In a recent essay James A. Henretta declares, "The history of the agricultural population of pre-industrial America remains to be written." Henretta's sweeping assertion cannot be easily dismissed. To appreciate how little we know about the work culture of Early American farmers, we have only to consider the impressive literature produced over the last quarter century dealing with other aspects of the colonists' lives. Studies of American Puritanism have generated subtle and sophisticated insights into the life of the mind. Demographic historians have revolutionized our understanding of the family—as well as many other things—in New England and the Chesapeake. Scores of investigations of colonial towns have deepened our knowledge of Early American community life. Historians have explored the evolution of slavery and the origins of a distinct Afro-American culture. We have learned a great deal about colonial cities, mob behavior, urban artisans, and yet despite this extraordinary flowering of colonial scholarship, historians have virtually ignored agricultural work, the endless jobs, in other words, that occupied the attention of the majority of the colonists during most of their waking hours.

Fifty years ago the study of agrarian culture enjoyed higher standing than it does today. Indeed, historians of immense talent then sifted through plantation accounts and farm records, and it is to these scholars—A. O. Craven, Percy W. Bidwell, John I. Falconer, Lewis Cecil Gray, Ulrich B. Phillips, Richard H. Shyrock, Robert Walcott, and others—that we frequently turn to discover the character of
agricultural life before the American Revolution. One example in particular stands out. Gray's monumental two-volume *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* first published in 1933 remains the standard guide to southern colonial agriculture. The work is regularly cited in the pages of learned journals, a striking phenomenon considering that most writings of Gray's more famous contemporaries, intellectual, social, and economic historians, have been superseded by later scholarship.

The strengths of these studies are obvious to anyone who bothers to review them. The authors were themselves familiar with an agrarian world that we have lost. They experienced the sights, sounds, and smells of farm life, and those memories enriched their analyses. Wesley Frank Craven's *Southern Colonies in the Seventeenth Century*, for example, contains deeply personal passages describing colonial Virginians who "smelled of tobacco, cattle, and sweat." Craven imagined what it must have been like to sail past an isolated seventeenth-century farm. "The bark of a dog, the crow of a rooster, the cluck of a fretting mother hen, or the cry of children at their play," he explained, "were among the sounds that carried over the water a familiar notice of the farmer's clearing in the woods." Craven not only wrote well, he also understood what producing a harvest required.

So did Ulrich Phillips. In his brilliant study, *Life and Labor in the Old South*, Phillips reminisced about his own boyhood experiences on a Georgia farm. Phillips "followed the pointers and setters for quail in the broomsedge, the curs for 'possums and 'coons in the woods, and the hounds on the trail of the fox; and for one season, suspending my college course for more serious affairs, I guided the plow and plied the hoe in a crop of my own, gaining more in muscle and experience than in cash." The drudgery in Georgia's red clay led in time to one of the more sensitive descriptions of staple agriculture ever written. One, of course, did not have to walk behind a plow to recapture the world of the Early American farmer, but apparently it helped.

After World War II the history of colonial American agriculture entered a fallow period. The concerns of an earlier generation were forgotten. Scholars transformed agricultural work into statistical abstractions, quantitative measures of production that were generally divorced from actual sweat and toil. Economic historians counted barrels and bales shipped to the West Indies and Europe, giving little thought to how export crops were produced or how their cultivation shaped the daily activities of countless colonial Americans. Hogsheads of tobacco or rice acquired interest only as units of international commerce. It was as if one set out to understand the meaning of industrial labor in the lives of
modern workers by counting the number of widgets and stopcocks that their factories had manufactured. The myriad local studies that appeared in the 1960's and early 1970's seldom mentioned Early American agriculture. In these investigations, men and women formed families, obtained land, joined churches, participated in town meetings; they did almost everything except work in the fields.  

