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Ariel Ron
aron@smu.edu

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SUMMONING THE STATE

Northern Farmers and the Transformation of
American Politics in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

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Ariel Ron

Yale Center for the Study of

Representative Institutions

ariel.ron@yale.edu

ABSTRACT

A vast agricultural reform movement emerged in the northeastern countryside during the antebellum era. The massive popularity of state and county agricultural fairs, starting in the late 1840s, formed the most visible manifestation of this phenomenon, while the earlier rise of an independent agricultural press formed its essential precondition. Surprisingly, historians have paid relatively little attention either to the social determinants or to the political consequences of the agricultural reform movement. Socially, the movement was rooted in a set of economic conditions and the thick print and associational networks characteristic of what I call the “Greater Northeast.” This article thus offers a friendly corrective to the recent historiography’s overemphasis on the connections between agricultural reform and modernizing southern slaveholders. Politically, the movement had complicated effects. On the one hand, agricultural reformers pioneered a mode of nonpartisan lobbying that led directly to the creation of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and to passage of the Morrill Land Grant Act, two landmarks in nineteenth-century American state formation. The story thus runs counter to the long-standing “party period” framework, which cannot account for these important policy innovations. On the other hand, and despite nonpartisanship, the movement’s dissemination of the discourse of “scientific agriculture” and natural-science education tilted the political playing field in favor of the Republican Party, thus contributing to the sectional crisis of the 1850s on the basis of rural development policy, not just free labor. This article therefore argues (1) that agricultural reform was a major social movement in mid-century America which deserves scholarly attention; (2) that it pioneered an incipient restructuring of the American state and political structure along the lines of administrative bureaucracy and interest-group politics; (3) that it nevertheless interacted in decisive ways with the party system; (4) and, finally, that it points the way toward broadening our category of social movements to include not only oppositional and moral reform movements, but what might be called state-allied or state-constructive movements.

SUMMONING THE STATE

Northern Farmers and the Transformation of American Politics in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

In September 1849 the population of Syracuse briefly quintupled. “Every street and public place was literally crammed with human beings,” a local paper reported. The New York State Agricultural Society’s annual fair had come to town. Accounts of the event invariably marveled at the incredible number of people, which likely topped a hundred thousand. In the Society’s triumphant boast, it was “a representation, almost by their individual presence, of the farmers of the State” (Figure 1).¹

One such farmer, Benjamin Gue, left his home on September 10 and walked eight miles to Canandaigua, where he boarded train cars “crowded as full as they could be.” Nearer to Syracuse, he observed a canal boat that was “a complete jam,” not “a spot on deck or below.” At last he arrived, disgorged into “one dense mass of human beings” that stretched “as far as the eye could reach.” Then, he entered the fairgrounds and was amazed: “Words will fail to describe the dazzling splendor and unsurpassed beauty and ingenuity here displayed” (Figure 2).²

But Gue was just a farm boy, not even twenty-one. What did he know of the world? Surely someone more sophisticated would be less easily impressed. Take Horace Greeley, born on a poor New Hampshire farm but by 1849 the most famous newspaper editor in America. Greeley made the New York *Tribune* into a leading publication thanks to canny media sense, a prodigious range of social interests, and the raw power of steam-press technology. Presumably he had seen a thing or two. Yet the Syracuse fair left him positively stupefied. “After passing three or four hours in wandering among and gazing at this bewildering mass of

Ariel Ron is a postdoctoral fellow at the Yale Center for the Study of Representative Institutions and assistant professor of history at Southern Methodist University. For helpful comments and research tips, he would like to thank Robin Einhorn, Brian DeLay, David Henkin, Richard Walker, Cathy Matson, James N. Green, Stephen Meardon, Richard John, Daniel Immerwahr, Corey Brooks, Emily Pawley, Dael Norwood, Caitlin Rosenthal and the reviewers of this article. For generous financial assistance, he thanks the Program in Early American Economy and Society at the Library Company of Philadelphia, the McNeil Center for Early American Studies, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, and the Jack Miller Center for Teaching America’s Founding Principles and History.

¹ *Literary Union*, Sep. 22, 1849, p. 394; *American Agriculturist*, 8 (Oct. 1849), 300; *New York Daily Tribune*, Sep. 17, 1849, p. 2; *Transactions of the New York State Agricultural Society*, 9 (1850), 12.

² Benjamin Gue, *Diary of Benjamin F. Gue in Rural New York and Pioneer Iowa, 1847-1856*, ed. Earle D. Ross (Ames, 1962), 51-52.

Live Stock, Implements, Farm Produce, Inventions, &c.,” he wrote to his many readers, “I have brought away little more than a headache . . . and a more lively idea of that beneficent Future to which Industry is now hastening.” Others were just as astonished. The fair’s displays were “numberless,” “unsurpassed,” to be “estimated by acres.”³

Agricultural fairs were major events by the late 1840s, “justly looked upon as the most important gatherings of our citizens.” New York’s 1850 exhibition was even bigger than the 1849 one. Indiana’s 1851 state fair reprised events at Syracuse, the town of Lafayette suddenly peopled to overflowing. Pennsylvania’s fair in 1854 attracted a hundred-thousand visitors. Five years later a farmer named Oscar Jackson observed a train “presenting the appearance of a mass of human beings” on its way to the Ohio state fair at Zanesville. But the tens of thousands of fairgoers there could not diminish the crowds that same autumn at the exhibition of the United State Agricultural Society in Chicago, which featured more than forty enclosed acres, 150,000 square feet of roofed display space, two steam-powered presses, a telegraphic office, and \$20,000 in prizes for farm products and implements. Given the millions who would visit world’s fairs only a few decades later, the numbers are only moderately impressive in and of themselves. But the ways that contemporaries described mid-century agricultural exhibitions suggest a powerful subjective experience that lends them obvious significance.⁴

To gain further insight into that significance, consider another kind of event, seemingly of a different order entirely. A decade after the Syracuse fair, Congress narrowly approved the Morrill Land Grant Act over fierce southern opposition. James Buchanan vetoed the bill, but three years later, with southern Democrats out of Congress, Abraham Lincoln signed not only the Land Grant Act, but the bill creating the Department of Agriculture (USDA), laying the foundations for a soon-to-be massive governmental agricultural apparatus. By the end of the century, the USDA had grown into an agency of unprecedented regulatory and scientific scope. Together with the land-grant universities and the

³ New York *Weekly Tribune*, Sep. 22, 1849, p. 3; *American Agriculturist*, 8 (Oct. 1849), 300; Gue, *Diary of Benjamin F. Gue*, 52; *Ohio Cultivator*, 5 (Oct. 1849), 290-291 (emphasis in original).

⁴ *Cultivator*, 6 (Oct. 1849), 304; William M. Reser, “Indiana’s Second State Fair,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 32 (March 1936), 30-31; *Annual Report of the Transactions of the Pennsylvania State Agricultural Society* 1 (1851-1854), 36; David P. Jackson, ed., *The Colonel’s Diary: Journals Kept Before and During the Civil War by the Late Colonel Oscar L. Jackson, Sometime Commander of the 63rd Regiment O. V. I* ([Sharon, PA?], [1922?]), 11 (<https://archive.org/details/colonelsdiaryjou00jack>); Albert Lowther Demaree, *The American Agricultural Press, 1819-1860* (New York, 1941), 202.

agricultural experiment stations, it reshaped agricultural production in the United States and the world over.⁵

What was the connection between the proliferation of agricultural fairs, on the one hand, and the rise of federal power, on the other? Consider a third kind of still more distant event, the failed 1848 revolution in France. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx traced that failure to the French peasantry, whose reactionary tendencies he attributed to parochial isolation:

Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not form a class. They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interest in their own name.

Marx drove home the point with an ironically homespun insult: “the great mass of the French nation is formed by simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes.”⁶

Whatever the merits of this as history, as political sociology it remains instructive. American farmers were precisely *not* a sack of potatoes. They were instead a well-networked social formation open to political activation in ways we have not understood. That is what links Syracuse in 1849 to Washington DC in 1862—and separates it from Paris in 1851. The massive state fairs of the 1840s and 50s were the most visible expressions of an agricultural reform movement that swept large segments of rural America during the antebellum era, beginning and most emphatically in what I call the Greater Northeast (a term I explain below). Animated by the promise of “scientific agriculture,” the movement aligned a substantial portion of the country’s overwhelming rural majority behind

⁵ On the later significance of the USDA and land-grant universities, see Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, *Arresting Contagion: Science, Policy, and Conflicts over Animal Disease Control* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015); Alan L. Olmstead and Paul Webb Rhode, *Creating Abundance: Biological Innovation and American Agricultural Development* (Cambridge, Eng., 2008); Gabriel N. Rosenberg, *The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America* (forthcoming from University of Pennsylvania Press); Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015); Daniel P. Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862-1928* (Princeton, 2001); Adam D. Sheingate, *The Rise of the Agricultural Welfare State: Institutions and Interest Group Power in the United States, France, and Japan* (Princeton, 2001); Earle Dudley Ross, *Democracy’s College: The Land-Grant Movement in the Formative Stage* (Ames, 1942); Alan I. Marcus, *Agricultural Science and the Quest for Legitimacy: Farmers, Agricultural Colleges, and Experiment Stations, 1870-1890* (Ames, 1985).

⁶ Karl Marx, *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (London, 2001), 131. See also Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (London, 1977), 198, 245-247.

a program of agricultural education, research and development. It then summoned the state to meet its needs.

The agricultural reform movement stood apart from what we usually regard as nineteenth-century America's formal political system. Institutionally, it was largely independent of the parties. Ideologically, it claimed to transcend "politics" altogether. This means that an approach centered on political parties cannot explain the origins of the USDA and the land-grant universities, even though these exemplary "agents of change" appeared precisely at the zenith of what we often call the "party period." The parties do play a crucial supporting role here, but not the lead. That part is reserved instead for farmers' organizations, which stumbled onto a kind of nonpartisan anti-politics that was rhetorically predicated on "common-sense" public policy and substantially backed up with an extensive network of organized supporters. The outcome was an incipient restructuring of the American state along the lines of administrative bureaucracy and interest-group politics. Yet despite the reform movement's avowed nonpartisanship, its vision of "scientific agriculture" tilted the field in favor of the emerging Republican Party, suggesting that ideas about economic development—not just ideas about free labor—lay at the heart of the Republicans' appeal in the northern countryside.⁷

Following the pathways of agricultural reform can therefore tell us a lot about the continuities and ruptures of mid-nineteenth century politics. By its own lights, agricultural reform was neither sectional nor partisan, but it became both in the volatile 1850s. Lending its independent organizational weight to the cause of northern rural development, it was one among several largely northern social movements that bore down with increasing force on a political system made fragile by sectionalism. The result was that agricultural reformers and Republicans each grew stronger in a manner that augured a new set of relationships among parties, the state, and the public sphere. Those new relationships, in turn, show that a society that Marx, Hegel and Tocqueville

⁷ Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), chap. 1; Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York, 1986). The "party period" construct has been the subject of two forums in this journal (Dec. 1997 and June 1999). More recent critiques include William J. Novak, "The Myth of the 'Weak' American State," *American Historical Review* 11 (June 2008), 752–72; Richard R. John, "Farewell to the 'Party Period': Political Economy in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Policy History* 16 (no. 2, 2004), 117–25. The restructuring process I describe draws on Elisabeth Clemens, *The People's Lobby: Organizational Innovation and the Rise of Interest Group Politics in the United States, 1890-1925* (Chicago, 1997). On free labor, see Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford, 1995).

perceived as all but stateless, could produce government bureaucracies as consequential as those of European empires.⁸

* * *

The agricultural reform movement originated in a particular set of conditions that characterized what I call the Greater Northeast: New England and the Mid-Atlantic states, shading into the upper Chesapeake around Baltimore and progressively incorporating portions of the Midwest as the frontier gave way to established communities. This region's rural economy was defined by relatively dense settlement, diverse crop specializations, and the growing presence of cities. Combined, these factors contrasted with the predominant modes of southern and western agriculture. They fostered a denser public space of civic associations and print outlets, including agricultural societies and journals. They comprised a broader range of agricultural practices and consequently a more varied ecosystem of rural capitalism. And they oriented farmers toward domestic rather than transatlantic markets, involving a complicated reciprocal relationship with cities: raw materials and caloric energy for people and horses flowed to town; consumer goods, agricultural technologies and fertilizers flowed to the countryside.⁹

Rural northeastern political economy was further shaped by a confluence of challenges that forced the region's farmers to change their day-to-day practices in fundamental ways over the course of the early national and antebellum periods. Depleted soils from generations of over-cropping called for new soil maintenance regimes that stressed intensive fertilization and crop rotation. A dramatically worsening pest environment and the emergence of western agriculture forced abandonment of grain culture in much of the region, leading

⁸ For Marx, Hegel and Tocquevill on the U.S. state, see Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (Cambridge, Eng., 1982), 5–8. For a statement of American state power in comparative perspective, see Monica Prasad, *The Land of Too Much: American Abundance and the Paradox of Poverty* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), chap. 1.

