At work in the fields: an essay into the work lives of nineteenth century English agricultural wage labouring and African American slave and freed women.

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AT WORK IN THE FIELDS:
An Essay into the work lives of
Nineteenth Century English Agricultural Wage Labouring and
African American Slave and Freed Women.

By
Anne Reeves
B.A., University of Louisville, 2002

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for the Degree of

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A Thesis Approved on

September 26, 2005

by the following Thesis Committee:

______________________________
John T. Cumbler, Thesis Director

______________________________
Ann T. Allen
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my sister, Evelyn Bumby, who once was
a field labouring woman and still works on the land

and

to all our rural female ancestors who

toiled in fields for meagre wages

and

to my spouse, Stuart L. Cipinko.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank professors Ann T. Allen and John T. Cumbler for their guidance and support over not only for the thesis and the past two years of graduate school but also throughout those of my first degree. Thanks, too, to professor Thomas Mackay for his earlier advice and guidance. My greatest thanks should go to my spouse, Stuart L. Cipinko, for his never failing support, advice, encouragement and love. Without his understanding and patience, none of this work would have been possible.
ABSTRACT

AT WORK IN THE FIELDS:
An Essay on the Work Lives of
Nineteenth Century English Agricultural Wage Labouring
and African American Slave and Freed Women

Anne Reeves
September 26, 2005

This thesis is a historical study comparing the work-lives African-American and English nineteenth-century, field-working women. It focuses on the ideology and structure of the gender division of labour as it formed and informed the lives of these women. It explores the complex relationship among gender and racial ideologies, social and economic structures and the extent to which the women determined their own lives. It argues that the particular historical, ideological and economic forces at work in England and the South differentially constrained their lives.

The work is divided into four chapters. The Introduction explains the study's purpose and explores the historical construction of gender ideology. Chapter One examines the declining employment of English female field labourers within its gendered socio-political context. Chapter Two examines the centrality of African-American women's field work as it evolved within the racial contexts of slavery and freedom. The Conclusion highlights the determinative power of economic and ideological forces on the structuring of the gender division of labour and on the ambiguous nature of rural women's agency.
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INTRODUCTION

"If men define things as real, they are real in their consequences."[1]

In both England and the southern states of America, during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, women laboured in the fields. This study is a comparison of the work-lives of two groups of such working-women: English day labourers and African American slave and freedwomen. The study attempts to understand the ways in which nineteenth century gender, class and racial ideology formed and informed the gender division of labour in agriculture over the period 1840 to 1870. How were agricultural jobs gendered and what was the significance of the gendering of jobs for female agricultural labour over time? How did the changing ideas about women and manual labour affect the lives of field working women in England and America? In what ways did social, economic, political, gender and racial ideological developments shape field labouring English and African American women’s perceptions of themselves as women and as workers? How can we understand the interweave of agency and structure in the work experiences of these different women, whose very diversity refuses simple categorization and tidy answers?

By comparing the similarities and differences of African American and English field labouring women we gain a greater understanding of the construction of the gender division of labour not only in agriculture but across the work landscape. I shall argue that notwithstanding women’s proven ability in field labour and in fulfilling tasks viewed as ‘men’s’, an increasingly influential set of ideas about the female body and sex-nature denied that capability; that the contemporary debates on female agricultural labour reveal how what was and would be understood as men’s work and women’s work evolved and solidified, and how these cultural assumptions contributed to the marginalization of women’s field work. These ideas developed
within contexts of changing social, economic and political landscapes that shaped the gender, class and racial ideologies of employers, politicians and reformers and the gendered perspectives of husbands and fathers; together they structured the possible in the lives of rural women. The overall decline in women's field labour was the result of the intersection of personal history with cultural forces: how much any one woman could choose to stay or withdraw from field work depended upon her personal situation and the local agricultural and cultural environment. Just as leaving the fields was a choice that some but not all women could make freely, so too was it a choice that not all women took.

I focus on the decades 1840-1870, in part because the material is most abundant for those years and in part because it was then that many of the gendered notions about work, which linger in the present, assumed their normative character in both England and America. This period was one of radically changing ideas about work and gender. The growth of the factory system illuminated, in unprecedented ways, the increasing presence and the nature of female labour outside the home. To the horror of the middle classes, the emergent manufactories threw men and women promiscuously together; to the resentment of working class men, the new industrialism brought women into the competition for a supply of jobs ever in flux. Females publicly performing waged labour challenged the nascent concept of their nature as delicate, virtuous and non-muscular, their only natural calling being that of wife and mother. Labour had historically been bounded along gender lines, but the earlier fairly flexible, gender division of work had by 1870 hardened, and for women, narrowed considerably. In agriculture, for example, typically males ploughed, mowed and herded sheep while females hoed, sheaved and milked cows. But this separation of task had not been always or everywhere absolutely inviolate; for instance, females in England, in the 1820s and 1830s, and in Mississippi, in the 1850s, had ploughed, while men in both places hoed.

Well before Victoria's accession to the throne in 1837, the ideology of separate, gendered spheres of social function had emerged, on both sides of the Atlantic. This conceptualization of
society as formed of a public, masculine, sphere of independent citizenship and a private, feminine one of domestic virtue had its roots in eighteenth century liberal political theory, the gradual development of industrial capitalism and the separation of workplace from the household among a growing bourgeoisie. It also owed much to the late eighteenth century reconfiguration of the sexual, biological and moral differences between females and males. Whereas before the Enlightenment male and female anatomy and physiology had been viewed as homologous, with females seen as inferior males, thereafter scientists and philosophers reconstructed the sexes as completely biologically and morally distinct from each other. This ideological reconstitution of women, while maintaining much of the essence of the older model, posited them as the weaker and reproductive sex - a sex whose physical, psychological and sexual difference from men was not merely one of degree but one of being. The new ideas about women and men, in combination with the changing social relations of production within an industrializing economy and reinforced by political ideology, transformed the image of ‘true’ womanhood. Women became the cultural repository of morality and purity; by fulfilling their gender distinctive and ‘natural’ work-sex role as wife and mother, within the home, their natural sphere, they ensured the stability of the social order.

Their identification with morality allowed some middle-class women, feminists and anti-feminists alike, to enter the male public arena, as social reformers and later as employees in suitably ‘feminine’ callings. Yet, even as such women challenged the ideological privatisation of the feminine, they rarely disavowed the cultural construction of the female as primarily nurturing, physically and emotionally weak, and as peculiarly unsuited to dirty, arduous, out-door labour. The perception that publicly-performed, waged, heavy labour was the ‘natural’ area of men and not of women gained currency among working-class men as well as in the middle classes. However, the physically demanding, often filthy, work done indoors by female domestic servants, raised few, if any, eyebrows, anywhere. Housework, in Anglo-American culture, had become idealized as a natural aspect of women’s sex role performed within the sacred space of
the home; the ideology of separate spheres had stripped the meaning of housework of its labour content. (By extension, any paid work which women did within doors also lost the connotation of labour.) The re-construction of the feminine as physically delicate and morally pure denied womanhood to those working class and slave women who daily performed the heavy manual labour necessary to the maintenance of middle and upper class comfort and display. As they laboured, the better sorts of women avoided sullying their purity and endangering their femininity with the muscularity, sweat and dirt of work.¹³

Until the 1870s, both England and America were predominantly agricultural; and in the southern states and England farming continued to be labour intensive. In both the South and England, women laboured alongside men in the fields, as slaves in the one and waged workers in the other. In both regions, though in radically different circumstances and to differing degrees, their field labour became an issue during the mid-nineteenth century. After 1865, northern and southern whites alike expected African American freedwomen to remain at the hoes they had wielded as slaves; elite and working-class English males desired that female field labourers leave theirs behind for the domestic sphere. Under increasing attack, English female waged field labour retreated, willingly or not, while American freedwomen sought to determine, as far as was possible, the terms of their own work, in and out of the fields.¹⁴

The comparative approach to the subject is most appropriate because heretofore women in agriculture have been studied as isolated racial and geographical groups. This parochial focus promotes a greater sense of separateness and distinctiveness of experience between women than perhaps the evidence everywhere would warrant. The result often only enhances the normative image of each group, even as it mutes the diversity among women within each group. Thus, for example, the image of southern white women as ‘ladies,’ northern farm women as domestically centred workers, slave women as gender transgressing field labourers and English women as dairymaids endures. This study is limited in its focus, concentrating on African American and English women only. It does so because these women had a common factor in their work lives:
both groups laboured in the fields on cash crops whose profits went to others. By comparing the experiences of both groups of women the study seeks to reveal the shared and the particular in the lives of all women who worked in the fields.

In both England and the United States, histories on women in industrial or professional work outnumber those on women engaged in agricultural labour. Not until the late 1970s did a few agricultural or rural historians devote significant, if any, space to female farm workers. In England, the earlier histories take a synthetic approach, drawing broad conclusions and provoking questions better answered by more focussed area studies. More recently, historians recognize that regional and local differences in customary farming practices, cottage industry, and the pace of change complicate broad depictions of female agricultural labour, both regarding its content and its diminution. An ongoing debate exists over whether or not the gender division of labour changed and solidified and when and why female field labour declined, with only a general agreement that some decline had set in by the mid-century.

K.D.M. Snell, in his classic study _Annals of the Labouring Poor_, raises several issues some of which have since been taken up by several historians. He posits that until the late 1700s the agricultural gender division of labour was relatively flexible, but that division rigidified as agricultural practices and rural societies changed, male farm labour unemployment rose, and pressure to restrict female labour grew. By the later eighteenth century, these “seemingly autonomous” structural changes left to women only the work vulnerable to economic forces and initiated a marked decline in female agricultural employment, particularly in the south-eastern counties. To presume that “Victorian moral sentiments” provoked the decline, is, he argues, wrong-footed; rather middle class views on women’s roles emerged from “changes in the economic structure, particularly” as they affected “male employment.”

While Snell’s suggestion that male agricultural un-employment may have influenced female farm employment has been ignored or largely downplayed, his other findings have been challenged. Some historians argue that continuity rather than change marked the gender division
of labour. Not all historians fully accept his argument that women’s declining participation in waged farm work derived from economic changes in farming or in agricultural production methods. Those who challenge these premises themselves disagree over women’s involvement in waged field labour: either married women, encumbered with child care duties, had never done more than assist at harvest; or, with the expansion of industrial agriculture on enclosure, a limited growth of female farm employment took place from 1795 to 1850; or it began to decrease from the 1830s. Other historians object to the focus of Snell and others on the structural at the expense of rural women’s agency in explaining their falling numbers in field employ. While recognizing regional diversity, they downplay the significance of social, political, “ideological and economic forces” in determining the work-lives of rural females, preferring to privilege women as autonomous actors choosing to leave the “formal labour market” for respectable housewifery.

Not only do such historians homogenize rural labouring women’s marital condition and outlook, they also obscure the fact that at the time married women’s ‘agency’ was legally and customarily at their husbands’ pleasure. Leaving aside any external factors determining married women’s ability to choose to work or not outside the home, within the marriage relation, a husband had control over what his wife did. Her capacity to make decisions about her activities was limited by his primary legal and customary authority within the family. Agency and structure are not discrete and opposing, but instead mutually constitutive and interactive forces. In marriage, a thoroughly gendered hierarchical structure, the agency of the wife depended upon that of the husband.

In general, though, no matter what their disagreement on the causative factors and precise timing, most historians conclude that by the latter half of the nineteenth century English women’s field labour had diminished significantly and by 1900 had all but ceased. In the American south, meanwhile, the rural picture was both similar and different. Most farms were family worked, while large plantations and sizeable farms used slave labour; therefore, waged agricultural labour
by European Americans of either sex was rare. Thus historians, when they consider female farm
labour in the South, focus on slave and freed women, and, in keeping with the early
historiography on white northern farm women, the product is synthetic and broad in scope. 28
Together these historians have sought to bring women out of rural historical obscurity and have
inspired further explorations into more localized studies of white and slave and freedwomen’s
lives. 29

As the historiography on slave and freed women makes clear, African American women
were in no doubt as to their gendered exploitation and oppression; there were few ‘men’s’ field
jobs that slave women were not expected to do. 30 White southern society viewed these women as
outside the bounds of the dominant gender ideology. According to historian Jacqueline Jones,
however, the slaves themselves maintained a strict “sexual division of labour” in their quarters
which paralleled that in white society, but whose roots, she contends, lay in West African
traditions. 31 In so doing, she argues, slaves not only reconstructed their African folkways but also
resisted “the master’s gender-blind approach” to the women’s field labour. 32

Writing in 1984, Jones, like historian Herbert Gutman before her, seeks to rescue the
slave and freed family from twentieth century critics who viewed it as the unstable and
matriarchal origin of modern female headed African American welfare dependent households. 33
She argues that, with emancipation, black women sought to withdraw from labouring for whites
so that they might devote more of their lives to their families as wives and mothers. 34 Because the
majority had to continue to work outdoors, however, most freed women and men who remained
in the rural South preferred sharecropping to waged day labour with its structural similarity to
slavery. Renting on shares appeared to give freed women more control over their labour power,
by allowing them the opportunity to decide on the division of their energies between domestic
duties and working in the fields. 35

Other historians gently disagree with this over-generalized assessment of both
freedwomen’s desires and the character of freed people’s marriages. 36 They argue instead that
slave women's experience of work influenced their conception of themselves as women and workers, and once freed some were less concerned about the gender division of labour than about controlling their own, whether in fields or in houses. Such historians as Nancy Bercaw have begun to present a picture of African American slave and freed women's diversity of experience which is somewhat at odds with the more normative and maritally harmonious one advanced by Jones.

Yet this tendency to generalize as women's experience that which properly belongs only to some (however numerous) married women has unfortunately a long history and a continuing historiographic presence. It denies the really existing problems of unmarried women, with or without dependents, and those of married women who for one reason or another, including volition, would have wanted to remain in the fields. Moreover, it is a position which accepts as normative, even to some degree as natural, the historical view of the appropriate place and work of women rather than being one which questions the very assumptions from which that set of ideas derived. What becomes clear is that the historians' own apprehension of gender and gender roles informs and shapes their arguments, often implicitly, at times forthrightly. While unsurprising, this can lead to an overemphasis on a particular reading of the evidence to the exclusion of other possibilities. Or the gender ideological agenda of the historian can cause some voices to remain unheard or to be dismissed as unrepresentative or more compromised than others because they express counter claims. Indeed the lasting influence of 'Victorian' gender ideology on the interpretation of nineteenth century women in agriculture is as interesting as its effects on the lives of the women themselves.

Those lives have largely to be construed through the words and voices of others, usually of men, which necessitates a brief discussion of the sources and the difficulties intrinsic to their use. The voices of the labouring poor in general and of poor women in particular have rarely made their presence felt in history, in part, at least, because they left so little evidence behind. Throughout the nineteenth century, full literacy was rare amongst the rural labouring classes and
rarer yet among the slaves of the southern states. Time, space and the means for writing were also beyond the capacities of most of the labouring poor. Almost all of our knowledge of the lower social and economic strata in England and America has been filtered through the prejudices and interests of a diverse array of concerned women and men from various sections of the middling and upper classes. Whatever their individual intentions towards the working-classes, their perceptions and introspections provide only an outside apprehension of how labouring people understood their own lives. Whether the works were accounts of travels through the countryside, farm or plantation day books, personal journals, or treatises on agriculture, the writers brought their own preconceptions and assumptions about appropriate gender roles and work forms to bear upon their observations. But despite the cultural distance from the women themselves, and the intrusive tones of many of their observations, these writers provided essential information and insight into what agricultural labouring women were doing and how their labour was perceived by the wider society.

Fortunately, a few nineteenth century rural English and African American women’s voices have been preserved, in the form of parliamentary testimony and Works Progress Administration (WPA) oral history. Both of the 1843 and the 1867-68 parliamentary inquiries developed from growing societal, particularly middle and upper class, anxieties about the propriety and nature of women (and children’s) labour. The 1843 investigation into women’s and children’s agricultural labour followed on the heels of an 1840 inquiry into, then legislation banning the working of women and children underground in mines. The 1867-1870 series took place amidst rising perturbation about women’s out-door employment and concerns about agricultural gang labour by mixed sex and age groups. The underlying aim of these inquiries was the establishment of causes for restrictive legislation. The WPA ex-slave narratives were collected by local writers during the Great Depression as both an archival and employment initiative. Compiled in the midst of Jim Crow segregation by overwhelmingly white female interviewers, many of whom were descendants of local slave owners and known to the narrators
as such, the narratives frequently have a deferential tone. Moreover, although many had been adolescents and young adults by 1865, many others among the interviewed ex-slaves had been younger. Thus their memories were recollections of what they had been told about that period rather than of their own experiences.

Both the contemporary parliamentary inquiries and the WPA ex-slave narratives are, nonetheless, invaluable. Both are the only sources available to historians who want to learn what some of the rural women, English and African American, who laboured in the fields in the nineteenth century had to say. Although few in number and possibly unrepresentative, the women who spoke about their field work to the commissions of inquiry in 1843 and 1867 and to the WPA interviewers in 1937 provide a unique window into their worlds: one from their point of view. Through their interlocutors, they revealed the diversity of their lives, their circumstances, aspirations and attitudes towards their labours.

In the light of what the various sources reveal, I differ with Jacqueline Jones, Nicola Verdon and the other historians who, like the Victorian middle classes before them, consider field work overtaxing of women’s strength and who submerge the differences between rural women into marital and domestically oriented uniformity. The sources demonstrate that some women performed, and capably, farm jobs viewed as men’s and as requiring a ‘man’s’ strength. The evidence shows how the cultural presumption that men were stronger and more skilled than women shaped the belief that the manual work men did required more physical strength and more skill than the work women did. (These assumptions are with us still.) And the documents reveal that not all women wanted to bid the fields goodbye and retire into the household. Rather, as the evidence makes clear, rural women, in both England and the southern United States, were diverse in their circumstances and interests, and a complex of economic, political, social, racial and ideological developments coalesced around the issue of women’s field labour, shaping and determining their lives.
The first chapter explores how, in England, over a period of some sixty years, many elite and working men attacked, politically and ideologically, working women’s out-door waged labour in general and field work in particular between 1840 and 1870. It examines how various official commissions of inquiry interrogated the appropriateness of female field labour as they investigated its conditions, type and hours, generally condemning it, calling for some restrictions upon it, and advocating basic education and domestic service for young single rural women.\textsuperscript{48} It explores how diverse field working women adapted to the combined effects of a decreasing range of work possibilities in many districts; the growing reluctance of many farmers to employ women at all; the constant carping of local elites about the degrading and demoralizing influences of field work on females; the growing antagonism of unemployed, under-employed and low-waged rural men towards female farm employment; and the developing desire for respectability among at least the ‘better’ class of farm labouring families.\textsuperscript{49}

Again focusing on the period 1840-1870, I next explore the situation of African American slave and freed women who laboured agriculturally in the southern states. The chapter begins with the work lives of slave women, in the rice slips and cotton fields, across various southern states. As the evidence shows, they were frequently called upon to perform tasks which they, like the wider society, considered ‘men’s’ work; yet their work was less variable than men’s. The sources further reveal the gendered nature of the allocation of skilled status and any consequent benefits. The chapter then shifts to the post-Civil War period, examining how freed women contended with the conjunction of profound poverty, no education, southern white pressure to maintain pre-war conditions, northern white pressure to conform to ‘free labor’ norms, and their own desire to decide how, when and where to work. It explores how freed women sought to re-construct their lives and work in ways appropriate to their needs and desires within a post war situation in which they held little or no power.

This study seeks to illuminate some of the complexities and ambiguities surrounding the changes in the work-lives of nineteenth century English and African American rural women,
which the tendencies to interpretive generalizations obscure. It takes the approach that at its best, women's history, like all history, is untidy, inchoate and complex and is an integral part of, and inextricably entwined with, the rest of history. Thus, because rural women's history is but a part of its wider historical milieu, it views the mutually constitutive interplay between structure and agency as essential to understanding the how and why of rural women's changing agricultural participation. Social, economic, political and ideological structures at work in the two cultures studied defined the particular world and determined the choices of English and southern African American rural women, even as their individual diversity of circumstance and interest informed their interaction with their situations. But this work attempts not only two case studies, but also seeks to draw a transatlantic comparison, which makes for yet messier history. However, it makes for more revealing history. The comparison opens a window on to the differential effects of nineteenth century embourgeoisement on English working class and on African American Freed women. And by broadening the prospect, it highlights the constructed nature of the gender division of labour and reveals its economic, class and racial foundations, in this case in agriculture.
CHAPTER ONE: ENGLAND: Defining the Real.

In nineteenth century England, there remained tens of thousands of women who worked in the fields as day labourers - often casual, mostly seasonal, occasionally regular. Over the course of the century their numbers dwindled, until only handfuls of them continued to be employed in isolated pockets across the country by the turn of the century. By 1900 agricultural labour was male in fact and in image. The gradual disappearance of women and children from the fields reinforced, if it did not create, the view of agricultural work as quintessentially masculine: muscular, mucky, sometimes skilled. It is on two interrelated issues that this study focuses: women's disappearance from the fields and the masculinizing of field labour. Over the years between 1800 and 1870, the gender division of labour in agriculture congealed, increasingly restricting women to more marginal work. Over the same period, within a historical context of social, economic, political and ideological flux, women's presence within the fields became a matter of public concern. Together these forces significantly determined rural women's work-lives, limiting and shaping their choices and their ability to choose; increasingly those constraints caused women to leave agricultural labour. While some rural women left waged field labour or never took it up, others, married and unmarried alike sought to stay on in the fields, if they could. Victorian respectability or domesticity did not beckon enticingly to all rural labouring women, nor could they all afford to assume its mantle, even were they married with a husband in the home.

The history of female agricultural day labour is an integral part of rural history as the rural world was and is an integral part of the wider social world. The socio-economic and cultural changes attendant on the industrial and agricultural revolutions shaped the lives of women as much as they did those of men, rural as well as urban. Some of the effects of those
transformations constructed the context within which English female agricultural day labour declined. It is, therefore, necessary to first understand something of that broader historical context before turning to the work-lives of the women themselves.

Between the 1750s and 1850s, Britain was in the midst of a social, economic and political transformation as industrialization urbanized the expanding population and class divisions rigidified and sharpened. Over the same period a gradually evolving and increasingly hegemonic gender discourse began to redefine women as physically and morally unsuited to waged outdoor manual labour. Whether in the factory, workshop or field, a recent phenomenon or a customary fact, women who laboured publicly (outdoors) embodied the threat of social disorder and displacement that those changes promised.\(^5^0\) Ensuring social stability seemed to necessitate the re-establishment of patriarchal control, in town and country alike. Beginning in the 1830s, governing elites and working class men sought protective legislation aimed at restricting women’s ability to work where and how they chose, reinforcing the redefinition of females as the domestic sex.\(^5^1\)

Already in rural areas, according to Snell and others, female field labour, local in extent, form and regularity, had begun to diminish in the mid-eighteenth century.\(^5^2\) The Napoleonic Wars, 1795-1815, had but temporarily obscured the trends which worked to reduce the scope and quantity of agricultural work for women: changing agricultural production techniques, an expanding rural population and growing rural male unemployment.\(^5^3\) From 1815 to the 1840s, agriculture experienced a long period of depression. The enclosure of commons, wastes and open fields was culminating; labourers were in over-supply.\(^5^4\) Farmers became “business calculators” more interested in ever rising profits and cutting costs, labour and poor rate, than in maintaining traditional social relations.\(^5^5\) Concerned about the worsening social relations and economic state of the countryside evidenced by rural militancy and rising parish assistance, Parliament initiated the first official inquiry into the state of the rural poor in 1832.\(^5^6\) Not until 1842 did Parliament establish the first official investigation devoted entirely to women (and children) in agricultural
employ. By that year, when the commissioners went out into the countryside, fewer women were working in the fields at a narrower range of jobs than twenty or more years earlier. K. D. M. Snell argues that the evidence for the south-eastern counties reveals that female field work shifted from a pattern shared with men to a divergent one which found them employed during “a less labour-intensive period of the year.” This fact taken together with an associated decline in their wages “implies” a downward trend in women’s field labour participation. This trend continued with women’s field labour becoming ever more marginal and vulnerable to economic and gender ideological change, as the evidence from those counties visited by the 1867 inquiry made clear.

Yet the very fact the governing elites deemed a second inquiry necessary demonstrates, that, in certain districts at least, women remained a noticeable and troubling presence in the fields. If we are to understand the changing gender division of rural labour and the near disappearance of female field labour, it is necessary to examine the connections between the broader social and economic changes and the development of gender ideology. The socio-economic transformations provoked by industrial and agricultural developments in turn produced protest and agitation among those worst affected. As urban and rural working men contested the effects on their work-lives of industrial capital’s transformation of the modes and relations of production, their rhetoric often took an increasingly gendered tone and content. The right of women to work outside the home, never firmly established, became a contentious and gendered issue across the class divide. Together these processes determined the limits of rural women’s ability to decide if, when, how and what work they would do, no matter what their personal preferences or circumstances.

The years between 1811 and 1842 produced some of the greatest urban and rural unrest and militant protest mainly by the labouring classes against an intransigently un-reformist government, the destruction of traditional ways of life, growing unemployment and the deepening of poverty caused by an emergent industrial and agricultural capitalism. Social chaos loomed as it had in the 1790s. The employing and ruling classes believed that the social upheaval caused by the changing social relations of production in urban and rural areas required the enforcement
of “social discipline” and a re-assertion of the social order. And, pace E. P. Thompson, it was a social discipline that often took on a gendered form; and when it seemed to their benefit, working class men were not above supporting, or pushing for, a social discipline which targeted working women.

In and around urban areas, particularly in the industrializing north, artisan and working class agitation, strikes and protest arose in 1811 with the Luddite machine breakings and surged regularly thereafter until 1842. Unlike their eighteenth century counterparts, who struggled against spinning being taken out the hands of both women and men in their cottage workshops, the Luddite stocking frame breakers sought to stop women’s employment at the frames. During this early industrializing period, working women became the focus of much male skilled worker resentment as apprenticeship rules relaxed and employers sought cheaper workers for machinery which needed fewer hands. After 1815, political reform zeal was strong in the industrializing north and not just among working class men - women too were publicly involved, as they were in strikes and protests throughout this period. In 1819, at St Peter’s Field in Manchester, a large peaceful meeting of the political reformers amassed; among them were considerable numbers of women, many representing their own Reform Clubs. They all sought the right “of political organiz[ing], the freedom of the press, and the freedom of public meeting” and inclusion in their own governance. The movement met with heavy governmental repression and collapsed. Again, in 1831, a working-class reform movement arose, agitating for suffrage. Many middle-class radicals soon joined its ranks, and quickly gained control of the movement. Seeking to defuse a potentially dangerous alliance between the middling and lower sorts, the Parliament passed Lord Grey’s Reform Bill, granting the middling sorts the franchise, in 1832. A perceived threat to the social order had been nipped in the bud and the ‘lower orders’ were now split into two opposing groups: the middle classes and the working classes.

In 1838, the Chartist movement emerged from the 1832 debacle; the movement pressed for the installation of the terms of its Charter - Parliamentary reform and universal suffrage. To
attract female support, some sections of the movement initially interpreted universal to include
women. But two years later, Chartism began to take a less gender egalitarian stance, when the
more conservative trades unions and short time committees became involved in Chartism and
brought to the movement their struggles for shorter hours and higher wages. From then on,
Chartists advocated a ‘male breadwinner’ wage and an end to women working outside the
home. Many among them believed that both were necessary for establishing working class
respectability, which was, as 1832 seemed to prove, essential for male suffrage. Chartist rhetoric
on the ‘male breadwinner’ wage grew ever more vociferous.

In their fight for higher wages for themselves and restricted hours for women, Chartist
men proved more than willing to denigrate women who worked in factories. Together, radical
reformers of all stripes had sung loudly about the pernicious effects of female factory work:
degraded women, dirty, uncomfortable homes, neglected children, idle or low paid men.
Chartists intended to persuade the governing classes that there were intimate connections between
the working men’s political exclusion, female factory work and their resulting degradation, and
the current social unrest. Few if any had listened to working class women who, in the 1830s,
challenged the right of men to determine their needs: “For thousands of females who are
employed in manufactories, who have no legitimate claim on any male relative for employment
or support....what is to become of them [if women are barred from working in factories]?” The
Chartist men shouting for a ‘breadwinner’ wage were even less inclined to pay attention to such
voices a decade later.

The summer of 1842 brought riots, strikes and protest marches across the nation. The
cotton workers’ leaders, who linked their exclusion from political power to their protracted
struggle over wages and prices, demanded implementation of the terms of their Charter as the
price of ending social unrest. But the violence of the summer’s agitations shocked Chartists and
elites alike; particularly ominous to both were the demeanour, language and militancy of the
women taking part. Their behaviour only seemed to confirm to many how work outside the
household so degraded and depraved females that they acted like men and thereby unsexed themselves. But, by pointing the finger of blame for their discontent on women's working outdoors, Chartists vitiated their political aims. Rather than concede any political ground, the government exploited the Chartists own linkage of women's out-door labour and degradation to the unrest, through the regulation of women's factory hours: in 1844 to twelve a day and then in 1847 to ten.

The rural world had been no less disturbed than the urban after the turn of the century. By 1800, small holding peasantry had all but disappeared, and an agricultural waged labour force had long been a feature of the English countryside. But not until the vast leap forward in the enclosure of commons, wastes and open fields, together with an increasingly industrialized farming and a rapidly expanding population, did the labourers all become utterly dependent upon the sale of their labour power. Enclosure, virtually completed by 1844, affected rural women more perhaps than men; it was they who had kept the cows and fowl on the wastes and gathered the firing on the commons; they too in customary right gleaned. Enclosers viewed such agricultural practices and customs as inefficient and conducive to idleness, pilfering and indiscipline. Women, whether wives, widows or spinsters, found that their subsistence activities had in many places disappeared with enclosure, while gleaning and wood-gathering were criminalized or restricted. And wage labour, depending upon the custom and development of the district, grew more seasonal, intermittent, or unavailable. Farming improvements and specialization increased, locally affecting labour requirements: in arable areas like East Yorkshire the seasonal need for labour grew, while in grazing districts like Derbyshire, the numbers needed fell. Generally, where farming intensified, labour needs rose. But those needs did not always translate into more work for adult labourers, male or female, as children frequently filled the demand.

Before the 1830s it was still possible for writers to propose that families were better off when rural wives and mothers worked for wages in the fields. In an 1802 account of the condition
of the rural poor, an author advocated the re-creation of older farming techniques to provide work for women and children:

If this mode of cultivation [hand dibbling and setting of wheat] were adopted in every kind of land, to which it is suited... [it would] give healthful and satisfactory occupation, and means of subsistence, to thousands of women and children, at the dead season of the year, when there is general want of employment... [emphasis in original] It is at this period that most women and children...become a burthen upon the father of the family, and in many cases upon the parish. The wife is no longer able to contribute her share towards the weekly expenses, unless (which is seldom the case) she has any peculiar skill in knitting, spinning [on the verge of extinction as a domestic industry] or sewing... she sits down... conscious of rendering no other service to her husband, except that of the mere care of his family.91

This excerpt illuminates how women and ‘women’s’ work were associated with redundant farming practices. It foreshadows the hardening of the gender boundaries of farm work, when working with machines would be considered ‘men’s’ work, while ‘women’s’ work remained confined to ever more ancillary, marginal, hand labour tasks. It also reveals that, in the early 1800s, married mothers of the labouring poor were, like single women, expected to work for wages, and that, when available, field work was considered suitable employment for them.

Within a couple of decades these assumptions would begin to fade.

