Planting the Seeds of Prosperity

The Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture and Agricultural Improvement during the Early Republic

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Abstract.

The physical and intellectual landscape of southeastern Pennsylvania, during the late eighteen hundreds, created a space ripe for agricultural improvement. Philadelphia inherited an enlightenment zeal for intellectual pursuit and society from the British, and sought to create a better society that manifested utilitarian ideals of improvement. Along with the passion for the pursuit of useful knowledge came the desire to study agriculture. Agriculture was not only the primary livelihood of Americans, and the young country's main source of economy, but also a noble subject of intellectual study on par with natural history, philosophy, literature, and other scholarly subjects. The Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture (PSPA) was created out of the intellectual and physical space within early republican Philadelphia that valued the practice and study of agriculture. The PSPA used agricultural reform as a way to enhance the character and boost the prosperity of the United States through the establishment of an American society --intellectually on par with England-- for the betterment of U.S. citizens, and the improvement of the tangible fertility of the land. The "betterment" of U.S. citizens meaning the cultivation of virtue, as linked to good husbandry. This thesis uses the first few decades of the PSPA to present a history of why and how land improvement in southeastern Pennsylvania came to be used to support American prosperity in a tangible and theoretical way.
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Introduction:

Soil matters. People sailed across the ocean, founded settlements, fought the cold and native inhabitants to reap the benefits of the fertile soil America had to offer. Southeastern Pennsylvania, with its temperate climate and incredibly rich soil, lured Europeans such as the Dutch, Swedes, Welsh, and English with the promise of agricultural prosperity during the seventeenth century. When the crop yields diminished due to exhaustion of the soil, many people moved to fresh new land because they could. However, with an expanding population and the growing establishment of Philadelphia during the eighteenth century, came a desire to stay put and maintain soil fertility. On a cold February day in 1785, twenty-three men of various gentlemen employments—some doctors, some lawyers, some merchants, and two gentlemen farmers—decided to form a society dedicated to enhancing that resource that made America, as a colony and a newly independent nation possible; they were dedicated to pursuing knowledge to maintain soil fertility and other agricultural improvements.

The Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture (PSPA) was established under the rising concern for agrarian practices. Agricultural improvement represented more than just technical solutions for production of higher crop yields. Of the twenty-three founding members of the PSPA, four signed the Declaration of Independence, four were members of the convention that drew up the United States Constitution, seven had served as officers in the Revolutionary War, and seven served in the senate.¹ To these leaders of the early republic, agricultural improvement was an essential object of study.

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and concern. As Richard Peters, the second president of the PSPA wrote, “Agriculture having been not only the first of arts in priority of time, but the first in the estimation of the wisest and greatest men of every age; should be ever deemed the first object, both of public and private attention.” From this passage it is clear that the high society of Philadelphia realized the importance of good farming and saw the link between a well-established civil society and fertile soil.

The Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture (PSPA) was created out of an intellectual and physical space, within early republican Philadelphia, that valued the practice and study of agriculture. The PSPA used agricultural improvement as a way to enhance the character, and boost the prosperity of the United States through the establishment of an American agricultural society --intellectually on par with England-- for the ideological betterment of U.S. citizens, and the tangible improvement of the fertility of the land. The “betterment” of U.S. citizens meaning the cultivation of virtue, as linked to good husbandry. As historian Drew McCoy explains, “As the necessary spur to industry, productivity, and virtue, commerce was instead the lifeblood of a republican system.” The commerce of the day was primarily agriculture. Thus a betterment of agriculture fundamentally supported the industry, productivity, and virtue of citizens of the early republic. Although historians of different fields have touched on aspects of agricultural improvement during the early republic, the argument presented in this thesis brings previous histories together with primary sources to present a history of why and

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how land improvement in southeastern Pennsylvania came to be used to support American prosperity.

When William Penn founded Pennsylvania in 1681, he saw the availability of land in the new world as the opportunity to create a better extension of England.¹⁴ Penn sought to intentionally shape the settlement of the landscape and the development of the people to create a virtuous society.⁵ To Penn, a virtuous society was comprised of hardworking farmers. This is clear in his passage describing the fall of Rome, which he included in one of his primary promotional pieces that laid out his vision for Pennsylvania settlement. Penn wrote, “For when they grew to neglect their ancient discipline [agriculture], that maintained and rewarded Virtue and Industry, and addicted themselves to Pleasure and Effeminacy, they debas’d their Spirits and debauch’d their Morals...”⁶ Penn’s connection between the industrious farmer and the virtuous citizen was embedded in the physical makeup of Philadelphia as Penn gave away plots in the city in accordance with land bought outside of the city. This duality of property ownership directly tied the large land holding settlers with the best real estate of Philadelphia; marrying the urban with the rural.⁷ The connection made between large landholders, many of whom were gentlemen farmers, and Philadelphia formed a direct connection between the Philadelphian elite and southeastern Pennsylvanian land. Penn’s advertisements also created an association of abundance with the land. In his Letter to the

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⁵ Penn, “Some Account of Pennsylvania”, p.203
⁶ Penn, “Some Account of Pennsylvania”, p.203
Society of Traders, Penn writes of the superior quantity and quality of land to be found in Pennsylvania. Penn’s message created a lasting legacy of Pennsylvania land as synonymous with abundance. This assumption of abundance is one that the PSPA battled with as they worked to make the case for improved agrarian practices amongst farmers. The PSPA wanted to prevent the depletion of soil fertility by encouraging better agricultural practices such as manuring, and crop rotation, but found it hard to get farmers to listen when no immediate evidence presented itself to demonstrate the decline of abundant, fertile land.

In 1783 the Revolutionary War ended with the Treaty of Paris, and the new U.S. shifted its focus from defense to internal development. The development of American society is evident in the high activity of the American Philosophical Society located in Philadelphia. During the war interest and activity within the society was strained as all of its members were actively involved with the war in some form or another. After the war there was a renewed energy to establish themselves as evidenced by the recommencement of the publication of their Philosophical Transactions and the many active members noted in those transactions. This energy was driven by a desire to use

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8 Penn, "Letter to The Society of Traders", p.240-242
11 This is evidenced by the reinstitution of the APS publication of their transactions. The first published in 1769 and the second in 1786. (See JSTOR’s complete collections of the Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, www.jstor.org)
the Society to increase knowledge to the benefit of the Society, to establish the Society as one comparable to European societies, and to use knowledge to better American life and economic stability. 13 Coming out of the APS’s desire to promote economic stability and prosperity, some of the members became increasingly interested in agricultural affairs. During the mid-eighteenth century, Britain experienced an agricultural revolution that led to a proliferation of literature on better land use practices for increased yields. Wanting to do the same for America, thirteen members of the APS and ten other Philadelphian gentlemen established the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture (PSPA) in 1785. 14 The Society’s goals were familiarize themselves with English practices, experiment with English practices on American soil, and promote a furthering of agrarian knowledge as pertaining to America. 15

There were several key events in American history that occurred between the foundational decades of the PSPA (1785 to 1818), both within and outside of the framework the PSPA, that had an effect on society, politics, or the economy in such a way that these historical event give context to the work of the PSPA. Early on in 1790, the capital of the U.S. was moved from Philadelphia to Washington D.C. Pre-1790, the off and on location of the capital in Philadelphia played a role in shaping the intellectual climate in Philadelphia because many of the top American thinkers and politicians were

13 Benjamin Franklin, "A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America" Yale University Press (Philadelphia, 1743)
in Philadelphia at the same time that the intellectual societies formed. The same year as
the foundation of the PSPA, Congress enacted the Land Ordinance of 1785, which stated
that all plots of land sold should be a minimum of 640 square acres. This not only set
the size of what Congress deemed to be an appropriately sized farm, but also made it
difficult for small farmers to be able to afford such large plots. The 1785 land ordinance
required a minimum initial payment of 640 dollars (half the total price) that was simply
too great for most farmers. A decade and a half later, Congress realized this and passed
the Land Act of 1800. This act reduced the minimum plot size to 320 acres and
introduced a system of credit for purchasing the land. This made it much more viable for
small farmers to purchase land. The war of 1812 had lasting economic and social
effects on the city as well. The war placed an emphasis on the need for agricultural
production to support the nation’s economy. In 1818 there was a culmination of
recognition of agricultural efforts to bolster unity evidenced by works by Richard Peters
and James Madison. These works embody the direct connection drawn between
American prosperity and agricultural improvement.

