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Approaches

Whatever events in progress shall go to disgust men with cities, and infuse into them the passion for country life, and country pleasures, will render a service to the whole face of this continent, and will further the most poetic of all the occupations of real life, the bringing out by art the native but hidden graces of the landscape.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

On 23 May 2007, the majority of the world population became urban for the first time in history, according to statistical modeling by two American sociologists. The United States has had a demographically urban form even longer; the 1920 census was the first to document a majority urban population. Given the numerical waning of rural populations, studying contemporary rural societies may seem a losing proposition, condemned to eventual obsolescence in an increasingly citified world. Every one of the American Ivy League schools has an academic department or curricular track in urban studies; the sole outpost of rurality is Yale’s small program in agrarian studies. Rural scholarship has become almost as depreciated as rural populations themselves.

Is it foolhardy, then, to study rurality? Or merely unfashionable? I believe the latter to be the case, largely because the holistic study of rurality as a social phenomenon has been parceled out into satellite fields, leaving no coherent central framework of rural theory. Several subtraditions of American studies traffic in the language of rurality, but none make it their chief object of interest. Environmental studies and landscape history deal with rurality as well. The mega-disciplines of geography, anthropology, and social theory have always included rural dimensions, but their rural subdisciplines have never come into sharp resolution. To study rurality, therefore, one must assemble its fragments from various corners of an academic diaspora.

One of the only traditions to explicitly treat rurality as a discrete category of analysis is rural sociology, developed at the beginning of the twentieth century as a union between the country-life movement and the nascent scientific sociology growing at places like the University of Chicago. Today, however, rural sociology

1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Young American” (lecture, Mercantile Library Association, Boston, 7 February 1844).
4 It is not a phenomenon confined to elite academia. As of January 2009, a Google search for “urban studies” turned up 25 times as many results than one for “rural studies,” and a search for “urban theory” turned up 23 times as many results as “rural theory.” While the statistics of Internet searches are only very crude indices of academic priorities, the broad prejudice in favor of urban rather than rural scholarship should be evident from these numbers.
5 For a full history of rural sociology as a discipline, see Lowry Nelson, Rural Sociology: Its Origin and Growth in the United States (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1980).
remains stubbornly wedded to positivistic and utilitarian methodologies. The applied social science of rural places remains important—there are of course still many real rural societies left in the United States that would benefit from analyses of their economic networks, educational systems, and so on. But the creative field of rural sociology is truncated by an avoidance of non-quantitative methods. Moreover, functionalist lines of inquiry will offer diminishing returns as statistically rural communities useful for quantitative analysis vanish into the mist of a globalized, neoliberal landscape.

A proper social study of a complex, geographically-defined social system must include many methodologies beyond intensive sociological ones. Rural studies must encompass ethnographic observations to provide complexity, historical observations to provide depth, literary and cultural observations to provide animation, and theoretical observations to provide the latticework of meaning which forms the guidelines along which knowledge systems extend and infill. Urban scholars have already made profitable use of this kind of polyvalent academic discourse, and rural scholars ought to take their creative successes as an example.

But these approaches cannot be thrown together in a rococo, haphazard manner. This essay is an exploratory effort at constructing a transdisciplinary theory of rural studies that synthesizes together historical, social-theoretical, ethnologic, literary, and aesthetic modes of conceptualizing rurality. It offers solutions to Kenneth Wilkinson’s concern that rural scholarship is marred by “the lack of a theoretical framework, the tendency to concentrate descriptively and superficially on details, and the absence of any attempt to examine underlying structural realities.” I lay the claim that rural studies can be just as theoretically rigorous a discipline as urban studies, and, moreover, that the current anorexia for rural studies leaches vitality from our understanding of past and present American

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6 To understand the emphasis on applied social science in rural sociology, it is important to understand that rural sociologists operate almost totally under the auspices of the land-grant university system or the United States Department of Agriculture; thus, fulfilling applied and extension functions is not merely the result of methodological choice but also of real situations in funding and administration. For more, see Frederick H. Buttel, “The Land-grant System: A Sociological Perspective on Value Conflicts and Ethical Issues,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 2, no. 2 (March 1985): 78–95.

7 In Volume 73 of *Rural Sociology*, 88% of articles of original research relied on quantitative or statistical methods.

8 The Rural Sociology Society is acutely aware of this problem, which for them is played out in a hemorrhage of membership numbers and hand-wringing about the discipline’s professional relevance. See Richard Krannich, “Rural Sociology at the Crossroads,” *Rural Sociology* 73, no. 1 (March 2008): 1–21.

9 The mission statement of Brown’s urban studies program is a typical example of this style of academic border-skipping: the program studies “urban development and economics, urban politics and community, the urban built environment, American urban history, suburbanization, and literary representations of urban space and social relations.” From “Urban Studies Program,” October 2008, http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Urban_Studies/.

society. At stake is our ability to marshal the scattered and as-yet unconsolidated resources that help us to understand human social behavior in relation to environmental variables.

The metanarrative of this essay is a theory of the new ruralism which maintains that “rural” is the most important containing category of analysis for an American cultural fascination with the human–nature dyad that has long been studied piecemeal by separate subdisciplines. I mean to establish rurality as the common variable linking many concepts generating and generated by American society. Terms like “western,” “frontier,” and “wilderness” define epiphenomenal characteristics of the social patterns and ethnologic complexes in which we are interested; the terms “pastoral” or “agrarian” are slightly better, but “rural” is best of all. The new ruralism re-establishes the legitimacy of “rural” as a first-order academic category by liberating it from the confines of its own component parts.

In applying this theory, I aim to disable two longstanding notions in the academic treatment of rural society: first, that rurality is in all cases a counterforce to modernization; and second, that rurality is defined solely by demographic and statistical patterns. The first assumption posits rural society as regressive and obsolete, and disengages it from academic studies of industrialization, secularization, and other modern phenomena. The second confines rural scholarship to a study of instrumentally rural populations, dooming it to further marginalization as those populations diminish in size. Both of these assumptions are built around beliefs which are unanalytical and normative; both constrain our ability to accurately understand social patterns; and, most importantly, both are untrue.

In opposition to the first notion—that rural places are anti-modern—this essay illuminates how rurality has pushed American social, political, and economic development forwards, emphasizing the frequent collusion between rurality and futurism. This breaks a longstanding cryptonormativity which is encoded into the very vocabulary of the English language. “Urbane,” from the Latin urbs, or city, indicates a high compliment which implies sophistication, intelligence, and refinement. By contrast, “rustic,” from the Latin rus, or countryside, indicates an unrefined aspect which is at best quaint and at worst backwards. “Urbane” is a progressive word; “rustic” is a regressive word. The binary reaffirms the inferiority and unenlightenment of rural conditions: modern is to archaic as urbane is to rustic as urbs is to rus. Yet semantics also reveal sites of confusion, places where normative signals have been crossed. The words “civilization” and “culture,” two of the most laudatory terms for social achievements, have overlapping and sympathetic meanings. Their spatial origins, however, are opposites. Civilization stems from civitas, and shares a common parent with “city.” By contrast, “culture” is from cultura, meaning tillage or farming, and shares a common root with “cultivation.”11 In line with this latter semantic field, the new ruralism makes the case that rural thinking can and often does express progressive cultural forces.

In opposition to the second notion—that rurality is an exclusively morphological condition—the new ruralism deals with the category “rural” in

contemporary society by giving it the form of a shared cultural imperative evident in ways of thinking about places, natural resources, meanings, politics, and morality in the social gestalt of a translocatable community. Using a metaphor of the sedimentation of cultural behavior, this essay shows how rurality in the United States has developed upward from a material rurality of conditions and demographic forms, through an aspirational rurality of political, social, and literary modernization, and finally into an imaginative rurality of epistemology and semiotics. This imaginative rurality is a plastic ethnographic concept. It translates the physical form of rural landscapes and environments into a mental form of social landscapes and environments, and it makes it possible to talk about rurality and rural thinking even amongst the residents of the largest cities. It is not, however, entirely independent of its foundational meaning as a specific type of built environment; rather, imaginative rurality has exceeded and transcended its former shapes while retaining their distinctive marks.

To develop this sedimentary analysis, the major structural arc of this essay is historical. It tracks how the concept of rurality has accreted and accumulated through time, dredging up old ideas and practices and converting them into new ones. Rural societies in the field, in the here-and-now, imply the existence of rural societies before (and after) them in time. To properly understand them, the social scientist must bore down through the layers of history and provide a stratigraphic analysis of the social landscape—performing, as Simon Schama puts it in Landscape and Memory, “an excavation below our conventional sight-level to recover the veins of myth and memory that lie beneath the surface.” This approach locates the ethnographic situation of the present day as a surface layer arranged above preceding layers which contour its forms. Any given point on the surface of the sedimented mass is situated atop a thick, complicated slab of historical accumulation. Thus this argument begins in the colonial period and concludes in the present day. Although this may induce the casual viewer to assume that this essay is principally historical in its methodology, the historical trajectory is symmetrical to and coincident with the social theoretical argument.

The second arc structuring this essay is spatial. Each of the six vignettes that follow begins in an actual rural place I visited during fieldwork in the summer of 2008. These places are all in the northeast United States, in a swathe from southwest Pennsylvania to central Maine. At first this may seem an inappropriate theater for a study of rurality; however, it is the very counterintuitive appearance of the northeast which makes useful in a new ruralist study. For in pointing out that the northeast—the traditional site of urbanization, densification, and industrialization in America—is still full of rural qualities, this essay shows that

12 This is a metaphor triangulated between Michel Foucault’s conceptual modes of “archaeology” and “genealogy.” For a précis of these two ideas, see Garry Gutting, “Michel Foucault,” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Edward N. Zalta, ed., http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/.

13 The concept of ‘imagination’ used in this essay is similar to, but not entirely congruent with, that employed in Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community.” Anderson is treated further in the concluding vignette dealing with imaginative rurality.

the sedimentation of rurality has occurred all across the American geography and
the American mind.

To examine material rurality, the essay visits Bennington, Vermont, a
colonial frontier, and Pine Hill, New York, the home of J. Hector St. John de
Crèvecoeur. To examine aspirational rurality, it visits Cooperstown, New York,
where The Pioneers and Rural Hours were written, and Katahdin Iron Works,
Maine, where a mighty industrial operation pierced the wilderness. To examine
imaginative rurality, it visits Mill Run, Pennsylvania, where Frank Lloyd Wright’s
Fallingwater house stands, and Confluence, Pennsylvania, where the streams of
ruralism are finally brought together. Side trips are taken to surrounding areas,
some outside of the northeast. The sources used include local histories, literary and
political writings, second-order theory, and ethnographic observations. As the
trajectory moves closer to the present day, historical sources are gradually replaced
with observations from the field; however, from the very beginning the two are in
constant flux.

This methodology adumbrates the fundamentally place-based nature of
rural knowledge, both the kind practiced by rural people and the kind practiced by
rural scholars. It affirms the profound contouring effect which spatial
environments have on their social occupants, and which indeed makes the very
idea of rural studies possible. It is not, however, meant to make the argument
narrowly particularist. These places form the superstructure of an argument which
exceeds them. The vignettes are the tangible framework which traps and makes
real a vaster argument about a complex and often inscrutable constellation of
social behavior according to rural ideals. The immediate conclusions drawn by this
essay are local, but the methodology used to reach them has universal
applications.15 Controlling the location to the northeastern United States reduces
the amount of incidental noise in the larger argument, and gives it a constant,
concrete, and identifiable stage on which to take place.

At first the very concept of rurality may seem to be an observation strictly
limited to a spatial artifact of American history. But, following the examples of
Walter Benjamin’s work on the Paris arcades16 or Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the
semiotics of the Kabyle house,17 we can employ this particular space as a
microcosm of the whole social array refracted through it. In the same way that
studying the arcades is the same as studying the European bourgeois or that
studying the Kabyle house is the same as studying Berber gender roles, studying the
rural places interposed between unshaped wildernesses and overshaped cities is the

15 Through the use of “fine-comb field study in confined context,” Clifford Geertz writes, “the
mega-concepts with which contemporary social science is afflicted—legitimacy, modernization,
inTEGRATION, conflict, charisma, structure, meaning—can be given the sort of sensible actuality that
makes it possible to think not only realistically and concretely about them, but, what is more
important, creatively and imaginatively with them.” In Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive


17 Pierre Bourdieu, “The Kabyle house or the world reversed” in Algeria 1960, trans. Richard Nice
same as studying the society-environment dialectic that has propelled American society forwards since colonization.

No single paper, and certainly not one of this short length, can singlehandedly inscribe a new kingdom on the academic landscape. This essay contributes to an emergent analysis of rurality along new conceptual alignments just beginning to germinate and yield results. Building the new ruralism is a necessary step in sharpening the resolution with which social scientists can describe the effect of place on people. A ream of contemporary issues—from the cultural iconography of the organic food movement to the politics of the Sarah Palin episode—are pointed reminders that rurality is still alive in the American mentality. Rather than cast it aside as the exclusive province of the past, of social cranks with an unproductive retrovision, or of insulated sub-studies of American life, we must engage the question of rurality in order understand how it continues to generate and delimit the fabric of American society.

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Before we begin this expedition, we must get our papers in order. What exactly is meant by rural life, rurality, and ruralism? Even the United States government finds precision difficult when it speaks about rural policy or rural statistics-gathering. Wilkinson laments that “the meaning of ‘rural’ is still confused, the meaning of ‘community’ is still confused, and when these confusing terms are joined, the problems of definition are compounded.” Discussions of rurality date back well before the period concerned in this essay and expand far beyond its specific geography. Varro wrote in the first century BCE of the “two modes of life, that of the country and that of the town” which differed “not only in place, but as to time when they began to be.” The Arab scholar Ibn Khaldun suggested that urban society was characterized by corruption, luxury, and the uttering of “vulgar and rude expressions,” whereas rural people were self-reliant, good at reading the land, and more likely to “show by their conduct that audacity and bravery have become second natures.” Adam Smith described rural society as a commercial group of primary producers who exchange “rude for manufactured produce.” The list goes on and on; a full dossier of thinkers who

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18 Krannich put the call-to-arms flatly in his 2008 presidential address to the Rural Sociology Society: rural sociologists, he argues, “should focus attention more explicitly on the shared interests and identities that can be forged by capitalizing on interest across multiple disciplines and subdisciplines in ‘things rural’ … to pursue a more much more explicitly interdisciplinary course. … rural sociologists have at least as much in common with geographers, anthropologists, political scientists.” In “Rural Sociology at the Crossroads,” 16–17.


20 Wilkinson, Community in Rural America, 53.


have treated rural places in some respect or another is far beyond the scope of this essay.

Modern social science, however, has treated rurality more narrowly. One common way of defining rurality has been to chain it to agricultural economics. In 1932, Pitirim Sorokin, Carle Clark Zimmerman, and Charles Josiah Galpin—foundational figures in American rural sociology—identified rural communities as economic units, writing that “the principal criterion of the rural society is occupational—the collection and cultivation of plants and animals,” and consequently “rural sociology is in the first place a sociology of an occupation group, namely the sociology of the agricultural occupation.”24 This way of thinking allied rural scholarship to a program of social reform directed at American farmers; as Donald Field and William Burch point out, “rural sociologists have long made the family farmer a center of interest and emotional commitment.”25 Another way of defining rurality was to focus on structurally identifiable patterns of social behavior. In 1950, Charles Loomis and J. Allan Beegle presented the theoretical analogy of the rural–urban gap as a divide between Ferdinand Tönnies’s conceptual Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft social patterns, cautioning that these were “broad, comprehensive terms which often fail to define explicitly their elements or components” before plowing ahead and claiming that “underlying rural–urban conflicts are the fundamentally different attitudes of people with basically familialistic Gemeinschaft orientations and those with basically contractual Gesellschaft orientations.”26 Yet both the agricultural occupation and the familialistic Gemeinschaft social type had already begun to drift away from holistic rurality by the time these writers were publishing, forcing a crisis in the purely sociological approach to rural understanding. As life in the countryside began to change morphologically, and eventually merged many of its cultural practices with those of urban life, the observable patterns which once indicated rurality became desynchronized from each other or attenuated entirely. Once farming and its attendant material phenomena were no longer dominant or even recognizable in the broad rural landscape, rural sociologists either had to transfer their work onto different specific forms or accept that rurality as a social concept had been obliterated. “By the 1930s,” wrote William H. Friedland in 1982 in an influential essay in Rural Sociology, “it became clear that the rural basis of American society was disappearing.”27 It was not in fact that rurality itself was disappearing but, instead, the epiphenomenal characteristics which had come to represent it.

This was a vanishing act which by the close of the twentieth century had thoroughly decimated the utility of agriculture, *Gemeinschaft*, or even population density as proxy definitions for rurality. Scholars who continued to define rurality in these material terms no longer had very much left to study, prompting a series of dire proclamations. Friedland concluded his essay by noting that there is “little ‘rural’ society left in the United States.” In 1980, Frederick Buttel and Howard Newby wrote that “rural sociology has given every appearance of having lost its way.” In 1986, Newby asked “who now would argue the utility of ‘urban’ and ‘rural’?” and quoted Copp’s 1972 observation that “there is no rural and no rural economy.” Field and Burch observed in 1988 that “social and economic ties now link the inhabitants of communities and their surrounding rural regions in America to a larger sphere of social action; indeed, linkage is to the whole world.” In 1990, Keith Hoggart suggested that “the broad category ‘rural’ is obfuscatory, whether the aim is description or theoretical evaluation, since intra-rural differences can be enormous and rural-urban differences can be sharp.” And in 2008, Richard Krannich, the president of the Rural Sociological Society, took the opportunity of his presidential address to admit that “much of what we traditionally studied as ‘rural’ is no longer so clearly evident, or so clearly distinctive, as was previously the case.”

There have been as many proposed remedies as diagnoses. In 1977, Irwin T. Sanders suggested the use of the articulation theory to explain “the process by which the rural society becomes incorporated more fully into the larger society while maintaining many of its rural institutions.” Lisandro Pérez asserted the “need for a synthesizing effort” and noted with some surprise that “there is apparently no such thing as the study of rural ecology.” He proposed recentering the study of rural places around the concept of “man-land relations” and insisted that “social processes form an integral part of the study of human ecology.” Quite by contrast, Friedland demanded that rural sociologists shake off the rural variable entirely and concentrate solely on the economics of agriculture, arguing...

33 Keith Hoggart, “Let’s Do Away With Rural,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 6, no. 3 (1990), 245.
37 Ibid., 594.
that “the potentialities of the Neo-Marxist paradigm in the formulation of a sociology of agriculture should be emphasized.” Jess Gilbert, proceeding from the assumption that “the evidence for a rural culture, a distinctive set of beliefs and values, is inconclusive,” also argued for a rural study dictated by a reconstituted economic analysis: “a type of material production best specifies rural. Direct, daily interaction with the natural environment—the labor of primary production—distinguishes the rural base.”

Still, what all of these treatments share is a somewhat quixotic attempt to protect the study of rurality within the domain of a strictly sociological analysis. The absence of the work of such major figures in rural cultural history as J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, Frederick Jackson Turner, Henry Nash Smith, and Leo Marx, or even of the cultural anthropological theories of thinkers like Lucien Lévy-Brühl, Hans Vaihinger, George Herbert Mead, and Clifford Geertz, which add a second layer of density to the former group’s work, betrays a stubborn unwillingness amongst rural sociologists to admit the richer details of historical, ethnographic, and semiotic analysis into their thinking.

Walter Firey made a step in the right direction by showing that the variegated and often asynchronous ecological, ethnological, and economic treatments of the rural resource complex are non-integrable, but still mutually necessary, approaches to a full understanding of rural life. “There is something heroic but futile in the ecological criterion of permanence; there is something aesthetic but anachronistic in the ethnological criterion of adoptability; and there is something rational but precarious in the economic criterion of efficiency,” he wrote. Donald Field and William Burch traced the study of environmental sociology through the stages of first dominion of nature by man, then the expansion of nature to include man in its terms, and finally into a “partnership” theory between humans and the environment. It is in this last category, they suggested, that we might locate a “natural resource sociology” whose “challenge is to contribute to our understanding of the changing patterns of man and nature in rural regions; to link agricultural systems with resource systems in new patterns of theory and application; and to continue a systematic, but humanistically informed, concern with the moral economy of rural communities.”

