

GARDEN SPOT

Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish,

and the Selling of Rural America

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INTRODUCTION

A Fertile Soil

There is almost an inverse proportion, in the twentieth century, between the relative importance of the working rural economy and the cultural importance of rural ideas.

—RAYMOND WILLIAMS, *The Country and the City*

Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, the “Garden Spot of America,” is a place of contradictions. Since 1950 it has grown faster than almost any county in Pennsylvania, yet it retains a reputation as a rural oasis in a sprawling desert of modern cities and suburbs. Its population has doubled in the past forty years, making the Garden Spot a metropolitan area unto itself. Its agricultural productivity is highest of any nonirrigated county in the nation, yet local farmers wonder whether farming there has any future. The county’s second largest source of income is the tourists who arrive by the millions each summer to see its rural landscape, yet thousands of acres of that landscape are taken each year for housing developments and highways. Lancaster Countians face the same problems and challenges as residents of most American cities and regions at the turn of the twenty-first century: job growth, suburban sprawl, highway congestion, utility regulation, adjustment to changing demographics. Yet residents’ sense of place, their county’s reputation as the Garden Spot, and hundreds of millions of dollars a year from agriculture and tourism all depend on the continued existence of a people seemingly stuck in the seventeenth century, farmers who refuse electricity and telephones and use horses for transportation. And even those people, the Amish and Old Order Mennonites, face changes and pressures that threaten not only their image as America’s quintessential traditional farmers but also their own sense of identity as peaceable children of God.

Similar contradictions confront many communities, but Lancaster's place in American culture makes it unique. Its farmland is some of the richest in the world, and since the eighteenth century its farmers have enjoyed both an uncommon measure of prosperity and widespread praise for their productivity and ingenuity. The presence of the Old Order Amish, who still farm the land their ancestors settled, turned Lancaster County from a respected eighteenth- and nineteenth-century farming community into a twentieth-century icon. Lancaster County has become, in the American imagination, the Garden Spot, the quintessential rural America. In the process, rural pride and agrarian ideals have been replaced by symbolic representations of Lancaster as the home of all that was right and good about traditional rural America. Even lifelong residents find it difficult to separate those images from the reality of their daily lives. Indeed, as image and reality have grown more incongruous, residents and outlanders alike have clung more tenaciously to the former. Lancaster County now ranks with Vermont, Iowa, and the Deep South in popular American iconography as one of a handful of quintessentially rural places, places that seem to define rurality rather than being defined by it. Say "Lancaster County" in a group of people almost anywhere in the United States, and someone will respond, almost immediately, "Oh, that's where the Amish live! What pretty farmland!"

I grew up in Lancaster County, a fact that helps only a little in understanding the place. The first time I recall thinking about what it meant to live in the Garden Spot of America was in the fifth grade, when my teacher read us an article from a local newspaper on "How to Tell If You're a Real Lancaster Countian." The article's author listed several questions to which a "Real Lancaster Countian" would answer in the affirmative; the one that struck me at the time—and the only one I can now recall—was, "Do you turn up your nose and hurry past an Italian restaurant, but inhale deeply when driving past a freshly manured field?" At the time it seemed a ridiculous question: manure stank, and I liked spaghetti and meatballs as much as any kid. So, no doubt, did the author of the article. Cuisine wasn't the point; rurality was. An Italian restaurant was new, a bit exotic (at least in Lancaster in the 1970s), fashionable, very much of the city. Manure, by contrast, symbolized a traditional way of life close to nature. It was a point that even at the age of nine I grasped easily. To be a Lancaster Countian was to live in the country, and to live in the country was better than to live in the city. By the time I graduated from high school that pair of ideas was firmly implanted in me.

But my upbringing was hardly so simple, or so rural. Lancaster County was not, after all, a tiny agricultural community that stayed rural because it had neither reason nor opportunity to change. My house was ninety minutes from south Philadelphia, seventy-five from Baltimore. The population of my home township grew by more than half in the first decade I lived there. I had not grown up on a farm, nor had most of my friends. We were inclined to be suspicious of the Amish

and understood them poorly; we had little more contact with them than tourists did, passing their buggies on the wide shoulders of country roads as we learned to drive. Yet despite our distance from agrarian life—or perhaps because of it—we became, like most Lancaster Countians, firmly and self-consciously rural. We learned to identify in vague ways with the country and proclaimed the superiority of the Garden Spot as naturally as the loudest of tourist operators. If we occasionally snickered at the Amish, we laughed openly at the tourists who inched past cornfields with license plates from New Jersey (the Garden State) and New York. Tales of urban ignorance grew into legend, like the story of the woman from New York who reported to a state trooper that an Amish farmer had refused to stand still while she took his picture: she thought he was an employee of the state tourist bureau and wished to complain to his superior. Lest we ourselves fall into such ignorance, we willed Lancaster County to remain rural. While in college I drove home on a Thursday evening, the night before a physics midterm, to sign my name to a petition protesting the planned construction of an apartment complex on a former dairy farm two miles from my parents' house—which was itself constructed on a former dairy farm.



The desire to sort out those contradictions—to understand *what is rural*—was the genesis of this book. Defining rurality recalls the Supreme Court decision about obscenity: most people know it when they see it, yet they would be powerless to name their standards. There are sociological definitions based on population density—a useful marker of rurality, but not sufficient; wilderness is sparsely populated yet not really *rural*, while the Garden Spot of America is home to half a million people. The small town seems to be associated with rurality; some sociologists define a rural place as a village or small town and its vicinity.¹ Yet the resident of a small town is just that, neither an urbanite nor, quite, a ruralite. Agriculture seems another necessary component of rurality, perhaps the most necessary, but only a certain sort of agriculture and a certain sort of farm will do: a “family farm.” The family farm is perhaps the essence of rurality for most Americans, and equally difficult to define. Again, there are sociological definitions. According to one academic study, a family farm is “an agricultural operation that is owned by a family or a family corporation, has gross annual sales of between forty thousand dollars and two hundred thousand dollars per year, and does not hire more than 1.5 person-years of labor.”² But while this definition may be appropriate for agricultural economists and government planners, it hardly explains the role of the family farm in American culture, or why rural America remains so vital in our culture despite its practical distance from the lives of most Americans.

Our ideas about family farming are part of a bundle of ideas about rurality that has been at the heart of this country's culture and politics since before its



Farmland in Drumore Township, Lancaster County, 1997. Photograph by the author.

founding. From Thomas Jefferson's proclamation that "those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God," to the agrarian republicanism of early proslavery thinkers, to the antebellum Republican hope that homesteading could prevent social ills, to William Jennings Bryan's fiery reminders that "the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies," Americans have seen theirs as a uniquely rural nation, and as one therefore uniquely blessed and virtuous. It is not hard to see why. Nearly all of the first settlers in the British North American colonies were farmers, or became farmers out of necessity upon arrival. Even by the time of the Revolution, the new United States was an overwhelmingly agricultural nation, with fewer than one resident in ten working off the farm. Looking for a way to separate themselves intellectually as well as politically from Europe, the first American political theorists developed and expanded upon the ancient belief that small farmers were the bedrock of a free society. Owning their land made farmers economically independent and therefore free from political influence, able to speak and vote their consciences. As independent landowners, they were wedded to the liberty and interests of their country. Labor in the soil made them virtuous—industrious, frugal, moral, supportive of the common good—in a way that was vital for the citizens of a republic. These yeoman farmers, as they were most often called, made up a free, stable, strong, and classless society. By comparison, the cities of Europe were hotbeds of poverty, vice, and social and political strife. Not only was the American republic an agricultural one; it *must* be agricultural to survive as a republic. Over time, the strength of that idea has faded, and many Amer-

icans of the past century have debated not only its truth but also the harm it may have done to the nation's development. Yet remnants of it still survive.

Ask most Americans today to define a family farm, and they will describe something like an idealized nineteenth-century midwestern homestead: corn, wheat, beans, vegetable garden, hay, hogs, chickens, cows; a white clapboard house and a red barn. The family wakes to a crowing rooster, works together, eats heartily, and produces nearly all of what it needs. There may be a few modernizing touches: the farmer rides a tractor, though probably not a large one; his wife cans fruits and vegetables in Ball jars. (That the picture shows a farmer and his wife, rather than co-farmers or a farmer and her husband, goes without saying.) This is the way farming is presented to children, at least to those who don't experience it firsthand. The farmer is somewhere between Old MacDonald and Noah, tending every kind of animal imaginable, all of them mooing and cock-a-doodle-dooing in perfect harmony. In this happy land there are no sharecroppers, no droughts, no production quotas, no banks threatening foreclosure. Bacon is transported from a living pig's belly to the breakfast table directly, painlessly, like a virgin birth. Animals do not, miraculously, produce manure; the farmer's nose is greeted only by the scents of wildflowers and freshly mown hay. If the thunderhead on the horizon brought manna instead of rain, no one would be surprised.

Ask them to think a little harder and they may mention images from the farm crisis of the 1980s (*Places in the Heart*, Willie Nelson, crying women in Kentucky, or was it Kansas?) or characters from Steinbeck novels, farmers dispossessed by hard times, bad weather, government policies, or agribusiness, impoverished and heartbroken but still heroic in their suffering. They may think of Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic*, of a farmer with face closed, jaw set, taciturn, puritanical, probably none too bright, wielding his pitchfork as a weapon as if ready to gore us should we venture too close. They may recall portrayals of country bumpkins and rubes: the Beverly Hillbillies, the Scarecrow from *The Wizard of Oz*. Or they may see farmers as repositories of a special wisdom that only country folk have, which they frequently use to embarrass city slickers. Come to think of it, even the Scarecrow turned out to be wise enough when it counted, and the conservatism Wood portrayed is as often praised as "family values." Farmers are simple, but their simplicity is a necessary antidote to the absurdities of modern, urban society. Farm country is God's country, a place where miracles can occur, a "field of dreams." Shoeless Joe Jackson would not have returned to life on a street corner in Chicago. All of this is rurality, and yet the jumble of icons brings us little closer to defining it.



