

Janet Schaw on American agriculture

WITH COMMENTARY BY DAVID WALBERT AND L. MAREN WOOD

Journal of a Lady of Quality; Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776, edited by Evangeline Walker Andrews (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921).

As you read...

JANET SCHAW

Janet Schaw was a lady from Scotland who traveled to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal between October 1774 and December 1775. In North Carolina she visited her brother, who like many Scots had moved to North Carolina in the years before the Revolution and now owned a plantation on the Cape Fear River. She kept a detailed journal of her trip, which was published in the early 1900s.

Because she visited North Carolina in 1775, just as the Revolution was beginning, she gives us an interesting European perspective on what was going on in the colonies. Here, she describes — and criticizes — the methods of farming she witnessed. In other parts of her journal, she described the events of the early days of the Revolution.

FARMERS AND SOCIETY

Many people in the eighteenth century believed that agriculture and private ownership of land were key to building a strong nation. They argued that if a person owned property, then he would have a self-interest in preserving the nation, in supporting industry, and in maintaining a well-ordered society through laws and regulations.

People also believed that farming made people more *virtuous* and therefore better citizens. They believed that the hard work (or *industry*) required to run a successful farm forged a strong character and instilled in men (and their wives and children) other virtues such as *frugality*, a willingness to live simply and get by with less, and *independence* or self-reliance. The *yeoman farmer*, a man who owned and worked his own land and provided for his own family, was considered the ideal citizen.

These ideas about agriculture and farming came from England and Scotland, and long before that they came from ancient Greece and Rome. They would continue to be held during and, especially in the South, after the American Revolution (and, in fact, they still persist today). Some of Janet Schaw's complaints about lazy farmers might have come from this belief that farmers should be hardworking, honest citizens.

LAZY AMERICANS, SNOBBISH EUROPEANS

Clearly, Janet Schaw wasn't impressed with what she saw in America. She gives us an accurate description of farming methods in eastern North Carolina at the time — simple, inefficient, and often wasteful, but

inexpensive and basically functional. Many American observers in the eighteenth century had similar complaints, and encouraged their fellow colonists to do better.

But Schaw's tone is just as interesting. What expectations did she bring to America? Do you think she was fair to American farmers? How might colonists have responded to this sort of criticism?



Figure 1. A view of the Cape Fear River today, near Wilmington.

Nothing can be finer than the banks of this river; a thousand beauties both of the flowery and sylvan tribe hang over it and are reflected from it with additional lustre. But they spend their beauties on the desert air, and the pines that wave behind the shore with a solemn gravity seem to lament that they too exist to no purpose, tho' capable of being rendered both useful and agreeable.¹ For those noble trees that might adorn the palaces of kings are left to the stroke of the thunder, or to the annihilating hand of time, and against whom the hard Sentence (tho' innocent of the crime) may be pronounced, why cumber ye the ground? As that is all that can be said of them in their present state that they cover many hundred, nay thousand acres of the finest ground in the universe,² and give shelter to every hurtful and obnoxious animal, tho' their site is a most convenient situation both for trading towns and plantations. This north west branch is said to be navigable for Ships of 400 tons burthen for above two hundred miles up,³ and the banks so constituted by nature that they seem formed for harbours, and what adds in a most particular manner to this convenience is, that quite across from one branch to the other, and indeed thro' the whole country are innumerable creeks that communicate with the main branches⁴ of the river and every tide receive a sufficient depth of water for boats of the largest size and even for small Vessels, so that every thing is water-borne at a small charge and with great safety and ease.



Figure 2. Many Americans agreed with Schaw's assessment of American agriculture and worked to improve it. Thomas Jefferson drew this design for a plow to work the ground more effectively and prevent soil erosion.

