteenth century strife has been seen as more common.¹⁵

Religious life has been considered tranquil in earlier years of these homogeneous towns, even though the prevailing Calvinism meant some were excluded from membership. The chief crises in the earlier years of Massachusetts revolved around those espousing unorthodox notions, and some were expelled. Most scholars have argued for a 'declension', that is a retreat from zeal after the first generation as Puritans became Yankees, as the communities' spirit fell before a growing individualism. A major step in that direction was taken early in the 1650s when the 'half-way covenant' was adopted allowing children of saints, but without a religious experience, to become

members of the congregations. Later shifts, most pointedly in the Salem witch trials in 1692, have been seen as yet another stage in the working toward commercialized individualism as the Atlantic and seaport trading life penetrated the rural towns. One can argue, however, for a weakening of communitarianism as soon as the initial need for public participation in the orderly setting up of the towns and indeed for commerce was fulfilled. Therefore, the view of people living in 'Christian Utopian Closed Corporate' peasant communities accepted widely only a decade or so ago considerably overstates the reality for most or indeed any towns. Households and local government may have exhibited a strong patriarchal tone, but that quality persisted long after the seventeenth century. Networks beyond town boundaries, county courts mediating local disputes, and intra-regional trade have become more apparent in recent writing, undercutting the notion of closed homogeneity.¹⁶

In the Middle Colonies distinctive national and religious communities appeared, some initially coincident with minor civil divisions. But in West Jersey and Pennsylvania, local Quaker hegemony generally broke down quickly as English and Welsh Anglicans, Welsh Baptists, then Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, German Lutherans and Reformed, Mennonites and Amish and others arrived. Local township government did not remain strong after counties were granted administrative as well as court powers by the legislatures. Much of community life revolved around the various congregations, in many townships creating diverse networks. The more exclusive groups with tighter discipline and providing mutual aid (but not living collectively), seem to have been more economically successful

¹⁴ Lemon, *Best Poor Man's Country*, chapters 2, 3. 'Lineal family', James Henretta, 'Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Preindustrial America', *WMQ*, 35, 1978, pp 3-32, but who overstates its importance relative to economic institutions. Cf exchange between Henretta and Lemon, *WMQ*, 37, 1980, pp 688-700, and in my view some misplaced comments in T H Breen, 'Back to Sweat and Toil: Suggestions for the Study of Agricultural Work in Early America', *Pennsylvania History*, 49, 1982, pp 241-55. Population densities, Lester Cappon, Barbara Bartz Petchenik and John H Long (eds), *Atlas of Early American History: The Revolutionary Era, 1760-1790*, Princeton, 1976. But see note 3 above.

¹⁵ Keith Wrightson and David Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525-1700*, New York, 1979. Bruce C Daniels (ed), *Town and Country: Essays in the Structure of Local Government in the American Colonies*, Middletown, Conn, 1978. Lucy Simler, 'The Township', *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 106, 1982, pp 41-68, 46-53. Lemon, *Best Poor Man's Country*, chapter 4.

¹⁶ Puritans and puritanism continue to be debated as in *WMQ*, 41, 1984, pp 3-61. The terms from Lockridge, *New England Town*. On courts, David Konig, 'English Legal Change and the Origins of Local Government in Northern Massachusetts', in Daniels (ed), *op cit*.

with more in the upper ranks and fewer of the 'poorer sort'.¹⁷

In the South, the Church of England was much more visible in the countryside than in the North, though pluralism increased especially through Baptist and then after 1750 Methodist vigour. Curiously, Maryland, granted to the Catholic Calvert family as proprietor, exhibited much the same quality as Virginia. The élite planters who gradually gathered more power were mostly Anglican and dominated parishes and county government. South Carolina was similar though the backcountries of all colonies were more populist. One great difference for the south was the presence of slaves after 1680, altering community relations especially in tidewater settlements. Although the vast majority of small farmers did not own slaves, they supported the rich in keeping blacks in line as a permanent underclass.¹⁸

Finally, regarding settlement and community, I have stressed religion strongly. The colonies were established at a time of high religious and national consciousness in Britain. The Pope may have been deposed as English society disengaged from Europe, but the fear of the papacy remained. Within this context theological and liturgical 'experimenting' became rampant. The resulting pluralism was taken to America where then and subsequently charismatic leaders promoted varieties of evangelicalism, yet had to tolerate one another as no denomination could maintain or achieve dominance. Rural communities experienced diversity of religion, pursued as much for emotional as for moral or theological reasons. A strong strand of religion stressing salvation still conspicuous today was, it seems, locked in at the beginnings of America.¹⁹

¹⁷ Essays in Michael Zuckerman, *Friends and Neighbors: Group Life in America's First Plural Society*, Philadelphia, 1982.

¹⁸ Essays by William H Seiler, Lois Green Carr and Robert Wheeler in Daniels, *op cit.* Edmund S Morgan, *American Slavery — American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, New York, 1975.

