THE EXPANSION OF THE AGRICULTURAL FRONTIER*

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FOR MORE than a century, from 1725 until 1840, Pennsylvania was foremost among the colonies and states in the production of food. Her preeminence in agriculture during the formative years of the nation was due not only to her rich heritage of land but also to the varied agricultural talents of the several nationalities that comprised her population. Pennsylvania was the "bread-basket of the nation" because much of her soil was fertile and because the majority of her settlers were traditionally wise in the lore of the land.

The greatest natural resource of Pennsylvania is her land. For three centuries this has been the major source of her wealth. Pennsylvania farmers love their land. A large number of farms now are operated by direct descendants of pioneers who carved them out of the wilderness. Titles to these farms, passed down from father to son through seven to nine generations, reach back to original patents from William Penn. This is the beginning of a permanent agriculture.

William Penn sought to attract to his province, first of all, God-fearing men of the soil; "Those persons," he said, "that Providence seems to have most fitted for Plantations."1 A majority of the settlers were farmers or craftsmen who were well equipped to cope with the hazards and toil of pioneer life. In their new and democratic environment European peasants became independent American farmers. During the two centuries from 1640 to 1840 farmers were by far the most important element in the body politic. They comprised most of the population, produced most of the wealth, and dominated the political and economic life of the province and State. Not until after 1840 did farmers become a minority group.

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The land policy of William Penn was very democratic for that period. It was his desire to found a colony of small, independent freeholders. Settlement was mostly by individuals not, as in New England, by communities. He sold some large tracts, mostly before coming to America, and established a number of so-called “baronies” and “manors,” but the great majority of his sales was in tracts of 100 to 500 acres. The democratic land policy of Penn, no less than his charter of civil and religious liberty, made Pennsylvania the haven of the oppressed and homeless of Europe.

The land policy of the proprietaries favored rapid settlement of the back country. A large proportion of the province, perhaps most of it, was occupied by settlers without legal sanction as squatters. Squatter sovereignty was promoted by an abundance of good land, loose business methods of the proprietaries, the overwhelming number of immigrants and the slowness of the proprietaries in extinguishing Indian titles.

Both Germans and Scotch-Irish, particularly the latter, were remiss in acquiring title to land by purchase. Said the harassed James Logan, agent of the Penns, in 1730, “The settlement of five families from Ireland gives me more trouble than fifty of any other people.” But the qualities of temperament that made trouble for the proprietaries in this respect also were indicative of the resourcefulness essential in frontier men. They pushed into the wilderness and occupied choice bits of land, title or no title. Eventually both the proprietaries and the Commonwealth were forced to recognize squatter and “tomahawk” rights as establishing priority of claim to land.

Soon after the settlement along the Delaware had become established emigration westward began. There were several motives. Some sought escape from the discipline and restraints of the eastern settlements; they desired to breathe the free air of the frontier, unhampered by the conventions of civilization. Others migrated for economic reasons; they sought an opportunity to make a fresh start in life. Still others were motivated by no other purpose than the spirit of adventure; they desired to see new country and to have new experiences.

The most compelling incentive to the advancement of the frontier, however, was land hunger. In the economy of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the principal form of property was land.
The lure of unoccupied land was the magnet that drew most settlers westward. The urge to acquire virgin land that had not been impoverished by the ruinous soil robbery which prevailed in the farming of that time was particularly strong in those who migrated from the older settlements near Philadelphia and in New Englanders who settled on the Connecticut claim. The glowing descriptions of new country by the Connecticut Land Company, the Susquehannah Company and the Holland Land Company made distant pastures look green.

“This passion for immigration,” said Brissot de Warville in 1792, “will appear to you unaccountable:—that a man should voluntarily abandon the country that gave him birth, the church where he was consecrated to God, the tombs of his ancestors, the companions and friends of his youth and all the pleasures of polished society to expose himself to the dangers and hardships of conquering savage nature.” To this cultured French gentleman the pioneer spirit was inexplicable but most Pennsylvania settlers were made of tougher fiber.

The agricultural frontier followed the hunting and trading frontier. Hunters, traders with the Indians and missionaries blazed the way for farmers. The Indian trail became the trader’s trace; this was widened into the pack-horse trail and eventually into the farmer’s road. Hunters and traders, however, were transients; they struck no roots into the soil. Pioneer farmers were the advance guard of a permanent civilization.

One reason why Pennsylvania became the bread-basket of the nation was the diverse elements in her population. Coming from different countries they brought not only differing agricultural techniques but also differing preferences for land. It is an ethnological principle that people migrating from one country to another tend to settle on land that most closely resembles the part of the “Old Country” from which they came, providing there is opportunity for choice. This principle has been amply demonstrated in the settlement of Pennsylvania, particularly by the Germans and Scotch-Irish, less so by the English. The successive waves of settlement which ultimately divided the province into “English Pennsylvania,” “German Pennsylvania,” and “Scotch-Irish Pennsylvania”
represented not only nationalistic clannishness but also, in considerable measure, the respective land preferences of each group.

