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YANKEE FARMERS IN NORTHERN VIRGINIA, 1840-1860

by RICHARD H. ABBOTT*

IN the spring of 1840 fifty-six families from Dutchess County, New York, moved south across the Potomac River to start farming anew on lands in Fairfax County, Virginia.¹ The arrival of these northern immigrants coincided with a renewed attempt on the part of Virginia planters to revitalize the state's agricultural economy. Led by Edmund Ruffin, the more progressive planters were adopting new farming techniques designed to revive the fertility of their soil and halt the decline of land values. Both Ruffin and Willoughby Newton, another of the Commonwealth's leading agricultural reformers, expressed hope that Virginia could entice farmers and capital from other states to help develop her resources.² Consequently the new arrivals from the North were well received in their adopted state, and the subsequent prosperity of the transplanted New Yorkers encouraged other Northerners to follow them. The success of Yankee farmers in Fairfax quickly focused the attention of a variety of reformers, both in Virginia and in the North, who wished to bring about various changes within the Old Dominion. When antislavery agitators began to point to the Fairfax farmers as a demonstration of the superiority of free labor over slave, native Virginians began to withdraw their original welcome for new arrivals from the North. Increasing sectional tensions in the 1850's finally ended the trickle of Northern migrants into Virginia.

At the time of the arrival of the New Yorkers, much of Fairfax County's flat, sandy soil was no longer under cultivation. Extensive tracts of waste land alternated with patches of timber. Old tobacco plantations had either been abandoned or reduced in size. Land values had dropped to the point where the newcomers were able to purchase farms at prices ranging from five dollars to fifteen dollars an acre. Within a decade, some one thousand

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¹ For general discussions of the movement of Yankees into Virginia, see Clement Eaton, *The Growth of Southern Civilization, 1790-1860* (New York, 1961), p. 181; and *Freedom of Thought in the Old South* (Durham, N.C., 1940), pp. 237-239; George Winston Smith, "Antebellum Attempts of Northern Business Interests to 'Redeem' the Upper South," *Journal of Southern History*, XI (1945), 177-181; Avery Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland* (Urbana, 1926), pp. 160-161; Lewis C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern States to 1860* (New York, 1941), II, 919-920.

² Edmund Ruffin quoted in *American Farmer*, V (1849-1850), 10; Willoughby Newton, *ibid.*, VII (1851-1852), 35.

Northerners came to Fairfax, attracted by cheap land, and optimistic about the possibilities of growing a variety of crops for sale in nearby Washington, D. C., or of exploiting the timber which grew abundantly near streams which could power sawmills. The newcomers invested over \$250,000 in the exhausted land, which they bought in parcels ranging from one hundred to two hundred acres. Although some migrants purchased large plantations, in order to speculate in land, most Yankees were content to buy smaller farms on which they could use their skilled labor to best advantage. A few newcomers, disappointed when they did not immediately reap rich rewards, left for the western frontier, but most Yankees came prepared to stay, and warned those who would follow them not to come unless they were ready to spend the time and effort required to revitalize the exhausted soil.³

Instead of trying to grow tobacco on the old plantation land, the Fairfax farmers produced a variety of other crops, including wheat, oats, barley, corn, rye, potatoes, turnips, beets, and carrots. Many farmers experimented with crop rotation. They used clover and plaster in an attempt to revive the soil, and also developed new methods of preparing manure. Generally they used plows which drove deep into the soil. Some New Yorkers who had been dairy farmers in their home state, built barns and began to raise herds to produce milk, cream, butter, and cheese for Washington consumers. Others experimented with raising sheep on some of their less desirable land.

