

The “Little Magician” after the Show: Martin Van Buren, Country Gentleman and Progressive Farmer, 1841-1862

When Martin Van Buren left the White House in March of 1841, he moved to his home town of Kinderhook, New York, and began running a farm. As a practical matter, the choice was a curious one. Although Van Buren's family had run a small farm as well as a tavern, as a boy Van Buren had shown no interest in farming. He had left rural employments as early as possible, apprenticing himself in a law office at the age of fourteen. Unlike his predecessors as chief executive, he had not practiced farming as an adult and owned no farm to which he could return. Van Buren bought his farm in the spring of 1839, three years into his presidency and only a year before he was defeated in his bid for a second term.¹

¹ Donald B. Cole, *Martin Van Buren and the American Political System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 12-14; David L. Uschold and George W. Curry, *Cultural Landscape Report for Martin Van Buren National Historic Site* (Boston: National Park Service, 1995), 31.

In the context of antebellum American culture, however, Van Buren's new career as a farmer was unsurprising. Retiring to agricultural pursuits, after all, was what former presidents *did*: of his seven predecessors, only John Quincy Adams failed to take up agriculture when he left office. The same was true of countless retired congressmen, senators, governors, and state representatives. By following their example, Van Buren placed himself in a long tradition of republican hero-statesmen. Like his predecessors, he emulated the great Roman general Cincinnatus, who refused to translate his military service into the selfish accumulation of political power, instead choosing to retire to his rural estate. By his actions, Van Buren testified to his republican virtue—his willingness to eschew power and self-enrichment for the good of his country.²

Emulating Cincinnatus was a gentleman's game, and by settling down to farming, Van Buren sought to consolidate his credentials as a gentleman. Both the great men of the President's youth and the new mercantile and manufacturing elite of his maturity celebrated rural pursuits as the pinnacle of genteel refinement and spiritual elevation. To them, country estates gave a gentleman the opportunity to exchange the shallow pomp, crass materialism, and Godless pursuit of power associated with business and politics for quiet contemplation, useful work, and refined living. Country life permitted gentlemen to display their taste and refinement in choosing the countryside and in erecting opulent, tasteful estates. It allowed them to elevate their aesthetic

² Entries for George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Andrew Jackson in *Dictionary of American Biography*; James Truslow Adams, *The Adams Family* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1930); W. P. Cresson, *James Monroe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1946); Edward Thompson Booth, *Country Life in America, as Lived by Ten Presidents of the United States* (New York: Knopf, 1947). On statesmen's modeling themselves on Cincinnatus, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,

sense and their spirituality through solitude and the contemplation of nature and beauty. And it permitted them to give free reign to their benevolence through useful work, agricultural experimentation, and the promotion of improved agricultural practices. Nowhere did this cult of rural gentility have deeper roots than in the Hudson Valley. All of the great men of Columbia County during Van Buren's youth—the Livingstons, the Van Rensselaers, the Montgomeries—lived on opulent and refined rural estates, as retired and public-spirited country gentlemen.³

1991), 205-206.

³ Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Cultivating Gentlemen: The Meaning of Country Life Among the Boston Elite, 1785-1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). On rural gentility in Columbia County, see Clare Brandt, *An American Aristocracy: The Livingstons* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986); George Dangerfield, *Chancellor Robert R. Livingston of New York, 1746-1813* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960); Elizabeth L. Gebhard, *The Parsonage Between Two Manors: Annals of Clover-Reach* 3rd ed. (Hudson, NY: Hudson Press, 1925).

Rural retirement had a special significance for Van Buren. The son of a tavern-keeper and farmer in one of the most gentry-dominated counties in the northern states, the young Van Buren was impecunious, poorly educated, and unrefined. His stance toward the gentlemen of Columbia County and to the rules of behavior that maintained their power was mixed, marked by a combination of ambivalence and shrewd calculation. As his biographer Donald Cole attests, Van Buren deferred to his social superiors throughout his life, and he remained acutely aware of his own humble origins, poor education, and lack of genteel bearing. At the same time, his political career often gave him an opportunity to disobey his patrician patrons and to insult, outmaneuver, and attack the power of his well-born political opponents—in short, to defy the rules of deference and clientage that underlay the gentry's power. From the early 1820s on, that personal defiance became an outright assault, as Van Buren helped pioneer a new politics which replaced the politics of clientage and deference with a new emphasis on party organization, grass-roots organizing, and popular appeals. There was certainly a place for great gentlemen and personal influence in the new politics, and Van Buren remained a master at soliciting the favor of influential men. But the politics he developed forced gentlemen to the sidelines of public life, placing upwardly mobile political entrepreneurs like himself at the center of political power.⁴

⁴ On the culture of gentility and clientage in New York, see Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Knopf, 1995), especially 141-46, 154-68; Reeve Huston, *Land and Freedom: Rural Society, Popular Protest, and Party Politics in Antebellum New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 15-19, 23-30, 35-38. On the politics of deference, see Taylor, "The Art of Hook and Snivey: Political Culture in Upstate New York during the 1790s," *Journal of American History* 79 (1993); Taylor, *William Cooper's Town*, 170-98; Huston, *Land and Freedom*, 30-33. On Van Buren's relationship to both, see John Brooke, "The World of Martin Van Buren: Civil Society, Property, and Crisis in Columbia County, 1811-1812" (unpublished paper, 1998); Cole, *Martin Van Buren*, 13-31 (esp. 13) and passim; *The Autobiography of Martin*

Van Buren, ed., John C. Fitzpatrick, *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1918* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920). On the nature of the new politics which Van Buren helped create, see Joel Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Harry Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Farar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990); Huston, *Land and Freedom*, 56-75 and passim; Cole, *Martin Van Buren*, especially 32-181.

Van Buren displayed the same double-edged relationship to gentility in developing his personal style. Beginning with his earliest years as a lawyer and political activist, Van Buren took on many of the ways of his former superiors, developing a taste for expensive clothes, haute cuisine, fine wines, extravagant homes and furnishings, and European travel. Still, he borrowed *selectively* from genteel ways, retaining his own folksy Yorker style of conversation and personal bearing as well as a cunning, calculating approach to politics. As Van Buren remade himself as a great man, he sought to *redefine* what it meant to be a great man to include his sort of enthusiasm, humor, practicality, and close financial and political calculation.

Van Buren's retirement must be understood in the context of his double-edged relationship to gentility. He bought the house and farm of Peter Van Ness, one of the most illustrious gentlemen in Kinderhook during Van Buren's youth. During his early years as a lawyer and low-level Republican political activist, Van Buren had come under the patronage of the Van Ness family, depending on their favor in building his legal and political career. But in 1804, he refused to follow the lead of his patrons in supporting Aaron Burr for governor—a clear betrayal according to the rules of genteel politics. In response, Van Buren's former benefactors shunned him and subjected him to numerous public humiliations. Although Van Buren made peace with the Van Ness's a year later, he still passionately recalled their humiliation of him half a century later.⁵

⁵ Cole, *Martin Van Buren*, 16-19; Van Buren, *Autobiography*, 14-16.

