



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

Marc Linder and  
Lawrence S. Zacharias

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## **9. WERE ALL KINGS COUNTY FARMERS DESCENDANTS OF THE ORIGINAL DUTCH SETTLERS? THE FARM-TENURE STRUCTURE**

Farmers cannot pay more than twenty dollars per acre, rent, and make a living.

— Charles Andrew Ditmas, *Brooklyn's Garden*, 1908

The Dutch farmers successfully managed the transition from extensive to intensive farming, but many of them eventually removed themselves from actual farm operations. Although they continued to own much if not most of the farmland, Dutch farmers increasingly sold or rented their land to German and Irish immigrants. These trends toward tenancy and ethnic heterogeneity, which characterized the farm sector by the 1880s, are the focus of this chapter, which also explores the consequences of this peculiar farm-tenure structure for the longevity of vegetable cultivation and the specific patterns shaping the eventual land sell-off.

### **NOT ALL FARMERS WERE DUTCH OR OWNERS**

As long as it was possible to do so, the landowners retained their farms as such; they were not anxious to cut up their beautiful fields into city lots, or to widen the green lanes and country roads into dusty avenues and wide boulevards.

— Gertrude Lefferts Vanderbilt, *The Social History of Flatbush*, 1880

The discussion of property taxes and other forces shaping Kings County farmers' decisions to sell their land conjures up the image of the prototypi-

cal farmer as a ninth-generation Dutch farm owner-operator, whose entire psychic and material inheritance and existence were inextricably interwoven with his farm. Such farmers did exist. Rulof van Brunt, a large New Utrecht farmer, died in 1883 on a farm that his family had owned for more than two centuries. The historian John A. Kouwenhoven in 1982 observed that his father, “born in 1870 on a Flatlands farm nine generations of his family had tilled, heard Dutch nursery rhymes from his mother and grandmother.” And Gertrude Lefferts Vanderbilt poignantly reinforced this image in 1880: “Nearly all the landed proprietors in Flatbush are those to whom the titles of their farms have been transmitted for several generations, dating in many cases from the settlement of the Dutch on Long Island. Now the land is passing out of the hands of its former owners, the old names are disappearing, and the descendants of the first settlers are comparatively few.”<sup>1</sup>

But not all late-nineteenth-century Kings County farm operators were owners of farms that had been in their families for two centuries. Nor were all farmers owners. Even in Lefferts Vanderbilt’s Flatbush, the 1880 census revealed that literally only a handful of old-line Dutch owner-operators remained. A growing proportion were new immigrants, and slightly more than half of all farms were operated by tenants. Some tenancies were, to be sure, merely temporary expedients. For example, when Joris Lott, one of Flatlands’ largest farm owners, died in 1835 at the age of 56, his wife Wilhelmina — “a most capable and energetic woman, possessing a mind of her own . . . showed much business tact and conducted her farm with exactness and profit” — leased the farm to various tenants until her sons Peter and George were old enough to operate it.<sup>2</sup>

But tenancy was not necessarily a transitional form: among the market gardeners to whom Peter Wyckoff rented 90 acres of his Brooklyn farm, one had leased for 41 years. Another factor promoting tenancy in Flatbush was that town’s Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, which the *Eagle* in 1873 estimated as owning lands and houses valued at half a million dollars. Most of the land was retained in old farms, “generally let out to persons who usually are gardeners, who till the soil and devote all of its productive power to the yielding of market vegetables and fruits.” Even if the Flatbush assessment roll for that year lists the church as owning only 50 acres valued at about \$60,000, its centrally located lands clearly added to the stock available for tenancy. In the mid-1880s, the church was still letting considerable farmland to relatively large Irish and second-generation Irish and German vegetable growers: 56 acres to John Heaslip, 14 acres to William Garnin, and 13 acres to Edward Kennedy.<sup>3</sup>

**This is to Certify,** That we have HIRED and TAKEN from  
The Trustees of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of  
Flatbush L.I. Thirty one and four half Acres Land  
bounded as follows: North by the Church Land  
East of land of Rev. J. M. Ferris  
South East of J. P. Ferguson  
West of the "Coney Island Road"

for the term of One Year  
 from the first day of March 1886 at the Annual  
 rent of Six hundred thirty dollars,  
 payable on the 1st day of August 1886

And we hereby promise to make punctual payment of the rent in manner aforesaid,  
 and to quit and surrender the premises at the expiration of said term, in as good state and condition as  
 reasonable use and wear thereof will permit, damages by the elements excepted.

GIVEN under our hand and seal the \_\_\_\_\_ day of February 1886  
virtues

IN CONSIDERATION of the Letting of the premises above described, and for the sum of one dollar,  
\_\_\_\_\_ do hereby become surety for the punctual payment of the rent, and performance of the covenants,  
 in the above written agreement mentioned, to be paid and performed by \_\_\_\_\_  
 and if default shall be made therein, \_\_\_\_\_ hereby promise and agree to pay unto  
\_\_\_\_\_ such sum or sums of money as will be sufficient to make up such  
 deficiency, and fully satisfy the conditions of the said agreement, without requiring any notice of non-  
 payment, or proof of demand being made.

