

Households and Markets: Toward a New Synthesis of American Agrarian History

Allan Kulikoff

THREE-FOURTHS or more of early Americans of European and African descent lived in the countryside and worked on farms or plantations. Until recently, their stories as farmers or farmhands have rarely been told. Agricultural historians analyzed crop production, land and commodity markets, settlement and credit; social historians described family life and community institutions in villages, often without mentioning farming.¹ After a fallow period during the 1960s and 1970s, when little innovative agrarian history was published, the past decade has brought a renaissance in the study of agrarian life, with a profusion of studies ranging from the colonial era through the nineteenth century. These studies are both rural—dealing with the societies farmers made—and agricultural—treating farm production, seasonal cycles, the market for farm products, and the world economy. They have uncovered in rich detail the lives of farm families, the ecologies they found and made, the social ideals they sustained, the cooperation and struggles between husbands and wives they enjoyed and suffered, their agricultural work routines and leisure activities, their churches and farm associations.²

This literature resists synthesis. Agrarian history is so divided by topic, epoch, and region that the patterns of development (even within regions) are obscured. The new agrarian history is diffuse, for many of the key

Mr. Kulikoff is a member of the Department of History, Northern Illinois University. He was a Fellow of the Institute of Early American History and Culture from 1975 to 1977. He would like to thank Stanley Engerman, Russell R. Menard, James Merrell, Sean Shesgreen, and Xie Lihong for comments on an earlier version of this essay.

¹ Classic agricultural histories include Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, 2 vols. (Washington, D. C., 1933), Paul W. Gates, *Landlords and Tenants on the Prairie Frontier: Studies in American Land Policy* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1973), and Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Cornbelt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1963). The Gates and Bogue volumes were culminations of earlier innovative work.

² See, for instance, essays in Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1985), and Lou Ferleger, ed., *Agriculture and National Development: Views on the Nineteenth Century* (Ames, Iowa, 1990); Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, *To Their Own Soil: Agriculture in the Antebellum North* (Ames, Iowa, 1987); Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1989); and Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1986).

works are local or subregional studies that inevitably slight regional and international economic trends. Even though agrarian historians seldom look outside their own time periods, understanding the *longue durée* is fundamental to understanding any particular era. Western settlers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for instance, experienced economic, demographic, and social challenges that their colonial predecessors had faced.³

The metaphors historians have used to explicate agrarian history—colonial and antebellum eras, the market, the frontier, and community—are incomplete and imprecise. We think of such terms as convenient labels or as analytical categories rather than as metaphors. But like metaphors they evoke comparisons beyond themselves. “Colonial,” for instance, conjures up images of isolated white settlements, Indian wars, fervent—if intellectual—religiosity. These terms have become part of the shorthand historians use almost unconsciously to sort material and thereby structure research, addressing certain issues while sidestepping others. To show how agrarian historians’ metaphors fail to be at once rural and agricultural we will analyze each term—period labels, the market, frontier, community—as metaphor. Then, we will suggest that the metaphor “households and markets” is a superior formulation and show how it can periodize agrarian history.

Our labels for time periods—this or that century, colonial, Revolutionary, antebellum, postbellum—are perhaps our most invidious metaphors. Periods raise barriers; historians choose a period and rarely look before or after, except to make short summaries. Standard periods, linked to events in political history, impede understanding of change. Rural historians, beginning at different times, tell the same story of raw frontiers and developing communities, of declension from communalism or the imposition of order, of the rise of the market and the growth of wage labor. If farmers in antebellum Pennsylvania, for instance, participated in a market revolution, then by implication the market was unimportant in earlier times. Such a period-based argument distorts the growth of commercial agriculture in eighteenth-century Pennsylvania as well as the way the market shaped colonial New England fisheries or Chesapeake tobacco plantations. Until we overcome the barriers of traditional periods, we will never learn how wage labor grew or when the market engulfed the nation. Beginning with the discrete data of economic, social, and demographic history, we ought to be able to create a new set of periods, calibrated to regional differences and linked to patterns of change.⁴

“The market” has been a powerful metaphor in the history of American

³ John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1985), and Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* (Charlottesville, Va., 1992), synthesize early American agrarian history, albeit from very different perspectives.

