CUMBERLAND COUNTY, VIRGINIA AGRICULTURE
1840 - 1860

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was begun as an honors thesis at Westhampton College, University of Richmond in 1969. My thesis advisor, Dr. Daniel P. Jordan, suggested that I narrow my interest in Virginia agricultural history into a topic by reading Avery O. Craven's classic Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606–1860 and Eugene D. Genovese's provocative The Political Economy of Slavery. The discrepancies between the conclusions of these eminent historians led me to try to discern which of the two men was correct, at least for Virginia. The paper I wrote at that time was a very general view of agriculture in the state with little emphasis on the Owsley school.

Dr. Boyd Coyner, Dr. James H. Hutson, Dr. Ludwell H. Johnson, Dr. John E. Selby and Dr. Richard B. Sherman, all of the College of William and Mary read this manuscript at various stages and made many helpful suggestions. Special thanks are due my father, Louis N. Agee, who assisted me in the strictly mathematical job of compiling long columns of statistics and who has given me information drawn from his years of experience as a farmer in Cumberland County.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the agriculture of Cumberland County, Virginia was prosperous or declining in the twenty years preceding the Civil War. Some historians have asserted that Virginia underwent a great agricultural renaissance in the period due to reformed methods of farming and others have asserted that reform was impossible.

While primary sources covered the 1840-1860 period, the bulk of the paper is based on the manuscript United States Bureau of the Census returns for the years 1850 and 1860. After compiling the information contained in them, it was possible to draw a statistical picture of agriculture in the county and to make conclusions from it.

It was concluded that Cumberland County agriculture was prosperous and fairly diversified in the period. The farmers were making more efficient use of a relatively stable slave population and production increased greatly while the number of improved acres actually declined, indicating improved methods. The burden of production fell on the middle class. The lack of evidence for drastic change may indicate the farmers felt no need of any.
While the belief that Virginia's agricultural economy was depressed during earlier years has been generally accepted, conflicting opinions about the period, 1840 - 1860, have been expressed by both contemporary observers and by modern historians. Was Virginia agriculture stagnant? The purpose of this paper is not to look at Virginia as a whole, but to arrive at some conclusions about one specific area of the state, Cumberland County. The farmers there faced many problems, but they were given some alternatives in solving them through the efforts of various reformers. An attempt to present a true picture of agriculture in the county will be made using a methodology drawn from several previous studies of southern agricultural history based on census returns for the years 1850 and 1860.

A negative attitude concerning Virginia agriculture was expressed by Edward Suffin in a book which originally appeared in 1834. He did not change his original statements in subsequent editions of the book. He stated that profits were slim and land values were low. Later he wrote that the poorest lands were located in the "highly tideswater

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INTRODUCTION

While the belief that Virginia’s agricultural economy was depressed during earlier years has been generally accepted, conflicting opinions about the period, 1840 - 1860, have been expressed by both contemporary observers and by modern historians. Was Virginia agriculture prospering or declining? The purpose of this paper is not to look at Virginia as a whole, but to arrive at some conclusions about one specific area of the state, Cumberland County. The farmers there faced many problems, but they were given some alternatives in solving them through the efforts of various reformers. An attempt to present a true picture of agriculture in the county will be made using a methodology drawn from several previous studies of southern agricultural history based on census returns for the years 1850 and 1860.

A negative attitude concerning Virginia agriculture was expressed by Edmund Ruffin in a book which originally appeared in 1834. He did not change his original statements in subsequent editions of the book. He stated that profits were slim and land values were low.¹ Later he wrote that the poorest lands were located in the "higher tidalwater

¹ Edmund Ruffin, Essays and Notes on Agriculture (Richmond, 1855), pp. 274-275.
counties where most farmers plowed when the ground was still wet, and neither drained their land nor rotated their crops. The few who did drain their land failed to utilize crop rotations. Peas were not grown for manuring purposes. Many farmers left land which had previously been sown in corn lying useless the next spring and summer by not sowing wheat on it. The region lacked accessible marl but there were rich deposits of shell and lime which the farmers ignored.²

Frederick Law Olmsted, in his Journey to the Seaboard Slave States, presented an unfavorable view of Northern truck farmers. He accused the region of providing New York with poor produce raised on poor soil. If the soil had been fertilized at all, he said it was fertilized with manure shipped in from Baltimore.³ Undoubtedly, Olmsted's pessimistic view of Virginia agriculture was affected by his anti-slavery bias. On a trip from Washington to Richmond, he found only about one-third of the land cleared and only about one-fourth of this land in cultivation. The rest of the land lay in pine forest or in a useless grass. The planters' houses were in a run-down condition.⁴


³Frederick Law Olmsted, A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States (New York, 1856), p. 158.