If Americans in general have struggled to find a satisfactory and sensible definition of rurality, rural Americans have not necessarily had an easier time of it.

Lancaster Countians have spent much of the last century trying to define what it is to be rural by way of defining what it is to be a Lancaster Countian, what it means to be the Garden Spot of America. Countless places in America have faced this dilemma of self-definition in an age of mass culture, and in this sense Lancaster's problems have not been unique. Yet Lancaster County, because of the way it has been defined, provides a unique window into the American fascination with rurality. The tension between rural and urban is heightened by Lancaster's historic connection to agriculture—the name “Garden Spot of America” was coined before the Revolution—and by the metropolitan pressures of nearby Philadelphia and New York. Lancaster County is a remarkably productive patch of agricultural land within a few hundred miles of a hundred million people; its annual produce, until recently, easily outstripped that of the entire “Garden State” of New Jersey. Its residents remain devoted to farming both economically and culturally long after most of the northeastern United States has abandoned agriculture. That many of those residents are Amish or Old Order Mennonite, members of Christian sects that see farming as an act of devotion to God and Creation, only heightens the tension. They live much as their ancestors did three centuries ago, without cars or electricity or telephones, selling their produce to urbanites and suburbanites who have cell phones and sport utility vehicles and Internet connections. The contrast between old and new serves as a constant reminder of the rural past and makes Lancaster County seem even more, by comparison to the rest of America, the Garden Spot. The public fascination with the tensions between rural and urban, past and present, has given birth to a hundred-million-dollar tourist industry that ranks second only to agriculture itself in Lancaster's economy. The area is now more famous as the home of the Amish and for Disneyland images of rurality created for tourists than it is for its agricultural productivity.

Because of these tensions, and because of the public scrutiny Lancaster County and the Amish receive, residents' efforts to define their home and to maintain it as rural have been unusually public and explicit. Largely because of the presence of the Amish, Lancaster Countians have been forced to confront the nature of rurality more directly than most Americans have in the twentieth century. When Amish and non-Amish residents argue over efforts to modernize schools, roads, and agricultural practices, their differences force deeply held beliefs about rurality to the surface. The attention drawn to the Amish by the tourist industry provokes the resentment of other Lancaster Countians, particularly mainstream Pennsylvania Germans who find themselves identified with their backward cousins. Attempts to rein in the tourist industry, to make it more “authentic,” lead to public and private debates about what authentic rurality really is—or was. And as tens of thousands of people from more urban backgrounds have moved into Lancaster County over the past thirty years, the erosion

of farmland and of the county's agricultural heritage has also become a source of public dispute.

It is these efforts to define Lancaster County—and by extension rurality—that are the subject of this book. What follows is the story of those who have stepped forward to enter the public debate about what Lancaster County was and should be. Some of those people were lifelong residents, others occasional tourists. Some made their arguments explicitly, through travel guides, letters to the editors of local newspapers, or government planning documents. Others made them implicitly, often without even realizing they were doing so, in pageants, arguments about education, even recipes for traditional foods. Many stood to benefit from their own definitions of rurality: agribusinessmen who wanted to consume and control it, planners who wanted to control and direct it, tourist operators who wanted to market it, tourists and homeowners who wanted to consume it in less obvious but equally destructive ways. Yet few held their beliefs any less sincerely for their hidden agendas.

All of these people have faced the same basic dilemma, and it is one that I, too, face in writing this book: it is the question of whether rurality and progress can coexist. A century ago, Lancaster Countians believed that they could. Rural Americans blended the two ideals fairly successfully until the early twentieth century. Since then, however, Americans have come to identify rurality with the past, and the ties between rurality and progress have come undone. This is in part a simple recognition of existing trends, of historical fact—the nation is urbanizing—but it has had the result that rurality and progress now seem to be mutually exclusive ideals. Even ruralites have, over time, unthinkingly accepted this equation of the rural with the past, for they have been and remain unable to define rurality on their own terms. Tourism in Lancaster County originally evolved from rural self-marketing, but this “authentic” approach (as ruralites called it) rapidly lost out to the negative symbols of rurality—backwardness, ignorance, hide-bound conservatism—that rural boosters had meant to combat, creating an irony that has played out in other arenas, as well. The problem, for ruralites, has been that urbanites usually control the terms of the debate, whether it involves the suburban family vacation, the popular press, or public policy.

As a result, twentieth-century debates over the future of rural America have generally broken down along lines of progress and preservation. Neither ideal is static, and supporters have often seemed to change sides depending on the issue at stake. Progressives—by which I mean, literally, advocates of progress—have ranged from Progressive Era activists urging social reform to business progressives urging *laissez faire* and economic growth. Whether liberal or conservative, all progressives tend to believe in the American creed of progress, the belief that life can and should continue to improve and improve and improve, *ad infinitum*. Tradition tends to be swept away in the winds of change, and believers in its value

are left with the creed of preservation, the cry of “Stop! Enough!”—which is no more tenable in the real world than a belief in infinite progress.³ In Lancaster County today, the two sides fall out behind real estate developers and farmland preservation groups; earlier preservationists have focused on education, language, and agriculture. But both progress and preservation in their purest forms have always come from urbanites, or at least seem to bear the city’s stamp. Both creeds assume that rurality is essentially of the past. And both have been used to justify the consumption of the country—physically, economically, socially, voyeuristically—by the city.

It is too easy, however, for ruralites to blame the city or big business or government or economics for their woes. I argue that the problems facing rural America are fundamentally cultural. At their root lies this problem of rural progress—which is really the problem of whether there is a future for rural America. Cultural problems are far less tractable than economic ones, less easily solved or defined—and worse, we have no one to blame for them but ourselves. Before the country was consumed physically and economically, it was consumed culturally. And that is a feast in which we have all partaken.



CULTIVATING THE GARDEN

The Invention of Lancaster County

At the age of ten each Amish boy was married to the soil, and to it he dedicated the remainder of his life, rising at four, tending his chores before eating a gargantuan breakfast at seven, labouring till twelve, then eating an even larger meal which he called dinner. He worked till seven at night, ate a light evening meal called supper, after the tradition of Our Lord, and went to bed. He worshipped God on Sundays and in all he did, and . . . he would pause sometimes to give thanks that fate had directed him to Lancaster County, a land worthy of his efforts.—JAMES MICHENER, *Centennial*

Each summer, millions of tourists flock to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in search of America's rural past. The Lancaster County they seek, the Garden Spot of America, can be found a few miles south of the borough of New Holland. There, on a warm morning in early June, the farmland spreads out on gently rolling hills around the crest of a country lane. An Amish farmer, identifiable even from this distance by his dark clothing and his mode of work, drives a team of horses through a field of newly sprung corn, the lines of cultivation visibly curving around hillsides and farmstead. By the white clapboard farmhouse, jewel-toned clothing hangs from a line; a young girl tosses feed to chickens; tomatoes gather strength in a garden plot; a windmill slowly turns, pumping well water to the house. Across the lane, black and white Holstein cows graze—one longs to say contentedly—in a verdant meadow. Beyond it are more meadows, more farms and farmhouses, more Old Order Amish and Mennonite farmers and families, in a patchwork stretching to the horizon. The view from this hillside is much like the

view from any other hillside in this region, and it seems not so different from the view here fifty or a hundred or two hundred years ago.

But scratching the surface of this landscape reveals a very different Garden Spot. The cow pasture to the west of our country lane reveals itself upon close inspection to be the abandoned roadbed of a four-lane restricted access highway, twin raised arcs now covered with grass, waiting for workers to return—which they may yet do, when the money and the will are found, to speed commerce with Philadelphia. The cows that graze there in the meantime are milked by diesel power even on these nonelectric farms, and their milk is carefully refrigerated until the dairy truck arrives. Many of these farms grow tobacco, though religious restrictions prohibit their owners from smoking. On the farm across the way, a retired Amish man, having turned over the daily operation of the farm to his son, works in the barn, adapting an old John Deere engine to crank ice cream, twenty gallons at a time, for a barbecue next weekend. His work is interrupted frequently by customers: in his retirement he builds outdoor furniture and wholesales canning supplies to small businesses and owners of farm stands. Farther into the valley the landscape hides a network of sewer lines, laid to facilitate housing development and the construction of a complex of retirement condominiums. In New Holland borough, a few miles away, reside a poultry processing plant and a producer of farm machinery, once locally owned but now part of national or international corporations, and smaller producers of boxes and other industrial goods. Where once farmers retired to *grossdawdi* (grandparent) houses on the farms their children inherited, now farms are paved so that the farmers' descendants can work and retire in separate comfort.

Tourists who avoid the narrow country roads south of New Holland can see the produce of the changing landscape at Central Market in downtown Lancaster. In continuous operation for two and a half centuries, it is today a curious jumble of new and old, rural and urban, foreign and local. Old Order Amish and Mennonite farm girls in aprons and bonnets sell fresh produce in season from local farms; they also work Saturdays at the Jewish bakery stand. A few stands still cater purely to locals with deep roots in Lancaster County: here a woman sells celery and (incredibly to the outlander) *only celery*; across the aisle a sign announces homemade cup cheese, a spreadable and notably strong-smelling cheese that some compare to Limburger. Butchers' stands sell traditional favorites—souse, ring bologna—alongside chickens and roasts. A few vendors cater primarily to tourists, selling crafts and books about the county and its Amish residents. Some reveal the city's ethnic diversity: a German immigrant sells imported wursts; a woman from Greece sells *dolmades* and *baklava*. Others blur the distinction between rural and urban. A man scoops herbs, spices, and teas from jars into plastic baggies at a customer's request: is this an old-fashioned market stand or a fashionable operation catering to environmentally conscious foodies? The same



FIGURE 1.1. The Herb Shop at Central Market blends old and new, rural and urban. Photograph by the author.

question might apply to vendors of organic fruits and vegetables or to the bakery stand selling “rustic” breads made from organic flour.