⁴ For similar comments on periodization see P.M.G. Harris, “The Social Origins of American Leaders: The Demographic Foundations,” *Perspectives in American History*, III (1969), 159–344.

farming. Farmers, after all, have always required a vent for surplus crops. Markets were ubiquitous in early America; every farm community had one, even those distant from highways or rivers. But the market implies far more than the existence of marketplaces where people exchange carpentry for corn or wheat for cotton. It conjures up an economic system in which supply and demand determine the price farmers get for corn or cotton, a system in which international markets drive decisions individual farmers make about what to grow. The metaphor presumes that commercial (even capitalist) agriculture arrived with the first European immigrants and that farmers still outside the market were merely waiting for the building of canals or railroads to open their way to the world market. The market interpretation of agrarian history is defective in that it ignores the yearning of many English migrants, as well as that of their descendants who moved west, to practice safety-first agriculture by ensuring subsistence before selling small surpluses at local markets. Their success at keeping capitalist relations of production at bay for centuries is one of the enduring stories of American agrarian history. As we shall see, we should rethink the market metaphor, in the light of community norms and household needs.⁵

For more than a century, the metaphor of the frontier stood at the center of agrarian history. "Frontier" evokes images of men (but rarely women) transformed by the wilderness, of savagery and civilization, of defeated Indians and embattled but victorious settlers. Many historians, understanding the resonance of "frontier," want to abandon it entirely, replacing it with the West as a region, with images of racial conflict and eventual conquest of the Indians on the contested "middle ground," of the preservation of ancient cultures within the multiethnic societies made by European immigration and conquest.⁶

Early American historians often substitute images of cultural continuities between England, Germany, or Africa and the English colonies for frontier transformation. The colonists, David Hackett Fischer argues, carried "Albion's seed" with them, remaking families, villages, and churches similar to those left behind, sustaining patterns later emigrants emulated. Settlers responded to a cold climate or thick woods, but they managed to wear furs like Indians and destroy forests while retaining their culture. "Albion's seed" powerfully organizes vast quantities of data, yet it also slides by the social conflicts that the frontier metaphor *does* evoke.

⁵ Jean-Christophe Agnew, "The Threshold of Exchange: Speculations on the Market," *Radical History Review*, No. 21 (1979), 99-118; Kulikoff, "The Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XLVI (1989), 122-132; Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1978).

⁶ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York, 1987), esp. 17-32, and Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence, Kan., 1991), are prominent examples; for the middle ground see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York, 1991).

Any agrarian history of cultural continuities ought to place the response of colonists to both the environment and the aboriginal inhabitants at center stage. Albion's seed must become Albion's encounter.⁷

The idea of a frontier stage of settlement persists even when the word is excised. Indians understood that the settlement of white frontiers brought racial warfare and final subjugation. Conquest of Indian lands opened up millions of acres to cultivation by Europeans; taking up land on the frontier remained a central experience for rural Americans of European descent through the early twentieth century. As soldiers and squatters expelled Indians and settlers rushed in, migrant after migrant filled the land with farms and built pressure to confiscate yet more Indian fields and hunting grounds. Rather than abandon the term, we need to place it in a new context, one that emphasizes how struggles between squatter and Indian, wage laborer and farmer, and farmer and urban capitalist shaped the frontier landscape.⁸

Studies of villages or counties, framed around the metaphor of community, have proliferated during the past few decades, showing complex patterns of social interaction among neighbors, friends, and kin. But this metaphor transcends social networks, evoking a social group, based on geography, that required adherence by all who lived within its bounds to the cultural values, beliefs, and norms about religion or leisure, farming or just prices that it instilled. Communal institutions—parish churches, town meetings, county courts—nurtured these values and norms while requiring dissenters to conform or leave. Although the genre of community history has added valuable insights about rural America, its emphasis on the development or breakdown of communal consensus precludes analysis of class relations within communities. The metaphor of community, moreover, limits discussion of everything outside the bounds of the communal institutions these historians examine. Much is left out—the market for agricultural goods, the role of the state (whether colony, state, or national government) in agriculture, the economic activities of farm households—that demands the attention of agrarian historians.⁹