⁹ This paragraph and the next draw on the following sources: Olmstead and Rhode, *Creating Abundance*; Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 2002); Donald Hugh Parkerson, *The Agricultural Transition in New York State: Markets and Migration in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (Ames, 1995); Thomas Summerhill, *Harvest of Dissent: Agrarianism in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Urbana, Ill., 2005); David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America, Revisiting Rural America* (Baltimore, 1995); Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, 1990); Donald M. Marti, *To Improve the Soil and the Mind: Agricultural Societies, Journals, and Schools in the Northeastern States, 1791-1865* (Ann Arbor, 1979); Clarence H. Danhof, *Change in Agriculture: The Northern United States, 1820-1870* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969); Paul Wallace Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture, 1815-1860* (New York, 1960).

to new crops and markets. Finally, outmigration to cities and the West threatened depopulation.

Reformers responded by arguing for a modernized “scientific agriculture” that would reinvigorate the countryside. The new farming would be intensive, sustainable, and profitable, its practitioners both market and technology savvy. To offset western superiority in grains, reformers urged specialization in bulky and perishable products in which northeastern farmers enjoyed a competitive advantage thanks to the proximity of domestic urban markets. To raise productivity, they called for investing in improved animal breeds and crop varieties, new implements and machinery, efficiently designed farm buildings, and natural-science education. Finally, they implored farmers to augment soil fertility by carefully conserving barnyard manures and introducing novel chemical fertilizers.

Reformers promoted this vision by founding societies, holding fairs, and publishing specialized agricultural periodicals. Initially this was rather an elite enterprise, dominated by the kinds of people George Washington called the “monied gentry.” The Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, founded in 1785, included four signers of the Declaration of Independence in addition to several senators, congressmen, and Army officers. Its counterparts in New York, Virginia and Massachusetts were led by the likes of Robert R. Livingston, James Madison, and John Adams. These organizations set themselves the goal of bettering the country’s general level of farming, but in practice they acted more like exclusive clubs for the polite consideration of learned papers. They articulated a project, but failed to constitute a movement.¹⁰

During the 1810s, new county-level societies innovated by turning to public exhibitions. Unlike traditional market fairs, these “modern” agricultural fairs revolved around public displays with an expressly didactic purpose. The heart of the distinction was the principle of “emulation.” Defined by Enlightenment thinkers as the noble pursuit of merit through imitation of great achievements, emulation was a mechanism for aligning individual behavior with broader goals of social and national advancement. It was a powerful concept in early national America. Rural academies that sprang up after the American

¹⁰ “Monied gentry” discussed in John Lauritz Larson, *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States* (Chapel Hill, 2001), chap. 1; Simon Baatz, “Venerate the Plough”: *A History of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, 1785-1985* (Philadelphia, 1985), 5–6; Alfred Charles True, *A History of Agricultural Education in the United States, 1785-1925* (New York, 1969 [1929]), 9, 15; *Centennial Year, 1792-1892, of the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture* (Salem, Mass., [1892?]), 8–15.

Revolution often applied the emulatory principle by employing public exhibitions and class rankings to motivate students—practices explicitly harnessed to the grand project of nation-building. Agricultural societies similarly offered “premiums” (prizes) intended to awaken spectators’ innate impulse for social recognition. By making farming “an object of public attention,” they hoped to reach the “retired and unknown farmer,” in turn expecting that “exciting emulation . . . will lead to important improvements in our husbandry” (Figure 3).¹¹

Thanks in part to modest state subsidies, agricultural fairs grew rapidly in number and popularity—until, that is, people noticed that wealthy country gentlemen seemed to win all the premiums. At one exhibition, every single one of the prize-earning neat cattle either belonged to or originally came from the herd of the organizing society’s president. Not surprisingly, the public funding of what looked like a network of gentlemen’s clubs came under attack from the small-government political forces that would soon coalesce into the Democratic Party. In 1824, Martin Van Buren’s Bucktails killed the New York Board of Agriculture. A year later, New Hampshire ended its agricultural subsidies amid charges that they were going to “great agriculturists.” A similar scenario played out in Pennsylvania. Heavily reliant on state aid, many agricultural societies simply ceased to exist when subsidies were withdrawn. But even where they continued, as in Massachusetts, popular enthusiasm lagged. The Middlesex Agricultural Society added hundreds of members from 1821 to 1824, but thereafter new membership slowed to a trickle until the 1840s and 1850s brought a widespread revival.¹²

If the 1830s proved the low tide for agricultural organizations, this was not necessarily the case for agricultural reform in general. The same period witnessed an explosion of new specialized farm periodicals. As Table 1 demonstrates, the number of new agricultural journal titles more than

¹¹ Quotations appear in Marti, “Agrarian Thought and Agricultural Progress: The Endeavor for Agricultural Improvement in New England and New York, 1815-1840” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1966), 98; *Centennial Year, 1792-1892, of the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture*, 82. See also Wayne Caldwell Neely, *The Agricultural Fair* (New York, 1935), 3-23, 155-184. On emulation, see John Iverson, “Introduction to Forum on Emulation in France, 1750-1800,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36 (Winter 2003): 218; J. M. Opal, “Exciting Emulation: Academies and the Transformation of the Rural North, 1780s-1820s,” *The Journal of American History* 91 (Sep 2004): 445-470.

¹² Baatz, *Venerate the Plow*, 42-46; Marti, “Agrarian Thought and Agricultural Progress,” 108-117, 146-148; Marti, “Early Agricultural Societies in New York: The Foundations of Improvement,” *New York History* 48 (Oct. 1967), 323-324; *Transactions of the New Hampshire State Agricultural Society* 1 (1853), 29; Membership book, 1819-1861, Box 2, Series III, Records of the Middlesex Agricultural Society, 1820-1892 (Concord Free Public Library, Concord, Mass.).

quadrupled from the 1820s to the 1830s, while the ratio of such journals to free rural inhabitants more than tripled. Still more appeared in the next two decades, but growing consolidation meant a slower relative increase of new titles even as overall circulation continued to expand. By 1852, according to one informed observer, about thirty active journals enjoyed a total circulation as high as 500,000. Many took this reading quite seriously. The eastern Pennsylvania farmer, Thomas J. Aldred, kept numerous clippings and handwritten transcriptions from agricultural papers in his personal journal and meticulously reproduced the illustrations from Thomas Jefferson's famous essay applying mathematical principles to the design of a plow's mould board.¹³

The demand for agricultural literature encompassed more than specialized periodicals. Newspapers large and small greatly expanded the reach of the farm journals by regularly reprinting their articles. Major dailies such as the *New York Tribune* and *New York Times* even came to employ well-known agricultural journalists to provide original content. Meanwhile, the catalog of agricultural monographs grew rapidly, evidenced by the appearance in 1847 of C.M. Saxton, the first book publisher devoted exclusively to agricultural topics. By comparison, the first book publisher specializing in technical industrial subjects appeared only several years later, achieving little success until after the Civil War.¹⁴

The new agricultural press successfully extended interest in agricultural reform and constituted its readership as a distinct public. Editors broadcast their message in a self-consciously vernacular mode and established a participatory public forum by soliciting reader correspondence, promising that "every practical man may have an opportunity to contribute his mite" to a medium premised on "brief, plain, pointed and practical" information "adapted to the comprehension of uneducated common sense." The upshot was a more impersonal, interactive

¹³ *Congressional Globe*, 32nd Cong., 1st sess., Appendix, April 20, 1842, p. 494; Thomas J. Aldred Papers, Miscellaneous Professional and Personal Business Papers, 1732-1945 (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa.). Danhof cites an estimated total circulation of 350,000 in 1860 (*Change in Agriculture*, 56-57). As Emily Pawley points out, effective circulation was undoubtedly much larger than the actual number of copies sold because of the prevalence of borrowing in contemporary reading practices ("'The Balance-Sheet of Nature': Calculating the New York Farm, 1820-1860" [Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania, 2009], 62-63). Demaree, estimates that "well over 400" agricultural journals appeared during the antebellum period, but the numbers I compiled from Stuntz in Table 1 suggest a somewhat lower number (*The American Agricultural Press*, 18). See also Sally McMurry, "Who Read the Agricultural Journals? Evidence from Chenango County, New York, 1839-1865," *Agricultural History*, 63 (Autumn 1989), 1-18; Marti, *To Improve the Soil and the Mind*, 162.

¹⁴ Solon Robinson, *Solon Robinson, Pioneer and Agriculturist: Selected Writings*, ed. Herbert Anthony Kellar, vol. 1 (Indianapolis, 1936), 31; Danhof, *Change in Agriculture*, 55, 58; *Pennsylvania Farm Journal*, 6 (May 1856), 154; Pawley, "'The Balance-Sheet of Nature,'" 14, 59-60; James Green, "Henry Carey Baird and Company, America's First Technical Publishers," *PASCAL News*, 1 (Sep. 1991), 7-9.

and inclusive discursive space than had existed in the 1810s and 1820s. At the same time, the editorial staffs of agricultural journals became the focal points of a great deal of private farming correspondence, which allowed them to make connections with numerous farmers, reformers, and rural businessmen. Through print and post, therefore, agricultural editors built a network of reform-minded individuals, a broad-based rural constituency for scientific agriculture.¹⁵

One part of this process is exemplified by a central Pennsylvania farmer named Charles Colfelt. In February 1844, the Albany-based *Cultivator* summarized a letter from Colfelt reporting his experiment on two fields of potatoes. The following year it published the full text of another letter, this one detailing a homemade fertilizer mixture applied to a corn crop. “Some of my neighbors rather quizzed me about the compost,” Colfelt wrote, “but when husking and hauling in time came, they were amazed.” With only these two brief appearances in print, Colfelt reached a wide audience. The Pittsfield (MA) *Sun* reprinted the essentials of his first letter and the Patent Office annual report did the same for his second. And at least one farmer—hundreds of miles away in St. Lawrence County, New York—reported good results after trying Colfelt’s methods. The exchange, mediated by post and perhaps a chain of reprinting, epitomizes what a farm journal correspondent called a “liberal commerce of thought and knowledge among agriculturists.”¹⁶

The agricultural press thus reconstituted agricultural reform not as the elite project it had been but as something like a social movement, complete with its own movement culture centered on the self-consciously modernizing slogan of “scientific agriculture.” Editors then mobilized the reform networks they had helped create to spearhead a revival of public support for agricultural societies. From the early 1830s, Samuel Fleet of the *New York Farmer*, Luther Tucker of the *Genesee Farmer*, and Jesse Buel of the *Cultivator* advocated tirelessly for government sponsorship of agricultural organizations. In 1832 these editors helped call a convention in Albany that formed a new state agricultural society and lobbied for subsidies. Meeting again each year for nearly a decade and

¹⁵ *Farmer's Monthly Visitor*, Jan. 15, 1839, p. 1; *New York Farmer*, 1 (Jan. 1828), 1; *Practical Farmer* (Mechanicsburg, Pa.), 1 (Oct. 1837), 3; Danhof, *Change in Agriculture*, 59; Donald Hugh Parkerson and Jo Ann Parkerson, *The Emergence of the Common School in the U.S. Countryside* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1998), 41–43. My thinking on antebellum communications networks is shaped by David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, 2006).

