Farm Labor in Southern New England during the Agricultural-Industrial Transition

Introduction

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FOR THE MOST PART, scholars investigating the social and economic history of New England have paid scant attention to farm labor. For the colonial and revolutionary periods, it has been yeoman farmers who have commanded attention because of their numerical predominance and their central political role.[1] For the later, early industrial era, it has been the new groups of workers in the burgeoning shoe, textile, and paper industries who

The three essays that follow this general introduction, by Ross W. Beales, Jr., Richard B. Lyman, Jr., and Jack Larkin, were presented, in slightly different form, at the New England Historical Association meeting at Historic Deerfield, Massachusetts, on April 25, 1987. Professor Brown was the commentator at this session.

1. Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967); Charles S. Grant, *Democracy in the Connecticut Frontier Town of Kent* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961); Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970; Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1976); James A. Henretta, 'Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-Industrial America', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 35 (1978): 3–32; Lee Nathaniel Newcomer, *The Embattled Farmers: A Massachusetts Countryside in the American Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), David P. Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); Robert J. Taylor, *Western Massachusetts in the Revolution* (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1954).

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have attracted scholarly investigation.[2] Since New England agriculture entered a long period of decline in the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that farm laborers, a shrinking, marginal segment of the population, were forgotten.[3] Yet as the following studies—of the eighteenth-century clergyman Ebenezer Parkman's farm (by Ross W. Beales, Jr.), of the early nineteenth-century Levi Lincoln sheep farm (by Richard B. Lyman, Jr.), and of the large, mixed-crop Ward farm in the nineteenth century (by Jack Larkin)—demonstrate, the examination of farm labor through the several generations-long periods of the agricultural-industrial transition supplies fresh, significant insights into the changing character of New England. Indeed, these studies suggest that while the rise of an industrial, commercial, and urban economy in southern New England provided new marketing opportunities for regional agriculture, it also undermined the already fragile supply of farm labor, thereby compounding the manifold obstacles to agricultural profitability.

Of course, three case studies spread across the span of more than a century, and all drawn from southern Worcester County, Massachusetts, however broad their implications, cannot provide a complete account of farm labor. The farming operations described

2. Mary H. Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender, and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry, 1780–1910* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976); Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), and his 'Women and Outwork in a Nineteenth-Century New England Town: Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, 1830–1850,' *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation*, ed. Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), pp. 51–69; Paul G. Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981); Judith A. McGaw, *Most Wonderful Machine: Mechanization and Social Change in Berkshire Paper Making, 1801–1885* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), and her '"A Good Place to Work." Industrial Workers and Occupational Choice: The Case of Berkshire Women,' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 10 (1979): 227–48; Jonathan Prude, *The Coming of the Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810–1860* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

3. Among the exceptions is Hal S. Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1984), and his 'Staying Down on the Farm: Social Processes of Settled Rural Life in the Nineteenth-Century North,' Hahn and Prude, *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation*, pp. 327–43.

here, the Reverend Ebenezer Parkman's eighteenth-century, mixed-production, semisubsistence farm, Levi Lincoln's absentee-owned sheep farm, and the extensive, multicrop market farm of the Ward family, were each distinctive and could scarcely be called typical. All of these farmers possessed more cash and other assets than the average farmer. Moreover, these farms illustrate how diverse New England agriculture was. For even though the 60 to 120-acre, mixed-crop, family farm was the most common type in 1840 as in 1740, many different kinds of farms—small and large, general and specialized, part-time and full-time—made up the New England agricultural landscape during this era.[4]

What the three farms shared in common was their dependence on the labor market. And in this regard all revealed the characteristics of a regional labor market that was changing over time. While particular experiences were unique, the circumstances for hiring and firing and the terms of employment were broadly representative and thus reveal the shifting conditions of agricultural employment. No farmer, after all, could hire laborers to work according to terms that were worse than those commonly accepted, not in 1740 or in 1840. Moreover, since none of these employers offered terms that were notably more generous than the norm, it is fair to conclude that insofar as the labor market was concerned, the accounts provided by Beales, Lyman, and Larkin are representative.

Indeed, the greatest limitation in these case studies of farm labor results from the narrow focus of the sources, employer records, not from the issue of typicality. Employers' account books supply only scattered glimpses of the lives of farm laborers. The employees' perspectives on their work, their goals, and their decisions can only occasionally be inferred from small fragments of evidence. Moreover, because the farm labor of women was not recorded in these accounts, a crucial dimension of family and farm economy

4. See Peter Benes and Jane Montague Benes, eds., *The Farm: Annual Proceedings of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, 1986* (Boston: Boston University, 1988); Jack Larkin, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life in the United States, 1790–1840* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

is left out.[5] That women were part of the contemporary labor market—as domestic workers from the beginning, and later in manufacturing as well—has long been well known. But because they were either not employed by Parkman, Lincoln, and the Wards, or (as is more likely) their employment was recorded in some other way, perhaps by a farm wife, they are invisible here. Since women, too, played central roles in the agricultural-industrial transition, this is a key omission.

Yet, even with a perspective limited by employer accounts of male workers only, these studies are remarkably illuminating. Prior to Beales's, Lyman's, and Larkin's investigations, scholarly understanding of the character of the agricultural labor market has been mostly anecdotal and intuitive. Such issues as who worked and for how long, the ages, ethnicity, and life courses of farm workers have not been generally known. Beales and Larkin, however, have compiled systematic data covering scores of workers across more than a century. The origins (local or extra-local), family connections, skills, and life courses, as well as the terms of service and mode of payment of these laborers are here available for systematic analysis.