Though there is no simple way out of these complications, the leitmotif of landscape is one keel which may stabilize the idea of rurality. By alloying the immanent and immediately recognizable identity of a rural physical landscape with the plastic potential of a rural mental landscape, it is possible to circumscribe a social complex which is both specific and non-reductive. John Stilgoe argues that “landscape is essentially rural, the product of a traditional agriculture interrupted

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40 Water Firey, Man, Mind, Land (Free Press, 1960), 251.
41 Field and Burch, Rural Sociology and the Environment, 102.
here and there by traditional artifice, a mix of natural and man-made form.”
Schama, in turn, points out that “landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock.” Thus in the metaphor of the landscape the social scientist has a concept with a concrete end for stability and extensible end for creativity. Rurality defined in this way contains both a morphological form—the actual rural scene recognizable in the field—as well as a social form which activates it and gives it meaning. And, just as the physical landscape accumulates through sedimentation, so too can we examine the social landscape stratigraphically, peering down through all its layers to understand it as a whole.

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In the *Eclogues*, Virgil suggested that people are drawn to rural society out of paradisal affinity: the shepherd Tityrus compels his friend Meliboeus to “forget your woes upon this leafy couch.”\(^1\) William Blake saw the attraction as an act of moral purification: in his “Songs of Innocence,” he recalls how he “made a rural pen ... and stained the water clear.”\(^2\) An economic analysis was offered by Philip Freneau, who wrote in “The American Village” that “here fair Charity puts forth her hand, and pours blessings o’er the greatful land.”\(^3\) Evidently intent on continuing this poetic dialogue, a day laborer of Bennington, Vermont scrawled the following lines in a wild oblique across the inside cover of his account book alongside arithmetic sums and amateur doodles:

All Nature sheds abroad  
Her glory with rural fertility on  
man o’ man what art thou  
why that jealous disposition\(^4\)

Notable historians, social theorists, and poets have labeled the disposition of the rural settlers of New England according to many different schemes. Oftentimes, though, the texture of social life evades the totalizing tendencies of neatly-bound, historically self-conscious descriptions. Instead, it is in the leaky seams of history, in dashed-off thoughts and idle speculations unprepared for professional consumption, that everyday ways of thinking are best preserved. The poetaster is a part of history as much as the great poet.\(^5\) Here, quite literally in the marginalia of history, this unknown laborer stumbled across an insight in social analysis that is arrestingly accurate. For it was indeed with a marked degree of jealousy that Europeans confronted the new continent and manufactured their desired rural felicity. An acquisitive jealousy of the existing environmental bounty of North America propelled a constructive jealousy as European settlers began to shape the land, their most coveted property, in the image they desired. *Material rurality*—the first phase of American rurality, in which wilderness, agriculture, and rural economies dominated both the physical and social landscape—was saturated with this jealous apprehension of rural prosperity.

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\(^5\) Christopher M. Jedrey recognizes that “the social history of colonial America is most often written about the country folk, and its intellectual history about the urban elites. But the *mentalité* of the rural majority is no less important than that of the urban leadership.” In *The World of John Cleveland: Family and Community in Eighteenth-Century New England* (New York: Norton, 1979), xi.
There is no proper historical zero-point where the elements of rural society can be said to have exclusively originated. A social state cannot be placed on a scale where the tare weight is subtracted, leaving only the intrinsic properties of the object. Each social antecedent and explanation implies another one behind it, and the chain extends all the way back into prehistory—the network of causes, overlaps, translations, and crosses which determine the makeup of society at any one time extends indefinitely outwards through time. Because of this, it is impossible to reach the very bottom of the rural mindset, to point at any single location and say “it began here.” A stratigraphic social history must deal with this problem of a nonexistent floor by selecting an instrumental—and inevitably arbitrary—starting-point for its analysis.

In American studies, this point is typically drawn at colonization. The passage of Europeans to North America represented a social and cultural restart not so much because this was actually the case, but because the colonists felt it to be. The distinction is important. Historians such as David Hackett Fischer have shown, correctly, that American social behavior exhibited noticeable sympathies between colonists’ home cultures and the ones they built in the New World. Rural life, and attitudes towards rural priorities, were no different. The rural setup of the colonies was deeply linked to settlers’ endorsements and rejections of European frameworks of land ownership and value. It would be foolish to think that a few weeks in a ship on the Atlantic might erase everything that the Europeans had learned about the meaning of rurality at home. The British tradition in particular had a fascination with rurality; William Shenstone in 1748 captured the matter-of-fact quality of British rural prejudice by stating that “no one will prefer the beauty of a street to the beauty of a lawn or grove.” It is therefore important to keep in mind that even the “original” colonists imported a host of preconceptions, preferences, hopes, and fears about rural life to the new world.

Moreover, establishing colonization as the instrumental zero-point of American rurality crudely dismisses the presence of Amerindian societies already living in the colonies. The aboriginal people of North America had their own maturely-developed ways of thinking about nature, society, and the rural landscape, even if they seem to have had no precise concept of “rurality” as Europeans framed it. These ideas were imported into the mainstream of American thinking about rurality with varying amounts of recasting. The semiotics of

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Amerindian culture and of European–Amerindian contact quickly became axiomatic to American rurality. Quite obviously, the settlers were not building their rural society on a blank continent.

Still, colonization represented a historical disjuncture during which a great number of people thought they were starting society from scratch, regardless of whether they really were. Colonization is thus a useful beginning for a stratigraphic study of rurality because the colonists’ own rhetoric was so deeply saturated with the language of newness and originality that the social patterns they built contain the marks of these beliefs. No doubt the history of European or Amerindian rural forms can provide powerful explanatory material in the story of American rurality. Both are bracketed here, which prevents the analysis from sprawling limitlessly across time and affirms that European colonization was, in fact, as near to a “starting point” for American culture as it is possible to locate in the development of an ethnologic form.

The temperate forests of Massachusetts Bay, fading off into the unknown wilderness of New Hampshire, Vermont, and Canada, provided the first environmental milieu for New England settlers, and the scene of the New England forest was permanently imprinted onto the form of the acts that would follow. The forest was not just an aesthetic backdrop. It was a semiotic environment which structured the laws and social priorities of the colonies. The forest as a symbolic icon already had a well-established place in European cultural schemas as an imagined site of fear and primeval disarray. In Old English, wylderness meant the “nest or lair of a wild beast,” a place “beyond human control.” Forests were hosts of an anarchic and primitive chaos which absorbed society’s castoffs and loomed as a persistent threat to the orderly passage of commerce and administration. “The forest,” suggests Frieda Knobloch, “defined by its inscrutability as an obstacle to decisive or virtuous action, is everything that stands in the way of lateral lines of conquest and civilization and vertical lines of enlightenment and grace.” Indeed, the forest presented the major challenge not only to the physical domination of the new continent, but to its symbolic domination by the systems of European scientific knowledge. It refused the orderly, productive patterns of European field agriculture and mocked the...
European understanding of knowledge production: visual perceptibility and linear comprehensibility.

But the settlers also had an acquisitive desire for the forest that mitigated sylvan contempt. Puritan religious leaders “alternatively described New England as the promised land and as an evil land.” If they were jealous that the existing forest resisted their entreaties, they simultaneously felt it could be an article of wealth and property to be possessed. Forestlands in Europe were privileged tokens of the aristocracy. One eighteenth-century treatise on British forest laws remarked that “a forest is in its Nature the highest Franchise of princely Pleasure, and the next to that is the Liberty of a *Free Chase*.” Europeans knew their technology and labor could temper the forest and make it tractable to the European body and the European mind, rendering it enormously valuable. This value was doubly potent for those emigrants who left Europe in response to power disputes that directly or indirectly involved land. Since the colonists “brought with them concepts of value and scarcity which had been shaped by the social and ecological circumstances of northern Europe,” they consequently “perceived New England as a landscape of great natural wealth.”

The common legal practice of paying a bounty for killing wolves and other forest animals is representative of how the twin jealousies—fear and appropriation—crystallized into sociopolitical form in the service of a specific physical idea of the rural environment. A number of accounts suggest that American wolves were not particularly threatening to settlers; Thomas Morton called them “fearfull Curres” which would “runne away from a man.” But wolves were freighted with a symbolic weight of the forest’s danger and unmanageability, so much so that the State of Vermont still offered a $20 bounty for grown wolves or panthers, $10 for “suckling whelps,” $5 for a grown bear, and $3 for a bear cub in the middle of the nineteenth century. Partly this was an effort to protect livestock and stabilize farming. That effort, however, was only a subset of the larger sentiment manifested by the wolf laws: the martial desire to bring the forest under panoptic surveillance. John Winthrop laid out Massachusetts’s anti-wolf policy as if it were total warfare, framing it explicitly in terms of sight, access, and control. “First deprive them of

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all their harbors,” he said, “then the heads of soe many as shall come within our
Compa, which may without great difficulty be performed.”

Clearing land, killing wolves, building roads, and other activities
undertaken in order to convert “wilderness” landscapes into “pastoral” ones were
material undertakings with supermaterial significance. Material rurality thus
already contained the early seeds of ethnologic significance which would flourish
in later layers of rurality. Knobloch refers to this process as the rationalist
“decoding” of forestland in the service of “recoding” it along lines of quantifiably
knowable and politically supervisory settlement patterns. The “civilizing” forces
which impelled colonization are ones that invoke “a simultaneous nostalgia and
contempt for [mankind’s] imagined sylvan origins.” In the process of
deforestation, the Europeans reified their own assumptions of civilization. They
“created an English sense of habitus” which “functioned as material indices of
Englishness” in an otherwise heretical environment. The landscape was molded
to conform to European assumptions and aspirations. Making the land European
was thus an epistemological reclamation project—to the settlers, converting the
miasma of forests, swamps, estuaries, and mudflats into the regular forms of the
agricultural landscape represented an importation of European spatial values onto
land which they believed to be a tabula rasa empty of human inscription.

Yet if a heavily symbolic codification of the diamagnetism between a
fanatical forest and a civilized agricultural village is useful in portraying the
pitched epistemological battle which the Europeans felt themselves to be
performing, it is less useful in describing the actual conditions of the proto-rural
landscape which existed prior to European contact. Indeed, it is nearly impossible
to provide a complete environmental inventory of precolonial New England, due,
as William Cronon points out, to the “inevitably incomplete” written records of
the first visitors which “testify as much to [Europeans’] cultural preconceptions as
to the actual environments they encountered.”

Still, it is at least clear that the unmitigated nightmare of an impassable,
primeval forest was more a product of rhetoric than an objective description of
New England botany. A subthread of colonial descriptions of New England
described it as a place of proto-Arcadian bounty. Such visions of rural fruition
were enough to tempt the settlers into believing that they might step directly into
a horticultural paradise. North American landscapes had been heavily influenced

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18 Qtd. in Barclay, 28. John Frederick Martin calls this the process by which Puritans “invested
with spiritual significance the literal art of taking possession of the wilderness” In Profits in the
Wilderness, 113.

19 Knobloch, Culture of Wilderness, 18–19.

20 Ibid., 15.

Anthropology 43, Supplement (August–October 2002), S88.

22 Cronon, Changes in the Land, 22. The problem is complicated when these primary sources on the
pre-colonization North American environment are considered in the context of a cultural lexicon
of rurality itself based on a nearly indistinguishable alloy of European antecedents and Euro-
American realizations.
by Amerindians who had practiced their own environmental modifications for
thousands of years as well as hundreds of unique geographic and climactic
determinants. Some places were full of economically useful plants; others were
park-like scenes of mature, thinly-scattered trees. William Wood described one
forest in which “one may ride ahunting in most places of the land if he will
venture himself for being lost.” The rural forms which the colonists built during
the first two hundred years of European settlement were stamped by a jealous lust
inspired by the promise of such idyllic landscapes.

Even though the rurality of the colonial period owes a good deal to the
jealous ethnologic patterns of settlers’ desires, it should be emphasized that they
did not ultimately have many options beyond rural life. City-building was out of
the question; not only were materials and labor for construction scarce, but the
centrifugal social forces of commercial trade and political control which demand
population concentration were absent. When they did build towns and villages,
they were barely urban. Events like the 1704 Abenaki raid on Deerfield,
Massachusetts, a town which only five years earlier had been called by Cotton
Mather “an Extraordinary Instance of Courage … in a very Pihahiroth [a Biblical
wilderness],” reminded colonists that the chaos of the woods still punctuated
nucleated development. While colonists no doubt believed in a system of value
which made them feel that their rural patterns were meaningful, developmental
constrictions meant that these patterns were also inevitable. Powerful cultural
notions of rural epistemology and semiotics were indeed in their germinate phases
during this era. It was economic and demographic forces, however, which
ultimately imposed a strict rurality of physical form on the colonies.

Between 75 and 90 percent of the colonial population still lived on farms
at the time of the American Revolution. This supermajority of farmers made up
the controlling framework of a social and economic amalgam which was
everywhere rural even when it was not explicitly agricultural. Social theories of the
Steam Age or the Atomic Age are not only about train conductors or missile
scientists; similarly, during what we might call the Plow Age, the economic design
of rural agriculture ruled social priorities beyond the fields. The most-urbanized
areas of New England were more physically rural in the colonial period than its
least-urbanized areas are today. The density of Middlesex County, today
Massachusetts’s most populous county, was only 19.47 persons per square
kilometer in 1790. Compare that to Massachusetts’s currently most rural county,
Franklin County, which today has 38.11 persons per square kilometer. John
Duntan, a visitor to coastal Wenham in 1686, called it “a delicious paradise; it

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23 Qtd. in Cronon, Changes in the Land, 25.
24 Qtd. in Evan Haefeli and Kevin Sweeney, Captors and Captives: The 1704 French and Indian Raid
26 U.S. Census Bureau, 1790 and 2000 censuses of the United States. By contrast, standard
definitions for urban areas in the United States range from around 100–500 persons per square
kilometer, depending on the agency involved. See “Behind the Numbers Rural,” The Center for
abounds with rural pleasures, and I would choose it above all towns in America to dwell in.”

Dorchester, now a component of the City of Boston, could be described as late as 1839 in the following manner: “No section of our country, of its size, is better cultivated, and no where is the union of wealth with rural felicity more complete.” Even in the early centers of population density, life was still utterly dominated by a rural superstructure through which “farmers and other rural inhabitants were inextricably linked economically, socially, and culturally.”

Workaday rural practices constituted the cultural conditions of this systematic, materially-enforced ruralism. It is tempting to backdate idyllic and romantic assumptions about rurality to their inferred generative sites in the colonial period, to assume that the modern rural imagination is born from an accurate memory of an idyllic rural past. However, rural nostalgia is not etiologically linked to an actual golden age of paradisal rurality, and if we allow it to color our analysis of material rurality, we arrive at conclusions which are oversimplified and do not square with the facts. Hard work, vicious competition, and modern economic systems were all present in this rurality of conditions.

Perhaps nowhere is glossy romanticism better disproven than in an attempt to match up the rhetoric of latter-day agrarianism to the lived ruralism of early New England. Douglas R. Hurt defines agrarianism as a value system which “implies that farmers willfully sought to avoid commercial agriculture and preferred a ‘moral economy’ in which they produced for subsistence purposes rather than market and economic gain,” making heuristic decisions based on an aesthetic-moral complex of familial reciprocity rather than quantified economism. It presumes of farmers a pre-rationalized understanding of trade and labor markets, an alogical orientation which is at best quaint and at worst superstitious. It moreover locates the rural epistemology somewhere near to what E. P. Thompson describes as “the conventions of a ‘pre-industrial’ society” in which allotments of time, labor, and money do not yet form equivalences. Thompson calls this a “task-orientation” notation of time in which “social intercourse and labour are intermingled—the working-day lengthens or contracts according to the task—and there is no great sense of conflict between labour and ‘passing the time of the day’.”

These assumptions are simply not borne out in the actual social life of material ruralism. Subsistence farming was an environmental dictate, not a moral choice, and farmers typically moved towards more advanced modes of production whenever possible. Virtually none survived on the product of their farms alone, and even the most sparsely-populated areas had surplus production and trade


28 Qtd. in Barber, *Historical Collections*, 464.


30 Ibid., 72.

networks. As Richard Bushman forcefully argues, “even in the heartland of communal agricultural villages—the inland New England town—production for use and production for exchange blended imperceptibly.” 32 Drawing a strict historical metonymy between mercantile trade as it would eventually develop and the concept of trade in general obscures the rural colonists’ participation in commercial activities. It also produces a phantom valorization of trade’s perceptual opposite, subsistence farming. “Subsistence farming might mean independence for anyone with a romantic notion of rural life,” Hurt points out, “but to the colonial farmer it meant only hardship.” 33

Nor can we say that the rural colonists had a fundamentally pre-rational understanding of labor and time-value. Paul Clemens and Lucy Simler, studying the rise of the cottager class of tenant workers in colonial Chester county, conclude that it proceeded “hand in hand with the commercialization of agriculture and the intensification of rural manufacturing.” 34 John Frederick Martin has shown that the settling of townships in New England was just as greedy and speculative in the eighteenth century as it was in the nineteenth; “what made frontier development different from one age to another,” he points out, “was not profit-mindedness and not corporate forms, but rather the matter of success.” 35 Both tenant labor and speculative town patents cut against the historical cliché that urban societies and societies with rationalized economic forms are congruent phenomena. The conventional teleology of historical progress as a move away from ruralism ignores the alternative appropriations of modern epistemologies which were taking place in rural areas. Just because labor as a salable good came to prominence with urban factories in the Industrial Revolution does not mean that a quantized epistemology of labor is exclusively an urban concept.

Colonial account books show that the lived rural economy included a startlingly modern understanding of labor as a commercial, alienable commodity. In Salem, Cockerl Reeves’s account book included listings for craft employment issued for a specific service—“to carve a bed,” for example, in 1712. But it also included a more general abstraction of labor—receipts issued simply “to a job”—and the most abstracted term of all—those issued merely “to work.” A day’s work of undistinguished labor implied a simple numerical price, and Reeves found it perfectly normal to account a sale of labor in exactly the same way that he accounted a transaction of goods. 36 Considering that Karl Marx would not coin the term “alienated labor” until nearly a century and a half after Reeves was selling

32 Richard Lyman Bushman, “Markets and Composite Farms in Early America,” The William and Mary Quarterly 55, no. 3 (July 1998), 363.
33 Hurt, American Agriculture, 68.
35 Martin, Profits in the Wilderness, 110.
his abstracted labor-power in the early 1700s, Reeve’s unaffected declaration of such a sale is a startling reminder that even at the high-water-mark of lived American ruralism, a purely romantic and familistic view of the rural economy is flatly incorrect.

In Hingham, Pyam Cushing’s account book reveals the diversity of goods and services that was circulating through the economy by the middle of the eighteenth century, such as receipts for “gingerbread and pins” and “a striped apron” in 1775, or bills “to killing a hog” or “to carting rocks, 1 day” in 1752 and 1758, respectively. The meticulous accounting of each item suggests that—for the class of laborers who kept such books, at least—this was not a Gemeinschaft economy of reciprocal understandings and favors. It was an economy of specific prices and carefully-accounted quantifications of personal interactions. It featured modern financial innovations, as indicated in Reeves’s note in 1709 of an extension of credit to Ibruk Baker. It also figured even the most familiar and intimate relations as economic nexuses, as in the unidentified Bennington laborer’s charge listed “to pulling your wife’s tooth.”

Even as we reject the distracting romantic notion of eighteenth-century rural life, however, we must avoid a vicissitudinous swing the other way into a portrayal of lived ruralism as a solely economic and demographic phenomenon unimportant beyond the scope of its material determinants and particularities. The dialectic between a romantic ruralism on one hand and a material one on the other is convenient but deceiving. David B. Danbom suggests that “the market orientation of colonial farmers was also diluted by the persistent sense everywhere—stronger in some places and among some people than others—that relations among friends and neighbors should take place in the context of a moral, rather than a market, economy.” The concept of relations taking place in contexts is important, as the material rurality of the eighteenth century was contextualized at the time by both realities and fables. This contextual approach is the only way to bridge the gap between a positivistic, intensive description of rural life, and a literary, extensive description of it. For the myths of rurality do not come from nowhere, even if they do not proceed out of a one-to-one relationship with material facts. The first layer of American rurality is wedged somewhere between statistics and semiotics.

