THE MID-ATLANTIC

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Physical Conditions

The mid-Atlantic region—here construed as the states of New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, and Delaware—falls within a humid continental climate zone. Though microclimates vary (especially on Long Island, along the Great Lakes, and in the Adirondacks), generally the region receives 30–40 inches of precipitation annually and around 150 frost-free days. Soils, topography, and drainage range from low, boggy coastal areas in New Jersey to prime farmland in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania to high elevations and poor soils in the Adirondacks of New York State. At the end of the last ice age, retreating glaciers profoundly shaped soils in New York and in the north and west corners of Pennsylvania; they also gouged out the Finger Lakes in central New York. The Appalachian Mountains curve through the region from southwest to northeast, then the topography diminishes to rolling hills and then to flat plains in southeastern Pennsylvania, Delaware, and south Jersey. Major rivers draining the region include the Hudson, Delaware, St. Lawrence, Genesee, and Susquehanna, flowing to the Atlantic Ocean; and the Allegheny/Ohio, to the Gulf of Mexico. Of these only the Hudson and the Ohio are consistently navigable. At the time of contact forest covered nearly 100 percent of the region.1

The Colonial Period

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Dutch, French, and English vied for supremacy, and indigenous peoples struggled to contend with them all. Lord Calvert received his charter for Maryland in the early seventeenth century; New Netherlands (including present-day New Jersey and New York State) came under English control by 1664; William Penn acquired present-day Pennsylvania (including present-day Delaware) in the 1680s. In the western interior the French Empire maintained a trade network, setting the stage for global conflict in the mid-eighteenth century. The indigenous Iroquois, Delaware, and other peoples faced virgin-soil epidemics and European pressure with increasing desperation and loss.

These geographic and geo-political realities set basic conditions as rural communities evolved in the mid-Atlantic during the colonial period. Explicitly tolerant of dissenting religions (Pennsylvania), intermittently so (Maryland), or more or less indifferent (New York), the mid-Atlantic colonies attracted settlers from all over Western Europe and even Scandinavia—a much more diverse group than in either
New England or the southern colonies. Soon boatloads of people were disembarking in Philadelphia and New Amsterdam. Many came for religious reasons, but most also sought land to occupy and farm. African slaves were forcibly imported, especially to Maryland but to the other colonies too. The colonial authorities tried hard to achieve orderly land distribution, but squatting was common. In New York, Dutch “patroonships” persisted after the English takeover and mingled with English land tenure customs. Settlers followed the river valleys and Indian paths first; from there they penetrated the interior, slowly hacking rudimentary roads and felling trees.

Ninety percent of the population lived on farms. Mid-Atlantic rural communities varied considerably in cultural makeup. Dutch-dominated hamlets lined the Hudson; Palatines came into the Mohawk Valley; and enclaves of New Yorkers in south Jersey coalesced at first around shared linguistic or religious traditions. By 1750 a third of Pennsylvania’s residents spoke German, and Germans were moving along the Great Valley corridor into Maryland. But, just as often, rural communities were quite heterogeneous. Not only were German, Dutch, and English widely spoken, but religious groups including Anabaptists, Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, German Reformeds, and Lutherans all intermingled. In Pennsylvania’s Oley Valley, for example, German Reformed, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Huguenot, and Swedesborgian congregations coexisted in a well-bounded, topographically isolated place. There Old World architectural and cultural patterns mingled. For example, many German speakers built houses in the “Continental” center-chimney style but, on the other hand, farmers often constructed their buildings with techniques from many places. Architectural evidence thus suggests that, from the outset, European immigrant groups interacted routinely.2

As they devised solutions to new farming problems, rural people created new forms of community. When it came to agriculture, Old World cultural background was less influential in shaping agrarian patterns than we might imagine. All cultural groups—even the Pennsylvania Germans—evolved similar, extensive practices. Of course, people brought with them domesticated livestock and traditional crops and tools, but they seized the opportunity to own land and willingly abandoned European-style nucleated settlement custom, instead scattering individual farms across the landscape. Settlers also readily adopted Native American crops like maize, pumpkins, and tobacco, and they abandoned intensive European-style land cultivation. Neither did mid-Atlantic farming people hesitate to import Africans for enslaved labor, especially of course in Maryland, but in the other colonies too.3

