



OF CABBAGES AND KINGS COUNTY

AGRICULTURE AND THE FORMATION OF MODERN BROOKLYN

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10. WHAT WAS THE DUTCH FARMERS' PRICE? PROFITS, TAXES, LAND PRICES, AND INCOMES

Fate put it into the hands of Dutch farmers, old fashioned and conservative, and they clung to their land as a cripple clings to his crutches or a drowning man to anything within his grasp. They had cabbages and potatoes to sell, and sometimes horses and cattle, but real estate? Not they!

— Henry Hazelton, *The Boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens*, 1925

Economists have traditionally examined farmers' land-sale decisions from the perspective of pull and push forces. The chief pull force is the offer of a high price, which the farmer is unable to resist. Farmers may also be pushed into selling by low product prices, high input prices, or high property taxes, which make farming unremunerative. In the 1960s and 1970s, when farmers reportedly received half of the \$13.5 billion annual gain in land prices from converting raw land to suburban residential use, land economists, in explaining the supply side of suburban land conversion, argued that: "The single most important cost of landownership is the interest which could be earned by investing elsewhere the money that could be realized from the sale of the land. Another cost of landownership is taxes."¹

The question here is whether these forces were relevant to Dutch farmers in nineteenth-century rural Kings County. To the extent that farmers in some of the Kings County towns were protected by annexation statutes that prohibited taxing their land according to the value at its potentially highest market use, property taxes may not have been so burdensome as to push

farmers out of agriculture. Since vegetable farming was not only still profitable but at its all-time peak in terms of output in the 1880s, when the great land sell-off began, the claim that farmers were motivated to sell out in order to leave a dying or unprofitable industry is unconvincing.²

Similarly inapplicable to Kings County is the argument that it was rational for farmers to sell out because: “Between 1865 and 1896, the prices of most commodities fell in real terms, as the American farmer paid more and more and received less and less. This meant that the value of land was falling for agricultural purposes, even as acreage within commuting range of a city was becoming desirable for residential use.”³ The cumulative effect of a handwriting-on-the-wall perception that has motivated some farmers in the twentieth century to sell out is a more plausible argument:

Once started, a decline in farming can perpetuate itself. When too few farms remain, local dealers for feeds, fertilizers, and seeds cannot support themselves. Farmers will then have to spend more of their valuable time getting needed supplies.

An even more insidious threat is the “impermanence syndrome” — the idea that the mere expectation of a decline brings about an actual decline. If farmers believe the end is at hand, they will not make long-term investments in . . . buildings, fences, and irrigation systems.⁴

But before any of these perspectives can bring their explanatory powers to bear on farming in Kings County, the basis for the initial sell-off has to be understood.

PREMODERN AND MONETIZED MENTALITIES

[T]he spirit of improvement resulting from our proximity to a vast and rapidly growing city . . . levels hills, fills up valleys, sweeps away forests, swallows farms, and forces the descendants of the founders of this portion of New Netherlands who desire to continue and enjoy that independence and contentment which the cultivators of the soil possess in a greater measure than those in the other pursuits of life, to abandon the homes of their fatherland and seek other more favorable localities removed from the turmoil of cities, where they can peaceably and quietly continue the occupation of cultivators without fear of disturbance.

— Teunis G. Bergen, *Genealogy of the Lefferts Family 1650–1878*, 1878

It is not intuitively obvious that Dutch farmers descended from families that had worked the same land for almost 250 years and were embedded in

a distinct regional, socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural, and religious tradition which, despite the early market orientation, may still have regarded the land as a use value for subsistence, would constantly have been looking over their shoulders to compare its capitalized value. If, toward the end of the twentieth century, culturally much less homogeneous farmers continue to mention their emotional attachment to their land and the noneconomic benefits of doing “something worthwhile” and “work[ing] close to nature” as reasons for resisting the sale of their farms, the prevalence of similar sentiments among nineteenth-century farmers is not implausible.⁵

The traditionalist mentality of the Dutch farmers was captured by Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale, in letters he wrote during a journey to Long Island in the early nineteenth century:

Young men, even of wealthy families, are usually taught scarcely anything more than to read, write, and keep accounts. . . . Intelligence is . . . disregarded by the body of the inhabitants, except as it aids them to the acquisition of property. . . .

The insular situation of these three counties has a very perceptible influence upon the inhabitants as a body. . . . Few objects can be presented to them, and few events can occur, of sufficient magnitude to expand thought. . . . Almost all of their concerns are absolutely confined to the house, or to the neighborhood. . . . Habitually bounded by these confines, the mind is neither very much inclined, nor very able to look beyond them. Its . . . pursuits will break through only to reach the market. . . .

[C]omparatively few persons of talents and information reside here. There is nothing sufficiently inviting in the circumstances of the island itself to allure persons of this character hither from the continent. . . . Such, it would seem, must through an indefinite period be the situation of Long Island.⁶

In the early 1880s, Brooklyn boosters were still attacking this mentality of Long Island farmers, “[c]ontent to be in a wilderness,” who “tilled the same few acres year after year . . . and never thought of making a change.” By then, however, “the strong hand of an enterprising and large brained capitalist ha[d] overthrown the Chinese wall of stupid conservatism which excluded the world from this insular Eden.”⁷

Despite these stigmata of inbred provincialism, the census data and land-sale records reveal that many old-line Dutch farmers had sold off or rented out their farms long before farming became (or would have become) unre-

munerative in Kings County. Presumably, therefore, either land prices had become so high that it was possible for farmers to live on the interest from the proceeds, or they foresaw that, regardless of the continued profitability of their agricultural operations, the encroachment of suburbanization was inexorable. Both possibilities, however, presuppose that their deepening integration into capitalist economic structures had detached the Dutch farmers sufficiently from their premodern ideological context to enable them socially and psychologically to abandon their economic base altogether. Especially where former farmers rented out their land to tenants, who in turn hired wage laborers, the land, for the participants in this transaction, became merely one field among many for the investment of their capital. Since the rent paid by the tenant, when capitalized, determined the land price, a farmer who based his decision to sell on whether he could live on the interest from the sale price was, in reality, merely going through the same calculation he had already undertaken in deciding to become a landlord: it was not a qualitatively new thought process.⁸

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, some observers formed the impression that the Dutch farmers' focus was coldly commercial. In the judgment of one of the Flatbush farmers' neighbors, Daniel Tredwell, there was nothing curious about their nourishing little sentimental attachment to their farms. He delighted in recounting the response that one of them had ventured to his inquiry as to "what he did with his vast accumulation of wealth. 'Oh,' said he, 'we count it.'"⁹

