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Historic Agricultural Resources of Pennsylvania c1700-1960
I. Introduction

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“Historic Agricultural Resources of Pennsylvania, c. 1700-1960” will eventually contain descriptions, analysis, and evaluative tools for understanding all of Pennsylvania’s historical agricultural landscapes with respect to National Register criteria. In its initial phase, the context covers twenty-four counties in the central, northern, and northeastern parts of the state. Future phases will cover the remainder of the state in stages. This introduction is based on research conducted on the twenty-four county area, but contains basic principles that will be applied throughout the Commonwealth. The time frame for analysis extends to 1960, because by the time the entire state is covered, 1960 will be within (or nearly within) the National Register 50-year cutoff.

Historical Farming Systems and Historic Agricultural Regions

To serve its users well, a National Register historic context for Pennsylvania agriculture must present a way to recognize patterns in the complex history of farming in the state, and to relate those patterns to buildings and landscapes. So many factors have combined to shape Pennsylvania agriculture that sorting them out is a major challenge. The hallmark of Pennsylvania agriculture from the very beginning right until the mid-twentieth century was diversification and flexibility. Unlike in Georgia or even some Midwestern states, in Pennsylvania farm families typically pursued an astonishing number of enterprises that varied with both time and place. Moreover, even farms producing the same item might use entirely different techniques and building accommodations depending on the time, place, and culture. For example, farms everywhere had granaries, but in southeastern and central Pennsylvania the granary typically was incorporated into a bigger barn, and in the Northern Tier, freestanding granary structures tend to be the norm.

No matter what the region or time period, where production was concerned the typical Pennsylvania farm unit was family-based, and pursued a wide variety of strategies; while particular *regions* of the state eventually came to emphasize some products over others, *individual farms* rarely could be regarded as being specialized. So, we cannot approach historic Pennsylvania as if it were today’s specialized, thoroughly commercialized agriculture writ small. The true essence of past Pennsylvania farming can only be captured by attending to the close-grained texture created by a multiplicity of small-scale, flexible enterprises, all of which served multiple purposes, including on-farm use, *or* off-farm sale, *or* barter. Thinking about Pennsylvania farms in terms of diversified production will allow for the most faithful interpretation of the Pennsylvania farmstead and rural landscape, which after all consist of a rich variety of buildings and landscape

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features -- with a variety of specialized spaces such as smokehouses, poultry houses, potato cellars, woodlots, summer kitchens, springhouses, and perhaps workshops or mills, not to mention intricate field and boundary patterns. This perspective also preserves -- indeed reclaims -- the contributions that a preoccupation with specialized market commodities tends to obscure: those of women, children, and farm laborers.

Given the rich blend of historic forces, finding an appropriate conceptual approach is a critical first step in creating a workable context. The concept of a “farming system” is helpful as a framework for understanding how agriculture in Pennsylvania evolved. It permits us to consider together the many forces that shaped historic Pennsylvania agricultural landscapes. These begin with physical factors like topography, waterways, soils, and climate. They also include product mixes, markets, and transportation. Other components, equally important but sometimes less tangible, form part of a “farming system.” Cultural values (including those grounded in ethnicity) influence the choices farm families make and the processes they follow. So do ideas, especially ideas about the land. Social relationships, especially those revolving around gender, land tenure, labor systems, and household structure, are crucial dimensions of a farming system. Political environments, too, affect agriculture.

Besides permitting analysis based on multiple factors, another advantage of the notion of a “farming system” is that it is dynamic. It focuses attention on how the elements of a system interact, rather than treating elements in static isolation. For example, in some areas, a grain and livestock system involved many intricate relationships among crops and animals, in which not only the crops themselves but their by-products (for example straw) were integral components. The farming system concept also accommodates change over time, again because of its inherently dynamic nature. The idea of a “farming system,” then, opens the way to a comprehensive and faithful interpretation of the historic rural Pennsylvania landscape. Whether we seek to interpret German Pennsylvania, the “Yorker” northern tier, home dairying areas where women dominated, or sharecropping regions in the heart of the state, the “farming system” approach is the key to understanding the landscape.