The contrast between English and American agricultural history during the post-war period is striking. At the very time that scholars on this side of the Atlantic turned away from rural culture, English historians advanced the study of agrarian life to new levels of sophistication. Joan Thirsk, Margaret Spufford, E. L. Jones, Alan Everitt, and E. Kerridge—just to cite a few of the more prominent names—explored the relation between agricultural production and social structure. The most impressive work was *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* edited by Thirsk. In this splendid investigation of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century agriculture, Thirsk drew important distinctions between highland and lowland cultivation, between pastoral and woodland economies, between chalky and clay soils. Not surprisingly, British agricultural history became identified with microanalysis. The results of this scholarship were extraordinarily provocative. Even small differences in soil types or in crop selection profoundly influenced the character of community activities, religious as well as political.  

Drawing upon the insights of this recent European scholarship, James Henretta published in 1978 a seminal essay entitled “Families and Farms: Mentalité in Pre-Industrial America.” This much cited article adumbrated a large research project in progress, but even in this preliminary statement, Henretta sought to deepen our understanding of “the economic and cultural consciousness of the mass of the agricultural population.” Most important, this work forcefully reminded colonial historians of the centrality of agriculture in the lives of the Early Americans. Indeed, Henretta issued a challenge. The time had come, he asserted, to rethink old, inadequate assumptions about “those activities that dominated the daily lives” of the majority of colonial men and women.  

The first substantial reinterpretation of Early American agriculture in several decades, Henretta’s analysis deserves serious consideration. Has it, in fact, helped us recapture a lost culture of the colonial farmer? Henretta began by clearing the field of accumulated intellectual rubble, scholarly writings that obfuscate our understanding of the farmers’ cultural values. His villains were the “entrepreneurial” historians who insist in their writings that the colonists “were individualists, enterprising men and women intent upon the pursuit of material advantage at the
expense of communal and non-economic goals." Henretta criticized Richard Bushman and Charles Grant, but he saved his sharpest barbs for James T. Lemon, an historical geographer who wrote about southeastern Pennsylvania in the early eighteenth century. Each of these scholars maintained that colonial farmers entered into market with one thought in mind, profit. At every turn Lemon's rural cultivators schemed to increase their share of the economic pie, and if their grubby maneuvering left none for their neighbors, then so be it. People looked out only for their own interests.

Henretta found this argument perverse, and not a little bit offensive. The "liberal" interpretation, he maintained, flew in the face of historical record. In particular, Lemon and his school possessed a shallow theory of human motivation. Henretta admitted that colonial farmers traded goods in the market place, but they did so sporadically, even reluctantly. Individual gain was not the driving force behind their actions. If we want to comprehend the culture of colonial farmers, we must recognize that early Americans did not march to Adam Smith's drum beat. The key to their "consciousness," Henretta believed, turns on quite different "epistemological principles."

Constructive reinterpretation followed demolition. Henretta claims to have provided insight into the farmers' mentality, a bundle of ideas, values, and attitudes that formed the core of early American culture. His rural cultivators were certainly not capitalists. Rather, Henretta declared, they were obsessed with survival of the "lineal family." Membership in family units provided men and women with meaningful identity, a measure of security in an insecure environment, and they regularly put aside thoughts of individual self-advancement in order to advance the family's welfare. Generations were bound to the common quest. Fathers, sons, and grandsons relentlessly strove to preserve the family from impoverishment or dissolution. "The lineal family—not the conjugal and certainly not the unattached individual"—Henretta announced defiantly, "thus stood at the center of economic and social existence in northern [from Pennsylvania to New Hampshire] agricultural society in preindustrial America."

II

Henretta's essay was provocative in the best sense of the term. It compelled other historians to confront the culture of agriculture, a complex fabric of values that not only helped shape public behavior, but also helped men and women to interpret that behavior once it had taken place. Surely, his work put to rest the notion that quantitative analysis of
exports and imports—in itself—reveals anything significant about an agrarian mentalité.\textsuperscript{12}

Before we herald the “new” agricultural history, however, we should examine some assumptions behind Henretta’s analysis. Only if we do this can we ascertain whether he advanced our understanding of colonial farm life beyond that of L. C. Gray and Ulrich Phillips. Specifically, three elements in Henretta’s formulation raise doubts about the efficacy of his overall interpretation: the dichotomous character of his argument, the extraordinarily broad level of his generalizations, and the tendentious treatment of the family.

