FRONTIER ECONOMY IN SOUTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

SOLON J. BUCK

As the first area west of the Appalachian Mountains to be occupied by the advancing army of home-seekers that was destined to sweep across the continent, southwestern Pennsylvania is of peculiar interest to the student of frontier economy. The characteristics of that economy in the region were in the main a result of its frontier status and consequently were similar to those of other areas in process of being occupied. They were intensified, however, by the isolation of the region from older settlements; and they differed from those of other frontier areas because of differences in the physical environment, in the cultural backgrounds of the pioneers, and in the scientific and technological equipment available during the period of occupation.

After a few preliminary advances and retreats, the army of occupation started to take possession of southwestern Pennsylvania about 1766. The settlers came in the main from the piedmont and valley sections of Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, where they had been accustomed to frontier conditions; and their antecedents were English, Scotch, Irish, and German. Topographically the region was a dissected plateau drained by the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers, which came together to form the Ohio at Pittsburgh. The soil was fertile, but a considerable part of the surface was too steep or broken for successful cultivation. Almost the entire area was heavily forested, and it abounded in wild animals, both game and predatory. The region had been visited by traders from across the

1 This paper was read by the author, director of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey from 1931 to 1935 and at present director of publications in the National Archives, before a joint meeting of the American Historical Association and the Agricultural History Society at Chattanooga, Tennessee, on December 27, 1935. It is a by-product of the author's work in the preparation of a history of "The Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania," one of the prospective publications of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey. This paper is also printed in Agricultural History for January, 1936. Ed.
mountains for a generation; two military routes, the Braddock Road and the Forbes Road, had been opened into it; and British troops had occupied Fort Pitt and other posts in it since 1758; but it was still in the main an unbroken wilderness when the settlers began to take possession. Although the claims of the Indians to the region were extinguished in 1768, their incursions were a menace to the pioneers during the greater part of the frontier period. Despite the difficulties involved in crossing the mountains and in establishing and maintaining homes in the wilderness, the population of the region rose rapidly from a few hundred in 1766 to about forty thousand in 1774 and then more slowly, especially during the Revolution, to about sixty-five thousand in 1790.

The motivating force back of this migration was predominantly economic. Some there were, especially among the first settlers, who were drawn by a love of adventure or of solitude or by a desire to escape the consequences of past conduct; but the great majority sought the opportunity to improve their economic status. This they expected to do by acquiring land and developing it into improved farms, which would provide old-age security for themselves and something to hand down to their children. It was not that they expected to make a better living, at least for some years to come, than they could in the East; but rather that they hoped to be able, while supporting themselves and their families, to acquire and create capital goods in the form of improved land, farm buildings, livestock, and equipment. Ultimately, of course, the durable wealth created by the pioneer would result in improved standards of living, at least for his children. The land in its wilderness state had comparatively little economic value; not until it was transformed into farms by the labors of the pioneers did it become productive capital; and it is probable that, during the frontier period, at least as much human energy was devoted to the creation of capital in the form of producers' goods as to the production of consumers' goods for the use of the producer or for sale or exchange.

Apparently a considerable proportion of the first settlers, however, were attracted more by the wilderness environment as they found it than by the opportunity of transforming it into improved farms. According to "a citizen of Pennsylvania," writing in the *Columbian Magazine* in 1786 about the "progress of population" in his state,
The first settler in the woods is generally a man who has outlived his credit or fortune in the cultivated parts of the state. His time for migrating is the month of April. His first object is to build a small cabbin of rough logs for himself and family. A coarser building adjoining this cabbin affords a shelter to a cow, and pair of poor horses. The labor of erecting these buildings is succeeded by killing the trees on a few acres of ground near his cabbin; this is done by cutting a circle round the trees, two or three feet from the ground. The ground around these trees is then ploughed and Indian-corn planted in it. His family is fed during the [first] summer by a small quantity of grain which he carries with him, and by fish and game. His cows and horses feed upon wild grass, or the succulent twigs of the woods. For the first year he endures a great deal of distress from hunger—cold—and a variety of accidental causes, but he seldom complains or sinks under them. As he lives in the neighborhood of Indians, he soon acquires a strong tincture of their manners. His pleasures consist chiefly in fishing and hunting. He loves spirituous liquors, and he eats, drinks and sleeps in dirt and rags in his little cabbin. In proportion as population increases around him, he becomes uneasy and dissatisfied. He cannot bear to surrender up a single natural right for all the benefits of government,—and therefore he abandons his little settlement, and seeks a retreat in the woods, where he again submits to all the toils which have been mentioned.