⁷ Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York, 1989), is only the most prominent of these works. Jack P. Greene, Virginia DeJohn Anderson, James Horn, Barry Levy, Ned C. Landsman, and Fischer, "Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America—A Symposium," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XLVIII (1991), 223–308, is a thorough critique and response to that volume. For environmental history see Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions*, and William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York, 1983).

⁸ Kulikoff, *Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism*, chap. 7; White, *Middle Ground*; James H. Merrell, *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1989). In dealing with settlers, one inevitably slights cooperation between Indians and whites in the fur trade.

⁹ Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town, the First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636–1736* (New York, 1970), and Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1970), remain classics of the genre. For a pioneering cultural interpretation of communal institutions see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790*

If we are to understand the place of the colonies and new nation in rural development, we need a more complete metaphor, one that encompasses the farm (and the gender division of farm labor) and the rural community, the local marketplace and the world economy, the sweep of American history and the importance of particular periods and regions within it. The metaphor "markets and households" embraces many of these concerns. Many of the new agrarian historians have examined the relationship between markets and households without placing it at the center of their analysis. Markets and households vividly evokes the history of farms and farmers. It links the daily work of farm families at home and in the community to broader economic exchanges, local, regional, and international. The relation between market and household has a history, with a beginning at colonization or European occupation of frontiers; a middle encompassing complex struggles over farm organization that stretched, in different places, from the mid-eighteenth century onward; and an end—the near disappearance of a farm-based rural society—in the second third of the twentieth century. At the same time, it transcends particular times and places, at least before the mid-twentieth century, for farmers (whether located near a bustling city like Chicago or on the slope of a Colorado mountain) searched for household independence (and subsistence production) in the face of increasing calls from commodity markets. Even capitalist farmers, who avidly followed commodity markets, hired wage laborers, and bought expensive reapers, continued to grow much of the family's food. This continued subsistence production within the household and the direct experience of farm families with commodity markets distinguish the relation between household and market in farming regions from that in cities, where men and unmarried women increasingly worked for wages and bought, rather than made, products.¹⁰

From the outset of European settlement, the world market played a major role in American agrarian development. Merchant capital, hoping to make profits from colonial staples, financed migration to the colonies. The first European immigrants to the English North American colonies came, in part, to make independent households, thereby escaping the

(Chapel Hill, N. C., 1982). Darrett B. Rutman makes a searing critique of these kinds of community studies in "Assessing the Little Communities of Early America," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XLIII (1986), 163–178, and he and Anita H. Rutman propose defining community exclusively in terms of social networks in *A Place in Time: Middlesex County, Virginia, 1650–1750* (New York, 1984), esp. chap. 4.

¹⁰ Nineteenth-century historians have completed the most impressive works implicitly or explicitly examining this question. See especially Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1988); Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions*, pt. 2; Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1990); and Joan M. Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750–1850* (New Haven, Conn., 1986). Within colonial history, Lois Green Carr, Russell R. Menard, and Lorena S. Walsh, *Robert Cole's World: Agriculture and Society in Early Maryland* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1991), is a first-rate exception.

debased wage labor spread by the development of capitalism in the homeland. But every farm family in colonial America, even if not producing tobacco or rice, had to sell surpluses to ensure the perpetuation of its household and was consequently tied to world markets. The poorest northern farmers traded at local markets, and some of the goods they sold wound up in the West Indies or Europe. Southern tobacco and rice planters, whether rich owners or poor tenants, were so tied to commodity markets that their year-to-year survival depended upon decent prices for their staples.¹¹

