

1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era

Volume 21

Article 10

2014

THE AMERICAN PIONEER FARMER It Is Time to Kill the Myth

A. G. Monaco

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty>



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

A. G. Monaco (2014) "THE AMERICAN PIONEER FARMER It Is Time to Kill the Myth," *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*: Vol. 21, Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty/vol21/iss1/10>

THE AMERICAN PIONEER FARMER

It Is Time to Kill the Myth

A. G. Monaco

*I*f one really wants to see the power of the written word or the influence the media has on shaping public opinion one should consider the treatment farmers receive in the United States. Long the darling of politicians and the media the American farmer has always profited from special consideration throughout the history of the country. The words that were used early in our history to describe them by powerful opinion-makers like Thomas Jefferson, Horace Greeley, and any number of novelists, dramatists, and journalists has had a lasting if not permanent effect on the nation's thinking. Rare can it be found outside of a religion that the spoken or written word of a few can shaped the minds of so many, for so long. What makes this fact most compelling is that the image of the pioneer, American farmer is based on a false premise that

these people were tied to the land by a strong moral foundation and committed to the settlement of the country for altruistic reasons.

The positive bias created in newspapers and books in the first half of the nineteenth century so convinced our nation of the near "sainthood" of the farmer that we continue to this day to provide modern farmers both large and small with incredible political considerations along with significant financial largesse. We may as a nation rail against corporations and banks that seek a government "bailout" but we do not hold the farmer to that same standard. Despite the fact that small non-farm business are thirty times more likely to fail than farms and despite incredible government support we almost always hold the farmer who fails blameless while pointing to the rules of the marketplace for everyone else. Instead of allowing the market to correct itself like we do with the neighborhood laundry or the local steakhouse, whenever farmers fail to adequately manage their businesses we drag Willie Nelson and John Mellencamp out of obscurity and hold a telethon or a "mega" concert to save the "family farm." Why is it that middle-class city dwellers can send money to people they never met who have incomes 53 percent greater than their own and yet rail at oil companies when gasoline goes up a penny per gallon?¹ Most of the behavior rests on political inaccuracies and biases that go back to opinions that grew out of the English Civil War.

The American, pioneer farmer's image of self-sacrifice and worship of the land is a product of the philosophy of the great English political philosophers of the seventeenth century who influenced an important founding father, who in turn influenced the romantic journalism of the early nineteenth century. In the end they all promoted an image that defied reality. Facts show that most early American farmers were not noble tillers of the soil working hard to settle our land but far more often economic opportunists who used government support and programs to make money. They were entrepreneurs who appropriately sought rapid returns on their investments and were for the most part not tied to the region they lived in. They were not guardians of the soil; they were land speculators.

¹ Vincent Smith, "Like the Past One, Farm Bill 2013 Is an American Boondoggle," *American Enterprise Institute* (July 17, 2013).

* It Starts with the "Agrarians" *

The canonization of the American farmer started with the logic presented by James Harrington, Algernon Sidney, and John Locke. These three seventeenth-century English philosophers promoted republican ideals and constitutional governments and in many ways shaped America's ruling principles and basic policies on private ownership of land. Harrington went as far as to say that the determining element of power in a state is land and the production of food and from that premise much of the "agrarian myth" is born.²

Harrington's ideas as stated in his major work *Oceana* influenced the designs of the Carolinas, Pennsylvania, and Georgia on an agrarian philosophical basis. In the case of Georgia its founder James Oglethorpe implemented a comprehensive plan for economic and social development that was based on the central concept of "agrarian equality," with the farmer as the central and most important part of society.³

Borrowing much from John Locke, the French Physiocrats led by Francois Quesnay held to the belief that all wealth originates with the land, making farming the only truly productive enterprise and declaring that those who work the land are its true owners. Locke and Quesnay in turn greatly influenced Thomas Jefferson, who more than anyone pushed America into its long love affair with farmers. Jefferson in a 1785 letter to John Jay once stated: "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting of bonds."⁴ Jefferson continued throughout his life to offer similar statements extolling the virtues of the farmer in many of his letters to influential individuals and made the importance of the farmer the cornerstone of his widely dispersed philosophy.

