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'The Farmer's Family Must Find Compensation in Something Less Tangible, Less Material': Culture and Agriculture in Maine and New England, 1870-1905"

Cover Page Footnote

“‘THE FARMER’S FAMILY MUST FIND COMPENSATION IN SOMETHING LESS TANGIBLE, LESS MATERIAL’: CULTURE AND AGRICULTURE IN MAINE AND NEW ENGLAND, 1870-1905”

BY CODY P. MILLER

Following the Civil War, American agriculture changed dramatically and New England was no exception. With new railroad systems, specialized crop markets, and chemical fertilizers, Maine and other New England farmers found themselves as part of an increasingly commercialized agricultural system. Farmers, urban pundits, and agricultural reformers all stressed the need to abandon small, mixed husbandry farming and instead they urged farmers to start treating agriculture like a business. In order to “progress,” one needed to increase acreage and adopt specialized cropping. While many farmers accepted this mantra, others resisted it and argued that there was a moral quality to agriculture that could not be found in increased profits; these farmers were content on making a living, working outside every day, and providing for their family. The two sides took to the Grange halls and the farm press, engaging in an intense debate about what it meant to be farmer. While it is certainly important to study the economic aspects of commercial agriculture, we also need to better understand its cultural aspects as well. The commercialization of agriculture played an important role in shaping farmers’ agricultural identity in the late nineteenth century. The heated debate over agricultural identity suggests that the transition to commercial agriculture in Maine and New England was not an easy one, and by the early twentieth century, what it meant to be a farmer was still up for debate. Cody P. Miller is a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Maine where he studies agricultural history and environmental history. He received his B.A. from Virginia Tech in 2010 and his M.A. from the University of Maine in 2012.

FARMER Olive Kimball stood before an audience at the Turner, Maine, Grange Hall in September of 1900, contemplating the meager compensation farmers received from their work. “We live in an age that is all the time searching for and exposing the inequalities

of life. Men and women are dragging into the light the differing conditions in which humankind is living . . . pointing to how unequal these conditions are.”¹ By the time of her speech to the Turner Grange, agrarian reformers—in the form of the Populist movement—had exposed these inequalities on a national scale. Although the Populists had drawn attention to the plight of the farmer, Kimball expressed a faith that “almost every lot in life, nearly every condition under which men and women live, has its compensation.” This included farming, which Kimball argued could not be measured in a purely economic sense. There was a greater reward that one enjoyed from working the land—something deeply personal and grounding.

Farm work could be dull and laborious, Kimball admitted, but she took pride in her role on the farm and defended it. She critiqued those who were ashamed of farm life, including young people who were afraid to openly admit that their parents farmed. Kimball placed strong emphasis on the cooperation of the farm family and celebrated an occupation and way of living that was close to nature.² “The man or woman who is entirely alien to the soil has missed something for which there is no compensation; but to the one who by dint of toil and experience can turn carbon and oxygen into the cornstalk or the potato comes the satisfaction of making something higher out of something lower; a feeling that he is in a sense a co-worker with God. This is his real compensation, not the potatoes alone, or the cornstalk.”

Kimball was responding to the increasing commercialization of New England agriculture in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and she was just one of many who questioned this expansion. As her speech suggests, the economic transformation of the region’s agriculture in the industrial age engendered an important cultural debate about rural identity. Envisioning rural life in all its aspects—cultural as well as economic—small farmers, practitioners of mixed husbandry, and their advocates took to the grange halls and farm newspapers to express their concerns.³ Their actions suggest that the shift to capital-intensive farming was a troubled and contested transition in Maine and New England, and that some farmers at least were content with an agricultural system that emphasized something other than capital gains.

By 1870, the United States was on the fast track to industrialization. Between 1870 and 1913, the country augmented its already substantial lead in labor productivity over other industrial nations with an astounding rate of real GDP growth.⁴ Different regions of the United States experienced this growth on different terms, but regardless of region, in-

dustrial and market capitalism permeated American farming. Despite the notion that New England agriculture was “going downhill,” as the popular saying went, the region actually saw impressive returns for its agricultural output, boasting some of the highest yields per acre in the country. In 1879, New England farmers exceeded national averages for corn by 19 percent; oats by 22 percent; wheat by 16 percent; barley by 7 percent; and buckwheat by 21 percent. Maine led the country in potato production based on per-acre yield, and Vermont could claim it had the biggest corn cannery in the nation.⁵

Historian Brian Donahue identified the 1920s, rather than the 1870s, as the beginning of New England’s agricultural decline—some fifty years later than the traditional interpretation. The period between 1850 and 1920, he argues, was actually a golden age for specialized products, including dairy products, eggs, and fruit.⁶ Given this accelerating commercialization and specialization, this region provides an interesting model of cultural resistance to intensive agriculture. Why did class friction and resistance to commercial agriculture appear in a region that was doing quite well, in an agricultural sense? The unsettled nature of this transition suggests that resistance to the sweeping forces of commerce and capitalism did exist beneath the surface of New England’s “success” in “making farming pay.” Economic growth did not come without conflict and resistance: not everyone heeded the “progressive call.”

Scholars have devoted substantial attention to the commercialization of American agriculture, producing an intense debate about just how early capitalism permeated American farms and fields.⁷ While the exact date of capitalist agriculture’s arrival is still contested, most can agree that by 1850, there were clear signs that farmers were engaged in the market economy. But should the debate stop there? Historian Beatrice Craig’s recent study of the Upper St. John Valley in eastern Canada complicates things by suggesting we need to look more carefully at how local people made local decisions. “The growing importance of local and regional markets ... shifts some of the initiative behind market transformations back to rural people, who can no longer be cast in purely reactive terms.”⁸ Craig notes a market culture existed in the Upper St. John Valley that was not necessarily capitalist and suggests a more complicated view of how rural people *actively* interacted with the marketplace. She also suggests greater care when placing farmers in a particular economic category, for there are many nuances to take into account within a market culture. If local people made local economic decisions, then they certainly had the power to shape the local economy to their own ends,

critique it, and even define it in a way that prioritized contentedness over market success.

While scholars have paid great attention to the economic aspects of capitalist agriculture in the industrial age, we need to better understand the cultural aspects, especially in regions like New England where the Populist movement was not the dominant form of agrarian protest.⁹ What did reformers, pundits, and other farmers like Olive Kimball think about this shift? How did it affect their sense of rural identity?