Except for Maryland (where staple tobacco production ruled), early farming was small-scale and highly diversified. Crops got more attention than livestock; animals often foraged for themselves most of the year and colonists slaughtered all but foundation stock in late fall. From the beginning, farming people used waterways to get products to market—the Atlantic, the Caribbean, the navigable portions of rivers, and the coastwise trade from Boston to Charleston. They shipped wheat, flour, tobacco, hides, and livestock from Philadelphia and New York, bringing cash or credit. By the late eighteenth century Maryland growers were shifting away from tobacco and adopting a mix more like that of the other colonies in the region.4

Export for cash was just one dimension in a system that featured highly diverse production for multiple uses. Grains, fiber crops, hay (mostly from low-lying meadows or salt marshes), fruits, and vegetables were not only exported; they were fed to animals,
consumed by people, or processed into thread, cider, dried fruits, and many other goods to provide a year-round food and clothing supply. People sold or used potash, pearlash, and lumber. Small numbers of animals provided meat, butter, cheese, fiber, and draft power. Individual farms rarely achieved self-sufficiency, so intense collective effort was needed to ensure community independence. In Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey (also Delaware, which split off from Pennsylvania in 1701) neighborhood exchanges layered economic relationships over already existing religious, linguistic, and ethnic ties, while early Maryland tobacco plantations were more isolated entities unto themselves.5

Rural residents in the colonial period shared a strong commitment to hierarchical social organization based on wealth, gender, and degree of dependency. Though hereditary titles might not play a large role, inherited or acquired wealth still afforded high social status and opportunity for more accumulation. English common law ensured women’s subordination throughout the region. In early Maryland’s “widowarchy,” skewed sex ratios and high mortality rates made white women servants highly marriageable and allowed a few to rise socially. In German Pennsylvania, patriarchy was particularly strong, though women achieved some status through their productive farm work. Gender was just one determinant of dependency; large portions of the population lacked property and were regarded as “dependent” through their status as indentured servants, apprentices, “redemptioners” paying off transatlantic passage fare, “inmates,” “cottagers,” tenants, or slaves. By the eighteenth century slavery was firmly tied to race and more permanent than other kinds of unfree labor, but still just the extreme on a spectrum of unfree labor. Even sons were dependent, albeit temporarily. The labor force for agriculture was drawn from these groups.6

During the Revolutionary era, agrarian concerns helped to shape resistance to British rule. As farming people pushed inland, frustration levels mounted over issues like land access and conflict with Native Americans. In Pennsylvania especially, people on the frontier clashed with the Quaker-led assembly, which refused to support military protection. After the French and Indian War, the Proclamation of 1763 further antagonized westerners. More broadly mid-Atlantic agricultural productivity played an important role in Thomas Paine’s declaration that an independent US would thrive “while eating is the custom of Europe.”7 Paine, after all, witnessed the scale of the wheat trade first hand in Philadelphia. Yet, when armed conflict ensued, rural communities fractured into loyalist, patriot, and neutral factions just as their urban counterparts did.

**Early Republic to the Civil War**

After independence, new disruptions visited Mid-Atlantic farming communities. The vulnerability of cash wheat culture began to manifest itself in pest infestations and declining yields, and the crisis worsened when European farmers resumed production after the Napoleonic Wars. Farm people pushed westward rapidly but the transport infrastructure was still uneven, so they had limited markets. For many the only way they could get much cash was to convert their grain to whiskey. On the western frontier in Pennsylvania and Maryland, whiskey even served as currency. When the national government (already unpopular from the start in this mostly anti-Federalist section) passed a whiskey excise tax in 1794, angry farmers responded with violence, protesting
the tax’s inequities. President George Washington was compelled to send troops to put down the Whiskey Rebellion. Only with the opening of the Ohio (with the Louisiana Purchase and the elimination of Native American resistance) did tensions subside. The Whiskey Rebellion showed that agrarian communities differed deeply in outlook, depending on their location within the Mid-Atlantic region.8

These intra-regional differences faded over time. In the early nineteenth century massive population movement occurred. Some migrants moved westward within the region or continued beyond. New Englanders flooded into New York State seeking better land; “Yankee/Yorkers” in turn spread into northern Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania Germans continued to populate central Maryland and the Pennsylvania interior. Over time, some places (especially Pennsylvania German areas) actually became more homogeneous. Throughout the Mid-Atlantic, dense kinship networks developed in rural neighborhoods as new generations married and established families in the vicinity.