The dichotomous quality of Henretta’s presentation was puzzling. He forced his readers to choose: \textit{either} colonial farmers entered the market place to make a profit \textit{or} they eschewed individual gain in order to preserve the family. This arbitrary separation runs counter to much of what we know about rural cultivators before the American Revolution. Certainly, the husbandmen of Tudor and Stuart England sold their produce, and unless a great deal of legislation about forestalling and engrossing was unrelated to social practice, these farmers do not appear to have been indifferent to the prices they received. Moreover, the promotional literature that drew people—many of them young, single males—to America stressed precisely the values that Henretta is so determined to deny. “What happiness might they [the migrants] enjoy in Virginia,” John Rolfe remarked typically in 1616, “where they may have ground for nothing, more than they can manure, reap more fruits and profits with half the labour.”\textsuperscript{13}

Perhaps the sea change temporarily deadened the entrepreneurial spirit, but evidence for such a transformation is difficult to find. Darrett Rutman, for example, demonstrates how the settlers of early Massachusetts Bay aggressively peddled their fish, timber, livestock, and grain throughout the Atlantic world.\textsuperscript{14} As Howard S. Russell explains in \textit{A Long, Deep Furrow: Three Centuries of Farming in New England}, these colonists possessed “the ability when the need appeared to adapt themselves to trade and to an increasingly commercial type of agriculture such as many of them must already have been well accustomed to in their old homes in Essex, Kent, and close to busy London.”\textsuperscript{15} Again, perhaps profit was not an obsession—a tendency upon which orthodox Puritans would have frowned—but sumptuary laws in seventeenth-century New England testified to the purchase of ostentatious finery by individual farmers.\textsuperscript{16} The story was not much different in the middle colonies. Indeed, it is difficult to understand how Henretta could fit Stephanie Wolf’s “urban villagers” of Germantown into his mentalité.\textsuperscript{17}
And in the tobacco colonies Aubrey Land discovered that a “cash crop was essential” for the struggling planters.\textsuperscript{18}

Henretta’s analysis, in short, rested upon an unnecessary dichotomy. The “determined pursuit of profit” occurred within large, extended lineal families. One only has to mention someone like Samuel Sewall to realize that a man of traditional values could care deeply about the welfare of his kinfolk and also drive a hard bargain in the marketplace.\textsuperscript{19}

Colonial cultivators tried to obtain the highest possible price when they sold their produce, and by so doing, they advanced not only their individual interests and those of the conjugal unit, but also those of future generations that would bear their surnames. Historians of pre-Revolutionary agriculture simply do not have to choose between the “lineal family” and profitable producers. What we need is an analytic framework capable of dealing with both dimensions of rural life.

A second problem inherent in Henretta’s argument is an inappropriate level of generalization. He sets out to tell us something significant about the values of northern colonial farmers, \textit{all} of them, a body of men and women scattered over thousands of miles and living in strikingly diverse social and physical environments. From this broad perspective, it is difficult to distinguish between Henretta’s rural cultivators and the ubiquitous yeomen who once flourished in the pages of American history textbooks. These intrepid democrats sprang up everywhere; one looked pretty much like any other. Henretta does not attempt to resuscitate a lost American yeomanry, but by failing to take regional and local differences into account, he creates an “ideal” type, a rural abstraction that only loosely explains the beliefs and customs of any particular group of early American farmers.

