



**OF
CABBAGES
AND KINGS
COUNTY**
**AGRICULTURE
AND THE
FORMATION
OF MODERN
BROOKLYN**

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4. LABOR SUPPLY: AGRICULTURAL WORKERS AND LABOR RELATIONS

Our laborers in the market gardens are generally an ignorant class with very little ambition, and not one in a hundred of them is fit to manage.

— Peter Henderson, *Gardening for Profit*, 1890

The transition to intensive agriculture in Kings County would have been impossible without the requisite labor force. The proximity of New York City, instead of luring away farmworkers and driving up their wages, attracted a large supply of experienced immigrant agricultural laborers. Vegetable farms may not have been a major destination of the world-historical waves of European emigration, which the advance of industrial capitalism and the commercialization of agriculture triggered in the nineteenth century when they drove Irish and German peasants and farm laborers across the Atlantic. Nevertheless, old-line Dutch market gardeners, as well as German and Irish farm owners and tenants, who employed laborers in Kings County, benefited from the transformations wrought by the world economy and, especially and ironically, by the successful penetration by U.S. grain of European markets. As a result, the viability of urban vegetable farming was never threatened by the lack of a labor force willing to work at the wage rates that farmers could afford.¹

Before turning to the nineteenth-century European immigrant labor force, it is necessary to examine the much neglected role of slaves and former slaves in Kings County agriculture. The presence of this traditional labor force on the Dutch farms facilitated the transition to intensive cultivation at midcentury; indeed, premodern slave society in Kings County was closely linked to the forces shaping modern Brooklyn. This startling juxta-

position is best illustrated by John A. Lott, one of New York State's highest judicial officers and the county's largest landowner. His extensive inherited wealth was in part created by agricultural slave labor, but he played a major role as a suburbanizer of Flatbush and Kings County in the 1860s and 1870s. Lott was born on a farm in Flatlands in 1806, the same year his father Abraham certified the birth of a child to one of his slaves. Lott grew up on the farm with enslaved persons, his father reporting the ownership of three slaves at the census of 1810 and seven at the census of 1820. That the memory of slavery, even in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, was apparently not an embarrassment, is suggested by the fact that the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* published excerpts from the late-eighteenth-century wills of the heads of such Dutch farm families as Lott and Lefferts in which the bequeathing of slaves was common.²

FARM SLAVES: THE FIRST SOURCE

"Well, I swear! Here is William Kouwenhoven, with his runaway slave Frank.

This is the third time the negro has run away."

— Willis Boughton, "Old Flatbush," quoting unpublished diary of John Baxter, entry for May 25, 1790³

Studying the role of Kings County's almost entirely forgotten large black slave agricultural labor force, who "did the most of the farm labor," is crucial not only with regard to the prehistory of market gardening, but also for understanding the presence of black farm laborers throughout the nineteenth century and the paternalistic matrix that continued to leave its imprint on farm labor relations.⁴ The economic and legal bases of slavery were intimately interlinked. By upholding private enslavement of workers well into the nineteenth century, the New York State legislature empowered Dutch farmers to extend their exploitation of their labor force. When the legislature finally enacted "An Act for the gradual abolition of Slavery" in March 1799, it meant the modifier literally:

That any child born of a slave within this state after the fourth day of July next shall be deemed and adjudged to be born free: *Provided nevertheless*, That such child shall be the servant of the legal proprietor of his or her mother until such servant, if a male, shall arrive at the age of twenty-eight years, and if a female, at the age of twenty-five years.⁵

In reenacting this provision in 1801, the legislature eliminated any doubts as to the status of existing slaves by condemning them to continued slavery unless their owners chose to manumit them.⁶

This scheme, common to the northern states, has been called “philanthropy at bargain prices” because it shifted to the slaves themselves almost the entire “direct financial cost of their freedom.” Not until 1817 did New York decide to free the slaves, even then postponing emancipation another decade until July 4, 1827. Slaveowners could also shift the cost of manumission to taxpayers in general by taking advantage of the statutory provision permitting them to abandon their right to service within one year of the child’s birth by notifying the town clerk; such children were then considered paupers and were bound out by the overseers of the poor. Adrian Martense, for example, availed himself of this opportunity on October 8, 1802, certifying that: “I abandon my right of Servitude of a Black male Child Named Frank Born the Eighth Day of July, which said Child you have got on record and I have now in my possession.” Since the statute expressly characterized the service to which the slaveowner was entitled for 25 or 28 years as “in the same manner as if the child had been bound out to service by the overseers of the poor,” it is unclear how this type of manumission differed from slavery — except that service ended at age 18 and 21 for females and males, respectively, at which time the master was obligated to give the servant a new bible.⁷

Other slaves continued to be traded. In 1802, Robert Benson, whose family’s farmland eventually became the Bensonhurst section of New Utrecht, paid Martin Boerum of Kings County \$75 for Jack, a slave, for the unexpired part of a five-year term lasting three years and fifty-seven days.⁸

Until the first decades of the nineteenth century, Dutch farmers in Kings County were so heavily reliant on black slave labor that the county exhibited the highest proportion of slaveholders and slaves in the North: “Nowhere was the commitment to slavery more apparent than in Kings County,” where 59 percent of white households at the first national census in 1790 owned slaves; in the villages of Flatbush and New Utrecht the proportions rose to two-thirds and three-fourths. These extraordinary shares, which exceeded those of major slaveholding states such as South Carolina, were correlated with the predominance of the Dutch, who “wanted slaves not as servants but as agricultural laborers as they sought to profit from feeding the metropolis.” As late as 1810, nine-tenths of households in rural Kings County using black labor still owned slaves compared to only one-half in

Queens County, where relatively few descendants of the Dutch lived. Kings County immigration patterns until the early nineteenth century resembled those in the South in the sense that slave labor made free wage labor so uncompetitive that “immigrants avoided the county” and the population remained sparse.⁹

Because “Dutch boers . . . had been since colonial times by far the largest users of slave labor in New York,” by 1790, 30 percent of all Dutch families in the state were slaveholding compared to 11 percent of English and Welsh families and 14 percent of all white families. Overall, there were 98 slaves per 100 Dutch families compared to only 39 for all white families in New York State. No wonder that in the New York State Assembly in the 1780s, representatives of Kings County, “where Dutch slaveowners were zealous of their property rights,” were among the leading opponents of emancipation. Consequently, whereas slaveowners in New York City, realizing that slavery could not maintain itself, negotiated self-purchase agreements or freed their slaves, slaveowners “in the surrounding countryside . . . and particularly farmers of Dutch origin, maintained the institution of slavery to the bitter end.” The Dutch farmers’ mentality was well represented by Judge Nicholas Cowenhoven of New Utrecht, who owned 10 slaves in 1790 and used chains in the cellar of his house “for punishing refractory slaves.”¹⁰

