History of Agriculture in the United States

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Abstract
Agriculture is at the very center of the human enterprise; its trappings are in evidence all around, yet the agricultural past is an exceptionally distant place from modern America. While the majority of Americans once raised a significant portion of their own food, that ceased to be the case at the beginning of the 20th century. Only a very small portion of the American population today has a personal connection to agriculture. People still must eat, but the process by which food arrives on their plates is less evident than ever. The evolution of that process, with all of its many participants, is the stuff of agricultural history. The task of the agricultural historian is to make that past evident, and usable, for an audience that is divorced from the production of food. People need to know where their food comes from, past and present, and what has gone into the creation of the modern food system.

Keywords
agriculture, history, environment, slavery, gender, frontier, African Americans, agency, women

Disciplines
African American Studies | Agricultural and Resource Economics | Environmental Studies | History of Gender | Women's Studies

Comments
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How Historians Have Approached United States Agricultural History,
or Cows, Plows, and Beyond
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If the past is a foreign country . . . the rural past is surely a district and little understood subregion, even as farm artifacts, structures, and landscapes promise to teach us a great deal about who we were and how we arrived at today (p. 555).

J.L. Anderson (2017)

These words provide an apt introduction to the subject of agricultural history. Agriculture is at the very center of the human enterprise, with its trappings in evidence all around, and yet, the agricultural past is an exceptionally distant place from modern America. While the majority once raised a significant portion of their own food, that situation ceased to be at the beginning of the twentieth century. A very small portion of the American population today has a personal connection to agriculture. People still must eat, but the process by which food gets to their plates is less evident than ever. The evolution of this process, with all of its many participants, is the stuff of agricultural history. The task of the agricultural historian is to make that past evident, and usable, for an audience that is divorced from the production of food. People need to know where their food comes from, past and present, and what has gone into the creation of the modern food system.

Agriculture and environmental science

Agricultural history has an intimate connection with environmental science, in that it studies the actions of human beings involved in the single activity that most transformed the landscape. Agriculture, at its most basic, is growing plants and animals on purpose for human
use. Over the course of millenia, feeding themselves by resorting to agriculture, humans have transformed the flora and fauna of the lands that now make up the United States. This was not a process that began with European colonists, but with the various tribes living in North America before the Europeans arrived. As historian William Cronon (1983) has described in *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, Indian peoples made extensive alterations to the lands upon which they lived. New England’s agricultural Indians used fire to drive game and to create conditions conducive to hunting. They used it to clear fields. 

Native American women also used fields intensively for cultivation of corn, beans, and squash, and then moved on when they had used up the soil’s fertility. These types of activities were not confined to New England, but were present throughout North America, wherever agriculture took hold. Even in places where hunting provided most of peoples’ food, Indians changed the way in which native grasses grew for their own purposes. As Julie Courtwright (2011) demonstrated in *Prairie Fire: A Great Plains History*, early Great Plains people used fire to control the growth of prairie grasses, thereby improving their chances of successfully hunting buffalo. In the Salt and Gila River valleys in the American southwest, Hohokam people constructed a vast network of irrigation canals, some of them miles long, thirty feet wide, and up to ten feet deep (Hurt, 1987). While their actions were a far cry from those of modern farmers with their tractors, combines, chemicals, and center pivot irrigation, the human need for food and fiber resulted in the reshaping of environments to fit their purposes. Over time, the means of effecting that change have become far more efficient and destructive, leaving North America fundamentally altered. Whether it is in Alaska, with its 760 farms, or Texas with its 241,500, the most important activity of agriculture is to remove what might have grown without human
intervention, and replace it with something that can be used or sold, and sometimes both (USDA, 2017).

The origins of agricultural history.

The ways in which historians have understood this ongoing transformation have changed significantly over time. The agricultural history of the United States has its origins as a field of inquiry in the early days of the twentieth century. At that point, historians largely defined the field as the study of production agriculture, with a focus on the methods, technology, and economics of growing crops and livestock. While these have remained important issues of analysis, the field has moved in many directions. Policy questions, such as the process of land distribution and the involvement of the federal government in agricultural development continue to be central issues. Changing understandings of who is a farmer and the composition of the agricultural household have broadened the discussion to questions of gender, age, labor, and class. Historians have examined the development of agriculture from its macro connections to world markets, down to its intimate relationship to local conditions. They have examined the history of crops, writ large, down to individual commodities, such as bananas, tomatoes, sugar. One of the most important developments of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries was a new vision of agricultural history that acknowledged its interrelationships with other fields, such as the history of science and technology, environmental history, and family and community history. What was at its inception a fairly narrow field has become quite broad and diverse in its understanding of its scope and areas of concern.

