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Lacy K. Ford, Jr.
University of South Carolina - Columbia, ford@mailbox.sc.edu

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Yeoman Farmers in the South Carolina Upcountry: Changing Production Patterns in the Late Antebellum Era

LACY K. FORD

No shortcoming plagued post-World War II southern historiography as long or with such debilitating effect as the failure of historians to pursue the issues raised by Frank Owsley and his students in their pioneering studies of the southern yeomanry published some four decades ago. Certainly few scholars working in the 1940s could have foreseen that the controversy over the position of the yeoman farmer in antebellum southern society sparked by Fabian Linden's pointed critique of Owsley's preliminary findings would soon be relegated to the status of cursory, obligatory footnote. Arguably, this Owsley-Linden citation has emerged as the most familiar, and the most predictable, note in all southern historical writing. Since 1946, few historians of the Old South have failed to mention, however briefly, Owsley's quantitative "discovery" of the region's white majority, those small and middling farmers who owned land but held only a few, if any, slaves. Against this reference to Owsley's findings, scholars usually juxtaposed Fabian Linden's charge that Owsley overlooked landless whites and ignored the heavy concentration of southern wealth in the hands of the planter elite.¹ Having duly

LACY K. FORD is Assistant Professor of History, University of South Carolina.

1. Frank L. Owsley and Harriet C. Owsley, "The Economic Basis of Society in the Late Antebellum South," *Journal of Southern History* 6 (February 1940): 24-45; Fabian Linden,

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noted the existence of the yeomanry and the disagreement over its role in shaping southern society, most historians then moved quickly on to questions they considered more pressing, or at least more fully documented. Neglect of the South's common whites might have been less striking had the years after World War II not proved so fecund with new ideas and interpretations regarding other aspects of antebellum southern society. Indeed, when Ira Berlin surveyed the literature in 1977, he rightly claimed that knowledge of the southern plantation system "from the big house to the slave quarter" had increased enormously while the study of yeoman farmers languished.²

In the brief period since Berlin's lament, much evidence has appeared suggesting that the long era of yeoman neglect may finally be over. A spate of articles, dissertations, and even books on southern yeomen has revived scholarly interest in the South's white majority.³ Foremost among these recent studies of southern yeomen is Steven Hahn's pathbreaking account of yeoman farm-

"Economic Democracy in the Slave South: An Appraisal of Some Recent Views," *Journal of Negro History* 32 (April 1946): 140-89. For the complete work of Owsley and his students, see Frank L. Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949); Herbert Weaver, *Mississippi Farmers, 1850-1860* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1945); Blanche H. Clark, *The Tennessee Yeomen, 1840-1860* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1945).

2. Ira Berlin, "White Majority: A Review Essay," *Social History* 5 (May 1977): 653-60. Historians of widely varying perspectives have recently noted the long neglect of the yeomen that followed Linden's criticism. See Steven H. Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), esp. pp. 1-11; Grady McWhiney, "Historians as Southerners," *Continuity* 9 (Fall 1984):1-32; James Oakes, "The Politics of Economic Development in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 15 (Autumn 1984):305-16.

3. For a sampling of this work, see, in addition to Hahn's *Roots of Southern Populism*, Randolph B. Campbell, *A Southern Community in Crisis: Harrison County, Texas, 1850-1890* (Austin: Texas Historical Association, 1983); J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta's Hinterlands* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1985); Arthur C. Menius III, "James Bennitt: Portrait of an Antebellum Yeoman," *North Carolina Historical Review* 58 (Autumn 1981):305-26; John T. Schlotterbeck, "The 'Social Economy' of an Upper South Community: Orange and Greene Counties, Virginia, 1815-1860," in Orville V. Burton and Robert C. McMath, eds., *Class, Conflict, and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), 3-28; John Solomon Otto, "Slaveholding General Farmers in a 'Cotton' County," *Agricultural History* 55 (April 1981):167-78; David F. Weiman, "Petty Commodity Production in the Cotton South: Upcountry Farmers in the Georgia Cotton Economy, 1840-1880" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1984); Lucy K. Ford, "Social Origins of a New South Carolina: The Upcountry in the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., University of South Carolina, 1983).

ers in Georgia's upper Piedmont. In Hahn's thoroughly researched study, yeomen in upcountry Georgia emerge as independent, self-reliant farmers who practiced "safety-first" agriculture, making self-sufficiency their top economic priority and engaging in production for the market only after a safe proportion of their resources had been allocated to subsistence crops. What upcountry yeomen could not grow or make on their own they acquired through trade with their neighbors or with merchants and artisans in small market towns scattered throughout the region. As a result of the yeoman farmer's emphasis on self-sufficiency and the overwhelmingly local nature of yeoman exchange, these yeomen-dominated hill-country communities remained largely isolated from the booms and busts of the larger national and international market economy.⁴

In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, and especially after the Civil War, the seemingly inexorable expansion of the market economy—an expansion propelled locally by the entrepreneurial drive of large landholders and credit-brandishing merchants—pushed these independent yeomen into deeper commercial involvement. As yeoman farmers were drawn reluctantly into the vortex of the cotton economy, often at the expense of their self-sufficiency, periodic fits of resistance to market expansion erupted in the countryside. At first these stirrings of protest, such as vigorous yeoman opposition to the closing of the open range, remained uncoordinated, but they eventually coalesced into the full-scale agrarian revolt of the 1890s. Highlighted by the emergence of the Populist party as a potent force in Georgia politics, this crusade drew heavily on the yeoman farmer's antebellum ideological heritage—the Jacksonian creed of personal independence—in an effort to defend the independent producer from the depredations of capitalist expansion.⁵ Other recent studies of southern yeomen differ from Hahn's account on certain particulars, but, taken as a whole, they also de-

4. Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism*, especially pp. 15–85.