⁴Frederick Law Olmsted, A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States (New York, 1904), I, 18.
The State Board of Agriculture, in its report to the General Assembly in 1842, noted an "increasing knowledge and attention" to farming in the state, particularly in the western counties. This progress was slow, but at least some farmers were making important reforms. They were using fertilizers; growing grasses and root crops; improving their livestock; and using excellent machines and implements. Yet, in each county lived farmers who were fifty years behind time. As an indication of the lack of interest only seven farmers even bothered to answer one of the fifteen hundred circulars sent out by the Board.5

Eugene D. Genovese, in a book concerning the economy of the South as a whole, propounded the idea that the region was unable to achieve any success with reform because of the slave system. He attacked those historians such as Avery O. Craven who believed that reform was possible by saying:

... the assumption that the reform movement would have proceeded smoothly in the course of natural evolution if the war had not intervened neglects the contradiction in the reform process. The grave effects of slavery in retarding capital formation, providing inefficient labor, and preventing the rise of a home market made the task of the reformer virtually impossible. Unless a conversion to free labor occurred, reform in one area only intensified

5"Report of the Board of Agriculture of Virginia to the Senate and House of Representatives [sic] of Virginia," Journal of the House of Delegates of Virginia (1842/1843), Doc. No. 12, pp. 1-2. See pp. 3-49 for replies. Some of the answers were also published in the Farmer's Register. There is no mention of the circular in Ray O. Hummel's Southern Broadsides before 1877 (Richmond, 1971). The questions dealt with geographical state, climate, surface and soil, minerals, water, quantity of arable land, size of farms, rotation of crops, implements, fencing grass, hay, livestock, dairy management, new agricultural practices and obstacles to improvement.
the difficulties in another.\textsuperscript{6}

Those who believed Virginia agriculture in the twenty years before the Civil War to have been flourishing included Robert T. Hubbard, Avery O. Craven, Kathleen Bruce, Charles W. Turner and Emmett B. Fields. Hubbard was a brilliant lawyer and a leader in agricultural reform. He operated "Chollowe" and "Rosney" in Buckingham County and "Tye River" in Nelson County, all large operations. He lived at "Chollowe", situated only a few miles from the Cumberland County line. In writing advice for his sons he stated:

Agriculture has improved immensely during the last twenty years and it is destined to much higher improvement .... The land is worked more judiciously than when I was a boy -- it is not worked so frequently in corn and other crops. The ploughs and the ploughing are much better. More manure is made, and more grass sown and an increased desire and determination for improvement is more common in Virginia than ever. God grant this state of things may be but the commencement of a career which will conduct this venerable old commonwealth to that fertility which marked her virgin soil in bygone times.\textsuperscript{7}

Craven believed the period 1840 to 1860 to have been one of reform and success. The years 1820 to 1840 merely laid the groundwork for a flourishing agricultural economy in the next twenty years. After 1840, Virginia entered a period of prosperity, having established a diversified system. In fact, in 1860, according to Craven, the Old Dominion was in the best


\textsuperscript{7} Hubbard Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.
condition agriculturally of her history. Virginia and Maryland had outstripped all other states in their advances.  

Kathleen Bruce agreed with Craven. She was a proponent of the idea that Virginia had undertaken successful reform and had revived her economy by 1860. Charles W. Turner agreed with Professor Bruce and expressed the view that Virginia was "diversifying her agricultural program, improving her property values, raising better varieties of crops and livestock, and increasing her production."  

Emmett B. Field's dissertation on the Virginia agricultural population in 1850 and 1860 contrasted Virginia and the lower slave states:

As compared with the lower South, its location on the upper Atlantic seaboard determined that it should have different soils, less annual rainfall, and a shorter growing season. The tobacco and grain cultivation which were its mainstays required patterns of landownership and slaveholding which were distinct from those suited to cotton, rice, and sugar.

A large portion of its soil had been turned by the plow and exhausted long before regions westward and southward had been opened to settlers and during boom times occasioned by removal to fresh tobacco lands and expansion of the short-staple zones, the Old Dominion had already passed the early peak of its prosperity and was suffering agricultural decline. Adjustment to the crisis produced a reinvigorated economy before the Civil War opened, but not without a far-reaching shift toward crop diversification and de-emphasis of slavery, which served further to distinguish Virginia from its lower southern neighbors.

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9 Kathleen Bruce, "Virginia Agricultural Decline to 1860: A Fallacy," *Agricultural History,* VI (1932), p. 3.


He concluded that tobacco was the most valuable money crop but was not grown extensively outside of the south-central counties and even in that area, grain and livestock were important. He saw improvements in the lower Tidewater's truck gardens. While there were large plantations, they did not dominate agriculture and the small farmers did not have poorer land. According to Fields, the small farmers sold slaves and bought land showing themselves more willing and able to change as slavery became unprofitable. Neither the large planter nor the yeoman controlled the economy. The majority of the middle class were climbing the social ladder to take the place of the declining upper class.\(^{12}\)

The purpose of this paper is to determine which of these opinions concerning Virginia agriculture as practiced in Cumberland County was correct. Before considering the work of various reformers and the question of whether or not Cumberland County agriculture was declining or prospering, one ought to examine problems which the county's farmers faced. Some of the problems were those common to agriculture everywhere. Others were either peculiar to the southern region or only to Virginia.

\(^{12}\)Ibid., pp. 195-199.
 Anyone who, by necessity or choice, is called to the agricultural vocation must cope with the unpredictable forces of Nature. She can be hostile or kind, bringing a bountiful harvest one year and disaster the next. This reality has made the farmer unique throughout history. While his fellow men are removed from the elements, he comes to grips with them in a most forceful manner. He makes a gamble every time he plants a crop. This most reckless of men, who bets that he can beat nature’s odds every year, is a very conservative fellow when it comes to experimentation. If he wins year after year with the cards he holds, he sees no reason to risk drawing from the deck. Obviously, he will be reluctant to change or reform methods.