Transport innovations (turnpikes, canals, roads, railroads) knit the region together internally and also tied it (and exposed it) to the west, which soon sent cheap wheat and other farm products east to compete with Mid-Atlantic wares. Yet eastern towns and cities were growing rapidly, providing new markets. Mid-Atlantic farming families continued to combine production for market with diverse output for household use and local exchange. However, a very important transformation took place, away from emphasis on crops and toward a more integrated crop and livestock husbandry. Farms produced corn, wheat, oats, barley, rye, hay, potatoes, swine, cattle, poultry, and perhaps a few sheep. Every farm had a substantial orchard. Oxen or horses provided draft power. Manure was composted in straw and applied to crop fields, creating a more dependable cycle of soil renewal.9

Virtually all Mid-Atlantic farms produced the same mix of crops and livestock, but local variations appeared as the result of many individual decisions to slightly emphasize one or two elements in the common mix. For example, diversified grassland farming predominated in New York State and northern Pennsylvania, where upland hay made from “tame grasses” (mainly timothy and clover) vastly expanded the possibilities for hay production. Central New York produced farm-made cheese for export, in addition to a diversified crop and livestock mix. In the Genesee Valley of western New York, newly opened land provided a wheat bonanza for a generation or so. Closer to large cities, butter dairying and stall feeding developed along with such saleable items as apples, potatoes, and hay. Chester County, Pennsylvania and Orange County, New York, became famous for prodigious amounts of high-quality butter for the city trade. Brooklyn was a center of food production for the city. Lancaster and Chester County in Pennsylvania became noted for fine, stall-fed beef, driven in from western Pennsylvania for finishing.10

Output increased steadily in nearly all agricultural enterprises. Agricultural reform was much discussed in the newly popular agricultural press and farm people often adopted improvements such as rotations, manuring, improved hay grasses, and liming. These practices might have helped conserve soil fertility, but it is not clear that they resulted in substantial per-acre productivity increases. The evidence strongly indicates that increased production was mainly achieved through expansion—by simply bringing more land into production. Mostly this was relatively simple tree cutting, but in low-lying places like southern New Jersey it might mean extensive dikeworks and water management.11

The percentage of the population in farming began to drop. In most of the region, though, the number of farms held steady or increased because people were still making
new farms or dividing existing ones. Land was still widely accessible, although various forms of tenancy were quite important throughout the region. Remnants of the Dutch land tenure system hung on in New York and New Jersey. In many Pennsylvania German communities “kinship-based share tenancy” was an important institution. In this version of an Old World “altenteil” or “old people’s part,” sons farmed on shares for a patriarch, who often exerted his power over adult offspring. In southeastern Pennsylvania and Delaware various renting arrangements obtained, usually based on cash rent or in-kind service. Across the region perhaps a quarter of all farm residents might be tenants.

As they matured, rural communities tended toward hybrid cultural expressions in their agricultural landscapes. For example, the Pennsylvania German bank barn appeared in the late eighteenth century. The lower level housed animals, while the upper level kept hay, grain, and equipment. Well suited to the new husbandry, the form was imported from Switzerland and was first adopted by Pennsylvania Germans. In the Hudson Valley and New Jersey, the “Dutch American” farm complex evolved. In New York and Pennsylvania, people experimented with adaptations of the old-style “English” three-bay barn to fit a mixed-farming economy. Evolving foodways affected the landscape too; smoke houses were common in pork-loving German Pennsylvania, but not so much in the more beef-centered Yankee sections. Even farmhouses revealed cultural preferences in rural communities. For example, the very plain, squarish “four over four” farmhouse predominated in German Pennsylvania, but the Yankees and Yorkers prized the Greek Revival and Italianate. These landscape variations speak to different emphases in the rural community. They perhaps reflect a tendency toward conservatism in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware. Meanwhile New Yorkers were more apt to embrace popular culture.

Rural communities arguably were now better defined spatially than in the colonial period. Social and economic interactions often revolved around the church, public school, hamlet, commercial center, processing center, or iron “plantation.” Kinship networks, intricate economic relationships, and shared convictions offered foundations for both community cohesion and tension. A few examples will illustrate how farming communities in the region were evolving in the antebellum era. Joan Jensen has suggested that Mid-Atlantic farm women “loosened the bonds” of patriarchy partly through their critically important labor in dairying. As women performed market-oriented work, they gained in social status and parlayed their new influence into outlets in benevolent work, religious activism, and even antislavery. In Oneida County, New York women’s labor in cheese making also contributed to new openings, especially in enhanced education and (often) a path out of farming altogether. In upstate New York rural and urban places alike were galvanized in the evangelical fervor that gave the region the nickname “Burnt-Over District.” Print media and traveling lectures exposed rural people in the region to new ideas; they formed organizations dedicated to all manner of causes from temperance to dress reform. These cultural and intellectual currents were often transformative.

