Families and Farms: 
*Mentalité* in Pre-Industrial America

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The history of the agricultural population of pre-industrial America remains to be written. As a result of quantitative investigations of wealth distribution and social mobility; of rates of birth, marriage, and death; and of patterns of inheritance, officeholding, and church membership, there is an ever-growing mass of data that delineates the *structures* of social existence in the small rural communities that constituted the core of American agricultural society in the North before 1830. But what of the *consciousness* of the inhabitants, the mental or emotional or ideological aspects of their lives? And what of the relationship between the two? Can a careful statistical analysis of people’s lives—a precise description of their patterns of social action—substantiate at least limited statements as to their motivations, values, and goals?

A number of historians have attempted to establish a connection between the subsistence activities of the agricultural population and its institutional, ideological, and cultural existence. Consider, for example, the entrepreneurial interpretation implicit in James T. Lemon’s highly regarded quantitative analysis of the eighteenth-century agricultural society of Southeastern Pennsylvania:

A basic stress in these essays is on the “liberal” middle-class orientation of many of the settlers. . . . “Liberal” I use in the classic sense, meaning placing individual freedom and material gain over that of public interest. Put another way, the people planned for themselves much more than they did for their communities. . . . This is not to say that

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the settlers were "economic men," single-minded maximizing materialists. Few could be, or even wanted to be. Nevertheless, they defended their liberal propensities in a tenacious manner. ... Undoubtedly their view was fostered by a sense that the environment was "open." As individualists, they were ready in spirit to conquer the limitless continent, to subdue the land.¹

However overburdened with reservations and qualifications, the general thrust of this depiction of values and aspirations is clear enough. Lemon's settlers were individualists, enterprising men and women intent upon the pursuit of material advantage at the expense of communal and non-economic goals.

Can the "consciousness" with which Lemon has endowed these early Pennsylvanians be verified by historical evidence? The question is important, for many of the statistical data presented by Lemon do not support this description of the inhabitants' "orientation," "spirit," or "propensities." Take the pattern of residence. It is true that the predominance of isolated farmsteads—rather than nucleated villages—suggests that these men and women were planning "for themselves much more than ... for their communities." But what of the presence of clusters of ethnic and religious groups? Such voluntary concentrations of like-minded settlers indicate the importance of communal values, of people who preferred to share a religious or ethnic identity. Here the author's evidence contradicts his conclusion. "Most of the people who came during this period," Lemon writes of the years between 1700 and 1730, "settled together in areas and communities defined by nationality or denomination. ... Language and creed thus exerted considerable influence on the whereabouts of people. Yet groups were mixed in several areas, for example on the Lancaster Plain."²

This exception only confirms the rule. Nearly every historian who has studied ethnic settlement patterns in the colonial period has stressed the existence of communal concentrations. In the Middle Colonies, for example, patterns of spatial segregation appeared among the Dutch in Newark, New Jersey, and to some extent among Quakers and Seventh Day Baptists in the same area. Most of the German immigrants who arrived in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1744 settled on the lots laid out by Dr. Adam Simon Kuhn, the leading German resident, rather than on land offered by the English proprietor, Alexander Hamilton. These linguistic and religious ties extended beyond settlement patterns to encompass economic relationships. Every one of the one hundred names inscribed in the account book of Henry King—

shoemaker, butcher, and currier of Second River, New Jersey, in 1775—was of Dutch origin; and the main business connections of the merchants of Lancaster, whether they were Jewish or Quaker or German, were with their co-religionists in Philadelphia.

Is an individualist spirit fully compatible with these communal settlement patterns and this religiously determined economic activity? It is possible, of course, that these ethnic or linguistic preferences facilitated the pursuit of individual economic gain, and that the patronage of the shop of a fellow church member brought preferred treatment and lower prices. But the weight of the evidence indicates that these decisions were not made for narrowly economic or strictly utilitarian reasons: the felt need to maintain a linguistic or religious identity was as important a consideration as the fertility of the soil or the price of the land in determining where a family would settle. The "calculus of advantage" for these men and women was not mere pecuniary gain, but encompassed a much wider range of social and cultural goals.

These ethnic, linguistic, or religious ties did not reflect a coherent ideological system, a planned communitarian culture similar to the highly organized Moravian settlement at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. These bonds among families, neighbors, and fellow church members were informal; nonetheless, they circumscribed the range of individual action among the inhabitants of Pennsylvania and laid the foundations for a rich and diverse cultural existence. These community-oriented patterns of social interaction emerge clearly from Lemon's quantitative data, yet they do not figure prominently in his conclusion. He has not explained the complexity of the settlers' existence but has forced their lives into the mold of a timeless, placeless concept of "liberal individualism."

A similar discrepancy between data and interpretation appears in Lemon's analysis of the economic goals and achievements of the inhabitants of eighteenth-century Pennsylvania. What becomes of the open environment and the conquering spirit when "tenant farming was much more frequent than we might expect[. . .] [I]n 1760 and 1782 about 30 per cent of

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4 Nor, in E. A. Wrigley's definition, was their society modern—one in which "the unit is the individual or, at the widest, the nuclear family" and "the utilities to be maximized are concentrated in a narrower band and are pursued with a new urgency" ("The Process of Modernization and the Industrial Revolution in England," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, III [1972], 233, 229).

Lancaster's and Chester's married taxpayers were landless" and an additional 15 percent of the total number of taxpayers in Chester County were single freemen—mostly young men without landed property. With nearly 45 percent of the members of the adult white male population without land of their own, the gap between evidence and conclusion is so obvious that it must be confronted; and what better way than by evoking the spirit of Frederick Jackson Turner: "As long as the frontier was open . . .," Lemon writes, "many people were able to move, and as a result frustrations were dampened and the liberal values of the original inhabitants of the colony were upheld." ⁶

This is an appealing interpretation, especially since it admits the necessary connection between the structure of opportunity offered by a given environment and the consciousness of the inhabitants, but it is not completely satisfactory. It assumes that the migrants came with "liberal" values, with an expectation that most adult males would own a freehold estate and that anything less than this would generate anger and frustration. Neither the basic proposition nor its corollary is acceptable, for both fail to convey the settlers' conception of social reality, their understanding of the structural components of age and wealth.

To be "young" in this agricultural society (as in most) was either to be landless or without sufficient land to support a family. As Philip J. Greven, Daniel Scott Smith, and Robert A. Gross have shown, male parents normally retained legal control of a sizable portion of the family estate until death, in order to ensure their financial well-being in old age, and the economic security of their widows was carefully protected by dower rights. ⁷ Nor were

⁶ Lemon, *Best Poor Man's Country*, 94, 97; James T. Lemon and Gary B. Nash, "The Distribution of Wealth in Eighteenth-Century America: A Century of Change in Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1693-1802," *Journal of Social History*, II (1968), Table I. Since indentured and hired servants are not included in the categories of married freeholder or single freeman, the proportion of landless males may be greater than 45%.