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If we return to Bennington, home of our unnamed laborer-poet, we find a rural life under construction whose materials were both material and positional. Vermont at the middle of the eighteenth century was still frontier, a mostly-unknown wilderness tucked in behind the backs of other British colonies. Partly because of its tardy incorporation, the struggle over land in early Vermont is a particularly lucid example of the rural interface between land, value, and meaning. Rural thinking fundamentally relies on land as a central pivot of not only


economic success but also the self-actualizing and cultural successes which accompany economic success and invest it with value.

Despite several attempts to duplicate European semi-feudal land ownership schemes in North America, the British colonies eventually settled on the fee simple method of land claim, in which a land title with a specific value grants the bearer what we understand as private ownership of the land.\textsuperscript{39} This method prevailed not only in speculators’ pocketbooks but in the moral encoding of the North American promise. The spatial vastness of the land, combined with a weak bureaucracy and an almost insatiable demand for new land by the settlers, rendered older hierarchical patterns of land title unworkable.\textsuperscript{40}

What emerged was a land economy in which “farmland provided the basis for subsistence, wealth, and status,” and in which the possession of land “gave the owner a stake in society, respectability, independence, and often the right to vote.”\textsuperscript{41} Land figured so centrally into the prospect of development that one of the very first domestic financial institutions was the Massachusetts Land Bank, which, up until its dissolution by Parliament in 1741, offered capital loans for those looking to acquire new land in western Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{42} When Governor Benning Wentworth of New Hampshire announced that he would offer sales of land in the indeterminate area west of the Connecticut River, the new town grants immediately became objects of heavy economic and social import. Wentworth granted fourteen such townships in present-day Vermont, mostly for the considerable income the transactions provided for him, but undoubtedly also for the quasi-messianic powers land-granting involved. The layout of the grants themselves imprinted the land with the matrix of values that had become commonplace elsewhere in eighteenth-century New England: townships six miles square, with sixty-four plots either sold or reserved for the church, the minister, the schools, and the Governor.\textsuperscript{43} They were laid out in regular grid sections,

\textsuperscript{39} The term derives from estate-style traditions of buying usufruct rights where “the land with the fewest strings attached—the simplest fee, you might say—was the closest to outright ownership.” In William H. Whyte, \textit{The Last Landscape} (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 90.

\textsuperscript{40} It also depended on the legal nullification of any property claims by the Amerindians. By ignoring any of their claims on the land, the continent was turned into legally ‘open space’ belonging to the state. See Cronon, \textit{Changes in the Land}, 62–71, for more on Amerindian conceptions of land rights.

\textsuperscript{41} Hurt, \textit{American Agriculture} 37.

\textsuperscript{42} Danbom, \textit{Born in the Country}, 59.

rational units of land-value much-beloved for their ease of surveying and progressive egalitarian overtones.\textsuperscript{44} A claim so valuable and based on such little legal precedent could not go unchallenged, however, and the governor of New York prevailed upon the British government to allocate the land west of the Connecticut River to his state—even though at least 250 permanent settlers were already living in the Bennington area under the presumed validity of the New Hampshire grants.\textsuperscript{45} What ensued was a high-stakes battle over the legitimacy of the land claims. The feud's deep emotions and fierce bickering—bordering on outright warfare—indicated that the fight over land was a proxy fight over the ideals which that land had come to represent in rural society. Such weighty feelings were hardly unique to Vermont. At the beginning of the nineteenth century in Maine, Ephraim Ballard would lament “the avaricious appetite of men who are striving to be independent Lords in a glorious Republic.”\textsuperscript{46} Laurel Thatcher Ulrich observes that rural people considered their struggle to protect freeholds against the systematic encroachment of urban speculation to be “nothing less than an attempt to save the Revolution.”\textsuperscript{47} Daniel Chipman, a nineteenth-century biographer of Seth Warren, one of the leaders of the movement against the “Yorkers,” offers a paragraph that illuminates the peculiar configuration of values implied in the struggle:

The history of any people in the defense of their rights against a more powerful assailant is ever interesting, the more so, if not only their independence as a people but the farms on which they lived were at stake. We are still more deeply interested by the struggle if those farms had been rendered more dear to them by the hardships and privations which they had endured as pioneers in the settlement of a new country.\textsuperscript{48} Chipman not only elevates landownership to the apex of the political value system by placing the stake of individual farms above the stake of political independence but also draws a moral equivalence between the rural cultivation of land from wilderness and the claim to fundamental affirmative rights. In 1960, William Brewster would suggest in his account of the Vermont movement that the settlers’ appeals to the British legal system over the legitimacy of the New Hampshire grants were facile, offering “a better justification” in “the inherent moral right of the settlers to the lands they alone made valuable by occupation and

\textsuperscript{44} The Vermont grid towns predated the more-famous Land Ordinance of 1785 which permanently established the rectilinear grid as the expression of Enlightenment modernity, Deist spiritualism, and democratic equality on the physical landforms of rurality. For more, see Stilgoe, \textit{Common Landscape}, 99–107; Albert C. White, \textit{A History of the Rectangular Survey System} (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, 1982); and William D. Pattison, \textit{Beginnings of the American Land Survey System, 1784–1800}, Department of Geography Research Paper no. 50 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957).

\textsuperscript{45} Brewster, \textit{Fourteenth Commonwealths}, 7.

\textsuperscript{46} Qtd. in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, \textit{A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812} (New York: Vintage, 1990), 217.

\textsuperscript{47} Ulrich, 217.

\textsuperscript{48} Daniel Chipman, \textit{The Life of Col. Seth Warner, With An Account of the Controversy Between New York and Vermont, From 1763 to 1775} (Burlington: C. Goodrich, 1858), 5.
improvement.” The rural keystone of value-impregnated land had not diminished in the 102 years between these two historians.

Tensions continued to mount in the New Hampshire grants as increasing legal systematization by the New York administration was met by increasing truculence from the farmers. Even after the Board of Trade explicitly acknowledged the Americans’ rural value system by insisting on recognizing New York claims only on the condition of actual settlement and improvement, the New York authorities, creeping towards urban suspicion of the hinterlands, continued to expand their control over the Vermont territories. As the political interests of the proto-city attempted to consolidate their hegemony over the rural hinterlands, rural inhabitants began to assert their social identity in an oppositional relationship to the city. The absentee administrators were bearing down upon a class of rural citizens who were prepared to claim rurality as a justification for resisting the unpopular expropriating efforts of the government. It was in this climate that Ethan Allen rose to prominence. Allen belongs in the set of American mythological rural heroes that includes figures like Daniel Boone and Buffalo Bill Cody, and, like the others, his mythologization is a coincidence between latter-day historical revision and Allen’s own boastful positioning on the frontier. A fierce supporter of the Vermont farmers’ rights against the city governor’s incursions, Allen headed a group that amounted to a riot mob of rural discontent: the famous Green Mountain Boys. It was one of the first incidents in American history where the struggle for systematic control over the rural countryside met with failure not only because of logistical difficulties but from a fundamental incompatibility of beliefs. Allen put it in his own terms when one New York official attempted to confront him: “The gods of the hills,” he cried, “are not the gods of the valleys.”

Allen and his companions lived in the Bennington area three quarters of a century before our laborer-poet wrote of the “jealous disposition.” Yet they were nonetheless jealous heroes, ready to incite outright rebellion at an instant’s notice when their claims to the rural landscape were threatened. During the period of material rurality, a disruption of rural felicity was equivalent to a disruption of life itself. In jealously protecting it, Allen and others provided a first confirmation of the potent value of rural places in American society.

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49 Brewster, Fourteenth Commonweal ths, 8.
50 Ibid., 16–17.
51 Ibid., 10.
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**Pine Hill, or, A Superior Goodness of Soil.**

In 1759, the son of a French count, having completed his tour of duty as a land surveyor in the French and Indian War, moved to the British colony of New York and declared himself an American. He obtained land in Orange County, which today is part of the New York City Combined Statistical Area\(^1\) but which was then a uniformly rural community midway between the proto-urban coast and the unkempt frontier of the Catskills. He built a farmstead there, named it Pine Hill, and married Mehitabel Tippet, a New Yorker. In commemoration of this rebuilt life, the immigrant renamed himself, leaving the old world of Michel Guillaume and beginning anew as J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur. From the view of the front door of his house, he looked at the fertile fields of his freehold and concluded: “men are like plants; the goodness and flavour of the fruit proceeds from the particular soil in which they grow.”\(^2\) The idea that a good society was predicated on a good environment was not particularly controversial in the eighteenth century. But it was Crèvecoeur, in his landmark *Letters from an American Farmer*, who first published the fundamental argument that the particular rural environment of the American colonies was the one which would inevitably yield an egalitarian, free, and self-determinate society. For Crèvecoeur was not merely a literary figure but also a social theorist. At Pine Hill, he saw a society guided into prosperous harmony by the munificent effects of rural life; his writings consequently pry beneath the surface of how the American environment governed social development.

There is something paradoxical in Crèvecoeur’s location within the historical sedimentation of American rurality. He is commonly called a “mythmaker,” and, indeed, his often-embellished descriptions of American farm life were more powerful as literary advertisements than as how-to manuals. But Pine Hill was also a real place, Crèvecoeur was a real farmer, and eighteenth-century Orange County was a real community with discrete systems of social, political, and economic interaction. Unlike mythologies which begin at Eden or Atlantis or Camelot, the American rural mythology can condense backwards onto a concrete place. At Pine Hill, material rurality first began to transform into a rurality of aspiration and modernization. Ethnologic rurality, however, retained the contours of place-based actuality, creating a dialogic interface between myth and reality. Thus, Crèvecoeur is a crucial link in reconciling early, material phases of rurality with later, imaginative ones, and in explaining how rurality acquired the imaginative and mythological potential which allowed it to escape from its phenotypic definition as a specific morphology.

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“Mythmaking” is a troublesome occupation because there is no clear definition of the word “myth.” Myths are one of social science’s most troublesome concepts, as they have a tendency to sprawl out beyond the reach of clinical definition and accurate examination. The very things which make myths powerful social forces and important objects of study—their ability to operate across historical and cultural boundaries, their ephemerality, their inscrutability—also make them difficult to treat academically without disappearing down a rabbit-hole of postmodernist relativism. When dealing with the mythological aspects of American rurality, we must perform the tricky task of making myths real via a non-reductive process, of making them calculable objects of study without sapping them of the vibrancy which makes them interesting in the first place. To do this, we must negotiate the relationship of myth with its perceived opposite: “reality.”

One strategy defines “mythmaking” as a necessarily fictional process, operating entirely beyond the material conditions of its situation. In such a definition, myths are reflexively catalogued by their inimical relationship to facts. This is the schema shared by “scientific” historians and positivist sociologists. It states that myths offer social insight only insofar as they document or parallel real sociological features, and have no autonomous historical power. They are byproducts, rather than generators, of social development.

The opposite way of thinking, and the one employed in this essay, argues that the history of mythology reveals material facts at the same time as it joins together in an alloy with those facts to produce social meanings along with new material facts. In this outlook, mythmaking binds the conditions of life together with the social and anthropological forces that drive those conditions through time. This is the schema preferred by anthropologists and historiographers. The crucial feature of this analytical method is that it folds mythmaking into the actuality of history. It places mythology in a coöperative, rather than inimical, relationship with descriptions of material facts. “Ideas and ideals,” writes William H. McNeill, are “self-validating within remarkably elastic limits. An extraordinary behavioral motility results.” It is not a contradiction that Crévecoeur the mythmaker occupies the section of this essay dealing with material rurality. Rather, it is a reminder that every layer of our archaeological analysis is imbricated in every other one, and that the divide between myths and facts is no more than a violent a posteriori dismemberment.

Henry Nash Smith argues against an “unduly rigid distinction between symbols and myths on the one hand, and on the other a supposed extramental

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historical reality discoverable by means of conventional scholarly procedures” by pointing out that “there is a continuous dialectic interplay between the mind and its environment, and that our perceptions of objects and events are no less a part of consciousness than are our fantasies.”

Ruralism is a field which particularly demands such a realization, because rural understanding must overlay the physical and cultural aspects of human-environment interactions with the same analytical latticework. As William R. Burch understood, “unlike nature, the web of human society is woven of myth and rhetoric, of faith and persuasion, which filter and sort the meanings of man and nature.” Knobloch, writing a natural history of cultivation, reached the same conclusion: the seemingly-positivistic history of agricultural economy is in fact “an intensely social enterprise, shaped by inescapably social desires and expectations, even if it is described in simplistic material or natural terms. [It is] as much about structuring political or social life as it is about raising cattle or wheat.”

One need only look as far as Crèvecoeur’s work itself to find this mode of analysis in play. 

Letters from an American Farmer is a piecemeal book. It contains sketches of factual ethnography, normative ideological yearnings, unvarnished everyday sentiments, and aspirational posturing. Trapped within the weft and warp of these threads is a core ideal which owes its central beliefs to the experience of life in rural space. In the end, Crèvecoeur’s work is exactly what its title implies: notes from life on the American agricultural scene, with no distinctions drawn between the life of economically necessary rural behavior and culturally potent rural values. 

Letters from an American Farmer is a rough work, the work of “a cultivator of the earth, a simple citizen,” as Crèvecoeur styled himself. Still it built a foundational structure for American social life; as Albert E. Stone notes, Crèvecoeur “set the stage for a cultural dialogue that has never ceased.”

Crèvecoeur’s central contribution to the nascent social theory of America was the argument that the layout of its landscape was what made its societies so exceptional, so invulnerable to Old World problems, and so radically modern. This must have been a fairly intuitive observation to anyone who left Europe for America during the eighteenth century. The change in environmental scale would have been staggering. At a time when western Europe was buckling under the own weight of its population, when essentially all of its hinterlands were crisscrossed with villages and roads, and when its natural resources were beginning to approach their limits, the young colonies were perched on a vast

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8 Knobloch, Culture of Wilderness, 3.

9 Crèvecoeur, Letters, 50.

10 Albert E. Stone, Introduction to Letters, 22.

underpopulated continent. Farmers who had emigrated as landless tenants could claim easy title to plots of land larger than noble estates in Europe. Even the largest and most infilled American towns dropped off quickly at their margins into zones of effective wilderness. Landholders became neighbors out of their own choice and convenience, not because they were forced uncomfortably into a crowded mêlée. From a twenty-first century perspective, it may seem pedantic or even increasingly anachronistic to characterize Europe as physically crowded and the United States as sparse. In 1770, however, this difference would have been so exaggerated and shocking that it would have overwhelmed all others. This spatial immensity, this experience of living in a place with unknowable—and thus perceptually infinite—physical limits, was at the very center of what made the American colonies noteworthy.

In the absence of the rigidly structured social, economic, and political hierarchies which determined social behavior in Europe, the landscape and environment rose to the fore as crucial variables. The effects ranged from the massive (flail threshing in New England soils versus animal treading in mid-Atlantic soils\(^\text{12}\)) to the microecological (convenient sheep-pens formed by the peninsulas and isthmuses of the Massachusetts coastline\(^\text{13}\)). Every decision was at least partially refracted through this primary relationship with the land. When John Cleveland left his family’s farm in Connecticut to study at Yale and become a preacher, it was not because he felt a social compulsion towards religion but because, as he wrote in his notebook, “meeting with a hurt in my body by hard lifting, I was disenabled to go on with hard labor.”\(^\text{14}\)

In any case, the close relationship between land and life meant it was not difficult to draw a metaphorical relationship between land and social sentiments. The elements of American culture which Crèvecoeur admired most—thrift, hard work, honesty, and equality—were in his view the social products of a capacious rural society. “There is room for every body in America,” he crowed, and, because of this, any industrious white man could easily assemble a happy middle-class life for himself. This was in direct contrast to Europe, whose inhabitants were “limited in [their] intentions, as well as in [their] views,” and where “the plenitude of society confines many useful ideas, and often extinguishes the most laudable schemes.”\(^\text{15}\) The double meaning of the “view” mentioned—a physical view of landscape, and a mental view of opinion—confirms Crèvecoeur’s environmental-cultural homology. Thus, Crèvecoeur builds for himself, and leaves behind for future Americans, an ethical system that might be termed “spatial morality.”

Ironically, this implies a tacit rejection of mythmaking. To argue that human morality is equivalent to environmental conditions is to assume that materiality has a major deterministic effect on social behavior and cultural values. Crèvecoeur found clear experimental proof of this phenomenon in the regional

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\(^{12}\) Hurt, American Agriculture, 60.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 51.

\(^{14}\) Qtd. in Jedrey, The Life of John Cleveland, 16.

\(^{15}\) Crèvecoeur, Letters, 76.
identities already starting to congeal in early America. Looking up and down the seaboard, he noticed a variety of societies occupying a variety of natural environments, and so drew a neat parallel between the two variables. “The inhabitants of Canada, Massachusetts, the middle provinces, the southern ones,” he writes, “will be as different as their climates; their only points of unity will be those of religion and language.” These cultural patterns closely mirrored the qualities of the environments involved. New Englanders were flinty and parsimonious, just like the thin, rocky soil of Massachusetts. Plantation owners were effete and aristocratic, just like the lush ease of the Georgian climate. “For instance,” he notes, “it is natural to conceive that those who live near the sea must be very different from those who live in the woods; the intermediate space will afford a separate and distinct class.” Though Crèvecoeur’s observations seem somewhat banal in retrospect, they belie actual sociological facts. In his study of the religious schism of the Great Awakening amongst theologians at Yale, Jedrey notes that the conservative Old Lights came almost exclusively from coastal towns where religious establishments structured social behavior, whereas the evangelizing New Lights were almost entirely the sons of frontier farmers, children of a wilderness where religion was homespun and idiosyncratic.

Crèvecoeur understood the connection not merely as correlative but as causal. Commenting on coastal dwellers versus their inland counterparts, Crèvecoeur offers:

Those who live near the sea feed more on fish than flesh and often encounter that boisterous element. This renders them more bold and enterprising ... their intercourse with mankind becomes extensive. This inspires them with a love of traffic, a desire of transporting produce from one place to another ... Those who inhabit the middle settlements, by far the most numerous, must be very different; the simple cultivation of the earth purifies them.

Here landscapes have active powers over passive societies. The sea “renders” and “inspires” those who live near it; cultivation “purifies” farmers. Crèvecoeur enumerated the conditioning factors of man in the order of their power: “We are nothing but the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment.” To find two environmental variables ahead of politics, religion, and economy may be startling to contemporary social theorists accustomed to working exclusively with the latter three. For Crèvecoeur, however, the landscape was the chief method of

17 Ibid., 71.
18 Jedrey, following in a path blazed by Crèvecoeur, suggested the farmstead environment lay down “tenacious traditions of lay hostility to clerical traditions” which “may have made [farmers] responsive to the idea of a ministry whose authority was based on spiritual qualities.” Jedrey, *Life of John Cleveland*, 30–31.
19 Crèvecoeur, 71.
20 Ibid.
social analysis. “Our opinions, vices, and virtues are altogether local,” he argued. “We are machines fashioned by every circumstance around us.”

What begins as a taxonomic method for classifying and diagnosing societies according to their environments, however, soon turns into a normative assessment of the values associated with particular ones. This idea is explicitly depicted in terms of distance from Europe and space for colonists to spread out. The masses of Europe leached off one another because they were crowded; in America, one could lay claim to a tract of land and the feelings of manhood and self-actualization which accompanied it. Crèvecoeur employs the analogy between man and plant in order to suggest that American land offered room to “transplant” European overage:

... our distance from Europe, far from diminishing, rather adds to our usefulness and consequence as men and subjects. Had our forefathers remained there, they would only have crowded it and perhaps prolonged those convulsions which had shaken it for so long. Every industrious European who transports himself here may be compared to a sprout growing at the foot of a great tree; it enjoys and draws but a little portion of sap; wrench it from the parent roots, transplant it, and it will become a tree bearing fruit also.

The allusion is to the technique of thinning: dense forests produce poor-quality growth because trees compete fiercely for resources. Productive forests, where large, mature trees grow far apart, yield a healthy timber operation. Here again, Crèvecoeur proves startlingly materialistic. In this, he echoes his contemporary Benjamin Franklin, who once remarked that the only the “crowding or interfering of each others Means of Subsistence” could halt the “prolific Nature of Plants or Animals,” including the spread of humans across North America.