The earliest practitioners of American agricultural history have largely been classed as “cows and plows” historians, devoted to the study of agricultural production, often from an economic point of view. This emphasis was prominent, although various historians argued for a
broader interpretation of the subject. In 1940, historian Louis B. Schmidt opined that “our agricultural history is not to be viewed in the strict or narrow sense, but in the broad sense to include the whole life of the agricultural population, the conditions which have affected the progress of agriculture in the different periods, and the influence of agriculture on our whole national life – economic, political, constitutional, military, religious, intellectual, moral, aesthetic (p. 126).” Nevertheless, the field remained more tightly focused. One particularly good example of this type of work was Clarence Danhof’s ground breaking 1941 article, “Farm Making Costs and the Safety Valve, 1850-1860.” Danhof carefully plotted the many elements that went into the creation of a frontier farm, and calculated their costs, from the land, to a home, and fencing. In doing so, he helped to dismiss the notion that the frontier existed as a “safety valve” for the population of crowded eastern cities. He calculated the costs of making a frontier farm at approximately $1,000, a sum far outside the realm of possibility for most common laborers. His work remains useful today. Along the same lines, Paul Wallace Gates, whose work on the trans-Mississippi West intertwined extensively with agriculture, produced encyclopedic work on the western lands and the settler’s problems gaining access to them. He characterized his own work as “largely devoted to the malfunctioning of an intended democratic system of land disposal.” He was no “starry eyed” enthusiast about the land disposal system, but did the painstaking work of documenting every detail of the public land system in his 828 page work, The History of Public Land Law Development (Bogue, et. al., 1999).

**Early histories of slavery**

One of the most consistent areas of examination was slavery and plantation agriculture in the antebellum period. Most of that history, in the first half of the twentieth century, was written through the prism of the work of Ulrich B. Phillips, whose conservative interpretation of slavery
generally cast the system as beneficial to slaves, and the institution as economically unprofitable for plantation owners. His works, *American Negro Slavery* (1918) and *Life and Labor in the Old South* (1929) were the standard early works on the topic. In his wake was a proliferation of studies of slavery in various locations and forms, and economic analysis of its features, such as L.C. Gray’s 1930 article, “Economic Efficiency and Competitive Advantages of Slavery under the Plantation System.” Gray, like many others, challenged the idea that the plantation system was unprofitable, but did not challenge Phillips’ racial assumptions. The emphasis was not on the experience of the individual under slavery, but the economics of the plantation system.

**Understanding institutions and processes**

This emphasis on understanding the way in which institutions and processes worked persisted into the 1950s and 1960s. Probably the best known of this genre of history is Allan G. Bogue’s 1963 classic, *From Prairie to Cornbelt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century*. Bogue’s work detailed the many steps and stages involved in building a prairie farm from the literal ground up. The reader found that “‘free land’ is not free,” and that farmers were overjoyed to mechanize because it allowed them to “farm sitting down.” Bogue’s work, as well as that of other historians such as Danhof and Gates, retains a great deal of its value because of the things that it does that more modern histories rarely do: actually explaining how farmers did their work. A 1965 review of Bogue’s *Prairie to Cornbelt* provided an encyclopedic list of the topics addressed in the book, including the “process of ‘breaking in’ pioneer farms, with special attention to plowing the virgin sod, providing fencing, and draining wetlands (Zelinsky, 1965). The reviewer further commented that “there is little that is startling to anyone familiar to the area, but we do have an eminently satisfying recital and ordering both of major issues and significant details (p. 123).” And yet, to historians reading generations later,
all of this is, if not startling, new. The age of farming with horses is for the vast majority long past. Many of the hows and whys of the nineteenth and early twentieth century agricultural experience have disappeared from the nation’s collective consciousness with the passing of several generations of farmers, and the earliest generations of agricultural historians, many of whom, like Bogue, grew up practicing the craft they later studied. Even museum professionals, when faced with collections of agricultural objects, often through up their hands in frustration, unable to identify the objects in front of them (Reid, 2017). Given that situation, the work of the past remains relevant in the present, and will only become more so.