In the 1840’s, this very logical conservatism was compared to a disease in a report of the State Board of Agriculture:

The characteristics of this disease are a kind of antipathy to every new process in husbandry, a strong aversion to the study of agriculture as a science, an overweening attachment to our own opinions and practices, an extreme backwardness to adopt any others, a neglect to keep anything like regular farming accounts, and above all, by a vast waste of the almost innumerable materials to be found on every farm, which might easily be converted into manure, to say nothing of the general...

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neglect to use any of the various fertilizing substances which cost money.²

Some problems faced by Cumberland County farmers were typical of the region. Genovese's list of the characteristics of southern agriculture includes an inefficient labor force, poor soil, lack of markets, poor quality of livestock, low level of liquid capital, and the one-crop system.

Historians are discussing and probably will continue to argue over the institution of slavery forever. Whether slavery caused the one-crop system or whether the one-crop system fostered the growth of slavery has been a "chicken and egg" controversy that has provoked much discussion. It would seem most reasonable to assert that the problem of a dearth of labor occasioned by the needs of a one-crop agriculture was handily solved by the importation of African slaves.³ Then the institution which had adapted itself well to a one-crop system became so firmly entrenched that it was difficult for a planter to change his habits, or indeed, if he were inclined to diversify his farming operation, to supervise his slaves scattered over a large farm.

This problem of slavery may be looked at in two ways. First, one may consider the individual slave's relation to agricultural


³See Thomas J. Wertenbaker's The Planters of Colonial Virginia (Princeton, 1922), pp. 86-161. Wertenbaker contends that the planters' need for cheap labor, especially after 1660, in order to grow tobacco at a greater profit margin caused him to import more and more slaves driving the yeoman farmer into debt or out of the state.
reform in any given place and, secondly, the effects of the system upon agricultural reform may be studied. Although a study of these two subjects would be a lifetime's work, it is helpful to establish some working conclusions based on a consensus of historical scholarship.

The first great historian of American Negro slavery, U. B. Phillips, described the Negro as "impulsive and inconstant, sociable and amorous, voluble, dilatory and negligent, but robust, amiable, obedient and contented ...." While Phillips' writings were racist in tone, at least he realized that the individual slave could be trained to do more than simply hoe weeds. In fact, he was aware that many Negroes were trained as artisans and skilled laborers. In agreement with Graven's "agricultural renaissance" thesis outlined above, he stated, "Any slave could spread manure or seed clover or cowpeas quite as well as a freeman."  

Kenneth M. Stampp, in the first major challenge to Phillips' work, re-introduced a moralistic tone into the historiography of the ante-bellum period. He, too, accepted the Graven thesis. Seeing the planter as a capitalist and Negroes as being, "only white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing less," Stampp contended the blacks could be trained for whatever tasks from which the planter could make the most profit. They could fit into a diversified system.  


5Ibid., p. 137.

other hand, with nothing to gain from the system, the Negro shirked work whenever possible, making him an inefficient worker. But, like Phillips, Stamp realized that slavery trained the black in skilled tasks.

The idea of a "cultural void" first described by Stamp was emphasized and extended by Stanley M. Elkins. In a Nazi-like system, the Negro became a "Sambo" ever ready to imitate white ways.

According to the studies of these three historians, the individual slave could and did adapt himself to diversified agriculture. Even with the difficulty of management, there seems to be no reason why the individual Negro could not fit into a diversified system and function well. The most eminent historian of Virginia agriculture, Craven also contended that the Negro, even enslaved, could perform complicated tasks, if he so desired or was forced.

While the individual slave probably was not a major hindrance to reform in Cumberland, the system of slavery may have been. Many studies of slavery have failed to prove whether or not the institution was profitable. In any case, the most drastic effect of slavery on the Cumberland planter was on his way of thinking. Some of the reformers of Virginia agriculture believed the system, as it existed, was unprofitable, but they had a difficult time convincing their contemporaries. For example, if the farmer were convinced slavery was profitable, then he would have little desire to change his methods.

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7Ibid., p. 102.

On the other hand, Edmund Ruffin believed that reform would keep slavery profitable, but the paternalistic nature of the master-servant relationship prevented many masters from making the most economical use of their labor. They would not sell surplus slaves.

Soil exhaustion has been one of the most publicized of Virginia's agricultural woes. Dr. William B. Smith, in an address to the Agricultural Society of Cumberland, stated:

> If our system of agriculture be correct, how does it happen that our lands have deteriorated and how are we to account for the fact, that in the tobacco region of Virginia, we have much sterile surface; one half being unfit for cultivation, and the other half affording a scant return to the agriculturist? Let those answer the question who have cultivated tobacco. The great object heretofore has been, to get as much forest cleared as possible, make a few crops of tobacco, to be followed with grain; until the soil by hard culture and frequent washings becomes exhausted and the land abandoned...9

Smith's speech was given in 1838. A year later, another Cumberland planter and doctor, William S. Morton talked to the assembled members of the local agricultural society and said:

> There is now nearly the same cause for lamentation over gullied and barren fields and wide-spread wastes, as existed about forty years ago, when John Taylor was exerting his powerful and patriotic mind, for the improvement of agriculture. Indeed, it is highly probable, that although there may have been a multitude of instances of individual improvements, yet, since that time the soil of the state has, in aggregate value, greatly lost.10

9William B. Smith, "Can the Culture of Tobacco Be Dispensed with in Eastern Virginia?" Farmer's Register, VI (1838), pp. 748-749.