Farm service, once a significant section of the farm labour force, began its decline in the 1820s, except in the northern counties of England, and by the 1850s was rare in most southern and eastern counties.92 Farm servants, usually young and unmarried women and men, had traditionally contracted to work for a year for board, lodging and wages (not usually paid until the end of the term). By the 1830s, farmers had largely stopped this practice. Enclosure had both reduced the impetus to hire servants and created a large reserve army of wage dependent labour.93

Waged day labourers came cheaply.94 As William Cobbett wrote:

Why do not farmers now feed and lodge their workpeople as they did formerly? Because they cannot keep them on so little as they give them in wages. This is the real cause of the change.95

The size of the poor rates was also at stake; servants on year long contracts gained settlement rights where they worked - a further incentive for farmers to discontinue the practice.96 By 1846,
the practice of hiring farm servants was much less common, as the American agriculturist, Henry Colman, touring the English countryside, noted:

The farm laborers... rarely, as with us, live in the house of their employers, but either in cottages on the farm or in a neighboring village... The cash wages paid to them seldom equals the cash wages paid to the laborers with us, and our laborers in addition to their wages have their board; but the English laborers are obliged to subsist themselves.97

Whether women and men were similarly affected by the reduction in farm service contracts is as unclear from the census data as from the literature.98 The censuses from 1841 not only do not illuminate with anything approaching precision “the economic participation rates of [rural] women,” but they also muddy the picture on female farm service completely.99 The census compilers tended to categorize general farm service as domestic service when women were the servants.100 So, too, years later, did some clergy and farmers respondents to the 1867 Commission speak of farm service, by women, as domestic service.101

A worsening labour and wage situation combined with that of falling relief to compound the miserable condition of the rural poor. The flooded labour market was a buyers’ market; work became casual, seasonal and low paid. Famine loomed.102 Wage rates also became tied to poor relief allowances under the various similar systems, all loosely referred to by the name of the most famous one set up at Speenhamland, Berkshire.103 Speenhamland was the farmers’ solution to two potential problems: social disorder and the need for higher wage rates.104 In a period of great unrest and upheaval, it acted as a means of social control, keeping the administration of relief in the hands of local elites, expunging the labourers’ incentive to move away from their parishes and denying the labourers the right to combine in their own interest; and it ensured that agricultural wage rates would not rise.105 Under Speenhamland the labouring families whose incomes “fell below subsistence” were subsidised from the poor rates.106 Unsurprisingly, farmers took advantage of this fact. In a vicious spiral, wages and poor relief plummeted hand in hand, as farmers paid ever lower wages, reckoning on the subsidies to make up the difference even as they, as rate payers, sought continually to cut relief allowances in order to reduce rising poor
rates. The system was neither based on the notion of a "breadwinner wage," nor on beliefs about female dependency; on the contrary, it assumed that among the labouring poor, women, married and unmarried alike, would work in their own support. But its premise that married men with large families should have their meagre wages supplemented with allowances for their children nonetheless foreshadowed future correlations between men's wages, 'their' family responsibilities, and thus men's superior right to work.

Whatever its original intentions, by the early decades of the nineteenth century Speenhamland, in the hands of farmers, had reduced the rural labouring population to starvation. Un- and under-employment had risen, particularly among male labourers. The rural labouring poor exploded in angry revolt in 1830. Agricultural labourers sought to regain the old, paternalist, social structure and the restoration of "their rights within it." As an additional rub, the threshing machine threatened what was for general farm labourers their only winter-time employment. Threshing machines were symbolic of their reduced state and the changed socio-economic order. Concerted acts of incendiaryism, threshing-machine wrecking, the distribution of threatening letters (from 'Captain Swing'), an occasional livestock maiming, much theft and poaching across the south-eastern counties made abundantly clear the discontent and disaffection of the agricultural work force. Not only male workers rebelled, as is demonstrated by some twenty females having been prosecuted for their actions against landowners' property. But the revolt failed. Incendiaryism, a rural form of protest with a long history in England and elsewhere, continued sporadically. Even by the 1850s "incendiary fires [we]re said to be of almost nightly occurrence in... [Cambridgeshire] and the adjoining part of Huntingdonshire."

Before the mid-century, however, rural matters seemed only to deteriorate further. Following the 1832 Reform Bill, which had opened the electorate to the middling classes, a newly invigorated Parliament brought in the New Poor Law in 1834. A hybrid piece of Benthamite utilitarianism and evangelical Christian conviction (inspired by Malthus), this revamped poor law sought to rationalize poor relief, reduce its costs and prove a punitive
deterrent to all who would apply. Its basic premise, less eligibility, ensured that wages would remain low; for, under its standard, any relief granted had to be less than the lowest wage a labourer could earn. The makers of the New Poor Law primarily sought to reduce the poor rates whilst also re-constructing the labouring classes as industrious, virtuous and economically independent but deferential workers. Much of the law’s focus was upon the rural poor where a rapidly growing population raised middle class concern about ‘improvident’ marriages. Desirous of instilling virtue into the demoralized poor and regarding women as responsible for morality, the New Poor Law commissioners intended to punitively deter working class women from extra marital sex and the ease with which they married following such activity. Furthermore, an unwed mother’s bastard should be “what Providence appears to have ordained... a burthen on its mother, and, where she cannot maintain it, on her parents.”

The single working-class woman, lacking either husband or father, was to work; any dependents she had were hers to support. Because Edwin Chadwick, one of the leading utilitarian authors of the New Poor Law, recognized that field working women could not live on their earnings, he advocated that their wages be raised rather than be subsidized by poor relief. Local officials baulked. Like “Tory radicals and trade unionists,” they tended to view women as dependents of men and not as wage earners in their own right; a view reflected in women’s wage rates, which were usually about one-half to three-fifths the male rate. Chadwick’s intentions foundered on the shoals of a gender ideology shared by men unwilling to legitimize women as workers. Women’s right to work was not to be established by the New Poor Law; nor was the law to underwrite their economic independence, whatever its sexual double standard strictures on their social obligations.

Amidst the social disturbances of the 1830s and early 1840s, “the anxious rulers of a rapidly changing society” set up “frequent social investigations” into the work and lives of the lower orders. The governing classes constantly tested the pulse of that part of the nation most distant from and foreign to themselves, but upon whose sweat and quiescence their prosperity and
security rested. The issue which perturbed them most was that of female outdoor manual labour: not only did women field workers degrade themselves, but they destabilized society by taking men’s jobs and inciting men to mischief. As the men appointed to discover the state of things industrial and agricultural ventured into the hinterland among the natives, time and again they found the wage-earning activities of women to be of dubious social, moral or domestic virtue or worth. They did so, for example, in 1833 and 1841, when, as Parliamentary commissioners, their original mandate was to inquire, respectively, into child labour in factories and in mines. The former enquiry resulted in the 1833 Factory Act, which restricted children’s hours; the latter produced the 1842 legislation banning women and children working underground in mines. In 1842 the men sent out by Parliament turned their eyes towards the countryside and the labour of poor women within it. The 1843 Report of Special Assistant...on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture formed part of an ongoing interrogation into working-class women’s publicly performed waged activities. It foreshadowed the far more extensive investigation of the work-life behaviours of women and children conducted over four years beginning with the 1867 First Report to the Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture.

The two documents resulting from those inquiries, official and riddled with class prejudice though they are, contain the recorded thoughts and responses, verbal and written, of individual members of the rural population. The greater number of these respondents were local medical, commercial and cultural elites. But these sources also significantly document the responses of individual members of the rural labouring poor, importantly including those of a number of the women, mostly labourers’ wives. It is the presence of these women’s voices which makes these documents unique. For these reasons alone the usefulness of the Reports of the inquiries far outweighs their problems. Using both documents further illuminates their utility: together they reveal both how the field jobs that women did and how the attitudes towards their field work changed over time.
The 1843 Report comprised the investigations of four commissioners, each of whom spent thirty days in three or four contiguous counties. While the commissioners paid attention to testimony regarding the living conditions of the agricultural poor, they adhered to their main focus rather than expand into other, perhaps more tendentious, areas. As indeed, one of them, Mr Austin, suggested, some questions, however helpful their answers might be to further elucidate the state of rural women, were beyond their remit: “[t]he condition of women’s working at agricultural labour...depends upon the general means of living of the labourer; and that without an inquiry into this extensive and difficult subject, it is clear that their physical condition cannot properly be understood.” The commission was specific: to discover what work rural women (and children) were doing, and how it affected them physically, morally and domestically. And as the commissioners found, in many districts, in 1842, women were still going out into the fields, albeit mostly seasonally and casually.

What kinds of field work were the women doing? What were they thought capable of by the respondents, commissioners and the women themselves? The commissioner sent to the south-east, Mr Vaughan, found that local “[c]ustom” played a great part in what was understood as being within ‘women’s’ capability. The hop-growing counties of Kent, Surrey and Sussex provide good examples of how labour was customarily divided by gender: “At Maidstone... the woman opens the hills and the man cuts the plants; at Farnham the man opens the hills and the woman cuts the plants.” In each place, the job that the man did was seen as too heavy for the woman, whilst her task, whether opening or cutting of hills, was viewed as less demanding. So, in Tunbridge women would “assist in reaping” when the work was done with sickles, but if done by bagging hook, then the women “tie... the corn into sheaves.” Yet in Dorking, Surrey, “women and boys do the bagging-hook work as much as they do the reaping work.” (Reaping the corn referred to use of the sickle to cut the ripened wheat, barley or oats.) The bagging hook, like the larger scythe, was more usually deemed too heavy for women; however, even the scythe was used by some women to mow hay on the occasional farm. The same farmer who employed
women to mow (term used for scythe work) the hay, did not, however, believe women were "strong enough" to bind the sheaves of corn; that work required men's 'strength.' Elsewhere in the same region and across the country by the 1840s, fewer women were to be found reaping and shearing (another term for cutting ripened corn) at harvest time. Instead, women and children had generally become the gatherers, binders and gleaners. Nevertheless, even in the 1860s, it was still possible to find a few female reapers. Diarist A. J. Munby met with some in southern counties, especially Sussex. He quoted one in his diary: "there's many women, she said, and girls too, married and unmarried, that works afield about here: hoeing, & couching, and reaping with the sickle: she can reap & does."

The tasks constituting the "ordinary labour of women" in the fields differed according to local custom, but was almost everywhere understood to be "the lightest known to agriculture." Adjacent districts, or villages, would habitually perceive the same task differently, with one assigning it to men and the other to women and thus would classify the task as either heavy or light work depending upon which gender designation it had. No matter what the job - if women performed it customarily, it was cast as light(er) work than that which men habitually did. Nevertheless, when women could not be got for the work, or too many married men were unemployed, then men would be taken on for such work, as James Caird, agriculturist and Parliamentarian, noted of Lancashire, outside the Fylde:

Women are seldom employed in the fields at hoeing or other light work, there being better payment for them in-doors at the factories. It is necessary, therefore, to employ men in this county in many operations for which women or boys are found competent in other districts.

In most districts where women worked in the fields, their commonest tasks comprised hoeing and singling, weeding, stone-picking, turnip or swede pulling, potato digging and picking and hay and corn harvests. The 1843 Report's evidence suggests that, depending on the district and the locale within it, the work women typically did could expand to include hop-ground work, fruit picking, milking, picking and carting cockles and mussels (for manure), assist at threshing,
or could contract to nothing but gleaning (where farmers permitted). Yet females occasionally performed work that was considered the preserve of masculinity: they filled dung carts, beat and spread dung, and ploughed. In 1843, neither commissioners nor their inquiry respondents made much of women working with dung and precious little about their work with horses. By the 1867 inquiry, matters had changed, as will be discussed later.

In the 1820s and 1830s, in Devon, as commissioner Austin discovered, young female farm apprentices had led or driven ploughing teams. Mary Puddicombe, 41 years, and Jane Bowden, 30 years, of Exeter, used, as girls, to “lead...horses... to plough” (Puddicombe also led bullocks), while Mary Rendall, 41 years, also of Exeter, “used to drive the plough.” It is likely that female ploughing had always been a local phenomenon, restricted to peculiar areas of the country. George Moxey, Devonshire farm labourer, had witnessed a few in his time but clearly thought it wrong: “I should think driving plough too hard work for women, but I have seen them do it.” Similar employment of young boys to lead or drive ploughs, harrows and carts, however, raised very little complaint amongst the inquiry’s respondents.

If young lads and young girls could be and were expected to do such jobs, on what grounds, beyond the ideological, has the historical perception been based that work like horse-drawn ploughing required mature masculine strength? To argue, as Olwen Hufton has, that biology not ideology prevented women from driving a horse-drawn plough because “[n]o one, for example, could plough a five-inch furrow in a condition of advanced pregnancy or even early pregnancy,” is to accept the ideological correlation that men’s jobs require superior strength because men do them. Such an argument ignores the evidence that at times and in some places females across a spectrum of ages and conditions have driven horse-drawn ploughs. And because it ties all labouring women to pregnancy, the argument obscures the different conditions and circumstances of individual rural women, who were not all married or always pregnant. Pregnancy does not explain why before the 1840s some females were employed at the plough yet afterwards no women were recorded as so employed. Females clearly could plough and some
of the other farm work they did, like digging and shovelling manure, surely required similar or more physical strength than did driving the plough. Ploughing was an agricultural specialism for men and as such brought higher wages and status; outside the dairy, female agricultural labourers were not employed as specialists. Women who ploughed did so as general farm labourers or servants, not as specialists. While female ploughing may never have been widespread nor involved large numbers, its demise was surely a symbol of the crystallizing of the gender division of labour and of the shrinking variety of field work available to women.

Female field work as outdoor casual employment had become problematic as the commissioning of the inquiry itself reveals. Were female agricultural labourers competitors for men’s work or were they only performing tasks that could readily be dispensed with?

Commissioners Austin and Vaughan considered it necessary to assure the public that

the work performed by women in farming is not the kind of work which it would answer to employ men upon; the employment of women, therefore, has not superseded that of men in any degree that I could discover. During the war, women were employed in greater numbers than at present in some districts, but they made way for the men immediately at the peace.

The work...of women...when directly hired [important proviso] is not generally a substitute for the necessary labour of men, but is supplemental to it...It consists frequently, though not universally, in acts of neatness and economy, which might be dispensed with altogether.

And as in south and west so in Suffolk, where as a respondent to commissioner Mr Denison noted: women do “a little weeding; occasional labour in hay-time; gleaning at harvest”; elsewhere in the same county they might also pick a few stones, hoe a bit and “drop... corn.” Only in Northumberland were women farm labourers - bondagers - considered “an important part” of farming. Outside of that county, only in localized areas were women found to be employed as regularly in the fields; and unlike the “women who worked the bondage” most of them were looked on as rather more dispensable if their work proved uneconomical.

However, the commissioners did present evidence that women, no matter what they were doing on the fields could, in times of high unemployment, be viewed as taking ‘men’s’ jobs. The year of the inquiry, 1842, was one of agricultural depression, and work was hard to find in some
districts. In Wiltshire, a vicar told of the “want of employment” that was “pressing at th[at] moment, and ha[d] been pressing for the last 18 or 20 months... this pressure cease[d] to be occasional, - it [was] continuous.” And in Somerset, a farmer said that women are not so much employed as formerly; men are more employed. Old men are employed in weeding [throughout the country usually a woman’s work]; this perhaps may be partly to keep the able-bodied labourers off the rates; and the increasing population is an inducement for men to work at anything.

In the south west, where jobs were scarce and poverty widespread, men were employed before women and the men would even do ‘women’s’ work. Only widows were considered needful of employment. For most rural women, whether single or married, their opportunity to work in the fields might well depend on the rate of male unemployment in a given district. Not only the gendered structure of work, but also that of the Poor Law influenced the decision to employ men before women, in part because the latter’s wages were, on average, half those of men.

Women’s labour might be cheaper but that afforded little incentive to the farmer as it might prove a dear substitute for men’s if the women were married and had children. In that case the families would certainly have to be given poor relief. The gendered differential attribution of the physical strength requirements of agricultural jobs helped to mystify an underlying economic advantage:

there seems to be no perceptible encroachment of this means of cultivation upon the ordinary proportion of adult workmen...besides... [the] heavy social burden...on the occupier of the soil if he were to supplant the adult male by the child or woman...on the cold and stiff lands of this district... the application of the weaker labour for the stronger would be... inexpedient or impossible.

Presumably single women with or without dependents had to find other means of employment.

The commissioners next turned to the all important questions of field labour’s effects on women’s physical, moral and domestic fibre. Overall, the tenor of their evidence is positive: field work was generally healthful, and their preparation for, or their completion of, domestic duties generally unharmed by it. Elite respondents - medical officers, most farmers, and vicars - agreed with the physical health assessment of a Dr Greenup, of Wiltshire, if not his conclusions:

[Women] are occasionally employed in work which I think fitter for men; but I have seen no ill effects from it...I think the employment very healthy...Here the poor do not suffer from work; the diseases I see arise almost all from want of proper food and clothing.
Even pregnant women, one surgeon believed, were uninjured by the work; he had known of “four or five” cases of pregnant women falling down in the fields but without serious result. Some women, all married, also expressed positive opinions about the salubrious effects of field work on their health, both mental and physical. A few declared their preference for field work to being at home, and others compared it favourably to working either in a factory or in cottage industry:

I am now in my fifty-seventh year, and have worked two-and-twenty years in the fields; I am always better when out at work, and prefer it to living at home.
I am 35...I am married and have had several children. I never found the work hurt me, but was always better when I was out in the fields at work. I used to make buttons before I went out to work in the fields. I was much better in health when working out of doors than when buttoning.
I have worked in the fields a great deal, many years. I was always rather the better for it. I think digging potatoes is the hardest work, but it is better paid. I would go out now if there was work to do. I like it.

Other women expressed more ambivalence over field work: guilt over leaving their children at home untended, or belief that there was little economic gain, yet acknowledging that necessity and personal desire drove them to work in the fields:

I was always better when out at work in the fields...I think it is a much better thing for mothers to be at home with their children...I have always left my children to themselves...but they [mothers] must work.
I...have worked all [my married life]...the fields in the spring, and at haymaking and harvest...sometimes the children prevented me from going out....I do not think a great deal is got by a mother of a family going out to work...she has to hire a girl...there is a great waste of victuals...and...working in the fields makes people eat so much more...generally I am better in health when I am out at work.

Of the women interviewed, only one was a widow, and none were unmarried. It is, therefore, difficult to gain direct impressions about how single women, young or old, viewed field work.

Indirect evidence suggests that some of them, especially young women, were willing to forgo higher wages in domestic service for the greater freedom and fixed hours attendant on farm day labour. Certainly, several respondents believed that young women preferred field work to in-door work: “I am sorry to say that out-door work is much preferred to in-door by girls above 15”; [field work is] “generally preferred because there is less restraint.” The choice was not always theirs to make. Parents determined, from the limited possibilities in their district, whether their young daughters went out to service, learnt lace-making or straw-plaiting, stayed at home to look
after the younger children, or went into the fields. At least one minister thought labouring parents were not only derelict in their duties but also incapable because inadequate:

not only do not [such parents] exercise their parental authority, but do not even possess it. Ignorant and vicious themselves, what notion of parental duties can they have? When young women themselves were old enough to choose for themselves the possibilities were no less constrained, this time by farmers, local farming practices, local custom, agricultural unemployment and alternative work.

Widows and older spinsters, however many or few there were, had little choice, no matter what their preference, but to go out into the fields in districts where no better paying alternative existed. And across the twelve counties visited alternatives to field work were scarce by the 1840s: some lace-making in Devon, a little button-making in Dorset, occasional glove-making and dress-making in Yorkshire. With the loss of spinning to the mills, women had few options outside of agricultural labour, especially in East Anglia, and that at a time when the opportunities for them to enter farm work were diminishing. Yorkshire bluntness put the matter succinctly: where there was no work but in the fields, and that insufficient, then “[t]hey are very glad to work [on farms] when employment can be had.” Washing and charring presented, in different places, something of an alternative to field work; and if it paid better and provided meals, then it might be preferred, as one Yorkshire respondent remarked. But even the lure of extra pay and food did not always serve to attract some women from field work because the latter meant shorter, fixed hours and an opportunity to work with other women. And more troubling to their social superiors in parts of Yorkshire but more significantly in East Anglia, were those young labouring women who, habituated to field work at an early age, then preferred it to domestic service.

A bad thing for women; there is difficulty in getting them to go to service. They dislike the confinement of it...

Girls seem to prefer field-work to household-work because they have greater liberty, and are not constrained in the evening hours, and particularly on a Sunday. It works much mischief; for in consequence of the great liberty they enjoy in the field they prefer it...

Respondents among the better sorts held mixed opinions about the effects of field work upon female morals. Most northern respondents concluded that agricultural labouring women’s
morals were generally good, field work even being viewed by a few as beneficial; in that region
idleness was perceived as far more deleterious to female moral health than any sort of farm work,
including dung spreading. Thus the Rev. Wyneard explained to commissioner, Sir Francis Doyle:
“Where there is no employment, I consider the effects bad, both on moral and social habits.”
Reporting on the south west, Austin concluded that “no very apparent effects upon the morality of
women” came from habitually working in the fields. Because their motives were often
“meritorious,” working as they did “from the sole desire of increasing the means of subsistence of
the family,” the women could not be immoral to any greater degree than others of their class.
He believed that poverty and especially inadequate housing were the main culprits in effecting the
immorality to be found among the agricultural labouring classes. Down among the hop-
grounds and corn fields, Vaughan found divergent opinions, one proffered by the employing and
other elites, two by the labouring classes. The former believed that it was not so much the out-
door work which degraded as that only women of “doubtful character” entered field labour, for
want of acceptance into other, more respectable employment. Among the labourers, opinions
were split between a majority who considered the married woman who went “a-field” to be
provident and acting on behalf of her family rather than neglectful of her domestic duties, and a
minority who believed that when women worked out-doors they were “destroying the home of
the poor man and converting it into a mere covert of nightly shelter.”

Respondents of the better sort in East Anglia, however, tended to more censoriousness, as
Denison discovered. The opinions expressed ranged from the belief that field work’s “moral and
social [results were] prostitution and unfitness for wives and mothers or domestic servants” to the
belief that it was “the want of employment...complete idleness...that increase[d] the bastardy
list.” Most of the farmers, vicars and poor law officials, however, believed field work among
young women between the ages of 15 to 20 to be the most deleterious because it made them
unsuitable for domestic service. Field work not only offered greater freedom after work and less
constraint during it, it also mixed them promiscuously with men, making them “impudent,”
"loose," "immoral in their language and conduct" and "coarse."

And when married they tended to neglect their homes and children and could not cook.

While there were those who considered women working at home as lace makers and straw plaiters more immoral and unchaste than field workers and quite as undomesticated, others viewed the women who stayed within doors as "better behaved" than those engaged in outdoor employment. To these respondents, women, whether single or married, who stayed in-doors made better wives, were more religious, and "apparently of a superior class" to "those who labour in the fields.

The better class of male farm labourer probably thought so too.

Although the object of investigation, female agricultural labour in 1842 did not provoke calls for legislative restriction amongst those questioned, nor did the resulting Report raise much interest once published. Women continued to labour in the fields around the country, albeit in declining numbers, at work that observers increasingly found unsuitable to female propriety. The American Colman noted their ubiquitous presence in the fields and was appalled by what he saw, convinced that physically dirty work irreparably contaminated the morality and respectability of the women doing it:

In all parts of the country, women are more or less employed on the farms and in some parts in large numbers; I have frequently counted thirty, fifty and many more in a field at a time... hewing turnips and...harvesting. I have found them likewise engaged in...pulling weeds...picking stones...unloading and treading corn...tending threshing-machines...in digging potatoes...pulling and topping turnips...tending cattle...leading out dung and carrying limestone...Indeed there is hardly any menial service to which they are not accustomed; and all notions of their sex seem out of the question wherever their labor is wanted or can be applied...the natural effect of such employment upon women is to render them negligent of their persons and squalid and dirty in their appearance; and with this neglect of person, they cease to be treated with any deference by the other sex and lose all respect for themselves. Personal neglect and uncleanliness are followed by their almost invariable concomitants, mental and moral impurity and degradation.

Such farm work as women performed did not excite public attention again until the later 1860s, serendipitously coincident with Benjamin Disraeli's push for a widening of the franchise (male) through a second Reform Bill, which Parliament enacted in 1867.

Between the 1840s and 1850s, with the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, the enactment and enforcement of the Ten Hour Bill in 1847, and the defeat of the last gasp of Chartism in
1848, class relations were relatively quiet, aside from the sporadic incendiaryism in the countryside. Legislation restricting women’s freedom to work where and when they would and poor law officials’ growing tendency to define single women as dependent helped to reassert a gender order weakened by economic and social change. Trade union unrest revived in the late 1850s, interestingly, during a period of rising wages rather than the falling ones of the 1840s and early 1850s. One union aim was a nine-hour work-day. The cotton workers enjoyed no success until the passage of the 1874 Factory and Workshop Act, again officially shortening the working hours of women and children and indirectly those of men. Each such piece of protective legislation effectively denied the right of women to decide to work when and as they might. The public rhetoric of the unions seeking a shorter work-day at mid-century took a new twist. Contrary to their earlier position that factory work sexually degraded women, they began to link such publicly performed out-door labour by women to maternal neglect. Union rhetoric formed part of a new cultural discourse on women, work and motherhood.

This discourse itself developed at a time of challenges to fundamental structures of the gender order: the marital relationship and the gender division of labour. From the 1850s, working women’s economic agency and middle class calls for legal, social and cultural changes to improve the status of and opportunities for women “threatened to un hinge the symbolic equation between sexual order and social order” by challenging coverture. C overture was the legal condition of married women, in which their existence at law was null, being subsumed into that of the husband. This dependent condition of married women shaped the lives of all women, legally, economically and culturally. Popular and scientific thought in the nineteenth century increasingly viewed women as the procreative sex; women were mothers - potential or actual. This ‘natural’ life role determined women’s social, legal and cultural status and value; it also formed the crucial ideological basis for the distinction between the sexes. Anything that disturbed the identification of women with maternity, “any behavior” by women “that deviated from the[ir
natural] function... as wife and mother," unsexed women, endangering the socially crucial distinction between the sexes.\textsuperscript{202}

Not only were working-class women raising the spectre of social and sexual disorder by their engagement in outdoor labour, but also women of the middle classes were increasingly intent on eroding the ‘natural’ gender order within marriage and elsewhere. They pressed for changes to the laws on divorce and married women’s property rights. Some feminists campaigned for the opening up of trades to women workers, an end to legislation curbing their employment activities, greater educational opportunities, and for women’s personal rights.\textsuperscript{203} To many across the class spectrum the gender order and thus the social order felt under great threat.\textsuperscript{204} Civilisation required the maintenance of sexual dissimilarity; nature demanded it, as Charles Evans, artisan, wrote in a pamphlet decrying women taking craftsmen’s jobs:

But if we observe the relative position of the sexes - not only artificially but naturally - not only in civilised life but among the savages we cannot fail to perceive that the harmony between the two exists not because they are alike, but because they are dissimilar...Each sex has its position assigned to it by nature, law, custom and usage. The proper sphere of woman’s labours is essentially domestic. In the discharge of duties connected with the home...the female portion of our working classes are provided with employment for which they and they alone are properly qualified by nature.\textsuperscript{205}

The creation of the social problem of the working mother, however, cannot be placed solely or even mostly on the shoulders of working men. Infant mortality blossomed into a significant cultural concern in 1862 with the publication of a Dr. Greenhow’s investigation into the condition of the children of working mothers in Lancashire.\textsuperscript{206} He decried the practice of leaving babies in the care of other women while the mother went into the mills because the babies got insufficient nutrition and, more important from his point of view, were “deprived of the warmth and comfort of their mothers’ bosom.”\textsuperscript{207} He and other medical officers considered working mothers responsible for the rise in infant mortality.\textsuperscript{208} They helped create a gendered discourse which stressed the links between womanhood and maternity and between women’s outdoor work and infant neglect and mortality.\textsuperscript{209} An infamous court case in the late 1860s in which
two women were tried for the murder of babies left in their care fomented sentiment against the working mother, and provoked an up-welling of public pressure for the protection of infants.210

Against this charged background, it is thus not too surprising that women's agricultural employment should be re-investigated; and more pointedly than ever, women's employment was linked in the inquiry to that of children. The impetus for the inquiry came in the wake of a Report, published in 1867, of an investigation by the Children's Employment Commission, itself a product of the growing concern over the expanding public gang system of farm labour in the eastern counties which had a high incidence of child employment.211 The resulting public outcry led to the constitution of a Royal Commission to examine not simply in what employments rural women and children were engaged, but also how such labour could be restricted or even prohibited. The introductory letter illuminates the tone of the investigation:

Is the labour of children, young persons and women in agriculture anywhere habitually, or in any places occasionally, of that excessive kind which was found to exist in the factories and workshops of the kingdom, and which justified the legislature in placing them under regulation in respect of hours of work...Does the employment of females in agriculture have an injurious effect upon their morals, or on their proper training for domestic duties?212

Such sentiment had largely been lacking in the earlier 1843 Report, and even the most outspoken antagonists to women's field labour had not called for its regulation or prohibition. By 1867, however, numerous people, across the class spectrum, expressed the desire to see some form of restriction placed on the field labour of girls and women.213 Outside of Northumberland, the voices across the countryside who viewed women's casual field labour with equanimity were drowned out by those who believed it corrosive of the gender and social order.

The six commissioners fanned out across fifteen, mostly eastern counties, from Northumberland to Sussex southward and from Norfolk to Gloucestershire westward.214 None of them could cover every parish in their assigned counties; instead they either selected those parishes they thought most typified the agricultural area or they picked the districts at random. However they chose where to visit, they sent questionnaires to various local officials and 'gentlemen of standing' and looked to "the best local advice" on whom to interview in person.215
Their class prejudices influenced how they weighed the evidence provided by the various respondents. They more frequently accepted the perspectives of respondents from the middle and upper classes to those put forward by members of the labouring classes. Thus Mr Culley, who visited Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire, considered “the most important evidence” to have come from local officials. Clearly, the commissioners generally felt more at ease speaking with the men of their own class and were more likely to trust their opinions, as commissioner the Rev. Fraser illuminates in his summary: “the Rev. Whitwell Elwyn...whose practical good sense is as conspicuous as his cultivated literary taste.” The Rev. Fraser also illuminates how alien the labouring classes could appear to those belonging to an (haut) bourgeois milieu:

The physical, social and educational condition of the labouring classes appeared to me to be low...in the wild tract of country...[Gloucestershire] there resides a population... wild and almost savage in their habits, who seem to lie out of the pale of civilisation...in which I had seen type after type of social life almost degraded to the level of barbarism.

Drawing on the responses given by local officials, landholders and clergy, the commissioners summarized local opinion on female field labour as being unsuitable on several counts, but only infrequently physically damaging. Mr Henley, commissioner at large in Northumberland and Durham, wrote in glowing terms of northern Northumberland women who are physically a splendid race; their strength is such that they can vie with the men carrying sacks of corn, and their [sic] seems to be no work in the fields which affects them injuriously, however hard it may appear.

The other commissioners admitted the general healthfulness of field work for women, but gave greater weight to the deleterious influences and effects of such employment on married and single females: to wit, demoralisation, degradation, maternal neglect and domestic ignorance. Mr Norman, commissioner in Northamptonshire, represented the wider view.

Although field work is not thought to be injurious to the health of women...it is considered to have a bad moral effect upon them. The mother of the family must neglect her children and her home duties, and her husband’s comforts cannot be attended to.