Yeoman farmers who produced small surpluses required credit to buy and cultivate the land that was the basis of their precarious autonomy. When English merchant capitalists (in whose hands credit originated) called in loans to Boston or Dedham merchants in times of world recession (like the late seventeenth century), local farmers could not find capital to expand and had to make do with small plots. When times improved, farmers moved to more promising frontiers. Farmers could lose their land when prices for corn dropped or credit dried up. To maintain secure title over their lands, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century yeoman farmers repeatedly battled (sometimes violently) with the representatives of English and later American capital—creditors, bankers, land speculators, or railroad operators.¹²

The market, especially international commodity markets, played an increasing role in northern agriculture. New markets for wheat in Europe and England (as well as the growth of West Indian demand) encouraged farmers in the Delaware Valley to grow grain for export (after milling it into flour). As cities grew in the new nation, more and more farmers, in such areas as western New York and the Midwest, turned to providing urban markets with fruit, vegetables, butter, and meat. Far from simply disposing of surpluses, these farmers allocated most of their time to producing those crops in highest demand. By the late nineteenth century, when fully integrated world commodity markets began to appear, northern farmers had become accustomed to market production and sent hundreds of millions of bushels of grain overseas each year.¹³

Household activities mediated market forces in unpredictable ways. A household is best defined as a unit that pools income and allocates tasks to ensure its own survival. The commodification of everything—the result

¹¹ See McCusker and Menard, *Economy of British America*.

¹² For instance, see Edward Countryman, "‘Out of the Bounds of the Law’: Northern Land Rioters in the Eighteenth Century," in Alfred F. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, Ill., 1976.), 37–69; Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York, 1986); Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development* (Washington, D. C., 1968); and Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York, 1976).

¹³ McCusker and Menard, *Economy of British America*, chaps. 5–9; Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991), esp. chaps. 3–5; Harriet Friedmann, "Simple Commodity Production and Wage Labour in the American Plains," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, VI (1978–1979), 71–100.

that complete hegemony in the market would bring—reduced but failed to eliminate the subsistence activities of farm households, at least until the middle of the twentieth century. Farmers remained janus-faced, looking backward to subsistence and the perpetuation of their farms and forward to the market exchange that made agriculture possible. Tension, even conflict, within families resulted, as farm women and men struggled with the effect their market decisions had on their daily labor. Women and men worked in households to support their families, dividing tasks in ways compatible with their perceived roles in life. Men usually cleared land and cultivated the grain, tobacco, cotton, or rice sold in the market; they were joined by their wives and daughters at harvest time. While men labored in the fields, women cultivated gardens, milked cows, baked bread, plucked chickens, and cooked meat. Even in a world of expanding commodity production, subsistence activities of farm women—clothes making, for instance—persisted. The wealthiest southern planters sought self-sufficiency in food and on occasion in cloth; large-scale Midwestern wheat farmers grew much of their own food and kept cows and chickens to provide the household with butter and eggs. Southerners considered late-nineteenth-century sharecroppers debased precisely because they were forced to buy nearly all their food.¹⁴

Until the mid-twentieth century, the household remained the fundamental productive unit in American agriculture. Not only did resident farm families produce nearly all the crops sold at market, but household labor provided most of the work necessary to grow crops. Parents and children worked the farms, aided on occasion by a servant, hired hand, harvest laborer, or slave. Southern slaves, who made most of the tobacco and cotton that planters exported, were subordinate members of the households of their masters, unable to make independent decisions about work and production. Extensive use of wage labor appealed to few farmers except the mid-nineteenth-century bonanza wheat growers and fruit farmers in California and the Great Plains.¹⁵

Farmers attempted to structure the market to meet the needs of their households. Every decision they made aimed at acquiring a sufficiency, sustaining the farm as a productive unit, and saving money to set their

¹⁴ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, chap. 1, presents a finely tuned theoretical introduction to the issue. This is contested terrain; for views that differ in emphasis from mine see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Housewife and Gadder: Themes of Self-Sufficiency and Community in Eighteenth-Century New England," in Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton, eds., *To Toil the Livelong Day: America's Women at Work, 1780-1980* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1987), 21-34; Clark, *Roots of Rural Capitalism*; Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds*; Nancy Grey Osterud, *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1991); and Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (Cambridge, 1977).