⁷ Philip J. Greven, Jr., "Family Structure in Seventeenth-Century Andover, Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XXIII (1966), 234-256, and *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970); Daniel Scott Smith, "Parental Power and Marriage Patterns: An Analysis of Historical Trends in Massachusetts," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, XXXV (1973), 410-428; Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York, 1976), 210, n. 22. These authors interpret this use of economic power as an attempt by parents to control the marriage age and the subsequent family life of their children. This may have been the effect of delayed transmission; the prime cause, however, was probably the parents' concern with financial security during their old age. The exercise of parental authority (with the resulting generational conflict) was not an end in itself but simply the by-product of the prudent fiscal management of productive property. Some of the difficulties in interpreting these data are explored by Maris Vinovskis, "American Historical
these cultural restraints on the transmission of improved property the only, or even the main, obstacle to the economic prospects of the next generation. For the high rate of natural increase constantly threatened to overwhelm the accumulated capital resources of many of these northern farm families. There was never sufficient cleared and improved property, or livestock, or farm equipment, or adequate housing to permit most young men and women to own a farm. In five small agricultural towns in New Jersey in the 1770s, for example, one half of all white males aged eighteen to twenty-five were without land, while another 20 percent of this age group owned fifty acres or less. And in Concord, Massachusetts, the percentage of landless males (many of whom were young) remained at 30 percent from 1750 to 1800. This correlation between age and wealth persisted throughout the life-cycle; all of the males in the lowest quintile of the taxable population in East Guilford, Connecticut, in 1740 were below the age of forty, while every person in the highest quintile was that age or above.8

The accumulation of financial resources by aging men brought them higher status and political power. In Concord, between 1745 and 1774, the median age of selectmen at the time of their first election to office was forty-five, a pattern that obtained in Dedham and Watertown as well.9 Indeed, the correlation among age, wealth, status, and power in these agricultural communities indicates the profound importance of age as a basic principle of social differentiation. And so it appeared to the Reverend William Bentley of Salem on a visit to Andover in 1793; the country people, he noted, assembled to dance "in classes due to their ages, not with any regard to their condition, as in the Seaport Towns."10 In such an age-stratified society economic "success" was not usual (and not expected) until the age of thirty-five, forty, or even forty-five. Proprietary status was the product of one or two decades of work as a laborer or tenant, or of the long-delayed inheritance of the parental

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8 Ryan, "Six Towns," 273 (Table 61); Robert A. Gross, "The Problem of Agricultural Crisis in Eighteenth-Century New England: Concord, Massachusetts as a Test Case" (unpub. paper, 1975), 7; John J. Waters, "A Yankee Village's Last Hundred Years: Guilford, Connecticut in the Eighteenth Century" (unpubl. paper, 1975), Table 1. The Wisconsin tax lists for 1860 indicate that a man one year older than another had, on the average, 7.8% more wealth than his younger counterpart. Lee Soltow, Patterns of Wealthholding in Wisconsin Since 1850 (Madison, Wis., 1971), 8. Soltow finds a "pattern of wealth increase from age 20 to 50 or 55, with a tapering after this age" in rural areas; and that age and nativity account for roughly 60% of the inequality in the distribution of wealth (ibid., 46, 42).


10 The Diary of William Bentley, D.D. . . . , II (Salem, Mass., 1907), 17.
farm. The ownership of a freehold estate was the goal of young male farmers and their wives; it was not—even in the best of circumstances—a universal condition among adult males at any one point in time. Age stratification thus constituted an important aspect of what Michael Zuckerman has neatly conceptualized as the "social context" of political activity in these small and ethnically homogeneous agricultural settlements. The economic dependence and powerlessness of young adults was a fact of life, the proper definition of social reality.

If cultural norms legitimated an age-stratified society in the minds of most northern farmers, then the character of social and economic life accustomed them to systematic inequalities in the distribution of wealth. Consider the evidence. In southeastern Pennsylvania in 1760 and again in 1782, the top 40 percent of the taxable population owned 70 percent of the assessed wealth, while the top 10 percent controlled 35 percent. On the 1784 tax list of Newtown, Long Island, the proportions were nearly identical, with the top 40 percent owning 73 percent of the wealth, and the richest 10 percent holding 37 percent. In both places, inequality increased steadily from the end of the seventeenth century even as the rate of natural population growth declined—a clear indication of advancing social differentiation (and not simply age stratification). And in Newtown, at least, the bulk of the poor population in 1784 was composed not of "younger sons or older men" but of workers in the prime of their productive lives.

The westward migration of this excess farm population was of crucial importance, although not for the precise reasons suggested by Turner and Lemon. Young men and women without a landed inheritance moved to newly settled communities not as yeomen but as aspirants to that status; they hoped to make the difficult climb up the agricultural "ladder" from laborer to tenant to freeholder. This geographical movement, in turn, helped to maintain social stability in long-settled agricultural towns. One-third of all


12 Lemon, Best Poor Man's Country, 11 (Table 1); Jessica Kross Ehrlich, "A Town Study in Colonial New York: Newtown, Queens County (1642-1790)" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1974), 178, 164 (Table 13). The data for Concord indicate that in 1770-1771 the top 20% of the population owned 48% of the land and 56% of the town's wealth but paid only 42.7% of the total tax (Gross, Minutemen, 212, 220, 231).
adult males in Goshen, Connecticut, in 1750 were without land; but two decades later a majority of these men had left the town and 70 percent of those who remained had obtained property through marriage, inheritance, or the savings from their labor. A new landless group of unmarried sons, wage laborers, and tenant farmers had appeared in Goshen by 1771, again encompassing one-third of the adult males. A similar process of out-migration and property accumulation would characterize many of the lives of this landless group, but throughout the northern region there was a steady increase in the number of permanent tenant farmers as the century progressed.\(^{13}\)

The renewed expropriation of aboriginal lands during the early nineteenth century brought a partial reversal of this trend. Massive westward migration enabled a rapidly growing Euro-American population to preserve an agricultural society composed primarily of yeoman freeholding families in many eastern areas, and to extend these age- and wealth-stratified communities into western regions.\(^{14}\) This movement did not, however, produce less stratified communities in the Northwest states, nor did it assure the universal ownership of land. Within a few decades of settlement the wealth structure of the frontier states was nearly indistinguishable from that in the agricultural areas of the more densely settled east. In Trempealeau County, Wisconsin, in 1870 the poorest 10 percent of the propertied population owned less than 1 percent of all assessed wealth, while the most affluent 10 percent controlled 39 percent. This distribution was almost precisely the same as that in those regions of Vermont from which many of the inhabitants of this farming county had recently migrated.\(^{15}\) "On no frontier," Neil McNall concludes from an intensive study of the settlement of the rich Genesee


\(^{14}\) The alternative was a class-stratified society, composed of a few owners of large properties and a mass of wage laborers—an agricultural proletariat. See, for example, J. Harvey Smith, "Work Routine and Social Structure in a French Village: Cruzy in the Nineteenth Century," *Jour. Interdisciplinary Hist.*, V (1975), 362.

\(^{15}\) Merle Curti et al., *The Making of an American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier County* (Stanford, Calif., 1959), chap. 4. Inequality in the Old Northwest was less acute than in Frederick and Berkeley counties in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia in 1788, where the top 10% of the landowners held nearly 50% of the land, or in the "cotton South," where the top decile controlled between 50% and 55% of the total wealth in 1850 and 1860. See Robert D. Mitchell, "Agricultural Change and the American Revolution: A Virginia Case Study," *Agricultural History*, XLVII (Apr. 1973), 131, and Gavin Wright, "'Economic Democracy' and the Concentration of Agricultural Wealth in the Cotton South, 1850-1860," *Agricultural Hist.*, XLIV (1970), 63-85.
Valley in upstate New York between 1790 and 1860, "was there an easy avenue to land ownership for the farmer of limited means."\(^{16}\)

Evidence from a variety of geographic locations indicates, therefore, that Lemon has presented an overly optimistic description of the agricultural economy of early America and has falsely ascribed a "liberal" consciousness to the inhabitants of eighteenth-century Pennsylvania. His analysis is not unique. A number of historians of colonial New England have offered similar interpretations of an entrepreneurial mentality among the majority of the agricultural population. Sometimes the ascription is implicit and perhaps inadvertent, as in the case of Philip Greven's path-breaking analysis of Andover, which focuses attention on the single economic variable of land transmission. Was the preservation of a landed inheritance the concern of most Andover families or only that of the very select group of substantially endowed first settlers and their descendants whom Greven has studied? The pattern of family life, geographic mobility, and economic values may have been very different among later arrivals to Andover—those who had less land to pass on to the next generation—yet this group constituted a majority of the town's population by the eighteenth century. Or what of the pervasive entrepreneurial outlook among Connecticut farmers which is posited by Richard L. Bushman in his stimulating examination of the transition From Puritan To Yankee?\(^{17}\) Bushman's interpretation of the Great Awakening is predicated upon the emergence of an accumulation-oriented pattern of behavior, and yet little—if any—evidence is presented to demonstrate its existence among the mass of the population.