And Mr Portman, commissioner at large in Yorkshire and Cambridgeshire, asserted that while field work held no physical injury to single women and children, the married woman of child-bearing age was in greater danger - or rather her progeny were.
It has been stated that the constant stooping at work has pernicious effect and that the high rate of infant mortality which has been ascertained in the district of Howden and Goole is to be attributed in a great measure to this field labour.221

The correlation between the kinds of jobs that women did in the fields and infant mortality had not been made in the 1840s, nor was it made by every medical officer within the same district, even in 1867.222 Nor did most medical respondents make this connection; yet, at the time, the majority of women field workers across the country did very similar ‘stooping’ labour. However, several medical and clerical respondents remarked that leaving infants in the care of elderly female child-minders, who dosed them with opiates rather than feeding them, caused greater infant mortality.223 A Lincolnshire surgeon noted that among the infants whose mothers worked in the fields those in gravest danger were “[t]wins and [the] illegitimate [who] nearly always die.”224 His finding suggests the low nutritional condition of many rural working women. But unlike the commissioners for the 1843 Report, those of 1867 did not appear inclined to enquire into the diet of agricultural labouring families, much less raise the issue of rural women’s under- and malnourishment as it affected their ability to work, or to produce and raise healthy offspring.225 To inquire into the diet and food allocation habits of the rural poor would have been to establish the inadequacy of male agricultural wages to support a family.226 But, nutritional matters aside, there were surely women who, unable to prevent multiple pregnancies, would doubtless have allowed some of their infants to die; however, that subject is beyond the limits of this paper. What appears not to have been firmly established was that it was field work itself which caused infant mortality.227

Whereas in 1843 only comparatively few respondents had expressed disgust at female field labour and disparaged the morality of those engaged in it, by the 1860s the belief that field work degraded, even unsexed, females was widespread and no longer confined to the better sorts.228 Indeed, Henley’s report on the north-east stands out as the only one which wholeheartedly approved of the effects of agricultural labour on women, physically, morally and domestically.229 And even in that county he discovered several respondents who thought females
working with horses intolerable. Until the 1830s, the practice of employing females to work with horses existed beyond Northumberland, as the 1843 reveals about the youthful experiences of a few women in Devon. Again, for the late 1840s, there is Colman, that indefatigable American witness to barbaric English practices, who to his disgust observed women in charge of these quadrupeds:

I confess...that my gallantry has often been severely tried when I have seen them[women] at inns acting as ostlers, bringing out the horses and assisting in changing the coach team while the coachman went into to test the strength of the ale. 230

Furthermore, the 1867 Report itself reveals that adult women had been employed to drive horse-carts in Sussex until the early 1850s. 231 By the 1860s they did no longer. Despite the paucity of information, what can be deduced is that women’s working with horses had once been more widespread than it was in 1867. By then it seems to have been habitual only in northern Northumberland. 232

By 1867, however, various Englishmen, of high and low station, deplored women’s managing horses, particularly when with a cart or harrow attached. First, the views of a variety of male respondents in northern Northumberland:

Driving carts is the only work which might be considered unbecoming to women, but no labour is injurious to them.
As a general rule it is questionable whether women should be permitted to drive carts on the country roads.
The employment of [women] driving horses, turning manure heaps and carrying heavy loads is in my opinion injurious physically and morally.
[I] would prevent women working with carts, though [my] wife drives [my] cart to market every week and is an excellent coachman. 233

Women driving horse-carts or leading horses at harrow - the very idea appalled many. The attitude of one Lincolnshire farmer toward women and horse-work is apparent as he told of a local farmer who “employ[ed]... women to lead manure carts, and they will often ride astride the horses. He’s the only one who does that.” 234 The Sussex labouring women who used to drive horse carts lost that employment because “[t]he practice” had caused them physical and moral mischief. 235 Whilst a surgeon thought that females driving carts or harrows could lead to
accidents, other men simply objected on the grounds that managing horses was unsuitable for women. But not unsuitable for boys, or only perhaps for boys of 8 or 10 years of age, when it is alleged...a most dangerous employment and no doubt a considerable number of accidents have occurred...But...[t]he fact is that when a boy begins to work at all regularly on a farm he is accustomed to go amongst horses, gets used to their ways and when under the eye of anyone who can prevent careless habits, he is exposed to little danger.

And boys of 9 and 10 years were leading horses at plough and driving carts, driving ploughs at 14 years in several counties, if not in all.

Some men viewed working with horses as work “too heavy for” women. But the Northumberland women who drove the carts and harrows told Henley otherwise: “we fight to drive the carts, it is easier work than loading.” He was perspicacious enough to recognize that many of his middle and upper class respondents objected to this practice because rural working class women were transgressing class boundaries when they drove horses. They would not, he argued, challenge women

in a higher social position and of greater social rank...[who] drive horses in the highest condition in every description of carriage; and...few would be bold enough to suggest that they do not show as much science and nerve as many men, or to propose legislative interference.

Here Henley also hints at his awareness that gender transgressions were also involved when females controlled horses. Class and gender order, the overlapping divisions on which nineteenth century upper- and middle class society was built, were both challenged when women of the labouring poor took charge of horses, driving carts or ploughs.

Many also viewed dung work as “quite out of woman’s sphere.” Women working with dung epitomized the ultimate in field work’s degradation of females for elite and labouring men alike. Many women field workers in southern counties no longer handled dung; nevertheless the subject arose at a labourer’s meeting in Gloucestershire where the men asserted that dung-spreading was not “proper work” for women. The dung work that women did in earlier decades, which had not raised an eyebrow then, now provoked protests of its (gender) unsuitability. But, Henley argued, even though to male observers such labour seemed “unsuitable for women...it must be borne in mind that if such labour were not desired by the women” they
would not do it.243 His view was much too rational. Besides, taking that position meant leaving the decision about what they could and should do to the women themselves; hardly an appropriate course of action for a gender that was dependent by nature.

According to those who opposed it, simply going to work in the fields encouraged young women to become bold, liberty-loving, and independent.244 These were the attributes of masculinity, and elite masculinity at that; for young labouring women to display such characteristics, otherwise admirable among the proper gender and class groups, was more than disconcerting. As women and as labouring poor women, these young females were transgressing their 'natural' gender and class place in English society. That field work seemed to inculcate abnormal boldness among lower-class rural women had raised concerns amongst some of the better sorts in the 1840s.245 Such preoccupations had increased by the 1860s, if the numerous complaints recorded in the Report about young women continuing to choose fields over sculleries provide reliable evidence.246 A shepherd's wife, a woman with 14 children, expressed the fears of many of her betters when she linked the independent spirit of young female fieldworkers to social disorder:

It's the ruination of the country, girls going into the fields; they will make neither good wives nor good mothers...they get bold and wild and independent of their parents. Why, there's three of them joined together and took a home by themselves at Sedgeford, to be their own masters...247

Field work apparently did not sufficiently develop the complaisance and docility (to say nothing of the chastity) expected of females in general and domestic servants in particular. Girls who went into the fields before going out to service were ruined for servitude, not only by their demoralisation but also by having been introduced to a tempting alternative.248

Many across the class spectrum thought that there was more than enough to scandalize in females doing any sort of field work - aside from helping at hay time and corn harvest. Few, however, could beat the contradictory position of Rev. Overton in Lincolnshire:

I am certain that the only way to strike at the evils of fieldwork is to forbid all female labour in the fields...I'm against all girls working because they never make respectable servants afterwards...I
object to mothers because they ought to look after their children. But for all women it’s nasty, wet and demoralising work. Of course, I make an exception for hay and corn harvest. Others of his social rank shrilly condemned field working women as degraded:

I am astonished at the great amount of bastardy and immorality here...field work is the origin... Field work for women results in loss of self respect...tends to coarseness of manners, encourages strong passions, rough language and general loudness... It makes them bold, coarse, rude and wild... is destructive of all tidy, notable, housewifely ways...The girls are very depraved...the general employment of women in agriculture, excepting at hay-time and harvest...[is] bad for their morality.

Among the rural women were those who also thought that field work coarsened young girls, by introducing them to indecent language and ideas:

the fields...a bad place for girls...they hear coarse talk and get unfitted for service.
I hold with them that says it’s not good for girls to go.
Never sent a girl into the fields...doesn’t like it, there’s so much swearing and bad talk.

And there were those, of course, who declared that the women, young and old, who went out into the fields were “only the rough ones.”

A number of married women from the labouring poor thought married mothers should not go into the fields and that labouring men needed their wives at home:

where there’s a family a woman’s place is better at home.
Let the woman stop at home and manage for the family, it would be a great deal better than going out to work [this woman both took in sewing and went out to “gentlemen’s” houses to sew].

Elites were as concerned about field labour’s effects on women’s wifely and maternal behaviour:

I think the effect on the women themselves is bad, but it is still worse as regards their children who are badly neglected.
When mothers are much in the field, both their morals and those of their families, with home comforts for the husband, are likely to suffer.
Those employed are chiefly married women who neglect their families in pursuing outdoor operations. I would prohibit fieldwork to those women with families.

The 1867 Report reveals that the rural labouring poor also believed that female field work was linked to male unemployment. Even in districts where only a few women were engaged for field work, men complained about the practice. In such cases a few women appeared to be too many, as a labourer in Northamptonshire reveals:

A great many women work about here; it is a very bad thing. I have known 10 or 12 belonging to this parish at work at once...They might make hay and work in harvest, but twitching and weeding
may be done by men just as cheaply...I think the labour of women and girls should be stopped by
law. I have known them work when there are plenty of men to do the work.256

This opinion expressed the general view of many of the male agricultural workers, who were the
majority of the labouring poor voicing objections to female field labour.257 A few labourers’
wives weighed in on the subject of male unemployment and women working:

Women do more work than they did. The farmers get them for less wages. There’s often men out
of work. Many farmers don’t employ a man all the summer, not a labourer, only women...I’ve
known my husband to be five or six weeks without work. I don’t think wives ought to go out at
all. When a wife goes out they can’t put their victuals to the best.258

Only one male labourer admitted to the commissioners that he did not “know what widows could
do to support themselves unless they went out to farm-work.”259 Several landowners and vicars
also remarked on the hardship restrictions would cause widows and “old spinsters.”260

Of the labouring women who were interviewed and recorded, most did not offer any
opinion about men’s unemployment. Nor would all the women whose comments made it to the
1867 Report have necessarily accepted the ‘men first’ argument. Several believed that little was
won when women with children went out; nevertheless, some of those women worked in the
fields when they could, like a Mrs Pratt, who with “four young children”
goesto work; wants the money; though doubts when there is a young family whether there is any
real gain. If a woman can stay at home and cook a bit of warm victuals there would be more stay
in it for a man than cold bread. 261

Did Mrs Pratt express her own views or those of her husband or her betters? Did she prefer going
out to work, or did her husband insist on it? Other married women with children expressed less
uncertainty than she about the usefulness of their field work’s earnings for their families
survival.262 Labouring women at a labourers’ meeting in Gloucestershire voiced similar attitudes,
arguing that if their work was restricted their children would go to bed hungry.263 A female tenant
farmer employing women to hoe wheat “and the like” agreed: “I don’t see how these women
could live if they did not so work.”264 Members of local elites noted that there was no other
employment available to adult women in their districts, or that men’s wages were too low to
support a family:

42
If female labour were entirely restricted, many women could hardly exist, as there is no other employment for them.\textsuperscript{265} Considering the rate of wages of the labourers generally, I think it would be a great hardship to place any restrictions on the employment of females in this parish.\textsuperscript{266}

Necessary, yes, but in the opinion of Miss Boucherett, a feminist and landholder, field work for women:

\begin{quote}
\textit{is bad, unprofitable work but hunger is worse. They don’t go unless poverty drives to it...Where the husband drinks or the family is very numerous, they must do more or starve}.\textsuperscript{267}
\end{quote}

While Miss Boucherett showed compassion, she denied to women the capacity for finding pleasure and satisfaction in field work. Would she have said as much about men doing agricultural work? That some women might seek out farm labour does not seem to have occurred to her. Only one woman recorded in the Report expressed a forthright preference for fieldwork: she “is never so healthy as when she is out” and thus inclined to work in the fields.\textsuperscript{268} That other women found it health inducing, a labouring man makes clear: “If women are a little poorly about here, they usually say they would be better if they could get out into the fields.”\textsuperscript{269} Sometimes that preference was fuelled by the desire to earn more than was possible at available alternatives. In Buckinghamshire, a farmer said that women earned “twice the amount at field labour [as at straw plait or lace] and are very anxious to get work.”\textsuperscript{270} And indirect evidence suggests that a number of married women opted for the fields, even when their husbands earned a higher than average wage, and that others would have gone had they the chance:

\begin{quote}
I go clouting (knocking manure) to pick twitch and to hay harvest. No girls go and not many women. \textit{There isn’t enough work to let all go that would go.}
I work all the year, but not regular. I take my children to carrot weeding and corn and potato harvest...I get 1s a day or 14d for harvest [her husband earned 15s a week].
I weed and go harvesting, but I go with the threshing machines \textit{whenever I can}.\textsuperscript{271}
\end{quote}

Most counties had some districts where females, young or mature, engaged in some form of agricultural day labour. The numbers depended upon the district. In parts of the East Riding of Yorkshire, for example:

\begin{quote}
Nearly all the able-bodied women go to fieldwork, weeding, harvesting and pulling mangel and turnips.\textsuperscript{272}
\end{quote}
By contrast, in Essex and Sussex generally, very few women at all were employed in field work, whether “old or young, married or single.” Whatever the local numbers, across the counties visited the overall impression gained by the commissioners was one of declining numbers of women going out into the fields. And their respondents provided anecdotal evidence of some decline in women’s labour, even in Northumberland, where the bondager system had begun to die out. In Gloucestershire, “[w]omen are not employed... in this district...[as much as] 25 years ago”; even in Northamptonshire, where women’s farm employment was normally infrequent, “they are not...as much employed as they used to be” and fewer were so engaged daily.

Various respondents accounted for the decline in several ways: domestic service in nearby towns, alternative work opportunities, and higher male earnings. In Sussex, the growth of attractive towns like Brighton and Cheltenham created numerous job opportunities in domestic service, shops, hotels, for increasing numbers of young women. Among the rural labouring poor, some parents told the commissioners that they had sent their daughters into domestic service rather than let them go into field labour, though how representative they were of the rural poor is unclear. These parents were determined to get their daughters out of their hands young:

Never let a girl go out into the fields; has got them all out into service. Turned them out into the world early, at 14 years of age or so.
Never allowed her girls to go into the field...Has always got her children out [into service] by the time they were 13.

Alternative employment for females ran the gamut across the country, but was locally restricted. That is, rural women could be found, for example, working in paper mills, filling lime kilns, caning chairs, making lace, plaiting straw, frame-knitting stockings, sewing ready-made clothes (slop-work), taking in and going out washing, and going out charring, but in any one area, only one or two, if any, such alternatives existed. Among them all, lace-making and straw-plaiting elicited as much antipathy as fieldwork. For some these two occupations were worse than field labour because they were recognized as physically more injurious and no better on moral or domestic grounds:
Women are very seldom employed in agriculture here, they are in lacemaking which is very sad: girls work at lacemaking very long hours and cannot go to school, and when they go to service their hands are so cramped that they cannot use them properly.

Strawplaiting is accused by some witnesses of doing physical injuries to those who practice it...many [view it]...injurious to morals...The great want of chastity amongst the plait girls...Women...in the lace and plait districts are utterly ignorant of...keeping their house clean.280

The evidence regarding the effects of higher male earnings on women’s taking up available field work is conflicting. Sometimes, despite what, for agriculture labour, was a higher wage, women still went out into the fields, whether from necessity or preference remains uncertain. Large families could reduce the significance of a higher wage; not all husbands turned over their wages to their wives, as a surgeon in Lincolnshire observed: “wives often go out to work because their husbands are hard on them and won’t pay for things...They [the women] generally have control of their own earnings.”281 Whether a man gave over his wages or only a portion of them to his wife was a matter of both local and individual custom. Then again a wife’s decision to go out into the fields or to stay indoors with other paid employment or none would not have been her choice alone (or even one to make). Among the wives of agricultural labourers who either never went into field work or stopped doing so, it is probable that some were overtly discouraged by their husbands and fathers because of the perception that “the mere fact of the employment of the wife and children has a tendency to depress the wages of the husband.”282 One labourer told commissioner Fraser that he “never allowed his wife to go...they just take [the work] out of the hands of men.”283 And there were surely those farm labouring families who were establishing respectability, a status requiring that women not be seen outdoors as hired field labour.

Reports of a growing disinclination “on the part of the women...to go out to field work” because “the men [were] certain of constant and well paid employment” or “children [were] also in great demand” are juxtaposed with reports of farmers being unwilling to employ females.284 At times and in some places they replaced the women above 18 years of age with children, usually because the latter were cheaper and could “be got to begin work at six in the morning.”285 Elsewhere, for example East Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, the presence of Irish labourers deterred
some women from going out; and some farmers replaced local women (and men at times) with
Irish labour because it was cheaper. In other districts, custom of the country and landholder
attitude influenced the inclination of both women and farmers.

The extent to which women are employed in this district on farms is very inconsiderable.
They are not found to be inclined to go, and it is not the custom of the country to employ
them.

Several employers who disagreed with female field labour expressed their refusal to engage
women at all; most only took them on at harvest or hay-time.

In those areas of the country, generally the southern counties, where females were “not
couraged” to go on the land, a few farmers increasingly chose machinery to perform the tasks
elsewhere done by women. But even where the farmer considered field work suitable for
women, machinery was spreading, as one in North Yorkshire remarked:

The females...as a rule are steady and respectable...and I do not find that field work has any ...[ill]
effect upon their health or morals or training for domestic duties...Wages have been raised in the
district by the ironwork and the people are very well off. Though the wages are higher [costs are
not] because of the use of machinery...fewer extra hands are wanted at certain seasons.

Of course, those extra hands could also be men’s, especially when some of the machinery in
question included horse-drawn mowing machines and steam ploughs. And the fact that the
spread of machinery endangered the men’s ability to find agricultural work, would also have
reduced women’s freedom to choose field work. As commissioner Stanhope found, even in a
district where the newer machinery was less in evidence, large numbers of ‘hands’ found work,
and women commonly went into the fields, men’s right to work would be privileged over
women’s less secure one:

In the Isle of Axeholme [Lincolnshire], I found that some men were thrown out of regular work by
the women being employed. But as a rule they [the women] can only get work at times when all
the men have found plenty of employment.

And in parts of the country where their field labour “was discouraged,” even when women
 needed agricultural work, as in Essex when the straw plaiting market was flooded and rates were
too poor, they found that farmers did not want them: “Male labour [was] considered cheaper and
better.” Some Norfolk farmers gave as their reason for viewing women as dear labour that “the
women who go out into the fields [were] seldom...the best class of women and [they needed]...superintendence."294 Under such circumstances, the numbers of rural women, married and unmarried alike, finding agricultural labour would shrink, willy-nilly of their own preference.

According to Fraser in his survey of the counties of Sussex, Essex and Gloucester "not a fifth part of the number of women is employed... now that was employed upon them [the farms] 25 years ago."295 But changing agricultural practices complicate an overall depiction of declining female field labour. Machinery was not the engine of the vast growth in farm productivity; rather it had been hand labour intensively used.296 And what the farm produced could make a significant difference in the existence or not of employment opportunities for women. For instance, where potato growing expanded, as it did in parts of the East Riding of Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire, the numbers of women engaged in the fields could increase, or at least not decrease.297 Conversely, where small-holdings and sheep raising predominated, as in parts of North Yorkshire and Sussex respectively, the job opportunities for women were few and had grown scarcer over the decades since the 1843 Report.298 The cultivation of turnips (and mangolds and swedes) as fodder crops had increased female (and child) labour, most particularly in the eastern, fenland counties, where farmers sought a high level of soil cleanliness, necessitating the eradication of twitch. But even in this region there were districts, as already noted, where farmers, who once had been more than willing to employ women, were beginning to replace them with children or men.

Beyond the anecdotal evidence within the two Reports, matters become more localized and ambiguous. The more concrete data to be found in farm records seem to both confirm and yet raise doubts about the extent of the decline. The recent works of rural historians, using farm accounts, have revealed contradictory trends. While some of the accounts demonstrate a significant decrease, between 1860 and 1890, in the employment of women working in their own name in parts of the country as diverse as East Yorkshire, Norfolk, Cumbria and Somerset, others, sometimes in the same counties, show a less marked decline, or even an increase in female
labour, as in parts of Gloucestershire and the general Cotswolds region. The numbers of women involved may have been small, in part owing to the size of the populations examined, in part to the reality of there having been fewer regular field working women. The larger problem of the farm account books resides in what they do not reveal: those women, married and single, who worked in the fields but who were not the contractee and thus whose work went unrecorded. As respondents to the 1867 commissioners noted, husbands and fathers would contract with the farmer for work by the task or piece and the women would then work alongside their men-folk. Most prevalent during hay-time and harvest, it could also include hoeing, weeding and potato picking. But because the women had not contracted the work themselves, their labouring presence, recognized at the time, has been lost to the historical records.

The numbers of women employed to work regularly in the fields was probably never very large across the country as a whole. According to the 1851 Census of Great Britain, there were just under 200,000 females engaged as agricultural day labourers and farm servants, around 10 per cent of the agricultural labour force; but this figure would have included the numbers for Wales. But, as Higgs argues, these figures are unreliable; had the census enumerators counted “family activities rather than individuals” more of women’s gainful employment might have been captured and the numbers engaged in agricultural labour recognized as greater, if declining. He in fact considers it likely that female farm employment was under-enumerated by more than 100 per cent. If Higgs is right then the recorded decline in female field work reflected, at least initially, a reduction in women’s independent hiring rather than a straightforward and increasing reduction. Such a shift would in itself render female field work more vulnerable to changes in the agricultural economy and to the vagaries of social attitudes.

But even when all of the factors tending to obscure rural women’s continuing agricultural labour force participation are taken into consideration, the evidence nevertheless suggests a protracted and real decline in women’s independently contracted waged field labour throughout the later nineteenth century. There is little historiographical debate over the fact of
decline, in part because, by 1910-1920, only localized, scattered groups of women were hired for any field work. The question of why, of what produced the decline (not a cessation), remains a matter of interpretation, of emphasis.

This study has taken the view that agricultural labour history is an integral part of working class history. Because of this perspective, it has sought to place the problem of women’s field work into its working class historical context. The transformations in economic and social relations which were central to the process of industrialisation involved the agricultural as well as the manufacturing world; the evolution of gender ideology, impelled by both Enlightenment ideas and social change, shaped the lives and work of rural as well urban working women.

Numbers of rural women had, over the centuries, worked not only as farm servants but also as casual, seasonal, field labourers without too much ado. But the rise of the individual employment of unprecedented numbers of females in manufacturing, beyond the patriarchal control of their fathers and husbands, caused much consternation among both the middle classes and working class males. Under pressure from middle- and working-class Radical reformers, during the 1830s and 1840s, Parliament made several investigations into women’s industrial employment with a view to restricting it. It was in this politically and ideologically charged atmosphere that public attention focussed on female agricultural employment.

By the 1840s, when concerns about women’s publicly performed labour had come to include females at waged work in the fields, it was already undergoing change. What women did in the fields and when they would be employed there was now not only dictated by local ideas about gender, but also by the needs of industrial farming. An earlier relatively flexible, if locally particular, gender division of field labour had congealed into more rigid separation of agricultural tasks in most regions of the country. The result was that women became confined overwhelmingly to what were recognized by contemporaries as the economically vulnerable, low wage ‘stoop’ work of the farm. Their work, like that of their more urban sisters, also became increasingly exposed to further gender ideological developments. First, the jobs they did were
perceived to unsex them, to morally degrade and deprave them, and to make them ignorant of their proper domestic role; later in the century, to the belief in their sexual and moral degradation was added the concern that outdoor work caused maternal negligence which led to infant mortality. Denigrated as slatterns and sluts and ‘criminalized’ as negligent, even murderous, mothers, with fewer farmers willing to employ them and male farm labourers viewing them as illegitimate competition, the number of women who took agricultural work progressively diminished. Under such circumstances, it should hardly be surprising that many of them might never want to go work in the fields, or would stop doing so as soon as they could. For those women inclined to agricultural labour, these obstacles would prove increasingly insurmountable.

For historians Nicola Verdon and Joanna Bourke, however, the fundamental reason that women, represented as married mothers, left the fields (and other outdoor waged labour) was that they had become “less willing to undertake low-paid, low status, backbreaking labour.” Both historians understand this change as ultimately deriving from women’s new perception of their role as housewives and mothers, that is from the adoption of middle class gender norms, and not primarily from external circumstance. This emphasis on rural women’s volitional departure from field work downplays, even ignores, the very active part that working class men played in trying to restrict or prohibit any female non-domestic labour throughout much of the nineteenth century. Most of those activities involved industries other than agriculture; yet as the 1867 Report reveals, resentment toward female field labour had developed among some male farm labourers and a few of their wives. Several of the farm labourers called for prohibition of women’s field employment. Three years later, Joseph Arch, farm labourer, would establish a national union for agricultural labourers. One of its aims was the elimination of female agricultural labour, seen as undercutting and replacing male labour as well as destroying farm labourer families’ respectability. It is difficult to believe that the development of these attitudes among male agricultural workers, usually the husbands and fathers of female field workers, had no influence on rural women’s decisions about field work. The importance of the husband’s input
into the choices married women made is illuminated in a Report of 1893: “[t]he labourers themselves generally dislike the employment of women, but look upon it as a necessity, in order to meet the expenditure of the family.” The tenor of this evidence, albeit written by a member of the middle class, raises doubts about the ability of at least some married women to exercise any agency over the deployment of their labour.

Despite the emphasis on wives and mothers, not all rural adult women had husbands though probably most had children. Verdon herself indicates as much: in 1871, in England and Wales, the ratio of married women to widows, aged 20 years and over, was 3:2; of women between the ages of 20 to 24, only one-third had ever been married, between the ages of 24 to 35, two-thirds. In the same year the number of women who never married was 12.2 per cent. By 1911, 16 percent of women were permanently unmarried. The later 1870s saw a return to the pre-mid-century higher age at marriage and fewer marriages. Such figures are less surprising when it is realised that in England and Wales, by 1871, there were nearly a million more women than men (this sex ratio imbalance had been noticeable from 1841 onwards). These data are total numbers, but they indicate that a considerable proportion of adult women did not fit the representative housewife-mother, including some among the rural poor. And among the rural poor would have been deserted wives, with or without dependents, whose household did not match the idealized image. Whilst not the majority, adult women heads of households formed a sizeable minority whose needs and interests would have differed from and cannot be represented by those of married women. Various contemporaries recognized the import of these differences whenever calls for restrictions to or prohibition of women’s labour arose. Surely it behoves present day historians to at least recognize that not all of the rural women they seek to discuss had a (working) husband in the home.

Perhaps the majority among the married women may well have opted out of their own volition, as Verdon and Bourke argue, however much that voluntarism may have been compromised by their husbands’ culturally vested authority over their lives. Perhaps that
withdrawal indicated an acceptance of the Victorian domestic ideal by individual women, perhaps not. Most women of the rural labouring poor, akin to the majority of the men and women everywhere, would have made the best of the world available to them, converting necessity into virtue. For those without husbands the possibility, if limited, of perhaps less physically demanding work with higher pay in towns likely did lure many, especially the younger ones, away from a labour in which they found little tangible respect for their competence. But, as the evidence indicates, not all married women - and surely not deserted wives, widows or older spinsters - necessarily wanted to leave the fields. Some of them would have found a certain satisfaction and pleasure in the labour, despite the cultural refusal to recognize their skills, let alone their dignity. Notwithstanding the marginalization of their work, the rigid gender division of field tasks, and its continuing low pay and low status, some women, here and there, were still going out to work as seasonal and casual agricultural labourers, into the twentieth century. Inasmuch as any woman, married or single, could exercise personal agency in the nineteenth century, surely the women who remained behind at the hoe did so, at least as much as those who withdrew from the fields.
CHAPTER TWO: THE SOUTHERN UNITED STATES: *Defining the Real.*

In the southern states of America, women were to be found at work in the fields in the nineteenth century, as they had been since pre-Columbian times. Where once Native American women had tilled their corn and bean fields, colonial English female indentured servants worked alongside men at the task of raising that labour intensive cash crop, tobacco. Those English women who survived their term of servitude and married a planter “too poor to afford bound labor” would continue to work in the tobacco fields, beside their husbands. But seventeenth-century Chesapeake planters with sufficient means began to replace the English bound workforce with African slave labour, initially men only; then, within a few years, African women joined them in forced field work. By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, enslaved African American women composed the majority of the field slave labour force in the South; from the end of the Civil War, they would form a significant contingent in the day labour and sharecropping workforce.

This chapter focuses on African American women who laboured in the cotton, corn and rice fields as slaves and freedwomen in the nineteenth century South. The purpose is to comprehend how gender worked in a context of racial oppression, and how the two ideological structures combined to shape the work-lives of those women, in slavery and in freedom. While in many ways the work that African American women did as field workers was similar to that of female English day labourers, the circumstances under which they laboured differed radically, before, during and after the Civil War. Yet in both cases a gender division of labour which began as relatively flexible, became generally more rigidly demarcated over time. The mechanisms and structures which led to changes in the organization of agricultural production in the southern
states similarly served to obscure much of freedwomen’s continued farming contribution, even as that production required their continued field activity.

As slaves, African American women had had little choice in their lives and labours; as freedwomen they may have had somewhat more, but were culturally invisible as workers. No longer slaves, they had to reconstruct their work-lives in an economic, social and political situation in which the promise of freedom was circumscribed by both past and contemporary racial oppression and gender inequity. Their effective agency in such circumstances was limited. Without land re-distribution and within a context of an ideology which posited waged labour as the ultimate good of freedom, paid employment of some kind became imperative for all freed people, impoverished and propertyless as they were. Few if any slave women entered freedom with any saleable skills beyond those of domestic service and field work. Fewer still had had the opportunity to accumulate either tools or money whilst enslaved. Thus a majority of freed women would have had little choice but to work in the fields for wages or shares.

Freedom arrived at a time when the middle class domestic ideal for women was in full flower in the northern states: marriage, care of the husband, home and children were supposed to be the central focus of women’s lives. Waged labour performed publicly outside the home by women marked them as unrespectable, irresponsible housewives and mothers. In the South, with emancipation, these views would be in tension with the political and ideological realities shaping the practicalities of freed women’s lives. At any given point in time, the majority of former slave women may well have been married with children. However, marriage hardly offered any haven from heavy labour outdoors for most freedwomen with husbands, whatever their or their husbands’ personal preferences might have been. Family and personal survival depended upon the women’s field work. But neither necessity nor being married inevitably entailed a loathing of manual labour, in the fields or elsewhere; nor did having to do field work always mean that that labour was “forced” while domesticity was volitional. Nor can it be assumed that all freedwomen, married or single, considered field tasks such as ploughing too
physically demanding. What freedwomen - and men - sought was the freedom to determine the structure of their work days; the extent to which they could depended upon the intersection of personal and external circumstances.

In regard to gaining an insight into how African American slave and freed women understood their own work-lives, the ex-slave narratives collected by writers working within the Federal Writers’ Project, as part of the Works Projects Administration (WPA), prove a unique resource. Nowhere else are the memories and perceptions of so many former slave women to be found. Of course, not all the narratives are by women; indeed, easily half or more are those of men, and where relevant their memories have been included. That they are memories and not contemporaneous experiential descriptions, and that because of the age of many at the end of the Civil War, very often they are received memories, has to be borne in mind. But that fact does not impair the value of the material for the purposes of understanding what the women, slave and freed, thought about field work.

Part New Deal employment initiative for local writers and part an oral history-folklore preservation project, the WPA interviews took place between 1936 and 1938. The overwhelming majority of the interviewers were white women, who were “frequently related to the local elite” and known to be so by their elderly, impoverished, often destitute, black interviewees. This situation, together with an editorial bias towards depicting slavery in a decent light, may have limited the expression of opinion on women’s work. Nevertheless, numerous women did express their views, often forthrightly.

Furthermore, the ex-slaves interviewed, approximately two percent of the surviving freedpeople, were those living in towns and cities, at a time when the majority of African Americans “over eighty-five years of age...lived in rural areas.” Not a random sample, then, they were selected by happenstance and convenience, and thus do not form a representative selection. Yet none of the above-mentioned problems should detract from what this body of evidence can give: the observations on their own lives and work by those who lived the slavery.
No sources are free of the problems of bias, partiality, the effects of class, gender and race ideology, relations and structures, geography, demography or historical happenstance. We should not ask more authenticity of these narratives than we do of other historical documents, certainly no more than of the planters’ diaries, records and similar contemporary material. The WPA ex-slave narratives remain the unique source of ex-slave women’s voices, and, as such, they provide a rare window into the work and lives, in bondage and in freedom, of an otherwise voiceless group.345

Although the United States as a whole was an overwhelmingly rural nation until the 1860s, the South remained peculiarly un-urbanised and un-industrialised much longer. In the Antebellum world, the republican ideal of independence, and thus of a virtuous free democracy, rested in the ownership and working of agricultural land; both northern family farmers and southern slave-holding planters believed that their agricultural modus operandi embodied that ideal.346 That world was, however, in the midst of rapid demographic, geographic and economic change. The population of the northern and north-western regions of the country grew exponentially from both European immigration and natural increase; the southern region’s population grew somewhat, but mostly among its enslaved. From the 1820s, in the North, the seeds of industrial manufacture and a capitalist economy began to burgeon gradually; the southern system of slavery impeded the development of a thriving industrial and market economy.347 And as the northern and southern frontiers moved ever westward, so too did agriculture expand into new territory.