In buying the Van Ness farm, Van Buren aimed not merely at taking the place of his former superiors, but at surpassing them. Soon after his purchase, he jettisoned the old estate name, Kleinrood, in favor of a new moniker: Lindenwald. And he began an intensive program of renovation, new building, and improvement. Many buildings were in disrepair; the farmland, long abandoned, was now dominated by rotting fences, weeds, and trash shrubs. But the former president sought to do more than restore the farm to its former state. The Van Ness home was large and well-proportioned, but it was the home of a provincial gentleman, with none of the grandeur of elite homes in New York City, Washington, or Philadelphia. The farm had been a moderate enterprise of 137 acres, with much of the land unimproved. In his first five years of ownership, Van Buren sought to turn this modest farm into model country gentleman's estate. Like other gentleman farmers of his generation, he modeled Lindenwald on the country estates of the English gentry. He added two wings to the old house. He added an enlarged garden and pleasure grounds, which he had laid out in the English style. Van Buren's gardeners kept many of the ancient trees, but added what one visitor called "one of the most beautiful lawns I ever saw . . . fresh and smoothly shaven." Van Buren was particularly smitten by the contemporary elite passion for horticulture; he had a new conservatory (greenhouse) built on his new estate, stocking it with exotic flowers and fruit. Finally, his workmen dammed a stream on the property, creating two artificial ponds which the former president had stocked with "fish for his table." After visiting Lindenwald in 1846, the English woman Sarah Mytton Maury commented that "the comforts and elegancies of his residence exactly resemble those we find in the country house of an English gentleman who lives upon his estate."⁶ With both the new name and the redesign of

⁶ *Albany Cultivator*, reprinted in *Farmer's Monthly Visitor*, 30 Sept. 1845; William B.

the farm, Van Buren symbolically erased the memory of the Van Ness's domination of the local landscape. And he established himself as a far greater, wealthier, and more refined gentleman than the Van Ness's had ever been. This can be read as a quiet act of revenge by a former subordinate, a daily indication that he had triumphed over his supposed superiors.

Hesseltine and Larry Gara, eds., "A Visit to Kinderhook," *New York History* 35 (1954):179; Sarah Mytton Maury, *The Statesmen of America in 1846* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1847), 119; Uschold and Curry, *Cultural Landscape Report*, 37-38, 43-47. On elite men's tastes in country estates, see Thornton, *Cultivating Gentlemen*; on the craze for horticulture after 1820, see *ibid.*, 147-70.

Van Buren's day-to-day life on Lindenwald was consistent with the look he gave the estate. The former president lived the life of a leisured country gentleman. He does not appear to have done any physical labor on the farm, hiring a series of foremen, tenants, gardeners, and laborers to do the planting, manuring, weeding, and harvesting. But he did take an active role in supervising the work of his employees. His 1841 contract with a tenant, Mr. Marquette, provided that "the whole farm" was "to be worked under the direction of Mr. V. B." Both his correspondence and the reports of visitors during the 1840s and early 1850s attest to the former president's avid interest in day-to-day work on Lindenwald. But his supervision of the farm did not take up his entire day. When weather permitted, each morning began with a ten- to fifteen-mile ride on Duroc, a fine horse given him by John Randolph. After breakfast the president oversaw the farm work and the renovation of his house "until he [became] tired," after which he devoted himself to reading and correspondence in his library. The size and state of Van Buren's library attested to the time he spent there. A visitor in late 1845 noted that "his collection of books is large, and the number of works on all political subjects . . . is immense, even for a statesman." The visitor noted that most of these books were "thumbed, the leaves hastily turned down, and the margins often covered with notes and references in his own hand." The evenings were often devoted to entertaining visitors—Silas Wright wrote that the former president kept a perpetual "open house"—and Van Buren often disrupted his work schedule to entertain visitors who dropped by during the day. In its equal attention to farming, study, correspondence, entertaining visitors, and genteel amusements, Van Buren's routine resembled that of countless country gentlemen.⁷

⁷ Draft of a share agreement between Martin Van Buren and _____ Marquette [1841?],

Martin Van Buren Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as “Van Buren-Marquette share agreement”); “Farm Account for 185_,” *ibid.*; “Farm Account for 1859,” *ibid.*; “Farm Settlements for 1861 till March 22nd 1861,” *ibid.*; U.S. Population Manuscript Census, 1850, Kinderhook, NY; U.S. Agricultural Manuscript Census, 1850, Kinderhook, NY; U.S. Population Manuscript Census, 1860, Kinderhook, NY; U.S. Agricultural Manuscript Census, 1860, Kinderhook, NY; Martin Van Buren to James Kirke Paulding, n.d., in Ralph Alderman, ed., *The Letters of James Kirke Paulding* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962), 430; Martin Van Buren to J.R. Poinsett, 1 Oct. 1842, *The Papers of Martin Van Buren*, ed. Lucy Fisher West (55 microfilm reels; Alexandria, VA: Chadwick Healy, 1987); Van Buren to Benjamin F. Butler, 15 Nov. 1842, *ibid.*; Van Buren to Poinsett, 13 Dec. 1842, *ibid.*; Van Buren to Poinsett, 29 June 1844, *ibid.*; Van Buren to Poinsett, 27 Dec. 1844, *ibid.*; Van Buren to Francis P. Blair, 16 Nov. 1850, *ibid.*; Van Buren to Erastus Corning, 26 April 1843, copy at the Martin Van Buren National Historic Site, Kinderhook, NY; James Kirke Paulding to Andrew Jackson, 4 Oct. 1843, in Alderman, *Letters of James Kirke Paulding*, 353; William B. Hesseltine and Larry Gara, eds., “A Visit to Kinderhook,” *New York History* 35 (1954):178-81 (quotation regarding Van Buren’s library on p. 180); *Washington Globe*, 19 Nov. 1841, reprinted in John D.R. Platt, “Historic Resource Study: Lindenwald” (unpublished paper in Martin Van Buren National Historic Site Library), 64; Maury, *Statesmen of America*, 119; *Cultivator*, reprinted in *Farmer’s Monthly Visitor*, 30 Sept. 1845; Cole, *Martin Van Buren*, 382; Thornton, *Cultivating Gentlemen*; Brandt, *American Aristocracy*; Taylor, *William Cooper’s Town*.

Uschold and Curry, in *Cultural Landscape Report*, claim that in 1847 Van Buren “became less active in politics” and “discharged his foreman and ran the farm himself.” (p. 31). This is contradicted by the evidence in the census and in Van Buren’s papers that Van Buren rented out his farm on shares during the late 1840s and 1850s (see above, this note, for specific citations). It also neglects the fact that Van Buren’s involvement in his political career intensified greatly in 1847 and 1848, with the split in the New York Democracy over the slavery issue and with Van Buren’s bid for the presidency on the Free Soil ticket. Edward Townsend Booth argues that Van Buren worked with his hands on one crop: orchard fruits. (Booth, *Country Life*, 142). It is true that Van Buren had an avid interest in his orchards, but I have not been able to find any evidence of his working with his hands in his orchards or elsewhere.