In his classic work on the subject, Avery O. Craven outlined two separate problems: "the factors which work immediately upon the soil to lower its yielding capacity" and the forces which determine the use of such agricultural practices as permit destruction.\(^{11}\) He listed five factors which caused soil exhaustion; the frontier, governmental action or inaction, markets and agencies, ignorance and habit, all of which were present in the Old Dominion.\(^ {12}\) Virginia's soil was particularly subject to leaching by rain and tobacco growing easily upset the acid-alkali balance. It was easier and cheaper to clear more land than to improve the land that had been under cultivation and many acres of land were simply abandoned.

Since the farmers had much capital tied up in slaves, little was available for buying machinery. Even though there were a number of innovations in implements made in the state,\(^ {13}\) in general, the implements were crude, and the farmers invested little money in them relative to the cash value of their farms.\(^ {14}\) The 1842 report of the Agricultural Board summed up the situation as follows: "with us Virginia farmers and planters the acknowledged utility of an agricultural implement is very far from introducing it into general use."\(^ {15}\)

\(^{11}\) Avery O. Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606-1860* (Urbana, 1926), p. 12.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 55.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 152.

\(^{14}\) U. S. Census, Manuscript Agricultural Schedules, 1850 and 1860, Virginia State Library.

Another problem faced by Cumberland farmers was the poor quality of livestock in the South as a whole. Hogs were not as good as those in the Middle West. Although the Virginia Piedmont and the Shenandoah Valley were getting better breeds of beef cattle, it was difficult to improve cattle because of the amount of capital required to buy a cow and because they multiply slowly.\textsuperscript{16} Again the report of the Agricultural Board pointed the condemning finger. It stated that the cattle were of a "non-descript breed" and livestock were only "one-half alive for two-thirds of the year."\textsuperscript{17} A Cumberland farmer asserted that the horses were worked too hard in the busy seasons (spring and fall) and that the cows were fed improperly and not cared for well.\textsuperscript{18}

Sheep in middle Virginia did not yield more than three and one-half pounds of wool apiece, a poor yield when compared with those of New England, Pennsylvania and New York.\textsuperscript{19} The number of horses and mules decreased between 1840 and 1850, but increased in the next decade. In 1845, a farmer complained that no horses were being raised in eastern Virginia, but were being brought in from other sections.\textsuperscript{20}


\textsuperscript{17}"Report of the Board of Agriculture of Virginia to the Senate and House of Representatives [sic] of Virginia," p. 8, 11.

\textsuperscript{18} W. S. Morton, "Address of Dr. W. S. Morton, president of the Agricultural Society of Cumberland, delivered 13 November 1840," \textit{Farmer's Register}, IX (1841), pp. 65-68.

\textsuperscript{19} Hubbard Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

\textsuperscript{20} Lewis Cecil Gray, \textit{History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860} (Washington) 1933), II, 851.
Another problem faced by Cumberland farmers, and by farmers everywhere until recent times, was the fluctuation of crop prices. The three principal crops were corn, wheat and tobacco. The prices of these crops affected many farmers both directly and indirectly, since their rise or fall might influence a farmer to diversify or to continue to grow only one major crop for income.

Corn was a subsistence crop on many Virginia farms. Some considered it to be the greatest exhauer of Virginia's soil; others regarded it as "meat, meal and manure."21 One historian has said, "corn is as basic to Southern history as Thomas Jefferson and John C. Calhoun."22

In general, corn and wheat price trends were similar, so a look at the latter suffices for both. During this period, wheat prices were down. A large crop in the United States in 1839 brought low prices and lower ones followed the next year. A small crop in 1841 caused higher prices, but another large yield forced them back down in 1842. This depressed trend continued from 1842 until 1845. The repeal of the English Corn Laws and the Irish famine affected prices favorably the next two years. Unfortunately, this caused the farmers to overproduce, adversely affecting prices for the next five years, 1848-1853. Subsequently, poor European crops and the Crimean War


forced up prices from 1853 to 1855. But, again, overproduction resulted in lower prices for the remainder of the period.\footnote{23}{Arthur G. Peterson, "Notes and Documents: Wheat and Corn Prices Received by Producers in Virginia, 1801-1928," \textit{Journal of Economic and Business History}, II (1930), pp. 382-391.}

(This analysis is based mainly on Virginia prices, but see Appendix A for New York prices.)