At the first U.S. census in 1790, slaves accounted for one-third of the total population of Kings County and two-fifths in Flatbush. In the even more rural and remote counties of Richmond, Queens, and Suffolk, the proportions were only 20, 14, and 7 percent, respectively. In Kings County, 61 percent of all white families owned slaves, rising to 74 and 75 percent in Flatbush and New Utrecht, respectively. The agricultural orientation of slaveholding in Kings County emerges from its size distribution. In 1790, 34 percent of slaveholders owned 5 to 9 slaves, while 7.5 percent owned 10 to 19; in purely agricultural Flatbush, the shares were even higher — 41 percent and 12 percent, respectively. Overall, the average slaveowning family in Kings County owned 4.5 slaves, reaching its peak in Flatbush at 5.2.¹¹

The largest slaveholding families in Flatbush in 1790, that of Laurence Voorhis and Johannes Lott, which owned 16 slaves each, were also the largest in Kings County. All families in the county with 10 or more slaves were, with one possible exception, Dutch. Among the Dutch farming dynasties owning slaves in 1755 that would still be prominent at the end of the nineteenth century were Lefferts, Lott, Van Sicklen, Vanderveer, Voorhees, Ditmars, Kouwenhoven, Wykof, Cortelyou, Van Brunt, Suydam, and Denyce.¹²

That emancipation did not effectively take place in Kings County until its

statutorily prescribed date of 1827 can be seen in the population figures from the last census before that year. In 1820, the 689 slaves in the towns of Kings County other than Brooklyn accounted for 17 percent of the total population: at this late date, fully one-fifth of the entire population of Flatbush and Flatlands was still enslaved. Flatbush alone, with 9 percent of the county's population, accounted for 24 percent of all its slaves.¹³

The trends in the slave and/or black populations in the county as a whole and in Flatbush from the early colonial period through the end of the nineteenth century are shown in table 9. From 1738 to 1790, the slave population almost tripled in Kings County. Even after 1790, the number of slaves continued to expand in parts of the county, although some Dutch farmers also sold off their slaves. Johannes Lott, a Flatlands farmer who owned three slaves at the time of the 1790 census, "sold all his negroes" on August 12, 1791. The slave population stabilized in the county as a whole and declined somewhat in Flatbush, but in New Utrecht, Bushwick, and Gravesend the number of slaves actually rose by 4 percent, 10 percent, and 20 percent, respectively, between 1790 and 1800. Only thereafter did their numbers begin to fall significantly in all county towns. In Flatbush, between 1800 and 1810, the decline in the number of slaves and the increase in the number of free blacks were almost identical: 125 and 131, respectively. Between 1810 and 1820, however, the number of slaves rose slightly whereas the number of free blacks fell by 87. These relations suggest both that a core of slaveholders kept slaves to the end and that many former slaves left Flatbush or died. The proportion of families owning slaves declined only slightly between 1790 and 1800 — from 74 percent to 69 percent; at the next two censuses, 1810 and 1820, the proportions were still high — 61 percent and 50 percent, respectively. Voorhis's and Lott's slaveholdings fell only slightly between 1790 and 1800 — from 16 to 13 and 16 to 12, respectively. But Cornelius Vanderveer still reported 10 slaves, while new large slaveowners appeared in 1800 who had been absent from the list of family heads in 1790: Johannes J. Lott with 16 slaves and Garrett Martense with 10. Some slaveowners actually increased their human holdings during the last full decade of legal slavery as prices for slaves "plummeted" in the wake of the emancipation statute. John Lefferts, for example, owned 5 slaves in 1810 and 8 in 1820, while Teunis Schenck increased his ownership from 8 to 12, making him the largest slaveowner in Flatbush.¹⁴

The tenacity with which many slaveowners held on to their human property during the final decades can be gauged by their compliance with the formal requirements of the gradual abolition act of 1799. In order to be en-

titled to the compulsory 28-year service of their slaves' children born after July 4, 1799, slaveowners were required to submit to the town clerk such children's birth certificates so that the clerk could record their ages. The files of the town of Flatbush were replete with such certificates submitted by large Dutch farmers, including Johannes Lott, Jeremiah Lott, John Lott, John Leferts, and John Vanderveer. They certified that the mother was "a Slave and my Property," or "belonging to me," or "belonging to the estate" of the self-characterized "Yeoman" who had in the meantime died. The records contain a certificate for a slave child born as late as February 13, 1826. John Leferts and John Vanderbilt manumitted slaves in 1822, George and Adrian Martense in 1824, while farmer John Hegeman waited until March 4, 1825, to manumit "a certain Female Slave named Bet and her Son Sam, now or late the property of me." Similar patterns of the maintenance of slavery prevailed in the other Kings County towns. In Flatlands, for example, John Ditmars certified the birth of ten children to his slaves beginning in 1814 and ending in 1826.¹⁵

Slavery became unlawful and disappeared by 1830, but its demise did not proceed uniformly throughout the county. Between 1800 and 1820, the number of slaves fell by 57 percent in industrializing Brooklyn, but only by 19 percent in the most outlying and agricultural area, Flatlands. Contrary to the trend in New York State as a whole, where slaves as a share of the total population declined during the latter part of the eighteenth century, they stood at historic high points in Kings County and Flatbush in 1790. If it is true, therefore, that statutory emancipation in New York State merely codified the economic system's abandonment of slave labor as "uneconomic" as the increased availability of white workers lowered their wages sufficiently to make slavery obsolete, this generalization overlooks the fact that forced labor remained the norm on Kings County farms into the first decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁶

Evidence suggests that ex-slaves may have continued to work on the farms of their ex-masters for some years. The strongest piece of quantitative evidence stems from the 1830 census, the first conducted after the termination of slavery. In that year, 175, or 68 percent, of 258 "free colored persons" in Flatbush were returned as living in a family headed by a white person. Six or more "free colored persons" were returned as living with each of five white families — four of them leading Dutch farm families: Jeremiah Lott, John Bergen, Adrian Martense, and G. Martense. Twenty-five of the 35 "free colored persons" living in these five households were between the ages of 10 and 55 and thus probably at work. By 1840, relatively fewer blacks lived with



FIGURE 7. *Vanderveer farm, Flatbush, 1890. From Edmund Fisher, Flatbush Past and Present 26.*

white families and those who did were more dispersed. Of 288 “free colored persons” living in Flatbush, only 53 percent were still living with whites. The farmers with the largest contingents of blacks returned as living in their families were John Antonides (4), Samuel G. Lott (4), John Ditmas (4), Jacob Snedecor (4), Garret L. Martense (4), John C. Vanderveer (5), Jeremiah Lott (9), and Abraham Lott (9). Of the 43 blacks in these eight families, 31 were between 10 and 55 years old. Although 35 members of these “mixed” white and black families were returned as employed in agriculture, not all prime-age blacks were employed in agriculture. Only three members of Jeremiah Lott’s family, for example, were employed in agriculture, yet five prime-age blacks lived in his family. Presumably, then, Lott and other Dutch farm families were wealthy enough to retain servants who performed non-farm labor.¹⁷

