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A METHOD OF ASCERTAINING THE IDENTITY  
OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZE FARMERS

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The problems involved with attempting to deal with turn of the 19th century farmers on a first-hand and specific basis are similar to those encountered when dealing with artisans, laborers, and sailors; that is, that farmers do not appear to have been prominent members of the community. By not having been 'prominent', I do not mean to imply that farmers did not take an interest in the community in which they lived or that they were un-civic-minded. Rather, I mean to imply that the identities of farmers do not figure highly among the materials which have been passed down to us, such as histories, newspapers, and personal primary documents (letters, ledgers, diaries, and so forth).

Thus, the mental picture that we have of a town like Middletown in 1880 is heavily influenced by the diaries, letters and newspaper announcements of professionals and prosperous merchants, followed by smaller bits and pieces concerning artisans and less prosperous merchants. Of farmers we hear relatively little. Of course, for families like the Millers and the Lyman's we have a relative wealth of knowledge, but to claim that the experiences of these families are representative of the farming class as a whole would be like claiming that the experiences of George Starr or Matthew Talcott were representative of the merchant class as a whole. When I look at the inventory of Isaac Miller's estate and see that it was valued at \$30,462.04 (Probate Records 11:275) at the time of his death in 1818, I cannot help but think that I am looking at something exceptional.

This is the trap into which much of history falls. The generalizations we make about societies are often based on the experiences of a few, and the 'masses' are relegated to oblivion, in a very literal sense. Marxist and quantitative histories have attempted to address this problem, but the difficulty with such 'mass' histories as these is that they tend to avoid any specifics. I shall not make any attempt here to resolve this basic dilemma of history, but I would like to point out that the shortcomings of 'elite' history are particularly acute with respect to farmers.

This is true simply because we have so few known farmers to check generalizations against. If a generalization is made about the merchant class or the professional class, we have a reasonably large pool of known merchants or professionals with which to determine the statement's validity. Thus, we can effectively deal with such statements as 'Merchants employed marriage as a device to advance their trading contacts', or 'The families of merchants tended to be larger than those of professionals.' If comparable comments were advanced concerning farmers, we would be on uncertain ground, since our pool of known farmers would be restricted to the Miller family, the Lyman family, and a few others.

It is generally accepted that the economy of Connecticut was still at this time (1800) predominantly agricultural. Yet on the basis of the occupational

information which we currently have for Middletown, we cannot strictly prove or disprove this relatively innocuous statement. It can only seem reasonable to us if we believe that most people were still engaged in farming here, or unreasonable if we believe that merchants and artisans had already assumed the farmer's former position. Until we have hard evidence one way or the other, this must remain an open question.

The use of probate records to identify the small and medium-sized farmer is one way to amass the information needed to even begin answering questions such as those raised above. A close examination of estate inventories should give us a good indication of what the deceased did for a living - in other words, we try to assess what the person did by looking at what he owned.

At first glance, this seems to promise a project that will be tedious but nevertheless highly rewarding. Unfortunately, the use of probate records in this manner is fraught with dangers of all kinds.

For one, every small and medium-sized farmer did not die in Middletown, and the probate records do not include those who may have sold their land and emigrated. In fact, my guess would be that medium-sized and particularly small farmers would have had the most reason to emigrate, since their holdings were probably the most meager and their soil the least fertile. The probate records, then, would tend to

reflect those farmers who were satisfied and prosperous enough to have lived out their lives here, however short. If we used probate inventories to come up with some 'average value of estate', the number would certainly be unrealistic, since it would be weighted toward those who were economically content enough to remain in Middletown until their death.

Another problem is that sons who remained on the family farm until marriage or even after marriage would not be counted as farmers until the deaths of their fathers, at which point a will, a court-ordered division of estate, or a cross reference to the land records could identify the sons and their occupational intentions. This time-gap would have given a son more opportunity to have become dissatisfied with his living arrangements or his expectation of inheritance, and we may have lost the identity of such a son to the charms of the West. Thus, a farmer's son, who may have been an active farmer himself in 1801, might have decided that the fortunes of the West were greater than his one-fifth share of his father's estate. The son emigrates, the father revises his will, and we have lost the identity of a man who was at one time a Middletown farmer. This scenario is admittedly exceptional, but it is a danger to keep in mind when dealing with probate records.

We are now confronted with a further and more basic question: What is a farmer? This question is being debated even today, but the difficulties it poses for the use of probate inventories are even more severe, particularly in an age when all classes of society tended to keep extensive gardens, and many people kept animals for transportation purposes. Obviously, just because Dr. William B. Hall owned two hogs and a barn, it does not mean that he was a farmer. Similarly, if we were to look into the garage of today's average suburban homeowner, we would be apt to find quite an array of farming tools, but that would not in itself mean that the owner of those tools was anything more than an avid gardener.

