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Douglas E. Bowers

Rural Concerns Voiced In Drafting U.S. Constitution

Farm foreclosures, trade problems, and inflation bedeviled earlier Americans, too. Just after the American Revolution, such problems had a more rural (and more urgent) focus than now. The response then, with some misgivings, was to fashion a blueprint for a stronger central government. The Constitution, though drafted for a primarily rural Nation, has adapted to changing circumstances and fortunes over our Nation's 200-year history.

America was overwhelmingly rural when delegates from the newly formed States assembled in Philadelphia during the summer of 1787 to write the Constitution. About 90 percent of the people lived on farms and another 5 percent lived in small towns or rural villages. They were primarily of British extraction, but nearly a quarter of them had come from Africa, and there were a number of Germans, Dutch, French, and Swedes, as well. Philadelphia, the largest city, had only 42,520 people in 1790. New York could boast only 33,131 and Boston had just 18,038. Every State, even Rhode Island, had a rural majority.

The American experiment in republican government thus began in a land peopled heavily by farmers. We have been fortunate that the Constitution written for that society was adaptable enough to withstand the stresses of industrialization and urbanization and the growth of government beyond anything imagined by its authors. The document produced by the Constitutional Convention not only laid the foundation for all future government policy, it determined the uniquely

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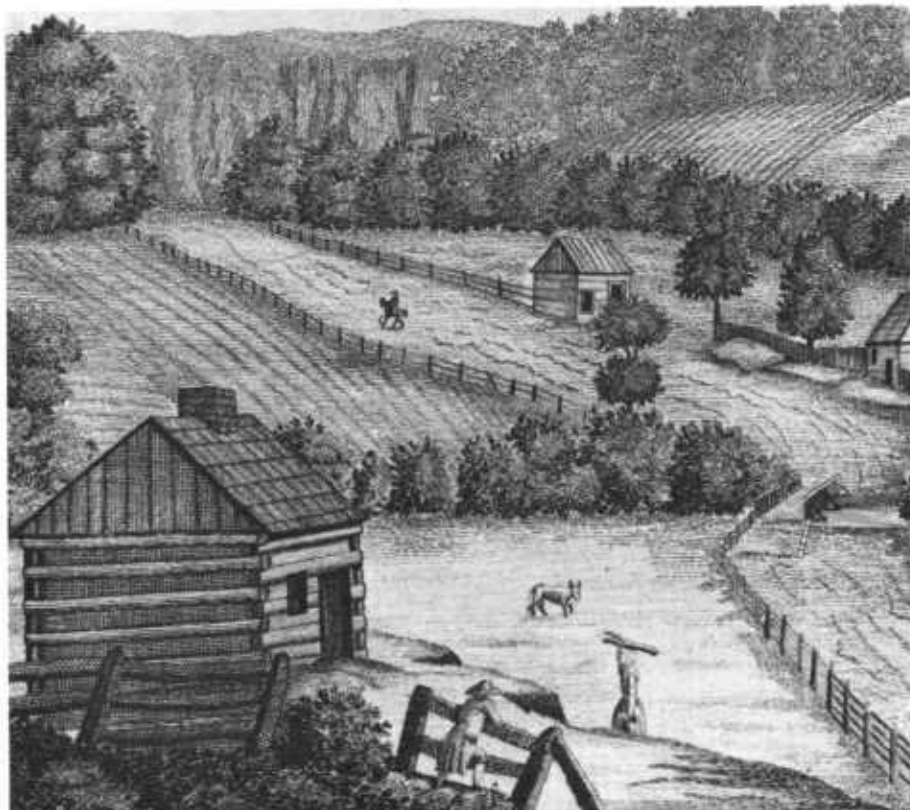
American framework in which public policy has been made for the last 200 years.

Agricultural and rural concerns affected the writing of the Constitution in at least three ways: in the issues that exposed the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation and led to the calling of the Constitutional Convention, in the debates during the Convention itself, and in the ideology of government held by many of the framers.