In 1849, the wheat grown in Virginia was worth twice as much as the tobacco,\footnote{24}{Gates, p. 100.} but tobacco for many years had been the main money crop. It still was a major part of the economy of many counties in an area bounded on the south by North Carolina, on the west by the Blue Ridge, on the north by Fredericksburg, and on the east by the fall line.\footnote{25}{Joseph C. Robert, \textit{The Tobacco Kingdom: Plantation, Market and Factory in Virginia and North Carolina}, 1800-1860 (Durham, 1938), p. 17.} In terms of the national total, the Old Dominion produced a declining percentage. In 1839, Virginia produced 34.4 per cent of the nation's total; in 1849, 29.4 per cent; and in 1859, 28.4 per cent.\footnote{26}{Gates, p. 100.}

Tobacco may not be planted more than three or four years on the same soil,\footnote{27}{Robert, p. 17.} necessitating either a move to new soil or a renewing of the old. Another problem with it is the eighteen-month period between planting and selling. Thus, the farmer plants again before he knows how much he has received from his previous crop.
As with wheat and corn, the major price movements in the tobacco crop were important in Virginia agriculture. The years 1841 to 1843 saw large crops and low quality. Western competition hurt Virginia tobacco prices in 1844. The smallest yield in seven years followed in 1845, contrasted by a huge crop in 1846. The English Corn Laws' Repeal had caused farmers to raise wheat in 1845. The 1848 crop was larger than the one of 1847, but the two were small enough to cause an upward price swing in combination with another small crop in 1849. There were generally high prices in the 1850's until the Panic of 1857 and overproduction in the three years before the Civil War caused a decline. 28 Another determining factor in the fluctuation of crop prices was the rapid growth of the West. Lewis C. Gray stated that, "Next to soil exhaustion, the foremost cause of the undoing of the older communities was Western competition." 29

Farmers in Cumberland suffered from grave problems, but there were some planters around them who were successful in carrying out agricultural reform and to whom they could have looked for guidance. The Old Dominion produced some outstanding reformers. In the early years of the nineteenth century, such men as James M. Garnett, Thomas Mann Randolph, Stephen McCormick, Fielding Lewis, Phillip Tabb, John Singleton, William Meriwether and W. C. Nicholas were implementing improved methods. John Taylor of Caroline, author of the Arator, was the most prominent figure in this early period. 30

28 Ibid., p. 135.

29 Gray, II, 855.

In surveying the years from 1840 to 1860, historians have recognized Edmund Ruffin as the best known, if not the greatest agriculturist of his day, surpassing the lesser lights of Theodore McRoberts, T. C. Botts, J. M. Daniels, R. B. Gooch, and his cousin F. G. Ruffin. Along with John Hartwell Cocks, he was a pioneer in the use of marl. Also using manure, cow peas and clover as fertilizer, he has been credited with lifting "his section from the nadir of agricultural depression to an abundant prosperity." Ruffin was president of the Virginia State Agricultural Society and in 1854, its commissioner. He believed slaves could be just as effective in a diversified system as they could be in a one-crop system.

Called "the Father of Soil Chemistry," Ruffin suggested an ideal crop rotation which would give both the largest profit and increased fertility. His greatest contribution was in the publication of his findings. He wrote articles in various magazines, but his master-piece on the subject of soil fertility was entitled an Essay on Calcareous Manures.  

Another reformer of this era was John Hartwell Cocks who lived from 1780 to 1866. An advocate of progressive agriculture and education, he was opposed to slavery, but practical enough to realize that there had to be a period of transition between slavery and absolute freedom. He sent some of his slaves to an Alabama plantation to earn money for their passage to Liberia. Cocks felt that tobacco,

slavery and inertia had caused Virginia's agricultural woes; Virginia's soils had been depleted by slave cultivation.\textsuperscript{32}

From the early 1800's, Cocke had been a progressive planter. But, according to K. Boyd Coyner, his biographer, "For many years, Cocke was almost alone among his neighbors in the pursuit of good agriculture in Fluvanna."\textsuperscript{33}

Another Virginia planter in the Piedmont area who was experimenting with improved agricultural methods was Robert Skipwith of "Bolling Hall" in Goochland. He attended the state agricultural fair in 1853 and held a life membership in the State Agricultural Society. Skipwith was interested in improved livestock and planted clover seed and fruit trees.\textsuperscript{34} In 1859, he wrote detailed plans and drawings for ditches after having been interested in tile draining by F. G. Ruffin, former editor of the \textit{Southern Planter}.\textsuperscript{35}

Cumberland farmers could also look to the example of Robert T. Hubard, farming in two nearby counties. An advocate of plowing deeply, using farm pen manure and growing clover, he recommended


\textsuperscript{33}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 82-83.

\textsuperscript{34}Robert Skipwith Manuscript Diaries, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary, December 11, 1853; May 30, 1854; July 26, 1860; January 15, 1855; February 10, March 1, March 17, April 6, 1854; February 6, 1855; January 16, 1854.

\textsuperscript{35}Robert Skipwith, Book on Ditching, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary.
the abandonment of the practice of using large hills for tobacco. Believing that the North understood the economy of labor much better than did the South, he criticized his native region for failing to realize the value of human labor. Hubard used progressive methods and kept extensive records which clearly show his profit for each year and he did separate money spent for agricultural expenses from that spent for personal expenses, a practice seldom followed in that era.