Each of Pennsylvania’s historic farming systems is associated with a specific geographic area. The earliest system, The Settlement Era system, covers the entire twenty-four county area under study. But after about 1830, six distinct Historic Agricultural Regions developed. Each differs significantly from the others, and each possesses an internal consistency that warrants calling it a region. These were determined through extensive

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research, and also by consulting the work of others who addressed similar problems. The six regions are as follows: Northern Tier Grassland; Central Limestone Valleys Diversified Farming; North and West Branch Susquehanna Diversified Farming; Potter County Potato and Cannery Crop Region; River Valleys Tobacco Culture; and Allegheny Mountain Diversified Part-Time Farming. The characteristic features of each system and region are detailed in the seven narratives that comprise this context.

It is very important to stress that this context develops historic significance for buildings and landscapes on a regional basis. Just as the soils, topography, markets, and cultural influences vary from one region to another, so the buildings and landscapes reflect that variation. A single, generic standard for evaluation would iron out these important distinctions and ultimately serve little use as a context. Farmsteads, farms, and historic agricultural districts are here evaluated according to the extent to which they typify historic patterns in their region. By taking these fundamental regional qualities into account, this context will provide an evaluation tool that avoids the “one size fits all” approach on the one hand, and also the over-detailed focus on a single farm or neighborhood on the other.

How the Regions were Identified: Mapping done by agricultural economists in the early twentieth century identified “Types of Farming” areas based on soil types, topography, markets, climate, and production. These helped to establish clear regional boundaries to the extent that topography, climate, and soil types set basic conditions for agriculture, and they also aided in identifying twentieth-century production patterns. However, the agricultural economists were mainly interested in production and markets; they did not take into account important factors which shaped the landscape, especially ethnicity, labor patterns, and land tenure. For this cultural and social data, cultural geographers’ work has proven valuable, because it maps information on settlement patterns, building types, and even speech patterns. And finally, new maps of farm tenancy were generated for this report. Examples of these maps are reproduced below. Together, these resources helped establish that the Settlement Era had common agricultural characteristics throughout the twenty-four counties, and they helped identify the six later Historic Agricultural Regions within the twenty-four county area that are described and analyzed in this context.¹

¹ Diane Lindstrom, in *Economic Development in the Philadelphia Region 1810-1850*, argues that Philadelphia’s agricultural hinterlands developed into roughly concentric rings that confirm the geographer von Thunen’s theories. Lindstrom does have good evidence in some cases, but her analysis extrapolates

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Overview: Historic Agricultural Regions, 1830-1960

After about 1830, a variety of historic farming systems developed. These internally shared fundamental qualities over a long period of time, within a reasonably well defined geographic area. While the farming systems systems changed over time within each region, they still retained a clear differentiation over time from other regions. For example, the Northern Tier Grassland area was shaped not only by glaciated soils, rolling hills, and access to urban markets, but by Yankee/Yorker culture, while farm households in the North and West Branch Susquehanna Diversified Farming region followed a diversified strategy that revolved around hogs and corn. In the Central Limestone Valleys, Pennsylvania German cultural influence was strong, and customs of share tenancy and rich limestone soil permitted one generation after another to raise grains and livestock in a highly mechanized farming system. For a brief time in scattered river valley bottoms in the north and center of the state, tobacco culture forced significant alterations to farming patterns, and to landscapes. Potter County's specialty system flourished in the twentieth century, and for a time relied upon African American migrant labor. And finally, in the poor soils of the Allegheny Mountain Diversified Part-time Farming region, mining and manufacturing households used farming as a means to ensure family subsistence in a situation wages were low. Women did most of the agricultural work in this system.