By 1850, the dispersion of blacks in Flatbush had progressed to the point at which only 15 percent of the entire population of 257 lived in white households. Even within this small group, only 10 were returned by the census as laborers living in a farmer’s household and thus presumptive farm laborers. Jeremiah Lott was still among this group of farmers, but only one black laborer lived with him, and only one farmer (William Stoothoff) was returned as employing two black laborers living in his family. Presumably many of the working-age blacks living with farmers’ or nonfarmers’ fami-

lies who were listed as without occupation were servants, an occupational designation that the enumerator did not use in Flatbush. Indeed, the enumerator knew virtually no occupation for blacks other than "laborer," which covered every black Flatbush resident in 1850 with an occupation except for one lone peddler. By 1860, only 11 of 34 black farm laborers in Flatbush lived in their employer's household. In addition to such old-line Dutch farm families as Ditmas, Lott, Schenck, Suydam, and Vanderbilt in each of whose households one black farm laborer lived, William Story's household included four who were employed on his 55-acre farm.¹⁸

Perhaps the most useful extant contemporary evidence on the aftermath of slavery comes from Gertrude Lefferts Vanderbilt, who self-consciously wrote her memoir of Flatbush from "a different standpoint. As a woman, I have inclined to the social side of life, and have endeavored to record the changes which time has made among the people in their homes and at the fireside." Lefferts Vanderbilt, whose wealth and position derived from two influential Kings County Dutch families, "was a friend of the negroes, organizing a society for ameliorating the condition of the poor of that race in Brooklyn."¹⁹ Looking back in 1880, she wove a few tantalizing facts into her nostalgic paternalism:

It is probable that there were few, if any, foreigners employed as domestics in the family or as laborers on the farms in Flatbush previous to 1822, the year in which all traces of slavery ceased to exist.

At that time those who were formerly slaves, and their descendants, still found employment in the families of which they had once formed a part. They felt a certain claim upon the master and mistress under whose roof they were born; this claim, if not legally recognized after this period, was at least so far acknowledged in the higher realm of duty that a kindly oversight was extended to the families of their former slaves, and they were provided for in cases of sickness and destitution. . . .

In some instances colored families continued after their manumission in the employ of those to whom they had once belonged, and always found employment when well and assistance when sick from their old master and mistress.

Scarcely twenty-five years ago [ca. 1855] traces of this, the only pleasant phase of that institution, still existed in Flatbush. . . .

. . . The foreign element in our population which now preys so largely upon our pity and our purse had not then come to our gates. . . .



FIGURE 8. *Loading hay, Jacob Rapelje farm, New Lots, c. 1890.*
Courtesy of Peter Rapelje.

It was considered in times gone by rather a sign of a well-to-do farmer to have a large family of colored people in his kitchen. . . .

This race for more than a century and a half formed part of the family of every Dutch inhabitant of Kings County. Speaking the same language, brought up to the same habits and customs, with many cares and interests in common, there existed a sympathy with and an affection between them and the white members of the household such as could scarcely be felt toward the strangers who now perform the same labor under such different circumstances.²⁰

Lefferts Vanderbilt's idealized reminiscences are difficult to reconcile with other accounts that portray the postslave era in a much harsher light. For decades, Dutch farmers continued to rehearse denigrating tales about their families' slaves. Even the worldly Teunis Garrett Bergen, old-line Dutch farmer in New Utrecht, surveyor, and member of the 39th Congress (which was so instrumental in supporting emancipated slaves' civil rights), reveled in stories about his ancestors' slaves in his family genealogy. A year after the Civil War ended, he regaled readers with an account of Negroes'

proverbial fondness for pilfering neighbors' poultry, which often led to their arrest and sentencing to the whipping post, prompting their owner to "shed tears to serve them."²¹

The racial discrimination to which "The Last Flatbush Slave" was exposed decades after his enslavement had ended suggests what agricultural employment relations may have been like. "Uncle Sammy" Anderson, born a slave on Jeremiah Lott's farm in 1810, died in 1902. Appearing as the head of his own household at the 1840 census, he was returned a farm laborer at the 1870 census, and a laborer in 1880. After conversion to Christianity at the age of 19, Anderson attended the Flatbush Reformed Dutch Church, but was confined to the gallery, which was "reserved for colored people." He rarely had enough money to ride the stagecoach from Flatbush to Fulton Ferry, but "when so fortunate, he was required to ride on the top of the stage, as the inside seats were reserved for 'white folks.'"²²

THE VEGETABLE PROLETARIAT: THE SIZE AND ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF THE LABOR FORCE

They composed a Dutch aristocracy as well as boers, their farm labor was performed by themselves, their sons and their negroes, under which they were rapidly attaining to wealth. New York, the greatest of American markets for their farm products, was at their doors, and the demand was limitless.

— Daniel Tredwell, "Kings County in Fact, Legend and Tradition," 1917

Because neither the contemporary press nor later scholars discussed the nature and source of labor on Kings County farms in the aftermath of slavery, information must be teased from sporadic and fragmentary evidence. From a rare surviving diary, for example, it is known that Adriance Van Brunt employed on his typical Dutch American farm in Yellow Hook in June 1828 two year-round hired men, three indentured servants, two hired women, four white men from New Jersey (including three hired by the month), two blacks hired by the month, one Virginian hired by the month, and five girls from New Jersey picking peas on a piece rate.²³

Unlike the situation in the postbellum South, where the ex-slaveholder Oemler boasted that emancipation had made extensive truck farming possible, in Kings County the Dutch farmer could no longer look exclusively to "the same God-given instrument, the negro . . . for his labor." That slavery had come to an end decades before the Civil War and before Kings County farmers made the transition from extensive to intensive cultivation meant

that the generation of ex-slaves that had continued to work on the farms had already died and some of their children had moved on (to the city of Brooklyn and elsewhere) before market gardening became the dominant form of agriculture.²⁴

The transition to more intensive and seasonal market gardening may have necessitated the recruitment and employment of a transient work force: "The labor per acre that is required on a highly cultivated vegetable patch greatly exceeds that for a wheat or corn field, hence the size of the plot of ground in vegetables which one man can cultivate by himself, is correspondingly limited." Whether late-nineteenth-century Kings County vegetable farmers, like their counterparts elsewhere, employed transient harvesters is unclear. Whether the unemployed, and "especially" women and children, who had "an advantage over men" in harvest piecework, in the New York area "eagerly" sought out such "opportunities" as they had elsewhere is unknown.²⁵

Local children did form a part of the agricultural labor force. For example, when potato bugs infested the plants in Flatlands in 1876, "boys were in quite a demand in town to help get rid of these pests, and find themselves with plenty of business." And a report in the late 1880s noted that in the late summer and autumn many a "thrifty modern husbandman" living in "quaint old Dutch mansion[s]" between Brooklyn and Jamaica Bay employed "scores of the poorer men, women and children of the neighborhood to dig his potatoes . . . and take care of his crops generally."²⁶

Historical researchers have long complained of a paucity of precise census data on agricultural labor in the United States. However, the manuscript schedules of the federal population censuses for rural Kings County in 1860, 1870, and 1880, unlike those for 1850, which used only the category "laborer," do include returns for "farm laborer," which make it possible to gauge the size and ethnic background of the self-reported agricultural labor force in those three census years.²⁷