One finds an excellent explanation of this sentimentalism regarding the early farmer in Richard Hofstadter's book *The Age of Reform* in which

² J. G. A. Pocock, "Editorial and Historical Introductions," *The Political Works of James Harrington* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), xi-xviii; 1-152.

³ Thomas D. Wilson *The Oglethorpe Plan: Enlightenment Design in Savannah and Beyond* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012) 134-57.

⁴ Thomas P. Govan, "Agrarian and Agrarianism: A Study in the Use and Abuse of Words," *Journal of Southern History* 30 (1964), 35-47, in JSTOR (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2205372>).

he described America's attachment to a rural way of life as a tribute to a "fancied innocence of their origins." He goes on to describe the belief as a myth that strongly influences the way people perceive farmers and he emphasizes the importance of the "agrarian myth" in American politics. He goes further to indicate that Jefferson's writings and behavior in regard to the agrarian myth was significant in furthering the myth among his many followers particularly in the South.⁵

Some of early America's most important influences and later many of its most important authors all promoted the agrarian myth. In addition to Jefferson, influential authors like Benjamin Franklin, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, John Taylor of Caroline, and others furthered distribution of the myth. Many of the later writers often relied on descriptions of the time periods greatest celebrity George Washington as the ideal agrarian. In the nineteenth century the list continued with Horace Greeley, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and of course Henry David Thoreau. Later years brought us dozens of authors who idealized the farmer, including literary titans like John Steinbeck and the rather overrated Willa Cather.

* The Speculator as Farmer *

Writers over the years have been far less kind to the land speculator than the pioneer farmer, disregarding the fact that during the first half of the nineteenth century they were often one and the same. A number of America's founding fathers were certainly involved in land speculation despite the published reports of their vocation as farmers/public servants. George Washington was a large landowner in Virginia, Pennsylvania, and the Ohio country; Robert and Gouverneur Morris, William Duer, Oliver Phelps, Nathaniel Goreham, and William Johnson all acquired princely domains in Pennsylvania, New York, and Maine. All of them acquired large tracts of land, resold them and made fortunes.⁶ From the country's earliest days through the first half of the nineteenth century, the frontier land speculator was a common sight whose exploits were chronicled by domestic and foreign authors and whose deeds

⁵ See Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).

⁶ Ada Hope Hixon, "Washington as Land Speculator" *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1911): 566-75.

were discussed in editorial columns and among the members of Congress.⁷ Far from the sinister way they are portrayed in modern literature or drama, the speculator was a member of a vocation that during the first seventy-five years of America's history was simply too common to be despised.

Thomas Jefferson himself was not immune to the profits offered by owning land. Charles Beard in *Framing the Constitution* points out that Jefferson wanted a Bill of Rights to protect his own interest as indicated by his stand on the rights of plantation owners. Though supposedly committed to controlling the Southern aristocracy through limitations, he also aligned himself with the wealthy farmers of the region rather than with the common man. Jefferson did not condemn the land speculation that was prevalent in his time; he, like most, profited greatly by the rapidly rising land values.⁸

James F. W. Johnstone England's leading agricultural scientist stated in 1851 that American farmers in New England and New York held no local attachment to their land or their work. Johnstone went on to say that "generally, every farm from Eastport in Maine to Buffalo on Lake Erie is for sale. The owner has already fixed a price in his mind for which he could do better for himself and his family by going further west."⁹

Economic historian Paul W. Gates noted in his work *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture 1815-1860* that to the American farmer land was "not an enduring investment but a speculation which they prepared to part with when opportunity came to sell at a favorable price." Unlike the stereotype passed on through history, Gates saw the American farmer of the early nineteenth century (with the exception of the inhabitants of the Pennsylvania Dutch region) as someone who generally did not look upon land as something that would be passed down through generations but rather as a "means of quickly making a fortune through rising land values which the progress of the community and their individual improvements would give it."¹⁰

⁷ Allan G. Bogue and Margaret Beattie Bogue, "Profits and the Frontier Land Speculator," *Journal of Economic History* 17 (1957): 1-24.

⁸ Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1913).

⁹ Paul W. Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture, 1815-1860* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 400.