These newly adopted lands, or rather the labour system to be current within in them, became a contentious issue as the territories applied for statehood, an issue made all the more volatile with the greater population growth in the northern, free labour states.348 The struggle over whether Kansas would enter the Union as a free or slave state was a particularly bloody and nasty fight immediately prior to the larger conflagration over “the freedom of labor.”349 That the northerners and westerners were largely “Free-Soilers” and anti-slavery did not mean that their
racial attitudes were more liberal than those of their southern counterparts. Free Soilers and many anti-slavery northerners sought to ensure that the western lands would be free labour territory rather than slave so that European American settlers would not have to compete for land with slave owners’ capital or for work with slaves. For all but a few of the most enlightened among the abolitionists, antislavery meant preventing the spread of bonded labour, not slave emancipation or racial equality.

The Civil War brought in its train not only a resolution of the slavery-free soil question, but also “the triumph...of” industrial capital, at least at the North. Not that northern and, later, western farmers suddenly found themselves enlaced in and dependent upon a market economy; to the contrary, they had been active participants in the emergent market from the previous century and earlier. From selling modest surpluses to producing specific crops and products for sale, farmers sought to retain their republican independence and self-sufficiency and to gain market derived profits. Meanwhile, at the South, subsistence and, on plantations, a self-sufficiency in basic foodstuffs and frequently in fabrics for slave apparel, remained the order of things, despite the region’s production of raw materials for international sale. Before the Civil War, slavery, and its concentration in very profitable cash crop production, inhibited the development of a free labour based economy, particularly an industrial one. After the war, the South remained essentially a cash crop based agricultural economy in a world market whose demand for its cotton and rice had declined. Indebtedness among tenants and sharecroppers grew, commodity production expanded, poverty increased, all exacerbated, if not caused, by planters’ determination to reinstate, as far as possible, the race-based status quo ante.

Slavery shaped the South economically and socially. It was a forced labour system, maintained by violence and supported by a supremacist ideology which enabled the existence of an overt class hierarchy. Slavery was also a gendered institution, structuring social relations hierarchically between black and white southerners. While white southern women were sexually off-limits to black southern men, white southern men had no similar prohibitions on
sexual access to black southern women. The racialized gender discourse of slavery constructed female slaves as sexuality incarnate, even as slaveholders required of them continual motherhood. At the same time, a race-gender-class ideology exploited their physical capacity to labour in the fields at work not thought suitable (or possible) for the ladies among the European American women of the South. (And while some white southern males may have associated manual labour with slaves and thereby been discouraged from such labour, the greater problem for most of the poor white population was finding an employer willing to take on southern whites as waged workers.)

A gender division of labour existed within slavery across the South, but it did not always, everywhere, fully conform to middle class nineteenth century, especially urban north-eastern, expectations. When they encountered situations in which few apparent gender work boundaries existed, outsiders criticized the transgressions. Frances Anne Kemble, the English wife of Georgia rice planter Pierce Butler, was one who viewed the lack of separation between slave men’s and women’s task work as abominable:

These tasks, of course, profess to be separated according to the sex, age, and strength of the laborer; but in many instances this is not the case...on Mr [Butler]'s first visit to his estate he found that the men and women who labored in the fields had the same task to perform. This was a noble admission of female equality, was it not?

Kemble was particularly concerned, however, with field work’s demoralizing effects on women and its reducing their ability to perform their ‘proper’ work: care of their children.

It is hopeless to attempt to reform their habits or improve the...[children’s] condition while the women are condemned to field labor; nor is it possible to overestimate the bad moral effect of the system as regards the women, entailing this enforced separation from their children, and neglect of all the cares and duties of mother, nurse and even housewife.

Moreover, however sympathetic towards the conditions under which her husband’s slaves lived, Kemble nonetheless shared some of the doubts of others of the slave-owning classes, when it came to women, pregnancy and work. Owners believed that slave-women frequently shammed pregnancy in order to escape the heavier tasks in the fields. Kemble linked the “indirect inducements...of less work and more food” attendant on pregnancy to several slave women’s
attempts to avoid field work, the result being either "reckless propagation" or a feigned condition. 366

Whether or not pregnancy and childbirth temporarily reduced a slave woman's field workload depended upon the individual plantation owner's economic calculations. On Kemble's husband's plantation, the women gained a brief cessation of heavy field work, both ante- and post-natally. 367 In his "Rules for Overseers" published in the Carolina Planter, 1840, a planter presented an ambiguous picture of his advised treatment of pregnant and lactating slave women: "Suckling and pregnant women must be indulged as much as circumstances will allow, and never worked as much as others...No lifting, spinning or ploughing must be required of pregnant women." 368 Whether this planter, named Franklin, made certain that his overseers did not overwork his pregnant slave women, or left the matter entirely on paper and to his supervisors to carry out as they understood 'as circumstances allowed,' is unknown. On other plantations, owners or their overseers worked female bondswomen "up to de day" their children were born. 369 As Jones argues, heavy manual labour, in the context of the debilitating effects of both "excessive childbearing" and malnutrition (if not also insufficient food), likely weakened many slave women, shortening their lives and reducing the viability of their foetuses and increasing the mortality of their infants. 370 And slaves, women and men had to work in all weathers in scanty clothing, frequently in mosquito ridden land, living without any but the most primitive of amenities in a situation without realistic hope of improvement of either their physical or their social condition. From every perspective, the planters desire for profit from both slave women's productive and reproductive labour existed in tension with the structures of slavery itself. 371

In the cotton growing areas, women hoed and picked the cotton; they also cleared the land of rubbish, ploughed, cut and threshed wheat, pulled fodder, sawed logs, split rails - whatever was required to be done, could be and was done by females. 372 Northerner Frederick Law Olmsted journeyed through the South in the late 1850s and whilst in Mississippi he watched a field being ploughed
with single and double mule teams... generally...by women, and very well performed, too. I watched with some interest for any indication that their sex unfitted them for the occupation. Twenty of them were plowing together, with double teams and heavy plows...superintended by a male negro driver...they twitched their plows around on the head-land...yelling to their mules, with apparent ease, energy and rapidity.373

This passage reveals that Olmsted found the sight of females ploughing capably something of a curiosity. Although the women’s ‘sex’ should have made it improbable, if not impossible, that they could plough at all, here a group of them were fulfilling the job well. “[D]ouble [mule] teams” and “heavy plows” not only describe the scene, but imply that Olmsted considered the slave women’s very ability to manage competently both draught animals and heavy equipment peculiar and likely unfeminine.374

Not only northerners but also many slaves perceived ploughing and other outdoor tasks as ‘men’s work’:

My mammy was a big sportly woman an’ brung a lot er money...Law, my mammy cud plow jes lak a man all day long; den milk twen’y head er cows afte’ she quit de fiel’ at night.

I hadda work powerful hard. I worked like a man. I warn’ no house nigger. I hoed, plowed, ditched, split rails an’ anything else dat needed to be did. Good, hard work neber hurt nobody.375

Although slaves may have viewed ploughing as a ‘man’s’ job, not all slave women or their children considered it beyond their strength. The pride in their mother’s and the women’s own ability to labour ‘like a man’ is apparent in these ex-slave statements.376 And “many...apparently enjoyed it,” with some expressing their preference for it to other forms of work: they “druther plough than chop [cotton]” or work in the house.377 Other slave women thought it to be nothing but harder work than they believed women should be expected to do:

I done er man’s work on de place; puttin’ up stone fences en rail fences, splittin’ rails, breakin’ hemp, plowin’ fields, doin’ cawn plantin’ en evry thing de men spose ter do, en I wuz sposed ter say nothin’.378

Slave women field hands had to do many jobs culturally viewed as ‘men’s,’ but if frequency of mention is a guide, then it was their ploughing which epitomised slavery’s gender division of labour transgressions.379 Animal drawn ploughing combines timing, machinery and large animals, and appears to demand much muscular effort - all of which carry the image of

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masculinity, an image sanctified by historical practice. However, assumptions about the strength and skill requirements of a job have derived, in part, from whether men or women have typically done the work. And males have more usually been the drivers of ploughs and other animal drawn equipment. That in a particular region, or on a specific plantation, or even on a family held and worked farm, women drove animal-drawn ploughs competently changed nothing in the cultural conception of the work as masculine. So in the present as in the past, historian Jacqueline Jones argues from this well-established gendered perspective: "[t]o harness a double team of mules or oxen and steer a heavy wooden plow was no mean feat for a strong man, and yet a 'substantial majority' of slave women mastered these rigorous activities." So deep and seemingly ineradicable is this gender construction of such work that the very (historical) evidence of women, boys, and girls (slave or not) doing the ploughing, and doing it well, neither could nor presently can do anything to shake it.

Whereas on cotton plantations ploughing was the norm, on the rice plantations of Georgia and South Carolina, it only tardily and unevenly replaced digging as the mode for turning the soil. "[H]orses [were] more costly to keep than colored folks'... therefore, dearer" than all hands digging the land. When rice planters finally succumbed to changing economic imperatives and invested in ploughs and draught animals (surely mules rather than horses), they assigned the task to men. Why on rice plantations men alone ploughed, while on cotton (and some tobacco) ones both men and women did so is unclear. Schwalm suggests, for rice cultivation, that the assignment of ploughing to men fitted with the gendered structure of job status: the almost complete correlation of maleness with specialized and 'skilled' plantation occupations. Yet that connection existed on cotton plantations, too. Nor can it have been a matter of local or regional gender sensibilities because women ploughed the cotton fields in South Carolina, as ex-slaves attested:

[I] used to plow, hoe, dig and do anything the men did on the plantation.
[It was] a plantation full of little niggers runnin' 'round...whilst deir mammies was in de field ahoeing and geeing at the plow handles, workin' lak a man...
And South Carolina cotton planter Louis M. DeSaussure intimated much the same in his plantation day book, for the year 1861: while the men were “making fences” the women were “listing - ploughing cotton land.”

While some slave women did not mind or even enjoyed ploughing, none of the slaves found the ‘mud-work’ on the rice and Sea Island cotton plantations anything but too heavy. Mud-work consisted of the construction and maintenance of the ditches, drains and banks which surrounded each field. The women worked alongside the men at this tedious, mucky and very heavy work, although not always doing exactly the same task. But “there was no pattern...[to] slave women’s exclusion from mudwork.” On some plantations, women were assigned, with men to “ditching,” while on others, “in the preperation [sic] of the Rice Lands, as ditching, embanking etc., the men alone are engaged with the spade.” Women could be required, with the men, to cut new ditches, to scoop out the mud and debris from old ditches, or they would (working behind the men) ‘throw back the mud,’ then carry the mud and spread it on the fields. On some plantations, Olmsted noted, the typical task allotment on “light clean meadowland” was to “dig one thousand cubic feet” of drainage ditch for a full field hand, man or woman. On “swampland... being prepared for rice culture,” the number of extant tree stumps determined the hand task cubic footage. Women did not however work with the plantation joiner to repair the “wooden culverts” and sluice gates; those less arduous jobs, recognized as skilled, were the province of men alone.

Whether or not some slave women ploughed, split rails, hauled out tree stumps and others dug and delved, the job most often assigned to female field hands was hoeing. So ubiquitous were hoes in the hands of female field slaves that Kemble called the women “human hoeing machine[s]”; and freedmen scorned the hoe as a “purely feminine implement.” Yet neither were the hoes themselves, nor the tasks to which they were put, light. Olmsted describes the normal eight-inch hoe - the women’s tool - on plantations as “great, long-handled, heavy [and]
And it was “almost everywhere, made to do the work of pick, spade, shovel and plow.” The introduction of the plough into rice cultivation reduced, but did not eliminate, the spade-plough uses of the big hoe. One rice planter noted in his journal, for April 1845, that “[a]ll hands dig behind ploughs.” Behind the men ploughing, came the women digging over the sodden furrows with their cumbersome hoes; which job was the less physically demanding?

Where both slave men and women ploughed, only men tended to be dignified by the title and specialist status of ‘ploughman.’ Done by women, it carried no special recognition; ploughing was one job among others that they performed, often in the same day. Such gendered distinctions in job status and skill recognition on slaveholding plantations was not uncommon. Male slaves trained as artisans as well as holding most of the ‘specialist’ jobs, like wagon-driver or (slave)driver. Never wagoneers, women were rarely (slave) drivers, and, like the women who ploughed but unlike male ‘specialists,’ they also had other jobs, diluting the status otherwise attached to the position of driver: “Part-time she was a slave driver, part-time help in the house.” Schwalm argues, and some ex-slave narratives and planters’ journals confirm, that however strong, skilled and knowledgeable individual slave women might have been, their abilities rarely gained the recognition that planters granted male slaves, through specialist titles and artisanal privileges.

Not only were slave women who performed work associated with men denied status and skill recognition, so too were those (often the same ones) who plied the typically feminine crafts. Many, probably most, female slaves had to spin, and many also wove the cloth and sewed it into the slaves’ clothing. These tasks formed part of their daily workload, given to them to do at night, after the day’s work in the fields or house:

I worked in de field ev’day and...I was one er de spinners too and was giv’ six cuts to do on a reel at de time, and do hit at nights lots er times too.
I had to wurk mit’y hard; I had to plow de fiel’s in de day an’ den at nite when I wuz so tired I cu’dn’t hardly stan’ I had to spin my cut of cotton befo’ I cu’d go to sleep.
Yet women who practiced *these* crafts were not accorded the same status as, for instance, carpenters - a trade restricted to men, whether slave or free. Spinning has been women’s peculiar work for millennia; its very ubiquity and association with females diminished its skill status. On the plantation, as beyond it, traditional female skills and crafts, ones associated with the domestic sphere, gained their practitioners little or no status recognition. Tacked onto the end of the day’s toil, or made the task for wet or freezing days, spinning, and sometimes weaving and sewing, accrued only more labour to the slave women, not an opportunity to earn money or escape the confines of the plantation. Nor would these skills open up work opportunities for freed women.

As in the non-slave environment, ‘skilled’ trades and specialized occupations on the plantations brought ‘class’ distinction and concrete ‘benefits.’ Those benefits could include better housing, access to better, or more, food, opportunities to both get away from the plantation and to earn money, and fewer beatings. As in the ‘free’ world, the men among the slaves were the more numerous beneficiaries of these opportunities and benefits because they were the ones who were trained as skilled artisans or most often hired out as workers. Sometimes the ‘dividends’ from a recognized skilled trade or specialised job came after freedom, providing those slave men with the opportunity to sell their skills and sell them well, or allowing them to change their slave occupation for a better or more prestigious one.

My father was a mechanic. He laid brick and plaster ... He was such a good worker Mr Scott [slaveholder] would give him all the work he could after he was free. Parson Caruthers learnt him [father] a trade - a shoemaker...when emancipation came he could read and write and make change...He started teaching school. He had been a preacher too during slavery...

Whether these situations represent a division of labour based on gender or one on financial hard-headedness depends upon the perception of the observing historian. For Jones the training of males in trades and the allotting of specialist work to men was less a factor of planters’ gender assumptions than it was a rational economic consideration of slave women’s reproductive value. “[T]he high cost of specialized and extensive training proved crucial in determining the
division of labor." They “childbearing and nursing” and “domestic responsibilities,” Jones argues, meant slave women as artisans would have been more generally unavailable and unprofitable to the planters. While there is no denying the economic importance of the women’s reproductivity to planters, that factor is of itself a gendered one and a contemporary justification for (and which ‘naturalized’) the existing gender division of labour. Some trades, like shoemaking, were surely light enough to be done by the most heavily gravid and women with infants in tow. Even if trades which demanded physical power and effort had been barred to slave females because of reproductive potential and its concomitant obligations, such an argument does not explain why they were excluded from lighter crafts done on the plantations. Nor does it answer why crafts like spinning and weaving and dyeing, which the women did, garnered no similar status or opportunities. Moreover, neither the needs nor obligations of reproduction and domestic necessity proved stumbling blocks to planters’ demands that the women work in the fields, for long hours at heavy labour and that afterwards they would spin, weave or sew.

Historian Leslie Schwalm posits a variety of possible causes, all shaped by gender ideology, for what amounts to the exclusion of women from the category of skilled labour. Besides those house servants who had some training in a particular aspect of household labour, some slave women were the designated “milkers” and “poultry” keepers, for example. Their work rarely gained attention, however, or much status, although they sometimes found ways to exploit their work to the immediate benefit of themselves and their families. Moreover, unlike many of the male specialists and artisans, few, if any, of the women were pastry cooks, poultry-keepers, milkers or slave-drivers alone; more typically females combined their ‘speciality’ with the more mundane labour expected of field hands or general house servants.

My mammy...had to milk and churn, wash an’ iron, card de bats, spin, weave an’ sometimes she had ter help cook, an’ sometimes she had to go to de fields. My mother was a milker...That not all my mother done. She plowed. Children done the churnin’.

Amy 38 years of age, pastry cook and House servant
Ella 17 years of age, her daughter House servant and field Hand.
On no plantation did slave women breach the gender boundaries surrounding ‘men’s’ trades and jobs, beyond those in field work. Indeed, the denial of specialist status to the women who ploughed, split rails and did other ‘masculine’ field work or who spun and wove, along with their not being inducted into ‘male’ crafts argues for planter regard for normative gender divisions of labour. Most of the skilled work done by slave women was culturally ‘feminine’ and most of them had to work in several job niches. As in free society, slave women were expected to be generalists - able to do a wide variety of tasks well, but granted status for none.

The Civil War and Reconstruction transformed southern society, ending slavery and introducing the form, if not the substance, of the free labour system. How did these changes alter women’s role in agricultural production, if at all; and how did they view their work-lives under the changed circumstances?

An overview of the situation brought about by the war and its aftermath is necessary, in order to understand the constraints and opportunities facing freedwomen. Of all that took place over the years 1860 to 1870, the contest over the meaning of freedom had the greatest significance on the work-lives of slave-freedwomen. When the dust of the struggle had settled, more or less, the freedwomen who remained on the land were left with something which fell far short of their conception of freedom. They, like freedmen, believed that only independent subsistence landholding would secure their personal liberty. Freed people also believed that, with their forced labour to others’ profit, they had earned a moral claim on the land; it was a claim recognized by very few abolitionists, even among the radicals. However, whether Union officers or civilian officials, most northerners believed that the ex-slaves should be wage workers, and that they could claim ownership only in their labour power. Renting land on shares became the compromise solution to freed people’s desire for independence. Sharecropping was far from the ideal to which the slaves had aspired but held the prospect of greater independence than the version of free labour northern officials, lessees and southern planters sought to impose on freed people.
The Civil War visited chaos upon the South. Most of the battles were fought in the region; Union forces blockaded southern trade; the southern economy plunged and its money became worthless. Due to a combination of the economic problems, the loss of manpower to the armies and death, the loss of land and slaves to Union forces, harvests were poor and food and other goods became scarce. Numerous planters fled their plantations east of the Mississippi for Texas in order to hold on to their slaves. Some planters and their families simply abandoned their plantations for the duration.\(^{427}\) With the Union territorial gains in Louisiana, the lower Mississippi, Virginia and South Carolina between 1861-1862, many hundreds of slaves, men, women and children, also took flight - to Union lines. As refugees, they were also enemy property. General Benjamin Butler, in May 1861, refused to return them to their owners, declaring them “contraband of war.”\(^{428}\) The majority of slaves, however, remained on their plantations, and they too became ‘contrabands’ whenever and wherever the Union army liberated them.\(^{429}\) However they came within the compass of Union control, these slaves were the first to encounter northern attempts to make of them independent free labourers.

From 1861 onwards, the Union army initiated much of the installation of free labour in the South, as it gained the responsibility for contrabands’ welfare and protection.\(^{430}\) To enable this military commanders appointed “superintendents of freedmen” to oversee the distribution of necessities and the mobilization of labour, at first in aid of the military, but increasingly on planter abandoned plantations.\(^{431}\) From 1862, northern abolitionists and philanthropists formed societies, under the aegis of the antislavery wing of the Union government, which sent teachers and plantation labour superintendents as ‘free labour and “Yankee culture” missionaries to the contrabands on the Sea Islands off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina.\(^{432}\) Not until its establishment in 1865 did the Freedmen’s Bureau take up many of the tasks begun by the military and the voluntary groups.\(^{433}\) The Bureau acted both as a relief agency and as the drafter and enforcer of plantation labour contracts until the end of Reconstruction.\(^{434}\) These then were the
main groups of northerners who sought to replace slavery’s corruptions with northern cultural systems, essentially contained within the ideologies constituting the free labour system.

The northern free labour system was ideological in nature and practice. Its origins lay in republican ideas and beliefs about the necessary relationship between economic and political independence, a relationship held to be essential for the constitution and maintenance of democratic freedom. In this doctrine, freedom, and thus independence, necessitated the ownership of economically productive property because such a relation endowed the proprietor with autonomy, i.e. self-ownership. Only such individuals could be trusted with republican democracy. All other social and economic relations to property induced dependence upon others; non-self-governing, such people, including male wage earners, were held incapable of autonomous political action. But under the pressure of propertyless artisans the concept of a proprietary right in the self as the fundamental marker of the autonomous individual superseded productive property ownership as the primary indicator of self-governance. Self-ownership included property in one’s own labour; thus the wage earning male, hitherto understood as dependent, was revealed as independent. Its corollary: that, by the 1830s, politically and legally both buyer and seller of labour power were equals.

Before the Civil War, however, Republicans such as Charles Francis Adams and Thaddeus Stevens could still consider independent entrepreneurship the backbone of the middling classes and of free government. But the belief that wage earning was a way station to self-employment, rather than an increasingly permanent condition for the many, was more romance than reality by the 1860s. The free labour system of wage labourers was intricately interwoven with the emergent industrialism of the North. Although some abolitionists had doubts about a system of economic relations which put individual self interest over that of the whole, others extolled it, at least rhetorically. For free labour ideologically and practically provided the all important contrast to slave labour.
But when, during the Civil War, northerners went South, seeking to install the free labour system, they encountered an ideologically paradoxical labour situation.\footnote{445} The ideological relationship between free labour, self-ownership and independence was, after all, a gendered one.\footnote{446} The free labourer, in the full ideological and factual sense, was male.\footnote{447} Women of the labouring poor often hired out for wages, but their relationship to waged labour brought them, single or married, none of the rights and privileges that accrued to men.\footnote{448} Working women were absent from the ideology because as females they were dependent, domestic, and thus politically null. Women also appeared generally absent from the northern labour scene.\footnote{449} Apart from the textile and shoemaking industries, labouring females most frequently worked less publicly and at jobs associated with traditional female domestic work: as domestics, laundresses, slop-workers.\footnote{450} Northerners coming South brought with them their idea of who the plantation field worker would be: an able-bodied male.

The whole number of freed people on the farm of all ages, is 61. Of these the number of able bodied men is five stout boys and men over 15, four... Able bodied women, fifteen... It should be observed to the credit of the experiment, how small the proportion of able-bodied men is to the non-producers on these farms, to the infirm and the women and children, whom they have had to support.

Sir... I have the honor to report that from the hordes of negroes left on the plantations, but about 320 have thus far come in and offered their services. Of these the Quarter-master has but about sixty able-bodied male hands - the rest being decrepid, and women and children... They are a prolific race, and it will be found that for every able-bodied male, there will be five or six females, children and decrepid.\footnote{451}

The fact that most female slaves were field hands, many of whom counted among the able-bodied, full and prime hands, seems to have been beyond the northern imagination.\footnote{452} The war situation probably reinforced their presumptions about the ‘normal’ structure of the field labour force, with large numbers of young men having either left the plantations voluntarily seeking to join the Union army or later having been drafted. The preponderance of females in the fields could easily be understood as the result of current upheavals, not as the plantation norm. Slave or freed women’s labour could be and was as easily undervalued as that of northern labouring women.\footnote{453}
Despite the gendered ideas of the northerners in the South, the implanting of a waged labour system took precedence over immediate ideological difficulties. Presumably, once the system was inculcated and its benefits manifest, then the proper gender order of things would naturally fall into place. Until then, it was a matter of instilling the virtues of the system through the rigours of disciplined, hard, and fairly remunerated labour. The officers and officials to whom Reconstruction had been charged wanted to prove the free labour experiment a success.

The experiment of free labor which I am trying is succeeding admirably, and I hope large results, not so much in profit to the United States as in example.\textsuperscript{454}

To ensure that success, it was necessary that the ex-slaves learn the primary lesson of free labour independence: no work, no pay; no pay, no food.

The hands on the place [plantation, St Helena, Sea Islands, South Carolina, 1862] are obliged to work. All who can are kept busy with the cotton, but there are some women and young girls unfit for the field, and these are made to do their share in housework and washing, so that they may draw pay like the others - or rations...\textsuperscript{455}

Matters were put more starkly in Alabama in 1865:

Colored persons [once slaves] having places or employment are advised to remain wherever their employers will compensate them for their labor. They are reminded that the laborer is worthy of his hire, and those who work shall be paid; those who are dependent on their labor for a living and do not work must starve.\textsuperscript{456}

Free labour assumed that waged workers had the right to choose for whom they would work, when they would leave and what they would work for. Yet the early labour contracts to which the freedpeople were supposed to adhere provided none of these presumptions of freedom. Instead the terms of the sale of their labour power were dictated to them by the combined powers of land lessees and Union army officers (later the officials of the Freedmen’s Bureau).\textsuperscript{457} And the former slave men who had not run to Union lines to fight or who had remained on the plantations seemed dubious material for the independent manhood necessary to both free labour and heads of households.

They are only too docile...It is because of that docility, that we must exercise a certain guardianship over them and suspend reconstruction until we have thoroughly emancipated them and got the idea of freedom into their heads.\textsuperscript{458}
The presumptions about gender and bondage combined in the thinking of northern officials, allowing them to assume the prerogatives that free labour ideology attached to the independently acting individual. Under this paternalist supervision, labour contracts attached an aura of gendered dependency to waged plantation labour. Indeed the fact that most plantation field labourers were female surely reinforced northern officials' belief that they needed to draw up the contracts with the lessees and planters and to oversee the fulfilment of the contract's terms. These early contracts, drawn up with Union officer input or approval and often secured with Union army troops, provided a model for later, post-war ones made between returned southern planters and freedpeople and overseen by the Bureau.

Freedpeople's notion of freedom, however, did not include being forced to work on the plantations under the conditions often dictated by the Union army, lessees, southern planters, or later the Freedmen's Bureau. The response to the imposition of contracts was varied. Many freedwomen and men resisted the imposition of workloads and hours too reminiscent of work under slavery. Some negotiated for terms that gave them greater control over their lives and workload; others simply walked or ran away. Freedwomen as well as freedmen sought not only fewer, shorter days and no drivers or gang labour, but also plots of land for their own crops and livestock.

Above all they refused to accept any contractual obligation to work on maintaining plantation property that was not of direct benefit to themselves. Whether low country mudwork or fencing and drainage, such tasks - arduous, physically wearing and time-consuming - were the jobs most associated with their bondage and, consequently, the most detested.
As former slaves, freedwomen knew what it was to have no control over their lives, labour and bodies, how they were used productively and reproductively. With freedom, they wanted to determine how, when, where and, within the limits of the possible, at what they would labour. The first taste of freedom was to test their ability to choose whether to stay on the plantation or to leave it. Many freedwomen remained on the plantations they knew, during the chaos of war and for some years afterwards; they had strong family ties to the place; they knew nothing else and thought it gave them the best chance to feed and raise their children.

[After the war] Mammy stayed on; she had to work hard; she plowed and hoed...when de end of de year come we neber had nothin'- But de next year mammy saved a little... Mammy stay dar till we chaps wus grown. I...had 28 [children], eight before de war...I stayed on de plantation eight years atter de war. I wuz one of de las' niggers to leave...I worked in de field.

Other freed women felt, not free to leave or stay, but compelled to remain on their home plantation from an absence of other opportunity or because of southern white violence.

We were not forced to stay...but we had to stay where we could get some work as we could not go where we wanted to go and get work there. We just done what we were forced to do under the circumstances.

[Union soldiers said] Yous am free, an citizens ob de United States. Dat means yous can go whar yous lak.' But de sojers am mistaken, cause 'twarnt so, weuns am not 'lowed to do as weuns please. Weuns am in'fered wid by de Ku Klux Klan, white caps weuns calls dem.

Past treatment as a slave, the desire to find sold relations, the wish to get out of the fields or simply to enjoy the right of mobility, any or all of these factors could motivate individual freedwomen with or without children to leave immediately on news of freedom: mothers “an’... chilluns slipped off way in de night an’ run away.” Others stayed “till de crops was gathered” and then they left. Leaving the plantation allowed some women, young and childless or older with families, some limited choice in what work they would do. Seventeen at war’s end, Lucretia Alexander, a slave in Mississippi, had only worked in the house:

Right after freedom I stayed with that woman I told you about. I was with her about four years. I worked for twelve dollars a month and my food and clothes. Then I figured that twelve dollars wasn’t enough and I went to work in the fields

Older women with children would also make the change from house service to field work on freedom, if that paid the way, as Adeline Grey’s mother did: “Atter freedom, my ma plow many a
day, same as a man, for us chillun. Other freedwomen moved from the fields into “white
folks” kitchens or to the washtub or did whatever came along:

After the War, I stayed with Mr Alford and worked in the field. I had a mighty hard time trying to
raise my children and make a living for them... I came to town and hired out to a Mr Nelson. I
worked in the field - I cooked and washed.

At least during the initial period of Reconstruction, the majority of the women remained in the
fields, even if those fields were on different plantations, earning their living by going from place
to place.

My father died...That left my mother a widow. She spent about 2 weeks at the old home place in
Louisiana. She pulled up and went to Natchez to my father’s people. She made two crops...In ’68
she worked with a colored man on the shares... In ’74 she rented.

Throughout the South, 1865 brought President Andrew Johnson’s restoration of
confiscated lands to southern planters, and with that any remaining hope of independent land-
holding died for the majority of the freedpeople. Whatever the arrangements before the
planters’ return, whether subsistence farming on plots of former plantation land, wage labour
contracts, working for shares, with restoration came a renewed attempt by the Freedmen’s Bureau
as well as the planters to end the freedpeople’s independent production. For the Bureau such
independent economic activity vitiated their efforts to firmly establish a wage-based free labour
system. For the planters such activity meant that the able-bodied freedwomen and men were
insufficiently dependent upon waged labour. But freedwomen and men resisted their reduction to
landless wage labourers.

In response to the continued resistance by freedwomen and men to waged labour,
variations on the sharecropping system emerged in 1866. In Mississippi, sharecropping and day
labour existed side by side for some twenty years, while in South Carolina a work-rent system
emerged. For the freedwomen and men who wished to remain on the land, working on shares was
a compromise solution in the face of the refusal of the government to recognize their claims to
some land. A form of tenancy, the work-rent-shares agreements allowed them greater control
over their labour and that of their family members than did working on the planters' lands only for wages or shares:

[The freedpeople] are still holding out with such unanimity...not to contract except on their own terms which are that they will work two days each week for the planter...481

Usually without money, tools or draught animals, the freed women and men who contracted to work on shares were vulnerable to economic exploitation.

All de slaves had hard times [after the war]. My Mammy went down in Louisiana to work on share for a Mr Blade an' when de crop wud made we got nuffin for our work.482

Often, because of the outright exploitation and their inability to earn any income on one plantation, freedwomen would move from place to place in hope that the next planter would prove honest and they would see some recompense for their hard work.

Kisanna and her husband stayed on at the plantation and worked for wages for several years. [He died.] She then moved about from one plantation to another for several years and worked as a sharecropper [with her children].483

Freedwomen were perfectly aware that the 'whites,' northern and southern, gained at their expense.