GIVEN under \_\_\_\_\_ hand and seal the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ 18\_\_\_\_\_  
John. W. Herslip & Co

FIGURE 21. Lease of farmland by the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of Flatbush, 1886. Courtesy of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of Flatbush.

A comparison of the Census of Agriculture for 1860 and 1870 and the Flatbush assessment rolls for those years reveals that many of the farmers returned as operating farms did not own the farmland since only a small proportion of the census farmers appear on the assessment rolls as owning any land, let alone the large acreage recorded by the census. The most intriguing possibility, at least for the 1880s, is that some landowners who were letting their farms to tenants may not have been (former) farmers themselves; instead, they may have been speculators who had bought up the farms and were at least obtaining rent (and taking advantage of the lower

tax rate on agricultural land) while waiting for the most profitable moment for development.

Not even all Dutch farm families had owned their land since the beginning of Dutch settlement in the seventeenth century. Some acquired their farms in the late eighteenth or even nineteenth century from other Dutch families. For example, Teunis G. Bergen, the militant traditionalist, occupied a farm that his father had not bought until 1828. By 1877, according to the *Rural Gazette*, John Lefferts, John Vanderveer, and Mrs. John Ditmas were the sole remaining landowners in Flatbush who held their titles from original grants that had never been transferred. And even in John Lefferts's case, the totality of land that he inherited had not been acquired all at once upon the arrival of his ancestor, Leffert Pietersen, in Flatbush in 1660, but had been assembled through purchases and marriage over several generations. Nor was all the land owned by Kings County Dutch farming families located in Kings County: John Lefferts's sister, Gertrude Lefferts Vanderbilt, inherited their father's lands in Jamaica, Queens.<sup>4</sup>

Another vivid illustration of long-term turns and twists in land acquisition is Rem Hegeman (1795–1867). In 1836 he bought a farm in Flatlands from Nicholas Van Dyke, whose family apparently had acquired it at some point from the Hogeland family, which, in turn, had purchased it in two parts in 1707 and 1722. This land was situated within the original 1636 patent to Andries Hudde and Wolfert Garretsen van Couwenhoven. Hegeman's ancestors had arrived in Kings County in 1650. Rem Hegeman, "a frequent purchaser of small plots of land and meadows," "evidently had a speculative tendency and his judgment seems to have been good, for he generally sold his purchases for more than he had given." (Hegeman was returned at the 1850 and 1860 Census of Agriculture as owning a farm of 48 acres and 10 acres, respectively.) The executors of his estate, in turn, sold it to the heirs of Jeffries Van Wyck in 1869. The land, at Flatbush Avenue and Kings Highway, had always been "the center of the village life of Flatlands."<sup>5</sup>

Even before the Civil War it was not at all out of the ordinary for large Dutch farm owners to rent out some of their land. For example, John A. Lott's uncle and father-in-law, Jeremiah Lott (1776–1861), whom the 1853 Flatbush assessment roll listed as owning 164 acres of farmland (in addition to 50 acres of woodland), and whom the 1860 Census of Agriculture returned as farming 80 acres, leased 10 acres to Thomas Bennet from 1858 to 1863 for \$80 annually to be paid in two payments. Under the indenture, the tenant promised that he would "well and sufficiently plough, manure, plant,

sow, employ, manage, cultivate and keep in tillage the . . . premises in a good, careful and husbandmanlike manner . . . and shall not . . . do or commit or permit, or suffer to be done any wilful or voluntary waste, spoil or destruction . . . and furnish at his or their proper costs . . . all the necessary and required manure, horses, cattles, carriages, wagons, tool and implements . . . and do . . . and cause . . . to be performed all the work and labor necessary for the proper cultivation.” The \$8 per acre rental that Lott received far exceeded his \$1.80 per acre property tax that year. Similarly, when descendants of the Martense family, one of Flatbush’s most prominent, sold the old Martense Homestead in 1889, it, too, had already for many years been occupied by tenants.<sup>6</sup>

Contemporaries were well aware of the economically different positions of those in Kings County who owned their farms “free and clear of all incumbrance” and the larger class of renters. In a remarkable reflection on the need for “Local Emigration from Kings County,” W. H. Stillwell in 1872 exempted to some extent farmers without mortgages from the forces of competition propelling tenants, who had to compete with distant farmers producing on cheaper land with cheaper labor and much less manure, “to newer and cheaper lands where they may reap the advantages of fertile soil and profitably contribute to supply the wants of Kings county, whose lands cannot supply a tithe of the wants of the city and suburban villages for agricultural products.”<sup>7</sup>

