

Introduction

This book tells the story of Pennsylvania farming through its historic barns, farmhouses, outbuildings, and landscape features. I hope that the perspective offered here will help non-specialists see the rural landscape in new ways. In these pages readers can learn not just how to identify specific building types or landscape features, but also how to decipher the stories the countryside tells about Pennsylvania's farming past. I hope, too, that I can explain why one part of rural Pennsylvania looks different from another, sometimes in nuanced ways and sometimes dramatically. Occasionally the history will conform to what readers already know; but in many cases, quite unexpected stories account for a place's appearance.

There are many fine books about the stately, exceptionally beautiful barns and farmhouses for which Pennsylvania is justly famous. Gorgeous images abound in all kinds of media from oil paintings to calendar art—more recently, on the Internet. Indeed, old Pennsylvania barns and houses have had a deep personal attraction for me since my childhood growing up (in an old farmhouse) along the Blue Mountain ridge, a short ride from the Lehigh County potato country in one direction and from the rich Northampton County farmland in another. But as a historian, I recognize that in order to really understand Pennsylvania farming landscapes we must consider not just the magnificent barns but also humble, ordinary buildings from the rough and lowly chicken coop to the outdoor privy. Many a historic Pennsylvania farm has not only a house and barn, but half a dozen or more outbuildings, not to mention structures like silos. How can we explain a farm's history without reference to them? Fields, lanes, and woodlots change over time too, and they serve as historical documents in their own right. Together these often overlooked features give us clues to how farming was conducted in past time, and they help us better appreciate the contributions of the people who labored in them.

The historic buildings and landscape features found on so many Pennsylvania farms convey four fundamental messages about our state's farming past. The first is that from the colonial era right up into the twentieth century, Pennsylvania agriculture was highly diversified. Most histories tell us that diversified farming declined earlier; this misconception has been driven by the present-day tendency to think about farming in terms of specialized commodities: dairy farm, apple orchard, poultry farm. However, both the documentary record and the landscape prove clearly that diversified farming prevailed even up until the Second World War in some sections.

The second message is that diversified farming itself varied depending on time and place. Colonial-era diversified farming meant mainly crops, with livestock occupying a marginal place; this began to change in the early national period as crops and livestock became more integrated. By the mid-nineteenth century virtually all Pennsylvania farms produced the same array of crops and livestock, yet paradoxically this consistency was paired with great variation in the ways that diversified farming was practiced. Depending on soils, topography, markets,

and climate, the emphasis within the common mix varied from one place to another. That alone was enough to shape architectural choices on the farm and—through hundreds of individual decisions—to impart regional distinctiveness. Different cultural repertoires—the strongest expressions coming from “Yankees” and “Germans”—made regional flavors in the landscape still more pronounced.

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The third message is that after about 1910, modernization produced new landscape layers that transformed the countryside in multiple ways. On the one hand, the state as a whole grew more homogeneous, because broader forces shaped the landscape now: standardization, a turn everywhere toward dairy and poultry production, mechanization, greater capital investment, government regulation, the land-grant system, more artificial inputs from fertilizers to herbicides. At the same time several specialized, geographically concentrated pockets appeared: the Erie and Adams fruit belts, two potato regions, a Pocono resort region, and a Chester County mushroom region. Whether we are talking about local specialization or statewide trends, the common factor was that markets and institutional forces now shaped the farming landscape far more decisively than did ethnicity. There were two exceptions to this modernizing trend. One was that “self-provisioning” continued to have a strong presence on farms throughout the state. The other was that Plain Sect people consciously resisted modernization out of religious conviction, in the process creating their own distinctive landscapes. Between about 1960 and the present, modernizing forces intensified. Newer buildings tended to be far out of scale with older ones, and many of the latter simply disappeared.

The fourth message is that regardless of era, the historic farm landscape conveys stories about work—performed by the yeoman farmer, and by women, children, tenants, and wage laborers. Most people know that farming involves hard work, but I would contend that by carefully observing buildings—from springhouses to bunkhouses—we can grasp much more concretely what farm labor meant to the people who toiled at it day in, day out, year in, year out.

So, in the following chapters I will show that we cannot understand Pennsylvania’s agricultural history without looking closely at the landscape. However, it is equally the case that we cannot fully understand the landscape without reference to the historical context. The two complement one another. Any landscape analysis has to be set against a backdrop that recognizes some basic facts. Farm numbers and acreage rose until about 1910, then both declined. Farm population as a percentage of the whole stood at over 90 percent in 1790 and declined continuously thereafter; today it is under 2 percent. We must keep these fundamentals in mind when we interpret the landscape. Historical context illuminates landscape in numerous other, smaller-scale ways. Contour strip cropping is a good example. We can only grasp why it became popular at the time that it did when we refer to a documentary record that shows how New Deal-era extension educators and government officials—alarmed by Dust Bowl-inspired stories of soil erosion—encouraged it. Why are there so many smokehouses, root cellars, and spring houses still extant on Pennsylvania farms? Not only because property owners today value and appreciate their attractive appearance but also because oral histories and census statistics alike show that these buildings were in active use not so very long ago. Another point is that landscapes tell only an incomplete story, for many features have simply

been erased. Without conventional documentation, for instance, we would know little about farm power supplied by windmills a hundred years ago. Then there are some crucial features about Pennsylvania farming that are very hard to see in the landscape at all, under any circumstances. You would not necessarily infer from looking at any well-appointed Pennsylvania farmstead, for instance, that off-farm wage work has long been crucial to household strategies. But primary sources from census records to directories confirm that as early as 1930 a good chunk of farming Pennsylvanians' income—no matter where they lived—came from off the farm. In short, for much of Pennsylvania's past, the farm has been but one element in the farming household's economic portfolio.

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Only by portraying Pennsylvania's buildings and landscapes within their agricultural context, then, does a more complete historical picture emerge.

A challenge in a broad work like this one is that many building types and landscape features are found in more than one region. Under which region, for example, should the classic Pennsylvania forebay barn be discussed? It is common in the Southeast, the Central Valleys, Lancaster County, the York–Adams region, and the Susquehanna Lowlands. I have addressed this issue by emphasizing for a given region a building's most typical or salient forms, without necessarily implying that these are the *only* forms that occur there, or that they *only* occur there and nowhere else. I also illustrate subtle regional differences in building types that sometimes occur.

A word about farm dwellings is appropriate here. Excellent scholarship elsewhere has devoted much attention to domestic architecture. I have therefore chosen to leave the architectural histories to others and instead to emphasize the farmhouse as a productive agricultural space. I consider its formal and aesthetic qualities primarily as they pertain to the agrarian landscape, for instance in the stylistic relationship (or lack of it) between the dwelling, barn, and outbuildings. That interaction can tell us much about how people thought about their farming lives.

Pennsylvania Farming is organized into four large sections, each corresponding to a major epoch in the state's agricultural history. Part I, "Beginnings," shows how from the precontact era to about 1830, Native Americans, European colonists, and then citizens of the new republic developed agricultural forms for the New World environment. Part II, "The Era of Regionalism, circa 1830–1910," explores nine different nineteenth-century agricultural regions within the state, each with distinctive farm landscape characteristics. Part III, "The Diverse Landscapes of Modernization, circa 1910–1965," outlines the landscape impact of familiar trends like mechanization and specialization—not only in the spread of dairying and emergence of concentrated orchard or potato regions, but in Plain Sect groups' reaction against modernization. Finally, in Part IV, "Pennsylvania Farming in the Late Twentieth Century," I consider more recent developments and look to the future.