5. Steven H. Hahn, "Common Right and Commonwealth: The Stock Law Struggle and the Roots of Southern Populism," in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 51–88; Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism*, pp. 137–289.

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scribe an increasingly embattled yeomanry struggling valiantly but vainly to preserve their status in a world where the assets of the capitalist and the skills of the entrepreneur were more richly rewarded than the toil of petty producers and wage-laborers.⁶

Thus recent scholarship has finally rescued southern yeoman farmers from historiographical obscurity. Yet, like all good scholarship, these studies have raised interesting new questions. The relations of yeoman farmers to the marketplace and to the South's staple-oriented slave economy, and especially possible changes in these relations over time, require further elaboration. Moreover, comparative studies of yeomen in the different subregions of the South remain a compelling need. In varying proportions, yeoman farmers populated black-belt, pine barrens, wiregrass, and alpine regions as well as hill-country areas like that studied by Hahn. Additionally, yeomen living in rice and sugar areas, where capital requirements and economies of scale effectively limited staple production to large farms, probably faced problems that were quite different from those encountered by yeomen who lived on the margins or in the interstices of the cotton and tobacco economies, where staple production on small farms was economically feasible. In sum, the Old South contained not simply one monolithic yeomanry but many yeomanries whose differences and similarities historians are just beginning to fathom.⁷

6. David F. Wieman, "The Economic Emancipation of the Non-slaveholding Class: Upcountry Farmers in the Georgia Cotton Economy," *Journal of Economic History* 45 (March 1985):71-94; Lacy K. Ford, "Rednecks and Merchants: Economic Development and Social Tensions in the South Carolina Upcountry, 1865-1900," *Journal of American History* 71 (September 1984):294-318.

7. For examples, see William Barney, "Towards the Civil War: The Dynamics of Change in a Black-Belt Country," in Burton and McMath, eds., *Class, Conflict, and Consensus*, 146-172; Mark D. Schmitz, "Farm Interdependence in the Antebellum Sugar Sector," *Agricultural History* 52 (January 1978):93-103; John C. Inscoe, "Mountain Masters: Slaveholding in Western North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* 61 (April 1984):143-73; Steven H. Hahn, "The Yeomanry in the Non-Plantation South: Upper Piedmont Georgia, 1850-1860," in Burton and McMath, eds., *Class, Conflict, and Consensus*, 29-56. For a provocative but controversial overview, see Eugene D. Genovese, "Yeoman Farmers in a Slaveholders' Democracy," in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 249-64. On differences between cotton, tobacco, and rice regions in a later era, see Pete Daniel, "The Crossroads of Change: Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice in the Twentieth Century South," *Journal of Southern History* 50 (August 1984):429-56.

This paper attempts to make a modest contribution to the comparative study of yeoman farmers in black-belt and hill-country settings by examining the changing production patterns of antebellum yeomen in the South Carolina Upcountry, a thirteen-district area lying north and west of the state's fall line. At first glance it might seem unlikely that the study of yeomen in such a small area could offer a comparative perspective, but upon closer inspection the South Carolina Upcountry emerges as an entirely appropriate place for comparative study, since the region contained both the black-majority plantation areas of the lower Piedmont and the white-majority, small-farm areas of the upper Piedmont. The quantitative portion of this analysis will focus on two neighboring up-country districts, Abbeville and Anderson. These districts lie along the Savannah River northwest of Augusta, hard against the Georgia border. Abbeville District, flanked by the Savannah on one side and the Saluda River on the other and situated in the very heart of the South's broad lower Piedmont, became one of the first districts in the region to specialize in short-staple cotton. Throughout Abbeville, and especially along the Savannah and near the banks of the Little River, one of the Savannah's major tributaries, energetic planters such as William "Cotton Billy" Calhoun (older brother of John C. Calhoun) and George McDuffie made some of the South's first great cotton fortunes in the early decades of the nineteenth century. By 1840 more than 12 percent of Abbeville's white families owned at least twenty slaves and blacks outnumbered whites in the district. In the same year, Abbeville's farmers produced more than 20,000 bales of cotton. By contrast, Anderson District, located between the Blue Ridge foothills and the Savannah River to the northwest of Abbeville, remained dominated by small farms throughout the antebellum era. Anderson possessed some excellent cotton lands along the Savannah, Seneca, and Saluda rivers, and by 1840 more than 5,000 bales of cotton were grown in the district. For the most part, however, Anderson's rolling red hills were better suited for small farms than for plantation agriculture. Like the rest of South Carolina's upper Piedmont, Anderson retained its white majority and remained substantially less specialized in cotton than neighboring black majority districts in the lower Piedmont. By the middle of the nineteenth century, South Caro-