In the way he wrote about his life at Lindenwald, too, the former president conformed to genteel conventions of country living. Like his fellow gentleman farmers, Van Buren celebrated rural life as a refined retirement from the crass, amoral, power mongering, and money-grubbing world of business and politics. In 1844, he wrote to James Wadsworth that, with the approaching completion of the improvements to his estate, he would “mature my plans for that life of quiet contentment for which I have so long looked in vain.” Two years later, he told a visitor that he was “surfeited with office” and felt fortunate to have “a temperament that enabled him to appreciate and be gratified with leisure and retirement.” And in April 1849, he declared to Gorham Worth that he had been absent from his farm “only three or four days” since the previous spring. “I would not again trust my nerves,” he wrote, “to so near an approach to one of the seats of political and Bank corruptions. Why can’t you decide upon becoming an honest and virtuous man, and plant yourself in my neighborhood upon a good farm[?].” There was more than a little dissembling in these sentiments. All were written shortly after Van Buren failed to regain the presidency, in 1844 and 1848; with them, the former president sought to assuage and deny his wounded ambition. The sentiments also spoke sincerely of Van Buren’s genuine enjoyment of living on Lindenwald and overseeing the farm operation there. But it is significant that Van Buren chose to lick his wounds and describe his pleasure in the language of rural retirement. His very experience of rural life was structured by genteel conventions.⁸

⁸ William B. Hesseltine and Larry Gara, eds., “A Visit to Kinderhook,” *New York History* 35 (1954): 180-81; Van Buren to James S. Wadsworth, 8 June 1844, quoted in John D. R. Platt, “Historic Resource Study: Lindenwald” (typescript report at Martin Van Buren National Historic Site), 66-67; Van Buren to Worth, 9 April 1849, *Papers of Martin Van Buren*. See also *Albany*

Cultivator, reprinted in *The Farmer's Monthly Visitor*, 30 Sept. 1845; Booth, *Country Life*, 147; Van Buren to Joel Poinsett, 13 Dec. 1842, 25 June 1843, both in Van Buren Papers; Van Buren to Francis P. Blair, 8 April 1848, *ibid.*; Van Buren to Benjamin F. Butler, 20 May 1851, *ibid.*; James Kirke Paulding to Andrew Jackson, 4 Oct. 1843, in Ralph Alderman, ed., *The Letters of James Kirke Paulding* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962), 353-54. On Van Buren's failed bids for the presidency in 1844 and 1848, see Cole, *Van Buren*, 384-99, 410-18.

Gentlemanly status was not the only benefit that Van Buren sought from country living. He also hoped to build a large, productive farm from which he could derive a both food for his household and a sizeable cash income. In addition to adding ponds, pleasure grounds, and a greenhouse to the farm, the Little Magician a initiated a number of practical improvements: extensive orchards and a nursery for growing fruit trees; new fencing to enclose his pasture; a large hay barn and hay press; houses for his farm foremen and for hired laborers. Van Buren also bought 84 acres that lay adjacent to the farm, expanding it to 221 acres. He had thirteen acres of bog land reclaimed through draining and fertilization, and he made frequent use of manure, ashes, English grasses, and other fertilizers and soil conditioners to raise the farm's productivity. Many of these improvements served the former president's self-presentation as a great man in retirement. In keeping with the current elite craze for foreign and exotic fruits, he stocked his orchards with pear trees from Hamburg and new breeds of apples. He had the house for his farm foreman built "under the chestnut tree on the brow of the hill," and he "venture[d] to predict" to Joel Poinsett, the well-born former Congressman and Secretary of War, that "Mrs. P. will think well of [it], which in respect to taste, is [irreproachable?]. And nothing so enhanced one's reputation as a public-spirited gentleman as an extensive use of manure. But Van Buren initiated these improvements to make money as well. When a correspondent to the *Albany Cultivator*, a progressive farm journal, visited Lindenwald in 1845, Van Buren informed him that the cost of reclaiming his bog land was \$38 per acre and bragged that the proceeds from the reclaimed land were now paying "the interest of a hundred to a hundred and fifty dollars an acre."⁹

⁹ *Cultivator*, reprinted in the *Farmer's Monthly Visitor*, 30 Sept. 1845; *Washington Globe*, 19 Nov. 1841, reprinted in Platt, "Historic Resource Study"; Van Buren to Poinsett, 29

Apart from a few fashionable indulgences like grapes, Van Buren's crops were chosen to meet this desire for both food and money. Like his neighbors, he practiced general farming, raising at least a dozen different crops and animals. This diversified strategy made sense for several reasons. First, raising a wide variety of crops and animals allowed him to meet many of the food needs of his own household. Indeed, this was Van Buren's first goal. During his first year of farming, when the farm was still being restored to productivity, Van Buren marketed not a single bushel of grain or fruit, though he did some limited trading with neighbors; everything went to meeting household needs. It was only when production at Lindenwald surpassed those needs that he began to market his crops. Second, diversification dispersed risk. If a crop failed or the price of a particular commodity plummeted, those losses would be counterbalanced by other, prospering crops. Finally, raising a wide array of crops and livestock spread the labor requirements of the farm more evenly across the growing season, allowing Van Buren to get more production out of his foremen, tenants, and wage laborers.¹⁰

June, 27 Dec. 1844, *Papers of Martin Van Buren*; Van Buren-Marquette share agreement.

¹⁰ *Cultivator*, reprinted in the *Farmer's Weekly Visitor*, 30 Sept. 1845; Van Buren-Marquette share agreement; Booth, *Country Life*, 142; Van Buren to Poinsett, 1 Oct. 1842, *Papers of Martin Van Buren*. For discussions of the reasons for crop diversification, see Alan Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); Martin Bruegel, "Uncertainty, Pluriactivity, and Neighborhood Exchange in the Rural Hudson Valley in the Late Eighteenth Century," *New York History* 77 (1996):256-57; Huston, *Land and Freedom*, 41. It is worth noting that Van Buren did not expect the farm to supply *all* of the food needs of his household. For most of his tenure at Lindenwald, Van Buren's employees grew no wheat; and no Hudson Valley farm could supply the fine wines for which the former president had such an eager palate. But virtually all of the meat, fish, potatoes, fruits, and vegetables eaten at Lindenwald were supplied by the Lindenwald farm. See "Farm Account for 185_," Martin Van Buren Papers; "Farm Account for 1859," *ibid.*; "Farm Settlements for 1861 till March 22nd 1861," *ibid.*

Unfortunately, the 1845 state census returns are not available for Kinderhook, but we can get a good sense of what Van Buren's tenant and farm foreman grew during his first decade from the former president's correspondence, the reports of visitors, and other documents. During the 1840s, Van Buren specialized most heavily in four market crops: potatoes, orchard fruit, orchard trees, and hay. Cities like Albany and New York, with their numerous horses, generated an insatiable demand for hay. But only those farms with easy access to cheap transportation could profitably grow that bulky crop. Lindenwald's proximity to the Hudson River put Van Buren in a good position to grow hay, and as soon as he bought the farm, he laid plans for cashing in on urban demand. Among his earliest improvements were "A large Barn for Hay & a Hay Press"; in 1848, he devoted a little over eighty-five of his two hundred improved acres to hay—by far his biggest crop in terms of acreage. Potatoes, too, enjoyed a steady urban market, and Van Buren had his tenant and foreman plant Carter's potatoes, a special breed of high-quality potatoes developed during the early 1840s by the Shakers. Van Buren boasted that these potatoes commanded fifty cents more per bushel on the New York market than ordinary potatoes. In 1848, his foreman planted four acres in tubers—a fairly large crop. Finally, the former president devoted a large portion of his land, capital, and time to his orchards. He wrote to his friend James Kirke Paulding that Lindenwald contained some two thousand apple trees and another thousand pear trees. Most of these trees were from special breeds. A visitor in 1845 wrote that Lindenwald contained "a great variety of pear trees, ordered from Hamburg . . . , five kinds lately introduced by the improvers of the pear, who are making it the most delicious of table fruits, and a table fruit of all seasons." The fruit fetched a premium on the market: in 1842 apples from Lindenwald sold for \$3.50 a barrel, while pears garnered \$8 per barrel. In the late 1840s, the

cultivating young fruit trees became just as important as growing fruit: in 1848, Van Buren reported that he currently had fifteen thousand young apple trees for sale, along with two hundred young pear trees.¹¹

¹¹ Van Buren-Marquette share agreement; *Cultivator*, reprinted in *Farmer's Weekly Visitor*, 30 Sept. 1845; *Washington Globe*, 19 Nov. 1841, reprinted in Platt, "Historic Resource Study," 64; Van Buren to Joel R. Poinsett, 1 Oct. 1842, 29 June 1844, both in *Papers of Martin Van Buren*; Van Buren to Francis P. Blair, 22 June 1848, *ibid.*; Van Buren to James Kirke Paulding, n.d., in Alderman, *Letters of Paulding*, 430; Booth, *Country Life in America*, 142; Stokinger, "Historic Grounds Report," 70; Percy Bidwell and John I. Falconer, *History of Agriculture in the Northern United States, 1620-1860* (1925; reprint ed., Clifton, NJ: A.M. Kelley, 1973); Clarence Danhoff, *Change in Agriculture: The Northern United States, 1820-1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969).