Of course, over time, regionalism declined in significance within Pennsylvania. Along with other eastern states, Pennsylvania agriculture shared in the general shift more towards specialization, commercialism, state oversight, industrialization, decline in farming population, and the like. This fact is also recognized in the context narratives. However, it is important always to keep in mind that existing literature on Pennsylvania agriculture exaggerates the degree of change before 1950. In 1946, Penn State agricultural economist Paul Wrigley identified "Types of Farming" areas in Pennsylvania. Only the Northeast and Northwest were given descriptors that implied specialization; these were dairying areas. The rest were given names like "General Farming and Local Market section." Equally significant was the fact that statewide, the top source of farming income – dairying -- only accounted for a third of farm income. To be sure, there were pockets where individual farms specialized to a greater degree (in terms of the percentage of income derived from a single product), but these were the

quite far from limited primary source material, and some of her conclusions regarding agricultural productivity and specialization are open to question.

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exception rather than the rule; overall even in the mid twentieth century, Pennsylvania agriculture was remarkably diversified both in the aggregate and on individual farms.

A visual presentation helps to clarify the nature of Pennsylvania's diverse farm production. Below are two charts showing 1880 census-derived production patterns for the major regions discussed in this context. They show data on a per-farm basis. The data was organized this way because it is more useful than aggregate data, because totals create distortions based on simple geographic size. A large county or township will usually show greater production, even if at the individual farm level, agriculture was comparatively unproductive. Of course, average farm size did vary from one region to another, and this is significant; but overall, in Pennsylvania the variation in farm size was far less than in many other parts of the US.

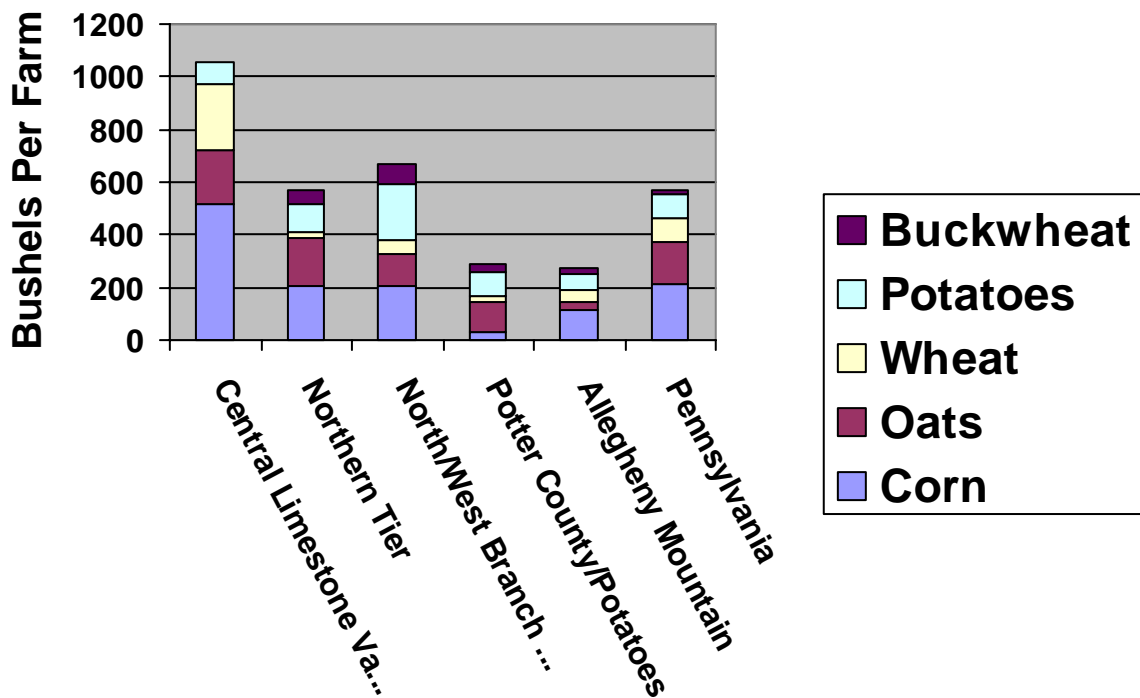
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Farm Crops by Region, 1880



This table shows data from selected townships for each region. Average farm size accounts for some of these variations; Central Limestone Valley farms were larger than the others. However, notice also the *proportions* of crops within each region, which vary significantly from other regions. The North/West Branch farm raised more buckwheat and potatoes proportionally than any of the others at this point in time.