Despite his unsocial character, the settler of the hunter-pioneer type had made a beginning in the process of creating a farm. He was usually succeeded, according to the same writer, by a settler of a second species, who enlarged the cabin by an addition of hewn logs, cleared meadowland, planted orchards, brought more land under cultivation, and raised wheat and rye as well as Indian corn.

This species of settler by no means extracts all from the earth, which it is able and willing to give. His fields yield but a scanty encrease, owing to the ground not being sufficiently ploughed. The hopes of the year are often blasted by his cattle breaking through his half made fences, and destroying his grain. His horses perform but half the labor that might be expected from them, if they were better fed; and his cattle often die in the spring from the want of provision, and the delay of grass. This species of settler... delights chiefly in company—sometimes drinks spirituous liquors to excess—will spend a day or two in every week, in attending political meetings; and, thus, he contracts debts, which (if they do not give him a place in the sheriff’s docket) compel him to sell his plantation, generally in the course of a few years, to the third and last species of settler.

This species of settler is commonly a man of property and good character. His first object is to convert every spot of ground, over which he is able to draw water, into meadow... His next object is to build a barn, which he prefers of stone. This building... is made very compact, so as to shut out the cold in...
winter; for our farmers find that their horses and cattle, when kept warm, do not require near as much food, as when they are exposed to the cold. He uses economy, likewise, in the consumption of his wood. Hence he keeps himself warm in winter, by means of stoves, which save an immense deal of labour to himself and his horses, in cutting and hawling wood in cold and wet weather. His fences are everywhere repaired, so as to secure his grain from his own and his neighbor's cattle. But further, he increases the number of the articles of his cultivation, and, instead of raising corn, wheat, and rye alone, he raises oats, buckwheat... and spelts. Near his house, he allots an acre or two of ground for a garden, in which he raises a large quantity of cabbage and potatoes. His newly cleared fields afford him every year a large encrease of turnips. Over the spring which supplies him with water, he builds a milk-house: he likewise adds to the number and improves the quantity of his fruit-trees... The last object of his industry is to build a dwelling-house. This business is sometimes effected in the course of his life, but is oftener bequethed to his son, or the inheritor of his plantation... The horses and cattle of this species of settler, bear marks in their strength, fat, and fruitfulness—of their being plentifully fed and carefully kept. His table abounds with a variety of the best provisions—his very kitchen flows with milk and honey—beer, cyder, and wine are the usual drinks of his family.

That this progression of farmers of three distinct types occurred with anything approaching uniformity in southwestern Pennsylvania may be doubted. The writer himself admits that there were exceptions to it.

I have known some instances where the first settler has performed the improvements of the second, and yielded to the third. I have known a few instances likewise, of men of enterprising spirits, who have settled in the wilderness, and who, in the course of a single life, have-advanced through all the intermediate stages of improvement that I have mentioned, and produced all those conveniences which have been ascribed to the third species of settlers... There are instances, likewise, where the first settlement has been improved by the same family, in hereditary succession, 'till it has reached the third stage of cultivation.