The first section, *A Space for Improvement*, argues that the Philadelphian patrician
society's concern with establishing themselves socially through intellectual societies

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16 Weigley, p.205  
18 Continental Congress 1781, 28:375  
20 Stoll, p.20  
21 Peters, "A Discourse on Agriculture", p.B-xxxv  
created an intellectual space that fostered the study of agricultural knowledge. The
PSPA’s concern for agricultural improvement came out of this intellectual, social space.
In other words, late eighteenth century Philadelphia was ripe for the development of a
society for agricultural improvement and the PSPA was the fruition of this potential. The
social and intellectual context out of which the Society arose set an underlying tone of
intellectualism that will become evident later in the work of the Society.

The environmental and economic context of agriculture in southeastern
Pennsylvania furthers the argument for a rise in agricultural improvement. The second
section, *Perceptions of Husbandry*, argues that the geographical and social environment,
coupled with the perceptions of Pennsylvanian husbandry expressed in eighteenth century
observations created a dual ideological and physical understanding of the need for
agricultural improvement. This dual understanding is then manifested into the work and
goals of the PSPA. In the reading of agricultural observations written by educated
travelers during the early republic mixed with a cross analysis of modern agricultural
historians’ assumptions and flaws, context is given to southeastern Pennsylvania’s
geographical location and the social and environmental meaning of that location, the
political history of Philadelphia, the perceptions of the agricultural practices of the
settlers of southeastern Pennsylvania, and the tensions and assumptions that existed about
the farming practices of Pennsylvanian settlers. This section details the assumptions
portrayed in elite observations of Pennsylvanian agricultural practices, and places them
within the context of the intellectual climate of early republican Philadelphia. Within this
context of patrician society, it is clear how these assumptions of agricultural practice
manifested in assumptions of intellectual superiority that is carried over in the work of the PSPA.

The third and fourth sections break reform down into two categories: the ideological and the tangible benefits. The PSPA had ideological reasons for supporting agricultural improvement that were based in a tangible need. The third section, *Creating Good Republican Citizens*, argues that the PSPA sought to generate and collect agrarian knowledge to educate the American farmer in order to foster their development as virtuous citizens. The questions this section seeks to answer are, what was the ideological framework concerning the concept of “good” husbandry during the time period that directly supported the activities of the PSPA? How did that ideology affect the PSPA? Did this ideology speak to the reality of farmers in southeastern Pennsylvania? This last question leads into the idea of tangible prosperity of both the farmers and Pennsylvania as a whole.

The fourth and final section, *The Land, The Society, and American Prosperity*, argues that poor farming practices in southeastern Pennsylvania led to noticeably impoverished soils during the early nineteenth century, which created a tangible need for improvement. The infertility of the soil presented an opportunity for the PSPA to use their findings on land improvement to generate prosperity much needed after the war of 1812. It is not until the 1800’s that Philadelphians transitioned from just writing about the poor farming practices that they have observed to writing about the actual effects of poor husbandry on agricultural production. How the people farmed in southeastern Pennsylvania during the late eighteenth, early nineteenth century, how they thought about farming, and the effects of that interaction caused fertility depletion in the soil. The
fertility was in turn affected by the pressures on food production generated by the needs of the country coming out of the war of 1812. All of these forces acting together created a need for better agrarian practices that could maintain soil fertility and, as the PSPA saw it, boost the prosperity of the country.

The term “agricultural improvement” refers to the pursuit of knowledge about, practice of, and promotion of agrarian reform with the intended betterment of the fertility, production, and tenure of the land. As environmental historian Steven Stoll defines it, “Improvement meant the changes that enabled land to be cultivated in the most prosperous way over the longest possible time.”

His definition is useful in understanding the larger picture of what agricultural improvement was trying to get at, but is lacking the theoretical component so crucial to understanding what Philadelphian agrarian societies were trying to do. The societies were trying to “improve” the character of the farmers as well as their agricultural practices. “Improvement” to societies like the PSPA was not just changes in practice, but the process of obtaining knowledge about superior practices and disseminating that knowledge as well. In other words, “improvement” was not, as Stoll’s definition suggests, simply the tangible transformation of agrarian practice, but the transformation of a theoretical practice as well. “Agrarian reform” is the improvement of any agricultural practices including crops, animal husbandry, and soil quality through experimentation and dissemination of knowledge. Agrarian reform is what comprises agricultural improvement. The definition of agrarian reform is based off of the use of the term in the PSPA mission statement, which includes

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23 Stoll, p.21
all agricultural practices. The societies who engaged in agricultural improvement are referred to as “improvers” when talking about their relationship to the land. Land that is cultivated for the livelihood of those living on it with an intention to sell the surplus produce is defined as a “farm” and land that is cultivated for pleasure or on a scale just to meet the needs of those tending it is defined as a “garden”. The difference between a farm and a garden is grounded in evidence from primary sources written during the early republic and by the definitions used by Andrea Wolf in her book, *Founding Gardeners*.

The term “patrician society” is used to define an elite society not determined by wealth or hereditary title, but by general prestige coming from a number of qualifying factors such as, but not limited to, education, wealth, social spheres, and political activity. The accessibility of education, participation in political matters, and access to elite social circles represented patrician status in a way that calls upon the understanding of the term “patrician” familiar in the Roman republic. In Rome, patricians were an elite but large population of citizens who were expected by society to be active in political and intellectual pursuits. Romans were born to patrician or plebian (common) families with only marginal potential to change status, which was similar—although not identical—to society within Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, one’s background played a large role in determining one’s social status, but did not permanently define them. Philadelphian patrician society was comprised of men such as Benjamin Franklin who worked his ways up in society from a seventh son of a candle-maker to a revered founding father, and George Logan who was born into a family with a well known name within intellectual

circles and access to a university education. The use of the term “patrician” over
aristocracy embodies the moderate flexibility of the social structure and the intellectual
and political expectations of involvement of patrician members of society. In general,
Philadelphians during the early republic would have abhorred the title “aristocracy”
because of its tie to a social system they were hoping to escape and improve upon.
Philadelphians would have preferred the connotations associated with “patrician” because
they saw themselves as an improved version of English society concerned with politics,
intellectual pursuits, and economy.
I. A Space for Improvement

In the transition from British colony to the United States, many social and cultural ideas were passed down and many were actively fought against. An example of a lingering social and cultural inheritance from the British that Philadelphians held on to was the social prestige of education. The idea of a landed aristocracy, as mentioned in the introduction, was something that Philadelphians actively worked against in attempts to rid their new country of an oppressive landed elite. Instead Philadelphians decided to distinguish themselves through membership of intellectual societies. The Philadelphia society, via their concern with establishing themselves through intellectual societies, created an intellectual space where agriculture was a prominent subject. The PSPA was created out of this social and intellectual space.

Pennsylvania was originally founded as a British colony and therefore the development of the patrician society in Philadelphia reflects the British heritage of the city. In England, the landed elite who were born into titles that came with wealth, intellectual culture, and education. By “intellectual culture” I mean an ability, if they so desired, to be involved in intellectual pursuits or engage in intellectual conversations about topics such as philosophy, natural science, literature, and agriculture. Since America didn’t have an elite pre-established by blood, Americans had to decide on a new way to establish themselves. During the early republic, many socially and politically influential Philadelphian residents self identified as British.26 After all, it had only been a few years since many of the elite Philadelphians had been subjects of England. Their ties

with the motherland still remained strong, as seen through the abundant correspondences between Americans and Europeans during the late seventeen hundreds. However, that even though Americans identified strongly with the British, they were also simultaneously trying to get away from the imperial pattern—a landed elite pre-established by birth—of aristocracy. Americans instead used intellectual societies, such as the American Philosophical Society (APS), as a way of distinguishing their new patrician society. Intellectual historian Simon Baatz quotes Henry Bradshaw Fearon, a representative of a group of prominent English families who were considering moving to America during the mid-eighteenth century. These families wanted a report of the country before they decided to settle. Fearon wrote, of the Philadelphian intellectual society members that “These are of the ‘first class;’ and although they have not the pomp or the titles, they have the pride of an aristocracy.” Though the traditional titles associated with English aristocracy such as “Lord” and “Duke”, etc. would never become a part of American society, a degree of the pomp and certainly the pride were engrained in this new American society, which manifested itself in the form of intellectual societies. Americans took pride in their quest for knowledge.