This kind of cost-benefit model, which reduces all dimensions of life to monetary commensurability, can be contrasted with the ideal-typical "premodern" model of incommensurability, in which no amount of money can induce a farmer to part with his land. Kings County Dutch farmers were not bereft of such premodern perspectives. Already in the 1790s, a French visitor commented that land was expensive in rural Kings County because New York assured the farmers a market for their produce and because the majority Dutch population did not wish to sell its land.¹⁰ A century later, Jeremiah Johnson Jr., one of the county's leading post-Civil War real-estate figures, described the attitude of his grandfather, General Jeremiah Johnson (1765–1852), a farmer whose Dutch ancestors were among the earliest Long Island settlers and one of the county's richest men:

To the writer who more than once made overtures for the purchase of a portion of his land his reply was uniformly, "As my father left the land to me, so will I leave it to my children. They can do as they please, I expect

them to sell it off for city lots, but I shall not." This tenacity of possession of inherited estates is not more characteristic of the old English families than of our Dutch nobility. Instances have come within the personal observation of the writer of the endurance of privations, but little short of poverty by Dutch families of large and immensely valuable estates, in order to retain them. At almost an hour[']s notice the plutonic money bags would have been dropped into their hands, to obtain a title to the lands which yielded by the most painful exertions barely enough to pay the rapidly increasing city taxes, and furnish them of bread.¹¹

CASE STUDIES OF THE MICROECONOMICS OF SELLOUTS

It has long been an iron law of the real estate market that if farmland stands in the path of urban expansion, no crop is valuable enough to keep it out of developers' hands.

— Barnaby Feder, "Sowing Preservation: Towns Are Slowing Invasion of Farms by Bulldozers," *New York Times*, March 20, 1997

The question here is whether the kind of (opportunity) cost-benefit analysis that economists customarily apply to the micro-decision-making processes behind exits from farming is appropriate to the premodern mentality and habitus that Dwight described and are reminiscent of the "idiocy of rural life," from which, according to the *Communist Manifesto*, the triumphant bourgeoisie had rescued a part of the population. An economic geographer in the 1960s, for example, illustrated this process by reference to a New York State dairy farmer with a \$30,000 investment and a \$3,000 annual net profit which, together with some in-kind self-provisioning, permitted a livable if not spectacular country living. If he were offered a factory job at \$2 an hour and the chance to liquidate his investment: "What would he do? If Jones looks at the money angle only, he would probably leave the farm, for he could invest his \$30,000 at 5 per cent (producing \$1,500 per year) and earn \$4,160 in wages. This is a total of \$5,660 as compared to \$3,000 earned on the farm. Even if housing, food, and other costs run \$1,800 higher per year in the city, he would still have \$3,860, or \$860 more than the farm provided." And even if higher income taxes take a part of this sum, "he has two days off each week, perhaps does not have to get up so early or work so hard; and maybe his wife and children are glad to get off the farm."¹²

Data are available to make similar calculations for Kings County farmers. A good sense of the potential financial inducement open to Kings County farmers can be gleaned from a tiny article that appeared in the *Real Estate Record* at the end of 1889. Declaring that New Utrecht was “just at present enjoying a sort of Western land boom,” it listed the land sales reported in the previous few weeks, which are reproduced in table 32.

At a time when the agricultural census of 1889–90 reported that the value of farmland in Kings County, the third highest in the United States, averaged \$844 per acre (almost double the value at the 1880 census), these sales, averaging \$1,300 to \$1,525 per acre, offered sellers 60 to 80 percent higher prices. In fact, the per acre valuation that many of these particular farmers reported at the 1880 census were below average, thus reinforcing the incentive to sell. Since the yields on U.S. railroad bonds and municipal bonds in the first half of the 1890s were about 3.6 percent, farmers could reasonably have anticipated annual interest income of \$50 per acre from the investment of the proceeds from the sale of their land. Thus a farmer with 20 acres could have received about one thousand dollars annually. This figure was a little more than twice as high as nonfarm employees’ average annual wages. No representative profit or net income data are available, but the average value of farm products per acre in Kings County was \$121.50 in 1879 and \$105 in 1889 (the second highest nationally). It might seem implausible that of these amounts \$50 per acre could have remained available for the farm family’s consumption, but these yields are significant understatements since only part of the total acreage was planted to crops in any given year.¹³

Data on individual named farmers from the 1880 Census of Agriculture make it possible to explore the micro-decision-making process in greater detail. The census did not collect comprehensive cost data, but it did secure information on the cost of fertilizer and hired labor as well as the value of the farm and of production. According to Peter Henderson’s figures for the New York area during this period, wages and manure accounted for 72.5 percent of total costs. If rent is omitted as irrelevant to longtime Dutch owners, the proportion rises to 77 percent. Thus for individual farmers enumerated in the census, estimated profits can be calculated by adding 38 percent and 30 percent to the total wage and manure costs of renters and owners, respectively, and subtracting the total from the total value of production. This maximum net income can then be compared to the capitalized value of the farm.¹⁴

Such a calculation can be made for some of the aforementioned New Utrecht landboomers. By the time of sale in 1889, some of these farms were

no longer operating or, if still producing, may merely have retained a name associated with a onetime owner. The wealthy Cortelyou family — Jacques Cortelyou established New Utrecht in the seventeenth century — was the prime example of this phenomenon. Jacques, Simon, and Peter Cortelyou were major slaveholders in 1800, owning 10, 9, and 5 slaves, respectively. Thirty years later, Ann Cortelyou still owned 186 acres, while Peter Cortelyou owned 125; but by 1837, the latter acreage had already passed into other hands, while the former was sold off a decade later. By the late 1850s, both holdings had been splintered, and no Cortelyou appeared as a farmer in New Utrecht in the Census of Agriculture for 1850, 1860, 1870, or 1880, or in the Census of Population for 1860, 1870, or 1880.¹⁵

Alternatively, tenants, who were particularly numerous in New Utrecht, may have been operating some of the farms. George Gelston, for example, appeared in the 1850 Census of Agriculture as operating a 170-acre farm, but disappeared from later agricultural censuses. The enormous discrepancy between the value of property that the 45-year-old Gelston reported at the 1850 Census of Agriculture (\$32,000) and Census of Population (\$135,000) and the large taxable income (\$3,238.61) that he reported to the federal tax assessor in 1866, makes it likely that the man who designated his occupation as “gentleman” at the 1860 Census of Population, at which time he owned \$105,000 of real and personal property, had other income sources.¹⁶

Tables 33a and 33b show the relevant variables for the landboom farmers who could be identified with reasonable certainty. If these farm owners had actually sold their farms for the amounts that they themselves stated them to be worth in 1880 and invested the proceeds, only one would have received even \$500 annually at the aforementioned 3.6 percent interest rate: Andrew Cropsey’s annual interest on \$14,000 would have been \$504. With one exception, however, the per acre values were all considerably lower than the average for Kings County even in 1880. Moreover, several of these farms did not appear to be flourishing. In terms of production and profit, only Andrew Cropsey, Martin, and Gubner were operating farms that might have sustained a family.