¹⁶ Charles Colfelt Ledger and Miscellaneous Accounts, Miscellaneous Professional and Personal Business Papers, 1732-1945 (Historical Society of Pennsylvania); *Cultivator*, 1 (Feb. 1844), 41; 2 (March 1845), 89; *Farmer's Monthly Visitor*, Aug. 20 1839, 124; *Pittsfield Sun*, Feb. 8, 1844, p. 4; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Patents, Agriculture* (1846), 186.

stimulating repeated petition campaigns, the convention finally won its point with an 1841 law that provided \$8,000 annually to the state society and its county subsidiaries, quickly leading to the proliferation of new county societies and fairs. Similar movements occurred elsewhere. In Ohio, for instance, a series of annual conventions followed by a final push of almost daily petitions to the legislature led to the 1846 creation of the state Board of Agriculture and a sharp uptick in new county societies.¹⁷

The founding of the Fairfield County Agricultural Society in Connecticut illustrates the ways that public funding and a more democratic approach from leaders brought about a popularization of agricultural reform. Responding to an 1840 law allowing up to \$200 annually to county agricultural societies, citizens of Fairfield met in August to form their own. Among the organizers was Eli T. Hoyt, a recently retired Danbury hat manufacturer. Hoyt understood that the society's survival depended on farmer involvement. Believing that the first fair would make or break the organization, he fretted over its location, called for a lot of small premiums instead of a few large ones so that many farmers could go home winners, and constantly reminded fellow organizers to promote the event through personal channels as well as through the press. "Procure by direct invitation the attendance of as many farmers as possible," he advised. "Be particular," he again urged, by contacting "known individuals" who could be counted on to get neighbors involved. The strategy appears to have paid off. A well-attended first fair led county towns to compete to host subsequent exhibitions. By 1843 there were effectively two Fairfield societies, each directed by a large, farmer-dominated executive committee (Figure 4).¹⁸

As Table 2 indicates, high levels of farmer participation appear to have been the norm in this phase of agricultural reform. Representing a variety of

¹⁷ Marti, "Early Agricultural Societies," 324-327; Marti, *To Improve the Soil and the Mind*, 45-123; *Transactions of the New York State Agricultural Society*, 1 (1842), 5-15; *Transactions of the Pennsylvania State Agricultural Society*, 2 (1855), 9; *Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1849), 327; (1851), 557-558; (1853), 712-713; (1857), 196-197; (1861), 265-267; *The History of the New Jersey Agricultural Society: Early Attempts to Form a Society, Proceedings, Fairs, Activities and Accomplishments, 1781-1940* (Trenton, 1947), 13; Robert Jones, *History of Agriculture in Ohio to 1880* (Kent, Ohio, 1983), 280-290; *Annual Report of the Ohio State Board of Agriculture*, 21 (1867), 476-477; *Acts of a General Nature and Local Laws and Joint Resolutions Passed by the General Assembly of the State of Ohio*, 53 (1856), 208; for petitions, *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Ohio*, 64 (1846), 40, 46, 57, 64-65, 82, 90, 103-104, 112, 117, 123, 129-130, 141, 148-149, 159, 167, 176, 183-184, 192, 208, 218-219, 227, 240, 245, 267, 280, 292, 302, 326, 341, 351, 359, 383, 514.

¹⁸ Quotations in Eli T. Hoyt to Rufus Hoyt, May 24, 1841 and Oct. 7, 1841, Folder 5, Series A, Fairfield County Agricultural Society Records, 1840-1851, collection no. MS B90 (Fairfield Museum and History Center, Fairfield, Conn.); see also additional letters and documents in Folders 5 to 8; *The Public Statute Laws of the State of Connecticut, Passed May Session, 1840* (Hartford, 1840), 3-4.

reform purposes in both coastal and interior rural communities, the table indicates that the movement enjoyed broad popularity among ordinary farmers, who took an active part in directing it. By ordinary, I mean neither the abjectly poor nor the fantastically wealthy. The Middlesex County Agricultural Society counted among the subscribers to its fairgrounds fund the likes of George M. Barrett, whose farm was worth roughly twice the town average, but also Marshall Miles, who moonlit as a pencil maker, and Cyrus Stow, whose livestock and tools fell below the average town values.¹⁹ In short, the movement's social base was the rural middle class.

* * *

Restoration of state aid for agricultural societies depended not only on reformers' organizational effectiveness, but on the fortunes of the Whig Party. This point is both obvious and not so obvious. On the one hand, reformers' calls for a kind of government-backed economic development aligned them with Whig ideology. On the other hand, many reformers were Democrats and the movement as a whole maintained an assiduous nonpartisanship that was rooted in long-standing rural norms of communal consensus. Reformers' efforts to foster occupational solidarity among farmers further encouraged nonpartisanship. Agricultural reform thus became "political"—a term reformers understood as more or less synonymous with "partisan"—almost only within the confines of the legislative chamber. Key roll call votes in New York and Ohio indicate strong to overwhelming partisan divisions (Table 3), but neither party appears to have actively campaigned on the issue.²⁰

This explains why political historians have not paid attention to the subject. Yet the oddly partial correspondence between agricultural reform and the Whig Party is precisely why the movement is so significant for how we

¹⁹ 1850 manuscript Federal Population and Agricultural Censuses for Concord, Middlesex County, Massachusetts, accessed through Ancestry.com; Jonas Michael Miles, *Miles Genealogy: John Miles of Concord, Massachusetts and His Descendants* (Boston, 1920), 31.

²⁰ On the Whigs, see Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1979); Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York, 1999). On contemporary framing of "politics" as partisanship, see Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *The American Historical Review*, 89 (June 1984), 620-47. On the persistence of the consensual style in northern rural communities, which by no means implies the absence of actual conflict, see Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1970); Hal S. Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Cambridge, Eng., 1984), chap. 6; Paula Baker, *The Moral Frameworks of Public Life: Gender, Politics, and the State in Rural New York, 1870-1930* (New York, 1991), 21-23, chap. 4.

understand nineteenth-century policymaking. The Whigs played a critical facilitating role, but it was reformers who made agricultural policy happen. As a correspondent for the *Ohio Cultivator* urged, “Let us go to the capitol OURSELVES and take the business into our OWN hands.”²¹

Reformers’ efforts in the 1840s and 1850s led many states to solidify the legal and financial standings of agricultural societies by providing them with acts of incorporation, tax breaks and modest levels of funding. Still, the societies’ relationship to state government remained loose. The advantage of this arrangement was that the societies avoided becoming patronage institutions beholden to whatever party happened to be in power. But by the same token, they had to fight for influence. The New York State Agricultural Society worked hard to secure its official status, establishing its headquarters in Albany’s “Old State House” and drawing attention to the fact that its annual transactions were published “under legislative authority.” To cultivate influential connections, it invited legislators to regular meetings of its executive committee. To strengthen ties to its farmer constituency, it worked with county agricultural societies, soliciting not only the formal county reports required by law but also “the names of *many* active practical farmers” and “any newspapers containing articles calculated to promote the interests of the Farming Community.” It thus built a record of public endorsements and a statewide list of contacts.²²

Most important, the society’s efforts resulted in spectacularly crowded annual fairs (Figure 5). Ultimately the power of such organizations derived from their ability to mobilize, on the one hand, a very large if dispersed constituency of farmers and, on the other hand, a small but powerful set of men in state capitals. If agricultural societies could effectively mediate between these groups, they might exert tremendous influence in a nation of farmers.

In this respect, the fairs’ representational work deserves special comment. Ultimately, the farmers themselves were what was on display. “It is not simply the husbandman’s fruits and cattle and machinery that we see at the Exhibition—we also see the man himself . . . and see the *very process* by which he succeeded.” This was the principle of emulation: best practices learned by direct observation. But there was also a collective display hinted at by commentators’ amazement at the great crowds. Fairs allowed rural people—by definition the residents of low-

²¹ *Ohio Cultivator*, 7 (April 1845), 53.

²² Folder marked “Printed material: 1844,” Henry O’Reilly Papers, Box 40, Series VI, (New-York Historical Society, New York, N.Y.), emphasis in original. For examples of laws, see *Laws of the State of New York* (1856), chapter 183, p. 304; *Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1849), 327; (1851), 557–558; (1853), 712–713; (1857), 196–197; (1861), 265–267.

population-density districts—to grasp the magnitude of their scattered numbers. Thus the 1849 Syracuse fair demonstrated that New York’s farmers amounted to “a throng beyond the population of a great city.” Perhaps it is no coincidence that only a few months after Syracuse, a prominent agricultural editor wrote that the farm press “begins to feel that it is of some account in the *commonwealth*” and able to stir “the farming class to a sense of its rights in the state.”²³

Politicians, who attended fairs regularly, were bound to notice. At Syracuse, Henry Clay was only the most prominent among visiting political figures that included Vice President Fillmore and Governor Hamilton Fish. Clay was the “man of men” in Benjamin Gue’s telling phrase, a “representative man” in Emerson’s. But whom did he represent in his capacity as a celebrity fairgoer? After all, it was not a party but the “farming class,” the “farming community,” or what reformers more typically called the “agricultural interest,” that defined such gatherings.²⁴ Fairs made the abstraction of “class” and “interest” visible, emboldening reformers to lay claim to the state and convincing politicians to pay attention even though such claims never came through the usual party channels.

There was little in the way of meaningful organizational hierarchy within agricultural reform. The journals, which tended to be regional, were linked to each other through lateral exchange relationships and to their readers by consumer choice. State boards and societies had no authority and little informal power to compel any kind of behavior from anyone, even from the ostensibly subsidiary county and town societies. Hence they “respectfully requested” information from their local-level counterparts and appealed to the “welfare of the Cause” to motivate action.²⁵ The whole enterprise thus continued to exist largely as a social movement rather than as a political machine or a bureaucratic agency.

All the same, the movement drew closer to the state. Government printing subventions budgeted separately from direct appropriations formed a critical facet of this tightening relationship. Although a few historians have duly noted these printing subventions, they have failed to register the remarkable quantity of agricultural reports that state printers turned out year after year. Ohio ordered fifty thousand total copies of the Board of Agriculture’s annual reports for 1855, 1856 and 1857, adding to that over seven thousand copies of the Board

²³ *Cincinnatus*, 2 (Oct. 1857), 407 (emphasis in original); *Transactions of the New York State Agricultural Society*, 9 (1850), 12; *Horticulturist*, 4 (April 1850), 441 (emphasis in original).

²⁴ Gue, *Diary of Benjamin F. Gue*, 52; *Transactions of the New York State Agricultural Society*, 9 (1850), 14; *New York Daily Tribune*, Sep. 13, 1849, p. 1.

