

THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL MAGAZINE

VOLUME 65

JANUARY 1982

NUMBER 1

TENANCY AND ASSET-HOLDING IN LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WASHINGTON COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

LEE SOLTOW and KENNETH W. KELLER

RECENT studies of early American rural life have turned scholars' attention to the problem of landholding and tenancy in the eighteenth century. In spite of the existence of relatively few useful records, especially outside New England, historians have begun to draw a sketch of landlords and tenants in early America. Records of tenancy in Pennsylvania are quite rare, but fortunately some evidence concerning it has survived for Washington County in the late eighteenth century. Close scrutiny of these records demonstrates that although many of the inhabitants of various Washington County townships were landless in the late eighteenth century, these persons without land — many of them tenants — possessed modest amounts of other assets and accordingly should not be considered an oppressed class permanently submerged in degraded poverty. It is the thesis of this article that tenants and landless persons in Washington County possessed enough resources to maintain an adequate, if frugal, style of

Professor of economics at Ohio University, Lee Soltow has published *Men and Wealth in the United States* and has a book forthcoming, *The Rise of Mass Literacy and the Common School: A Socio-Economic Study of the United States to 1870*. Kenneth W. Keller is associate professor of history at Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia. He has published articles in the *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society*, *Labor History*, and, with Professor Soltow, *Pennsylvania History*. His monograph, *Rural Politics and the Collapse of Pennsylvania Federalism*, will be published in the *Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society*.—Editor

life and that for most of them tenancy represented a status from which they might move into independent proprietorship in time. This study also supports the view that Washington County landlord-tenant relations were primarily between local people, and not distant absentees and a population of oppressed dependents.

The records of tenancy in Washington County are especially interesting to historians because literary evidence about landlord-tenant relations in the county has survived in the papers of Western Pennsylvania's most important landowner, George Washington. In 1794 the president asked Senator James Ross of Pennsylvania to act as his agent in the sale of Washington's lands in Washington and Fayette counties. The president owned about three thousand acres in the former county near Miller's Run and seventeen hundred acres in the latter. Washington wanted to be "free from cares" of property he deemed "unproductive" of everything but frustration. To Washington the most onerous burden of his landlordship was his tenants, who continually tried to escape from their legal obligations to pay him rent. They charged improvements they constructed to Washington's account and deducted the cost of rail fences and unnecessary "improvements" from their rent payments. The constant scarcity of specie forced Washington to accept payment in cumbersome deliveries of wheat to Western Pennsylvania gristmills. The exasperated Washington "experienced more losses than profit in collecting the rents" of his Western Pennsylvania tenants, so his lands there went up for sale, and by June 1796 Washington had sold them because they had been an investment "more productive of plague than profit."¹

The president's bitter experiences with his Western Pennsylvania tenants may not have been typical of those of other landlords and they were not unique.² What is remarkable about his relationship with tenants is that, in spite of the fact that he was president of the United States, a national hero, and one of the richest men in the country,

¹ John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington, 1748-1799*, 4 vols. (Boston, 1925), 2: 291-98, 313, 3: 142-43, 210; Louisa Lear Eyre, ed., *Letters and Recollections of George Washington* (New York, 1906), 64, 73-74, 175, 178, 182-84, 190-92. For a sketch of Washington's Fayette County holdings, see Hubertis M. Cummings, "George Washington's Pennsylvania Lands," *Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Internal Affairs Bulletin* 31 (Feb. 1963): 8-13.

² For the experiences of another Virginia absentee landlord, see Louis Morton, *Robert Carter of Nomini Hall* (Charlottesville, 1945), 72-75. A student of tenancy in Virginia argues that Virginians promoted tenancy as they moved west. See Willard F. Bliss, "The Rise of Tenancy in Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 58 (Oct. 1950): 441. Perhaps Virginians were responsible for establishing it in Washington County.

his tenants tried to confound him and place obstacles in his path at every turn. They were not intimidated by his wealth, power, influence, or prestige, and they eventually succeeded in driving him out of Western Pennsylvania land speculation. Their lack of deference and sturdy resistance to his claims raises an important question about the nature of tenancy in the early years of America. Did the tenants resist Washington because they were a destitute, exploited, subject class, so poor that they were unable to pay rent, or were they really sharp-eyed, thrifty farmers trying to amass capital on their way up an "agricultural ladder" from landlessness to independent proprietorship? What, then, was the real nature of Western Pennsylvania's landless population? These questions are particularly important to modern social historians, and the subject of tenancy has recently become a topic of considerable scholarly debate.

