

IV. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW, NEW CASTLE AND KENT COUNTIES

A. 1830-1880

Industrialization, urbanization, and transportation developments in the nineteenth century significantly impacted the Middle Atlantic (Lindstrom 1978, 1979; Taylor 1964b; Walzer 1972). During the first half of this period, Philadelphia's economic influence over the region declined considerably, a result of Baltimore's rise, the two cities' competition for markets, and a drop in foreign consumption of Philadelphia's agricultural produce. Regional farmers, including those in Delaware, responded by diversifying their production. In addition, the region devoted ever more resources to manufacturing (Lindstrom 1978: 122).

The rapid population growth of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had forced many new farmers to clear and farm lands of poor or marginal quality. Farming methods not emphasizing conservation, erosion, exhausted land, and a decline in wheat prices, however, soon meant economic woe for Delaware farmers. Many farmers were hard-pressed to turn a profit, and thus migrated to better lands in the west during the 1820s and 1830s.

As more and more people left Delaware, the resulting labor shortage made the cultivation of marginal and exhausted lands even less profitable. In the Piedmont and Upper Peninsula, a reorientation of the Delaware landscape occurred, as less productive farms were abandoned and incorporated into the larger holdings of wealthier farmers (Herman 1987). Farmsteads averaged a little over 200 acres, and most farmers had improved about 60-70% of their acreage by 1820 (Herman 1987: 113-114).

The economic crises of the first decades of the century contributed to what became an agricultural revolution in Delaware. The extension of railroads through the state significantly influenced the course of economic development. The first line, constructed in 1832, was built as competition for the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal (Hoffecker 1977: 43). Within a decade, the Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore Railroad had become the major transportation route across the Delmarva Peninsula, extending the existing water-based systems for transporting Piedmont and Upper Peninsula produce to the growing eastern markets (Dare 1856; Potter 1960). The extension of the Delaware Line to Sussex County between 1856 and 1878 also provided a vast agricultural hinterland with direct access to urban markets (Hancock 1976a: 89). The revived New Castle County Agricultural Society and the new Kent County Agricultural Society, established in 1835, encouraged farmers' use of improved drainage techniques, fertilizers, and machinery. As a result, by 1860, the Delaware Piedmont and Upper Peninsula ranked among the finest agricultural regions in the United States (Hancock 1947).

Between 1830 and 1880, both the number of farms and the acreage under cultivation in Delaware rose (Bausman 1933, 1940, 1941a, 1941b). In each county, farmland accounted for between 75% and 90% of the total available surface area throughout the period. The overall increase in farm number and size reveals that land previously considered marginal for agriculture was brought under cultivation, and suggests an accompanying reorganization and rebuilding of the agricultural landscape.

Beginning in the 1830s in northern Delaware and with the arrival of the railroad in Sussex County, Delaware was the center for peach production in the eastern United States. Rich soil, favorable climate and rainfall, good transportation facilities, and strategic location near large markets made peach production a lucrative enterprise. Rail and steamship lines shipped massive harvests to New York. There the produce was readied for resale to the northern states. The spread of a disease known as the "Yellows" devastated orchards and brought an end to the boom in the 1870s. Until the peach blight curtailed production, the peach industry proved profitable for a large number of growers, as well as a variety of support industries (Hancock 1976a).

Concomitant with this agricultural growth, however, the income per agricultural worker fell well below that of the non-agricultural worker (Lindstrom 1978, 1979; Taylor 1964a). The relative size of the agricultural labor force also decreased during this period, from over 76% of the population in 1820 to 70% by 1840 (Lindstrom 1978: 123). Nevertheless, the income of Delaware farm owners was higher than that of farmers in other areas of the nation. Thus, while the economy forced many farmers to become agricultural tenants, or to migrate west or into the cities, successful farmers enjoyed substantial prosperity, re-investing their profits in improvements to the farm (Herman and Siders 1986: 87).

The combination of good transportation, a large labor pool, and a ready supply of raw materials also promoted the rapid growth and diversification of industry in the Delaware Piedmont. In the 1850s, most workers in Wilmington were employed in cotton manufacturing, iron-casting, wheel-making, railroad-car manufacture, shipbuilding, carriage-making, leather-tanning, and cooery. In addition, the Piedmont and Upper Peninsula supported several small enclaves of manufacture and industry, such as the Hagley and Dupont Mills on the Brandywine, and the textile manufactories along the streams of northern New Castle County.

By the start of the American Civil War, the U. S. Census recorded 380 manufactories in New Castle County. They included a variety of boot and shoe manufactories, flour mills, clothing manufactories, carriage shops, cabinet and furniture manufactories, cotton manufactories, and tin, copper-ware, and sheet-iron factories. Kent and Sussex counties, on the other hand, supported

only grist and saw mills along with a few other small manufactories meeting local needs. The trend toward industrialization in New Castle County continued through 1880, when Kent and Sussex counties produced only 1/10 of the total goods manufactured in New Castle County (U. S. Census 1850, 1880).