**Social history and agriculture**

Even in the midst of the cows and plows, however, were harbingers of developments to come. One of the earliest comprehensive histories of American agriculture was Joseph Schafer’s *The Social History of American Agriculture*, published in 1936. Although he called it a social history, most of the book dealt with the whys and hows of American agricultural life, devoting chapters to topics such as land acquisition and the impact of internal improvements. Even so, he found time to discuss such topics as the impact of settlement on the acculturation of immigrants. While historians in the twenty-first century would not consider his tone and conclusions acceptable today, he did point the way for other scholars to consider a broader range of topics under the umbrella of agricultural history. Women’s history also made an occasional appearance in early works. Gilbert Fite’s *The Farmer’s Frontier, 1865-1900* (1966), turns, in the end, to an examination of the social life of the frontier, including, if fleetingly, the problems facing women on lonely, frontier farms. Within a fairly short time, historians of rural women would begin to ask that the term “farmer” be redefined to include both men and women.

**Early environmental history of agriculture**
There were also early practitioners of what would come to be known generations later as environmental history. Several of the western historians of a very early generation examined the impact of environmental conditions on the process of frontier agricultural settlement. Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the settlers’ confrontation with the frontier was a recurring process, and that farmers were the culmination of that process, their presence indicating that the stage of frontier settlement was complete (Turner, 1893). Walter Prescott Webb (1931), writing more than thirty years later, argued for the importance of place over process, positing that the conditions on the Great Plains had completely remade American agricultural settlers because of the embedded difficulties of settling in that particular place. Especially among historians of the west, questions about the impact of frontier conditions on the lives of agricultural settlers were paramount.

James C. Malin, writing in the 1930s and 1940s, was a considerably more thorough practitioner of what could be classed as environmental history, writing extremely detailed descriptions of the grasslands, culminating in 1947 with the publication of *The Grassland of North America: Prolegomena to Its History*. Vastly underused, largely because Malin’s dislike of editors led him to self-publish his very dense prose, *The Grassland of North America* lays out in detail many elements he believed were necessary to understanding that region’s history: ecology, climatology, geology, geography, and soil science. He plunged into both census and scientific data to a degree rarely seen among historians of his day (Bogue, 1981). With the growing interest in environmental topics in the 1970s and 1980s, historian Robert P. Swierenga selected and edited Malin’s work, making it more accessible to a new generation of scholars (Malin, 1984).

**Community studies and agriculture**
A flourishing of community studies took place in the 1970s and 1980s, adding a new wrinkle to the study of American agriculture. Although most of the authors of these studies did not consider themselves agricultural historians, their works found a ready audience among them. Books such as Kenneth A. Lockridge’s (1970) *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years* detailed the realities of life in pre-industrial Dedham, Massachusetts. Darrett Rutman and Anita Rutman did the same for Middlesex County, Virginia, in their 1984 book, *A Place in Time.* These historians classified themselves as historians of colonial America, but colonial America, for the most part, was made up of agricultural communities. On the frontier this was true as well. One of the most notable of these works was John Mack Faragher’s (1986) *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie.* Most notably, Faragher is known as a historian of the American frontier, but for the majority America’s frontier experience was agricultural in nature. *Sugar Creek* followed the development of an Illinois community from detailed description of its physical environment, to an examination of Indian land use, to the arrival of settlers. Those settlers, in turn, made farms, added to their families, and eventually achieved stability on the land. Faragher detailed the successes of some, which existed alongside the failures of others, and explained how the community went from the chaos of its early years to eventual stability and conservatism. His concern was with the transformation of rough frontierspeople into staid and sober agrarians, with a good dollop of environmental description adding to his discussion as well.

Others followed with their own community studies, but more consciously as agricultural historians. Hal Barron’s (1984) *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* tackles the problem of what became of agricultural communities after their initial years of growth and development passed. Chelsea, Vermont’s story followed the trajectory of many New England communities. As families grew, the land base shrank. Couples began to
choose to restrict their fertility, and to explore alternative forms of agriculture more suited to a tight land base. Outmigration began, leading to a community that was, over time, more stable and more homogeneous. Published a year later, Orville Vernon Burton’s (1985) *In My Father’s House are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina* does the somewhat more complicated task of exploring the contours of the dual communities, both white and black, in this southern location. He also traced their histories, both before and after the Civil War. Burton gathered information on every single household in Edgefield in order to examine their composition, concluding that wealth was the greatest determinant of how families structured their lives in this rural location. Studying more contemporary communities, Jane Pederson (1992) turned to the stories of rural families in Trempealeau County, Wisconsin. Using the communities of Lincoln and Pigeon Falls, Pederson examined the ways that distinct ethnic groups established their own place and traditions between 1870 and 1970. Lincoln and Pigeon Falls developed their own culture, distinct, local, and rich, far different from that of more urban areas. Pederson commented that although this culture dissolved in the face of the economic troubles of the late 20th century, what was perhaps surprising was that it lasted this long.

