TO express a degree of well-being that was both desirable and morally legitimate, early modern Englishmen often chose the term competency. Thus, when William Wood pointed out in 1634 that, however rude the circumstances of the first New Englanders might seem, they were “well-contented, and looke not so much at abundance, as a competencie,” he was trying to strike just such a decently attractive note. To early modern readers, the idea connoted the possession of sufficient property to absorb the labors of a given family while providing it with something more than a mere subsistence. It meant, in brief, a degree of comfortable independence.¹

Such an ideal was necessarily imprecise. One man’s comforts could be his neighbor’s rarest need, and even in the course of a single lifetime people had to shift their standards upward and downward to fit their changing circumstances. A farm that might be judged prosperous enough to keep a young family in relative independence might not serve equally well as children matured. True, most English households survived at levels of competency that were modest at best. Such qualifications being granted, the ideal of competency nevertheless had a broad constituency within the producing ranks of society, and a vast range of behavior spoke

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to its importance. It inspired working people to engage in petty commerce, structure inheritance practices to maintain family farms intact, claim perquisites at harvest, and even riot when their customary rights to common land were threatened.² Modest as it might be, competency required constant effort to achieve or protect. Real, if elusive, it provided the central motivation to everyday work.

This article argues that the aspiration to comfortable independence, or competency, accompanied English families to America and infused the economic culture of free working people from the period of settlement down to the beginnings of industrialization. It suggests that the obsession with competency troubled early Americans far more than worries about the legitimacy of commerce. And it tries to explain how this superficially benign ideal was, in fact, the source of deep social tensions that English and American people managed only with difficulty to control. The inquiry was launched in the belief that our knowledge of economic behavior and social structure in early America has far outdistanced our understanding of the values that infused them.³ To try and redress this balance, we begin by describing how the ideal of competency operated in the single carefully documented case of one perfectly ordinary American boy. Not only must we know the pattern of his working life; we need also to examine empirically from his own language the meaning he attached to it.

I

Caleb Jackson, Jr., grew up during the decades that followed the American Revolution on a fifty-acre farm in Rowley, Massachusetts. He was born in 1786 ten miles away in Andover, and his family lived in rented quarters there until 1791, when Caleb, Sr., pushing thirty-six, found the Rowley farm for sale and purchased it for £172. The family’s lands were of reasonable quality and some commercial potential, since they lay within a few hours’ hauling of Salem and Newburyport, but on balance the Jackson farm provided barely enough, even in the summer season, to keep Caleb, his father and mother, brother Samuel, and sister Sally employed.⁴


³The best summary of this literature, but one that continues to privilege behavior and structure, is Allan Kulikoff, “The Transition to Capitalism in Early America,” William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Ser., XLVI (1989), 120-144.

⁴Bettye Hobbs Pruitt places Rowley (with Concord, for example) among Massachusetts’ “egalitarian farm towns,” based on her analysis of the 1771 Provincial Tax Valuation List. This means that by her measurements it possessed a profitable agriculture, a fair number of wealthy farmers, enough commerce to move produce to market, and a relatively egalitarian distribution of wealth. See “Agriculture and Society in the Towns of Massachusetts, 1771: A Statistical
This unexceptional family would have rested quite forgotten, had not Caleb, who was fond of reading and handy with letters, decided in his fifteenth year to begin a daily journal.

Why did this project strike his fancy? In Caleb’s own words, it was intended “as a Memmorandum of the most remarkable Occurrences and events which happen, and to give an account of the Weather that we may look and see how things have got along one year after another that we may see what the season has been heretofore and to keep old things in memory which would otherways be lost.” The predictable rhythm of the year and the extraordinary events that punctuated it: these were traditional concerns for New England journal keepers; they tie this diary and its author firmly to the past. So, too, did a sense of historical change that could define the development of the Jackson homestead simply as getting along from one year to the next or could prompt someone so young to emphasize memories rather than possibilities as the proper subject for reflection.

Caleb used the diary in the major task of his teenage years—mastering the art of husbandry. By noting the points on the calendar when certain chores were to be performed or when a given type of weather might be expected, by recording the effects of rainfall and temperature on the growth of crops, and by setting down aphorisms to help him remember it all, this apprentice husbandman was fixing in his mind the customary routine of the Jackson farm. Similarly, when we read of his attending the “Public Vendue” where the estate of Clement Pingrey was auctioned off and remembering to jot down the price of orchard land at $37.25 per acre, we catch a self-conscious attempt to develop the sense of property that would stand one of his calling in good stead through the years to come.7


Jackson Diary, frontispiece.

6 The instances of this to be found in the Jackson Diary are too numerous to mention, but see especially Oct. 6, 1802, summary for June 1803, Aug. 24, 1804, and the tables that follow the annual summaries for 1802 and 1803.

7 Jackson Diary, Dec. 13, 1804. See also ibid., Dec. 7, 1802, Nov. 8, 1803.
Caleb may have been rare among farm boys in feeling the need of committing all this to paper, but the wish to master the traditional body of knowledge that was American husbandry at the beginning of the nineteenth century was general to rural youth.8

There was nothing, however, in Caleb's understanding of what it meant to be a farmer—traditional as it was—that precluded the idea of producing for a market that was at least regional in scope. He, his father, or sometimes both drove their cart laden with corn, potatoes, cider, and firewood, perhaps with an animal tethered behind, to Ipswich, Salem, or Newburyport (journeys of between five and fifteen miles), usually every month. In town they would purchase needed supplies—perhaps some lumber, flour, leather, or glass—and be home before dark. That night, Caleb would enter in his journal the prices he had paid if they seemed worthy of note, as they frequently did.9

Were the goods that the Jacksons carried to market nothing more than the surplus left over after family needs had been satisfied, the product of economic thinking that was geared to use and not to sale?10 Some of them—certainly, the occasional cartloads of mixed farm produce that Caleb and his father drove to Salem and Ipswich—undoubtedly were. Yet other transactions, even of this modest household, bespoke a clear commercial sensibility. Why, for example, did the Jacksons pick black cherries by the bushel every August or September? To sell them, wrote Caleb, for "cherries ... are ready cash." In December 1803 his father bought a load of walnut and oak at a local auction only to carry it to Ipswich two weeks later and sell it for, assumably, a tidy profit.11 They also dispatched cords of firewood and barrels of cider to town in quantities that argue for a mode of production geared to considerations of use and sale.12


9 See, for example, Jackson Diary, Oct. 23, Nov. 5, 1802, May 26, 27, June 21, Nov. 8, 1803, May 7, June 1, July 5, 1804, Jan. 7, Sept. 27, 1805.


11 For cherry picking see Jackson Diary, Sept. 23, 1802, Aug. 26, 27, 1803, summary for Sept. 1805. For wood speculation see ibid., Dec. 6, 19, 1803.