In addition to these major crops, Van Buren's foremen and tenants grew rye (thirty acres in 1848), which were either consumed by the people or animals on Lindenwald or sold to the distilleries of Albany, Troy, and New York. They also grew corn and oats (twenty and twenty-eight acres, respectively, in 1848), most of which was probably consumed by the farm's livestock but which could have been sold. And they raised cows, pigs, chickens, ducks, turkeys, and perhaps one or two sheep. Most of the cows were milk cows, which supplied the households headed by Van Buren and his employees with fresh milk, cream, and butter; they also provided butter—the main marketable product of Columbia County dairies—for sale. The other animals (and their eggs) were for eating in Van Buren's and his employees' households. Several visitors commented on the minor part that livestock played in Lindenwald's production, and Van Buren aimed to keep it that way. His 1841 agreement with his tenant, Mr. Marquette, limited the number of milk cows that Marquette could keep to eighteen—a moderately large herd, one but that would leave most of the farmland and Mr. Marquette's energies for other crops. Finally, both Van Buren and his tenants kept extensive gardens, raising a wide variety of vegetables and fruits for consumption in their own households.¹²

In subsequent decades, Van Buren stayed with this pattern of general farming and continued his emphasis on hay and orchard products. But he made several changes in his crop mix. In 1850, his tenant, Abraham Kearn, added a new crop: wool. Kearn kept 103 sheep that year, which yielded 305 pounds of wool. He also grew ten pounds of a new and untried crop,

¹² Van Buren-Marquette share agreement; *Cultivator*, reprinted in *Farmer's Weekly Visitor*, 30 Sept. 1845; Van Buren to Poinsett, 1 Oct. 1842, *Papers of Martin Van Buren*; Van Buren to Blair, 22 June 1848, *ibid*; Stokinger, "Historic Grounds Report, 71-72; Bidwell and Falconer, *History of Agriculture*; Danhoff, *Change in Agriculture*; Bogue, *Prairie to Corn Belt*.

one that promised stupendous profits: hops. And at a moment when wheat prices were rising and Lindenwald's fertility had been restored to a point where the grain could be profitably raised, Kearns began growing wheat. As he did with many crops, Van Buren used a special, commercially developed breed of wheat—Pure Soule's—which, he said, yielded him “the best field of [wheat] in the county.” During the 1851 harvest, he predicted that his first crop would yield him \$500; on that assumption, he “ordered my friend March at Madeira to convert it into five hundred dollars worth of choice wine, as the most agreeable way of providing a fresh recollection of the crop.”¹³

¹³ Entry for Abraham Kearns, 1850 U.S. Manuscript Agricultural Census, Kinderhook, NY; Van Buren to Francis P. Blair, 16 Nov. 1850 and 15 July 1851, both in *Papers of Martin Van Buren*.

By 1855, Van Buren had a new tenant, Jeremiah Hess, who expanded the dairy herd from 8 to 12 cows. He also improved butter production per cow, from 87.5 pounds per cow in 1850 to 100 pounds per cow in 1855. Hess also expanded the farm's sheep holdings to 125. This expansion in Lindenwald's herds put new demands on Hess's time, with the result that hay production fell from 80 to 65 tons, at a moment when a growing amount of that hay was being consumed on the farm. The farm's potato crop suffered even more dramatically, falling from 600 to 25 bushels. Its corn and oat crops suffered as well. Van Buren may well have fired Hess for this decline in productivity. Whatever the reason, by 1860 he once again had a new tenant, Isaac Collins. Collins cut back dramatically on the farm's herds and concentrated instead on raising the productivity of each animal and on restoring production of the farm's meadow and field crops. The number of dairy cows fell to 9, but their productivity increased slightly, to 101 pounds of butter per cow. The number of sheep plummeted from 125 to 39, but their productivity more than doubled, from 2.4 to 5.1 pounds of wool per sheep. More importantly, Collins brought hay production to unprecedented heights—115 tons—and increased potato, rye, and oats production as well. He also grew a small amount of a new crop: buckwheat.¹⁴

¹⁴ Entry for Jeremiah Hess, 1855 New York State Manuscript Census, Kinderhook, NY; Entry for Isaac Collins, 1860 U.S. Manuscript Agricultural Census, Kinderhook, NY.

In all aspects of the Lindenwald enterprise, Van Buren sought to use cutting-edge breeds, seeds, and techniques. The former president was a self-conscious participant in a movement that sought to “reform” American agriculture by convincing farmers to reject what movement participants saw as their wasteful, fertility-draining, tradition-bound ways of farming in favor of systematic, “scientific,” profit-calculating, and soil-preserving practices. From the late eighteenth century through the 1810s, agricultural reformers tended to be great gentlemen, who saw their efforts to reform agriculture as part of their benevolent work. By the 1840s, most gentlemen had withdrawn from the movement, as part of a broader retreat from practical farming and public service and a new emphasis on the ornamental and aesthetic aspects of rural life. The movement became dominated by prosperous, often wealthy working farmers, along with a host of journalists and entrepreneurs in the seed and farm implement businesses. Although their specific recommendations varied, “progressive” farmers and other agricultural reformers sought to convince farmers to take active steps to increase soil fertility; make use of new seeds, livestock breeds, and farming techniques that promised to increase crop yields; and rationalize their work routines, purging them of such “unproductive” practices as drinking and visiting. Above all, agricultural reformers sought to make American farmers more experimental, more solicitous of their soil’s fertility, and more “businesslike.” They sought to convince farmers to abandon tradition and habit in favor of systematic experimentation with new seeds, breeds, and techniques. They encouraged them to augment soil fertility and to choose the crops and animals that were best suited to the soil of their particular farms. And they pressed farmers to carefully calculate the costs, savings, and monetary rewards of each farm technique and decision; alter their inputs and crops to take advantage of both market shifts and the specific quality of their

soil; and strive to increase the productivity of both their own and their workmen's labor.¹⁵

¹⁵ The best discussions of agricultural reformers are in Danhoff, *Change in Agriculture*; Bogue, *Prairie to Corn Belt*, 193-215; Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in the Early Republic and the Origins of Conservation* (New York: Hill and Wang, forthcoming); Thornton, *Cultivating Gentlemen*, chapters 2 and 4; and Robert A. Gross, "Culture and Cultivation: Agriculture and Society in Thoreau's Concord," *Journal of American History* 69 (1982):42-61.

Unlike the gentleman farmers of a previous generation, Martin Van Buren was not an active promoter of agricultural reform, nor did he seek to develop new farm techniques through experimentation. Instead, he was what historians of agricultural reform call an “innovator”: someone who put innovations developed by others into practice on his own farm.¹⁶ No issue, save the fate of the Democratic party, elicited Van Buren’s enthusiasm more than fertilizer. In 1843 he wrote to Joel Poinsett that “there is no way in which a man can employ himself more meritoriously” than in increasing a farm’s fertility. When his structural improvements to the Lindenwald farm neared an end in 1844, he wrote that “henceforth manure–manure–is the word and if I have five years I promise to show you as [productive?] a farm for its extent as any in the state.” Van Buren used numerous techniques, all of them actively promoted in the agricultural reform press, to raise the fertility of Lindenwald’s soils. The most important was animal manure. His 1841 tenancy contract with Mr. Marquette required the tenant to keep all animal manure on the farm, and Van Buren’s correspondence makes frequent mention of use of this most abundant fertilizer. The Little Magician also made extensive use of English grasses like Timothy and clover, as well as an American grass, redtop–another popular technique for restoring depleted soil. Finally, he made regular use of commercial fertilizers and soil conditioners like ashes, plaster, and lime.¹⁷

¹⁶ Danhoff, *Change in Agriculture*, 282-84; Bogue, *Prairie to Corn Belt*, 193-215.