¹⁹ Far too little, American scholars have compared the religious and community experience of New Englanders with that of the

Agriculture and the rural economy

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, English travellers and indigenous reformers complained mightily of the sloppy agricultural landscape. Positive statements were few. After 1750 continuous cropping did become more common, but intensive convertible husbandry was to become widespread only after 1790 in long-settled areas. Productivity had been more than adequate in most areas within a relatively loose style of agriculture. Even the oft-cited New England agricultural 'crisis' in the latter half of the eighteenth century supposedly brought on by Malthusian pressure on an uninnovative agriculture is now being questioned. As in England, urban demands did eventually induce greater attention to practices, though mechanization and improved care of the land came slowly.²⁰

Among the natives the dominant mode of agriculture was long fallow or shifting cultivation without livestock. As far north as Maine and the St Lawrence Valley, Indians had used this method, creating fields of up to 600 acres or more around their nuclear villages. By girdling, trees were killed. Around the dead trees, maize was sown in hills, followed by beans and squash. Tobacco was grown by some peoples. Eventually the fallen trees would be burned contributing potash and a further renewal of the soil. Even the addition of fish as fertilizer

English. See Michael G Finlayson, *Historians, Puritanism, and the English Revolution: The Religious Factor in English Politics before and after the Interregnum*, Toronto, 1983.

²⁰ William Strickland, *Observations on the Agriculture of the United States*, London, 1801; G Melvin Herndon, 'Agriculture in America in the 1790s: an Englishman's View', *Ag Hist*, 49, 1975, pp 517-31; G E Fussell, 'An Englishman in America in the 1790s', *ibid*, 47, 1973, pp 114-18; *American Husbandry*, Harry J Carman (ed), New York, 1939; Jared Eliot, *Essays on Field-Husbandry in New England and Other Papers* [1750s], Harry J Carman and Rexford Tugwell (eds), New York, 1934. Critics of 'crisis', Bettye Hobbs Pruitt, 'Self-Sufficiency and the Agricultural Economy of Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts', *WMQ*, 41, 1984, pp 333-64; Winifred B Rothenberg, 'The Market and Massachusetts Farmers, 1750-1855', *Journal of Economic History*, 61, 1981, p 312; Robert A Gross, 'The Problem of the Agricultural Crisis in Eighteenth-Century New England: Concord, Massachusetts, as a Test Case', paper, American Historical Association meeting, 1976, already versus his own (and widely and long held) view in *The Minutemen and Their World*, New York, 1976.

did not, however, prevent the decline of productivity over time. After several years, new fields would then be created. Eventually, perhaps owing as much to increasingly inaccessible wood supplies and waste accumulations, as to a total reduction of fertility, villages were moved. Villages held large tracts of land for hunting and fished the streams.²¹

In contrast to the Indian mode, the settlers replicated European livestock and crops, even while adding maize and other Indian plants, and methods. Whereas the natives had domesticated only dogs, beginning with the first ships, Europeans brought cattle, horses, pigs, sheep, goats and fowl. Settlers became far less reliant on game birds and animals and fish for meat. They could use dairy products and rely on oxen and horses for labour. Wheat, rye, oats, barley, flax, hemp, fruit, garden crops, and grasses were grown in the earliest settlements, though with varying success depending on climate and interest. As in Europe, women were responsible for the kitchen garden, fowl and milking, the men for the fields and most activities associated with livestock, whereas native cropping was largely in the hands of women, while men hunted (and fought). Even though the settlers adopted the sowing of maize in hills during much of the era, the ways did diverge.²²

Although direct references to pre-1750 practices remain elusive, it does appear that

settlers also adopted to a degree long fallow cultivation, albeit within private rather than communal holdings as among the natives. And many cattle, horses, and especially pigs became feral, nearly as wild as deer. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century accounts are based on hearsay as often as on documents. Heavy reliance has been placed on the biased travellers' accounts late in the eighteenth century and from inferences. A rare local statement in 1797 by a farmer in Thornbury Township, Chester County, only twenty miles from Philadelphia and first settled a century before, described to relatives in England the 'old method' before farmers stopped clearing 'fresh' land.

Our land is mostly good, but we have dropped our old method of farming. We used to break up our fields in May, cross or stir them in August, and sow them with wheat and rye in September. This was done once in three or four years in rotation; in the intermediate spaces between they were pastured. The land would produce from twelve to twenty bushels per acre. This way was followed until the land ran out, as we call it. We planted corn, sowed barley, oats, and flax, likewise buckwheat, in small portions of land allotted for that purpose, which took the greatest part of our dung to manure it; our meadows got some, and we had very little left for our winter grain. We followed this old way until we could scarcely raise our bread and seed. But there is as much superstition in husbandry as there is in Politics or Religion, therefore those that broke off from the old rule were laughed at by those who were bigoted in the old way.²³

Given the ability of Pennsylvania to export wheat and flour, this view seems overstated. But even so, other commentators noted that corn, hemp, flax, hops and

²¹ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, New York, 1983.