The American Civil War had a greater social than economic effect on Delaware's citizens. Parts of the Lower Peninsula, particularly those areas with economic ties to the lower Chesapeake supported the Secessionist cause, while northern Delawareans supported the Union. The major Federal military installation in Delaware, Fort Delaware on Pea Patch Island in the Delaware River, served from 1862 until the end of the war as a Confederate prisoner-of-war camp.

Throughout the 1830-1880 period, population growth continued at a rate of about 5% per decade, rising to 10% between 1850 and 1860 (Ames et al. 1990: 49). At the outbreak of the Civil War the population of Delaware stood at 112,216. Of this total, nearly 49% resided in New Castle County, including large numbers of Irish and eastern European immigrants living in Wilmington. Kent County held 25% of the state's population, and Sussex the remaining 26%.

B. 1880-1940

Delaware's population in 1900 stood at 184,735 inhabitants. As previously, the greatest percentage, 59%, lived in New Castle County; 23% lived in Sussex County, and the remaining 18% in Kent County (U. S. Census 1900). Nearly 70% of New Castle County's population resided in Wilmington; many of the city's inhabitants had recently immigrated from eastern or central Europe (Hoffecker 1974). Between 1870 and 1900, the percentage of Delawareans employed in agriculture declined from 39.5% to 26%, while the percentage engaged in industry and manufacturing rose from 23.5% to over 31%. Persons working in the trades also rose during this period, from 8.5% of the total state population to 14% (Reed 1947). Paralleling this changing occupational structure, the proportionate value of manufactured products compared to agricultural products increased over this 30-year period. Most of the wealth generated by this increased industrial production concentrated in the Piedmont region, near the industrial and commercial center of Wilmington (Hoffecker 1974).

Beginning in the later nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth, Delaware farmers focused on raising perishables, and correspondingly de-emphasized staples. Farmers grew more diverse crops, such as tomatoes, apples, potatoes, strawberries, and other fruits and vegetables, in response to the demands of markets in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and other cities. Poultry and dairy production also increased significantly in this period, particularly in Kent and Sussex counties (Munroe 1984).

Nevertheless, farm size and the total acreage in farmland declined noticeably (Bausman 193, 1940, 1941a, 1941b). This decline marks a period of farm abandonment and/or readaptation in the early 1900s, coinciding with the beginnings of suburbanization in New Castle and Kent counties. After 1910 in these northern counties, farms of 100 acres or less were in the majority, and in Sussex County farms of this size accounted for over 70% of the total by 1920 (Bausman 1941a, 1941b). Tenant farming, a common feature of the agricultural landscape through all of the preceding periods, became even more prevalent during the late nineteenth century. Large landowners, having acquired much of their holdings during the hard times of the 1820s, leased their lands to tenants. By 1900 over 50% of Delaware's farmers were tenants or sharecroppers. Between 1880 and 1900 alone this figure represents an 8% increase in farm tenancy (Shannon 1945: 418). Tenancy remained a dominant farming practice into the twentieth century.

Internal transportation and inter-regional routes saw continued improvement, and connected Delaware more integrally with the rest of the Middle Atlantic region. By 1910 the Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia Railroad extended from Lewes to the Chesapeake Bay, providing residents of Maryland's western shore with easier access to the Delaware beaches. By 1924, Coleman DuPont's revolutionary concrete highway (present-day Route 113) ran the length of the state (LeeDecker et al. 1989; Rae 1975).

By the turn of the twentieth century, America's industrial economy had become truly national in scope; however, Delaware was falling behind the rest of the nation. Large, national companies bought many of Wilmington's successful firms, and others went bankrupt due to competition from the Midwest. Nonetheless, in 1907, Wilmington stood seventh in manufacturing in the United States according to population, and hosted a greater diversity of industries than any other city in the United States (Hoffecker 1974). Industrialization and commercialization remained focused predominantly in the Piedmont north and west of Wilmington, with the Upper and Lower Peninsulas considerably less industrialized. Generally for this period the historical record shows three dominant trends: a developing commercial agriculture, an increasing urbanism, and a growth in light manufacturing, such as carriage-making and cabinet-making, and foodstuff processing, such as canning and juice/syrup production (Hoffecker 1977).

The advent of the automobile produced major changes in the landscapes of the Upper and Lower Peninsula zones as well. The construction of Route 13 in the 1920s and the improvement of secondary roads reoriented overland transportation networks, collapsed the distances between town and back country, and reconfigured towns by renovating strong commercial centers and creating industrial fringes. As the towns' populations grew, so did their physical size, resulting in new residential neighborhoods. It is also in this period

that more rigorously racially segregated neighborhoods begin to appear in town settings throughout the state. Although most of the land was still used for farming, the two regions were no longer completely dependent upon agriculture. While early suburbanization began around established towns, large-scale suburban development was a product of the post-World War II era (Ames et al. 1990: 51).