Modern scholarly analysis of tenancy has shown that it was a common status in parts of early America, but historians have not been able to say whether tenants were truly poor and devoid of hope of advancement. Robert E. Harper's study of the class structure of Western Pennsylvania found "a significant degree of tenancy." According to his estimates, about 20 to 25 percent of the total population of Western Pennsylvania townships he studied were tenants in the 1790s.³ Records did not permit him to specify, however, how many of these were poor. James T. Lemon's analysis of the "best poor man's country" of southeastern Pennsylvania estimated that in 1782 about 30 percent of the population of eastern Chester and Lancaster counties were landless tenants.⁴ Jackson Turner Main found from Bedford County's 1783 tax records that the county "contained a relatively high percentage of men who did not have title to any soil," some of whom were tenants, but the majority of whom were farm laborers. In 1781, Main concluded, the proportion of landless men in Washington County was "slightly smaller."⁵

Contemporary Pennsylvanians wrote relatively little about it, but what has survived indicates that writers of the day believed that tenancy was common, but temporary, and that not necessarily all tenants faced grinding poverty and subservience. An anonymous writer in the same year Washington sold his lands suggested in the

³ Robert E. Harper, "The Class Structure of Western Pennsylvania in the Late Eighteenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1969), 219, 289.

⁴ James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country* (Baltimore, 1972), 12, 94.

⁵ Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton, 1965), 16.

Philadelphia *Aurora and General Advertiser* of February 8, 1796, that one-third of all Pennsylvanians were tenants and that one-half of these were poor. Another significant impression appeared in a letter in the *Lancaster Intelligencer* of October 8, 1805, in which the writer estimated that seven out of ten Pennsylvanians owned real estate.⁶ How many of the remaining 30 percent were poor the writer did not say. Optimistic boosters of immigration to Pennsylvania like Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush asserted that tenancy was only a temporary status in America. It was ideally suited for newcomers, who would serve as tenants for a short time, and then, after saving up enough money to buy land, they would depart for the West to become proprietors. Rush noted that American leases were short, unlike those common in England, so after a few years of saving, Americans would leave their landlord to become landowners themselves.⁷ Thomas Jefferson, friend of the husbandman, also believed that tenancy was a status of short duration for Americans, who would quickly move away once they amassed capital.⁸ One Pennsylvanian maintained in Philadelphia's *American Museum* magazine that tenancy may have produced a permanent, subservient class in slave states like Maryland, but since Pennsylvanians were frugal and industrious, they quickly emancipated themselves from dependency on their landlords.⁹

Students of tenancy have had a difficult time in finding records of the new nation that allow them to identify tenants and characterize them. Few Pennsylvania county and township tax lists fully stated relationships between lessors and lessees in the late eighteenth century. Federal census records also did not indicate tenancy. A complete record of tenancy in Western Pennsylvania in the 1790s does exist, however, in a remarkable 1796 county tax list for Cecil Township in Washington County, Western Pennsylvania's most populous county.¹⁰ Cecil Township lay a few miles south of the three thousand-acre tract

6 [Philadelphia] *Aurora and General Advertiser*, Feb. 8, 1796; *Lancaster Intelligencer*, Oct. 8, 1805.