12 Jackson Diary, Aug. 21, Dec. 21, 1802, May 26, 27, Dec. 16, 19, 1803, Jan. 25, Feb. 2, 16, June 1, July 21, Oct. 2, 1804, Jan. 2, Feb. 18, 19, 23, Mar. 21, June 7, Oct. 26, Nov. 1, 1805. On the operation of the cider mill see esp. ibid., Sept. 6, 7, Oct. 28, 1802, Oct. 3, Nov. 6, 1804, summary for Nov. 1805. On the marketing of cider see ibid., Oct. 23, 1802, May 31, June 21, Oct. 8, 1803, June 1, July 24, Nov. 7, 1804, Mar. 30, Apr. 23, 1805. On one occasion, Caleb, Sr., even purchased 45 barrels of apples from a neighbor in order to leave for town the following day with ten barrels of his own to sell. See ibid., Oct. 7, 8, 1803, Apr. 16, 24, 1804, Mar. 25, 1805. This evidence underrepresents the number of trips to sell wood and cider since many other journeys took place in which the goods to be marketed were not specified.
Caleb and his family did not plan the entirety of their economic lives around the market. The point here is simply that commercial exchange was not only necessary but patently attractive for a family that was simultaneously involved in supplying most of its own needs. The distinction between production for use and production for sale was sometimes recognizable and sometimes not, but it was never a matter of significance. The Jacksons were interested in a "comfortable subsistence," to borrow the words of Sarah McMahon, and whether they achieved it through selling their produce abroad or storing it in their cellar was a matter of little importance. Indeed, now that historians have successfully disposed of self-sufficiency as an early American reality, they ought further to admit that it was not even an aspiration. Those who argue for the importance of this ethic usually depend on evidence that comes from well into the nineteenth century, or they call by self-sufficiency what is really the rather different notion of independence. In Caleb's time, the latter meant the possession of sufficient property and skill to ensure free access to the means of production. Families that were able to deal with others from an independent perch, in the knowledge that they were not bargaining away the privilege of managing their own working lives, regarded the act of buying and selling in a healthy light. For them, the marketplace did not carry with it the same connotations of dependence that it did for those who entered it of necessity to sell their labor for a living. To households of economic competence, it was an arena of free activity. Indeed, if the idealization of the "self-sufficient" farmer of past centuries has any reality, it is as a sentimental invention of an industrializing world, and it would have puzzled our diarist considerably.13

At the point, however, when involvement in the marketplace began to threaten that independence, the Jacksons did react. Laboring on family property to produce items that would meet with a profitable sale was a New England ambition in Caleb's day as it had been for his ancestors. But working to the commands of other men was not. It was the deep valuation of property's independence, rather than a lack of interest in dealing for profit, that divided the Jacksons from their modern American descendants.

Between the ages of fifteen and twenty, Caleb spent nine days out of ten working for one man—his father. Hiring himself out was more common in

the warmer months than in winter; but in no season did it form a significant part of his experience. Sometimes, neighbors came to work for the Jacksons, particularly if they had specialized skills to offer. Thus Hannah Ellsworth, a local tailor, called in about once a year “to make up some clothes” and stayed with the Jacksons while she worked. In the summers of 1804 and 1805, the family built itself a new dwelling, and this involved hiring masons and carpenters on and off for several months. “We do the hoeing and such work,” observed Caleb, “and Sir works with the carpenters on the house.” But such events were only interludes in the routine operation of the farm, which remained overwhelmingly a family affair. More important, the performance of these various tasks never compromised the independence of the parties involved. Neither the Jacksons with their land and farming know-how nor the craftsmen with their specialized skills and property of their own had any reason to fear the economic power of the other.

This is not to argue for family self-sufficiency. Undoubtedly, there were many occasions when the Jacksons dealt with their neighbors on a variety of levels that our diarist never recorded. His father must have lent out his oxen and borrowed equipment, and his mother surely traded dairy and garden produce with other farmwives in the vicinity. Caleb, Samuel, and Sally may have negotiated with their teenage friends all sorts of informal bargains and arrangements that the diary never mentioned. But it is important to remember that the great majority of such dealings would have involved borrowing tools, hiring skills, and swapping finished products. Raw manpower of a dependent or neighborly sort counted for much less. Some days Caleb toiled shoulder to shoulder with Samuel and his father, and other days he worked by himself, but most days he labored within a structure of authority that his family controlled.

This could be interpreted as merely a matter of opportunity at home and limited alternatives abroad. If, in a world with few large employers, the Jackson farm could keep the family busy, why look elsewhere? But the fact is that their fifty acres could not, and Caleb, Sr., was forced to search beyond its boundaries in every season of the year to find ways for him and his sons to employ their time. What is interesting about his efforts is that,

14 Jackson Diary. Of the 669 days during that period when he recorded work of any sort, roughly 600, or 90%, were spent exclusively on family matters, whereas only about 60, or 9% were passed even partly in the employ of his neighbors, and only 9, or 1%, included community tasks like barn raising or working on the roads. These figures are only accurate to about 2%, because it is impossible to distinguish in Caleb’s entries between work “at Mr. Woods” and the Jacksons were renting and work “at Mr. Woods” when Woods had hired their labor.


16 Jackson Diary, July 3, 1805.

as far as possible, he tried to direct his household into forms of activity in which it might preserve its independence.

One of these was making apple cider. Although the family pressed a good deal of cider for home consumption or for sale, far more was made for neighbors who brought the produce of their orchards to the Jackson's mill for Samuel and Caleb to grind. Although, in a sense, this was labor performed for other families, it did not entangle the household in relationships of dependence. The proprietor of the mill was Caleb, Sr., and his two sons worked directly for him (as on most days of the year), not for his customers. The father sold a service, true. But he did so to his equals; the productive equipment was his; and the Jacksons took orders from nobody as to how the mill should run.

The second strategy was to gain access to others' land through sharecropping and leasing. "We take Mr. Jonathan Woods Planting Land, Orcharding, etc. and about 10 acres of meadow," recorded Caleb one year. "We are to carry it on according to the Rules of Good Husbandry and have half the crops for our labour."18 Sometimes they appear to have leased the lands of others outright, as in "our field of potatoes at Captain D." that the boys hoed in the summer of 1803; at least twice they hired the right to pasture cattle in neighboring meadows.19 In each of these instances, the privilege of managing the property passed over to the Jacksons. Jonathan Woods apparently made it clear that his property was not to be ruined by bad farming practice, but otherwise the freedom of Caleb, Sr., to organize his own efforts and those of his sons was essentially uncircumscribed.