²² Some works with at least some focus on agriculture, not noted elsewhere in these footnotes, include: Howard S Russell, *A Long, Deep Furrow: Three Centuries of Farming in New England*, Hanover, NH 1976, a rather unanalytical work, but bringing together a great deal of material; Carl Bridenbaugh, *Fat Mutton and Liberty of Conscience: Society in Rhode Island, 1636-1690*, Providence, 1974; Bruce C Daniels, 'Economic Development in Colonial and Revolutionary Connecticut: An Overview', *WMQ*, 37, 1980, pp 429-50; Douglas R McManis, *Colonial New England: An Historical Geography*, New York, 1975; Ulysses P Hedrick, *A History of Agriculture in the State of New York*, Albany, 1933; Herbert G Schmidt, *Agriculture in New Jersey: A Three-Hundred-Year History*, New Brunswick, NJ, 1973; Stevenson Fletcher, *Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life, 1640-1840*, Harrisburg, 1950; Paul GE Clemens, *The Atlantic Economy and Colonial Maryland's Eastern Shore: From Tobacco to Grain*, Ithaca, NY, 1980; Gloria L Main, *Tobacco Colony: Life in Early Maryland, 1650-1720*,

Princeton, 1983; Max G Schumaker, *The Northern Farmer and His Markets*, New York, 1975; Laurel Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*, New York, 1982; Joan M Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850*, New Haven, 1986. The traditional works are Percy W Falconer and John I Falconer, *History of Agriculture in the Northern United States, 1620-1860*, Washington, 1925 and Lewis C Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States*, 2 vols, Washington, 1933.

²³ Thomas Cheyney to John Waldren in England, 26 October 1796, Chester County Papers, 1684-1897, Folder 183, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, quoted in part in John S Futhey and Gilbert Cope, *History of Chester County, Pennsylvania* ..., Philadelphia, 1881, p 339. In same collection, folder 87, Robert Parke to Mary Valentine in England, 10 December 1725, describing some practices.

potatoes reduced the 'first fatness' of the soil, necessary because it was said wheat would run to straw, then for several years fall-sown wheat was broadcast. After harvest in late June or early July, livestock would graze on the stubble, weeds and if they were lucky on spontaneous white clover. After the land ran down it would be turned over to rubbish fallow for three or five years. Implying even longer fallows were references to 'sapling' land. Indeed, overall, wheat yields were noted by many at around 10 bushels to the acre, perhaps only half those of England. Presumably a similar path was followed with other crops, though maize was harder on the soil. Extensive occupation of ever more land was the basic reason: low population levels and hence low intensity of production on relatively large holdings.²⁴

In the South, tobacco was even a harsher sapper of nutrients. In All Hallows' Parish, Maryland, tobacco land would be fallowed even longer; after three or four years of tobacco, followed by a year or two of corn, it would be allowed to stand until trees reached lumbering dimensions, that is, fifteen or twenty years in that area with a long growing season. The soil would be renewed by decaying leaves and by haphazard dunging.²⁵

Livestock running loose in forest was described by commentators. Pigs, beef cattle, and even horses roamed the woods near settlements and on range land in the unsettled backcountry in the winter as well as summer. Severe weather in the north especially would cull the unhardy, suggesting not only low labour inputs but an abundance of livestock. Unfortunately, tax returns do not specify these as carefully as they do working horses, oxen, or dairy cattle. Pigs were not assessed, though they were recorded in estate inventories. How

many ran 'wild' in the unsettled forests is anyone's guess.²⁶

Low grain yields and large holdings with uncultivated tracts imply low labour and capital inputs but a strong desire for maintaining *large holdings*. Wheat yields averaging only 10 bushels to the acre, from one bushel sown, suggest as much. Although some leases specified the fertilizing of grain fields, it would seem that it was not often applied to grains or even tobacco. Large holdings and low population densities also suggest that there was little urgency to clear more than 20 to 50 acres at any one time. The movement to new lands by second and subsequent generations relieved the pressure. Tenants on small plots were a modest counter pressure. Assuming tax rolls to be more or less correct, the low densities of population by English standards after two or three generations of settlement (say five families per square mile) up to 1775, and the still extensive forest (even if not virgin timber on the best land) are understandable. Given the low level of markets relative to land potential, it is little wonder that intensification of holdings came slowly. It almost seems as though middle and upper rank landholders saw themselves as 'barons' over vast acreages whether cultivated or not, with a concern for providing for their offspring.

It would be a mistake, however, not to note points of intensification before 1750 in terms of land use and labour. On farms themselves, permanent garden plots and orchards, whose production is hardly ever calculated (nor can be easily), added to the abundant diversity of living though entailing hard work. By 1725 potatoes were firmly entrenched, undoubtedly helping the less affluent to eat well too. Irrigated meadows became common. Folding of sheep did occur. Market gardening, dairying and fattening of livestock developed around ports. Ignoring the whole farm, the fields

²⁴ Lemon, *Best Poor Man's Country*, esp. pp 169-76. The 1960s works of A H John, E L Jones, E Kerridge, G E Mingay provided useful points of comparison for my study. Cf Breen, 'Back to Sweat and Toil', *op cit*.

²⁵ Earle, *op cit*, pp 24-37, 127-31. Clemens, *op cit*, p 189.

²⁶ Earle, *op cit*, pp 120-6.

of tobacco in production themselves demanded high labour inputs. Perhaps the most important technical innovation occurred in rice production in South Carolina and adjacent Georgia and North Carolina. Perhaps, as recently argued, West African blacks taught English planters, most of whom came via Barbados, how to grow rice. By the mid-eighteenth century production was enhanced by flooding paddies by cleverly using the tidal flow of heavier salt water to push the lighter fresh water through the sluices. But rice and indigo acreages were small.²⁷