Hugh Blair Grigsby, in nearby Charlotte County, was also interested in using improved farming methods on his estate, "Edgehill." Although a man of letters, he became interested in the details of plantation life when he took charge of the estate upon the death of his father-in-law, Clement Carrington, in 1847. Grigsby kept an illuminating diary during part of his long life and in it, one finds this entry for a day in 1850, "... I fixed with Pat's aid the trenches about my cowpen, so that the fluid manure should waste itself on the land to be cultivated in tobacco this year, instead of being carried uselessly to the branch." Two months later, Grigsby wrote, "After breakfast walked to the Granary lot, where the ploughs were turning in manure."

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36 Hubard Papers.

37 Hugh Blair Grigsby Diary, February 15, 1850, Virginia Historical Society.

38 Ibid., April 29, 1850.
Within their own county, Cumberland farmers could look to the example of William Smith Morton, operator of "High Hill" plantation, a farm which has always been a difficult one to manage because of its extensive lowgrounds on the Appomattox River. He wrote to a Mr. Hedges in Jefferson County, Virginia (now West Virginia), "I purchased the place about fifteen years ago. The low lands terribly sobbed for want of draining and the hills ... gullied and grown up .... I had the land to clear -- ... then I had to fill the gullies and manure the soil."39

Besides the efforts of these great individual planters, there were attempts at organized reform. Agricultural societies were formed in various counties, and Cumberland was no exception.40

Efforts to form a state organization commenced in 1811 when the Virginia Society for Promoting Agriculture was founded. By the 1850's, it had a rival in Petersburg.41 The attempts to found and perpetuate a state society indicate the degree of interest in the Old Dominion for such an enterprise. In 1839, there were too few people to make a quorum. Two years later, an attempt to form a new society failed. After an unsuccessful movement to revive it in 1847–1848, it was reorganized in 1850. Early 1853 found it with less than two hundred members, but the list grew steadily with two thousand members in 1855 and a phenomenal

39W. S. Morton to [?], Hedges, April 18, 1852, Hugh Blair Grigsby Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

40See the Farmer's Register from 1838 to 1842 for various mentions of the Cumberland Agricultural Society.

increase to 10,103 farmers in 1856.\textsuperscript{42}

Another incentive for reform was the fair. Albemarle was the pioneer in 1819. The first state fair was held in Richmond, November 1 - 4, 1853. Grounds were donated by the City Council in addition to six thousand dollars. Successful the first year, it was given twenty thousand dollars the following year. The two rival state societies held a joint fair in 1858 in Petersburg.\textsuperscript{43}

Publications also encouraged reform. Ruffin's \textit{Farmer's Register} was published for ten years, 1833 to 1842. A new series of the magazine began in January, 1843 edited by Thomas S. Pleasants, but after only three months ceased publication. The \textit{Southern Planter}, still published today, began in 1851.\textsuperscript{44}

Governmental action by a General Assembly made up of farmers or men with farming interests was surprisingly slim. The state granted funds for surveys of internal improvements and minerals, but not for agriculture. A report made by Edmund Ruffin and a Mr. Richardson in 1855 was paid for by the State Agricultural Society.\textsuperscript{45} The Colonial Fence Law which called for the enclosure of every field by a fence was repealed, in part, by 1840, but bills for agricultural education failed.\textsuperscript{46}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[44]\textit{Ibid}.
\item[45]\textit{Ibid.}, p. 86
\item[46]Kathleen Bruce, "Virginia Agricultural Decline to 1860: A Fallacy," \textit{Agricultural History}, VI (1932), p. 3.
\end{footnotes}
On March 20, 1841, an act was passed setting up a State Board of Agriculture with a membership made up of two men from each of the four geographic divisions of the state. It was to hold one session each year with three men constituting a quorum. Its duties were to present an annual report, to collect information on soil, to watch home and foreign markets and to suggest legislation to the General Assembly. The members' remuneration was to be three dollars for each day in session, plus expenses.

Cumberland farmers were facing severe problems, but some planters were successfully solving them through individual effort and organized reform. Did the average farmer in Cumberland with all of this activity around him practice these reforms? Did he significantly change his methods of husbandry and was he prosperous in the years before the Civil War?

Various historians have devised methods of answering questions concerning the lives of the general population and a methodology has been established for an "in depth" study of the average farmer.

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CHAPTER II

THE AVERAGE SOUTHERN FARMER THROUGH THE EYES OF THE HISTORIAN

The yeoman left evidence of a different sort from his planter counterpart who wrote voluminous letters, diaries, journals and account books. The common man's record must be sought in public documents such as wills, inventories of estates, county tax books and federal manuscript census returns.

Historians, led by Frank Lawrence Gwesley, made studies of agriculture in the South using public records. Gwesley's first article appeared in 1940, and was expanded into book form, Plain Folk of the Old South. Gwesley used county tax lists and manuscript census reports to analyze both land and slaveholding in sample counties.

Chase C. Mooney studied Tennessee slavery by using the manuscript federal census reports of 1850 and 1860. His method involved choosing a total of 18,718 farmers from fifteen sample counties in 1850 and 29,558 in 1860.

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2 Frank L. Gwesley, Plain Folk of the Old South (Chicago, 1949), pp. 150-229.