The Philadelphian intellectual societies were heavily influenced by enlightenment thought that defined their pursuit of “useful knowledge”. According to intellectual historian Brooke Hindle, early American intellectuals followed a utilitarian view of

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27 Peter S. Onuf, Jefferson’s Empire, (Charlottesville, The University Press of Virginia, 2000) p.60
30 Brooke Hindle, The Pursuit of Science in Revolutionary America 1735-1789 (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1956), p.143
knowledge. Sir Francis Bacon wrote that "the improvement of man's lot and the improvement of man's mind are one in the same thing."\textsuperscript{31} Bacon believed, as did most utilitarian intellectuals, that knowledge directly correlated with the improvement of man. This belief in the "improvement of man" through beneficial education is clearly engrained into the first established American intellectual society, the American Philosophical Society (APS) as evidenced when Benjamin Franklin wrote that one of the aims of the Society was to study subjects that "tend to increase the power of man over matter"\textsuperscript{32}. Franklin instilled a Baconian goal of the utility of knowledge into the work of the APS. Franklin's time in France and England exposed him to the societies that had risen out of Enlightenment, such as the Royal Society in London, and gave him utilitarian inspiration for the American society. As Hindle explains, "The Royal Society, which played such an important part in colonial intellectual development, was in some measure a monument to Baconian ideals, its Philosophical Transactions showing a continuing attention to useful knowledge."\textsuperscript{33} Hindle points to a direct correlation between the Royal Society and the APS's utilitarian aims. The first published Transactions of the American Philosophical Society in 1765 likewise shows the connection between the British and American societies when it states explicitly, "These rules were adopted from the rules of that illustrious body the Royal Society of London, whose example the American Philosophical Society think it in their honor to follow."\textsuperscript{34} The Society is clearly looking

\textsuperscript{31} Hindle, p.190

\textsuperscript{32} Franklin, "A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America"

\textsuperscript{33} Hindle, p.190-191

to recreate prominent intellectual societies from abroad in America and seek out useful knowledge.

One of the legacies of the Enlightenment was the pursuit of scientific knowledge and significantly, the pursuit of knowledge that led to ideas of improvement: 35 improvement of government, improvement of general knowledge, and improvement of agriculture. As Franklin writes in his initial proposal for founding the APS,

"That the Subjects of the correspondance [of the APS] be, all new-discovered plants, herbs, trees, roots &c. their virtues, uses &c. methods of propagating them, and making such are useful, but particular to some plantations, more general. Improvements of vegetable juices, as cyders, wines &c.... Nature of the soil and productions...New improvements in planting, gardening, clearing land &c... And all philosophical experiments that let light into the nature of things, tend to increase the power of man over matter, and multiply the conveniences or pleasures of life." 36

This passage is significant for a number of reasons. The first being that it shows how Franklin emphasized plants, herbs, trees, and roots that can be marketed. The APS therefore sought understanding of these natural resources that could be manipulated via cultivation to the general population’s advantage and utility. The passage also clearly mentions improvement and “the power of man over matter”. This idea of man as master of nature is a legacy of Christianity that came to have a new meaning with the increased pursuit of science during the Enlightenment. With the changes in scientific process and inquiry, came the increased awareness of man’s power to shape the world around him and his ability to harness this power to his benefit. Franklin writes in an essay “On Discoveries” that “so vast are the improvements of science, that all our knowledge of mathematics, of nature, of the brightest part of human wisdom, had their admission

35 Hindle, p.190-191
36 Franklin, “A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America”
among us within these last two centuries. Franklin says this in reference to the progress man has made in discovering new lands. These discoveries were made possible by technologies, inventions, and experiments of man. Here Franklin expresses that notion of man as master of nature through the process of observation and dissemination of knowledge embodied in Enlightenment thought. Through careful experimentation and study, British eighteenth century agricultural reformists such as Arthur Young and Jethro Tull, like Franklin’s point about discovery, experimented and developed systems of “improved” agriculture that produced higher yields of crops.

But why was agriculture a worthy subject of intellectual pursuit? Agriculture was an important subject of study not only because of the Enlightenment fascination with man’s ability to shape the natural world, but because it was a fundamental aspect of political economy during the early republic. Joshua Gilpin, a Philadelphian merchant, defined political economy in the early nineteenth century as “the operation of a government upon its domestic resources independent of its external or foreign administration.” Or in other words, the governmental concern for and tie to the economy. The political economy of the early republic was affected by the interplay between the government and the economy, and visa versa. The economy was predominantly agriculture. Historian Drew McCoy explains that this political economy based in agriculture was also a complex system of interdependence between politics,

38 McCoy, p.6
society and the economy. This meant that agriculture—because of its economic prominence and therefore national importance—and the improvement of agricultural practices, was important to politicians and socialites alike. George Washington wrote that “With reference either to individual or national welfare, Agriculture is of primary importance… By diffusing information, [we could] encourage and assist a spirit of discovery and improvement.” This passage captures agricultural improvement’s primary role in intellectual inquiry in the United States. This idea of agricultural reform as a politically significant subject becomes more apparent when looking at the formation of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture and its members.

The Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture (PSPA) was born out of the rich culture of intellectual societies in Philadelphia—of which agricultural improvement was a prominent subject—in order to create a space intended to focus on and further agricultural knowledge. In February of 1785 John Beale Bordley, a gentlemen farmer, member of the APS, and lawyer from Maryland, spearheaded the establishment the PSPA. The PSPA responded to the needs of the political economy of Philadelphia for knowledge of agricultural improvements to strengthen the domestic economy of agricultural exports. The Laws of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture stated that “The society’s attentions shall be confined to agricultural and rural affairs; especially for promoting a greater increase of the products of land within the American States” This statement shows that from its inception, the society focused on fulfilling

40 McCoy, p.6
41 Benjamin R. Cohen, Notes from the Ground, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) p.19
the role of supporting the republic by educating farmers in order to help them produce more agricultural products. The declaration of intention also shows hints of intellectual power steeped in the act of promoting a "better" form of agriculture as deemed by the Society. What made this agriculture better and how did it show social power as linked to agricultural knowledge? In their list of premiums offered for the best experiments in agriculture, the Society notes that experiments must be "agreeable to the English mode of farming." This implies two things. The first was that the English mode of farming was the standard that the Society aimed to meet and second, that those conducting the experiments should have been well versed in the English mode of farming. This expectation gave English standards of agriculture intellectual prominence. Additionally, by requiring that those sending submissions of agricultural improvement writings know English methods, the Society limits those who participate to those who are of a social standing high enough to have access to books and correspondence explaining the English method. Although many Americans could read, there is no evidence that the larger population had access to English agricultural writings. Therefore the PSPA isolated themselves in a society who simultaneously tried to emulate English models while trying to disseminate agricultural knowledge.

The structure of the society itself furthered the gap between the Society and the farmers they hoped to reach. As Baatz explains, the Society was comprised of elite members of society --some of whom were gentlemen farmers-- contrasted to the audience and constituency, which were made up of lower class working farmers. This dynamic

43 Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, "Laws of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture", p.17
44 Baatz, Venerate the Plough, p.2
created a tension between the Society whose membership saw their role as agrarian philosopher and educator, and the farmers they wished to teach. Where it is difficult to understand how the farmers felt about the PSPA, it can be deduced that at least in the early years the Society had little effect, because there were no significant changes observed of farming practices in southeastern Pennsylvania. Thus an interesting dichotomy can be drawn between a patrician society that was using improvement theories coming out of the Enlightenment to assert power over a more plebian society of farmers with the intention of national stability via enhanced agriculture. Agricultural improvement was, on the one hand, a form of encouraged subjugation to a uniformity of “better” agricultural practices, and, on the other hand, a way of boosting the national economy by helping individuals increase production.

The social roots of intellectual societies in Philadelphia explain the social dynamics present within, and essential to understanding the PSPA and the social tensions existing within the larger agricultural community. This patrician society defined by intellectual goals, married society to enlightened ideas of improvement sought out by elite, educated men. Agriculture, a form of “useful knowledge” carried over from the English agricultural revolution became a hot topic for inquiry within the APS and fueled the formation of a more focused intellectual society: the PSPA. The PSPA carried with it the desire to emulate European intellectual societies and the understanding that their work was important in a deeply philosophical sense. The PSPA’s belief that agricultural improvement was socially and intellectually important was manifested in their work.
II. Perceptions of Husbandry

The perceptions, and actual physical environment of southeastern Pennsylvania during the early republic generated an understanding of a need for agricultural improvement, which the PSPA intended to fulfill. However, the nature of the PSPA’s understanding of the need for reform was problematic because of their sources of reference to the condition of husbandry in southeastern Pennsylvania. The social and physical implications of the geographical location of southeastern Pennsylvania, traveler’s accounts of Pennsylvanian agriculture, and the discrepancies between those accounts and the reality of husbandry in southeastern Pennsylvania demonstrate the problems that arose from the PSPA’s sources and thus the conceptual understanding of the need for agricultural improvement within the Society.

