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Slavery, Technology and the Social Origins of the US Agricultural State

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The early months of 1862 saw the US Congress busy devising war plans. Soldiers were recruited on an unprecedented scale. An entirely new currency funded immediate military spending.

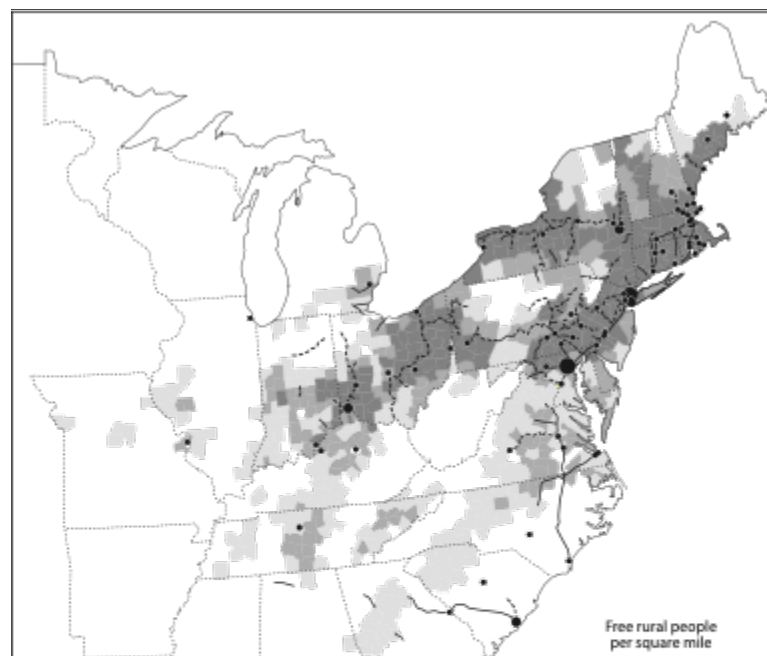
Enslaved people flocking to Union lines demanded some kind of policy response. In the middle of all this, Congress somehow found time to create the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the land-grant university system, agencies that represented major departures in the forms of American governance and came to wield immense power. Over subsequent decades the USDA and land-grant universities fundamentally reshaped agricultural [development](#) in [countless ways](#) while serving as models of governmental [autonomy](#) and [interventionism](#). Later, they became key centers of [expertise](#) for American foreign policy [objectives](#). Yet scholars never wonder where these agencies came from. They never ask: How is it that Congress chose to fundamentally reorient the federal government's relationship to the country's largest economic sector and occupational category at precisely the moment it was absorbed with a total war against slavery?

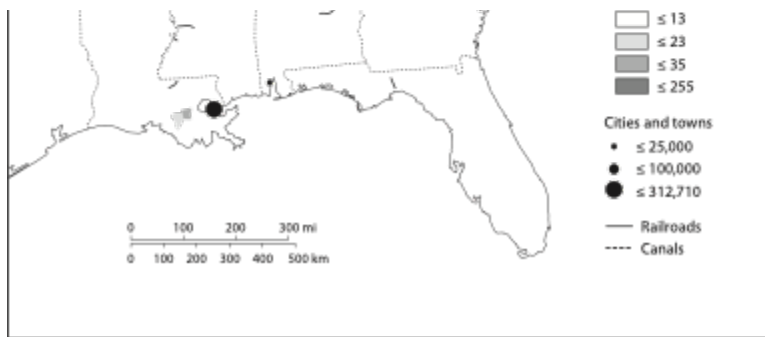
I try to answer this question in my [book](#), *Grassroots Leviathan: Agricultural Reform and the Rural North in the Slaveholding Republic*. I focus on a vast agricultural reform movement that arose between the American Revolution and the Civil War to demand novel federal policies that were fiercely opposed by slaveholders. These demands came to determine key aspects of the governing agenda pursued by the antislavery Republican Party, leading to a

profound restructuring of the American state and its relationship to the agricultural sector.