²⁵ “Printed material: 1844,” Henry O’Reilly Papers.

president's separate report. These documents were far and away Ohio's most heavily printed state papers and were specifically exempted from the general law on printing; their cost greatly exceeded the state Board of Agriculture's annual budget. A similar situation obtained in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Wisconsin and elsewhere, evidencing the spread of agricultural reform as the economic conditions of the Greater Northeast extended across much of the Midwest. The New York legislature supported the publishing costs of not one but two major agricultural institutions, the state society and the agricultural section of the American Institute of the City of New York.²⁶

The revival of government support for agricultural reform thus flooded the countryside with hefty official farming reports. Yet this paled in comparison to the output of the federal government. Between 1851 and 1860 Congress ordered the printing of roughly 2.2 million copies of the Patent Office's annual "Agricultural Report." In 1859 alone, the Government Printing Office turned out more than 326,000 copies of the six-hundred-page tome, a figure comparable to the record-breaking first-year sales of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Easily the federal government's leading annual printing expense, the Agricultural Report was a perennial best-seller. "Probably most of the members of this House, who represent rural districts," asserted one Congressman, "are almost daily reminded of the estimate placed upon these reports by their constituents." It may seem incredible that a volume containing several hundred pages of technical farm jargon could arouse so much interest, but such seems to have been the case. Newspaper editors consistently praised the reports' "real value," agricultural reformers avidly exchanged them with one another, and members of Congress vied for more to meet constituents' requests.²⁷

As Oz Frankel has argued, the distribution of official documents was a major means of state-making in the nineteenth century. If so, then agricultural reports played an especially significant role in this process—a circumstance that might, after all, be expected in a predominantly agrarian country. On the one

²⁶ *Acts of a General Nature and Local Laws and Joint Resolutions Passed by General Assembly of the State of Ohio* 53 (1856), 171–178, 248–249; *Ohio Cultivator*, 14 (April 1858), 104; *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York* (1858), 768–769; *Transactions of the Illinois State Agricultural Society*, 2 (1858), xi; *Acts and Resolves Passed by the General Court of Massachusetts* (1856), 268.

²⁷ "Printed material: 1844," Henry O'Reilly Papers; James Worthington to John Alsop King, April 4, 1855, John Alsop King Papers, Box 1 (New-York Historical Society); *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Cong., 1st sess., May 10, 1854, p. 1145. Figures compiled from the periodic reports of the Superintendent of Public Printing, 33rd through 37th Congresses (my thanks to James N. Green of the Library Company of Philadelphia for alerting me to these sources). Ronald D. Patkus and Mary C. Schlosser, "Aspects of the Publishing History of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1851-1900," *Vassar College Libraries, Archives and Special Collections*, <http://specialcollections.vassar.edu/exhibits/stowe/essay2.html>.

hand, government publication lent a new ubiquity and authority to the discourse of agricultural reform, rendering “scientific agriculture” the official future of American farming. Politicians soon had the lingo down pat: during an 1856 discussion, one Senator casually informed another that the nitrogen content of a certain fertilizer was “given as 13.50 including the crenates and humates of ammonia, oily matter and lithic acid.” On the other hand, by generating new information on declining crop yields, parasitic infestations, and other urgent problems, the reports implied new state responsibilities. As Frankel points out and as politicians have long understood, any officially sanctioned investigation easily becomes a call for action.²⁸

Thus by the late 1840s, having established the principle of state aid and benefitted accordingly, the agricultural reform movement’s broad popular base, loosely federated structure, and growing public legitimacy gave it the power to pursue innovative government policies. In 1854 the New York legislature began funding the state society’s entomological research; in 1856 it paid for the society’s new building; in 1862 it charged the society with supervising the collection of agricultural statistics in each of the state’s roughly 12,000 school districts. When an 1859 outbreak of cattle pleuropneumonia in Massachusetts threatened the entire nation’s cattle stock, a special legislative session turned to a commission under the supervision of the state Board of Agriculture to fight the epizootic. By this time Maryland was employing a state agricultural chemist and had joined Pennsylvania and Michigan in pledging substantial support for the founding of the country’s first public agricultural colleges (Figure 6). At the state level, at least, the “agricultural interest” had arrived.²⁹

* * *

The federal government, however, proved a different beast. There reformers ran into a solid wall of southern Democratic opposition, which was

²⁸ *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st sess., Jul 22, 1856, p. 1697; Oz Frankel, *States of Inquiry Social Investigations and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the United States* (Baltimore, 2006).

²⁹ *Laws of the State of New York* (1854), ch. 283, 616; (1862), ch. 293, 489-491; Asa Fitch, *First Report on the Noxious, Beneficial and Other Insects, of the State of New York* (Albany, 1855); *Dedication of the New York State Agricultural Rooms, Albany, February 12, 1857* (Albany, 1857); *Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Board of Agriculture of Massachusetts* (1861), 5-91; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Patents, Agriculture* (1861), 241-267; Michael Bezilla, *Penn State: An Illustrated History* (University Park, 1985); Keith R. Widder, *Michigan Agricultural College: The Evolution of a Land-Grant Philosophy* (Lansing, 2005). On federated advocacy organizations, see Elisabeth Clemense, “Organizational Repertoires and Institutional Change: Women’s Groups and the Transformation of American Politics, 1890-1920,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 98 (Jan. 1993), 755-98

conditioned by a pronounced sectional disparity in agricultural reform institutions in favor of the North. In the political context of the 1850s, this northern bias doomed reformers' aspirations for new federal agricultural agencies. The same situation, however, drove the movement's deepening alliance with the Republican Party, an alliance easily made thanks to Republicans' prior embrace of scientific agriculture as a fundamental aspect of national economic development. Thus despite its non-partisanship, agricultural reform contributed to the Republican appeal in the northern countryside and ultimately to the Union's dissolution.³⁰

The North's domination of the reform movement went well beyond its sheer numerical superiority in population. Table 4, based on a national survey of agricultural societies conducted by the Patent Office' Agricultural Division, helps establish this by indicating that the societies were heavily concentrated in the northern states both absolutely and relatively. For reasons I discuss in depth elsewhere, the figures are problematic and should be taken only as indicative. In particular, there is good reason to conclude that Midwestern figures were highly inflated while those of other regions somewhat underestimated. There is not, however, any reason to suspect that underestimation affected the Southeast and Southwest more than the Northeast. Given the caveats, the magnitude of the *relative* difference between North and South in the propensity to organize agricultural societies appears important.³¹

Sectional disparity manifested itself in agricultural publishing as well. By the end of the 1850s, something like thirty agricultural journals were published in the North, excluding the Pacific states, as compared to eleven in the South. Although these numbers are roughly proportionate to sectional populations, the northern journals enjoyed far larger circulations. The *Southern Cultivator*, perhaps the most successful southern journal in the 1850s, claimed a readership of about 10,000 in 1859. By contrast, the *American Agriculturist* reached as many as 100,000 subscribers, the *New England Farmer* around 50,000, and even relatively

³⁰ Recent work has begun to piece together the agricultural aspects of the Republicans' ideology, though in different ways than here; see Sarah T. Phillips, "Antebellum Agricultural Reform, Republican Ideology, and Sectional Tension," *Agricultural History*, 74 (Autumn 2000), 799-822; Adam Wesley Dean, *An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill, 2015); James L. Huston, *The British Gentry, the Southern Planter, and the Northern Family Farmer: Agriculture and Sectional Antagonism in North America* (Baton Rouge, 2015).

³¹ It appears that Midwesterners eagerly established agricultural societies, many of which may have been little more than paper organizations, for a variety of reasons, including community, boosterism, and the desire to secure seeds and reports from the Patent Office. See Ariel Ron, "Developing the Country: 'Scientific Agriculture' and the Roots of the Republican Party" (Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley, 2012), 46-49.

small journals such as the *Boston Cultivator* and *Working Farmer* more than 20,000. Several northern journals enjoyed large southern readerships, but this ultimately underscores the North's superiority in the field. If southern subscribers led northern editors to tiptoe around slavery, they did nothing to change basically northern outlooks, interests and loyalties.³²

None of this is to suggest that southerners were uninterested in agricultural reform. Yet although they read agricultural journals, adopted new planting and slave-driving regimes, and formed some societies, they proved far less active organizers than did northerners. Perhaps wealthy planters did not feel the need for the kind of popular fairs and societies common in the North. "The habits of planters are those of separate action," a committee of the South Carolina Agricultural Society admitted in 1845. Certainly no southern agricultural organization ever achieved the national stature of the New York, Massachusetts, or Ohio state organizations. Nor did any southern state other than Maryland go as far in establishing an agricultural college before the Civil War as did New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio and even Iowa. Moreover, to the extent that southerners did organize vibrant agricultural societies, they tended to be concentrated in the Upper South, where patterns of trade, settlement and urbanization most closely followed those of the Greater Northeast. Similarly, the only two nominally southern journals that could make any claim to national standing were based in Baltimore (*American Farmer*) and St. Louis (*Valley Farmer*)—both Upper-South industrial cities that ultimately stood with the Union.³³

³² Gilbert M. Tucker, *American Agricultural Journals: An Historical Sketch* (Albany, 1909), 76; *New England Farmer*, 5 (Jan. 1853), 15; penciled note in the Library Company of Philadelphia's copy of *Boston Cultivator*, 13 (Jan. 1851), 1, (my thanks to Connie King for bringing this to my attention); *Working Farmer*, 13 (Nov. 1861), 241; see also Demaree, *The American Agricultural Press, 1819-1860*, 339, 351, 375. Though the accuracy of self-reported subscription figures is supposition, there is no reason to dispute the order of magnitude because editors monitored each other for grossly unrealistic claims.

³³ Quotation in Drew Gilpin Faust, "The Rhetoric and Ritual of Agriculture in Antebellum South Carolina," *Journal of Southern History*, 45 (Nov 1979), 557; David R. Francis, "Southern Agricultural Fairs and Expositions," in *The South in the Building of the Nation*, (Richmond, 1909), V, 589; Fred Kniffen, "The American Agricultural Fair: Time and Place," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 41 (March 1941), 46; Gates, *Farmer's Age*, 314–315. Recent work on southern agricultural improvement includes John Majewski, *Modernizing a Slave Economy: The Economic Vision of the Confederate Nation* (Chapel Hill, 2009), chap. 2; Ian Beamish, "Saving the South: Agricultural Reform in the Southern United States, 1819-1861" (Ph.D., Johns Hopkins University, 2013). In 1853, Daniel Lee reviewed the state of American agricultural literature. As editor of both the *Genesee Farmer* and *Southern Cultivator* and head of the Patent Office's Agricultural Division, no one could have been better informed on the subject. Lee commended the many voluminous reports produced by the New York, Massachusetts, Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin agricultural societies, but referred only to a single southern report, the one volume issued by Georgia's South Central Agricultural Society (*Report of the Commissioner of Patents, Agriculture* [1853], 21-22). Given Lee's pro-slavery views and residence in

To understand the disparity we must consider the agricultural reform movement in light of the recent literature on comparative sectional development. What allowed the North to develop more rapidly than the South in the antebellum period, several scholars have found, was the much higher density of its free rural population and consequently the greater size of its consumer markets for manufactured goods. It seems likely that a similar dynamic was at work in the case of agricultural reform, which depended on well-attended fairs and a wide market for agricultural publications. Indeed, the point can be generalized. The North's higher rural population density—particularly in the Greater Northeast—sustained not only deeper consumer markets, but thicker associational networks.³⁴

The rural North's relative egalitarianism also mattered. If population density meant that northern farmers interacted with one another more frequently, low inequality meant that they tended to do so as social equals who could readily collaborate to form new civic associations. The Guilford Farmers' and Mechanics' Society, for instance, was born of a casual encounter among local farmers in the town store; an agent for the *Cultivator* picked up subscribers who happened to live near his church. We can, of course, imagine similar scenarios in the South, but they must have occurred less frequently. And no southern agricultural society could have embraced the enslaved who did much of the actual farming. This is not to overdraw sectional contrasts. Yet the relative difference between the northern countryside and the southern "carceral landscape" surely matters. "The power which trampled on the colored people also kept themselves ['poor whites'] in poverty, ignorance, and moral degradation," observed Harriet Jacobs, whose dissection of slave society's pathologies neither prevented her from criticizing the North nor blinded her to manifest sectional differences. When it

Georgia, northern prejudice could not have been the reason for the disparity; see E. Merton Coulter, *Daniel Lee, Agriculturist: His Life North and South* (Athens, Ga., 1972).