¹⁵ Daniel Vickers, "Working the Fields in a Developing Economy: Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630-1675," in Stephen Innes, ed. *Work and Labor in Early America* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1988), 49-69; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*; Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1981).

children up on farms of their own. Northern (and later Midwestern) farmers, for instance, attended to market demand for their products but ultimately chose to produce grain or raise hogs or cattle that could be used for family subsistence as well. Until the late nineteenth-century, substantial market opportunities abounded in settled areas, especially in the hinterlands of towns and cities. Even poor men might lease land in these areas and make a good living selling at nearby city markets. Yet hundreds of thousands of farmers chose to procure frontier lands recently taken from Indians rather than rent eastern land. As market opportunities opened up, frontier households could build farms for themselves and their children or take advantage of the growing capital gains on lands they improved to purchase even larger farms further west. A few families did rent land in the century before the Civil War, especially in areas around cities, but they may have done so in order to build capital to buy their own farms. Tenancy and sharecropping, uncommon in the North before 1860 (about one-twelfth of farms behind the frontier), became more common after the Civil War, encompassing about a fifth of northern and close to half of southern farms.¹⁶

The metaphor of markets and households, then, raises major historical questions, focusing interest on daily life on the farm and the responses of farm families to the demands of commodity markets. The relation between the market and the household evolved within specific communities, located in particular regions, affected by political, social, and cultural imperatives and by the development of world capitalism. When embedded in the history of class and gender relations and of capitalism in particular communities, the metaphor not only documents the direction of economic change but points toward the ways farmers understood what they were doing and how successful they were in challenging the increasing control of the market and the capitalists who ran it.¹⁷

The relationship between market and household was class and gender specific. Only landowning farm operators (and cash tenants to a lesser extent) could make independent decisions (constrained by demands of the market) about farm labor, production, and trade. Not surprisingly, small farm owners dominated most antitax or anticapitalist farm movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Given the inability of farm wives to make contracts or hold property, they had to acquiesce in decisions

¹⁶ Vickers, "Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in Early America," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XLVII (1990), 3-29; Lucy Simler, "Tenancy in Colonial Pennsylvania: The Case of Chester County," *ibid.*, XLIII (1986), 542-569; Atack, "The Agricultural Ladder Revisited: A New Look at an Old Question with Some Data for 1860," *Agricultural History*, LXIII (Winter 1989), 1-25; Atack and Bateman, *To Their Own Soil*, 110; Fred A. Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier: Agriculture, 1860-1897* (New York, 1945), 418.

¹⁷ For debates over the origins of capitalism in Europe and America see Rodney Hilton, ed., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London, 1976); T. H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge, 1985); and Kulikoff, "Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," 120-144.

their husbands made. Farmer or farm wife directed the labor of hired hands on yearly contracts. Wage laborers possessed an unmediated relation to the market: they worked for a wage that they then used to feed and clothe their families. Any relation slaves had to the market was mediated through their master's household, their occasional exchange of commodities with whites notwithstanding. Over-reliance on the metaphor of households and markets obscures endemic conflicts between farm husbands and wives, farmers and harvest laborers, or masters and slaves.¹⁸

Communities mediated between households and markets. Farm families depended on neighbors for economic survival. On frontiers, neighbors helped neighbors build houses, raise barns, break sod, and harvest crops. Such cooperation continued long after the frontier stage had passed. Until the late nineteenth century, neighboring farmers—both men and women—exchanged labor and surpluses, raised barns, made quilts, purchased reapers together, and borrowed money from one another to expand their operations. To participate in such extensive exchanges, farmers had to accept communal norms concerning planting and harvest times, the division of labor between men and women, and farm management. The refusal of most farmers who lived on frontiers or in the South, far into the nineteenth century, to accept the methods of “book farming” found in agricultural newspapers attests to the strength of these communal norms.¹⁹ Chain migration by New Englanders or southerners, Germans or Scots to frontier regions heightened communal solidarity and made deviation from communal norms even more difficult.²⁰