Adolphus Gubner, who in 1850 had immigrated from Prussia at the age of 21, had two sons, Friedrich and Stephen, ages 19 and 21, whom the census returned as “farming” in 1880, but who presumably could not both have supported families on the income that this one farm was generating. In the case of several farms, the output was so low or the relationship of costs to output so unfavorable that the owners may have been in the process of winding them down. In Gubner’s case, the family’s income was significantly

supplemented by the \$1,200 salary that he received as an interpreter at the county court; in addition, as a member of the New Utrecht Democratic General Committee, president of the ward association, and New Utrecht justice of session, Gubner had access to other political sources of income. Gubner was also the New Utrecht town supervisor from 1873 to 1878 and in 1880 became an associate justice on the Brooklyn Court of Sessions.¹⁷

Gubner, as the 1889 land-sale table suggests and farmline maps indicate, farmed jointly with Sieger. The net income before property taxes of 65-year-old German immigrant William Sieger — who in the mid-1870s “has one of the finest side-hills to raise hot-bed truck that we have seen for some time” — was only \$562. It must also be borne in mind that Sieger and Gubner, as immigrants, unlike the old-line Dutch families, may have had mortgage payments as well that had to be financed from the farm’s revenues; on the other hand, given the long period that they had been farming, it is also possible that their farms were already fully paid for. Even Sieger’s low outlier profit exceeded the (national) average industrial worker’s annual wages and was more than twice as great as the average farm laborer’s \$20 per month wage. Sieger’s annual income would, however, have been lower than that of many skilled workers in Brooklyn — if they were not unemployed more than three months. Farmers whose profits fit in the \$2,500 to \$4,000 range fell “squarely within the ranks of the metropolitan upper middle class.”¹⁸

The key indicator with regard to vindicating market rationality is profit per acre from farm operations (shown in the next-to-last column of table 33b) in contrast with the sale price. If the rate of interest on safe bond investments in the 1880s was about 3.6 per cent, farm owners should have sold when a buyer offered them a per acre price for their land more than 27.7 times ($100/3.6$) the profit per acre that they obtained from their farms. These thresholds amounted to the following per acre prices for the New Utrecht landboomers: Andrew G. Cropsey (\$1,080), Andrew J. Cropsey (\$1,773), William Cropsey (\$1,607), Sieger (\$388), Gubner (\$1,191), Suydam (\$1,967), Martin (\$2,438), and Lott (\$609). In relation to the narrow range of per acre prices at which these farmers actually sold their farms (\$1,300 to \$1,525), only one, 64-year-old Isaac Martin, had recorded per acre profits far in excess of the sale price — and significantly he sold a smaller share of his holdings than anyone else in this group (16 of 45 acres). Sieger and 52-year-old Aaron Lott clearly had the greatest financial incentives to sell out since their net incomes were far below the interest that they could receive from investing the proceeds from the sale.¹⁹

Since the per acre prices that these owners received in 1889 were as much as nine times higher than the self-valuations of 1880, it is no surprise that they agreed to sell. The total \$67,500 that Aaron Lott was paid, for example, was 59 times the profit he received from farming a decade earlier. Because the profit data were from 1879 and the value of productions per acre for the whole county fell somewhat from 1879 to 1889, it is possible that the per acre profits for these potential sellers were even lower by the end of the 1880s, thus enhancing the rationality of departure from the dirty-hands world of farming for the loftier status of rentier. These transactions confirm the prediction that the *Rural Gazette* made in 1873 in support of annexation: “who among us will be the poorer 10 years hence for having sold our land now producing us \$20 an acre for an amount the interest of which will bring without labor \$35 or \$40.”²⁰

Further light is shed on the microeconomics of the New Utrecht land-boomers’ farms by their property tax assessments. For the year (1879) for which the Census of Agriculture of 1880 collected production data, table 33b shows the amount of tax that five of the farmers paid. For the five farmers, property taxes in 1879 ranged between 1 percent (Martin) and 19 percent (Suydam) of their profits. For Martin and Gubner (5 percent), these tax payments did not significantly reduce their profits, but for the other three farmers taxes may have played a part in the decision to sell. Corroborating this causality is difficult, however, since the small size of their farming operations could also mean that they were being wound down for other reasons. In particular, Suydam’s meager output, especially in relation to the acreage on which he was paying tax, but which he was apparently not farming, strongly suggests this possibility, since the farm had been shrinking since 1850 when it had encompassed 100 acres.²¹

For the years immediately before and after the sales, 1880–1890, table 34 shows the acreage, value, and taxes. The purchaser of much of this boomer land was the Bay Ridge Park Improvement Company, which was incorporated in November 1890. Its president, Daniel Lewis, represented the Brooklyn City Railroad Company, of which he was also president. The formation of the Bay Ridge Park Improvement Company was, in the words of the *New York Times*, “the first step in what promises to be a steady development of all the suburban resorts lying south of Brooklyn.” The most pressing need for increasing the value of the company’s property, which consisted largely of old farms situated between Brooklyn and Bath Beach and had cost it \$500,000, was to extend electrified surface lines of the Brooklyn City Road

through New Utrecht. The Improvement Company's contribution to suburbanizing the Bay Ridge section of New Utrecht lay in offering 3,000 building sites from 69th Street to 86th Street and crossing 8th through 14th Avenue. That the boom was no onetime event was dramatized just days after the incorporation when the *Times* reported that at an auction of more than 300 lots in Bay Ridge single lots had been sold for as much as \$745 — half of the very high price that the farmers had received for an entire acre just two years earlier. And by March 1891 the *Times* reported that a corner lot in Bay Ridge had been “run up to \$1,800.”²²

The acreage subject to assessment during these years was, at least for Gubner-Sieger and Martin, almost identical with the amount sold in 1889; Lott's estate sold somewhat more than his assessed acreage and Suydam's heirs somewhat less. The value per acre of the land in the assessment rolls rose, as shown in table 34, from 33 percent to 100 percent between 1888 and 1890; vis-à-vis the self-valuation in 1880, the changes in per acre values varied wildly from farm to farm: Suydam's land was valued at far less in 1888 than in 1880, whereas Lott's more than doubled in value. The ratio of the per acre purchase price in 1889 to the assessed value of the same year ranged between 6 to 1 for Martin's land to 1.8 to 1.0 for Lott's. The property tax per acre was rather low, varying from \$3.19 for Gubner to an outlier of \$12.10 for Lott. For most of the farmers such deductions from their per acre profits would have been far from fatal, but for Lott and Sieger, who already had the greatest financial incentives to sell out, this additional cost item would surely have operated to push them out of farming.