Hierarchies of wealth and gender persisted, but social organization based on “dependency” (and deference) was giving way to more fluid and dynamic market forces. Slavery was eliminated by gradual emancipation statutes, except in Maryland and Delaware. Other forms of unfree labor disappeared, making the contrast between free and slave labor starker. In general, free wage labor was the new norm, prompting
a new attention to efficiency in labor processes on the farm. The Pennsylvania barn not only served as a tool for an integrated grain and livestock system; it also facilitated efficient use of labor through gravity power and centralized feed, water, and equipment storage. Temperance campaigns in rural areas pressured farmers to quit supplying harvest workers with their customary whiskey allotment. Social tensions accompanied the shift to a more competitive, money-oriented economy; the “anti-rent wars” in New York State are a good example.15

By far the main labor source on Mid-Atlantic farms remained the farm family members and their neighbors and kin. Families were getting smaller and new implements were available to save labor, so farm households reorganized their labor patterns to fit new technologies and production priorities. For example, throughout the region women engaged in important market activity, especially dairying. In German Pennsylvania, “English” women withdrew from this field labor while German women continued field labor. Throughout the region farming people “changed works” and labored together to accomplish big tasks collectively. They kept scrupulous book accounts even if they seldom actually exchanged any cash.16

Mid-Atlantic farming communities enjoyed a time of prosperity and optimism in the antebellum period. Rural residents celebrated the ideal of a family “competency” – a “comfortable sufficiency.” They engaged in fulsome rhetoric about the nobility of farming as an occupation and the virtuous independence of the American yeomanry. Prideful farm names like “Quiet Home” or “Pleasant Farm” were popular. These notions didn’t always match up to the reality but they represented powerful

Figure 2.1 Decorated red barn, State Route 135, Moselem Springs, Berks County, PA. Digital ID: hhh pa1541.photos.141317p. From the collections of the Library of Congress.
and deeply held beliefs, so much so that they soon became an important component in free-soil antislavery ideology. The yeoman ideal was central to the politics of “free soil, free labor, free men.”

**The Civil War**

Though it only lasted four years, the Civil War brought fundamental changes to Mid-Atlantic rural communities. Rural areas disproportionately sent men to the military; women, children, and immigrants stepped in to do their work, and farm mechanization increased markedly. In grassland areas, the horse-drawn mower epitomized the trend, while in wheat-growing areas the reaper was adopted. These two were just the most prominent among many new farm machines. Some processes moved from farms to centralized “factories”; cheese making is a good example. Prices were high. Cotton shortages and the demand for uniforms, tents, and blankets fueled a wool boom in places like southwestern Pennsylvania. Overall, Mid-Atlantic agricultural production actually increased during the war, and exports from the region helped the U.S. economy by earning precious hard currency. In Maryland and Delaware the picture was more chaotic. Emancipation finally came for African Americans there, and Maryland was disrupted by military campaigns, most notably the devastating battle at Antietam.

Many rural communities in New York, northern Pennsylvania, and New Jersey solidly supported the war. On the home front, existing kin and neighborly ties were strengthened by the formation of local relief and soldiers’ aid societies (mostly run by women) which sent quantities of medical supplies and foodstuffs to units at the front. Other rural areas were more ambivalent. In central Pennsylvania, for example, a strong Democratic Party advocated a negotiated end to the war and a return to the prewar status quo. Draft evasion was common in the agricultural central valleys. In places with pacifist legacies (Anabaptist and Quaker communities), attitudes to the war were also mixed. The war years marked a turning point for farming families and communities. They emerged more tied to the national economy and culture and more committed (willingly or not) to an industrialized and intensified agriculture.

**Civil War to Early Twentieth Century**

The postwar period saw still more changes. The opening of the West accelerated, the transport network consolidated, and urban growth took off. These trends presented both challenges and opportunities to rural people. Western competition finally pushed out flour processing; former important milling centers like Rochester and Buffalo went into decline, along with their hinterlands. The “corn and hog” belt shifted the geographic center of swine production westward. By the late nineteenth century the refrigerated rail car allowed Chicago and its vast hinterland to dominate the national meatpacking business. Mid-Atlantic producers didn’t get completely eliminated, but they were hard hit and concentrated into more localized areas. For example, Lancaster County continued as an important feeding center, as much for the animals’ manure (it was crucial for the nutrient-hungry tobacco crop) as for profits from their sale.