The third significant area in which the male Jacksons extended their activities beyond family property was shoemaking. In January 1803, the diary reported that "Sir made a bargain with Capt. Perley to make shoes for him." A few days previous, Samuel and Caleb had received "7 pares . . . to try," and the two had shown enough aptitude that their father contracted to produce one hundred more before spring. Every winter thereafter, Caleb, Sr., agreed with local dealers (agents for the wealthier merchants of Newburyport and Lynn) to buy cut leather that his sons could stitch and make into shoes.20

18 Jackson Diary, June 6, 1802. For other examples of arrangements "to the halves" see ibid., Oct. 5, 7, 1802, May 6, 1803, May 4, Aug. 14, 1804, Sept. 10, 1805. For examples of the Jackson family "buying the grass standing" see ibid., Aug. 19, 31, Sept. 15, 1803, Aug. 17, 1804.

19 Jackson Diary, June 1, 29, 1803; see also July 28, 1802, July 5, 1803, May 5, 10, 1804.

Although here, as in most other tasks, the two boys toiled for their father, shoemaking was different in one important respect. The Jacksons depended on Captain Perley for access to both raw materials and markets, and when they took his cut leather on credit, they accepted a real limitation in their freedom to bargain over the worth of their product. Thus a finely stitched sale shoe brought the boys no better price or greater recognition as craftsmen than a routinely finished one. True, there was general agreement among the Jacksons that this was a useful way of improving the otherwise idle days of winter and thereby obtaining the means of settling retail accounts with local shopkeepers. But it never commanded the dignity of independent farming. There is no evidence that Caleb, Sr., ever stitched, lasted, or bottomed a single shoe. He passed the awl on to his sons in exactly the same way that early American farmwives delegated spinning or hatmaking to their daughters—as an occupation proper to dependency.\(^{21}\)

Caleb was no more inspired by shoe manufacture than his father; he regarded it mainly as an unpleasant obligation—something “we have got to [do],” which was language he never applied to husbandry. The problem was not with the craft itself. The delicate “thin shoes” he fashioned for his mother after two years of experience at the bench were one of several custom pairs that he noted down with pride. But for the most part Caleb was not a custom shoemaker, and although working in the shop behind the kitchen was better than day labor abroad, it was with outwork such as this that the Jacksons began to overstep the limit of what early Americans considered to be a satisfactory way of life.\(^{22}\)

What in general does Caleb’s diary reveal about the ethic that guided him at work? Certainly, the Jacksons put a high premium on comfort and improvements to the property. A store-bought gun, a new end to the barn painted “Spanish Brown,” a bigger cider mill, and a remodeled shop, not to mention the new house with its six fireplaces, nine rooms, and


\(^{22}\) On Caleb’s distaste for making sale shoes see Jackson Diary, Jan. 15, Mar. 29, 1803, Jan. 3, 1805. On custom shoemaking see *ibid.*, Feb. 16, 18, Nov. 24, 1804, Jan. 31, Feb. 2, 12, 1805. Whereas the details of farming made it into Caleb’s diary in daily entries, shoemaking only merited recording in the briefest manner once or twice a week, even during the winter months when the two boys were hard at it most of the time; it never figured in his annual summaries. Hans Medick, “The Proto-Industrial Family Economy,” in Peter Kriedte *et al.*, *Industrialization before Industrialization: Rural Industry in the Genesis of Capitalism*, trans. Beate Schenmp (Cambridge, 1981), 44, agrees that outwork was generally held in lower esteem than farming one’s own land, but Medick suggests that the key distinction was one between craft work and agriculture, whereas I would argue that, for both spheres, what really mattered was the terms on which the work was performed.
twenty-seven windows—all carefully enumerated—took an important place in the diary and in Caleb’s sense of purpose. All of these things cost money, and the Rowley youth worked hard to earn it, even at jobs he did not enjoy. The carpenters who worked on the house, for example, were paid in part with store credits that the boys promised to repay by shoemaking the following winter. A persistent theme in the diary, the celebration of the farm’s productivity is difficult to understand if the fruits of family labor were not to be enjoyed.

If material accumulation was important to the Jackson’s productive ethic, it was never the only element. Indeed, the diary is for the most part a paean, not to prosperity, but to work. “We got up and [ground] on a pressing of apples for Mr. Dodge and got out two barrels of Cider and milked the cows before sunrise,” Caleb exulted one September morning in 1802. So industrious were his brother and he that they could “make a pressing of 4 to 5 barrels in a day.” In the same vein, he rhymed one spring:

Let the Great Sun look down and view Industry in each rural Village. Every Man his work pursue, Farmers now attend your tillage.

Here he was admonishing people like himself, not necessarily to prosper or even to provide for their families, but to improve the property that defined their status as independent farmers. Doubtless, daily rounds were dull at times, but the argument of Barbara Karsky that rural New Englanders considered work to be drudgery—something to be performed only until minimum standards of subsistence and comfort were met—finds little echo here. Within his world, therefore, independence took at least an equal place alongside material comfort in defining the goals of working life.

Caleb did not frame these beliefs in individualist terms; this is implied in the very structure of his language, for the diary tells its story in phrases that either begin with “we” or leave the collective family subject assumed. Nor, indeed, did he have much to say about the surrounding

23 On improvements to the property see Jackson Diary, Sept. 10, Nov. 16-19, 1802, June 10-13, 23, 1803, summary for Dec. 1805. For store purchases see ibid., Jan. 23, Feb. 7, Mar. 16, 30, 1805.
24 Jackson Diary, Dec. 10, 1805.
25 Jackson Diary, June 27, 1803.
27 In June 1803, for example, Caleb recorded 34 separate instances of work that different members of his family performed. In 8 cases, “we” did it; in 2, “I” did it; in 7, other members of his family mentioned by name did it; and in 17, Caleb did not mention the agent at all. In none of these 17 cases, however, did Caleb
community. Rarely would a neighborly activity like the raising of a cider mill or a trip with nonfamily members to a salt marsh for hay result in a longer entry than normal. Meaningful as they were in certain ways, however, these events were hardly central to his understanding of what work was ultimately about. Obviously, Caleb had a life beyond the farm, just as he had interests that were purely private. But the fact that he told the story of how “things have got along one year after another” in family terms can only mean that he believed comfortable independence, or competency, to be a family possession foremost.

This understanding of labor’s purpose anchored Caleb in an Anglo-American tradition, broadly shared among working people, that stretched back into the Middle Ages. As a value, competency was predicated on the decline of feudal forms of dependency and the slow development of commercial farming at the village level; the force that it obtained among village folk arose directly from the ambitions and anxieties that these first glimmerings of capitalism provoked. The pursuit of competency differed from the workings of mature capitalism because it was tied, not to a logic of endless accumulation, but to the limited, human needs of individual families and to the diminishing emotional returns to their labor that those needs implied. To label Caleb or his New England neighbors “embryo John D. Rockefellers,” as Charles S. Grant did, is to misunderstand the conceptual boundaries of their culture.28 In an age of nascent capitalism, when family producers had to confront ever more constantly the possibilities of hiring their neighbors or working for them, and of marketing produce or buying their own bread, it was the worry over whatever level of independence and material well-being they possessed that occupied their minds. For some, the rising winds of the market economy blew fair, full of promise for prosperity and control over their own affairs; for others, they whispered of poverty and dispossession. But through the centuries that stretched from the waning of the feudal age to the triumph of industrial capitalism, the value of family competency defined for ordinary Anglo-Americans the purpose of work.