Philadelphia, the city of southeastern Pennsylvania was a central location during the early republic both politically and geographically, which created a space ripe for intellectual and physical, agricultural reform. Geographically, Philadelphia is situated in a central location between the northern states and the southern states making it an ideal location for the gathering of state representatives. These political visitors, along with the leaders already residing in Philadelphia such as Benjamin Franklin, made Philadelphia the birthplace of the Declaration of Independence and the first capital of the newly formed republic before the end of the Revolutionary War. Up until 1790 when the

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45 Weighley, p.154
capitol of the United States was moved to Washington D.C., Philadelphia served as the nation and state’s capitol for most of the country’s first 14 years.\textsuperscript{46}

As a political center, many key leaders of the early republic lived in the city or visited the city at some point.\textsuperscript{47} This political influence meant that Philadelphians were constantly exposed to political ideology. The city as a whole developed an identity as a rich intellectual and political environment. Philadelphia distinguished itself by being an intellectual, as well as, political center of the nation because in the early republic, political and social intellectual thinkers were not entirely separate. For example Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison are representative of both politically and socially active leaders comprising the membership of Philadelphia intellectual societies.

Philadelphia’s geographical centrality along the eastern seaboard of North America also meant that the city and the surrounding southeastern Pennsylvania enjoyed a naturally fertile agricultural landscape. Southeastern Pennsylvania is marked by its temperate climate and long growing season. Where the south had to work with the extreme heat of the summers and the north coped with the long harsh winters, southeastern Pennsylvania enjoyed a more mild climate ideal for growing crops. By the eighteenth century, the region would become the richest agricultural area of any colonial city.\textsuperscript{48} By 1790, throughout the nation, it could be estimated that 90% of the population farmed.\textsuperscript{49} George Logan (a member of the PSPA) wrote, specifically of Pennsylvania, that most inhabitants were farmers. He noted that those who were not farmers were still

\textsuperscript{46} Weigley, p.20
\textsuperscript{47} Weigley, p.169-205
\textsuperscript{48} Weigley, p.5
\textsuperscript{49} John T. Schlebacker, \textit{Whereby We Thrive}, (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1975) p.97
dependent on agricultural production. The combination of a high population of farmers and those connected closely to farming meant that agriculture was not a peripheral but central topic of concern and identity for southeastern Pennsylvanians. The social applications and understandings of agriculture therefore are not simply the recognition of agriculture’s importance, the intellectual understanding of “good” husbandry. The intellectual understanding of “good” husbandry held by the PSPA tells us more about their agricultural improvement aims and writings than the assumption that their pursuit of agricultural improvement derived solely from an economic need.

Travelers and visitors’ accounts of the agricultural practices of southeastern Pennsylvania embody the patrician view of Pennsylvanian husbandry and help to understand how members of the PSPA came to have their view of common farmers. The work of the PSPA’s relationship to the physical landscape of southeastern Pennsylvania unfolds through understanding their view of common farmers as represented in traveler’s accounts. These accounts detailed the practices of the various national groups such as the Swedes, Scotch, Irish, Welsh, and English, who settled throughout Pennsylvania. Written in the form of observations and critiques the accounts stereotyped and built ideas of agricultural superiority. The observations paint a picture of a landscape of southeastern Pennsylvania that was physically governed by the actual practices of the farmers and intellectually governed by the assumptions made by those in power about the

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50 Stevenson Whitcomb Fletcher, Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life; 1640-1840, (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1950), p.40

51 Fletcher, Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life; 1640-1840, p.33-56
farming practices of different nationalities. These assumptions later affected impositions of agricultural improvement.

To unravel the legacy of these accounts one must look at the two main understandings modern historians of Pennsylvania agricultural had concerning farming practices during the early republic. The first understanding was that early American farmers in Pennsylvania were not “good” farmers in the sense that they practiced poor husbandry. The second understanding was that Germans were better agriculturalists than Pennsylvania farmers. The source for the first assumption was *American Husbandry,* written by “an American” in 1775 and widely read by both educated men during the early republic and modern historians. In the chapter on Pennsylvania there are at least eight separate and clear accusations of “general bad management” in regards to the farmers and their use of the land. In one passage, the anonymous author of *American Husbandry* writes, “In many parts of Pennsylvania, a country in which nature has done so much, man will do so little.” and a few pages later remarks about the lack of crop rotation “This is not only proof of the planter’s bad husbandry; it is also a proof of what excellent land it must be to yield such a succession of crops in plenty.” These excerpts have a twofold meaning. First, the author notes the poor husbandry of Pennsylvania farmers by highlighting the little amount of work farmers put into the land, and their lack of crop rotation (a clear sign of poor husbandry). From this, modern historians have deduced that Pennsylvanian farmers practiced husbandry that depleted the soil of its

53 American, p.158
54 American, p.154-184
55 American, p.165
56 American, p.171
natural fertility without replenishing it through better agricultural techniques such as crop rotation and manure for fertilizer. Second, these passages remark upon the natural fertility of the land. This concept of a naturally fertile land would lead the PSPA and modern historians to understand the Pennsylvania physical environment as one that is naturally very fertile, but due to poor farming practices became depleted. This assumption reflects the PSPA's understanding of the relationship between the environment's fertility and farmers to be one where the farmers caused infertility. The Society then discerns that those who know how to farm better from their extensive reading, correspondence, and experimentation (the Society) should educate farmers for both physically and ideologically beneficial results.

American Husbandry not only builds assumptions stated as fact but also creates deeper understandings of why Pennsylvania farmers farmed the way they did. After a detailed description of the use of fields for growing, fallowing, and grazing cattle, the author writes,

"This absurd way of having an eye to nothing but exhausting the land as quick as possible by constant crops of corn, is pernicious to their interests: it is owing as I before said, to plenty of land, for new settlers always take up as much as they possibly can, and far more then they know how to stock or cultivate; they can afford no care for manuring, nor yet to clear two pieces of ground for corn as long as one will bear it." 58

This passage says that because there was plenty of land, settlers disregarded the need to concern themselves with the fertility of the soil and instead farmed in a way that exhausted the soil. Once the soil was depleted, settlers moved to a new piece of land. This understanding of land exhaustion, linked to the ability to easily move to new land, is

57 Stoll, p.19  
58 American, p.172-173
one that is perpetuated throughout early American history because it is grounded in the truth of the conditions. When land is farmed with one or two kinds of crops consistently without rotation or manure, the crops deplete the nutrients in the soil and decrease the soil’s fertility. When there is an abundance of fertile land, people can move to fresh land if they exhaust the soil. This is a truth of the conditions. However, to say that poor husbandry was practiced just because of the abundance of fertile soil is not telling the complete reality of the situation. The author of *American Husbandry* continues the previous passage by saying, “They clear a field and have not the strength of ploughs and cattle, and men to crop more than that; they therefore stick to it as long as they can get any corn, and then the land will no longer bear it, they clear another piece and serve that in the same manner, till they have run through their whole ground...”

In this passage a second piece of the puzzle of poor agricultural practices comes into place: labor. Managing soil fertility took a large amount of labor that many Pennsylvania farmers simply did not have. The issue of poor husbandry in Pennsylvania is then an understanding (based in much truth) of the result of too much fertile land and not enough labor.

The sources of the reports on the quality of American husbandry explain the historical understanding of American farmers during the early republic as poor husbandmen. *American Husbandry* was not the only source for such reports, although it is one of the most extensive and specific. Agricultural historian Stevenson Whitcomb Fletcher notes in his book, *Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life*, that similar

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59 American, p.173
60 Stoll, p.34
observations of land exhaustion, caused by an excess of fertile land and scarce labor, were written by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Peter Kalm.\(^{61}\) The use of this excess of fertile land as an excuse to disregard soil maintenance in farming practices was further considered by these men as poor and therefore inferior husbandry when compared to the agriculturally forward British farmers.\(^{62}\) The abundance of similar observations to *American Husbandry* proves that the assumption of poor agriculture, based in a lack of knowledge on how to farm better, was founded in a common observation of intellectual writers of the time. The assumption of poor husbandry, however, is not altogether unproblematic. For one, it is problematic that the only first hand accounts written about agricultural practices come from educated men who observed farming practices with their own biases about what constituted good agriculture. To the authors of the observations, the English method of agriculture was the standard of good agriculture.