Rural issues in the 1780's figured significantly in the events leading up to the Constitutional Convention. In many respects the issues are like those of rural areas today, although circumstances were quite different. Land, credit, and trade—aggravated by a postwar recession—all played an important role in the decision to replace the ineffectual national government under the Articles of Confederation with the stronger Federal system set forth in the Constitution.

Rural America in 1787

The most obvious difference between rural areas in the late 18th century and today, of course, was that then the United States was still, by modern standards, a developing nation. Although Americans had an unusual degree of political sophistication and a higher average standard of living than people in other parts of the world, the United States lagged



"View from Bushongo Tavern," outside Richmond, along the Baltimore Road. Etching from *Columbian Magazine*, 1788.

Courtesy of the New York Historical Society, New York City



Photo by Sam Abell and Victor R. Boswell, Jr., © 1987 National Geographic Society

Most of America's leading political thinkers 200 years ago had rural roots and rural issues focused the debate that led to the drafting of the Constitution.

behind the most advanced countries of Europe in economic development, especially industrialization. Part of this lag was a legacy of the colonial years. British regulations encouraged Americans to produce raw materials rather than to manufacture finished products. The frontier was also a factor. Americans had only begun to settle in large numbers west of the Appalachians in 1787.

A general lack of development meant that rural people, even in the more settled East, suffered from a shortage of commercial and social services that sustain human and economic growth. Today's declining rural population makes it difficult for many small towns to sustain a viable economic base. Eighteenth century communities often had a similar problem but for the opposite reason: the population had not yet become large enough to support well-developed services. Scattered mills transformed grain into flour and logs into lumber. General

stores in villages and towns, the centers of marketing and short-term credit, sold little beyond basic necessities. Older communities generally had plenty of churches, which were often centers of community life. But, schooling depended on private initiative in placing children in one-room schools or with tutors.

Transportation was poor everywhere but, as with most services, frontier areas fared far worse. Smalltown banks did not yet exist and rural newspapers were only just beginning to appear. Communication was slow everywhere: between counties and between the cities and the surrounding countryside. Thus, although coastal towns stayed in touch with European news, ideas, and fashions, rural areas remained relatively isolated. The typical rural social network consisted of families within a radius of just a few miles. These were cohesive networks, but their members had to rely on mutual cooperation to fulfill many of their needs.

Other economic pursuits, such as manufacturing, recreation, and retirement communities, have recently taken hold in rural areas as alternatives to agriculture. But, "rural" in the 1780's was virtually synonymous with "farming." American farming practices at the time were not very advanced by the best European standards. America's cheap land encouraged extensive agriculture in contrast to the intensive cultivation practiced in Europe. Few farmers bothered with fertilizer, crop rotation, or other soil-building practices, except for a few areas, such as in southeastern Pennsylvania and in German enclaves in general. Farmers thought it made more economic sense to plant a field until the soil wore out, then clear new land. A few progressive farmers, however, were beginning to seriously consider agricultural improvement. The first two American agricultural societies were founded in 1785 in Philadelphia and Charleston. The Philadelphia society included among its members George

Washington, who experimented with new agricultural techniques on his Mount Vernon plantation.

Because labor was scarce, most farmers depended on their families to get the work done, except on southern plantations which used slave labor. This scarcity of labor would later put American farmers in the forefront of mechanization, but in the 18th century their tools were generally no better than those of European farmers. The large American family, averaging nearly six people in 1790, was a boon to farmers who needed laborers. As in many developing countries, the birthrate was high. In 1800 (the first year for which an estimate is available) the birthrate for the white population stood at 55 per 1,000, higher than any since. And with a median age of 16, the population was young and growing rapidly, increasing by a third from 1790-1800 with little immigration into the country.

“...To Form A More Perfect Union”

Several rural issues, chiefly dealing with land, trade, and credit, were among those that focused the new Nation's attention on the weaknesses of the central government authorized by the Articles of Confederation, and thereby helped lead the country to see the need for a Constitutional Convention. National government under the Articles was too weak to protect western settlers from foreign incursions, it had too little clout even within its own borders to ensure the integrity of the money supply, and it received too little respect from other nations to negotiate trade treaties to expand farm exports.

The land question was closely related to the way Americans occupied and farmed the virgin territories of North America.