II

On neither side of the Atlantic did there ever exist developed land and productive equipment sufficient to bring comfortable independence within the easy reach of all. Growing families had to struggle—in private competition with one another or collectively across class lines—to protect or obtain the degree of competency that was adequate to their needs. If the aspirations of one family or class of families were to be satisfied, others

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mention doing anything else but the task in question. Hence I conclude that (1) most of the men in the family were working together, and (2) Caleb understood the work to be collective in nature. See Jackson Diary, June 1-30, 1803.

28 Charles S. Grant, Democracy in the Connecticut Frontier Town of Kent (New York, 1961), 53.
would have to do without. The stakes were high, and there was no general agreement over which institution—the community, the state, or the free market (whether local or national)—had the authority to resolve the incipient conflict. If society itself were not to perish in the fight, some means or another had to ensure that the struggle proceeded at a tolerable social cost, and it is to the cultural forms that permitted this that we now shall turn.

In England, to the degree that production was structured by class, these tensions became class tensions, and collective ritual was the forum where they manifested themselves. Accepting this point, close students of the history of English working people have reconstructed around plebeian collective interest a tradition of “moral economy”—the sword that protected common folk from the advances of capitalism by doing battle with the competing principles of political economy within the realm of ritual and ideology. People did not struggle with their masters continuously in the streets; rather, they demonstrated periodically under the banner of moral economy, arguing for the legitimacy of custom against modern property right and the rule of market logic.29

The basic premise of this tradition was that a fair measure of competency could be guaranteed only if access to land, subsistence, and employment was not made wholly subject to the iron laws of political economy. Thus, in times of dearth, the price of basic foodstuffs ought to be regulated at the customary local level, either by government action or, failing that, by the forcible intervention of the crowd. Equally sacred were the rights of smallholders to their lands in the open fields, their access to common lands, and the body of common rights in manorial lands that enabled those of little means to hunt, fish, graze animals, cut timber, and glean after harvest. In the labor market, moral economy demanded that the price of a day’s work be standard and that certain customary perquisites at harvest—special beer and meat allowances, largesse, and a banquet, for example—be paid by masters to their men. Tenancy on customary land was also a sensitive issue. Rents and fines should remain fixed at ancient levels, regardless of movements within the land market, and the right of copyholders to keep their holdings for life and pass them along to their children should be inviolably maintained. Finally, this tradition included the right to employment at a customary standard of living and dignity, so that any master who reorganized the workplace or introduced new technology with the aim of laying off his men was sure to meet with popular censure.30


The power of the moral economy in early modern England was rooted in the concrete interests of common people. For those who spent much of the year in the employ of others, who were purchasers, not sellers, of bread, and who owned their meager holdings of land and productive equipment on terms of copyhold or credit, the defense of customary right was vitally important. It may or may not have kept their standard of living above the level that a more rationalized and capitalist economy might have set, but it certainly served to protect their independence. For a great many ordinary folk, the tenets of moral economy offered the only hope that there would remain a sphere of economic life that they could manage for better or for worse but as they saw fit.

To defend these tenets, laborers, journeymen, smaller husbandmen, craftsmen, and their families were willing to go to law or challenge the law forcibly in the streets, and they were quite prepared to intimidate their friends and neighbors into joining in. Even in years when these differences did not explode in conflict, the frontier between capitalism and common right was never free of skirmishing. Bob Bushaway has described how English village ceremonies—from Plough Monday through the sheep shearing and haying festivals of midsummer to the culminating ritual of the harvest home—could be occasions when the boundaries between the two were repeatedly tested. During Rogation Week, for example, whole parishes made the circuit of the manor, clarifying and reemphasizing the claims of customary right against those of private property. These could be the scenes of violent conflict, but even in their commonly peaceable form, communal perambulations reminded participants of the battle front and its importance.31

This is not to say that the common people of England lived entirely within an orbit defined by moral economic culture. Inside the limits that their means allowed, working families were ready to avail themselves of market opportunities, even to exploit their traditional rights with a view to profit. Thus copyholding farmers in the north of England waxed prosperous during the eighteenth century by dealing in the cattle trade to London while continuing to pay their landlords fines at a level far lower than a free market would have set. In the much earlier period of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Zvi Razi has discovered wealthier peasants of the West Midlands operating their lands directly and dispatching their surpluses to market, in spite of the rising wages that followed upon the Black Death, because they could mobilize the labor of neighbors on customary and inexpensive terms. R. H. Hilton has argued for the later Middle Ages as a whole that the village economy incorporated elements of mutual help and commercial exchange, and that the former “could imperceptibly develop” into the latter over time.32 It would be plainly wrongheaded, in

31 Bushaway, By Rite, esp. 39-40, 81-88, on Rogation Week perambulations.
other words, to subsume the entirety of class behavior under cultures that
proscribed either tradition or the market. In any English community at any
given time, there would have been large areas of economic life in which
one or the other ruled by general agreement. Long-enclosed fields where
modern property law had been in force for time out of mind, remote
wasteland where common rights were not under challenge from the
landlord, marketplaces in times of plenty when the prices of many
provisions could be set with little objection by supply and demand—all
could coexist in village society and be used at once by the villagers
themselves because they all enjoyed a degree of local legitimacy.

This much granted, there nonetheless existed in every English village
between the advancing capitalist order and the shrinking domain of
feudalism a thin but contested frontier where the rules of economic
propriety were often in hot dispute. This boundary could never be entirely
forgotten; the collective experience of struggle about it gave the bite to
English community and corporate solidarity.

For nearly twenty years, historians following the lead of E. P. Thompson
have been reconstructing in all its richness the tradition of ritual and
popular belief that he labeled “moral economy.” So successful have they
been that we probably have a more nuanced understanding of how
ordinary people in England saw the market as a threat than we do of the
ways it may have sparked their ambitions. Perhaps this is as it should be.
But can we sensibly look for moral economy in America and expect it
to approach the authority it commanded in England? Without a large body
of permanently poor households dependent on customary right to protect
their access to the means of production, and without local histories
stretching back into a feudal past, could there exist the material to support
a cultural form based on the appeal to ancient tradition? Did settlers in the
New World fashion customs of their own to contest the advance of
political economy? New questions these are not, but they bear on the
character of early American economic culture, and in light of the spate of
recent writing on the subject they deserve renewed attention.