Informal community life—market days, court days, county fairs, agricultural societies—brought new ideas about farming into rural communities. Creditors and buyers from distant places attended colonial market and court days, creating community networks of great importance in a time when the state played a weak role in the relation between markets and household. These ties strengthened in the nineteenth century, when voluntary associations induced greater market participation by farmers. Improving farmers displayed the fruits of their superior methods at nineteenth-century county fairs; and the wealthy members of agricultural societies (mostly located in long-settled communities) disseminated book farming, encouraging sometimes resisting farmers of lesser means to adopt

¹⁸ Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1986), chaps. 2–3; Carville V. Earle and Ronald Hoffman, “The Foundation of the Modern Economy: Agriculture and the Costs of Labor in the United States and England, 1800–60,” *American Historical Review*, LXXXV (1980), 1055–1094.

¹⁹ Michael Merrill, “Cash Is Good to Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States,” *Rad. Hist. Rev.*, IV (Winter 1977), 42–71; John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven, Conn., 1986), chaps. 13–16; Osterud, *Bonds of Community*, chaps. 9–12.

²⁰ Kulikoff, *Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism*, chap. 7; Robert C. Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted: The Trans-Atlantic Experience of a Swedish Immigrant Settlement in the Upper Middle West, 1835–1915* (Madison, Wis., 1988), chap. 4.

advanced agricultural techniques. Agricultural newspapers and societies, nonexistent before the Revolution, appeared soon thereafter and spread throughout the country by the 1830s or 1840s. These societies encouraged farm women to run efficient households, and ideas of domestic management permeated the county fair, where women as well as men showed their wares.²¹

The state had an increasing impact upon household and market. The economic policies that colonial vestries, justices, or legislators imposed limited the marketing of agricultural produce. Governments set tax rates, thereby potentially reducing farm household income. The state strengthened its control over farm production after the Revolution. Not only did state quality inspection of agricultural commodities—common in the colonies—persist, but states began to finance (through bond issues) or even build turnpikes, canals, and railroads. The growing willingness of taxpayers to finance or guarantee the construction of internal improvements increased access of farmers to distant markets. Without good transportation links, farmers seeking an outlet for surplus had to market easily transportable goods (like livestock, flour, or whiskey) rather than bulky products (like corn). When internal improvements were completed, farmers had to pay far more attention to the price and demand for all sorts of commodities.²²

The ways communities mediated between households and markets depended on the speed of capitalist transformation, and that, in turn, varied greatly from region to region. Although every part of early America was more or less integrated into the North Atlantic economy, farmers in different regions forged distinctive relationships between market and household. Planters in staple-producing regions of the colonial South cultivated tobacco or rice for distant markets, borrowed heavily to buy unfree laborers to raise larger crops, and only then worried about food production or household manufacture. At first, everyone in the Chesapeake colonies, white women included, struggled to make tobacco, but as the supply first of servants and later of slaves increased, white women withdrew from field labor to cultivate gardens, make clothes, or churn butter. The growth of subsistence production in the eighteenth-century South, then, required a ready supply of slaves who could make tobacco or rice as well as grow food, make cloth, and sew clothing for slaves in their spare time.²³ In contrast, most northern and southern backcountry farmers sold surpluses at local markets only after they had insured that their

²¹ Arthur Lowther Demaree, *The American Agricultural Press, 1819–1860* (New York, 1941); Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture, 1815–1860* (New York, 1960), chaps. 15–16.

²² George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815–1860* (New York, 1951), chaps. 3, 5; Peter Wallenstein, *From Slave South to New South: Public Policy in Nineteenth-Century Georgia* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1987), esp. chaps. 2–5; Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, chap. 2.