A prime reason for the sell-off was doubtless the death of the farmer-patriarchs. Gubner, Lott, and Suydam, for example, all died before 1889, and Andrew G. Cropsey would have been 86. Presumably, their male children, as the city grew nearer, were either more attracted to other, urban, pursuits, or decided that living from the proceeds of the sale was superior to cultivating cabbages. Ill health also may have contributed to the decision to abandon farming, as was the case with a number of farmers in Kings County.²³

These accounts should not, however, lead to the hasty conclusion that economic conditions structurally precluded New Utrecht farmers across the board from achieving high levels of profitability. Another member of the Lott family did so: in 1879, James B. Lott, all of whose \$6,500 in production stemmed from market gardening, produced \$217 per acre in output and should have received (according to Henderson's ratio) \$126 in profits from

each of his 30 acres, which he valued at only \$6,000. A member of another old-line Dutch farm family, William Bennett, all of whose \$9,000 of output was likewise in vegetables, produced on his 25 tilled acres and 5 acres of meadow \$300 per acre, of which \$118 was profit.²⁴

A comparison with the 1860 agricultural census confirms that the New Utrecht landboomers had successfully effected the transition to intensive agriculture. Sieger's 40-acre farm purportedly lost half its value while market garden output increased sevenfold; Aaron Lott's farm, almost unchanged in acreage, lost one-third its value while vegetable production rose 11-fold; Martin's farm, in contrast, almost quadrupled in size and vegetable production while losing half its per acre value. (Even in 1860, the per acre values of Sieger's and Lott's farms were below the Kings County average.) Similarly, Gubner reported to the census enumerator in 1870 that his 98 acres were worth \$50,000, or more than \$500 per acre — three times their reported value a decade later when Gubner farmed only 60 percent as much land but produced almost 40 percent more in terms of the value of his market garden produce.²⁵

Similar calculations can be made for the other towns. In Flatbush, six old-line Dutch farmers were returned by the 1880 agricultural census as owning the farms they operated. The value of market garden produce as a proportion of the total value of these farmers' production ranged between 67 and 85 percent. Table 35 presents estimates of the economic variables underlying a decision to sell. The ratio of the value of the farm (including buildings) to profit can roughly serve as an indicator of the number of years the owner could live on the proceeds from the sale — not on the interest from the proceeds (which even in the case of the most valuable farm, Vanderveer's, would have amounted to only \$1,800 at 3.6 percent). Only one of these farmers, Peter Neefus, could have lived longer than a few years on the proceeds in this manner. To be sure, John Vanderveer and Cornelius Suydam were both old men and might have wanted to sell their farms, but neither was listed in the population as retired (as were many other farmers), and both had farming sons: Suydam's 35-year-old son John lived in his household, while 49-year-old Jacob Vanderveer was John Vanderveer's son. Vanderveer, one of the largest market gardeners in Kings County, should have obtained \$92.5 profit for each of his 80 acres. William Williamson's per acre profit was even higher — \$137. The estimated per acre profits of three of the other four farmers were also high: \$87 for Suydam, \$98 for George Schenck, and \$91.50 for John Schenck. Even Neefus's \$38 per acre profit was

considerable compared with his per acre property tax of little more than five dollars. Once Flatbush developers, however, began paying several thousand dollars per acre, even these quite high yields may have seemed scarcely worth the hard work of farming (if in fact these owners worked).²⁶

That these farms, like the typical Flatbush farm, were expanding rather than contracting as intensive market-garden operations can be shown for at least the three of the six farms that were also enumerated in the 1860 agricultural census. In that year, Suydam reported no market garden production, John Schenck only \$120, and the two John Vanderveers \$500 and \$1,000 compared with \$5,000, \$2,000, and \$8,000, respectively, in 1879; similarly, the number of bushels of Irish potatoes they produced rose: Suydam's output from 1,300 to 6,000, and Vanderveer's from 2,000 or 1,000 to 5,000. Schenck's rose only from 1,300 to 1,600, but his acreage also declined from 45 to 20. The per acre value of the whole group of farms rose about 60 per cent from 1860 to 1880.²⁷

The \$500 to \$600 per acre farm values that these farmers reported in 1880 may not have induced them to sell regardless of how low their operating profits were. But the \$2,000 to \$8,000 per acre that developers paid them in the early 1890s, when compared with per acre profits only one-twentieth to one-eightieth the size, must have made the decision to close out a quarter-millennium of Dutch-American agrarian history much less painful. Significantly, all six of these farmers were located to the east of Flatbush Avenue, away from the urbanizing sections of Flatbush and toward the more rural parts of Flatlands and New Lots; all but Vanderveer were outside of the gas district and thus subject to lower tax rates.

It was not coincidental, then, that none of these six farms was cut up into lots until the 1890s. The Vanderveers sold much of their farmland to a large developer, Germania Real Estate and Improvement Company, in 1892, while the other owner-operators all subdivided their land in 1894. Williamson, who still owned 56 acres valued at \$52,500 in 1893, was taxed on 117 lots in 1894, the year that Flatbush was annexed by Brooklyn. The Neefus family, to be sure, had been dividing its land into lots since 1874 — John Neefus, who had spent his entire life on the extensive farm, died in 1875 in his eighty-third year — but its 81-acre farm valued at \$75,790 on the 1893 Flatbush assessment roll was completely subdivided by the next year. That year, 1894, was also the year in which the Suydam family subdivided its 50-acre farm, and the Schencks all cut their smaller acreage. Significantly, at the end of 1892, when owners of land fronting on East Broadway or Church Lane in-

formed the Flatbush Board of Improvement that they favored granting a franchise or privilege to any responsible railroad that could give a satisfactory guarantee of the speedy completion of a proposed railroad along those streets, the first four signatories were Williamson, Neefus, and George and John Schenck.²⁸

That these six Dutch farmers were “pulled” out of farming by very high land prices rather than “pushed” out by high taxes is underscored by the 1879 tax and profit data in table 36. All the farmers, with the exception of Neefus, were required to pay only a very small percentage of their profits to the town, county, and state, and even Neefus was left with a large profit. Even these shares represent a significant overstatement of the tax burden because an indeterminable proportion of the assessment was accounted for by the farmer’s house (or, in Williamson’s case, two houses), which was neither an imposition peculiar to farming nor one that the farmer could escape by abandoning agriculture. Thus since the tax on the income-generating enterprise itself was even lower than the aforementioned amounts, it is implausible that taxes “forced” these old-line Dutch farmers out of business.²⁹

The irresistible pressures to convert farmland to urban uses can be illustrated, in the extreme, by using contemporaneous data from New York City, where the process of deagriculturalization was several decades in advance of Kings County’s. The horticulturist Peter Henderson reported in 1886 that an elevated railroad passenger traveling from 60th Street to Harlem could see between June and October

little patches of vegetation of different shades of green, ranged in uniform and regular lines. These are the “salad patches,” cultivated mainly by German market gardeners; they range from two acres down to an acre in area. It seems a wonder that the cultivation of such a small plot of earth should give an able-bodied man a living; but a living it does give in nearly all cases, and some have quite a respectable surplus for a “rainy day.” . . .

Four crops of Lettuce are usually taken from June to October. . . .