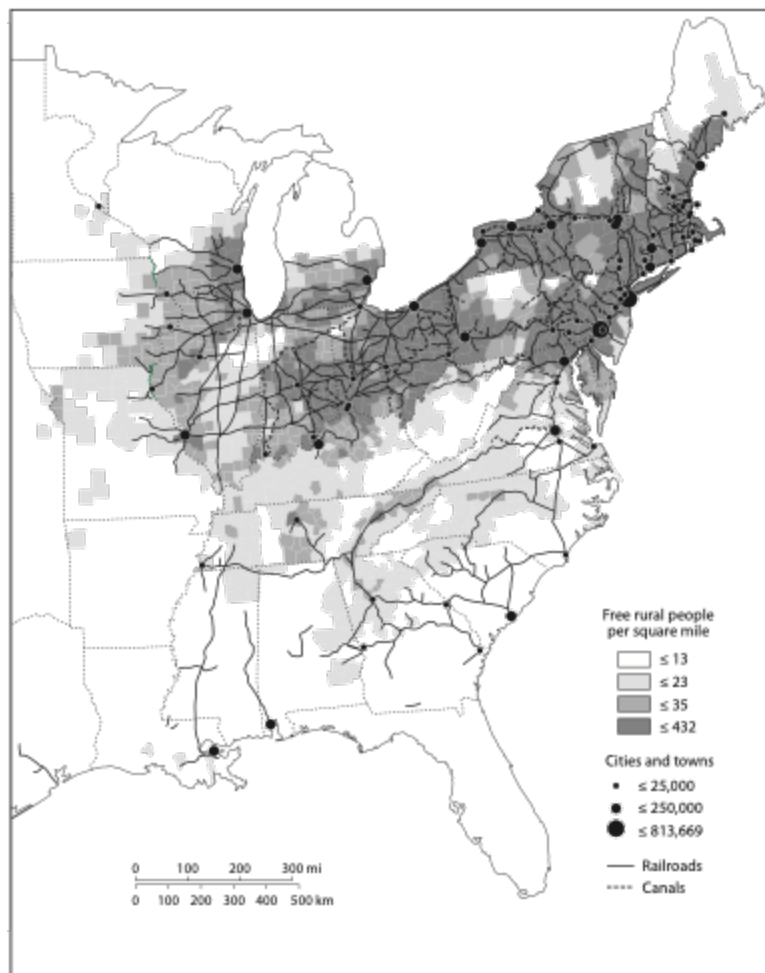
A thumbnail sketch of the plot might go something like this:

Immediately after the Revolution, patrician agricultural improvers, animated by Enlightenment ideals, tried to modernize American farming from above. They succeeded in generating widespread interest in scientific farming but were cast aside when a sweeping deference-to-democracy politics took hold in the 1820s. Over the next couple of decades an enormous specialized farm press emerged, creating a distinct agricultural public composed of millions of middle-class farmers. After about 1840, a new generation of reformers mobilized this public to win state-level subsidies for agricultural societies that pledged to reform and improve farming practices through the introduction of science and technology, including biological innovation. During the 1850s, reformers (now backed by a huge network of agricultural societies, fairs and journals) scaled up their ambitions to the national level. They called for new kinds of federal farm agencies and funding for agricultural education and research. Southern politicians fought these initiatives tooth and nail, but when secession left Congress in the hands of the Republican Party, action was swift. Despite the pressing demands of the Civil War, Congress acted because a vast movement had prepared the ground years ahead of time and continued to exert organized pressure.