English agricultural historians—among others—have forcefully reminded us of the difficulties that arise from this level of generalization. Joan Thirsk made the point eloquently in the opening lines of her \textit{Agrarian History}: “The variety of England’s scenery is a commonplace to the Englishman, yet his textbooks of economic history have not so far taken full account of the significance of this variety in ordering man’s work and shaping their societies. The conventional notions about farming and the structure of rural communities still rest upon the convenient generalization that England was composed largely of nucleated villages, populated by \textit{corn-and-stock peasants}, who farmed their land in common fields and pastures.”\textsuperscript{20} What a man grew and where he grew it turned out to be considerations of major importance in understanding agricultural cultures in the past.\textsuperscript{21}

Although the colonial American countryside—north or south—has
SWEAT AND TOIL

not been analyzed as thoroughly as England’s, we do know that different areas within the colonies became identified with distinct crops. Striking variations sometimes occurred within rather small regions. Howard S. Russell, for example, complained of New England agricultural historians who have “treated farming as though it were a single comprehensive occupation, carried on practically everywhere according to a uniform pattern.” Russell’s own research revealed that from the very beginning of English settlement “the types of agriculture varied in response to natural conditions of soil and surroundings, available markets, and the experience an individual farm family brought or inherited from England.”

Soil types, length of the growing season, the farmer’s European background, proximity to dependable markets, even chance (as in the case of the discovery of indigo in South Carolina) influenced the character of agriculture in the scattered American settlements.

Within each region the dominant crop became the arbiter of time, not to mention the farmer’s expertise. It set the annual schedule, and one person’s year—indeed, his day—might not have borne much resemblance to that of a cultivator dwelling only a short distance away. Consider the relation between tobacco and wheat, two crops that figured prominently in the development of the late eighteenth-century Chesapeake colonies. A planter who made a crop of tobacco worked steadily throughout the year. The tasks were well-defined: planting, hilling, transplanting, hoeing, topping, suckering, cutting, curing, prizing, and finally, a full fifteen months after the tiny seeds were first placed in a bed, marketing the loaded hogsheads. With wheat the annual routine was notably different. The farmer sowed the seed and chased away pesty birds, but for the most part, a person who cultivated wheat simply waited for the grain to ripen, a sign that an exhausting harvest season was at hand. It is not surprising that after George Washington dropped tobacco cultivation for that of wheat, he discovered that he had more time for foxhunting, his favorite pastime. As his biographer, Douglas Freeman, explained, wheat altered the pace of Washington’s life, for in this type of agriculture, “The ground was plowed; the grain was planted; after that, nothing need be done or could be done, except keep livestock away, until harvest.” In South Carolina and Georgia still another routine prevailed. In this region, especially along the rivers, rice was master. As Sam B. Hilliard, an historical geographer, remarked with some amazement, “Rarely has a single crop ever dominated so completely the energies of agriculturalists as rice did during its heyday along the South Atlantic coast.”

By lumping farmers together in a single cultural category—cereal
and livestock men—one cannot take proper note of major agricultural shifts that occurred before anyone thought of mechanization. There is no question that colonists changed the dominant, regional crops from time to time. They did not always do so with enthusiasm or because they were intent upon entering the new market. But whatever their causes, such transformations altered basic agricultural routines and inevitably affected fundamental values associated with crops, land, and work.

In the early decades of settlement almost everyone from Massachusetts Bay to South Carolina seems to have concentrated on raising livestock. Within a relatively short period, however, people discovered other, more promising agricultural opportunities. Eighteenth-century Carolinians took up rice, and to a lesser extent, indigo. By the mid-seventeenth century Chesapeake planters relied almost totally upon tobacco. For some colonists even that dependence eventually came to an end. In the late eighteenth century many established Tidewater families in Virginia and Maryland were forced to plant wheat where tobacco had once grown. And in pre-Revolutionary New England, because of black stem-rust that destroyed wheat crops, and because of competition from cereal producers in the Middle Colonies, farmers shifted their attention back to livestock. Albert Laverne Olson has written of Connecticut’s agriculturalists, “As the eighteenth century advanced, the inhabitants raised cattle, horses, and mules to be sold in the West Indies and to be driven to points within the colonies. By the post-Revolutionary times many areas formerly tilled were used as pasturage for animals.”