Were Americans, for example, worried about the free operation of
markets? Caleb Jackson was never troubled on this score as long as the
independence of his own family was not under attack, but can we
generalize from his case? The call for regulation was not unknown in the
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and a great many towns did have
marketplaces where such rules could have been enforced. Larger cities
possessed assizes of bread throughout this period and often attempted to
set the prices of other commodities as well. During the national emer-
gency of the Revolution, regulatory orders were common everywhere,
and the struggle to maintain them was intense. Popular agitation against

No. 93 (1981), 31-33; Hilton, The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages: The
33 See n. 29.
private marketing was never the rural phenomenon that it was in England, but urban crowds did attempt to halt grain exports several times during the eighteenth century.34

And yet by English standards, the limits to popular interest in the regulated economy were narrow. Evidence for enforcement of controls in peacetime is scarce, and instances of food rioting are rarer still. Both are swamped by the surviving documentation of private trading and the free movement of prices in country and town. As early as 1640, John Winthrop could write of his fellow colonists that it was "the common rule that most men walked by in all their commerce, to buy as cheap as they could, and to sell as dear." A century later, popular sympathy still stood so solidly behind the principle of private trading that when the town of Boston constructed a publicly regulated market in 1736, a crowd attacked the building and tore it down. Similarly in Virginia, when mobs of smaller planters and their tenants razed four tobacco warehouses in 1732, they were reacting to the Inspection Act that limited their right to grow as much tobacco as they pleased.35

When uttered, moreover, the language of regulation in early America tended to be more particularist than the English model of moral economy would suggest. In times of dearth, men and women in the old country did direct most of their wrath against the individual ships and caravans that were carrying their grain away, but they could also march into marketplaces to demand wholesale regulation or range the countryside forcing one farmer after another to open his barn. In this way they framed their words and actions to a broader condemnation of private marketing, accusing wealthy farmers and middlemen in general with dealing away the


food that local people had grown.36 By comparison, when Americans argued for regulation—even in the cities—they did so less because they disagreed with the notion of private marketing in general, and more because they feared the evil-minded intentions of powerful individuals and small cartels. The word that suffused their thinking on the matter was “monopoly.” Of course, English towns and villages were not without their individual villains either. The transatlantic shift was only one of tendency. But insofar as the American market-going crowd, even in the seaports, numbered more people with some claim or reasonable aspiration to independent status, it was capable of seeing more justice in the operation of supply and demand. Corrupt dealers like Robert Keayne of Boston could threaten the fairness of the market, and they needed discipline. But the terror of widespread hardship that activated the English crowd and evoked its call for general local regulation was bound to have less force in a land of relative plenty. Producing families pursued their ideals of competency, therefore, sometimes in concert with one another but also in competition—sliding back and forth between public cooperation and private dealing as circumstances prescribed.37

Striking an easy balance did grow more difficult with time, especially in the cities as the politicization of craftsmen during the Revolutionary years and their gradual proletarianization in the subsequent decades began to dampen hopes of individual success and raise the legitimacy of collective action. As Alfred F. Young has put it, “they acquired a greater consciousness of themselves as citizens, as producers and as a ‘mechanic interest,’ and in doing so they reached back and over to retrieve [English artisanal] traditions.” When capitalist social relations began their long sweep westward in the first half of the nineteenth century, the process Young describes repeated itself—diminishing, though never killing, the faith of American working people in the justice of negotiated bargains.38


Did tenancy in America give rise to expressions of moral economy? Renters were not as common in the colonies as in the mother country, and they generally held their lands on shorter and more contractual terms. Most of them, furthermore, lived scattered among landowning farmers and could entertain a reasonable hope of someday escaping tenancy. In certain regions, as in the Hudson Valley of New York, there were entire communities of tenants with some sense of collective interest organized by their common dependency on a single manor lord; they were quite capable of pressing to the point of violence the demand for an end to their tenant status, as in the land riots of 1766. In no way, however, did they think of themselves as struggling to preserve a moral and customary past. When they did act in concert, it was to shake off tradition and secure for their families the independence that seemed proper to the New World.\textsuperscript{39}

Were common usages regarding land and water any more important? In any legal sense, the answer is no. New England families did enjoy the privilege of keeping animals on designated town commons, and everywhere people could fish in the waterways. But formal rights could never have the shaping influence on popular sensibilities in America that they had in England. Although disputes over the town common and undivided lands were common enough, most of them were legally resolved, and there is little evidence that they pitted in the English manner one class against another.\textsuperscript{40}

More important, of course, were the customary rights to hunt, fish, cut wood, and even farm on the outward fringes of settlement. For a few decades, exigencies of life on the moving frontier did force settlers into a strategic relaxation of their commitment to property right. In such surroundings, hunting game, fighting Indians, and fleeing federal authorities put a premium on mobility and rendered land deeds an encumbrance. Squatting \textit{was} customary there, and groups of settlers whose titles to their farms were challenged by nonresident proprietors did invoke a degree of moral economy in self-defense. The Green Mountain Boys of Vermont and the so-called White Indians of Maine, for example, believed that their


occupation constituted far more legitimate grounds for ownership than did the indistinct paper claims of urban greatees in New York and Massachusetts. The vigor with which they organized to defend their rights is somewhat reminiscent of lord-and-tenant conflict in the mother country. Where the pattern differed was, first, in the difficulty of policing the backwoods, which enabled rebels there more frequently to win their point, and, second, in the greater tenacity of the English struggle. Even the White Indians, who kept up the fight for their claims for nearly fifty years cannot match in sheer staying power the tenants of the bishop of Worcester or those on the Percy manors near the Scottish border, who carried on their struggle over centuries. In 1808, when Maine squatters and Massachusetts proprietors were ordered by the General Court to compromise, the former, writes Alan Taylor, "gradually forsook their White Indian ways and focused on earning enough from their lands to pay for them." There as elsewhere, once the frontier had slipped over the western horizon, local commitment to moral economy dwindled away.41

Only on the far side of that frontier did there exist societies with real reservations about the legitimacy of political economy. Native Americans may well have been ready to employ commerce to advantage when the opportunity presented itself, but even in the marketplace their understanding of exchange incorporated all sorts of political, social, and religious considerations that inhibited their freedom to deal for the highest price. On the question of property right, moreover, the English and the Indians were worlds apart. Wherever white settlement pushed outward, native tribes argued and fought back, not only to defend their sovereignty, but also to protect a wide variety of traditional usages—hunting and gathering rights especially—on lands to which they had provisionally admitted their fair-skinned neighbors. If the strict English definition of private property right was a cultural weapon in the conquest of this continent, then the spirited Indian defense of their lands across the centuries can well be termed the only pure expression of moral economy in American history.42


42 For two different viewpoints on the fur trade see Arthur J. Ray and Donald B. Freeman, "Give Us Good Measure": An Economic Analysis of Relations between the Indians and the Hudson's Bay Company before 1763, (Toronto, 1978), and Calvin Martin, Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade
III

The argument that moral economy has limited applicability to early America is not intended to imply either that economic development was freer of social tension than in England or that economic culture was somehow poorer. It only suggests that as long as the frontier and the relative cheapness of land inhibited the growth of the laboring poor, working Americans were unlikely to be troubled by either property right or the legitimacy of commerce.