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lina's lower Piedmont was as specialized in cotton as the richest plantation districts of the Alabama black belt, and nearly as specialized as sections of the Mississippi Delta, while the upper Piedmont remained on the fringe of the cotton economy—involved but not yet heavily specialized in cotton production.⁸

Prior to the emergence of short-staple cotton as a viable cash crop, the entire Upcountry, including both upper and lower Piedmont, had been mired in hard times. In the 1790s, most Upcountry households concentrated on subsistence production and held little hope of achieving modest comfort, much less riches. Even the larger landholders, most of whom had already acquired a few slaves, floundered as their efforts to raise tobacco and produce indigo brought more debt than profits.⁹ "The whole interior was languishing," South Carolina jurist William Johnson noted, "for want of some object to engage their attention and employ their industry." With the onset of the cotton boom of the early 1800s, the Upcountry economy came to life. "Individuals who were depressed in poverty and sunk in idleness have suddenly risen to wealth and respectability," Judge Johnson explained, "Our debts have been paid off, our capital increased, and our lands trebled in value."¹⁰ Such claims were far from mere hyperbole or idle boosterism. As the cotton revolution swept through Abbeville, the percentage of households owning slaves rose from 33 percent in

8. Robert Mills, *Statistics of South Carolina* (Charleston, S.C.: Hurlbut and Lloyd, 1826), 348–365, and 671–692; Edwin L. Green, *George McDuffie* (Columbia, S.C.: The State Company, 1936); Ford, "Social Origins of a New South Carolina," 1–59; H. H. Townes to George F. Townes, 14 June 1833, Townes Family Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina. For purposes of this paper, I have defined yeoman farmers as all those farmers who owned no more than five slaves. Admittedly, this definition is somewhat arbitrary, but it is one that includes the bulk of family farmers in the Upcountry. Some scholars object to classifying any slaveholding farmers as yeomen. I feel that for practical purposes those farmers who owned only a few slaves operated on a scale not very different from that of the nonslaveholder. In particular, the farmer himself continues to work in the field with his family and slaves and had not moved into a supervisory capacity as overseer of a slave work gang. Whenever necessary I have distinguished nonslaveholders from small slaveholders.

9. Marjorie S. Mendenhall, "A History of Agriculture in South Carolina, 1790–1860" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1940), 93–132.

10. *The Federal Cases, Comprising Cases Argued and Determined in the Circuit and District Courts of the United States* (St. Paul, Minn., 1894–97), vol. 29, 1072. See also, Donald G. Morgan, *Justice William Johnson: The First Dissenter* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1954), esp. 93–109.

1800 to 47 percent in 1820. Moreover, the absolute number of slaveholders in the district rose from 603 in 1800 to 1148 by 1820. Doubtless those farmers who had acquired slaves before 1800, or who were otherwise well-positioned to take advantage of the cotton boom, profited handsomely. The number of planters in Abbeville tripled between 1800 and 1820, increasing from 33 to 107 in just twenty years. But the number of small slaveholders, those household heads owning five or fewer slaves, also doubled during the same period, increasing from 310 in 1800 to 629 in 1820. The early expansion of cotton culture into the South Carolina interior had a decidedly less dramatic impact on the upper Piedmont. Prior to 1827 the territory that became Anderson District was a part of Pendleton, a large district occupying the northwestern corner of the state. In Pendleton District, the percentage of households owning slaves rose by less than 3 percent, from 19.4 to 22.3 percent, between 1800 and 1820. In the latter year, only thirty-three families, less than 1 percent of all households, owned twenty or more slaves. Of the 833 slaveholders in Pendleton in 1820, 244 owned only one slave and 560 owned no more than five. Still, Pendleton had nearly 250 more slaveholders in 1820 than in 1800. Certainly, the first cotton boom generated great fortunes for backcountry planters, but throughout the Upcountry, and especially in the lower Piedmont, the boom also made it possible for hundreds and even thousands of farmers to become slaveholders.¹¹

As the cotton frontier moved westward, and the once-rich backcountry soils were depleted by cotton profiteers, the Upcountry economy entered a period of relative decline. The long agricultural depression that followed the Panic of 1837 hit the Upcountry particularly hard. Yet Upcountry farmers continued to

11. On the spread of short staple cotton through the South Carolina interior, see Rachel Klein, "The Rise of the Planters in the South Carolina Backcountry, 1765–1808" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1979), especially pp. 275–310; Lacy K. Ford, "Self-Sufficiency, Cotton, and Economic Development in the South Carolina Upcountry, 1800–1860," *Journal of Economic History* 45 (June 1985):261–67. The figures on slaveholders were calculated directly from the Manuscript Census schedules for South Carolina for 1800 and 1820. These schedules are available on microfilm at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History (hereinafter SCDAH) in Columbia, S.C.