**African American history in a civil rights context**

The study of the American South saw a transformation, too, with different types of studies of slavery, and intense attention to the situation of African American farmers in the years following slavery’s end. This move away from Phillips’ interpretations came on the heels of the work of historian Kenneth Stampp. While Stampp (1952) praised Phillips for the mountains of historical material he uncovered, he criticized him for the approach he took to the lives of people living under slavery. Stampp wrote, “No historian of the institution can be taken seriously any longer unless he begins with the knowledge that there is no valid evidence that the Negro race is
innately inferior to the white . . . He must also take into account the equally important fact that there are tremendous variations in the capacities and personalities of individuals within each race, and that it is therefore impossible to make valid generalizations about races as such (p. 620).” Stampp’s (1956) *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* shifted the discussion away from Phillips’ emphasis on slavery as a benign institution, to one emphasizing its cruelty. By the 1970s, slaves regularly appeared as fully-fledged human beings in the historical narrative. John Blassingame’s (1972) *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, as its title would suggest, put a greater emphasis on the experiences of slaves themselves. Blassingame turned his attention to the development of slave culture, and the portions of that culture that had come with the enslaved from Africa, being transformed in the process, but also transforming the culture that they found on plantations in North America. Eugene Genovese’s (1972) *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* also honed in on the humanity of the enslaved, discussing extensively the ways in which slaves worked to mitigate the damage that the plantation did to their communities and their persons.

Included in this new wave of southern history was a careful examination of the post-slavery development of sharecropping across the South. As Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch (1977) argued, the end of slavery offered only “one kind of freedom.” While personal freedom was one thing, the system did not, on the whole, bring economic freedom to the former slaves. Although freed people responded to emancipation with hard work, that hard work was not rewarded. They ended up with low levels of education, low levels of landholding, and enormous debts. The system, as developed in the years following the Civil War, did not lead the region toward prosperity, but toward stagnation. Ransom and Sutch characterized southern tenant farmers as individuals whose fates were determined by their landlords and their lenders, and who
were allowed to make only the smallest, least significant decisions themselves. This, in turn, led to inefficient, unambitious farming. African Americans had gained their physical freedom, but not the kind of economic freedom that would improve the prospects of agriculture and farmers throughout the South.

This was, perhaps, not the best time for the publication of Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman’s (1974) *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, which attempted to use statistical methods (often called cliometrics in that era) to minutely analyze the physical conditions shaping the lives of the enslaved. They, in the end, argued that the physical conditions under which slaves lived were not terribly onerous (diets, for example, were boring but adequate), and that the material conditions of their lives compared favorably with those of industrial workers living in the same era. They ended their analysis by criticizing the works of those like Blassingame and Genovese, characterizing their work as the historical glorification of slaves as “sympathetic failures, but failures nonetheless (p. 259),” when they should have been examining the actual material conditions of slave life, and their relative level of comfort and success. Their work set off a firestorm of criticism, and then gradually disappeared from view. As historians shifted their attention from the economics of slavery to the family and community lives of slaves, an analysis based solely on the tabulation of calories consumed and burned and hours worked seemed cold and calculating. Although there had been a significant emphasis on the use of statistical data in the study of history in the middle years of the twentieth century, the years following publication of *Time on the Cross* saw a shifting away from such statistical forays into the past. While historians continued to use statistical, and particularly census, data as appropriate, they came to think of some topics as less susceptible to or appropriate for this sort of analysis.