To be sure, methodological inconsistencies and flaws in the census detract to some degree from the accuracy of the count of farm laborers. One major source of undercounting was the practice of labeling as "servant" all female employees living in farm households: even if engaged part-time in fieldwork, they were not included in the farm labor force. Since female servants lived in a very large number of Kings County farm households, the undercount is potentially large. In 1860, two-thirds of Flatbush farm households included at least one servant as did a majority in Gravesend and New Utrecht; in Flatlands and New Lots servants were returned as living in one-

third of farm families. Since enumerators listed literally only a handful of women as working on farms, the census doubtless underestimated the contributions of wives and daughters.²⁸

Another source of undercounting was omission of the occupation on the manuscript schedules. For example, Cato Oliver, a black man, was returned as a farm laborer in Flatbush in 1860, but his occupation was omitted in 1870. Yet his obituary in the *Rural Gazette*— extraordinary for a black person — in 1879 focused on his devoted work for 48 years on the John Vanderveer farm, which he performed virtually until the day he died. This obituarial vignette may well have been representative of master-servant relations between Dutch farmers and their black farm laborers: “No matter how tired he might be in the evening, if any of the family expressed a wish to have anything done, Cato would cheerfully exclaim ‘All right, I’m here.’” Serendipitous discovery of this omitted occupation suggests that census omissions of farm laborers’ occupation may have been common — especially among children who worked as farm laborers.²⁹

The data on farm laborers may be misleading insofar as they include sons and other relatives of farmers. (This issue did not arise in 1860, when the enumerator returned no sons of farmers living in the household as farm laborers.) To be sure, the sons did not bulk nearly so large as in one midwestern study, which found well over half the farm laborers to be sons of operators in 1880, but they were significant enough to merit comment. Enumerators did not list all sons as “farm laborer,” “working on farm,” “works on farm,” or “farm hand”; some were returned as “farmer.” In Kings County, 87, or about one-seventh of all, farm laborers in 1880 were closely related to the farm operator; of this number, 76 were sons.³⁰

Kings County was just one in the New York City environs in which “an untold number of immigrants swelled the shifting population of farm laborers . . . on the prosperous market gardens.” Given, for example, Irish immigrants’ largely agrarian backgrounds, it is plausible that the two to five thousand Irish-born counted among the rural Kings County population by the census between 1855 and 1890 formed a source of late-nineteenth-century farm laborers. And indeed, the manuscript schedules reveal that although the Irish lost their status as the chief source of the farm labor force after the Civil War, they still constituted the largest group of farm laborers in 1870 and the second largest in 1880. That so many Irishmen became farm laborers must have reflected a lack of other employment opportunities; for their association of farming with “impoverished potato patches” and oppression in Ireland prompted few to seek such work in the United States.³¹

Table 10 records the ethnic breakdowns for farm laborers. In 1860, 63 percent of rural Kings County residents self-identifying as farm laborers had been born in Ireland, 11 percent in Germany, while another 12 percent were U.S. blacks. These three groups accounted for 85 percent of the work force. In 1870, the Irish share had fallen to 38 percent, while that of Germans and blacks had risen to 22 and 14 percent. Thus almost three-fourths of farm laborers still came from these three groups. The share of U.S.-born whites increased from 10 to 22 percent of those returned as farm laborers. Ten years later, a small shift had taken place toward U.S.-born whites (excluding second-generation Irish), who now accounted for 35 percent of farm laborers. Native Irish in 1880 constituted 27 percent of the labor force, rising to 32 percent with the inclusion of second-generation Irish. That year one-sixth of farm laborers were native-born Germans, while blacks formed another 12 percent.³²

These relative shifts in the composition of the farm labor force between 1860 and 1880 are shown in table 11, which gives the absolute and percentage changes in the four major groups — Irish, Germans, and U.S. whites and blacks. Over the 20-year period, the decline in the overall size of the labor force in rural Kings County farming was controlled by opposite changes in two subgroups: whereas the number of Irish laborers fell by a total of 328, or 67 percent, the number of U.S.-born white workers rose by 134, or 170 percent. In contrast, Germans and U.S. blacks moved in and out of the farm labor force in much smaller numbers.

Irish, Germans, and blacks were significantly overrepresented in the farm labor force in relation to their numbers in the overall rural Kings County population. In 1870, the native-born Irish and Germans accounted for 18 percent and 14 percent, respectively, of the whole rural Kings County population, while blacks formed an additional 3 percent, for a total of 35 percent compared with 74 percent of farm laborers. In 1880, native-born Irish were 14 percent and native-born Germans 12 percent of the rural population, while blacks remained 3 percent for a total of 29 percent compared to a total of 55 percent of farm laborers.³³

The aggregate data for Kings County obscure large differences in the size and ethnic makeup of the farm labor force in the five towns. Table 12 compares the towns for 1860, 1870, and 1880. Whereas Flatbush and New Utrecht experienced sharp decreases in the number of farm laborers from 1860 to 1880, the other towns saw increases. The 258 laborers in Flatlands in 1880 were the highest figure in any town for any of these census years. In rank order, the most concentrated farm labor populations resided in New Utrecht,

Flatlands, Flatbush, Gravesend, and New Lots in 1860, Flatlands, New Utrecht, Gravesend, New Lots, and Flatbush in 1870, and Flatlands, New Lots, Gravesend, New Utrecht, and Flatbush in 1880. Whereas Flatlands was the largest and Flatbush the smallest residential base in 1870 and 1880, New Utrecht was the largest and Gravesend and New Lots the smallest in 1860.³⁴

In 1860 and 1870 the Irish were the largest ethnic contingent in all towns except New Lots, where Germans predominated; in 1880, non-Irish U.S. whites became the leading group in New Utrecht and New Lots. Black farm laborers formed an appreciable proportion of the work force in all towns (exceeding one-fifth in Gravesend in 1870) except New Utrecht, from which they were totally absent in 1880 — and where U.S. whites were much more heavily represented than anywhere else — and in New Lots in 1860 and 1870. The predominance of the Irish among farm laborers was paired with this occupation's predominance among the Irish. In Flatbush, for example, the category of laborer closely followed by that of farm laborer accounted for more than half of all employed Irish males in 1870. That predominance was of some vintage in Flatbush: as early as 1850, when the census did not use the term "farm laborer," 62 percent of the 89 laborers returned as living in farmers' households were Irish. In 1860, when the Irish made up 17 percent of the population of rural Kings County (excluding the institutionalized in Flatbush), ranging from 8 percent in New Lots to 25 percent in New Utrecht, Irish farm laborers accounted for 26 percent of the entire Irish population, ranging from 6 percent in New Lots to 56 percent in Flatlands.³⁵