The “Greater Northeast” in 1840 and 1860



The clash with slaveholders was conditioned by the agricultural reform movements’ geographic distribution. The movement was rooted in a region I call the Greater Northeast. Less a neatly bounded space than a set of conditions, the Greater Northeast expanded out of New England and the mid-Atlantic states into the Ohio River Valley, the Great Lakes’ region and the upper Chesapeake around Baltimore. It was defined by the growing presence of cities and manufacturing surrounded by dense hinterlands of free farmers growing a diverse mix of crops primarily for domestic rather than export markets. Its distinctive features are

captured in the above maps, which show cities, major transport routes, and free rural population densities by county. With urban and enslaved people taken out, the maps highlight the enormous disparity between southern and northern hinterlands, even as agriculture continued to dominate the entire US economy both North and South. Comparatively, then, the Greater Northeast fostered a larger and more varied economic ecosystem and, by the same token, a more extensive and diverse public sphere, which gave rise to the agricultural reform movement. Data collected by the Patent Office in 1858, though flawed, indicates much higher total and per-capita numbers of agricultural organizations in the North. Additional evidence only reinforces this picture and the available figures for the number and circulation of agricultural publications show an even greater northern advantage.

TABLE 2.2.
Farmers' Presence in the Agricultural Reform Movement

Group	State	Year(s)	No.	No. with known occupations (% of total)	No. of farmers (% of known occupations)
Publishing Committee of the <i>Practical Farmer</i>	PA	1837	17	9 (52.9)	9 (100)
<i>Cultivator</i> subscribers in Oxford	NY	1839–65	132	119 (90.2)	87 (73.1)
Executive Committee of the Fairfield County Agricultural Society	CT	1843	77	48 (62.3)	39 (81.3)
Petitioners for a federal agricultural bureau from Turbot	PA	1850	45	34 (75.6)	27 (79.4)
Fairgrounds fund contributors from Concord	MA	1853	29	23 (79.3)	17 (73.9)
Founding members of the Octoraro Farmer's Club	PA	1856	23	23 (100)	22 (95.7)
Shareholders in the Bucks County Agricultural Society	PA	1858–59	148	86 (58.1)	69 (80.2)
		<i>Totals</i>	471	342 (72.6)	270 (78.9)

Sources, in order of table rows: Practical Farmer 1 (Oct. 1837): 1; Sally McMurry, "Who Read the Agricultural Journals? Evidence from Chenango County, New York, 1839–1865," *Agricultural History* 63 (Autumn 1989): 5–6; meeting minutes, Oct. 18, 1843, FCAS-FMHC, series A, folder 2; petition from Northumberland County, PA, referred to House Committee on Agriculture, May 28, 1850, RG 233 (HR 31A-G1.1); "Report of the Committee to Purchase Land, &c.," Oct. 4, 1853, MAS-CFL, series 5, box 5, folder 3; Sanders P. McComsey, ed., *A History of the Octoraro Farmers Club, 1856–1946* (Manheim, PA: Sentinel Printing House, 1948), chap. 2; stock certificate book of the Bucks County Agricultural Society, 1858–1867, ASBS-MMSL.

Note: Occupations were determined mostly from manuscript census records for 1850 and 1860 obtained through Ancestry.com. Some additional determinations were made with the help of local histories and genealogies.

Agricultural societies were genuinely farmer-led, as revealed by a range of measures linking obscure archival sources to manuscript census data. These organizations' primary purpose was to put on an annual fair. At the state level, such fairs were often massive

events that astounded visitors by their crowds. They were uniquely rural instances of emerging mass society and they were repeated many times over, in miniature form, at the county and local levels. Typically, the fairs were organized around exhibitions of farm goods and technologies in various categories, with public awards going to specimens judged best. The goal was to stimulate innovation and to diffuse best practices according to the logic of emulation, a psychological “passion” that Enlightenment thinkers [regarded](#) as a powerful lever for social change. Although the data may not allow for well-identified econometric determination of the fairs’ effects on American agricultural practice, a [study](#) of similar institutions in Meiji Japan finds they had “a strong positive effect” on innovation as measured by patenting activity.