¹⁷ *Cultivator*, reprinted in *Farmer’s Monthly Visitor*, 30 Sept. 1845; Van Buren-Marquette share agreement; Van Buren to Poinsett, 25 June 1843, 29 June 1844, 27 Dec. 1844, all in *Papers of Martin Van Buren*.

In his use of special crop breeds and blooded livestock, too, Van Buren was an avid follower of progressive farm techniques. He planted new breeds of fruit trees from locales as diverse as Hamburg and Wayne County, New York. He made exclusive use of Carter's potatoes, a special breed with a reputation for both extraordinary productivity and good eating. When he planted wheat, he made use of another special breed, Pure Soule's. His bull and at least some of his milk cows were full-blooded Durham cattle. And he continually experimented with new crop breeds recommended by correspondents or the agricultural reform press. In 1848, for example, he planted a new breed of corn seed on the advice of his former political ally Francis Blair, who claimed that the breed yielded a hundred bushels per acre. The Little Magician also adopted new technology and techniques, buying a new subsoil plow and purchasing the right to use a new technique for composting corn stalks in the early 1840s.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Cultivator*, reprinted in *Farmer's Monthly Visitor*, 30 Sept. 1845; *Washington Globe*, 19 Nov. 1841, reprinted in Platt, "Historic Resource Study," 64; Van Buren to James Kirke Paulding, in Alderman, *Letters of Paulding*, 429; Van Buren to Erastus Corning, 26 April 1843, copy at Martin Van Buren National Historic Site; Van Buren to Francis P. Blair, 13 March 1846, 17 Feb. 1848, 16 Nov. 1850, in *Papers of Martin Van Buren*.

In adopting new seeds, breeds, and techniques, Van Buren displayed the qualities most celebrated by agricultural reformers: a careful calculation of costs and benefits and a wholehearted devotion to entrepreneurial principles. He considered adopting each seed, implement, or technique with an eye to its potential for making money in the market for agricultural produce. He reported to the correspondent to the *Albany Cultivator*, an agricultural reform newspaper, that draining and restoring thirteen acres of bog land to fertility cost him thirty-eight dollars per acre, while the produce of each reclaimed acre was enough to pay the interest on a hundred to a hundred and fifty dollars an acre. Similarly, he frequently boasted to correspondents about the superior productivity of his special crop breeds and about the premium that those breeds fetched on the open market. The novelist and Democratic activist James Kirke Paulding captured the Little Magician's practical and calculating approach to farming well. After visiting Lindenwald in 1843, Paulding wrote to Andrew Jackson that "the same practical good sense, the same sober, consistent, and judicious adaptation of means to ends, which has carried him successfully through every stage of his political life, is discoverable in his system of Farming. His calculations are all judicious, his anticipations always well founded, and his improvements never fail to quit cost, at least."¹⁹

¹⁹ *Cultivator*, reprinted in *Farmer's Monthly Visitor*, 30 Sept. 1845; Van Buren to Poinsett, 1 Oct. 1842, *Papers of Martin Van Buren*; Paulding to Jackson, 4 Oct. 1843, in Alderman, *Letters of Paulding*, 353.

This practical, calculating spirit led Van Buren to take a cautious, experimental approach toward new seeds, implements, and techniques. In 1842, Van Buren visited the New York state fair at Albany, where he saw “a quantity of manure” produced from composted corn stalks and straw through a patented process. Intrigued, Van Buren sought a second opinion. He sent his gardener, a Mr. Schenck, to Albany to inspect the compost; if Schenck approved, Van Buren instructed him to buy the right to use it—but only for a few acres. Schenck did buy the right to use the process, and Van Buren wrote that “I am about to make the experiment.” If it succeeded, he intended to extend the process to his entire acreage for “it would if successful double the value of your land.” Apparently the experiment was a failure, for Van Buren never mentioned the composting process again in his correspondence. Still, Van Buren’s approach to the composting process typified his approach to innovation: he sought second opinions and tried untested seeds and techniques on a small scale before adopting them. He prided himself as a practical farmer, and adopted innovation only if it worked—that is, if it paid.²⁰

²⁰ Van Buren to Joel R. Poinsett, 1 Oct. 1842, Van Buren to Andrew Jackson, 19 Oct. 1842, both in *Papers of Martin Van Buren*. Van Buren’s last mention of the technique was in December of 1842, when he wrote to Poinsett that he had postponed the composting experiment because of an early frost. See Van Buren to Poinsett, 13 Dec. 1842, *ibid*.

Money was not the only reward the Van Buren reaped from progressive agriculture, however. For like his greenhouse, artificial ponds, and pleasure grounds, his involvement with agricultural innovation provided entry into a select circle of genteel progressive farmers. Van Buren corresponded frequently with a small circle of elite men, most of them former political allies and most of them farmers: Joel Poinsett, Francis P. Blair, Gouverneur Kemble, John M. Niles, Henry D. Gilpin, James Kirke Paulding, Andrew Jackson. Jackson and Kemble were, like Van Buren, men of humble birth; all were now established gentlemen, all but two of them (Blair and Gilpin) immersed in the pleasures of rural retirement. The correspondence among these men served as a means of disseminating the results of their experiments with new techniques, seeds, and breeds. Van Buren avidly reported on his trials of new crops and techniques, and sought out the experience of his correspondents. It also served as a means of distributing new crops themselves: Van Buren sent several correspondents seed potatoes, wheat, and apples, with special instructions; Gouverneur Kemble sent him grape cuttings and instructions about how to care for them. For Van Buren, at least, it provided a forum for boasting about his successes. Finally, the correspondence allowed Van Buren to present himself as a progressive farmer—an essential part of many gentlemen farmers' self-presentation as refined and progressive men. In 1843, Van Buren wrote to Erastus Corning that "I have put a subsoil plough in operation to the amusement of some of my neighbors, one of whom said he would not put a thing of the kind in his land upon any terms. I promise myself however the best results, & have no doubt of their becoming popular, even in this land of dutch obstinancy, and regular habits." Here Van Buren presented himself as a man on the cutting edge of agricultural innovation, ridiculed by the

“obstinate” crowd for his advanced ideas. No self-presentation better befitted a gentleman.²¹

Making money, maintaining his credentials as a gentlemen--these were the poles of Martin Van Buren's class identity as a farmer. Van Buren was not unique among gentleman farmers in making profitability a priority, though he was probably in the minority. But he was unusual in the frequency and exuberance with which he discussed the pecuniary side of farming. Preoccupation with costs, savings, and income was the mark of a grasping bourgeois, not a gentleman; to the latter, the purpose of rural retirement was to *escape* obsession with money, not to embrace it. This was particularly true in the 1840s and 1850s, when most gentleman farmers de-emphasized the practical side of farming, celebrating instead the purely aesthetic side of rural life--most clearly in a new craze for horticulture and exotic flowers. Thus, while Van Buren certainly embraced the main conventions of rural retirement, he was selective in his use of them. As he had throughout his adult life, he combined bourgeois calculation and practicality with a

²¹ Van Buren to Corning, 26 April 1843, copy at Martin Van Buren National Historic Site. For a sampling of Van Buren's correspondence with other gentlemen farmers, see Van Buren to Kemble, 19 April 1845, 18 April 1848, 5 Jan. 1852; Van Buren to Blair, 13 March 1846, 17 Feb. 1848, 11 Dec. 1852, 16 Nov. 1850; Van Buren to Henry D. Gilpin, 29 Nov. 1856; Van Buren to Poinsett, 1, 13 Dec. 1842; Van Buren to Gorham A. Worth, 22 Oct. 1846; Van Buren to Jackson, 19 Oct. 1842, all in *Papers of Martin Van Buren*. See also Van Buren to John M. Niles, 16 April 1843, quoted in Platt, “Historic Resource Study”; Van Buren to Paulding, n.d., in Alderman, *Letters of Paulding*, 429.