In 1846 a group of New Jersey Quakers established a particularly successful settlement in Fairfax County. Attracted to Virginia by advertisements of large stands of timber, they purchased over two thousand acres, formerly a part of the Mount Vernon estate. Some forty Quaker families subdivided the land among themselves, and soon were building grist and saw mills, schools, and churches. Once the original purchase had been settled, other Quakers acquired surrounding lands. Together they soon developed a thriving lumbering business which supplied Northern orders for shipbuilding materials and railroad ties.⁴

³ Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of Virginia . . .* (Charleston, 1852), p. 254; Manuscript United States Census, 1850, Fairfax County; *Monthly Journal of Agriculture*, II (1846-1847), 445-446; *Cultivator*, IV (1847), 77-78; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 916; John Robert Godley, *Letters from America* (London, 1844), p. 203; *American Agriculturist*, III (1844), 8; *Country Gentleman*, VI (1855), 90, 155; *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, April 22, 1845; *New York Weekly Times*, February 19, 1853.

⁴ *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, May 24, 1845; *Cultivator*, IV (1847), 299-300; VII (1850), 387; *American Agriculturist*, VI (1847), 368; VII (1848), 123; X (1851), 21-22; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 920; *Country Gentleman*, IX (1857), 35. On the Quaker settlement see Dorothy T. Muir, *Potomac Interlude: The Story of Woodlawn Mansion and Mount Vernon Neighborhood, 1846-1943* (Washington, 1943).

Within a decade, visitors to Fairfax were noting that the county was enjoying a new prosperity. One observer, reporting in 1852 to the Commissioner of Patents, who handled agricultural matters for the federal government, insisted that the county had improved so much that a traveler who had passed through it ten years earlier would not recognize it. Charles Lyell, a prominent English geologist, traveled through Fairfax County in 1841 and again in 1845, and on the latter visit found an astonishing increase in the productivity of the land. The *Baltimore American* announced that the new farmers had restored a high degree of fertility to the soil, and a correspondent for the *Country Gentleman* declared that "the Yankees are doing wonders both in this region and many parts of Virginia upon what were considered worn out lands."⁵

The energetic Yankees, bringing with them capital to invest in Fairfax lands, found a warm welcome in Virginia. The editor of the *Richmond Examiner* applauded the efforts of the new settlers, and, judging by their example, concluded that "an infusion of a little Yankee industry and capital into the arteries of Virginia will produce a beneficial effect." The editor of the *Fairfax News* welcomed the new arrivals, and hoped that more would follow. According to the *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, the Yorkers in Fairfax had "made many solitary places glad" with the "beneficial effects" of their labor and capital. Travelers in the area reported that Virginians admitted the Yankees were setting a valuable example in introducing improved farming techniques. William C. Rives, president of the Agricultural Society of Albemarle County, declared that "this agricultural immigration into our state from New York marks a new and cheering era in the history and fortunes of Virginia."⁶

As news of the success of the Yankee farmers in Fairfax spread around the Old Dominion, landholders from the Blue Ridge to the Eastern Shore, from the Panhandle to Southside, hoping to duplicate the Fairfax experience in their own locality, began to advertise their lands for sale in Northern newspapers and agricultural periodicals. Farmers across the Northeast, responding to the publicity, wrote the editors of agricultural periodicals to seek more information about land in Virginia. By 1852 a correspondent for

⁵ *Report of the Commissioner of Patents, for Year 1851: Part II, Agriculture* (Washington, 1852), pp. 274-275; *Baltimore American* quoted in *Alexandria Gazette*, September 30, 1847; *Country Gentleman*, V (1855), 391; Charles Lyell, *Second Visit to the United States* (New York, 1849), I, 207.

⁶ Eaton, *Freedom of Thought*, p. 238; Muir, *Potomac Interlude*, pp. 53-54; *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, August 29, 1846; William Chambers, *Things As They Are in America*, (London, 1857), p. 256; *Country Gentleman*, V (1855), 391; *Richmond Enquirer*, November 11, 1842.

the *New York Times* could say that he had read "at least a hundred advertisements" in Northern newspapers and agricultural periodicals, offering inducements to Yankees to cross the Potomac.⁷ A trickle of Northerners came; during the late 1840's and early 1850's small numbers of individuals and families found their way to several Virginia counties and cities.⁸