Along the highway east of the city crowd attractions beckoning tourists: the “working” farms and museums purporting to show how the Amish really live; the all-you-can-eat “family style” restaurants; the purveyors of postcards and hex signs and Amish dolls. Attractions compete over which is most authentic—and over which is loudest. “Authentic” shoofly pie is sold from a giant windmill; a hotel in the shape of a steamboat reminds visitors that Robert Fulton hailed from Lancaster County. A children’s amusement park, forgoing any connection to the Garden Spot or the Amish, looms behind the facade of a giant white castle. To keep tourists coming in the off-season, outlet malls fill the gaps between tourist attractions, advertising their low prices as evidence of Pennsylvania Dutch frugality. The Amish avoid these areas when they can; the heavy traffic and busy intersections make it difficult to navigate a horse and buggy. Though most tourists come to see the Amish, they are as unlikely to see them near the largest tourist attractions as anywhere in the county.

Residents have other images of Lancaster County. Miles of housing developments fill the townships north of the city, linked by clogged highways still dotted with eighteenth-century stone barns. A suburban shopping mall is one of the largest in the state, and the city’s Franklin and Marshall College is an old and prestigious liberal arts college. Portions of downtown Lancaster, historic and beloved

by lifelong residents, are now populated primarily by Latinos whose own small businesses may succeed where successive waves of urban renewal have failed. The county's non-Amish farmers, indistinguishable from the rest of the county's rural population when not at work, find new ways to make a living; some succeed with organic or no-till methods, while others expand dairy operations to meet rising costs. Small towns survive throughout the county, some growing, some failing; the former river port of Columbia continues to fade; Lititz and Strasburg renew their main streets with antique shops; Quarryville and Ephrata keep their down-towns alive with residents and small businesses.

Diversity and confusion about identity are nothing new to Lancaster County. The area has always blended old and new, rural and urban. Even in the eighteenth century, its population of English, Scotch-Irish, Welsh, a variety of Germans, and a few Africans was as diverse as any in the colonies, and its economy blended a highly productive agriculture with growing industries. Today, nearly half a million people live in Lancaster County, with backgrounds, occupations, and homes more diverse than ever. Yet the notion of a single place called Lancaster County, and residents' identification with that place—an unusual thing for a county—persists into the twenty-first century. The idea of Lancaster as the Garden Spot of America, prosperous seat of agriculture and repository of rural heritage, somehow unifies its residents. For them, the county's ruralness is a source of identity; for outsiders, it is a source of fascination. That the reality of the Garden Spot has changed dramatically over the past century matters little; its reputation has only grown stronger despite those changes. And this, perhaps, is Lancaster County's greatest conflict, for just what it means to be the Garden Spot of America has been a subject of continual debate.

Through two centuries of debate and diversity, however, the idea of the Garden Spot as the seat of all that is right and good about the country—and of the country as the seat of all that is right and good about America—has rarely wavered. Until the twentieth century, the Garden Spot was also a place of progress, an idea that helped to unify it further. The Europeans who settled Lancaster County were mostly farmers, and they saw in farming great hope for the future. Their Garden Spot was no biblical paradise, the pristine gift of God to be spoiled by man, nor some poor backward substitute for a European metropolis. It was instead a new model of community, a middle ground between nature and metropolis, where the soil was married to the city it fed, the spirituality of religion to the logic of material progress, the traditions of the past to the needs of the future. For Lancaster County in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rurality was not merely the past but the present and the future, and this was the key to its success. The idea of the Garden Spot never entirely lost its Edenic roots, but by blending those roots with the American desire for progress, it became a model for all of rural America and the hope it represented.

The Garden

For the settlers who arrived here from Europe in the eighteenth century, the word *garden* conjured up images of the Garden of Eden. Indeed, the New World had often seemed, to early explorers and especially to Europeans who listened rapt to their tales, an Edenic garden or an Arcadia in which man had not yet fallen from innocence and all was harmony and abundance. The tropics of Central America displayed a variety and bounty of flora and fauna that dazzled Spanish conquistadors, and native Americans who wore little clothing and lacked the other supposed benefits of European civilization must surely (thought their conquerors) be remnants of man's existence before the Fall. By the time the English and Germans arrived in Pennsylvania two centuries later, most of the original human inhabitants had died of European diseases such as smallpox, and the relatively unoccupied land appeared as God's gift to its new inhabitants. Rivers teemed with fish; deer ran freely in the woods; giant hardwoods—of the kind German farmers knew to mark good soil—towered over the landscape. The name of England's first colony, Virginia, suggested tribute not only to the Virgin Queen but also to the virgin land of America. Certainly the vision of a New World garden for men to till and keep without toil was a tempting one, and the association of its natural bounty with Eden colored the early labeling of Lancaster County as a Garden Spot.¹

Another tradition entered into the European thinking about America here as well, that of the pastoral, of a well-ordered and cultivated but still peaceful and harmonious garden. The pastoral ideal, which appeared in the writings of the Roman poet Vergil and was revived in Renaissance Europe, saw the country as a place of retreat from the troubles of the world. The idealized farm was a safe haven where, one of Vergil's shepherds says, "my cattle browse at large, while I myself can play the tunes I fancy on my rustic flute." Man lives in harmony with nature and is rewarded with peace, leisure, and self-sufficiency.² A somewhat different version of that ideal, more practical for real farmers, descended from the Greek poet Hesiod, who lived in the seventh or eighth century B.C. Hesiod's epic poem *The Works and Days* provided practical advice and moral lessons for the man who would succeed at farming.³ His ideal farmer was independent, owning his own land, tools, and livestock, and would rise or fall by his own ability and luck. His farm was small, perhaps six to ten acres, quite diversified, and part of a thriving, self-sufficient community in which the moral right and the practical good were one and the same. Although he was not unrealistic in his expectations—he anticipated only a grudging cooperation among people, accepted from necessity, and saw toil as necessary and ever-present—Hesiod believed that the best life came from living in harmony with the will of God, with nature, and with one's fellow human beings, while at the same time being as much as possible morally and economically self-sufficient.⁴

Vergil and Hesiod helped to establish, for Westerners, the two main intellectual models of the country. Both saw the farm as ideally a place of harmony, but while Hesiod saw it as a place of productive toil, the best situation for imperfect men in an imperfect world, Vergil described a place of peace, a retreat from the troubles of the world.⁵ To say that Hesiod wrote from the country while Vergil wrote from the city would be an oversimplification, but it helps to explain the differences between them. Vergil wrote at the dawn of the Roman Empire, when the independent family-owned farms of the Republic had been replaced by large-scale agricultural operations owned by aristocrats and worked by slaves. For him, as for the poets and philosophers of Renaissance Europe who enjoyed his work and copied his motives, the thriving, independent rural community was a symbol of a simpler, more innocent past, when man and nature were not in conflict and farming was not an impersonal mode of economic production but the sum of personal, cultural, moral, and social relationships. Hesiod, however, lived the rural life that Vergil meant to describe. Hesiod saw that life more realistically, though he still sought to improve it by practical wisdom. For Vergil, however, ideal and reality were in hopeless conflict.⁶

A similar contradiction faced rural England on the eve of American colonization. Rural England in the Middle Ages had been based on local community and self-sufficient, diversified farming, but by the sixteenth century the enclosure movement was eliminating common lands and breaking manors into individual fields and farmsteads more suitable for grazing sheep. This “modernization” made English agriculture more profitable, but at the expense of rural communities. Enclosure forced thousands of people off the land, and the new focus on producing wool for export turned farming from a way of life into a business. As a result, agriculture and its symbols became a battleground for moralists and modernizers. The plow had long served as an emblem of rural England, once as the symbol of traditional community and local self-sufficiency but now as a sign of national pride, economic progress, and competitive individualism. As older views of agrarian England became less relevant, traditionalists were left with a symbolic plow that was now merely decoration in a pastoral landscape. The traditional agrarian way of life still seemed right and good, but as it disappeared its advocates, like Vergil, were left to portray it in increasingly nostalgic terms.⁷

The English in America, however, faced no such contradiction. There they found a clean slate on which farming could symbolize economic and cultural progress without losing its moral overtones. Their vision of an agrarian America was more individualistic than that of medieval England but no less firm in its commitment to farming as a way of life. America was an agrarian nation; farmers made up the overwhelming majority of the population in 1790. Its philosophers and statesmen were farmers, or fancied themselves as such, and it was natural that they saw farming as central to their present and future societies—especially since

they had only recently carved their farms out of what they viewed as a wilderness. American agrarianism, as originally conceived, was about the future, not the past. American writers juxtaposed rural America with both the wilderness and the European metropolis, holding it up as an ideal middle state between two dangerous extremes. Great cities such as London and Paris encouraged disparities of wealth, crime, immorality, and the laziness of both the spoiled rich and the indigent poor. The wilderness of the New World allowed barbarism and, in its own way, the laziness of people content to live off the bounty of nature. The rural society of small landholders, however, avoided the corruptions of both extremes by fostering hardworking, moral, sturdy inhabitants.⁸