The second assumption made by modern agricultural historians of superior German farming practices builds upon the historical evidence of the first assumption of poor husbandry and draws from other traveler’s notes without regard for the writer’s political or social bias. For example, highly revered for his intellect, Dr. Benjamin Rush wrote an “Account of the Manners of the German Inhabitants of Pennsylvania”. In it he writes that Pennsylvania was “indebted for her prosperity and reputation, to the German part of her citizens…”\(^{63}\) Rush explains that “the German’s farm was easily distinguished from those of others, by good fences, the extent of the orchard, the fertility of soil,

\(^{61}\) Fletcher, *Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life*, p.124-125

\(^{62}\) Fletcher, *Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life*, p.124-125

productiveness of the fields, the luxuriance of the meadows.” Because of Dr. Rush’s reputation, this statement carried weight and was read by the PSPA (of which Rush was a member). Sources that Fletcher uses in his appraisal of German farming include a Frenchman (Brissor de Warville), and Wayland F. Dunaway who Fletcher deems “an unbiased historian”. Rush, Warville, and Wayland are all problematic sources because they are all biased sources in their own way. There were no objective, qualitative ways of measuring good and poor farming practices used in Rush and Warville’s accounts; at least not in the sense that we today think of objective, qualitative reasoning. Instead the accounts just make generalizations about various communities and individuals of German settlers based in the social assumptions carried by the observers. To Rush, as well as other members of the PSPA, good farming practices were those that went along with the British understanding of good husbandry, which included diverse production such as orchards, meadows and fields, and orderly structures such as fences as seen in Rush’s quotation above. The idea of “good husbandry” was prescribed to the understanding of what the writer deemed to be “good” based on his own understanding of agriculture, which for the PSPA was the English method. What is more, the “unbiased historian” then was using these observations as a primary source, which then makes his opinions biased by his data.

Geological historian James T. Lemon examined the biases of the two historical assumptions of poor agricultural practices, and the superior agricultural practices of the Germans. His findings help bring to light the discrepancies between patrician

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64 Rush, p.11-12
65 Fletcher, Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life, p.51
understandings of the farmers of southeastern Pennsylvania and the actual physical and social landscape. Lemon draws from a combination of geological studies on soil quality by region, primary historical accounts, agricultural production reports from almanacs and newspapers, and secondary agriculture historical writings, to argue that the Pennsylvania agricultural historians made a mistake in their analysis. The previous assumption made by observers and held as truth by later historians was that Germans primarily sought limestone rich, lowland soils. Lemon’s geographical data shows that after 1760 many Germans settled in shale areas, which contradicts previous assumptions. Lemon then suggests that regional patterns of productivity seem to be related to affluence more than nationality. This means that the German farms that would have been known for their superior practices were located in more affluent German areas. So the very example the Society (from Rush’s observations) had of common farmers practicing what they deemed to be “good husbandry” was in all likelihood from a community of more affluent Germans who could have had access to more labor, livestock, books about the latest farming methods, and other sources of information which would have put them more on the same page of agricultural standard of practice as the PSPA.

In looking at the assumptions of quality of husbandry and German farmers in southeastern Pennsylvania, it becomes clear how “unbiased historians” came to make biased claims and how people living within the time frame of the early republic themselves became swayed and corrupted by unfounded claims of agricultural superiority. Lemon also addresses the stereotypes that generated assumptions about

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66 Lemon, p. 473
67 Lemon, p. 447
nationalities and their farming practices. He points out that these stereotypes come primarily from philosophical trends and attitudes from England, which were manifested and perpetuated, by writers and prominent Philadelphians. Since it is then the same prominent Philadelphians who are a part of, or closely tied to the members of agrarian societies like the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, Lemon’s work highlights the stereotypes and assumptions they carried with them and that manifested consciously or unconsciously in their work. The very nature of their work as researchers, experimenters, and distributors of agriculture knowledge assumed intellectual superiority.

The assumption of the agricultural intellectual superiority of the PSPA is problematic for a number of reasons, one being that most of the prominent Philadelphians were not, in fact, farmers. Most of these Philadelphian intellectuals got their information from English books, which came out of the Agricultural Revolution in England. This disjunction between farmer and agricultural improver made sense on an intellectual level because the aim of science is objectivity and agricultural improvers saw their work as a scientific process of experiment, observation, and deductive reasoning. The problem was that the soil, weather, and crops are all different in England and any differences in those three things would require different agricultural practices. Those who were not farming the land would not have the best understanding of these unique conditions. Therefore the observations of men steeped in English understandings of good husbandry could not produce unbiased or fully accurate accounts of the agricultural practices of southeastern

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68 Lemon, p. 493-494
69 Lemon, p. 493-496
Pennsylvanians. To get a better picture, one must put together the biased primary sources, the biased secondary historical sources, and the geological and social research of Lemon.

When you combine the intellectual, social, and political climate with the assumptions made by *American Husbandry* and other observers it is clear that agriculture, in the late eighteenth century, became a physical and intellectual topic. As leaders in Philadelphia thought about the shape of the nation, and were exposed to enlightenment ideas of improvement upon nature, agriculture was emerging as an important aspect of the physical, and cultural landscape. Philadelphia, as the hot bed for leadership, agriculture, and exchange of ideas, was the perfect place to implement the kind of agricultural reform that England had just experienced and improve upon English practices. This climate, both tangible and imagined, in southeastern Pennsylvania was a prime setting for agricultural reform. The assumptions under which the Philadelphia patrician society operated explains the formation of the PSPA and helps define the work that they did to “improve” their own gentlemen farming practices and impose these improvements on others whose husbandry they deem “poor”.
III. Creating Good Republican Citizens

Agricultural improvement, because of the prominent role of agriculture in intellectual thought and economic need, became a venue for the PSPA to instruct Americans on how to be good republican citizens. The PSPA saw themselves as responsible for this undertaking. The prominence of the use of agricultural improvement for citizen reform is evident in the way society, politicians, and the PSPA viewed common farmers --through their publications, letters, and independent writings--. Drawing upon the early republican ideologies of Thomas Jefferson, along with other quotations from political leaders, a picture of the yeoman or “common” farmers emerges as the society would have seen them. Through this picture, the explicit aims of the society and their publications show how the ideological side of agricultural improvement manifested in the work they did and the way they wrote it. Finally, the odd man out example of George Logan embodies the disconnect between the PSPA’s vision of American farmers and the farmers themselves. Each group had a different idea of the importance of agricultural reform and of good husbandry. These final conclusions led to an exploration of the farmers, the physical environment they were working within, and the tangible suggestions given by the PSPA to show how they connected and how they did not.

The extent to which early republicans concerned themselves with agriculture is evident in the writings and correspondences of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson is known in history as a strong supporter of the independent American farmer. He believed that the American farmer was fundamental to the prosperity of the republic. Jefferson wrote that “generally speaking, the proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens
bears in any state to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts, and is a good-enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption.”\(^{70}\)

Jefferson says here that good farmers were, in the eyes of republican politicians, the "healthy parts" of the citizenry and thus essential to fighting corruption and preserving the republic. The standard of husbandry was a kind of "barometer", which could be used to measure the virtue of the people and country. Jefferson furthers his point at the end of his paragraph, writing, “It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor.”\(^{71}\) This quotation clearly states that the morals of the people made the strength of the republic. Agricultural improvement was the maintenance of that moral vigor, and therefore agricultural improvement was the pinnacle form of maintaining a strong republic.

Similar to Jefferson’s sentiments, Beal Bordley’s favorite John Swift quote captures the significance he and the other founding members of the PSPA placed on agricultural pursuits. Swift writes “Whoever could make two ears of corn or two blades of grass to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind, and do more essential service to his country than the whole race of politicians put together.”\(^{72}\) This quotation shows how Beal Bordley saw the work of the PSPA as over and above the work of mere politicians for the benefit of the nation. The quotation suggests that Beale Bordley clearly saw the PSPA as fundamental to national prosperity in a moral, philosophical sense. When recommending the foundation of a state library of agricultural books, Beale Bordley wrote, “This would not only promote the interests of


\(^{71}\) Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, p.291

agriculture, but it would diffuse knowledge among the people and assist good
government, which is never in danger while a free people are well informed.” Beale
Bordley’s argument asserts that a well-informed people who have access to agricultural
writings make a strong republic.

A decade later William Strickland, a gentlemen correspondent of Jefferson’s in
London of whom the PSPA and Beale Bordley would have been familiar, affirmed
Jefferson’s assertion that the husbandry of the people was tied to the virtue of the people
and Bordley’s belief in the inherent good of agricultural improvement for the country as a
whole. In a letter from Strickland to Jefferson in 1790, Strickland writes,

“Where the improvement of the agriculture of a country can go hand in hand, with
the improvement of the morals of a people, and the increase of their happiness, there it
must stand in its most exalted state, there it ought to be seen in the most favourable
light by the Politician there it must meet with the countenance and support of every
good man and every friend to his country; so is it at present circumsitanced in your
country.”

This quotation shows a number of key elements of the role of agriculture in politics and
intellectual inquiry. First, the quotation draws the connection between agriculture and
morals, and therefore the character of the citizens of a country. Strickland said that those
who practice improved agriculture are also “improved”, moral people themselves. The
republic relied on good, moral citizens to support a free and prosperous nation. Second,
the quotation says that because agricultural improvement led to virtuous citizens,
politicians should give prominence to the improvement of agriculture. Third, Strickland
wrote that the appreciation of agricultural improvement by politicians was a “present
circumstance” in America. Therefore, even those abroad (by the year 1796) noted that

some Americans paid attention to agricultural improvement. He doesn’t make any claims on the form or extent, but noted it as common for politicians to give prominence to the study of agricultural improvements in the United States of America.