We farmed bout, cleared land. Never got much fo the hard work we done. The white man done learned how to figure the black folks out of what was made cept a bare living.484

Despite the exploitative realities of sharecropping, freedwomen and men nevertheless preferred these contractual arrangements to those of day labour.485 Freedpeople understood their freedom and independence to depend upon access to land, even garden plots:

The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor-that is by the labor of the women and children and old men; and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare...We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own.486

For most northern officials, however, any labour arrangement which did not accord with their notions of the "proper modes of work and appropriate behavior [of] manual laborers" was to be severely discouraged.487 The former slaves, whose work habits northerners believed to have been corrupted by their previous condition, needed the discipline of compulsory "honest steady labour" to learn the "manliness and self reliance" necessary to the free labour system.488 Fending
for themselves outside a narrowly defined wage labour system, whether by peddling, fishing, doing odd jobs or blending subsistence agriculture with working on shares would continue them in their idle and dependent ways. \(^{489}\) Waged labour was the necessary and salutary way for poor, manual labourers, such as freedwomen and men were, to become truly independent, free labourers. \(^{490}\)

Abolitionists had believed that while ownership in one’s own labour power was a necessary condition of free labour, it was insufficient. After all, slavery had been a form of exchange relationship, of basic necessities for labour. \(^{491}\) (And on that basis alone, women might have been able to claim similar self-governing, independent status.) However, men laboured “willingly...[if] Give[n] the prospect of a home, a family” unscathed by the market. \(^{492}\) Therefore the hallmark of free labour, and thus the foundation of independence, was the working man’s right to his own private domestic sphere. \(^{493}\) The free labouring man was master of his own home and family; as for the free woman, properly his lawful wife - her place was in that home. \(^{494}\) And the only legal, socially acceptable family form was the nuclear one. That form alone ensured to the free labourer both his freedom and his independence, through ownership in the labour of his wife and children and in taking on his family’s responsibilities. \(^{495}\) Whatever had passed for family in slavery had denied slave men their free, manly place at the head of their own household: “The Freedman’s wife and family are his- The Slave’s are not.” \(^{496}\)

For the middle class and elite men who came South, not only did ownership in a family secure male freedom and independence, but marriage also constituted the cornerstone of the republican social order. \(^{497}\) Marriage, they believed, brought social stability by structuring gender relations, within and beyond the household, so as to ensure the legal and social subordinate status of females and regulate their sexuality, that the legitimacy of heirs to paternal property be certain. \(^{498}\) Not only the transfer of property was concerned in the containment and regulation of female sexuality (hardly a concern for property-less wage labourers), but also the very constitution of civilization itself. \(^{499}\) Thus, when the northerners in the South encountered first
hand the variety of family forms and more particularly the freedom with which freedwomen entered and left sexual liaisons, they denounced such behaviour.

Six thousand men and women coming from the darkness of slavery into the broad light of freedom, could not...know or obey the obligations of their changed condition...the women of the District were still as in days of slavery wanting in chastity. 500

Slave marriages had not been legal; on freedom they would have to be formalised. 501

While many, perhaps most, couples willingly legalized their relationship, numerous others were less keen. Not all of them had been free to choose with whom they would mate:

A house nigger man might swoop down and mate wid a field hand’s good lookin’ daughter, now and then, for pure love of her, but never see a house gal lower herself by marryin’ and matin’ wid a common field nigger. Dat offend de white folks...who like de business of match makin’ and matin’ of de young niggers.

My papa went off when freedom come...Mama never seen him no more...Mama didn’t care so much about him. He was her mate give to her. 502

The majority of freedwomen with children would likely, at any one time, have been married, but husbands died, left for other women, or were too abusive to stay with. 503 Slave women had often been the heads of households on plantations; families were frequently separated by the sale of one or the other, or the couple lived on different plantations. Usually, the children stayed with the mother when the man and woman went their own ways:

My ma...[and] my pa...dey wuz on separate plantations...I guess they had sorter growed away from one another ‘casin when us wuz freed, de slaves dat wuz married all had to git a license...My pa quit my ma when he found dis out an’ wouldn’t marry her over again. A heap ob ‘em quit dat way...when my pa left her she had all de ‘sponsibility. Us made out first one way den t’uther fer two or three years an’ den settled on a farm. 504

Even when freed, many former slave women remained the mainstay of the family when their spouses left for or were drafted into the Union army or when, for any number of reasons, the couple never got together on freedom, or they married and divorced numerous times. 505

My mother named Emma. Never married to my daddy, cause they didn’t live on the same plantation...He took up wid another woman after freedom 506

Moreover, not all of the women, as slaves or once freed, saw any advantage to being married:

[As a slave] I thought a heap o’ times I wuz in love but wuz fraid to git married, ‘cause feared on[e] or tother ob us might be sold. [Slave and freed] I neber wanted no man a beatin’ me up, so I raised my six chillun wid out de fears and worries ob bein’ married 507
Planters exploited the gender hierarchy, officially recognized in nuclear family structure, as they sought to regain control over black southern labour and crush any structure of independence for freedmen.\textsuperscript{508} Labour contracts were signed only with household heads, generally male, who then were responsible for the upkeep of all family members and ensuring that every member who could work did.\textsuperscript{509} Then at harvest time, at least in the Mississippi Delta, planters commonly "discharged" the head of household, leaving the family - the women - to complete the contract at their lower rate of pay.\textsuperscript{510} The Freedmen’s Bureau agents, in their belief that freedmen needed to learn the attributes and obligations of manhood further ensured that contracts upheld the "nuclear family as a work unit"; but they had not envisaged planters exploiting northern initiatives mandating lower rates of pay for female plantation labour, whom they had categorized as "below first-class."\textsuperscript{511}

The Freedmen’s Bureau had championed formal marriage with its concomitant legal and social subjection of wives to their husbands’ will. Among married freedwomen, as among other American women of the period, were some whose husbands decided whether and where they would work.\textsuperscript{512} And some "did not wish their wives to work at-all" and sought contracts enshrining that fact.\textsuperscript{513} But most freed people’s marriages were less based on male dominance and female subordination than the bourgeois form envisaged; slavery had induced in both freed women and men a profound dislike of ‘ownership,’ of “mutual dependency.”\textsuperscript{514} The reality of most freedwomen’s lives necessitated that they work, whether or not there was a ‘man in the house.’ His wages alone, although higher than hers, were insufficient to maintain a family, unless he had learnt a trade whilst a slave or had the opportunity to work on the railroad on freedom.\textsuperscript{515} And field labour generally meant family labour:

Well I have done just about everything here that was possible to do in the country or on the farm to help my man make a living from plowing to cutting cord wood.

Afterwards, father and mother dey is gone ter live with ole Miss Elliott...Ole Miss done de cookin'...But mother had ter wuk in de fiel' en plow jus' like er man, en de res' us chilluns big nuff ter pull weeds er swing er hoe, wuz out en er fiel' wukin', fum daylight till too dark ter see."\textsuperscript{516}
And although planters in general might have made labour agreements only with male family heads, some clearly signed labour contracts with female heads of household:

[After the war] we stayed on and helped Mrs Emily that year and farmed thirds and fourths with her, you know de niggers get a third of de corn and a fourth of de cotton. My Mammy and us chillun, my paw was dead den, cleared 'bout a bale of cotton and two loads of corn dat year. We moved to de Carlisle place de next year and stayed there for a right smart while.517

Female headed families farmed on shares, signing contracts in their own right, into the twentieth century:

I been a widow 40 years. Yes ma'am. I farmed myself and my children helped me...Made good crops, me and the children. I managed to take good care of them.518

Freedwomen continued to work “long hard hours” in the fields across the South, throughout Reconstruction and thereafter. Some were proud of their ability to work well both in the fields and at home:

I am not able ter wurk now, but I hev seed de time when I culd beat eny uf de niggers wurkin’ in de fiel’ an’ doin’ all my wurk at de house, an’ tendin’ ter de chaps as well. None of dese young ones can do dat now.519

But because many freedwomen sought, where and when they could, to control the quantity and quality of their labour, paid and unpaid, they were condemned by planters and northern officials alike. As planter E. B. Heyward griped (while noting who his best field hands were):

The women have got rather lazy and try your patience severely. The work progresses very slowly and they seem perfectly indifferent...because they are allowed the opportunity. They wish to stay in the house, or in the garden all the time-If you chide them, they say “Eh ch! Massa, aint I mus’ mind de fowl, and look a’ me young com aint I mus watch um.” And to do this, the best hand on the place will stay at home all day and every day.520

However northern and southern whites conceived of freedwomen’s waged field labour, both viewed any freedpeople’s attempts to control it as a transgression of their racial and class place.521 Freedwomen “generally decline to work altogether and depend on their lords [husbands] for their support”: only “rigid necessity” or the threat of “starvation” would drive freedwomen out to the fields.522 In South Carolina’s low country, for example, married freedwomen increasingly opted to sign contracts as “three-quarter or half hands,” rather than as the full (and prime) hands
that planters such as Heyward knew them to be. And necessity alone drove those freedwomen for whom the fields meant nothing but hard labour:

Yes ma’am, I sure have worked hard. I’ve plowed, split wood and done a little bit of ever’thing. But it was all done since freedom. In slavery times I was a housegirl. I tell you I was a heap better a slave than I was free. After freedom we had to go and get what we could get to do and work hard.

Despite the deferential tone of this former slave woman’s narrative, she makes explicit her grievance over having had to work harder than she had wanted at jobs she found unrewarding. Had she, and others like her, been able, she would have withdrawn.

More often than not, faced with the need to support dependents, many freedwomen laboured as they had before, all day and every day - “rigid necessity” indeed compelled them. My mother was one of the leading plow hands...After emancipation she had to hustle for all of them [8 children]. She would...work - pick cotton, pull corn, or what not.

Necessity yes, but that need not preclude, always, a quiet satisfaction and pride in work well done and children well raised:

Hard on a woman to run a farm by herself. Well, now, I don’t know. I made out. I raised my children and raised them healthy. I got along well with the farm owner. You might know when I was let to stay on one place for 15 years. You know I must have treated the land right and worked it fair.

Pleasure too could also be found in doing agricultural work, even in the face of necessity:

[As a slave] I never did work in the field-I was raised up a housegal...After freedom my father had me in the field. I used to cut and split many a hundred rails a day and didn’t mind it neither. I used to like to work - would work now if I was able. And I’d rather work in the field any day as work in the house.

And some, perhaps many, freedwomen taught their daughters not only how to work in the fields but also how to like the work:

My mammy and her chillun stayed...till a long time after dey tell em dey was free...Stayed to de nigger quarter in my mammy house cause we was learn to be field hands...I recollects I used to be right much of a hand to pull fodder en pick cotton en all such like dat cause all my work was in de field mostly till I got to de place dat I couldn’ work no longer...

I was the onliest child mama had...I done everything could be thought of on a farm. I ploughed...some less than five years ago. I liked to plough.

African American slave women had worked publicly in the fields and at tasks deemed masculine long after most white women had retired from such ideologically unseemly labours. As
freedwomen and their daughters, many continued to labour at the hoe and the plough well into the twentieth century. After Emancipation, while not all of the freedwomen who remained working on the land laboured there because they wanted to, some did. Other freedwomen left the fields for domestic service jobs in towns and villages. The economic and social transformations wrought by the Civil War and Reconstruction on the South ended slavery and opened, albeit limited, ways in which former bondswomen could choose to stay in or to leave the fields.

Those freedwomen who remained on the land were caught in the middle of northern military and civilian officials' attempts to construct a free labour economy. Working from within the entwined ideologies of free labour and separate gendered spheres, the northerners believed it essential that the former slaves learn the demands and rewards of free labour: survival required waged labour which brought manly independence. But freedwomen formed a gender, though not a racial, anomaly for the northern espousers of the virtues of free waged labour.530 While some northern officials may have hoped that freedwomen's waged labour would be a temporary expedient before they could take up their proper duties, the women's propertyless and impoverished situation ensured that gainful labour would be a continuing necessity in their lives. However, to initial northern consternation, first freedwomen and men and then planters resisted the installation of the wage (free) labour system, though with very different ends in view. The eventual compromise was sharecropping. For all its many and great faults and problems, this system offered freed women and men a semblance of independence and a chance to remain on the land; it was an opportunity that many of them took.531

In seven states with the highest slave populations, the 1860 Census counted in excess of 730,000 female slaves between the ages of fifteen and sixty; the majority of these African American slave women would have been field hands.532 With freedom, the numbers of African American women working the land markedly fell away, if the 1870 Census presents an accurate picture in its finding of some 323,000 females employed as agricultural labourers in the same seven southern states.533 However, the reliability of this census is open to question, taken as it was
in the South in the midst of Reconstruction; it was certainly known to be inaccurate with enumerations of the 1880 census, at least as far as the southern states were concerned. Moreover, throughout the nineteenth century, and not only in the South, census takers tended to undercount married women’s gainful employment when its pattern did not accord with that of men’s. Additionally, how individual freed women and men understood the proper role of women within the freed family, no matter what they actually did, may well have influenced the responses given to census takers. Further obscuring the outdoor labour of freedwomen for the record was the pattern of planters contracting only with heads of households, most usually male, even though all household members worked to produce the crops. That fewer African American women were working the land in 1870 and beyond is probably the case. To what extent they left the fields is less clear and remains a question which the sources cannot definitively answer.

How to interpret the continued field labour of married and single freedwomen and how to understand their perception of the gender division of labour has been the focus of this chapter. Census data alone cannot provide any insight into how people understand their lives; that requires the other sources used: contemporaneous documents, from journals to official communications, and the ex-slave narratives collected by the WPA in 1937-1938. These sources, particularly the narratives, provide a view into how freedwomen and others understood their field labour, and what meaning surviving freedwomen attached to it. Some, reflecting on their labour as slaves, then as freed, clearly would have preferred either to withdraw or to have done much less field (or other) work. Others, as Jones argues, saw their outdoor work simply in terms of family caregiving. A few, however, over and above any recognition that they were working for their families, expressed a sense of craft pride in their ability to do field work well and a pleasure in the tasks involved. These freedwomen were motivated by more than family need; like men, they seem to have understood themselves, in part, as skilled workers. Yet to these voices Jones pays little or no heed.
Does the evidence support the view that the majority of freedwomen who could, those whose husbands were “able-bodied,” withdrew from wage labour? And does it support the argument that their “productive labor had no meaning outside the family context”? This study does not, because it cannot (the data are too unreliable for any solid assertions), deny that the majority of freedwomen had husbands and families. Moreover, census data, even when completely reliable, capture only one moment in the midst of a time period of twenty years. Nor would it deny that care of their families was of major importance to freedwomen, whether married or not. It does, however, seek to problematize both the idea that many married freedwomen’s experiences spoke for all freedwomen’s lives, and that all married freedwomen’s circumstances and interests were alike. While accepting as probable that many freedwomen left the fields and that many more would have if they could have, I argue that such was not the aim or desire of them all. Rather, it is my contention that freedwomen’s responses to field labour were as varied as their circumstances allowed.

Sharecropping was a household enterprise, not one easily taken on alone. Unmarried freedwomen without dependents, or those with dependents unable to work, who remained in the fields had to do so as wage labourers. Or such women had to find another way to earn a living. That numbers of them continued on as field workers may as well reveal a preference for that labour as the lack of an alternative way to survive. Sharecropping as a labour system kept those freedwomen and their daughters who lived within larger households in the cotton and rice fields of the South until well into the twentieth century. The married among them probably had reduced field workloads as their husbands and sons took on more of the labour - although not always. Many worked long hours regularly in the fields. The gender division of field labour for many likely hardened, confining them to hoeing and picking/gathering - but not always. Several former slaves and their daughters told WPA interviewers that, for instance, they ploughed and liked to. The demands of sharecropping necessitated freedwomen’s participation, wives and daughters, aunts and grandmothers, even though much of their actual labour has been obscured by male-
centred contractual relations. Some laboured only as and when they had to, others eagerly, preferring field work to housework; some for their families alone, others for both their families and themselves, proud of their strength, skill and management.

Gender, race and class cultural practices as they evolved in the Reconstruction South did indeed confine the majority of freedwomen to work lives similar to those they had had under slavery. But limited horizons and necessity do not always entail antipathy towards the work-life lived, as several of the former slaves revealed. Married or not most freedwomen had to work, and most of them had to labour in the fields; but none of that necessarily precluded their also taking pride, and finding fulfilment, in their skill. For some at least such satisfactions would surely be true, while others would find, indeed found, in such work only hard unrelenting and unrewarding labour. But even assuming, if we could, that a majority of freedwomen, at any given moment, were married, it behoves historians to also give full due to those freedwomen who were unmarried, widowed, deserted and with or without dependents. Any historical interpretation which includes these women along with the tidily married, or does not exclude them, is necessarily messier and fuzzier; but then, so is the history itself.
CONCLUSION: Real Consequences.

“It is difficult,” historian Nicola Verdon writes, “to pinpoint the experience of the ‘typical’ or ‘average’ woman worker.” While Verdon raises this historiographical problem about English working women, her statement applies equally as well to African American slave and freed labouring women. And as this present comparative study reveals, her perception is well founded. With regard to these two populations of women, at least, the available evidence is ambiguous, fragmentary, contradictory and, at times, unreliable, and therefore does not support sweeping generalizations. Most particularly it does not with regard to the numbers married, or in gainful (here agricultural) occupations, or to the women’s attitudes towards field work. Therefore, it is a pity that, despite that insightful warning, she and some other historians continue to conceptualize the work-life experiences of these women in ways which posit a normative overwhelming majority while reducing any diversity among them to anomalous exceptions, unimportant to the larger narrative.

Thus, in these narratives, the majority of field working women, whether waged English day labourers or African American freedwomen sharecroppers, are represented as married, driven by necessity alone into paid field work, and wanting domestic escape from labour depicted as monotonous and overly physically demanding drudgery. Those rural women who remained outside these categories, who could not be brought into the gender normative fold, get short historiographical shrift. While Verdon, Jones and others attend to how economic, political and ideological changes and local agricultural developments limit and shape rural women’s lives, they also argue for the determinative significance of those women’s agency. That agency apparently only revealed itself when rural women opted for as much withdrawal from the fields as they could

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to devote themselves to the domestic sphere. Women it seems, from these historians historically
gender normative view, would never freely choose to be agricultural labourers.

As this comparative study reveals, the situation on both sides of the Atlantic was much
messier and more ambiguous than such interpretations allow. Yet the evidence from the
comparison does reveal significant structural differences between the work-life experiences of
English and African American women field workers. Bourgeois social mores, intersecting as they
did with economic developments and gender and racial ideologies, had differential effects on
each population of rural women. In England, female farm day labourers were never central to
agricultural profit-making and were thus vulnerable to job marginalization resulting from
evolving gender ideologies, themselves emerging from economic changes, and agricultural
production developments. Middle-class ideas about the proper duties of wives and mothers, male
working class demands for a ‘breadwinner’ wage and an end to female competition for (their)
jobs, spread to rural areas. However many of the rural labouring poor accepted such ideas, many
of their employers appear to have adopted them. Over the middle decades of the century, rural
women’s field labour came under official scrutiny, its propriety being questioned. An already
existing gender division of labour narrowed and reified, leaving to women those field work tasks
deemed appropriate to female strength and ability levels, and which prevented them from
competing with male labourers. Willy-nilly of their needs or preferences, rural women’s
opportunities for independently paid farm employment declined greatly. However, regional
diversity in agricultural crop production, hiring and work customs, and male and female
employment patterns and local work alternatives complicate the picture of ubiquitous, total
decline leading to cessation. But by the 1920s, only a few local pockets of small numbers of rural
women continued to work with any regularity in the fields as employees.

Meanwhile, in the southern states of America, African American slave and then freed
women were pivotal to cotton and rice production and profitability. Gender boundaries of labour
had existed under slavery and continued in freedom, but were, in the fields though not in the
workshop, more fluid than those found in England. All other, especially craft, occupations on plantations were allocated by gender. The antebellum division of field labour depended upon not only individual slaveholders’ attachment to the prevailing gender ideology but also, and perhaps more importantly, on the size and type of agricultural operation. During and after the Civil War, under northern pressure to install the free labour system, African American efforts to determine the meaning of their freedom, and southern white opposition to any radical alteration of the social relations of production evolved the ‘compromise’ solution of sharecropping which tended both to obscure much of African American women’s labour input and retard its decline. More African American rural women probably spent more of their daily round at household labour and fewer hours in the fields. Whilst at crop productive work they were probably less likely, if married, to do the ‘masculine’ labour, like ploughing, demanded of them as slaves. Yet by no means all freedwomen either wanted to or could stop performing such labour, in the early days of Reconstruction or later.

The comparison of English women waged farm labourers with African American slave and freed women has uncovered the local mutability of the gender division of labour. The work experiences of both populations reveal that the pre-existing gender associations of specific agricultural tasks produced the presumption of the strength and skill levels necessary to the work tasks, and of the significance of the jobs. Farm jobs (and by extension many others) were gendered because they were customarily performed by men or women, not because of any strength or skill demand intrinsic to the task. As the evidence from both sides of the Atlantic reveals, little that the women field workers, English waged or African American slave and freed, did was accorded skilled status; few held ‘specialist’ positions, most were expected to be generalists. "Gender mattered" both on southern plantations and in English fields. Gender ideology not only structured the division of labour in the fields and beyond, but also informed the effects that the modes of agricultural production, and the social relations embedded within them, had in determining rural women’s work-lives. And, to a greater or lesser degree, it informed the
women's own perception of themselves and their abilities, further shaping the limits of their agency.

One of the objects of this study has been to interrogate the assumption that most rural women were married and mothers, and that their interests and circumstances were similar and so they typify women *per se*. Behind such assumptions lies the belief that every woman had and has the same gender vocation; that their sex (reproductive) role was and is their life-work (productive) role. This view of women derives from the gender ideology which evolved over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and whose traces remain evident in the present. To argue, as some historians have, that for freedwomen “productive labor had no meaning outside the family context,” or that “[m]ost working-class women did not want paid employment,” is to naturalize the gender division of labour. Such a stance presumes that the vast majority of women were existentially wives and mothers, and that they always and everywhere perceived themselves as peculiarly and essentially that. Historians' own understanding of gender and gender roles informs their interpretation of the communities of women about whom they write. This danger exists for all interpreters of the past. This is especially so when the result of social change is clear and to all appearances confirms deeply held beliefs, but the evidence from the period prior to change is ambiguous. Little in the sources, beyond the few women's voices recorded in parliamentary testimony and the WPA narratives, provides any insight into what most of those nineteenth century rural women, African American or English, thought about themselves, their work or their condition. Because we have so little direct information from the women themselves as well as unreliable numerical data, we surely should resist making generalizations about them and their lives; most especially, care is needed not to generalize from effects to causes.

The lives of nineteenth century English and African American rural women, mothers and wives included, who enjoyed or even preferred agricultural to domestic labour tend to be obscured by history and in the histories. Such women have been treated as exceptions to their gender's norm and to that elusive but clearly necessary 'average' woman worker, rather than as
equally important to an understanding of rural women’s history. The opinions of women who liked agricultural work exist alongside those of similar women who did indeed view field work as a tedious and exhausting necessity. A recorded few, particularly among African American freedwomen, evinced workers’ pride in their ability to do farm jobs well - especially those jobs viewed as ‘men’s.’ Assuredly, these women worked in the fields out of necessity, and for their families, but those facts did not deter their getting satisfaction out of their paid labour.552

Yet, however varied their circumstances and whatever their preferences, racial, gender, class and economic structures determined the world of English and African American field labouring women. These structures complexly interwove in ways peculiar to each culture, differentially affecting both populations of women. But in neither country had these women any determinative control over how the racial and gender ideologies formed and then informed the changing needs of agricultural and industrial capitalism. As the evidence reveals, the presence or absence of women at work in the fields depended upon the necessity of their labour to the profitability of the crop. In England, where the gender division of labour within agriculture had so constricted the work available to women as to marginalise them and where they, as waged day labourers, had never constituted a large labourforce, their labour was not crucial to the agricultural economy. Thus the increasingly normative bourgeois gender mores were able to define the boundaries of rural English women’s work lives. Conversely, even as similar middle class gender norms spread among European Americans, the racial structure of the southern economy essentially degendered African American freedwomen because the work they did in the fields remained as central to the demands of commodity agriculture as it had been under slavery.

The structural needs of their country’s agricultural economy combined with racial and gender ideologies to differentially circumscribe the boundaries of the possible in the actual and conceptual work lives of both English and African American rural women. Certainly, these women had agency in their own lives, but that very internal ability to conceive of and act upon their world was itself determined by those self-same external structures and circumstances which
shaped and limited the possible. The historical trajectory of the work lives of these two populations of rural women reveals the determinative power of structure on their worlds and on their agency within their situations.
essentially domestic one. For Rousseau it meant that women were, or must be, subordinated to men, and, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) and the Marquis de Condorcet (1791), often viewed women's role as an raisonnée des principaux ouvrages
2 Sonya O. Rose, “Protective Labor Legislation in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Gender, Class, and the Liberal State,” in Gender and Class in Modern Europe, ed. Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 199. Rose points out the gender contradiction at the heart of liberal bourgeois society: even as it posited a “new female subject” one viewed as both incapable of and to be sheltered from hard physical labour, it “depended on” females performing that sort of labour for its profits.
3 See Susan Groag Bell & Karen M. Offen, “General Introduction,” in Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in the Documents, Volume One, 1750-1880, ed. Susan Groag Bell & Karen M. Offen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 3. Enlightened men of the mid to late eighteenth century, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) and the Marquis de Condorcet (1791), often viewed women’s role as an essentially domestic one. For Rousseau it meant that women were, or must be, subordinated to men, and, therefore, their education should be different from that of men; for Condorcet women’s role as wife and mother necessitated their being educated equally with men. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile, bk. 5, in Oeuvres complètes, ed. Michel Launay, 3 vols (1967-71), III, Oeuvres philosophiques et politiques: de l’Emile aux derniers écrits politiques, 1762-1772, 243-47 (1762), in Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in the Documents, ed. Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 47; Marie-Jean-Nicolas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, “Sur l’Instruction publique: Première mémoire: Nature et objet de l’instruction publique,” in Oeuvres de Condorcet, ed. A. Condorcet O’Connor and F. Argao, 12 vols. (1847-49), IX, originally published in Bibliothèque de l’homme public, ou analyse raisonnée des principaux ouvrages français et étrangers, etc., ed. M. Condorcet et al, (1791), in Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in the Documents, ed. Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 80-81. Mary Wollstonecraft advocated independence and equality for women, but at the same time considered the motherhood role to be uniquely feminine; see Mary Wollstonecraft, Vindication of the Rights of Women, (1792), ed. Miriam Brody, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1986), 285, 315. The classic scholarly book on the rise of domestic ideology in New England is Nancy F. Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835, 2nd ed. ed. new preface by author (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1997), 98-100. Originally published in 1977, Cott’s analysis of the emergence of this powerful and lasting ideology was class, race and region specific, a fact that she acknowledged at the time. These specificities do not alter the fact that very similar ideological changes were also occurring in England over the same period; thus, her analysis provides a useful tool for approaching the situation across the ocean. Perhaps the most important point she raised was that domestic ideology - in part in continuity with the past sexual division of household labour and in part as a result of changes in what that labour entailed - assumed that all women had the same (and natural) vocation; that women’s sex role was their (life) work role.
4 Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose, Introduction: Gender and the Reconstruction of European Working-Class History, in Gender and Class in Modern Europe, ed. Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 12. See also, Catherine Hall, “Gender Divisions and Class Formation in the Birmingham Middle Class, 1780-1850,” in People's History and Socialist Theory, ed. Raphael Samuel, History Workshop Series, gen. ed. Raphael Samuel, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 164-175:166-170. Here Hall argues that the relationship between the rise of industrial capitalism and the separation of gendered spheres of action is neither a necessary nor a straightforward one. Further she questions the view that separate spheres grew solely out of the separation of the workplace from the home; while an important factor, it cannot have been the only one, as the evidence of a wide variety of middle class work-home arrangements continued through the nineteenth century.
7 Laqueur, Making Sex, 5-6.
8 For Europe in general and England in particular, see Marilyn J. Boxer & Jean H. Quataert, “Women in Industrializing and Liberalizing Europe: Overview, 1750-1890,” in Connecting Spheres: Women in the Western World, 1500 to the Present, ed. Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. Quataert, (New York: Oxford
University Press, 1987), 114-126; for the United States and a slightly different angle on similar developments, see Ruth H. Bloch, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother," Feminist Studies 4 no.2 (June 1978); 101-126. Bloch argues that the ideological change, which took place in the later eighteenth century following the separation of men's work from the household, was one which emphasized motherhood as the ideal role of women, and, unlike the earlier 'American' image of the ideal woman as a helpmeet to her spouse, this maternal ideology came from England. The earlier image had not privileged women as mothers over men as fathers in the raising of children; rather both parents, and especially the father, were viewed as the educators and moral preceptors of their children. By charging women with the sole responsibility of children's upbringing, the perception, even the reality of gender differences increased.  

9 Cott, The Bonds, 140-159; Bloch, "American," 101; Bell & Offen, Women, 240-244. For a brief mention of middle and upper class women's incursions into the public sphere through unpaid "philanthropic and charitable work" see Karen Offen, European Feminisms 1700-1950: A Political History, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 96-97; see also, Christine Stansell, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860, (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), xii, for a sense of the self-congratulatory nature of some of the moralized philanthropy. For a contemporary discussion of the need for women of the better sort to work (sans pay, of course) in aid of their needier and younger sisters, who without such moral and practical training would become depraved and vicious, see "The Employment of Women," in The North British Review, 52 (February 1857), particularly, 159-164. The article devotes its final pages to the situation of women of the middle and upper classes who, at times, were without men's financial support and provides employment suggestions and argues against the prevailing view that women ought not to trespass into areas of male employment, pp. 177-182.  


12 See "The Employment," North British Review, 162-165, where the heavy manual labour and filthiness of domestic service work were either ignored or obscured in the cant about its suitability for raising destitute females out of, or preventing their fall into, ruin. Such practical training in domestic occupations would "ennoble and purify the womanhood of these poor women,"; see also Jennie Kitteringham, "Country work girls in nineteenth-century England," in Village Life and Labour, ed. Raphael Samuel, History Workshop Series, gen. ed. Raphael Samuel, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 132-133. Kitteringham finds the absence of any inquiry into female domestic service, despite the "harsh and gruelling tasks" and conditions and frequent 'moral' dangers endured by the women, "notable" for its apparent inconsistency. As she argues, to officially inquire into this sector of work would have been viewed as an "attack" on accepted gender and class differences, on the very structures assumed to constitute the bedrock of civil society. See also, Stansell, City, xii-xiii, for the class nature of domesticity.  


14 See the arguments provided by Leslie A. Schwalm, A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), particularly on pages 200-211, 266-268.  


16 Not that earlier historians of women failed to recognize the shifts in women's labour which had occurred. See M.F. Davies, "Rural Districts," in Married Women's Work, ed. Clementina Black, (1915; reprint, New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1980), 230-251, for one such early study. In the essay, M. F. Davies describes her 1909-1910 comparative study of three different sets of married women, living and (mostly) working in three different counties in England. She apparently spent several weeks in each district, talking with and observing the women, all from the working-classes, in an attempt to discover the
physical and psychological effects of waged work on rural married women. The Worcestershire women were field workers. As she wrote, by 1910, “Within the memory of people still alive women worked habitually in the fields in many parts of England. Now it is only in few and far apart districts that women are to be found who, as part of their daily routine, perform certain duties about the fields and farms of their own neighbourhood.”

17 See Ivy Pinchbeck, Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850 (London: G. Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1930), microform, The Gerrissen Collection of Women's History. From Pinchbeck onwards these questions have structured studies on women in agriculture, at least in Britain. She did not devote more than a short portion of her book to farm working women, but her conclusions have been influential because her work was thorough, considered, and one of the few earlier histories of labour which focussed on working women.