A search of New England agricultural newspapers reveals a lively debate over the merits of commercial agriculture. Even those who engaged in commercial agriculture might be straddling the worlds of pre-capitalist and capitalist farming. My intention is not to argue that Maine and other New England farmers were avoiding commercial agriculture, but rather that the commercialization of agriculture was not a foregone conclusion at the turn of the century. Farmers had not clearly settled on the question of what it meant to be a farmer in the region. We need to better understand not only the degree in which Mainers and their New England counterparts were involved in the market economy, but also what these farmers were *saying* about the market economy.

The Commercialization of New England Agriculture

To begin, it must be noted that many New England farmers valued new forms of capital-intensive agriculture and sought to turn farming into a purely business occupation. New England farmers who remained skeptical of commercial agriculture faced cultural critiques from urbanites, but they also had to deal with agricultural leaders and fellow farmers who embraced the new farming system. To understand farmers' criticism of commercial agriculture, we must first look to its proponents.

Samuel Boardman, who served on the Maine Board of Agriculture, was a strong supporter of commercial farming and the Kennebec Valley's place in it. In his 1892 *History of the Agriculture of Kennebec County, Maine*, he boasted of the valley's productivity, but he also detailed the socio-cultural and economic changes that the region was experiencing. Kennebec farms used to be self-dependent in the "pre-historic agriculture" stage, he said, "when the farmers were obliged to look to their farms and the labor of their hands for everything that contributed to material welfare. The land supplied everything, and the farm was a small empire. Little was had by the rural people that the farm did not furnish."¹⁰ The small farmer was a thing of the past, and Boardman embraced the changes that came to the valley: carding mills, power looms,

industrial centers, stronger markets, luxury items for the home, mowing machines, improved roads, and the higher social position of the farmer's family. All of these changes amounted to a revolution in the valley, as "old things had passed away; all things had become new."¹¹

Specialized farming was the "new" way of life in the Kennebec Valley. According to Boardman,

while in general the agricultural methods of the county may be regarded as a mixed system of husbandry, they are less so at the present time than formerly. In the earlier days each farmer raised some of all the farm crops and kept all kinds of stock, as each made it a point to be independent of every other. Now the tendency is toward the more perfect growing of crops . . . farmers who have large orchards, or make dairying a specialty, or having a good grass farm sell hay and purchase commercial fertilizers, or breed a particular kind of cattle, or fine colts of a fashionable family—give special effort and attention to these branches.

Along with urging farmers to expand their operations, progressive farm leaders like Boardman also encouraged them to adopt concrete business practices. Many hoped to place farming in line with other industries and show its ability to turn profits with efficient capital management.¹² The Secretary of the Maine Board of Agriculture, S. L. Goodale, echoed Boardman's sentiments. In 1873, Goodale opined to the Maine Board of Agriculture that after the Civil War, many people were able to garner large amounts of capital. These capitalists established new wage labor systems and their "possession of the means led to the gratification of numerous wants, and to indulgence in numerous luxuries never before thought of."¹³ New arenas of capital investment, then, were the crux of agricultural change.

One of the agriculture secretary's most telling points was his discussion about the meaning and value of agricultural work. Goodale wished to separate agriculture into two different camps: farming as a business and farming as a living. The former was distinct from the latter because "it should yield profits." In fact, Goodale argued that there was nothing more important for Maine agriculture than introducing business principles into farming, making the occupation more progressive in turn. "It is one thing to pursue farming as a calling whereby to earn a living—to get the simple worth of the labor bestowed—such as one would get if he sold the same labor to another for wages," he said, "and it is very different thing to conduct farming as a *business* which shall yield a *profit* upon its operations over and above *actual cost*." These two very different ap-

proaches lay at the center of the agricultural debate in late nineteenth-century New England. For many New England farmers, agriculture was a way of life and a foundation for identity, not solely a business practice. Goodale was right: for content farmers, agriculture was a way of making a living and getting by.

Another aspect of the agriculture secretary's paper was his insistence that Maine's historical mixed-husbandry system was too excessive, and that it limited farmers' productivity. The type of agriculture one practiced was central in the debate over the value of agricultural work. Mixed-husbandry had always been tied to the household economy, and for many small farmers, it was integral to their identity. It allowed the farm family to grow most of their own products for their daily needs, while also providing some items for exchange. Mixed-husbandry was a safe system of farming because of its inherent diversity. The farmer raised livestock, fruits, and vegetables, which decreased the risk if a particular crop failed or if the season proved challenging. This system also relied on soil nutrient recycling in the form of manuring and crop rotation to maintain the land's fertility and was inherently tied to balancing the utilization of grasslands, woods, and water.¹⁴

Although Boardman and Goodale lauded commercialized and specialized farming, they did not speak for all Mainers. The *Maine Farmer*, among other publications, was filled with discussion about the disadvantages of commercial farming. In this and other venues, farmers spoke out against it. Their critiques were not only based on practical and economic considerations, but on broader social issues like economic inequality, community stability, morality, and threats to personal autonomy. These two very different approaches to farming lay at the center of deeper debate about rural identity in late nineteenth-century New England. For many New England farmers, agriculture was a way of life and a foundation for this identity, not solely a business practice. Traditionalist farmers were not averse to turning a profit, but they were not driven by profits alone, nor were they constantly looking for the next opportunity to expand and increase profit capacity.

During the late nineteenth century debates about mixed husbandry and specialization became quite heated in New England, and many farmers remained skeptical of monoculture systems.¹⁵ Proponents of mixed husbandry were skeptical of specialized farming for several reasons. The first—and perhaps simplest—reason was the fact that monoculture was risky. If for any reason the crop failed that season, what would the farmer do? At this time there were no farm subsidies like

those that would come during the New Deal, so crop failure was a serious predicament. Monoculture crop systems were also more firmly linked to the market economy, and this meant farmers also had to engage in uneasy and tense relationships with the business world.¹⁶

Ezekiel Holmes, the editor of the *Maine Farmer*, was a proponent of mixed husbandry and stressed the system's ability to provide security. "A dependence upon the home sources of fertility, the barn-yard, stable, hog-pen, compost heap, muck-bed, ash-barrel, &c.," he said, "would give better satisfaction than any amount of money put into concentrated fertilizers. In short, a general system of mixed husbandry . . . has, for the generality of Maine farmers, been the safest course."¹⁷ The editor also claimed that mixed-husbandry would allow farmers to be independent, content, debt-free, and engaged in their communities. In the matter of contentment, becoming involved in corporate agriculture did not seem like the wisest choice. Specialization did indeed appeal to some; the Mt. Vernon, Maine, farmer's club, for example, saw it as a path to greater prosperity.¹⁸ But by no means was commercial agriculture universally accepted in Maine.