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rely heavily on cotton despite the incessant pleadings of agricultural reform leaders.¹² Thus, by the late 1840s, the Upcountry's position in the world cotton economy seemed well established, though somewhat less advantageous than it had been several decades earlier. Among yeoman farmers, the familiar pattern of "safety-first" agriculture predominated in the upper Piedmont. In Anderson, where 86 percent of all farm operators in 1850 were yeomen, common agricultural practice called for first striving to achieve self-sufficiency while production of a surplus for market remained a secondary consideration. A substantial majority of Anderson's yeomen, nearly 70 percent, participated in the cotton economy (by growing at least one bale of cotton during 1849), but these cotton-growing yeomen raised relatively small amounts of cotton, and a large majority of yeomen, more than 70 percent, remained self-sufficient in grain. On the average, Anderson's yeomen produced just over two bales of cotton and just under 400 bushels of corn per farm. Interestingly, nonslaveholding farmers in Anderson raised almost as much cotton as did small slaveholders (farmers with five or fewer slaves), although nonslaveholders raised only about three-fourths as much grain. Thus only about one-fifth of all small slaveholders failed to achieve self-sufficiency while nearly one-third of nonslaveholders failed to produce a basic subsistence. This one-third of slaveless farmers who were not self-sufficient were for the most part simply the poorest of all upcountry farmers. These hardscrabble farmers, working plots of forty acres or less, failed to achieve self-sufficiency because they could not rather than did not want to, and their hard lot reveals just how difficult survival was for some families in the southern backcountry.¹³

12. Alfred G. Smith, *Economic Readjustment of an Old Cotton State: South Carolina, 1820-1860* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1958), pp. 19-111; Marjorie Mendenhall, "A History of Agriculture in South Carolina," 166-227; Drew G. Faust, "The Rhetoric and Ritual of Agriculture in Antebellum South Carolina," *Journal of Southern History* 45 (November 1979):541-68.

13. A clear, concise explanation of "safety-first" agriculture is found in Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 55-74. Quantitative analysis discussed herein is based on samples taken from the Manuscript Census returns for Abbeville and Anderson Districts, South Carolina, for 1850 and 1860. Since the essay examines agricultural production patterns, the sample was compiled by identifying farm operators on the Agricultural Schedule and then tracing those farm operators back to the Population and Slave Schedules to garner

In the lower Piedmont a somewhat different production pattern prevailed. Nearly 90 percent of all Abbeville yeomen, including 89 percent of all nonslaveholders, grew cotton, and the average cotton output on small farms in Abbeville was nearly double that for Anderson. Slaveless farmers in Abbeville grew more than 40 percent more cotton per farm than did their counterparts in Anderson, raising over 1,300 pounds of cotton each. Small slaveholders in Abbeville outstripped slaveholding yeomen in Anderson in cotton production by an even wider margin. Abbeville's small slaveholders produced more than six bales (over 2,400 pounds) of cotton per farm, over two and one-half times as much the comparable group in Anderson. Moreover, Abbeville yeomen produced far more cotton (on a per farm basis) than Anderson yeomen despite their working slightly smaller farms. In Abbeville, both slaveless farms and farms with five or fewer slaves were on the average ten to twenty acres smaller than their counterparts in Anderson.¹⁴

Clearly, Abbeville yeomen were much more deeply involved in the cotton economy than Anderson yeomen, despite the fact that most yeomen farmers in Abbeville possessed fewer agricultural resources. At least partially as a result of their concentration on cotton, yeoman farmers in Abbeville produced less than two-thirds as much corn per farm as yeomen in Anderson. Thus food deficits were far more common in Abbeville. Only slightly more than half of all slaveless farmers there were self-sufficient in foodstuffs. Small slaveholders in Abbeville fared somewhat better than nonslaveholders, with 68 percent achieving self-sufficiency

further information. As a result of this process, townspeople, as well as farm laborers and other rural people who were not farm operators, do not appear. In the Upcountry as a whole, about 75 percent of household heads identified themselves as farmers in 1850. (See Ford, "Social Origins of a New South Carolina," p. 39.) A systematic rather than a random sample was taken and each was designed to include at least 250 farms. Sample sizes were as follows:

<i>District</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Anderson	1850	288	1 of 7
Anderson	1860	269	1 of 6
Abbeville	1850	267	1 of 7
Abbeville	1860	298	1 of 5

See table 1.

14. See tables 1 and 2.

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Table 1. Production and Value in Anderson District

	1850	
	<i>Nonslaveholders</i>	<i>Small slaveholders</i>
Cotton (lbs.)	907.8	928.8
Corn (bushels)	335.2	456.9
Improved acres	67.4	87.6
Cash value of farms	\$1159.9	\$1303.4
Swine	17.3	20.8
Cotton-Corn ratio	2.7	2.0
% Growing cotton	66.3	78.7
% Self-sufficient	68.5	79.0

	1860	
	<i>Nonslaveholders</i>	<i>Small slaveholders</i>
Cotton (lbs.)	954.1	1018.2
Corn (bushels)	256.9	306.2
Improved acres	57.4	62.6
Cash value of farms	\$1449.4	\$1988.8
Swine	10.9	14.4
Cotton-Corn ratio	3.7	3.3
% Growing cotton	80.3	80.3
% Self-sufficient	60.0	65.2

Source: Sample of Manuscript Census for 1850 and 1860. Cotton-corn ratio calculated by dividing pounds of cotton by bushels of corn. Self-sufficiency calculations based on test devised by Robert Gallman.

in grain, but in Anderson nearly 80 percent of all small slaveholders were self-sufficient. On the whole, yeoman farmers in Abbeville concentrated more heavily on staple production than their Anderson counterparts, while the record of Abbeville yeomen in subsistence production was decidedly mixed.¹⁵ As a result, yeoman farmers in Abbeville were far less likely to achieve self-sufficiency than were yeomen in the upper Piedmont.

