

Statement of Intellectual Development

My decision to study the rural and agricultural history of the United States appears perhaps an obvious choice, but one at which I arrived by a less than obvious route. As an undergraduate at Vassar College I studied European history. I spent a semester in Prague. I focused enormous energy on learning the Russian language, and I wrote a thesis on the educational institutions of the Russian émigrés in Paris and Prague in the 1920s. I wanted to be a historian, and Eastern Europe called me with its beauty and its mystery, its music and its languages.

But the call home was stronger. I grew up on a farm where we raised peanuts, cotton, grains, corn, and poultry, and, beginning during my college years, fresh produce. The vegetable market presented new challenges for us. Compared to the crops to which we were accustomed, fresh produce markets were hard to access, prices were volatile and never assured, and crop insurance unavailable. Nevertheless, vegetables offered a high-value method of much-needed diversification. It was a risky, but potentially very rewarding, move. During my junior year, my parents and other farm families in the community who were making similar production choices pooled their resources and built a storage and packing facility for their sweet potatoes. I was a daughter of a farmer who rented his land, and I grew up knowing I had to find my own career because of the uncertainties inherent in such an arrangement. But when my parents told me of the plans to build this facility, to bypass the middleman to do our own marketing, and grow a business that would be their legacy to my brother and me, and “wouldn’t you want to be a part of that?,” there was no conceivable answer but yes.

So I graduated from Vassar and headed not to graduate school but back to eastern North Carolina and a brand new packing house to learn to manage the fledgling Sandyland Produce, LLC. There was much to learn, and I began intense on-the-job training, spending hours working on the packing line and in the field. I learned to set sweet potato plants, to estimate the day's harvest from a squash or cucumber field, to build a drip irrigation system for watermelons, and to accurately weigh those melons simply by holding them in my hands. I learned to operate a fork lift, to run a packing line, to make a balance sheet and figure payroll, and manage large groups of people. I learned to negotiate with produce buyers and ace a USDA inspection. In two years I was responsible for most daily operations and all quality control. In three years, I became the general manager.

In the midst of these experiences I found my current academic focus. I continued reading during these years, especially during the less hectic winters. A few book recommendations from a Vassar professor in response to some of the new ways history was capturing my imagination helped me find my way to American historians. From there I set off on my own circuitous route from one topic to the next: from discourse about an age of homespun to negotiators on the Pennsylvania frontier, to the inner workings of the plantation household and Southern memory of the Civil War. Finally, while browsing my local library's shelves, I found Jack Temple Kirby's book, *Rural Worlds Lost*. I always knew that agriculture had a history, but somehow I never understood that it was a history that occupied professional historians. I would evaluate Kirby's arguments later; for now it was enough that the book existed. When it became clear that Sandyland would succumb to the weather and the poor odds that most new,

small businesses face, I knew that graduate school was still where I wanted to be.

Agricultural history, especially that of the South, was where I found my new interest.¹

During my years in the packing house, in moments of reflection, I stored up questions that centered on what I saw to be contradictions within farm life and work. Modern farming families occupy a unique position in American society and the American economy. They are the embodiment of contradiction, both anachronistic and fully modern. These family units are consumers and producers, and uneasily patriarchal in an ever less patriarchal society. Farming is now a professional and highly technical occupation, yet farms still require a vast and cheap labor supply to perform unmechanized, repetitive work. These farms are unabashedly for-profit businesses for which land is so much more than simply capital, the site of the majority of farmers' business and individual wealth and a tangible family legacy. Fiercely independent in mindset and outlook, farmers are rarely economically independent. Often their business and personal property are highly leveraged to banks and supply retailers, and over the course of the twentieth century, farms grew dependent on the government to stabilize prices, provide access to markets and smooth the way to obtaining capital. I wanted not to resolve these contradictions but to understand how they came about. History, I was certain, could answer these questions.