³⁴ John Majewski and Viken Tchakerian, "The Environmental Origins of Shifting Cultivation: Climate, Soils, and Disease in the Nineteenth-Century US South," *Agricultural History*, 81 (Oct. 2007), 541. I am not arguing that southerners generally eschewed civic organizing; see Jonathan D. Wells, *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800-1861* (Chapel Hill, 2004). For comparative sectional development, see Sean Adams, *Old Dominion, Industrial Commonwealth: Coal, Politics, and Economy in Antebellum America* (Baltimore, 2004), especially 77, 80-81; John D. Majewski, *A House Dividing: Economic Development in Pennsylvania and Virginia Before the Civil War* (Cambridge, Eng., 2000), 171-172; Brian Page and Richard Walker, "From Settlement to Fordism: The Agro-Industrial Revolution in the American Midwest," *Economic Geography*, 67 (Oct. 1991), 281-315; David Meyer, "Emergence of the American Manufacturing Belt: An Interpretation," *Journal of Historical Geography* 9 (April 1983): 145-174.

came to forming agricultural societies, then, relative northern social equality compounded the effect of population density.³⁵

More importantly, the rural North's relative egalitarianism sustained a deep commitment to education that underpinned the drive for scientific agriculture. Starting in the early republic, middling northeastern farmers began to pursue literacy and numeracy as never before, increasingly through formal channels. According to one study, before 1850 "the rural North led the world in the building of schools, the hiring of teachers, and overall enrollments." According to another, farmers within the rural North "seem to have invested much more in the education of their children" than did non-farmers, and northeastern rates of school attendance were higher than midwestern rates. Further attesting these trends, enrollment increases in New York Regents' academies, which were mostly located in small country towns, outpaced new school capacity in every decade between 1820 and 1860.³⁶

This demand, several education scholars have found, "was rooted in rural life and the commercial farming economy." Isaac Roberts, the Cornell College of Agriculture's first dean, recalled that in the 1850s, "ambitious families . . . laid almost as much stress upon 'schooling' as upon manual dexterity and willingness to work." The wording here is important, depicting education as complementary with, not alternative to, manual labor and traditional work ethic. Agricultural reformers relentlessly insisted that successfully negotiating the processes of economic development required a new degree of scientific and technological literacy. "The farmer is no longer a mere laborer," explained the editor of the *Working Farmer*. "To succeed in competition with the improvements of the day, he must be educated to a fair extent."³⁷

³⁵ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Mineola, N.Y., 2001), 55-56; "carceral landscape" from Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), chap. 8; Mary Hoadley Griswold, "Guilford Fair," file folder G-F-3 (Guilford Free Library, Guilford, Conn.); Jeremy Fisher, "Improving the Soil and Mind: The Geography of The Cultivator" (M.A., Pennsylvania State University, 2008), 119-121.

³⁶ Sun Go and Peter Lindert, "The Uneven Rise of American Public Schools to 1850," *The Journal of Economic History*, 70 (2010), 2; Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, *To Their Own Soil: Agriculture in the Antebellum North* (Ames, 1987), 47; Nancy Beadie, "Toward a History of Education Markets in the United States: An Introduction," *Social Science History*, 32 (Spring 2008), 59; Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York, 1983), 13, 29; Patricia Cline Cohen, *A Calculating People: The Spread of Numeracy in Early America* (New York, 1999), 12, 116-149; Claudia Dale Goldin and Lawrence F Katz, *The Race Between Education and Technology* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), chap. 4.

³⁷ First quotation in Nancy Beadie, "Toward a History of Education Markets in the United States," 59-60; Isaac Phillips Roberts, *Autobiography of a Farm Boy* (Albany, 1916), 66-67; *Working Farmer*, 1 (Feb.

Economic priorities brought a new emphasis on the natural sciences (Figure 6). In the rural New York counties of Cortland and Steuben, “Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and Algebra” were “regarded of much importance” and even “required” by many common schools as early as 1843. A petition to the Pennsylvania legislature from about the same time called for education to “enable all classes of the community in every section of the State, to collect, examine, and understand the natural productions of their respective vicinities.” Horace Mann placed this popular scientific interest squarely in the context of agricultural reform:

Agriculture requires knowledge for its successful operation. In this department of industry, we are in perpetual contact with the forces of nature. We are constantly dependent on them for the pecuniary returns and profits of our investments, and hence the necessity of knowing what those forces are.

This was not merely the pronouncement of a leading reformer from on high. Levi and John Weeks, brothers who farmed on shares and made their children’s shoes themselves, subscribed to farm journals, adopted improvements, and attended lectures on electricity, magnetism, physiology and chemistry. “In this age science is greatly popularized,” the New York Regents reported in 1857, for “it is a conceded principle of political economy, that science and knowledge constitute the most productive capital.”³⁸

The connections among education, agriculture, science and political economy contributed to northern identity in ways we have not, perhaps, fully appreciated, and this is especially relevant for understanding the early Republican Party. One of these connections concerns the relationship between economic development, on the one hand, and the openness of information, on the other. “Nothing more steadily advances the cause of science or of agriculture,” insisted the president of one county agricultural society, “than the free interchange of knowledge and opinion.” Agricultural reformers took every opportunity to encourage information exchange by establishing libraries and reading rooms,

1849), 4; see also Parkerson and Parkerson, *Emergence of the Common School in the U.S. Countryside*, 18, 23–26, 48–49.

³⁸ Cortland, Steuben and Regents quotations in *Annual Report of the Regents of the University of the State of New York* 56 (1843): 174, 181; 70 (1857): 20, 23; Petition, 15 Feb 1838, Item no. 7375 F 52, Box 23, Series II, McA MSS 017, John A. McAllister Collection (Library Company of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pa.); Mann quoted in the Massachusetts *Annual Report of the Board of Education*, 5 (1842), 102–103; for the Weeks brothers, see Pawley, “The Balance-Sheet of Nature,” 40–41, 54–55, 69–70.

offering farm journals and monographs as fair premiums, organizing agricultural lecture series, and advocating the establishment of farmers' discussion clubs. These efforts contained an obvious component of self-promotion, but reformers made no apologies. "If 'he who causes two blades of grass to grow where but one grew before, is a benefactor of his race,' he is not less so who imparts to millions a knowledge of the methods by which it is done." As William Seward told an audience at the 1842 New York state fair, the "means of diffusion" now available to farmers meant that "all scientific acquirements here, and all inventions, pass immediately to the general use and contribute directly to the general welfare." This logic linked national material advancement to what a Seward lieutenant called the "extraordinary activity of mind" characteristic of a northern countryside in which "every body is taught to read, and . . . every body writes and discusses, and prints."³⁹

A second aspect of this logic integrated agricultural reform into a distinctly northern brand of developmental ideology. The key in this case was the positioning of slavery as a foil for science and technology rather than for free labor. The basic idea appears clearly in the lyric epigraph to Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1858 essay, "Wealth":

New slaves fulfilled the poet's dream,
Galvanic wire, strong-shouldered steam.

Here the telegraph and the steam engine appear as "new slaves" precisely because they are not what Emerson knows to be actually existing slaves. The personification of steam as "strong-shouldered" underscores the point.

Such figurations of technology in terms of slavery go back a long way, but in this case Emerson was drawing directly on the political economist, Henry C. Carey, whose ideological influence on the early Republican Party has long been recognized. Less known is Carey's use of agricultural reform discourse to refute the implications of Malthusian population theory and Ricardian rent doctrine. Carey argued that agricultural science could more than keep up with a growing population's food needs, thus voiding the dismal science's predictions to the contrary. For Emerson and many northerners, the upshot was that "political economy is not mean, but liberal." As Michael Hudson explains, it would be

³⁹ Henry G. Foote, *Address of the St. Lawrence County Agricultural Society Delivered at the Eighth Annual Fair, at Canton (Ogdensburgh, N.Y., 1859)*, 6; J. H. Walden, *Soil Culture; Containing a Comprehensive View of Agriculture, Horticulture, Pomology, Domestic Animals, Rural Economy, and Agricultural Literature* (New York, 1860), 5; William Henry Seward, *The Works of William H. Seward*, ed. George E. Baker (Boston, 1884), III, 167; *The Cortland Academy Jubilee Celebrated at Homer, N.Y., July 7 & 8, 1846* (Syracuse, 1846), 55-56.

“nature and not labor that was exploited” in this vision of economic development. Scientific agriculture thus unlocked a brave new world of freedom from that oldest of slave powers, nature. Half a century later the Rockefeller Foundation articulated its vision of global economic development in much the same language, averring that “mankind, when properly organized, can dominate its environment instead of being enslaved by it.”⁴⁰

Within the agricultural reform movement itself, which remained committed to avoiding “politics” for organizational reasons, the linkages between scientific agriculture and opposition to slavery remained submerged. Precisely this, however, encouraged northern farmers to imagine their own contexts and standards, so overrepresented in agricultural reform discourse, as normative. Southerners gradually caught on and began to construct a separate vision centered on slavery. In an insightful recent dissertation, Philip Herrington explores this divergence by charting the widening gap between “farming” and “planting” in American culture. For Herrington, an “environmental critique of slavery” as “wasteful, unattractive, and unsustainable” gradually “exceptionalized” the plantation. Long before Frederick Law Olmstead’s critical missives from the South appeared in the *New York Times*, southern agriculture became associated with backwardness. In my view, northern farmers likely understood this “environmental critique” in nationalist terms. That is, they understood it not as a parochial northern view, but as a material truth that ought to determine the future of all American farming. Contra the current historiographical emphasis on plantation slavery’s profitability and modernity, northerners perceived it as

⁴⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Wealth,” in *The Conduct of Life*, www.rwe.org; Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Address Before the Middlesex Agricultural Society, Sept. 29, 1858,” in Charles Flint, ed., *Abstract of Returns of the Agricultural Societies of Massachusetts, 1858* (Boston, 1859), 18; Michael Hudson, “E. Peshine Smith: A Study in Protectionist Growth Theory and American Socialism” (Ph.D., New York University, 1968), 134; Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, 2010), 27. For Carey’s influence on Emerson, see Thomas D. Birch, “Toward a Better Order: The Economic Thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson,” *The New England Quarterly*, 68 (no. 3, 1995), 394–400; Kenneth Cameron, “Emerson’s Second Merlin Song and Economist H. C. Carey,” *Emerson Society Quarterly*, 13 (1958), 65–83. For Carey’s influence on Republicans, see Stephen Meardon, “Postbellum Protection and Commissioner Wells’s Conversion to Free Trade,” *History of Political Economy*, 39 (Dec. 2007), 571–604; Arthur M. Lee, “Henry C. Carey and the Republican Tariff,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 81 (1957), 280–302; George Winston Smith, *Henry C. Carey and American Sectional Conflict* (Albuquerque, 1951). Carey’s mature views first appear in Henry C. Carey, *The Past, the Present, & the Future* (New York, 1967 [1847]). For Carey’s interest in scientific agriculture, see Ariel Ron, “Henry Carey’s Rural Roots: ‘Scientific Agriculture’ and Economic Development in the Antebellum North,” *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 37 (June 2015), 263–275; Paul Keith Conkin, *Prophets of Prosperity: America’s First Political Economists* (Bloomington, 1980), chap. 10–11.