15. See tables 1 and 2.

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Table 2. Production and Value in Abbeville District

	<i>1850</i>	
	<i>Nonslaveholders</i>	<i>Small slaveholders</i>
Cotton (lbs.)	1308.0	2424.0
Corn (bushels)	197.2	321.7
Improved acres	41.1	60.9
Cash value of farms	\$880.2	\$1607.9
Swine	16.3	35.9
Cotton-Corn ratio	6.6	7.5
% Growing cotton	88.7	90.0
% Self-sufficient	51.5	68.0

	<i>1860</i>	
	<i>Nonslaveholders</i>	<i>Small slaveholders</i>
Cotton (lbs.)	1343.9	2945.9
Corn (bushels)	124.0	230.5
Improved acres	56.7	79.3
Cash value of farms	\$1463.5	\$2239.7
Swine	9.1	17.8
Cotton-Corn ratio	10.8	12.8
% Growing cotton	87.0	94.1
% Self-sufficient	21.0	47.1

Source: Same as Table 1.

Nor did the contrast between upper Piedmont yeomen and lower Piedmont yeomen end with their differing degrees of market orientation. Yeomen in the upper Piedmont controlled a far larger share of their area's wealth, grew a larger share of its agricultural output, and owned a greater percentage of its livestock than did small farmers in the lower Piedmont. In 1850, yeoman farmers in Anderson owned 70 percent of the improved farm land, raised four-fifths of the cotton and two-thirds of the corn, and owned more than 70 percent of the hogs in the district. In fact, Anderson yeomen controlled nearly 70 percent of the district's agricultural

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Table 3. Distribution of Population and Wealth—1850

	<i>Anderson</i>	
	<i>Share of Nonslaveholders</i>	<i>Share of Small Slaveholders</i>
Cotton	59.2%	19.6%
Corn	52.5	16.9
Improved acres	52.2	20.4
Swine	53.8	19.6
Cash value of farms	45.7	23.9
Total no. of farms	63.9	22.2

	<i>Abbeville</i>	
	<i>Share of Nonslaveholders</i>	<i>Share of Small Slaveholders</i>
Cotton	7.3%	7.2%
Corn	10.6	10.9
Improved acres	12.1	9.3
Swine	24.4	18.0
Cash value of farms	6.4	9.5
Total no. of farms	36.3	18.7

Source: Sample of *Manuscript Census of 1850*.

wealth, as nonslaveholders alone controlled over 45 percent of Anderson's total farm wealth.¹⁶ In the plantation-based economy of the lower Piedmont, however, yeoman farmers possessed a much smaller share of the wealth. In Abbeville in 1850, yeoman farmers operated 55 percent of all farms in the district but controlled only 16 percent of its agricultural wealth. Abbeville planters, on the other hand, owned nearly 60 percent of the district's farm wealth although less than one out of five farm operators was a planter. Not surprisingly, planters also dominated agricultural production, growing at least half of all cotton and corn

16. See table 3.

raised in the district, while yeoman farmers produced only about 15 percent of Abbeville's cotton and 22 percent of its corn. Yet even though yeomen in Anderson controlled a much larger share of their district's wealth than Abbeville yeomen, they simply owned a larger piece of a smaller pie. Total farm wealth in Anderson, which ranked in the bottom one-third of all South Carolina districts in per capita wealth, was less than 40 percent of total farm wealth in Abbeville, which ranked in the top one-third of all districts in per capita wealth. In fact, the average wealth (as measured by the cash value of farms) of yeoman farmers in Anderson and Abbeville was roughly equal. Non-slaveholders in Anderson were slightly better off than non-slaveholders in Abbeville, but small slaveholders in Abbeville were slightly better off than small slaveholders in Anderson.¹⁷

Thus in 1850 yeomen in the lower Piedmont displayed a stronger market orientation than upper Piedmont yeomen and were either less able or less anxious to achieve self-sufficiency in foodstuffs than were their hill-country counterparts. Lower Piedmont yeomen stood a much better chance of reaping a quick cash bonanza than did their upper Piedmont counterparts, but they were also at least somewhat more dependent on the market for basic needs and seemingly more vulnerable to the cyclical booms and busts of the larger market economy. Upper Piedmont yeomen, or at least the majority of them, participated in the market economy, but theirs was a limited, and very carefully leveraged, involvement. The ethic of self-sufficiency, and the widespread practice of "safety-first" agriculture, protected upper Piedmont yeomen from some of the vicissitudes of the market economy while allowing them to share modestly in its benefits. Operating on the geographic fringe of the cotton economy, yeomen farmers in the upper Piedmont dominated the local economies of their region and preserved their independence through a measured market involvement. Yet whether on the fringe of the cotton economy as in Anderson or thoroughly surrounded and largely enmeshed by it as in Abbeville, Upcountry yeomen enjoyed, or endured, roughly the same standard of material well-being.