The foundation of Pennsylvania agriculture was laid by the Swedes, who controlled the Delaware from 1638 to 1655. "The first planters in these parts," wrote William Penn in 1683, "were the Dutch, and soon after the Swedes and Finns. The Dutch applied themselves to traffick; the Swedes and Finns to Husbandry." This was a fair appraisal of the two nationalities; the Dutch were traders, the Swedes were farmers. Agriculture was the primary objective of the Swedish colony; Governor Johann Printz was instructed by the Swedish Royal Council to "forward agriculture and the improvement of the land," first of all. The Swedes developed a prosperous agriculture. English, German and Scotch-Irish settlers who followed and eventually absorbed them could not have become established on the land so quickly had they not been able to utilize the experience of pioneer Swedes in crop husbandry, as well as the surplus of their herds and flocks.

Being dependent upon water transportation, the Swedes clung to the land along the Delaware and its tributaries. In 1683 Thomas Paschall wrote, "The River is taken up all along by the Swedes and Finns and some Dutch, before the English came, near eight score miles." Like the Swedes, the English had a passion for land. Spanish adventurers in Florida and the Southwest were drawn to those regions by the magic of the word "gold." The Dutch had attentive ears for the word "beaver." The primary objective of English settlers was to establish homes on the land. After 1681, when they began to come to Penn's Woodland in considerable numbers, they found the best land along the Delaware occupied by the Swedes. According to Thomas Paschall, "Some of them buy the Plantations (of the Swedes) and so get room by the great Riverside, and the rest get into Creeks and small rivers that run into it, and some go into the Woods seven or eight miles." By 1700 the English had occupied much of the present counties of Chester, Delaware, Bucks and Montgomery. They found it to their liking; it resembled the gently rolling countryside of the mother country and the Penn,

\[5\] William Penn, "Letter to the Committee of the Free Society of Traders," (1683), Myers' Narratives, 237.

\[4\] Thomas Paschall, "Letter" (1683), Myers' Narratives, 251.

\[5\] Ibid., 251.
Manor, Lansdale and Chester soils, as they are known today, were not unlike some of the better farm land of Britain.

A group of people of English stock from Virginia became established in the southwestern part of the colony but soon was submerged by the more numerous Scotch-Irish in that area. Beginning in 1769 a larger number of English-speaking people from Connecticut and other New England colonies established themselves in northeastern Pennsylvania. The Connecticut Yankee element was preponderant in that area as far west as Potter County; that county, together with McKean, Warren and Erie, was settled mainly by people of English stock from New York.

Land in the Connecticut Claim, other than in the Wyoming Valley, was much more hilly than that near Philadelphia and the soil somewhat less fertile, but the Yankees found it to their liking. The hills reminded them of New England, and the glaciated Volusia and Lackawanna soils were much like the soil of the farms they had left. Soon they began to build great stone walls around their fields, after the fashion of New England; these stood until the advent of mechanized agriculture, more than a century later.

It is not suggested that the settlers from Connecticut chose this land because it resembled New England; they merely settled what they considered to be the westward extension of Connecticut. It is an interesting coincidence, however, that there was such a marked similarity between the two areas.

As a group, the English were good farmers, although inclined at first to neglect livestock. They had a highly developed business instinct; as time passed they dominated the economic and political life of the colony. From the little group of "gentlemen farmers" of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture came many important contributions to agriculture, the most notable of which was the practice of rotating crops. This has been commonly, but erroneously, attributed to the Germans.

The advance guard of German farmers, under the leadership of Pastorius, arrived at Philadelphia in 1683. They founded Germantown, as he recorded, "two hours walk from Philadelphia, where there is a good, fertile soil and many fresh, wholesome springs of water and good pasturage for cattle." During the next thirty years

*Francis Daniel Pastorius, "A Particular Geographical Description of the Lately Discovered Province of Pennsylvania" (1700), Myers' Narratives, 381.
German immigrants, mostly sectarians, settled the valleys of the Schuylkill, Perkiomen and Lehigh, and parts of Montgomery and Lancaster Counties. Mass immigration of "church Germans," mostly adherents of the Lutheran and Reformed churches, began about 1727 and continued until the Revolution. They settled in Lancaster, Berks, York, Lebanon, Northampton, Lehigh and adjacent counties. Eventually Germans spread throughout southern and central Pennsylvania, and became the major element in the agriculture of the colony, as they are today.