But how to go about looking for those answers, when as I soon learned, rural and agricultural historians are themselves tangled up in these very same contradictions? I had a vague idea that perhaps labor history was one way to do it. One of the classes I most enjoyed at Vassar was a political science class on the politics of labor migration and citizenship. In my role as manager of Sandyland, I supervised and worked alongside

scores of Hispanic migrant laborers, some of whom I came to know quite well. I witnessed the challenges they faced while living and working in the United States, navigating American bureaucracy without English and without citizenship. I was interested on a personal level and an intellectual one. I began thinking about agricultural labor systems and how those systems shaped families, communities and societies over time.

Labor history alone, however, turned out to be insufficient. To the extent that labor historians have turned their attention to agriculture, they study large groups of workers: migrant laborers in California's cotton fields and on Florida's truck farms, packing house workers, and tobacco and meat processors, even sharecroppers. The families who owned their farms mostly escape the notice of labor historians, and these were the farmers I wanted to know more about. The observations of labor historians are vital to understanding the agricultural sector, but alone, existing labor history is insufficient for the research I wanted to pursue.²

Agricultural histories themselves vary widely in focus. Many, if not most, are social histories of farming families or farm communities. Fascinating histories of rural community-building, the gendered nature of farm work and rural power, of the rise of rural consumerism, and the effects of technology all have much to tell us about rural society. Southern and economic historians' work on plantation agriculture sheds light on the fundamental ways this system contributed to enduring patterns of land tenure and labor organization. Old debates over the degree to which farmers are or have ever been capitalists and nostalgic accounts of the demise of the family farm gave way to new

studies. These newer works revisit gender, shed light on New Deal farm policy, and offer analysis of the unique character of Southern Populism.³

In my Southern history field, I explored agricultural labor systems through the lens of race and gender. I developed my own understanding of how these forces worked together to shape rural communities, as can be seen by the historiographical essay and syllabus I composed for the field. While my primary interests lay in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I reached back to the seventeenth century in this field in order to explore the origins of a modern Southern agricultural system that can only be understood with proper attention to colonial commodity production. I concluded that rural Southerners developed their race and gender ideologies in answer to agricultural problems, and over time they met the changing labor needs of plantations and farms within the bounds of those dominant ideologies. These ideologies changed in response to alterations in the nature of the labor force, the availability of land, and market conditions, as well as war and technological advancements. The ideologies and the structures they supported gave way to alternate interpretations and new structures, and the nature of these changes reflected the contours of power in Southern rural societies.⁴ These were important conclusions to draw upon as I framed my dissertation.

Yet still, something was missing. My own experience told me that today's farms, even those whose operators self-identify as family farmers, were essentially businesses that operated in the market and interact with the government like so many other businesses. References to "corporate" agriculture in agricultural histories frustrated me because of their implication that modern business practices and profit-seeking were somehow incompatible with an atrophying, if not already dead, virtuous agrarian past. I

found this approach limiting as it abandons modern agriculture to the evils of the ubiquitous corporations and does not seek to understand how the small farms that remain cope with a new context. *Here* was a contradiction I sought to reconcile as I became convinced that twentieth century farming must be placed within the context of business history in order to understand it.

So it was to business history that I looked for my outside field. During an independent study on the topic I focused almost exclusively on American business history, and increasingly by the end, on economic regulation. I also explored the relationships between big and small business, focusing particularly on their relationships with the state, but also on their relationships with each other as mediated by the state. My study included many different types of businesses, not just agriculture, but I paid particular attention to the regulation of businesses involved in the production or processing of natural resources, thus broadening the context into which I can place my study of agriculture and the state.⁵ I also took an agricultural economics course at North Carolina State University that provided a survey of twentieth century farm policy. This helped me tighten my grasp of U.S. farm policy, specifically, which I was able to place in the broader context of American historical regulatory structures.

My portfolio field widens the spectrum even more, as I have examined business-state relationships in the trans-Atlantic world. It has also taken me beyond the work of historians to incorporate the extensive work of sociologists, economists, and political scientists in this field. It comes as no surprise that there are drastic differences in the nature of business-state relationships in the United States, Europe, and Latin America. Economic regulations by independent agencies held sway in the United States while for

decades nationalized industries constituted the preferred European approach (although Brussels-based regulation is changing this pattern). Latin America faced the challenges of development in a colonial and post-colonial context, and as exemplified by the Brazilian case, fraught relationships with multi-nationals and a struggle to mitigate dependent development characterized business-state interaction. In all cases, farm and food policy was a contentious point of domestic politics. It is also an unavoidable quagmire of international trade negotiations, such as the Uruguay round of the GATT, which pitted the E.U.'s Common Agricultural Policy against American farm policy, and the more recent WTO dispute between Brazil and the United States over U.S. cotton subsidies.