In *Cultivating Gentlemen*, Tamara Thornton argues that agricultural reform was central to the class identity and self-presentation of the upper crust of Massachusetts gentlemen farmers from the 1790s to the 1820s, but that its importance declined thereafter. And certainly, Van Buren's engagement in agricultural reform was nowhere near as public as that of Massachusetts gentlemen before 1820. Nonetheless, the Little Magician's participation in progressive agriculture clearly contributed to his own assertion of his gentility and benevolence. But this assertion occurred in private correspondence, not in public meetings and publications--a critical difference. As such, Van Buren's private trumpeting of his progressive farming is in accord with Thornton's overall argument that meanings of rural retirement became privatized in the 1840s and 1850s. See Thornton, *Cultivating Gentlemen*, chapters 2, 4, and 6.

genteel style--thus remaking that style to his own liking.

In one respect, however, Van Buren fully embraced the tradition of genteel farming: he never got his dirt under his fingernails. Who, then, did the physical work on Lindenwald farm? Throughout his tenure at Lindenwald, Van Buren had a gardener whose responsibility it was to care for the orchards, the fruit tree nursery, the fruits and flowers in the greenhouse, and the ornamental plants on the pleasure grounds of the estate. When Van Buren went fishing in his artificial ponds, it was the gardener's duty to dig worms for his bait. We have only scattered information about Van Buren's gardeners. In 1843, his gardener was a man named Schenck; in 1845, he was a Frenchman whose name is now unknown. In 1855 and 1856 (and perhaps before), it was Peter Huyck, a 34-year-old immigrant from Germany. Huyck probably lived on one of the smaller dwelling houses on Lindenwald with his wife and his daughter, who was seven years old in 1855. Huyck and his family had been in Columbia county for at least seven years in 1855. And in 1860, Van Buren's gardener was Anthony Scalin, a 42 year old immigrant from Holland. Scalin boarded in the household of one of Van Buren's neighbors, the farmer Jacob Evarts. In addition to his full-time gardener, Van Buren hired day laborers to work in his orchards, greenhouse, and garden--at least in the early years, when he was having them created. In 1840, he paid one Thomas Mulligan about a dollar a day for thirteen and a half days' labor in the garden.¹⁹

¹⁹ *Cultivator*, reprinted in *The Farmer's Monthly Visitor*, 30 Sept. 1845; entry for Peter Huyck, 1855 New York State Manuscript Census, Kinderhook, New York; entry for Jacob Evarts, U.S. Manuscript Population Census, 1850, Kinderhook, NY; Van Buren to Henry D. Gilpin, 29 Nov. 1856, *Papers of Martin Van Buren*; Van Buren to Joel Poinsett, 13 Dec. 1842, *ibid.*; Van Buren to James Kirke Paulding, n.d., in Alderman, *Letters of Paulding*, 430.

The main farm operation--the cultivation of hay, potatoes, and grain; the care of livestock, milking of cows, gathering of eggs, shearing of sheep, and slaughtering of pigs--fell primarily to a series of farm foremen and tenant farmers, each of whom was aided by several wage laborers. During his earliest years at Lindenwald, Van Buren delegated most of the farm labor to tenants, whom he hired for a share of the crop. A draft share agreement from 1841 with a Mr. Marquette spells out the nature of the arrangement. Van Buren supplied all the tools, wagons, and draft animals; the milk cows and animals raised for slaughter; the fertilizers, soil conditioners, and grass seed; and two-thirds of the seed grain and seed potatoes. Marquette provided one third of the seed and all of the labor. Marquette's status was that of an employee rather than a landless but autonomous farmer. "The whole farm [was] to be worked under the direction of Mr. V.B," and the contract restricted the time and manner of plowing and forbade the tenant from taking manure off of the farm. In reward for his labors, Marquette got one third of all crops, butter, meat, and eggs; a third of all the offspring of Van Buren's poultry; and all the milk and cream his family consumed. This was the standard payment for tenants who did not provide tools or draft stock. It laid out the outlines of a dependent relationship, a far cry from the Jeffersonian-style independence celebrated in politics by Van Buren and his supporters. Nor did the arrangement provide Marquette with the money he needed to become an independent farmer. A third of the crop on a farm as large and prosperous as Lindenwald could easily provide an ample income for the tenant once the improvements were completed. But the improvements were far from completed in 1841. In that crop year, Lindenwald was a subsistence operation; Van Buren marketed no crops whatsoever, and indeed had to buy food from his neighbors to feed his

household. A third of this scanty crop promised poverty to a sharecropper like Marquette.²⁰

Perhaps because he could not keep a sharecropper on such terms, Van Buren gave up on his share agreement in 1842, hiring what he called a “farm foreman,” whom he paid either wages or a yearly salary. The 1850 census lists the farm operation under Van Buren’s name, not under the name of a tenant; normally, census marshalls listed leased farms under the name of the tenant. In 1850, Van Buren’s foreman was one Abraham Karn, who lived in the house nearest Van Buren--almost certainly his foreman’s house. Karn was a thirty-eight year old native of New York; he listed his occupation as “farmer,” but owned no real estate. He lived with his wife Elizabeth, also thirty-eight; two daughters, aged seven and nine; and Cornelia Meickle, a twenty-eight year old New York native--almost certainly a servant. At his age, Karn still had a chance to accumulate the money needed to purchase his own farm; he may also have had a living, landowning father from whom he expected an inheritance. But he was close to the end of such hopeful years and may have despaired of ever becoming an independent farmer.²¹

²⁰ Van Buren-Marquette share agreement, 1841, Van Buren Papers.

²¹ Van Buren to Joel Poinsett, 1 Oct. 1842, 1844, *Papers of Martin Van Buren*; entry for Abraham Karn, U.S. Manuscript Population Census, 1850, Kinderhook, NY.

By 1855, Van Buren had returned to delegating the farm operation to a tenant--probably a share tenant. No record of Van Buren's agreements with his tenants survive from the early or mid-1850s, but surviving farm accounts show that while Mr. Marquette received only a third of the proceeds of the farm, tenants during the late 1850s and early 1860s got half of the produce. As he did with Mr. Marquette, Van Buren probably followed the common practice with these later tenants: when the landlord supplied the draft animals and tools, he received two thirds of the crop; but when the tenant supplied the implements and working stock, landlord and tenant split the proceeds evenly. Thus Van Buren's tenants in the 1850s were probably more prosperous than Marquette had been, owning some of the capital needed for farming. As a consequence, they received a greater share of the farm's produce. And by the end of the 1850s, that share was quite substantial. In 1859, Van Buren valued the total harvest at Lindenwald at \$1,840.74; the tenant's share of this gross income was \$920.37, less \$181.11 for seed, leaving a net income of \$739.26. This income was in addition to the foreman's house, which came rent-free, and probably most of the food needed by the tenant's family.²²

²² "Farm Accounts for 1859," Van Buren Papers.

