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Those who stayed behind

Rural society in nineteenth-century New England

HAL S. BARRON

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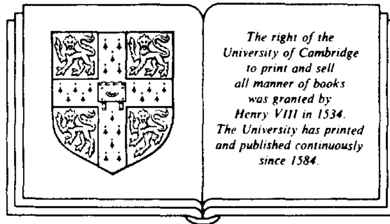

Cambridge University Press

Cambridge
New York New Rochelle
Melbourne Sydney

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1984

First published 1984
First paperback edition 1987

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Barron, Hal S.
Those who stayed behind.

(Interdisciplinary perspectives on modern history)
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. New England – Rural conditions – Case studies.
2. Chelsea (Vt.:Town) – History. 3. New England –
Population, Rural – Case studies. 4. Rural-urban
migration – New England – History – 19th century – Case
studies. I. Title. II. Series.
HN79.A11B37 1984 307.7'2'0974 83-26354

ISBN 0 521 25784 0 hard covers
ISBN 0 521 34777 7 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

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Preface

The majority of people in nineteenth-century America lived in rural communities, but most of the social history of nineteenth-century America is not about them. This book is. Instead of following the long-standing emphasis on the frontier, however, I have written about those who stayed behind in settled rural areas. There, society was often shaped by population loss and little economic growth, quite unlike the rapid economic and demographic expansion so prevalent in the West and the cities. How such conditions came about and how they affected those who lived and labored under them are the subjects of this book.

In many respects, settled rural life offered a counterpoint to the more dominant themes being played out as the United States became an urban and industrial nation. Rural society was part of this great transformation, but the stability and homogeneity that developed in older agrarian communities contrasted sharply with the flux and diversity so common in the rest of American society. In the same vein, the persistence of family farming facilitated the retention and adaptation of older values to a greater degree than occurred in urban and industrial communities. City and country diverged during the course of the nineteenth century, but rural society and rural attitudes continued to influence American life, resulting in numerous political and cultural conflicts. Thus, it is important to understand the dynamics of older agrarian communities not simply because so many people lived there, but because they can also tell us much about the larger thrust of nineteenth-century American society.

In particular, this book is about those who stayed behind in the township of Chelsea, Vermont, between 1784 and 1900. Of all the states in New England, Vermont has been the least affected by urbanization, industrialization, and immigration, and it remained predominantly rural throughout the nineteenth century. I chose Chelsea as a case study because it has the most promising records of the many Vermont townships that experienced significant population loss during this period. From a historical point of view, this seems to be the community's sole distinction, and developments in Chelsea represent a pattern that was common in rural New England and

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New York. Lessened growth was not simply another Yankee peculiarity, however; it occurred throughout the agrarian North as farm communities moved past the settlement period. Although the patterns of change in Chelsea are not necessarily representative of these broader changes in any statistical sense, they are certainly indicative of the more general characteristics that distinguished settled rural society from the rest of nineteenth-century America.

I think of this study as very much a part of the new social history even though such a declaration is no longer as fashionable as it once was. It tells a story of historical change, a narrative if you will, but one that would be impossible to recount without the painstaking analysis of quantitative data and the utilization of social-scientific theories and methods. Whereas I hope I have gleaned as much as possible from that often unyielding field, it was also necessary to consult a wider variety of sources and to incorporate still other approaches in order to have a story worth telling. Ultimately, these distinctions are trivial: This work will be judged not by the thickness or thinness of its description but by the insights it offers into what it meant to stay behind in rural America as the United States moved on in new and different directions.

Scholarship, like farming, often gives the illusion of being a solitary endeavor when, in fact, success in both owes much to the help of friends, neighbors, and kin.

This book began as a dissertation in history at the University of Pennsylvania where I was privileged to be part of an intellectual community devoted to interdisciplinary scholarship in the best sense of those words. The late John Shover first stimulated my interest in rural history, Etienne van de Walle gave me many of the tools necessary to undertake this study, and Michael Katz offered his perspective as a leading practitioner of the new social history. My dissertation director, Charles E. Rosenberg, has been my guide, and his sound advice, keen insights, and the example of his own scholarship have been both a source of inspiration and a pattern for emulation. Allan Bogue read the manuscript and offered many valuable suggestions for revision, which I hope I have incorporated. The manuscript and its author have also benefited immeasurably from the critical comments and friendly encouragement of Walter Licht, Tom Dublin, John Modell, Dick Olson, Allan Winkler, and Martin Ridge.

In addition to intellectual stimulation and scholarly advice, there has been much assistance of a more tangible nature. The initial research for the dissertation was made possible by an Arthur L.

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