Indeed, the only work which attempts explicitly to demonstrate the predominance of entrepreneurial values among the farming population of New England is the small but influential study by Charles S. Grant, Democracy in the Connecticut Frontier Town of Kent. According to Grant, the one-hundred-odd male settlers who arrived in Kent during the late 1730s and the 1740s were "remarkably uniform . . . prosperous enough to buy proprietary shares and to accumulate large amounts of land." They were "versatile and ambitious," and the economic opportunity available in Kent—"fertile (but stony) farming land, . . . deposits of iron ore, and abundant water power for . . . mills"—induced in these settlers "not placid contentment, but an almost


frenzied determination to try a hand at everything.”

Thus “virtually every family settled on a farm which . . . usually produced a salable surplus”; “virtually every family had some member involved as operator or part owner of an ironworks”; and “virtually every early settler was an avid land speculator.” By the time of the American Revolution this activity had produced “a population raised on an economic tradition of land speculation and individualistic venturing” which refused to make “economic sacrifices” for the sake of Independence. While Grant indicates that there may have been “humble subsistence farmers” and “obscure yeomen” in the town, he “is impressed not so much with the contented subsistence way of life as with the drive for profits.” Indeed, he devotes a chapter to “The Drive For Profits,” and concludes it by stressing the acquisitiveness of the economic elite, the “aggressive opportunists” whose ethical standards were “part and parcel of the spirit of Kent.” “One sees in certain of the Kent settlers not so much the contended yeoman, certainly not the ‘slave’ toiling for his master, but perhaps the embryo John D. Rockefeller.”

Even when stated in more historically realistic language, Grant’s argument is not sustained by his evidence. He begins by distorting much of the allegedly opportunistic and profit-seeking economic activity in Kent by calling it “nonagricultural.” In actuality, most of the nonfarm enterprises were sawmills, gristmills, fulling mills, and tanneries. These were profit-seeking businesses, but they were also social necessities in a rural community; all were intimately connected to agricultural production. With the exception of the iron industry (the development of which lends some support to Grant’s thesis), these enterprises produced primarily for a local market and were so crucial to the welfare of the inhabitants that they were supported by communal action. Following the long New England tradition of material inducements to skilled artisans, the proprietors of the town voted an extra lot in the first division to Ebenezer Barnum “on condition he build a sawmill by the last of December next and also a gristmill in two years.” Thus the mere existence of most of these “non-agricultural” enterprises will not substantiate Grant’s interpretation. They were traditional, not new, enterprises, practical necessities rather than dramatic innovations, and the product of communal legislation as much as of an adventurous individualism.

A second distortion appears when Grant argues that “the most signifi-

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19 Ibid., 170, 42, 53, 171.
20 Ibid., 78, 29, 54, 53.
21 This vote (as well as the fact that there was a common field system in Kent in the early 1740s) is mentioned in Grant’s “A History of Kent, 1738-1796: Democracy on Connecticut’s Frontier” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1957), 43, 57-58, although not in the published version.
cant aspect of this enterprise... would seem to be the magnitude of profit-seeking activity." "Altogether," he indicates, "209 men were investors in nonagricultural enterprise at Kent between 1739 and 1800." But what is the significance of this number? Neither in his monograph nor in his dissertation does Grant indicate the aggregate number of adult males who lived in Kent during this sixty-year period; yet this total is crucial, for it represents the number of potential investors. The statistical material that is available suggests that at least one thousand (and probably one thousand five hundred) adult males worked and resided in Kent during this period; thus the 209 resident "profit-seekers" constituted only 15-20 percent of the potential investing population. What Grant has depicted as the activity and the ethos of most of the inhabitants of Kent becomes, at most, the enterprise and outlook of a well-to-do upper class.

In an attempt to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this entrepreneurial outlook in Kent, Grant adduces another type of evidence. His position—based more on assumption than on argument—is that the sale of "surplus" agricultural products on the market constitutes prima facie evidence of a profit-oriented attitude. Considered abstractly, this is a weak line of reasoning, if only because of the word "surplus" itself. This term, as it was widely used in America until the middle of the nineteenth century, clearly indicated that market sales were a secondary rather than a primary consideration: the "surplus" was what was left over after the yearly subsistence requirements of the farm household had been met.

Even if this faulty reasoning is ignored, the factual evidence will not sustain Grant's argument that a majority of these farmsteads produced a surplus which could be sold or exchanged. Grant himself states that 40 of the 103 farms in Kent in 1796 could provide only enough foodstuffs for the sustenance of their occupants. And this estimate is undoubtedly too low, since his computations assume a grain harvest of twenty-five bushels per acre for both corn and wheat. Such yields might be attained on the best land (and then only for the first harvests), but reliable data from areas as far apart as Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North Carolina indicate average yields of fifteen bushels per acre for corn and eight to twelve bushels for wheat. If these yields are assumed, the proportion of Kent farmsteads that

Grant, Democracy in Kent, 44.

Grant notes that 474 adult males lived in Kent between 1738 and 1760 and that 525 adult males lived in or moved through Kent in the four years 1774-1777. Since some of these 999 men were undoubtedly "double-counted," the total number was somewhat less; but because this calculation pertains only to 26 years out of a total of 62, the total number of resident adult males during this period must have been at least 1,000.

Danhof, Change in Agriculture, 17-18.

Grant, Democracy in Kent, 34, n. 3. The computations appear only in the
produced even a small salable surplus drops from two-thirds to one-third; only the most productive farms—15-20 percent of the total—could have produced enough to engage in extensive market transactions.

Why was this the case? Was the soil too poor? The climate too forbidding? Or were the aspirations of the settlers too limited? What was the economic and cultural consciousness of the mass of the agricultural population? These questions raise fundamental issues pertaining to the nature of social reality and the sources of human motivation; and their resolution must begin with an investigation of the epistemological premises of the entrepreneurial school of agricultural historians. Once again, Charles Grant offers an ideal entrée, this time as he explicitly acknowledges the source of his interpretation: "Hofstadter suggests," Grant explains in a footnote, "that where the yeoman practiced only subsistence farming, he did so out of necessity (lack of transportation and markets) and not because he was enamored of this way of life. The yeoman farmer wanted profits."

At issue here is not the validity of the argument but the assumptions on which it is based. Following Hofstadter, Grant effects a radical disjunction between the constraints imposed by the material and social environment and the yeoman's consciousness. The "drive for profits" simply exists, even given the "lack of transportation and markets." The subsistence way of life does not seem to affect or alter the sensibility of the farmer; consciousness is divorced from condition.

Contemporary observers who spoke to this issue assumed a rather different relationship between environmental opportunities and human goals. "We know," wrote one migrant to the Genesee Valley in 1810, "that people who live far from markets and cannot sell their produce, naturally become indolent and vicious." "There can be no industry without motive," another migrant warned the readers of The Plough Boy in 1820, "and it appears to me [that without markets] there is great danger that our people will soon..."

dissertation, pp. 67-68, 78-79, where heavy reliance is placed on the yields reported in American Husbandry. This anonymous work, published in 1775, is criticized for its inflated estimates of farm yields in Harry Roy Merrens, Colonial North Carolina in the Eighteenth Century: A Study in Historical Geography (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1964), chap. 6, n. 11. Merrens also provides more reliable estimates (pp. 110 ff.), as does Lemon, "Household Consumption in Eighteenth-Century America and Its Relationship to Production and Trade: The Situation Among Farmers in Southeastern Pennsylvania," Agricultural Hist., XLI (1967), 59-70, and Best Poor Man's Country, 152-153 (Table 27). In Concord, average grain yields—corn and wheat combined—increased from 12.2 to 15 bushels per acre between 1771 and 1801 (Gross, Minutemen, 231), while Mitchell reports wheat yields of 10 bushels per acre in the newly settled Shenandoah Valley ("Agricultural Change," Agricultural Hist., XLVII [1973], 129).

limit their exertions to the raising of food for their families." A somewhat similar point had been made in the mid-eighteenth century by William Byrd II when he came upon a fertile allotment that "would be a valuable tract of land in any country but North Carolina, where, for want of navigation and commerce, the best estate affords little more than a coarse subsistence." All were agreed that "convenience and a ready market is the life of a settler—not cheap lands."  