From the beginning, American farmers expected to own their own land. Early colonists often received small land grants for emigrating to the New World, at the behest of the King or colonial proprietor. By the 1780's the better coastal lands had been occupied and some, especially in tobacco areas, were already worn out and abandoned. But there was still much land available in piedmont areas and, farther west, on the large, unsettled tracts owned by land companies and speculators. These lands, though unimproved, were cheap. Even so, pioneers who could not

afford them often just squatted on them for a few years before moving on. Each region of the country developed different farming styles: plantations with slave labor in the South and a village organization partly on the European model in New England. But, even in the South, the farm owned and operated by the family, without slaves, was the basic unit.

The cheapness of land was probably the most important factor shaping American agriculture and land use patterns. Extensive agriculture and an expanding population gave Americans an insatiable appetite for land and land speculation. Americans were a highly mobile people in the 18th century but, instead of moving from farm to town as in this century, they moved from old farms to new ones. It was not just the wealthy who engaged in land speculation. Many farmers owned more land than they could farm, especially those in forested areas where only a few acres could be cleared each year. They hoped to make a few improvements, sell the land at a profit, and move on to new and cheaper land. This type of land use resulted in sparse settlement throughout much of the country. Farmers moved westward even before the East had been fully occupied.

The unquenchable thirst for land became, indirectly, a constitutional issue. When the Revolution ended British restrictions on western settlement, pioneers poured across the Appalachians. The Confederation Government, in one of its few memorable acts, had provided for the orderly settlement of the vast western lands acquired when the eastern States ceded their western claims. In ordinances of 1785 and 1787, the Government organized the survey of public domain in the States north of the Ohio River into the rectangular pattern of sections and townships that characterizes the West even today. More significant, it permitted new States formed in those territories to enter the Union on an equal basis with the original 13, thus ensuring that the country would not duplicate the unhappy relationship of the colonies with Britain.

But, while the government was prepared to settle the West, it was not strong enough to defend it against encroachments. Britain still kept its forts on the U.S. side of the Canadian border, despite agreeing in the 1783 peace treaty to evacuate them. More important, Spain

held New Orleans, the Mississippi River gateway to nearly all trade west of the Appalachians. By erecting barriers to trade against U.S. citizens wishing to ship their crops through New Orleans, the Spanish hoped to persuade westerners to leave the United States and join Spain. The Confederation Government could do little to stop this and westerners grew increasingly irritated, some to the point of intriguing with Spain. If the central government were not strengthened, many felt, the Union might fall apart. European governments expected that to happen and stood ready to pick up the pieces.

“ To Regulate Commerce with Foreign Nations... ”

Trade was one of the most critical problems of the time. Few American farmers were satisfied to produce only for subsistence; they grew commercial crops whenever they could find a market. But bad roads made internal trade extremely difficult except by water. Moreover, the preponderance of farmers in the Nation virtually demanded that they market overseas. The South's economy depended heavily on tobacco and rice exports to Europe. The Middle States exported much grain to the Caribbean and Europe. New England supplied provisions to ships and meat to the Caribbean.

Americans had been aggressive exporters from the beginning, even circumventing British colonial restrictions on trade. After the Revolution, America lost most of its traditional British markets, and other mercantile powers in Europe were reluctant to open their protected colonial ports in the Caribbean to American ships. The weak Confederation Government was at the same disadvantage here as in dealing with the problems of western settlers: it did not command enough respect from other countries to negotiate favorable commercial treaties. Another complicating factor was that States levied tariffs, even against other States in the Union, and the Government could do little to prevent it.

“To Coin Money... ”

The credit problem was closely related to land. Cash was scarce and, even with reasonably priced land, farmers had to borrow to purchase land and supplies. The only banks were city banks intended

mainly for short-term mercantile loans, not farm loans. Farmers could get credit for supplies at general stores, but for land they often had to rely on family members or land speculators.