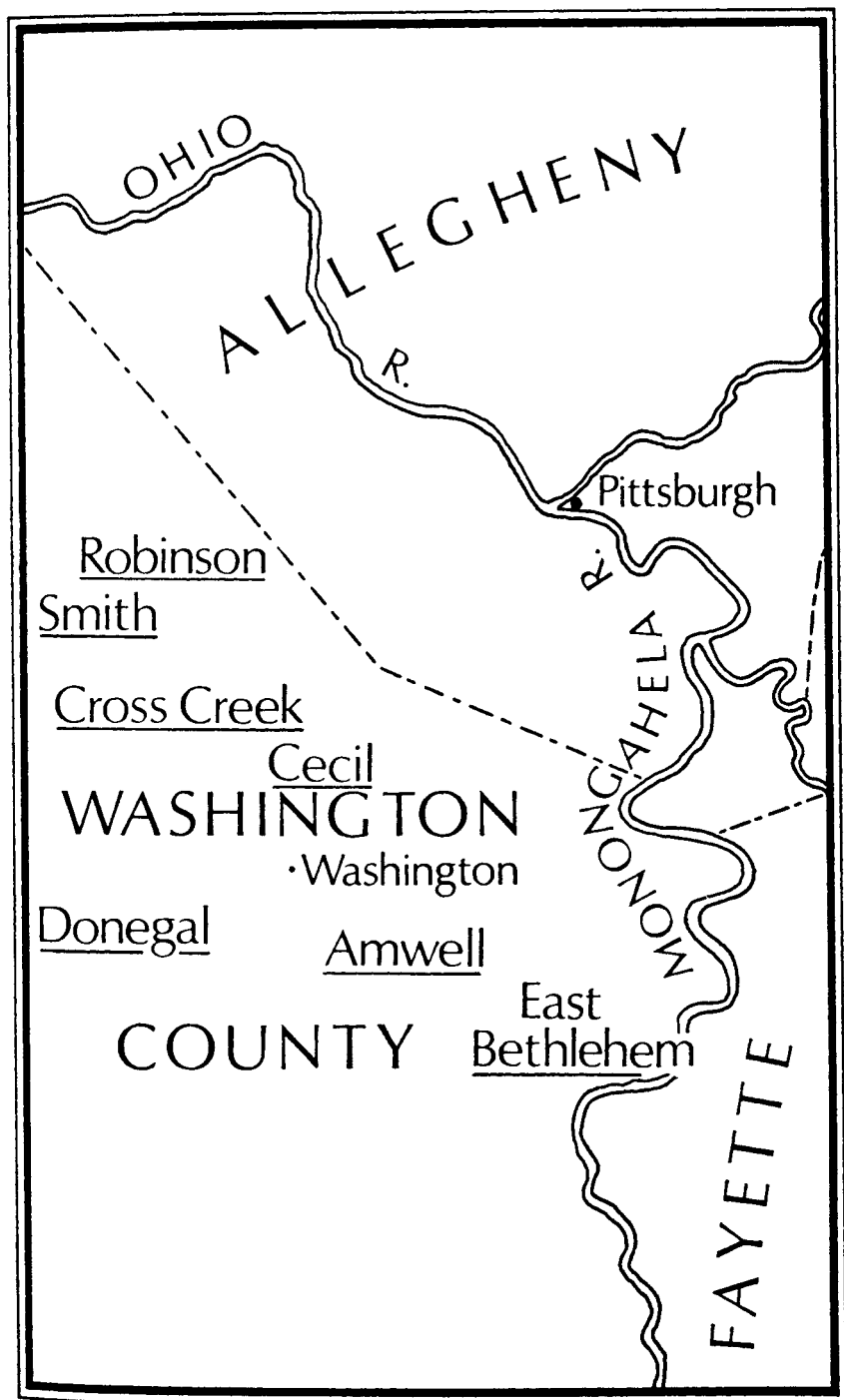
7 Lyman H. Butterfield, ed., *The Letters of Benjamin Rush*, Volume 1 (1761-1792), in *Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society* 30 (1951): 550, 552; Ralph Ketcham, ed., *The Political Thought of Benjamin Franklin* (Indianapolis, 1965), 340.

8 Thomas Jefferson believed that Americans made poor tenants. They were "unsure" because they wanted to move on too quickly. He advised a potential investor in western lands to seek non-English-speaking foreigners, especially Germans, as tenants. See Thomas Jefferson to Colonel Richard Claiborne, Aug. 8, 1787, in Andrew E. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, eds., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 20 vols. (Washington, D. C., 1905), 11: 2.

9 *American Museum* 7 (1790): 71-74.

10 Tax duplicate for 1796, Cecil Township, Washington County, Washington County Courthouse, Washington, Pennsylvania.

LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WASHINGTON COUNTY



on Miller's Run that Washington sold in 1796. The list reports on 165 individuals, and in most cases, their occupations, acreage owned, taxable personal property, and whether they were landlords or tenants. It is quite likely that the 165 men appearing on the tax list constituted nearly the entire free white male population of the township, for records of the township's population in the 1800 federal census, when adjusted for population growth between 1796 and 1800, yield a count of free white adult males close to the figure 165. The 1800 federal census reported that about 210 free white adult males lived in Cecil Township; this number would become about 165 if it were adjusted downward for four years at the rate of growth of the population of Western Pennsylvania.¹¹ Accordingly, the Cecil Township tax list of 1796 provides much information on patterns of tenancy in the time it was compiled.