²³ McCusker and Menard, *Economy of British America*, chaps. 6, 8, 14; Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, chaps. 2–4, 10; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, chap. 1.

families had food and clothing. Since they relied almost exclusively on family labor, they forged an intricate division of labor on the farm, with men responsible for most market production and women for subsistence production. Lacking sufficient labor even to approximate self-sufficiency, these farmers created extensive systems of local exchange of goods and labor, sustaining a substantial home market for farm products and for goods made by local artisans or by farmers skilled in crafts.²⁴

Just as staple agriculture expanded to cotton-producing areas of the post-Revolutionary South, the safety-first "borrowing" system spread to the Midwest and the mountain South. But capitalist agriculture, with its emphasis on wage labor and market production, grew at the same time, especially in the rural Northeast and Midwest close to cities. The change from a safety-first system to capitalist agriculture was gradual. Middling farmers (such as those in southeastern Pennsylvania in the mid-eighteenth century) responded to strong demand from nearby cities or Europe by changing to more specialized agriculture, sending wheat to Europe or vegetables, hay, or butter to Philadelphia. To satisfy these urban demands, they cut down their subsistence production, thus increasing their need for manufactured cloth or candles and changing the division of labor on the farm. Farm women gradually took up such commercial activities as selling butter to city folk. Influenced by ideals of urban domesticity, they spent more time nurturing children and managing their household budgets.²⁵

The development of capitalist agriculture created fertile ground for conflict, both within northern capitalist societies and between the capitalist North and the anticapitalist South. Just as western yeoman farmers competed with speculators to buy federal acreage at the lowest price, small capitalist farmers organized against big capitalist creditors or railroad owners who they believed threatened their status as independent businessmen. As farmers in the North became small capitalists and subscribed to the new ideology of free labor, southern farmers and planters found themselves increasingly isolated.²⁶

The market and household metaphor thus provides new insight into the dynamics of American agrarian history, permitting speculation about a new periodization for change in rural America. Such speculation is essential if we are to make progress in writing the history of rural society in early America. Only when we see the whole chronological picture, starting

²⁴ For examples, see Faragher, *Sugar Creek*, chaps. 9–16; Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (New York, 1983), chaps. 1–3.

²⁵ Paul G. E. Clemens and Simler, "Rural Labor and the Farm Household in Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1750–1820," in Innes, ed., *Work and Labor in Early America*, 106–143; Thomas M. Doerflinger, "Farmers and Dry Goods in the Philadelphia Market Area, 1750–1800," in Hoffman, McCusker, Menard, and Peter J. Albert, eds., *The Economy of Early America: The Revolutionary Period, 1763–1790* (Charlottesville, Va., 1988), 166–195; Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds*.

²⁶ Kulikoff, *Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism*, chap. 3; Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South*, 2d ed. (Middletown, Conn., 1989); Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*.

in early modern England and ending in the mid-twentieth century, can we devise effective strategies for examining ties between market and household in early America. That relation should be seen dialectically, as farm families balanced dependence on markets with independent subsistence. From the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth, communities modeled on European prototypes probably experienced three successive relations between farm households and the market: a fortress period of heavy dependence upon outsiders for subsistence; the development of surplus and commercial agriculture; and the spread of capitalist agriculture. Ultimately, during the twentieth century, household subsistence activities disappeared and nearly all farmers moved into greater dependency upon the state.

The earliest settlers in Virginia and New England proved unable to achieve communal self-sufficiency in food. English merchant capital, seeking profitable staples, encouraged colonists to make only those commodities that could be sold. At first, New England fishing outposts and the tobacco colonies attracted few women; women in the Chesapeake, moreover, worked in the tobacco fields beside the men. With few craftsmen among their number and little time to produce food, colonists depended on English manufacturers for virtually everything they used and often on Indians for their food. These fortress outposts developed into more self-sufficient farming communities rapidly in New England, but they lasted for several decades in the South. This dependency may well have been repeated in every new settlement whites began from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century, but as transportation improved and surpluses in older settlements increased, this stage grew ever shorter.²⁷

Farmers in every colony eventually reduced their dependence on England or local Indians. They created, as we have seen, systems of staple agriculture in the South and surplus farming in the North. No matter where they lived, farmers all sought communal self-sufficiency, at least in food production, sustaining subsistence activities for women. Yeoman classes—predicated on widespread land ownership, male legal supremacy and a language of male independence, and systems of local exchange—appeared everywhere in the eighteenth century, and that class later reinvented itself in the upcountry South and the Midwest.²⁸