Having space to spread out in was not just a convenience for American settlers. It was also constituent to humane and enlightened life. It could reform European society’s sclerosis: on coming to America, a European “very suddenly alters his scale; two hundred miles formerly appeared a very great distance, it is now but a trifle; he no sooner breathes our air than he forms schemes and embarks on designs he never would have thought of in his own country.”

Nowhere was the ideational pull of this rural expanse clearer than in the case of indentured servants, who abandoned Europe in droves in order to work long and difficult indentures based only on the eventual promise of some open land. As Crèvecoeur suggested, these servants fled “a crowded society where every place is overstocked ... that perpetual collision of parties, that difficulty of beginning, that contention which oversets so many.”

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21 Crèvecoeur, Letters, 71.
22 Ibid., 80.
24 Crèvecoeur, 82.
25 Hurt, American Agriculture, 55.
26 Crèvecoeur, Letters, 81.
Crèvecoeur’s social theories are of a style that might retroactively be called “landscape sociology.” Commenting on religion, Crèvecoeur observes: “If the sectaries are not settled close together, if they are mixed with other denominations, their zeal will cool for want of fuel, and will be extinguished in a little time. Then, the Americans become as to religion what they are as to country, allied to all.” Here, a social variable—religious fervor—is not socially inculcated but spatially determined. “Zeal in Europe is confined; here it evaporates in the great distance it has to travel; there it is a grain of powder inclosed; here it burns away in the open air and consumes without effect.”

It is a thread of thought which has remained latent in American social thought ever since. In 1846, James B. Brolin wrote that “if you wish to preserve and perpetuate [the government’s] democratic form, you must pursue a policy tending to disseminate the lands amongst the largest amongst the largest number of people in the state.” In 1860, William Gilpin suggested on the eve of the Civil War that “the holy question of our Union lies in the bosom of nature … it lies not in the trivial temporalities of political taxation, African slavery, local power, or the nostrums of orators.” In 1929, Sorokin and Zimmerman claimed that the rural environment produced families of “stability, integrity, and responsibility.” And in 1960, Talcott Parsons defined community as “that aspect of the structure of social systems which is referable to the territorial location of persons.”

Crèvecoeur did not make up this landscape sociology on his own. In the Letters, writes Manuela Albertone, “echoes of Montesquieu, pervasive Rousseauian sensibility and physiocratic ideas appear in the untangling of recurrent Enlightenment themes.” Crèvecoeur was almost certainly familiar with the physiocratic theory of A. R. J. Turgot and François Quesnay, which asserted that agricultural freeholding was the superior method of economic development. And in 1802, Henri de Saint-Simon wrote that “if you examine, on your plan of

27 Ibid., 74.
28 Ibid., 76.
30 Qtd. in Smith, Virgin Land, 40.
31 Qtd. in Loomis and Beegle, Rural Social Systems, 51.
32 Qtd. in Wilkinson, Community in Rural America, 18.
34 Quesnay divided all of society into three types: the productive class consisting of farmers, the proprietor class of landowners, and the sterile class of everybody else. See “Analyse du tableau économique,” Collection des principaux économistes (Paris, 1846), II:58.
the universe, that part of space which you occupy, you will not see any difference between those phenomena which you call moral and those you call physical.”

Through his social theory, Crèvecoeur injected a rural normativity into the canon of American social progress, locating spatial freedom at the core of communal and individual harmony. As Stone suggests in the introduction to the *Letters*, Crèvecoeur’s adoption of rural themes, and his persistent ignorance of urban life, “answers both to the historical facts and to the ideal bucolic argument of the author.” As subsequent writers adopted Crèvecoeur’s assumptions, they perfected a social myth with real power to bend social forms to its will. In “accepting the America of common experience as their proper province, [writers] have actually shaped that real world to private patterns and values, [which has] often meant turning away from urban life.”

By valorizing the makeup of a particular reality, privileging certain of its forms and eliding others, and passing on those cryptonormative beliefs in the vessel of a shared cultural mythology which attests to the superiority of rurality as a social value, the materialist became mythmaker.

The promise of an unlimited America, an infinite space which would absorb cramped Europeans and morally recuperate them into freeholders, laid another cornerstone in Crèvecoeur’s vision of rural American society: the countryside as a site in which society could start from new beginnings. This reform proceeds first through emancipation from material want, then through acquisition of politico-social equality, and ultimately through a rebirth of the spirit itself. As he puts it:

> But how is [Americanization] accomplished in that crowd of low, indigent people who flock here every year from Europe? I will tell you; they no sooner arrive than they immediately feel the good effects of that plenty of provisions we possess. ... He begins to feel the effects of a sort of resurrection; hitherto he had not lived but simply vegetated; he now feels himself a man because he is treated as such ... Judge what an alteration there must arise in the mind and the thoughts of this man. He begins to forget his former servitude and dependence; his heart involuntarily swells and glows; this first swell inspires him with those new thoughts which constitute an American.

The rural environment provides a catalyst for a setting-aloft of the social spirit. Physical and metaphysical facts join together: both “that plenty of provisions” and “new thoughts” constitute Crèvecoeur’s Americanism.

This generative Americanism is reflexively rural. Crèvecoeur provides the reader with an outstanding parable of the new rural man in his “history of Andrew, the Hebridean.” Crèvecoeur’s account of Andrew’s Americanization may be termed a sort of “ruralist realism,” containing, as it does, all the normative aspects of the rural regenerative ideal hidden inside the language of common

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36 Stone, Introduction to *Letters*, 16.

37 Crèvecoeur, *Letters*, 82.
verisimilitude. As with socialist realism (or “capitalist realism”\(^\text{38}\)), this is an attempt to keep the what-should-be and the what-is in the air at the same time, in order to lend the former the credibility of the latter.\(^\text{39}\)

By labor and good nature, Andrew realizes material success in the colonies: the construction of a homestead. Crèvecoeur notes that the emotional power of this milestone signaled the completion of the regenerative process, and in such a way it was more significant than any inheritance of Europe. He drew the comparison directly:

> The powerful lord, the wealthy merchant, on seeing the superb mansion finished, never can feel half the joy and real happiness which was felt and enjoyed on that day by this honest Hebridean, though this new dwelling, erected in the midst of the woods, was nothing more than a square inclosure, composed of twenty-four large, clumsy logs, let in at the ends.\(^\text{40}\)

The central configuration of Crèvecoeur’s American ethic—self, labor, rurality, and humility—is self-evident here.

Landowning and independence are thus implied by each other, and the farm becomes a built assertion of the farmer’s ability to manifest himself in nature and fashion a subsistence for his family. Just as the original colonial land grants were scaled according to a person’s social status, occupation, and familial prominence,\(^\text{41}\) the new farmers felt this land lent them a provable social respectability. Crèvecoeur says on the privilege of owning American land:

> This formerly rude soil has been converted by my father into a pleasant farm, and in return, it has established all our rights; on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens, our importance as inhabitants of such a distinct ... this is what may be called the true and only philosophy of the American farmer.\(^\text{42}\)

A title to land—universally available to all free male settlers willing to build their spiritual selves and their material household—thus became the sole, equalitarian measure of accomplishment in the regenerative ethic.

This was a normative sociology which deliberately flattened rank. Crèvecoeur himself considered his occupation and social class coextensive—an American farmer, nothing more. He exhibits the humble conditions of farm life in an attempt to situate himself in a position more detached from and more genuine


\(^{39}\) Crèvecoeur begins the narrative by insisting the story contains “not a single remarkable event to amaze the reader, no tragical scene to convulse the heart, or pathetic narrative to draw tears from sympathetic eyes.” Instead, he notes: “All I wish to delineate is the progressive steps of a poor man, advancing from indigence to ease, from oppression to freedom, from obscurity and contumely to some degree of consequence—not by virtue of any freaks of fortune, but by the gradual operation of sobriety, honesty, and emigration.” Crèvecoeur, *Letters*, 90.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 104.

\(^{41}\) Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 33–34.

\(^{42}\) Crèvecoeur, *Letters*, 54. It should be noted that the father referenced here is entirely mythological: Crèvecoeur’s real father was still a French aristocrat, and had nothing to do with Pine Hill. Crèvecoeur was playing fast and loose with the truth to make himself seem like an American son—which, for all literary intents and purposes—he was.
than the lettered class. For Crèvecoeur, the ideal American is not and cannot be a man of letters, for intellectual concerns can be articulated only in the company of personal industry. This sentiment of Crèvecoeur’s is located at the beginning of a long American suspicion of those who work only with their heads, and it sets up the American agonism between the rural, common farmer and the urban, aristocratic intellectual. It is a uniquely American style which deliberately prostrates itself before the image of “greatness,” but does so in a clever attempt to undermine it. Hofstadter famously characterized this sentiment as a characteristic “anti-intellectualism” of American society, and used it to bludgeon rural places into an oppositional relationship with modern progress. But it is not so much a crude anti-intellectualism as it is an affirmation of simplicity which grew out of a suspicion and a jealousy of the customs of Old Europe. It is a subtle attempt to redefine the terms of genuineness in the direction of a particular affect—a rural one.

The entirety of the first of his Letters, “Introduction,” consists of a quitclaim deed on intellectualism. He deliberately trots out his awkwardness for public display, attempting to show his readers just how foreign are his aims from literary ambition. A working farmer, he argues, cannot participate in the life of letters. He tells how his wife mockingly asks of him:

James, would’st thee pretend to send epistles to a great European man who hath lived abundance of time in that big house called Cambridge, where, they say, that worldly learning is so abundant that people get it only by breathing the air of the place? Would’st thee not be ashamed to write unto a man who has never in his life done a single day’s work, no, not even felled a tree; who hath expended the Lord knows how many years studying stars, geometry, stones, and flies and in reading folio books?

He never becomes convinced—or, at least, never admits to being convinced—of his own literary capacity. Instead, he grudgingly accepts that his amateur stylings might provide some interest or amusement to Europeans unfamiliar with them. He agrees to put his thoughts on paper only with the clearly articulated disclaimer that he is not doing it out of vanity. “If they will not be elegant,” Crèvecoeur recounts his minister describing his letters, “they will smell of the woods and be a little wild.”

In this way, Crèvecoeur establishes a semiotic binary in which his work, itself a representative of American thinking, is counterpoised against the privileged assumptions of his European readers. It establishes a set of parallel value associations which remain potent in contemporary American sentiments:

| rural | urban |
| simple | intellectual |
| American | European |
| physical labor | mental labor |

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45 Ibid., 39.
The vertical linking of the elements in each of these columns is critical not only in Crèvecoeur’s own portrayal of American life, but also in establishing an American ethnocultural system in which rural life is historically orthogonal to life in the cities. Both Crèvecoeur and the Americana myth which proceeded out of him exhibit a highly contested, but not necessarily diametrically oppositional, relationship with the intelligentsia.

For intelligent people could also take part in rurality as a way of distinguishing the new nation. One such person was Thomas Jefferson—politician, naturalist, and theoretician—whose core beliefs were “accepted and perpetuated” in a tradition which came to dominate the American valuation of space. Jefferson had a major role to play in the valorization of the idea of a rural republic. He was a clever proponent of American exceptionalism, and his unwavering faith in the beneficial effects of the American rural landscape made him the leading figure in the branch of thought that considered the United States rurality as the embodiment of Enlightenment ideals. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he offered a three-page listing of the quadrupeds of Europe and North America to counter the claim of the Comte de Buffon and Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton that North America was only a poor facsimile of Europe. Here Jefferson engaged in more ruralist realism: the table was a listing of facts, but it carried the ideological assertion that America was not only comparable to but superior than Europe, and would thus overtake it by the moral force of its landscape. As with Crèvecoeur’s plant analogy, the scientific nature of the American environment bore mythologic value as proof of the new nation’s superior social system.

But if Jefferson’s name has been applied retroactively to describe the formative layer of rural prioritization in American development, even he admitted that he was only one player out of many. Echoing Crèvecoeur’s humility, he wrote to Charles Thomson after the publishing of *Notes on the State of Virginia*: “in literature nothing new: for I do not consider as having added any thing to that field my own Notes of which I have had a few copies printed.” His own protests notwithstanding, Jefferson could not have created aspirational rurality alone. It was only through the mutual recognition of its value by the modal American that it took on any significance.

The social theory of rurality first outlined by Crèvecoeur and elaborated by Jefferson was imprinted on the minds of rural practitioners, who then imprinted those ideals on the land. This affirms the belief “that history cannot happen—that

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46 In the nineteenth century, the fact that immigrants did not have to doff their hats to their superiors was seen as “part of an iconography that attested to perceptions of greater social equality in the United States.” See Gjerde, 31.


is, men cannot engage in purposive group behavior—without images which simultaneously express collective desires and impose coherence on the infinitely numerous and infinitely varied data of experience. Crèvecoeur offered a ruralist set of social values which embraced commonness, freeholding, and simple ambition, all tied to the experiential behavior of carrying out rural life. Pennsylvanians proudly called their colony “the best poor man’s country,” but the sentiment extended beyond Pennsylvania’s borders. For adult white men, rural America had become a promised land, a place where the prevailing economic, social, and demographic conditions enforced equality because the landscape made it so. Crèvecoeur described the colonies as “modern, peaceful, benign. Here we have no war to desolate our fields, our religion does not oppress the cultivators, we are strangers to those feudal institutions which have enslaved so many.” American settlers had no formal theoretical design according to which the social equalization of European emigrants would be executed. Rather, the real situations of rural life demanded a particular social configuration. Crèvecoeur was amongst the first to take this situational reality and fix it in place in a permanent system of value. He thus forms a bridge between the material rurality which he lived and the aspirational rurality which was about to explode onto the American mind during the nineteenth century.

50 Smith, Virgin Land, ix.
51 Danbom, Born in the Country, 60.
52 Crèvecoeur, Letters, 42.
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**Cooperstown, or, Westward the Course of Empire.**

The trans-Mississippi wilderness was already tugging at the heartstrings and pursestrings of the United States in the closing years of the eighteenth century. As the nineteenth century ran its course, the west would bend the morphology and ideology of the nation in a profoundly rural way, and it would compel writers, scholars, and laypeople alike to reflect on the profound social import of the western landscape. "One of the most persistent generalizations concerning American life," argues Smith, "is the notion that our society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westwards."

It is, of course, historical and continental chance that the configuration of North America’s landmass drew resources, populations, and cultural meanings westward. The United States expanded in a more-or-less linear fashion across the continent, and so the obvious relationship between moving westward in direction and moving forwards in time is a controlling narrative of American history. The west, though, transcended its original geographic chance and became valorized as a cultural idea. In the nineteenth century, social images of westwardness assumed a central position in the American cultural and political constellation. The west acquired a powerful aspirational pull as the vector *par excellence* of progress, civilization, and economic bounty. It is thus unsurprising that so many of the most important narratives of the American rural ideal have drawn parallels between this geographic vector and social, ethnologic, political, and literary vectors.

Yet it is easy to lapse into “western studies” when describing the complex effects of the rural landscape of the United States on the cultural life of its citizens. Such an orientation implies too crude an equivalence between a physical artifact of historical development and a comprehensive understanding of rural communities in the ethnocultural evolution of Americana. It is possible to be eastern and rural, as well as western and urban. Cities followed, and sometimes preceded, the westward expansion across the continent. No doubt there is an ethnologic entity of westernness which is embedded within American rurality. But to understand rurality, we must delaminate “western” and “rural” as analytic concepts, and offer a view of rurality which incorporates the effects of western expansion on rural thought patterns without lazily merging the two. This is one reason why the term “ruralism” and the mode of study on which it pivots offers a more synthetic and thus more useful line of approach to the question of physical space’s impact on the historical and contemporary behaviors of American societies.

For it was not on a western frontier that the following passage was written—

> At length, nearly three long centuries after the Genoese had crossed the ocean, the white man came to plant a home on this spot, and it was then that the great change began; the axe and saw, the forge and wheel, were busy from dawn to dusk, cows and swine fed in thickets whence the wild beasts had fled, while the

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1 Smith, *Virgin Land*, 3.
ox and the horse drew away in chains the fallen trunks of the forest. The tenants of the wilderness shrunk deeper within its bounds with every changing moon; the wild creatures fled away within the receding shade of the forest.\(^2\)

— but rather in central New York, on the shores of Lake Otsego, where Susan Fenimore Cooper wrote her diaristic *Rural Hours*, published just one year after Francis Parkman’s emblematic western work *The Oregon Trail* was printed. Cooperstown, less than two hundred miles from New York City, was and is a rural community. Susan was predated on the site by her brother James Fenimore Cooper, who relied heavily on the the landscape of the region in his frontier novels. His hero Natty Bumppo, “the most important symbol of the national experience of adventure across the continent,”\(^3\) lived in a fictional hut on the shore of Lake Otsego from which “the eye might embrace, in one view, thousands and tens of thousands of acres, that were yet tenanted only by the beasts of the forest.”\(^4\) Today Cooperstown houses the Farmer’s Museum, which invites visitors to “rediscover the innocent beauty, the intricate wisdom and the enduring charm of our rural past.”\(^5\)

Yet Cooperstown is no farther west than Philadelphia.\(^6\) David Jones calls Cooperstown “one of many spots where a fragment of civilization broke away from the westward movement in the 1790s and came to permanent rest.”\(^7\) This image of westward development leaving behind “fragments” of itself along its march to the Pacific is one way of squaring the conventional narrative of westward physical movement with the fine-grained geographical detail necessary to understand rurality as a social object. Fragmenting the west cuts across reductionist totalities of history to create a theory of American rurality which is translocational. The material westward expansion of the United States has no doubt been a crucial animating factor in American society. But by the nineteenth century, rurality was fast becoming an *aspirational*, rather than a material, concept. It had infected the political and ideological narratives of the whole country, and its accessibility as a cultural idea was not limited to any one region. The “frontier” story, and the story of the “west,” can thus be found written into the social landscape of rural parts of the country which were neither frontiers nor westerly by the middle of the nineteenth century.

Bishop Berkeley’s 1726 claim that “westward the course of empire takes its way” became the banner words for nineteenth-century Americans’ plans of social progress.\(^8\) According to the new ruralist schema, this imperial course refers not merely to a westward geography of the continent, but also to a westward


\(^{3}\) Smith, *Virgin Land*, 61.


\(^{6}\) Cooperstown lies at longitude 74°9′ W; Philadelphia is at 75°2′ W.

\(^{7}\) David Jones, introduction to *Rural Hours*, xi.

\(^{8}\) Qtd. in Smith, *Virgin Land*, 8.
geography of the mind, a westward catalog of semiotics, and a westward shift in social aspiration. By situating this vignette, concerned chiefly with the frontier utopianism and westernization of nineteenth-century America, in Cooperstown, east of the Appalachians, I hope to break the vulgar simultaneity of the physical and metaphorical taxonomies of the American “west.”

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Susan Fenimore Cooper promised to write “a simple record of those little events which make up the course of the seasons in rural life,” and assured her readers that Rural Hours would be offered “in perfect good faith.”9 She stood by her word on this point more steadfastly than her more luminous contemporary Henry David Thoreau, who commissioned “a simple and sincere account of his own life,”10 and then went on to write a brilliant, but hardly simple, work of philosophy, poetry, and social theory. By modern literary standards, Rural Hours is weaker than Walden. It contains none of the commanding insights which make Walden a cornerstone of American literature and social thought. Thoreau broke his promise of simplicity in order to perform a remarkably complex affirmation of simplicity’s ideal form. Cooper hews to her advertisement of ordinarness.

This ordinarness, however, is what makes Rural Hours such a rich source of cultural insight into the everyday life of nineteenth-century rurality. This was an era jammed with figures notable for their role as architects of the ruralistic way of thinking. Not only Thoreau, but William Gilpin, John C. Frémont, John O’Sullivan, Andrew Jackson, and Mark Twain all lived during this aspirational phase of rurality, and all of them made significant contributions to the historical master-narratives of American rurality during the nineteenth century. These men rightfully earned their places as canonical rural American thinkers, and their central location in rural intellectual history is well-merited. They were not, however, the sole practitioners of the social experiment in rural valorization. The power of rural places in the unfolding of American modernity owes as much to the plain observations found in books like Rural Hours, as well as to the infinitely variegated, widely cast field of common experience, as it does to the ideas of the handful of worthies which have come to symbolize that power. Even if these artifacts of everyday life are admittedly ineloquent, they are nevertheless part of the same latticework of rural thinking which informed better-polished works. The messiness of such texts—like the lay poetry of our Bennington laborer—permits a view through the seams of historical tidiness into the dense ethnologic forces which drove rurality forwards.