On the positive side, eastern seaboard cities were growing rapidly and (in Pennsylvania especially) coal towns sprang up practically overnight. City people demanded
foodstuffs and perishables, and rail and trolley lines soon reached far out into the countryside, making it profitable for farming families to follow dairying, truck farming, and fruit growing. Hay production was also profitable, since so many horses and mules worked in the cities and the mines. The nationally integrated market economy created opportunities for specialized production in several Mid-Atlantic localities. Central New York dominated hops production; Lancaster County and northern Pennsylvania produced cigar-leaf tobacco; the Lake Erie shore region became known for Concord grapes; and scattered localities specialized in potato production. New Jersey was on its way to becoming the “garden state” by producing vegetables and fruits for the city. Florists, seedsmen, and nursery-stock growers also thrived near the cities.

Farm produce flowed into the city for distribution in large, city-owned farm markets, curb markets, privately owned wholesale businesses, and a network of urban groceries, butcher shops, fruit and vegetable vendors, etc. Many farmers had their own huckster routes with regular customers. Processors (Campbells, Heinz, and many smaller, decentralized concerns) provided important markets. The Mid-Atlantic region was not self-sufficient in food by any means (meat, grain, fruit, and vegetables came from other places), but much of the eastern seaboard cities’ food supply originated on Mid-Atlantic farms.

Production for on-farm use and local circulation continued, but the market became much more important because capital requirements were increasing significantly. Greater expenses for equipment and fertilizer, livestock, and land meant that farm families had to invest more money in their business. Making a profit was a challenge because the farm economy fluctuated so wildly; depressions in the 1870s and 1890s were followed by high prices in the early twentieth century. Mid-Atlantic farming families still valued a “competency” and still found diverse small-scale production strategies viable; they still produced a complex mix of small grains, corn, hay, fruit, potatoes, and livestock. Cattle were more important, while swine were declining and sheep had essentially disappeared from the region. Another way of diversifying was to pursue nonfarm work on a part-time or seasonal basis. In Pennsylvania especially, there were opportunities for wage work even in quite rural areas.

This was a period of dynamism for farming communities. The number of farms was still climbing and average farm size was still falling, yet the percentage of the total population in farming was still dropping, as was the average farm family size. Steady outmigration to the west and to the cities further altered the demographic complexion of rural communities. Some places lost population, others were stable, and some enjoyed modest population growth, but rural places didn’t attract as many newcomers as did the cities. In general, Mid-Atlantic rural communities became more socially homogeneous—long settled, relatively stable, inward looking—especially in comparison to the urban and industrial population, which was being leavened by immigration and farm-to-city migration. Yet rural social life was rich and vibrant. Rural organizations flourished. Well-established social institutions like schools and churches continued as social centers, augmented by explicitly farm-oriented organizations like the Grange. Country people created a lively social environment; they visited constantly and enjoyed entertainments, whether locally generated or commercial. Nourishing the “bonds of community” was the particular care of women. Amish communities became more notably separate than before; their story appears elsewhere in this volume.
Farm labor still came from family members and nearby kin, supplemented by local wage labor. Tenancy continued to be common. Neighborhood work exchanges were still important as a way to get things done and to cement communal ties. At the same time, the nature of agricultural work on the farm and in the community was changing. Growers in the hops and grape regions, for example, recruited large seasonal labor forces made up overwhelmingly of young women. In the cigar-leaf tobacco areas the entire family worked year round with the crop.

Much human energy was expended on farms, but machinery transformed human labor. This was the golden era of horse power. As well, stationary steam engines reduced labor in tasks like threshing and windmills powered water pumps and machinery. The gender organization of labor on many farms also changed significantly. For example, the rise of fluid milk production (home butter and cheese making had been moved to factories) meant shifted duties for women. They still milked cows but no longer made butter and cheese. Some shifted into poultry raising or market gardening, while it seems that dairy work for men intensified. Now that canning and the modern cook-stove made elaborate self-provisioning possible, farm household members (mainly women) processed more food than ever. The family enjoyed an enhanced level of dietary variety. Seasonality was still quite important, even in dairying. Household members followed a daily and seasonal rhythm of butchering, canning, drying, animal tending, harvesting, woodcutting, maple sugaring, and the like.20

Farming took place in a wider context that could be pastoral but just as often was industrial. Activities such as coal mining, oil and natural gas extraction, and lumbering took place throughout the rural Mid-Atlantic. In western Pennsylvania especially, oil and gas derricks and coal shafts became common landscape features on many a farm. These resources could provide income to farming families via royalties, leasing, and jobs, but they also exacted an environmental toll in such problems as compromised water quality and erosion. Northern New Jersey industrial practices eventually resulted in many “brownfield” sites in the state. In southern New Jersey, fear for the state’s water supply actually led officials to reject a proposal from Philadelphia’s Joseph Wharton to import water from the Pinelands Aquifer.