Capitalist agriculture—characterized by full participation in commodity markets, reduction of familial and communal self-sufficiency, hiring of wage labor, female outwork in farm homes, and purchase of agricultural machinery—began in the mid- to late eighteenth century in the rural hinterlands of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. The American Revolution and the Constitution, with its emphasis upon individualism and economic development, thrust other farmers in the Northeast into the production of commodities for capitalist markets. The competitive, small-

²⁷ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975), chaps. 1–6, remains the best extended study.

²⁸ Kulikoff, *Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism*, chaps. 2, 3, 5.

scale capitalism of the first half of the nineteenth century may have strengthened links between subsistence and market production. Farm men turned more and more to market production; farm women worked their gardens but increasingly traded goods like butter or eggs at nearby farmers' markets, providing a measure of security in times of low farm prices. The growth of monopoly capital after the Civil War thrust ever more farmers into international cotton or wheat markets. Southern merchants, controlled by large northern finance capitalists, had little choice but to enforce crop liens against sharecroppers, black and white; northern farmers suffered from what they felt were unfair railroad rates and took out mortgages that bankers might call in times of poor prices.²⁹

During the twentieth century, the intricate relationship between market and household disintegrated everywhere. As agriculture grew more efficient with the diffusion of gas-powered agricultural machines and monopoly capitalists (through their control over credit and transportation) impoverished the least efficient operators, more and more farmers deserted the land to seek greater opportunities in cities. The declining farm population made the reciprocal borrowing system farmers had long enjoyed ever more difficult to sustain. Populists and other agrarian radicals had wanted the state to support them in their conflicts with monopoly capitalists, and in the middle of the Great Depression the federal government instituted price supports, crop reduction, crop inspection, and loans to insolvent landowners. This new dependency upon the state increased over the second half of the twentieth century, mandating rules that discouraged subsistence production. By the 1950s, farm wives bought food at grocery stores and took jobs away from the farm home, much like their city cousins.³⁰

Research on the relation between households and markets in early America is still rudimentary. Work on the colonial North emphasizes how households operated but slights the market; historians of the early South, in contrast, emphasize the market but slight the household. Historians must look more closely at households and markets together. Given how slowly the relation between the two changed, long-term studies are essential, especially ones that break the traditional chronological bounds of early American history and extend forward into and even through the nineteenth century. A study of the Philadelphia hinterland, for instance, focusing on the role of the urban market in changing the household division of labor and the ways farm households shaped urban markets, should stretch from the early eighteenth century to the early twentieth. Or one might plumb the subtle changes in gender roles in southern Maryland from the late seventeenth century to the present, analyzing the impact of English merchant capital, the Revolution, the growth of Washington and

²⁹ Ibid., 43–57; Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, chaps. 6–9.

³⁰ Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*; Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920–1960* (Baton Rouge, La., 1987), chaps. 2, 8–9; Deborah Fink, *Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition, and Change* (Albany, N. Y., 1986).

Baltimore markets, shifting forms of tobacco consumption, and changes in state intervention.

Early America holds a central place in the development of relations between household and market. Colonists set patterns that persisted for centuries. Building on visions of an ideal English freeholder society, colonial migrants managed their households to avoid wage labor and complete market dependence. While southern plantations were more commercial than northern farms, all early American farmers shared the goal of local self-sufficiency. The staple- and small surplus-producing farms they created survived for more than a century after the Revolution, perhaps because of the strong interdependence within the household that they mandated. The market activities of farm men provided income to procure necessities, decencies, and maybe a few luxuries and amenities; the subsistence activities of white women ensured the farm's survival through hard times. Farmers in a few places in the North took hesitant steps toward more capitalist agriculture and a new division of labor, but the absolute dependency on commodity markets and state so characteristic of present-day American agriculture was nowhere apparent.