Many different reasons impelled farmers to rent their farms to tenants. One unusual case can perhaps be understood as an illustration of the lack of capacity to operate or manage spatially separated farms. At the time of the 1880 census, the 27-year-old John Ditmas, scion of one of the oldest and land-richest families of rural Kings County, operated a 57-acre farm in Flatlands, employing three farm laborers who lived on the farm, on which \$5,000 worth of products were produced. Late that year he announced that since he was leaving for his new home in New Lots, a tenant would occupy the homestead farm and another would work 23 acres. Ditmas himself was “fully occupied in properly caring for the estate, without the extra labor necessary for farming.” A few months later it was revealed that he had moved to New Lots into the house of his father-in-law. His wife’s family, the Liningtons, was one of the biggest farm operators in the county.<sup>8</sup>

Other farmers let out their farms because impairments of their health made it impossible for them personally to continue farming. Some landowners were not farmers at all. William Langley, one of the richest New

York merchants living in rural Kings County, owned a 44-acre farm in addition to other land in New Utrecht. In 1876 he advertised in the *Rural Gazette* that those interested in letting his farm could inquire at 78 Worth Street in Manhattan or at his house in Bay Ridge after 6 P.M. John A. Lott, in a class by himself as a landowner, had never personally farmed; instead, he rented out his farmlands to various tenants in several of the rural towns. John C. Bergen, who in 1870 at age 44 owned a 145-acre farm in Flatlands (only 22 acres of which were improved) on which he produced only \$1,500 worth of products, repeatedly advertised for tenants to occupy a 63-acre farm on Bergen's Island off Jamaica Bay in the 1870s, presumably because he had moved from Flatlands and perhaps entered into other business pursuits.<sup>9</sup>

### WHO WERE THE KINGS COUNTY FARMERS?

Within the recollections of the author, there were three large farms in Bedford, one in Flatbush and two in New Utrecht cultivated by Leffertses, who were among the wealthy, respected and successful cultivators in Kings county: at present there is but one held by an individual of the name, that of Mr. John Lefferts of Flatbush, a worthy successor of his ancestors, occupying premises held by the family for at least five generations.

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

As a first approach to gauging the trend to tenancy, the number and ethnic composition of the residents of the five Kings County towns returned as farmers at the 1860, 1870, and 1880 censuses are reported in table 25. U.S.-born farmers formed the large majority throughout this period, but the number and proportion of farmers who had been born in Ireland and Germany rose threefold — from 59, or 11 percent, in 1860 to 94, or 19 percent, in 1870 to 172, or 35 percent, in 1880. This shift toward foreign-born farmers suggests that some multigenerational Dutch farm families had either already sold their farms or were renting them to tenants. In fact, tenancy, especially by Irish immigrants, increased enormously by 1880, leading the *Rural Gazette* to acknowledge that they could be good market gardeners. The ethnic shift is underscored by a count of specific names. The number of farmers (including both those returned as “retired” and sons returned as “farmer” even though they were living in their parents’ household) from 50 old-line Dutch farming families fell by almost one-half from the 1860 to the 1880 Census of Population. Whereas these 384 farmers accounted for 70 percent

of all rural Kings County farmers in 1860, by 1870 their 300 counterparts made up 59 percent of farmers, and the 204 in 1880 accounted for only 42 percent. Similarly, the number of old-line Dutch family farmers returned at the 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880 Census of Agriculture was 203, 194, 148, and 154; they accounted for 76, 51, 58, and 40 percent of all farmers enumerated in those years in rural Kings County.<sup>10</sup>

The full extent of concentration of wealth in the old-line Dutch families is obscured by the intense intermarriage, "a kind of extended clan" reminiscent of "the Hapsburg marital connections." This "rule of endogamy" included the following "Dutch patrician pairings":

Judge John A. Lott and the daughter of his [uncle] Jeremiah Lott; Stephen Schenck and Maria Martense; Lucas J. Voorhees and Gertrude Suydam; John Lott Van Pelt and Anna Maria Cortelyou; Garret Co[u]wenhoven and Magdalen Van Nuys; Theodore V. Bergen and Nettie Co[u]wenhoven; John C. Vanderveer and Elizabeth Van Brunt; Judge Garret L. Martense and Jane Vanderveer; Dr. Adrian Vanderveer and Elizabeth Lott; Rem Hegeman and Helen Wyckoff; Abraham Polhemus and Mary C. Gerritson; John Vanderbilt and Gertrude Lefferts; Garret Martense and Jane Ann Ditma[r]s; Teunis G. Bergen and Catherine Lott.<sup>11</sup>

This intermarriage extended also to families that were originally English, such as the Stillwells, who early on became so intertwined with Dutch families that they were well known for their unswerving allegiance to the Dutch government. This "unwritten, local social code that encouraged inter-marriage . . . and frowned severely on matrimonial alliances with 'outsiders,'" not only "caused the entire population to be intimately related," but also led to great confusion because there were "probably not more than twenty-five family names."<sup>12</sup>