Whatever the mentality of the Early American farmers may have been, it varied according to place and time. A comparison between agricultural and industrial work is instructive here. No one would claim that work meant the same thing to the women of early nineteenth-century Lowell as it does to modern laborers assigned to an automobile assembly line. Moreover, foundry work and metal lathe operation was clearly different from other types of industrial work. My point is that historians must bring the same kinds of qualitative and temporal distinctions to agricultural work as they reflexively bring to industrial labor.

A third troubling feature of Henretta’s analysis concerns the family. Henretta argued that values, attitudes, and assumptions associated with the family were springs of behavior in rural America. “Lineal family values did not constitute, by any means, the entire world view—the mentalité—of the agricultural population,” he explained, “but they did define a central tendency of that consciousness, an abiding core of symbolic and emotive meaning; and, most important of all, they
constituted a significant and reliable guide to behavior amid the uncertainties of the world."

The problem is that the family cannot possibly carry the interpretative weight that Henretta has placed upon it. The family, after all, is a universal human institution, and it is difficult to think of a society, any society, in which the family did not provide "an abiding core of symbolism and emotive meaning." In other words, to declare that the family—however defined—shaped the way that people interpreted day-to-day life experiences is a truism. During wars, famine and plague, when national governments have dissolved, when the very fiber of society has seemed to unravel, men and women have always fallen back upon family members for love, fulfillment, and security. Consider the impressive historical literature on the slave families in ante-bellum America. For black people faced with systematic debasement, the family proved to be an amazingly resilient institution for carrying distinct Afro-American values over generations; it placed the individual within a web of relationships that provided meaning and identity. For white European migrants the family served many of the same functions. Indeed, so central was the family in early Salem, Massachusetts, that authorities ordered single men to form artificial families. No one would deny the need to explore in greater detail the character of colonial families. It seems unlikely, however, that this research in itself will significantly advance our understanding of the specific cultures of early American farmers.

III

After pointing out the problems with Henretta's argument, we are still left with his initial challenge. The history of the agrarian population of colonial America has not yet been written, and if the "lineal family" does not hold the key to lost agrarian mentalités, it is incumbent on us to consider how the history of Early American farm cultures might be constructed. One place we might start is with the insights of scholars like Craven and Phillips. These historians recognized that agriculture involved work—hard physical labor—and a clearly defined series of tasks that varied from region to region. Production, then, becomes our focus. Even in this preliminary discussion, we need to consider the complex relation between the actual cultivation of a crop—be it rice, tobacco, or wheat—and the farmer's cultural values.

Cultural anthropologists provide us with insights into the ways crops may have influenced the producer's perceptions of time. As we noted
earlier, each plant dictated a slightly different production schedule. Colonial historians might profitably explore the cultural implications of different agricultural work routines. The tobacco calendar—to cite a familiar example—was relentlessly demanding, filling the planter’s entire year (with the possible exception of several slow weeks in late fall), with prescribed tasks. Moments of recreation, visits with friends and distant relatives, even the timing of life-cycle events such as marriage and baptism, may have been fitted into this demanding work schedule. The planters’ dispersed settlement pattern only added to the difficulty of arranging communal gatherings.

By contrast, the cultivation of wheat culminated annually in a harvest, a period of intense labor requiring an enlarged work force. Often the harvesters were hired hands. They were sometimes strangers in the community, and their very presence increased the anxiety of the harvest. After the grain had been safely carried to the barns, however, the cereal farmer could relax, give thanks, and celebrate with neighbors. Tobacco generated no such special days precisely because a new crop was in the ground long before the old one was ready to ship to market. This staple created no “dead time,” no natural cycle of social events, and it is not surprising that the patterns of face-to-face relations in the Chesapeake differed markedly from those of the Middle Colonies. Tench Coxe, an essayist and politician who studied these rhythms, observed in the 1790’s that farmers in New England and the Middle Colonies were particularly well-prepared to become artisans and craftsmen in the New Nation. The “union of manufactures and farming,” Coxe explained, “is found to be convenient on the grazing and grass farms, where parts of almost every day, and a great part of every year, can be spared from the business of the farm, and employed in some mechanical, handycraft, or manufacturing business.”