what the Republicans would soon term a “relic of barbarism,” as much in a developmental as in a moral sense.⁴¹

* * *

If northerners dominated agricultural reform’s national agenda, what was it that they wanted? In brief, new federal agricultural agencies. Reformers’ dawning realization that their successes were balanced by vexing failures drove a general shift in focus from the state to the federal level over the course of the 1840s and 1850s. Campaigns for agricultural colleges, for example, went nowhere in some states while they merely stumbled along in others due to inadequate funding. Meanwhile, the diffuse network of agricultural societies, fairs and journals proved unable to effectively regulate a rapidly expanding market for new-fangled agricultural technologies—everything from mechanical implements to chemical fertilizers to novel plant and animal breeds. Finally, growing alarm over soil depletion and erosion led to the problem’s conceptualization in national terms. These circumstances led reformers to call on the federal government to take on new functions by establishing a national agricultural agency and supporting agricultural education and research.⁴²

Reformers soon discovered, however, that they faced implacable hostility from southern Democrats. This became evident in 1850 when a concerted campaign for a federal agricultural bureau within the newly created Interior Department began to stall. Reformers had believed themselves powerful enough to anticipate success. “If we prove not recreant to our own best interest,” they assumed, “we shall have all that we require.” Besides, the effort amounted to little more than conferring official status on the *de facto* agricultural bureau that already existed in the Patent Office. Known informally as the “Agricultural Division,” the agency had arisen over the preceding decade to prepare the annual agricultural report. Southern Democrats found this development disturbing. According to North Carolina’s Abraham Veneble, the Division formed “an entering-wedge to an agricultural department,” something Jefferson Davis held “to be no part of the functions of this Government.” Although agricultural reports continued to appear in growing editions, southerners successfully thwarted the campaign for a federal agricultural bureau, even in the face of strong bipartisan support from northern members of Congress, the backing of the

⁴¹ Philip Mills Herrington, “The Exceptional Plantation: Slavery, Agricultural Reform, and the Creation of an American Landscape” (Ph.D., University of Virginia, 2012), 1, 5–6.

⁴² Ron, “Developing the Country,” chap. 2-5.

Taylor and Fillmore administrations, and an impressive petition drive that recruited the signatures of ordinary farmers from across the Northeast. In the tiny central Pennsylvania township of Turbot, for instance, twenty-seven of the thirty-five petitioners whose occupations could be identified were farmers (Table 2). Revealingly, the only petitions to arrive from the South came from counties in what would become West Virginia.⁴³

Agricultural reformers responded to initial defeat by forming the United States Agricultural Society (USAS) with the express purpose of lobbying Congress. Despite its name, the USAS was never truly a national organization. Instead it was dominated by leading reformers, mostly Whigs, from the seaboard states north of the Potomac. The influence of Marylanders such as Charles Calvert ensured that the organization took an accommodationist stance toward slavery. Still, the USAS found itself entirely cutoff from even Virginia's reformers, not to mention those of the Deep South, who simultaneously organized their own "Agricultural Congress of the slave-holding states." On the other hand, it easily forged ties with antislavery Whigs and Republicans such as Justin Morrill, James Harlan, Horace Greeley, Benjamin Wade, John Alsop King and many others, all of whom strongly supported agricultural reform initiatives.⁴⁴

In 1856, prospects for a federal agricultural agency looked bright when House Agriculture Committee chairman David Holloway, an Opposition Party member from Indiana who had attended the USAS meeting in February, introduced a bill with the apparent backing of congressional Republicans. The accompanying majority report registered reformers' influence by reminding legislators that, "for the last four years, petition after petition has been received from the people." Still, the bill was never even taken up for debate, much less voted on. Clearly frustrated, USAS President Marshal Wilder wondered plaintively, "Why has it hitherto been so difficult, nay, *impossible*, to get a bill through Congress for the establishment of such a department?"⁴⁵

⁴³ *Valley Farmer*, 2 (1850), 76; *Congressional Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st sess., March 12, 1850, pp. 503-504; May 6, 1850, p. 916; Petitions, 31st Cong., HR 31A-G1.1; 32nd Cong., HR 32A-G2.1, Record Group 233 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

⁴⁴ M. P. Wilder to John A. King, 10 Jan 1853, Box 1, John Alsop King Papers; *Journal of the United States Agricultural Society*, 1 (1852), 6-20; 4 (1857), 10-11; 7 (1860), 86-88, 192, 388; *The Plough, the Loom, and the Anvil*, 4 (Aug. 1851), 97; *American Farmer*, 7 (Aug. 1851), 70-71; *Southern Literary Messenger*, 18 (Oct. 1852), 613-614; *Southern Cultivator*, 12 (Jan. 1854), 28-29.

⁴⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 34th Cong., 1st sess., Aug. 5, 1856, pp. 1923-1924; *Journal of the United States Agricultural Society*, 5 (1857), 24 (emphasis in original), 4 (1856), 8; *American Farmer*, 12 (Oct. 1856), 97-101; *New York Daily Tribune*, Mar. 5, 1856, p. 4.

Facing gridlock, the USAS worked for more influence. To build support from its constituency, it partnered with local and state agricultural societies to sponsor highly publicized fairs (Figure 8). It also worked to make its presence felt on Capitol Hill, inviting members of Congress to its annual meetings and obtaining the services of two Washington insiders. Benjamin Brown French, a charter member of the USAS and its treasurer from 1855, served as clerk of the House of Representatives and in other official capacities through several succeeding administrations. The brother of an assistant editor at the *New England Farmer*, he had a strong commitment to the reform agenda, noting in his diary his hope for an expansive “Department of Agriculture, not a Bureau.” No less important was the society’s secretary, Benjamin Perley Poore, the Washington correspondent for the *Boston Journal* and a longtime observer of the city’s political life. In 1858 the USAS established a permanent Washington office for Poore, taking a step toward maintaining a year-round presence in the capital. Poore turned the society’s annual publication into a quarterly journal and later into a monthly bulletin. In these ways the USAS increasingly resembled a modern special interest organization, complete with central office staff and regular contact with constituent members.⁴⁶

These moves paid dividends when, in January 1859, the Senate prepared to take up the Morrill Land Grant bill, commonly known as the “agricultural college bill.” Convening an “Advisory Board of Agriculture” in aid of its mandate to gather farming statistics, the Patent Office brought leading reformers to Washington at government expense. Only three of the twenty-two invited reformers represented slave states, none the Deep South, while ten had close ties to the USAS. Meeting January 3 to 11, the better part of the group immediately reassembled as the annual USAS convention for an additional three days. As in previous years, several members of Congress attended the meeting, which featured a powerful address in support of the Morrill bill. Thus just two weeks before the Senate took up the matter, the capital was practically swarming with leading advocates of agricultural education. Not amused, southern Democrats called for an investigation.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Benjamin French, *Witness to the Young Republic: A Yankee’s Journal, 1828-1870*, ed. Donald B. Cole and John J. McDonough (Hanover, N.H., 1989), 246 (emphasis in original); *Journal of the United States Agricultural Society*, 3 (1855), 23; 5 (1857), 3; 7 (1859), 7, 10; Joseph P. McKerns, “Benjamin Perley Poore,” *American National Biography Online*.

⁴⁷ Gates, *Farmer’s Age*, 378–379; *Journal of the United States Agricultural Society*, 7 (1859): 18-19, 89-97; *Congressional Globe*, 35th Cong., 2nd sess., Jan. 7, 1859, pp. 256, 268; *DeBow’s Review*, 26 (1859): 237, 608.

The Senate debates revealed the depth of southern Democratic opposition. Clement Clay of Alabama called the bill “monstrous.” Jefferson Davis regarded it as “fraudulent.” Expansion of federal involvement in the domestic economy, particularly in an area as sensitive as agriculture, frightened slaveholders. Government itself was not the issue. J.D.B. DeBow, strongly favored state-level government support for agricultural reform but would not do likewise at the national level. Echoing the well-worn arguments of Old Republicans and Nullifiers, Virginia’s James Mason spelled out the implications:

If these agricultural colleges should be built as functionaries of the General Government . . . in a very short time the whole agricultural interest of the country will be taken out of the hands of the States and subjected to the action of Congress, by direction or indirection, either for the promotion of it in one section or the depression of it in another.

Southern agriculture, of course, was inextricably linked to slavery, which the bill’s Republican sponsors openly regarded as a national malady.⁴⁸

Two pieces of context will clarify Mason’s comments. The first concerns the growing influence of the Agricultural Division. Surviving records from the 1850s show the Division using its distribution of seeds and annual reports to establish connections with local postal officials and agricultural societies throughout the country. A typical letter of 1852, dated Edwards, Mississippi, stated that the “increasing interest felt in the cause of agriculture induces me to hope and to ask for a much larger edition of the Agricultural Report from the Patent Office than has yet been issued.” The multiplication of such requests led one congressman to comment a few years later that “the farmers of this land are sending us letters, I may say by the bushel, for these reports.” Indeed, only a few months before the Senate debate on the Morrill bill, Mississippi’s Otho Singleton observed that “not only the wealthy planters, but the poor men are taking an interest in” the reports. Given the avowed aim of leading Republicans to dissociate the federal government from slavery through executive patronage, the

⁴⁸ DeBow’s Review, 13 (Dec. 1857): 639; *Journal of the United States Agricultural Society*, 4 (1856), 78-80; *Congressional Globe*, 35th Cong., 2nd sess., Feb. 1, 1859, pp. 716, 722; 3 Feb 1859, 786. For earlier, similar southern arguments and language, see Larson, *Internal Improvement*, 105; William W. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836* (New York, 1966), 125.

creation of federal agricultural agencies with direct ties in the southern countryside suddenly loomed as a powerful weapon.⁴⁹

The second bit of context pertains to Mason's earlier comment that passage of the Morrill bill would allow Congress to "fasten upon the southern States that peculiar system of free schools in the New England States." Republicans responded with a mix of mockery and reason. James Harlan conceded that Virginians might consider high levels of adult white illiteracy "a blessing," but not so his own Iowa constituents, who "prefer that the mind of the laborer should be developed." Meanwhile, James Simmons and Justin Morrill argued that education promoted not only individual but regional economic development. The whole exchange must be understood against the backdrop of the rural North's regard for education. As Abraham Lincoln would argue only a few months later at the Wisconsin state agricultural fair, "free labor insists on universal education," whereas slaveholders "assume that labor and education are incompatible."⁵⁰

Although Republicans successfully engineered a narrow congressional victory, the margin was too slim to overcome President James Buchanan's veto. Republican editors seized on this outcome as *prima facie* evidence of slaveocratic tyranny. "Southern fire-eaters had made up their minds that [the bill] should be vetoed, and it was done." Nothing but "the remorseless negative of slavery" could explain resistance to a measure supported by "the matured judgment of the entire Northern Press, of both Houses of Congress, of numerous Agricultural Societies, and of every unprejudiced mind in the United States not absorbed in the breeding of negroes." The Slave Power was "radically hostile to educated labor," for "an Industrial College in a Slave State would be as great a solecism as a blacksmith's shop in a powder house."⁵¹

If Republican editors found the defeat of the Morrill bill a good opportunity to rally northern farmers to their cause, agricultural reformers were bitterly disappointed. Yet passage of the bill in Congress was a tremendous step forward. As congressional Republicans repeatedly reminded their colleagues, the

⁴⁹ M.W. Philips to Daniel Lee, Aug. 31, 1852, Records of the Agricultural Division, 1839-60, Record Group 16 (National Archives) (many similar examples could be cited throughout the 1850s); *Congressional Globe*, 35th Cong., 1st sess., Jan. 6, 1858, p. 206; May 19, 1858, pp. 2241-2242. For Republicans and the federal government, see Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 119-123.