The decline in the total farm labor force by 17 percent during the 1860s and a further 6 percent during the 1870s, which coincided with the shift from extensive to intensive agriculture, is counterintuitive. One plausible explanation is that as farming became more seasonal, many who harvested vegetables did not work all year in agriculture and therefore did not report themselves to the census enumerator as farm laborers. Migratory farm laborers who were not residing in Kings County at the time of the enumeration in June or July would also have been excluded. How large this seasonal harvest force was is unknown. Because the principal crops, cabbage and potatoes — early potatoes can be dug as soon as they are large enough to eat, whereas late potatoes should remain in the ground as long as possible without freezing — unlike strawberries and other fruits, did not need to be urgently harvested within a very compressed time period, it is possible that the seasonal peak demand for harvesters in Kings County was much lower than in New Jersey, where many migrant workers picked fruits and vegetables in the late

nineteenth century. The labor exchange established in 1850 at Castle Garden, the main entry point for immigrants, which undertook to supply agricultural laborers to employers anywhere in the United States, may have been a source of recruitment, but of “the immigrant farm-laborers, only a small number remained in New York.” In addition to private employment bureaus in Brooklyn, the Free Employment Bureau in Manhattan, under the auspices of the Young Men’s Christian Association, could supply farmers and other employers large numbers of men on one day’s notice, requiring them to pay only the transportation cost to the workplace.³⁶

Significantly, not a single Italian-born farm laborer was recorded at the 1860, 1870, or 1880 census. Large-scale immigration to the United States from Italy, where an agricultural crisis had erupted in the 1870s, did not begin, coincidentally, until 1880; at the time of enumeration in June of that year, only 25 Italian-born residents were returned for all of rural Kings County. The *Rural Gazette* was apparently describing an uncommon sight when it reported in 1873 that: “Large crowds of Italian laborers were seen on Wednesday morning last, on their way through Clarkson street en route for the Kings county sewer. They seemed to be all hearty fellows . . . though they are short in stature.” Nevertheless, the next year many Italians were praised for doing good heavy landscaping and paving work at Washington Cemetery in Gravesend and New Utrecht. The extensive employment of Italians (who lived in Manhattan) by the mid-1870s to lay track for the steam railroads to Coney Island suggests that they were a potential source of seasonal harvest labor if Kings County had faced shortages.³⁷

A large majority of pre-World War I Italian immigrants had been employed in agriculture in Italy, but only a very small proportion of them engaged in farmwork in the United States. Yet by the early 1890s, the USDA singled out Italian immigrants among the foreigners lacking “adaptation or intelligence” on whom — in addition to “incompetent” workers of native origins discharged by manufacturing enterprises — New Jersey farmers had to rely. Nevertheless, by the turn of the century, the Department called Italian immigrants at work on farms on Long Island and in New Jersey “good help.” Beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century, many farms “abandoned by the Yankees who go west or enter business in the city” were taken over by Italians, who specialized in vegetable truck farms in southern New Jersey, the vicinity of Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Chicago, and, later, on Long Island. At the turn of the century, too, entire families of Italians and Poles dominated market gardening

on rented microplots within New York City. By World War I, Italians (together with Poles and Germans) formed the great proportion of market gardeners on the western end of Long Island. At this time an urban market gardening enthusiast recommended that for large weeding jobs, “you can hire Italians or Germans to do it better and cheaper than you can do it yourself.” And the *Eagle* was touting “350,000 acres of fertile soil” on Long Island that were “standing idle, awaiting willing hands.”³⁸

As vegetable farming became more labor intensive, requiring more regular picking and pruning in season, and as Irish and German immigrants found employment more readily in industry, it is possible that farmers who wished to expand their operations might have experienced difficulty in recruiting a long-term workforce. In 1892, when Kings County agriculture was already beyond its peak, the Department of Agriculture reported a labor “scarcity, caused by abundance of work on public improvements. It is more difficult each year to get men to work. Large contracts are given out yearly, and men are in constant demand.” Nevertheless, during the first decade of the twentieth century, day laborers were still “extensively employed” on market garden farms in Kings and Queens counties. Ironically, if vegetable farming had been able to resist suburbanization for another decade or two, sufficient Italian immigrants might have been available to work in the market gardens — if not as laborers, then as tenants or owners.³⁹

Ethnic and racial historiographies have neglected the late-nineteenth-century agricultural employment of these groups in Kings County. Consequently, nothing is known of the working or living conditions of farm laborers such as Henry and Joshua Jackson, 62- and 22-year-old black father and son in Flatbush in 1880, or 27-year-old Irish-born John McGuire, living and working on William Kouwenhoven’s Flatlands farm in 1870, or 48-year-old German-born Jacob Hammerschlag, living and working on Abraham Van Siclen’s farm in New Lots in 1880, or U.S.-born Abraham Applegate, still a farm worker at 60 years of age, who felt obliged to report to the census enumerator in 1870 that he owned \$200 worth of personal property. There is no evidence that black workers remained on or migrated to Kings County farms out of a conviction that “economic improvement could best be achieved by abandoning the cities for the simple and virtuous attractions of agrarian life,” but it is plausible that the at times virulent and antagonistic competition between them and Irish immigrants for low-wage jobs spilled over into agricultural employment.⁴⁰

This extraordinary reliance on immigrant workers becomes ambiguous

when contrasted with the derisive remarks by Peter Henderson, a large vegetable farmer across the Hudson River in Hudson County:

To such as require large numbers of hands, and look to such ports as New York for emigrants, let me caution my friends from the rural districts not to believe too implicitly in the promises of these prospective American citizens. Much vexatious experience has taught me that one out of every three men is either worthless, or will run away, so that for many years back, if I wanted four hands, I made one job of it and hired six, well knowing that before a week had passed, my force would be reduced to the required number.⁴¹

The virtually total silence with which the *Kings County Rural Gazette*, which was published from 1872 to 1885, enveloped the issue of the farm labor supply suggests that scarcity was not a general problem. Indeed, at times the newspaper reported that harvesters were plentiful — for example, to harvest the likewise plentiful strawberries in Flatlands in 1876.⁴² The only direct light that the newspaper shed on the subject involved William Bennett, a large farmer in Gravesend, one-fourth of whose 100 acres were planted to potatoes. In the summer of 1872 it reported that:

To manage these twenty-five acres, Mr. B. employs nine horses and six men, who work early and late. Much trouble is experienced in keeping hired help in digging season, as the usual monthly rate of \$20 is small compared with 8 cents a bushel paid for digging by the job. Men who work by the month will dig 30 and 40 bushels a day, but when working by the job, the same men will often dig 100 bushels a day.⁴³

Although the gist of Bennett's predicament — namely, how to retain year-round employees when they could earn as much in two and a half days on a piece rate as he paid them for an entire month — is clear enough, the consequences are not. Were those working by the job seasonal workers who migrated from elsewhere? Or were they other Kings County farmers' year-round laborers who abandoned those farmers to secure this sinecure? And, finally, if farmers could afford to pay harvesters the higher piece rate, why could they not offer the same wage to their year-round workers during the harvest season? The work itself could be brutal at the height of the summer, when workers were overcome by heat, narrowly escaping death by sunstroke. Whatever potato farmers' predicament with their human employees in 1872, it soon paled beside that of their horses — which had to be used in



FIGURE 9. *Workers harvesting potatoes, Jacob Rapelje farm, New Lots, c. 1890. The smokestacks in the background reveal the advance of urbanization. Courtesy of Peter Rapelje.*

relays of teams for field and market work especially on days when several wagon loads were marketed — many of which died in an almost nationwide epidemic.⁴⁴

