

# Women's Labor and Farm Production in the Late 1800s: A Comparison of a Southern and Northern Town

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## How did women's labor relate to farm production in the late 1800s?

### Why the late 1800s?

This is a time when many modern American institutions emerged, including mass production, commercial small-scale agriculture, progressive movements, and the consumer economy. We're particularly interested in exploring the development of commercial smallholder farming and it's eventual transition into industrialized farming in the 20th century. We are pursuing this through a multiscale examination of material remains, landscapes, and historic documents. We begin this venture here with an analysis of census and agricultural schedule data.

### Why women's labor?



The Jones farm in c. 1938

Simply put, there is conflicting information on women's roles and labor input on farms. Sally McMurry (1996) notes that mid-1800s documents discuss how women were pushed out of farm labor—particularly dairy production as it became a money maker—and forced exclusively into domestic roles. Women's contributions to agriculture in the 20th century are marginally discussed in academic or popular outlets. However, family histories, Eric's included, and actual experiences in daily farm life suggest that gender roles were and continue to be fluid.

Why does the narrative not seem to match with some experiences in the 20th century? Did the trend reverse in the early 20th century? Is it perception vs. reality? Was the situation more complex or fluid? Historical documents also tend to highlight wealthier farmers, so are smallholders different? We turn to census data here to explore women's roles and what their contribution was to farm production at this time.

### Why Fenner, NY and Broadway, SC?

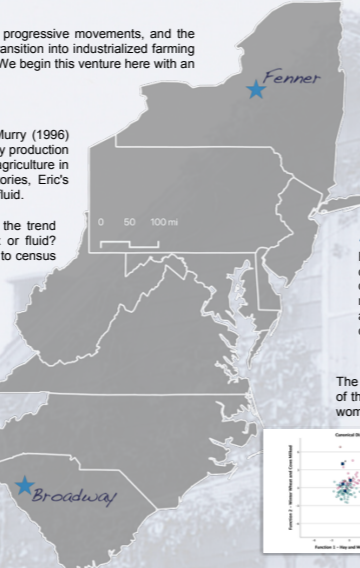
We wanted to examine communities focused on smallholding agriculture, and we wanted to compare a northern and southern town to examine the intersection of gender, class, and race during this critical time in American history. Eric's family are farmers with a long history in Fenner, so it is a community project and has an auto-ethnographic component. As for Broadway, we wanted to include a local component in South Carolina, given that Kelli, Amber, and Wyatt have roots there, and Anderson County was one of the few with both detailed historical maps and census data.

## A Brief History and Basics of Farm Production

### Town of Fenner, Madison County, NY

Euro-American settlers flooded into upstate New York during the early 1800s, primarily from New England. Immigrants, mostly from Wales and Ireland, began settling there in the mid-1800s. Atack and Bateman (1987) and Parkerson (1996) each note this era was marked by residential mobility and increasing commercialization. The latter created tensions between the independence and individualism idealized by smallholding farmers and the societal movement toward a national economy and mass production. In censuses, before 1865, there were 1-2 Black farmers in the town. By 1870, every farmer in the agricultural schedules was white, and Black men are almost always listed as "farm laborers" not "farmers". There are no Black residents in Fenner today.

Year	Sample Size	Total Farms	Avg. Total Acres	Avg. Improved Acres	Avg. Value
1855	116	240	76.4	59.8	\$3,003
1860	67	253	95.6	69.3	\$3,640
1865	176	245	82.7	63.1	\$2,635
1870	62	218	108.4	81.7	\$5,513
1875	95	236	112.2	71.3	\$4,214
1880	100	239	85.0	62.4	\$3,362



## Methods

1. We first transcribed agricultural data from state and federal census records.



2. We modified and applied Parkerson's (1996) equation for calculating surplus from farm products and farm and household consumption:

$$S(\text{urplus}) = T(\text{total farm production}) - P(\text{planting requirements}) - F(\text{feed requirements}) - H(\text{human consumption})$$

We then applied this to our sample of farms. Commodity values for 1860 dollars come from Atack and Bateman (1987). The 1860 and 1870 censuses did not record acres planted, so we used average amounts from 1865 in New York as substitutes in the equation for calculating planting requirements.