The newly arrived Irish and German farmers could not have formed the same cultural-emotional attachment to their farms (if indeed they were owners at all) that long-term Dutch farmers had. To the extent that the newer immigrants developed short-term instrumental attitudes toward making a living in their new country of residence, this phenomenon would reinforce the argument that, despite the peak outputs achieved in 1880, the end of Kings County agriculture was already in sight. Even if the new immigrant farmers were owners, the fact that they had had to buy the farms implies mortgage payments that would have subjected them to cost and profitability pressures unknown to the old-line Dutch farmers. Unsurpris-

ingly, they were also less likely to accumulate the great amounts of wealth that Dutch farmers had amassed. The late advent of non-Dutch farmers emerges clearly from the 1850 Flatbush census. Of 142 persons returned as farmers (including sons of farmers), only 6 were not U.S.-born (3 in Ireland, 2 in Germany, and 1 in Wales). Only 2 were also listed in the Census of Agriculture as owner, agent, or manager of a farm, and only 1, Thomas Murphy, owned a farm valued at an appreciable amount (\$20,000). In 1870, 11 of the 13 farmers in Kings County who reported \$100,000 or more in such property were members of old-line Dutch families; only 2 were Irish or second-generation Irish. One of these was William, the 38-year-old son of Thomas Murphy, who reported \$120,000 worth of real estate, while 55-year-old Irish-born John Phillips reported \$100,000.<sup>13</sup>

As with farm laborers, the countywide data conceal marked differences among the five towns. Table 26 breaks out the data by town. Whereas in 1860 and 1870 the predominance of U.S.-born farmers impressed all the towns with the same stamp, ethnic differences came to the fore by 1880: the Irish were clearly more important than the Germans in Flatbush and nonexistent in New Lots, whereas the Germans outnumbered the Irish in New Lots, Flatlands, and New Utrecht. The lopsidedness of the ethnic composition among farmers in Flatbush and New Lots conforms to that among farm laborers. The sudden advance of the Irish during the 1870s from 12 percent to 40 percent of all Flatbush farmers was particularly impressive when their historical disadvantages are recalled: few Irish (or for that matter few non-Dutch) settled in Flatbush or elsewhere in Kings County during the colonial period because the descendants of the original Dutch settlers monopolized the farmland. Even in the most homogeneous farming town, Gravesend, where in 1860 U.S.-born farmers accounted for 94 percent of all farmers, Germans and Irish increased their representation from only 4 percent in 1860 to 20 percent in 1870 and 34 percent in 1880.<sup>14</sup>

Unsurprisingly, only a single black farmer was recorded in 1860, 1870, or 1880. (In 1850, not only were no blacks returned as farmers in Flatbush, but every single black person whose occupation was entered was listed as a laborer.) This man, whom the Census of Population returned as 50-year-old F. Anderson of Flatbush in 1870 and 63-year-old Frank Anderson of Flatbush in 1880 (and may or may not have been the same person), was an example of a not uncommon census phenomenon — the “farmer” without a farm, who was not listed in the 1880 Census of Agriculture as a farm owner or tenant. Anderson was far from alone. In 1880, 481 persons (excluding re-

tired farmers) were returned as farmers by the Census of Population in rural Kings County, whereas the Census of Agriculture returned only 388 persons as conducting a farm. This excess of 24 percent was considerably lower than the 88 percent in 1870, when the 478 farmers enumerated by the Census of Population exceeded the 254 agents, owners, or managers of farms returned in the Census of Agriculture, or the 46 percent for 1860.<sup>15</sup>

### **OWNERS AND TENANTS COMPARED**

The old Dutch farmers somehow left their virtues in the soil, so that it has not been favorable to successors of ignoble breed.

—*Flatbush of To-Day: The Realm of Light and Air*, 1908

The tenure relations on Kings County farms by the late nineteenth century also no longer reflected a homogeneous Dutch yeomanry. Table 27 identifies Flatbush farmers by tenancy and ethnicity in 1880. It reveals that by 1880, of 47 farms returned by the Census of Agriculture for Flatbush, 38 were operated by tenants, only 7 by owners, and 2 included both owned and rented land. All six of the identifiable outright owners were old-line Dutch farmers (the seventh was not listed as a farmer in the Census of Population for that year): Neefus, George and John Schenck, Suydam, Vanderveer, and Williamson. Of the 33 tenants identifiable from the Census of Population, 18 had been born in Ireland (arguably all 5 unidentifiable tenants also had Irish names), 2 were second-generation Irish, 2 had been born in Germany, 2 were second-generation Germans, and 1 each had been born in England and Russia. Several of the seven U.S.-born tenants (Van Wyck, Eldert, Lefferts, and Schoonmaker) stemmed from old-line Dutch farm families and were presumably tenants of relatives. The most prominent Dutch tenant was James Lefferts, whose father John was one of the rural county's wealthiest landowners; in 1875, he started operating his father's farm "on his own hook."<sup>16</sup>