It is clear in the writings of the PSPA that they were among those Americans who believed that agricultural improvement was essential to a healthy and happy republic. They saw themselves as responsible for obtaining and disseminating that information.74

In one of their addresses, the PSPA begins stating the point of their publication as,

"The very imperfect state of American husbandry in general, compared with that of some countries in Europe, is too well known to be controverted. It was a conviction of our great inferiority, in this respect, that gave rise to the present Society, formed after the example of institutions in Europe, whose laudable endeavors to promote the Agriculture of their several countries, have been rewarded with the happiest effects."75

In other words, the society saw it as their duty to educate themselves with up to date agricultural theory from abroad so they could educate American farmers to be more productive. Just as American leaders gathered knowledge of successes and failures in governmental structure from Europe as they shaped the foundation of the American government, intellectuals and prominent members of society gathered knowledge about the foundational social, intellectual, political, and economic pillars of prosperous nations. The fundamental pillar of America, as argued earlier, was agriculture and therefore the Society required a compilation of the most up to date theories on agricultural improvement. The PSPA saw it as their responsibility to society at large to gather and disperse agricultural information to further awareness amongst American farmers.

The motive of the PSPA, to disperse knowledge about agricultural improvement to American farmers, was clear and available to anyone who read the newspaper. In March of 1786, the *Pennsylvania Evening Herald* published a statement from the PSPA that called for submissions of experiments conducted by farmers and stated that “These views being to promote improvements in agriculture, and in every article which claims the husbandman’s attention (objects of the first consequence to the citizens of these states)”76 This statement is an example of the clarity of the aims of the PSPA. This example also furthers the argument of the clear connection the Society’s members drew between the enhancement of citizens and agricultural improvement. By “objects of first consequence” they are talking about agricultural concerns as the number one imperative of the citizenry of the United States. In July of 1820, the *Baltimore American Farmer* reprinted an address originally published that year in the *Philadelphia Rural Magazine* that said the following.

“May I be permitted then to declare my conviction, that amidst the profusion of societies with which the present age abounds, there is none more useful, or more dignified, then that for the promotion of Agriculture. Indeed, in point of utility, I might justly say that it proceeds all others.”77 This passage, written nearly four decades after the previous quotation, shows the longevity of the vision of agricultural improvement that the Society held. One of the then Vice-Presidents of the PSPA, William Tilghman, wrote the address quoted above. The passage and the date of the passage --in reference to the first example-- also demonstrate how even during a time period where many things were changing constantly, the same connection between agricultural improvement and good citizens was made.

Though the Society consciously made their intentions and advertisements for submissions of experiments available to the “public” via the newspapers, there was still a disconnect between how members of the Society viewed independent small scale farmers and how they viewed educated gentlemen farmers from whom they could expected submissions. In his “Essays and Notes on Husbandry and Rural Affairs” published in 1799, Beale Bordley (founder of the PSPA) wrote about his learning to farm from his farmer neighbors. He remarked that they knew how to practice husbandry in the “mannor common to the country” but could teach him nothing about the “principles” of farming. The idea of “principles” of farming is an intellectual and philosophical conception of agriculture. Beale Bordley then proceeded to experiment on his own and “became more and more assured that great improvements might be made by professed farmers, in this first of all employments, if they could be brought to relinquish their bad habits.” This passage shows a clear intellectual supremacy that Beale Bordley saw of himself over his neighbors. In this section he painted his neighbors as unaware of the principles of good husbandry. He saw their methods as basic and in need of improvement that he, as an educated man, was capable of deducing through tested experiment. The idea that one could develop a mastery over something through books and experimentation came directly from the enlightenment. Going back to Hindle’s work linking intellectual societies to their utilitarian roots, the intelligible man was required to question and find a better method of man’s use of nature by deducing laws and principles of that nature.

The scientific method used by agricultural improvers is directly addressed by

79 Beale Bordley, *Essays and Notes on Husbandry and Rural Affairs*, p.iv
80 Hindle, p.194
environmental historian Benjamin R. Cohen when he writes, “Participating in correspondence networks, the seed trade, and economic planning across the Atlantic world, improvement advocates encouraged attention to method and process in farming practice.” In other words, the enlightened improver did not simply farm as he was told, but farmed as he found the best way to be. To find the best agricultural methods, the enlightened improver had to build off of the experience and writings of others, and further the work with his own scientific experiments. Furthermore, when Beale Bordley wrote “this the first of all employments” he is referring directly to the idea that agriculture was the number one employment of America both in actuality and in theory. Beale Bordley, in this passage, clearly saw the American farmer as one who needed instruction to break “bad habits”, and this instruction he saw coming from the enlightened, educated improvers such as himself and the PSPA. Beale Bordley’s view is problematic because it omits the voice of the farmers themselves who make up half of the agricultural improvement equation.

George Logan was one of two members of the PSPA who was an actual farmer. More specifically, Logan was a gentleman who chose to be a farmer and therefore provides a case study to look at the reality of the lack of true diversity of perspective within the PSPA, and the lost voice of the farmers who had no other vocational option then farming. An examination of Logan’s view of farmers clarifies the detachment of the Society from the reality of farmers. Logan was born into one of the most intellectually prominent families in Philadelphia in 1753, studied at Edinburgh, and was trained as a

81 Cohen, p. 41
82 Beale Bordley, Essays and Notes on Husbandry and Rural Affairs, p. iv
Instead of continuing down this elite track, Logan chose to make husbandry his primary livelihood because of his firm conviction for the self-sufficient American. In 1791, Logan wrote his *Letters Addressed to the Yeomanry of the United States*. This document was intended to educate the very part of society that Logan and Jefferson so strongly believed were the foundation of a strong republic; the Yeoman farmer. Where this may have been the intention, the document reads in a condescending tone. For example Logan began by saying, “It is time that you should know what comforts you are to enjoy, what rights you have to defend.” This quotation shows that Logan is clearly assuming that these farmers are ignorant of their rights and the “comforts” that their future holds. Its approach is from that of a superior who “knows better”. The document is, in many ways, not so different from Beale Bordley’s writings on farmers. The lack of difference between the tones of the two writers is poignant because Logan constantly claimed to be the defender of the small farmer.

In 1818 Logan wrote his *On the Errors of Husbandry in the United States*, to be delivered before the PSPA. In it he stated that, “It behoves then the husbandmen of Pennsylvania, if they wish to retain the honorable station in society, to which they are entitled, on account of the solid utility of their occupation to their country, to cultivate their minds with useful knowledge, and not leave them blanks.” This quotation serves as evidence first of the view the Society held of the “honorable station” of farmers as

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83 George Logan’s grandfather James Logan was well known abroad for his scientific achievements and his father William Logan was a good friend of Benjamin Franklin. Frederick B. Tolles, *George Logan of Philadelphia*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1953), p.7
84 Tolles, p.52
85 George Logan, *Letters Addressed to the Yeomanry of the United States*, (Philadelphia: Oswald, 1791) p.3
86 Tolles, p.86
important to a strong republic, second of the encouragement of “useful knowledge”, which the Society deemed to be agriculture, and third of the assumption that these farmers had minds that were “blank” and malleable to malice. Logan’s quotation, demonstrates the Society’s consistency in understanding their work as imperative to the formation of good citizens. The Society assumed that farmers had malleable minds, ready for the Society to teach them how to be better. This assumption of ability to mold the character of American farmers through the dispersal of “useful knowledge” in the form of agricultural reform is huge. It is no small assumption to make, but it is one that the Society, and even the most liberal and farmer-like member (Logan) of the Society, continued to make.

By looking at the examples of Jefferson, Strickland, the PSPA, Beale Bordley, and Logan’s writings about farmers and the role of agriculture in shaping the American character and therefore the republic, the hierarchy of knowledge and the assumptions of superiority become clear. The PSPA was, in accordance to political thought during this time period, assuming that good husbandry was the key to a strong republic and agricultural improvement was the root to creating good farmers. These thoughts are aligned with enlightenment thinking of man’s ability to learn the laws of nature and improve upon his interactions with nature to produce higher yields and strengthen the economy. Strickland’s point that man could be made more “moral” improving upon his knowledge of agriculture is one that by the first few decades of the nineteenth century is at the heart of the work of the PSPA. This section therefore proves that one of the ideological goals of the PSPA was to transform their neighbors into better and more virtuous farmers.
IV. The Land, The Society, and American Prosperity

Southeastern Pennsylvanian farmers created a pattern of poor farming practices because of a lack of labor and the abundance of land. The farmers harvested from the land until it was exhausted and then abandoned it for new land. In other words, the natural fertility of the virgin, fertile land in combination with the fact that the independent farmers had few or no additional laborers created a culture of poor husbandry. The United States, as a nation, inherited these bad habits when they gained independence from the British. Poor husbandry was something that the patrician society of Philadelphia acknowledged and saw as an area of much needed improvement, so much so that they formed a Society for the sole purpose of learning more about and promoting better agricultural practices. The depletion of soil fertility in Pennsylvania during the early nineteenth century fueled the energy of the PSPA to publish memoirs and newspaper articles of agricultural improvement writings that were meant to address the issue of soil fertility, boost American prosperity, and fulfill their goal of getting American farmers up to and beyond English farming practices.