The plants are set about a foot apart each way, and will average one cent per head, so that the four crops give a return of nearly \$2,000 per acre. This seems like an immense return for an acre, but though the net profits are respectable, there are some serious disadvantages attending the cultivation. Few, or none, of these men are owners of land in New York City, nor in hardly any instance have they a lease. They are tenants at will, and pay a yearly rental, in some instances, of \$250 per acre. Many of our country readers may think that an extra cipher has been added to

the amount, but they must recollect that the value of some of these “salad patches” . . . is \$8,000 per city lot, or over \$100,000 per acre, so that the paltry rental of \$250 per acre hardly pays the interest on the amount of taxes.³⁰

The owners of such land were, presumably, merely biding their time until they sold it to developers.³¹

HOW RICH WERE THE DUTCH FARMERS?

[W]e are quite certain no farmer in Kings County can get as much money from his farm to use it for agricultural purposes as he can to sell it off to people who want rural homes; invest the money so received and count his interest without laboring so hard as many of them do.

— “The Reason Why,” *Kings County Rural Gazette*, October 11, 1873

One important source for gauging the progress of income and wealth formation within (and outside of) Kings County agriculture that has never been made use of is the surviving Internal Revenue Assessment Lists from the Civil War-era federal income tax (1862–1871). Lost to memory in many ways, the Civil War-era tax regime, which included the first national income tax, was extraordinarily invasive by today’s standards. In addition to a progressive tax on income and legacies and distributive shares of personal property, the statutes imposed annual license fees for all trades and occupations (including doctors and lawyers), annual duties on carriages, yachts, billiard tables, gold watches, and silver plate, and monthly duties on manufactures, articles, and a broad variety of products, and monthly taxes on bond interest. All persons with income were required to fill out and submit a Form 24 akin to today’s Form 1040, showing their income together with allowable deductions. Most startling to late-twentieth-century citizens accustomed to promises of tax secrecy, the lists that the assessors compiled from these forms setting forth the taxable income and tax due were advertised as publicly available for review.³²

One possible side effect of the introduction of a federal income tax is that it prompted Kings County farmers to begin keeping account books. For example, in 1865 John C. Bergen of Flatlands, who in 1854 had taken charge of the farm of his father, who had apparently stopped keeping his account book in 1835, began keeping accounts, a focus of which was the preparation of his federal tax returns.³³

The value of the assessment lists, which today would be inaccessible to scholars for identifiable persons, is considerably enhanced by the availability of the manuscript schedules of the 1870 Census of Population and Census of Agriculture, which reveal occupations and microeconomic data for farms. Such administrative record matching for 1869 — the year from which the Census of Agriculture collected most of its harvest data — makes it possible to estimate the profitability of individual named farm operations.

Table 37 displays the income and occupation of the 38 taxpayers in rural Kings County whose taxable incomes in 1869 exceeded \$4,000. With the \$1,000 exemption applicable that year, the incomes of all these taxpayers exceeded \$5,000. The presence as early as the 1860s of numerous wealthy nonfarmers in rural Kings County, especially in Flatbush and New Utrecht, underscores the need to visualize these towns as much more than farming communities. The fact that so many large merchants and other businessmen with firms in New York or Brooklyn monopolized the highest reaches of the income hierarchy suggest that landed property was already losing its status as the dominant economic basis, although several of these rich non-agrarians (such as Hope, Langley, and Murphy) also appeared as significant landowners on the farmlines maps of the late 1860s and early 1870s, and others (such as Lefferts, John A. Lott and his wife Catharine Lott, and Martense) derived some of their current income from agricultural rents or land sales. The robust contingent of dry goods merchants among the rich residents of Flatbush and New Utrecht reflected the fact that in the 1860s they constituted “the largest business interest of New York.” Of the 38 richest taxpayers listed for 1869, at least 15 were listed in that year’s *Trow’s New York City Directory*. In the other years in which federal income tax was assessed, between five and nine of the ten richest rural Kings County residents operated businesses in New York City.³⁴

Remarkably, only one person who was returned as an active farmer at the 1870 census was among the residents of the rural areas reporting more than \$4,000 of taxable income. And even that farmer, 43-year-old Jacob Ryerson of Flatlands, the very last in rank, was presumably a part-time farmer or had other sources of income: according to the 1870 census, the total value of his agricultural production on his 21-acre potato farm was only \$500, or less than one-eighth of his taxable income. A number of other active or retired taxpaying farmers fit the same description. The highest income of any farmer whose entire income could plausibly have derived exclusively from his farming operation in 1869 was the \$1,167.68 (to which must be added

the \$1,000 exemption) of Abraham Linington of New Lots, the second-largest market gardener in the county. Bernard Larzelere of New Utrecht, another large market gardener, the farmer occupying this leading position in 1870, reported a taxable income of only \$2,126.02 (in addition to the \$2,000 exemption).³⁵

Many other farmers also appeared in the Internal Revenue Assessment Lists. Of the 278 residents of the rural towns listed as having paid income tax for 1869, 56 appeared in the 1870 Census of Population or Agriculture as operating farms or as retired farmers. Viewed from the other perspective, about 13 percent of farmers returned by the Census of Agriculture and 10 percent of those returned by the Census of Population as farmers or retired farmers paid federal income taxes. By 1870, when as a result of the increase in the exemption to \$2,000, the total number of federal taxpayers fell to 96, only 22 farmers were included among them. Many more paid federal taxes on their gold watches (\$1 per watch) and carriages. But many larger farmers paid no income tax at all.

Several reasons may explain the failure to pay federal income tax. The statutory \$1,000 or \$2,000 exemption and business expense deductions (for wages, rent, interest, repairs, etc.) made it possible for farmers to produce considerable amounts before meeting the net-income threshold. Except for a few very large farmers, most farmers' gross output was low enough plausibly to preclude a net income in excess of the exemption. Widespread non-compliance with the filing requirements may also explain why so few large farmers paid any, or any significant, income tax.³⁶

An examination of the accounts of several farmers reveals that their declared net income for federal income tax purposes appears implausibly low. Abraham Linington, for example, was the second-largest market garden producer according to the 1870 census, having produced \$12,800 worth of products on his 110-acre farm, the second biggest in New Lots, which he valued at \$100,000. Production values this large should, based on the typical cost structures of the period, have generated a considerable profit. Wages, according to Peter Henderson's contemporaneous calculations, made up 50 to 60 percent of total costs (table 7). Linington's \$4,300 wage bill, even if doubled to arrive at total costs, should have left him with more than \$4,000 in profit. Yet he declared only \$1,167.68 in taxable income — to which the \$1,000 exemption must be added to gauge his real income. The Henderson rule-of-thumb is supported by Linington's self-reported taxable income for 1870, which overlapped with the census year, amounting to \$1,678.65 —

over and above the \$2,000 exemption for that year. (For 1871, the last year of the federal tax, Linington's taxable income rose to \$3,223.01 in addition to the \$2,000 exemption.)