But these uncommon advantages are almost entirely neglected. In the course of sixteen miles which is the distance between these places and the town, there is but one plantation, and the condition it is in shows, if not the poverty, at least the indolence of its owner. My brother indeed is in some degree an exception to this reflection. Indolent he is not; his industry⁵ is visible in every thing round him, yet he also is culpable in adhering to the prejudices of this part of the world, and in using only the American methods of cultivating his plantation. Had he followed the style of an East Lothian farmer, with the same attention and care, it would now have been an Estate worth double what it is. Yet he has done more in the time he has had it⁶ than any of his Neighbours, and even in their slow way, his industry has brought it to a wonderful length. He left Britain while he was a boy, and was many years in trade before he turned planter⁷, and had lost the remembrance of what he had indeed little opportunity of studying, I mean farming. His brother easily convinced him of the superiority of our manner of carrying on our agriculture, but Mrs. Schaw was shocked at the mention of our manuring the ground,⁸ and declared she never would eat corn that grew thro' dirt. Indeed she is so rooted an American, that she detests every thing that is European, yet she is a most excellent wife and a fond mother. Her dairy and her garden show her industry, tho' even there she is an American. However he has no cause to complain. Her person is agreeable, and if she would pay it a little more attention, it would be lovely. She is connected with the best people in the country, and, I hope, will have interest enough to prevent her husband being ruined for not joining in a cause he so much disapproves.⁹



Figure 3. This farmer, using a pair of horses to pull this small plow, is working much as farmers in Britain and America would have worked in the eighteenth century.

I have just mentioned a garden, and will tell you, that this at Schawfield is the only thing deserving the name I have seen in this country, and laid out with some taste. I could not help smiling however at the appearance of a soil, that seemed to me no better than dead sand, proposed for a garden. But a few weeks have convinced me that I judged very falsely, for the quickness of the vegetation is absolutely astonishing.¹⁰ Nature to whose care every thing is left does a vast deal; but I remember to have read, tho' I forget where, that Adam when he was turned out of paradise was allowed to carry seeds with him of those fruits he had been suffered to eat of when there, but found on trial that the curse had extended even to them;¹¹ for they were harsh and very unpalatable, far different from what he had eat there in his happy state. Our poor father,¹² who from his infancy [alternative reading, from his first creation] had been used to live well, like those of his descendents, was the more sensible of the change, and he wept bitterly before his beneficent Creator,¹³ who once more had pity on him, and the compassionate Angel again descended to give him comfort and relief. "Adam," began the heavenly messenger, "the sentence is passed, it is irrevocable; the ground has been cursed for your sake, and thorns and briers it must bring forth, and you must eat your bread with the sweat of your brow, yet the curse does not extend to your labours,¹⁴ and it yet depends on your own choice to live in plenty or in penury. Patience and industry will get the better of every difficulty, and the ground will bear thistles only while your indolence permits it. The fruits also will be harsh while you allow them to remain in a state of uncultivated nature; because man is allowed no enjoyment without labour; and the hand of industry improves even the choicest gifts of heaven." Adam bowed in grateful acknowledgment, and his heavenly instructor led him forth to the field, and soon taught him that God had given him power over the inanimate as well as the animate part of the creation, and that not only every beast and every bird was under his command, but that he had power over the whole vegetable world; and he soon proved that the hand of industry could make the rose bloom, where nature had only planted the thistle, and saw the fig-tree blossom, where lately the wild bramble was all its boast. He taught him that not only the harsh sourness of the crab was corrected, but the taste and flavour of the peach improven; by the art of ingrafting and budding the pear became more luscious, and even the nectarine juice was poor and insipid without this assistance. Adam had no prejudices to combat, he gave the credit due to his heavenly instructor,¹⁵ and soon saw a new Eden flourish in the desert from his labours, and eat fruit little inferior to those he had left, rendered indeed even superior to his taste by being the reward of his honest Industry.¹⁶



Figure 4. In a zigzag fence, the rails are laid “zagly” on top of each other, without posts.



Figure 5. These hoes, made by hand in twentieth-century West Virginia, haven't changed much since colonial times, although the neck of a colonial hoe might not have been as carefully curved.