Wherever settlers were bent on achieving independence and prosperity for their progeny, however, economic development was an issue and one that demanded an enormous application of work. And because the frontier was close enough that they could not rely on the poverty of others to furnish them with aid, Americans had to employ other types of power to satisfy their labor needs in ways and degrees that had been unfamiliar in England. Thus credit, political privilege, slavery, and parental authority served to mobilize the help that—outside of the urban seaports—planters, merchants, and ordinary householders could not raise on the free market alone. If, then, it was in the forum of ritualized ideological contest that social tensions were played out, and if these tensions were rooted in the exercise of power, it follows that we should locate the contested ground in early American economic culture, not around the issues of markets and property right, but around the agencies of power that actually organized the economy.43

Many Americans felt the hand of social and economic power through the instrumentality of credit. To spare themselves the trouble and expense of managing a free labor force in a world where labor was scarce, colonial developers often delegated the responsibility over production to individuals or households by advancing the capital they needed to conduct operations. Fishermen and whalemen obtained vessels, provisions, and gear; homesteading farmers acquired land and livestock; artisans founded shops, mills, and yards—all on credit dispensed liberally enough to make Americans a heavily indebted people. As capital in the hands of the borrower, credit was a vehicle of opportunity, but as a debt that the lender

(43) Although this article does not deal with slavery, there is a parallel question concerning the nature of black resistance to slavery and the degree of slaves' attachment or resistance to market logic and the existence of property right in things. See Philip D. Morgan, "Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700 to 1880," WMQ, 3rd Ser., XXXIX (1982), 563-599; T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes, "Myne Owne Ground": Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640-1676 (New York, 1980), 78-83, 98-100; and John Scott Strickland, "Traditional Culture and Moral Economy: Society and Social Change in the South Carolina Low Country, 1865-1910," in Hahn and Prude, eds., Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation, 141-178.
could call, it remained an instrument of social power and, as such, often became the focus of deep social tension.\textsuperscript{44}

Most of the time, people dealt with these matters as individuals—debtors and creditors facing each other in a continuous renegotiation of terms. Every year or so, the process reached a periodic crisis at the reckoning when, in private or among friends, the parties worked out new terms for the months to come. When the stakes were high, these occasions could be true theater. In seventeenth-century Springfield, John Pynchon confronted his clients in interviews, seeking to mold the credit terms between them to his advantage with threats, logical arguments, and appeals to their business sense. They replied by casting their prospects in the best possible light, invoking tradition, or simply pleading poverty to carve out some breathing room for themselves. Although there was a limit to what good acting could effect, even the slightest advantage gained or lost could tip the scales of family histories.\textsuperscript{45}

In certain circumstances, the social tension imbedded in credit relationships found expression in litigation between individuals or even in collective confrontation over currency questions and debtor relief. The pattern of escalation in protests over these issues had something in common with food riots in the mother country. Americans clearly had an understanding of when debts could reasonably be called and when not; when they could be sued and when not; when a pattern of unjust collection merited communal intervention; and when violence was appropriate. What began with isolated complaints could coalesce under certain conditions into collective petitioning or political agitation and even erupt into attacks on foreclosing sheriffs or the disruption of courts. When did collective action become legitimate? Probably what mattered most was the question of political privilege: whether or not the creditor was believed to be connected to some distant seat of power, capable of reshaping the law to his own ends and ready to deprive honest and well-managed households of their independence. Neither the Regulators of North Carolina nor the backwoodsmen in Shays’s Rebellion joined in arms to protest the legiti-


\textsuperscript{45} Innes, \textit{Labor in a New Land}, 66-71.
macy of debt collection. They organized collectively only when they
decided that fair bargains under the law were impossible to obtain.46

Political privilege had implications for the economic lives of Americans,
however, that went well beyond the realm of credit. Although by early
modern standards, American families barely felt the weight of govern-
ment, they were as sensitive as any people to the threat of privilege (and
sometimes as envious of its perquisites), largely because of what they
thought to be its bearing on the competent functioning of their house-
holds. Particularly suspect in their eyes were absentee land proprietors
and speculators who depended on courts and legislators to defend claims
derived in many cases from ancient royal grants and obscure Indian
purchases. So, too, were lawyers, trained beyond popular understanding
in the very language of political power. “Millers’ clacks and lawyers’ clacks
are in perpetual motion with the like sound and sense,” claimed the
Farmers’ Almanack of 1802, “and as the first grinds down your corn, the
other grinds down the land it grows upon.” Customs officers were still
another type that people loved to hate. In 1693 a crowd of Bostonians led
by the native-born governor, William Phips, descended on a customs
storehouse and watched approvingly as Phips himself attacked the collector,
“pulling and dragging him aboute the wharfe of the said Storehouse”
until he agreed to release some impounded goods. So cowing was the
experience of collecting duties for His Majesty that some colonists
quipped:

He that keeps a Plantaçon Custom-house
One year, may bee a Man, the next a Mouse.47

These prejudices and others fed at the everyday level the suspicion of
distant power that opened eighteenth-century American sympathies to the
republican tradition. In rural Massachusetts, Richard L. Bushman has
argued, the conspiracy that Revolutionary farmers sought to repel was one
widely believed to have a concrete social program designed at “reducing

46 David P. Szatmary, Shays’ Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection
(Amherst, Mass., 1980), chaps. 3, 4; Hall, Politics without Parties, chap. 7; James
P. Whittenburg, “Planters, Merchants, and Lawyers: Social Change and the Origins
of the North Carolina Regulation,” WMQ, 3d Ser., XXXIV (1977), 226-227, 232,
238; Marvin L. Michael Kay, “The North Carolina Regulation, 1766-1776: A
Class Conflict,” in Young, ed., American Revolution, 84, 85; Brown, “Back Country
Rebellions,” in Brown and Fehrenbacher, eds., Tradition, Conflict, and Modern-
ization, 79-86.