In 1869–70, William H. Allgeo produced \$8,500 worth of output on 97 acres in Flatbush, the town's largest farm, which he valued at \$90,000; despite having paid only \$2,000 in wages (including board), which should also have left him with more than \$4,000 in profit, he declared himself subject to federal taxation only with respect to two gold watches. Since Allgeo rented his farm (from John A. Lott), he may have paid \$20 per acre, which at almost \$2,000 should still have left him with taxable income. Similarly, George Lott produced \$7,000 worth of produce on his 131-acre farm, the largest in Flatlands; his \$2,000 wage bill should have left him with a \$3,000 profit, but he declared net income of only \$143.52. The output of the 88-acre farm of his older brother, Peter Lott, was valued at \$7,720, so that his \$2,300 wage bill should also have left him with more than \$3,000 in profit; at least he declared a taxable income of \$1,145.05 taxed at \$57.25. In Gravesend, Henry R. Wyck-off produced \$3,000 worth of output on his 50-acre farm while paying only \$800 in wages; he could have been expected to have achieved profits of almost \$1,500, but he reported a net income of only \$12. Abraham Barre, operator of Gravesend's biggest farm in terms of acreage, produced \$8,000 worth of produce including 6,000 bushels of potatoes on 100 acres, paying out \$2,500 in wages; he should have obtained profits of about \$3,000, but all that he declared was a gold watch, for which he was taxed \$1. Gravesend's biggest farmer in terms of value of output, William Bennett, produced \$9,000 worth of produce on 97 acres; despite paying only \$2,310 in wages, he does not appear on the assessor's list even as the owner of a gold watch.

The largest New Utrecht farm in terms of acreage was owned by 77-year-old Daniel Roberts, who was also one of the income-richest residents of the town. The 1870 Census of Population returned him as a lawyer, while at the 1860 and 1850 census he had been listed as a farmer.³⁷ The approximately \$10,000 incomes that he reported for 1869 and 1870 could obviously not have been derived from his 119-acre farm, the gross output of which was valued at only \$4,000 and toward the production of which he paid \$2,000 in wages. Similarly, John L. Van Pelt was taxed on a net income of \$2,908.69 for 1869, although his farm's total output for 1869–70 was valued at only \$3,000.³⁸

David Bennett's 70-acre New Utrecht farm, which he valued at \$70,000, showed the county's second-highest value of farming implements and machines (\$3,500) and by far the county's highest payroll (\$8,000). This ex-

traordinary outlay for wages may have meant that total costs equaled the farm's total value produced (\$15,000) — especially since its minimal \$1,400 market garden output makes a puzzle of the farm's specialty. And, indeed, Bennett declared nothing but a carriage and a gold watch to the federal assessor. Bernard Larzelere reported to the census enumerator that he had produced \$11,000 worth of output, \$9,000 of which was market garden produce, yet paid out only \$1,600 in wages to the one German and four Irish farm laborers living in his household; despite this very favorable cost-revenue structure on his 66-acre farm, he did not appear on the assessor's list at all for 1869, but did report net income of \$2,126.02 for 1870, on which he paid \$53.15 in taxes. Even the notional profit of more than \$4,000 resulting from inclusion of the \$2,000 exemption seems modest. Garret Cowenhoven reported \$801.89 in net income (beyond his \$1,000 exemption) for 1869, although his gross farm output amounted to only \$2,500 and he paid out \$1,000 in wages alone. More plausibly, Teunis Bergen, the surveyor and ex-Congressman, reported \$968 in net income for 1869; his gross farm product for the year was \$7,000 and his payroll \$1,500. A number of New Utrecht farmers whose cost-revenue structures indicated that their operations were quite profitable for 1869–70 are not found on the assessors lists for those years. An example is Theodore Bergen whose output was valued at \$8,000 and who paid wages totalling only \$2,000.³⁹

Kings County farmers' behavior is strikingly at odds with the taxpaying behavior of their prosperous contemporaries in Brookline, Massachusetts, a rural town developmentally comparable to Flatbush. More of Brookline's residents (357) paid federal income tax in 1867 than in all five rural Kings County towns in 1869 (239), which were about four times as populous. If nationally almost 7 percent of the population was assessed for income in 1869, in rural Kings County the proportion was only about 1 percent. To be sure, no matter how spectacularly Kings County farmers may have understated their incomes for federal tax purposes, even if they had been able to produce without incurring any costs whatsoever, the value of their gross output would not have ranked them among the richest residents.⁴⁰

Only one active farmer appeared among the income-richest residents of rural Kings County, but several others were members of old-line Dutch families whose wealth originated in agriculture. These residents included Lefferts, Bergen, Schoonmaker, and the Lotts and Martenses. The predominance of non-Dutch nonfarm families at the highest income levels is, nevertheless, striking. The concentration of such nonagricultural rich, especially in Flatbush and New Utrecht, suggests that by the 1860s these two towns had

already become suburban residential centers for capitalists operating in New York and Brooklyn. To be sure, a certain fusion of non-Dutch merchants with rural Dutch families took place through marriage: for example, in 1866 Henry Lyles Jr., who later also became president of the gas company, married Mary Lott, the daughter of Ann Bergen and Samuel Lott, who had bought his farm from Abraham Vanderbilt.⁴¹

**FROM CABBAGE-CULTIVATORS
TO COUPON-CLIPPERS?
DUTCH FARMERS AFTER THE SELL-OFF**

The males of the family in this vicinity . . . appear to be decreasing . . . so that there is a probability that the day is not far distant when the family name of Lefferts will disappear from our midst. . . . There is another family among us, that of the Martenses, once numerous, whose males have dwindled down to a single household.

— Teunis G. Bergen, *Genealogy of the Lefferts Family*, 1878

Did Kings County Dutch farmers who sold out become wealthy enough to participate in the Gilded Age as latter-day farmers are reputed to do? What did the Dutch farmers do with the proceeds from the sales of their farms? Did they retire to Brooklyn, Manhattan, or perhaps the Dutch settlements in Putnam and Dutchess counties north of New York City, or Bucks County, Pennsylvania, as did their early-eighteenth-century ancestors when Kings County farming land became occupied? Or did they go east to Nassau and Suffolk in the literal footsteps of their counterparts in the latter part of the seventeenth century and later too? “As the land in the older section of Flatbush became covered with farms and families increased in size, the new generation began to move out toward Queens.” Although it was no less true then than now that “it does not bode well for the area’s agricultural future if a farmer can sell out at a price that will allow immediate retirement,” some of the traditionalist Dutch farmers must have asked themselves, as their late-twentieth-century counterparts do: “But then what would I do?”⁴²

That a source of farmers on the move was available in Kings County must have seemed plausible to the Union Pacific Railroad, which as early as 1873 advertised in the *Rural Gazette* and *Eagle*: “12,000,000 Acres cheap farms.” Advertisements for Maryland fruit farms at \$10 to \$25 per acre also suggest the presence of a pool of geographically mobile farmers. And although the local news columns of the *Rural Gazette* in the 1870s and 1880s

were far from overflowing with items about residents departing for farms elsewhere, it did register a few such moves. Several involved buying farms to the east on Long Island that were larger than those in Kings County. Only one Dutch family operating a large farm was reported as leaving: in auctioning off their implements in 1885, the Van Wycks of Flatlands intended to move to New Jersey to raise livestock.⁴³