It should be added that in some cases land speculators, as for example George Washington, sent out gangs of indentured servants and slaves under overseers to make the first clearings and erect log houses on their properties, after which the incipient farms were sold or leased to settlers. There were instances also in which well-to-do settlers, using slave labor in part, created plantations with mansion houses and many acres of cleared land in a comparatively short time. There is plenty of evidence, however, that farms and farmers of each of the described types, and of intermediate types, were to be found in the region during the frontier period; and it is
clear that, in most cases, more than a generation was required to advance a farm to the state in which it produced much surplus.

If agriculture be understood to include the making of farms and the domestic industries that were conducted on them as well as the production of crops and the raising of livestock, then the economy of southwestern Pennsylvania was almost wholly agricultural during the frontier period. Pittsburgh had fewer than four hundred inhabitants in 1790 and the half-dozen other villages were even smaller. It is probable that at least ninety-five per cent of the inhabitants lived on farms at that date, though some of the farmers were also millers, tavern-keepers, ferrymen, boat-builders, or even preachers. On the other hand some of the professional men and merchants in the villages were also farmers, and practically all the villagers at least kept a cow or two and cultivated a garden. From an examination of tax records and descriptions of farms in newspaper advertisements it appears that farms of about three hundred acres, of which perhaps forty acres were under cultivation and a somewhat smaller amount in meadow, were common in southwestern Pennsylvania around 1790. On such farms, as a rule, would be found two horses, three or four head of cattle, and four or five sheep, though perhaps a third of the farmers had no sheep. As early as 1781, however, General John Neville had ten horses, sixteen head of cattle, and twenty-three sheep on his thousand-acre estate near Pittsburgh. On the other hand, as late as 1790 there were still many farmers in the region who possessed only one horse and one cow.

The earliest farms were, of course, essentially self-sufficing units. Because of the isolation of the region and of the individual farms, it was more economical to produce at home the necessary commodities, makeshifts though they might be, than to transport surplus crops to a distant market and bring back the goods received in exchange; and this was true whether the transportation were done by the farmer himself or by a middleman. Moreover, in the early stages of the making of a farm, when only a few acres had been cleared and much of the energy of the farmer was devoted to clearing more, little surplus was produced. It should be remembered, also, that domestic industries flourished at this time in all parts of the country and even in Europe: the age of specialization was only in its infancy.
Each farm unit, therefore, was the scene of a wide variety of activities; and, since neither labor for hire nor money to pay for it was available, the work was done by the farmer and his family, with occasionally an indentured servant to help them, and everyone had to be a Jack-of-all-trades. Such division of labor as there was was based on sex and on age or strength. To the men fell the tasks of hunting and fishing, clearing the land, erecting buildings and fences, plowing, cultivating, harvesting, threshing, grinding, shearing sheep, and providing firewood, together with such domestic industries as butchering, smoking meat, making maple sugar, blacksmithing, coopering, cabinet-making, tanning, and shoemaking. The tasks of the women included the care of the stock, except perhaps the work animals, and of the poultry, as well as the preparation of food, the making of clothing, and the care of the house and the children. They did the baking, brewing, churning, spinning, dyeing, weaving, and knitting and made the clothes, candles, soap, and cheese, in addition to cooking the daily meals and occasionally nursing the sick. The children, even very young ones, could assist their elders at the tasks of the farm and the household, and, as the work was never ending, the parents were spared the modern domestic problem of finding something for the youngsters to do. Moreover, the children were learning by the laboratory method the processes that they would need to know when they set up their own households, and some of them were developing skills that would enable them later to specialize as artisans.

These frontier farms were never completely self-sufficing, of course. From the very beginning of settlement, iron and glass, salt and spices, and a few luxuries were brought over the mountains, at first on the backs of pack horses and later in wagons. Once a year in the early period an expedition from each neighborhood made the trip to the East to get the necessary supplies. About the only commodities produced in the region of sufficient value in proportion to their weight to warrant their being transported across the mountains to balance the imports were furs, whiskey, and ginseng. Cattle were sometimes driven to market, but the trip was so hard on them that they could not compete successfully with eastern and southern cattle. A small local market for more bulky products was supplied by immigrants and by the military establishments, but the payments in Continental currency during the Revolution were not relished by the
farmers. About the close of the Revolution farmers and merchants began to make occasional shipments of grain, flour, pork, and beef down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans, where, if the Spanish officials happened to be agreeable, such products could be disposed of for cash; but the restrictions imposed upon this trade and the danger from the Indians prevented any considerable development of it until after 1795. Most of the money received for the sale of products was quickly drained out of the region in payments for land or for imported commodities.