47 George Lyman Kittredge, The Old Farmer and His Almanack . . . (Boston,
Mass., 1904), 102; William Manning, The Key of Libberty, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison
(Billerica, Mass., 1922), 33-34; Whittenburg, “Planters, Merchants, and Lawyers,”
WMQ, 3d Ser., XXXIV (1977), 228-238; Brown, “Back Country Rebellions,” in
Brown and Fehrenbacher, eds., Tradition, Conflict, and Modernization, 79-86;
quotations from Thomas C. Barrow, Trade and Empire: The British Customs Service
in Colonial America, 1660-1775 (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 31, 41; Maier, Resis-
tance to Revolution, 7-9.
the country to lordships.” As a few of the weaker-willed in every corner of the colony succumbed to the lure of imperial preferment, cosy stipends, and delegated power, the rest of their formerly independent neighbors would be reduced to the status of tenants and laborers. Naturally, if Americans had not been prey to these attractions, the whole scenario would not have made them so nervous. But insofar as the anxiety over political independence among ordinary people was rooted in their fears for the loss of household independence, an important part of the political discourse of our period was informed—most obviously during the War of Independence itself—by the ethic of competency.48

The single force that mobilized more labor in early America than any other was the parental and sexual authority internal to the family. In a predominantly rural country, where most householders owned or rented the lands they operated and kept their children about them, and where labor was accordingly scarce, most of the economy was necessarily driven by mothers’ and especially fathers’ directives.49 The stream of commands and the tensions they bred, which in the Old World had been structured more by class, in America became chiefly a family concern. Households differed from class-structured workplaces, however, in that they were cooperative institutions that existed primarily for the benefit of their offspring. Certainly they suffered from internal disagreements. Some of these were framed by gender, others by generation, and still others sprang from the laziness, selfishness, or sheer cussedness of family members. “Finished digging potatoes without the aid and assistance of ‘cold fingers,’” complained Caleb Jackson one November day about his younger brother, Samuel, hinting at a smoldering issue between them. Nevertheless, the two boys knew exactly why they were digging in the patch that day, and Caleb would not have thought twice about telling his brother off.50 Whatever their difficulties with one another, family members shared a commonly recognized interest in the achievement of household competency, and so the frank confrontations of power that were not usually acceptable between households were quite appropriate within them. Thus, while those who dealt with one another across class boundaries normally required cultural formalities to negotiate, those who managed the same within the family usually did not.

This explains why the extraordinary calendar of communal rite that structured the English working year and mediated power relationships between classes had such a muted echo in America. Take, for example, the cultural context of the harvest. In the mother country, this climax to the agricultural working year was dense with ritual. Choosing the harvest

50 Jackson Diary, Nov. 11, 1802, Oct. 25, 1803.
lords, ten-pounding, booting, food and drink, last sheaf, last load, crying largesse, harvest home, and gleaning combined to mark off in highly ceremonial fashion the progress of work. At the season when anxiety ran highest—both for the farmer worried about his crops and for the laboring family counting on a sizable chunk of its yearly income—the possibility of conflict was great, and the ritualization of production helped ease the class relationship at its most delicate point.

Americans harvests, by comparison, proceeded with far less ceremony. Where large farms and plantations demanded gangs of reapers and pickers, work might be accompanied by some collective ritual in the English manner. On the shores of the Chesapeake Bay in July 1774, Nicholas Cresswell came upon a feast with dancing or “what they call a reaping frolic.” The teams of men who harvested the larger farms of eastern Pennsylvania demanded special customary allowances of meat and drink, selected their own leaders, and structured the pace of the working day along quite formal lines. A New England husking, where a farmer feasted the boys and girls of his neighborhood in return for their performing in ceremonial fashion the minor task of husking his corn, was an interesting version of the English harvest home. As a gesture that crossed, not class, but generational lines, it mirrored the productive relations within New England villages. And yet, on balance, the record of early American harvest festivals is relatively lean, nor should this surprise us since, for the most part, it was not the community that harvested crops but the family.

This is not to say that family farming did not give rise to resentments and misunderstandings; to some degree these were alleviated by domestic ritual. Thus, when the crops had been gathered and stored away, American families marked the occasion either by fasting in thanks, feasting in celebration, or both. Superficially, this resembled the harvest home, when the English farmer treated his crew at the completion of its work to a grand feast of “roast beef, geese, good plumb-puddings, and as much liquor as they chuse.” Both in its character and its social composition, however, the American Thanksgiving dinner was different. In 1761, a New Jersey farmer recorded in his diary that there had been “much rejoicing and some merriment today when the family came together for the Feast of the Harvest. The children with their own [children] travelled many miles as there had been snow and good riding.” Juliana Smith, a minister’s daughter in Sharon, Connecticut, described a Thanksgiving dinner in 1779 attended by herself, her father and mother, four siblings, two grandmothers, two sets of cousins with four aunts and uncles, the family next door, seven of

51 Bushaway, By Rite, 107-148.
her father's students, and four "Old Ladies... [without] Homes or Children of their own"—thirty-five in all.\(^{53}\) Unlike the harvest home that united employer and employees, Thanksgiving drew in mainly separate families of physically distant kin who had probably not been much involved in the host's harvest at all. And whereas one ceremony represented the obligation that a master owed his men, the other was an occasion to express the gratitude that independent households believed they owed to God alone. In search of competency, grown and married children had scattered, but on this occasion they reunited to reaffirm and demonstrate before their own children the principle of family solidarity that they themselves were testing. Any disagreements relating to the harvest itself had chiefly been dealt with informally within these households. Thanksgiving served its purpose, not by mediating those conflicts, but by easing the strains that arose when brothers and sisters grew up, married, and went their own ways in pursuit of separate goals.

Indeed, tension between families competing over the means to competency was general. Where independence was widespread, producers maintained a dense network of exchange. Among themselves, they traded or purchased land, produce, and equipment (not labor), and, being well-equipped American households, they had a good deal to sell and swap. Stated comparatively, the access to land, equipment, and items of consumption that most English working people gained by working for and purchasing from the propertied classes, free American families either possessed themselves or obtained from their neighbors. As we have seen, these dealings were aimed ultimately at accumulating enough property to settle several children in circumstances of relative comfort and independence. So, in towns of limited size possessing limited capital with which to plant these offspring or launch them westward on their own homesteading trail, such dealings could not help but be competitive and infused with tension. It was in the land market that the success or failure of families was mostly measured, but ultimately families rose or fell by their abilities at household management, which included careful, frequently hard-headed, and even conniving dealings with their neighbors.

How could such a society reproduce itself? Sometimes it did not. In his almanac for 1813, Robert Thomas wrote about farmer Freeport, a convivial but spendthrift Yankee who ran into financial difficulties and turned to his neighbors for help. As Thomas told the tale:

Old Capt. Gripe came in for his share of Freeport's estate; and there was Plunkett, the cobbler, he had lent him nine pence several

times and now had cobbled it up to a court demand. Bob Raikens had swapped watches with him and now came in for the boot. The widow Nippet had lent him her mare twice mill and once to a funeral, and had sold the boys and [*sic*] old tow jacket for a peck of whortleberries, and also given them a mess of turnips, and so she made out her account and got a writ. Tom Teazer, well-known at the grog shops for a dabster at shoemaker loo, old Jeremiah Jenkins, the Jew, Stephen Staball, the butcher, and all the village moon-cursers came in for their portion of the wreck. So poor Freeport gave up vessel and cargo to these land pirates, sent his disconsolate wife again to her father with one of their babes, the rest were provided for by the town; and as for himself, miserable wretch, he became an outcast, a vagabond, and died drunk on the highway.  