Thus already by 1880, when Kings County vegetable growers produced their peak output, tenants overwhelmingly conducted the farms and those tenants were largely immigrants, most of whom had been born in Ireland. Unfortunately, from the census records it is impossible to determine the identity of the owners of the tenant farms. The career-occupational paths of many of the tenants are also unknown. Some had been farm laborers, children of farmers, or nonfarm laborers in Kings County, but presumably

other immigrant tenants had arrived in the United States during the 1870s and thus did not appear in the 1870 Census of Population.<sup>17</sup>

Table 28 shows the marked differences between three groups of farmers in Flatbush: the 6 old-line Dutch owner-operators, the 18 Irish-born tenants, and the 5 old-line Dutch tenants. The old Dutch tenants operated farms significantly larger than those of the Dutch owners, which in turn were much larger than the ones operated by the Irish tenants. The three groups accounted for roughly the same monetarized total production, while the Irish tenants produced somewhat more vegetables (in monetary terms) than the other two groups. On a per capita basis, however, the Irish tenant farms' output bore an even smaller proportion to that of the other groups than did their acreage. This smaller financial yield may be linked to the fact that the Irish tenants owned disproportionately less in the way of implements and machinery and spent disproportionately less on fertilizer and labor. The Irish tenants produced almost as big a potato crop as the Dutch owners and tenants combined, but their per acre yield was little more than three-fourths as high. Although the Dutch owners produced somewhat less than the Dutch tenants, they also spent considerably less on fertilizer and wages; since the latter, by definition, also paid rent, their operations appear to have been distinctly less profitable than those of the owners.

What is remarkable here is that the very same six Dutch owner-farmers were also the only Flatbush farmers who in 1870 owned all the land they farmed. The Census of Agriculture did not collect information on tenure relations in 1870, but a comparison of the census manuscript schedules with the Flatbush assessment roll for that year reveals that of the 29 people returned as agents, owners, or managers of farms, only these 6 also appeared on the assessment roll as owning acreage approaching the size of the farm they operated. Significantly, only very few of the other farmers were members of old-line Dutch farm families that owned large farms and from which they might have been renting the land that they cultivated. Chief among these were the Ditmas and Lott families. But many large landowning families (including Bergen, Cortelyou, Lefferts, Lott, and Martense) had ceased to operate their farms, which then became available to tenants. Several farmers were long-term tenants of certain families: Allgeo rented his 97 acres from the Lott family, while Berry rented from the Martense family. If turnover among tenants was high, those returned by the 1880 Census of Agriculture may not have represented long-term tenants. Such a possibility is embedded in an unusual qualitative comment inscribed by the enumer-

ator of the Census of Agriculture for Flatbush, who wrote in explanation of the absence of production data for one Irish tenant that he had not farmed this land in 1879 and had informed the enumerator that “the party who had could not make it pay.”<sup>18</sup>

Only when the search is taken back as far as 1860 — before the transition from extensive to intensive production had been completed — are farm owners found to be a large proportion among farmers in Flatbush. And although even then more than half of the farmers returned by the Census of Agriculture did not appear on the assessment roll as owning land at all or land approaching the acreage that they farmed, 1860 was the last census year in which several of the older farming families were still represented among active farmers. Prominent among them were the Bergen, Cortelyou, Dittmas, and Martense families, which during the last third of the nineteenth century figured only as landlords. The abandonment of direct farming by many of the old-line Dutch families, who began renting their land to tenants, coincided with the transition to vegetable production. The different and more intense managerial-organizational tasks associated with the new cultivation systems may have prompted them to relinquish day-to-day responsibility for their farms.<sup>19</sup>

A sense of tenure relations can be gleaned from a survey of the rural towns in the *Eagle* on the occasion of the annexation debate in 1873. The newspaper reported that “most of the farms” in Gravesend were “rented out to market gardeners at merely nominal rentals, the prevailing price being from fifteen to twenty dollars per acre. Much of the land is not fertile, and requires a great deal of enriching by manures to yield any crops of any kind.” In New Utrecht, too, not “many of the farms are cultivated by their owners but are rented, either on shares or at the rate of twenty dollars per acre.” Only in Flatlands did the farmers “for the most part” till their own land.<sup>20</sup>

The data collected by the Census of Agriculture in 1880 for the first time on tenure relations partially confirm the *Eagle*'s account. Table 29 shows the number and proportions of owners and tenants for all the county towns. The *Eagle* report may have exaggerated the preponderance of renting, but tenants still accounted for a majority of all farm operators. In the rural towns as a whole, renters slightly outnumbered owner-operators, but these proportions reflected the situation only in Gravesend, New Lots, and New Utrecht, whereas Flatbush and Flatlands deviated sharply from that pattern. In Flatbush, tenants outnumbered owner-operators by four to one; in Flatlands, tenants were in the distinct minority. Tenants by shares were everywhere a minuscule phenomenon.<sup>21</sup>