As I cannot produce my Authority, perhaps you may suspect I have none, but that it was coined for the present purpose, should you think so, I cannot help it, but should Gabriel¹⁷ himself assure the folks here that industry would render every thing better, they would as little believe him, as they would your humble servant. Truly the only parable they mind is that of the lily of the Valley, which they imitate as it toils not, neither does it spin, but whether their glory exceeds that of Solomon is another question¹⁸, but certain it is they take things as they come without troubling themselves with improvements. I have as yet tasted none of their fruits, but am told that notwithstanding the vast advantages of climate, they are not equal in flavour to those at home in our gardens,--on walls which indeed they have no occasion for. Wherever you see the peach trees, you find hard by a group of plumbs¹⁹ so fit for stocks, that nature seems to have set them there on purpose. But her hints and the advice of those who know the advantages of it are equally unregarded. There are also many things that are fit for hedges, which would be a vast advantage, but these straggle wild thro' the field or woods, while every inclosure is made of a set of logs laid zagly close over each other²⁰.

On our arrival here the stalks of last year's crop still remained on the ground. At this I was greatly surprised, as the season was now so far advanced, I expected to have found the fields completely ploughed at least,²¹ if not sown and harrowed; but how much was my amazement increased to find that every instrument of husbandry was unknown here; not only all the various ploughs, but all the machinery used with such success at home, and that the only instrument used is a hoe, with which they at once till and plant the corn. To accomplish this a number of Negroes follow each other's tail the day long, and have a task assigned them, and it will take twenty at least to do as much work as two horses with a man and a boy²² would perform. Here the wheel-plough²³ would answer finely, as the ground is quite flat, the soil light and not a stone to be met with in a thousand acres. A drill²⁴ too might easily be constructed for sowing the seed, and a light harrow would close it in with surprising expedition. It is easy to observe however from whence this ridiculous method of theirs took its first necessary rise. When the new Settlers were obliged to sow corn for their immediate maintenance, before they were able to root out the trees, it is plain no other instrument but the hoe could be used amongst the roots of the trees, where it was to be planted, and they were obliged to do it all by hand labour. But thro' this indolence some of them have their plantations still pretty much incumbered in that way, yet to do justice to the better sort, that is not generally the case. Tho' it is all one as to the manner of dressing²⁵ their fields, the same absurd method continuing every where. If horses were hard to come at or unfit for labour, that might be some excuse, but far is it otherwise. They have them in plenty, and strong animals they are and fit for the hardest labour.

On the web

The creation and fall of man, from Genesis

<http://learnnc.org/lp/pages/1673>

The creation story from the biblical Book of Genesis describes how God created heaven and earth, plants, animals, and people; and later how the first people were cast out of the Garden of Eden as punishment for eating from the "tree of knowledge of good and evil."

Video of a walking plow

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7-rEOlvY94&feature=related>

From YouTube, a video of a plow drawn by two horses, with the farmer walking behind. If you look closely you can see the blades turning up the earth.

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Notes

1. Schaw believes that the inhabitants of North Carolina should be harvesting the trees and selling or using the lumber. Like many people in the eighteenth-century, Schaw appreciates the environmental beauty of these trees, but she also believes that nature is a resource that should be exploited for profit.
2. Once the trees were harvested, the land could be used for farming.
3. A ship that could carry 400 pounds of cargo could travel up the river about 200 miles. This means that the water was fairly deep and could accommodate a lot of trade. The larger the ship, the deeper the water it needs or it will get stuck on the river bed.
4. The most efficient way to transport goods in the colonial era was on waterways. Roads were very rough, and the only means of transporting goods across land was with oxen or horse teams pulling a cart. A horse or oxen team could pull only so much weight, far less than what could be transported on a river.

Using smaller ships and rafts, farmers could bring their goods to the ships to be transported to market and the cargo from the ships could be unloaded and taken up rivers into towns to be sold.

Because waterways were so important for the transportation of goods, the most desirable land was along a riverway. If a farmer did not have direct access to a river, he would have to pay his neighbor to ship his goods to market, cutting into his profits.

5. *Industry* in the eighteenth century meant hard work, so a person with industry (an *industrious* person) was someone who worked hard.
6. Robert Schaw acquired "Schawfield" in 1772 and 1773.
7. *Planter* here simply means a farmer. Over time, the word would come to imply a wealthy man whose farm was worked by slaves.
8. Janet Schaw is referring specifically to the practice in Scotland (and elsewhere in Europe) of using animal manure as fertilizer, and she assumes that American farmers are lazy or foolish for not manuring their fields. Her sister-in-law, by contrast, thinks the idea of eating food grown in "dirt" is disgusting!