Such astute contemporary perceptions constituted the empirical foundations for the argument propounded in 1916 by Percy Bidwell, the leading modern historian of early American agriculture. Why should the farmer specialize, "why should he exert himself to produce a surplus," Bidwell asked in his classic analysis of the rural economy of New England, when there was no market in which to sell it, when "the only return he could expect would be a sort of psychological income . . . ?" Bidwell's logic is still compelling, for it is based on epistemological principles that command assent. It recognized, if only implicitly, that there was a considerable diversity of motivation and of economic values among the farm population. In this respect, it echoed the observation of another contemporary. "Farming may be so conducted as to be made profitable, or merely to afford a living[,] or to run out the farm," a Massachusetts writer noted in 1849. "Taking the land as it averages in the state, this depends more on the farmer than on the soil." At the same time, Bidwell insisted that everyone was affected by the structural possibilities and limitations of the society, whatever their cultural propensities or economic aspirations. There was a direct relationship between the material environment, on the one hand, and the consciousness and activity of the population on the other. This understanding informs Bidwell's account and renders it far superior to that of the entrepreneurial school of agricultural historians. "Potatoes are very much used and increased attempts are making to raise them for market," Bidwell quotes the Reverend Samuel Goodrich of Ridgefield, Connecticut (c. 1800), "but the distance from the market is so great that it is not expected the practice will be general." Acquisitive hopes had yielded to geographic realities.

A convincing interpretation of northern agriculture must begin, therefore, not with an ascribed consciousness but rather with an understanding of

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27 Quoted in McNall, *Agricultural History of the Genesee Valley*, 104.
30 *Ibid.*, 317n; The Massachusetts quotation is from Danhof, *Change in Agriculture*, 134.
the dimensions of economic existence. These varied significantly from one region to another, primarily as a result of differential access to an urban or an international market. Yet in every area similar cultural constraints circumscribed the extent of involvement in the market economy. Indeed, the tension between the demands of the market and the expectations stemming from traditional social relationships was a fact of crucial significance in the lives of this pre-industrial population.

Given the absence of an external market, there was no alternative to subsistence or semi-subistence production. Following the settlement of an inland region, for example, there would be a flurry of barter transactions, as established settlers exchanged surplus foodstuffs, seeds, and livestock for the scarce currency and manufactured items brought by newly arrived migrants. Subsequently, the diversification of the local economy created a small demand for farm produce among artisans and traders. Yet neither of these consuming groups was large. Migrants quickly planted their own crops, and most rural artisans cultivated extensive gardens and kept a few head of livestock. The economy had stabilized at a low level of specialization.

This system of local exchange, moreover, did not constitute a market economy in the full sense of the term. Many of these transactions were direct ones—between producers of different types of goods and services—without the involvement of a merchant, broker, or other middlemen. Farm men and women exchanged wheat for tools, meat for furniture, or vegetables for cloth, because their families had a specific personal use for the bartered product. They would attempt to drive a hard bargain or to make a good deal in their negotiations with the blacksmith, cabinetmaker, or seamstress—to insist, for example, on a carefully crafted, high-quality product. Yet their goal was not profit but the acquisition of a needed item for use. "Robt Griffins wife got 10 coks of hay from me which she is to pay in butter," Matthew Patten of Bedford, New Hampshire, noted in his diary in the 1770s; "I asked her 2fc for a cock." Even when an artisan or merchant would "sell" goods to a farmer and record the obligation in monetary terms, it was assumed that the debt would continue (usually without interest) until it was balanced in a subsequent barter transaction of "Country Produce at Market Price." 31

31 By these terms I mean limited participation in a commercial market economy. As the preceding quotations suggest, most farm families had enough land, equipment, and labor to raise as much food as they could consume. Thus their living standards (in terms of calories and protein) could rise even if they did not engage in extensive market transactions. The pressure of population on resources inhibited such advances, but there were no near-famines or subsistence crises in the northern colonies, as there were, for instance, in France in the 1690s.

32 Max George Schumacher, The Northern Farmer and His Markets during the Late Colonial Period, Dissertations in American Economic History (New York,
A market existed, therefore, and it regulated the overall terms of trade among farmers, artisans, and merchants. But this price system was not sovereign; it was often subordinated, in the conduct of daily existence, to barter transactions based on exchange value—what an item was worth to a specific individual. Some goods could not be purchased at any price because they were spoken for by friends, neighbors, or kinfolk. "I went to Joseph Farmers and [to] Alexanders to buy some corn," Patten noted in 1770, "but Farmers was all promised and Alexander wood [would] not take 2 pistereens a bushel and I got none." 38 The maximizing of profit was less important to these producers than the meeting of household needs and the maintaining of established social relationships within the community. And it was this "subsistence farm society" which Jackson T. Main correctly specifies as "the most common type throughout New England and perhaps in the entire North" until the end of the eighteenth century. 34 As Bidwell argued, "the revolution in agriculture, as well as the breaking down of the self-sufficient village life, awaited the growth of a [large, urban] non-agricultural population." 35

A commercially oriented agriculture began to develop after 1750, in response to lucrative urban and European markets for American grain. Yet the size of these new trading networks should not be overestimated. The meat exports of the entire state of Connecticut between 1768 and 1773 would have been absorbed by an additional urban population of twenty-two thousand—a city the size of New York; and the shipments of grain from

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1975), 88, 83. For further detail see The Diary of Matthew Patten of Bedford, N.H. from Seventeen Fifty-Four to Seventeen Eighty-Eight (Concord, 1903).


34 Main, Social Structure, 18. Another important characteristic of many of these communities was an extensive debt structure. Grant notes a "fast tangle of debts" in Kent, with each adult male having an average of 20 creditors in the 1770s. There was no concentration of debts in the hands of a moneylending class; most of the obligations were small, often ran for years, and frequently cancelled each other out. When Elisha Hurlbut, a merchant of Windham, Conn., died in 1771, he had 20 creditors but was himself owed money by 17 men. In more commercial settlements there was a distinct financial elite. When Elisha Hurlbut, a merchant of Windham, Conn., died in 1771, he was owed a total of £590 by no fewer than 77 debtors, and during the preceding 12 years had initiated 212 debt actions (13% of the total) in Windham County Court. See William F. Willingham, "Windham, Connecticut: Profile of a Revolutionary Community, 1775-1818" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1972), 77-91, 240-261. The debt structure in Newtown, N.Y., remained extensive as late as 1790, while that in Lancaster, Pa., conformed to the Windham pattern. Ehrlich, "Town Study in Colonial New York," 151-154; Wood, "Conestoga Crossroads," 167-168.

Connecticut ports were even smaller. Exports of wheat and flour from the Middle Colonies during these years were far more substantial, with the annual average equivalent to 2.1 million bushels of wheat. Still, the amount of wheat consumed by the residents of these colonies was nearly twice as large (3.8 million bushels per year). And wheat was normally cultivated on only one-third of the acreage devoted to the production of grain, most of which was corn that was consumed by livestock. The "surplus" wheat exported to foreign markets thus remained a relatively small part of total production (15-20 percent), even for commercially minded family farmers. As late as 1820, "the portion of farm products not consumed within the northern rural community" and sold on all outside markets, both foreign and domestic, amounted to only 25 percent of the total.

Given the existence of a growing European market—a demand for wheat that brought a price rise of 100 percent during the second half of the eighteenth century—the slow and limited commercialization of northern agriculture is significant. Far more dramatic changes were occurring in the South, on slave plantations rather than on family farms. During the years from 1768 to 1773 wheat and flour exports from Virginia and Maryland amounted to 25 percent of the total from the "bread-basket" colonies of New York and Pennsylvania. This "striking expansion of the wheat belt" to the southern colonies after 1750 clearly indicated, as Max Schumacher has argued, "that production on the individual [northern] farms was not elastic enough to cope with the rising wheat market."