19 Snell, Annals, 66.

20 Snell, Annals, 61, 51-52.

21 Surprisingly, none of these historians set the work-lives of rural women within the wider cultural context of political, social and economic upheaval during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the Luddite machine-wrecking, bread riots, the Tolpuddle Martyrs, the 1834 New Poor Law, the reform movement, the Swing Riots, the Chartist movement and its related riots, the Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867, the Ten Hour movement and its anti-female prescriptions or the renewed efforts by working men against women working at the pit-brow and in the small metal trades, in the 1860s -1880s. See Nicola Verdon, Rural women workers in the nineteenth century: gender, work and wages (Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, New York: The Boydell Press, 2002), 15. She denies any significant effect on agricultural working women of the legislative offensives against women’s work; nor does she reckon ‘male breadwinner wage’ ideology to have had much influence on their lives. Also lacking in this work is any recognition of the significant legal and customary power and authority of husbands and fathers over the lives of women, including those of the labouring poor.

22 Judith Bennett, “Women’s history: a study in continuity and change,” Women’s History Review 2 (1992): 173-184, reprinted in Women’s Work: the English Experience 1650-1914, ed. Pamela Sharpe, Arnold Readers in History, (London: Arnold, 1998), 58-68; Verdon, Rural, 27-28, 121-126. Bennett refutes the argument for the existence of a ‘golden age’ in women’s work. Even when, or if, in the centuries preceding the nineteenth, women had a wider range of manual and trade work possibilities, labour had always been divided by gender; and men’s work was always the more highly valued. She also argues against any significant change to a division of labour which had always existed.

23 Jane Humphries, “Enclosures, Common Rights, and Women: The Proletarianization of Families in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries,” The Journal of Economic History 50 no. 1 (March, 1990): 17-42. Humphries does not appear to consider enclosure per se to be an aspect of an emergent technological or production change, even though she argues that it proletarianized the landless labourers. See also Pamela Sharpe, “The female labour market in English agriculture during the Industrial Revolution: expansion or contraction.” Agricultural History 47 no. 2 (1999): 161-181.

24 Sharpe, “The female,”163 -165, 171. She agrees with Pinchbeck that the numbers of women in agricultural labour rose in the late 18th century, positing agricultural improvements and the Napoleonic
Wars as creating pull factors bringing women into the fields at a time when the sharp decline in cottage industry pushed rural women to seek alternative means of support. Women's participation then began to fall off again from the mid-nineteenth century. Sharpe thinks that Snell is overly deterministic in his linkage of technological change to women's departure from the fields. Instead she argues for a "more nuanced approach which gives greater weight to local variations due to geography regional culture and time-honoured patterns of customary work." However, Snell is careful not to extend his assessment beyond the south-east grain-growing region, which he contrasts briefly with the situation in the south-west; he recognizes that agricultural labour customs and trends were different elsewhere in the country for just the reasons that Sharpe raises. For another view entirely, see Humphries, "Enclosures," 37. Humphries assumes rural women to be married and with children. Those who were neither wives nor mothers were either young and servants in husbandry or apparently unimportant. She asserts (without cited evidence) that because "agricultural wage labor often required work far from home, for specific hours, and without interruption" married mothers simply could not have done it. Rural women would have worked "at or from home" because there they "could also utilize the labor of their children, transmit skills, and keep a watchful eye on the chance encounters of their daughters." She does not seem to have read either the 1843 or the 1867-1870 parliamentary commissions of inquiry into women's agricultural labour. Had she, she would have found sufficient evidence to contradict these assertions. Her argument reflects rather strongly a general, middle-class worldview, one whose ideological premises derive from the period under discussion. As evidence against the use of bottle-feeding methods, she adduces modern germ theory, together with what contemporary physicians thought women with children could or should do to support her argument that rural women with infants could not have worked in the fields. Unfortunately for this argument, there is evidence in both parliamentary reports on such women going out to work in the fields and leaving their babies and infants behind in the care of others, often children little older than their charges. For an argument that supports Snell's link between agricultural changes and female employment patterns but does not agree with his assessment that women's participation in agricultural labour rose between 1780 and 1840, see Joyce Burnette, "Labourers at the Oakes: Changes in the Demand for Female-Day Laborers at a Farm near Sheffield During the Agricultural Revolution," *The Journal of Economic History* 59 no. 1 (March, 1999): 41-67.

25 Verdon, *Rural*, 194, 199. In particular she cites the work of historian Karen Sayer, but her general argument is also against Snell's structural perspective. She recognizes the significance of structure in limiting women's ability to act autonomously, but nonetheless the tenor of her argument denies the affect of structure on agency. Instead she posits a generalized tendency for rural married women having and using that limited agency to opt out of the fields because the work there was "tedious and unrewarding" work and domesticity beckoned. Structure only seems to have really shaped agency, for Verdon, when women went into the fields - then they were "forced" by economic need. See also for an argument which takes a similar stance, Joanna Bourke, "Housewifery in working-class England 1860-1914," *Past and Present: A Journal of Historical Studies* 143 (May 1994): 167-197, reprinted in *Women's Work: The English Experience 1650-1914*, ed. Pamela Sharpe, Arnold Readers in History, (London: Arnold, 1998), 332-355.

26 Verdon, *Rural*, 197-199; Bourke, "Housewifery," *passim*. More than Verdon who agrees with her argument, Bourke strongly asserts the desire of working class women for full-time domesticity and dependency rather than taking employment outside the home. It does not appear to strike either historian as odd that at the very moment in history when women gained (1870) legal title to their own earnings, working class married women should so eagerly seek to retire into the home and become economically dependent. Neither historian mentions this particular piece of legislation.

27 While this study has not focussed on married freedwomen's political relations with their husbands, it was and is an important aspect of African American women's history that many freedwomen refused to concede their independence or their belief in their equal right to citizenship. Although not all freedwomen were so independent of mind and body, many seem to have been unwilling to accept as their lot male dominance or violence. Some were willing to challenge the gendered legal norms, for their rights and those of their children, whether the men abusing those rights were white or black. For in depth discussions of such activity, see for example, Nancy Bercaw, *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Household in the Delta, 1861-1875*, Southern Dissent Series, ser. eds. Stanley Harrold and Randall M. Miller, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 112-116, 133-157, 171-177, *passim*; Karen L. Zipf,


33 Jones follows the argument of Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925,* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976). Both posit a rather traditional view of the family, albeit that Jones argues that the relations within the conjugal family were intricately interwoven with those within the slave then freed community, the forms of which derive from Africa. They both tend to perceive African American gender relations as rather more harmonious and for Jones at least, more egalitarian, than either European American relations between the sexes or the evidence would perhaps permit. See also, Christie Farnham, “Sapphire? The Issue of Dominance in the Slave Family, 1830-1865,” in “To Toil the Livelong Day”: *America’s Women at Work, 1780-1980,* ed. Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton, Essays from the Sixth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 68-83, for an interesting and thought provoking critique on the changing nature of the literature on African American female headed households in slavery, their meaning and significance.

34 Jones, *Labor,* 63; White, *Ar’n’t I, 163-164; Sterling, We Are,* xiv-xvi. White and Sterling also argue that freedwomen, like their grand-daughters and great-grand-daughters, could not leave the fields or white people’s houses to care for their own families and homes, even if they would have preferred to. Sterling is less certain than Jones; she argues that the evidence does not allow for making assumptions about freed women’s desire for the dependent life of domesticity. As matters stood, the women had little choice but to work and few options from which to choose.


36 White, *Ar’n’t I,* 150-152; Schwalm, *Hard Fight,* 260-266; Mary J. Farmer, “‘Because They Are Women’: Gender and the Virginia Freedmen’s Bureau’s ‘War on Dependency,’” in *The Freedmen’s...*
The desire to control their own labour (and bodies) meant that they did not all necessarily wish to render up that control to their husbands on freedom; it was not only the white men’s control that some were concerned to temper. See Schwalm, Hard Fight, 8, 268.

Verdon, Rural, 197. First she points out, and then goes on to ignore, that a considerable number of women, in 1871, were either unmarried or widows, of whom a proportion would have belonged to the rural labouring poor. Not to mention that some among the unmarried would have been mature women with or without children.

Verdon, Rural, see particularly 164-165, 197-199. To repeat, for Verdon women’s agency, limited to be sure, meant only choosing to withdraw from the fields. Furthermore, in her assessment of the factors responsible for limiting female agency that of the legal and cultural authority vested in the husband and father get no mention. Nor does she write much about the distinctly disapproving attitude several (many?) farmers held about female farm workers (farmers who did not employ them at all or did so only at hay and corn harvest). And she ignores evidence of antagonistic attitudes held by male farm labourers (and some labourer’s wives) towards those women who did go out. A desire for respectability and domestic fulfilment may not have been the only reasons women had for leaving the fields: other possible factors surely included male unemployment and the belief that women’s low wages depressed men’s. See Jones, Labor, 29-40, 58-59, 63, 4, particularly for her discussion of the gender division of labour within the slave quarters, followed by her discussion of the post-war situation. Jones argues that Black women continued often to work in the fields, but for their families and not directly for white profits. But she emphasizes freedwomen choosing to withdraw as much as they could, a choice they made in harmony with their spouses. Women who might have wanted to work in the fields rather than be housewives, freedwomen who were not married, were widowed or deserted, or those who were unhappily married can be glimpsed but briefly in her depiction of freedwomen’s lives. She reveals her own position on women work, marriage and the home in her foreword - see pp. xi, xiii. See Bourke, “Housewifery,” 339. Bourke decries feminists’ and left-wing historians’ arguments which posit working women as the victims of male antagonism to their going out to work. She, too, argues that working class married women sought out domesticity rather than continue with the ‘double shift.’ She argues that dependency did not have to mean powerlessness within the marriage. Bourke, like Jones, believes in working class domestic harmony, arguing that domestic violence declined over the second half of the nineteenth century. The unreliability of nineteenth century crime statistics, the increasing taboo nature of speaking about domestic abuse when ‘respectable,’ and the reality that husbands were legally entitled to chastise their wives - none of these problems influence Bourke’s rather rosy evocation of later nineteenth century working class married life.

Bourke, “Housewifery,” 333-334, leaves her readers in no doubt as to her conservative and anti-feminist position in her opening paragraphs.

Of course, for slaves literacy was illegal rather than simply unaffordable, as it was for English agricultural labourers. By full literacy, I mean being able to both read and write. I hedge here because blanket statements are not wise; even among the slaves some -a very few - learnt to read and write.


Selections of the WPA narratives have been published by various editors. The ones used here come from the most extensive compilation, that edited by George P. Rawick in the 1970s.

Investigations into the validity of women labouring always included children similarly occupied.

The ‘better’ class because better paid and because these jobs were ‘specialized’; all included working with animals. Thus, shepherd, herdsman, ploughman were all in this category. As for the significance of respectability, it became linked, at least in the minds of Chartists and union men, with obtaining a workinh class male franchise. See Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class*, Studies on the History of Society and Culture, ed. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 220-221, 255-257, 261-263. By the 1870s (and perhaps before) the organized agricultural workers (all male) appear to have been similarly concerned. An essential step towards Victorian respectability was that females remain in the home, and when they worked, as they often had to, for wages, the home should be the setting. This perspective was expressed by Thomas Wright, Journeymen Engineer, *Our New Masters*, (1873; reprint, New York: Augustus M. Kelley, Publishers, 1969), 373. Women of the industrious poor (as distinct from the brazen sluts of the idle poor) “are seldom to be seen save by their neighbours...[and they] with true womanly instinct shrink from public gaze.” Of course, the women took in work, but they neither competed for jobs, nor commingled, with men.

Lord Ashley’s *Reply to the Lancashire Short-Time Committee*, pp. 6-8, in *The Battle for the Ten Hours Day Continues: Four Pamphlets 1837-1843*, British Labour Struggles: Contemporary Pamphlets 1727-1850, gen. ed. Kenneth E. Carpenter, (1842; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1972). Ashley wrote in response to the summer’s riots and strikes in which women had had a prominent and, for elites and Chartists, socially troubling role: “But the late unhappy disturbances have exhibited to you and the world the pernicious results of violating the order of Providence by the abstraction of the females from their peculiar calling. Their presence, nay more, their participation in the riots, has read us an awful lesson; for when the women of a country become brutalised, that country is without hope” [emphasis added].

*Verdon, Rural*, 15.


Valenze, *First*, 4-12 and chapters 1 & 2.

Enclosure is the term for the appropriation for private, individual use and profit of lands hitherto held and/or used in common by local people. Such common usages had existed across the country since at least...
the middle ages, and were regulated by custom and local parish meetings or courts leet. (Common did not mean that just anybody could use the lands and exploit usage rights, such as those of turbarry, estover, levancy and couchancy - that is, collecting turves, wood and brush, and grazing animals, cattle particularly.) See E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*, (New York: The New Press, 1993), Chapter III, for an in depth and fascinating discussion of the struggle over enclosure and its meaning during the eighteenth century. He also provides insight into the complexity of law and custom involved in the commons.


Verdon, *Rural*, 52.

Snell, *Annals*, 63. See the whole of chapter one on agricultural seasonal unemployment of women, 1690-1860. The shift was to spring field work and generally away from harvesting. The jobs women did in the spring were such that could easily be considered as superfluous in an agricultural depression or as expensive once machinery could do it: weeding, hoeing and singling of turnips, picking stones and twitch.

See *First Report*; Northumberland, Durham, parts of Lincolnshire, East Yorkshire and Norfolk continued to have appreciable numbers of women in the fields, but, by the 1860s, even in these redoubts their numbers were beginning to decline.

Reform Bill of 1832 notwithstanding, the government continued to be repressive and unwilling to reform itself - hence the Chartists demands, not simply for [manhood] suffrage but for radical parliamentary reform. The 1832 bill brought benefits to the middle classes, which they were only too willing to use to their own advantage and against the working classes. See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963; reprinted with revisions, Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1975), 888-901. On page 893 he quotes from the *Poor Man’s Guardian*: “The promoters of the Reform Bill, projected it, not with a view to subvert, or even remodel our aristocratic institutions, but to consolidate them by a reinforcement of sub-aristocracy from the middle-classes.”

Thompson, *Making*, 111-203, passim. The French Revolution provoked republicanism among the artisanal and commercial strata of English plebeian society, frightening the ruling elites no end. The government proved unwilling to make compromises with those deemed outside polite society, instead it chose repression to quell any potential rebellion.


See, for instance, the testimony of a “Lancashire male cotton” worker who suggested that women’s as well as children’s labour be restricted, in part to “give the female a domestic turn” in Parliamentary Papers, 1833, vol. XX, D1, p.50, quoted in Valverde, “ ‘Giving’,” 626; see too: “Misery, poverty and wretchedness have...been caused by the employment of females in factories...the reduction of wages is caused by [them]...Then came the introduction of females into...weaving...at a reduced price...Thus have females been the cause of thousands of men being thrown out of employment,” “A Chartist intimately acquainted with the feelings of the working classes of Manchester,” quoted in Sir Charles Shaw, *Manufacturing Districts: Replies of Sir Charles Shaw to Lord Ashley M. P. regarding the Education and Moral and Physical Condition of the Labouring Classes*, pp. 33-34, in *The Factory Education Bill of 1843: Six Pamphlets British Labour Struggles: Contemporary Pamphlets 1727-1850*, gen. ed. Kenneth E. Carpenter (1843; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1972).

See, for example, J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer 1760-1832*, (1919; reprint by arrangement with Longman Group Ltd., London; Stroud, Glouce: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1995). As they make clear, the Luddite protests of the early 1800s were part of a tradition of protest, certainly from the 1770s, against the encroachment of improving machinery upon the livelihoods and lifestyles of artisans.


This was the occasion of the Peterloo massacre, which was the result of armed governmental repression against a peaceful, orderly and disciplined crowd. Some 9-11 people were killed and hundreds injured; several people were arrested and charged with High Treason, among them several women. See, *The Gentlemen’s Magazine*, August 1819, 171-174; Thompson, *Making*, especially, 745-751, on the event.

Some Chartists, for instance, R. J. Richardson, supported female suffrage for single and widowed women alone; wives “and their husbands are one, or ought to be as one” and that one was of course the husband. Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists*, (London: Temple Smith, 1984), 125. Thompson argues that “support for the idea of women’s votes was always widespread amongst Chartists.” See also Clark, *Struggle*, 220. Clark differs with Thompson, arguing that in the early period in the influence of Thomas Paine’s definition of citizenship as a “universal political right of every human being” on Chartism allowed some women to argue for female suffrage too. True, some sectors of the movement, particularly the Owenites, favoured women’s suffrage, but they were in a minority. What can be said is that truly universal suffrage was an ambiguous project for most Chartists, and that that ambiguity is reflected in the way different historians have interpreted the evidence. See also, Anna Clark, “Manhood, Womanhood, and the Politics of Class in Britain, 1790-1845,” in *Gender and Class in Modern Europe*, ed. Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 276-277.

Clark, *Struggle*, 215 & 220; Valverde, “Giving,” 625; Clark, “Manhood,” 276-277. See also the *Address to the Friends of Justice and Humanity in the West Riding of Yorkshire from the Meeting of the Delegates of the Short Time Committees, Established to Promote the Legislative Adoption of the Ten Hour Factory Bill*, in *The Factory Act of 1833: Eight Pamphlets 1833-1834*, British Labour Struggles: Contemporary Pamphlets 1727-1850, gen. ed. Kenneth E. Carpenter, (1833; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1972), 4, 15. Chartists, men and women, were, in the main, from the artisan and skilled worker strata; at least those who were ‘card-carrying members.’ These were the very groups who developed a strong “male bread winner pride” according to Seccombe, “Patriarchy,” 65.

See Anna Clark, “The Rhetoric of Chartist Domesticity: Gender, Language, and Class in the 1830s and 1840s,” *Journal of British Studies* 31 no. 1 (January 1992): 66-67. Clark argues that when the men of the middle classes, but not those of the working classes, won the vote in 1832, “gendered notions of virtue demarcated the working class as different and inferior to the middle class,” because the former could not contain or maintain its womenfolk in the home, unlike the latter.

The trade unionists, particularly in the cotton mills, merely sought mill-women’s restriction to ‘unskilled’ positions, according to Clark, *Struggle*, 243; Valence, *First*, 100. Valence is less sure than Clark that male cotton workers and their unions were only interested in shortening hours; she considers them to have been as interested in getting a ‘breadwinner wage’ and the women out of the factories.


Clark, “Rhetoric,” 83-84.


Seccombe, “Patriarchy,” 73. Seccombe attributes some of the growing resentment among Chartists towards women independently taking paid employment to the demise of the influence of the Owenites within the movement.

Clark, “Rhetoric,” 82-83.

Clark, “Rhetoric,” 84-85.

Clark, “Rhetoric,” 84; Ashley, *Reply*, 6-8. Women equalled, within the ideology (as, I would argue, they still do) SEX/ THE SEX; men then, as now, were not sex. Women acting in ways construed culturally as masculine were believed to be un-sexing themselves in multiple ways, particularly by denying their sex-nature and adopting that of the male (who was not conceived of as sexed). The nineteenth century produces a plethora of works poring over and pondering women’s sexuality/sex-nature (at once passive/predatory),

83 Clark, "Rhetoric," 84-85.
84 Clark, "Rhetoric," 84-85.
85 See J. L. Hammond & Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer, 1760-1832: A Study in the Government of England Before the Reform Bill*, (1911; reprint, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), 17-18. The Hammonds write that nearly six million acres between 1761-1805 were enclosed, followed by nearly three million more by 1844. See Snell, *Annals*, chapter 4. He reckons the costs of enclosure during this period specifically to have been: "the unfathomed economic costs and long-term effects of increased labour unrest and class tension (nineteenth century incendiaryism [distinct from earlier forms, about the commonness of which see Hobsbawm, *Labouring*, 5-10], the poaching gangs, the rural constabulary, farmyard pilfering...)...the economic and motivational effects of terminating partial self-sufficiency and the keeping of livestock among the poor...; the consequent deterioration in diet, and the economic implications in that; the demise of craft industries and domestic production dependent on raw materials found in an un-enclosed village; the loss of fuel; the contribution to the decline of service; the effects of such changes on prices and aggregate agricultural demand;... out-migration..." (224). However Snell does not refer to any direct effect on women throughout his long chapter on the effects of enclosure on agriculture. See also Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain*, 36; Raphael Samuel, "Village Labour," in *Village Life and Labour*, ed. Raphael Samuel, History Workshop Series, gen. ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 3-26.

88 Valenze, *First*, 35-37, 38-39. Gleaning ceased to be a legally protected customary right, after a suit brought in 1788; henceforward, it was to be at the farmer's discretion. Wood gathering along the lanes and on the commons and wastes - an important fuel source - became illegal with legislation in 1766. Kitteringham, "Country," 75-138: 98; Burnette, "Labourers," 41-67.
90 *Reports of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor*, III. (1802), quoted in Valenze, *First*, 46,[emphasis added].
91 Verdon, *Rural*, 78.
92 Snell, *Annals*, 216-217. According to Snell, prior to enclosure, farmers had had to employ servants on long contracts and provide 'living-in' (board and lodging) as well as a wage because it was the only means by which farmers could ensure that labour would be there when needed. Meanwhile, open commons and wastes and the right to various forms of usage allowed the landless labouring poor to be partially independent of waged income.
96 Colman, *Agriculture*, 40.
98 Verdon, *Rural*, 77-83, *passim*. Verdon discusses the historical debate on the survival, or not, of female farm service from 1830-1870; opinions differ because the evidence is ambiguous. The classifications of the census data reflect a wider societal tendency to submerge farm service by women into domestic service, in part because any farm work they did as servants, no matter the actual proportion of their time devoted to it, was viewed as supplemental, and in part because women's farm service was assumed to be mainly if not wholly household in nature.
100 Higgs, "Occupational," 702-703. Because of the many problems with the censuses arising from their intended purpose (medical and actuarial statistics), married women were frequently either simply categorized as the "farm labourer's wife" for example, or put into the catch all "general labourer category" or "domestic servant" category. And many women, from 1881, who had earlier been put into a 'semi-employment' category, such as "shopkeeper's wife," were from then on categorized as "unoccupied," whether they were in fact gainfully employed in the family business or not.
101 *Reports of Special*, 27. Three farmers lamented their inability to find young women willing to become domestic servants.
Contrasting Assumptions,” Journal of Social History 34 no. 2 (Winter 2000): 263; Thompson, Making, 247-248; Hammond & Hammond, Village, 87, who write that far from rising, as was desperately needed by families caught between the loss of access to common lands and food prices which continued to rise, real wages fell. Quoting a Professor Levy’s work, the Hammonds write that between 1760 and 1813 while wage rates rose by 60 per cent, prices for staples like wheat rose by 130 per cent.

Hobsbawm and Rudé, Captain, 47; Hammond & Hammond, Village, 139-141. The Hammonds argue that Speenhamland exploited already existing principles of relief; what was new, they contend, was that “the governing classes... applied to the normal case methods of relief and treatment that had hitherto been reserved for the exceptions. The Poor Law... [d]esigned to relieve his [sic] necessities... was now his bondage. If a labourer was in private employment, the difference between the wages his master chose to give him and the recognized minimum was made up by the parish. Those labourers who could not find private employment were either shared out among the ratepayers, or else their labour was sold by the parish to employers, at a low rate, the parish contributing what was needed to bring the labourers' receipts up to scale.”


Clark, “New Poor,” 262-263.

See Hammond & Hammond, Village, 139-140, for information on the additional allowances made to a needy working man with a wife and for every child: “A single Man according to his labour. A Man and his Wife not less than 6s. a week. A Man and his Wife with one or two Small Children, not less than 7s a week. And for every additional Child...1s a week...” The Hammonds do not give any listing for single working women’s allowances, whether with or without children.

“William Cobbett’s cry of rage about the men found dead behind the hedges with nothing but sour sorrel in their famished bellies,” from Political Register, 6 November 1830, p. 711, quoted in Hobsbawm and Rudé, Captain, 52.

Thompson, Making, 250. Thompson argues that it was the Whigs and that bastion of “middle-class Radicalism” The Times who brayed for severe treatment of the rural insurgents. And they got their desires.

Hobsbawm and Rudé, Captain, 61, 90-91. Ground down as they were by the combination of enclosure, population explosion, agricultural capitalism, widespread unemployment and underemployment, falling wages and rapidly shrinking poor relief, the once semi-independent waged farm labourers had become starved, resentful dependents on whatever wages farmers were willing to pay for casual, seasonal labour and however much Speenhamland bread they were willing to dole out. It is hardly surprising that, as Hobsbawm and Rudé point out, that they finally revolted; but the situation had to be ripe - not merely totally exploitative; there needed to be a catalyst, and it is their contention that the 1830 French revolution together with local Radical agitation provided the necessary spark. Agricultural labourers took little or no part in the ongoing urban radical reform protests and agitations which brewed steadily on for most of the next decade or so.

Hobsbawm and Rudé, Captain, 74.

The wrecking of threshing machines again, as in the case of Luddism, was not directed against mechanization per se, but a particular form of it, and that because of the machines’ devastating effects on male farm workers’ winter employment and thus wages. Prior to threshing machines, men, and some women, had been employed in threshing throughout much of the winter, ensuring a non-relief income during what was otherwise the deadest agricultural time of the year. Threshing machines reduced both the number of weeks and the numbers of people needed to complete the work. See Hammond & Hammond, Village, 220-221; Hobsbawm and Rudé, Captain, 85.

Hobsbawm and Rudé, Captain, 240-241, 246-249. They remark that it was probably “not surprising that women played so small a role” in Swing because there were no “food issues.” Such an assumption is
problematic: it assumes very few were involved because very few were caught and prosecuted and that
most women would only be interested in ‘domestic’ concerns. They seem not to imagine the possibility that
many working men might have refused to let women take part. Finally, one could argue that Swing was, at
bottom, a ‘food’ issue.

116 Hobsbawm and Rudé, Captain, 249, 263. Nineteen were executed and 481 transported to Australia. The
labourers believed “[I]ke most ‘primitive rebels’... justice - and even the law - was on their side.” It was,
for them, a question of traditional rights and the ancient notion of a moral economy; overwhelmingly
illiterate and knowing only how to honestly ‘graft,’ they were innocents in a fast changing world.

117 Caird, English, 467.

118 The New Poor Law was the brainchild of utilitarian Edwin Chadwick and others who were acolytes of
Bentham, as well as of bourgeois evangelical Christians in British political circles. See Clark, “New Poor,”
264.

119 Clark, “New Poor,” 264. Concerns about social unrest in the countryside and town arising from
starvation militated against too rigorous an adoption of Malthusian ideas. Whilst not initiating the practice,
the new law regularized the inclusion of the labouring poor themselves in those rateable for poor rates. In
this way they hoped to use peer pressure as an additional tool in their effort to make applying for poor relief
so undesirable that only in the direst moments would anyone do so.

120 Clark, “New Poor,” 261, 262-263.

121 As the 1843 and 1867 inquiries show, across England, among the working-classes, pre-marital sexual
relationships were common and pregnancy was expected. Often it was the precursor (though not always
did the couple see the need to marry formally) to marriage. This behaviour horrified the newly sensitized
middle-classes; they viewed it as a clear demonstration of the lower classes degradation and demoralization
(July 1967): 110-119, for the evolving nature of the clauses affecting unwed women and their offspring.
Under the old poor law unwed mothers or mothers-to-be could not only claim support for herself, but also
the offspring. And if she named the father, the parish would press the paternity suit (if the man was still in
the country) for child support payments, which went to the maintenance of the child. Under the Bastardy
Clauses of the new law as they were finally resolved in 1844, following a decade of public pressure against
the earlier, draconianly anti-mother versions, affiliation and maintenance actions could be taken only by the
mother (while she was alive) and with independent evidence corroborating her statement.

122 Report from H. M. Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the
Poor Laws (London, 1834), p. 197, quoted in Henriques, “Bastardy,” 109; Relief to Mothers of Bastards,
January 8, 1840, Poor Law Board, Official Circulars of Public Documents and Information, Directed by the
Poor Law Commissioners to be printed Chiefly for the use of Boards of Guardians and their Officers, Ten
Board of Guardians had inquired about what was to be done with the monies obtained from the father
following an affiliation order. Edwin Chadwick replied that in all such cases the changes made to the Poor
Law now required the following: that the order made against the putative father be “made to the petty
sessions within three calendar months after the chargeability of the child has accrued. The order is to be as
under the Poor Law Amendment Act, to reimburse the expense which has been incurred by the Union in
the maintenance of such child, and is not to be granted in any case where the Union has not been put to
some expense in its support and maintenance... no part of the money recoverable under the order can be
paid to the mother of the child, nor will any personal relief given to the mother be a sufficient ground to
warrant the justices making an order upon the putative father” [emphasis added]. After 1844, while in legal
theory the mother resumed her ability to sue the father for maintenance, few if any did so because, even if
they knew of their rights, they had to stand the whole costs of the action themselves. No longer were Poor
Law authorities able to take action on her (or their) behalf. See Henriques, “Bastardy,” 119.


124 Clark, “New Poor,” 267; Sharpe, “The female,” 174. Sharpe argues that the lowness of female field
labour wage rates was to a large extent customary and justified not only on dependency grounds but also on
biblical ones (Lev. 27. 3-4). She quotes Sir Frederick Eden on his puzzlement at the gender wage disparity
he found between farm servants: “The wages of man-servants employed in husbandry, who are hired from
half-year to half-year are from 9 to 12 guineas a year, whilst women, who here do a large portion of the
work of the farm, with difficulty get half as much. It is not easy to account for so striking an inequality and
still less easy to justify it.” Typically for day labour women were paid between 6d-10d. a day for ordinary
labour and from 10d to 1s 6d a day at harvest and haytime. In specific locales, like the potato-growing districts of East Yorkshire, women could earn twice the usual amount per annum because they were regularly employed, 10L instead of the more usual 5L, according to Sir Francis Doyle, Report by Sir Francis Doyle on the counties of Yorkshire and Northumberland, Reports of Special, 282. But this does not mean a greater day rate than normal; it only indicates more days work per year. (In Yorkshire generally they received 10d and 1s a day, season depending.) Moreover, women’s day rates remained virtually the same throughout the nineteenth century; even in 1909 they had hardly shifted, women in Worcestershire got 10d or 1s a day for intermittent, seasonal labour, Black, Married, 233. (She also notes men’s weekly rates, for general farm labour, which at 12-14s a week had also risen by only two or three shillings over half a century.)

Clark, “New Poor,” 268.


Humphries, “Protective,” 100.

Sir Charles Shaw, Manufacturing, 28-29, 34-35.


These documents are used by all historians of nineteenth century rural women’s history. They are the only contemporary sources containing a record of rural working women’s reported speech. They contain the responses labouring poor women gave to the commissioners’ questions and must be read as such. Their original speech, which would have been in broad dialect, has clearly been standardized for an audience untutored in the vast variety of local and regional variations on English. This might well account for some of the uniformity of expression, particularly in the 1843 document.

Mr Austin was the commissioner sent to Wiltshire, Dorset, Devon and Somerset; Mr Vaughan went to Kent, Sussex and Surrey; Mr Denison went to Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Suffolk; and Sir Francis Doyle went to Yorkshire and Northumberland.

Report by Mr Austin on the Counties of Wiltshire, Dorset, Devon and Somerset, Reports o/Special, 13.

Report by Mr Vaughan on the Counties of Kent, Sussex and Surrey, Reports of Special, 33.

Reports of Special, 133, 183, 187-188. See for instance the evidence given by Mr James Landsdell of Tunbridge Wells where typically the women working on the hop grounds do not ‘open the hills’ (level the soil heaped around the plants) because the work was hard “for a woman”, although on occasion they were so employed. Mr John Cogger, near Maidstone, stated “[w]omen and boys are both employed in opening the hops...The man cuts, the woman opens and the boy closes up again commonly.”

Reports of Special, 133, 166.

Mr James Landsell, relieving officer, Reports of Special, 182. Corn, in British English, was, and continues to be, the generic term for the cultivated grains: wheat, barley, rye and oats. Most typically it refers to wheat and barley. What it does not refer to is maize, which continues to be outside the familiar group.

Mr Christopher Baxter, bailiff, Reports of Special, 194.