Bennett's productivity data also make it possible to estimate upper and lower limits of the harvest workforce. The total number of potato harvesters was a function of the length of the harvest. If the harvest lasted 30 days,

the maximum would have been 858 workers (1879) and the minimum 140 (1874). Where the harvest lasted two months or longer, the required number of potato harvesters could have been fewer than half as many as this maximum and minimum. Despite concurrent and overlapping cabbage and other harvests, these numbers suggest that the rural Kings County population would not, under any plausible scenario, have been overwhelmed by a burgeoning migrant labor or dependent farm labor population if farmers had sought to continue their operations later in the century. These labor requirements must also be adjusted downward to take into account the considerable number of wives, children, relatives, and neighboring children who harvested crops without having been returned by the census as having any occupation.⁴⁵

Despite their proximity to the third largest city in the United States, Kings County farms in the latter part of the nineteenth century were hardly commuter operations. In 1860, before the transition to market gardening had taken place, about two-thirds of farm workers lived in farmers' households. Some farmers built special separate structures for their farm laborers, sometimes above a wagon house; some lodged them in the former slaves' quarters. In 1870, after market gardening had become the mainstay of Kings County farming, 301, or 46 percent, of those returned as farmworkers lived on their employer's farm; this number declined to 194 by 1880, but still represented 32 percent of the enumerated farm laborers. The largest contingent of resident farm laborers worked on Williamson Rapalje's 51-acre market garden farm in New Lots in 1870: 10 Germans and 1 Swiss. This kind of ethnic homogeneity was widespread and aided by the fact that by 1870 the vast majority of black farm laborers no longer lived in their farm employers' household.⁴⁶

The labor intensiveness as well as the degree of proletarianization of Kings County agriculture are reflected in the ratio of the number of farm laborers to the number of farms. In the five towns, this index rose from 2.1 (778/367) in 1860 to 2.6 (648/254) in 1870, before falling markedly to 1.6 (611/391) in 1880. As low as these ratios seem, they were considerably higher than for agriculture in general in an era when many farm laborers were both geographically and socioeconomically in transit. In 1860, for example, the ratio in the 15 principal northern states was only 0.4; the highest ratio in any state, neighboring New Jersey, amounted to only 0.66. The trend in the number of farm laborers per acre, a more accurate gauge of labor intensity, differed in that the decline during the 1870s did not bring about a lower value than at the starting point: the ratio rose from 0.06 laborers per improved

acre (778/14,871) in 1860 to 0.07 (648/9,700) in 1870, and then declined to 0.06 (611/10,383) by 1880. The continued decline in farm laborers during the 1870s in tandem with the trend reversal in acreage suggests the possibility of rising productivity during the peak decade of vegetable production.⁴⁷

Labor intensity can also be measured by farmers' payrolls. The quantitative significance of wage labor in Kings County agriculture can be gauged by unpublished data on wages collected by the census for 1879. Of the 406 farms, 372 (92 percent) reported that they had paid \$284,063 in wages for farm labor (including board), the average farm paying \$764. This sum amounted to about 23 percent of the value of all farm productions, 127 percent of the value of farm implements and machinery, and 134 percent of that year's expenditures on fertilizer.⁴⁸

The data collected on wages (including board) by the census in 1869–70 also make it possible to compare Kings County with other counties with regard to average per farm expenditures. The average for Kings County farms, \$1,035, was almost nine times the national average of \$117, six and one-half times the New York State average of \$159, and three times that of neighboring Queens County, whose total wage expenditures were more than three times higher.⁴⁹

Table 13 displays the wage intensity of the 20 largest market garden-producing counties (arranged in descending order) in 1869–70. Per farm wage expenditures in Kings County were almost three times higher than the aggregate average for the other 19 counties (\$391). In general, counties in which labor-intensive vegetable production bulked large also spent more on wages. With the exception of some even more labor-intensive cotton and rice producing counties in the ex-slave South, Kings County farms were the most wage-intensive in the United States. At least among counties whose aggregate farm wages were as large as Kings County's, only in 19 were per farm wage expenditures greater. These extraordinary outlays in Kings County bespeak — unless Dutch farmers paid wages to their own sons — a radical break with cultivation based on family labor and an impressive turn toward capitalist agriculture. Such wage expenditures would be consistent with the employment of large numbers of seasonal piece-rate harvesters, but there is no evidence that migrant farm laborers worked on Kings County farms in the later part of the nineteenth century.⁵⁰

This degree of labor-intensity warranted the employment of a foreman on some farms. Abraham Linington, who owned the second-largest vegetable farm in Kings County in 1870, with \$12,200 in sales from 82 acres, employed 31-year-old U.S.-born William Selover as a foreman, who also lived

on the farm. Although the enumeration may not have been complete, all the foremen were young, U.S.-born, and worked on farms in New Lots.⁵¹

Proletarianization in Kings County agriculture was not permanent or lifelong in the sense that very few of the more than two thousand workers returned as farm laborers at the 1860, 1870, and 1880 censuses remained in that class, sectoral, and geographic location from one decade to the next. Not a single worker appeared in all three censuses as a farm laborer in rural Kings County. Nathaniel Vail (or Veil), who was 82 years old in 1880, came closest. This black resident of Gravesend was returned as a farm laborer in 1860 and 1880, while in 1870 he was a gardener.⁵²

Rem Hegeman, who was a farm laborer in 1860 and 1870, was returned in 1880 as a laborer — whether he had really left agriculture or whether the enumerator merely used shorthand is unclear. His long-term status as a laborer is instructive. His like-named father had been a large farmer in Flatbush, but at the time of the 1850 census, when he was also returned as a farmer on his 72-year-old father's farm, his two older brothers, who were also returned as farmers there, presumably had greater claims to the farm. The 56-acre Hegeman farm appeared in the 1850 Census of Agriculture, but not again. Perhaps the farm, which reported no market garden production in 1850, failed to make the transition to intensive agriculture. Nor was any member of that Hegeman family returned as a farmer in Flatbush at the 1860 census; by 1860, both of Rem Hegeman's older brothers were returned as living in his household without occupations.

Table 14 presents the most important cross-tabulations, broken down for race, ethnicity, nativity, and town, relating to persistence among farm laborers at the three censuses of 1860, 1870, and 1880. Despite the long period between censuses and the happenstance of what kind of work a particular worker might have been performing at the time the census was conducted, the low degree of persistence from one census to the next is still striking. Overall, the rate was only 1 percent in 1860/1870 and 6 percent during the next decade. Even these low aggregate figures conceal large differences among groups, years, and towns. The black persistence rate was almost ten times as high as for whites in the 1860s and seven times higher in the 1870s, when it rose to 21 percent. In the 1870s, 28 percent of black farm laborers in Gravesend and fully one-third in Flatlands remained in this occupation; in contrast, not a single one in either town did during the 1860s. Especially in Flatlands, this black persistence rate in the 1870s was a function of the fact that men of ages varying from 16 to 70 in four families (Moore, Anderson, Johnson, and Thompson) remained on the farm.⁵³