Unfortunately, the distinction between professional farmers and part-time farmers is not always as clear as in the case of Dr. Hall. Professional farmers themselves often engaged in part-time activities to supplement their income, and the difference between being a farmer who practices a trade and an artisan who farms is not exactly well-defined.

The method I used to attempt to separate the farmers from the part-timers is admittedly unscientific, but I think useful. Essentially, I looked at three things: land, livestock, and tools. Land was chosen for almost obvious reasons, although I did not reject out of hand holdings that were not extensive. Often landholdings were itemized, and

this made the task somewhat simpler. On the other hand, I generally thought it safe to assume that estates which contained vast amounts of land would have been too time-consuming for their owners to have devoted their attention to much else, although I was not unaware of the possibility that sons or hired hands could have left the owner free to pursue other activities.

The second criterion was livestock, and for this I devoted attention to number and type. Many people kept animals like sheep, pigs, and chickens for their abilities to convert table scraps and other undesirable foods into mutton, bacon or eggs, but that does not mean that these people were necessarily farmers. Of course, if the quantity of these animals was great, the chances were improved that the owner was a farmer.

An even more telling source of information was the type of animals listed. If steers, stallions, heifers and colts are mentioned, we can probably assume that animal husbandry was taking place. It seems unlikely that part-time farmers would have engaged in breeding unless it was a special interest of theirs. Perhaps the single most important type of animal was the ox, and if an ox or a team of oxen is listed in the estate we can be sure that heavy work was being undertaken, like plowing and stone-moving. The presence of oxen, when combined with the presence of a fair amount of land and farm implements, seemed always to signal a



farm. It is unlikely that people would have kept them as pets, and the part-time farmer probably would have found them troublesome and expensive. If a part-time farmer needed his modest field turned over or some other heavy work done, it seems likely that he could have got a neighboring farmer and his team of oxen to do the job for him.

The third type of evidence which I looked for was farm implements. These ranged from simple tools like spades, shovels, hoes, and axes to more specialized tools such as dung forks, broad axes, adzes, iron wedges, and sheep shears to machinery that was almost exclusively agricultural in nature, such as harrows, hay knives and forks, plows, scythes, and sickles. The presence of the last-named implements would almost certainly indicate a working farm. As a general rule, those farmers whose estates were valued the highest tended to have the most complete sets of implements.

There is another aspect to the estate inventories which should be kept in mind, and that is that they are only a brief glance into their owners' lives. In this sense they are analogous to a profit and loss statement in accounting; we have, so to speak, a picture of the owner's possessions at the time of his death, which may have occurred early or late in life, or early or late in the year. We do not, to extend the analogy, have a statement of the 'cash flow', measured over an extended period, to see how the owner got

to where he was at the time of his death. Ledgers would be most useful in this respect, but for most farmers we do not have ledgers.

This is a problem that merits consideration because we do not know how quickly younger farmers may have acquired their capital equipment, whether bought or inherited from their fathers, or whether older farmers may have disposed of some of their assets as they became too old to work their farms and approached death. Whether any inventory represents the actual wealth of any farmer would depend to a great extent upon the suddenness of his death and his position in life.

On a lesser scale, the time of a farmer's death within the farming year would also influence our perception of his financial position. A farmer who died before harvest-time might have had many debts outstanding, so many, in fact, that his estate might have been declared 'insolvent'. On the other hand, a farmer who died after the harvest might have had an estate that appeared to be in rather good financial condition.

The above describes my strategy and the limitations under which I labored. My tactics very simply consisted of plodding through Volume 7 of the probate records, reading the inventories of estates. I chose this method because it was convenient and representative. It was convenient because my aim was merely to identify some of the poorer

farmers; if I had sought to identify specific individuals, I would have needed to (1) look up the exact dates of death and (2) deal with the indices from numerous volumes. The method was, of course, not representative in any statistical sense, but we can say that Volume 7 (January, 1800 to June, 1803) gives us a good 'slice of death'. This assumes that death struck the population randomly, and that poorer farmers weren't dying off faster than richer farmers during the period 1800-1803, but that appears to be a reasonable assumption. Another advantage to using this particular period was that tax, census, and freeman lists were readily available.

The following is a list of individuals whom I feel reasonably certain were small and medium-sized farmers. A few, such as John Ward, may appear to be wealthy when compared with the others, so I have included Isaac Miller in the list for the purposes of further comparison. All inventory material is derived from Volume 7 of the probate records, with the exception of Miller's, which comes from Volume 2.