The high cost of inland transport was one factor that inhibited the expansion of northern wheat production. A bushel of wheat could be shipped 164 miles on the Hudson River from Albany to New York City in 1769 for fourpence, or 5 percent of its wholesale value, but the proportion rose to 18 percent for a journey of the same distance on the shallow and more difficult waters of the upper Delaware River in Pennsylvania. And the cost of land transportation was much higher. Even in 1816, when the price of grain was high in Philadelphia, the cost of transporting wheat from 50 miles outside the city amounted to one-fourth of the selling price.

Technological restraints and cultural preferences placed even greater limitations on the expansion of wheat production on the family farms of the

36 Schumacher, Northern Farmer, 33. 42 and 42n for the macro-estimates; Lemon, Best Man's Poor Country, Tables 27 and 28, and 180-181 indicates that 8 of 26 cultivated acres on a typical farm of 125 acres would be planted in wheat and that 50 bushels of grain (out of a total of 295) would be available for sale or exchange.
37 Danhof, Change in Agriculture, 11, 2.
38 Schumacher, Northern Farmer, 142. See also pp. 110, 154, 167.
north. Thomas Jefferson isolated the crucial variable when he noted, in 1793, that planters "allow that every laborer will manage ten acres of wheat, except at harvest." The inefficiency of the sickle, which limited the amount a worker could reap to one-half or three-quarters of an acre per day, placed a severe constraint upon the cultivation of wheat. Large-scale production—with annual yields of 1,000 bushels from 100 acres—was attempted only by those northern producers who were prepared to bid for scarce wage labor during the short harvest season or who controlled a captive labor supply of indentured servants or black slaves. In Somerset County, New Jersey, one farmer relied on the assistance of six blacks to harvest his 80 acres of wheat, while a Trenton proprietor had three blacks to reap 20 acres. Such entrepreneurial farmers were exceptions. They entered the market not only to buy necessities and to sell their surplus but also to buy labor—slaves, servants, wage workers—in order to make a profit. Their farms were "capitalistic" enterprises in the full sense of the term: privately owned productive properties which were operated for profit through a series of market-oriented contractual relationships.

Even in the most market-oriented areas of the Middle Colonies, many farmers participated in the commercial capitalist economy in a much more limited way and with rather different goals. Lacking slaves or indentured servants and unwilling to bid for wage labor, they planted only 8 to 10 acres of wheat each year, a crop that could conveniently be harvested by the farmer, one or two growing sons, and (in some cases) his wife. Of the normal yield of 80 to 100 bushels, 60 would be consumed by the family or saved for seed; the surplus of 20 to 40 bushels would be sold on the Philadelphia market, bringing a cash income in the early 1770s of £5 to £10 sterling. The ordinary male farmer, Lemon concludes, was content to produce "enough for his family and . . . to sell a surplus in the market to buy what he deemed necessities." There was little innovative, risk-taking behavior; there was no

40 Jefferson to President Washington, June 28, 1793, in Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert E. Bergh, eds., The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, IX (Washington, D.C., 1903), 142.

41 Lemon, Best Poor Man's Country, 180; see also Tables 27 and 28 and pp. 179-183. Was there a "motivationally subsistent agricultural class" in the North similar to that found among the poor white population in the South? "A common practice of [southern white cotton] farmers in plantation areas," Julius Rubin has argued, "was to raise the minimal amount of cash crop needed to buy a narrow and rigid range of necessities: tobacco, lead, powder and sugar." For these men, mere participation in the international economy was neither an indication of nor conducive to the development of an entrepreneurial mentality. See Julius Rubin, "Urban Growth and Regional Development," in David T. Gilchrist, ed., The Growth of the Seaport Cities, 1790-1825: Proceedings of a Conference Sponsored by the Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation March 17-19, 1966 (Charlottesville, Va., 1967), 15. Two other
determined pursuit of profit. Indeed, the account books of these farm families indicate that they invariably chose the security of diversified production rather than hire labor to produce more wheat or to specialize in milk production. Economic gain was important to these men and women, yet it was not their dominant value. It was subordinate to (or encompassed by) two other goals: the yearly subsistence and the long-run financial security of the family unit.

Thus, the predominance of subsistence or semi-subsistence productive units among the yeoman farming families of the northern colonies was not only the result of geographic or economic factors—the ready access to a reliable, expanding market. These men and women were enmeshed also in a web of social relationships and cultural expectations that inhibited the free play of market forces. Much of the output of their farms was consumed by the residents, most of whom were biologically or legally related and who were not paid wages for their labor. A secondary group of consumers consisted of the inhabitants of the local area, members of a community often based on ties of kinship, language, religion, or ethnicity. An impersonal price system figured prominently in these transactions, but goods were often bartered for their exchange value or for what was considered a "just price."

Finally, a small (but growing) proportion of the total production of these farms was "sold" on an external market through a series of formal commercial transactions.

If freehold ownership and participation in these urban and international markets meant that northern agriculture did not have many of the characteristics of a closed peasant or a pre-capitalist economy,\(^2\) they do not imply that

\(^2\)There are a number of other reasons for not describing this as a "peasant society," as Kenneth A. Lockridge has done in *A New England Town, The First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736* (New York, 1970). Dedham was simply not analogous to the subjugated aboriginal settlements which Eric Wolf depicted as "closed corporate peasant communities" ("Closed Corporate Peasant Communities in Mesoamerica and Central Java," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, X [1957], 1-18). A more realistic comparison is with the peasant societies of early modern Western Europe; and the differences are sufficiently great as to render use of the term unwise in the American context. There were few landlords and no nobility in the northern colonies; the settlement pattern was diffuse rather than nucleated by the 18th century; the central government was weak; the role of the church was limited and the established Congregational churches of New England were non-hierarchical in structure; and the system of property relationships was
this system of production and exchange was modern or that its members were motivated primarily by liberal, entrepreneurial, individualist, or capitalist values. Nor is it sufficient to describe these farming communities as "transitional" between the ideal-types of traditional and modern or pre-capitalist and capitalist. To adopt such an idealist approach is to substitute typology for analysis, to suggest a teleological model of historical development, and to ignore the specific features of this social and economic system. Rather, one must point to its central features: the community was distinguished by age- and wealth-stratification and (usually) by ethnic or religious homogeneity, while on the family level there was freehold property ownership, a household mode of production, limited economic possibilities and aspirations, and a safety-first subsistence agriculture within a commercial capitalist market structure. And then one must seek an understanding of the 'coping strategies' used by individuals, groups, and governments to reconcile the competing demands, the inherent tensions, and the immanent contradictions posed by this particular configuration of historical institutions and cultural values.

It would be premature, at this point, to attempt a complete analysis of the mentalité of the pre-industrial yeoman population. Yet a preliminary examination may suggest both a conceptual framework for future research and the character of certain widely accepted values, goals, and behavioral norms. An important, and perhaps controversial, premise should be made explicit at the beginning. It is assumed that the behavior of the farm population constitutes a crucial (although not a foolproof) indicator of its values and aspirations. This epistemological assumption has an interpretive implication, for it focuses attention on those activities that dominated the daily lives of the population—in the case of this particular society, on the productive tasks that provided food, clothing, and shelter.

contractual and malleable. Finally, these American farming communities constituted the central core of the society; they were not "part-societies" and "part-cultures" (in the definition of peasant society advanced by Robert Redfield), dependent upon and exploited by a metropolitan elite.