The *Eagle* did not venture a quantitative estimate for Flatbush, but it quoted, without identifying, one of “the most prominent of farm owners” as stating:

all that we can rent the land for is (where there is a house upon it) about twenty dollars per acre yearly. Twenty-five dollars is very rarely paid, and I know that fifteen is not an unusual bargaining figure for it. Now, for instance, I rent a farm of thirty acres; its assessed value is \$66,825. I get but twenty dollars per acre for it. The taxes and other costs last year ate up (within a few dollars) the entire rental. There are men I know who cannot advantageously sell now and who barely live off the small income they are able to command from the rents.<sup>22</sup>

Fortunately, this unique insider can be identified, and his biographical details deepen the understanding of his views. A property exactly fitting this description is found in the Flatbush assessment rolls for 1872: the heirs of Garrett L. Martense — who last appeared in the 1850 Census of Agriculture at the age of 57 as owning a 152-acre farm valued at \$40,000, and was also an associate judge of the county courts — owned 30 acres on the west side of Coney Island Road assessed at \$66,825; the tax assessed and paid was \$930.27, which was more than 50 percent higher than the \$600 annual rent that Martense presumably received.<sup>23</sup>

The farm owner quoted in the *Eagle* was 49-year-old Jacob Van Brunt Martense, who appeared in the 1850 and 1860 Census of Agriculture; his 70-acre farm, valued at \$21,000, was one of the largest in Flatbush in 1860 in terms of number of horses and bushels of potatoes and value of market garden produce produced. In 1869, he declared \$3,320.69 in net income for federal income tax purposes, while his mother, Helen (almost \$8,000), and his sister’s husband, John Prince (\$6,500), were among the income-richest residents in rural Kings County.<sup>24</sup>

Why Jacob Martense, the last member of his family to operate the family farm and the Flatbush town supervisor from 1871 to 1874 (and thus a member of the Kings County Board of Supervisors), and dying in 1881 at age 57 “possessed of considerable estate,” retired from farming at such a relatively early age and how he secured such a large income from such allegedly poultry rent collections is unclear; similarly odd is why he would have continued to rent land for a sum that fell so far short of the tax. But, if Kings County market gardening could easily generate profits of \$100 to \$300 per acre or several thousand dollars annually, it is unclear why rents would have been

as low as \$15 to \$20. Conversely, if such large profits were achievable, why did farmers such as Martense pass them up for meager rent payments?<sup>25</sup>

The Berry family cultivated the Martense farm for many years. Richard Berry, who first appears in the Census of Agriculture in 1870, operated one of the largest farms in Flatbush. The 70 acres that he farmed in 1870 was exactly the size of Jacob Martense's farm, but it remains unclear who farmed Judge Garrett L. Martense's 152-acre farm. By 1880 Berry's output on 75 acres was valued at \$9,500, almost all of it market garden produce. His combined fertilizer and labor costs (\$4,200) amounted to a somewhat above-average 44 percent of total output, but the farm should nevertheless have been able to support rent of more than \$20 per acre. Why would Martense not have caused the tenant to pay the tax or included the tax in the rent? Puzzling, finally, is why farm owners who could not live on such low rents allegedly spearheaded the resistance to annexation, which, rather than raising their taxes and thus plunging them into negative income, would have made — and eventually did make — it possible to sell out quite "advantageously."<sup>26</sup>

Some landed gentry did require their tenants to pay at least some taxes. For example, Egbert Benson, who owned more than two hundred acres in New Utrecht, included provisions in his leases requiring his lessees to pay school taxes and road assessments. In one of his leases, running from 1865 to 1868, Benson charged a rental of \$15 per acre, in another running from 1863 to 1866, \$11.25 per acre. As meager as these sums appear, they still far exceeded the Benson family's property taxes for these years, which ranged between \$2.77 and \$3.64 per acre.<sup>27</sup>

Jacob Martense presented his counterintuitive antiannexationist position not only with all imaginable clarity, but as typical of almost all of Flatbush's large landowners:

We are almost unanimously opposed to annexation. We do not need it, we cannot afford it and we don't want it. We have our old homesteads and outlying farms just as they should remain, intact and undisturbed for years to come. . . . Some of us wish to keep our old family homes, the homes of several generations without alteration; we do not wish our old farms mutilated by being cut and hacked up into useless streets and unsalable lots. A few only can bear the increased burden of taxation, which the success of the project will surely bring. Some of the estates will entirely be eaten up in the expenses and taxes.<sup>28</sup>