By examining the occupations, property, and landlord/tenant status of the 165 men on the list, we can learn much about the wealth or poverty of tenants. It is difficult to classify all the men on the Cecil list, however, for some not indicated as landlords in the township may have owned property in other townships for which no tax lists survive, and this property may have been rented out. Some tenants listed may have rented houses while others rented acreage; what was rented was not always precisely indicated, although usually tenants rented farms with cleared acreage. In any case, Cecil Township in 1796 consisted of about 35 landlords, 43 tenants, with 62 others owning land, and 25 landless persons, or, added together, 165 free white males. The landlord/tenant designation was applied to seventy-eight persons, or about half the labor force.

The Cecil list shows that the proportion of the township's men who were landowners compares typically with other American localities for the time. The 97 men who were landlords or owners of land represented about 59 percent of Cecil Township's population of 165 free white males aged twenty-one and older. Of these, thirty-five were landlords, or about one-third of the owners. Studies of landownership patterns now under way for the year 1798 indicate that the Cecil proportion of landowners of 59 to 60 percent was a ratio typical of the rural population of Pennsylvania as a whole. It was also similar to that of Ohio in 1810, and it conforms with estimates made for eastern Pennsylvania by James Lemon for the 1780s.¹²

¹¹ United States Census Office, Second Census, 1800. *Return of the Whole Number of Persons within the Several Districts of the United States* . . . (Washington, D. C., 1801), 2F.

¹² The number of Pennsylvania farms in 1798 accounts for about 58 per-

The tax list also reveals other characteristics of landlordship in Cecil. It is not surprising that the larger a landlord's acreage, the more tenants he had. Table 1 demonstrates the increasing number of

TABLE 1
INCREASE IN NUMBERS OF TENANTS PER FARM WITH
INCREASING ACREAGE, CECIL TOWNSHIP, 1796

Number of Tenants	Frequency	Average Acreage
3	3	74.0
2	5	64.0
1	26	38.0
0	131	12.8

Source: Cecil Township Tax List for 1796, Washington County Courthouse, Washington, Pennsylvania.

tenants and acreage in the township. Apparently, Cecil landlords were resident landlords, because they all reported cleared acreage in addition to the property they rented out. Cleared acreage indicates the presence of a functioning farm. (The tax list mentions only three cases of holding unseated, or unoccupied and unimproved, land that was not taxed.) Pennsylvania law permitted tenants to pay taxes on land upon which they lived and then to deduct tax payments from the rent they paid their landlord. When tenants did pay the tax, it meant the landlord was not resident in the township in which the tax was collected. Tax assessors often noted that taxes had been paid by a tenant for an absent landlord on the tax list. On the entire Cecil list,

cent of the rural population twenty-one and older, or 95,000 persons in 1800. This estimate is derived from a sample of 4,933 farms drawn from the federal direct tax of 1798. This figure, part of a study presently under way by the authors, represents a sample of every tenth farm in the direct tax records. See also Lee Soltow, "Inequality amidst Abundance: Land Ownership in Early Nineteenth Century Ohio," *Ohio History* 88 (Spring 1979): 133-51. For a critical view of tenancy, see Aaron M. Sakolski, *Land Tenure and Land Taxation in America* (New York, 1957), 217-25. But Donald L. Winters and others believe tenancy served a useful purpose. See Donald L. Winters, *Farmers without Farms — Agricultural Tenancy in Nineteenth Century Iowa*, Contributions in American History, Number 79 (Westport, Conn., 1978), 106-7. Rowland Berthoff notes that tenancy did not become common in the north until the 1837-1843 depression. By the 1850s it was widespread. See Rowland Berthoff, *An Unsettled People* (New York, 1971), 181. For studies of eighteenth-century tenancy, see Gregory A. Stiverson, *Poverty in a Land of Plenty: Tenancy in Eighteenth Century Maryland* (Baltimore, 1977) and Sung Bok Kim, *Landlord and Tenant in Colonial New York: Manorial Society, 1664-1775* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1978). See also Lemon, *Best Poor Man's Country*, 12.