Eighteenth-century American writers joined this notion of the moral superiority of the country to the English “country” ideology in politics. This ideology, created when the furor over enclosure had barely died down in the seventeenth century, set the country in opposition to the metropolis as the natural seat of all that was right and good in society. Country ideology assumed that people who were dependent economically upon others—whether by wages or actual servitude—would also be dependent politically. The city was a web of interdependence and, therefore, of corruption. But the country was the home of sturdy farmer-citizens whose self-sufficiency and independence allowed them the moral freedom to stand by the good of the community rather than the interests of a private cabal. For many country thinkers, the ideal form of society and government was a republic modeled on those of ancient Greece and Rome, in which the small, independent farmer, or “yeoman,” would be the model citizen. In England, this ideal remained always out of reach, never taken seriously by more than a radical few except during the years when Cromwell temporarily dispatched the monarchy. America, however, seemed the perfect proving ground for country ideology. There was no monarch (at least not in residence) and no hereditary aristocracy; the great majority of citizens were farmers, and most of those farmers, even in the slave South, were yeomen. When Americans began to separate themselves psychologically from Britain in anticipation of a political separation, they took up this republican country ideology to explain why America was superior to Europe. America became the country, Britain the metropolis; and the virtuous, hardworking yeoman, morally and economically self-sufficient and willing to fight for the common good, became the model citizen of the new American republic.⁹

Thomas Jefferson provided the most influential, if not the most consistent, articulation of this yeoman ideal. “Cultivators of the earth,” he wrote in 1785, “are the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to its country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bands.” America, Jefferson argued, should strive to remain agrarian as long as possible. “I think our governments will remain virtuous . . . as long as they are chiefly agricultural,” he prophesied, but

when Americans “get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe.” Manufacturing should be left to Europe; Americans could trade agricultural products for finished ones.¹⁰ This strain of “agrarian republicanism” resisted all efforts to make the United States an industrial nation. In its purest form it took root in the South, where by the mid-nineteenth century it had mutated into an ideology that was actively proslavery and extremely conservative. But this pure form of agrarian republicanism had a major flaw. It assumed the existence of cities and factories elsewhere to supply farmers with the manufactured goods they craved; the moral costs of the farmers’ dependence upon manufactures were merely externalized, not eliminated. And to avoid that problem was to assume, even worse, a static society in which there could be no material progress at all.

Most Americans, however committed they might be to an agrarian way of life, also wanted progress, material improvements that would make their lives easier, more productive, and more enjoyable. Particularly in the North and West, statesmen and philosophers tried to combine their belief in the superiority of a predominantly rural civilization with a philosophy of economic progress. Tench Coxe, assistant secretary of the treasury under Alexander Hamilton, tried to separate mechanical improvements from the cities and factories that created them in Europe, arguing that small-scale production would preserve the best elements of rural society while allowing for progress. A “purified” factory system might support farmers and undergird a strong rural society. It was an idea whose merit even Jefferson eventually conceded.¹¹

Something like it also formed the basis of the pre-Civil War ideology of the Republican party, which captured the votes of midwestern farmers and businessmen with a vision of an America of small towns and cities that would exist in harmony with the surrounding countryside. Henry Carey, a Pennsylvania economist, developed a theory of small industrial nodes, centers of manufacturing to serve local farmers and provide a market for their produce. This locally oriented economy, Carey argued, would be beneficial not only economically, by providing a firm, stable basis for trade, but morally as well. “The more directly the consumer exchanges with the producer,” he wrote, “the less will be the disposition and the power to commit frauds. . . . The shoemaker makes good shoes for his customers, but he makes indifferent ones for the traders who deal with persons that are distant.” Long-distance trade broke up families and communities; better that a man remain at home, where he could tend to his family, his land, and his neighbors. Farming and close agrarian communities fostered intellectual growth, an appreciation for aesthetic beauty, and physical and spiritual health. Carey objected to wage slavery and division of labor but also to socialism and communism. His solution was essentially agrarian in that it preserved localism and the cultural and economic primacy of agriculture, but it differed from traditional agrarianism by

making room for economic and material progress. Americans might not necessarily support the details of his economics (he argued that economic protectionism would foster this “American system”), but they could certainly agree with his vision in an America where a sizeable majority still farmed and large-scale factories and corporations remained the exception.¹²

If it is obvious now that nineteenth-century economic progress would fail to produce harmony between city and country, it was far from obvious at the time, and it is certainly unfair to criticize people in the past for failing to accurately predict the future. Some intellectuals worried that the contradictions between the philosophies of agrarianism and progress would prove such harmony untenable, but it was only reasonable for ordinary Americans, and particularly for ruralites, to believe that rurality and progress were not inherently in conflict. Though they desperately wanted progress for themselves, their communities, and their nation, most Americans before the Civil War had in mind a level of comfort they wished to achieve but did not imagine themselves as future tycoons or millionaires. Farmers might wish to salt away enough money to buy farms for their children or more productive land for themselves, but for the most part they saw themselves remaining farmers and their children remaining rural. For rural Americans, rurality was not in conflict with progress but rather at the very heart of it, supporting both morality and economy. The American view of the country was largely a rural view of the country, self-referential; it could not, like Vergil’s eclogues, refer to the past, but only to the present and future; and it must, like Hesiod’s ideal farmer, combine practicality with idealism. The truth or possibility of that vision was less important, at least culturally, than its tenacity.¹³

The Garden Spot

Lancaster County was nearly a perfect fit to this American ideal of the country. By the turn of the nineteenth century, its agriculture had few rivals in either productivity or reputation. Hardworking and independent yet connected to their communities, Lancaster’s farmers seemed to combine the best traditional practices with an innovative, progressive spirit that built productive, diversified farms and kept them at the forefront of American agriculture. The productivity of their soils was improving, not declining, from the generous application of manure, the inclusion of red clover in the crop rotation, and, by the early nineteenth century, the application of burnt lime and potash. While small farms in New England were declining and new midwestern farms were taking over the national grain market, Lancaster farmers found new crops and markets, including cattle fattening (which included still more manure as part of its profit) and, eventually, tobacco. As early as 1779, residents of the mid-Atlantic referred to Lancaster County as the “Garden of Pennsylvania,” and by 1800, it was being called the “Garden

Spot of America.” The name stuck. Lancaster County was no utopia, certainly, but it could serve as a practical model for practical people.¹⁴

The first white settlers in Lancaster County were also its first Pennsylvania German farmers: Swiss Germans who called themselves Mennonites, after Menno Simons, the founder of their Anabaptist religion. Led by Hans Herr, they purchased ten thousand acres on the Pequea Creek, near the present-day village of Willow Street. They were not the first Mennonites in Pennsylvania, thirteen families of their faith having founded Germantown in 1683. Nor were they the last. By 1727, hundreds of Mennonites had settled in a wide swath through the middle of Lancaster County, and dozens more a few miles to the north. Though welcomed by William Penn and his fellow Quakers, who believed in freedom of conscience, they had been persecuted in central Europe for their refusal to accept military service. By mid-century, their numbers included several settlements of Amish, a sect that had split from the Mennonites in the late seventeenth century. Other Germans arrived soon after. The Brethren, often called Dunkards because they “dunked” or fully immersed believers during baptism, fled persecution in their homeland in the 1720s. Like the Mennonites and Amish, the Brethren were Anabaptists and would become known as “Plain people” because their faith proscribed the wearing of fancy dress. Members of the Lutheran and German Reformed churches also fled the chaos of war-torn central Europe for Pennsylvania. These “Church” Germans—so called because they belonged to established churches, or because unlike the Mennonites they built churches rather than worshiping in their homes—first came to Lancaster County in significant numbers in the 1720s, settling mainly in what would be the northern part of the county. Most were farmers, but as the towns of Lancaster and Manheim grew later in the century, a number of Church Germans set up shop in the county’s fledgling industries. In the countryside, scattered settlement spawned “Union” churches that alternated Sundays between Lutheran and Reformed churches, a practice that continued well into the twentieth century and helped to unite Germans of the two faiths.¹⁵

Other ethnic groups soon joined the German majority in Lancaster County. English men and women settled in the growing towns and cities as well as on farms. Some English Quakers spilled over from settlements in Chester County to settle along the western bank of Octorara Creek. They were joined by a handful of Welsh Quakers, who came in larger numbers to northeastern Lancaster and Berks counties. Large numbers of Scotch-Irish, Scottish Presbyterians who had lived for a time in Ulster before seeking economic opportunity in the colonies, settled in the northwest and southwest portions of Lancaster County and gave their names to the townships of Drumore and Donegal. While the Penns recruited Mennonites to Pennsylvania because their nonviolent faith resembled the Quaker faith, they recruited the Scotch-Irish for a very different reason: to provide a sturdy bar-