Pennsylvania Germans illustrate to a striking degree the influence of soil on settlement. For thirty centuries the ancestors of the Palatines had lived on the banks of the upper Rhine. This is a gently rolling country with fertile soil; it is one of the most productive wheat-growing districts in central Europe. German immigrants looked for this kind of land in Pennsylvania. They found it in the limestone valleys. Travelling through the wilderness in search of sites for their new farm homes they appraised the native fertility of the soil by the kind, number and size of the trees growing on it. Land that was heavily stocked with hardwoods—oak, maple, hickory, beech and especially land on which black walnut grew to large size was preferred; these were familiar signs of rich land. They chose limestone soil as most closely resembling that to which they had been accustomed in the fatherland. Their descendants have clung to this soil tenaciously, but not exclusively, ever since; a considerable number of German settlers found Berks shale and other soils acceptable.

The close association between German farmers and limestone soil is an interesting illustration of the reaction of man to his environment. Says F. J. Turner, "The limestone area in a geologic map of Pennsylvania would serve as a map of German settlements. First they filled the Limestone Island adjacent to Philadelphia in Lancaster and Berks counties. Then they crossed the Blue Ridge into the Great Valley (Cumberland) which is floored with limestone. Following it toward the southwest they crossed the Potomac into central Maryland. By 1732, following the same formation, they began to occupy the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia."

The hunger of German farmers for limestone soil was not satisfied until they had occupied the Lebanon Valley and practically all the narrow limestone valleys of central Pennsylvania. They

followed limestone soil as the needle follows the pole. Germans looked upon farming as a preferred way of life, not merely as an occupation. They settled on land to remain there; in many cases their descendants are there to this day.

In their passion to possess limestone soil German farmers tended to keep out or to supplant farmers of other nationalities. In colonial days nationalistic and religious prejudices ran high; it was inevitable that sharp group antagonisms should develop. German and Scotch-Irish frontier farmers, in particular, were not congenial neighbors. Their religious faith, philosophy of life, and methods of farming were different. The almost complete displacement by Germans of English-speaking farmers on limestone soils is one of the most significant facts in the agricultural history of the State.

Between 1740 and 1790 Scotch-Irish were in almost sole occupancy of the Cumberland Valley west and south of Shippensburg. About 1790 they began to give way to Germans; by 1830 most of them had sold their farms to Germans and moved west. The record of this wholesale exodus is written on tombstones in the cemeteries of now defunct Presbyterian churches. The same change of occupancy took place on the limestone soils of Lancaster County, Northampton County and in the Kishacoquillas and other limestone valleys of central Pennsylvania. The present prevalence of Germans on nearly all the limestone land of the State is due not only to the choice of this soil by the first settlers but also to a gradual displacement. It is the result of difference in mode of farming and is primarily economic.

The process of displacement still goes on. There is economic competition for the best limestone soil even among different groups of Germans. Says Walter Kollmorgen, "When the Amish began to invade the Lancaster Limestone Plain in the middle of the eighteenth century it was already occupied by communities of German Lutheran and German Reformed as well as by communities of English Quakers, English and Welsh Episcopalians and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. Today the churches built by these people are not used; they stand as monuments to former communities that have disappeared. The Amish and, in part, the Mennonites now occupy the land."

8 Walter M. Kollmorgen, "Culture of a Contemporaneous Rural Community: The Old Order Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania," Rural Life Studies No. 4 (1942), United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics.
Pennsylvania Germans were efficient farmers. They tilled their land intensively and built large, comfortable barns to house their crops and livestock. They were the foremost exponents of livestock husbandry as a means of maintaining the fertility of the soil. They were and still are the most numerous and most productive element in Pennsylvania agriculture.

The immigration of Scotch-Irish to Pennsylvania was mostly contemporaneous with that of Germans, mainly from 1728 to 1776. Since they found land in the three original counties quite fully occupied by English, Welsh and Germans, they pressed on to the frontier, which was more to their liking. At that time the frontier was Lancaster County. Donegal township in that county was settled about 1716; it became the seed-bed of Scotch-Irish in Pennsylvania. Soon parts of Dauphin, and Lebanon counties, as now organized, were occupied. By 1730 venturesome Scotch-Irish had crossed the Susquehanna into York and Adams counties and by 1745 had taken possession of the Cumberland Valley. All but fifty families of the approximately 5,000 people in that valley in 1750 were Scotch-Irish.

After 1750, beginning to feel crowded in the Cumberland Valley and being under strong economic pressure from German farmers, many of them sold their farms, planted outposts all along the line of the Indian trading path to Bedford, and advanced into central Pennsylvania. Settlement of the valley of the Juniata and its tributaries began about 1740, but was not extensive until the close of the Indian War, in 1764. All of central Pennsylvania was first settled by Scotch-Irish except Union and Snyder counties where Germans predominated.