At the end of the eighteenth century, the Chester County, Pennsylvania, farmer quoted above noted that a shorter sequence of three or four years developed, when wheat was sown no more than two years in succession, followed by a year of spring grain then fallow. Even though in the 1790s, according to some commentators, no clear rotation pattern had emerged and bare fallows remained common, intensification was becoming apparent. By then the more aggressive upper middle farmers had clearly introduced clover, then lucerne (alfalfa) into rotation systems. Clover replaced weeds as the ground cover and soil builder in wheat fields. Only then too were ploughs with iron-clad mould-boards introduced in any serious way. Before then, hoes and wooden ploughs ensured only shallow cultivation as holdings began to be subdivided further, woods diminished, and in the nineteenth century even disappeared from the best lands.²⁸

Productivity and consumption have been measured though comparative analyses have been few. Perhaps the perception that early Americans had more than adequate food-

stuffs, and therefore met no real problems, has dampened interest in household and regional needs and yields. Also the data, though abundant enough, is quite intractable. Estate inventories specify durables but cannot with full confidence be used to analyse food consumption, though providing clues to relative importance. Widows' portions specified in wills have been the basis of calculating consumption for some places in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. The Mennonite decadents in the latter particularly were concerned with setting forth amounts of goods and services, especially food. They were probably over-generous, or perhaps expected their wives to sell surpluses. The recently-published 1771 Massachusetts valuation list has provided the basis for a more precise analysis of acreages and production, particularly in establishing minimum need. In the process, other estimates of consumption based on wills have been criticized, mostly as being overstated, though debate continues over the figures. Rare farm and shopkeeper account books and diaries are obviously useful for information and rough calculation. But they are few compared to the extant city merchants' records, themselves of some use in analysing rural trade. 'Living' farms, such as the National Colonial farm on the Potomac, Old Sturbridge in Massachusetts, and Ridley Creek in Pennsylvania, are breeding crops and livestock. Despite the difficulties of handling the data, that more scholars are now asking questions about diet and clothing, often associated with studying women's activities, is resulting in considerable analytical ingenuity. Although calculations still vary considerably, more precise regional comparisons are likely to follow.²⁹

²⁷ On potato, 1683 [William Penn], 'Information and Direction to Such Persons as are Inclined to America', *Pa Mag Hist Biog*, 4, 1880, pp 332-3. Mary T Wilson, 'Americans Learn to Grow the Irish Potato', *New England Quarterly*, 32, 1959, pp 333-50. James M Clifton, 'The Rice Industry in Colonial America', *Ag Hist*, 55, 1981, pp 266-83. Henry C Dethloff, 'The Colonial Rice Trade', *ibid*, 56, 1982, pp 231-43. Daniel C Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade*, Baton Rouge, La, 1981. Peter Wood, *Black Majority*, New York, 1974.

²⁸ Lemon, *Best Poor Man's Country*, chapters 7-8.

²⁹ Pruitt, 'Self-Sufficiency', *op cit*. Rothenberg, 'The Market and Massachusetts Farmers', *op cit*. Sarah F McMahon, 'A Comfortable Subsistence: The Changing Composition of Diet in Rural New England, 1620-1840', *WMQ*, 42, 1985, pp 26-65. Laurel T Ulrich, 'It "went away shee knew not how": Food Theft and Domestic Conflict in Seventeenth-Century Essex county [Massachusetts]', in Peter Benes (ed), *Foodways in the Northeast*, the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife: Annual Proceedings 1982, Boston, 1984, pp 94-104. Other papers, including reports on archaeological excavations, tend to be less

What has emerged from analyses confirms earlier views of how much Americans continued European dietary preferences. Wheat, beef and pork were favoured, though in the farther south maize was of greater importance for human besides animal consumption. Even in New England, where wheat production was severely limited by disease, it was still preferred over rye and maize, and so was imported from the Middle Colonies for sale to the more affluent. The less affluent had to rely more on rye, peas and maize. While wool and flax were produced in the colonies, more British cloth and clothing was imported than earlier assumed.³⁰

Durable goods carried an indelible English stamp. English regional styles had some effect; over time divergences occurred from Britain. A recent spectacular show in Boston of early New England material goods exuded a sense of continuity. But, as might be expected, wood played a much larger role in building materials and household goods than in England. Large tracts of seemingly endless forest were also kept for charcoaling in the gradually increasing iron industry, and for heating city houses, retarding the introduction of coal. Unlike those in Britain, the coal seams of Pennsylvania, too, were not nearly as accessible.³¹

satisfactory in dealing with diets. Ulrich's *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*, New York, 1980, is among the better of recent studies on women. Carole Shammas, 'How Self Sufficient Was Early America?', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 13, 1982, pp 247-72. Winifred B Rothenberg, 'New Sources for Rural History: 1 Farm Account Books: Problems and Possibilities', *Ag Hist*, 58, 1984, pp 106-12.

³⁰ McMahon, *op cit*. Karen J Friedmann, 'Victualling Colonial Boston', *Ag Hist*, 47, 1973, pp 189-205. David Klingaman, 'Food Surpluses and Deficits in the American Colonies', *Jour Ec Hist*, 31, 1971, pp 553-69.

³¹ Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *New England Begins: The Seventeenth Century*, 3 vols, Boston, 1982. Discussed, John Demos, 'Words and Things: A Review and Discussion of "New England Begins"', *WMQ*, 40, 1983, pp 584-97. Also, for example, Henry Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts*, Knoxville, 1975. Paul F Paskoff, *Industrial Evolution: Organization, Structure, and Growth of the Pennsylvania Iron Industry, 1750-1860*, Baltimore, 1980. Deborah Ducoff-Barone, 'Marketing and Manufacturing: A Study of Domestic Cast Iron Articles Produced at Colebrookdale Furnace, Berks County, Pennsylvania, 1735-1751', *Pa Hist*, 50, 1983, pp 20-37.