17. See table 3.

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But perhaps more important, the yeoman's position in Upcountry society in 1850 was not a stable one. Beginning in the late 1840s, as cotton gradually rebounded from its long slump and headed toward the sustained, if occasionally interrupted, boom of the 1850s, and continuing right up through the secession crisis of 1860, a major commercial expansion gradually transformed the upcountry economy. Although fueled by the profits from the last antebellum cotton boom, this dramatic commercial quickening was largely generated by the development of railroads in the Upcountry. Prior to 1848, not a single mile of railroad track in South Carolina lay north of the fall line, but by 1860 six railroad companies, using more than 400 miles of track, served every district in the Upcountry except Lancaster. Built at a cost of nearly \$10 million, and financed largely by investments from local planters and state subsidies, this Upcountry railroad network both broadened the scope and quickened the pace of market activity in the region.¹⁸ Banks and banking agencies, representing a capital investment of nearly \$1 million, appeared in the Upcountry for the first time.¹⁹ Towns along the railroad lines doubled, tripled, and quadrupled in size, while major new trading centers sprang up as the railroads were built in previously undeveloped areas. During just one six-year period the value of goods sold in the Upcountry increased by nearly 50 percent, from \$2,717,777 in 1853 to \$4,020,000 in 1859. In the upper Piedmont, where the arrival of the railroads ended generations of isolation, the volume of commerce in local towns doubled during the same period.²⁰

Moreover, the railroad expansion of the 1850s created qualitative as well as quantitative changes in the Upcountry economy. For the first time, large quantities of cotton were bought and sold in Upcountry towns. Almost immediately, the cotton trade became the most lucrative, though also the most risky, line of busi-

18. Ford, "Social Origins of a New South Carolina," 273–306.

19. J. Mauldin Lesesne, *The Bank of the State of South Carolina: A General and Political History* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), 117–52; Washington A. Clark, *The History of Banking Institutions Organized in South Carolina* (Columbia, S.C.: The State Company, 1922), 160–214.

20. Ford, "Social Origins of a New South Carolina," pp. 309–10. At the end of October 1852, South Carolina began collecting a sales tax of 15 cents per \$100 of goods sold. These tax returns provide evidence for the value of goods sold in the state for each year thereafter.

ness in the region. Again, this new form of commerce was most attractive in upper Piedmont towns where little cotton had been traded before the railroads. The mercantile firm of "Pitner and England" from Athens, Georgia, dispatched one of its most promising clerks, Sylvester Bleckley, to open a branch in the town of Anderson. By 1860, "England, Bleckley and Co." had become one of Anderson's leading firms and Bleckley its leading cotton buyer. The new cotton trade also attracted more than its share of reckless speculators.²¹ Anderson druggist Isham Taylor alarmed his friends with his speculation in cotton, and J. J. Brown, son of prominent merchant Daniel Brown, developed a dubious reputation as a "regular helter-skelter cotton buyer." "J. J.," one observer noted with alarm, "pays high for cotton, is very excitable, and gets drunk."²²

The countryside also felt the impact of the Upcountry commercial transformation as market orientation increased in almost all areas during the 1850s. By 1853, when the Greenville and Columbia Railroad, which wound its way for more than 150 miles from Columbia through the upper Savannah River valley to the far upcountry trading center of Greenville, was completed, both Abbeville and Anderson districts enjoyed rail connections with fall-line markets and the port of Charleston.²³ Together with higher cotton prices, these transportation improvements encouraged the area's yeoman farmers, as well as middling slaveholders and planters, to specialize more heavily in cotton. Overall, the expansion of cotton production among upcountry yeomen was modest but significant. In the upper Piedmont, slaveless farmers produced about 5 percent more cotton per farm in 1859, a poor crop year in the region, than they had in the more normal crop year of 1849. Small slaveholders in the upper Piedmont produced nearly 10 percent more cotton in the "off-year" of 1859 than they had

21. R. G. Dun and Company Collection, South Carolina, vol. 2, 58 and 72F, Baker Library, Harvard School of Business Administration; David L. Carlton, "The 'Town People' of Anderson, South Carolina: A Case Study in Modernization" (paper presented at the annual convention of the American Historical Association, December 1980).

22. R.G. Dun and Company Collection, South Carolina, vol. 2, 58, 68, 70, 72D, 72G, Baker Library, Harvard School of Business Administration.

23. *Proceedings of the Annual Stockholders Meeting of the Greenville and Columbia Railroad*, 11 July 1855; Thomas H. Pope, *The History of Newberry County, South Carolina, 1790-1860* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1973), 40-146.