The only other option was the State land bank. Many States, at the request of farmers, set up State offices that loaned money to farmers using land as collateral. The States obtained the funds for this by simply printing paper money. This, in turn, frequently led to inflation. That worked to the advantage of debtors, such as farmers, but creditors were hurt. In the depressed years following the Revolution, States that ignored farm demands for land banks and paper money had to contend with protests. The most serious was Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts, during which farmers and ex-soldiers prevented foreclosures on bankrupt farms. Shays' Rebellion and other signs of discontent convinced many Americans that the country needed a national government strong enough to protect the rights of creditors and put an end to State-issued paper money.

At the Convention: The Delegates...

Much of the agenda of the Constitutional Convention was, therefore, fashioned from issues in which agriculture had a special concern. Urban interests were represented at the Convention out of proportion to the urban population, as they were in most matters cultural and commercial. But rural areas were there in strength. Twenty-two of the 55 delegates received most of their income from farming; these were almost all wealthy farmers. Presiding was probably the Nation's leading farmer, George Washington. Other delegates lived in rural areas or engaged in land speculation. Nearly all those in attendance, in fact, were among the country's elite.

Regardless of background, the delegates showed a high degree of political sophistication. James Madison, James Wilson, Alexander Hamilton, and Benjamin Franklin were all there. Only Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, both on European diplomatic missions, were missing from the assembly of the Nation's major political thinkers. The delegates drew on the experience of State governments and on their own readings of polit-

ical philosophy to produce a national government unlike any tried before.

...And the Debates

The Nation's scattered pattern of settlement posed a special problem in framing the government. Political thinkers, heretofore, had assumed that republican government worked best in small, uniform nations. How could a central government hold together such a far-flung collection of States without being so overbearing that it threatened the people's liberty? Nearly all the delegates wanted something stronger than the Articles of Confederation but many, especially those from smaller States, were afraid that too powerful a national government would trample the rights of States. And the fear of tyranny was pervasive in a country that had just thrown off British rule.

The Constitution was a victory for nationalists like Madison, Washington, and Hamilton who leaned toward a strong central government. But, by setting up a Fed-

eral system, the Constitution also took care to protect most of the traditional functions of State and local governments. All powers not assigned to the Federal Government were reserved to the States. By this means the Constitution was able to permit regional diversity to continue, while giving the central government enough authority to be effective.

Another way the framers helped assure that the national government would not become too strong was by setting up checks and balances between the different branches. These profoundly affected the policymaking process. The delegates, being mostly wealthy property owners themselves, were not eager to facilitate majority rule nor did they want to encourage the formation of political parties. They, like Americans in general, basically distrusted political power. They made sure that government decisions would be made only after deliberation by several different bodies. Bills could not become law until they passed both houses of Congress and were signed by the Presi-

Washington and Franklin, Two Early Agricultural Leaders

Most of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention with agricultural interests were large-scale farmers who did not make any special contributions to agriculture. But two delegates, Washington and Franklin, exemplified the best in the agricultural thinking of the day.

Washington used his Mount Vernon plantation as an experiment station for trying out new ideas. He practiced drainage and crop rotation and studied the effects of different fertilizers on crops. Early in his career as a planter, he gave up tobacco growing, which quickly depleted the soil, and switched to wheat, corn, and a variety of other crops. He kept in touch with the leading agricultural reformers of the day, both in America and England. Though many of his experiments were failures—Mount Vernon never became a profitable operation—he was successful in pioneering the use of the mule, which he bred from a jackass given to him by the king of Spain in 1785. The mule became a mainstay in southern agriculture for over a century.

Benjamin Franklin, senior delegate at the Convention, was perhaps the quintessential urbanite of his age. But, like so many 18th century scientific thinkers, agriculture occupied an important place among his interests. During his numerous travels, he was always on the lookout for new varieties of vegetables to send home to his farming friends. He is credited with introducing rhubarb and Scotch kale to America. His *Poor Richard's Almanac* was replete with homey advice drawn from rural experience. Like Washington, Franklin was a member of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, one of the first American agricultural societies. He was also a founder of the American Philosophical Society and he made the improvement of agriculture one of its goals. Finally, he may have been the first American to suggest that practical agriculture be taught in schools, a suggestion that eventually came to fruition in the land-grant college system.

dent. The framers assumed that the judiciary would also review legislation. Thus, Federal policymaking was dispersed among several institutions, making quick action difficult. The Constitution, in effect, encouraged consensus decisions and discouraged ideologically oriented political battles. In later years, decisionmaking became even more complicated when the States were drawn into the Federal process, as they have been in several areas affecting agriculture and rural development, such as extension, soil conservation, forestry, and economic development districts.