Southwestern Pennsylvania was officially opened for settlement in 1768, following purchase of the area from the Indians. After that, the disciples of John Knox migrated into this region in such large numbers as to make it predominantly Scotch-Irish, as it is today. They also settled much of northwestern Pennsylvania except counties bordering on New York.

Like German immigrants, Scotch-Irish preferred land resembling that to which they had been accustomed in the homeland. In general, they chose foothills rather than valleys; shale soils rather than limestone. Early immigrants occupied a considerable area of limestone land in the Cumberland and smaller valleys, but were quite willing to relinquish it to Germans and move on to the hills.
They were distrustful of what they called “dry limestone” land, on which there were few springs, preferring the less fertile but better watered soils of the foothills. Their desire to live in hill country was fully as strong as that of Germans to live in limestone valleys and was an equally important motive in settlement.

The relative distribution of Scotch-Irish and Germans in Chester, Lancaster and York counties illustrates the respective land preferences of the two groups. The Scotch-Irish settled and still occupy the hillier sections of these counties. Pigeon Hills, Conowingo, Nottingham and State Line “barrens” were settled by Scotch-Irish; the limestone areas by Germans. Scotch-Irish occupied the chestnut “glade land” of northern Lancaster and Chester counties in preference to limestone land. In Northampton County, according to Sherman Day, the Scotch-Irish “generally avoided the limestone lands (there known as Dry Lands), preferring the slaty hills of Mount Bethel and Allen townships where they found pure springs of water.” In Juniata County, as reported by the same historian, they preferred “slate lands bordering mountains, watered by clear and copious springs to limestone lands where the water sunk beneath the surface and expensive wells were consequently required.”

The Scotch-Irish also looked with disfavor upon limestone valleys because these were heavily wooded and they were not accustomed to woodland. Furthermore, they considered such valleys subject to frosts. Germans, on the other hand, were accustomed to a heavily wooded country and were not daunted by the labor required to clear it, nor by the frost hazard.

Little has been written about the Scotch-Irish as farmers, in comparison with the many volumes that sing the praises of Germans in this respect. As a group, they did not produce as bounteous crops as Germans on their more fertile soils. They were less interested in livestock husbandry and soil conservation, but they adapted themselves readily to the difficult conditions of frontier farming. Hardy, courageous and self-reliant, they were well qualified to conquer the wilderness. They were a frontier people because

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*Sherman Day, Historical Collections of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1843), 510.

**Ibid., 510.
they preferred that way of life. It must be admitted that their less highly developed instinct for permanence often led them to sell their partially developed farms to the on-coming Germans and move farther into the wilderness; sometimes this process was repeated several times. But this was a minor fault as compared with the great contribution of the Scotch-Irish in blazing the way for the expanding life of the colony and Commonwealth.

After the triumphant conclusion of the Revolution the State began to dispose of the immense area of land that it had acquired from the proprietaries. Then followed an era of land speculation, chicanery in public office and iniquitous land legislation which has not been equalled elsewhere on this continent. Great blocks of public land were acquired by speculators, many of them State officials, for practically nothing and exploited solely for personal gain. The shady land deals of John Nicholson, James Greenleaf and Robert Morris, in particular, and the operations of the Pennsylvania Population Company, the Holland Land Company and other greedy speculative groups retarded the settlement of a large part of northwestern Pennsylvania for more than a quarter of a century because of prolonged litigation and uncertainty as to the validity of titles. At the time of his death in 1800, John Nicholson controlled 3,700,000 acres, or about one seventh of the land area of the State, and his debts totaled the staggering sum of $12,000,000.

The last frontier in Pennsylvania, comprising the present counties of Potter, McKean, Jefferson, Cameron, Elk and Forest, was not occupied to any extent until after 1840, following the departure of lumbermen who had ruthlessly stripped the area of its magnificent virgin forests. In 1822 Nicholas Biddle of Philadelphia described this as "the last wilderness in the East." He said, "It is indeed lamentable to see so much of this long-established state totally abandoned . . . to meet, almost in the heart of Pennsylvania, Seneca Indians from New York hunting through a wilderness hundreds of miles in extent with less interruptions, perhaps, than they would have found two centuries ago. There are seventeen adjoining counties north and west of the Susquehanna containing more than 18,000 square miles, with a population of about six souls for every square mile. . . . I seem to be speaking of some desert on the Yellowstone, not a region within four days' ride of Phila-
There is no example among the old states of a wilderness like this."

Time has obliterated all visible evidence of the last resting place of many pioneer farmers, but has deepened our sense of obligation to them.

The ploughshares
Cleave softly through the mellow loam
Where you have made eternal home
And set no sign. Your epitaphs
Are writ in furrows.