Reconstruction of activities of individual farms and farmers from archival material has been rare. Among the very intensive studies of rural Maryland undertaken in recent years, study of a set of accounts for Robert Cole's plantation in St Mary's County, Maryland, however, reveals how a middling to upper middling farmer owning 300 acres (with rights to more) rapidly transformed the land into a profit-making venture. Cole settled in 1652 or 1653. After his death in 1662, and at least until 1673, an administrator handled the estate for the benefit of Cole's children and thus kept close track of activities. During this latter decade, revenue from trade provided about 55 per cent of the farm's income, two-thirds of it from tobacco (which fluctuated considerably) and 20 per cent from local trade in livestock and livestock products and other produce. Much of the latter went to help newly-established farmers. Self-sufficient activities provided about 45 per cent of 'income', obviously a more stable source than uncertain tobacco. Like most farmers there and elsewhere, diversity of crops and livestock was the norm, though later stronger commercial diversification occurred on tobacco plantations. Close to 60 per cent of the farm's expenditures went to imported goods and services: English cloth, clothing and shoes, and for industrial servants. About 40 per cent was expended on local goods and services: wages to tailors, coopers, maids, carpenters, and in this case at least, education for the children. Taxes were virtually non-existent — a condition twentieth-century Americans believe should still be the case. Consumption while not extravagant was comfortable.³²

Between 1652 and 1673 the value of Cole's

³² Russell R Menard, Lois Green Carr, and Lorena S Walsh, 'A Small Planter's Profits: The Cole Estate and the Growth of the Early Chesapeake Economy', *WMQ*, 40, 1983, pp 171-96. The intensive probing by these and other scholars (following Aubrey Land's earlier studies) on Maryland has led to three Hall of Records Conferences in Maryland History, the most recent being on 'Maryland, a Product of Two Worlds', 1984. Also Paul GE Clemens, 'The Operation of an Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Tobacco Plantation', *Ag Hist*, 49, 1975, pp 517-31. On diversification, Earle, *op cit*.

farm rose rapidly: between 1662 and 1673 at nearly 5 per cent a year. Wealth grew more quickly than income: savings and accumulation grew in this early phase in the life of the farm. Farm development was thus the major source of wealth generation. Probably after 1673 the rate slowed as the limits of growth were being reached: adding further livestock or even replacement of English goods contributed only marginally more to the wealth. In this situation, where technological change was minimal, income continued then to grow only slowly. Once the pioneering stage of farm-making was completed, more time was available for leisure. Low-risk diversified agriculture guaranteed a good life for most, allowed the pursuit of status including the buying of frontier lands (as was surely the case in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake), and not least helped to explain why intensive technical changes in land use were so slow in arriving. A relatively sloppy landscape was the reflection of the easiest lifestyle in the world. The wastefulness of American society today may well follow from the abundance of that colonial era. Only in the late eighteenth century was the region where Cole's farm was located under pressure: improved practices but more obviously increasing movement to the lands of the west helped many. To argue for Malthusian pressures — at least without considering the possibility of more intensive practices — is difficult. Poverty was a result of maldistribution within a social system stressing private property.³³

Trade

In understanding the Cole farm, concern over the rapid early improvement is matched in interest by the amount of trade engaged in.

As with land, no precise limits were placed by governments on individuals in trade, except briefly and unsuccessfully through fixed wages and prices in early Massachusetts and in some borough towns in all colonies. The limits were set by conditions rather more than by any moral or legislative injunctions. Undoubtedly, some resisted participation in the market, some lacked skill, thus lagged behind leaders, and probably only a minority sought to be 'maximizers'. A few can be labelled capitalists who gained a head start by bringing bargaining power with them in pounds or access to credit in Britain. Open environment or not, they could command respect from others when organizing trade, work and the distribution of land. But after the initial burst of activity in settling farms and towns, differential growth could not be great. Before the application of new technologies in manufacturing in the late eighteenth century, in the North only gradually did striking distinctions in wealth appear in rural communities. Not surprisingly, urban merchants did well. In the South, large planters often doubling as merchants, stood out.³⁴

External trade has received far more attention than internal; only recently have scholars seriously turned to the latter. Debates continue over the relative importance of export staples as the engines of growth. Some would argue that staples led in creating overall productivity. But this remains moot.³⁵

Regional distinctions in external trade emerged at the start of settlement, because exploitation lay at the base of mercantile empire building. By the years 1768–72

³³ Landscape, *ibid.* Also H R Merrens, 'The Physical Environment of Early America: Images and Image Makers in Colonial South Carolina', *Geographical Review*, 59, 1969, pp 530–56. T H Breen, 'Horses and Gentlemen: The Cultural Significance of Gambling Among the Gentry of Virginia', *WMQ*, 34, 1977, pp 239–57. Rhys Isaacs, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790*, Chapel Hill, 1982. On the present, David Lowenthal, 'The American Scene', *Geographical Review*, 58, 1968, pp 61–88.

³⁴ Nellis, *op cit*, pp 538, 542. Jon C Teaford, *The Municipal Revolution in America: Origins of Modern Urban Government, 1650–1825*, Chicago, 1975, on urban prices.