Cooperstown, as Susan Fenimore Cooper described it at the midpoint of the nineteenth century, had “a cheerful, flourishing aspect, yet rural and unambitious, not aping the bustle and ferment of cities.”11 She certainly had good reason to cherish the rural prosperity of her home: it was physically and socially close to the perfect community of American hopes. It was also her own family’s

9 S. Cooper, Rural Hours, preface.
10 Henry David Thoreau, Walden, or Life in the Woods (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), 1.
11 S. Cooper, 75.
handiwork. The town was originally settled in 1786 by Judge William Cooper, Susan's grandfather, after the American Revolution nullified Loyalist claims to land in upstate New York. Through his land speculation and townbuilding efforts, Cooper “shrewdly exploited [the Revolution's] economic, social, and political fissures to make himself a great man in the new republic,” a member of the first wave of Americans to vault into national prosperity through the force of rural expansion.12

Because of the topographical irregularity of inland New York, the area around Lake Otsego had been kept mostly undeveloped all the way up to the threshold of the nineteenth century. Susan Fenimore Cooper could thus subtly challenge the strictly westward teleology of American expansion by noting:

> While towns were rising on the St. Lawrence and upon the sea-board, this inland region lay still unexplored; long after trading-houses had been opened, and fields had been tilled, and battles had been fought to the north, south, east, and even at many points westward, those pines stood at the heart of a silent wilderness.13

What William Cooper achieved at the headwaters of the Susquehanna, and what makes Cooperstown such an emblematic site of nineteenth-century rurality, was “a jarring intrusion on a recently wild land, a place where aspirations exceeded tastes and means, where pretentious but awkward structures sprouted among the lingering ruins of a formidable forest.”14

Nowhere is Cooperstown's status as a finger of social modernity tentatively reaching into the immensity of the wild better commemorated than in James Fenimore Cooper's 1823 novel *The Pioneers*. Only a thin varnish of fictionalization separates *The Pioneers* from a functional history of Cooperstown. In that fictionalization, however, James Fenimore Cooper created dreams out of facts. Written as a history, the Cooperstown story still occupies the stratum of material ruralism; written as a novel, it pulls rurality into an aspirational stratum valuing the “master symbol of the garden” which “embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth.”15 Through the personalities of the stubbornly independent hunter Natty Bumppo and his Mahican companion Chingachgook, *The Pioneers* flirts with the romance of the undeveloped continent. “Put an end, Judge, to your clearings,” Natty implores of Marmaduke Temple, the facsimile of William Cooper, and throughout the novel the ominous bearing-down of urban man’s “wasty ways” is portrayed with an insidious portent.16 Yet *The Pioneers* ultimately settles on a social layout which retains the formalities and hierarchies of modern life, unwilling to fully endorse the inscrutability of the wild. In the end, Natty retreats in the direction of the Great Lakes and Chingachgook kills himself in a forest fire. *The Pioneers*, despite

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13 S. Cooper, *Rural Hours*, 130.
14 Taylor, *William Cooper’s Town*, 199.
15 Smith, *Virgin Land*, 123.
its paeans to the wild, casts its final vote in favor of organized society, of progress and organization, and of domesticity—each in rural forms. It is a view of rural social harmony which splits the difference between a frontier democratism full of social disarray and an urban aristocracy full of social ossification.

This dialectic interplay between the anarchic, radically free society of the frontier and the settled, organized life of the village was at the very heart of aspirational rurality. One of the prevailing social questions of this time concerned how the vastness of the American continent could be made economically useful and socially malleable without stripping it of the natural features which made it special. Rural landscapes, carefully pinned into place between the conundrum of the forest on one side and the catastrophe of the cities on the other, offered a solution that carried a taste of utopia. The premier landscape prophet of the middle of the century, Frederick Law Olmsted, saw northeast rurality as a way out of the “triple frontier” of the chaotic west, the slave-ridden south, and the inhumane metropolis.\textsuperscript{17} As demographic and social compressions began squeezing the material rurality of Bennington and Pine Hill, the nation could no longer rely on a simple rurality of conditions to prevail. Suddenly it became necessary to make positive judgments in the arena of politics and literature about the future structuring of society and space, where before it had been enough to let the environmental determinism of the colonial landscape undertake its beneficial handiwork. Thus a rural world which could negotiate the twin desires for limitlessness and delimitation became, “on the plane of rational and imaginative interpretation,” an overarching “agrarian social theory” for the nation to believe in.\textsuperscript{18} “How pleasant things look about a farm-house!” wrote Susan Fenimore Cooper. “It seems natural to like a farm, or a garden, beyond most workshops.”\textsuperscript{19}

A striking analogy of the dialectical nature of this sentiment occurs during one of Cooper’s meditations on the botany of the Otsego valley. She records feeling struck by the fine variety of flowers that grew on the “border of an old wood.” Here, she found “a mingled society of plants” where wild and domesticated species joined to form a uniquely American ecological community. “The wild natives of the woods grow there willingly,” she wrote, “while many strangers, brought originally from over the ocean, steal gradually onward from the tilled fields and gardens, until at last they stand side by side upon the same bank, the European weed and the wild native flower.”\textsuperscript{20} While the author made no explicit reference to her own town’s social admixture of wilderness and European ideals growing together on the border between an old forest and well-tilled development, the metaphor is immediately clear. Here the ecological metaphor of Crèvecoeur’s plants growing in good soil takes the form of a specific plan for the extension of American society perched between two regimes, able to draw from

\textsuperscript{17} Charles E. Beveridge, “Regionalism in Frederick Law Olmsted’s Social Thought and Landscape Design Practice,” in \textit{Regional Garden Design in the United States}, ed. Therese O’Malley and Mark Treib (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995), 211.

\textsuperscript{18} Smith, \textit{Virgin Land}, 125.

\textsuperscript{19} S. Cooper, \textit{Rural Hours}, 104.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 51.
the vital forces and cancel the vices of both its neighbors. This metaphor was, to Cooper, a “backdrop to her dreams and aesthetic theories” about the best way to structure a rural American future.

Since aspirational rurality is the stratigraphic layer intervening between material and imaginative rurality, it exhibits social features of both. In this way, aspirational rurality provided the crucial mediating interface between the two in an era when a national American identity was coming into resolution, an age of rapid sociological transformation. “No part of the earth,” Cooper wrote, “has taken the aspect of an old country so soon as our native land,” referring to the highly-developed social consciousness and mature agriculture which had appeared in upstate New York in less than a century. “Very much is due, in this respect,” she explained, “to the advanced state of civilization in the present age, and much to the active intelligent character of the people, and something, also, to the natural features of the country itself.” These were, indeed, the three main components of the rural life which fashioned dreams out of realities and negotiated between the two: modern civilization of the nineteenth century, bound with the yeoman ethic of individualism promoted by rurality and the natural shape of the land itself, set the terms for American development. As the century unfolded, this increasingly meant that resources and social ideals were directed down the path of a practical utopianism played out in such political programs as the Preemption Act of 1841 and its more-famous successor, the Homestead Act of 1862; in social experiments like that of the Norwegian violinist Ole Bull, who purchased land in central Pennsylvania with the intent of establishing an agricultural utopia of New Norway; and in the rhetoric of cultural leaders like Emerson who claimed that “every man has an exceptional respect for tillage, and a feeling that this is the original calling of his race.”

Perhaps one of the most fascinating examples of the way in which social priorities, state authority, and landscape aesthetics colluded during aspirational

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22 S. Cooper, *Rural Hours*, 95.

23 The full history of how the Homestead Act operated in practice is quite different from its mythology as a democratizing force making land available to all. Despite this, the rhetoric surrounding the act’s passage was diagnostic of a political desire to make rurality available to all as the prevalent mode of land development. For more, see Paul Wallace Gates, *The Jeffersonian Dream: Studies in the History of American Land Policy and Development* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1996).

24 Today, Ole Bull State Park in the Kettle Creek Valley remains as a monument to Bull’s failed ruralist utopia, complete with the abandoned hilltop cellar hole from which his aspirations of a “New Norway consecrated to liberty, baptized with independence and protected by the Union's mighty flag” still seem palpable. For more, see Norman B. Wilkinson, Robert K. Currin, and Patrick A. Kennedy, “Ole Bull’s New Norway,” Historic Pennsylvania Leaflet No. 14 (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1983). Yet the creation of ethnic communities was resented by some who thought it would destroy republicanism. See Gjerde, 41–43.

rurality can be found in an often-neglected artifact of political development in American history: the visual iconography of state seals. The story of rurality across the continent is reproduced in the illustrations of the seals. As the power of modern bureaucracy waxed throughout the nineteenth century and reified itself on the friezes of buildings and in the letterheads of administrative forms, seals became increasingly prominent in the visual imagination of state power. But what was being stamped on these archetypal artifacts of modernity were symbolic scenes of rural value. [See Appendix I for reproductions of state seals following.]

The seals of older colonies typically contained images of colonial rurality, like Massachusetts’s noble savage or New York’s two sailing vessels meeting on a river in front of “a grassy shore fringed with shrubs.” Vermont’s is a “precise reproduction” of a seal designed by Ira Allen, Ethan’s younger brother. It shows a pine tree haloed by bundles of wheat, a cow, and the Green Mountains. Pennsylvania’s features a ship, a plow, and three bundles of wheat, along with a stalk of corn as a border—a standard icon of rurality that would become popular in the seals created during the nineteenth century. Ohio’s original design was painted on the rotunda of the state house in 1847, and bears the image of the Scioto River flowing through cultivated fields. Kansas adopted its seal in 1861; the law establishing it stated that “agriculture is represented as the basis of the future prosperity of the state, by a settler’s cabin and a man plowing with a pair of horses.” This iconic agrarian rurality was not confined to the west: Maine, which adopted its seal in 1820, shows a moose on a tilled field between water and forest, with a “husbandman, resting on a scythe” to one side and “a seaman, resting on an anchor” to the other. State governments of many different political philosophies, historical situations, and socioeconomic characters all chose to endorse the semiotics of rurality in their most important political badge.

This symbolic analysis shifts the center of gravity of nineteenth century American development from a focus on the frontier to a focus on rurality. The frontier first began to take on significance in the American mind through the conduit of rural value, and thus the relationship between the rural and the frontier is repeatedly concentric. Rural mentality gave meaning to frontier life, which took on a symbolic code of its own that was then re-encompassed by rurality. Originally, settlers had no reason to think that the interior of the continent had any spiritual value mandating its conquest; frontier settlement may have had material appeal, “but it had no meaning in itself.” Such an inchoate narrative of

26 Laws of New York, Article 6 §70.
27 Some have speculated that the fourteen branches on the pine tree in Allen’s original design represented Vermont’s desire to become the fourteenth state; the lack of a leading branch symbolizes that the union should have ‘no one dominant state.’ See Deborah L. Markowitz, ed., Vermont Legislative Directory and State Manual (Montpelier: Secretary of State of Vermont, 2007), 10.
28 Ohio Revised Code 5.04.
29 Kansas Revised Statutes 75–201.
30 Maine Revised Statutes Title 1, Chapter 9, Subchapter 1, §201.
31 Smith, Virgin Land, 5.
the early frontier settlement goes some way in explaining why it was such a haphazard affair. The frontier did not yet have an idealistic totalization around which the spiritual role of the settler and the physical shape of his constructions might be organized.

Looking back on the nineteenth century from 1994, though, it was possible for Hurt to write about that century’s social mentality as filled up by a pervasive sense of agrarian philosophy which had grown so strong as to outlive the initial conditions of its conception. Hurt describes a nearly-delusional sense of rural romance amongst “presidents, congressmen, state legislators, editors, and bureaucrats,” a fantasy world so detached from its material realities as to provide “a classic example of the intrusion of myth into history.” This idea, he points out, “has so captured the American mind that it continues to transcend the boundaries of agricultural and rural life.”

How did something which was once so anodyne become an object of such supersignificance?

It occurred largely through the rhetoric of aspirational rural modernity, the process by which rural places were claimed as the sites of an American project strikingly futurist in its rhetoric. Recognizing that rurality is an agent of modernization is essential to the development of the new ruralism, for it renders invalid the notion that changing social and economic patterns left rural America behind. The vast migration to newly-opened land is inexplicable on purely economic and demographic terms. Settlers poured into rural landscapes from Maine to Nebraska because they were guided by a spirit of historic, not merely geographic, destination. Sometimes this veered off into absurdity, as in S. D. Baldwin’s 1864 work 

Armageddon, which attempted to prove that Biblical prophecy predicted the growth of the United States as a rural empire which would annihilate monarchy, fulfill the promise of a millennial republic, and extend its dominion over the earth. But even where it was not quite this extreme, the rural aspirations of the nineteenth century were everywhere expressed with an excited belief that human society was to be reshaped and human potential liberated on the canvas of the American landscape.

Although this is a story charted out in the practice of everyday life, it is impossible to discuss the frontier’s role in the ruralist modernity of the nineteenth century without at least cursory acknowledgement of Frederick Jackson Turner, the eminence grise of frontier studies. Any account of the role of the frontier in either historical or contemporary life must account for its relationship with Turner, be it correlative, antagonistic, or merely proximate. It is possible to take Turner not chiefly as a historian but as a piece of history himself, and, more importantly, as the most prominent diagnostic example of an American value-system which he attempted to illuminate in his scholarly works but also ended up documenting simply by and of his own existence. This is a process of converting

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32 Hurt, American Agriculture, 73–76.

33 S. D. Baldwin, Armageddon: Or, The Overthrow of Romanism and Monarchy; the Existence of the United States Foretold In The Bible (Cincinnati: Applegate, 1864).
Turner from a secondary to a primary source, of presenting him as an artifact of the same ideational milieu which he documented.\footnote{For an example of how this can be done, see John Mack Faragher, \textit{Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner} (Yale: Yale UP, 1993).}

As Smith points out, “the enormous currency of [Turner’s] theory proves that it voices a massive and deeply-held conviction,”\footnote{Smith, \textit{Virgin Land}, 4.} and it is therefore indexical of a particular set of cultural meanings which resonate both backwards and forward from Turner’s time. A dynamic understanding of historians’ roles in the generation of new history—a mode of thinking perhaps more intuitive to anthropologists than conventional historians—sets Turner up as reflexive proof of the validity of his hypothesis.\footnote{Knobloch calls Turner “an explorer, not of a real ‘wilderness’ but of the textual historiographical one .... [His] thesis was an exercise in nostalgia for the explorers who had gone before.” In \textit{The Culture of Wilderness}, 149.} In offering an analysis of what Americans found important about the frontier, he generated an \textit{ex post facto} belief in what he had described historically. His theory became “an image that defines what Americans think of their past, and therefore what they propose to make of themselves in the future.”\footnote{Smith, \textit{Virgin Land}, 4.} This treatment of Turner demands a field of recognition in which the spaces of frontier, rurality, scholar, and history come into an interface with each other and attain a layer of supererogatory meaning.

* * *

If aspirational rurality was shot through with a sense of heightened energy, however, it also faced a frontier of loss and ephemerality. Back in Cooperstown, Susan Fenimore Cooper wrote:

This little town itself must fall to decay and ruin; its streets must become choked with bushes and brambles; the farms of the valley must anew become buried within the shades of a wilderness; the wild deer and the wolf and the bear must return from beyond the great lakes; the bones of the savage men buried under our feet must arise and move again in the chase.\footnote{S. Cooper, \textit{Rural Hours}, 135.}

The ever-present threat that rural life might slip back into nothingness loaned a bonanza aspect to the entire episode of aspirational rurality. As the rural landscape was extraordinarily precious, it was also secretly ephemeral. What Cooper did not expect was that her beloved village was under more threat from charging too fast into the future rather than from slipping back into the past.
Katahdin Iron Works, or, Magic Cities in the Wilderness.

East of Greenville, Maine, near the state’s geographic center, the paved state highways end abruptly, ceding to the idiosyncratically winding dirt roads of private lumber companies. The entrance to the Jo-Mary logging tract, just past Greenville’s tiny airstrip, is guarded by a checkpoint where a woman halts cars momentarily with a tripwire made from a rope with a stop sign in the middle. After registering your destination with her, handing over the fee that is shared between the State of Maine and the lumber company, and listening to the reminder that logging trucks always have right-of-way on these roads, the woman waves good-bye and lets you pass by lowering the rope to the ground.

From here, the roads get progressively worse, sometimes demanding that the driver veer onto the wrong side of the road—at least where the road is wide enough to allow such a distinction. Weaving through deep washouts and stray rocks is only made slightly easier by the near-total absence of traffic. Since this is private land, there are no state road signs or distance markers; a few handmade wooden posts make suggestions, but for the most part route-finding is a process of careful map-reading and some instinct. The road crosses the Appalachian Trail, which at this point is running through a stretch known as the “One Hundred Mile Wilderness.” This is an extremely rural part of an already-rural state; it lies within the vast swathe of northern Maine which has remained obstinate to even the vaguest hint of urbanization through four centuries of New England infilling.

The loneliness of the setting makes it all the more shocking when, after driving for what seems an interminable distance down the logging roads, a clearing opens up in the forest where two massive stone industrial buildings stand, the last remnants of a giant iron factory. This is Katahdin Iron Works, or at least the parts of it that remain. It was once an important New England industrial site, with a furnace that turned out up to 4,000 tons of iron at its peak output, and a sales network that extended into the Midwest. Yet Katahdin Iron Works is in the middle of the Maine woods, an Ozymandias-like ruin amidst hundreds of thousands of acres of timberland.

Industrial cities such as Birmingham or Manchester in England, or New Haven and Saugus in New England, make up the stock material of what we imagine when we picture the rise of industrialization in Western social and economic systems. Industry and the city, so it goes, are conjunct forces, and thus the processes of industrialization and urbanization signify coincident historical forces. The Industrial Revolution, as well as its consequent social configurations of wage labor, the bourgeoisie and proletariat, technocratization, and Taylorism are stories which have played out on urban stages. Standing inside the giant blast furnace of Katahdin Iron Works and then walking out into a forest towards a dirt road which leads back to a town of 1,623, it is difficult to keep faith in that convention.

For there is a significant cross-cut of rurality that has accompanied the rise of industry in the United States, both in the geographic locations of industrial
output and in the rhetorical forces that swirled around the debate over industrialization's social meaning. By the middle of the nineteenth century, American industry and rural places had entered into a union which would transform both, loosening ruralism from its strictly agrarian definitions and bending industrialization towards the contours of a rural ideology. This is not meant to deny the profound impact of industrial centers like Pittsburgh or Chicago, but rather to show that there is no a priori coincidence between urbanity and industrialization. Even in those physically urban centers, rural values often prevailed.¹ Rural industrialization, like rural modernity, developed orthogonally to urban industrialization; that is, the relationship is not one of opposition but of alterity. The view from the Katahdin Iron Works blast furnace, where fires once burned year-round and illuminated the night sky of the pine forests hemming it in on all sides, is a view into a scene where the sedimentation of American rurality acquired an industrial layer, and incorporated industrialism into its inner logic.