there were only two references to land owned by someone not resident in the township, and these references are to small parcels. These tenants paid taxes on what the assessors noted as "Orphant's land," which consisted of one tract of eighteen acres and another of twenty-five. "Orphant's land" may have been land administered for probate purposes by the county's Orphan's Court. If "Orphant" was a person, he certainly did not monopolize the township's land through absentee ownership. The largest landowner in Cecil Township was Thomas Bracken, who owned 112 acres of cleared land, six houses, two horses, and six cows; he had three tenants, one of whom had his surname, so this tenant was most likely a close relative. Five other landlords rented their land to persons who had their surnames, so these were probably relatives as well. Cecil residents rented lands from their neighbors or kinsmen, not from distant speculators like George Washington.

Just as Cecil's landlords tended to be familiar to their tenants, they also tended to pursue occupations that were by no means extraordinary. The Cecil list shows that the township's landlords included a blacksmith, a schoolmaster, and a fuller, but most were farmers. They may have been better off than their tenants, but they were not distant or prestigious. No Cecil landlord held public office, either. For example, the local justice of the peace, Matthew McConnell, held fifty cleared acres with five houses, two horses, and ten cows, but he was not a landlord, though a substantial farmer. In 1799 Governor Thomas Mifflin appointed a second justice for the township, the tailor James McBurney, who owned thirty cleared acres, two houses, two horses, and a cow; he was not a landlord either.¹³ Cecil's landlords, then, may have been better off than their tenants, but they were not distant or entrenched in a local squirearchy.

What is especially unique about the Cecil Township tax list is that it reveals some of the characteristics of its landless population. The thirty-five landlords had at least forty-three and possibly forty-five tenants listed on their land. These tenants amounted to 26 percent of the population. Another twenty-five persons were neither tenants nor landowners; they comprised 15 percent of the 165 persons listed. Were these landless the poor of Cecil Township? Tax list records of occupations show that among the tenants there was a constable,

13 For the names of all local justices of the peace, see Appointment Books, 1790-1815, vol. 1 (1790-1801), Records of the Department of State, Bureau of Commissions and Elections, RG 26, Division of Archives and Manuscripts (State Archives), Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

a wheelwright, a doctor, and three coopers; the rest were farmers or agricultural hired hands. Perhaps the tenants were employed at least part of the year working their landlords' farms. As Table 1 shows, there was a relationship between the size of a farm and the numbers of tenants. The larger a landlord's acreage, the more tenants it was likely he had. These tenants were important in maintaining farm operations of considerable size. It is likely that all of Cecil's tenants were gainfully employed and earning a livelihood. There were also two persons who were landlords or owners of other pieces of property with cleared acreage even while they rented the place of their domicile from someone else: one, David McCrory, was a tenant of a relative, but was also listed as the landlord of fifty acres and six houses.

The Cecil list also recorded the names of thirty-three individuals, persons who were usually single, probably recently out of their apprenticeships, and often residing with their parents. Although a 1799 Pennsylvania tax statute indicated that single men were freemen above the age of twenty-one "who shall not follow any occupation or calling," the Cecil assessors did not use the term in 1796 as the 1799 statute was to provide.¹⁴ The Cecil assessors listed occupations for most of the township's single men. Among the Cecil single men were a blacksmith, a shoemaker, a carpenter, a miller, and three weavers, all of whom did not own land. Seven other single men declared cleared acreage. As most of the landless were employed, so also they owned other assets. Over half the landless had horses, and two-thirds of them possessed cows or other cattle. These landless persons with livestock must have had access to private land or commons in Cecil. Assessors placed the value of a cow roughly at \$8, a horse at \$10-\$20, and land at \$1 to \$3 an acre. A horse and cow might be much more valuable than a small farm. Moreover, many of the landless had skilled trades that were undoubtedly in demand when Washington County, the center of Western Pennsylvania's population in the 1790s, served as a point of departure for migrants traveling down the Ohio. The township's landless population was not rich, but neither was it indigent. Tenants may have been saving money to buy land or waiting to acquire knowledge of land reasonably priced. Since at least two of those who had no improved land in Cecil recorded the possession of some untaxed, unseated land, at least some were beginning to invest in what might become a future farmstead. Since several of the single men

¹⁴ James T. Mitchell and Henry T. Flanders, eds., *The Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania from 1682 to 1801*, 18 vols. (Harrisburg, 1896-1915), 16: 379, 434.

have surnames of several of the landed inhabitants, it is probable they were family members rather than indigent outcasts.