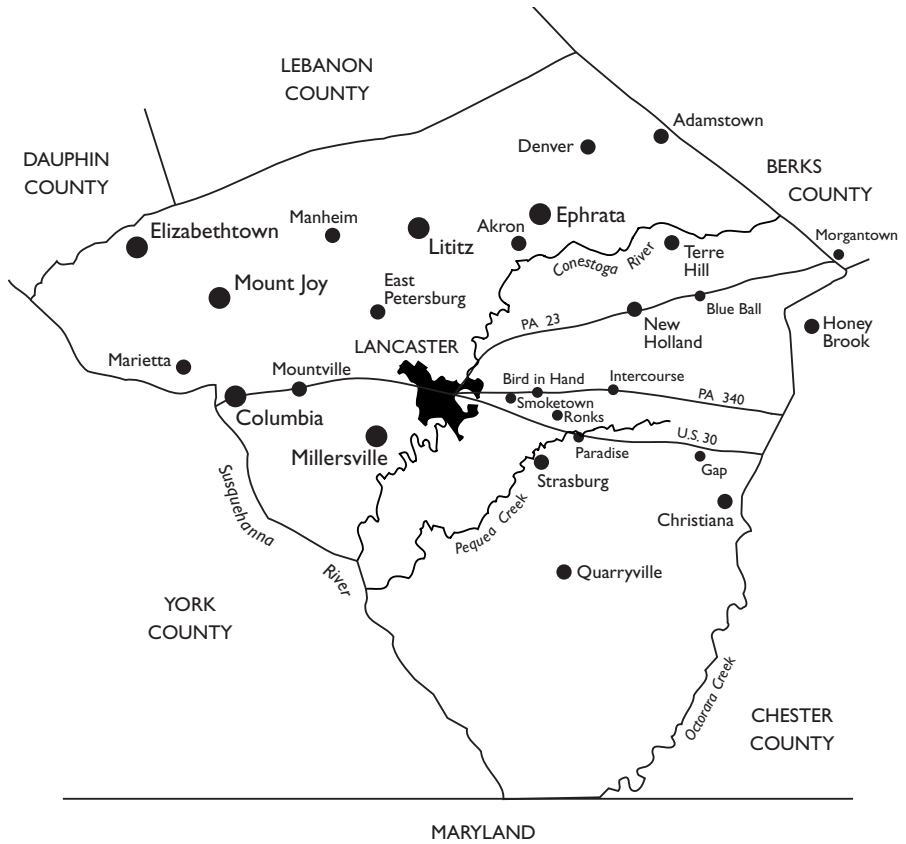


FIGURE 1.2. Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

rier against Catholic settlers from Maryland and Indians from the Appalachians. Good land, abundant natural resources, and the tolerant policies of the Quakers made Pennsylvania perhaps the most diverse of the English colonies in North America, and Lancaster County was no exception.¹⁶

By the eve of the Revolution, Lancaster city had become the largest inland town in the colonies, an important stop on the “Great Wagon Road” from Philadelphia west and south through the Appalachians. The Conestoga Wagon originated there, on the banks of the river from which it took its name, as did the misnamed Kentucky rifle. But it was agriculture for which Lancaster County fast became known. Southeastern Pennsylvania generally, and Lancaster County in particular, boasted some of the best soils in the colonies. Not only religious freedom but also economic opportunity awaited migrants, for labor was as scarce as land was plentiful. Slavery was far less common than in the South; the Quaker and Mennonite faiths forbade slavery, and the climate, though ideal for some

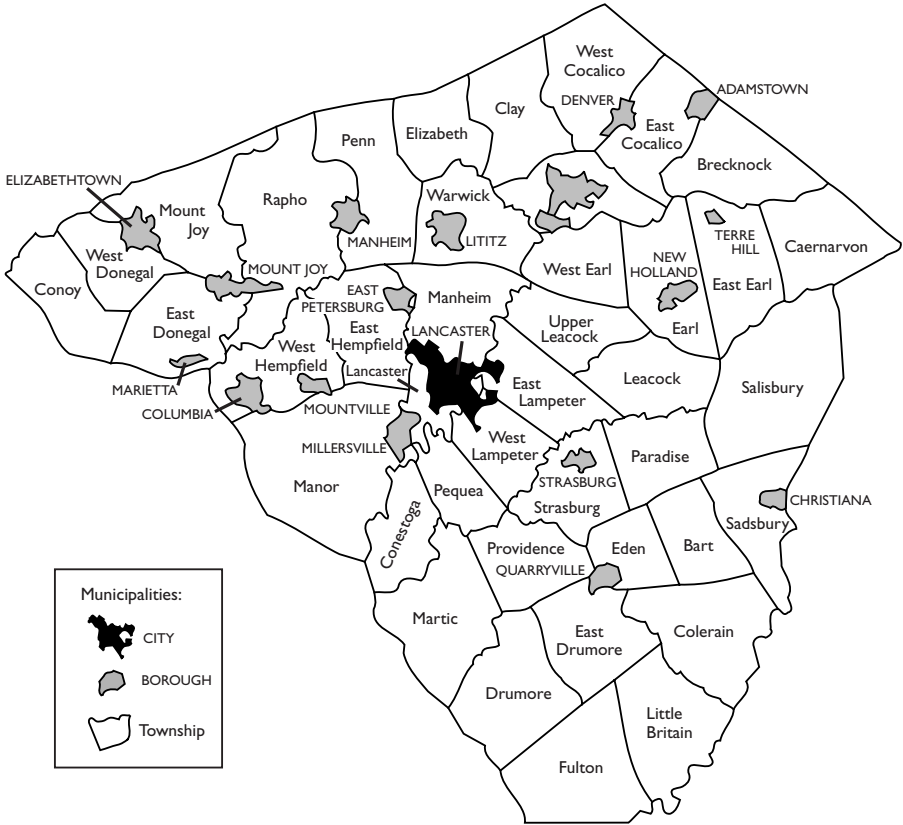


FIGURE 1.3. Lancaster County municipalities, 1990.

kinds of agriculture, did not support large-scale, labor-intensive commercial farming. Europeans and Americans alike considered Pennsylvania “the best poor man’s country in the world,” and it was indeed as affluent an agrarian society as could be found in Europe or America. Although farmers were never quite self-sufficient, they created a varied agriculture, growing grain for market and feed, a fair variety of vegetables, an array of livestock, and apple orchards. The market at Lancaster was known for the quality of the produce sold there, and the region’s cider won praise as well.¹⁷

Although Pennsylvania’s temperate climate, gentle slopes, rich soils, ample water supply, and abundant flora and fauna all impressed observers, most praised the settlers themselves, particularly the Germans, for the region’s agriculture. The Pennsylvania Dutch, as they were increasingly called, seemed to be more industrious, more frugal, and simply better farmers than their English and Scotch-Irish neighbors. Comparison with the Scotch-Irish, who had a reputation for moving

frequently and working poorly, particularly helped the Germans. An English visitor to the colonies in 1775 wondered how in “a country in which nature has done so much, man will do so little,” and his contemporaries largely agreed that Pennsylvania’s agriculture left much to be desired. Yet most observers made an exception for the Germans. George Washington noted that the German farmers took better care of their farmsteads and livestock than those in other parts of the commonwealth. Poor Richard, however much his alter ego Benjamin Franklin despised the dissonant tongue of the “Palatine horde,” praised the “habitual industry and frugality” of the Pennsylvania Germans. Benjamin Rush found the Germans’ agricultural abilities so impressive and so vital to Pennsylvania’s well-being that he wrote a short book on the subject in the 1780s. Pennsylvania German farmers, Rush claimed, were “industrious and frugal . . . skillful cultivators of the earth.”¹⁸

The solidity and permanence of the Germans’ stone “bank” barns (figure 1.4) stood out particularly among the somewhat ramshackle dwellings more common in turn-of-the-nineteenth-century rural Pennsylvania and testified to the value Pennsylvania German farmers placed on the care of their livestock. Similar barns had existed in the mountains of Switzerland, and although the first generation of immigrants made do with more temporary shelters, their sons and grandsons replaced the first crude shelters as soon as their means allowed. On many farms, permanent barns appeared before permanent houses and were much larger, lending the impression that German farmers cared more for their livestock than for their own comfort. The stone barns gave permanence to the landscape; indeed, many of them remain today even beside busy highways. But the barns’ purpose also gave permanence to the land itself. As winter housing for livestock, the big barns allowed farmers to collect great quantities of manure, which, when mixed with the straw from the animals’ beds, broke down into ideal fertilizer for the next season’s crops. While the fertility of most well-farmed American soils was declining by the end of the eighteenth century, that of many Pennsylvania farms seems to have been improving. German farmers had also learned by that time to add red clover to their crop rotation rather than let their land lie fallow; red clover, a legume crop, restored nitrogen to the soil and made an excellent hay for livestock. Advertisements for “Lancaster County Red Clover Seed” began appearing regularly in Pennsylvania German newspapers by the mid-1780s, several years before the gentlemen farmers of the Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Agriculture lent their names to the cause of soil improvement.¹⁹

Not only was Lancaster’s agriculture increasingly productive at the turn of the nineteenth century, but it also fit almost perfectly the developing American conception, or at least the northern one, of an ideal farming community. Like most of the first European settlers in what became the United States, immigrants to Lancaster County settled not in villages but on separate farms. Given the slow

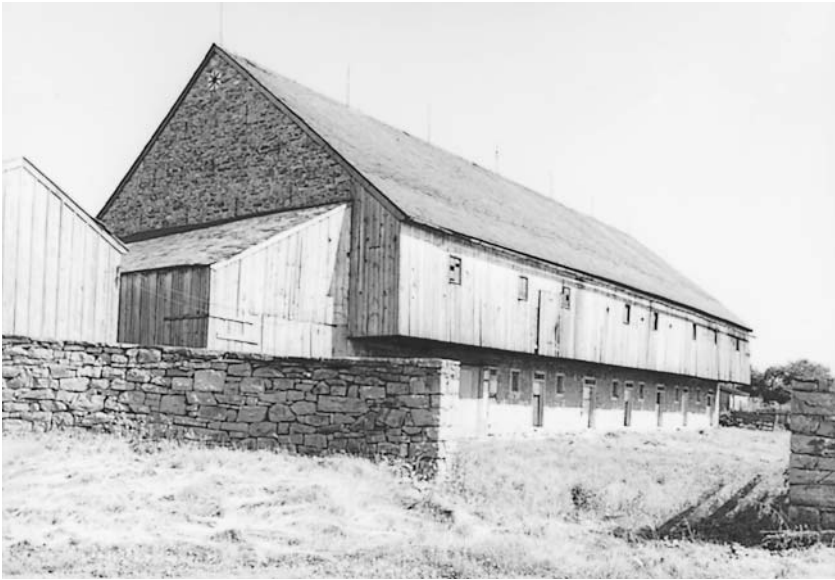


FIGURE 1.4. The Jacob and Elizabeth Miller barn, built in 1804, is typical of the Pennsylvania German bank barns that still make Lancaster County's agricultural landscape distinctive. Photographed in 1941 by Charles H. Dornbusch for the American Institute of Architects Pennsylvania German Barn project. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Historic American Buildings Survey, HABS,PA,36-LANC. V,6A-1.