Merion sheep, modified by American breeders from Spanish stock imported in the 1810s, displayed here at the 1849 New York State Agricultural Fair in Syracuse.

As agricultural reformers soon discovered, their networks of semi-public societies, fairs and journals could not handle some important tasks, including regulation of novel artificial fertilizers and other technologies, collection of comprehensive national agricultural statistics, and establishment of institutions for agricultural research and education. So reformers turned to government. By the 1850s, they had built up considerable influence in several northern state capitals and had succeeded in founding a few state agricultural colleges. Yet these were always plagued by unstable and inadequate public funding. The situation drove reformers to Washington, DC. There, too, with the help of a newly formed

national agricultural society, they began to exert real influence. But they also ran headlong into the “Slave Power,” the institutional matrix that allowed defenders of slavery effectively to veto any federal actions they found threatening. Although the South was overwhelmingly agricultural and therefore set to benefit disproportionately from new kinds of federal aid to agriculture, the agricultural reform movement’s decidedly northern tilt made it suspect to slave-state politicians. They repeatedly torpedoed reformers’ efforts, culminating with their engineering of a presidential veto of the Morrill Land Grant Act in 1859.



Students at Farmers’ High School of Pennsylvania (1860).

Slaveholders had reason to worry. Some agricultural reformers were actual abolitionists, though the movement as a whole was often accommodating to slaveholder sensibilities in an effort to remain nonpartisan and, in appearance at least, above politics altogether. But the movement’s northern social roots and interests, together with southern obstructionism in Congress, drove an alliance with the nascent, all-northern, antislavery Republican Party. This linkage gained depth from an encompassing economic ideology that I call the “Republican developmental synthesis.” At a theoretical level it was expressed most forcefully by Henry Charles Carey, the doyen of the American School of Political Economy, whose big idea was that agriculture enjoyed a reciprocal relationship with manufacturing: raw materials and organic energy flowed to town, while consumer goods, new technologies, and

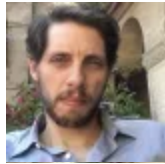
fertilizers flowed back to the countryside. “Improvements in agriculture always accompany manufactures,” he [maintained](#). Industrialization was thus what made agriculture scientific and this implied that farmers should support a protective tariff. In fact, agricultural reformers, as represented by farm editors and fair orators, did tend strongly to support the tariff. Evidence abounds that many northern farmers followed suit. Whatever one thinks about this, the Republican case for protecting infant industry, combined with reformers’ calls for a USDA and land-grant university system, presented an integrated, coherent developmental plan with broad electoral appeal—at least, in the North.



“Diploma” from the Pennsylvania State Agricultural Society, awarded to a premium winner at the 1885 annual fair

The Civil War settled the conflict over slavery—though not over the place of Black Americans in the United States—and agricultural reformers got the agencies they had long advocated for. The politics changed at this point and eventually southern growers and their representatives came into the fold, becoming essential powerbrokers of federal agricultural policy. In the nearer-term aftermath of the war, however, one image perfectly captured the

northern vision that had created a national agricultural state at the same moment it had destroyed slavery. On the left, a seemingly white overseer supervises dark-skinned laborers working the land with primitive hand tools. On the right, a single farmer accomplishes the same task with a horse-powered mechanical reaper. The message was clear: free farmers were as technologically superior to slaveholders as they were morally superior.



- I'm a historian of nineteenth-century U.S. politics and economic development, paying particular attention to the dynamics of northern agriculture and the political economy of slavery in the decades of the Civil War era. I tend to think about these topics within the broader frameworks of nationalism, state formation, party politics, systemic racism and the history of economic thought. My new book, *Grassroots Leviathan: Northern Agricultural Reform in the Slaveholding Republic*, will be out in fall 2020 with Johns Hopkins University Press. I'll be on research leave 2019-2020 at the Cornell Society of Fellows and 2020-2021 at the Kluge Center at the Library of Congress.

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