Genealogies of some of the leading Kings County Dutch families reveal similar patterns of sporadic agriculturally driven out-migration. For example, in 1870, 40-year-old Tunis and 28-year-old John Bergen of Gravesend bought a farm at Mattituck in Suffolk County. Both carpenters, they were the sons of John Bergen, whose father was the owner of Bergen Island in Flatlands; since his older brothers had inherited the family farm, he moved to Gravesend, where he operated a country store and was postmaster. Martenus Bergen (born 1811), who took over his father's 120-acre farm in Gowanus in the 1830s, first moved to New Jersey to farm; then in 1873 he moved to Virginia, where he had bought 3,000 acres. His abandonment of farming in Gowanus may well have been driven by urbanization of this part of the newly incorporated city of Brooklyn.⁴⁴

Only two items during the *Rural Gazette's* 13-year run suggested that a more generalized migration took place before the mid-1880s. In connection with a report in 1878 that a resident of Bay Ridge had bought 20 acres in Mattituck, at the eastern end of the north shore of Long Island, for \$5,000 — at \$250 per acre the price was low by rural Kings County standards, but certainly not dirt cheap — the paper observed: “There is quite a settlement there now from Kings County, and all say they are pleased with the change.” Three years later an unsigned piece by one who had moved to the north shore of Long Island from Kings County 14 years earlier revealed that neighbors of small means had followed him. What they all had in common was an inability to buy a farm in Kings County and the cultivation of cauliflower on Long Island. Further explaining the move, the writer asserted that “of all men that have a hard lot of it, who have to toil early and late, through sunshine and storm, through heat and cold, it is the market gardener of small means on the west end of Long Island.”⁴⁵ Allowing for the rhetorical overload, these brief pieces hold out the possibility that Long Island, and especially the more remote Suffolk County, did offer some small or would-be farmers an opportunity to farm that they lacked in Kings County. These reports do not, however, support the speculation that larger established farmers, prior to the 1890s, moved there after either lucratively selling out or failing to make an acceptable living.

By the end of the 1890s, however, an eastward movement of farmers from Kings County was in full swing. In early 1899, the *Long Island Farmer* reported that the “migration of farmers from Gravesend and New Utrecht to eastern Jamaica and Flushing and more generally, to points in Nassau Co. is attracting attention. The movement is caused by the large sales of farmlands in Kings County at high prices to building syndicates.” Alone in the preceding one year, at least forty Kings County farmers — “all skilled truck farmers and . . . nearly all wealthy and a desirable class of citizens” — had bought farms in eastern Jamaica, Flushing, and North Hempstead. Contemporaries were acutely aware that the “large purchase of farms between Brooklyn and Coney Island” and “filling up” of Kings County had prompted this unprecedented “general exodus of farmers” from Kings to Nassau County and thus a shift of the truck farming district 20 miles eastward. Intriguingly, when one well-informed local resident named three of the Gravesend farmers who had recently secured fifteen or twenty farms near Hyde Park and moved there, they all bore Irish names. This fact takes on added significance in connection with the statement that: “While the high city assessments have tended to drive the farmers out of the Kings County towns, the land owners have been assisted by the fact that there was an active demand for building lots and have let their farms go for that purpose.” Gertrude Ryder Bennett’s report that Irishmen who settled in Gravesend after having fled the famine “worked for farmers until they could purchase farms of their own” may therefore have been referring to farms on western Long Island.⁴⁶

This distinction between farmers and landowners suggests the possibility that those moving eastward had been tenant farmers, whereas the enriched owners remained in Brooklyn. How the Irish tenants had accumulated sufficient resources to become “wealthy” and to buy farms is not clear. To be sure, if it was possible for Kings County market gardeners to achieve profits of \$100 per acre while paying rents of only \$20 per acre, then the tenants’ accumulation of wealth would be understandable. The puzzle would then be owners’ failure to extract higher rents. The fact that land prices were lower in Nassau County would have facilitated tenants’ geographic and social mobility as would have the strategy of buying small truck farms, but that very surge of demand triggered a rise in prices — from \$150 to \$400 an acre within one year in some localities — that may have impeded the migration of tenants, but presumably not that of owners who might have realized \$2,000 to \$3,000 per acre for the farms that they had sold.

In Flatbush, several old-line Dutch farmers remained after selling their

farms to become members of the new nonagricultural business elite; in an alternative interpretation, they were merely consummating a program of economic diversification that they had been pursuing for decades. As early as the second quarter of the nineteenth century, such rich men as Adrian Van Sinderen and Adrian Hegeman were officers of the Brooklyn Savings Bank, and “such other eminences” as Losee Van Nostrand, Leffert Lefferts, Jacob Bergen, and John C. Vanderveer had been prominent owners of Brooklyn’s corporate wealth. The head of the Lott family at the turn of the century and son of John A. Lott, John Z. Lott (1838–1914), was an attorney, president of the Flatbush Trust Co. and the Flatbush Water Works Co., an organizer of the Flatbush Gas Co., and commissioner of the Flatbush Police Department. With such links, it is hardly surprising that “no important real estate movement has occurred in the last twenty-five years [1883–1908] in which the Lotts were not a prominent factor.” Equally unsurprising is that he left an estate of \$281,000. Significantly, not only did none of Flatlands farmer Rem Hegeman’s sons become a farmer, but his grandson John Rogers Hegeman, symbolizing the Dutch farmers’ diversification, was already president of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in 1891, five years before Flatlands was annexed to Brooklyn.⁴⁷

Cornelius Schoonmaker, who was born on his father’s Flatbush farm in 1823 and devoted his life to it, was still living there at 85. Like many Dutch farmers, he married into another Dutch farming family (that of Jacques Denyse); one of his daughters married into the Stilwell family, another farming family. William Allgeo, who farmed his family’s acreage, remained in Flatbush after the land was cut into lots and houses built on it. Peter Remsen, a descendant of one of the early Dutch colonialists, after having devoted the greater part of his life to farming, built a modern home in Flatbush shortly after the turn of the century. Jerome Lott, who, after brief stints in a Brooklyn law office and a New York customs house brokerage, farmed at his family’s homestead in Flatlands, disposed of the property in 1899, “making many investments in Flatbush, where he subsequently erected a modern home.”⁴⁸