In 1855, Van Buren's tenant was Jeremiah Hess, a 51 year old Columbia County native. Like Kearn, Hess listed his occupation as a farmer but owned no real estate. He headed a very large household that included his wife Margaret, aged 48; six unmarried daughters, aged ten to 22; a married daughter and her husband, aged 23; his son-in-law's brother, aged 18; and a 24 year old male laborer. Like Hess, all the members of his household were born in Columbia County. Hess's age suggests that Hess was unlikely to acquire a farm of his own. And although the job as Van Buren's tenant paid quite well, it could hardly keep pace with the cost of a farm in Kinderhook, where farmland sold for fifty dollars an acre and up. Hess's choice was to save his money and move west, where his savings could buy a substantial tract of land, or to resign himself to becoming one of the more prosperous members of a new and growing class of permanent agricultural laborers.²³

By 1860, Van Buren had yet another tenant: Isaac Collins, a 33 year old native New Yorker. Unlike his predecessors, Collins was neither a member nor a potential member of a

²³ "Farm Account for 185[?]," "Farm Accounts for 1859," "Farm Settlement for 1861," and "Farm Settlements for 1861 till March 22d 1861," all in Van Buren Papers; entry for Jeremiah Hess, 1855 New York Manuscript Census, Kinderhook, NY. Hess was identified as Van Buren's tenant by the following method: Laura Eve-Moss, a researcher on this project, looked for men in the New York manuscript census who listed their occupation as "farmer" and who were shown to be growing crops on 200 improved acres (Van Buren's improved acreage), but who owned no real estate of their own. This method was adapted for the New York Census from John T. Houdek and Charles F. Heller, Jr., "Searching for Nineteenth-Century Farm Tenants: An Evaluation of Methods," *Historical Methods* 19 (1986):55-61. On land prices in Kinderhook, see 1855 New York Manuscript Census, Kinderhook, NY. On the growth of a permanent class of agricultural wage laborers during the 1850s, see Huston, *Land and Freedom*, 47-56, 200-209; Sally McMurry, *Transforming Rural Life: Dairying Families and Agricultural Change, 1820-1885* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 62-71; Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 304-309; David Schob, *Hired Hands and Plowboys: Farm Labor in the Midwest, 1815-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).

permanent agricultural working class. He owned \$5,500 worth of real estate--the worth of a small farm in Kinderhook--and another \$500 in personal property. At his young age and with property already accumulated, he could reasonably hope to accumulate yet more land through hard work and savings. Collins lived with two women, probably his wife and his sister: Julia Collins, aged 38, and Laura Collins, aged 34, both natives of New York. Also under Collins's roof was Andrew Krum, a 67 year old New Yorker, and a 19 year old Irish-born laborer names Lawrence Wyerkeen. Collins remained the tenant at Lindenwald until Smith Van Buren, Martin's son, sold the farm in 1864, after Martin's death.²⁴

²⁴ Entry for Isaac Collins, U.S. Manuscript Population Census, 1860, Kinderhook, NY.

As his use of the term “foreman” to describe his employee indicates, Van Buren intended that his foremen’s and tenants’ labor be supplemented by the work of wage laborers. He included in his renovation plans not only a home for his tenant or foreman, but also two gate houses, which he had built in 1849-50. Each 1 ½ story, 16-by-23-foot house was built as modest residence to accommodate the gardener, coachman, or farm laborers who worked on Lindenwald. Scattered evidence from Van Buren’s papers also suggest a heavy use of wage labor on the farm. He estimated that during the 1842 growing season he paid out two hundred dollars in “Wages on Farm & Garden over and above what farm garden & orchard pay.” The excess of labor costs over income was certainly due to the fact that in 1842 he was hiring a lot of laborers to improve the farm and orchards, but mentions of multiple workers cropped up in later years as well, long after the improvements were completed. In 1849, he wrote that he was having a larger hay barn constructed, and that “my men are helping to get out the timber.” The phrase “my men” and the fact that they were “helping” the workers hired especially for the construction suggests that Van Buren had several regular employees on the farm. Finally, between January and March 1861, Isaac Collins had a farm laborer helping him; his wages for that period were \$156.48—a sum that Van Buren paid.²⁵

²⁵ “Probable expenses from 1st May [18]42 to 1st Jan. [18]43” and “Farm settlements for 1861 till March 22d 1861,” both in Van Buren papers; Van Buren to Francis P. Blair, 9 April 1849, quoted in Platt, “Historic Resource Study,” 78.

Some of the laborers at Lindenwald lived with Van Buren or his tenants; if they followed typical practice, these men worked full-time, on yearly agreements or contracts that lasted for several months. In 1850, one such laborer was twenty-three year old Allen Kearn, a landless farmer who lived in Van Buren's household. Kearn was almost certainly a relative of Abraham Kearn, Van Buren's foreman. By 1855, the former president no longer boarded farm laborers, but his tenants did. Jeremiah Hess undoubtedly depended on the help of his son-in-law and son-in-law's brother in running the farm, so he was probably less dependent on wage laborers than were other tenants. But he still had one male laborer who was not a relative, Aaron Vanderpool, living with him. Similarly, Isaac Collins boarded Lawrence Wyrkeen, who almost certainly worked on the Lindenwald farm.²⁶

In addition to these live-in workers, several landless laborers lived on and around Lindenwald. Neither the New York nor the federal census says which dwellings were owned by Van Buren, so we can not distinguish between those laborers who lived in one of the gate houses and those who lived nearby. But they were numerous. In 1850, four landless laborers (not counting those living with Van Buren or his foreman or tenant) lived ten or fewer houses away from Van Buren. In 1855 seven laborers lived nearby; in 1860, the number dropped to six. In each year, several of these neighboring workers probably worked for the former president, but we have no information on whether they worked as occasional day laborers or on longer-term agreements.²⁷

²⁶ Entry for Martin Van Buren, U.S. Manuscript Population Census, 1850, Kinderhook, NY; entry for Jeremiah Hess, 1855 New York Manuscript Census, Kinderhook, NY; entry for Isaac Collins, U.S. Manuscript Population Census, 1860, Kinderhook, NY.

²⁷ Entries for dwellings number 521-41, U.S. Manuscript Population Census, 1850,

Kinderhook, NY; entries for dwellings number 61-81, 1855 New York Manuscript Census, Kinderhook, NY; entries for dwellings number 639-59, U.S Manuscript Population Census, 1860, Kinderhook, NY; *Cultural Landscape Report*, 38-41; Stokinger, "Historic Grounds Report," 77.

Like their counterparts throughout the northeast, the laborers who lived on and near Lindenwald faced new obstacles in what had always been a treacherous road to independent proprietorship. Opportunities to acquire land diminished greatly throughout the northeast and upper Midwest during the 1850s, as populations grew, unimproved land disappeared, and real estate prices rose. From Massachusetts to Ohio, farmers saw the character of their wage workers change. The sons of neighboring farmers, many of whom had a good chance of becoming independent proprietors, continued to do wage work for other farmers. But they were joined by another sort of laborer: outsiders and footloose strangers, often European immigrants and African Americans, who had little chance of gaining land of their own. These workers could be expected to remain wage laborers throughout life. Van Buren's laborers were just such a mix of local boys, immigrants and blacks, young and old men. In 1850, half of the six laborers living on or near Lindenwald were under the age of thirty—an age when a man still had a chance of accumulating the money to buy a farm. But the other half were forty-four and older; these men were almost certainly lifelong laborers. Not surprisingly, two of the three young men were native New Yorkers, while two of the three men in their forties and fifties were from Ireland or England.²⁸

²⁸ Entries for dwellings number 521-41, U.S. Manuscript Population Census, 1850, Kinderhook, NY. On the changing opportunities for young men to acquire property and the changing character of agricultural workers in the 1850s, see Huston, *Land and Freedom*, 47-56, 200-209; Sally McMurry, *Transforming Rural Life: Dairying Families and Agricultural Change, 1820-1885* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 62-71; Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860*, 304-309; David Schob, *Hired Hands and Plowboys: Farm Labor in the Midwest, 1815-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).