Agriculture and agents of change

As the transformations within the study of slavery would indicate, histories often reflect the social movements of their time, as new topics and social concerns become matters of inquiry. The question of authority came to the forefront in the 1960s and 1970s, and was evident as well in the work of agricultural historians. Scholars, reformers, and government officials have long noted the prickly relationship that farmers have had with change, and its agents. Rather than treating that relationship as irrational, historians began looking for the sources of that discomfort. In 1979, David Danbom published his book, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930*. Danbom wanted to understand, among other things, why farmers had not embraced various reforms ostensibly suggested for their own good. In the case of the early 20th century’s Country Life Commission, Danbom found that their suggestions really had far more to do with the needs of an urbanizing nation that had to be fed than the real and pressing needs of farming people. (Danbom, 1979) When Mary Neth (1995) examined the attitudes of farming people during roughly the same period, she found resistance to organizations such as agricultural extension and the Farm Bureau. According to her analysis, their resistance grew out of their satisfaction with local ways of doing and being. Farm people wanted to continue their own traditions, which included making do and doing without, rather than blindly accepting new techniques and technology. Remaining on the land became increasingly difficult for small farmers, who struggled to remain competitive.

Other historians found farm people accepting change, but on their own terms. When Katherine Jellison (1993) studied farm women’s acceptance of new technology in the period from 1913 to 1963, what she discovered is that farm women often wanted that technology, but not for the reasons that extension personnel believed they should. The USDA’s Extension home
economists believed that they could encourage women to remain on farms by giving them newer and better technology that would make it possible for them to live more leisurely lives, similar to those of middle class women in town. Farm women, or rather those whose families could afford it, were happy to make use of that technology, but not so they could experience more leisure. Instead, they wanted to save time on the washing, for instance, in order to devote more energy to their income-producing flocks of chickens. Farm women thought of themselves, first and foremost, as producers, Jellison argued. Likewise, historian of technology Ronald Kline (2000) argued that farm people were frequent adopters of all sorts and varieties of new technology, but again, on their own terms. While the electric company might want farmers to completely wire their homes and use copious amounts of power, farm families limited the amount of wiring, as well as the amount of electrical usage in their homes. They wanted to be frugal and strategic in their use. While the phone company disapproved of the ways in which farm communities used the telephone for social purposes, that disapproval did not dissuade people from participating in activities such as sharing music over party lines. Kline’s farmers bent technological change to their own uses. J. L. Anderson (2009), author of *Industrializing the Corn Belt: Agriculture, Technology, and Environment, 1945-1972*, found farmers being resistant to expertise well into the post-World War II period. One of the big concerns of the USDA in this period was management of farmers’ use of new chemicals, such as the pesticide DDT. What Anderson found was prevalent among farmers was an “if a little is good, more must be better” attitude, with farmers applying the chemical in large dollops on their property, from the barn, to the barnyard, to the house. Their understanding of how to make use of chemicals was not always in line with that suggested by the experts – and not always in their own (or everybody else’s) best interest.
While these works by Jellison, Kline, Anderson and others would seem to indicate a serious resistance among farmers to education and expertise, other work paints a more accommodating picture. Nancy Berlage’s (2016) *Farmers Helping Farmers*, described a very different culture of farm families and expertise, forged by joining the Farm Bureau. While some historians, such as Neth, have cast the Farm Bureau as an elitist organization, out of touch with the needs of average farming families, Berlage challenged this characterization, arguing that there was no single type of Farm Bureau family, beyond their desire to join together with others in order to promote better farming through greater education and better practice. In her study, Farm Bureau families participated in a wide variety of educational activities meant to promote better and more scientific agricultural and home making practices by men, women, and children. These farmers, rather than rejecting science, embraced it. Whether this same spirit will be found by other historians, studying other groups of farmers, has yet to be seen.

**The impact of post-World War II environmentalism**

If studying questions of authority was one way of bringing agricultural history into the second half of the twentieth century, studying the relationship of agriculture to the environment was another. The environmentalism of the post-World War II period found its way more regularly into discussions of agriculture’s past. Although historians who wrote about the environment certainly existed prior to the 1970s, it was in that decade that environmental history as a clearly identified sub-discipline began its evolution. It is not surprising that some of the first topics tackled by environmental historians were agricultural. The relationship between human beings and landscapes is clearly visible on farms, and provides extensive material for examining environmental questions. Donald Worster’s (1979) *Dust Bowl* tackled the drought and dirt storms of the 1930s, and blamed the decade’s events on the greed of farmers looking to cash in
on the bounty to be had from lands newly broken by the plow. Worster did not define himself as an agricultural historian, and his work has served to illustrate some of the differences between environmental and agricultural historians. Agricultural historians have been highly critical of Worster’s source base, and his focus on certain environmentalist values without reference to the complexities of the era. Historians making use of agricultural census materials, and more recently GIS, have challenged a number of his conclusions (Riney-Kehrberg, 1994; Cunfer, 2005).