One of Owley's graduate students, Blanche Henry Clark, did another study of Tennessee farmers, which like Mooney's, was published in 1942. Quoting her mentor, she listed a number of possible sources for a study of the lives of the sturdy yeoman. These were church records, wills, administrations of estates, county court minutes, marriage licenses, inventories of estates, trial records, mortgage books, deed books, county tax books and the manuscript records of the United States Census returns, she compiled her information with an adding machine, a hand counter and a Monroe Calculator.

The noted chronicler of Georgia history, James C. Bonner, studied only one community, Hancock County. He reaffirmed the contention that "the most reliable data available for a comprehensive study of the submerged half or two-thirds of the population are to be found in the manuscript records of the Federal Census, particularly those of 1850 and 1860." He prepared a card index of all names appearing on Schedules I, II and IV of the seventh and eighth censuses. A master file was then made including some data from other sources. Harry L. Coles, Jr. made an early study of this type in 1943. He used eleven out of forty-nine Louisiana parishes.

Another one of Owley's graduate students, and the husband of

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Blanche Henry Clark, was Herbert Weaver. His approach was to trace several hundred heads of families through the censuses of 1850 and 1860. He used punch cards, electric sorting machines and an electric calculator in compiling information from the three census schedules. He studied Mississippi farmers. Weaver gave a detailed account of his method and since it is very similar to the one adopted by this writer, it should be presented at some length.

The seventh and eighth censuses included six schedules. Schedule I listed free inhabitants, Schedule II listed slave inhabitants, Schedule III gave mortality statistics, Schedule IV was composed of the productions of agriculture, Schedule V gave products of industry and Schedule VI listed social statistics.

Most of the information for Weaver's study came from Schedules I, II and IV. Schedule IV was the basic one. It listed the names of farm operators producing more than one hundred dollars in crops. Each farmer was asked various questions concerning his farm, forty-six in 1850 and forty-eight in 1860. The questions included acres of improved and unimproved land either owned or rented, the value of the farm, value of farm implements, and number and value of various types of livestock. Then followed the quantity of each crop raised the preceding year, value of home-manufactured articles, and value of animals slaughtered on the farm.

Schedule II "furnished the number and age distribution of slaves owned by each operator, and the number of slave houses owned."

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7 Herbert Weaver, *Mississippi Farmers, 1850-1860* (Nashville, 1945), pp. 15-17
Weaver then added the information contained on Schedule I, that is, place of birth, age, etc. to data contained on Schedules II and IV to complete the picture. He described the job as an "onerous task."  

Using all three schedules diminished the possibility of error or the misunderstanding of information. After the master list was completed, the information was recorded on punchcards and sorted by machine.

He divided the farmers into three classes: big planters were those with fifty slaves and five hundred acres of land; middle class or small farmers were those with twenty slaves and two hundred acres of land; and yeoman were those with up to two hundred acres of land and no slaves.

In 1953, Emmett B. Fields received his doctorate from Vanderbilt. The method he used in studying the agricultural population in Virginia was very similar to that of Weaver. He studied fifteen counties, none of which were in West Virginia.

The decade of the nineteen sixties brought about a change from sorting machines to computers and, perhaps, to a more sophisticated look at southern agriculture by both historians and economists. In 1970, the January issue of the periodical, Agricultural History, was

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8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., p. 38.

devoted entirely to a statistical study of the cotton economy of the South. In one article, Gavin Wright pointed out the possibilities for error in using the manuscript census returns. The first question he raised was, did the assistant marshal count all of the farms? They were under oath and under threat of heavy penalty for neglecting their duty. Population trends indicate the 1850 and 1860 counts were reasonably accurate and the counters were paid per entry.\textsuperscript{12} (It seems unlikely that the enumerators in Cumberland overcounted to increase their pay since they were local people and not anxious to ruin their reputations; also the names listed appear to be correct according to residents of the county today.)

Errors could have been caused by the population's fear that the information would be used to raise taxes; their lack of knowledge concerning their farms; and their misunderstanding of the questions asked. The last problem was pointed out in returns for the value of homemade manufactures and animals slaughtered. While total figures were to be recorded, it is apparent that in many cases only the value of manufactures and animals sold was given.\textsuperscript{13}

Of course, there is no way to estimate the amount of error. The only correction that can be applied is to discount data that seem totally unreasonable. Another source of error is in mismatching


\textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 97
names, but since the data on the various schedules are in roughly the same order, this is not a serious problem.

Even with its shortcomings and faults, the Owseley methodology does offer a reasonable approach to answering important questions about agriculture. Applying the "Owsey school" approach to a representative community offers a very valid way to study pre-Civil War agriculture in Cumberland.

County are located on microfilm in the Virginia State Library at Richmond. The information contained throughout most of the remainder of this paper was derived from them.

Schedule VI of the census returns contains the social statistics which reveal an overall picture of the county under study. There were no libraries or newspapers in either year. In 1850 there were fifteen common schools with 275 pupils and three female schools with an enrollment of thirty. In 1860 there were only eleven common schools with 163 pupils, one classical school and one musical school. Sixteen churches existed in 1850 and eighteen by the end of the decade. In an age in which families and neighbors took care of their own, there were twenty-eight pumas in 1850 and the number had decreased to seventeen by 1860. The valuation of real and personal estate jumped from $1,583,706 to $3,066,397 in the ten-year span.