These Cecil township patterns bear comparison to what has recently been discovered about patterns of landownership in Europe. Certainly the 26 percent tenancy proportion for Cecil appears moderate by European standards in the late eighteenth century. In 1798 England had a tax inventory showing that only about 20 percent of its landed properties had possessors who were also owners. Cecil's 1796 experience was that almost all cleared lands were owner-occupied; there was little evidence that landlords were not local residents. The English counterpart would have necessitated ownership of almost all Cecil's land by a few rich Philadelphians; only 20 percent of the township's ninety or so farms would have been occupied by their owners if English patterns prevailed.¹⁵

Although the Cecil Township tax lists provide the only complete identifications of landlords and tenants for late eighteenth-century Washington County, other records supply information about the landless population of other parts of the county about the same time. By using these documents we can locate where the county's landless population tended to concentrate and then discover whether or not it was in any sense a deprived class. Since a part of the landless class were tenants, we can indirectly learn something about tenants in other parts of the county. These other records are tax lists for six Washington County townships for the years 1799 and 1800 and the federal census of 1800. The 1799 and 1800 Washington County tax lists are for the townships of Amwell, Cross Creek, Donegal, East Bethlehem, Robinson, and Smith.¹⁶ They list landholders, but do not designate tenant or landlord status, for 809 residents of the townships in 1799 and 1800. The six townships' tax duplicates list 1,331 persons. The federal census of 1800 gives the total white male population of the six townships and breaks down this figure into age groups of persons under age ten, between ten years and sixteen, between sixteen and twenty-six, between twenty-six and forty-five, and above forty-five years of age.¹⁷ We can estimate from the federal census of 1800 the total adult white male population of the townships by assuming that twenty-one occurs midway between sixteen and twenty-six and adding half of the sixteen to twenty-six group to the white males aged twenty-

15 Lee Soltow, "The Distribution of Property Values in England and Wales in 1798," *Economic History Review* 34 (Feb. 1981): 60-70.

16 All tax duplicates used in this study are on deposit in the Washington County Courthouse, Washington, Pennsylvania.

17 U.S. Census, 1800.

six and up. Using this method, we estimate that 1,520 adult white males lived in the six townships in 1800. Perhaps the 1800 federal census takers counted some persons the local tax assessors of 1799 and 1800 omitted. By comparing the numbers of landholders listed in the county tax duplicates for the six townships with the estimated number of white males aged twenty-one and over in the same townships, we can estimate how many landless persons there were in each township. Table 2 presents these estimates.

TABLE 2

POPULATION COUNTS IN SIX TOWNSHIPS OF WASHINGTON COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA, 1799-1800, WITH ESTIMATED PERCENTAGE OF PERSONS HOLDING LAND

TOWNSHIP TAX DUPLICATE LIST	Year	Total Number on List	Possessors of Land	% of Number on Duplicate Possessing Land	Estimated 1800 Federal Census White Males Age 21 and up	% 1800 Federal Census White Males Age 21 and Up Possessing Land
Amwell	1800	218	154	71	252	61
Cross Creek	1799	282	178	63	354	50
Donegal	1800	150	105	70	164	64
East						
Bethlehem	1799	272	115	42	281	41
Robinson	1800	113	79	70	124	64
Smith	1800	296	178	60	345	52
TOTAL (Average)		1,331	809	61	1,520	54

Source: Tax duplicates for the years 1799-1800, Washington County Court-house, Washington, Pennsylvania, and federal census of 1800 using the average of those sixteen and older and those twenty-six and older to estimate the number of white males aged twenty-one and over.

The estimates derived show that in the six townships about 54 percent of the estimated 1800 adult white males or about 61 percent of the 1799 and 1800 taxpayers possessed land. Table 2 demonstrates that there was wide variation in landholding patterns in the county: some townships had more than 60 percent of their 1800 adult white male population owning land, while one township had barely 40 percent of its 1800 adult white males owning land. The results using the