Worster was not the only environmental historian to develop important agricultural themes. William Cronon’s (1983) Changes in the Land has proven a less controversial offering, and one that has proven particularly useful. Cronon put the interaction of humans and landscapes at his book’s very core. The conflicting land use and agricultural patterns of Indians and European settlers formed the heart of the book, with the highly mobile Indian land use patterns falling before a British understanding of land use based not on mobility but permanence. Also among the useful offerings of environmental historians was Mark Fiege’s (1999) work, Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West. Although Fiege identified primarily as both an environmental and western historian, his work was incredibly useful as agricultural history. His most important contribution to the discussion were his complication of the idea of “natural” and his description of the ways in which nature asserts itself in the face of human action. Irrigation ditches may appear to be wholly unnatural, but the wild finds its way into that landscape. For example, even within a highly altered irrigation landscape, water behaves as if it was part of a natural watercourse, and wildlife flocks to it, “natural” or not. Additionally, the human beings Fiege described lacked the ability to control that water as completely as they would have liked. There was a constant interplay between the
naturally occurring and the created. As Fiege wrote, “nature changes what humans build, often in unanticipated ways; sometimes nature comes back more powerful than before (p. 9).”

**Feminism and agricultural history.**

While environmental historians were, in the 1980s and 1990s, shaping agricultural history from the outside, women’s historians were shaping agricultural history from the inside. Rural women’s history grew out of two separate sets of concerns. One was that women’s roles on farms received very little attention in traditional agricultural history. In most agricultural history, farmers’ wives existed at the periphery, tucked into the kitchen and garden, with little role to play in the main story. This, historians of rural women argued, was a gross oversimplification of the female role on farms, given the great importance of family labor to the development of agriculture in the United States. A second, related concern also spurred these historians to action. While mainstream women’s history had grown out of the second wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, it had grown largely without acknowledgement of the roles of farm women. With its emphasis on activism and urban, wage-earning women, that story had little to say about the majority of American women over time who had been, in fact, employed in agriculture. The literature, if it dealt with them at all, tended to dismiss them as individuals enmeshed in a patriarchal culture who had little interest in the vast changes in women’s possibilities emerging in the second half of the twentieth century.

Although Minnie Miller Brown’s (1976) article, “Black Women in American Agriculture,” appeared in *Agricultural History*, it was a rarity to see such work in the mid-1970s. By the 1980s, however, there was a concerted movement to write women into agricultural history, writ large, made evident by Joan Jensen’s (1981) *With these Hands: Women Working on the Land*, an anthology of primary sources by and about women, meant to refute the notion that
women were absent from agriculture. As Jensen wrote, “Taken together, the documents in this anthology reveal women as active participants in every stage of agricultural production and in every period in agricultural history (p. xxiii).” They were meant as a challenge, and were “raw materials out of which, some day, the full history of women working on the land can be written (p. xxiii).” What followed was the creation of an organization dedicated to scholarship in rural women’s history, known since the early 2000s as the Rural Women’s Studies Association, and a flood of scholarship putting women’s stories at the center of agricultural history.

One of the central questions of this literature has been the value, or lack thereof, that men placed on women’s roles in agriculture. While this new literature universally acknowledges the many and varied roles that women played, and their importance to production in a variety of environments, there is little consensus among scholars about conditions within the farm household. The strongest proponent of the mutuality school, which argues that farm women and men were largely involved in shared decision making and recognition of each others’ contributions is Grey Osterud, author of *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York* (1991) and *Putting the Barn Before the House: Women and Family Farming in Early Twentieth-Century New York* (2012). In Osterud’s telling, the families of New York’s Nanticoke Valley were engaged in sustaining agricultural operations across generations through a process of shared work and shared decision making. When men “put the barn before the house,” women agreed with and supported those decisions, because they contributed to the long-term well-being of the family, and the survival of the farm. To do otherwise would be counter-productive and self-defeating. A continuation of this line of analysis is Jenny Barker Devine’s (2013) *On Behalf of the Family Farm: Iowa Farm Women’s Activism since 1945*. The women Barker Devine studied were a small but vital portion of Midwestern
farm women, those committed to economic and political action in aid of the region’s family farmers. Although they lived and worked within a patriarchal system, they regularly stepped outside of their allotted sphere because of their passionate involvement in their families’ businesses. Barker Devine called them “agrarian feminists,” active in pursuit of an economically sustainable future.