The physical landscape of southeastern Pennsylvanian, which provided naturally fertile soil, and lack of labor allowed for the development of poor husbandry. As Washington wrote in a letter to British agrarian reform leader Arthur Young, “The aim of the farmers in this country (if they be called farmers) is, not to make the most they can from the land, which is, or has been cheap, but the most of the labor, which is dear”88 The conditions of the physical environment allowed for a culture of “scratched over”

88 From a letter of George Washington to Arthur Young quoted in Stoll, p.34
cultivation, where farmers reaped what they could while putting in minimal effort.\textsuperscript{89} The land therefore played a part in shaping agricultural culture in Pennsylvania. As one Pennsylvanian farmer wrote in 1810, “The field which I pitched upon for my experiments contains about fourteen acres; it had been cleared about fifty-three or forty years, and continued in constant cultivation for upwards thirty years, without manure of any kind.”\textsuperscript{90} Judging by this passage, farmers in Pennsylvania could expect the fertility of their land to last up to, and perhaps beyond, thirty years before they would have to consider fertilizing or changing their crop rotation to one that replenishes the soil with clover (as the PSPA suggested).\textsuperscript{91} Another contributor to the PSPA memoirs, American agriculturalist John Lorain, wrote that “they [American farmers] fall or girdle the timber, scratch the soil, and commence cropping, which is continued without intermission, until the fertility of the ground had been exhausted, which renders fresh soil and further clearing necessary, and this new spot also undergoes the same destructive process.”\textsuperscript{92} Washington and others who wrote of the land’s effect on Pennsylvania farmers saw the low-maintenance husbandry--demonstrated in the passage by Lorain--and were worried about the consequences. Many educated Americans knew the history of soil depletion back in England, as evidenced by their concern for the concept of agricultural improvement, which came out of the English agrarian revolution. These educated Americans knew that the English had realized that by

\textsuperscript{89} Stoll, p.35


\textsuperscript{91} Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, “An Address, from the Philadelphia Society”, p.5

changing their agricultural techniques they could reliably produce more crops.

Washington and the members of the PSPA therefore could ascertain that with poor husbandry would come depletion in crop production; a cost the fledgling nation could not afford economically since they relied so heavily on agricultural exports and internal trade.

With the prosperity of so many farmers tied so intimately to the fertility of the land, soil quality became tied with a prosperous and stable American future. Previous sections of this paper detailed the large economic role that agriculture played during the early republic, but now that role has taken a new level of meaning. Now agriculture, economy, society, and the land itself were all a part of the future of the young United States; a future that was put in check continuously throughout the foundational first decades of the PSPA’s existence. For instance, in 1793 Yellow Fever broke out across Philadelphia, putting the meetings temporarily on halt. In 1798 and 1802 the fever returned again, and finally in 1805 the PSPA resumed its meetings but now with a new president, Judge Richard Peters and vice president, George Clymer. A little over a decade later, the closing of the war of 1812 brought about an increased focus on patriotic pursuits and a high demand for farm products. The war placed an emphasis on the need for agricultural production to support the nation’s economy.

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94 Baatz, Venerate the Plough, p.16

95 Baatz, Venerate the Plough, p.21

96 Stoll, p.20
The ending of the war of 1812 and the maturation of the PSPA coincided in a way that made agricultural improvement an ideal way to further their aim of establishing Americans as agriculturally on par with England. The PSPA’s social status as educated men granted them access to information about agricultural improvements abroad. Members were of a social status that allowed them to correspond with prominent scholars, scientists, and gentlemen abroad such as Arthur Young, Jethro Tull, and William Strickland. These correspondences opened doors to innovative new practices, suggestions, and a flow of literature. Beale Bordley’s library was known to house the essentials of an enlightened scholar along with the latest in agrarian reform. It was common at that time to share the knowledge one obtained via correspondence with one’s social and political peers. This is seen clearly in the PSPA’s memoirs, which are comprised of a compilation of essays and letters written to the society and then read and approved for publishing with some commentary added. It is important to note here that although the PSPA took it upon themselves to disperse this information, because of their position of being the bearers of knowledge, they did not see themselves as acting in a way that sought out political and social power in an individualistic sense. In the preface to their first memoir the Society writes, “We selected subjects rather than essays ; and risk this recommencement of our well meant endeavors, to promote the happiness and prosperity of our country, with no motive either of personal fame, or interest.” This passage shows that they saw their actions not as derived from a desire for personal power.

97 Fischer, p.333
98 See Memoirs I, II, and III of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture in bibliography.
or interest, but of pure intentions to enhance American life and prosperity. The Society's aims then are ideological. They envision themselves as the enlightened men that are to lead their country, through English agricultural improvements, to be more prosperous and gain respect for their intellectual character.

In his "Advertisement" at the end of the PSPA's second Memoirs, the then President of the Society, Richard Peters, stated the role of the Society was to encourage an empowerment of people. He writes that

"There are few landholders who cultivate their own soil (as do most in this country) who cannot express their knowledge of facts sufficiently clear in writing, on a subject to which they are more competent then literary theorists. No farmer is remote from some well educated neighbor, who can write down and communicate facts recited to him. It is therefore the more to be lamented that any want of information on practical husbandry, should retard the improvement this kind of knowledge would promote." 100

Here he clearly believes that everyone is capable of contributing to the cause of agricultural improvement and wants the people to participate. This call to action is particularly interesting because it would have been a "well educated neighbor" who had access to the newspaper would have read the advertisement. Peters' call then is to those men who are educated to empower their neighbors to contribute by dictating their practices to them. This call was idealistic and envisioned a republic in which every citizen of every level of educational, social, and political status was doing their part to improve agriculture, and by doing so, improve the prosperity of the country.

Peters was not exclusive in who he aimed to involve with agricultural improvement. In his advertisement, Peters is asking for more then involvement from

farmers, but for patronage from patrician society for the PSPA’s endeavors to use agricultural improvement to boost American prosperity. This is clear in the second part of the passage when Peters writes,

"The citizens of Philadelphia, are exceeded by those of no other part of the United States, in talents and capacity to promote prosperity of their country by encouragements to agriculture; -- the foundation upon which public happiness, comforts and support are erected. There is no part of the United States, in which such talents and capacity, can be more effectually and beneficially employed, for the mutual prosperity of both city and country."  

Peters did not write this simply as a promotional piece (though it acts as that as well) but wrote it because he, along with the other members of the Society believed that what they were doing was to the benefit of the prosperity of the nation. This passage is an empowering call to arms (of sorts) to enhance city and country prosperity through the patronage and support of agricultural improvement.

The emphasis on the Society’s role in promoting prosperity during the second decade of the nineteenth century is highlighted in James Madison’s Address to the Agricultural Society of Albemarle Virginia in 1818. In a particularly poignant section, Madison writes “a just estimate of the happiness of our country will never overlook what belongs to the fertile activity of a free people, and the benign influence of a responsible Government.”  

This passage ties together a common rhetoric of agricultural improvement bringing happiness and prosperity to the people, and the idea that the Government (via the work of the Society) is responsible for collecting and disseminating this information. The idea that the PSPA saw themselves in this role of establishing

102 Madison, p.76
agricultural standards and disseminating information is made evident in one of Logan’s more ideological sections of his *Fourteen Agricultural Experiments* as well. Logan quotes L’Poivre, a celebrated French philosopher, in saying “I will then assert with confidence, that in every country in the world, the state of agriculture depends solely, upon the established laws and customs of the country.”\(^{103}\) This passage does two things. First it represents how Logan saw the role of those establishing laws and customs or, in the case of the Society, standards of improvement. Logan saw the Society as crucial to the quality of agriculture. Second, this passage demonstrates, yet again, how members of the society were looking to intellectuals abroad to formulate their ideas about agriculture and their role in the improvement of agriculture.