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The Abenaki were the first to hint at the industrial potential of what would become the Katahdin Iron Works site. The aboriginal name for the Pleasant River, Munna Oalammon Ungun, translates as “place where very fine paint is found,” from the deposits of red ochre, or iron oxide, through which it passed.² Taking this name as a clue, Moses Greenleaf investigated the site in his 1829 Survey on the State of Maine, finding red and brown hematite near the Ebeeme Mountains and isolating it as a possible location for serious iron production.³ The wild country north of Dover-Foxcroft was not a counterintuitive place to locate an iron works in the nineteenth century. Because charcoal was the only fuel widely available that could heat iron ore to the temperatures necessary for processing, the location of new forges were more often than not built on the edges of forests.⁴ They were sited based on a rational calculus of which site “offered access to raw materials, fuel and a market at the lowest cost combination.”⁵

In the case of Katahdin, the forge’s first owners bought claims to a 33,000-acre woodlot which furnished 20,000 cords of hardwood fuel each year at the peak of production.⁶ The Smith family incorporated the Maine Iron Company, and began building an industrial outpost in a place that must have seemed even more isolated than it does now. To start the operation, they had to construct an entire village to house and feed the operation, a project which would eventually

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⁵ Eastman, History of Katahdin Iron Works, 18.

cost more than building the works themselves. The company owned the land of the entire township, which they called Smithville, and everything in it.\textsuperscript{7}

Wood was converted in sixteen kilns into charcoal, with each kiln burning up to 50 cords at a time. To maintain the supply line of wood, a force of 400 men and 200 horses and oxen worked cutting and transporting lumber at the height of Katahdin’s operation.\textsuperscript{8} After the Maine Iron Company failed to turn a profit, the Smiths sold the operation to David Pingree, who established the Katahdin Iron Works corporation. Pingree hired a Dartmouth graduate, John Hayes, as the supervising agent, and it was Hayes who oversaw the first successful run of industrial rurality on the site. The intelligent, ambitious Hayes understood that a “solid scientific base of information to the formation of plans was necessary for the proper operation of an iron industry,” and proceeded with a detailed plan to run the works efficiently and technocratically.\textsuperscript{9} The vernacular term “backwoods” usually implies bungling, incompetence, and outmoded technology. For Hayes, however, this backwoods operation was on the vanguard of nineteenth-century industrial knowledge. The forge operators kept a “meticulous daily account” of the furnace’s operation, and ore extraction proceeded according to a plan that was “laid out and wrought square and neatly.”\textsuperscript{10}

It was an industrial operation which both confirmed and resisted conventional narratives of capitalist development. The land itself had been transformed into a numerically calculable commodity, and an 1848 report on the company’s holdings included prices for “the value of the water power at the saw mill, grist mill, machine shop, and at two water falls below the dam.”\textsuperscript{11} Pingree, evidently intent on securing a constant price for raw material, established contracts with local businessmen to furnish the requisite manufacturing resources. The first contracts set up fixed prices for mining ore, roasting ore, delivering ore, chopping wood, hauling wood, making charcoal, filling and emptying charcoal kilns, delivering flux, clearing land, and sawing lumber. In September 1853, as the operation ran into management difficulties, even the smelting and transportation were put out to bid. By this point, Pingree and the Katahdin Iron Works corporation were providing nothing more than capital resources; their interest in the works was no more than a financial speculation. When the contracts went bad, as when Moses Chandler went insolvent on his smelting contract, the corporation sued for damages, eventually extracting $25,371.08 from Chandler, seizing all his property, and forcing him into penury. Pingree and the corporation, the iron works’s absentee owners, could not have cared less about the use value of iron—for all they cared, their distant factory in the Maine woods could have been producing lead, or coffee. It was, in the words of the nineteenth century’s most important economic thinker, a classic money-commodity-money circulation, where “both the

\textsuperscript{7} Eastman, \textit{History}, 25.

\textsuperscript{8} “Katahdin Iron Works.”

\textsuperscript{9} Eastman, 45.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 66; 49.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 71.
money and the commodity represent only different modes of existence of value itself, the money its general mode, and the commodity its particular, or, so to say, disguised mode.”

Like the vast agricultural markets that would later power Chicago’s ascent as an industrial hub, this economic nexus allowed for the “abstraction of a natural resource” and the conversion of natural holism into quantifiably manageable value.

If the same social torque that was about to plunge Europe into a century of political and social revolutions was also afoot in the Maine wilderness, however, a firm guiding hand of American rurality permanently rerouted the course of this modernization. Although material needs initially dictated Katahdin Iron Works’s location in the Maine woods, that location emerged as a highly symbolic icon of the ruralized industrial systems which contained American hopes for a compromise between the seemingly-incompatible ideals of equalitarian republicanism and free-market commercial expansion. At rural factories, the American land merged seamlessly with engines of economic might. Laborers lived in an idyllic rural community exposed on all edges to nature rather than in the nightmarish row houses of the manufacturing city. Best of all, the industrial operation could exist in symbiosis, rather than competition, with the agricultural economy surrounding it—mining and roasting ore, as well as woodcutting and charcoal making, were undertaken in the winter when local farmers sought extra employment.

Thus, although the guiding interest of Katahdin Iron Works’s owners was simple economic profit, in practice the place had taken on a quasi-utopian aspect from the beginning. By its last major overhaul in 1884, it was, in W. H. Bunting’s assessment, “the most advanced, hopelessly outdated ironworks in the country.”

The company town featured boarding-houses, the Silver Lake Hotel, a photo saloon, a company store, the homes for 200 workers, and two farms. When the first wood-burning locomotive, “Black Maria,” made its maiden voyage from the works to Brownville, it carried the entire population of the village, and “men, women, and children made the trip with songs and shouts and laughter in high holiday mood”—a far cry from the mechanistic doom which often accompanied anxious writing about industrialization. From 1876 to 1890, the town even had its own benign autocrat, Owen W. Davis, who, in addition to his role as a major shareholder in the Katahdin Iron Company, served as “dictator, councilor, judge and jury for the entire township.” His “Davis scrip” was accepted as legal tender

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14 Eastman, *History*, 60.
18 Ibid.
as far away as Bangor. When the bank finally foreclosed on the works, Davis stalled the sheriff who had been sent to seize the property at the train depot in Brownville and rushed back to the iron works to distribute the company’s entire reserve of cash and goods amongst the workers so that the state would have little left to seize from the corporation. In this way, Katahdin Iron Works became an inadvertent emblem of the ruralist-industrial utopianism which charged American economic development throughout the nineteenth century.

Even Karl Marx, famously suspicious of “the idiocy of rural life,” recognized the extent to which a connection with the land could prevent economic exploitation. “We have seen,” he wrote in *Capital*,

that the expropriation of the mass of people from the soil forms the basis of the capitalist mode of production. The essence of a free colony, on the contrary, consists in this—that the bulk of the soil is still public property, and every settler on it can turn part of it into his private property and individual means of production, without hindering the later settlers in the same operation.

The oppressive cancer of the wage-labor system could thus be tempered by enough open land to absorb the primary economic needs of a growing population. Indeed, this point—that “virgin countries, such as America, were ideal for the development of free societies”—is one of the few where Marx and Adam Smith held coincident opinions. With a heavy dose of sarcasm, Marx wrung his hands over how, in America, where “the cultivation of land is often the secondary pursuit of a blacksmith, a miller, or a shopkeeper,” the “constant transformation of the wage-laborers into independent producers” made “the degree of exploitation of the wage-laborer remain indecently low.” The economic independence which Crèvecoeur once described in factual terms was here put in service of an ideological optimism that America alone could evade the perils of industrial change through the force of its rural life. In this “doctrine of the safety valve,” then, American rurality acquired an economic power with international appeal, invoking a cultural myth that “a beneficent nature stronger than any human agency, the ancient resource of Americans … would solve the new problems of industrialism.”

The Katahdin Iron Works was only one of the many sites where this hopeful nonurban industrialization played out. Thoreau, writing in *The Maine Woods* in 1864, made the following observation en route to climb Mount Katahdin:

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22 K. Marx, 842–843.
23 Smith, *Virgin Land*, 205.
24 Even in Lowell, the bellwether of industrial progress, ideas of rurality remained strong. In 1920, one historian wrote of Lowell that “the city at its outset may be urban in name and numbers; its ways are still essentially those of rural North America.” In Frederick William Coburn, *History of Lowell and Its People* (New York City: Lewis, 1920), 2.
omas Fowler’s house is four miles from McCauslin’s, on the shore of the pond, at the mouth of the Millinocket River, and eight miles from the lake of the same name, on the latter stream.... It was as if we sucked at the very teats of Nature’s pine-clad bosom in these parts,—the sap of all Millinocket botany commingled,—the topmost, most fantastic, and spiciest sprays of the primitive wood, and whatever invigorating or stringent gum or essence it afforded steeped and dissolved in it,—a lumberer’s drink, which would acclimate and naturalize a man at once,—which would make him see green, and, if he slept, dream that he heard the wind through the pines.25

Fowler would later sell his homestead to Charles T. Powers, and Powers was still the only person listed in residence in Indian Township 3 in 1889. But just a year later, in 1900, the census recorded 430 Italian-born males living there, and, by 1901, the township had incorporated as Millinocket.26 In less than forty years, a place which Thoreau described through a hazy wilderness inebriation had become a beacon of New England industrial power. Remark ing on this fantastic change, which clove the history of the town neatly down the border of the two centuries, a 1903 report of the Maine Commission of Industrial and Labor Statistics noted that “the history of Millinocket ... reads more like romance than reality.”27 The paper industry, like the iron industry which it immediately followed in the Maine woods, was another case in which the engines of economic modernization found a home in places far from the conventional arteries of commerce and manufacturing. At these meeting-places, both industry and rurality were transformed by their mutual interaction. At a single place like Millinocket, the musings of Thoreau and the designs of capitalism came into overlay. A ruralist social order, fed at the “teats of Nature’s pine-clad bosom” but funded by modern capital, took shape.

A report by Hugh Chisholm, the Canadian entrepreneur who would eventually found the giant consortium of mills known as International Paper in 1898, reveals how easily an appreciation of the natural qualities of rural places could metamorphose into unblushing corporate ogling at their economic potential. Chisholm’s first business was publishing picture books of the rural beauty of backwoods Maine, but when he came upon the falls of Rumford, he did not take long to extrapolate his former naturalistic passion into a calculus of gains by improvement. “The magnificence of the spectacle,” he wrote, “was not lost on me. [But] very soon, I began to realize, as probably many a thinking man has done before me, the vast power that was and for countless years had been going to waste ... and I pictured to myself the industrial community that might grow up there.”28

It is tempting to suggest that logging, paper, and charcoal-forge iron industries tell only a superficial story of rural industrialization. Each of these industries is of course somewhat anomalous due to the intimacy they must maintain with nearby woodlots, an effective spatial restriction on their

27 Qtd. in Rolde, 282.
28 Qtd. in Rolde, Interrupted Forest, 276.
urbanization. However, at this historical layer of rurality the dominant feature was
the political and social rhetoric of rural modernization, rather than the materiality
of physical forms. What the logging and paper industries illuminate is the way in
which industrial and rural narratives of progress contended and colluded. The
parable of the logging industry, for example, which operated in the wilderness but
which had become by the middle of the century “a specialized occupation with a
great deal of division of labor [which was] part of a total industrialized process,”
is one that captures these aspirations wholesale. It is thus a useful microcosm of
the industrial-rural complex and a reflection of the broad pageant of industrial
progress in nineteenth-century America. Just as Maine loggers were instrumental
in “hastening the sense of the industrialization of the woods,” the economic and
cultural trajectory of logging and loggers indexes the metaphorical
industrialization of a metaphorical woods.

Logging cities, provisional industrial outposts in the forest, fashioned
themselves in the name of mechanized progress situated amongst natural
benevolence. The concept of a prosperous industrial operation that was organically
connected to the land around it and thus free of the travails of urban life figured
heavily into the American ideal of conjoining futuristic modernization and ruralist
virtues. Such a settlement would be autarkic due to its proximity to agriculture
and isolated from the horrors of shopfloor alienation by the regulating spatiality of
the countryside. When the principals of a new logging venture unveiled their
plans for a factory at Eagle Lake based on the success in Millinocket, they giddily
described how “there is to be another magic city in the wilderness.” The vision of
the “magic city in the wilderness”—or, as Leo Marx famously styled it, the
“machine in the garden”—was a way to reconcile rural society with the
revolution in the American economy, and it provided an ideal which could
animate and valorize development during this period.

In this conceptualization, a dual function had to be applied to nature. It
had to become simultaneously revered and objectified. Society had to remain
soluble within the natural world while learning to profit from extractable
resources. The best syntheses came in cases where the two met halfway. Either this
meant that nature would act quasi-rationally or semi-industrially, or that society
could be kept in an organic form. Two stories in John S. Springer’s Forest Life and
Forest Trees illustrate these perpendicular approaches to the same compromise. In
the first, the lumbermen set up camp and establish a non-nomadic site around
which to nucleate and locate the centrifugal functions of their industrial program.
They find a place where meadow-grass naturally grew, yielding both clear land and
livestock fodder. “By this remarkable arrangement,” Springer wrote, “Nature has
anticipated, as it would appear, the wants of lumbermen in locating, and in

30 Rolde, Interrupted Forest, 286.
31 Qtd. in Rolde, 287.
preserving from the encroachments of the forest, a plentiful supply of subsistence for the teams employed in procuring lumber in its immediate vicinity, and far from the haunts of civilized man.”

In the second, society bends to meet nature. During one drive, the lumbermen find themselves stranded on a stream at night, and, unable to find their way in the forest, blunder around in the dark. At last they find a “log cabin, tenanted by a man with his family, who had settled down for the purpose of clearing up a farm.” The homestead, he notes with some approbation, was “surrounded by an almost unbroken wilderness.” After locating the homestead by shouting “Halloo,” the lumbermen arrive and stay the night. When they awake, they find themselves enchanted by their luck, and Springer reports that they “almost fancied [themselves] awaking up in some fairy land.” The fairy land here is a tiny “magic city,” population one family, and it is refreshing to the lumbermen both in the respite it offers them from the woods and the way in which it has not yet risen too far from those same woods. Here the woodsmen, harbingers of economic modernity, found succor in primitivism.

The industrialization of the forest thus challenges Whiggish urban-industrial-modern historical narratives. The semiotic power of the forest resisted the acquisitive programs of modernization, modifying them but not canceling them outright. Springer describes how the lumbermen would often ascend a tree to survey the land beyond the entanglements of the understory. “The uneven surface of the country, together with the density of the forest, circumscribe the vision,” he noted. “To overcome this impediment, we ascend into the top of some lofty tree.” The description of this ascent and the vision afforded by it is eerily prescient of the metaphor that Michel de Certeau would use in 1988 to frame his opposition between the totalizing, panoptic Concept-city and the inscrutable idiosyncrasies traced out in the paths of the city’s pedestrians. Certeau compares the view from the top of the World Trade Center, where the total view “allows one to read the city, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god,” to the Wandersmanner of the people in the streets, who “make use of spaces that cannot be seen.” The street-level paths, Certeau notes, “elude legibility.”

There is a sympathy between Certeau’s top-floor viewer, whose vision is the “exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive,” Springer’s ascent to the top of the tree, where the landscape can be rationally apprehended and totalized, and the developers of Katahdin Iron Works who brought the illuminating light of the blast furnace to the wilderness. In the same way, just as Certeau noted that “the Concept-city is decaying” due to its perpetual erosion by the “procedures that


35 Ibid., 51.


37 Ibid., 92.
elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised,” 38 the scions of industry could not escape the everyday dictations of rurality through which they operated. Thus the industrial order found itself impregnated with the meanings and signs of the rural system which it attempted to overcome, and so the two converged on each other in a collapsing orbit of dominance. Certeau makes the sidelong point that “spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life.” 39 The industrial order came into an interface with rural spatial practices which had been accumulating in the American cultural system for several centuries, and the two struck a compromise, the latter “secretly structuring” the conditions of the former.

The ambiguity of where, exactly, the compromise was to be drawn between the industrializing faculties of men and the natural inviolability of the existent landscape framed a question running throughout nineteenth-century dialogue. “The objective,” suggests Leo Marx of the American balancing-act in the nineteenth century, “was a society of the middle landscape, a rural nation exhibiting a happy balance of art and nature.” 40 But this middle landscape became increasingly elusive, preserved by ideology rather than reality, as economic change and development wore on. Americans felt that by inserting their rural beliefs into an ambitious program of expansion they could ennoble the former while reaping the benefits of, and avoiding the problems of, the latter. Soon aspirational rurality thus became “a rhetorical formula rather than a conception of society, and an increasingly transparent and jejune expression of the national preference for having it both ways.” 41 By the dawn of the twentieth century, rurality had escaped into the realm of imagination, where it continued to embody a collective myth of American culture which “enabled the nation to continue defining its purpose as the pursuit of rural happiness while devoting itself to productivity, wealth, and power” even as that rural happiness vanished from the physical environment. 42

However, even as the rural-industrial dyad shifted from a brief material reign as a real socioeconomic governing force into the domain of literary and symbolic parsing, it continued to insinuate itself into the fabric of very real sociological and economic features of the American rural landscape. If the logging industry provides a good spatial metaphor for the effect of rurality on industrialization, the railroad industry serves a similar function as the guiding symbol for the effect of industrialization on rurality. The technical improvements of the railroads on the rural landscape were central to the way that rural places moved into the future. Asa Whitney, a prominent agitator for the transcontinental railroad, argued that the farmers of the trans-Mississippi remained mere “demi-savages” without the railroad to ship produce to market and thus integrate them as

38 Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 95.
39 Ibid., 96.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
useful members of progressive society.\textsuperscript{43} Despite the crude language about the frontier farmers, Whitney was hardly an urbanist. His rhetoric on the railroad was heavily invested with the contemporary vocabulary of an American agrarian empire, and his concern was the elevation, not the evisceration, of rural economies. It was directed at a rural society which was not achronical and alogical, but which exhibited an aspirational affinity for futuristic technological progress.

In Maine, the railroad became the herald angel for a backwoods flourishing of communities and rural industry. It came too late for Katahdin Iron Works; once the line was extended there, the forge could no longer compete with the new coal furnaces of Pennsylvania. The lumber industry, on the other hand, received a vital boost from these steel arteries. They powered the rural state’s industrial prospects to the top of the new mechanized order. By 1890, due to an extensive rail network with the inland timber reserves, the mills of S. D. Warren & Co. in Maine were “among the most extensive of their kind in the globe.”\textsuperscript{44} Albert A. Burleigh’s Bangor & Aroostook Rail Road became the axis along which the “miracle cities” such as Millinocket would grow up. The messianism of railroads running through the farmland of the Maine coast even inspired such a startlingly futuristic scheme as John Alfred Poor’s plans for a “European and North American Railroad,” which would shuttle passengers from Boston to Louisbourg on Cape Breton Island, where they would board steamships headed to Ireland and England.\textsuperscript{45}

The railroad, then, rather than killing off rurality with a mechanistic terror, allowed rural places to flourish and modernize in a way they never had before. A 1920 educational and ethnographic film produced by the United States Department of Agriculture titled “The How And Why of Spuds” documents the extent to which machine and nature had hybridized even in the farthest woodlands of northern Maine. The film shows potato farmers in Aroostook County—then and now an extremely rural place in density, economics, and character—and describes how they employed new tractor, cultivator, and automatic harvesting technologies in the service of rural life. To watch potato farmers pull a mechanical seed planter behind a horse in Aroostook County is to understand a larger process of combinations and juxtapositions at work: the process by in which rural practice has folded around technological change to produce ruralistic modernity. Thus liberated from the material constrains of Bennington or Pine Hill, rurality became inwardly prepared to accept its final sedimentary layer in the twentieth century.

\textsuperscript{43} Smith, Virgin Land, 34.

\textsuperscript{44} Rolde, Interrupted Forest, 275.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 277.
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Mill Run, or, To Grip the Whole to Earth.

There is no easier way for an ethnographer in the field to achieve a quasi-panoptic view of the geographic diversity accumulated in a particular leisure destination than by walking through its parking lot and looking at license plates. Such parking lots serve as convenient indices of the people who arrived in the cars lined up neatly for the field researcher’s observation. Although cars and their license plates are not flawless transcriptions of the social, cultural, and economic traits of their owners, they are a fine way to sum up the general social group which is attending the attraction in question.

The bulk of tourism in rural Fayette County, Pennsylvania is local and lower-middle-class in character.¹ Day trips are held from schools in the area to Fort Necessity National Battlefield, and local fishermen come out to drop a line in the small rivers and streams running throughout the county. Diners and convenience stores affirm a spatial regime structured for the needs of travelers looking for a day out with a family. There are few of the comprehensive resort amenities which identify the vacation haunts of the upperclass. In Ohiopyle State Park, a popular destination surrounding the impressive Ohiopyle Falls on the Youghiogheny River, families come to use the large campground and go rafting in the rapids. At the central parking lot in Ohiopyle, the local quality of tourism is plain: a preponderance of yellow-and-white Pennsylvania license plates, a handful of Ohio ones, and a smattering of West Virginia representatives to fill out the difference. One quick calculation at Ohiopyle in the summer of 2008 revealed that better than 85% of the cars assembled there came from within the state.²

Drive less than five miles north on State Route 381, however, to Mill Run, and the scene changes more abruptly than seems appropriate for such a short distance. Here is a very different tourist attraction: Fallingwater, the famous house Frank Lloyd Wright designed for Edgar J. Kaufmann in 1935. The site is privately managed by the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy; tour prices here begin at $18 and run up to $100 for a sunset tour where you are invited to “enjoy hors d’oeuvres with your guide” or a brunch tour which serves as “a memorable accompaniment to a wonderful light meal.”³ In this parking lot, by direct contrast to the Ohiopyle one not far away, Pennsylvania license plates are something of a rarity. New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, Illinois, and even California plates appear here regularly, and plates from every corner of the United States and Canada fill out the

1 The “Laurel Highlands” tourism region, which includes most of Fayette County, ranked in the bottom half of the fifteen surveyed regions in Pennsylvania in terms of the average household income of tourists. The two most common reasons for overnight visiting were listed as “visiting friend/relative” (at 46% of tourists) and “getaway weekend” (22%). D. K. Shifflet & Associates, Ltd. “Primary/Secondary Region Tables, 2002,” Pennsylvania Tourism Travel Profile Reports, http://media.experiencepa.com/statistics/Secondary_and_Primary_Region_Tables_for_2002_Sept03.pdf.