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under better growing conditions a decade earlier. Also, more than 80 percent of all nonslaveholding farmers in Anderson raised cotton in 1859, a noteworthy increase over the two-thirds who raised cotton in 1849. The level of specialization in cotton also increased for both nonslaveholders (by 38 percent) and small slaveholders (by 65 percent) in Anderson during the 1850s.²⁴ In the lower Piedmont, where nearly all yeoman farmers raised at least some cotton as early as the late 1840s, the percentage of small farmers involved in the cotton economy increased only slightly as a result of railroad development, but their concentration on cotton at the expense of other crops increased dramatically. Small slaveholders in particular raised substantially more cotton in 1859 than in 1849, increasing their average output by more than 500 pounds, or about 22 percent.²⁵

Perhaps more noteworthy than the increase in cotton production among yeoman farmers was their corresponding decline in self-sufficiency. In 1859, average corn output in Anderson fell nearly 25 percent below 1849 levels among nonslaveholders, while the corresponding decline among small slaveholders was even more pronounced, reaching nearly 33 percent. As a result, nearly 40 percent of all nonslaveholders (up from 31.4 percent in 1849) failed to achieve self-sufficiency in 1859, and the percentage of small slaveholders failing to meet basic subsistence needs rose to more than 34 percent (from only 21.3 percent in 1849). In Abbeville, where self-sufficiency had been far less pervasive even before the market expansion of the 1850s, the trend away from self-sufficiency was equally clear. In 1859, slaveless farmers there grew nearly 38 percent less corn per farm than they had in 1849, and small slaveholders grew about 29 percent less than they had a decade earlier. Among Abbeville yeomen in 1859, self-sufficiency in foodstuffs had become the exception rather than the rule. In that year, more than half of all small slaveholders failed to produce enough grain to meet their basic subsistence requirements.²⁶

24. See tables 1 and 2.

25. See tables 1 and 2.

26. See tables 1 and 2. Also, outmigration of population from the Upcountry continued during the 1850s. The number of farms in Abbeville decreased from 1814 in 1850 to 1452 in 1860, a decline of 20 percent. In Anderson, the number of farms decreased from 1,986 in 1850 to 1,655 in 1860, a decline of nearly 17 percent. The published census reports regarding the

Across the Upcountry, crop yields were below average in 1859, not just in cotton but also in corn and wheat.²⁷ Part of the decline in self-sufficiency might be attributed to one-time crop shortfalls. But one-time crop shortages cannot account for the dramatic decline in pork production in the Upcountry during the 1850s, since swine herds fed largely off the open range. In the upper Piedmont, the average size of a nonslaveholder's swine herd fell from 17.3 in 1849 to 10.9 in 1859, while the average small slaveholder's herd shrank from 20.8 to 14.4 during the same decade. The size of the hog population in the lower Piedmont also decreased rapidly during the 1850s. On the average, slaveless farmers in Abbeville owned 16.3 hogs each in 1849 but only 9.1 in 1859, and small slaveholders saw their herd size shrink from 25.9 to 17.8 during the decade.²⁸ Moreover, the very concept of "safety-first" agriculture rests on the experienced farmer's ability to estimate how much acreage he must allot to subsistence crops in order to achieve self-sufficiency even when his crop yields fall well below par.²⁹ The farmer, if he possibly can, must allow an ample "margin of safety;" he must base his calculations on worst-case scenarios. The kind of sub-par, or below average, yields that occurred in 1859 were common enough, and Upcountry farmers were well aware of such possibilities. That cotton production was spreading and specialization increasing demonstrates that most yeomen *could* have allocated more resources to subsistence crops if they had felt it necessary. Instead, more and more upcountry yeomen were becoming dependent on the marketplace for corn and pork.

number of farm operators in the Upcountry are inaccurate. The figures used herein were tabulated directly from the manuscript census schedules. In 1860 yeoman farmers in both Abbeville and Anderson controlled a substantially smaller share of wealth and agricultural output than they had a decade earlier. Yeomen were wealthier in 1860 than in 1850, but they comprised a smaller percentage of all farm operators. See table 4.

27. For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Donald F. Schaefer, "The Effect of the 1859 Crop Year Upon Relative Productivity in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Economic History* 43 (December 1983): 851–65. Schaefer points out that even though the 1859 crop year produced a bumper crop of cotton in the South as a whole, it was actually a bad year for cotton in the South Atlantic Region. My examination of the Manuscript Census of Social Statistics for both 1850 and 1860 confirmed Schaefer's findings as applicable to the South Carolina Upcountry.

28. See tables 1 and 2.

29. Wright, *Political Economy of the Cotton South*, 164–76.

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Table 4. Distribution of Population and Wealth—1860

	<i>Anderson</i>	
	<i>Share of Nonslaveholders</i>	<i>Share of Small Slaveholders</i>
Cotton	32.9%	17.6%
Corn	33.2	19.8
Improved acres	29.5	12.1
Swine	31.9	21.3
Cash value of farms	18.8	23.5
Total no. of farms	49.0	24.5

	<i>Abbeville</i>	
	<i>Share of Nonslaveholders</i>	<i>Share of Small Slaveholders</i>
Cotton	4.7%	6.9%
Corn	6.3	8.0
Improved acres	5.3	6.7
Swine	8.7	11.6
Cash value of farms	5.3	7.9
Total no. of farms	25.2	17.1

Source: Sample of Manuscript Census of 1860.