Mixed husbandry also presented more balanced work rhythms and a stronger sense of control over the productive process. In 1880 Maine farmers, for example, still produced multiple consumables on the farm, and even though they had access to new produce markets, their surpluses were minimal.¹⁹ To many farmers, commercial farming was simply too unpredictable and complex. Perhaps most importantly, mixed husbandry encouraged a sense of equity and cooperation among neighbors who were not looking for exorbitant profits. Farmers hoped to sustain the rural lifestyle they were used to and keeping farm operations relatively small and diverse was one way to accomplish this.

While diversity provided stability, it did not often yield high profits. This is where specialized, commercial agriculture came into play. For Goodale, mixed husbandry was a "custom adapted only to primitive times and the wants of pioneers."²⁰ If Maine truly wanted to make farming into a respectable business and industry, individual farmers had to select one primary crop as the focus of their labor. By focusing on sweet corn, for example, the farmer would be able to grow larger crops, thus increasing profitability. "Eminent superiority cannot be obtained by rambling practice at all branches [of farming]...the principle of division of labor can be applied in agriculture to as real advantage as in any other branch of manufacture whatever." Farming was to take its place next to other industrial giants.

One area of commercial agriculture that appeared problematic to traditional farmers was its relationship to the environment. Farmers were no strangers to the call for natural resource conservation, as the soil they cared for and worked was integral to not only the well-being of their communities but to the rest of the country as well. The capitalization of agriculture greatly increased the possibility of undermining this relation to the land. New England farmers had been conscious of soil depletion as early as 1883, when market gardener John Morrow of Concord, Massachusetts, urged his fellow farmers to not fall victim to greed.²¹ Morrow decried the “colossal farming in the Western country, of the growing of wheat by the thousands of acres...[as] nothing but downright land robbery, a depletion of the land of its fertility, like a scourge leaving nothing but sterility and ruin in its wake.”²² Morrow’s statements foreshadowed the Dust Bowl that would destroy the Great Plains five decades later.²³

And yet, Morrow was a prominent farmer in Concord, a town in one the wealthiest agricultural counties in New England. He surely saw market gardening as an excellent way to accumulate wealth, and no doubt treated it like a business. He had prime access to Boston markets and could be called a commercial farmer. Although involved in commercial agriculture, Morrow realized its limits and potential for environmental destruction.²⁴ Morrow’s case illustrates the paradox of New England farming: increasing market connectivity and growth often meant sacrifices. New England farmers, both traditional and commercial, faced difficult moral conundrums in a region where environmental stewardship and capitalism were two sides of the same coin.²⁵ These predicaments suggest that we look more carefully at the nuances of the late-nineteenth-century shift to commercial agriculture.

Agriculture within Popular Culture

The debate over commercialized agriculture was in part shaped by pressure from urban journalists and pundits.²⁶ The dialectic between rural and urban notions of country life in this time is but one facet of a complex cultural interaction between city and farm in nineteenth-century America. Studying this cultural interaction reveals much about agricultural identity. Urban commentators characterized the farmer as backwards, lazy, overzealously independent, and averse to economic progress and these characterizations are essential to understanding how farmers experienced the rise of commercial agriculture in the late nineteenth century.

Popular publications like *The Atlantic Monthly*, *World's Work*, *The Independent*, and *New England Magazine* viewed New England agriculture mostly in terms of economic progress. If a farming community had not commercialized, then it was seen as resisting progress. This assessment became part of regional rural identity. Communications scholar Janice Peck has noted that the media can be crucial arenas for cultural "moments of danger." She points out that

as institutions located at the heart of social existence, the media are key players in this dynamic process of inclusion and exclusion, incorporation and resistance, and as such are prime sites and objects of critical historical examination. Through their role in the production, dissemination, and legitimization of a 'selective tradition,' media are also important targets for alternative and oppositional forces in society who strive to tell a different story about the past and to imagine a different social order in the future²⁷

Perhaps farmers saw themselves in their own "moment of danger," in which reformers and urban journalists together pushed for modernity: an abandonment of familiar forms of identity. Popular culture critics saw rural New England in several, often contradictory lights. On one hand, they criticized farmers, who seemed to labor in unnecessary hardship and monotony every day. On the other hand, the countryside itself offered a place of pre-industrial solace. Writing about an unidentified valley in Vermont, one journalist noted the "brightness and freshness" of the place, but also bemoaned the "severity of weather and . . . scarcity of social comforts and opportunities."²⁸ This dualism was exhibited in much of the popular literature of the time. But perhaps the dominant impression of country life was the measure of its progress. If a New England farmer did not appear to be economically motivated, journalists deemed that farmer backwards and resistant to change. A key cultural measurement of a successful farmer was the ability to seize opportunity, increase farm acreage, or augment farm operations.

Writing for *The Atlantic Monthly*, another journalist only going by the pen name "Englishwoman" described her experiences in the New England Hill Country in 1880. The writer probably took up residence in New Hampshire, as she "was not many miles from the Maine frontier, and the only difference between the two sides of the line is that it is a trifle easier to get liquor on the Maine side than on ours."²⁹ She stressed the intellectual complacency of the local residents and suggested that a penchant for progress would more likely be found in New England's urban

and suburban areas—especially in the “city Yankee.” The journalist represented a common thread of external commentaries about the countryside. She failed to judge rural New Englanders on their own terms, and instead proposed to change “the character of the rowdiest or most Rip-Van-Winkle like rural population.” The author insisted that rural areas must be *changed* somehow.