Mr Thomas Rammell, tenant farmer, Kent, Reports of Special, 191.

Rammell, Reports of Special, 191.

Verdon, Rural, 64; she writes that of the districts visited by the commissioners [and they did not go to the north-west or northern midlands besides Lincolnshire] women cut the corn in Kent and in parts of the north east; Mr Smith of Yorks, Report by Doyle, Reports of Special, 314. See also Kitteringham, “Country,” 96: “The out-door employment of women...[their] wages for reaping corn are calculated by the acre.”


Reports of Special, 133-134.

Caird, English, 284. The Fylde is the alluvial ‘plain’ in west central Lancashire - to the east of Blackpool; the River Ribble runs through it. Fylde according to the OED is an obsolete form of field; it is, however, pronounced /field/.

Swedes, or swedish turnips, are called rutabagas in the United States. The ones grown for fodder are much larger than those seen on the greengrocery counters here. Mangold wurzels or mangels were another root grown for fodder, similar in appearance to swedes, only larger and more temperamental, thus grown where swedes did not fare so well.
Throughout the term respondent will refer to local people questioned by the commissioners, either by letter or in person.

It is likely that other women worked with dung and horses (driving carts, leading horses at plough, harrowing etc) in counties or parts of counties not visited. In 1867 female labourers in northern Northumberland frequently drove carts, worked with dung, even drove horses at harrow and all of these activities caused commissioners and local elite males to condemn these practices. Yet the 1843 Report by Doyle makes no allusion to women doing any of these jobs. He may have confined his investigation to the southern part of the county, or may not have visited the districts where it was prevalent. He had only thirty days, after all, in which to complete his survey.

Mary Puddicombe, farm labourer’s wife, Jane Bowden, sawyer’s wife, Mary Rendall, farm labourer’s wife, Report by Austin, Reports 0/Special, 109, 112-113.

John Waters, Report by Vaughan, Reports of Special, 185. He was the only person to mention any possible difficulty young lads might have with ploughing or harrowing (rough land).


Verdon, Rural, 29-30, 124, argues against a flexible division of labour for women day labourers which might have included ploughing, harrowing and so on, because she too appears to accept that women lacked the requisite (never specified but assumed) strength. Certainly the only evidence available suggests that girls - as farm servants/apprentices - ploughed (although the Northumberland women harrowed), but none indicates that women who worked casually or seasonally on a day by day basis did so. Surely the fact that some women working as day labour had as girl apprentices and servants driven ploughs is worthy of some attention. She also would seem to accept the gendered assumption the women have “nimble fingers and an ability to concentrate on tedious backbreaking but undemanding tasks for long periods.” Few arable jobs are other than tedious. As for the nimble fingers - contemporaries believed that to the contrary, agricultural labour made women’s hands rough, horny (as it does), and so unfit for such fine-fingered, ‘feminine’ work as sewing. See Clericus, Letter to The Times, (London), December 30, 1843, 5.

I do not argue that there were no women ploughing in England even after the 1870s, only that no females were reported as being employed for wages by farmers to do so as part of their general field labour. Certainly not in the counties covered by the Reports. It is not unlikely that up in Northumberland or Cumberland a small holding’s female owner or owner’s wife would drive the plough on occasion; but further south such a possibility would have been highly unlikely. Ploughmen were ‘skilled’ labourers, fetching higher wages that general farm labourers - in part because they looked after the horse team. It is more than likely that adult female competition for such specialized, higher waged jobs, jobs would not have been countenanced by either the male workers or possibly even the farmers.

See Colman, Agriculture, 40-41.

As the above-mentioned evidence in Austin’s report suggests.

Rev. Cane, Notts, Evidence of Stanhope, First Report, 326. The Rev. Cane told Stanhope that his “housemaid... had followed [i.e. driven] the plough and led horses.” This was presumably as a young woman - apprentice perhaps or farm servant; but its occurrence was likely to have been in the 1840s-1850s.

Report by Austin, Reports of Special, 27.

Report by Vaughan, Reports of Special, 130-131.

J. H. Heigham, Esq., Mr R. W. Clarke and Mr J. Last, Report by Denison on the Counties of Suffolk, Norfolk and Lincoln, Reports of Special, 231.

Report by Doyle, Reports of Special, 296. In Northumberland as in Scotland a system of contract agriculture employment existed until the end of the nineteenth century in which a man, known as the hind, contracted for a year with a farmer. He was bound by the terms of the contract to find a woman to work with him in the fields full-time - to work the bondage. She was the bondager. The hind paid her from the earnings he contracted for from the farmer; he also supplied her with her keep and her housing. Ideally the bondager was his daughter or sister, but, often enough, it was a ‘stranger’ who then had to share the tied cottage with the hind and his family. (Tied cottages are houses belonging to the farmer which are provided rent-free or not to the full-time agricultural labourer and his family.)

Reports of Special, 297.

Hobsbawm, Labouring, 24, 76-77. The depression of 1841-42 was not restricted to agriculture, and according to Hobsbawm, it was “appalling” in its effects on labour.
commissioners to prod farmers into paying family wages to married men, farmers (usually also on the Board of Guardians) refused to do the latter and continued to subsidize low wage rates through poor relief doles. See Clark, “The New Poor,” 264-265.

Report by Vaughan, Reports of Special, 130.

See all four of the summaries written by the individual commissioners for this general assessment; a only a few individual respondents expressed counter opinions.

Dr Greenup, M.D., Wilts, Report by Austin, Reports of Special, 58. Several doctors and other respondents assessed the health situation similarly: that field work was healthy in and of itself for women, but their living conditions - especially insufficient and low quality foodstuffs and lack of clothing and consequent cleanliness - caused illnesses and any debility suffered. Among the few women interviewed, two gave evidence which illustrates the doctors’ conclusions. Mrs Smart, wife of a stone mason who rarely went into the fields, and then only to glean or do a little in hay time said that

"I always work in my stays, which get wet through and they are still wet when I put them on again in the morning. My other clothes are also often wet when I take them off and are not dry when I put them on again in the morning. I have not a change of clothes.” The typical southern labouring family’s diet consisted of “bread...potatoes, a little bacon” now and then, never “butcher’s meat”; and in the south west, the fare more usually included cheese than bacon. If the families raised a pig, it usually went to pay bills rather than feed themselves, as Mrs Wilshire, Wilts, said “We have never killed a pig for ourselves,” Reports of Special, 65-66, 68-71.

James Lyddon, Esq., surgeon, Devon, Reports of Special, 94.

Susan Vacher, Mary Cox, Mrs Cozens, Reports of Special, 66-70. See also Mary Hunt: [49-50] “I began to work in the fields at 16...I was always better when out at work in the fields; and as for hard work I was never hurt by it”; Mrs Britton: “I am 41...I have never felt that my health was hurt by [field] work....Working in the fields is not such hard work as working in the factory. I am always better when I can get out to work in the fields”; Jane Long: [48] “I never felt the work hurt me...I was always better when working out in the fields than when I was staying at home,” Reports of Special, 89, 91, 111.

Mrs Mary Hunt and Mrs Sumbler, Reports of Special, 67-68.

Report by Denison, Reports of Special, 244.

The hop-grounds offered little direct employment to girls - though for them to become skilled at hop-tying, for instance, they would probably have gone with their mothers to help and so to learn. During the 1820s-1840s in southern and south-eastern England, domestic industry all but disappeared; enclosure reduced a wide variety of cottage employment and spinning had departed northwards into the mills; lace and straw plait were not yet widespread; glove-making and stocking knitting were very localized. Besides ‘domestic’ service (which could include farm service), field work would have been the only female employment possibility in areas like East Anglia. See Snell, Annals, 59, 65, 211, 317.

Rev Prattient, Dorset, Report by Austin, Reports of Special, 79. He continues in the same jejune tone: "let the labouring class see that they depend upon the observance of the decencies of life and moral and religious conduct for employment and the means of comfortable living - let them thus experience the respective consequences of virtue and vice.”

Parents of the labouring poor - at least in the mind of their social superiors - did not exert sufficient authority over their female children. Were they to, young women would be sent into service, but “the parents don’t try to get them out,” Report by Denison, Reports of Special, 244.

Lavenham, Suffolk, Reports of Special, 228. “Strawplaiting is now the only domestic manufacture in this neighbourhood. Formerly all the women and children in the neighbouring villages, from 10 to 15 miles round, used to be employed in spinning yarn.”

Mr George Hammond, Yorks, Report by Doyle, Reports of Special, 310.

Mr Benjamin Robinson, Yorks, Reports of Special, 346: “We have no in-door work except charing [sic] and that preferred in consequence of getting more wages, as well as victuals.”
179 Rector of Hunmanby, the Vicar of Osmotherly, and Mr Smith of Bridlington, Yorks, *Reports of Special*, 223, 364, 342.


181 *Reports of Special*, 244, 254.

182 Report by Doyle, *Reports of Special*, 371; see also, for idleness, Mr H. T. Robinson, Clerk of Union at Helmsley; for benefits/good, Rev. J. Holmes, Rev. G. Dixon, Mr J. Little; for comparison with other employments, Mr Sowerby, who compared field workers favourably to weavers and Mr Weatherill, who saw no difference between the morals of domestic and field workers, *Reports of Special*, 325, 330, 356, 360-61, 367, 369.


184 *Reports of Special*, 24-25.

185 *Reports of Special*, 243-245, 255.


187 J. E. Cutliffe, Esq., and James Flaxman, Esq., *Reports of Special*, 102, 104.

188 Report by Denison, *Reports of Special*, 244.

189 Colman, *Agriculture*, 49, 54. In a similar vein, some three years earlier, Clericus had written a vicious condemnation of female agricultural labour and of the women themselves, *The Times*, 5.

190 See Seccombe, “Patriarchy,” 66-67; Rose, “Protective,” 198-199. Both argue that it was women’s individual, independent employment in mills and factories which so disturbed contemporaries because it threatened the gender order (patriarchal) believed to be essential to the stability of the social order.


193 Rose, “Protective,” 204. Rose does not link it to the feminist demand for a wide range of job opportunities, including craft trades, to be opened to women. Coverture is the legal term for the legal condition into which women fell on marriage - femme covert. On marriage women ceased to have any independent legal existence: they became personless, submerged totally into the personhood of their husband. His person was the only one legally recognized. He owned all the property, including that which had formerly been hers, made all the contracts, and any wages she earned were his to dispose of. Likewise, his wages were also his property; he could legally withhold all or whatever portion of them he chose from her; she had no legal grounds for complaint. This matter of wages had more relevance to the labouring poor than property ownership, especially to the women. See James Morrison, quoted in Seccombe, “Patriarchy,” 71-72, for a trenchant critique of the economic power labouring men had over their wives.

194 Rose, “Protective,” 206.


202 Malone, “Gendered,” 175.

Malone, “Gendered,” 175.


Malone, “Gendered,” 175; Rose, “Protective,” 204-205.


Not just farm labour - this was also the beginning of a new round of attacks by working class men against working class women’s labour. See Michael Hiley, *Victorian Working Women: Portraits from Life*, (London: The Gordon Fraser Gallery, 1979; Boston, Mass: David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1980), 52-60. Not only artisans fought against the ability of women to work publicly in jobs men thought ought to be theirs, other sections of the male working classes also sought an end to female outdoor competitive labour in the small metal trades and brickfields. And the miners, having succeeded in getting women out from under the ground, then battled to rid the pit brow of women, too. In 1865, north-eastern miners wanted Parliament to prohibit women’s pit brow employment because, they said, it degraded “the sex, leads to gross immorality, and stands as a foul blot on the civilisation and humanity of the kingdom.” This led to three years of Select Committee inquiries into women’s pit brow work: their conclusion - that the men had no case. The miners repeated their attempt in 1886-1887. A deputation of the women from Wigan “marched to the Home Office” some dressed in their work clothes of “clogs, trousers, short sacking apron, topcoat and pitbonnet” to protest against the men’s efforts to put them out of work. The pit brow women were supported by feminists and other members of the middle classes, including diarist A. J. Munby.

The six commissioners and their allotted counties were: The Rev. Fraser - Norfolk, Suffolk, Sussex, Essex & Gloucestershire (Gloucs); The Hon. Stanhope, Esq., - Lincolnshire (Lincs), Nottinghamshire (Notts), & Leicestershire (Leics); The Hon. Portman, Esq., Cambridgeshire (Cambs) & Yorkshire (Yorks) (treated as three separate districts: the East, North and West Ridings); Mr Norman - Northamptonshire (Northants); Mr Culley - Bedfordshire (Beds) & Buckinghamshire (Bucks); and Mr Henley - Northumberland (separated into northern and southern districts) & County Durham.


See the letter from H. Threman, medical officer for Howden Union, Evidence accompanying the Hon. Portman’s Report, *First Report*, 389. “[t]he said labour or employment has not any tendency to increase the mortality returns of infants, except in those instances where very young children are put out to day nursing, as is sometimes the case, particularly the children of young unmarried females and that even such instances are not frequent occurrences.”

See for example, Mr. H. T Ellis, surgeon, Lincs., in, Evidence accompanying the Hon. Stanhope’s Report, *First Report*, 295. Mr Ellis was quite specific: “The mortality among infants is very great in this district; 50 children under three months old died during 1865-6. The mothers leave their children out to work; even children that are suckling are left a whole day; often 35 children in the charge of one old woman. Sometimes they give them Godfrey’s [a syrup, spice and opium concoction] to keep them quiet while they are out...I know a case here where a woman has had five or six children all of whom have died, having been given opium to keep them quiet.” See also, the Rev. Hutchinson, Howden, Evidence of Portman, *First Report*, 389. The other favoured opiate was laudanum.

Mr Ellis, *First Report*, 295.

Three of the four 1843 commissioners asked most of their respondents about, and received information on, the diets of agricultural labouring families. Commissioner Austin was clearly concerned about the inadequate quantity of the food in the diet of a minority of field working women in the south-western counties he visited. The poor quality of the food was more general, but he estimated, on advice from local medical officers, that was less a problem when there was sufficient food, especially in the case of those women who worked in the fields. See Report by Austin, *Reports of Special*, 17-18. In 1867, a field-working
the grounds that the work ensured their health as mothers and thus the nation’s health by their comfortab

226 There was also the significant matter of gendered food allocation within families, with females getting less in quantity and quality than male wage-earners, despite women’s often equal productive and additional reproductive work. See Stephen Nicholas and Deborah Oxley, “The living standards of women during the industrial revolution, 1795-1820,” Economic History Review, 46 no. 4 (1993): 737-739. They argue that females got a smaller proportion of the food resources - and accepted that arrangement - because men, following enclosure and the decline in women’s agricultural employment, were perceived to work harder. Males certainly earned more and as the legal heads of households, which together gave them dietary prerogatives. Women had always earned less than men in like employment; and it is questionable whether in fact women were working less hard than men. Such an argument perpetuates the notion that housework, the additional work of wage earning women, was physically undemanding, even when it consisted of only the most rudimentary of tasks. Rural males rarely (like other working men) had a double shift of any sort. See Mary Collier, The Woman’s Labour, in Stephen Duck, The Thresher’s Labour and Mary Collier, The Woman’s Labour, The Augustan Reprint Society, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, Publication No. 230, (1739; reprint, Los Angeles: University of California, 1985) for a sturdy, credible, poetic description of many rural women’s working lives, whether at day labour in the fields or in the big house.

227 Interestingly enough, in 1873, a Mr. Whately Cooke Taylor presented a paper before the Social Science Congress, in which he suggested that agriculturally employed women were viewed as better mothers than those working in factories. See Whately Cooke Taylor, “The Employment of Married Women in Manufacture,” a paper read at the Social Science Congress, held in Norwich, October 1873, reprinted by kind permission of the Vigilance Association for the Defence of Personal Rights, (London: 1873), microform, The Gerritsen Collection of Women’s History.

228 The clothing some of the women wore raised eyebrows and comments. For instance, in Norfolk, at a meeting of the Norfolk Chamber of Agriculture, the President, reported that he had heard some ‘ladies’ say that the dress of female field workers in the area was “awfully disgusting.” He defended the field women, describing their work clothes: “a strong pair of laced highlows, good woollen gaiters, and skirts that, instead of being 18 inches on the ground were 18 inches off the ground... [while an not] elegant or...becoming dress... it was a useful one.” Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 12.

229 This is not to say that a few of his respondents did not consider farm work morally unsuitable. See Evidence accompanying Mr Henley’s Report, First Report, 250.

230 Colman, Agriculture, 52-53.

231 Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 95-96.

232 But we only have evidence from 15 English counties in the 1867 report. While it is probable that the remaining 23 counties were similarly deficient in female horse workers, the evidence is not readily available. And of course the evidence regards women employed by farmers (and innkeepers, clearly) not wives and daughters of farmers or self-employed women. Thus, as in much else regarding women and un/paid agricultural labour, we know only bits and pieces about their work with horses.

233 Mr Brown, medical officer, Berwick-on Tweed; Mr Brown, surgeon, Wooler; Dr Robertson, Glanton; Mr G. Davidson, relieving officer, ex-Presbyterian schoolmaster; Rev Green; Mr Dickson, blacksmith, Evidence of Henley, First Report, 236, 229, 238, 240.

234 Mr Ashton, farmer, Lincs., Evidence of Stanhope, First Report, 307-308.

235 Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 95-96.

236 Evidence of Henley, First Report, 229. Mr Brown, surgeon, believed that females driving carts were more likely to have accidents than males, in part because of their clothing. See also Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 139. The Rev. Legge in Sussex found “[s]preading dung, driving horses... most objectionable.” He was thankful that in his district women no longer did these jobs, having stopped some 15 years earlier (c. 1850). See also Evidence of Henley, First Report, 229. Patrick Baker, overseer, “there is some employment not suitable for women, such as leading horses and carts.”

See, for instance, the Rev. Hill who expressed his belief that not only did domestic work become "irksome" to women field labourers but that their boldness and "masculinity" derived from working with men, where there was no privacy for urination and where the language and topics of conversation would be coarse. Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 140.

See for example several of the Norfolk respondents' comments in Report of Denison, Reports of Special, 244-245.

See, for example, several clergy and overseers, Evidence of Stanhope, Lincs., First Report, 294; several clergy, Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 136.

Mary Cole, shepherd's wife, Norfolk, First Report, 198.

This was a frequent cry. See, for example, Rev. Shirley & Rev. Harrison, First Report, 135.

Frequently, among those men more than willing to severely restrict or even prohibit female field labour were some who would make an exception for women's working at harvest and hay-time. See for instance the Rev. Overton, Lincs., Evidence of Stanhope, First Report, 283.

Rev. Stuart and Rev. Floyer, Evidence of Stanhope, First Report, 291, 305; Earl Spencer, Evidence accompanying Mr Norman's Report, First Report, 428; Mr Brunyee, overseer, Evidence of Mr Stanhope, First Report, 295; Rev. Stocker, Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 137.

Sarah Green, labourer's wife, 13 children, Norfolk, First Report, 200. She used to go charring. Mrs Wicks, yardman's wife, 4 children, Norfolk, First Report, 203 (her husband's employer selected her as a candidate for the commissioner's report and was present when she was interviewed. Fraser noted, after reporting her responses, that "She was...described to me by Capt. Caldwell, Lord...agent, who took me to see the cottage, and was present while I collected the above evidence, as a model wife"). See also, Mrs J. Green, labourer's wife, Lincs., Evidence of Stanhope, First Report, 309.

See for example, Mr Askew, schoolmaster, Evidence of Stanhope, First Report, 288.

Elizabeth Gowan, labourer's wife, 9 children, and Mary Ann Nash, labourer's wife, 9 children, Essex, Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 196, 200.


A vicar and a poor relief overseer also expressed the view that women working in the fields meant unemployed men. They also noted that this meant poorer families, as women earned much less than the men. Rev. Tasker, Cambs., Evidence of Portman, First Report, 350; Thomas Stubbins, overseer, Lincs., Evidence of Stanhope, First Report, 298.


See, for example, John Kingswood and John Jeffrey, labourers, Lincs., Evidence of Stanhope, First Report, 286, 290; John Townsend, parish clerk and farm labourer, Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 198-199; William Betts, labourer, Evidence of Stanhope, First Report, 297-298. Mr Betts believed himself to have been out of work because of women working in the fields.

Mrs Cawthorn, labourer's wife, Mary Ann Nash, and Mrs Jackson, labourer's wife, Evidence of Stanhope, First Report, 200, 296, 314; Mrs Jones & Mrs Goddard, Evidence of Portman, First Report, 340, 338. Mrs Goddard saw the gangs of girls as the main cause of male unemployment, 338.

Townsend, Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 198-199.

See, for example, John Bladworth, Esq., and Samuel Rowlandson, Evidence of Portman, First Report, 401, 417; Rev. Beckett and a letter from Howard Taylor Esq., Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 136-137, 172-173; for employment of mainly widows and married women, see Mr Bramley, Evidence of Stanhope, First Report, 287-288.

Mrs Pratt, labourer's wife, 4 children, Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 195.

See, for example, Sarah Watling, labourer's wife, 8 children alive, and Sarah Ann Hubbard, labourer's wife, 6 children living, Norfolk, First Report, 196.

Meeting of labourers and their wives at Linton, Gloucs., First Report, 131-132.


Rev. Statter, Bucks, Evidence of Culley, *First Report*, 483 See, too, Evidence of Stanhope, *First Report*, 297; an extract from the Return to the Commission by the Rev. Humphrey, and then later his letter to Stanhope, retracting his earlier opinion. Humphrey admitted to originally deploring female field labour as destructive of family life. When he later discussed his views with an erstwhile labourer’s turned shopkeeper’s wife, he realized that he had been mistaken in his understanding. With her help, he estimated a family’s weekly expenses: “On the whole, it seems clear that women’s work is needful to eke out the means of living [earned by the husband]...[without] outdoor occupations for the women” the family” must soon be plunged into debt.”


Mr Howey, Amersham, Evidence of Culley, *First Report*, 484.

Twitch grass, quitch grass, couch grass - all names for *Agropyron repens*, a grass with extensive, ramifying root systems. It requires a lot of effort to extirpate it because missing just one root allows the plant to re-establish itself. Mrs Everett, labourer’s wife, Leicestershire; Mrs Wilkinson, labourer’s wife, Lincs, Mrs Robb, labourer’s wife, Evidence of Stanhope, *First Report*, 331, 296-297 & 305 [emphasis added]. Leicestershire was the main stocking knitting cottage industry area; many rural women worked in that [emphasis added].


Mary Cole, shepherd’s wife, Norfolk; Mary Ann Tash, labourer’s wife, Essex, Evidence of Fraser, *First Report*, 198, 200.


Robert Emerson, Esq., surgeon and farmer, Lincs, Evidence of Stanhope, *First Report*, 296-297; Mrs Lack, labourer’s wife, Beds, Evidence of Culley, *First Report*, 503. Mrs Lack had no idea how much her husband earned: “I know what I get from him and it ain’t scarcely enough to buy bread, let alone send my girl to school.” Bedfordshire farmers had little field work for women; lace making and straw plaiting were their major alternatives.

Evidence of Norman, *First Report*, 433. See also Evidence of Fraser, *First Report*, 36, for the report from the parish meeting at Salhouse, Norfolk, where two farmers thought that adult women no longer went into the fields because of the men’s higher wages. The reason they concluded was that the women no longer cared to. The question is why did they not care to.


*First Report*, 76.

Mrs Jackson & Mrs Borringham, Evidence of Stanhope, *First Report*, 314, 291. Mrs Jackson made clear that the “Paddies” were not welcomed by the English rural labouring poor because the Irish were often taken on for harvest because they worked for lower rates. Sometimes, in some places they were employed for longer which was not much liked, but it was harvest that especially mattered to the rural
English poor. Harvest earnings were what made it possible to survive the year, particularly as there was often no winter work. Harvest work was by the task or piece at slightly higher rates. Evidence of Portman, First Report, 390, 398.

287 Report of Fraser, First Report, 113-115; Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 138.

288 See, for example, farmers, Robinson, Siddons, and Hopkinson. Evidence of Norman, First Report, 447, 448, 434; Gurney, Bucks, Evidence of Culley, First Report 534.

289 Evidence of Norman, First Report, 439; Evidence of Portman, First Report, 414-415; Report of Fraser, First Report, 74-75; Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 100-102, 121-122.


291 See for example, for machinery in general and mowing machines and steam ploughs particularly, Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 100-102, 84-85, 90-91; machinery in general and horse-hoes in particular, Evidence of Portman, First Report, 415.

292 Report of Stanhope, First Report, 74 [emphasis added].

293 Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 67.

294 Parish meeting in the Union of Swaffham, Norfolk, First Report, 58-59.

295 Report of Fraser, First Report, 18.


297 For example, Lincolnshire, Evidence of Stanhope, First Report, 296-297; East Riding of Yorkshire, Evidence of Portman, First Report, 368.

298 North Riding of Yorkshire, Evidence of Portman, First Report, 412-413; Sussex, Evidence of Fraser, First Report, 87-88, 90-91.

299 Verdon, Rural, 114-121, passim. See, for example, her table on “Sewerby Home Farm,” East Riding of Yorkshire, between 1861 and 1891, the percentage of the total number of days that women worked went from 19 per cent to 5 per cent. The largest decline was between 1861-1871, with a drop by 9 per cent of the total days worked by women. Conversely, the percentage of the days worked by men rose over the same ten years by 14 per cent, from 74 per cent to 88 per cent, with children’s labour making up the difference. In another table, Verdon shows that on a farm at Hovertton St Peter in Norfolk, the percentage of days worked by women fell from 12 per cent in 1861 to 1 per cent in 1891. Men’s percentage of days worked rose steadily at about 7 per cent a decade until 1881. Again children’s labour made up the difference, although it too fell from a high in 1861 of 26 per cent to 20 per cent in 1891. See Celia Miller, “The hidden workforce: Female field workers in Gloucestershire, 1870-1901,” Southern History 6 (1984), quoted in Verdon, Rural, 119. She uses Miller’s work to reveal the difficulties involved with extrapolating from a few districts to the whole country. Miller shows, through the use of farm accounts, how the census collectors simply ignored the agricultural employment of the women on several farms in the district. Some of the women had worked 200 days, others 100 days out of the year. In a job sector which, at the time, generally did not employ male general agricultural labourers (non-stockmen) all year round, a woman working 200 days was very close to being a full-time, regular farm worker.

300 Fewer, that is, by the later nineteenth century.

301 See Report of Stanhope, First Report, 74: “at this work [harvest] good men will often earn from 7s to 10s a day, if helped by their wives. Other sorts of work are done under the same system, such as dropping beans, flax pulling, ketlock [charlock] pulling &c.” [emphasis added]; Mr Weddell, farmer in North Yorkshire, Evidence of Portman, First Report, 410: “turnip hoeing is taken by the piece at 8s or 9s an acre. A man and his wife can hoe an acre a day or more.”


303 Of course, if women go out to work every hay time and harvest, that is regular; however, by regular field employment is generally meant, and is so meant here, going out to work between 100-200 days a year.


306 Higgs, “Occupational,” 708-712, passim. He includes the female relatives of farmers, the female relatives of farm labourers working about two months a year. He applied the ratio of female farm labourers (not farmers’ relatives) to male farm labourers in 1906 (1:7.5) to earlier decades. As 25 per cent of female ‘domestic’ servants worked for farm families, Higgs argues that they worked part of their time in some form of farm labour (as had historically been the case).
307 By then too the number of male farm labourers had declined considerably and would continue to do so throughout the 20th century; see Table 41.4e, in Bethanie Afton and Michael Turner, “Agrarian Occupations,” in Part VII: The Statistical Base of Agricultural Performance in England and Wales, 1850-1914, in The Agrarian History of England and Wales: Vol. VII 1850-1914 (Part II), ed. E.J.T. Collins, The Agrarian History of England and Wales, gen. ed. Joan Thirsk, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1975. See also, Brain Short, “Rural Demography, 1850-1914,” in The Agrarian History of England and Wales: Vol. VII 1850-1914 (Part II), ed. E.J.T. Collins, The Agrarian History of England and Wales, gen. ed. Joan Thirsk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1232-1247, for an illuminating discussion on the difficulties involved in producing reliable statistics for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from the changing meaning of rural, to the significance of local custom to the meaning of age at marriage, for example, to the great interrelated local variances among agricultural employment practices, modes of, and changes in farming. Thus it was perfectly possible for writers to remark on the loss of farm employment for women in some areas, whilst at the same time in a few others “large increases in women farm workers” might be noted.

308 By economically vulnerable is meant those jobs which, in a downturn or with a change of technology, and so viewed as unprofitable and/or superfluous, cease to exist. Weeding, hoeing, and gleaning were chief among the jobs that the women (and children) did that were vulnerable in those ways.

309 Flora Thompson, Lark Rise to Candleford: A Trilogy, (1945; reprint, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974), 58. Ms Thompson writes about the attitudes of some the village women she knew in the 1870s and 1880s. They looked back on the women who had once worked in the fields (they may themselves have been among them) as “lawless, slatternly creatures, some of whom thought nothing of having four or five children out of wedlock. Their day was over; but the reputation they had left behind [deserved or not; hindsight or not] had given most country-women a distaste for ‘goin’ afield.’” But bad reputations or not some middle-aged village women braved the respectable gossips because they had “a liking for an open-air life and a longing for a few shillings a week they could call their own.”

310 Verdon, Rural, 164; Bourke, “Housewifery,” 334-335.

311 Verdon, Rural, 164; Bourke, “Housewifery,” 335-337. Neither historian denies that external influences were compelling factors; both however, believe that women of the labouring poor only worked outside the home when driven to it by necessity. Bourke is particularly vehement in her assertions against any argument that views working women’s retreat into the home as the result of male and/or class ideological efforts.

312 Neither Verdon nor Bourke - for example - touch the issue of nineteenth century working men’s active resistance to working class female outdoor paid labour. Neither historian appears to have attended to the animus several agricultural labourers and labourers’ wives expressed, in the 1867 Report, towards female competition for ‘male’ agricultural jobs.

313 Verdon, Rural, 165 n. 3. Verdon notes that at the time male agricultural workers were increasingly concerned about respectability and the need for women to be in their proper sphere for its appearance and maintenance. However, this information about Joseph Arch and the agricultural labourers’ union remained firmly in that single footnote and did not bring any influence to bar on her argument.

314 Verdon, Rural, 165 n. 3.


316 In her discussions of waged day labour Verdon concentrates on what she interprets as the needs and desires of the majority - married mothers - to the virtual exclusion of those of other rural adult women. For Bourke married mothers determined (positively) the shape of all women’s lives.


For instance see the letter from a Mrs Burrows, “A Childhood in the Fens, about 1850-1860,” in “Extracts from Guildswomen’s Letters”: Life As We Have Known it by Co-operative Working Women: Working Women describing their jobs, families and political awakening in early-twentieth-century England, ed. Margaret Llewellyn Davies (1931; reprint, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975), 109-114. Mrs Burrows writes briefly about her own four years of agricultural gang labour as a small child and then her placement in a factory at the age of 12. She also mentions her parents situation: “My father...was a great sufferer with a tumour in the head. For sixteen years, he was never able to earn...wage, and my mother worked like a slave to keep a home over our heads.”


Edmund S. Morgan, American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 304-305, 310, 420-421. Morgan asserts that English women had not been “normally employed” in the fields; putting slave women to such work reflected their enslaved status. Later, feminist, historians have concluded otherwise about English and other ‘white’ women. See, for example, Carr and Walsh, “Planter’s,” 29, 40-41; see also, McCurry, “Producing Dependence,” 55-71, passim, for a discussion of women in nineteenth century southern yeomen farmer families working in the fields, including ‘helping’ with the ploughing. In the northern colonies and then states, wives and daughters frequently ‘helped’ in the fields at anything from ploughing, to hoeing, to reaping and binding. See, for example, Osterud, “’She Helped,’” 89-93, passim; Bruegel, “Work,” 7-14, passim. See also, Mary Neth, “Gender and the Family Labor System: Defining Work in the Rural Midwest,” Journal of Social History, 27 no. 3 (Spring 1994): 563-577, for a discussion of the part family dynamics as well as ethnic traditions played in the structure of the gender division of field labour among European American farm families between the 1880s and 1950s.