¹⁰ Gates, *The Farmer's Age*, 401.

Gates also lists passages from the periodical *The Albany Cultivator*, which in 1836 expressed the expectation, that land values would increase annually:

Who ever heard of a man buying and selling a farm at the same or a lessened price? It is so well understood that the seller is to have more than he gave that it has become a settled principle in the purchase of real estate. This percentage is sometimes very high, but in almost all cases it adds materially to the profits of the investment. Besides, it is correct in principle; a tract of land under judicious culture, must be enhanced in value at least five per cent per annum . . . nine-tenths of all our property has been derived from this source alone, the increased and increasing value of real estate.¹¹

Such speculation was not limited to the eastern farmers since evidence exists of similar mindsets in the west. Solon Robinson the pioneer and agriculturist spoke of the farmer's mindset in early Indiana throughout his writings. "There is not certainty if a man makes an improvement this year that he will enjoy them next; for the fashion of 'selling out' and making a new location is so strong that no one can resist it; so that it may be said that nearly the whole of the western population are afloat, with sails unfurled and anchors tripped, and ready to be off with the first favorable breeze that blows."¹²

The trend to capitalize and move on did not stop on the Banks of the Wabash, and we see in an 1853 letter from an Iowa farmer to his brother back East similar behaviors. In his letter Arthur Carpenter noted that nearly every farmer in his region was ready to sell his farm for the right price.¹³

Although agriculture was continuing to expand at a high rate prior to the Panic of 1857, the bulk of profits earned in the enterprise came from increasing land values not from crops or livestock. Between 1850-1860 overall United States farmland values including new farms increased by 100 percent, with an average gain of 50 percent. Land values saw the largest gains in Mississippi at 176 percent and Illinois at 121 percent.

¹¹ Gates, *The Farmer's Age*, 348

¹² Herbert Kellar, ed., *Solon Robinson Pioneer and Agriculturist* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1936) 384-85.

¹³ Gates, *The Farmer's Age*, 400.

Tennessee, Louisiana, and Alabama all saw values increase by more than 100 percent. New Jersey, New England, and Pennsylvania saw much more modest increases of 40 percent primarily because of the skimming of profits from numerous land sales by prior generations of farmers.¹⁴



Figure 1: "Holding Out for Top Dollar on the Land"

Self-sufficiency was never the goal of the average pioneer farmer, since most sought to produce something they could trade or sell until the price of their land offered them a profit or the opportunity to acquire more land that they could later sell for a profit. The southern region of the country presented some very interesting behaviors in regard to the people who owned farms and their resistance to living and working on their land. These behaviors presented interesting economic reversals despite massive increases in the value of the land. While the South was initially richer than the North on the eve of the American Revolution, it clearly suffered a significant economic decline so that by 1840 its white population was noticeable poorer than free Northerners.¹⁵

As to their commitment to the land we know that the commitment extended only so far as the land was profitable. As early as the 1780s it became apparent that farmers were overplanting and overgrazing their land

¹⁴ Gates, *The Farmer's Age*, 402.

¹⁵ Peter H. Lindert and Jeffrey G. Williamson, "American Incomes 1774–1860," *NBER Working Papers* 18396, National Bureau of Economic Research, Inc. (2012): 7.

and the problems of "soil exhaustion" was being broadly discussed.¹⁶ Those discussions however had little impact on the practices of farmers, and rather than living up to their image as protectors of the land, most behaved in a destructive manner that they knew would damage the land. One could easily argue that the "pervasive foe of improved methods was the abundance of land, along with the steady migration of farmers westward."¹⁷ The Southern planter's style of life precluded investments in their land or reforms related to crop rotation. The reforms that were needed to protect the soil and the environment required the expenditure of capital, which demanded that the farmer reduce his spending. Additionally the new ways of farming called upon the planter to remain out in the fields and supervise his enterprise directly. This left him often far from populated areas and solely in the company of poor whites and slaves which too many landowners found unattractive.¹⁸ "Strong was the temptation to leave one's fields to the care of an overseer and to seek diversion at a county seat or at distant plantation houses. There was no place like home—to be away from."¹⁹