T.N. Carver, a popular writer and professor of political economy, took a trip throughout rural New England in 1905. Beginning at Cambridge and then touring eastern Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and southern Connecticut, Carver found a region in which “farming was never a self-sufficing industry.”³⁰ Yet the Bostonian observed a more serious problem: degeneracy among the inhabitants: like others, he bemoaned the loss of “sound New England stock.” He concluded with a section entitled “mental attitudes,” deducing that “New England farmers were distinctly disinclined to talk about their farms or their leading crops—[they] were anxious rather, to ask me questions regarding other matters. This may argue greater mental alertness, but I think it also argues a lack of interest in their own occupations.” The farmers’ unwillingness to augment operations would certainly check their progress.³¹

Historian David Nye argues that Americans formulated a national narrative that equated technological advancement with progress, even if the technology itself undermined democracy, republicanism, or political ethics.³² As these urban-based observations suggest, this was also true of commercial agriculture and specialized farming. According to some reformers, monoculture was the way of future, and a larger farm was a sure sign of success. Progress was a contested term during the late nineteenth century, with New England farmers—at least those expressing a traditional small landowner ideology—clearly on the defensive. How, then, did they cope with these external views of their lifestyle?

The defense of traditional agriculture rested on the cultural authority of independent landownership, the contentedness of rural life, a rejection of greed, and an open dialogue about the dangers of commercial farming. Rural New Englanders expressed this cultural authority in rural publications, attempting to bolster faith in traditional farming methods and ways of life. They also gathered to debate the capitalization of agriculture at their local grange halls, as these were dynamic spaces of social interaction.³³ Ideas discussed during grange meetings would often later be found in the rural press, and the results of these meetings and correspondence to rural newspapers suggested that New England farmers were not behind the times at all; rather they were living in a way that ex-



Photograph of grange members gathered outside of the Franklin Grange Hall, Bryant Pond, ca. 1892. Farmers often met at the local grange hall to debate the merits of capitalizing agriculture. Often these ideas would find their way into the rural press. Collections of the Maine Historical Society.

pressed their independence from the culture of industrial and market capitalism. Their way of life was rich in intellectual rewards and in the satisfaction of a close relation to the land. Their agricultural methods were foundational to the cultural authority they preached. While not averse to turning a profit, they saw limits to agricultural growth. If profit margins interfered with independence and community structure, they questioned large-scale production.

In publications like *The Massachusetts Ploughman* and the *Maine Farmer*, traditionalists challenged urban stereotypes and the promotion of capital-intensive farming. Since the circulation of these publications was limited, they failed to alter the dominant cultural perception of New England farming, but their message illustrates their own sense of identity and indeed the power and relevance, as they saw it, of the countryside. This culture of resistance has deep roots. Christopher Clark points out that in 1842, for example, several rural New Englanders founded the Northampton Association in western Massachusetts, drawing communi-

Foolish Greed For a Larger Farm.

Be Content With Less and Make the Best of It.

BY WALDO F. BROWN.

I was born early in the thirties, and have lived all my life in a neighborhood of small farmers, where the farms average less, perhaps, than 100 acres, and I have a good chance to know what can be done on a small farm. In an adjoining county, a few miles away, is a region of large farms, ranging from 200 to over 1,000 acres each, and I am personally acquainted with many of the owners and know something of their life and management. I have also given attention to this question in my attendance at institutes and other farm gatherings in some seventy-five counties of several States, and, besides, I have had personal experience in this very line, for I farmed successfully, and very pleasantly, for several years on a forty-acre farm, and then bought two additional small farms, one of which joined mine and the other laying convenient on the road between my farm and the village. I have also been familiar with the experience of many farmers who, after years of successful management of small farms, bought others or additions. I speak of these things that you may see I have qualifications for giving advice. And I would say that the farm which will support a fam-

This article for the *Maine Farmer*, published on June 1, 1899, shows concern for small farmers in Maine. In this publication, traditionalists challenged urban stereotypes and the promotion of capital-intensive farming.

tarrians from all over the region to create a new society, removed from the dangerous fluctuations of market capitalism.³⁴ Members of the association had seen what happens when the market system failed—as it did in the 1837-39 financial panic that ruined a large number of families dependent upon commercial production.³⁵ The association's members ate in common dining rooms, purchased land and buildings in the Connecticut River Valley, established a collective farming system, and set up a school. Although the Northampton Association eventually collapsed, the legacy is important as an expression of rural misgivings about commercial farming and an attempt at resisting it. New England farmers were not able to change popular conceptions of rural life, but they accepted these stereotypes on *their own terms*.

Responding to critics' accusations that farming was unprofitable, a Cornish, Maine, farmer, for example, argued in 1873 that "making farming pay" was an entirely different subject in rural circles. "What does the farmer want of money?" he asked. "I mean, more than he can acquire by a rational method applied to the soil? Can we better a man who has a comfortable home in the country by giving him money? Not a bit."³⁶ Farmers like this rejected industrial values and instead struck a balance with the land, capping farm size when it breached certain moral values. The Cornish farmer summed up his idea of the content farmer: "he has a

home he can call his own—he has fuel for his fire—bread and vegetables for his table—all the fruits of the season—pure and unadulterated products o’ the dairy—pure air and water, and leisure to cultivate his mind, and something to spare for a rainy day. We think *farming pays*.”³⁷

The question “does farming pay?” was discussed so fervently in farm publications and grange-hall debates because many mainstream papers challenged this notion of success. Like the Cornish, Maine, farmer, the editor of the *Massachusetts Ploughman* criticized farmers who rushed to the fields with large amounts of capital in order to quickly “make farming pay” and offered the example of a wool merchant who turned to farming after growing tired of the wool trading business. According to the editor, “it was enough to make any farmer laugh to see him work...he could buy and sell wool, but he could not farm.”³⁸ The merchant told his son that he could have the farm if he could earn a living, but the question remained open: how could one determine if the young man would indeed be “farming successfully”? Surely not simply in terms of dollars and cents. The editor offered his evaluation

it always has its ups and downs, and it always will. It pays any one who can get a good living, feed, clothe and give his children a fair education. Keep right along with just the same crops from year to year; you may miss it one year, perhaps, and hit it to next. Pay no regard to the ten hour law: it is nothing to anyone how many hours you work out of the twenty-four; keep doing little by little, and be sure you will come out all right in the end . . . now any man that says farming does not pay, does not know anything about it or else he don’t love to work

These ambiguities highlight the pre-capitalist values farmers continued to hold in the industrial period. Many—like the editor of the *Ploughman*—rejected attempts to analyze New England agriculture solely in economic terms. Although the agricultural landscape was becoming increasingly complex, some New England farmers clung to values based on contentedness rather than profits; they were content with getting by. New England farmers were engaged in an ongoing debate: what does one need to live happily? To live comfortably? Their responses continue to resonate today.