2 Author’s fieldwork.

remainder of the lot. The cars themselves are different from those in Ohiopyle, too. Instead of older vans and station wagons, the Fallingwater lot is full of luxury sedans and convertibles. As far as I know, a parking lot has never been used as an ethnographic index in this way. It is the perfect method, however, to measure the culturally distance between these two geographically nearby sites.

On a nature path above the Bear Run over which the famous house is cantilevered, an elegantly-dressed woman is interviewing a gentleman tourist in sharp-looking, pressed clothes for a public radio station in New York. “I have always wanted to see Fallingwater. I have been to many other of Wright’s houses,” he says. “Isn’t it amazing how beautifully the house and nature work together?”

The tourist clientele at Fallingwater, and the cultural fragment in this man’s overheard interview, offer a snapshot of the sedimentary level of gentrified American rurality that began when rurality finally disconnected from the boundaries of reality. In this layer, the nation’s rural places became a repository for ideals which an élite class of Americans hoped to preserve in the face of troublesome social changes in American life. It is not ethnographically precise to caricature this process as one in which “traditional” values were associated with rural places out of a sentimental rebuke of social modernization. Instead, the patrician appropriation of the rural ethic which hit its stride in the first decades of the twentieth century was one in which an emergent bourgeois class took the semiotic system of ruralism which had accreted thus far in the American imagination and impregnated it with their own codices of ownership. It was a dialogical and microprocedural effort through which rural places were made to be the natural bearers of cultural priorities which were under threat of obsolescence. As ethnic diversification, international politics, and trade globalization began to sweep across the United States, prosperous Americans increasingly turned towards rural areas as the places where they could carve out a distinct American gentility buffered from the unfamiliar and worrisome upheavals of the cities.

As it happens, Frank Lloyd Wright himself was a key figure in the cultural movement which employed rural typologies in roles servicing the language (verbal, visual, and implicit) of the élite ethic at the turn of the century. Writing of the strong horizontal lines in a series of houses he built for several wealthy patrons, he noted that “the planes of the building parallel to the ground were all stressed, to grip the whole to earth.” In such a way, modern luxury might be constructed so that “light, air, and vista permeated the whole with a sense of unity.” The school of “prairie architecture,” as Wright termed it, provides a visual metaphor for the imagination of the American rural landscape in the context of a semiotic appropriation of rurality by a particular socio-aesthetic class during this period. Suspicion of an aristocracy is a classic American social trait, evident everywhere from Crèvecoeur to the Constitution. However, if the American upperclass could not have a titular nobility, they could build an aesthetic one. They did so through through reconceptualizing rurality in a way which, through its

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5 Ibid., 45.
blurred channels of intellectualism and primitivism, allowed them to express conservative and progressive sentiments with the same breath. This was not, however, a straightforward procedure. As we have seen in the previous historical vignettes, and as will be elucidated here, the social conceptualization of rural spaces has always been caught in a conflict between democratic and aristocratic values. By working with this already-existent dialogue, fraught with multiplexed semiotic conceptions of ruralism, the imaginative ruralism of the twentieth century made tenuous compromises of its own. It was to be yet another step in producing a field of rural images cross-hatched with competing social imperatives.

* * *

By the turn of the century, a curious upperclass mentality which fused together conservative values of social orderliness with modern values of rational administration and civilized noblesse oblige had exploded onto the political scene under the title of Progressivism. One of the most complicated and interesting political philosophies of the twentieth century, Progressivism expressed a desire to undo the disruptive forces of economic and demographic change which had been wrought by the Industrial Revolution and a sentimental affinity for the smoothly-operating organic society that was imaginatively located in antebellum American life. It was a movement which found its most widespread support amongst well-educated whites who lamented the chaotic tendencies of the industrial world. They glossed their sentimentality under the banner of “progress” by employing the language and methods of nascent social-science research and conscientious elite stewardship. The politics of Progressivism, combining backwards-looking wistfulness with forwards-looking social improvement, simulated the same interplay of forces which are at the core of rurality itself.

The branch of Progressivism which had the most intimate relationship with rurality was nature conservation. By the close of the nineteenth century, natural resources and wild landscapes once taken for granted on the seemingly limitless North American continent were beginning to demand protection. It was, like much of the Progressive movement, a political sentiment born of leisure. As William Burch has noted “the priests, scribes, and other intelligentsia necessary for the functioning of a complex social order develop a fondness for

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6 Though American progressivism was indebted to American myths, it was not an exclusively domestic political sentiment. In particular, the increasing prominence of Atlantic grain markets meant rural Progressivism borrowed ideas across borders. See Chapter 8, “Rural Reconstruction,” in Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998), 318–366.

7 For more on the difficulty of assigning contemporary labels like ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ to the Progressive political outlook—which was the sum of many different reactions to many different social problems—see Martin J. Sklar, *The United States as a Developing Country: Studies in U.S. History in the Progressive Era and the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 37–77.

8 Europeans had destroyed resource complexes since they landed on the Atlantic coast; see Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, for more. It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century, however, that the “safety valve” of the rest of the continent finally began to exhibit observable ecological stress.
nature that increases as they become further and further removed from direct contact with its demands.\textsuperscript{9} The landscape architect and member of the New England aristocracy Arthur Asahel Shurtleff—who renamed himself from “Shurtleff” in order to emphasize the British-heritage gentility of his position—remarked in his autobiography that his social and aesthetic ideals, like those of most of his class, stemmed from:

- my interest in country scenery, landscape sketching, and painting, natural history, touring-a-wheel, camping, mountain climbing, and in a fondness for farms, the poetry of Wordsworth, Emerson, and the journals of Thoreau—these influences led me away from mechanics toward scenery, toward planning and construction for the scenes of daily life.\textsuperscript{10}

Elites could look at nature from a state of repose and distance; by ennobling the landscape they “might regain a lost imaginative contact with some secret source of virtue and power in the universe.”\textsuperscript{11}

In a 1913 book laying out the goals of the Progressive Movement, S. J. Duncan-Clark glowingly noted that Theodore Roosevelt—at the time the nation’s most recognizable Progressive figure—was instrumental in founding the conservationist school of Progressivism that was “doing so much for the saving of our forests, mines, water-power, and soil.”\textsuperscript{12} These conservationist sentiments were prevalent amongst upperclass members of a set of newly founded exclusive homosocial groups like the Boone and Crockett Club, a collection of wealthy east coast figures centered around Roosevelt. The club was initially formed in response to worries that the big-game population of the American interior might vanish, leaving nothing for the gentleman hunters to pursue. The eradication of the Plains buffalo due to profligate commercial overhunting provided a powerful example that scared many aristocratic hunters into action.\textsuperscript{13} For this particular cultural set, hunting was a leisure activity, an import from European aristocracy which had no link to economic or agricultural necessity. The retention of the spirit of Boone and Crockett in the club’s name, however, indicates the degree to which material realities had been denatured and converted into the raw mental stock of imaginary cultural sentiment. No member of the club lived a life anything like that of Boone or Crockett (Crockett’s brief term in the House of Representatives notwithstanding). In 1897, the entrance fee to the club was $25, and a maintenance fee of $5 was required of the members each February. Membership was by invitation only, and if six sitting members did not like a prospective

\textsuperscript{9} Burch, \textit{Daydreams and Nightmares}, 71.


\textsuperscript{11} Smith, \textit{Virgin Land}, 77.

\textsuperscript{12} S. J. Duncan-Clark, \textit{The Progressive Movement: Its Principles and Its Programme} (Boston: Small, Maynard, & Co., 1913), 110–111. Roosevelt wrote the introduction to Duncan-Clark’s book, and in it he claimed the agrarian-republican legacy of Jefferson: “If the Democratic Party were true to the purposes of Thomas Jefferson for the uplifting of the people it would of necessity adopt the Progressive platform,” xv–xvi.

\textsuperscript{13} For more on the story of bison overhunting and the ensuing preservation movement, see Dale F. Lott, \textit{American Bison: A Natural History} (Berkeley: U of California P, 2003).
candidate, he could be excluded. It appealed to “city people who found in [the wilderness] a temporary relief from artificiality and confinement.” Thus the club’s name referenced an imaginary relationship with a “manly” mock rurality.

Asserting their relationship with an aesthetic rurality which was considered fundamental to American life was a way of stabilizing the élite’s social identity. Country clubs were invented in New England at the end of the nineteenth century for this reason. Traditional system of preserving class—dynastic families in isolated communities—had forestalled the need for any national culture of formal class distinction. But by the turn of the century, “nationalization, industrialization, mechanization, centralization, urbanization, and incorporation” were wreaking havoc on traditional class reproduction methods, leading to an increased anxiety amongst the wealthy “that cultural authority was collapsing.” Moss argues that country clubs were a direct response to these social changes, “part of the attempt to respond locally to the nerve-racking progress of change” through artificial landscapes which “effectively reestablished the vanishing village.” They borrowed golf—a sport becoming fashionable in England and Scotland—to create American imitations of European gentility, and built rural clubhouses in order to “escape the city to a privately controlled space in the country.” It would have been impossible to manufacture this social imaginary out of whole cloth; instead, élites rededicated rural ideas from preceding sedimentary layers to their own ends. As one glowing article from 1905 in Outing magazine put it:

The country club seems almost destined to satisfy the somewhat communistic dream that in the middle of the last century, and sporadically ever since, brought about Brook Farm and such places … Without the stress and tension of new-century town life, so generally condemned, country clubs could not have multiplied. … A club, by gathering under one roof persons of similar tastes and means, brings order to the chaos created by sudden prosperity … It stratifies social development, and thus assures its permanence.

As élites reconfigured their social definitions in keeping with an imagined connection with rurality, they began to apply Progressive principles to rationally manage the rural qualities of the countryside, and, in doing so, undertook a cultural museumification of rural places and rural societies. Chapter XI of Duncan-Clark’s Progressive manifesto laid out principles for “Conserving Rural Life,” asserting that “the whole organic structure of our civilization, is affected,

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14 George Bird Grinnell and Theodore Roosevelt, *Trail and Camp-Fire: The Book of the Boone and Crockett Club* (New York: Forest and Stream, 1897), 345. Ironically, it is unlikely that Boone himself could have secured membership in the club which bore his name had he been alive: he was “a fugitive from civilization who could not endure the encroachments of settlements upon his beloved wilderness.” In Smith, *Virgin Land*, 54.


17 Ibid., 12.

18 Ibid., 19.

both socially and economically, in things moral and in things material, by those conditions that obtain to rural communities.”

He laid out a variety of programs ranging from teaching farmers scientific growing techniques to reclaiming land through irrigation. He also wrung his hands over the depopulation of rural areas, asking himself “how can we conserve rural life as the sweet and wholesome source of what is best and strongest in the life of the country?”

Oftentimes this meant extending the power of urban political authority deep into the life of the countryside, which was rapidly losing its social independence as the gentry redefined rurality to meet their own recreational and sentimental desires. The Boone and Crockett Club wrote approvingly of strict deer hunting regulations in New York, claiming that “the lovers of fair sport were encouraged by the increased interest in our forests … to hope for legislation that would wisely protect the deer.”

Administrative programs like the Department of the Interior, the Forest Service, and the National Park Service were established during this period to provide central control over the management of rural resources. Imaginative rurality had acquired a mental life quite independent of material rurality, and through technocratic administration and evaluative embellishment, elites hoped that they could bend real rural landscapes closer to the ideal ones that existed only in their minds. It was, as Susan Coleman writes of ski resorts, the construction of a crafted nature in which “meanings hinged upon a designed, constructed, and patrolled landscape.”

This required new methods of aesthetic social distinction. Where it had previously been enough to draw clear spatial boundaries between the educated men of the universities and the coarse demi-savages of the wilderness, the new upperclass ruralism had to find ways to celebrate the rural landscape while eliding the ugly specter of the indigent. Francis Parkman, on an 1842 expedition through the New York countryside, complained that “there would be no finer place of gentlemen’s seats than this, but now, for the most part, it is occupied by a race of boors about as uncouth, mean, and stupid as the hogs they seem chiefly to delight in.”

Parkman was one of the early élites who tried to have his ruralism both ways; he knew that he was merely playing frontiersman and ran no risk of being dragged into the cultural cesspit which he observed in the rural social milieu. As a

20 Duncan-Clark, *The Progressive Movement*, 188.

21 Ibid., 193.

22 Ibid., 267.


25 Qtd. in Smith, *Virgin Land*, 51. Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale, considered the woodsmen of a Vermont a nearly subhuman species, and Cornelius Felton, the president of Harvard, complained they had “none of the restraints which fetter the characteristics of the working classes in other countries,” Smith, 217–218.
“young gentleman of leisure,” Parkman “could afford better than anyone else to indulge himself in the slightly decadent cult of wilderness and savagery.”

Upperclass mock primitivism took the frontiersman ethic and coated it with a thick wash of elegant romanticism, in which well-educated gentlemen became convinced that “wilderness and savages seemed to have advantages over civilized nature and man” and so took leisurely outings to the countryside in order to momentarily escape the formalized social etiquette which ultimately they could not bear to part with.

The overt cultural sneering of people like Parkman had to be tempered, or at least submerged under a veneer of social integrability, if it was to be made a part of the socially-responsible sentiments of the Progressive conservationists. The nineteenth century had enshrined the “common man” at the center of American myth, and if the new élite class planned to style itself as a safekeeper of virtue, it would have to pay lip service to social equality. So, although Roosevelt and the upperclass ruralists of the turn of the century inherited romantic attachments to a sanitized, gentrified wilderness from Parkman, they had to frame their programs in terms of “stewardship.”

This did not mean, however, that the new upperclass rurality could be made to sit easily in good company with the existing values of rural inhabitants. With exoticized humor, the Outing article on the country club portrayed an irate yokel who reluctantly provided directions to “thet cussed, durned Country Club.”

The federal acquisition of Yellowstone National Park, transacted in part by the lobbying efforts of members of the Boone and Crockett Club, also revealed the ambiguity with which the aristocratic and populist appropriations of the rural landscape came into interplay. Packaging the wilderness for the tourist consumption of a class with enough disposable income to play rural at will “transforms the meaning of ‘rural’ at the same time that it transforms the physical environment.”

Alvah Dunning, a resident of the Yellowstone area, summed up in 1897 what Karl Jacoby has called “the central transformation of rural life at the turn of the century”:

Times is different now ... [I]n them days nobody said a word if a poor man wanted a little meat an’ killed it, but now they’re savin’ it until the dudes get time to come up here an’ kill it ... [and] they’d put me in jail ef I killed a deer when I needed meat. I dunno what we’re a-comin’ to in this free country.

Dunning’s choice of words is suggestive not only in the particular conflict it describes—the fight between open hunting rights and managed game laws—but also in the political sentiment enclosed by his appended question. The modern

26 Smith, Virgin Land, 52.
27 Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind, 151.
29 Coleman, 284.
31 Qtd. in Jacoby, 91.
administration of wildlands in the United States navigated tricky territory between appropriating the countryside as the symbolic heirloom of wealthy “wilderness lovers” and retaining the libertarian politics of open, unrestricted land so fundamental to American ideas about democratic virtue.

The arrest of several poachers classed as “white Indians” during the first years of comprehensive federal administration at Yellowstone is one way in which this imaginary conflict played out in real terms. Yellowstone had exploded into the spatial imagination of many of those wealthy enough to travel; urban visitors found it “akin to stepping back in time, a trip that enabled one to see wild nature untouched by the modern era.”32 Ironically, though, it took conscious planning and reshaping of the landscape to achieve this condition of “pristine” naturalism. Yellowstone was, in many ways, a rural theme park, deliberately built in a way that would occult the industrial reshaping of a fabricated wilderness.

Making the wilderness tenable meant clearing out intractable messes which fit poorly with the aesthetic rural imagination, an epistemological parallel to the original clearing of the wilderness in colonial rurality. Often that meant bringing Amerindians under the direct control of the modern state—the federal government set up the Dawes Commission in 1893 for the “conversion of the [Oklahoma] Territory from an Indian hunting ground to an enlightened American state.”33 When Ed Howell, a notorious buffalo poacher, was finally apprehended in Yellowstone, the conservationist magazine Forest and Stream noted with a measure of haughty disdain that he was “a most ragged, dirty, and unkempt looking citizen, dressed in an outer covering of dirty, greasy overalls,”34 an analog of the same aesthetic distinction which characterized Parkman’s aristocratic sneers.

The conservationists, however, were unable to vilify Howell completely, since they were unable to totalize his actions in a domain entirely separate from their own. His poaching contained a reflexive link to the very rural values which the conservationists were in the process of folding into their new paradigm of elitism. Hunting and tracking in the wilderness, following in the footsteps of cultural icons like Leatherstocking, or, it should be noted, the two namesakes of the Boone and Crockett Club, was a skill which required a passionate involvement with and knowledge of the rural landscape. In other words, it “relied on many of the qualities at the core of the rural masculine identity.”35

Moreover, the image of the hunter retained democratic and egalitarian connotations which could not easily be spun out. For many years, restrictive game laws had been associated with tyrannical European customs such as royal estates. Natty Bumppo called it a “hard case” to have “his honest case for a livelihood stopped by laws,” and upon his arraignment for killing a deer out of season asked the court, “I should like to know where you’ll find a man … who can get an easier

33 Qtd. in Kent Carter, The Dawes Commission and the Allotment of the Five Civilized Tribes, 1893–1914 (Ancestry, 1999), 166.
34 Qtd. in Jacoby, 103.
35 Jacoby, 102.
living for all your betterments and your deer-laws.”36 The open game fields of the United States guaranteed that nobody, not even the poorest members of society, should go without subsistence. The Livingston Post asked of Howell’s arrest in 1894:

Was he, like many another man in these times, out of employment and destitute of the means of securing clothing, a bed, or perhaps even food? Indeed, it would seem that he must have been surrounded by some such circumstances to induce him forward.37

But this material argument no longer held much sway. The rural fortunes of rich and poor had diverged; the rural landscape which had once been the material promise for a class of yeomen living symbiotically with the land had become the highly-symbolic cultural dominion of an élite imagination.

This imagination was one of the major forces which drove the career of Frank Lloyd Wright. The wealthy, well-educated families who made up the bulk of his clientele were members of a generation of urban dwellers who wanted their dreams relocated to the countryside and their social positions redefined into an American version of the landed aristocracy. They were impelled by the same sentimental fascination with nature, accompanying a symbolic rejection of city life, which ran through the members of the Boone and Crockett Club. In Wright, they found an architect who offered a compelling spatial program for society which matched their imagination of what rurality ought to be. “Be gently lifted at nightfall to the top of a great down-town office building,” Wright once wrote, “and you may see how in the image of material man, at once his glory and his menace, is this thing we call a city … High overhead hangs the stagnant pall of its fetid breath.”38

Such feelings were not outright rejections of modernity but imaginations of an alternative course of modernity. Aspirational rural industrialization had once hoped that the effect of the countryside could reroute the course of modernization. When this dream turned out to be fruitless, the same urge was reanimated in the imagination of a patrician class who hoped they could still alter the course of modernity by redirecting it into a rural form. In the Prairie School of Wright and his contemporaries, they found an architecture which could “domesticate the country for historically new middle and upper-middle classes.”39

Crucially, this meant that the city—the developmental site of this new social class—could be rarefacted, deurbanized, and reshaped to rural ideals. This is the mark of imaginative rurality: rural ways of thinking even amongst urban participants. When “the work of the Prairie School aimed to make urbanites comfortable in the country by melding newly acquired city sophistication with nostalgia for rural values [and] buttressing old-fashioned social forms with avant-garde art forms,” it did so by employing a plastic rurality which could be molded into a culturally

36 J. F. Cooper, The Pioneers, 176; 220.
37 Qtd. in Jacoby, 100.
useful form totally independent of the actual statistical and demographic markers of material rurality. Elsewhere they preserved the memory of material rurality by recommissioning it in the form of imaginary phantasms, as in the 1927 construction of Colonial Williamsburg or the 1936–1941 development of Old Sturbridge Village—both of which were landscaped by Shurcliff and involved the financial backing of wealthy urbanites.