Other sections of Madison’s address closely tie to the ideas of the PSPA during the early nineteenth century, and serve to highlight themes that link the work of the Society to the promotion of American prosperity. Madison writes that “the resources of our country may not only contribute to the greater happiness of a given number, but to the augmentation of the number enjoying a greater happiness, the motives become stronger for the improvement and extension of them.”\(^{104}\) This passage is bringing in happiness as tied to prosperity rhetoric and draws upon the duty of Americans to support their fellow countrymen in the improvement of their agricultural practices. Like Peters, Madison sees agricultural improvement as something that all good citizens should be participating in. He writes explicitly “agriculture is the basis of population and

\(^{103}\) Logan, "Fourteen Agricultural Experiments", (Philadelphia, Baileys, 1797), p.38
\(^{104}\) Madison, p.76
prosperity."\textsuperscript{105} and that "Patriotic societies, the best agents for effecting it [agricultural improvement], are pursuing the object with the animation and intelligence which characterize the efforts of a self-governed people."\textsuperscript{106} The "Patriotic societies" Madison is referring to are agricultural societies such as the PSPA. Although the idea of patriotism is something that, as mentioned previously, is becoming more popular after the war of 1812, the sentiments of concern for the well being of fellow country men was something that was present since the inception of the society in 1785. This passage shows the clear link that Madison drew between the study of the improvement of agriculture and the self-governance of the people via intellectual societies. Madison’s piece all together portrays the message that agricultural improvement was necessary for a prosperous and happy nation. Like Peters, Madison is saying that the process of experimentation, correspondence, and dissemination of this information was a process that every citizen could and should participate in and the Society saw themselves as the instigators and moderators of this important activity.

The theoretical side of reform and the ideas of republican virtue fueled the work of the PSPA. However, there were very physically practical implications and goals of their work as well. In Peter’s “Address to the Citizens” at the beginning of the second volume of the \textit{Memoirs of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture} he writes a list of the aims of the Society. The first is that they “wish to receive and promulgate agricultural information and intelligence both theoretical and practical; preferring always

\textsuperscript{105} Madison, p.76
\textsuperscript{106} Madison, p.77
Here Peters is referring to the practical, as distinct from theoretical. The Society's preference to the practical is made explicit in their aims to have premiums that increase incentives for all to contribute, establish manufactory of agricultural implements, establish a pattern farm to serve as a school of agricultural experiments, found a veterinary institute to investigate animal diseases, and promote the formation of similar societies. In these goals it is clear that the Society was trying to bridge useful knowledge into useful institutions and implementations, with the aim to produce tangible results in land as well as the people. Though the Society had trouble getting the level of participation as they had hoped, it is clear through the publication of their memoirs, compiled from pieces written by many different authors, that the Society was encouraging correspondence and dissemination of information between gentlemen and lay farmers in the hopes of improving the actual, physical practices of the farmers.

The example of Gypsum represents a solution, presented by gentlemen farmers, to the soil depletion problem that could be found within the American natural environment and repurposed to work as a fertilizer. The use of Gypsum (a naturally occurring sulfate mineral), or plaster of paris as it was also called, was started by PSPA member Jacob Barge before the Society existed. Gypsum was made popular throughout the late eighteenth century, largely by Peters and (to a smaller degree) by Logan. Writing in reflection to the dispersal of knowledge about and the increased use of Gypsum, the Society anonymously writes "The society reflect with patriotic pleasure, upon their

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107 Peters, "Address to the Citizens", p.xvi
108 Peters, "Address to the Citizens", p.xvi
109 Peters, "Advertisement" p.iii
110 Tolles, p.97
agency in diffusing more extensively the knowledge of its effects upon the land; and in assisting to dispel the prejudices which unfortunately prevailed against it, by the publication of the communications of practical men, containing the result of their experience with that valuable substance [gypsum].”\textsuperscript{111} Here the society directly sees their role as teacher. They are responsible for dispersing knowledge about Gypsum. They are making this knowledge widespread by publishing the communications of “practical men” (which were largely the members of the Society), their correspondents at home and abroad, and some educated farmers. They drew a direct link in this statement between the work that they do and practical knowledge. In this way they were making it clear that the Society’s work was two-fold; they were providing a practical service that boosts American prosperity (through higher crop yields) that fit into the theology of what they, as educated and concerned citizens, owed their fellow countrymen.

Through the evidence provided thus far, it has been made clear that the aims of the PSPA arose from a tangible need derived from the depletion of fertility within the physical environment. In combination with the ideology of the PSPA, the Society’s goals were clearly to boost American prosperity through better crop production, and to bring Americans up to date with English methods. If this argument was not made explicit enough, Peters summed it all up in his Discourse on Agriculture when he writes “It should continue to be our ardent wish, as it has been our humble endeavor, that these exceptions should multiply, until the improvement of our agriculture shall become as extensive and imperishable, as the freedom and happiness of our country”\textsuperscript{112}. The fertility of the land

\textsuperscript{111} Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, Memoirs Vol. I, p.ii
\textsuperscript{112} Peters “A Discourse on Agriculture”, p.xvii
has become synonymous with the fertility of American prosperity, and with the actual and feared depletion of the soil came the call for action. The physical, need married with the ideological goals and ideas of responsibility, created a solid purpose for the Society, which drove their work. Peters said that “If the liberty of our country be so connected with it [agriculture], that, as all history and experience show, it is the test of its stability; furnishing in war the supplies indispensible for defense, in peace the materials for subsistence, comfort and wealth, what further inducements can there be?"113 Simply put, the work of the PSPA was for the economic stability and prosperity of the nation. This work arose out of a combination of theoretical implications of good husbandry and a physical need demonstrated by the depletion of soil noted by farmers and visitors alike.

113 Peters “A Discourse on Agriculture”, p.xvii
Conclusion:

Agricultural improvement was important to early republican Philadelphia. People relied on agricultural production for sustenance, economy, and livelihood. To have successful agriculture people needed fertile land and labor. Before the Revolution and in the years immediately following, southeastern Pennsylvanians developed farming practices that focused on immediate gain and had little concern for the long-term fertility of the land because there was more land than labor to be had. The early republic saw changes in this attitude. The social, and intellectual climate of early republican Philadelphia, gave rise to, and defined agricultural improvement as represented in the work of the PSPA. Agricultural theory, handed down from the English and French agricultural revolutions became a hot topic of study in Philadelphia. Agricultural improvement, during the early republic, was comparable to literature, philosophy, and natural science within intellectual societies. The rise of intellectual societies therefore led to the increased intellectual study of agricultural improvement and the formation of the PSPA.

The intellectual and social climate was placed into a physical context that likewise gave space for improvement. It was not an accident that Philadelphia was so active in agricultural improvement. The PSPA was a direct reflection of the intellectual culture that arose from its geographic location, and the perceptions and needs of local farmers. The assumptions made by visitors and patrician observers were translated directly into the work of the PSPA. Their work therefore carried a tone of superiority that matched well with their enlightened understanding of the relationship between man and nature. They understood that through correspondence and experimentation, man could learn to
master nature to his advantage and the PSPA saw it as their responsibility to gather and disseminate this knowledge.

The development of the work of the PSPA transformed into something Society members believed would enhance the character of the farmers they were educating. Agricultural improvement, to the PSPA, was not limited to agricultural methods but inherently linked to the improvement of the farmer as well. A “good” husband was believed to be synonymous with a “good” and virtuous republican citizen. The perceptions the patrician, Philadelphian society had of the farmers themselves, not just their practices, demonstrated the link that the Society drew between a good farmer and a virtuous citizen. The PSPA had a strong ideological side to their work that hoped to improve the character of the farmers they sought to educate. The ideological was then married to the tangible improvement by notions of soil fertility, agricultural improvement, and American prosperity. Sources from the early nineteenth century stated with conviction that the connectivity of agrarian reform and prosperity were both possible in an ideological and tangible sense. Here it can be discerned that the ideological and the tangible were not mutually exclusive but complimentary in the eyes of the PSPA. To improve the practices of the farmers was to improve their prosperity and the prosperity of the country.

Through the work of and surrounding the PSPA, it is evident that soil did matter and so did society. Because of the intellectual climate of Philadelphia, the issues that arose when the natural fertility of the soil of southeastern Pennsylvania began to diminish were made meaningful in a larger context. The PSPA’s work was not just a practical solution, but also a manifestation of ideology intricately woven with the struggles the
young United States had in establishing itself as a nation and their desire to emulate England. The intellectual societies of Philadelphia saw their work as comparable to that of European societies even though they had merely a fraction of the intellectual resources. The PSPA saw their Society as a furthering of the work accomplished in the English agricultural revolution made meaningful for America. As they drew out the Laws of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting Agriculture on that chilly February day in 1785, and throughout the decades that followed, the PSPA used their work to support the tangible, economic, and intellectual prosperity of their countrymen and country.
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