Small Farmers and Agricultural Identity

As rural class divisions grew sharper, the populist message gained traction in New England. Farmers were no strangers to class-conscious-



A photograph of sweet corn under cultivation in Fryeburg, Maine circa 1939-1941. This image is an example of crop specialization taking hold over the mixed husbandry practiced by traditional farmers. By focusing on one crop it was thought that the farmer would be able to grow larger crops, thus increasing profitability. Image courtesy of University of Maine Special Collections.

ness; even in New England clear distinctions were drawn between “small farmers” and “large farmers.” Since Jacksonian times, the former group had signed their journal correspondence anonymously with titles such as “A SMALL FARMER” or simply, “SMALL FARMER.” As small farmers began to identify themselves more and more as a separate type of farmer, they emphasized their independence from commercial production and corporations. Class was a binding force in Maine agriculture.

H.L. Leland, an agricultural journalist living in Piscataquis County, was convinced that the small farmer occupied a permanent place in Maine agriculture. Speaking at the Maine Board of Agriculture semi-annual meeting in 1879, Leland claimed that, “a large portion of our farmers are what is termed small farmers. Care should be taken not to rush too hastily into, say, one branch of farming. A leading requirement is to grow all or much of the food possible on their farms going to support the family, especially the bread.”³⁹ Ten years later in 1889, Leland warned Maine farmers to be wary of the market economy, with its monopolies and inequitable exchange. The object of his complaint was the canned sweet corn industry.⁴⁰ “The farmer who permits himself to be dependent upon the markets for his provender supplies,” he insisted, “must submit to the ruling prices of the market. He has no effective means of pro-

tecting himself against excessive prices.”⁴¹ Late-nineteenth-century farmers were still uneasy about full participation in capitalistic institutions. Leland was interested in making his farm more profitable, but he resisted the idea of a completely transformed agricultural landscape.

New England small farmers, like their western Populist counterparts, saw themselves as an oppressed class. Frustrated with taxes, one “small farmer” from Gray, Maine, wrote to the *Maine Farmer* on at least three separate occasions in early 1890. His concern was not so much the payment of taxes but the fact that small farmers were paying more than they should. Larger farmers and corporate organizations were openly evading a fair tax assessment, and he lamented, “no sane man can doubt that 80 per cent. of the property of this country escapes taxation, either by exemption, evasion, or under-valuation.”⁴² For Mainers like this, the unequal tax burden encroached on a larger moral value system predicated on independence, community, and equality: the tax problem was an ethical dilemma.

As a small farmer, his argument was class-based. Small farmers were proud of their family-based operations but wanted a fair playing field—not to augment their operations, but to preserve the equity in the farm system. Thus agrarian class-consciousness became even sharper in the industrial age, where the rules of agricultural production and exchange became more complex. New transport systems, machinery, markets, sources of capital, and ideologies about farm labor left some in a state of optimism and others feeling isolated and on the defensive.

Much of the rural debate about progress, commerce, and capitalism revolved around the idea of “fancy farming,” a system that required large amounts of capital deployed to increase the size of the farm and the margin of profit. During the late nineteenth century, “gentleman farmers”—usually wealthy urbanites—turned to the country as place of leisure and perhaps a place to make another fortune. Some New Englander reformers believed that these wealthy farmers could foster a sort of “trickle down” farming system—one that would enhance the common farmer’s class aspirations.⁴³ But the majority of New England farmers had limited access to capital, and thus “fancy farming” simply aggravated obvious class differences. Fancy farmers, more often than not, did not list farming as their primary occupation but rather worked the land as a hobby, employing large amounts of capital and technology in the process.⁴⁴ Debates over fancy farming played out across the pages of New England farm journals, and while fancy farming did bring some advantages, the average farmer remained skeptical because fancy farmers often came

from outside areas. A correspondent to the *New England Farmer* called for letters testifying to those who managed to improve their farms without these large amounts of capital—from those who “commenced farming without any capital but their hands.”⁴⁵ Many farmers simply did not aspire to better technologies and larger operations; they were content with getting by.

Other farmers were intrigued by the idea of fancy farming and suggested that small farmers embrace this system. George Brackett, a wealthy farmer from Belfast, Maine, was sympathetic to the common farmer’s complaints about fancy farmers, but he also saw the benefits. He defined fancy farmers as “those who, possessed of capital, expend it lavishly upon their farms in various directions. . . . They are usually men who have made their money in other professions than farming . . . and they enter upon new schemes with more impetuosity than wisdom.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Brackett saw possible benefits in these spectacles. Fancy farmers might waste their fortunes by buying up every new amenity, but through experimentation, they might yield new understandings of agriculture.

Such optimism was not shared universally amongst New England farmers. Some deemed this reckless investment a form of greed. Thus the debate over fancy farming pointed to a much larger debate about agricultural value systems in which economic growth was tied to morality and cultural identity. Fancy farming did not only cause class friction, but it challenged the worth of the small, independent farmer. Fancy farming relied on investment and acquired debt—concepts that were foreign to the small New England farmer.

In 1905, a young Massachusetts farmer commented that he “wouldn’t take one of those nabob farms as a gift with money to pay the bill. He felt more comfortable with “that old farm that my great grandfather cleared and that my father worked on all his life. Let me take that old place with all its memories and live an independent life, and improve the farm for my children and leave it better than I found it. That’s fancy farming enough for me.”⁴⁷ He spoke for those who rejected the “progressive” call to expand crop output and infrastructure. He reasserted his identity as a rural New Englander by expressing his satisfaction in improving the farm while at the same time keeping operations and output at stable levels.

Farmer L.J. Gardner of Berkshire County, Massachusetts, also skeptical of “fancy farming,” mocked those who focused only on profit, Gardner criticized the “false envy, so to speak, of our more fortunate and bet-

ter-to-do neighbor farmers” and assured readers that this kind of farming was often foolish, and would most likely lead to failure. He warned his fellow farmers to not become lost amidst the glitter and excitement of new tools and machinery and more land, and to rely on labor, traditional methods, and small investments. In other words, if farmers did not let greed overcome them, they would be much better off. If proper cultivation and care for the land gave way to unreachable ambitions for profit, farmers would produce not so much a good harvest but rather “a big crop of throwaside wagon buggies, two-seaters, plows and harrows left for sale at half or quarter value when forced to sell out.”⁴⁸ Gardner challenged the idea of progress extolled in the urban media: by becoming too caught up in commercial agriculture, one could become a fool.