³⁵ Jacob M Price, 'The Transatlantic Economy', in Greene and Pole, *op cit*, pp 18–42. Sheridan, *op cit*, p 44. John J McCusker and Russell R Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789*, Chapel Hill, 1985. Cf. Review, Joseph Ernst, *Reviews in American History*, 14, 1986, pp 190–4. James F Shepherd and Gary M Walton, *Shipping, Maritime Trade, and the Economic Development of Colonial America*, Cambridge, Mass, 1972.

(based on the best data before 1776), the West Indies exported goods yearly of £4.75 sterling per capita, to £1.82 for the Chesapeake, £1.78 for the Lower South, £1.03 for the Middle Colonies, and £0.84 for New England. Sugar was thus relatively more important than Chesapeake tobacco, South Carolina rice and indigo, Pennsylvania wheat, and Maine forest products and fish. But if invisibles are added, New England and the Middle Colonies come off better: most towns and more merchants were in the North. The relative commercial weakness of rural New England was offset by Boston's carrying trade. But even in New England some agricultural specialization occurred early: horses from Rhode Island were sold to the West Indies, as were onions from Wethersfield on the Connecticut River below Hartford. Springfield and later Albany on the Hudson were fur trading centres until about 1700. The Connecticut Valley also became the major wheat belt of New England. The Middle Colonies exported wheat and flour and livestock very early to the West Indies and southern Europe, Pennsylvania gaining the lead. In the mid-1760s when Britain began to buy wheat and flour, mills concentrated at favoured locations with good falls of water, as on the Brandywine near Wilmington, Delaware, and then in Baltimore and Richmond as wheat production moved south into Maryland and Virginia. To Virginia's major export, tobacco, most of which was re-exported to the Continent, was also added the industrial crop, hemp, grown in the backcountry. Farther south, wheat expanded into the Carolinas, and besides rice and indigo, naval stores were sent from North Carolina pine forests.³⁶

Far less is known of imports to this consumer society, though their value jumped markedly in the late 1740s, signify-

ing a quickening of intensification. Many were tropical, East Indies or English luxuries: sugar, molasses, coffee, tea, silks, fancier millinery and hats, and books. But cheaper goods, probably more than earlier assumed from what we have noted above, came from Britain, such as cotton, woollen, linen cloths and clothing, shoes and iron products. Some of these already competed with domestic production and would confront it increasingly more after 1790. By 1720 slaves were dressed in cheap imported clothing. Imports reached America primarily through the large northern ports and Charleston, and in the Chesapeake especially in the eighteenth century through the large plantation owners who acted as 'urban' merchants or through Scottish factors who operated stores in the back-country. Imports put America's farmers into the transatlantic credit system focused on London, and increasingly also on Glasgow. They could not easily escape the clutches of the metropolis, even though by the end of the colonial era export staples composed a shrinking share of the total product. On the other side, Britain's dependency grew substantially as three-quarters of its exports by 1775 went to the colonies.³⁷

Internal trade became gradually more vigorous though the times of intensification are not clear. By the late eighteenth century, regional economies were far more central than external connections in generating wealth, especially in the Middle Colonies. The topic has been neglected in the past, not only because measurement is difficult but probably because the image of subsistence farming has overwhelmed any sense that it could have been important. The unearthing of by-employment from early settlement onward suggests far more interaction. Even if most families engaged in farming, probably most also had members with other skills to offer others. Even affluent farmers engaged in other crafts, such as clockmaking or furniture making. Weavers were not all

³⁶ Recent interpretations by economic historians provide useful data, Edwin J Perkins, *The Economy of Colonial America*, New York, 1980. James F Shepherd and Gary M Walton, *The Economic Rise of Early America*, Cambridge, Mass, 1979.

³⁷ Shammas, *op cit*.

poor; some men organized others into shop production. Then in New England, Lynn became known for shoe production, though English clothing remained cheaper. Similarly, iron production though increasing, was hampered by more economic English goods. In Massachusetts small holders with inadequate lands to produce enough for their livestock and themselves traded their labour for goods with the more affluent, representing something like 'proto-industrialization'. In southern Maryland, the big planters, even while diversifying, acted as bankers and middlemen.

Recorded transactions everywhere were usually noted in monetary terms. Although interest was charged only on money loaned and credit terms were lenient, small farmers in some regions periodically agitated for paper money because their debt burdens were onerous. As today, the poorer one was, the more cash loomed in importance. The affluent had wider access to credit facilities. In Pennsylvania the public Loan Office after 1723 provided mortgage financing for the relatively affluent, probably contributing to capital investments. Open market commodity trading expanded. The mechanisms operating in market towns such as central markets and semi-annual fairs worked imperfectly as peddlers were hard to control and merchants dealt directly or through agents to farmers. In fact, by the late eighteenth century in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, fairs had degenerated into what were considered immoral social affairs. By the early nineteenth century they were resurrected by agricultural societies with an emphasis on promoting improved intensive farming. Prizes and showmanship encouraging quality marked fairs. The trading went among individual dealers, some of whom were agents of prosperous urban merchants.³⁸