Other historians of women in agriculture have been far less convinced of the reciprocal nature of relationships within the farm home, and have been quicker to label those relationships as both patriarchal and abusive. In works such as Deborah Fink’s (1992) *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural America, 1880-1940*, the picture that emerged was grim. She wrote, “Although plains farming would have been impossible without women, their indispensability was embedded in the institution of the nuclear family, which limited and constrained any power they might have garnered through their economic activities. Life on the farm did not insulate women from the gender oppression afflicting U.S. society as a whole. On the contrary, rural women had little social protection against violence and exploitation p. 190.” Barbara Handy-Marchello (2005), in her work on North Dakota’s farm women, commented “women’s subordination was established by custom and religion (p. 50),” and remarked on the frequency of abuse of both women and children. Marriage was an economic partnership, but women were generally subordinate partners. In Jane Adams’ (1994) telling, farm women generally did without things that they both wanted and needed, to the point where, sometimes, tearing down the house was the only way to get men to pay attention to their requests. These works, whatever their interpretation of women’s experiences, which put farm women at the center of agricultural life, rather than the periphery, were not the traditional offerings of agricultural historians. By the 1980s, agricultural history had taken on new and expansive forms.
Defining agricultural history

All of this begs the question then, what is agricultural history? In 1970, this was, perhaps, an easy question to answer, but perhaps not. The reviewer of John Schlebecker’s encyclopedic 1969 work, *Bibliography of Books and Pamphlets on the History of Agriculture in the United States, 1607-1967* protested Schlebecker’s failure in “establishing boundary lines for what is agricultural history. The processing of farm products is not included but slave revolts, cowboy artists, floriculture, race horses, logging, wild flowers, and Mennonites are included (p. 420).” (Shideler, 1970) As this criticism would suggest, even in the period before environmentalism and the women’s movement changed historians’ direction, the field was far more inclusive than “cows and plows.” In light of the way in which the discipline developed across the twentieth century, the definition might very well be as big as “the history of the processes involved with growing things on purpose, and the story of those individuals, families, communities, and organizations that interacted with these processes.” In the 21st century, the net cast by the field has only gotten wider. Agricultural historians have increasingly embraced their multidisciplinary and expansive tendencies. In 2011, the Agricultural History Society, founded in 1919 and the second oldest of all historical organizations in the United States, made “cage free since 1919” its unofficial motto, embracing the multiplicity of approaches that have long informed the work that agricultural historians do. The agricultural history with which the 21st century began developed along lines suggested by the last quarter of the 20th.

Defining the farmer

Historians continue to ask the question, who is a farmer? While the answer to that question in 1950 might have been a white landowning male, by the 1980s, historians had added the women, and tenants, white and non-white, as well. The twenty-first century found historians
looking even farther afield, bringing all those laboring in the fields into the story. Understanding the place of children as sources of agricultural labor has become increasingly important, especially since in the period prior to World War II, farms that did not rely on at least some child labor were rare indeed (Riney-Kehrberg, 2005; Birk, 2016). Migrants of all types have become increasingly important to the story, and especially because as the use of children diminished, the use of itinerant adult labor increased (Higbee, 2003; Hahamovitch, 1997). The whole meaning of being an agricultural laborer is up for grabs as well, with animals beginning to get their due as agricultural producers (Brown, 2016).

**Defining progress is an agricultural context**

Historians are continuing to question the concept of “progress” as well. While much of the literature has focused on the way in which technological change freed farmers and their families from backbreaking toil, there has been less attention to what this meant for those individuals forced out of agriculture in the process. This is particularly noticeable in the history of the cotton south, which moved from hand labor to mechanization in the middle of the 20th century. There is a tendency to assume that transitions such as this one, which happened in the 1950s and 1960s, meant opportunity for those leaving agriculture. After all, who would want to spend their days doing intensive agricultural labor in the hot sun, month in and month out, for years on end, and for little remuneration? That is certainly the premise of books such as Donald Holley’s (2000) *The Second Great Emancipation: The Mechanical Cotton Picker, Black Migration, and How They Shaped the Modern South*. While it is true that many African Americans voluntarily left the South in the first half of the twentieth century, seeking work and greater civil rights in the cities of the North, that does not mean that everyone wanted to go. Especially after the passage of voting rights acts in the 1960s, more African Americans wanted
to remain in the South, living in the communities they called home. Greta De Jong (2016) detailed this story in her work, *You Can’t Eat Freedom: Southerners and Social Justice after the Civil Rights Movement*. In the wake of changes to civil rights law, white Southerners, who had generally opposed African American migration out of the region, decided that the time had come to mechanize, and make their tenants and agricultural laborers redundant. At the very least, they would be reduced to such limited work roles that hourly compensation would offer a very meager living, encouraging them to leave the South. Southern politicians also manipulated access to programs, such as food stamps, that might have made it possible for people to feed themselves while looking for alternatives. They literally hoped to starve African Americans out of the South. Although some options, such as agricultural cooperatives, offered an alternative path to economic stability, by the 1970s they were unable to sustain political support. The agricultural South remains marked by the poverty and dislocation of the immediate post-war era.