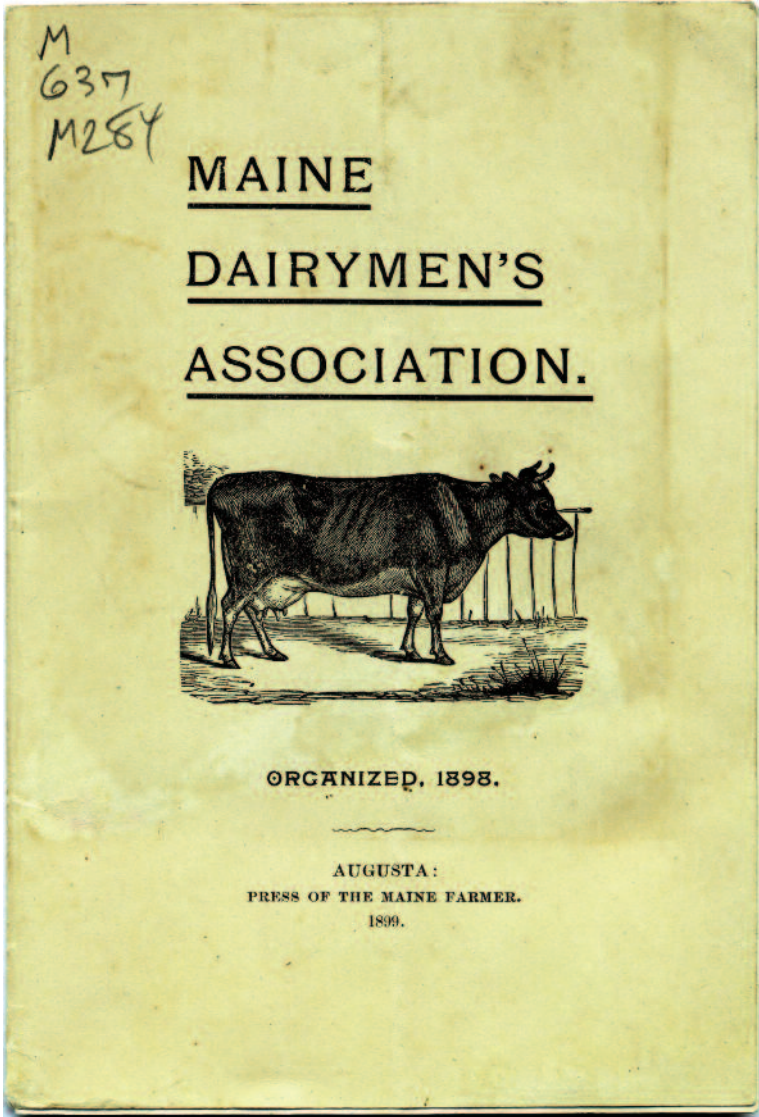
In a time when expansion of American industry was gaining admiration all across the globe, a large cohort of small New England farmers clung to their traditional aspirations, placing their emphasis on familial relations and community integrity. Olive Kimball had expressed such views in her Turner Grange speech; she understood that “the farmer’s family...will never gain great wealth,” but she nevertheless rejected the full embrace of capitalist aspirations.⁴⁹ Instead, she urged that, “the farmer’s family must find compensation in something less tangible, less material, but more enduring and equally enjoyable.” More important than immense wealth was the integrity of the soil, and the relationship that one could have with it. The greatest compensation one could get from farming was the “pride in the broad sure acres that have been reclaimed and made fair and fertile by an honest, earnest father’s toil . . . [children] should be proud of their father’s and mother’s life work.”

Kimball’s sentiments also reflect the sense of land conservation that was so important to northern New England farmers. A farmer’s true compensation came from a personal relationship with the land, and ensuring that this ethic was passed down to the next generation was also important. In this agricultural vision, farming was influenced by what might be called today a moral ecology. As Richard Judd has argued, farmers saw their agriculture as a *part* of nature, not opposed to it. While farmers did intend to make a living, profits were not their only motive; they were concerned about beautification efforts around the farm and about natural balance and harmony. They removed unsightly rocks and boulders from their land, disposed of rusted farm machinery and tools, and cleaned up stagnant pools and ditches that marred the landscape. Ironically, they also debated the merits of protecting birds—considered by some the farmer’s historic enemy.⁵⁰

Small farmers had advocates in a variety of places, including the University of Maine. Addressing the Kennebec County Fair in September of 1900, University of Maine Agriculture Professor G.M. Gowell asked the audience, “are small farmers to go?” Gowell noted that Chauncey M. Depew—lawyer for Andrew Carnegie, Railroad Manager, and future U.S. Senator—had argued that “the era of the great farmer is upon us—men who will control hundreds and thousands of acres instead of sixty or a hundred. That the methods of the merchant and manufacturer will apply here as readily as anywhere else, and the farmer will be a capitalist in the truest sense of the word.” As to the accuracy of this observation, Gowell opined that “every one is at liberty to judge for himself.”⁵¹ Why was he skeptical of Depew’s claims? Gowell and the farmers he worked with understood that working the land meant something else—a morality that did not fall in line with Depew’s corporate model. Gowell argued that farmers remained on the land because this offered them a chance to work in the open air and an opportunity to remain independent, no matter how small their property. More important, they remained in control of their own lives. Like Depew, he believed that a new era of farming was coming, but his vision involved a resurgence of small landholders. Access to capital was not important in this vision, as farmers had no need for it. Gowell’s small farmers would not completely isolate themselves from market capitalism—they needed supplies and machinery—but they would consciously avoid full immersion into the market system.

Gowell saw the small farmer as a unique class of farmer—the backbone of Maine agriculture and an economic foundation of the New England hill country. He also acknowledged the corporate farm operation and its potential for monopolizing lands in the hill country. He was not all that concerned about this, however, as he believed “the small returns for money investments in agriculture are the safeguards of our farm homes, and are my reasons for believing that capitalists will be slow in seeking the ownership of large areas for farm lands.” Small farmers would be shielded from the advances of modern capitalism by the New England environment. Corporate interests were unlikely to buy up land in the hill country.