³⁸ Nellis, *op cit.* Earle, *op cit.* Pruitt, *op cit.* On Pennsylvania, work in progress by Lucy Simler and Adrienne Hood has been unearthing new concrete data on manufacturing. Stephanie Wolf, *Population, Community and Family Structure in Germantown, Pennsylvania, 1683-1800*, Princeton, 1976. Older overviews: Rollo M Tryon,

The pace of growth

White families 'almost certainly', according to one recent commentator, enjoyed the highest material standard of living in the world; probably one-fifth higher or more than the average family in England. Only a small minority failed to share in the largesse. Hence, by 1775 the gross product of America had reached 40 per cent of Britain's. One estimate puts the median per capita in the 1770s at £13, or about one-eighth of the present day. Even slaves earned (in kind) about £7. Food and energy were cheap. One-quarter of a typical family's income went to a more than adequate diet. Muster rolls of soldiers in eighteenth-century armies show that native-born Americans were taller than British soldiers, indicating a better protein diet. They were probably of higher social status than Britain's too. Working-class people in cities such as Philadelphia and Boston were closer to the edge of poverty owing to higher costs relative to incomes. As never before, in the 1760s and 1770s poverty stalked the streets of Philadelphia. Even before then, Boston paid a high cost for fighting Britain's battles to the north: widows there lived in poverty over several decades after 1740 when the city's economy was less vibrant than earlier.³⁹

Regional wealth patterns showed marked disparities if slaves are considered. Accord-

Household Manufactures in the United States, 1640-1860, Chicago, 1917. Victor S Clark, *History of Manufactures in the United States*, 3 vols, Washington, 1929. Mary McKinney Schweitzer, 'Government, Capital Formation, and Colonial Economic Development: The General Loan Office of Pennsylvania, 1723-1755', Paper, Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies, 1983. John J McCusker, 'Sources of Investment Capital in the Colonial Shipping Industry', *Jour Ec Hist*, 32, 1972, pp 146-57. DC Coleman, 'Proto-Industrialization: A Concept Too Many', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXXVI, 1983, pp 435-48. But probably manufacturing processes as described by Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England*, Oxford, 1978, may have been similar in early America, but as yet we do not know clearly. See Diane Lindstrom, *Economic Development in the Philadelphia Region, 1810-1850*, New York, 1978.

³⁹ Perkins, *op cit.* Walton and Shepherd, *Economic Rise*. Fred Anderson, 'A People's Army: Provincial Military Service in Massachusetts During the Seven Years War', *WMQ*, 40, 1983, pp 499-527. Gary B Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass, 1979.

ing to a recent analysis, in the era of independence per capita non-human wealth amounted to £36.4 sterling in the South, £36.4 in New England, and £40.2 in the Middle Colonies. But taking only free whites and adding slaves and servants to the value, the South gained a substantial edge, to £60.2. The relative differences did not change significantly over time. By 1775 landed gentlemen, such as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, had achieved a material status higher than merchants in the northern cities and all but the greatest gentry and merchants in Britain. The slaves, 90 per cent of the half million living in the South, fared materially almost infinitely better than those in the Caribbean, where the death rate was enormous. Material security could not, of course, compensate for their lack of status.⁴⁰

The pace of economic development remains problematic as it does for Britain, but the arguments for these centuries revolve around subtle differences. America was growing largely by extension — by the population expanding over a wider territory with only modest technical and capital inputs. A recent survey on Britain suggests that acceleration was more gradual in the eighteenth and into the early nineteenth centuries than earlier estimates had proposed, and agricultural growth was probably greater before 1760 and less after than previously proposed. Nonetheless, a 'quickenings' if not a 'take-off' occurred in the 1780s and 1790s. In the 1790s Americans too followed the same pattern of more rapid growth leading to another major shift in the 1840s when steam, railways and urbanization were the key ingredients.⁴¹

Before 1790, the picture is hazier. One view would argue for growth only by extension, another for modest per capita increases with periods of stagnation which varied regionally — the South between the 1680s and 1720 and in New England especially after 1740. But a number of writers speak of a quickening generally in the late 1740s, because of trade, a degree of urbanization in the backcountry of most provinces, and the first signs of concentrated and larger-scale manufacturing. But only in the 1790s would urban population begin its sustained increase overall, with technical improvements such as elevators and conveyors in flour milling, the cotton gin, and New England, New Jersey and Pennsylvania textile factories. Then the United States would be setting the stage for catching up to Britain, and within an economy looking more and more inward and less outward. For the colonial period as a whole, there may have been an increase of 0.5 per cent per annum in wealth, following one analyst, although 0.2–0.3 per cent yearly increase in income over 150 years seems more likely. But all calculations are suspect. As noted earlier, in an environment where the most rapid growth of wealth occurred on individual farms during the first decade or so, perhaps the best indicator is to look at the times of most rapid immigration and then the times of rapid establishment of second and third generation families on the land. Attempting to isolate the latter would not, to say the least, be easy, since so little is known precisely on internal movements. Rapid immigration in 1620–40 to New England, New York and the Chesapeake and 1680–1700 to Pennsylvania and South Carolina, however, contributed to the rapid growth over the whole region.⁴²

⁴⁰ Alice Hanson Jones, *The Wealth of a Nation To Be: The American Colonies on the Eve of the Revolution*, New York, 1980. Jones, *American Colonial Wealth: Documents and Methods*, 3 vols, New York, 1977. But see Carville Earle review, *Annals of Scholarship*, 1, 1980, pp 107–17, who criticizes severely her approach and conclusions. Also James Henretta, 'Wealth and Social Structure', in Greene and Pole (eds), *op cit*, pp 262–89.