Although the writer believed in running a tight ship and was exaggerating for the purpose of his moral lesson, he did live among these people, and he understood the potential for discord built into their rural economy:

Now to preserve a good understanding and continue in friendship with friends and neighbors, call upon all those you have had any dealing with the preceding year, and make a complete settlement; pay them off, if convenient, if the balance be in their favour—if in yours and they find it not convenient to pay, put it to the new account and pass receipts. By practising this method you will not only be able to ascertain your neat income, but prevent those disagreeable altercations and petty law-suits which take place too often between man and man from a delay in settlement.

Early Americans took to the law with alarming frequency precisely because the tensions arising out of a labor system geared to the values of competency—Caleb Jackson's values—were so hard to defuse. The courts enabled neighbors, as Bruce H. Mann has explained, "to live together, if not in peace, then at least in a truce."

Yet this society not only reproduced itself, but thrived. And it managed this largely at the level of ritual. Family and village custom helped mitigate ill-feeling and resolve disagreements within and especially between households by bringing people into formal settings where they could reopen lines of communication that had stretched or even snapped in the course

64 Kittredge, Old Farmer and His Almanack, 95.
65 Ibid., 82.
of working life.⁵⁷ Although such formalities are the stuff of household and community in any society, it is interesting how often cultural forms that in England had served to reaffirm customary right and mediate class conflict were redirected in America at the preservation of local and family consensus. One can view this process in all sorts of settings—church services, town meetings, quilting bees, huskings, even mealtimes—and each of these could sustain careful study. We have space here only to suggest through a few examples drawn from the world of work how ritual operated in this way.

There was for one thing the celebration of neighborliness itself. Precisely because cooperation between families was at once so necessary and so difficult to reconcile with the pursuit of competency, it had to be clothed in a self-conscious spirit of community. Simply to preserve the system of local exchange Americans had to interrupt it with neighborly gestures unconnected with the basic functioning of their own households: gifts for which they expected no immediate return. Thus new settlers arriving in the community were welcomed with presents of produce and offers of help until they could establish themselves. Family members who fell sick or a mother who had just given birth could count on neighbors to look after things until the emergency passed. Handing the jug around to friends who had just helped one finish off a chore expressed the same principle. These were gifts and, as such, not part of the borrowing system, but they were critical to its operation in that they enabled individuals to mend or maintain fences on ground where the balancing of family interests was not the issue.⁵⁸

Nowhere was this principle more evident than in the raising of barns and houses—practical affairs but conducted in a ceremonious manner. In character they were voluntary. When Caleb Jackson "rode around to invite hands" to a house raising in the spring of 1805, he placed an obligation on their shoulders, but he had to solicit their help, and they could beg off. Abner Sanger of Keene, New Hampshire, assisted at only one of the four raisings he mentioned in his diary for 1781, even though he knew all of the owners. People might feel under some sense of duty to help, but the cast of participants was ultimately joined together by choice. In this, however, lay the whole point. On the one side, by calling on each neighboring family for unpaid help, the owner admitted that he could not survive by self-interested negotiation alone. And on the other, by voluntarily lending a hand—not only to the owner but to everyone assisting—the neighbor made quietly but in common view a simple gift to all. In the course of the day, moreover, by pitching in here and there to

⁵⁷ Gerald M. Sider, "Christmas Mumming and the New Year in Outport Newfoundland," Past and Present, No. 71 (1976), 118-123.
⁵⁸ Faragher, Sugar Creek, 133, 134; Fletcher, Pennsylvania Agriculture, 120, 121; Susan Geib, "'Changing Works': Agriculture and Society in Brookfield, Massachusetts, 1785-1820" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1981), chap. 4; W. J. Rorabaugh, The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition (New York, 1979), 19.
help selected individuals at different stages of the job, he could with the least possible embarrassment make up for past transgressions and smooth the way for the everyday dealings of the months to come. By joining in a formalized and relatively anonymous toast at the day's end, he was effectively wiping the moral slate clean so that the exchange of goods and services between households could proceed.\(^{59}\)

IV

Early Americans inhabited a cultural space that extended far beyond the villages and counties in which they lived. Whether toiling at home or dealing with neighbors, they understood their household economies and planned for them, not only in terms of the realities of their immediate surroundings, but also in light of what they expected to come. Roads would be opened; towns would develop; land values would rise; and the amenities of life that they had heard about or remembered from back east or overseas would also come in time. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century people in this part of the New World were rarely organized in capitalist productive relations, but they knew about the market and the opportunities it afforded. They realized that, situated as they were on the periphery of the European world economy, and as long as they were free to mobilize their own households or find a dependable source of external help, they were likely to do well. By pursuing comfortable independence for their families they were, of course, aiding in the process of primitive accumulation that would one day undermine household production. In time the very term competency would come to denote a degree of skill or capacity (sufficient to survive in an industrializing world) and lose its traditional meaning, which had hinged on property ownership.\(^{60}\) But these developments were never anticipated. In the beginning at least, American working people cast the seeds of change themselves.

Every culture needs its lies, and the great lie in American history is that the ethic of competency could somehow be a peaceable one. The Indians discovered very early the true nature of this idea; later, Africans did too; and eventually the entire world gained a taste of its significance. But even in the heart of Anglo-American society, the basic drive to procure enough land and productive equipment to ensure, at the very least, that nobody in one's family would have to depend on others for work was a socially divisive force. If it developed into a real thirst for wealth of the sort that fostered the growth of slavery, the search for credit, and the scramble after political privilege—as it did where rich lands and the possibilities for commerce allowed—the potential for social tension similarly soared.


\(^{60}\) *OED*, II, 719.
Contrary to a common argument, cooperation between households did not coexist easily with the basic aspirations of working people.

The achievement of American history—at least for European colonists and their descendants—was to keep these explosive forces contained. The game of life—the *competition* from which *competency* derived—could be divisive, acrimonious, and nearly impossible to negotiate openly. Accordingly, men and women needed the formal settings of huskings, Pope Day celebrations, or court closings to communicate the vital truths on which society's survival depended. Sometimes they launched their message collectively across lines of power, and it spoke of rights that would be defended by force if necessary. More often, they sent it along to neighbors, and it stated simply that in spite of their differences they did need one another. In pre-industrial America, competency and spirit of community were necessary opposites—flip sides, as it were, of the same coin.