development of trade, farmers and communities there as elsewhere were forced to be relatively self-sufficient, with diversified cultivation and local craft and industry. As time went on, the self-sufficiency of individual farmers diminished, but Lancaster farmers never adopted the monoculture of nineteenth-century southern plantations or twentieth-century midwestern grainfields; they retained a mix of livestock, feed crops, and crops for market that allowed a measure of local if not personal self-sufficiency. Lancaster's rural population was dense enough for social and economic intercourse; the frontier of settlement had passed the Susquehanna decades before the Revolution, leaving the original scattered farms far from isolated. New arrivals from Europe could not simply strike out on their own, even had they wanted to, and Germans in particular relied on networks of family and friends to make their way in the New World. The society they built had a balance, if not quite a harmony, of individual and community interests. By the early nineteenth century, Lancaster County had several well-established nodes of settlement, with networks of roads and trade that helped to bind communities together.²⁰

The Pennsylvania Dutch commitment to farming as a way of life, it is often argued, lent permanence to this milieu of small farms. Although this claim, like so

many aspects of Pennsylvania Dutch agriculture, has been exaggerated, the Dutch tended not to accrue land unnecessarily, in general limiting themselves to what they and their families could farm and spending profits on land for their children. Culture was partly responsible for the relatively small size of their holdings, especially the religious beliefs of Amish and Mennonite farmers, which enjoined them to be stewards of God's creation. Pennsylvania German language and culture remained relatively intact through the nineteenth century, and farmers still partly separated from national markets by a language barrier might have been less eager to embrace them economically. Practical considerations were also important: Lancaster's proximity to eastern population centers and the quality of its soil meant that land there was always in demand and therefore costlier than land farther west. The county had been settled early, too, so that by the nineteenth century many once-large farms had been subdivided among several generations of children. The land was so productive that a large family could live quite well on fewer than a hundred acres; there was no urgent need for more. Larger holdings would have required more labor, in the form of slaves, indentured servants—immigrants who sold their labor for a term of several years to pay for their passage across the Atlantic—or expensive paid labor. When immigration to Pennsylvania peaked before the Revolution, a number of German farmers bought indentured servants, most often from their own country, but few bought slaves. Even if slavery had not been antithetical to Pietist beliefs, neither the climate nor the topography of southeastern Pennsylvania encouraged large-scale commercial agriculture. Lancaster County was, culturally and economically, best suited to small farming.

Yet the proximity of urbanity, ironically, played a vital role in maintaining the county's rurality in the nineteenth century. While homesteaders on the Great Plains were lucky to have neighbors less than a mile away, Lancaster farmers had the advantages of thriving communities and nearby towns. City markets had always provided a destination for local produce and would continue to do so, keeping Lancaster's agriculture relatively diverse; before the advent of refrigeration and trucking, there was no way to sell fresh produce at any appreciable distance from its source. Urban markets also provided new possibilities for commercial agriculture, even as old ones dried up. Until shortly after the Revolution, Lancaster's main market crop had been wheat, but after the Upper Midwest opened to settlement in the early nineteenth century and the growth of canals and railroads eased transportation and trade over the Appalachians, farmers in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois could grow cereal crops more cheaply than Pennsylvania farmers could. Cereal crops require little labor but also produce little profit per acre, and the (by comparison) huge farms of the wide-open Midwest were better suited to corn and wheat than the smaller, hillier farms of the East. To survive economically, Lancaster farmers had to find new crops. Luckily, as the market for

grain was diminishing, new markets were emerging in the swelling urban centers of southeastern Pennsylvania. Cattle raised in the midwest were now brought to Lancaster for finishing (that is, fattening in pens) before being sold as beef to urban consumers. After the Civil War, the city of Lancaster became a railroad terminal for livestock, and by the 1920s it was known in some circles as the “Largest Stock Yards East of Chicago.”²¹

If the physical presence of cities helped preserve small-scale farming, what those cities represented—the ideal of progress—helped even more. The willingness to experiment and adapt produced, by the time of the Civil War, another new cash crop: tobacco. Farmers discovered that Lancaster’s highly fertile limestone soils produced excellent cigar leaf, a higher grade of tobacco than was possible in the poorer soils of Virginia and North Carolina. Tobacco tended to deplete the soil more quickly than most crops, but as part of a well-established rotation and with regular amendments of manure, it proved sustainable. Tobacco was (and remains today) highly profitable on a per-acre basis but quite labor intensive—also perfect for farmers facing a growing population and shrinking landholdings. Amish and Mennonite farmers, wanting to put their large families to work year-round, found tobacco well-suited to their culture. Other innovations followed, spurred by developments in transportation and technology. When refrigeration and trucking became possible in the early twentieth century, Lancaster farmers could market fresh produce to somewhat more distant cities, particularly Philadelphia. They also expanded their operations to include dairying, which eventually became the most important and most visible segment of local agriculture. This willingness to experiment with new crops and adapt to changing economic conditions, combined with the early adoption of crop rotation and soil amendments, kept Lancaster County’s farms fertile and profitable despite the looming shadow of Philadelphia and New York. Plain sect farmers, the Amish, Mennonites, and Brethren, were behind much of that success. Although it seems strange today to discuss the Amish as progressive farmers, they were far from being hide-bound, ignorant rubes. Like successful farmers in any era, they knew their craft well, and whatever their disdain for “book farming,” they knew a good thing when they saw it. The presence of urban markets and ideas, the balance of tradition and progress, made Lancaster the Garden Spot, and kept it growing—in both senses of the word—into the twentieth century.²²

Plain People

Although the story of the Garden Spot is a complex one, it is in large part the story of the Plain sects, the Amish, Mennonites, and Brethren. Their centrality to Lancaster County’s twentieth-century image makes this so, but they have always made up the largest share of the county’s farmers and have been primarily re-

sponsible for keeping the county's best lands productive. By the twentieth century the Brethren had moved closer to the mainstream of American society, dropping their plain dress and even building a college. Lancaster's Mennonites remained true to their roots until mid-century, and the handful of Old Order Mennonites still retain a way of life very similar to that of the Amish. But it is the Amish, and particularly the Old Order Amish, who play the greatest role in making Lancaster the Garden Spot today. In the twentieth century, the Amish came to exemplify many of the traits central to Americans' idealizations of the country—the hopeful harmony between tradition and progress, economics and spirituality, and the individual and the community.

The Amish have their origin in the spiritual chaos of Reformation Europe. They are descendants of the first Anabaptists, followers of Ulrich Zwingli who broke away from Zwingli's state-supported church in Zurich in 1525. These dissenters baptized one another (hence the name "Anabaptist," which means "re-baptizer") to symbolize their break with the church and because they believed infant baptism to be meaningless. But since church and state were one, to reject infant baptism was to reject not only membership in the church but also citizenship and its duties. As Anabaptist ideas spread, the rulers of Swiss city-states saw them as an invitation to chaos and harshly punished as many Anabaptists as their bounty hunters could catch. The lucky were merely jailed or harassed; others were tortured, burned alive, drowned, dismembered, or sold as galley slaves. The violence lasted several decades, but persecution, far from stopping the Anabaptist movement, seems actually to have encouraged its growth. By mid-century, Anabaptist groups had sprung up not only throughout Switzerland but also in northern Germany and the Netherlands.²³

The persecution, moreover, left a deep impression on the Anabaptists and their descendants. If they had begun by rejecting citizenship and refusing military service, they now developed a deep distrust of larger society and especially of government. Twentieth-century Amish still read and retell the stories of sixteenth-century persecution collected in their book *The Martyrs Mirror*. The culture of South German and Swiss Anabaptists already encouraged meekness, simplicity, humility, and nonresistance, but the arrogance and violence of the world strengthened these opposite tendencies and made the Anabaptists cling to them self-consciously.²⁴ In particular they stressed "radical obedience" to the examples and teachings of Christ, a conception of the church as a voluntary body of believers bound to one another by mutual covenant, and "an ethic of love" that forbade all violence. The need to hide from their persecutors also forced many Anabaptists into the mountains, where they turned to farming, a life well-suited to their beliefs. "Be not conformed to this world," the command of St. Paul, became their creed.²⁵

But the small, mobile congregations that persecution created also encouraged a multiplicity of beliefs. Although all Anabaptists shared basic principles, they

differed in how strictly they were willing to adhere to them. The largest group followed the leadership of a former Catholic priest, Menno Simons, and thus became known as Mennonites. In the late seventeenth century a group of Mennonites emigrated from Switzerland to Alsace, and it was there that the Amish emerged as a sect in 1693. A young leader, Jacob Ammann, taught that the church should take more seriously the need for mutual accountability. The Swiss and Alsatian Anabaptists practiced the *Meidung*, or shunning, of errant members but excluded them only from communion; Ammann wanted to exclude them from all social relations. The Alsatian Mennonites followed Ammann's leadership; the Swiss did not, and Ammann excommunicated them. By 1711, the breach was final, and the "Amish" became a separate church.²⁶

Both Mennonites and Amish arrived in Pennsylvania within its first decades as a colony. Although their numbers grew slowly before 1900, Amish communities in the United States have—surprisingly enough—mushroomed in the twentieth century. Today there are some 24,000 Amish in Lancaster County alone, as well as nearly 200 settlements elsewhere in Pennsylvania, the Midwest, and Ontario.²⁷ Although Mennonite churches have grown up around the world, the original Amish communities in Europe have long since died out. As different as the Amish are from mainstream modern Americans, traditions of local government and religious freedom have allowed the Amish to flourish in this country even as the gulf between them and their non-Amish neighbors has widened.