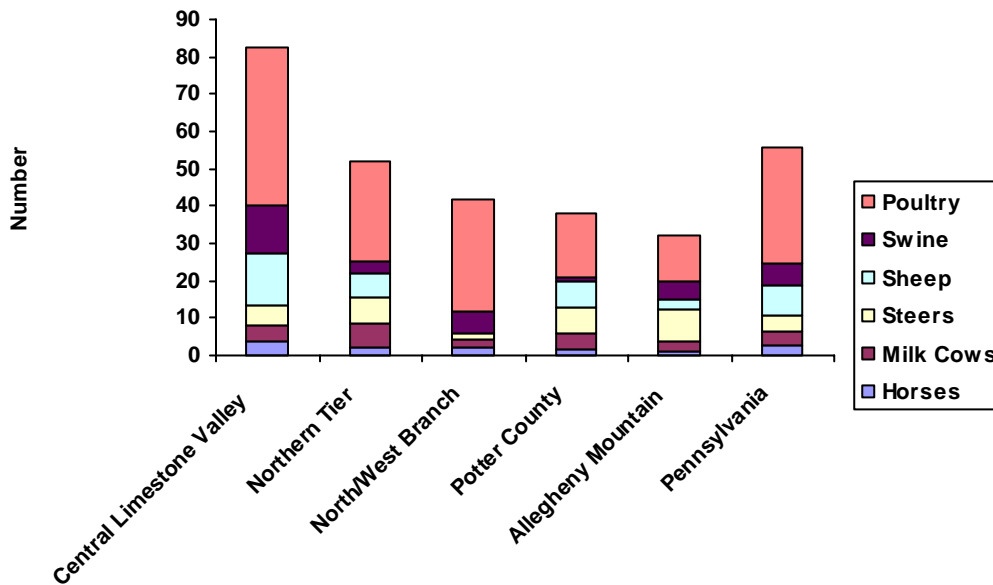
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Farm Livestock by Region, 1880



This chart shows regional differences in livestock production. The Central Limestone Valley farms clearly not only had the most of all types of animals, but also the larger number of horses hints at a more highly mechanized agriculture. The dairy emphasis of the Northern Tier is already obvious; that region not only has more milk cows in absolute terms, but also in relative terms, that is, as a proportion of its overall livestock mix.

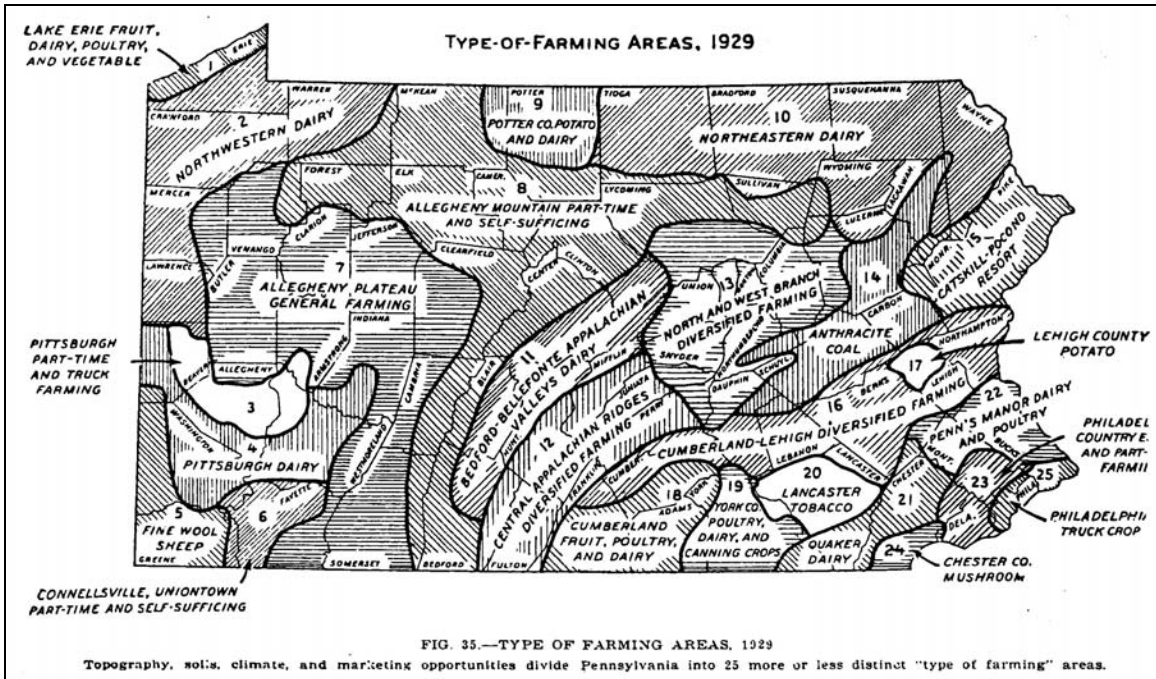
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Maps:



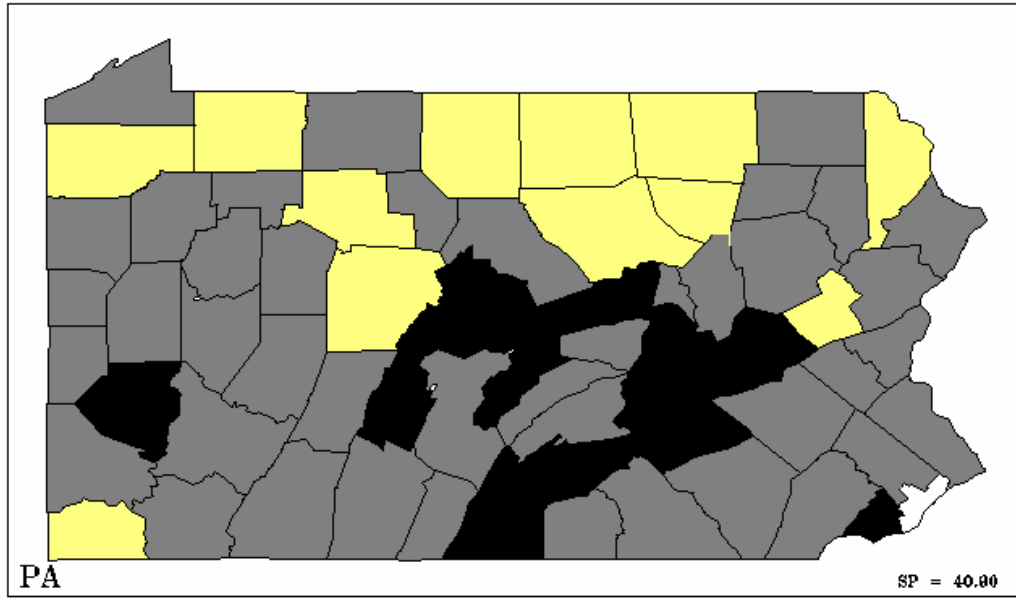
From Penn State College Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 305: "Types of Farming in Pennsylvania," April 1934

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Share tenants and cash tenants as percentage of all farmers, 1880
(excluding Philadelphia County)
30 - 50 % = dark
15-30 % = medium
0-15% = light

Pennsylvania Farm Tenancy, 1880.

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Organization of the narratives

Each context narrative is organized in a similar way. The narrative begins with a summary statement defining agricultural regions. This is followed by a description of Location, Climate, Soils, and topography. The Historical Farming Systems are discussed according to the periodization for the region and within the discussion of each system the narrative is organized the topics Products, Labor and Land Tenure, and Buildings and Landscapes.