The new settlers in Fairfax added to the advertising of opportunities in Virginia; they formed a "Farmers' Association" to publicize their accomplishments. They sent glowing reports North in order to attract further migrants, then sometimes sold out to the newcomers, an action which revealed the speculative nature of some of the farming ventures. Although some Yankees who failed in their speculation consequently warned others against coming to the state, most seemed to enjoy their new surroundings. One New Yorker in Fairfax, who claimed to be the first from his home state to move to the county, assured his old neighbors that "I have never known a practical, industrious good managing farmer [to] locate in this country that had good cause to regret doing so." A Pennsylvanian insisted that "we have as kind neighbors as ever honored a neighborhood; some of them have endeared themselves to us, beyond what you could imagine." Many others likewise praised Virginia hospitality and society.⁹

Despite their general satisfaction with the Old Dominion, the Northern farmers revealed a wide-spread disdain for Southern farming methods. They found native Virginians indolent, ignorant, and unaware of proper farming techniques; according to one newcomer, "there is no place in the United States where God has done so much and man so little." Faultfinding Yankee farmers ridiculed the crop yields produced by native Virginians, and bragged about the production of their own fields. One farmer announced that the land he settled was worthless, until he plowed it with "four good stout Virginia Yankeeised Oxen." Another was certain that until Virginians learned to read, they would never learn how to restore their lands. One New Yorker noted with pride that although his neighbors first laughed at his barn when he built it, they soon followed his example. Many correspondents to Northern agricultural periodicals reflected the sentiments of one transplanted New Englander, who insisted that "nothing so provokes a Yankee as the odd way of doing things on a Virginia farm." If ever Vir-

⁷ Frederick Law Olmsted, *Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, with Remarks on their Economy* (New York, 1859), pp. 175-176.

⁸ Discussion of land sales and migration into various parts of Virginia can be found in a number of periodicals and newspapers for the years 1845-1855: see e.g. *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, *Cultivator*, *Country Gentleman*, *American Agriculturist*, *Genesee Farmer*.

⁹ *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, May 24, 1845; *American Agriculturist*, VII (1848), 123; *Cultivator*, IV (1847), 299-300.

ginia became "that earthly paradise, which the Father of his country predicted it would ultimately become," this observer believed it would be due to "northern implements, northern usages, habits, customs; northern schools and churches; northern industry and economy . . . and northern restlessness and progressive improvement."¹⁰

Many another Northern newcomer echoed the conviction that all Virginia needed to regain her prosperity was the application of Yankee industry and skill to her tired soil. Sighed one such Yankee, traveling through the Old Dominion in 1846: "Suppose it were possible, by some magic power, to lift up this whole county, and place it in the midst of Pennsylvania, or . . . Connecticut, or Massachusetts! Imagination can scarcely conceive of a greater transformation than it would undergo." Since Virginia land could not be transported to New England, Yankee farmers would bring their skills to the land. One visitor to Fairfax County noted with great satisfaction that "the schoolmaster in husbandry, as well as in political and moral science, is abroad, and all this salubrious region will ere long bear the print of his footsteps."¹¹

A variety of observers, foreign, Northern, and Virginian, also found in the activities of the Fairfax farmers all manner of evidence to uphold their particular theories about the superiority of Northern ways and the disadvantages of agricultural societies based on slave labor. Charles Lyell, who disliked slavery, found that the New Yorkers had provided "a practical demonstration" that slavery was less profitable than free labor. Another Englishman, Thomas C. Grattan, who came through Virginia in the early 1840's, insisted that slavery "and its concomitant train of ills" was the one overwhelming drawback to the state. He saw hope for the state, however, in the inward migration of "white labour and Yankee enterprize" which he thought would surely reduce the Negro population of Virginia.¹²

American observers also found support for their particular social and economic opinions by observing Fairfax. Frederick Law Olmsted, touring the South as a reporter for the *New York Times*, applauded the efforts of the new Fairfax farmers. His comments on the success of the Yankees in

¹⁰*The Plow*, I (1852), 304-305; *Cultivator*, VI (1849), 238-239; VII (1850), 154; *American Agriculturist*, VIII (1849), 120; VII (1848), 123; X (1851), 21-22; *Country Gentleman*, II (1853), 278-279; *American Farmer*, II (1846), 139; III (1847), 170; *New England Farmer*, XXII (1843-1844), 113; XXIII (1844-1845), 140.