In the concepts that are the bread and butter of business history, I found the tools to tell an essential but missing part of the story of Southern agriculture's twentieth century transformations. Regulation, vertical integration, horizontal combination, and creative destruction are necessary concepts for understanding how Southern farms became modern businesses, embattled by the unpredictability of the weather and international commodity markets, vulnerable to competition and consolidation, and dependent on governmental market intervention.

My dissertation, "Uncle Sam on the Family Farm: Farming Families, Farm Policy, and the Business of Southern Agriculture, 1900-1980," will pull together business and social history concepts in an attempt to understand how farming families adapted both family life and business strategies to Southern agriculture's transition to a modern business structure, a transition encouraged and facilitated by public policy. My portfolio fields have given me the tools to write the sort of history that is still lacking among the

work on twentieth century agriculture. It is essential to understand the elements that combined to create the “family farm” as it currently exists if we are to understand the challenges Southern rural society faces and to craft farm policy that is not at odds with its stated goals.

Situated as I am, at the beginning of my dissertation with still so far to go, contemplation of what comes next feels daunting. But I remember the feeling that came with the first year of graduate school, when every class and every assigned reading made the world a little bigger, when every day brought something to consider that I had not considered before. I believe that my general interests in methods of agricultural production and the role of business and government in these processes will continue to capture my interest and my imagination. The American South may prove to be only a spring board to an academic career that is more international or transnational in focus. Or perhaps the United States will be my cornerstone as I examine the place of American agriculture and agricultural policy in the world. A topic as broad as agriculture, and training in American social, political, and business history, as well as trans-Atlantic regulatory history leaves me many possibilities. International conversations about food production, trade policies, and regulatory reforms make this an exciting time to pursue my chosen studies, and I have no doubt that they will remain relevant and vitally important well into the future.

¹ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Hometown: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (2001); James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (1999); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South* (1988); David Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: the American South and Southern History* (2002); Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960* (1987).

² See for example: Cindy Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870-1845* (1997); Devra Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (1994); Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South* (2003); Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (1994). For a recent example of ethnographic anthropology, see Striffler, *Chicken: The Dangerous Transformation of America's Favorite Food* (2005).

³The following works on these topics have been influential in shaping my thinking on these topics and helping me ground my very personal interest in the context of academic history. For a classic community study see John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (1986). On farmers in the market place and their relationship to American capitalism, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: from Bryan to F.D.R.* (1955), Allan Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* (1992), and Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (1990). On slavery and plantation agriculture see, Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (1975), Edmund Sears Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (1975), Phillip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (1998), Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (1986), Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1972), Peter Coclanis, *The Shadow of a Dream: Economic Life and Death in the South Carolina Low Country, 1670-1920* (1989), and Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (1999). On the demise of the family farm, see Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (1987), Gilbert Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (1984), Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (1985). On gender and agriculture, see Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (1996), Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Householders, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (1995), Lu Ann Jones, "Mama Learned Us to Work": *Farm Women in the New South* (2002) and Deborah Fink, *Open Country Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition and Change* (1986). On the New Deal, see Sara Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (2007) and Sally Clarke, *Regulation and Revolution in United States Farm Productivity* (1995). On Southern Populism, see Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeomen Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (1983).

⁴ See Elizabeth Brake, "Race, Gender, and Agricultural Labor in the Upper South, 1650-2000," in this portfolio.

⁵ On oil, see Paul Sabin, *Crude Politics: the California Oil Market, 1900-1940* (2005). On agriculture the law, see Harold Woodman, *New South, New Law: The Legal Foundations of Credit and Labor Relations in the Postbellum Agricultural South* (1995) and Victoria Saker Woeste, *The Farmer's Benevolent Trust: Law and Agricultural Cooperation in Industrial America, 1865-1945* (1998).