The belief that farmers were committed to their occupation is dispelled early in our history. America's movement away from agriculture as the primary means to earn a living started early. Census figures show that by the start of the 1860s less than for 40 percent of Americans earned their livings from agriculture. That figure does not mean all of those listed were farmers, since it reflected a significant portion of the population who worked in pursuits connected to agriculture but who did not live or work on farms.²⁰

In some part this decline in the number of people employed in farming is the result of advances in the technology that served agriculture—inventions and use of devices such as John Deere's more effective plows, and the replacement of the scythe with higher capacity threshing machines in the 1830s reduced the number of people needed to farm plots of land. In tandem with those advances the building of canals and railroads, which

¹⁶ Avery O. Craven, "Soil Exhaustion," *Agricultural History* IV, 2 (April, 1930): 37.

¹⁷ Curtis P. Nettles, *The Emergence of a National Economy, 1775-1815*, (New York: Harper and Row), 250.

¹⁸ Brooke Hindle, *The Pursuit of Science in Revolutionary America, 1775-1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 355.

¹⁹ Nettles, *Emergence of a National Economy*, 251.

²⁰ Gates, *The Farmer's Age*, 401.

brought western goods eastward, certainly provided some impetus for a decrease in the number of eastern farmers that were needed to feed the seaboard populations. We can assume also that as the ability to make money through land speculation diminished in the East many "farmers" simply abandoned "their stewardship of the land" in favor of more urban-based vocations. Particularly in the south, where cities like Atlanta, Savannah, Charleston, and New Orleans offered more opportunities to earn fortunes away from the hard toil of farming, more and more farmer/speculators were drawn away from land.

* Conclusion *

Perhaps summing up the plot of Willa Cather's *My Antonia* with the phrase "Rain or shine the famers whine" earned me the low grade I deserved on my freshman term paper, but my feelings about the heroic description of the pioneer farmer have not changed. I have long believed that the positive image of the American farmer resulted in actions that ran counter to the economy's dependence on a less restrictive marketplace. Long before and well after Ms. Cather commenced writing her drab prose, writers and politicians have mislead America about the integrity and importance of the pioneer farmer. Starting very early in American history, journalists and authors have painted a rather romantic portrait of the pioneer farmer as someone who tirelessly and proudly works the earth. As a result we as a society have long accepted the concept of the American farmer as a heroic figure morally tied to the land out of some selfless desire to improve our universe. That same society will in turn use pejorative terms to describe individuals involved in other enterprises that had a far greater impact on the eventual prosperity of the nation. Many early Americans characterized as "robber barons," "corporate raiders," and "stock speculators" (or is that swindlers) injected far more effort into the progress of our nation and our individual freedom than most farmers did during the same time period. Still we honor the farmer while the industrialist and the financier are fair game to be ridiculed and abused in art and literature.

I eat, in fact I eat a lot, and as a result I think farming and agricultural businesses are important but like all businesses their primary purpose is to provide a positive return on an investment. Farmers are like most

business owners following a desire for profit, and there is nothing wrong with that pursuit. What is wrong is the reallocation of wealth from the pockets of one set of business owners or workers to the pockets of farmers based on a premise that is more than two hundred years old and that was never true. Agricultural policies long supported in the halls of Congress and every state house in the country have created opportunities for farmers that defy the marketplace and in turn deprive non-agricultural businesses and workers of funds. While the fairness of our political practices are subject for a different article what is most interesting is how despite proof to the contrary, the population by a large percentage endorses the special treatment of farmers as a deserved and necessary practice. We can trace back this bias to the self-interested actions of people like Thomas Jefferson early in our history but the push to promote the image of the farmer remains active. Today we hear from authors like Wendell Berry or scholars like Paul Thompson of Michigan State (a wonderful writer I would add) who seek to canonize the traditional farmer and move us back to agrarian behaviors that at best were only rarely practiced.

Clearly, history is not always reported correctly, but in the case of the American farmer, their present-day treatment emanates from a false premise that has been repeated for centuries. One has to marvel at the staying power of the work of those romantic era philosophers and the politicians and writers they enlightened with their words. Perhaps it is a reminder to all of us that the bias we see in today's various communication mediums may very well create a myth that can last for centuries with a significant, long lasting political and economic impact.