If a historical analogy is required, then the "post-reform" peasant societies of 19th-century Western Europe are the most appropriate, not those of the ancien régime. See, for example, Walter Goldschmidt and Evelyn Jacobson Kunkel, "The Structure of the Peasant Family," American Anthropologist, N.S., LXXIII (1971), 1058-1076. Then, too, the pattern of family behavior and values may be similar among small freeholding farmers, whether they live in a yeoman or in a peasant society: compare, for example, Greven's Anover families with those analyzed in Lutz K. Berkner, "The Stem Family and the Development Cycle of the Peasant Household: An Eighteenth-Century Austrian Example," American Historical Review, LXXVII (1972), 398-418.
This process of production and capital formation derived much of its emotive and intellectual meaning from the cultural matrix—from the institutional character of the society. Work was arranged along familial lines rather than controlled communally or through a wage system. This apparently simple organizational fact was a crucial determinant of the historical consciousness of this farming population. For even as the family gave symbolic meaning and emotional significance to subsistence activities, its own essence was shaped by the character of the productive system. There was a complex relationship between the agricultural labor and property system of early America and its rural culture; and it is that matrix of productive activities, organizational structures, and social values which the following analysis attempts (in a very preliminary fashion) to reconstruct.

Because the primary economic unit—the family—was also the main social institution, production activities had an immense impact on the entire character of agrarian life. Family relationships could not be divorced from economic considerations; indeed, the basic question of power and authority within the family hinged primarily on legal control over the land and—indirectly—over the labor needed to work it. The parents (principally the husband) enjoyed legal possession of the property—either as freeholders, tenants, or sharecroppers—but they were dependent on their children for economic support in their old age. Their aim, as Greven has pointed out, was to control the terms and the timing of the transfer of economic resources to the succeeding generation.

The intimate relationship between agricultural production and parental values, between economic history and family history, is best approached through a series of case studies. The first of these small family dramas began in 1739 with the arrival in Kent, Connecticut, of Joseph Fuller. At one time or another Fuller was an investor in an iron works, a "typical speculative proprietor," and a "rich squatter" who tried to deceive the Connecticut authorities into granting him (and his partner Joshua Lassell) 4,820 acres of provincial land. Fuller's energy, ambition, and activities mark him as an

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entrepreneur, even a "capitalist." Yet his behavior must be seen in the widest possible context, and the motivation assessed accordingly. When this restless man arrived in Kent at the age of forty (with his second wife), he was the father of seven sons, aged two to sixteen; thirteen years later, when his final petition for a land grant was rejected, he had nine sons, aged eleven to twenty-nine years, and five daughters. With fourteen children to provide with land, dowries, or currency, Fuller had to embark on an active career if he wished to keep his children (and himself and his wife in their old age) from a life of landless poverty.

In the event, fecundity overwhelmed the Fullers' financial ingenuity. None of the children of Joseph Fuller ever attained a rating on the tax list equal to the highest recorded for their father, and a similar pattern prevailed among the sons of the third generation. The total resources of the Fuller "clan" (for such it had become) grew constantly over time—with nine second- and twelve third-generation males appearing on the tax lists of Kent—but their per capita wealth declined steadily. The gains of one generation, the slow accumulation of capital resources through savings and invested labor, had been dispersed among many heirs.

Such divisions of limited resources inevitably roused resentment and engendered bitter battles within farm families. Ultimately, the delicate reciprocal economic relationship between parents and children might break down completely. Insufficiency of land meant that most children would have to be exiled—apprenticed to wealthier members of the community or sent out on their own as landless laborers—and that parents would have to endure a harsh old age, sharing their small plot with the remaining heir. High fertility and low mortality threatened each generation of children with the loss of class status; the unencumbered inheritance of a freehold estate was the exception, not the rule.

Even in these circumstances—as a second example will suggest—the ideal for many dispossessed children remained property ownership and eventual control of the transfer process with regard to their own offspring. "My parents were poor," an "Honest Farmer" wrote to the Pennsylvania Packet in 1786,

and they put me at twelve years of age to a farmer, with whom I lived till I was twenty one. . . . I married me a wife—and a very working young woman she was—and we took a farm of forty acres on rent. . . . In ten years I was able to buy me a farm of sixty acres on which I became my own tenant. I then, in a manner, grew rich and soon added another sixty acres, with which I am content. My estate increased

Beyond all account. I bought several lots of out-land for my children, which amounted to seven when I was forty-five years old.

About this time I married my oldest daughter to a clever lad, to whom I gave one hundred acres of my out-land.46

Was this "success story" typical? Did the "Honest Farmer" minimize the difficulties of his own ascent and exaggerate the prospects of his seven children, each of whom would have to be provided with land, livestock, or equipment? It is clear, at any rate, that this Pennsylvanian enjoyed a crucial advantage over Joseph Fuller; he could accumulate capital through the regular sale of his surplus production on the market, and offer economic assistance to his children. His grandchildren, moreover, would grow up in the more fully developed commercial economy of the early nineteenth century. Ten years of work as a farm laborer—and an intense commitment to save—would now yield a capital stock of five hundred dollars. With this sum invested in equipment, livestock, and supplies, it would then be feasible to rent a farm, "with the prospect of accumulating money at a rate perhaps double that possible by wage work."47 To begin with less than five hundred dollars was to increase dependence on the landlord—to accept a half-and-half division of the produce rather than a two-thirds share. In either case, there was a high financial and psychological price to be paid. For many years these young adults would be "dependent," would work as wage laborers without security, as sharecroppers without land, or as mortgagees without full independence; their labor would enrich freeholders, landlords, and bankers even as it moved them closer to real economic freedom.

This process is readily apparent in a third case study, an archetypical example of the slow but successful accumulation of productive agricultural property in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1843 a young farmer in Massachusetts bought an old farm of 85 acres for $4,337; "in order to pay for it, I mortgaged it for $4,100, paying only $237, all that I had, after buying my stock." Nine years later it was clear that some progress had been made, for he had "paid up about $600 on the mortgage, and laid out nearly $2,000 in permanent improvements on my buildings and farm." This hard-working farmer was "a little nearer the harbor than I was when I commenced the voyage," but he was still $3,500 in debt and had interest payments of $250 to make each year.48 These obligations might be met in ten or fifteen years, but

46 Quoted in Stevenson W. Fletcher, Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life, 1640-1840 (Harrisburg, 1950), 315.
47 Danhof, Change in Agriculture, 91 and 78-115.
48 Ibid., 112; quotations are from Amasa Walker, ed., Transactions of the Agricultural Societies in the State of Massachusetts, for 1852 . . . (Boston, 1853), 93-94.
by then new debts would have to be incurred in order to provide working capital for his children. This farmer would die a property owner, but at least some of his offspring would face a similarly time-consuming and difficult climb up the agricultural ladder.

Two features of the long-term process of capital formation through agricultural production revealed by these case studies stand out as particularly important, one static and the other dynamic. The recurrent factor was the continual pressure of population on the existing capital stock; the rate of natural increase constantly threatened to outstrip the creation of new productive resources: cleared land, machinery, housing, and livestock. This danger is demonstrable in the case of the Fuller clan, and its specter lurks in the prose of the "Honest Farmer" and his younger accumulation-oriented counterpart in Massachusetts. Economic prosperity was the result of unrelenting labor by each generation. Only as farm parents began consciously to limit their fertility were they able to pass on sizable estates to their children—and this occurred primarily after 1830.49

What changed—from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century—was the increased rate of capital formation stemming from the expansion of the market economy; the growing importance of "unearned" profits because of the rise in the value of land and of other scarce commodities; and the extent to which middlemen dominated the processes of agricultural production and of westward migration. These three developments were interrelated. All were aspects of an increasingly important system of commercial agriculture that generated antagonistic social relationships and incipient class divisions. These alterations brought greater prosperity to those farmers whose geographic locations and cultural values were conducive to market activity. The new structural possibilities undoubtedly induced other producers (who might otherwise have been content with their subsistence existence) to raise their output, perhaps even to alter their mode of production by hiring labor or purchasing farm machinery. Certainly, the boom in land values enabled those settlers with substantial estates to reap windfall profits. They had not always purchased their land with speculative resale in mind, but they benefited nonetheless from social and economic forces beyond their control: the surge in population and in agricultural prices both in the American colonies and in Western Europe. Finally, there were individuals and groups who sought to manage the new system of production and exchange. By the mid-eighteenth century, merchants and land speculators had appeared as

crucial factors in the westward movement of population, and within another fifty years bankers and mortgage companies were also extracting a share of agricultural production. At some times and places the monetary liens imposed by middlemen and substantial landowners were justified; they represented fair returns for services rendered. More often, the farm population—especially those of its members who were young or landless—paid a disproportionate price for access to the productive system because bankers, speculators, and merchants were able to use their political and economic power to set the terms of exchange in order to gain a greater share of the growing wealth of the society than was warranted by their entrepreneurial contribution.50

Even as this process of economic specialization and structural change was taking place, the family persisted as the basic unit of agricultural production, capital formation, and property transmission. This is a point of some importance, for it suggests that alterations in the macro-structure of a society or an economic system do not inevitably or immediately induce significant changes in its micro-units. Social or cultural change is not always systemic in nature, and it proceeds in fits and starts. Old cultural forms persist (and sometimes flourish) within new economic structures; there are "lags" as changes in one sphere of life are gradually reconciled with established values and patterns of behavior.