⁵⁰ *Congressional Globe*, 35th Cong., 1st sess., Jan. 6, 1858, pp. 718, 720, 721; Feb. 26, 1859, 1414; Abraham Lincoln, *The Works of Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Debates, 1856-1859*, ed. John H. Clifford and Marion M. Miller (New York, 1908), II, 289-290.

⁵¹ *Philadelphia Press*, Feb. 28, 1859, p. 2; *Chicago Tribune*, March 1, 1859, p. 2; *New York Tribune*, Feb. 28, 1859, p. 4.

agricultural reform movement exerted influence at every level of government, building support in Washington by direct lobbying while it simultaneously orchestrated multiple state legislative resolutions to instruct Senators and hold representatives accountable. Beyond dispute, these efforts had made the difference, rendering passage of the Land Grant and USDA bills inevitable once secession left Congress firmly in northern hands. Both measures became law in 1862. At about the same time, Republicans also deployed the rhetoric of agricultural reform in support of the Homestead and Pacific Railroad Acts.⁵²

Analysis of congressional voting patterns reveals how Republicans benefitted from agricultural reform's ostensibly nonpartisan agenda. In 1858-1859, the Morrill bill was decided along the intersecting dimensions of party, section and region, the last being the key complicating factor (Table 5). For westerners, the bill's funding mechanism of land grants raised the danger of speculation, all the more so because it might interfere with their cherished Homestead Act. Thus five of the six Republicans opposing the bill were Midwesterners and the sixth was the Homestead bill's primary sponsor Galusha Grow. The same concerns meant that Northwestern Democrats overwhelmingly opposed the bill (16 to 2) whereas their Northeastern colleagues split more evenly (15 to 11 against). A closer look at Northeastern Democrats is revealing. In the Northeast, only Democrats opposed the bill besides Grow. These opponents clustered in two locations: the New York City area, where cotton interests predominated, and Pennsylvania, where the Buchanan administration exercised special clout. Pennsylvania's J. Glancy Jones, for instance, was a Buchanan protégé and "reliable doughface" who voted against the bill.⁵³ It therefore seems that southern influence largely determined northeastern Democratic opposition. The inference is confirmed by the 1862 Morrill bill vote, in which northeastern Democrats went for the measure 11 to 1 with all but one of New York and Pennsylvania's delegations voting yes.

On the other hand, members from public domain states were divided in both parties. This is clearly evident in 1862, when northwestern Republicans gave the bill a bare majority (21 to 20). In 1858-1859, however, sectional pressures pushed Republicans from the same states to close ranks behind the bill (29 to 6). Meanwhile, the land speculation issue provided cover for northwestern

⁵² For reformers' influence on ultimate passage, see *Congressional Globe*, 37th Cong., 2nd sess., May 8, 1862, p. 2014; May 22, 1862, p. 2276; for other measures, Dean, *An Agrarian Republic*, 84, 95.

⁵³ Michael Todd Landis, *Northern Men with Southern Loyalties: The Democratic Party and the Sectional Crisis* (Ithaca, 2014), 135-136.

Democrats to oppose the bill in order to satisfy the Buchanan administration and the South. With that influence gone in 1862, northwestern Democrats split about evenly (7 to 6).

A second regional split is also revealing. The Upper South gave significant support for the bill, and most of this came from the future Unionist slave states of Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri, which together voted 11 to 5 in favor. A majority of these yeas, in turn, came from former Whigs now organized in the American Party. Their persistence in prioritizing economic development over the slavery issue reflects their Whig heritage. But it also reflects the economic conditions of their regions, which, but for slavery, resembled the Greater Northeast in terms of market structure, relative urbanization, and agricultural diversity. But for slavery. That was the key that left much of the Upper South caught between northern trade patterns and southern racialized property relations.

* * *

Why has the agricultural reform movement's political influence gone largely unnoticed? One way to think about the problem is to imagine a bureaucratically centered politics in the absence of bureaucracy. Unlike the other major social movements of the antebellum era—antislavery, temperance, nativism—agricultural reform did not aim at one-time legal fixes. Legislative success for agricultural reformers meant not the end of their mission, but the establishment of new government agencies for its continued pursuit. Moreover, reformers spent most of their time dealing with agricultural techniques rather than with politics. In fact, they often claimed to want nothing to do with “politics,” as they understood that term, and they typically argued that what they proposed were common-sense policies that did not properly enter the political realm at all—that is, the realm of partisan contention. This is what I mean when I refer to a nonpartisan anti-politics.⁵⁴ Reformers insisted that appointees to government agricultural posts be “above political contamination” and that “no changes should be made with a change in the presidency.” In the heyday of a patronage-based party system, there was little institutional space in which to meet such demands. Eventually, agricultural policy achieved significant independence from the parties and came to be determined by a matrix of technocratic government agencies, legislative committees, and a range of business, consumer

⁵⁴ I borrow a term and a measure of inspiration from James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Cambridge, Eng., 1990).

and agricultural interest groups—the infamous “iron triangle.” But in the 1850s this kind of bureaucratically-oriented politics was simply unavailable. Instead, agricultural organizations needed first to build up federal and state bureaucracies.⁵⁵

To do so they had no choice but to go through highly partisan legislatures. The 1850s presented a uniquely volatile period in which to pursue this path. But the reform movement possessed its own organized constituency, independent media outlets, and federated lobbying operation, which allowed it to keep its goals on the public agenda regardless of what party leaders decided. When the Republicans emerged to confront slaveholder interests, agricultural reform practically fell into their laps, a readymade program of rural economic development backed by an extensive popular movement with none of the Jacksonian baggage carried by banks and tariffs. Yet Republicans never made agricultural reform a major campaign issue. And because reformers themselves articulated their demands in nonpartisan language that appeared in their own network of publications, rather than in the party press with its impassioned rhetoric, it has been easy to overlook the massive effort involved in simply bringing the Morrill bill to the House and Senate floors. This effort did not occur by accident.

Nor do I think the effort was entirely unique. Once we see agricultural reform as a social movement, parallel examples suggest themselves. For instance, the common school movement seems to have followed a strikingly similar pattern. In schematic outline, the trajectories of both movements went something like this: during the early 1800s, patrician reform efforts gained traction on public policy but quickly provoked popular backlash at their elitist cast. Several state boards of agriculture and education were repudiated almost as soon as they were created. Around the 1830s, however, a new generation of middle-class reformers built renewed public support for reform by founding associations, establishing specialized publications, and organizing public events such as fairs and conventions. Thanks to these efforts, broad-based reform movements emerged, endowing their discourses with a new measure of popular legitimacy. A combination of specialized periodicals and government reports were critical in this phase. Subsequent public campaigns successfully renewed government

⁵⁵ “Report [of the Committee on Agriculture],” *Minutes of the Votes and Proceedings of the Seventy-Fourth General Assembly of the State of New Jersey* (1850), 496; *Working Farmer*, 1 (1849), 73. My thinking in this paragraph is influenced by McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy*; Skowronek, *Building a New American State*; L. Ray Gunn, *The Decline of Authority: Public Economic Policy and Political Development in New York, 1800-1860* (Ithaca, 1988).

reform measures. In the case of education, these included public funding of common schools, reestablishment of state boards of education, and the founding of normal schools to professionalize teaching. Finally, new bureaucratic governing forms institutionalized the links between reform constituencies and state power. By the end of the cycle, an entirely different kind of relationship existed as before between society and its governing structures.⁵⁶

In light of this, I would like to suggest that we should pay more attention to mass mobilizations outside of our usual guiding frameworks. If the USDA and Morrill Act are not well explained by the “party period” construct, neither does the agricultural reform movement fit the “contentious politics” literature on social movements, which relies on a sharp disjuncture between state and society. But perhaps social movements—which is to say, social phenomena more definite and purposeful than constituencies, networks, or discourses—can engage with the state constructively as well as antagonistically. If this is the case, then we must broaden our conception of social movements or risk consigning to obscurity the origins of whole policy realms. For agriculture, this means extending recent work that argues for farmers’ critical role in American state-building.⁵⁷ For the nineteenth century, this means expanding beyond the dominant historiographical emphasis on moral reform and the Benevolent Empire. Other kinds of issues could also spark consequential movements. For American history more broadly, this means thinking carefully about how state structure and partisanship has conditioned the emergence not only of oppositional movements, but of what might be called state-allied or state-constructive movements.⁵⁸ The story of the antebellum agricultural reform movement is a first step in this direction.

⁵⁶ My view of educational history is based primarily on Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic* and Charles Leslie Glenn, *The American Model of State and School: An Historical Inquiry* (New York, 2012), as well as on my own reading of contemporary documents concerning education.

⁵⁷ Prasad, *Land of Too Much*; Cullather, *Hungry World*; Rosenberg, *4-H Harvest*; Immerwahr, *Thinking Small*; Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford, 2007); Catherine McNicol Stock and Robert D. Johnston, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of the Modern State: Political Histories of Rural America* (Ithaca, 2001); M. Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917* (Chicago, 1999).

⁵⁸ Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768-2004* (Boulder, 2004); Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (New York, 1998). See also John L. Brooke, “Cultures of Nationalism, Movements of Reform, and the Composite-Federal Polity: From Revolutionary Settlement to Antebellum Crisis,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 29 (Spring 2009), 1-33.

FIGURES

Figure 1: The 1849 New York State Fair at Syracuse

Source: *Transactions of the New-York State Agricultural Society* 9 (1850). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.



Figure 2: Benjamin F. Gue

Source: University Archives, Iowa State University Library.

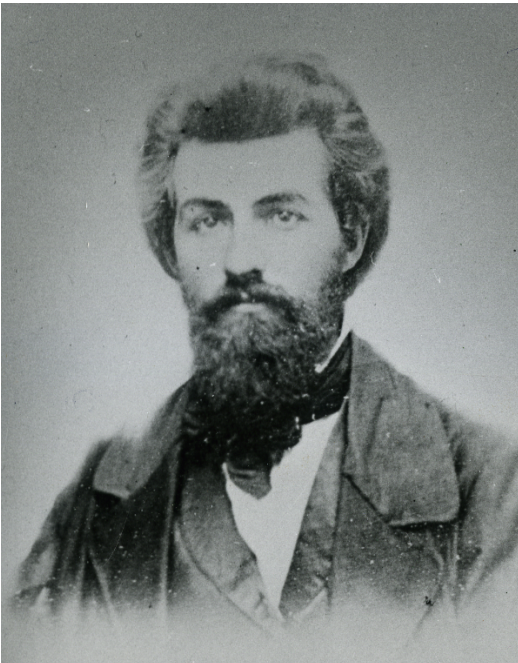


Figure 3: Diploma of the Montgomery County (Pa.) Agricultural Society, 1857
 Source: Library Company of Philadelphia.