By knowing more about how colonial farmers perceived and organized work, we may better understand why contemporary observers so frequently criticized agricultural practices in pre-Revolutionary America. Take the example of New England’s rural cultivators in the eighteenth century. Since the time of Jared Eliot, commentators on agriculture in this region have chastised Yankee farmers for their slovenly, wasteful habits. These colonists, it seems, refused to rotate their crops, ignored agricultural innovations, and engaged in extensive cultivation when they might have produced the same harvests with much less damage to the soil through more careful, intensive procedures.

It does not appear to have occurred to these critics that New Englanders may have been doing quite well by their own standards.
Indeed, what seemed to be lazy, untidy farm methods may have resulted from a cultural decision not to let women work regularly in the fields. With the family's effective labor force so reduced, the cultivators had to adopt extensive practices in order to survive. When Timothy Dwight, Connecticut's famed diarist, visited Hudson, New York, he saw for the first time women at work in the fields. “I was presented with a prospect entirely novel to me,” Dwight marveled. “Ten women, of German extraction, were arranged in front of a little building, busily employed in dressing flax. In my childhood I had seen women, in a small number of instances, busied in the proper labour of men; particularly in raking hay immediately before a shower, when the pressing nature of the case demanded extraordinary exertions. Even this I had not seen for thirty years. Women in New England are employed only in and about the house, and in the proper business of the sex. I do not know, that I was ever more struck with the strangeness of any sight, than with the appearance, and business, of these German females.”

Not only does Dwight's account reveal how substantially agricultural practices varied within a small geographic area, but it also reminds us how much about agriculture is a matter of cultural values associated with work.

Whenever colonial farmers and planters gathered, they spoke of the state of “certain privileged crops,” a marvelous phrase devised by the Marquis De Chastellux during a visit to the United States in the 1780's. Around the courthouses of Virginia, in the smart clubs of Charleston, along country roads in Carolina, outside mills in Pennsylvania, after town meetings in New England men talked about agriculture. Indeed, if they had not done so, we would have reason to be surprised. Their lives were intimately tied up with the plants in the fields. In 1680, for example, a Dutch minister, Jasper Danckaerts, left New York City to observe the character of Long Island's truculent farmers. He certainly found no Puritans. “The boors . . . talked fouly and otherwise. . . ,” Danckaerts reported, “even without speaking a word about God or spiritual matters. It was all about houses, and cattle, and swine, and grain.” Josiah Quincy, Junior, a curious Bay colonist who toured the South in 1773, discovered that in South Carolina, “The general topics of conservation, when cards, the bottle and occurrences of the day don't intervene, are of negroes, and the price of indigo and rice: I was surprised to find this so general.” Even retired presidents were obsessed with obtaining news about agriculture. In 1796 Benjamin Latrobe visited Mount Vernon and reported the “Coffee was brought about 6 o-clock. When it was removed[,] the president addressing himself to me enquired after the state of Crops about Richmond.”
discussion turned to the Hessian Fly, Indian corn, and finally, the design of plows, and if Latrobe was disappointed, he could at least take comfort in the knowledge that similar topics dominated dinner table conversation throughout the young republic.

These conversations tell us much about the culture of agriculture in Early America. Indeed, if we were to examine this rhetoric closely, we would find that colonial farmers were simply not passing the time of day when they chatted about prices and yields. The quality of one's crop—be it rice, tobacco, wheat, or livestock—was a central element in a complex agrarian moral system. Producers measured the worth of other men as well as themselves by these public exchanges, by the appearance of the plants, by the prices they received, by the ability to manage a farm or plantation.