In this study, the three schedules which list farmers, free inhabitants and slaves were copied either into bound ledger books or in the case of the latter two groups onto notebook paper. The Agricultural schedule (Schedule IV) was copied in its entirety. In Schedule
CHAPTER III

A STATISTICAL PICTURE OF CUMBERLAND COUNTY AGRICULTURE

Microfilm copies of the manuscript census returns for Cumberland County are located on microfilm in the Virginia State Library at Richmond. The information contained throughout most of the remainder of this paper was derived from them.

Schedule VI of the census returns contains the social statistics which reveal an overall picture of the county under study. There were no libraries or newspapers in either year. In 1850 there were fifteen common schools with 275 pupils and three female schools with an enrollment of thirty. In 1860 there were only eleven common schools with 183 pupils, one classical school and one musical school. Sixteen churches existed in 1850 and eighteen by the end of the decade. In an age in which families and neighbors took care of their own, there were twenty-eight paupers in 1850 and the number had decreased to seventeen by 1860. The valuation of real and personal estate jumped from $1,583,706 to $3,066,357 in the ten-year span.

In this study, the three schedules which list farmers, free inhabitants and slaves were copied either into bound ledger books or in the case of the latter two groups onto notebook paper. The Agricultural schedule (Schedule IV) was copied in its entirety. In Schedule
I, free inhabitants were listed along with ages, occupations and the amount of real estate owned. Only those were copied who were heads of households or owned real estate or had occupations given. The slaveholders on Schedule II were listed along with the total number of slaves owned or hired. There was no way of separating slaves who were owned from those who were hired. In the overall totals this would make little difference unless they were hired from another county; in any case, they still represent effective slave labor.

After the copying of statistics from microfilm was completed, the three schedules were compared. All persons listed on the agricultural census were considered to be farmers, either full or part-time and this schedule formed the basis of the study. The farmers' names were then found on the list of inhabitants along with their ages and occupations. Next the slave schedule was consulted to obtain the names of those who held slaves and the number they held. In this way, the pertinent information from all three schedules was combined to form a master list.

While the information for both years seemed to be complete, the handwriting of V. C. Ryals, the assistant marshal in 1860, was extremely difficult to read. His "6's" and "4's" were so nearly alike that in some places it was possible only to make an educated guess. The inhabitants' schedule for 1860 had faded to the point of being almost illegible. By comparing it with the other two schedules, it was possible to figure out the name in almost every case. The real estate listing on Schedule I helped to identify many persons. These difficulties were not considered to have had any appreciable effect on the conclusions.
After compiling the three schedules, the farmers were sorted into seven groups on the basis of the number of improved acres worked. This yardstick was used rather than grouping them by cash value of farms or by the number of slaves. The cash value of a farm rests on such vague conditions as the number of buildings on the farm and their worth. For example, William B. Hobson in 1860 held 600 improved acres and 254 unimproved acres. His farm was listed at $8,540. P. H. Jackson in the same year also held 600 improved acres and had 310 unimproved acres. The cash value of his farm was $27,300. One can easily see the problem. The "slaveowner" approach has been overworked and so the "improved acreage" basis offers a new approach.

The information was recopied on thirty column ledger paper in their proper groups. All of the information in the agricultural census was not used. Some headings had no information under them or the data was insignificant and these were eliminated. These categories included such crops as cotton, hops, hemp, flax and silk. These headings were to apply to the United States as a whole.

The farmers were divided into seven groups on the basis of the amount of improved acreage which they farmed:

- **Group I** (no acreage listed, but producing farm products)
- **Group II** (less than 100 improved acres)
- **Group III** (100-199 improved acres)
- **Group IV** (200-399 improved acres)
- **Group V** (400-700 improved acres)
- **Group VI** (800 to 999 improved acres)
- **Group VII** (1,000 improved acres or more)

The only way to present the information is to list statistics and attempt to interpret them. Percentages are helpful but, in most cases, are not accurate enough. (See Tables 2 through 30 for a breakdown of the following totals).
In 1850 there were 407 farms with improved acreage and six farmers producing crops with no ownership of land. The latter were probably tenant farmers and fall into the first group. In 1860 there were 370 farms with improved acreage and five farmers with no acreage. This represents a decrease of thirty-eight farmers over the ten years.

Of the 407 farmers listed in 1850, only 337 were full-time farmers and in 1860, 322 of the 370 farmers listed agricultural pursuits as their only occupation. Many of the very largest plantations in the county were owned by doctors and lawyers. (See Appendix B for a division of the farmers into occupational groups according to the amount of improved acreage farmed).

The average age of farmers in 1850 was forty-six years and in 1860 it was forty-eight years. The number of improved acres remained relatively stable for the next two years with 93,525 acres in 1850 and 91,342 acres in 1860 showing an insignificant decrease of 2,183 acres. Perhaps, the decrease can be explained by abandonment; or by inadvertent omission in the returns; or by purchase by those not producing farm products.

The average Cumberland County farm in 1850 had 229.7 improved acres, compared with an average of 120.7 improved acres in the South as a whole. The figure in Cumberland was almost three times the national average of 78.0 acres. The percentage of improved acres to total acreage in Cumberland (53 per cent) was higher than that of either the nation (30 per cent) or of the South (38 per cent).\(^1\)