The most notable development in the field of commerce during the years immediately following the Revolution was the advent of the general store. Stores of a sort had existed in Pittsburgh ever since the place was occupied by the British under General Forbes in 1758, but the early ones were concerned primarily with the Indian trade, though they also catered to the soldiers, occasional travelers, immigrants, and near-by settlers. The improvement of roads, the development of agricultural surpluses, and the increase of migration through the region after the Revolution made it practicable for merchants to import larger and more varied stocks of goods and to offer them for sale or barter not only in Pittsburgh but also in the other villages such as Washington, Brownsville, and Uniontown. There were eight general stores in Pittsburgh in 1784 and another was about to be established.

The founding in 1786 of the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, the first newspaper west of the mountains, enabled the merchants to advertise their wares, and the fortunate preservation of files of that paper makes available information as to the character of the stocks. An assortment of goods offered by Terrence Campbell in his new store in Washington in 1788 contained fifty varieties of cloth, including broadcloths, serges, cottons, flannels, velvets, jeans, and linens; fifteen articles of wearing apparel, such as hats, shoes, gloves, aprons, shawls, and hose; one hundred and twenty-five items of hardware and notions, including looking-glasses, snuffboxes, pistols, scalping knives, scissors, combs, spectacles, brushes, carpenters' and sliding rules, inkpots, watch chains, jew's-harps, fiddles, candlesticks, flat-irons, china, axes, tongs, sickles and scythes, and artificial flowers; and twenty-five articles of food or staples, such as coffee, tea, chocolate, spices, tobacco and snuff, indigo, German and Crowley steel, bar iron and castings, and gunpowder. The more or less permanent stores were supple-
mented by wandering merchants, who hauled their “ventures” across the mountains and moved them about from place to place by wagon or by flatboat until they were disposed of.

It is significant of the lack of money in the region that nearly every merchant offered to accept “cash or country produce” for his merchandise. One storekeeper in Pittsburgh elaborated the familiar phrase in 1786 into “cash, flour, whiskey, beef, pork, bacon, wheat, rye, oats, corn, ashes, candlewick, tallow, &c. Ec.” Ginseng, snakeroot, skins and furs, and “country linen” were also accepted, and sometimes cash was offered for ginseng. Goods were often sold on credit, and there is evidence in the advertisements that collections were frequently difficult. Apparently the merchants disposed of the bulky products they received in exchange for imported goods to villagers or immigrants or shipped them down the rivers to the New Orleans market. Furs, ginseng, and whiskey were sent east in the wagons that brought out the merchandise.

Within less than a decade after the first permanent settlements, diversification of activities began to develop within the region itself. Sawmills, boat yards, and blacksmith shops were in operation for the benefit of traders and the army even before the advent of permanent agricultural settlers; mills for the grinding of grain soon made their appearance in every considerable neighborhood, to be followed a little later by fulling mills; weaving and distilling tended to concentrate in the hands of those who were more skillful or had better equipment than the average; and itinerant shoemakers and tinkers began to relieve the farmers of difficult tasks. Most of these industries were operated on a custom basis, and payment for the work was usually in the form of raw materials. The mills were operated by water power as a rule, though occasionally horse power was used.