¹¹*Monthly Journal of Agriculture*, I (1845-1846), 475-476; *American Agriculturist*, I (1842-1843), 374-375; *The Plow*, I (1852), 302.

¹²Charles Lyell, *Travels in North America . . .* (New York, 1845), I, 104-105; *Second Visit to the United States* (New York, 1849), I, 207; Thomas Colley Grattan, *Civilized America* (London, 1859), II, 248-249; Chambers, *Things as They Are*, p. 256; James Robertson, *A Few Months in America* (London, 1855), p. 43.

Virginia were tinged with the hope that other Northerners would follow them into the state and thus bolster the ranks of those who would abolish slavery there. A land reformer, who advocated the subdivision of land into small tracts so that poor men could buy them, pointed to the success of the Fairfax farmers, who had broken up old plantations into small farms. John S. Skinner, editor of a variety of agricultural periodicals, seized upon the example of Fairfax County to support his conviction that Virginia would do well to develop a varied economy of general farming, milling, lumbering, and manufacturing. Skinner looked forward to selling his new magazine, *The Plough, Loom, and Anvil*, to converts in northern Virginia.¹³

In the 1840's, propagandists in Virginia also found ammunition for a variety of causes in discussing the activity of the Fairfax Yankees. According to the editor of the *Fredericksburg Recorder*, the newcomers were successful because they came from states "where there are *free schools*." He urged Virginia to profit by the example. Virginia agricultural reformers urged their neighbors to imitate the Northerners' farming habits. An official of the Henrico County Agricultural Society was sure that if Virginians did not improve the soil of their state, "the Northern people would do it, and call upon us as unjust stewards to surrender our homes to those who would give a better account of their stewardship." The editor of the *Winchester Republican*, noting the Yankee success, asked his readers "if such results can be attained by proper exertion, why should Virginia be permitted to sink in her agricultural character?"¹⁴

More than a few Virginians hoped that the arrival of Northern settlers would encourage the Old Dominion to give up the unprofitable and undesirable institution of slavery. The newcomers did not use slaves, but they did not complain about the existence of the institution in their midst. Most apparently agreed with one of the earliest immigrants from New York, who stated that the Yankees in Fairfax "possess too much good sense and entertain too just an appreciation of what is due to the courtesies and reciprocal obligations of social intercourse to volunteer their opinions, unsolicited, upon the abstract question of the justification [of slavery]."¹⁵ Nonetheless, the editor of the *Norfolk Herald* applauded the presence of the Yankees in

¹³ *American Farmer*, VIII (1851-1852), 133; *Plough, Loom, and Anvil*, III (1850-1851), 445; *Monthly Journal of Agriculture*, I (1845-1846), 475-476.

¹⁴ *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, June 30, 1846, and September 30, 1847; *Country Gentleman*, V (1855), 391; *Southern Planter*, VII (1847), 16-17; *Richmond Whig*, quoted in *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, August 29, 1847; *Richmond Enquirer*, October 28, 1842.

¹⁵ *Monthly Journal of Agriculture*, II (1846-1847), 446-447; *Cultivator*, IV (1847), 77-78.

Fairfax stating that "a change of our slave population for one of moral and industrious white people" was "a consummation devoutly to be wished." A Virginian educated at Harvard termed the incoming Yankee farmer a "practical philanthropist" who was helping free the state from the incubus of slavery, "which has for so long a time darkened her prospects and retarded her prosperity."¹⁶

In the fall of 1845 several Virginia newspapers, including the *Richmond Whig* and the *Alexandria Gazette*, ran a series of letters entitled "Yankees in Fairfax," written by Samuel Janney. A prominent Loudoun County Quaker, poet, teacher, and preacher, Janney had for some twenty years agitated for the abolition of slavery in Virginia. Certain that his fellow citizens would prefer his strictures on slavery to those of Yankee abolitionists, he sought to utilize Virginia newspapers to promulgate his views. In December 1844 he told an associate that "the time has come for the discussion of slavery in Virginia. I have begun it in earnest, and believe it will be my duty to pursue it with vigor."¹⁷