Thomas Ward - Inventory, page 19. Total estate - \$4286

buildings and 140 acres land - \$3888

livestock - \$133

enfranchised: April 13, 1778

1800 tax list: sons appear on Newfield and Straddle Hill

list (the estate had, apparently, already been divided by the time taxes were reckoned).

Nathanael Ranney, page 99 Total estate - \$1207

buildings and approximately 22.5 acres land - \$878

livestock - \$32

enfranchised- name does not appear

tax list: North society \$13.59 (Ranney's estate)

John White, page 167. Total estate - \$4085

buildings - \$500

119.5 acres land - \$3029

livestock - \$99

enfranchised - name does not appear

tax list: North society \$156.75

Ruth Hawley, page 219. Total estate - \$2060

41 acres land - \$1285

livestock - \$49

notes (credits) - \$511

tax list - Middlefield \$51.88

Manoah Hubbard, page 226. Total estate - \$1309

(insolvent, page 216)

buildings - \$207

32.5 acres land - \$673

Livestock - \$72

enfranchised: September 21, 1779

tax list: Maromas \$152.75

(possibly a fisherman on the side - mention of a 'fish place' in Chatham.)

William Johnson, page 251. Total estate - \$1269

buildings and 42 acres land - \$1010

livestock - \$118

enfranchised - September 16, 1783

tax list: South Farm \$64.27

Aaron White, page 315. Total estate - \$5258

buildings - \$626

105 acres land - \$4089

livestock - \$368

enfranchised - September 16, 1777

tax list: North Society \$372.60

Lemuel Sage, page 363. Total estate \$2920

buildings - \$345

76 acres land - \$2017

livestock - \$171

enfranchised: September 21, 1801

tax list: North Society \$172.35

Caleb Hubbard, page 375. Total estate \$1707

buildings - \$202

82 acres land - \$164

enfranchised: September 21, 1801

tax list: South Farm \$158.50

(there was mention of a shop, so Hubbard probably engaged in some other activity in addition to farming.)

John Ward, page 435. Total estate - \$8547

buildings and 290 acres land - \$8074

livestock - \$59

enfranchised: September 16, 1777

tax list: Long Hill \$257.97

(Ward had a great number of carpentry and leather-working tools, and also quite an extensive set of farm implements.)

Jonathan Thayer, page 471. Total estate \$2665

buildings - \$110

219 acres land - \$1997

livestock - \$155

enfranchised: name does not appear

tax list: Maromas \$135.79

Isaac Miller 11:271.5 Total estate \$30,462

buildings - \$1702

land - \$12,502

livestock - \$506

1800 tax list: Middlefield \$524.67

Census Data 1800

	Males					Females					Free blacks
	UNDER 10	10-15	16-25	26-44	45+	UNDER 10	10-15	16-25	26-44	45+	
Hawley	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	2	
Johnson	1	2	-	-	1	1	1	1	-	1	
Hubbard, C.	1	1	3	-	1	-	1	1	-	1	
Miller, I.	-	1	-	-	1	-	1	2	-	1	
Ranney	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	1	2	1	
Hubbard, M.	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	1	-	1	
Thayer	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	
White, J.	-	-	2	3	1	-	-	1	-	4	
White, A.	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	1

(Thomas Ward was already dead when the census was taken.  
Lemuel Sage and John Ward do not appear.)



Without making gross generalizations (which would indeed be gross on the basis of so small a sample), I should like to make a few observations.

Ruth Hawley's farm becomes suspect when we see that there were only two old women and a younger woman to work it. Unless they hired help or got some form of outside assistance, it seems improbable that the estate could have been farmed.

The fact that a free black resided in the Aaron White household suggests that White and his wife were old and well enough off to incur whatever expenses were involved in the employment of a servant.

If we look at the ages of the children in the census, it appears that the group as a whole was not that young. There are, for instance, only three children under the age of ten. The 45-plus columns, however, are relatively full.

The most salient thing about the information I have provided from the inventories is how much wealth is locked up in buildings, land, and livestock. In most cases, the greatest part of the farmers' wealth has been invested in these categories.

Further comment would not be justified on the basis of such a small group of people. The method I employed was tedious but productive on the small scale on which it was carried out. The crux of my argument remains that small and

medium-sized farmers should not and need not remain anonymous. There is much valuable information in estate inventories, although they must be used very carefully. A more extensive examination of these inventories, combined with a careful cross-referencing with other documentary materials, would, I think, give us enough data to make or break generalizations about the farming class.

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