As a result, we can trace fundamental alterations in the character of the employer-employee relationship. For while it is true that each of these employers and their farms had some special characteristics, the movement away from a quasi-paternal master as on the Parkman farm, toward the Wards' essentially one-dimensional, economic form of employment is significant. In the Parkman household, employees entered under family government, wherein their private habits and moral conduct, not just their farm labor, were subject to their master's scrutiny. A century later, however, when the Wards resorted to the recruitment of passing strangers, no such expectations survived. Farm employment had become a relatively impersonal, commerical relationship.

5. See Joan M. Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750–1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England. 1650–1750* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

At Levi Lincoln's sheep farm, the employer's active mistrust of his workers forms a central theme of Lyman's account. Since Lincoln was an absentee proprietor, the possibility of a quasi-paternal master-servant relationship was certainly remote, and Lincoln's temperament must also have been a factor. Yet, the chronic intensity of the employer-employee tension is significant. Never satisfied, Lincoln still felt constrained to retain people whom he regarded as inefficient and untrustworthy. Viewed in conjunction with the Wards' experience in Shrewsbury, where they personally supervised their workers daily, it is clear that the problem was not simply Lincoln's personality or management style. The market in agricultural labor, which was not very remunerative for workers, did not favor employers either.

In New England, the scarcity of farm labor had, of course, been a long-standing reality, even if we allow for the fact that we know this chiefly from the testimony of employers whose bias is evident. For Beales shows that in the eighteenth century Parkman was frequently struggling to find satisfactory workers, and he was never so well off as when he possessed the labor of his own sons on the farm. But Parkman's situation as an employer was more promising than that of Lincoln or the Wards later on. For the southern New England countryside was becoming overpopulated with experienced, young, would-be yeoman farmers in Parkman's day. The well-known demographic pressure of fourth- and fifth-generation settlers created a comparatively favorable situation for farm employers.[6] Indeed, the fact that Parkman, who had no training, experience, or inclination for farming, could manage a tolerably successful operation tells a great deal about the quality of his employees as well as the character of the agricultural economy. Had Parkman tried to operate in the same way a century later, he would have sunk into penury. And it was not just Parkman.

6. Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World*, ch. 4; Kenneth Lockridge, 'Land, Population and the Evolution of New England Society, 1630–1790; and an Afterthought,' *Colonial America: Essays in Politics and Social Development*, ed. Stanley N. Katz (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1971), pp. 466–91 (first published in *Past and Present*, number 39, in April 1968).

Nineteenth-century New England clergy generally gave up farming.

There are many explanations for this clerical retreat from farming, which was itself part of a larger movement. Several of the reasons are evident in the Lincoln and Ward farm studies. Changes in land and agricultural commodity prices, the availability of tillable land, and the character of the labor market were all important. The enlarged marketplace of the nineteenth century, which was connected to the transportation revolution and to the general expansion of commercial networks, accelerated the industrialization of southern New England; however, the consequences for the region's agriculture were not all benign. Industrialization did expand farmers' markets, as is evident in the Ward's operations in Shrewsbury, but increased access to grains and meats produced outside the region also brought a new level of agricultural competition. Young men and women who would have worked in farming in the eighteenth century, and who still had few alternatives to farm work in much of the country, were now drawn into industrial, commercial, and urban employment. Simultaneously, urban development and population pressure in southern New England raised the prices of real estate in all but the more remote, hill locales. As a result, the rate of return on capital investment in agriculture declined, and men who could not expect to inherit farms looked for other occupations.

Under these circumstances, the advantages that Parkman and other eighteenth-century farm employers enjoyed, as compared to Lincoln, the Wards, and other nineteenth-century employers, are clear. Young men skilled in agriculture were willing to spend part of their life doing farm labor in order to realize their ambition to become yeomen. But by 1840, and even a generation earlier, farm employers could not pay well enough to attract capable and ambitious workers to an occupation that offered so little promise for the future. Immigrant laborers, whose expectations were often more modest, provided some help, but, like the native workers,

they too were drawn chiefly to industrial and commercial employment.

Agriculture did survive in nineteenth-century New England, and even prospered in some situations. But the Lyman and Larkin studies suggest one of the key reasons why large-scale farming did not thrive in contrast to large-scale industry. For in manufacturing, increasing levels of capital investment led to economies of scale that enhanced profitability. The Lincoln and Ward experiences, however, show that whatever the level of capital investment—and theirs was much higher than for most farms—profitability remained a severe problem. Because of the competition that southern New England farmers faced, not only from more fertile regions with longer growing seasons but in the labor market as well, the availability and productivity of workers limited the possibilities of large-scale farming. As a result, the farms that would enjoy longevity on the New England landscape were not operations like that of Lincoln or the Wards. The most durable farms were small, family enterprises that could, in their sons and daughters, retain skilled and well-motivated workers, and also specialize in dairy or vegetable products that benefited from the farm's proximity to urban markets.

By 1860, as the history of the Ward farm suggests, these realities were becoming painfully clear to the rural gentry, however attached they might be to farming as a way of life and as a foundation for public service. Hereafter, the New England labor market would not sustain agriculture at a level of profitability that could allow the survival of the tradition that joined community leadership to polite living, farming, and financial security. The studies of Ross W. Beales, Jr., Richard B. Lyman, Jr., and Jack Larkin illuminate crucial aspects of that historic development.