And so it was in the case of the pre-industrial yeoman family. Changes in societal structure did not alter the basic character of the farm family (although the proportion of such families in the population steadily decreased). As the case studies suggest, the agricultural family remained an extended lineal one; each generation lived in a separate household, but the character of production and inheritance linked these conjugal units through a myriad of legal, moral, and customary bonds. Rights and responsibilities stretched across generations. The financial welfare of both parents and children was rooted in the land and in the equipment and labor needed to farm it. Parents therefore influenced their children's choice of marriage partners. Their welfare, or that of their other children, might otherwise be compromised by the premature division of assets which an early marriage

50 On this controversial topic see McNall, Genese Valley, 14, 48, 63-64, 240-241, and chap. 4. A favorable view of the tenancy system is offered by Sung Bok Kim, "A New Look at the Great Landlords of Eighteenth-Century New York," WMQ, 3d Ser., XXVII (1970), 581-614. Kim succeeds only in demonstrating that their own financial interests often prompted landlords to offer reasonable terms to their tenants; he does not demonstrate the inherent superiority of the tenancy system or that it was not more exploitative than, for instance, the grants of the New England governments during the 17th century or of the U.S. government under the Homestead Acts.
entailed. The line was more important than the individual; the patrimony was to be conserved for lineal purposes.

The historical significance of these lineal values was immense. The emphasis on the line or upon the welfare of the entire family, for example, inhibited the emergence of individualism. When the members of this agricultural society traced the contours of their cultural landscape, they began with the assumption—as John Demos has amply demonstrated—that the basic unit was a family, "a little commonwealth," not a man (and still less a woman) "for himself," in their disparaging phrase. This stress on family identity also shaped the character—and often confined the scope—of entrepreneurial activity and capitalist enterprise. Lemon's analysis indicates that most male farmers in Pennsylvania preferred family labor (including the assistance of nearby relatives) to that provided by indentured servants, slaves, or wage laborers. Religious membership was also circumscribed by cultural values, especially in the Congregational churches of New England. As Edmund Morgan argued thirty years ago (in an hypothesis recently supported with quantitative evidence by Gerald Moran), Puritanism quickly became a "tribal" cult, with family lineage the prime determinant of elect status.

Nevertheless, lineal values were not always dominant. And they were often affected by the emergent market economy; indeed, the commercial family-capitalism of the early modern period and the small father-son businesses of the nineteenth century represented striking adaptions of the lineal ideal. Equally significant alterations took place in rural areas, in response to the pressure of population on agricultural resources. In the seventeenth century many settlers had attempted to identify the family with a specific piece of land, to ensure its continued existence by rooting it firmly in space. Thus, in 1673, Ebenezer Perry of Barnstable, Massachusetts, entitled his land to his son Ebenezer and to the latter's "eldest son surviving and so on

51 See the discussion in n. 7 above.
53 Edmund S. Morgan, The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England (Boston, 1944), chap. 6; Gerald Francis Moran, "The Puritan Saint: Religious Experience, Church Membership, and Piety in Connecticut, 1736-1776" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers Univ., 1974). Moran has analyzed the membership of a number of Congregational churches in Connecticut between the time of their founding (1630s and 1640s) and 1800. He finds that 60 to 70% of all members during that period were either the original founders or their descendants.
to the male heirs of his body lawfully begotten forever." Other early inhabitants of Massachusetts preferred to bequeath the family homestead to the youngest son—ultimogeniture—both because this would allow elder siblings to leave the farm at an early age and because the youngest son often came to maturity just as the parents were ready to retire. In either case, the transmission of property was designed to link one generation with the next, and both with "family land."

When the pressure on family resources made it impossible to provide all surviving sons with a portion of the original family estate, the settlers devised alternative strategies of heirship. Some parents uprooted the family and moved to a newly settled area where it would be possible to maintain traditional lineal ties between generations. "The Squire's House stands on the Bank of [the] Susqueannah . . . ," Philip Fithian reported from the frontier region of northeastern Pennsylvania in 1775. "He tells me . . . he will be able to settle all his Sons and his fair Daughter Betsy on the Fat of the Earth." Other farmers remained in the old community and sought desperately to settle their children on nearby lands. The premature death of one son brought the Reverend Samuel Chandler of Andover, Massachusetts, to remember that he had "been much distressed for land, for his children," and to regret that "he took so much care . . . [for] one is taken away and needs none." From nearby Concord, Benjamin Barrett petitioned the General Court for a grant of land in New Hampshire, since he and many other residents were "without land for their posterity"; yet when this request was granted, none of the petitioner's migrated to the new settlement. When Barrett died in 1728, the income from these western lands helped to settle two sons on his Concord estate and two younger sons on farms in nearby Worcester County.

This imaginative use of western land rights to subsidize the local settlement of offspring may have been fairly widespread. Of the forty-one men who were the original purchasers of proprietary shares in Kent, Connecticut, twenty-five did not become inhabitants of the town but sold their rights to residents, relatives, and neighbors. Still, the limited availability of

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arable land in the older communities of New England and the Middle Colonies ruled out this option for most parents. The best they could do was to finance the migration of some children while keeping intact the original farmstead. Both in Newtown, Long Island, and in German areas of Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century, fathers commonly willed the family farm to the eldest son, requiring him to pay a certain sum of money to his younger brothers and his sisters. In other cases, the farm was "sold" to one son or son-in-law, with the "profits" of the transaction being divided among the other children—daughters usually receiving one-half the amount bestowed on the sons.69

These attempts by individual farmers to preserve a viable family estate reflected a set of values that was widespread in the community and which eventually received a formal legal sanction. When the appraisers of intestate property in Concord, Massachusetts, reported that a property could not be divided "without Spoiling the Whole," the probate court granted the farm intact to one heir (usually the eldest son), requiring him to compensate his brothers and sisters for their shares in the estate.60 Such rulings confirmed the societal norm: even as New England parents wrote wills that divided their lands, they encouraged or directed their children to reconstitute viable economic units, with regard to both size and access. As Mark Hasket of Rochester, Massachusetts, wrote in his will: "my sons shall not any of them debar or hinder one another from having a way over each others Land when and where there may be ocation for it."61

There were other respects in which the central position of the lineal family (rather than the conjugal unit or the individual) was reflected in the legal system. On the death of her husband, a wife normally received the "right" to one-third of the real property of the estate. Yet this control was strictly limited: it usually lapsed upon remarriage and, even more significant, did not include the privilege of sale. The widow's "third" had to be preserved intact, so that upon her death the property could revert to the heirs of the estate. More important than the economic freedom of the widow—her rights as an individual—was the protection of the estate and the line of


60 Gross, "Problem of Agricultural Crisis in Eighteenth-Century New England," 8. Of the landed estates settled in probate in Concord between 1738 and 1775, 60% were not divided; only 25% were divided among three or more heirs.