1799 and 1800 tax lists produce even higher rates of landownership — about 70 percent for three townships. What accounts for these variations? Historians of American agriculture have long maintained that tenancy tends to be more common in old settlements or in regions where land has relatively high value.¹⁸ The pattern of tenancy in Washington County seems to support these views. The largest proportion of landless inhabitants by both measurements was in East Bethlehem Township in southeastern Washington County. This township was the site of the oldest European settlements in the county: according to historian Boyd Crumrine, Washington's first settlements appeared there in 1766. The highest proportion of federal census landholders — 64 percent — appeared in far western Donegal Township on the state line and in central Amwell and Robinson townships. The earliest settlements appeared in Donegal and Robinson about 1773-1774, although the first important influx of settlers did not begin until the 1780s.¹⁹ The distribution of the tenant population can also be linked to land values in the county. The Washington *Western Telegraphe* reported in 1796 that the highest land values in the county were in the townships along the Monongahela and in the county seat at Washington.²⁰ The only Monongahela River township for which we have an estimate is East Bethlehem, the township with the highest percentage of landless adult white males. Presumably its land values followed the pattern the *Western Telegraphe* noted.

How common was absentee landownership in the six townships? Not all the six tax lists provided enough information to indicate the frequency of absentee landownership, but for Cross Creek, Donegal, and East Bethlehem, assessors did note when someone who rented paid the tax for his landlord. As we have seen, Pennsylvania tax law permitted tenants to pay county taxes on their landlords' land and then deduct what they had paid from their rent. Some indications of this practice appear for the three townships. In nearly all the cases shown in the three townships, the landlord for whom taxes were paid was a resident of the township, or was, in one case, a tenant himself.

18 Percy Wells Bidwell and John I. Falconer, *History of Agriculture in the Northern United States, 1620-1860* (Washington, D. C., 1925), 242, 449; Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (Washington, D. C., 1932), 1: 406-7. In 1793 Tench Coxe noted that tenancy was rare in Pennsylvania because land was cheap. See Tench Coxe, *A View of the United States of America* (London, 1795), 439. See also Stevenson Whitcomb Fletcher, *Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life, 1640-1840* (Harrisburg, 1971), 305-6.

19 Boyd Crumrine, *History of Washington County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1882), 742-43, 764-65, 900-3, 969-70.

20 [Washington, Pennsylvania] *Western Telegraphe*, Apr. 19, 1796.

Some land in the townships was owned for speculative purposes and did not have tenants upon it. In East Bethlehem Township, at least six persons owned unoccupied lots in Frederick Town on the Monongahela. In Donegal Township, the assessors indicated the owners of unseated, or unoccupied and unimproved, land. These owners seem to have been residents of the county, not absentees who lived far away as did George Washington. In Donegal, Judge Alexander Addison, town proprietor and former state senator John Hoge, his brother Judge William Hoge, all residents of the county seat of Washington, and the Presbyterian divine John McMillan owned unseated land without tenants. The only person owning land from outside the county seems to have been justice of the peace John Findley from nearby Allegheny County.²¹ These landowners were not distant absentees. As in the case of Cecil Township in 1796, there is little evidence of absentee ownership, and when persons from outside the township did own land, it was without tenants and the owners were local people. Landownership and tenancy seems to have been largely a relationship between local people in Washington County.

Did the landless persons of these six Washington County townships possess assets other than land? As Table 3 indicates, if we estimate the total number of adult white males in the six townships by using the number of 1,520 calculated from the federal census of 1800, then the tax lists show that a little over half the landless adult white males reported some other types of assets: 51 percent of the landless persons listed on the county lists declared horses, cows, or, in a few cases, a house. If we calculate asset-holding by using the number of 1,331 taxpayers listed on the 1799-1800 county tax duplicates, the results are even more impressive: 61 percent of the 1,331 owned land.²² Even if they lacked land, their existence was not necessarily impoverished. About 122 of the 711 landless persons of Washington County listed were artisans, professionals, or tradesmen. Among the landless of the six townships were blacksmiths, shoemakers, weavers, hatters, boatbuilders, masons, turners, carpenters, and a schoolmaster. The skills these workers possessed were most likely in demand in an

²¹ John Findley is identified as a justice of the peace in Allegheny County in the Appointment Books of the Secretary of the Commonwealth. See footnote 13 above. In the Donegal Township list he is simply identified as "Findley Esq. of Alegany County." "Esq." was a designation commonly used by justices of the peace.

²² The proportion drawn from the 1799-1800 tax duplicates is in accord with the figure of 62 percent landowners reported for three southwestern Pennsylvania counties in 1783-1785 by Robert E. Harper. See Harper, "Class Structure of Western Pennsylvania," 39.