About the close of the Revolution artisans of many sorts began to set up their shops in the villages. From advertisements in the Gazette it appears that by 1790 Pittsburgh could boast of carpenters, cooperers, wagon-makers, and cabinet- and chair-makers; tanners, curriers, cobblers, and saddle-makers; distillers, vintners, and bakers; tailors and hatters; watch- and clock-makers and gold- and silversmiths; masons and quarrymen; ropemakers; and printers. Most of these artisans did their work in their homes or small shops, with sometimes an apprentice or two to help them,
and like the merchants they were often obliged to accept country produce for their wares. Doubtless there was also considerable exchange of commodities among artisans and of stock and produce among farmers; and it is significant of the growing internal trade that a market house was erected and regular market days were established in Pittsburgh in 1787.

The transformation of southwestern Pennsylvania from an isolated frontier community made up of self-sufficing agricultural units to one of specialized activities integrated with the national economy went on apace during the last decade of the eighteenth century. Several factors contributed to the acceleration of this movement. As the farmers increased their acreages of improved land, the agricultural surpluses became larger and larger. The armies of the United States operating against the Indians in the Northwest Territory from 1790 to 1794 furnished a cash market for much of this surplus, and the immigrants that poured into that territory after the Indian wars were over usually bought their equipment and supplies for the first season in southwestern Pennsylvania. In 1794 the Whiskey Insurrection brought another federal army into the region, for which supplies had to be purchased locally. These outlets were temporary, of course, for the armies were disbanded and the immigrants were soon producing surpluses of their own; but the removal of restrictions on the Mississippi trade effected by Pinckney's Treaty in 1795 opened the markets of the world to the farmers and merchants of the West. Flatboats and keelboats made their way to New Orleans from the upper Ohio in ever increasing numbers, and before the end of the century ocean-going ships had been built in western Pennsylvania, loaded with the produce of the region, floated down the rivers, and sailed out on the high seas. In this period also the improvement of the highway from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, largely at the expense of the state, and the extension and improvement of local roads decreased the cost of wagon transportation and greatly facilitated the introduction and distribution of eastern commodities.

Most significant, however, of the changing economy of the region was the beginning of manufacturing as distinguished from the custom, handi-
craft, and domestic industries. With a market available for flour, merchant mills made their appearance in the towns and began to purchase grain with cash or with warehouse certificates, which circulated as currency. Large-scale breweries and distilleries also began to operate on a
merchant basis. The first blast furnace for the manufacture of iron was blown in Fayette County in 1790, and by the end of the decade sixteen ironworks had been established in the region. Most of these were furnaces and forges combined, but there were several bloomeries and one slitting mill. The products were castings and bar iron. As a rule these works were located in rural districts near the westernmost ridges of the Appalachian Mountains, where local ores and wood for charcoal were available—both commodities that have no part in the present-day iron and steel industry of the region. A paper mill began operations at Brownsville in 1796, and two glass factories with imported workmen were established in 1797, one by General James O'Hara near Pittsburgh and the other by Albert Gallatin at New Geneva. Coal from surface pits had been used in the region for heating purposes and in forges from a very early day; it was used in the manufacture of glass at O'Hara's works from the start; but it was not substituted for charcoal in the blast furnaces until many years later; and its use as a source of power had to await the construction of the first steam engine in the region in 1808. The products of the furnaces and factories not only supplied the needs of the people of the region for such commodities but also found their way downstream to the newer settlements farther west and in some cases even to New Orleans.

Southwestern Pennsylvania was still predominantly agricultural at the end of the eighteenth century, but the process of making the farms was approaching completion, commerce both internal and external was well established, and manufacturing and mining were being developed. The population of the district had risen to about a hundred thousand. Pittsburgh, its metropolis, was a thriving commercial and industrial center with 1,565 inhabitants. A visitor of 1800 reported that he "found the town, which was called the Western Exchange, a reflex of New York, the same earnest bustle in the business, and the same national variety in its thickly thronging strangers." In approximately a third of a century the region had been transformed from a wilderness to the habitat of a numerous human society well supplied with capital goods in the shape of improved farms, roads, buildings, and factories, and equipped with a complex economic structure. The frontier stage in the development of the region had been completed.