As Gowell understood, small farmers were resourceful in their attempts to shape commercial agriculture to their own ends. They had to become creative in order to adjust to the increasingly corporatized agricultural economy of the rural North.⁵² As Maine and other New England farmers became more and more accustomed to dealing with corpo-



This pamphlet for the Maine Dairymen's Association is an example of the specialization of agriculture to produce one product, in this case dairy. Many progressives hoped to place farming in line with other industries to show its ability to turn profits with efficient capital management. Collections of the Maine Historical Society.

rations—canning companies, for instance—they realized they could organize and resist corporate control of their operations.

Farmers learned to project their own version of progress. One, for instance, suggested they simply form “corporations” themselves—cooperative organizations. This self-proclaimed small farmer explained that the old farm was not usually at fault for hard times, so some other factor must be to blame.⁵³ He used to think the tariffs were the culprit, but was now convinced that “many manufacturing and transportation companies have or are trying to consolidate, and what for? Simply to make more money . . . Can you stop them? No! Then what are you going to do about it?” The solution was “simply this, *form corporations ourselves* [and] fight them with their own weapons, adopt their tactics, control the prices of our products as they do theirs.”

The farmer admitted that many family farmers like him were at a disadvantage when it came to the trusts. They lacked access to capital, equipment, and a large labor force. But if farmers came together and purchased a dozen farms in one area, they could control all aspects of production and exchange. The farmer also advocated specific roles and positions for the new farm “corporation.” There would be a foreman to oversee the teams and plan out the crop systems, a marketman to handle the selling of the produce, a cooperative slaughterhouse, feed and supply store, grist mill, saw mill, and even a small canning operation for fruits and berries. As for the labor force, he suggested that, farmers’ wives and children should work alongside them. His plan seemed to have every angle covered in order to place the agricultural power structure back into farmers’ hands.

While the Maine farmer’s vision was somewhat unrealistic, his proposition pointed to the small farmers’ frustration. They seemed lost in a complex and changing economic landscape where the size of one’s farming operation became more and more a factor in success. Historically, independence was a central feature of New England rural ideology, but cooperation and combination, by 1900, seemed a fact of life. The Maine farmer admitted he had great faith in the old small farm, but he realized that cultural and technological changes challenged this kind of farming. “None of us can comprehend how great the changes have been, for we are short-lived mortals. The old-time individual trader was supplanted by the copartnership, and this, in turn, is giving way to the big department corporation stores.”⁵⁴

Farmers straddled two worlds in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. It seems ironic that the author, a small family

For the Maine Farmer.

A PLEA FOR THE SMALL FARM.

Mr. Editor: We saw in the *Farmer* a short time ago where one man spoke very discouragingly of the small farmer. There is a very prevalent habit to-day among farmers of "biting off more than they can chew." They will buy a large farm, pay one-third down, or perhaps one-half, and mortgage the remainder; then they will deprive themselves of everything and try to cultivate 50 acres, and put work and dressing, &c., on it that they ought to put on 10 acres. It is, and always has been, to me a deep mystery why people want to mow over 50 acres to get what they ought to get from ten. The above-named farmer will work for a number of years and his farm will grow poorer and poorer, and his mortgage longer and still longer, till finally he will be compelled to give it up, whereas, had he purchased a smaller farm and paid for it, or the most of it, one that he could care for properly, he would soon have had a farm that would sell for double what it cost him, and not had to live on "pork fat and Johnny

An example from the *Maine Farmer* on July 18, 1889, shows how some individuals spoke out against the increasing acreage of farms and were content with running smaller farms.

farmer, could envision an agricultural cooperative complete with its own supply store and processing capabilities, but it is clear that like the western Populists he saw the need for dramatic measures in order to protect a traditional way of life in the industrial age. Small farmers were on the defensive, struggling to make sense of their place in a changed economic landscape, and even those Mainers who adopted specialized farming learned firsthand the inequalities that could occur when working with a corporation. Despite its novelty, the Maine farmer's cooperative vision rested on a value system that recognized one's independence from corporations and membership in a distinct class of ethical small farmers. These farmers were not necessarily aspiring to remain independent of each other but rather from urban ideologies, corporate culture, and commercial inequity.

Does Farming Pay?

Maine farmers and others in New England continued to critique commercial farming into the early twentieth century. In the midst of a popular culture that both chided them as backwards and encouraged them to increase their operations, farmers displayed an enduring sense of pride in an agricultural ideology based on contentedness and an identity as small farmers. In a culture that worshiped “progress,” many hewed to traditional modes of land stewardship and sought to make their place on their own terms. The debates in farm journals illustrate the centrality of traditional rural identity in the shift to commercial agriculture. They remind us that exploring what it meant to be a farmer is just as important as studying how farmers worked the soil.

In 1873, Maine Board of Agriculture Secretary S.L. Goodale had urged Maine farmers to abandon mixed husbandry and specialize. “A little farm well-tilled is pretty enough to talk about,” he said, but with a few exceptions, it probably will not pay.⁵⁵ Yet even in the early twentieth century, the question, “does farming pay,” had no single or simple answer. Historians must be careful about drawing a sharp line between those who engage in a market economy and those who resist it. As these debates illustrate, farmers often straddled the divide between tradition and modernity. It important to examine how different groups experienced this complex cultural and economic landscape, because by doing so, we can better understand the impact of new institutions and the way farmers responded by creating and recreating their own agricultural identity.

NOTES

1. Olive Kimball, “Compensation,” *Maine Farmer*, September 20, 1900. Henceforth, *Maine Farmer* will be noted as *MF*.

2. As Mary Neth discusses in her study of family farming in the early twentieth-century Midwest, Grange Halls, and ultimately the Populist Party, were sustained by community-based local groups that included entire families as members. See Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 129.

3. The Grange, officially known as the Patrons of Husbandry, became a popular institution for farmers looking to find support in the turbulent economic landscape of the late nineteenth-century. As historian Stanley Howe notes, membership especially increased after the Panic of 1873, as farmers found that their local Grange chapter offered economic cooperation and political possibilities not found in the current agricultural system. See Stanley R. Howe, *A Fair Field and No Favor: A Concise History of The Maine*

State Grange (Augusta, ME: The Maine State Grange, 1994), 6.