Amish society is organized on three levels: the *settlement*, the *church district*, and the *affiliation*. A *settlement* consists of all the Amish living in a particular area; Lancaster County is a single settlement. The *church district*, or congregation, is a group of twenty-five to thirty-five families living in close enough proximity to gather for worship every second Sunday. The number of families in a district is also limited by the number of people who can be accommodated in a large house, since the Amish worship in their homes and not in special church buildings. The district is self-governing, although members of different districts may share virtually identical beliefs. An *affiliation* is a group of congregations whose members interpret their beliefs similarly. The largest affiliation in Lancaster County (and the one that receives the most attention) is that of the Old Order Amish, which consists of some 140 congregations; there are also smaller groups of more liberal New Order and "Beachy" Amish.²⁸

The small size of the church district and the fact that such small groups govern their own social and religious affairs help to preserve the Amish community, which is at the heart of all worldly concerns. The Amish conception of the church (and of the community, for they are the same body) is of a voluntary band of believers, responsible to one another and governed only by God's will. All are equal before God; ministers, deacons, and bishops are chosen by lot. Members join voluntarily and only when they are old enough to understand fully the choice they

make—in practice, in their late teens or early twenties. They are then baptized, taking a vow of obedience to God and to the church. The Amish take this vow quite seriously. Before they join the church, youth can flirt with the world with only minor penalties, the equivalent of an Amish parental grounding. Some “running around” is expected and even encouraged as a normal part of growing up and allows youth to choose the Amish way with fuller understanding of what they are giving up. (In practice, of course, a young man or woman who has lived his or her entire life in an Amish community would find it difficult to live completely in modern society. About 80 percent of Amish children remain within the Old Order; those who leave usually join a more progressive Amish or Mennonite church.) Once baptized, however, an Amish person who breaks the vow of obedience faces excommunication.

In practice, the community is governed and maintained according to the *Ordnung*, an orally transmitted set of rules respecting all aspects of life. The *Ordnung* is created and when necessary altered by unanimous consent of the congregation. Most of the rules are taboos against overly showy or individualistic dress, appearance, or behavior, or against the adoption of certain worldly luxuries such as electricity or automobiles. Although the rules of congregations of one affiliation tend to be similar, particular taboos may vary. The most common rules, universal among the Old Order Amish, prohibit electricity, telephones in homes, central heating, and automobiles; they require beards but not mustaches for married men, long hair for men and women, hooks-and-eyes rather than buttons on coats, and the use of horses for farming and transportation.²⁹

Since Amish belief forbids physical violence, the *Ordnung* must be enforced through informal, peaceful means. The means vary with the seriousness of the transgression. For small offenses, the errant member may confess privately to the minister or deacon and be forgiven. For greater offenses he or she may be required to make a public confession before the congregation. If the offense is serious enough or is part of a pattern of worldliness, the member may face a six-week period of *Meidung*, during which members of the congregation must avoid all social contact with the transgressor. The ultimate punishment for those refusing to submit to the church's authority is permanent excommunication—not only from the church but from Amish society as well. In time the offender may be allowed to confess and rejoin the congregation; others join a more liberal church. Under the *Meidung*, however, the remaining members of the congregation may have no social or economic intercourse with the expelled individual. The ban extends to members of the same family, and even to husband and wife.³⁰

To outsiders, the *Meidung* sounds unbearably harsh, a terrible contradiction to the Amish community's professed values of love and charity. In the modern world, however, the threat of shunning is necessary to prevent an Amish community from slowly disintegrating. Without the *Meidung*, members could flout the

Ordnung with impunity. It is not employed casually—only to punish intransigent sinners, and even then only to guide the sinner back to the church. Ideally, it should deter disobedience without the need of using it, and church leaders often go to great lengths to win back errant members. But a single intransigent individual represents a very real threat to the stability of an Amish community. The Amish take very seriously the biblical injunction to avoid intercourse with sinners, lest the righteous too be turned to sin. In the midst of what they consider a world of sin, the Amish must remain isolated or cease to exist.³¹

The heart of the Amish conception of community, however, is not about rules and punishments but rather the idea of *Gelassenheit*, or submission. *Gelassenheit* means meekness, humility, and service to God and to others. It also means non-resistance to evil—turning the other cheek—but it is more than passive avoidance of a sinful world. At its best, the doctrine of *Gelassenheit* is a positive, affirming basis of community. According to Sandra Cronk, the Amish see Christ as a “suffering servant” who saves through his own submission, through the “power of powerlessness.” Love, not might, gave Jesus the power to bring about radical change, and the Amish attempt to follow his example. In Amish society, the most important expression of love is in the ritual of work. Whereas a modern economy functions through an impersonal system of distribution of goods and services, the Amish household economy relies on personal gifts of work. Through hard work, a person shows his or her love and commitment to the family and community. “If a daughter does not make a rug from fabric scraps,” Cronk explains, “the family may have no rug on the floor. If a son does not cut the lumber from family land and make the kitchen cabinet, his mother may have no place to put her dishes.” To reduce work by means of technology and conveniences would be to break down the sharing relationships that are the basis of Amish family life.³²

The oft-depicted barn raising, therefore, is more than a primitive substitute for fire insurance, more than a system by which labor is exchanged for the promise of future assistance; it is the most visible manifestation of a vast network of gifts of work that holds the Amish community together. The Amish, unlike Hutterites or Shakers, do not live communally; they own property as individuals and households. But any Amish person who needs help, because of age, infirmity, death in the family, or natural disaster, is given help—ideally, without keeping tabs on who owes whom a favor. Actions, not words, form the basis of Amish society. Their faith, in this sense, differs from the evangelical doctrine; although the Amish follow Luther’s teaching that man is saved by faith alone, they believe that faith will show in behavior. Conversion is not a single experience but an ongoing, lifelong process of yielding one’s will to God’s and to that of the community.³³

Ironically, it is the emphasis on unanimity and on visible manifestations of faith that creates so many schisms. When a dispute between members of a church becomes great enough and there can be no compromise, one group often splin-

ters off to form a new sect. The complex divisions among Amish and Mennonite affiliations defy easy explanation; even settlements and districts of the same affiliation often differ on minor points of the *Ordnung*. In general, however, there is a continuum of affiliations of Plain people from the “low” (conservative) Old Order Amish to the “higher” Beachy and New Order Amish, the Old Order and still higher Mennonites, and finally mainstream Protestantism. “High” churches are more evangelical and less removed from society at large than low churches, whose members wear plainer dress and are more likely to eschew modern conveniences. The “ladder” of sects serves a useful purpose: when a member of one sect leaves or is excommunicated, he or she will likely join the next church higher up on the ladder. The variety of choices thus presented allows each district to maintain its own integrity. In the Lancaster settlement, nearly all of the Amish belong to the Old Order, with small numbers of Beachy Amish, who use electricity, automobiles, meetinghouses, and tractors but otherwise live, dress, and worship much as the Old Order Amish do. (Those who leave the Old Order most often “go Beachy.”)³⁴ Lancaster County also contains a great diversity of Mennonite churches.

The Old Order Amish are the plainest of the Plain people and therefore are the most noticeable and receive the most attention from outsiders. Plainness, like so much of Amish culture, is a part of *Gelassenheit*; to be showy or to make a prideful display of one’s wealth or abilities would be to elevate oneself above one’s community. Over the centuries, plainness has also become a way of distinguishing members of the Amish church from the world of sin. To outsiders, the most obvious mark of their separation from the world is their clothing, which has not changed greatly since the seventeenth century (even then, it was plainer than the fashions of the day). Coats must close with hooks-and-eyes, not with buttons, and they have no lapels. Men’s hats must have at least a three-and-one-fourth-inch brim; pants fasten with a flap and buttons, not a zipper, and are held up with suspenders. Men wear their hair long (the more conservative the church, the longer the hair) and grow untrimmed beards but not mustaches: the Bible warns men not to “round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard” but does not require mustaches, which are reminiscent of military fashion in early modern Europe. Women wear dresses cut for modesty but not impractically long for housework, with a cape, apron, and bonnet. They do not cut their hair but wear it in buns beneath their bonnets after the commandment of St. Paul. Patterned clothing is forbidden, a prideful and unnecessary luxury, although shirts and dresses are often dyed bright blue, green, red, or purple. No jewelry may be worn, nor frivolous accessories such as neckties. In general, an Amish person must project an appearance of meekness and modesty; the details vary among districts, and the *Ordnung* is often quite specific about what type and style of clothing may be worn.³⁵

But plainness goes far beyond dress. A plain life is a simple one, close to nature. The Amish see the work of God in the soil, in the weather, in plants and animals, in the cycle of life; the city, however, is the work of Man, a place of leisure, waste, and wickedness.³⁶ Hence their use of horses for transportation and farming: to use automobiles and tractors would be unnecessary, wasteful, and a step further removed from God. Whenever possible, Amish people live and work on farms. Given their insistence on traditional methods, Amish farms are to many people surprisingly productive. Centuries of nurturing the soil and a willingness to work long hours at physical labor allow the Amish to remain more than solvent. Large families, often multigenerational, can live comfortably on farms that average (in the rich soil of Lancaster County) about sixty acres. The Amish have been quite successful in remaining farmers, buying for their sons land from non-Amish farmers looking for a more financially rewarding line of work.