That one of the county's richest landowning families, which by its own account reckoned its continuing agricultural ties a losing operation, really op-

posed the annexation that would predictably expand its wealth rapidly met with at least some skepticism. The *Eagle* quoted another (unnamed) “well to do lot owner” who was convinced that there was

a great deal of sly underhand work going on about this annexation business among some of those who pretend to oppose it. Of course they must do so to “keep on the right side” of their old relatives and political friends, and there are some, undoubtedly, who are in a quandary, because they are without any resource except the rental or sale of their lands, and could not maintain their grasp on their landed possessions, if street and other assessments came upon them. I will wager that some of these large property owners who declaim against the proposition, when the truth is known, will be really in favor of it.<sup>29</sup>

In light of the fact that in the very year (1873) of the great annexation debate, 16 pages of the Flatbush assessment roll were taken up with listing the 548 lots into which the heirs of George Martense, the father of Jacob Martense, had divided his land — once one of Flatbush’s largest farms — this anonymous skeptical neighbor appears to have correctly divined that urban development politics could be opaque. One reason might have rationally impelled some wealthy Dutch agricultural patriarchs: so long as they retained control over political-economic development in the town of Flatbush, the street, water, and gas lighting franchises remained under their control. Perhaps well-connected landlords like Martense sought to ensure that they would control all the franchises before annexation occurred. To be sure, this hypothesis fails to explain why a central figure like John A. Lott was such an early and stalwart advocate of annexation.<sup>30</sup>

A middle ground between modernizing annexationists and adherents of the status quo was also available and occupied. As late as 1883, a group of taxpayers in the rural towns supported economical improvements but opposed annexation.<sup>31</sup> The *Rural Gazette* to a large extent adopted this position although it believed that annexation was inevitable and imminent. In one of its most important editorials ever, the newspaper sought to dispel farm owners’ fears that improvements would necessarily increase taxation. To this end it presented data for “some farm lands” in Flatbush showing that the assessed value per acre, tax rate, and tax per acre had all declined from 1870 to 1880. It explained this trend by reference to the improvements (such as gas and police) that had been introduced: by inducing neighbors to settle in Flatbush, they increased the total property base. To be sure, the per acre assessed value and tax figures were unrepresentative: most farmers’ land

was not assessed at \$1,800 and taxed at \$35 per acre in 1870 or \$1,414 and \$19 per acre in 1880. But the point that the *Rural Gazette* was trying to make was nevertheless crucial for understanding why farmers wanted to sell rather than rent out their land:

It is unaccountable that the farm owners who value their acres at from \$1,500 to \$2,000 and let them at the low rate of fifteen to twenty dollars per acre, earning only one per cent, should be so blind to what these figures should teach them, that they must encourage and help forward improvements before they can expect to realize the value they place on their acres. If four houses, costing \$2,500 each are built on the acre valued at \$2,000 making houses and land worth \$12,000, they will easily rent for \$250, earning 8 per cent instead of one. But the land will not be bought nor houses built until those in search of homes can find in our town all the conveniences they can get in the city.<sup>32</sup>

Presumably the newspaper did not mean that the farmers would themselves finance such housing construction at the rate of \$10,000 per acre, but that only after an adequate suburban infrastructure was in place, would speculators or developers pay farmers as much as \$2,000 per acre for their farmland. The close link between infrastructure and realizing high prices for the conversion of farmland into suburban real estate was manifest in the advocacy by Philip Crooke, a patrician powerholder in Flatbush, of the construction of sewers on the grounds that without them ten lots were needed for a residence, whereas with sewers one lot sufficed.<sup>33</sup>

A principal weakness of the *Rural Gazette*'s analysis lay in its assumption that the only choice for farmland owners was to rent to tenant farmers at \$20 per acre or to sell to speculators. In fact, for real farmers the possibility still existed of cultivating vegetables for profits amounting to as much as \$100 per acre. Here a closer look at the assessed value and real property taxes is necessary. The landowners assessed and taxed at the levels that the *Rural Gazette* mentioned were exceptional. The value of the principal holding of John Lefferts was assessed at \$2,080 per acre and taxed at \$41.51 in 1870 and at \$1,468 and \$19.59 in 1880. Significantly, Lefferts was both a farmer and a developer. The land of his sister, Gertrude Lefferts Vanderbilt, was assessed at much higher levels: \$5,714 and \$598.58 in 1870 and \$5,600 and \$74.67 in 1880, respectively. But her holding was too small for farming and her house was one of the most elegant in Flatbush. Even the per acre assessed value of the land of John A. Lott, the largest landowner in rural Kings County, was only \$924 in 1870 and \$764 in 1880, while his per acre tax amounted to \$18.45

and \$10.19, respectively. Scrutiny of Lott's individual holdings on the assessment roll reveals enormous differentials: on two small parcels, one-half and one-quarter acre, each of which included a house, the assessed value in 1870 was \$16,000 per acre and the tax \$319.24 per acre. In contrast, his large 90.5-acre farm (including a house), which was rented out for farming, was assessed at only \$751 per acre and taxed only \$14.99 per acre.<sup>34</sup>