Between 1850 and 1855, the number of landless laborers living near Van Buren increased, and the proportion of them who were likely to become independent farmers fell dramatically. Of the eight workers living on or near Lindenwald in that year, five were in their twenties. But three of these young men were already married, and two had young children—factors that increased their household expenses and diminished their chances of accumulating property. More importantly, four of the five young men were ethnic or racial outsiders—two were from Ireland and two were African American. Their outsider status made gaining a farm less likely, for it cut them off from the help of propertied family members and from access to credit. The remaining three laborers were men in their forties and fifties; all were either Irish-born or African American. Overall, the proportion of laborers who were Irish immigrants or African Americans increased enormously—from (3 of 6 =) half in 1850 to (6 of 8 =) three quarters in 1855.²⁹

By 1860, the prospects and status of the laborers living on and near Lindenwald improved. Half of the eight laborers were under the age of thirty, and three of those young men were white New Yorkers. They thus were the sort of men who had a chance of escaping wage labor and becoming independent proprietors. The other half of the men were aged forty or older—probably permanent wage laborers. Overall, three of the laborers (38 percent) were immigrants from Ireland or Germany; the rest were native white New Yorkers.³⁰

²⁹ Entries for dwellings number 61-81, 1855 New York Manuscript Census, Kinderhook, NY.

³⁰ Entries for dwellings number 639-59, U.S Manuscript Population Census, 1860, Kinderhook, NY.

One final characteristic of the laborers who lived on and near Lindenwald stands out: their geographic mobility. Of all the laborers who lived near Van Buren in 1850 and 1855, not one remained in the neighborhood five years later. The same was true of Van Buren's foreman and tenant. Like landless agricultural workers everywhere, they were an extraordinarily mobile lot, ready to move on when they fought with their employers, when they grew tired of their current situation, or when a new opportunity beckoned.³¹

³¹ Entries for dwellings number 521-41, U.S. Manuscript Population Census, 1850, Kinderhook, NY; entries for dwellings number 61-81, 1855 New York Manuscript Census, Kinderhook, NY; entries for dwellings number 639-59, U.S Manuscript Population Census, 1860, Kinderhook, NY. On the mobility of landless farm workers and tenants, see Jonathan Prude, *The Coming of Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810-1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Schob, *Hired Hands and Plowboys*; Huston, *Land and Freedom*, 54, 202-204.

With his extensive use of hired labor, his extensive improvements to the farm, and his careful and shrewd adoption of cutting-edge inputs and techniques, one would expect that Van Buren's farm and orchard provided a handsome income. No information is available about Van Buren's income from his orchards and nursery, but his main farm enterprise did pay well in absolute dollar terms. But not at first. During the early years of his occupancy, the cost of improving the farm outstripped farm income. In October 1842, during his second harvest while living at Lindenwald, the Little Magician wrote ecstatically to Joel Poinsett that he was about to harvest his first marketable surplus beyond his household needs. His apples alone, he wrote, would produce enough to pay his farm foreman for the year. "I have given notice to my neighbors, from whom I bought any thing last year, that if they fall short, in Hay, Oats, Potato, &c., I can sell, or will lend them, which has amazed, as well as discomfitted them." Despite his exultation, Lindenwald was not yet paying for itself. We do not know whether Van Buren's prediction about crop's covering the foreman's wages was fulfilled, but we do know that it did not cover all the labor costs of the farm. In a list of his expenses from May 1842 to January 1843, he estimated that he would spend two hundred dollars for "wages on farm and garden over and above what farm garden and orchard pay."³²

Lindenwald probably began to generate an income in the mid-1840s. In the summer of 1844, Van Buren announced that his improvements to the farm (except for continued manuring) were nearly at an end. With that development, the expenses of the farm undoubtedly fell dramatically, while the land's ability to produce crops reached a high level. Unfortunately, we

³² Van Buren to Poinsett, 1 Oct. 1842, *Papers of Martin Van Buren*; "Probable expenses from 1st May [18]42 to 1st Jan. [18] 43," Van Buren Papers.

have no information about the farm's income during the 1840s or early or mid-1850s. But the evidence we do have, from 1859-61, suggests that Van Buren received a substantial income from the farm. In 1859, by Van Buren's accounting, \$1,667.73 worth of produce was sold from Lindenwald, and another \$163.01 worth of goods remained on the farm at the time of the accounting. Van Buren split the total of \$1,840.74 with his tenant, Isaac Collins, leaving him a gross income of \$920.37. Van Buren had to pay \$174.40 in farm expenses that year, plus \$181.11 for half of the seed, leaving him a net income of \$564.86--plus food for his household, most probably. In 1861, the produce sold from Lindenwald was worth \$1,792.49, leaving Van Buren \$896.24, less the farm upkeep and his half of the seed. This income seems to have been from the field crops and livestock alone; it apparently did not include the proceeds of Van Buren's orchards and fruit tree nursery.³³

³³ "Farm Accounts for 1859," "Farm Settlement for 1861," both in Van Buren Papers. Another settlement with his tenant, from some time in the 1850s, showed similar receipts from selling produce: \$1677.73. See "Farm Accounts for 185_," Van Buren Papers.

This income was a significant one which, together with the income from his other investments, allowed Van Buren to live handsomely. But as a return on his capital, Lindenwald's income may have been quite poor. Lindenwald was listed as worth \$40,000 in the 1860 federal census. The implements, machinery, and livestock on the farm were valued at another \$2063. If these valuations were correct, Van Buren's net income from Lindenwald in 1859 was only 1.34 percent of that capital valuation. Even if we assume that the food Van Buren got was double his cash income from the farm (an extremely generous estimate), Van Buren would have made more money by selling his farm and lending out the money at interest. But the valuation of the farm seems inflated. Just five years before, the farm was valued at \$16,000; in 1850, it was valued at \$22,500. Further complicating this picture was the fact that it is unclear whether the valuation of the farm included Van Buren's orchards, which were quite valuable. The evidence is simply too ambiguous to calculate with any confidence Van Buren's farm income as a return upon capital.³⁴

Martin Van Buren's life at Lindenwald is a study in paradoxes. A lifelong Democrat and the principal architect of a political system designed to destroy gentlemen's monopoly on political power, the Little Magician strove to establish himself as a country gentleman upon retiring. Enthusiastically adopting the genteel code of rural retirement, with its rejection of the money-grubbing ways of the world of business, Van Buren displayed enormous and vocal enthusiasm for making money at farming. Yet it is unclear whether or not Van Buren would have made more money by selling his farm and lending the proceeds out at interest. But we should expect no less of Van Buren, whose entire career had been a study in cultural

³⁴ U.S. Manuscript Agricultural Census, 1850, 1860, Kinderhook, NY; New York State Manuscript Census, 1855, Kinderhook, NY.

contradiction. In retirement as in public life, Martin Van Buren embodied numerous paradoxes, which seem only to have fed his exuberance. In the end, he made gentleman farming his own. And all the evidence suggests that he had a terrific time doing it.