Circa 1910–1960

Already in the late nineteenth century farm numbers had begun to decline in parts of New York and New Jersey; Pennsylvania hit a peak sometime in the early twentieth century. After this it was steady decline everywhere. Average farm size increased somewhat, but many acres were taken out of production by either abandonment or development. In New York State alone, for example, farm acreage would drop by nearly half between 1920 and 1990. The farm economy presented difficult challenges; two decades of outright depression (1920–40) were followed by better conditions, but a pervasive cost–price squeeze. Together with rising capital requirements these trends pushed many families off the farm. The percentage of the region’s population living on farms (already low in the national context) went into a steep decline from around 10–20 percent in 1900 to under 2 percent by 1970. The rise of irrigated, corporate farming in the West (especially California) and the appearance of a vast trucking infrastructure spelled trouble for Mid-Atlantic farming enterprises, severely limiting their potential for profit. Meanwhile the land-grant system, together with rising agribusiness, pushed breeding, sophisticated
feeding, heavy pesticide and herbicide usage, and investment in artificial fertilizers. These expensive “inputs” vastly increased productivity and resulted in overproduction. The gasoline revolution displaced horses and freed up cropland, making the situation worse still. Government regulation became a much more important factor to be reckoned with, especially in the dairy industry. Farmers wanting to sell fluid milk now had to comply with ever stricter sanitation regulations involving considerable building costs and new procedures. Among farm operations that managed to survive all the shakeouts, there was much greater farm-level and regional specialization, mainly in dairying but also in pockets of fruit (Adams County Pennsylvania, the Lake Erie shore), potatoes (Long Island, Lehigh County Pennsylvania), truck farming (Southeast Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Long Island), and mushrooms (Chester County Pennsylvania.)

The Mid-Atlantic became the site of important changes in the poultry industry. Lancaster and York County, Pennsylvania became national leaders in chicken and egg production. Poultry operations in Pennsylvania were numerous but relatively small. On the other hand, large-scale specialized broiler production developed nowhere more intensively than on the Delmarva Peninsula. Local lore holds that the first broiler business here was started by a coast guardsman’s wife and soon copied by people looking for a new source of income as fisheries and oyster harvesting declined. By 1950 Delmarva produced almost 40 percent of national commercial production, which in turn accounted for 40 percent of all chicken meat. Delaware by 1953 depended for 80 percent of its agricultural income on this industry. The Delmarva broiler industry arose from a confluence of circumstances. Climate, soils, and land costs had little bearing. More important were low feed costs (because most supplies were locally procured); nearness to hatcheries; lower transport costs due to inexpensive truck transportation; lack of other investment and employment opportunities; high demand; the decline of truck farming in the face of southern competition; and ecological crisis in the fisheries. Delmarva chicken meat reached markets in thirty-five states.21

For farming families the transition to market dependency was now completed. Production for farm use and local exchange atrophied, though collective work and social exchanges continued in different forms. Silo filling, for example, became a shared work process, and the automobile facilitated new kinds of socializing. In the main, though, rural communities were seriously challenged by outright depopulation, aging, and poverty. Expensive amenities like indoor toilets and running water were out of reach for many farm families during the Depression, and sometimes the gulf between city and country seemed wide indeed. Rural people responded to these challenges resourcefully. Farm women increasingly put the “barn before the house,” not because they were being submissive but because they reasoned that attention to the barn would enable the family eventually to put resources into the “house.” Off-farm work became a key part of farm household strategies. Employment opportunities were increasingly accessible because transportation was better and the mid-Atlantic industrial economy was so highly developed. Even in remoter places in Pennsylvania, for example, rural people could find work. Off-farm work, along with consumption, the auto, electricity, and radio promoted greater rural integration with the national culture.22

Not surprisingly, these years witnessed conflict in the region. Local tensions erupted over consolidated schools; rural people (including the Amish in Pennsylvania) were
reluctant to surrender autonomy and control of education to central authorities. In the end, though, the non-Amish people accepted consolidation, and the new consolidated high schools often became important social centers. Animal-disease eradication programs were another point of contention. Government campaigns against bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis met with hostility and resistance in some places. Some of the last holdouts were Lancaster County farmers, suspicious of government regulation and angry about low indemnification levels. In central New York, Dairyman’s League cooperative members went on strike against milk distributors in the 1930s.23