The practical problems of remaining solvent as farmers in the late twentieth century have nevertheless forced the Amish to make some compromises with modernity. Population pressure on farmland and plummeting crop prices have meant that Amish farmers have had to adopt some technology to compete for a market share and to pay rising property taxes. Although they still make use of the manure from their livestock, they augment it with chemical fertilizers and pesticides. They use gas-powered machinery in the field, but it must be pulled with horses; they may own tractors, but only for stationary diesel power in the barn. Diesel engines power milking machines and the refrigeration required by dairy health laws. As the Amish population in Lancaster grows and farmland slowly dwindles, many young Amish men are forced to leave farming or to supplement their farm income with other work. Although the Old Order still does not allow factory work, more than 1,500 Amish-owned enterprises have appeared in the last half-century. Amish women, too, often earn extra money by selling quilts, baked goods, pickles, and preserves, often out of their homes—and often to tourists.

The key for the Amish is to adopt necessary or useful technology without adopting the values that come with it. They will, for example, accept rides from neighbors with cars, should the need arise, but they may not own cars themselves, lest they become too reliant on them. An individual who can, anytime he or she wishes, drive hundreds of miles in a day will no longer remain tied tightly to home and community. Similarly, Amish shops may contain telephones for business purposes and farmers may use community phones, but they are forbidden in homes. Telephones are necessary and useful at times, but to rely on them for communication would erode the face-to-face contact vital to maintaining a strong sense of community. To rely too heavily on telephones and automobiles would, moreover, yoke the user to the outside world. The same is true of electricity. To adopt electrical conveniences would make an Amish family dependent on

modern society for its daily activity and would open the door to the influence of television and radio. If community is created through personal contact and gifts of work, technology threatens to isolate individuals from one another and at the same time tie them unacceptably to a sinful world. To remain a separate people in a modern world, the Amish must both survive economically and maintain their cultural integrity.



The Amish conception of community seems, at first look, utterly at odds with some of the most cherished American values. Yet the extreme individualism of American society makes the Amish appear more communitarian than perhaps they really are. The Amish are far from utopian; their worldview is more like that of Hesiod's farmer than that of Vergilian shepherds (or of twentieth-century hippies, for that matter). On the contrary, it is their belief in human corruptibility that has led them to create such tight restrictions on behavior. They live, as they always have, on individual, family-owned farmsteads and produce for their own profit; at the same time, those profits are most often returned to the land or used to buy farms for the next generation. Work is family-centered and only to a lesser extent community-centered; it is also to be valued for its own sake. The individual's relationship with the community might be described in more familiar terms as *neighborliness*—the free gift of what one has clear title to, with the expectation of similar good will in return but with no sense of explicit trade or obligation. Amish beliefs about technology, too, are extreme only when contrasted with those of mainstream American society. The Amish do not eschew technology or the benefits it brings; they adopt it selectively, to maintain a balance between spirituality and economic necessity, between tradition and progress. If they are hardly Jefferson's idealized yeomen, they are nevertheless an exaggerated embodiment of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American ideals of rurality, and the differences between them and their more secular neighbors are far less obvious now than they were at the time.

As recently as the early twentieth century, in fact, the Amish were far from unique. In their attitudes toward agriculture, community, technology, and progress, they had much in common with other American family farmers. Farm families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries responded to change by striving to maintain a balance between individual success and community needs and between modern conveniences and traditional ways of life. Because the good of any individual was linked to the good of the farm and therefore of the family, and because the family was the basic unit of production, personal ties formed the basis of local economies. Individual and community needs must similarly be balanced; though work and cooking often inspired competition, too much competition was showing off and led to censure by neighbors. A neighborly combination

of hospitality and favors was the basis of community. Neighbors did not keep a tally of exchanges or expect favors in return for favors; if a neighbor could help, she was simply expected to do so, and it was equally important that those in need ask for help. Labor, given the relative lack of material goods in traditional farming communities, was the main resource shared among families. This system of mutual assistance met not only the economic needs of farm families but emotional needs as well, building, ideally at least, an attitude of friendly help rather than one of obligation. Rural Americans a century ago thus integrated work and community much as the Amish still do—and not, as might be expected, purely out of necessity. When government, agribusiness, and reformers introduced new agricultural techniques and consumer goods that emphasized individual work and rendered neighboring practices unnecessary, farmers were slow to give up traditional family and community ties. Farm people tried to blend the old and the new, recognizing the practical value of radios and automobiles but also the cultural and spiritual value of communal work and neighboring. They were eager to improve their lives, but not at the cost of rendering their way of life obsolete.³⁷

Just as rural America before the twentieth century was defined by the desire to integrate progress and tradition, ruralites also tried to integrate individual needs with those of the community and productive work with spiritual and cultural needs. This was as true in Lancaster County as elsewhere. Barn raisings were as practical and enjoyable for other farm families as they were for the Amish, as were other occasions for communal work such as threshing, butchering, or making apple butter. Even so simple an occasion as moving day—by tradition the first day of April in Pennsylvania German communities—became an opportunity for people not only to work together but simply to enjoy one another's company and, of course, to eat together. One non-Amish Lancaster Countian, writing in 1906, defined a good neighbor simply as "One we can depend on for help in times of sickness or for help with some extra work and with whom we can dispense with formalities." (Or, as a Pennsylvania Dutch saying joked, "You never have any bother to get people to help you move. If you were a good neighbor, they were always happy to help. If you were a bad neighbor, they help to be rid of you.")³⁸ The Amish underpinned their way of life with a unique religious doctrine, but other Plain sects shared aspects of this as well; the Brethren remained committed to farming as a way of life until the late nineteenth century, and the majority of Lancaster's Mennonites until the middle of the twentieth. The doctrine of nonconfrontation in particular set the Plain sects apart, as it always had. And, of course, Old Order groups enforced their way of life with more stringent rules, customs, and punishments than other Americans ever did. But although other ethnic and religious groups may have been more eager to embrace progress or less thoroughly committed to farming, the majority of Lancaster Countians at the turn of

the twentieth century shared with the Old Order Amish an important core of agrarian ideals.

Into the Twentieth Century

That core of agrarian values meant that decades after the Civil War, Americans—both North and South—could still believe in the possibility of a rural America that successfully integrated agrarian tradition and culture with the fruits of material progress. But by the end of the nineteenth century, the tie between rurality and progress was coming undone. The closing of the frontier, announced by the 1890 census, symbolized the end of an era of expansive growth in which the existence of empty land to the west had guaranteed that rurality meant freedom and opportunity. The United States was urbanizing and industrializing, fed by new waves of immigration and huge concentrations of wealth in northeastern cities. The Republican party that had risen to power on a platform of free labor, free soil, and free men now wielded it by abandoning homesteaders in favor of corporate industry and railroads. When in the 1890s southern and western farmers turned to populism in an attempt to find a new community spirit that would save them from the excesses of economic individualism and from their own isolation, they represented not the vanguard of a new agrarianism but the last gasp of the old. A slim majority of Americans still lived in the country, and would until World War I, but an era was rapidly passing.

An increasingly urban culture brought with it a new perspective on rural America. Increasingly, in fact, ruralites became objects of pity instead of admiration. Urbanites aspiring to sophistication had always looked down on farmers, but now there were enough of them to do some cultural damage. Tourists to northern New England found real farmers to be dirty, dull, and isolated—utterly unsatisfactory compared with the idealized farmers of American myth. Wealthy northerners also invaded Appalachia after the Civil War, but with an eye on profit as well as recreation. Appalachians seemed, to proper Victorians, sadly backward and in desperate need of education and improvement. Women and men from middle- and upper-class backgrounds moved south to help, building schools and “settlements” not unlike those used to Americanize turn-of-the-century immigrants, in which Appalachian children were taught the essentials of mainstream middle-class culture. American fiction, most famously the novels of Sinclair Lewis, began to show the negative side of small-town and rural life, emphasizing its banality and narrow-mindedness. The city had become the home of opportunity; Horatio Alger, not James Fenimore Cooper, portrayed the American spirit of freedom and opportunity.³⁹

Stable rural areas were slower to accept these new ideas, but even they were slowly changing, and there were fewer of them all the time. Parts of rural New

England, long in decline, found their economies supported primarily by tourism.⁴⁰ Where agriculture still flourished, mechanical innovations were changing it—not as rapidly as they would in the twentieth century, to be sure, and farmers could still fit steam-powered threshers into patterns of community work.⁴¹ But these “improvements” were enough to increase production and feed a downward spiral in prices that bankrupted many homesteaders in the 1880s and 1890s. Lancaster County, as usual, was more fortunate than most rural areas; farmers there were only then fully exploiting the possibilities of tobacco fields and stockyards, and intensive dairying still lay on the horizon. Yet Lancaster was not immune from broader changes in economy and culture. By the time of the Civil War, the county’s farms could be subdivided no further and remain profitable; the rural population had, for the time being, reached its peak. The “excess” population headed to the city—to Lancaster, or perhaps to Reading or Philadelphia—for industrial work. The changes especially threatened Pennsylvania Germans, whose slow absorption into the Anglo-American mainstream seemed to reach a crisis stage. Not only were they increasingly drawn to cities for work, but urban culture reached out to them, even through such devices as the mail-order catalogs delivered free to their doors. No one, certainly, was ready to abandon the Garden Spot, but doubts were beginning to creep in about just what the future might hold.

In the midst of this change remained the Amish, clinging stubbornly to their faith and their way of life. As the world around them changed in the early twentieth century, they would become more and more noticeable to outsiders, and their comparatively communal way of life would remind “progressive” Americans of a time now lost, for better or for worse. The ideals they shared with other agrarian communities would be more than sufficient to facilitate their adoption as symbols of America’s past agrarian age—and, by the mid-twentieth century, of the Garden Spot itself. But what would it mean for a people increasingly associated with the past to represent a place that had always prided itself on progress as much as tradition? And though the idea of the Garden Spot remained as strong as ever, if progress meant urbanization, how could Lancaster County remain rural without becoming backward? These questions, both philosophically and practically, would haunt Lancaster County throughout the twentieth century.