TABLE 3

ESTIMATES OF PERSONS HOLDING VARIOUS TYPES OF ASSETS IN SIX TOWNSHIPS OF WASHINGTON COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA, 1799-1800

	LANDHOLDERS	LANDLESS		ALL PERSONS	
		From Duplicates	From U.S. Census Estimate	From Duplicates	From U.S. Census Estimate
Number of					
Persons	809*	522*	711†	1,331	1,520
Percentage with:					
Land	100	00	00	61	54
Horses	79	45	33	66	58
Cattle, cows	83	50	37	70	61
Horses, cows, cattle, or houses	89	70	51	81	71

Source: Tax duplicates for Amwell, Cross Creek, Donegal, East Bethlehem, Robinson, and Smith townships, Washington County, 1799-1800, Washington County Courthouse, Washington, Pennsylvania, and federal census of 1800.

*Indicated on 1799-1800 county tax duplicates.

†Obtained by subtracting landholders on 1799-1800 county tax duplicates from estimated 1800 federal census white males aged twenty-one and over as noted on Table 2.

age when Washington County served as a point of departure for westward expansion. About a third of the landless estimated from the federal census possessed horses and about 37 percent owned cattle. Using the figure 1,331 from the county tax duplicates, 70 percent of the landless declared horses, cows, or in a few cases, a house. Others listed stills or tanyards. Since the landless persons included many single men who were landless but living at home with their parents, many who did not even have these assets may have had access to their relatives' wealth. It is impossible to say precisely how many of the landless were tenants, but the chance is good that most tenants were among those with the assets mentioned on the tax lists. These landless persons were not as rich as the landowners, but they were not poverty-stricken dependents either. Quite possibly poor men were not included in the tax lists, for Pennsylvania law gave county commissioners the power to exonerate indigents from paying county taxes.²³ They simply did not appear among the landless persons noted on the tax lists. On the Cross Creek tax list for 1799, eight poor men were separately listed from the rest of the township's taxpayers and were

²³ Mitchell and Flanders, *Statutes at Large*, 16: 375-90.

not charged taxes. In the eyes of local assessors, the other 104 landless people listed on the tax record were not poor, so they were grouped with landowners and charged.

These fragmentary tax records, then, tell us why even the president of the United States could not make a profit by collecting rent from Western Pennsylvania tenants. Washington's tenants were not wealthy, but they were possessed of enough wealth to aspire to accumulate even more and resist the collection of what they owed the president. Tenancy was primarily a relationship with a local landowner, not a distant speculator. George Washington suspected that even tenants could exert political pressure on their neighbors who were charged with collecting rents for distant landlords. When Washington began to ask his tenants for the rent owed him, he arranged to have Colonel John Canon, founder of Jefferson College and the town of Canonsburg, collect it. Although Washington trusted Canon at first, by 1794 he believed that Canon, an assemblyman and justice of the peace, refused to press the tenants for what they owed him because Canon did not want to make himself unpopular with his constituents. Canon stalled and repeatedly deducted the cost of rail fence improvements from the rent owed Washington, even though the lands had been occupied fifteen or twenty years and, in Washington's view, were already improved enough.²⁴ In Western Pennsylvania, tenant-landlord relationships worked within a community of local farmers, some wealthy and others less wealthy. Absentees, no matter how lofty their status, could not expect even local men of property to fight for the landlord's just claims, because the locals were obligated to keep county voters content with their leadership. Although the landless people of Western Pennsylvania may have possessed small estates, they did possess the ballot, for in the late eighteenth century payment of a small county tax qualified even landless adult males to vote. Since tenancy was fundamentally a relationship among local people in Washington County, the tenants' resort to the ballot might have been sufficient to discourage politically ambitious landowners or their lawyers or agents. The social fabric of Western Pennsylvania was not overly democratic, but relative political democracy and the ties of neighborhood relationships kept tenancy from becoming a force for crushing the poor.

²⁴ Fitzpatrick, ed., *Diaries of Washington*, 3: 210, 293, 298; Eyre, ed., *Letters and Recollections of Washington*, 64, 175, 178-79, 190-92; Crumrine, *History of Washington County*, 226. Washington had become so frustrated with Canon's inability to collect the rents due him that he asked Senator James Ross to take over Canon's responsibilities as agent.