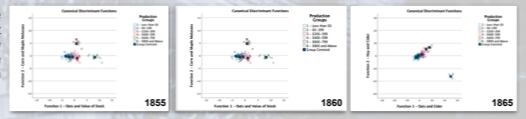
3. We compared various groupings of households/farms using discriminant function analysis to examine how they differed with regard to farm activities and production levels. We compared:

- Subsistence (<\$200) vs. commercial farms (≥\$200) (a set of 4 imported Staffordshire dinner sets)
- \$200 production groupings
- Woman-owned vs. man-owned farms
- Households with different numbers of adult women

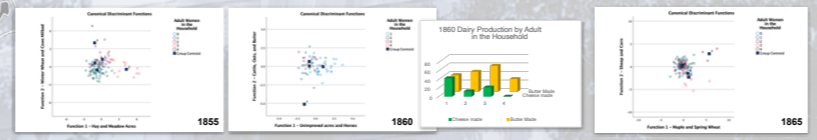
## Results from Analysis of Census and Agricultural Schedules

### Fenner in 1855-1865

Production of oats was the consistent activity that distinguished farms with the most surplus from subsistence and lower production commercial farms.

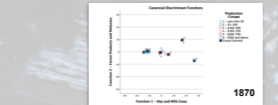


The scatterplots below show more cows milked was a trait of households with 4 women in 1855 and more butter was a trait of those with 3 women in 1860. Also, in 1860, butter production increased with number of women in the household (up to 3 women). In 1865, woman-run farms are distinguished from those run by men by their increased cheese production.

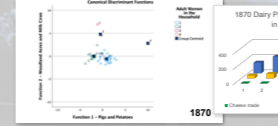


### Fenner in 1870

The number of milk cows and hay most distinguished farms with regard to overall surplus production.

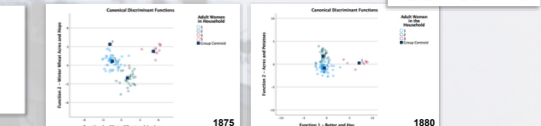
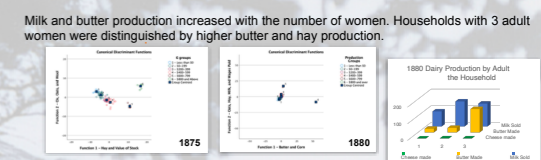


And, milk sold increased with the number of women in the household. Also, woman-owned farms and farms with 3+ women were distinguished by having more milk cows.

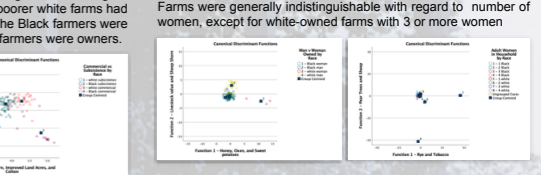


### Fenner in 1875-1880

Oats returned to prominence in 1875 along with hay and livestock. The most productive farms in 1880 were distinguished by producing more butter, corn, oats, hay, and milk.



Milk and butter production increased with the number of women. Households with 3 adult women were distinguished by higher butter and hay production.



### Broadway in 1870

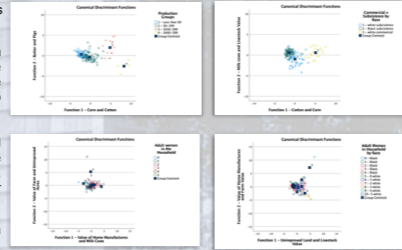
Corn and cotton production distinguished commercial from subsistence farms. When race was examined, this trend continued. There were no Black commercial farmers at this time.

Year	Sample Size	Total Farms	Avg. Total Acres	Avg. Improved Acres	Avg. Value
1855	116	240	76.4	59.8	\$3,003
1860	67	253	95.6	69.3	\$3,640
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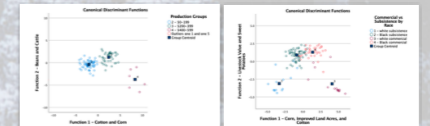
When race and gender were examined together, farms owned by white men and women were somewhat distinct from those owned by Black men based on total profit and livestock value. However, farms run by white women were distinct in their lower values of animals sold and lower output of home manufactures.

Number of women in the household did not seem to distinguish farms, except for white farms with four women.



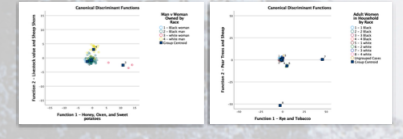
### Broadway in 1880

Commercial farms were still distinguished by cotton and corn. Additionally, Black and white commercial farmers had more improved acres. However, white farmers were particularly distinct with regard to these factors, while Black commercial and subsistence farmers were more similar to one another. White farmers in general had higher livestock values and more sweet potatoes, but poorer white farms had significantly less cotton and corn. Over 90% of the Black farmers were sharecroppers, while 70% of white subsistence farmers were owners.