Schaw was only partly right about colonial farmers. Many of the improvements in agriculture that Schaw and other writers advocated were fairly new, and some ideas that farmers today take for granted weren't understood yet. In the northern colonies, where the climate was more like that of Scotland and farmers grew crops more like those grown in Scotland, agriculture was

more like what she expected to see. But even there, prominent Americans, too, criticized colonial farmers for not doing enough to care for their soil.

When a farmer breaks new land that has grown wild for many years, the soil is very fertile, because nature maintains soil fertility through cycles of death and rot. In the woods, for example, leaves fall to the ground and decay, and animals eat berries and nuts and leave droppings. Insects and microorganisms turn this organic matter into new soil, which feeds the next generation of trees. When farmers plant and harvest crops, though, those crops take nutrients from the soil, and unless a farmer does something to put nutrients back in, over time, his soil will produce fewer and smaller crops. Manure was one way to put nutrients back in. Another was to plant crops such as red clover that draw nitrogen from the air and “fix” it in the soil.

Improving the soil, obviously, takes work, and the benefits of that work weren’t yet clear to colonial farmers. In most of North Carolina, farmers had only been growing crops on a large scale for a few years. (American Indians practiced agriculture, but there were far fewer of them, and they grew only what they ate and didn’t grow extra food for export.) As a result, the soil was still quite fertile even if farmers didn’t do anything to improve it. And if soil began to wear out — as it already had in parts of New England — it was cheaper for farmers to buy new land further west than to do the extra work of collecting animal manure and spreading it on fields.

In economic terms, land was cheaper than labor. But while farmers who used up their land’s fertility were making a reasonable choice to produce food as cheaply as possible, later generations paid the price in having to farm land that was much poorer than it had once been.

9. Schaw’s brother was a loyalist. About 15 to 20 percent of people living in the thirteen colonies remained loyal to Britain and fought against American independence. Other British colonies in North America, including those in present-day Canada and the Caribbean, remained loyal to England despite the attempts of diplomats such as Benjamin Franklin to persuade them to join the Patriot cause.
10. Here Schaw observes what we noted above — that North Carolina’s soils were incredibly fertile in the eighteenth century.
11. Schaw is describing the biblical story of Adam and Eve. According to Jewish and Christian tradition, Adam and Eve were the first people created by God. They lived in the Garden of Eden, a place where there was no pain, suffering, or death — nor, according to Schaw, weeds. Everything was beautiful, lush, and perfect.

In the garden was the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam and Eve were told not to eat the fruit or they would be punished. But they broke this rule, and God cast them out of the Garden of Eden into the world. Adam and Eve were forced to work very hard in order to grow food, something they did not have to do when they lived in Eden.

12. Adam. In the eighteenth century, Christians believed that all human beings were descendents of Adam and Eve.
13. God.
14. In other words, Adam needed to learn how to work hard in his fields to prevent weeds from growing. If he chose to be a hard worker, God would reward him. His food would grow and taste like the fruit he had eaten while living in Eden. Adam, however, had to do the work.

15. Adam thanked God for teaching him how to work hard and how to grow the good, healthy, and savory food.
16. In other words, the food that Adam grew himself tasted better than the food he had been given in Eden not because it was better quality, but because it was so rewarding to Adam to do the work himself.
17. In the Bible, Gabriel is an angel sent to earth as God's messenger. Schaw believes that he is the angel who visited Adam to teach him to farm. In the Christian tradition, Gabriel visited the Virgin Mary to tell her she would be the mother of Jesus.
18. The parable is from Matthew 6:28–29, in which Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about money or work, because God will take care of them:

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:
And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one
of these.

A lily of the valley is a flower that will grow in almost any conditions, even in a field of thorns. And Solomon was a king who according to Biblical tradition reigned over Israel at its greatest. God, Jesus was saying, takes care of these flowers, and he will take care of you.