The assessed value and tax of John A. Lott's farmland much more closely approximated those of the old-line Dutch families with large holdings, which they continued to farm. At the time of the 1880 census, the per acre assessed value of the land of the aforementioned six Dutch owner-operators (Neefus, George and John Schenck, Suydam, Vanderveer, and Williamson) ranged between \$334 and \$506, while the tax per acre ranged from \$3.51 to \$6.44. At such low levels, even annual rents of \$15 to \$20 per acre would have enabled the owners to obtain 4–5 percent. The taxes were so modest that they constituted only a small fraction of the net profit from farming. Nevertheless, and ironically, it was precisely such low valuations that enticed farm owners to sell in the late 1880s or 1890s when developers offered prices as much as ten times higher.<sup>35</sup>

The *Rural Gazette's* analysis makes more sense as applied to one non-farming landowner — the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of Flatbush. In the mid-1880s, the church's agreements uniformly charged tenant farmers \$20 per acre for land that was assessed at as much as \$1,600 per acre. The church's commercial behavior appeared all the less explicable in light of the fact that it was paying over 50 percent more per acre in property tax on some of this land than it was receiving in rents.<sup>36</sup>

The relatively large proportion of owners who rented out their farms in Flatbush raises the question as to the size of the group of old-line Dutch family heads who by the last third of the nineteenth century continued to call themselves farmers, but who were in fact landed aristocrats with other sources of income. Jacob Martense at the 1870 census listed himself as a government official (elected supervisor) and at the census of 1880, just a year before his death, revealingly called himself "Gentleman" — one of very few inhabitants of rural Kings County who did. His anonymous remarks in the *Eagle* would have made more sense if he had been identified as a member of the nonworking landed gentry, who insisted on financing a life of leisure or public service by extracting rents from the tenant farmers of their market garden farms. Some old-line Dutch farmers may have held their land in order to maintain a traditional way of life, while others used it as a key resource in outfitting their daughters with dowries for the complicated net-

work of intermarriage and interbreeding that defined property transmission among the Dutch in rural Kings County. Others, finally, may simply have been holding on to their farmland for what they speculated would be an eventually highly remunerative sell-off.<sup>37</sup>

Table 30 records the ownership structure for the census years 1880 to 1910. The larger farms tended to be owner-operated in all years, and over time the relative importance of tenancy diminished — from 53 percent of all farms in 1880 to 38 percent in 1910. Once farming began to reach the vanishing point, however, tenancy unsurprisingly increased sharply: by 1925 tenants operated 78 percent of the 40 surviving farms. In 1910, 47 owners were U.S.-born whites and 16 foreign-born whites; 26 tenants were U.S.-born whites and 16 foreign-born whites. In 1910, of 46 owner-operated farms reporting, 34 were mortgage-free and 12 showed mortgage debt. These figures, however, fail to convey the peculiarities of Kings County farms. Table 31 shows how deviant the ownership structure was compared to that of farms in New York State as a whole. Of all counties in New York State, Kings County in 1880 had the smallest proportion of owner-operated farms, and in 1890 the lowest proportion of farm-owning families, the lowest proportion of farm families owning both with and without incumbrances, and the fourth highest proportion of owning families that owned without incumbrances. In other words, few families in Kings County owned (as opposed to rented) their farms, but among the owners a high proportion owned them free and clear. These unincumbered owners were presumably the last of the old-line Dutch farmers.<sup>38</sup>

Among the 40 Kings County families with incumbered farms in 1890, the average incumbrance amounted to \$3,213, or 34.5 percent of the value of the farm; at an annual interest rate of 5.83 percent, the farm families paid on average an interest charge of \$187. This sum amounted to about 40 percent of the average Kings County farm's expenditure on fertilizers in 1889.<sup>39</sup>

Deagriculturalization leads to urbanization through several economic routes. Landowners can convert their property from agricultural to urban uses by ceasing to farm, subdividing the land, and renting it out for housing or industrial-commercial purposes. Alternatively, owners may rent it out to others who in turn can convert parcels from agricultural to urban uses. Finally, the owner can sell the land to others who will undertake the conversion. The point is not only that land-use conversion can occur in various ways, but that the threshold at which owners decide that conversion is appropriate may also differ according to the mode of conversion.

By the end of the century, the groups that would have been in the best

position to keep vegetable farming viable in Kings County were themselves not landed — German and Irish and, a little later, Italian tenants (and, secondarily, laborers). As rent payers, these tenants could hardly pay off old-line Dutch farm owners in the same way as real-estate speculators and developers. Moreover, it might have taken a generation of financial success before the new dominant ethnic groups would have achieved the requisite level of commercial independence. In the interim, more than a few Dutch owners would have had to remain supportive of these operations. Faced with a choice between financing their tenants/workers without any long-term assurances about the continued viability of market gardening and cashing out for amounts that would at least afford them a solid annuity, Dutch farm families, unsurprisingly, sold the land out from under the active tenant farmers.