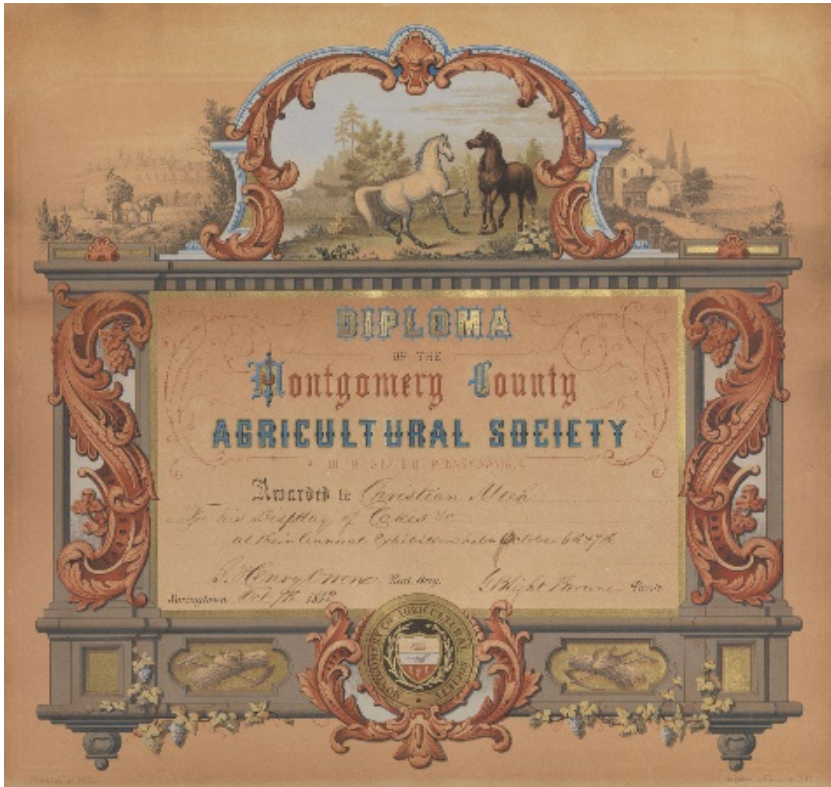


Figure 4: A Plowing Match at the 1852 Fairfield County (Conn.) Agricultural Fair

Source: *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*, 3 (Nov. 6, 1852), 297.
 Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.



Figure 5: Crowded Floral Hall at the 1849 New York State Fair

Source: *Transactions of the New-York State Agricultural Society* 9 (1850). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

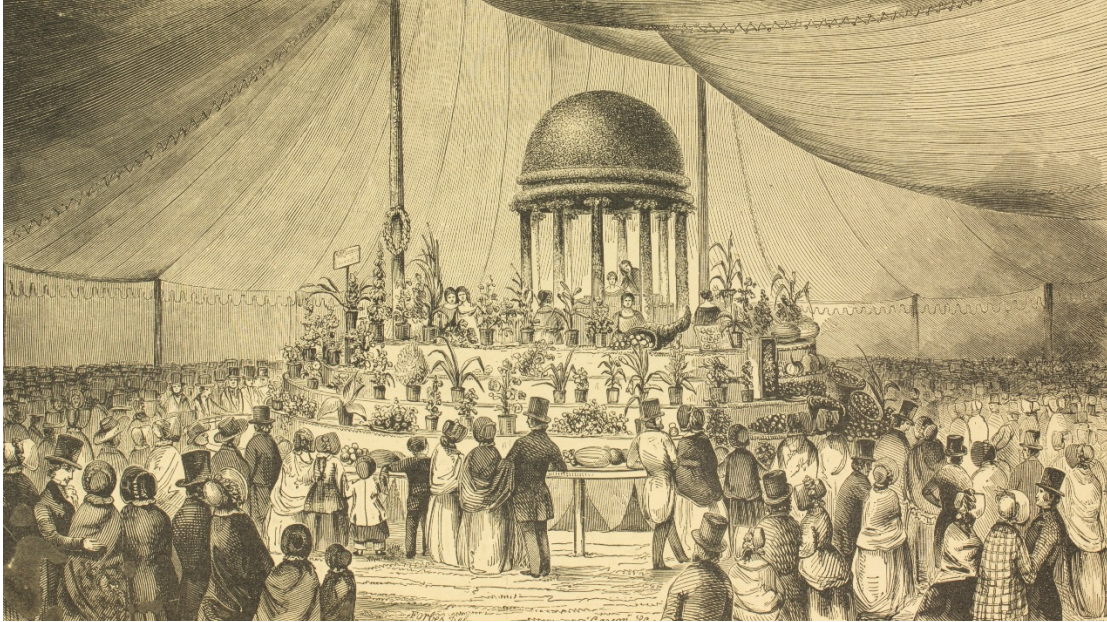


Figure 6: The Farmers' High School of Pennsylvania, 1859

Source: Courtesy of the Pennsylvania State University Archives.



Figure 7: The Promise of Scientific Agriculture

Source: M. M. Rodgers, *Scientific Agriculture, or the Elements of Chemistry, Geology, Botany and Meteorology, Applied to Practical Agriculture* (Rochester, 1848), frontispiece. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

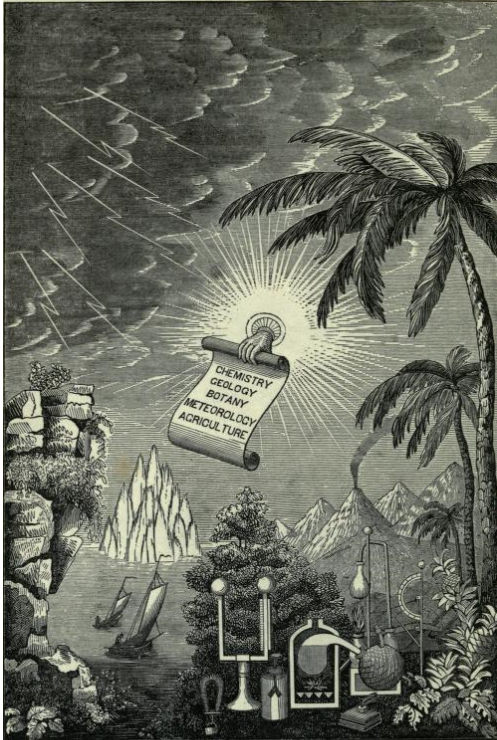


Figure 8: The 1857 United States Agricultural Society Fair in Philadelphia

Source: Library Company of Philadelphia.



TABLES

TABLE 1: DISTINCT AGRICULTURAL JOURNAL TITLES
PER 100,000 FREE RURAL INHABITANTS BY DECADE

<i>Decade</i>	<i>Distinct Titles</i>	<i>Per 100,000 Free Rural Inhabitants</i>
1820-1829	19	0.195
1830-1839	90	0.707
1840-1849	141	0.857
1850-1859	181	0.851

SOURCES: S. C. Stuntz, *List of the Agricultural Periodicals of the United States and Canada Published During the Century July 1810 to July 1910*, ed. Emma B Hawks (Washington, 1941); *Historical Statistics of the United States, 1789-1945* (Washington, 1949).

NOTES: The second column counts number of journal titles to publish at least one issue in a decade. The right-most column divides title count by free rural population as estimated from the federal population Census at decade's end.

TABLE 2: FARMERS' PRESENCE IN THE AGRICULTURAL REFORM MOVEMENT

<i>Group</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>No. w/known occupations (% of total)</i>	<i>No. of farmers (% of known occupations)</i>
Fairfield County Agricultural Society, members of the 10 th and 11 th district executive committees	CT	1843	77	48 (62.3)	39 (81.3)
Turbot, Northumberland County, petitioners for federal agricultural bureau	PA	1850	44	35 (79.5)	27 (77.1)
Middlesex County Agricultural Society, contributors, from town of Concord, to purchase of permanent fairgrounds	MA	1853	29	24 (82.8)	18 (75.0)
Bucks County Agricultural Society, shareholders	PA	1858	148	86 (58.1)	69 (80.2)
Subscribers to the <i>Cultivator</i> , list of agent Henry Balcom of Oxford, Chenango County	NY	1839- 1865	132	119 (90.2)	87 (73.1)
		<i>Total</i>	430	312 (72.6)	240 (76.9)

SOURCES: Occupations determined from local histories, genealogies and manuscript Census records (via Ancestry.com). For figures, see meeting minutes, Oct. 18, 1843, Fairfield County Agricultural Society Records; printed petition from Northumberland County, PA, referred to House Committee on

Agriculture, May 28, 1858, in Petitions, 31st Cong., HR 31A-G1.1, RG 233 (National Archives); "Report of the Committee to Purchase Land, &c.," Oct. 4, 1853, Middlesex Agricultural Society Records; Stock certificate book of the Bucks County Agricultural Society, 1858-1867, Collection no. BM-F-8 (Mercer Museum and Spruance Library, Doylestown, Pa.); McMurry, "Who Read the Agricultural Journals?" 5-6.

TABLE 3: ROLL CALL VOTES ON PUBLIC FUNDING
FOR AGRICULTURAL SOCIETIES IN NEW YORK AND OHIO

	<i>New York (1841)</i>		<i>Ohio (1846)</i>	
	For	Against	For	Against
Whig	34	12	30	1
Democrat	21	17	2	19
Overall	57	30	33	21

SOURCES: *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New-York*, 64th sess. (1841), 198-199, 240-241, 762-763; *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Ohio*, 44 (1846), 3-5, 706, 720-721; *Annual Reports for 1875, Made to the Sixty-Second General Assembly of the State of Ohio at the Regular Session, Commencing January 3, 1876*, (Columbus, 1876), I, 298-300.

NOTES: Partisan counts do not add up to overall totals because a few legislators could not be affiliated with a party.

TABLE 4: AGRICULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS BY REGION IN 1858

<i>Region</i>	<i>Agricultural Organizations</i>	<i>Organizations per 100,000 Total Inhabitants</i>	<i>Organizations per 100,000 Free Rural Inhabitants</i>	<i>Organizations per 1,000 Farms</i>
Midwest	411	5.29	6.11	0.63
Northeast	279	2.63	4.10	0.50
Southern Interior	112	1.71	2.85	0.26
Southern Seaboard	85	1.45	2.68	0.31

SOURCES: *Report of the Commissioner of Patents, Agriculture*, (1859), 91; 1860 Federal Population Census.

TABLE 5: CONGRESSIONAL VOTING (BOTH HOUSES) ON THE MORRILL BILL, 1858-1862

	<i>Morrill bill</i> (1858-1859)		<i>Morrill bill</i> (1862)		<i>USDA bill</i> (1862)	
	For	Against	For	Against	For	Against
Overall	129	124	122	32	150	20
Partisan splits						
Republican	94	6	78	22	27	4
Democrat	23	112	18	7	103	12
American/Unionist	12	6	26	3	20	4
Sectional splits						
North (Free)	112	41	98	31	126	16
South (Slave)	17	83	24	1	24	4
Union States	123	46	122	32	150	20
Confederate States	6	78	~	~	~	~
Regional splits						
Northeast	78	16	70	4	78	7
Northwest	34	25	28	27	48	9
Upper South	15	34	24	1	24	4
Lower South	2	49	~	~	~	~
Select combined splits						
Northeastern Democrats	13	15	11	1	14	0
Northwestern Democrats	2	16	7	6	8	3
Northeastern Republicans	65	1	57	2	62	7
Northwestern Republicans	29	5	21	20	39	5

SOURCES: *Congressional Globe*, 35th Cong., 1st Sess., p. 1742; 35th Cong., 2nd Sess., p. 734; 37th Cong., 2nd Sess., pp. 2017, 2634, 2770; Kenneth A. Martis, *The Historical Atlas of Political Parties in the United States Congress, 1789-1989* (New York, 1989), 110-111, 114-115, 393-395.