The family and local hired workers still provided the labor supply on dairy and general farms, but the labor picture was changing too. Already in the late nineteenth century the “padrone” system had developed to supply farm labor for intensive truck farms in New Jersey and Long Island. Many were immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Growers also recruited Italian immigrants from Philadelphia to harvest tomatoes, beans, sweet corn, and other crops in New Jersey and Bucks County Pennsylvania. World War II brought a marked shift and consolidation in the Atlantic Coast migrant labor stream. The so-called “Florida Itinerary” brought impoverished African American workers northward with the seasonal ripening of crops. They harvested potatoes, cannery crops, tomatoes, sweet corn, beans, strawberries, and the like from Florida to Maine and then returned south for the winter months. Agricultural labor in the mid-Atlantic had become “southernized.”24 During and after World War II African Americans were supplemented with workers from Puerto Rico and elsewhere in the Caribbean. They labored on farms throughout the region. These workers had few protectors and toiled in bad conditions for low pay. On occasion the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and other groups drew public attention to abuses. Migrant quarters in farming communities segregated workers and signaled new social divisions between the local rural residents and the temporary workforce.

1960–2000

In the late twentieth century all the trends of the postwar period played out in an even more exaggerated manner. Farm numbers continued the downward spiral, as did total acreage and the percentage of the population in farming. Average farm size increased somewhat, but millions of acres went out of production altogether. In southeastern Pennsylvania, Maryland, northern Delaware, northern New Jersey, and Long Island mass-produced suburbs ate up farmland at a prodigious pace, while in the Pennsylvania and New York interiors reforestation took place as farmland went out of cultivation. Forest clearing had been perhaps the most drastic environmental intervention of the many that farming entailed. Now, the return of forest cover arguably brought environmental benefits. The species composition of the new forest land, however, differed drastically from that of the original forests. Not only did new species replace the older hardwoods, in some regions a “depauperate” forest resulted from over-browsing by species like the white-tailed deer, now free from its native predators.25

Ironically, much of the land being developed for suburbs was prime farmland, especially in Pennsylvania and Maryland. Beginning in 1974, the Mid-Atlantic states adopted agricultural land preservation programs that aimed to keep farmland in production through various means, mainly through purchase or transfer of development
rights. The government administered some, while private foundations ran others. These programs brought together unlikely allies. For example, the Philadelphia city council endorsed a Pennsylvania bond issue to finance farmland preservation because it hoped to stem the outflow of people and resources to the suburbs. Even some suburban areas supported farmland preservation as municipalities discovered that rural areas paid more in taxes than they used in services, while the inverse obtained in suburban areas. At first supporters were motivated by alarm at unchecked development; beginning in the twenty-first century, the conversation turned also to food-supply security. Overall, the movement was quite successful in preserving farmland; as of this writing, Pennsylvania alone is expected to have reached half a million preserved acres and New Jersey had successfully enrolled almost a third of its farm acreage. However, it was less successful at stemming development.26

In the agricultural economy, specialization and concentration ruled. For example, fruit regions shifted from a variety of fruits to just one crop, such as grapes or apples. Many farms relied on just one or two products—hay, grain, milk, mushrooms, or poultry. Concentration also became marked; a very few operations accounted for a huge proportion of cash receipts. This was especially true in the poultry business, which became vertically and horizontally integrated. It applied to every product, though. By 2007 there were only sixty-nine mushroom producers in Pennsylvania, but they accounted for virtually the entire crop and for a quarter of all crop cash receipts for the state in that year. Not surprisingly, under these conditions most farm households relied on off-farm income. In fact, after 2000 fewer than 10 percent of farms generated enough income for the household, and a typical Mid-Atlantic farm household relied on off-farm sources for 90 percent of its income.27 Women’s employment probably played a major role in this trend. Some analysts called part-time operations “hobby” or “lifestyle” farms, but that terminology arguably stemmed from a longstanding bias toward large-scale agriculture, which had not ever been dominant in the Mid-Atlantic. Despite these patterns, the Mid-Atlantic states all touted agriculture as a major industry and government statisticians made it look more important by including ancillary industries like processing. Yet the region ran a deep food deficit. The Delmarva poultry area was upstaged by the South, dairying shifted geographically to the South and West, and the orchard industry was hit by competition not only from California and the Pacific Northwest, but from overseas sources like China.