4. Ralph Landau et al., *The Mosaic of Economic Growth* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 26-27; 42.

5. Michael Bell, "Did New England Go Downhill?" *Geographical Review* 79, no. 4 (October, 1989): 450-466.

6. Brian Donahue, *Reclaiming the Commons: Community Farms and Forests in a New England Town* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 64.

7. For an introduction to the debate, see James Henretta, "Families and Farms: *Mentalite* in Pre-Industrial America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 35, no.1 (January, 1978): 3-32; Michael Merrill, "Cash is Good to Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States," *Radical History Review* 3 (1977): 42-71; and Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism in Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

8. Beatrice Craig, *Backwoods Consumers, Homespun Capitalists: The Rise of a Market Culture in Eastern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 11-18

9. Lawrence Goodwyn argues that urban centers and trusts had been more successful in gaining economic and political control in New England, restricting farmers' control in the process. Firm commitment to progress and "hard money" among both Democrats and Republicans also shielded much of the Northeast from the national populist rhetoric. See *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 353.

10. Samuel Boardman, *The History of the Agriculture of Kennebec County, Maine* (New York: H.W. Blake and Co., 1892), 3-5, Special Collections, Raymond H. Fogler Library, Orono, ME.

11. *Ibid.*, 2.

12. Chad Montrie, *A People's History of Environmentalism in the United States* (New York: Continuum Press, 2011), 16.

13. S.L. Goodale, *Of the Changes in Farming Which Have Taken Place And Which Should Be Made: A Paper Read Before the Maine Board of Agriculture* (Augusta, ME: Sprague, Owen & Nash, printer, 1873), 7, The John Marshall and Alida Carroll Brown Research Library, Maine Historical Society.

14. For an excellent discussion of the English mixed husbandry system that was later transplanted to New England, see Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

15. Richard Judd, *Common Lands, Common People: The Origins of Conservation in Northern New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 59-67.

16. R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2002), 165.

17. Ezekiel Holmes, "Progress Backward," *MF*, November 4, 1876.

18. Secretary of Mt. Vernon Farmer's Club, *MF*, April 13, 1872.

19. Clarence Day, *Farming in Maine, 1860-1940* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1963), 165. Day notes that by 1880, Maine farmers continued to produce their own products like milk, butter, cheese, eggs, poultry, wood fuel, apples, potatoes, and beans. He notes that expenses for flour, sugar, and clothing were not all that large either.

20. Goodale, *Of the Changes in Farming*, 20.
21. As Brian Donahue has shown in *The Great Meadow*, New England farmers had been conscious of soil fertility issues and ecological limits since the colonial period.
22. John Moore, "Market Gardening," in *The Thirty-First Annual Report of the Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Agriculture with Returns of the Finances of the Agricultural Societies for 1883* (Boston, MA: Wright and Potter, 1884), 88.
23. See Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
24. As Richard Judd argues, Euro-American settlement was much more intense and prolonged in New England than the American West, which makes its environmental history more complex. This longer, more in-depth interaction created a dynamic sense of place and land conservation system, which was then carried over into the post-frontier phase and complicated the terms of commercial agriculture. See *Second Nature: An Environmental History of New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).
25. Brian Donahue, "Environmental Stewardship and Decline in Old New England," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24 (Summer 2004): 234-41.
26. For a substantial study on writers' role in shaping industrial agriculture in the twentieth century, see William Conlogue, *Working the Garden: American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
27. Janice Peck, "Moments of Danger and Challenges to the 'Selective Tradition' in U.S. Communication History," in Janice Peck and Inger Stole, eds., *A Moment of Danger: Critical Studies in the History of U.S. Communications Since World War II* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2011), 3.
28. Bradford Torrey, "A Green Mountain Corn-Field," *The Atlantic Monthly* 62, no. 369, July 1888, 47.
29. "An Englishwoman in the New England Hill Country," *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1880, 243.
30. T.N. Carver, "What Awaits Rural New England," *World's Work*, January 1905, 5749.
31. Carver, "What Awaits Rural New England," 5750.
32. David Nye, *American as Second Creation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
33. James B. Vickery and Richard Judd, "Agricultural Crisis and Adaptation, 1861-1900," in Richard Judd et al., eds., *Maine: The Pine Tree State from Prehistory to the Present* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1995), 406.
34. Christopher Clark, *The Communitarian Movement: The Radical Challenge of the Northampton Association* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 29-30.
35. John Lauritz Larson, *The Market Revolution in America: Liberty, Ambition, and the Eclipse of the Common Good* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 92.
36. G.F.G., "Does Farming Pay?" *MF*, July 5, 1873.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Editor of the Massachusetts Ploughman, "Does Farming Pay?" *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture*, July 19, 1879. Henceforth, this journal will be cited as *MP*.

39. "Maine Board of Agriculture: Semi-Annual Session Success in Farming, Reported for the Maine Farmer," *MF*, September 12, 1879.
40. Vegetable canning was a significant industry in Maine and New England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially sweet corn. Farmers often disagreed with the canneries over prices. For a historical geography of the region's sweet corn industry, see Paul Frederic, *Canning Gold: Northern New England's Sweet Corn Industry: A Historical Geography* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002).
41. H.L. Leland, "Make the Farm Self-Supplying," *MF*, July 4, 1889.
42. Small Farmer, "The Unequal Distribution," *MF*, May 29, 1890.
43. "Editorial: Back to the Country," *MP*, September 24, 1881.
44. "Correspondence: Farm Notes," *New England Farmer*, June 16, 1883.
45. *Ibid.*
46. George Brackett, "Fancy Farming," in Geo. E. Brackett, *Farm Talk: A Series of Papers Written in the Colloquial Style, Illustrating Various Farming Subjects* (Belfast, ME: Belfast and Co., 1881), 32-33, Special Collections, Raymond H. Fogler Library, University of Maine.
47. "Fancy Farming," *MP*, October 21, 1905.
48. L.J. Gardner, "Take Care of the Dollars," *MP*, October 28, 1905.
49. Kimball, "Compensation," *MF*.
50. Judd, *Common Lands, Common People*, 73-89.
51. G.M. Gowell, "Are Small Farmers To Go?" *MF*, September 20, 1900.
52. Hal Barron, *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 9.
53. A Maine Farmer, "An Important Problem: Corporation Farming as Viewed by a Maine Farmer," *MF*, April 5, 1900.
54. *Ibid.*
55. Goodale, "Of the Changes In Farming, 21."