If farmers had been less personally involved in production, if like the great sugar lords of the Caribbean they had been absentee investors, then they might not have been so sensitive to what other men obtained in the marketplace or so worried about comparisons made by neighbors riding past one's fields. But throughout colonial America such was not the case. In Virginia, for example, Tidewater planters calculated not only their own standing but also that of their competitors by the appearance of fully cured tobacco leaves. "I know in this neighborhood," Landon Carter declared, "people are very fond of speaking meanly of their neighbor's Crops and I am certain mine has been so characterized." Fortunately for Carter, as he travelled about the Northern Neck gratuitously inspecting other men's tobacco, he did not "see any so good [as mine]," and he even ventured, "a wager with the best of them both as to quantity and quality." In this agrarian culture, Carter's good management publicly demonstrated his private virtue.

Agricultural production, therefore, seems to have shaped powerfully group behavior, though not precisely in the manner that Henretta suggests in his essay. Over an extended time, several generations at least, men living within a specific region were constantly judged by the quality of their crops. They assessed others by the same standards. These exchanges, repeated until they became an unconscious part of daily life, slowly transformed the dominant plant and the particular work schedule that it demanded into an emblem of local culture. Migrants and young persons in the area learned that one grew a certain crop in that part of the country. To do otherwise was unthinkable, an anti-social act, an individual decision that ran counter to the symbolic world of the producing community. At markets and fairs, in the newspapers and almanacs, in face-to-face relations at grinding mills or tobacco ware-
houses, farmers reaffirmed a traditional relation between crop and culture. J. E. Spencer and Ronald J. Horvath, two historical geographers, explained, "The argument of two neighbors over some cropping technique or the advice given to new arrivals in the area by older residents can have far-reaching consequences, in view of the fact that this same scene is taking place throughout an area about to become an agricultural region settled by an immigrating population." They also observed that "A farming 'mentality' in this context refers to the totality of the beliefs of the farmers over a region regarding the most suitable use of the land in an area."40

This argument suggests that agricultural change may have involved a difficult, even wrenching cultural process. Such shifts were not matters of simple economic expediency. Considering the specialized expertise associated with each crop, one could hardly expect early American farmers to have jumped from crop to crop in a frantic effort to maximize profits. Rather, agricultural shifts were deeply disturbing events within an established symbol system. An example of such a profound redefinition seems to have occurred in Tidewater Virginia during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. For planters who had acquired a sense of individual moral worth through the cultivation of tobacco, whose families time-out-of-mind had produced the leaf, the movement from tobacco to wheat as the dominant local crop created a crisis of self-perception. The familiar fabric of everyday life was filled increasingly with problems. The sights and sounds of the fields became less reassuring; a traditional ranking system lost meaning.41 As N. F. Cabell, an early nineteenth-century historian of Virginia agriculture, remarked, "Many planters first lessened their crops of tobacco and then abandoned them altogether. Planters thus became farmers, and as such entered on a general course of improvement, but suffered much during the period of transition." Cabell did not explain what he meant by "suffering," but one suspects that the planters' distress was not purely economic.42

Analysis of agrarian work culture leads inevitably to a reconsideration of ideas, political as well as religious. We know that various colonists were more or less open to evangelical religion in the mid-eighteenth century. Moreover, some Americans accepted the teaching of whig political theorists with greater enthusiasm than did others. At this time we can only speculate on the possible relation between specific forms of agriculture and receptivity to particular ideas, but it does not seem unreasonable to assume that a farmer's ideology was, in part at least, bound up with his daily work experiences.