Other issues at the Convention pertained more specifically to agriculture. Trade was dealt with in a way that benefited both farmers and merchants. Northern merchants wanted sweeping commercial powers for the new Federal Government to protect their own interests. Southern delegates, because of their section's heavy dependence on exports, worried that the new government might tax exports, levy high tariffs on imports, or pass restrictive navigation acts like the British Parliament. They wanted to require a two-thirds vote in Congress for any trade measures but settled instead for a prohibition on export tariffs. As a concession, southerners were guaranteed that the government would not interfere with the slave trade for 20 years. The Constitution gave the government substantial powers over commerce ranging from control of interstate trade to the ability to levy tariffs. States were specifically forbidden to impose tariffs. Federal tariffs became the chief source of revenue for the national government. The government's commerce powers later became the wellspring for aid to transportation, which greatly benefited farmers, and in the Federal Government's (including USDA's) regulatory work.

Many farmers did not like the delegate's handiwork with credit. The Constitution prohibited States from coining money or issuing bills of credit, a provision intended to cut off State paper money. Property rights were protected by making it unconstitutional for States to pass laws that impaired contracts. This gave creditors what they sought and paved the way to putting the United States on a sound financial footing. As for land, the Constitution echoed the 1787 ordinance by providing for the admission of new and equal States. The concentration of foreign policy in the President ensured that the

new Nation could enter into treaty negotiations with authority, and within a decade of the Constitution's ratification, both Spain and Britain had stopped their meddling in the western territories.

Farmers Balk at Ratification

The Constitution, approved by the delegates on September 17, 1787, was less than perfect in the eyes of many farmers. Getting the States to ratify it was difficult. Most of the opposition came from rural areas, which were often divided sharply on the issue. Those along major commercial routes usually supported the Constitution. But many farmers in less accessible areas thought it worked to the advantage of merchants and creditors and to their detriment. They also feared that the new Constitution, not yet amended by the Bill of Rights, would curtail their liberties by creating too strong a central government. These misgivings were, in part, a manifestation of the distrust that farmers felt toward cities.

Some of these rural attitudes were reflected in Jefferson's philosophy of government. Jefferson believed that "those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God," as he put it. Farmers' widespread ownership of land made them self-reliant and gave them economic and political independence in contrast to the "subservience and venality" Jefferson noted in Europe's urban poor. Indeed, Jefferson and his followers believed that a nation of farmers was an essential prerequisite for democratic government. But, unlike farm opponents of the Constitution, Jefferson, Madison, and others like them found much to admire in the document and believed it would enhance rural prosperity. While not infatuated with active government, they were convinced that, with proper checks and balances, strengthening national power would help preserve, not threaten, liberty. They were optimistic about the future of exports under the new government. They were confident that securing the West would provide enough land for many future generations of farmers and, hence, keep the republic safe. A new government might improve transportation, provide an effective postal service, and do other things to enhance rural life. Enough farmers shared this optimism for the Constitution to be ratified by 1788.

Hamilton and many urban supporters of the Constitution saw a different future. They envisioned a vigorous government more involved in promoting commerce and industry than the Jeffersonians wanted. They saw the United States diversifying its economy and expanding its urban centers. This, they argued, would not hurt farmers but would ultimately help them by providing urban markets for surplus farm production.

During the 1790's, the Nation divided into two political parties grouped around Hamilton and Jefferson. Jefferson's election as President in 1800 was seen, in part, as a victory for the agrarian view of democracy and limited government. Rural opposition to the Constitution faded away and soon the framework of government created in 1787 became an object of veneration by Americans from every walk of life. As the Jeffersonians became the party of an overwhelming majority of Americans, they absorbed many of the ideas that Hamilton had espoused. But the agrarian ideology of the Constitutional era remained an important strain in American politics and became the basis of later farm movements. **FDP**

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