The head of the Lefferts family, John Lefferts (1826–1893), despite having “devoted himself to agricultural pursuits all his life” on his large Flatbush tract, which had been “deeded to his ancestors by Gov. Stuyvesant in 1661,” was also treasurer of the Flatbush Gas Company, president of the Flatbush Water Works Company, president of the Flatbush Plank Road Company, a director of the Brooklyn Bank and Long Island Safe Deposit Company, and a trustee of the Dime Savings Bank of Brooklyn. At the time of his death,

with “the growth of the city toward Flatbush,” his son, James Lefferts (1855–1915), “abandoned farming and began the development of the estate by opening streets and avenues through it and erecting many buildings.” Little wonder that he, too, died “one of the very wealthy men of the borough.” That the Lefferts family had diversified early is evident from the fact that Leffert Lefferts was the president of the first bank in Brooklyn, the Long Island Bank, from its incorporation in 1824 until his death in 1847. In addition to having owned a very large potato farm in Flatbush, John Lefferts also owned a 31-acre farm along Lefferts Avenue and numerous lots in New Utrecht, which he presumably sold during the real-estate boom in the 1880s. The houses that he built in Flatbush in the 1880s reputedly reflected “his usual earnest desire for the growth and prosperity of our town.” Further diversification occurred in 1876 when John Lefferts Jr. married the daughter of Joseph W. Gray, a tobacco merchant and one of the income-richest residents of Flatbush.⁴⁹

The Ditmas family, which had also settled in Flatbush in the mid-seventeenth century and several members of which farmed until the end of the nineteenth century, also branched out into other fields of enterprise. Henry Clay Ditmas, an intimate friend of the political boss of Gravesend, John Y. McKane, “made a fortune by transmitting by telegraph to the poolrooms throughout the country the news from the race tracks” in the New York area, and left an estate estimated at between \$200,000 and \$1 million at his death in 1893. John H. Ditmas, who inherited a part of the farm of his father, Henry Suydam Ditmas, in 1884, was a director of the Flatbush Trust Company, who at his death in 1914 left \$177,000. An exemplar of the interbred Dutch family, John Ditmas married a Kouwenhoven, while his sister Jane married Judge Gerret Martense’s son Gerret and Maria married John Z. Lott. Abraham I. Ditmas was secretary of the Flatbush Gas Company and of the Midwood Electric Light-, Heat-, and Power Company, and a principal of the Knickerbocker Electric Light and Power Company of Flatbush in the early 1890s.⁵⁰

New Utrecht, too, could boast of its newly enriched Dutch farmers. Consider Garret Peter Cowenhoven (1846–1927), the son of Peter Cowenhoven (1816–1888). The father at age 64 appeared in the 1880 census as owner of an 80-acre farm, which he valued at \$12,500 and produced \$5,000 worth of market garden produce in 1879. The son, then already 33 years old, was still returned by the census as farming on his father’s farm, which was located between 15th and 18th Avenues. The New Utrecht assessment roll for 1889 listed Garret Cowenhoven as owning 35.75 acres (located at 17th Avenue and

62nd Street) valued at \$10,435 (\$292 per acre), for which he paid \$161.30 in tax. Peter Cowenhoven appeared on the New Utrecht assessment rolls for 1888 as owning two properties, 23.83 and 19.00 acres (at 18th Avenue and 51st to 52nd Street), which were valued at \$7,850 and \$4,750 (\$329 and \$250 per acre), respectively. Their assessed value, which remained virtually unchanged in 1889, rose by 45 percent and 60 percent, respectively, from 1889 to 1890. By 1892, just four years after the father's death, Jere Johnson Jr., a leading real-estate figure in Kings County, announced in the *Eagle* the "Grand Closing Out Sale of all the remaining 300 lots on the famous Cowenhoven Farm, New Utrecht, on Labor Day." Johnson advertised: "splendidly located," "[g]rade level, every lot ready to be built upon."⁵¹

Already six years later, barely 50 years old, Garret Peter Cowenhoven, "known as a retired farmer," was a "reputed millionaire." The circumstances under which his fortune came to be reported in the *Eagle* themselves cast a fascinating light on one possibly representative career-ending trajectory of those Dutch farmers who made the rapid transition from cabbage cultivators to rentiers. Apparently having retained after the land sale his family's old farmhouse "in a lovely section of the suburbs," Cowenhoven in the mid-1890s "in order to entertain his friends . . . transformed his old barn into a club house. He fitted it up with gymnastic apparatus and included among the other fittings a pool table." Indeed, the barn's "modern design" made it appear "very much like a club house." All these details became public knowledge not because the *Eagle* was interested in Dutch farmers' interior decorating, but because a police captain raided the barn one rainy Saturday evening, arresting Cowenhoven and seven others as common gamblers. In 1926, a year before he died, Cowenhoven finally moved from his family New Utrecht farm homestead to the more sedate suburban Ditmas Park section of Flatbush.⁵²

Not all old-line Dutch farmers, however, transmogrified themselves into financially diversified and worldly sophisticates or led a life of ease made possible by the fruits of their quondam cabbage fields. Before another member of the huge and ramified Cowenhoven family, Randall Gordon Cowenhoven, "about the last direct descendant of one of the oldest families on Long Island, dropped dead" in 1890, neighbors frequently saw "the old man plowing up the earth with an antiquated wooden plow, or planting seed." At one point the Cowenhoven family had owned land in Kings County "now worth millions, but by alienation and legal squabbles it passed into other hands" and Randall Cowenhoven had fallen into "financial difficulties."⁵³

Perhaps the most prominent example of the unreconstructed was Abram

Van Sicklen, who died in 1898 at 79, the oldest resident of Coney Island. According to his obituary in the *New York Times*, his father had owned the oldest farm on Coney Island, which the son ran until two years before his death. At the time of the 1870 Census of Agriculture, he produced \$3,500 worth of produce, including 2,000 bushels of potatoes, on the farm's 28 acres. Van Sicklen's most endearing characteristic was that after having arrived in Coney Island at four months of age, he "spent all his life there" — not just in the usual sense, but by virtue of never having remained away overnight and never having crossed the Brooklyn Bridge: "He used to say that there was plenty to see on Coney Island."⁵⁴ So struck was the *Times* by this sedentary provinciality, that the next day it devoted an editorial to Van Sicklen, which can also be interpreted as a valedictory to the literal agrarian insularity that might have shocked even Timothy Dwight if not Karl Marx. Finding it "practically impossible" to imagine Coney Island as anyone's residence, the newspaper opined that:

It is obvious that nobody would live there permanently except under compulsion, and, as there is no compulsion, the conclusion is inevitable that nobody does or ever has. Unfortunately, Mr. ABRAM VAN SICKLEN has been doing just this thing for full eighty years, and only changed his habits this week at the persuasive entreaty of — death. . . . [N]ever in all his long life did curiosity or any other motive lead him so far away from home as the Borough of Manhattan. . . . Mr. VAN SICKLEN must have been a remarkable man, with vast mental resources and much philosophy of a sort which, if it were more common, would probably add to the sum total of human happiness. It would not accelerate the world's progress, however, so perhaps there is no reason to regret that he monopolized the whole American supply.⁵⁵

Finally, there is Daniel Tredwell's description of what the Flatbush Dutch farmers did once they realized the capitalized value of their cabbage farms-turned-real estate: "Vast tracts were sold and the former owners retired independent, eschewed hard labor and went about dressed in their Sunday clothes every day in the week."⁵⁶