Several possible links between ideas and work might be explored. To
modern political historians, the Tidewater planters' support of the American Revolution, and in some cases, of radical, even egalitarian notions about governance seem inexplicable. These gentlemen were wealthy slave-owners, connected commercially and socially to England, and they appear to have had nothing to gain by fomenting rebellion. If we take a different, more anthropological view of the evidence, however, their actions become less mysterious. The difficult shift from tobacco to wheat—again, we are considering only the region's dominant crop—may well have caused men like Richard Henry Lee, George Washington, and Landon Carter to contemplate a bold reordering of their entire symbol system, one that includes kings as well as tobacco. There is no hard evidence that this was the case. But one finds tantalizing suggestions. Thomas Jefferson, the most innovative mind of his generation, coupled Virginia tobacco cultivation with dependence upon England and in *Notes on Virginia* announced he was happy to be free of both of them. And one Maryland planter explained: "As the culture of wheat, and the manufacturing of it into flour travelled southward, the people became more happy, and independent of the British storekeepers who had kept them in debts and dependence."44

Popular religious persuasion may also have been connected to agrarian work culture. Certainly, this relation deserves investigation. It is possible, for example, that a crop such as tobacco heightened the producer's confidence in his ability to control nature. Leading Virginia planters in the Revolutionary period spoke of themselves as managers, as crop masters, as persons capable in other words of making decisions affecting the quality of the finished leaf. One had to know when to top and worm the plants, when to cut the tobacco, how long to let it cure. As little as possible in this long work schedule was left to chance. Failure, therefore, resulted from personal dereliction, and by the same token, success implied "virtu." It is not surprising that members of the Virginia gentry generally subscribed to a calm, reasonable, low-church Anglicanism, a theology that did not challenge their Pelagian tendencies. How different the experiences of the wheat farmer. He found himself dependent upon natural elements beyond his direct control. The vulnerability of the cultivator, his enforced passivity during much of the growing season, may have convinced him of God's terrible omnipotence. It would be interesting to know if cereal producers favored the Great Awakening in significantly greater numbers than did the tobacco planters.

The most influential evangelical preacher of the eighteenth century, George Whitefield, certainly recognized a relationship between forms of
agricultural production and a people's receptivity to the "new light." He loved the prosperous farmers of Pennsylvania. "Their oxen are strong to labour," he recorded in his journal, "and there seems to be no complaining in their streets. What is best of all, I believe they have the Lord for their God. . . . The Constitution is far from being arbitrary; the soil is good, the land exceedingly fruitful, and there is a greater equality between the poor and rich than perhaps can be found in any other place of the known world." How different Maryland and Virginia appeared to Whitefield! The dispersed tobacco planters had neglected building towns of consequence; there were few churches. When Sunday services were held, farmers offered lame excuses why they could not possibly attend. Tidewater society, so full of "wicked men," discouraged even the indomitable Whitefield. "The greatest probability of doing good in Virginia," he concluded, "is among the Scots-Irish, who have lately settled, in the mountainous parts of that province. They raise little or no tobacco, but things that are useful for common use."

The next decade could be an exciting time for colonial agricultural historians. Some years ago Keith Thomas, a highly respected British scholar, remarked, "For a historian to write about both eighteenth-century religion and eighteenth-century agriculture would be highly eccentric." This statement is less true today than when it was written. An increasing number of scholars concerned with reconstructing past cultures will return to old sources and discover to their delight a rich variety of farm mentalities. And in time, this work will compel us to rethink much of what we take for granted about other aspects of early American life.

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20. Thirsk, ed., _Agrarian History_, 1 [emphasis added]


23. Breen, “Culture of Agriculture.”


32. Breen, “The Culture of Agriculture.”


39. Jack P. Green, ed., *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752–1778*, Virginia Historical Society Documents, Volume 4 (2 vols., Charlottesville, 1965), I, 474. The wives of the great planters were also caught up in the culture of agriculture. Philip Fithian, a young tutor at Princeton, hired by Robert Carter, reported, “I had the pleasure of walking to Day at twelve o’clock with Mrs. Carter; She shewed me her stock of Fowls & Mutton for the winter; She observed, with great truth, that to live in the Country, and to take no pleasure at all in Groves, Fields, or Meadows; nor in Cattle, Horses, & domestic Poultry, would be a matter of life too tedious to endure.” (*The Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773–1774: a Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion*, ed. by Hunter Dickinson Farish [Williamsburg, 1945], 42.)