Futuristic and preservationist imaginations of rurality came together in the Greenbelt New Towns of the 1930s, the first fully-planned communities in the United States. These New Deal-era towns were the brainchildren of Rexford Guy Tugwell, “not an urban planner but an agricultural economist.” Tugwell, like his predecessor and founder of the Garden City movement Ebenezer Howard, had come to the conclusion that “the city was basically unfit for human habitation,” but, unlike Howard, felt that new cities could function properly if they were closely intermeshed with the rural landscape. He found a sympathetic ear in Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who as Governor of New York had taken it upon himself to “destroy all this”—meaning cities—and to take “industry from crowded urban centers to airy villages … giving scrawny kids from the slums opportunity for sun and growth in the country.” What resulted was a series of government-planned projects like Greendale, Wisconsin, which were cities in form but countrysides in imagination. They bore the physical marks of urban design and thus have fallen under the academic auspices of urban theory. However, in spirit they were principally rural, driven by a millennialist imagination of the power of the rural environment to shape society, and thus they are properly the province of new ruralism.

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40 Twombly, “New Forms, Old Functions,” 86.

41 Melanie L. Simo, An Interview with Sidney N. Shurcliff on Arthur A. Shurcliff (Watertown, MA: Hubbard Educational Trust, 1992), 11. Imaginative ruralism was not solely a museumifying project. Le Corbusier, the priest of architectural High Modernism, was himself a participant in the imaginative language of rural tranquility. He and Wright differed in their epiphenomenal treatments of nature—the former rationalizing and systematizing natural elements in a way that the more-picturesque Wright did not—but both shared a trademark rational organicism, a stoic and ultimately Cartesian belief that through an artistic alloy of mechanization and nature, society could reach its ultimate teleological form. His signature skyscrapers-in-parks, which allowed the creation of a “broad vista in the urban scene,” were manifestations of the belief that natural settings were on the vanguard of social progress, tools of the rural imagination used to solve urban problems. See Le Corbusier, The City of To-Morrow and Its Planning (New York: Dover, 1987), 232.


43 Ibid., 232.

44 Ibid.
6  Confluence, or, Towards the New Ruralism.

The borough of Confluence, Pennsylvania is named for the intersection of the Youghiogheny and Casselman Rivers and the Laurel Hill Creek, which lazily merge together here and roll on together as an indistinguishable whole towards the Monongahela. It is not only waterways which blend, though. On the small town green, observed from just the right position, a contemporary gazebo is juxtaposed in front of a dusty hardware store, a peninsula of homes, a tourist map, and a railroad bridge slouching into ruin. A newer pedestrian bridge crosses the Casselman near the town green and compels road bikers along the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail to excite the sleepy economy with urban money; a newer train bridge across the Laurel Hill Creek carries CSX freight trains which rumble through the town with cargoes of grain, oil, and automobiles. In the small grocery abutting the green, locally-canned apple butter is sold next to genetically-modified, factory-grown tomatoes; the woman at the cash register describes with a trace of a southern accent her son’s recent trip to a Civil War reenactment at a nearby historic site, and how she bought a DVD made of the event to watch on her new state-of-the-art home entertainment system.

It is a scene of many messy elements conjoined into one. Claude Lévi-Strauss calls this a *bricolage*; Melville Herskovitz calls it *syncretism*; Homi Bhaba calls it *hybridity*; Ulf Hannerz calls it *creolization*. The residents of this town of 837 have stumbled upon another term: confluence.

Confluence is a place which is undoubtedly rural according to an intuitive, phronetic understanding of the term. The town is serviced only by small state highways, it is losing population, its mean family income is just over half of the national average, and its racial makeup is 99.5% white. The area in and around the center of Confluence is typical of the rural “Pennsylvania landscape” which has long been the icon “exemplifying the entire colonial, then national effort to create a new spatial and social order.” In other words, it would not be difficult for the lay viewer to tag a photograph of Confluence as a rural place.

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6 U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census.
Yet many of the standard material indicators which have long been the axiomatic tools of social science research in rural areas are absent. There is some work in the extractive resources to be had in the area—farming, lumbering, and mining—but it is not central to the economy and it is certainly peripheral to everyday life. Nationalized and even globalized telecommunications have conspired to drag the superficial cultural elements of the community—the films watched, the clothes worn, the consumer goods desired—into harmony with an omniglot, undifferentiated, neoliberal economy. The extended family unit is no more noticeably prevalent here than it is elsewhere, and economic relationships are hardly transacted on familial grounds. Under the hegemony of increasingly structured forms of consumer value and capitalist reification, the rural landscape has lost many of the particular features which once made it identifiable and useful to rural scholarship throughout the twentieth century.

Quantitative statistics, though, tell an incomplete story. There are ethnographic details which remain inscrutable to census data. The social character of the town is firmly self-lodged within the schema of value orientation which considers itself rural; in Confluence, rurality is an identity caucus, one that can be played out even through the emblematic technologies of post-industrial capitalism. In a thread entitled “Confluence of Years Ago” on an online forum for the community, it’s possible to find a quaint rhetorical turn like “Ole Agnus could be a little crooked sometimes” typed into a computer and then shunted through the routers and cables of a global communications infrastructure. Elsewhere on the same thread, the conversation turns towards the disputed parentage of a local family, an example of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft collided together and pulverized. These same virtual paradoxes are evident standing in the sweltering summer heat at the center of Confluence. It is impossible to miss how strikingly different this place feels from the teleological and totalized story of urbanization, yet it is difficult to describe this difference in simple terms. After all, amongst the buildings surrounding the green are a U.S. Post Office where you can buy a standardized stamp and send a letter anywhere via a giant bureaucracy; a bicycle shop catering to urban professionals out for environmentally-sound tours through the countryside; and a supermarket where the same Doritos and Coca-Cola which are staple foods of New York City can be purchased. In a town named after the synthesis of rivers, where past and present histories and imaginations also come into synthesis, a concept of ruralism which extends beyond the material is needed.

Walking in Moscow, the inadvertent disciple of urbanism Walter Benjamin asked himself “which truth is inwardly preparing itself to converge with

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the real?” Urban theory has made profitable use of the complicated literature of Benjamin and his contemporaries; it is appropriate for rural theory to do the same. For there is a sympathy here to the course of the rural trajectory in American mental life, which “was contrary to empirical possibility on the plains, [but] true to the course of history.” It is not so much which truth is factually concordant with reality, but which truth is inwardly convergent on reality. Contemporary America is not, in fact of form, a rural nation; the course of history ultimately followed a different morphological route. But that does not mean the central importance of rurality in America is any less true, or any less real. The inner logic of rural life—its social prerogatives, aesthetic forms, semiotic fields, and epistemological formulae—is confluent with the inner logic of American life.

If we are to develop a ruralism which can simultaneously comprehend the multiplexed constituents of the modern rural imagination, we must understand that it is a “tradition built from a rich deposit of myths, memories, and obsessions.” Like Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” but without its nationalistic and racial emphases, the rural imagination employs the networks of mediated interaction to allow “rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate to others, in profoundly new ways.”

We must furthermore consider that the most recent layer of sedimentary rurality—that is, the layer which lies at the surface now and thus constitutes a reflexive part of ourselves even as we study it—is not coextensive with the real. Instead, what we know to be real is a complex of historical realities and contemporary realizations which activate those realities; this most recent layer is not an inert ideal-state but a correlated accumulation of many past states which itself is being refracted into the future. As we work towards the new ruralism, we must excavate these rural meanings in a way which does not do them violence; we must treat rurality with an anthropological gloss that preserves their messiness while drawing out their specificity.

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The forces of the new ruralism are already afoot, though as yet they are only rudimentarily theorized. Michael Bell has recently worked towards a promising theoretical structure which he terms the “two-ness” of rural life. Bell calls material definitions of rurality the “first rural.” This is the rurality of Bennington or Pine Hill, a rurality of conditions which today encompasses between 17.4 and 21 percent of the United States population, depending on the exact statistical method chosen. This first rural, he argues, “handles the

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12 Smith, Virgin Land, 180.
13 Schama, Landscape and Memory, 14.
unfortunate opposition of rural to urban by making it as conceptually thin and ‘simple’ as can be, scraped down to only relative population density, as required by the capitalist whole.”16 Moving beyond this, to the “second rural,” he arrives at an epistemological state approximating the trajectory of imaginative ruralism advanced in this essay:

By second rural, then, I mean the rural we often have trouble knowing, and that we typically regard as secondness, even when we do not know it: the epistemology of rural as place, as unconfined to lower population density space, as (at times) consumption, as socionature, as meanings which we may never unambiguously see—the ideal moment (in the philosophical, not the evaluative sense) of the rural.17

According to this way of thinking, it is possible to recognize rural scalars even amongst the most urban or the most transnational social groups. Here is the rurality of Mill Run or Confluence. Bell’s second rural “is not necessarily epistemologically relative to the urban. It crosses space and turns it into place.”18

Still, a theory which relies too heavily on a metaphysical category runs the risk of escaping too far from the materiality of history and gazing too deep into a second rural which is, ultimately, an ad hoc and unanalytical ephemerality. Bell, recognizing this, suggests a twinning of the two: “first rural and second rural are equally first—and equally second—in the lived experience of the rural.”19 He assigns to first rural a quality of reality which terms the “mater-real” and to the second a quality of reality termed “idea-real.” Each, he argues, replicates and refracts parts of the other in the daily experience of rural life, joining together into an orbit where they “immediately rotate into the other.”20 The striking visual similarity to a confluence is self-evident here. “In short,” he concludes, “mater-reality and idea-reality each announciate, and reannunciate, the rural—and each other.”21

This is a clever theoretical stance and a major step forward in a synthetic approach to a rural theory. It is also deeply resonant with contemporary social thinking about the relationship between ideas and practices. As Bourdieu frames it:

Produced by the practice of successive generations, in conditions of existence of a determinate type, these schemas of perception, appreciation, and action, which are acquired through practice and applied in their practical state without acceding to explicit recognition, function as practical operators through which the objective structures of which they are the product tend to reproduce themselves in practices.22

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16 Bell, “Two-ness of rural life,” 408.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 409.
19 Ibid., 412.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 413.
Put in rural terms, Bourdieu’s theory is useful in explaining how rural thinking is heirloomed through history in the form of practices which create an underlying structure that molds, but does not determine, behavior and belief. A loose philosophical parallel may be drawn to Sartre’s contrast between being-in-itself and being-for-itself: the facticities of the in-itself contour the possibilities of transcendent freedom, but fail to dictate their forms. This opens up the territory for a dynamic negotiation between the polar extremes of the vulgar positivism of classic social science and the anything-goes haze of latter-day postmodernism. Like the anthropological “militant middle ground” Michael Herzfeld offers in order to “collapse the supposed opposites of epistemology: empiricism and speculation,” balancing rurality between its concrete and abstract endpoints allows for a theory with both an anchor and sails.

At the same time, some additions are needed to Bell’s concept in order to make it more robust for both the historical and contemporary analysis of rurality. Instead of decomposing ideas of rurality into a binary opposition (a theoretical stance which is attractive more for its convenience than its truth), the range of rural existences from the built-natural-material to the ideational-political-imaginary make up a field of ethnologic variances. More importantly, these interactions operate not only “sideways” within a single sociocultural moment, but also “backwards” in reference to their historical antecedents and “forwards” to new forms. Or, in other words, field atop field atop field. For this reason, it is through the sedimentary process charted in this essay, in which myths exist atop realities, which in turn exist atop more myths and more realities, that we may offer an even better comprehensive view into the interrelationship of the different valences of a ruralistic system. Binding the positive analysis of history with the metaphysical analysis of ethnography yields a “historical ethnography” in which facts and ideals exist in reciprocal dialogue. Importantly, though, and in addition to Bell’s conception, this dialogue is locked in a serial narration which has a stable chronological vector. The material ruralism of Bennington and Pine Hill, followed by the aspirational ruralism of Cooperstown and Katahdin Iron Works, followed by the imaginary ruralism of Mill Run and Confluence, comprise a chain in which semiotic conditions arise out of material ones and consequently escape from them.

Rurality is thus liberated from its historical contingencies according to a discrete escape trajectory. In this liberation, however, the material conditions which precipitated out the cultural ones are not annihilated as quantities of analytical explanation. Proceeding across the field in the direction of imaginative ruralism is an act of emergence from conditionality, not a negation of it. Conditions explain the particular directions in which imaginative systems trend, but, once formed, those imaginative systems shake off their factual contingencies.

Attractive though it may be, this is hardly a theory without any difficulties. One obvious problem with isolating the contemporary rural imagination in a way

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that is useful for serious scholarship is the frustratingly abstract and diaphanous way in which the term “rural” is defined throughout lay life. In many ways, this mimics the ambiguity with which professional scholars have approached the concept of rural in academic discourse. All the same, despite its elliptical and unstable explicit value, it still indicates a fairly precise implicit understanding. While practitioners often find a great deal of difficulty in expanding their idea of contemporary rurality into an elegant or event coherent systematic explanation, they nevertheless insist that it locates a specific idea which makes intuitive sense to them. Thus the term “ruralism” indicates a site at which language binds a confused and often paradoxical series of ideals and practices into a single semantic term, disguising multitudes within the confines of an ephemeral exactitude.

Some ethnographic fragments provide useful illustrations. While I was reading about the history of the wilderness writer George Washington Sears at the Green Free Library in Wellsboro, Pennsylvania, 170 miles northeast of Confluence, an older man came in with his wife to look up genealogical records. His wife was from the Wellsboro area originally but the two now lived in Binghamton, New York—population 47,380 and a city according to New York law. We struck up a conversation in which I eventually admitted to him my espionage activities in the countryside. He told me that he was surprised that I had any interest whatsoever in “rural folks” and then went on to describe the rural population—of which he considered himself a member—in a cavalcade of terms which included simplicity, suspicion, old age, anonymous columns in the local newspaper written as “Phil Osopher,” a respect for Harry S Truman, the beauty of “country girls,” and a hatred of free verse. It would be difficult to seriate these values into a streamlined theory of rurality. They were, nevertheless, the everyday and authentically-given imagination of a man who considered himself rural despite having almost none of the sociological flags which might distinguish him as such. Kathleen Stewart suggests such ambling descriptions of rurality follow “ways of talkin’ and ways of doin’ people” which “have become metacultural markers of a local way of life in deliberate distinction from the demonized ways of the cities.”

Elsewhere, the landscape is a jumble of pieces from each layer of rurality that have become bound together in the form of the topmost, present-day layer. On a winding backroad in Pennsylvania which I took only because the DeLorme cartographers had made an error when tracing one road over the edge from one map page to another (indicating once again that the purposive intentionality of systematic plans are always resisted by accidents, elisions, and incorrect jumps across pages), I stopped the car to let a group of pigs cross the road. The midafternoon scene was strikingly pastoral, enough to activate the rural sentiments of any practitioner at any of the historic layers—but it also included a

26 Ibid., 3.
series of small oil derricks arrayed in a greedy row of extraction. Later on the same road, a few signs on the side informed me that I was passing through an “Agricultural Security Area” where the government had intervened in the regular operation of the market to ensure the health of the farm economy. The road then passed by the Crooked Creek Reservoir, a state-owned property that served both as a natural recreation area and a resource management center, past the Lenape Heights Golf Course, named after the Amerindian tribe which Cooper described in loving detail, before arriving in Kittanning, a rather large town at 4,787, where the giant concrete pylons of the divided highway Route 28 symbolically dwarfed the rural road that slipped into town beneath it.

The ethnographic view from rural roads is full of these confluences that sprawl across and structure rurality. On State Route 487 in Pennsylvania, a hand-lettered sign advertises a “Golf + RV Resort,” a visual and semantic jumble of the elite preservation of nature (golf), the unashamed cultural stereotype of lowerclass recreation (RVs), and a noun which awkwardly bridges the two concepts (resort). A truck on the highway in rural Pennsylvania is labeled with the slogan “Kane trucking … we’re able!” indicating that religious behavior can be found on the side of a semi just as well as on the billboard of a church. An AM radio broadcast in New York complains about the hegemony of “the North.” During a flash downpour near Castile, New York, the rain breaches a berm, freeing a rusted wheelbarrow from a genetically-modified cornfield and forcing a giant flatbed truck carrying General Electric rotor blades for a new wind power installation to come to a stop. On the Saint Lawrence River, a massive concrete dam named after Robert Moses, the scion of giant urban highways (and also giant urban parks) admits commercial ships bound for the Great Lakes through its locks and creates an isolated island midstream which has become a landscape park and, where, during a week in August, a Civil War reenactment troupe holds a gathering.

These are the sorts of actual ethnographic scenes which collectively make up a confluent contemporary rurality. It is, moreover, a systematics which resists systematization. As Stewart writes of the residents of West Virginia coal country:

...when something happens, people make sense of it not by constructing an explanation of what happened but by offering accounts of its impacts, traces, and signs ... the act of mimesis rises to importance as a local ‘way’—an epistemological principle in its own right that exceeds the rigid discipline of cause and effect or truth and lie.27

What organizes all these scenes into a coherent whole is a social pattern which can take no other term but “rurality.” If the sentiments at work here are shoved into any of rurality’s child categories, the social analysis goes insolvent: it is impossible to explain this cultural phenomenon in terms of westernness, the frontier mentality, agriculture economics, familial communitarianism, Gemeinschaft, or whatever other proxy for the epiphenomenal characteristics of rurality one might choose. The complexity of the situation forces a recognition of “rural” as the containing category and the most important variable of consideration.

27 Stewart, A Space on the Side of the Road, 57–58.
This story of rurality began in Bennington, on the colonial frontier where American colonists first apprehended the forests and began carving out a life which was morphologically distinct from urbanity and permanently stamped by open land, establishing the original divide between “hill gods and valley gods.” It continued through Pine Hill, where Crèvecoeur took a real life of farming and rurality and began to valorize it and make it part of the axiomatic core of an American identity which was nourished by “a superior goodness of soil.” It then traveled to Cooperstown, where nineteenth-century Americans began to use rurality in the vocabulary of national expansion and the political, social, and literary forms which it demanded, as “westward the course of empire” in both compass direction and social direction. It stopped in at Katahdin Iron Works, where industry and nature came together in a rural futurism that promised “magic cities in the wilderness.” By the time it came to Mill Run, rurality had become an imaginative concept which could be used create fictional communities of value, and where aesthetics allowed a fictional design “to grip the whole to earth.”

Finally, in Confluence, while eating local apple butter on organic bread processed in a city, it is possible to concatenate this theoretical summation into the experiential quality of life in rural America. This most recent layer of sedimentary ruralism is confusing and dense. But it is also unmistakeable. Too often we have treated this rurality in a rather lazy way. It cannot be defined as a condition of statistical and demographic forms. Nobody reduces urbanity to a collection of people living in an appropriately-high density area; urbanity is a quality of mental as well as physical life. So too with rurality. Moreover, rurality is not the leftover parcel in the negative space of modern life. Rural modernity has progressive and futuristic elements which make it an orthogonal process to urban modernity, not a countervailing one. In America particularly, the course of history has been animated, not restricted, by a resilient attachment to rurality.

These assertions, and the type of study commissioned in this essay, are the building-blocks for a new way of thinking about the social science of rurality. It is hardly the last word. As social scientists learn to adapt to new ways of thinking about new forms of rural life, the methodological and creative boundaries of research and scholarship will no doubt continue to expand. In Confluence, we have not arrived at, but are on our way towards, the new ruralism.
Appendix I, Images of State Seals.

1. Seal of the State of New York
2. Seal of the State of Massachusetts
3. Seal of the State of Vermont
4. Seal of the State of Pennsylvania
5. Seal of the State of Ohio
6. Seal of the State of Kansas
7. Seal of the State of Maine
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