Ironically, however, the coming of the railroads, which encouraged market involvement among yeomen, also diminished the small farmer's vulnerability to subsistence crop shortages. Prior to the 1850s, when an upcountry farmer failed to achieve self-sufficiency because of poor crops, it was highly probable that most of his neighbors faced similar shortfalls. A shortage of corn was likely to be a general neighborhood shortage, and market corn fetched a high price because it had to be imported from outside the region over a poor transportation network. Before the existence of railroad connections to outside markets, the price of corn in the local market was highly dependent on the local supply. One farmer's failure to achieve self-sufficiency, if

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Table 5. Slaves and Farms in the South Carolina Upcountry, 1850–1860

	<i>Percentage of Farms By Slaveholdings</i>				
	<i>0</i>	<i>1–5</i>	<i>6–9</i>	<i>10–19</i>	<i>20 and over</i>
<i>1850</i>					
Abbeville	36.3	18.7	13.9	13.5	17.6
Anderson	63.9	22.2	6.6	5.9	2.4
<i>1860</i>					
Abbeville	25.2	17.1	12.4	19.5	23.5
Anderson	49.0	24.5	10.0	11.2	5.2

Source: Sample of *Manuscript Census for 1850 and 1860*.

repeated by his neighbors, as it probably would be during a general drought, promised to prove very expensive indeed. By the 1850s, when it was reasonably easy to import food, if needed, over the new Upcountry railroad network, wild fluctuations in local food prices were less likely since local prices no longer depended so heavily on local supply. Once the range of market prices for corn and other foodstuffs became more predictable, small farmers could afford to operate with a smaller “margin-of-safety” in food production because they knew that local shortages did not necessarily mean a dramatic rise in local prices. “By the aid of our railroad,” Laurens yeoman J. J. Atwood explained to his brothers in Alabama in 1852, “we can get as much corn as we want. . . . Everything else is plenty and cheap enough.”³⁰

Thus the significant increase in cotton specialization did not mean that upcountry yeomen had surrendered their traditional notions of independence, even if the drift away from self-sufficiency was at least partially due to the yeoman farmer’s own

30. J. J. Atwood to Joseph H. and Menoah Atwood, 4 April 1852, reprinted in the *Laurens Advertiser*, 10 June 1970. Atwood was referring to the Laurens Railroad, a thirty-two mile spur line which originated in Laurensville and connected with the Greenville and Columbia Railroad near Newberry.

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changing calculations. Still, these trends do provide ample evidence that the world of the yeoman was in flux. Not only did he raise less food and a larger market surplus, but, by 1860 he could hear locomotives roaring in the distance, and experience the bustle of trade firsthand in the towns he visited occasionally. And if the yeoman remained nonplussed by all that, he also knew that his yearly taxes were getting higher. Worse still, he had in all likelihood heard his favorite local politician complain about those reckless spenders down in Columbia, legislators who had taken such a fancy to railroad subsidies, free schools, and insane asylums. Why, the legislature had even agreed to spend millions on a new place to house its own shenanigans.³¹

By the end of the 1850s, yeoman farmers in the Upcountry viewed the economic transformation that had occurred in the region with considerable skepticism. Economic changes brought new dangers as well as new opportunities. At the heart of yeoman anxiety lay their fierce devotion to the ideal of independence and their intense fear of dependence—a condition yeomen viewed as nothing less than slavery.³² Elite South Carolinians had long recognized the common white's love of independence. In 1846, Hiram Hutchinson, one of the four principal investors in the Graniteville Manufacturing Company, president of the Bank of Hamburg and scion of an upcountry planter family, acknowledged the yeomen's fierce independence in a letter to fellow entrepreneur John Springs. Explaining his plans for the huge textile mill, Hutchinson confided:

Although I am decidedly opposed to *Negro* operatives, I see we will have to fill our spinning room with young negroes as there will be some difficulty in disciplining 300 Carolinians at once—We hope to have *all white labour* in two or three years. We think we can train them to the Harness best by degrees, keeping ourselves in an *independent* position.³³

31. Ford, "Social Origins of a New South Carolina," 468–79.

32. On the political ramifications of the yeoman's devotion to the ideal of independence, see especially J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

33. Hiram Hutchinson to John Springs, 22 April 1846, Springs Family Papers (microfilm), Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Mary Moragne, the well-educated daughter of prominent Abbeville slaveholder Isaac Moragne, acknowledged the common whites' devotion to independence more succinctly and with more sympathy. "They are," she confided to her diary, "so republican—so proud."³⁴ In 1860 convinced by the changing conditions in their own material world that their liberty was endangered, upcountry yeomen proved a receptive audience for radicals like B. F. Rice of Union, a secessionist who explained the virtues of a new slaveholder's republic in terms yeomen applauded. "Where Capital rules, where there are no black slaves," Rice declared, "there must be white ones. No Southern born [white] man would brush the boots . . . of his extortionate Master."³⁵ Yeoman farmers in the South Carolina Upcountry needed no further prompting.

34. Entry for May 8, 1839, Mary Elizabeth Moragne Diary, SCL, University of South Carolina. This diary has been published as *The Neglected Thread: A Journal From the Calhoun Community, 1836–1842*, ed. by Delle M. Craven (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1951). The quotation is taken from p. 124.

35. Draft copy of a speech by B. H. Rice [c. 1860], Wallace, Rice, Duncan Papers, SCL, University of South Carolina.