As Janney described his series of eight letters to the *Richmond Whig*, he sought to discuss "agriculture, education, and political economy, showing the superiority of free labor over slave labor in promoting public prosperity." Janney found the Yankees in Fairfax County provided an excellent opportunity for developing his opinions. In his letters, the Quaker abolitionist described the farming operations of the Yankees in great detail. Noting the many signs of prosperity in Fairfax, Janney contrasted its farms with the "idleness and extravagance which has impoverished so large a portion of Eastern Virginia." According to Janney, the Yankee farmers had increased the value of their lands anywhere from fifty to one hundred percent. The moral that he drew from his observations was clear: only a "radical change in [Virginia's] system of domestic policy—the substitution of free for involuntary labor," would arrest the "retrograde movement which has so long been going on in the Eastern part of the State." Once slavery was abolished, insisted Janney, more immigrants would flood into Virginia, industry would develop, and the state would prosper.¹⁸

Janney's opinions received favorable comment from the editors of the *Richmond Whig* and the *Alexandria Gazette*, as well as from the editor of at least one Northern newspaper. The connection he and others made,

¹⁶ *New England Farmer*, XXIII (1844), 108; *Norfolk Herald* quoted in *Alexandria Gazette*, September 30, 1845, and also August 18, 1846.

¹⁷ Samuel M. Janney, *Memoirs of Samuel M. Janney . . .* (Philadelphia, 1881), pp. 86-91; Eaton, *Freedom of Thought*, pp. 234-235.

¹⁸ *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, September 12-November 19, 1845.

however, between the immigration of free labor and the end of slavery bade ill for the further movement of Yankees into the Old Dominion. In the ten years after Janney published his letters, tensions between North and South over slavery increased. Native Virginians began to fear that the Yankee immigrants in Fairfax were plotting to run off their slaves. Resentment in Virginia grew as critics of the state's peculiar institution drew sharper comparison with Yankeedom. In 1853 the author of an article in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* announced that in Fairfax County, "the North and the South stand face to face," precipitating a struggle between the "rich, enterprising disciple of progress" from the North, and his "broken-down poor-gentleman brother" of the South. According to the writer, the "rich brother" pitied his Southern counterpart and offered to rejuvenate his country for him. A Virginian answered the offer through the columns of *DeBow's Review*: "The work of regeneration must be that of [Virginia's] OWN SONS." In 1856, when Eli Thayer of Massachusetts recommended establishing a free-labor colony of Yankees in western Virginia, citizens of the Old Dominion were not receptive to the idea. John M. Daniel, editor of the *Richmond Examiner*, warned of the menace of "The Vandal Invasion of Virginia," while a correspondent in his newspaper attacked the "grand scheme set afoot down East for the resuscitation and abolitionizing of our good old State." Though some Virginia editors indicated a willingness to admit Northern capital and labor, they would do so only if Virginia institutions were safeguarded. Northern plans to regenerate the Upper South were met with the cry of "Black Republicanism."¹⁹

Thus, what had begun as a small but significant movement of Northern farmers into the exhausted lands of northern Virginia became a tool in the hands of various reformers and propagandists, and, with increasing sectional antagonism, the migration ceased. The "Vandals" were not to enter Virginia again until the Civil War had decimated the state and destroyed slavery. Then, as S. S. Randall of New York had done in 1847, they would come "with family and a good assortment of carpetbags" to seek new opportunities in the Old Dominion.²⁰

¹⁹ Osgood Mussey, *Review of Ellwood Fisher's Lecture on the North and the South* (Cincinnati, 1849), p. 84; *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, II (1853), 201; *U. S. Gazette*, quoted in *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, October 16, 1845; *De Bow's Review*, XXII (1857), 621-623; Smith, "Ante-Bellum Attempts . . . to 'Redeem' the Upper South," *Journal of Southern History*, XI, 210-212; Patricia Hickin, "John C. Underwood and the Antislavery Movement in Virginia, 1847-1860," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, LXXIII (1965), 163-164.

²⁰ *Cultivator*, IV (1847), 77-78.