61 Quoted in Waters, "Traditional World of New England Peasants," NEHGR, CXXX (1976), 7; Danhof, Change in Agriculture, 80.
succession. These deeply held values were preserved even in the more diverse, money-oriented economy of eastern Massachusetts in the eighteenth century; the law was changed to permit widows to sell family property, but the court carefully regulated such transactions to ensure that the capital of the estate would be used for the support of the child-heirs. Property was "communal" within the family, with the limits of alienation strictly limited by custom or by law. Even as the link to the land was broken the intimate tie between the estate and the lineal family was reaffirmed.

These traditional notions of family identity were subjected to considerable strain by the mid-nineteenth century. The psychological dimensions of the economic changes that diminished the importance of the family farm as the basic productive unit are revealed, in an oblique fashion, in the naming patterns practiced by parents in Hingham, Massachusetts. During the colonial period, most parents in this agricultural settlement did not perceive their children as "unique per se." If a child died, his or her existence was perpetuated indirectly, for the same forename was normally given to the next infant of the same sex, especially when the dead child carried the same name as one of the parents. This necronymic pattern, with its obvious emphasis on the line rather than the individual, persisted in Hingham until the 1840s. So also did the tendency of parents to name their first children after themselves—to entail the parental name, as it were, and thus to stress the continuity between generations. As economic change altered the structure and character of Hingham society, these lineal conceptions of identity gradually yielded to more individualistic ones. After 1800 first sons were given the same forenames as their fathers but a distinctive middle name. This was a subtle and complex compromise, for these middle names were often family names as well (the mother's surname, for example)—yet another manifestation of the persistence of traditional forms in a time of transition.

It is significant that this shift toward a distinctive personal identity—toward individualism—has been traced in Hingham, Massachusetts, one of the oldest English settlements in America, and not on the frontier. A similar development may have resulted from (or accompanied) the westward movement, but it is equally likely—Frederick Jackson Turner to the contrary—that lineal family values were more important than individualism in the new

63 Daniel Scott Smith, "Child-Naming Patterns and Family Structure Change: Hingham, Massachusetts, 1640-1880" (unpub. paper, 1975), 10. Over 60% of first sons and over 70% of first daughters bore the same forename as their parents in 17th-century Hingham families, and the proportions remained high until the first children of the 1861-1880 marriage cohorts, when "the respective fractions are two-fifths and one-sixth."
farming communities of the old Northwest. For farm families usually trained and encouraged their children "to succeed them, rather than to 'succeed' by rising in the social system." The young adults of thriving farm communities were not forced to confront the difficult problems of occupational choice and psychological identity as were those from depressed and overcrowded rural environments or growing cities. The dimensions of existence had expanded in the East, even as the eighteenth-century patterns of farm life, community stratification, and family identity were being recreated, in a modified form, in the new settlements of the West.

In some of these older and crowded communities in New England and the Middle States, lineal family values remained important well into the nineteenth century because they were consistent, at least temporarily, with rural industrialization and an emergent market economy. Fathers and mature sons continued to farm the (now depleted or subdivided) land while mothers, daughters, and younger sons turned their talents and energies to the production of textiles, shoes, and other items. The period between 1775 and 1815 was "the heyday of domestic manufactures" in America.

The family factory assumed major economic importance as a result of the commercial dislocations produced by the War for Independence; household production of linen and woolen cloth was increased to compensate for the lack of English imports. Subsequently, this enlarged productive capacity was systematically organized by American entrepreneurs. In some cases, merchants sought out new markets for household manufactures and then capitalized part of the productive process itself, providing necessary materials and credit through the "putting out" system. Tens of thousands of "Negro shoes" were sold to southern slaveholders by Quaker merchants from Lynn, Massachusetts; and this productive network extended far back into the New England countryside. An even more important product of the rural family factory was wearing apparel. In New York State the production of textiles increased steadily until 1825, when the per capita output of household looms amounted to 8.95 yards.

64 The quotation refers to the socialization process in a "tradition-directed" culture, as described by David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven, Conn., 1950), 40, 17-18. See also Joseph F. Kett, "Adolescence and Youth in Nineteenth-Century America," *Jour. Interdisciplinary Hist.,* II (1971), 283-299. As Nancy Cott and R. Jackson Wilson have pointed out to me, the agricultural journals of the 1830s are filled with articles and letters expressing parental concern over the urban migration of farm youth; such sentiments suggest the persistence of lineal, farming-oriented values.


66 Paul G. Faler, "Workingmen, Mechanics and Social Change: Lynn, Massa-
This extraordinary household output was made possible not only by the existence of a regional or national market—the product of a mature merchant-directed commercial capitalism—but also by the peculiar evolution of the factory system. By the late eighteenth century certain operations which were difficult in the home—such as fulling, carding, dyeing, and spinning in the case of textile production—had been assumed, with constantly increasing efficiency, by small mills. This process of specialization was as yet incomplete; eventually the weaving of cloth (as well as the preparation of the yarn) would be removed from the home and placed in the factory. For the moment—indeed for more than a generation—this final stage in the "evolution of the simple household industry into the . . . factory system" was held in abeyance by technological constraints, and the family factory reigned supreme.67 Rural industrialization expanded the productive capacity of the society and systematically integrated female labor into the market economy; but it did so without removing the family from the center of economic life.

One result was to perpetuate, for another generation, the delicate and reciprocally beneficial economic relationship between eastern farm parents and their offspring. The intergenerational exchange of youthful labor for an eventual inheritance had been threatened in the mid-eighteenth century by land scarcity, which diminished the financial security of aging parents and their ability or willingness to assist their children. Some young adults implicitly rebuked their parents by migrating; others stayed and exercised a gentle form of coercion. Nineteen percent of all first births registered in Concord, Massachusetts, in the 1740s were premaritally conceived, and the proportion rose to 40 percent in Concord, Hingham, and many other northern communities by the end of the century. "If they were again in the same circumstances," one observer noted, these young men and women "would do the same again, because otherwise they could not obtain their parents' consent to marry."68 Once the legal and financial concessions were extracted from reluctant parents, marriage quickly followed. Both parents and children shunned illegitimacy; both accepted the cultural norm of stable family existence.

Whatever their economic weakness and vulnerability to youthful persuasion, parents retained significant power over their offspring. Affective bonds remained strong, and they were augmented by the power of the state.

chusetts, 1800-1860" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1971), 41-43; Taylor, Transportation Revolution, 212-213; Tryon, Household Manufactures, 190, 276-279, 370-371, and Tables 12, 16, 18.

67Tryon, Household Manufactures, 243-259, 272-276; Danhof, Change in Agriculture, 20-21.

Young men who wished to work outside the household unit before they attained their legal majority were obliged to buy their economic freedom, undertaking in written contracts to pay their parents a certain sum in return for the privilege. Similarly, the first New England mill girls turned at least a portion of their earnings over to their parents; they were working outside the home but not for themselves as unattached individuals. The lineal family remained predominant, in large part because there were few other institutions in early nineteenth-century America that could assume its social and economic functions—few schools, insurance companies, banks, or industries to provide training and capital for the new generation, and comfort and security for the old. Only a major structural change in the society itself—the widespread appearance of non-familial social, economic, and political organizations—would undermine the institutions of lineage; until this occurred there were simply no "alternatives to the family as a source of provision for a number of crucially important needs."70

The lineal family—not the conjugal unit and certainly not the unattached individual—thus stood at the center of economic and social existence in northern agricultural society in pre-industrial America. The interlocking relationship between the biological life cycle and the system of agricultural (and domestic) production continued to tie the generations together even as the wider economic structure was undergoing a massive transformation and as the proportion of farming families in the population was steadily declining. Most men, women and children in this yeoman society continued to view the world through the prism of family values. This cultural outlook—this inbred pattern of behavior—set certain limits on personal autonomy, entrepreneurial activity, religious membership, and even political imagery.71 Lineal family values did not constitute, by any means, the entire world view—the mentalité—of the agricultural population, but they did define a central tendency of that consciousness, an abiding core of symbolic and emotive meaning; and, most important of all, they constituted a significant and reliable guide to behavior amid the uncertainties of the world.