The overall white persistence rate, minimal as it was, also consisted of vastly different rates among subgroups. The rate among U.S.-born whites, surprisingly, was four to five times higher than among Irish immigrants, while only a single German farm laborer was returned as persisting in his position throughout either decade. The high rate among U.S.-born whites in New Utrecht derived largely from the fact that three sons of Dutch farmers had not yet taken over from their fathers and were still working on the farm. But much more remarkable than the proportions among U.S.-born whites, whose numbers were too small to be meaningful, was the virtual absence of persistence among Irish and German immigrants. This exit-mobility strongly suggests both that working in a subordinate position on a rural Kings County vegetable farm in the 1860s and 1870s did not appeal to these immigrants as a viable long-term occupation and that they had better job opportunities either elsewhere or in other industries. Of the more than one hundred Irish-born farm laborers in Flatbush in 1860, only four reappeared in the 1870 Census of Population for Flatbush in other occupations (all were nonagricultural laborers).⁵⁴

For a few, upward mobility meant tenancy. In Flatbush, at least three Irish immigrants (James Bennett, Edward Kennedy, and James Leary) who had been farm laborers in 1870 reappeared 10 years later as tenants. As old-line Dutch farmers increasingly withdrew from active farming by the 1880s, tenancy became more common among Irish and German immigrants. Since revenues from farm rents by the late 1880s and early 1890s could not provide landowners with income flows remotely approaching the deals that real-estate developers and speculators could offer, it would have been very difficult for such tenants to induce their landlords to sell them the farms even if they had sufficient capital to finance the purchase.

STINGY BILL AND PRETTY JACK: WAGES AND WORKING AND LIVING CONDITIONS

Because no data on the wages and working conditions of farm laborers in Kings County were ever collected, some sense of farm labor conditions must be teased from census data as well as incidental and anecdotal sources. Unemployment among Kings County farm laborers was pervasive and extended. Although census officials concluded that the data on unemployment that the Census of Population collected for the first time in 1880 were too erratic and incomplete to justify tabulating and publishing, some Kings County enumerators took their charge seriously. No figures were entered

for residents of Flatbush and those for New Lots and New Utrecht were scanty, but the entries for Flatlands and Gravesend, the towns with the largest and third largest farmworker populations, appear to be comprehensive. In Flatlands 29 percent of farm laborers reported having been unemployed during the census year, while 51 percent of those in Gravesend experienced unemployment; the modal duration was two to three months. The pervasiveness of unemployment showed an unmistakable racial skew: whereas 20 percent of Germans, 23 percent of U.S.-born whites, and 29 percent of Irish had been unemployed, fully 61 percent of black farm laborers in Flatlands had been out of employment. Whether this difference resulted from the more casual or seasonal farm employment of blacks or their difficulty in securing other employment is unknown.⁵⁵

Such levels of unemployment are even more impressive because 1880 fell in the prosperity phase of the business cycle. Nevertheless, the *New York Irish-American* reported that year that discussion was taking place of the possibility of “utilizing the waste lands of Long Island by forming colonization societies and establishing villages for mechanics and laboring men in overcrowded cities.” At \$10 to \$15 per acre, acquisition of such land was deemed financially manageable.⁵⁶

Although there are no data on wage rates for Kings County farms, \$1.50 per day and \$20 per month with room and board were probably the prevailing rates. In 1883 William Bennett paid his laborers in Gravesend \$1.00 per day in April and \$1.50 per day once the harvest season began in June; in the 1890s he paid various workers between \$16 and \$30 per month. The Kings County highway commissioners paid \$1.50 per day to (the mostly Irish) workers performing road labor in the 1870s and 1880s, and practical horticulturists indicated that in Manhattan in the 1870s as well as generally in the early 1890s, \$40 per month or \$1.50 per day was the average rate. Dividing the total wage bill of rural Kings County (\$275,292) for 1879 by the 611 farm laborers returned for 1880 generates average annual wages per laborer of \$451. With two months of unemployment factored in, this sum seems plausible. Total wages paid out in rural Kings County in 1870, \$274,865, divided by that year’s farm labor force of 648, work out to almost the same amount — \$424.⁵⁷

Little is known about labor relations on late-nineteenth-century Kings County farms, but scattered evidence suggests that not all was idyllic. The extremely antiunion editor of the *Rural Gazette* claimed in April 1877 that he was informed that “it is in contemplation by some farm laborers when our farmers get hurried with work along in June next, to inaugurate a strike

and use means to prevent those who won't strike from doing any work." Though perhaps only anecdotal in isolation, the facts of one prominent lawsuit seem sufficiently realistic and familiar from the general run of labor relations to claim some representativity. The *Rural and Brighton Gazette* not only deemed it significant enough to report and editorialize on it at great length from the employer's point of view, but observed that, having "attracted great attention," the trial "was considered one of the most interesting that ever occurred in this country." Styled *John Turner v. William W. Kouwenhoven*, this suit for wages pitted a farm laborer against a member of one of the largest old-line Dutch farm families — or, in the words of the *Rural Gazette*, "an Irishman . . . against a well-known market gardener and respected citizen of Flatlands." The decisions in the case, together with the unpublished briefs and trial transcript and the unpublished manuscript schedules of the 1880 census, shed invaluable light on the day-to-day operations of a Kings County vegetable farm and the relations between the owner and his employees.⁵⁸

In 1880 John Turner was a 25-year-old Irishman who lived on the 45-acre Flatlands farm of the 34-year-old Kouwenhoven. One other farm laborer also lived on the farm — 19-year-old U.S.-born Thomas Duley (or Dooley). The farm, which was valued at \$10,000 in addition to \$700 worth of farm implements and machinery and \$1,000 of livestock, in 1879 produced \$5,000 in products, \$4,000 of which were market garden produce. On 23 of the acres 4,600 bushels of potatoes were harvested. Kouwenhoven spent \$1,500 on fertilizer and \$1,000 on wages for 100 weeks of hired labor, and had six horses at his disposal, for which he harvested six tons of hay. He had only one milk cow and three swine on hand in 1880, and bought and sold one head of cattle in 1879. His farm produced 150 pounds of butter and 200 dozen eggs in 1879. He also grew 150 bushels of Indian corn on six acres and 60 bushels of wheat on two acres. The farm was typical both in its size and in having made the transition from grain and livestock production to vegetable production while retaining small self-consumption capacities for certain basic foods.⁵⁹

If, based on Henderson's data for the 1870s and 1880s, wages and fertilizer accounted for about 77 percent of total market-garden costs (abstracting from rent for farms that had been in the family for generations), adding 30 percent to those two cost components and subtracting the total from the value of productions should generate an approximation of the farmer's profit. In 1879, then, Kouwenhoven's profit should have amounted to about

\$1,750 or 75 percent more than he paid all his laborers. It was also more than seven times greater than Turner's \$240 annual wages.