⁴¹ Perkins, *op cit*. Walton and Shepherd, *Economic Rise*. NFR Crafts, 'British Economic Growth, 1700–1831: A Review of the Evidence', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXXVI, 1983, pp 177–99.

⁴² On mid-century, Marc Egnal, 'The Economic Development of the Thirteen Continental Colonies', *WAIQ*, 32, 1975, pp 191–222. Joyce Appleby, 'Liberalism and the American Revolution', *New England Quarterly*, 49, 1976, pp 3–26. J E Crowley, *This Sheba, Self: The Conceptualization of Economic Life in Eighteenth-Century America*, Baltimore, 1974. On 1790s, Walton and Shepherd, *Economic Rise*, chapter 9. Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order*.

The long run

Intensification of agricultural practices finally became more pronounced, it would appear, in the late eighteenth century. Mechanization of agriculture would only appear significantly a half century later. The workings of colonial agriculture thus still remain somewhat of a mystery though we clearly know a good deal more about wealth, crops and rural life than we did in 1960 or so.

How can we fit the farmer's experience into a longer perspective? Passing frameworks such as 'traditional' and 'modern' or Tonnies's 'gemeinschaft-gesellschaft' will not do, nor really will the transition from feudalism to capitalism, even with, as some have argued for America, an intervening stage of an 'independent mode of production'. Certainly over the long run, the expansion of capital and its increasing velocity occurred and the more complex instruments of exchange and bookkeeping became more widespread. But probably today there is relatively no more cash in circulation than there was then. Bills of exchange and bookkeeping debts are still with us one way or another. Money has not really changed its quality, despite the arrival of formal banking in America in the late eighteenth century and in Britain a century before. My own sense is that the scholars promoting deep or grand transitions see only 'capitalism' today and that reciprocal relationships have dissolved before the onslaught. Searching once again for a mythological 'golden age of homespun', as did early twentieth-century historians, will hardly do. Who can now say when capitalism, if that is the correct term, began?⁴³

Some current interpretations of Britain stress continuity of institutions, values and *mentalités* since at least the Black Death and even earlier. American development has to

be recognized as part of British development. The war of independence itself obviously has to be seen as part of that: Americans disliked taxes (even if not in the slightest burdensome, except in New England, when Britain fought wars, but on the other hand compensated by British military spending) but without representation they liked them even less. The early American experience was born out of an expanding nationalistic, anti-continental, anti-Catholic and empire-building Britain. Within that context adventurers sought their fortunes by exploiting the New World. Even if many settlers were not aggressive profit seekers, they were led by those who sought status through exploitation. Most seem to have sought independence from what they thought were the tight reins of communal institutional life. Their religion and their descendants' religion continue to stress individual renewal parallel to economic freedom. In my *Best Poor Men's Country*, I described early Pennsylvanians, whatever their religious and ethnic stripes, as being liberal, that is stressing individual property rights: they and their offspring have defended that liberalism in a tenacious conservative fashion. Crèvecoeur's famous late eighteenth-century characterization of the American as the 'new' man resonates to the present, even as the power of corporations and of government has grown.⁴⁴

What can be pursued within this overall picture is not to look for one major exclusive change but rather to see long cycles. Given current economic difficulties, Kondratieff fifty-five year waves are back in fashion. Many scholars identify four turning points to rapid growth within capitalist development in the West: 1780-90s, 1845-57, 1896-1913, 1940-57, all followed by a gradual downswing as investment relatively weakened and returns diminished. Usually these jumps have been connected with

⁴³ Lemon, 'Spatial Order', *op cit*. See also fruitless polarized debate between ideologues — of Marxian and free enterprise persuasions. Rona S Weiss, 'The Market and Massachusetts Farmers, 1750-1850: Comment' and Winifred B Rothenberg, '... Reply', *Jour Ec Hist*, 43, 1983, pp 475-80.

⁴⁴ Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, *Eighteenth-Century Travels in Pennsylvania and New York* [1801], Percy S Adams (ed and trans), Lexington, Ky, 1961, p 32.

technological and organizational breakthroughs in production. Urbanization was both a consequence and a factor for change. Whether a 'fifth Kondratieff' is in the offing for the West through electronic information systems or the like is moot. What can be suggested is that the period 1600 to 1800 probably can be put into the long wave pattern: in the 1740s overseas trade quickened, in the 1680s-90s the slave trade increased tobacco production in America. Of course, these are harder to detect than the subsequent 'quickenings' or 'take-offs'. They are, I would suggest, because the long run of 500 years saw a slow rise to the dramatic reordering of rural to urban in the nineteenth century. If Britain reached its

relative peak about 1850, America did about 1900. Since then, decline has set in, though obscured by the latter's military strength. In retrospect, structuring time this way may help if regional differences are accounted for. Farming over the centuries from the colonial family farm and the commercial south through the 'freehold empire' of the nineteenth-century midwest and antebellum plantations to increasingly corporatized control today can be understood within such a framework, as indeed can the politics of sharing power and wealth.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ See bibliography in Peter Hall, 'The Geography of the Fifth Kondratieff', in Peter Hall and Ann Markusen (eds), *Silicon Landscapes*, Boston, 1985.