Suburban development plus changes in farming practice created major environmental problems in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Essentially, excess nutrients were washing into the rivers and moving down into the bay, disrupting delicate biological processes. Fisheries declined; a “dead zone” developed. Farming practices were implicated, especially over-application of fertilizer. Cattle and poultry waste added to the problem, exacerbated by modern confinement practices. Another factor apparently was regional nutrient transfers. In other words, feed and hay were imported from outside the region, bringing more nutrients that were then passed on into the watershed. In the 1970s the federal government began to try various (mostly voluntary) ways to deal with the issue, but the bay’s condition improved little. After three decades of ineffective regulations, in the early twenty-first century the government issued “TMDL” (Total Maximum Daily Load) regulations that aimed to push municipalities and farmers alike toward better practices. These new rules, if consistently implemented, would significantly change farming practices and agricultural landscapes.
On the farm, mechanization reduced reliance on migrant labor in potato growing, grape culture, and vegetable crop production. Tomatoes, once an important crop, were no longer raised on a large scale because of California competition. Migrant workers were still a factor in orchard operations, mushroom growing, cranberry harvesting, and on the remaining truck-farming operations. Migrants also moved into other sectors like dairying and poultry. The makeup of the migrant labor force changed; African Americans withdrew, as did Puerto Ricans. As citizens, both groups arguably had more options than the newer, often undocumented workers from Mexico and Central America. Slowly, Hispanic enclaves developed in rural Chester County, Adams County, and Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and other locales. Shoppers in the Lancaster City Central Market could now purchase whoopie pies and quesadillas in one stop.

It seems that during this era Mid-Atlantic rural communities continued to struggle. Declining tax bases meant that communities struggled to raise enough money for public education, even though their “tax effort” was greater than in wealthier places. Transfer payments accounted for a significant portion of income. Just as their predecessors lacked electricity, rural Mid-Atlantic residents lacked high-speed Internet access. “Urban” problems like drug addiction came to rural areas, bringing acute distress. Villages and towns declined. Equipment suppliers went out of business. Exurban development brought complaints about odors and demands for infrastructure and services. When Marcellus Shale development came to the region in the early twenty-first century, many saw it as a source of badly needed income, even as they recognized the potential for harm.28

In the early 2000s a local food movement gained exposure in national media and public conversation. Many critics have called attention to major weaknesses in the U.S. food production and distribution system, especially in overreliance on irrigated, petroleum-dependent California farms. Mid-Atlantic farms seemed well positioned to take advantage of these new concerns. Should Eastern food-supply vulnerabilities increase in a time of drought or high fuel prices, Mid-Atlantic farms may gain new relevance and farm communities may legitimately hope for revitalization.

The region can provide much material for thoughtful new studies in agricultural history to build upon previous generations’ interest in such topics as state-based histories, gender, or demographics. The growing interaction between agricultural and environmental history seems especially promising. During the colonial period, for example, massive water meadow construction in southeastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey intensively managed water and labor. This system has not been adequately described or analyzed. No one has done for any Mid-Atlantic nineteenth-century farming systems the kind of textured study that Brian Donahue undertook of “The Great Meadow.” For the twentieth century, agro-environmental histories could analyze specialized production systems within the region like potato farming, intensive orchard culture, poultry production, mushroom production, or cranberry and blueberry raising. An agro-environmental history of the Chesapeake Bay watershed could provide much-needed historical perspective on an important contemporary problem. Forest history is a longstanding field of study, but for the Mid-Atlantic we don’t even precisely know the extent of agricultural deforestation and subsequent reforestation in farming areas. The historical interrelationship between agriculture and oil/gas extraction should also be explored.
Other topics suggest themselves based on dominant patterns in the region’s agricultural history. Histories of local food systems, for example, could provide insight about how food was produced and distributed in local networks. The rise and “discovery” of part-time farming is poorly understood, especially the role played by women’s off-farm labor in twentieth-century farm household economies. The history of migrant labor after 1945 in the region needs fuller explication. Finally, there is no comprehensive history of the rise of intensive poultry production in the region. These topics all could well be interpreted in light of current historiographical and theoretical perspectives.

Notes
5 Lemon, Best Poor Man’s Country; Allan Kulikoff, Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800 (Williamsburg, VA: Omohundro Institute, 1986).
9 Steven Stoll, Larding the Lean Earth (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).


18 McMurry, Transforming Rural Life.