At trial in 1882, Kouwenhoven testified that he had met Turner eleven years earlier at Castle Garden at the southern tip of Manhattan — the chief immigrant station in the United States from 1855 until Ellis Island replaced it in the early 1890s — where he had gone “to get” the 16-year-old. Thus from the moment Kouwenhoven “found the plaintiff — an emigrant boy just arrived from Ireland” — Turner was in his employ: “When he first came to work for me he did general farm work. I promoted him to be my market man since 1876.” Kouwenhoven paid Turner \$20 per month during the entire 11-year period. Turner received an additional \$1 for each wagon-load of produce that he sold. Kouwenhoven generally paid Turner, who had a sleeping room in the farmer's carriage house, his annual wages at the beginning of the following year. The structure of this relationship implies that the laborer must have been receiving room and board throughout the year to make it possible for him to live until he received his entire annual wage at the end of the term. The terms of payment suggest either that the farmer had a cash-flow problem and could not pay out wages until he himself had sold his crops or that the labor market was favorable enough to workers that the farmer felt it necessary to impose a severe financial disincentive on laborers for departing from their service before the end of their term. That at least some workers acquiesced in such terms suggests, in turn, either that they were without less onerous employment opportunities or that the annual compensation included a premium sufficiently above the going monthly rate to justify the risk of total forfeiture — an empirically implausible possibility.⁶⁰

The relationship between Kouwenhoven and his farm laborer was distinctly paternalistic. When asked at trial how he paid Turner, the farmer replied: “Whenever he needed any money during the year, I would give him whatever he called for; then at the end of the year I would deposit in the Brooklyn Savings Bank the balance coming to him.” The dependency embedded in this system of dribbling out a few dollars now and then to the employee-suppliant when he made specific requests was highlighted by a story that Kouwenhoven recounted at trial about how Turner had given money to a Sunday school. One Sunday about dinner time, when Turner came to ask for \$2, Kouwenhoven asked him why he had not come Saturday night when he was in the habit of paying the men. Later that day Turner gave 12 shillings of the \$2 to the school: “He was a member of my class, and

it was the habit, just before Christmas festival, to give money to the missionaries. If he had not borrowed the two dollars from me his contributing \$1.50 would have caused me to make inquiry where he got it from, knowing that I had all his wages. I have been a farmer in Flatlands for quite a while." The account creates a mystery of how an Irishman came to support a Dutchman's missionaries, but it leaves no doubt as to the nature and source of the power relations: after Turner had worked for 11 years for Kouwenhoven and with but a few days left in 1881 before the lump-sum payment of his annual wages came due, Kouwenhoven not only jealously regarded every "shilling" of it as still his, but found it perfectly appropriate to demand to know where his employee had obtained as little as \$1.50.⁶¹

The picture-book image of close family relations between the farmer and his "hands" was hardly applicable to this farm. Presumably the most reliable characterization of Kouwenhoven's reputation in the small Flatlands community came from his own defense witness, Jackson Ryder. A 41-year-old neighbor, who had known him for 20 years, Ryder farmed 30 rented acres at the time of the 1880 census. In addition to confirming that Turner was known as "Pretty Jack," Ryder testified that he and others called Kouwenhoven "Stingy Bill": "Yes: there are three William Kouwenhovens. One is called Big Will, one Dandy Will and another Stingy Bill."⁶²

Other aspects of the relationship between this particular farmer and worker and other personal characteristics may not have been representative. Turner, who according to his own account could not read writing and did not keep any papers — Kouwenhoven testified that Turner could read and write, but was not certain that he could do more than sign his name — not only entrusted his employer with his annual wages and his savings bank book, but permitted Kouwenhoven to assist him in investing \$2,000 of his savings in a mortgage and bond in March 1879. "With that exception," according to Kouwenhoven, "his wages have remained on deposit from the beginning." Turner appears to have had another savings account as well; the combined total of his deposits during his 11 years with Kouwenhoven, which included gifts and inheritance from relatives — he also inherited a farm from his father in Ireland — reached several thousand dollars. If Turner's nonproletarian financial status had in fact been typical for young Irish immigrants, it would explain why so few Irishmen remained in subordinate positions on Kings County farms from one census to the next.⁶³

Turner's suit centered on the year 1881, during which Kouwenhoven marketed over \$7,000 worth of produce — \$2,000 more than the census year of 1879 and on five fewer acres. In 1881, the farm's vegetables, including po-

tatoes, cabbage, sprouts, squash, turnips, carrots, and lettuce, went to market in 211 loads, 201 of which were taken by Turner and 10 by his coworker Dooley. Kouwenhoven had three farm wagons for such transports, the oldest of which was fifteen to twenty years old. Over the course of the year, the average load was worth \$30 to \$35. Ryder testified that for Kouwenhoven's 40-acre farm, 100 to 175 loads constituted a good annual crop and 211 an "extra crop"; Kouwenhoven's father, C. B. Kouwenhoven, as a 62-year-old farmer at the 1880 Census of Population, characterized 150 to 200 loads as good, whereas 211 "would be pretty heavy."⁶⁴

Turner's complaint alleged that he had sold 398 loads for Kouwenhoven, who had not paid him the agreed-upon \$1 for any of them; in addition he claimed that he was owed his wages of \$240 for the year minus a \$10 advance, for a grand total of \$628. That Kouwenhoven delegated the task of marketing his key cash crops to a young semiliterate Irishman suggests that it did not require any significant special expertise and/or that Kouwenhoven's attention was fully occupied in managing the farm itself or perhaps even in some other business. Thus, just as Turner entrusted his entire wages and savings to his employer, Kouwenhoven may have let his entire cash flow pass through his employee's hands. Kouwenhoven testified that he had also gone to market himself and understood the business. Marketing manifestly required energy, patience, and perseverance. If, for example, Turner could not sell the entire load in Brooklyn, it was "his duty to go over to New York and sell the rest for less or whatever he could get."⁶⁵

The legal proceedings and rulings in the case — the jury's award of \$431 to Turner was upheld by the higher courts — are not pertinent here, but the rhetoric deployed by Kouwenhoven in his brief to the state's highest court recreating a context that underscored the vitality of Kings County vegetable production in the early 1880s is crucial to the overall argument here.⁶⁶ The defendant sought to explain why:

The practical importance of the question of law here at issue can hardly be over-estimated when the number of farmers in our country towns is considered. . . . The question of supreme importance here is: What is to be the permanent and abiding rule of law which this Court is prepared to establish and apply for the protection of the respective rights of the numerous farmers and marketmen within this State?

In the County of Kings alone hundreds of these marketmen are employed. They are all of them, as far as we can ascertain, employed upon yearly contracts, similar to the one on which this plaintiff sues. From the

very nature of the employment — the sales being for the most part to utter strangers in public market — but little check can be kept upon them by their employers, even were the latter far more skilful accountants than farmers are wont to be. On the other hand these marketmen have large opportunities and great temptations to dishonesty, since almost the entire capital of their employees [*sic*; should be “employers”] passes through their hands in the course of the year.⁶⁷

Even discounting for inflationary advocacy, no lawyer would have expected such a plea to solve a burning social problem to resonate with judges if the public believed that urban market gardens in general and those of Kings County in particular were about to disappear. Even if the Dutch farmers’ inability to implement a system of formal controls placed them “entirely at the mercy” of their Irish marketmen, the imminent or inexorable extinction of close-in vegetable farms would have made the verdict in *Turner v. Kouwenhoven* not “transitory” but conclusive and definitive.⁶⁸