Schaw, though, is being sarcastic. Obviously, North Carolinians weren't living like Biblical kings. She doesn't take Jesus' teaching literally to mean that people should not worry about work, but instead is suggesting that North Carolinians are lazy.

19. *Plumb* means straight and vertical, so Schaw is probably referring to trees that grow straight and could be used for fencing — “stock” or *stockade*, a kind of fence made from upright posts. Generally, in this section, she is complaining that Americans don't build decent fences or use attractive hedges (shrubs) to divide fields and gardens.
20. The fence mentioned here is the “zigzag” or Virginian fence. In southern New England, and frequently in the Middle West, it is known as the “snake fence” or “log fence.” The rails, usually split, are laid zigzag fashion, one upon another, without posts, but generally with bracing of some sort at the angles. It is a sloppy fence, but it is easy to make and makes removing sections convenient. Its height runs from three to five feet.
21. A plough (or plow) is used to turn soil over and to cut rows to plant crops. It is basically a set of triangular blades connected by wood, or today by metal. A plow in the eighteenth century would have been pulled by one or more animals, such as oxen or horses, and a driver would stand behind the plow and direct the animals. (See the video linked in the sidebar.)

In England and Scotland, the plow had been commonly used in farming since the sixteenth century. In fact, it had become a symbol of agriculture there. To Janet Schaw, farming without a plow was hardly farming at all! But a plow was heavy machinery that someone had to build. A blacksmith had to make the blades, and someone else would have to build the frame. Britain had done everything possible to discourage American manufacturing, and importing machinery from Britain would have been quite expensive. It was cheaper, and still effective, simply to use a hoe — especially if the workers were slaves.

The plow also has its disadvantages. Plowing dries the soil, exposes it to wind and to rain that can wash it away. Soil erosion caused by careless or unnecessary plowing removes fertile topsoil, and although agricultural schools and experts have been working to prevent soil erosion since the early twentieth century, one recent study (see

<http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.news.cornell.edu/stories/March06/soil.erosion.threat.ssl.html>) found that even today, soil erosion worldwide destroys an amount of cropland the size of Indiana! But colonial farmers didn't know that, and so we can't really give them credit for preventing soil erosion.

22. That is, two horses to pull a plow, with a man behind to guide them and a boy walking alongside.
23. A wheel plow is designed to be used by a single person, without help from work animals. It has either a single wheel in front or a wheel on either side to help steady it and make it easier to push. Since it's smaller than a full-sized plow, it would have been less expensive to buy or build. But because they're light tools, wheel plows work only in light, loose soil.
24. A seed drill allows a farmer to plant seeds at a specific depth and to space them evenly, which is more efficient and precise than simply "broadcasting" them or tossing them across the ground by hand. A seed drill uses a rotating wheel to put holes in the ground, then drops seeds into the holes. Like a plow, it would have been drawn by a horse.

Although seed drills had been used in Europe since about 1600, though, they weren't widely used until the 1800s, so it isn't surprising that Janet Schaw didn't find them in North Carolina.

25. That is, tending their fields or taking care of them.

Contributors

DAVID WALBERT

David Walbert is Editorial and Web Director for LEARN NC in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education. He is responsible for all of LEARN NC's educational publications, oversees development of various web applications including LEARN NC's website and content management systems, and is the organization's primary web, information, and visual designer. He has worked with LEARN NC since August 1997.

David holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America*, published in 2002 by Oxford University Press. With LEARN NC, he has written numerous articles for K–12 teachers on topics such as historical education, visual literacy, writing instruction, and technology integration.

L. MAREN WOOD

Maren Wood is a research associate with LEARN NC's North Carolina History Digital Textbook Project. She is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her dissertation, under the direction of John Wood Sweet, is titled *Dangerous Liaisons: Narratives of Sexual Danger in the Anglo-American North, 1750 to 1820*.

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Figure 2 (page 2)

Thomas Jefferson's design for a plow, ca. 1794, from the Thomas Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. Original image available from Library of Congress ([http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mcc:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(mcc/026\)\)\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mcc:@field(DOCID+@lit(mcc/026))))). This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.

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