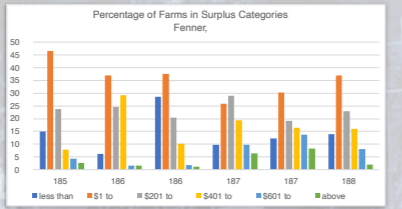


Examining just gender, men's farms had more milk cows and produced more butter. Adding race, white women's farms were particularly distinct from other farms. White men's farms had higher livestock values and more sheep.

Farms were generally indistinguishable with regard to number of women, except for white-owned farms with 3 or more women



The data show increasing overall surplus production until 1870, with a decline following. Throughout this period, about half of all farms make \$200 or less of surplus.



### Town of Broadway, Anderson County, SC

Several characteristics distinguish Anderson County's agricultural history from other South Carolina upcountry counties, as well as from the state's well-known Lowcountry, including few large-scale plantations and a smaller historic enslaved population. By the middle of the 19th century, Anderson Co. boasted a highly productive and diversified agricultural economy accompanied by a history of smaller, family-owned farms (Revels and Sherer 2002). After emancipation, this trend continued but with Black residents now running their own farms. However, many were sharecroppers and thus did not own the land upon which they farmed.

Year	Sample Size	Total Farms	Avg. Total Acres	Avg. Improved Acres	Avg. Reported Value	Surplus 1860 Dollars
1870	141	199	97.2	23.2	\$651	\$65.68
Black	71	71	14.2	10.4	\$101	\$4.39
white	70	128	179.1	36.0	\$1,200	\$126.15
1880	125	278	57.5	27.3	\$482	\$196.90
Black	96	-	43.0	25.7	\$391	\$200.70
white	29	-	105.7	32.5	\$783	\$184.30

In 1870, there were enormous discrepancies between Black and white farmers across all categories. By 1880, those gaps close with regard to improved acres and farm profits. In fact, Black farmers may have been producing more surplus than white farmers. However, the renters and sharecroppers were being required to give a large proportion their production to the landowner, sometimes half or more. That could explain why despite producing more, Black farmers reported farm values half that of white farmers.

## What can we say about women's labor and farm production?

Dairy cow herd sizes and milk production increased in Fenner throughout this period, and dairy activities start to distinguish commercial farms after 1870, along with hay, oats, and corn. This combination is still the focus of agricultural activities for smallholding farms in the town to this day. It appears this approach was formed during the 1870s.

The correlation of woman-owned farms and more adult women in the house with more dairy production was seen throughout the 25-year period. This suggests that women were not being universally pushed out of dairy production, as documents described. Also, the number of farms owned by women increased in the agricultural schedules despite women never being listed as "farmers" in the census. That designation was almost always reserved for a male relative. Individual histories may help here.

In 1855, Mahala Northrup ran a farm with negative production, and by 1860, she had over \$300. Her 18-year-old son was listed as the farmer. From 1855 to 1865, Mary Pierce grew her farm surplus from \$54 to over \$100. In 1880, Hanora Warlock and Sarah Loundsberry kept their farms as productive as their late husbands did. None of them were ever listed as farmers in the census or talked about in town biographies. These women, like Eric's own great-grandmother, are rarely the face of the American farmer. Aesenth "May" Jones was only ever listed as "keeping house" in the census but started the farm with her partner in 1938 and ran it after he died, until her grandson took it over in 1967. Outward portrayals of farm life in news articles and histories may have conformed to Victorian gender ideologies, but life on the farm did not always conform. Learning about individual households through archaeology and oral history can explore the variability that seems to have been the norm.



Mahala Northrup, 1855

In Broadway, cotton and corn were the cash crops and most correlated with surplus production, particularly for white commercial farmers. The high percentage of Black sharecroppers and low production of cash crops by white subsistence farmers, shows a Post-Reconstruction landscape controlled by wealthy white landowning men.

Farms run by white women and white-run farms with 3+ women were the most distinct in ventures but not surplus. However, what distinguished them was not consistent across time or groupings. Supplemental activities varied widely from farm-to-farm, but it appears that the number of women in the household impacted decisions about what to farm.

Both Black and white women in Broadway were listed as "farmer", and young Black women were regularly "farm laborers", unlike their counterparts in Fenner. Campbell (2012) discusses how gender and class were defining social characteristics in the 1800s North, and race and ideology in the South. Perhaps maleness was more important to the ideology of farming in the North and whiteness in the South.

However, this fails to account for the lack of Black farmers in Fenner, then or today. In fact, many ideologies of this period persist. In the South, attempts to erase the contributions and existence of Black farmers continue. In the North, progressive narratives dominate, but active resistance to Black settlement in rural spaces is ongoing. In both places, gendered labor fluidity may be more common on farms than in other spaces in American society.



Mary Pierce, 1865

## Acknowledgments

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