**Transnational examination of U.S. agricultural history**

Another very recent development is the understanding that such problems – and their solutions – need to be examined within an international context. United States agricultural history has taken a transnational turn, intimately tied to its environmental turn, as historians have increasingly acknowledged that agricultural history refuses to remain within the borders of individual nations. Plants and animals have histories that stretch across borders, as flora and fauna bred in one place took root in other soil. People export and import technologies around the globe, often far from the place that first inspired their development. Plant and animal diseases move with startling ease between continents, as the progress of diseases such as avian flu has shown. Agricultural policy and ideas take on a life of their own, as well. Tore Olsson’s (2017) *Agrarian Crossings: Reformers and the Remaking of the US and Mexican Countryside* detailed
the way in which agricultural reform moved back and forth between the US and Mexico during the twentieth century. Historians, and the public, have often assumed that this was a one way exchange, with the US sending expertise and technology to Mexico as a part of the post-World War II green revolution. Olsson, however, discovered a more mutual interchange. Small and tenant farmers in Mexico and the American South faced a whole host of shared problems, one of the most significant of which was access to land. These shared concerns, coupled with experiments in land tenure in both places in the 1930s, led to cross-border discussions and experiments. While this culminated in the mostly unidirectional experimentation with wheat in Mexico as a part of the green revolution, Olsson argued that the interchange between the countries was much more fluid, and in its earlier iterations, much more in tune with local conditions and needs than it eventually became. The green revolution in Mexico and other locations, Olsson argued, was successful in producing abundant food and fiber, but also successful in producing “breakneck and ramshackle urbanization (p. 198),” a situation which he perceived as being as dangerous to the health of the planet as the hunger that inspired the spread of the technology of large scale American agriculture around the globe.

**Defining the future of agricultural history**

The future direction of agricultural history is up for grabs. Given that history is generally concerned with the past – and the not terribly recent past at that – it is always expanding, and the ways in which study progresses are always evolving. Another way of putting it is that historians usually want to know how a story turned out before turning to their analysis of it. Because of that disciplinary bias, historians usually will not jump into a topic before twenty years or more have passed since its occurrence. Historians are only just beginning to tackle the Farm Crisis of the 1980s, since its fallout has been affecting agriculture for more than thirty years. Historians,
for the most part, have not turned to studying the history of genetically modified organisms, since concern over that scientific development has only grown to significant proportions in the twenty-first century. Historians are only beginning to turn to the study of large scale agribusiness because of the recent development of many of those firms, and the problems of gaining access to their records. Material has to be available in order for the story to be researched and written. Nevertheless, as agriculture evolves, its history must be written.

Even though agriculture, as historian and museums expert Debra Reid (2017) has acknowledged, is often a yawn inducing subject, it is one that no one can completely ignore. Everyone must eat, just as they must breathe. In encouraging greater integration of agriculture into museums, she also suggested a way forward for a greater concern with the history of agriculture: historians need to focus “on the humans at the heart of the story. People passed the laws that created ‘public lands’ that people bought and sold, and plowed, planted, and cultivated with machinery that other people designed and fabricated, using draft stock that people bred to do the work. These human-centric stories become the tools to reach members of the general public who are physically close to the historic fields and factories that fed and clothed them, but who cannot see those buried clues through the accretions overlaying the past (pp. 7-8).” There is very little that is more intimately connected to human wellbeing than agriculture, and little else that is so invisible, given the current residence of most Americans in cities and suburbs, and the way in which they acquire their food from grocery stores and restaurants. The job of the agricultural historian in the twenty-first century is to make visible to their readers the way in which their food and fiber comes to them, how that process has changed over time, and the way in which the acquisition of that food and fiber affects the larger world.
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Suggested Readings


Routledge.