See Schwalm, Hard Fight, 19, for the situation in South Carolina’s low country, for instance.

The gender division of labour can refer to either the general cultural notion of separate spheres with public and paid activity as the reserve of men and privately performed unpaid domestic activity as that of women; or it can refer to specific jobs or tasks within fields of paid labour which are gender marked. Both aspects of gendered labour intimately and complexly interact, mutually reinforcing and reproducing each other. Here I refer to both understandings. See Jones, Labor, 63-64, 87, for her argument on the increasing separation of gendered tasks in black families once emancipation became a reality. The gender division of labour which existed in the ‘quarters’ became the standard after slavery. Jones means both the separate spheres of labour (fields primarily for men, homes and gardens for women), and, as far as was possible she argues, a sharper separation of task in the fields, with the plough becoming the ‘men’s’ tool and the ‘hoe’ the woman’s. Not that wives entirely forsook the plough, but she argues, the times when they ploughed were fewer than under slavery.

Certainly to the northern men who came South with the army, the abolition societies and later the Freedmen’s Bureau, the field labour that African American women had done as slaves was all but invisible, as various documents attest. Even when it was recognized, it was assumed that women’s field work was worth less than men’s: that they could not have been nor were of ‘full hand,’ let alone of prime, full hand status. And when labour contracts were agreed with the heads of households, overwhelmingly men, they became, in effect, family labour contracts. With that, the women’s labour ‘disappeared’ from the record, even though, in some cases, the women (and children) did the contracted work while the men took seasonal or other work. See Schwalm, Hard Fight, 259-260, on this and its related contractual problems; see also, Dempsey Pitts, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 4, 1720-1721: “About five years after freedom, I married a woman by the name of Anna. We had seventeen children. We lived right there on the same place forty-eight years...I...started out as a preacher...While I was preaching, my wife and children was making the cotton crop.”

Jones, Labor, 63; Schwalm, Hard Fight, 200.

Unlike, as shall be shown, some male slaves.

Jones, Labor, 53.
by women (out of 338 Black families in 27 cotton counties in eight southern states) was never less than 335 Looking simply at the census data used in Jones, "the crisis of free labor": northern gender beliefs and southern realities. Alice Kessler-Harris, Out to Work, 72.

Looking simply at the census data used in Jones, Labor, 333-342, the percentage of households headed by women (out of 338 Black families in 27 cotton counties in eight southern states) was never less than 10.4 per cent (1880). In 1870 - an very unreliable census data year - it had been slightly over 16 per cent. The data set is very limited in size. Furthermore, it is quite possible that any adult male (18+) living in the household would have been enumerated as the head by census collectors. Whether under 20 per cent is viewed as sizeable or not depends upon one's point of view; but census data, even when reliable, provide only a momentary time snapshot taken out of the lives of those enumerated.

Married freed women who, with their husbands, took up sharecropping resembled white southern yeomen farmers' wives, in that they doubtless tried to balance the dual duties of housewife-mother and field worker. As argued earlier, it is more likely that no matter what jobs they had done under slavery, as the wives of sharecropping men, they would plough infrequently, if at all. But some with husbands did plough. See, Fannie McCullough Driver, who ploughed with oxen, in Rawick, The American Slave, Texas Pt. 3, 1235. Unmarried freedwomen (with or without dependents) who sharecropped were much more likely to have continued doing all of the tasks necessary to raising crops, especially if they had been slaves on cotton plantations. A few freedwomen and their daughters expressed a preference for field work over housework, for example, see, Mollie Williams, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi Pt. 5, 2344; Hattie Hill in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 3, 263.

Married freed women, destitute and frequently hungry, expressed comparisons which favoured their physical conditions under slavery as opposed to their present existence; it does not mean that they preferred slavery to freedom, only being able to eat sufficient food and not having to worry about whether they would be thrown out of their home for lack of money for rent or taxes. This of course tells more about their lives in the 1930s than about their lived reality under slavery and Reconstruction. But much else is revealed within the narratives about slavery and the early days of freedom (although some collections are better than others for details on post-bellum life).

Rawick, Introduction, The American Slave, xxxi-xxxii. He stresses that despite editorial censorship, which focussed almost exclusively on slave-owner treatment of slaves, former slaves managed to reveal significant detail about "the masters' treatment of slaves," often by transferring the story of what went on on their plantation to neighbouring ones, or the masters' treatment of them to the overseers.
This is particularly true of the vast majority who were field workers. Overwhelmingly they were illiterate and neither ran away North, nor wrote their own autobiography.


Fox-Genovese, “Women,” 267; she, however, suggests a wider self-sufficiency than simply that in staples. See also Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 55-74. Wright, using the calculations of Robert Gallman, notes that on large plantations food production for domestic use was usually sufficient for the plantations’ populations. Clearly, for those planters requiring luxury goods and tools, imports from the North and abroad were necessary. The persistence of subsistence production for both the ‘big house’ and the slaves is depicted throughout the WPA narratives, particularly in foodstuffs and basic commodities, including soap and candles. The clothes of the slaves were often not only sewn on the plantations, but also the cloth was made from the raw products, cotton and wool, grown on the estates. Shoes, for slaves, too, were made from plantation tanned hides.


Wright, *Political*, 168-183. Southerners, black and white, recognized that, first and foremost, they needed to grow sufficient for their families to eat. But the freed people, who, without tools or animals let alone land, were sharecropping for large planters, had to repay the debts they had incurred with the landlord before they raised a single crop. Cotton had, therefore, to take priority. At the same time, the planters worked to prevent black self-sufficiency in food - seen as independence - by ‘renting’ to them ever smaller plots of land (this would happen to poor whites too). Thus sharecroppers and other tenants were caught between the need to repay their debts accrued while the crop was growing and having too little land to grow both sufficient cotton to pay down the debt, furnish for the next year and grow food for the family in a market in which the price of cotton was falling because of increasing production and declining demand. Social relations were also structured hierarchically within each ‘racial’ group. Class distinctions existed not only between whites, but also among slaves. Difference in job category brought difference in privilege and reward, as slaves from the larger plantations well recognized.


As McCurry, “Producing,” 60-63, demonstrates, southern yeomen’s wives and daughters were not always similarly believed to be incapable of field labour; nor were they shielded from it. And Olmsted observed a white family digging and shovelling then roasting iron ore in the Piedmont. Of the family of workers, it was the wife-mother’s efforts which most impressed him, in Olmsted, *Journey*, 208.

To be white in the South was to be a member in a racial aristocracy, no matter how dirt poor the reality of one’s existence; and the mark of an aristocrat was the appearance of idleness. See Morgan, *American*, 58-79 for an amusing as well as scathing view of English aristocratic (and small semi-independent farmer) idleness. Other deterrents to poor white industry also existed in the South: inadequate diet, lack of local markets for cottage industry goods, and male slaves used for a variety of non-farm labour. Moreover, many southern employers of non-plantation slave labour would not employ whites because they couldn’t “drive them.” See Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller’s Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States: Based upon Three Former Volumes of Journeys and Investigations by the Same Author*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, (1861; reprint, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 64-65, on his observations about poor whites versus slaves as workers, & then 43-44, for his
observations on coal miners, most of whom were slaves. Slaves were seen as preferable because they could be made to work; and in some of the few southern factories/mills, for instance in the Tredegar Ironworks in Richmond, Virginia, slaves were heavily used. For a discussion of the effects of the use of slave labour in southern industry on white male workers, see Patricia A. Schechter, “Free and Slave Labor in the Old South: The Tredegar Ironworkers’ Strike of 1847,” Labor History, 35 no. 2 (Spring 1994): 165-187.

Outsiders, it has to be said, who were apparently in ignorance of European American women’s field work in the northern and north-western territories/states, as well as that done by women in Europe, including England. Perhaps most of these commentators spent little time in frontier or deep northern country districts; and Frances Anne Kemble seems to have known nothing about the rural women of her own country.

Kemble, Journal, 66.

Kemble, Journal, 156. Not only ignorant of what her female rural working-class compatriots were doing in the fields of England, she also gave little thought to the actual parenting activities among the women of her own circle, whether to the north or in the south. She herself had a full time Irish nursemaid, Margery O’Brien, so just how much time she could have or would have devoted to child rearing is moot. (Throughout the journal she talks about her perambulations around the plantations and her daily rowing, fishing then riding trips - accompanied not by her children, but mainly by a young slave lad.) Perhaps the sacred responsibilities of motherhood included obtaining the services of a competent and trustworthy nursemaid, to whom one could safely leave all but the lightest and most pleasurable moments with your children. As for housework - I doubt she had ever lifted, let alone used, a mop or a scrubbing brush, in her life.

Kemble, Journal, 170; see also, Thomas B. Chaplin, The Journal of Thomas B. Chaplin, [1822-1890] ed. and anno. Theodore Rosengarten, in Theodore Rosengarten, Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter, (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1986), 336, 338-339, 342, 351, 35. Chaplin notes the number of days one of his female slaves, Peggy, stays in bed. In his entry for May 17th 1845, he writes: “Peggy has not gone out to work yet. In fact she does not want to do anything. She has now been laying up for 82 or more days,” [emphasis added]. On July 10th she gives birth, and Chaplin’s reacted: “She had...good cause for laying up, being delivered of two fine boys.”


See also, Thomas Anderson Carlisle, in Rawick, The American Slave, South Carolina Pt.2, 68 for a rather more generous memory of the length of time away from field work allowed postnatal women.

Franklin, “Rules for Overseers,” Carolina Planter, (Feb. 1840), in Albert Lowther Demaree, ed., The American Agricultural Press 1819-1860, Columbia University Studies in the History of American Agriculture, no. 8, ed. Harry J. Carman and Rexford G. Tugwell, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), 277. While it is quite possible that Franklin ensured that his child bearing slave women were so treated, it is equally likely that he did not oversee the overseers’ actual treatment of pregnant slave women. Schwalm, Hard Fight, 279 n. 20, points out that there was a distinct gap between what planters said about their treatment of slave women and what the daily work records...reveal about actual labor assignments.”

Jennie Webb and Lizzie Williams, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi Pt. 5, 2250, 2337. Mrs Williams told her WPA interviewer that “[l]ots o’ times we women in dat condition [close to confinement] would be plowin’, hit a stump, de plow jump an’ hurt de child to where dey would loose [sic] it an law me, such a whippin’ dey would get.”

Jones, Labor, 35-36. Whilst I agree with Jones that having to continuously do physically demanding work whilst mal- and undernourished and continually pregnant/giving birth caused serious health risks to slave women (and any other women in similar or close to similar situations), I do not accept that heavy manual labour per se was the cause. See some recent work on women in modern day Africa, in Han Bantje, “Women’s Workload and Reproductive Stress,” in Women Wielding the Hoe: Lessons from Rural Africa for Feminist Theory and Development Practice, ed. Deborah Fahy Bryceson, Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women, Vol. 16, (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1995): 116-127. Bantje makes several related points about rural African females: the fertility rate is high; women work up to the “day of delivery” and return to it shortly thereafter; under-nutrition, small stature and childbirth complications from small pelvises. As for the link between heavy work, too-early delivery and lower birthweight (with concomitant risk to infant life), the data are ambiguous, with some studies showing no relationship, others some or inconclusive evidence. She concludes that comparing rural African women’s work and reproductive lives with western norms distorts our understanding. On diet see Kemble, Journal, 99-100; Kemble notes that on
her husband's plantation, on which, she remarks, the slaves were "generally considered well off," the slaves laboured all day in the fields on two meals of "Indian corn or hominy." See also the section on food in, *American Slavery AS IT IS: Testimony of A Thousand Witnesses*, The American Negro: His History and Literature, gen. ed. William Loren Katz, (1839; reprint, New York:Arno Press and The New York Times, 1968), 27-35: especially, on quantity, 28-30; on quality, 31-32. Slave men, too, were generally ill fed, and, according to Jones' calculations, on average had slightly shorter lives. Jones, *Labor*, 35. Between 1850-1860, slave men's average lifespan was 32.6 years to slave women's 33.6 years. See also Madison Griffin, in Rawick, *The American Slave, South Carolina* Pt. 2, 212; Mr Griffin told his interviewer that sometimes the slaves were he lived had "plenty to eat, but sometimes we went hungry."

Not all slave women endured pregnancy if they could avoid it. Clearly abortion and contraception were difficult topics to broach in the deeply and religiously conservative South during segregation as well as the illegality of the former if not also the latter. I have found only two former slave women who raised the subject in their WPA interviews: Mary Gaffney and Lu Lee, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Texas* Pts. 4 & 5, 1453, 2299. Mrs Gaffney, forced to have sex with a man she did not like refused to become pregnant whilst a slave, chewing cotton plant roots as a contraceptive. After freedom, she and her husband (same man) had five children. Mrs Lee said that slave "women that got pregnant and didn't want the baby...unfixed themselves by taking calomel and turpentine...[or] indigo."

See, for example, the narratives of Sallie Crane, of Arkansas, Maria Sutton Clements of Georgia, William Brown of Arkansas and Spencer Barnett of Alabama, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Arkansas* Pts. 1 & 2, 52, 16, 317, 117; see also Lucy Ann Warfield of Kentucky, Maria Love (about her mother) of Tennessee in Rawick, *The American Slave, Indiana & Ohio*, 455, 116.

Olmsted, *Journey*, 81. This is perhaps his only description of slave women labouring in the fields or on the roads which does not also contain some derogatory remarks on their appearance.

See Olmsted, *Cotton*, 161-162, 192, for further descriptions of slave women working in the fields for more overt allusions to his assessment of their lack of 'true' femininity. For example: "We stopped...near where some thirty men and women were at work repairing the road. The women were in the majority and were engaged at exactly the same labour as the men; driving carts, loading them....cutting down trees...hoeing and shovelling. They were dressed in coarse grey gowns...very dirty...which were reefed up with a cord...a little above the hips...On their legs were loose leggings...they wore very heavy shoes...Clumsy awkward gross, elephantine in their movements; pouting, gumming and leering at us; sly, sensual and shameless in all their expressions and demeanour..." Further on, in the uplands of South Carolina, gangs of women were listing: "The expression on their faces was generally repulsive and their ensemble anything but agreeable. The dress of most was uncouth and cumbersome, dirty and ragged; reefed up...so as to show their heavy legs, wrapped round with pieces of old blanket, in lieu of leggings or stockings."


Fox-Genovese, "Women," 280 and see also her note on page 295. Liddie Aiken, about her mother who had been a slave in Georgia, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Arkansas* Pt. 1, 19; Mollie Williams, about her mother as a slave in Mississippi (she also spoke about her own preference for field work to housework), in Rawick, *The American Slave, Mississippi* Pt. 5, 2344.

See Adeline Montgomery, about her mother, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Mississippi* Pt. 4, 1514; Maria Love, about her mother and Lucy Ann Warfield, in Rawick, *American Slave, Indiana & Ohio*, 116, 455. Slave women's resistance to the labour they were forced to do should not be read as inevitably meaning a dislike of particular tasks rather than a global detesting of the nature of their labour relations, but it could also include that sentiment. Resistance to forced labour took many forms, but for some women continuous pregnancies could provide a way to reduce the work load in the fields, increase the food ration, and bring a few weeks break from labour. See Kemble, *Journal*, 95. She observed that the slave women were fully apprised of the material advantages attached to giving birth many times, even in the face of
child-birth dangers, all the greater because of their under and malnourishment. But not all planters were so ‘generous’ as to give maternity ‘leave’ or work reductions for their pregnant slaves or post-partum mothers. See R. Emanuel and Susan Hamilton in Rawick, *The American Slave, South Carolina*, Pt. 2, 12, 236; Adeline Jackson, in Rawick, *The American Slave, South Carolina*, Pt. 3, 3.

379 For more slave women ploughing see: General Jefferson Davis Nunn and Oliver Bell about their mothers, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Alabama*, 279, 57; Katherine Clay, Josephine Ann Barnett and William Brown, about their mothers, Mattie Fritz, about her ‘mammy,’ Marie Sutton Clements, Sallie Crane, Fannie Brown and Ella Johnson about themselves, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Arkansas* Pts. 1, 2 &4, 13, 109, 317, 353-4, 16, 52, 180, 80; Dora Johnson, about her mother, and Lizzie Williams and Lucindy Hall Shaw about themselves, in Rawick *The American Slave, Mississippi* Pts. 3 & 5, 1110, 2335, 1926; Clara Brian, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Texas* Pt. 4, 429-430; Charles Robinson and Anne Bell, on slave women ploughing, in Rawick, *The American Slave, South Carolina* Pts. 4 & 1, 36, 53.

380 Men have been associated with ploughing across cultures since the practice began. In England the association surely pre-dates William Langland’s fourteenth century poem, *Piers Plowman*.

381 Not only slave women toiled in southern fields. The wives and daughters of yeoman farmers did too, but this was rarely publicly acknowledged. See McCurry, “Producing,” 60-65.

382 Jones, *Labor*, 16. Jones’s argument not only exemplifies the power of gender discourse but also the problem that arises when one population of women workers (slave or free) is studied in isolation from others doing similar work.

383 Boys ploughed too. See Ezra Adams, in Rawick, *The American Slave, South Carolina*, Pt. 1, 5. Mr Adams was a boy of about ten or eleven, by his reckoning, when he was a “plowboy.”

384 For the uneven adoption of ploughing on Butler Island, Georgia, in the late 1830s, see Kemble, *Journal*, 155-156, 159, 178. See also editor’s note in the *Journal of Thomas B. Chaplin*, in Rosengarten, *Tombée*, 332 n. 37: “Plows were gaining favor on the Sea Islands after being shunned for 100 years”; see also William Ervine Sparkman, *Plantation Journal*, [1833-1866], Reel 1, Ser. J, Pt. 3, South Carolina, Kenneth E. Stampp, ed., Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War [hereinafter RASP], Selections from the Southern Historical Collection, Manuscripts Department, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, for years 1844-1845 (those years when Sparkman wrote up his plantation’s daily doings fairly meticulously), 33. Sparkman did not always have his land ploughed. See, for example, the entries for November 11-23, 1845, when he noted that he had either women alone or men and women together digging the land (and not just digging up potatoes).

385 Kemble, *Journal*, 155. Interestingly, women digging fields instead of ploughing them does not seem to have raised the same gendered concerns, despite the far heavier labour and greater muscular demands that would seem to have been involved in the former.

386 That is, when slaves became more expensive than draught animals; Schwalm, *Hard Fight*, 20. See for instance Ben Sparkman, *Plantation Journal*, [1848; 1853-1859], Reel 1, Ser. J, Pt.3, South Carolina, Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War [hereinafter RASP], Selections from the Southern Historical Collection, edited by Kenneth E. Stampp, Manuscripts Department, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, for entries from April 1853 and May 1855 noting the tasks of ploughmen, with the latter entry naming three of them: “Tom, Duncan and Richard,” 11 & 47.


389 See for example, Sara Benton, father a shoemaker, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Alabama*, 61; Ella Glaspie, parents slaves in Mississippi, father a shoemaker and preacher, Susa Lagrone, born in Mississippi, father a bricklayer and plasterer, J. T. Tinis, born Mississippi, father was an ox-driver, and Willie Johnson, born Tennessee, father a blacksmith and shoemaker, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Arkansas*, Pts. 3 & 4 and Pts. 5 & 6, 44, 223, 341,130.

390 Charlotte Foster, 98 years, and Nelson Cameron, in Rawick, *The American Slave, South Carolina*, Pts. 1 and 2, 80, 173.

391 Louis M. De Saussure, March 13th, 1861, Plantation Day Book, [1835-1864], Reel 17, Ser. J, Pt. 3, South Carolina, Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War [hereinafter RASP], edited by Kenneth E. Stampp, Selections from the Southern Historical Collection, Manuscripts Department, Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 42 [48]. Only three entries, between 23rd February and 13th March 1861, in his day book mention workers at all, (throughout
the rest of the plantation record De Saussure used a passive construction along the lines of ‘had threshing
done’ or ‘cotton picked’); and these three entries also specify the sex of the slaves assigned to the tasks.

392 Schwalm, Hard Fight, 23

393 Thomas B. Chaplin, April 10th 1852, “All hands ditching,” and again on July 2nd 1852, “Men and 2
women ditching,” in his Journal, in Rosengarten, Tombee, 567, 574; James R. Sparkman, letter to
Benjamin Allston, March 10th 1858, in The South Carolina Rice Plantation: As Revealed in the Papers of
Chicago Press, 1945), 345.

394 Southern Agriculturist, November 1833, in Schwalm, Hard Fight, 22; Sparkman, Plantation Journal,
February 28, 1845, 39; “women bed upland - fellows ditch...women throw back mud.”

395 Olmsted, Cotton, 192. Slave field hands were allocated to full, three-quarter, half or quarter hand status,
depending on their age and apparent health. Gender could play a part in determining hand status for women
during pregnancy or should a particular planter believe females inherently less capable workers than males.

396 See Schwalm, Hard Fight, 28-30, for a description of the hand status ‘ladder.’

397 Olmsted, Cotton, 192.

398 Kemble, Journal, 156; Elizabeth Allston Pringle [Patience Pennington], A Woman Rice Planter,
Southern Classics Series, ed. John G. Sproat, Published in cooperation with the Institute for Southern
Studies and the South Carolina Society of the University of South Carolina, (Columbia, South Carolina:
University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 78.

399 Olmsted, Cotton, 216-217.

400 Frederick Law Olmsted, A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, with Remarks on Their Economy,

401 W. E. Sparkman, Plantation Journal, Reel 1, Ser. J, Pt. 3, RASP, 41. Quite why the work effort had to be
doubled is unclear.

402 Slave men who ploughed probably did other work at peak times, such as harvest and cotton picking., in
part at least because few other field tasks were done by machinery. They may also have been the men who
were in charge of the cotton gins (mule driven). In England ploughmen got extra pay and only worked with
the horse/ox drawn machinery. Colman noted that “[t]he division of labor among them [agricultural
labourers] is quite particular - a ploughman being always a ploughman,” in Agriculture, 40-41. Now
Colman viewed their cleaving to job demarcations as stultifying of their innovation and initiative, unlike
the ingenious American farm worker. He was clearly unaware that, particular skills got higher wages, and
when animals were involved in the job, the work was generally year round. Little or nothing was to be
 gained by ploughmen, shepherds or even ditchers (no animals but winter work) being willing to do other
farm work, beyond that of harvest work. He was comparing north-eastern American farm servant labour
with English day wage labour without allowing for the fundamental differences between the two systems.
(Had he compared English farm servants with their American counterparts he would have found them very
similar.) On the cotton and then rice plantations, men who ploughed were ‘ploughmen’ whether they also
did other jobs or not. Women who ploughed were not titled ‘ploughwomen’; also employed in cooking,
spinning, weaving, and more generally in the fields, they were simply field hands.

403 Likely specialist jobs were only possible on larger plantations, but recognition of skill and the granting
of status surely was not confined to large slaveholdings.

404 There are numerous examples in the WPA narratives of ex-slaves, or more usually their fathers, having
been trained as shoemakers, blacksmiths, builders, and mechanics; others men occupied the position of
wagon driver, cartier, slave driver.

405 Schwalm, Hard Fight, 23-24; Charles Williams, about his mother, in Rawick, The American Slave,
Alabama-Washington, 200.

406 Schwalm, Hard Fight, 20-21. See also overseers’ reports in Easterby, South Carolina, 262-263, 267,
276, 280; Chaplin, Journal, in Rosengarten, Tombee, 330. Moreover, those planters who often noted that
slaves (or negroes) were doing the work (as in ‘hands planting slips’) also at times named particular slaves
doing specific jobs; when they did so, those named tended to be the men, usually because they were
assigned to individual tasks, like ploughing, carting crops, repairing plantation machinery or equipment.

407 Sara Colquitt, c. 100, Rawick, The American Slave, Alabama, 99; Lucindy Hall Shaw, Rawick, The
American Slave, Mississippi, Pt 5, 1926; see also, Mariah and Berle Barnes, in Rawick, The American
Only when mule-spinning entered the mills and the machines became larger and 'self-acting' and men took over that form of the spinning did the work gain craft status. Once that happened the men fought (in Lancashire at least) to keep 'unskilled' women out of mule-spinning work (they did not always, everywhere succeed). See Mary Freifeld, "Technological change and the 'self-acting' mule: a study of skill and the sexual division of labour," Social History, 11 no. 3 (October 1986): 319-343. See also Valverde, "Giving," 619. But this is another place and another story.

White, Ar'n't I, 76. White raises an interesting issue about slave women's 'confinement' to the plantation, as opposed to men's freer movement beyond it. Although she looks specifically at this issue in relation to "abroad marriages" (ones in which the couple lived on neighbouring, often adjacent, plantations), her conclusions also potentially relate to the gender differences in craft/skill training and hiring out. She posits that one of the reasons fewer numbers of slave women ran away is that they had not been able to gain much if any personal knowledge of the territory beyond the plantation. When a couple lived on separate but neighbouring plantations, it was almost always the man who travelled to his wife's plantation. Because it was mostly slave men and not women, who went 'abroad' (off the plantation), she argues that their presence outside may have provoked less interest than would slave women wandering about. Some slave women ran away, but their numbers were many fewer; and several among them disguised themselves as men.

Rosa Starke, in Rawick, The American Slave, South Carolina, Pt. 4, 148. Ms. Starke's statement was in response to a question about the type of housing slaves lived in. Her answer made it clear how some, particularly the "common field" hands, slaves felt about the fine distinctions the planters made between them, based on the job categories to which they were assigned. The benefits to, among others, "cowmen," "wheelwrights," "house servants," as far as she (a field slave) was concerned, did not stop at better housing; it also included easier work and no beatings. See also John Collins, in Rawick, The American Slave, South Carolina, Pt. 1, 225: "Master didn't have many slaves. Best I 'member, dere was about twenty men, women and chillun to work in de field and five house slaves. Dere was no good feelin's 'twixt field hands and house servants. De house servants put on more airs than de white folks. They got better things to eat, too, than de field hands and wore better and cleaner clothes." And Mrs Charlotte Stephens, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 6, 228: "Both my father and my mother had peculiar privileges. The Ashley family were exceptional slave owners; they permitted their servants to hire their time. There was class distinction, perhaps to a greater extent than among white people." As for 'escaping' the confines of the plantation for days, months, even years at a time, numerous examples abound; overwhelmingly those in this position were male. For example, see Robert Lofton, born a slave in Georgia, about his father, a waggoneer, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 4, 267. See also Chaplin, Journal, in Rosengarten, Tombee, 330, 338, 377; overseers' reports, in Easterby, South Carolina, 262-263, 269-271; Olmsted, Cotton, 114-115, where he describes the labouring life of male slaves who were hired out to cut and prepare swamp timber in situ. These men spent only a couple of winter months back at their masters' residences, during which time "little or no work is required of them." When at the swamp lumber camp, the slaves "live....measurably as... free m[e]n" able to hunt, fish, eat, drink, smoke, sleep, play and work when they choose - so long as the stint is done.

Slave men seem to have been more frequently hired out than women, probably because their trades were more saleable and there was a wider variety of work opportunities for males, in, for example, lumber and turpentine camps, mines, mills, and railroads. See Olmsted, Cotton, for numerous examples of male slave hirelings, passim.

Susa Lagrone, from Mississippi, and Ella Glaspie, from Mississippi, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas Pts. 3& 4, 223, 44.

Jones, Labor, 18.

Jones, Labor, 18. Jones also recognizes that the cash crop trumped all other concerns; thus planters' interest in full-bore child bearing on the part of their female slaves was often in opposition to their even stronger interest in getting out a profitable commodity crop. This latter was the reason for the plantations' being and the basis of the planters' lifestyle.

And it was potential, until the babies began being born. Further, males were not always trained as youths; additional trade training could take place in adulthood. See for example, Willie Johnson, about his
father who first learnt the trade of blacksmithing and later that of shoemaking, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 4, 130.


417 For female house servants, see letter to R. W. Allston, [1838], in Easterby, South Carolina, 86; for female slaves milking, see Josephine Ann Barrett about her mother in Tennessee, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 1, 109; and Tom Wilson about his mother, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 5, 2376; for poultry keeping see R. W. Allston to Adele Petigru Allston, [1859], in Easterby, South Carolina, 153.

418 Usually with extra or better food. See for example, Rachel Bradley, in Rawick, The American Slave, Alabama-Washington, 54; Lucy Chambers and Thomas Cole, in Rawick, The American Slave, Texas, Pt. 2, 679, 786; Mary Raines in Rawick, The American Slave, South Carolina, Pt. 4, 2. Ms Raines (99 years) had worked in the fields, until her owners found that she was not afraid of the cows. Her job then became the milking and churning, and taking care of the cows. With the job change she became a ‘house servant’ and she said: “Bless God! Dat took me out of de field. House servants ‘bove de field servants, them days. If you didn’t git better rations and things to eat in de house, it was your fault.”

419 Jim Martin, about his mother, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 4, 1439; Josephine Ann Barrett, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 1, 109; Sara Benton, in Rawick, The American Slave, Alabama, 61; Peggy Grigsby, 106 years, in Rawick, The American Slave, South Carolina, Pt. 2, 215; Easterby, South Carolina, 86.

420 Schwalm, Hard Fight, 28.

421 Schwalm, Hard Fight, 28. Machinery has a long cultural association with males. Schwalm writes that when water, later steam, driven mills came to the low country rice plantations, planters replaced skilled female hand threshers with male artisans (all slaves, of course) to run and maintain the machinery.

422 Schwalm, Hard Fight, 155-158, quoting a Union Officer reporting the constant petitions of freedwomen and men, who asked: “what good it did them to make them free, unless they were to own the land on which they had been working, and which they had made productive and valuable.” See also Bercaw, Gendered, 28-29; Ira Berlin et al, eds., “The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor, 1861-1865,” in Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861-1867, selected from the holdings of the National Archives of the United States, Series 1, Vol. II: The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South, ed. Ira Berlin et al, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 75.

423 James M. McPherson, Preface, in Letters from Port Royal 1862-1868, ed. Elizabeth Ware Pearson, The American Negro: His History and Literature, gen. ed. William Loren Katz, (1906; reprint, New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), iii. McPherson argues, that in the Sea Islands many of the ‘Gideonites’ - the name given to the abolitionists who went to work among the refugees and contrabands of the low country Carolinas and Georgia - “wanted the government to grant twenty or forty acres to each Negro family, ‘who so long have tilled them without wages,’ ” or to let them have the opportunity to buy land very cheaply; Berlin, Freedom, 15.

424 Berlin, Freedom, 15.


427 See, for example, Jones, Labor, 61, who accepts the term “compromise” with understandable reluctance given its suggestion of equal power relations and of equitable dealings. But in the existing circumstances (the impossibility of land reform where property was sacred), she argues that it afforded freed people more independence than any of the other ‘free labour’ possibilities available. See also, Schwalm, Hard Fight, 187-207, on the initial resistance of freedwomen and men to the restoration of lands to returning planters and to wage labour contracts which specified ten-hour days and overseers; then their acceptance of the two or three day work-rent system (2-3 days at task labour for a crop share and the use of plantation land for self-employed production).


429 McPherson, Ordeal by Fire, 290.


431 Berlin, Freedom, 12, 18.

432 McPherson, Ordeal by Fire, 429; Berlin, Freedom, 31.

433 McPherson, Preface, i-ii; Berlin, Freedom, 17.

434 The Freedmen’s Bureau’s official title was Bureau of Refugees, Freed Men and Abandoned Lands.
434 See Schwalm, *Hard Fight*, 204 & 230-231, for examples of the labour contract enforcer role (especially the Bureau’s preference for wage labour contracts) in South Carolina; also Bercaw, *Gendered*, 124-125, 130-131, for the Bureau’s role in constructing the boundaries of freedom in Mississippi.


437 For an excellent discussion of the intimate and *essential* relation between independence and dependence in nineteenth century free labour ideology, no matter whether traditional republican or wage labour inclusive, see Foner, *Free Soil*, xxvi-xxxi.

438 Foner, “*Meaning of Freedom*,” 442.

439 An intrinsic and necessary factor in the development of this re-conception was the erosion of the varying forms of unfree labour, apart from slavery. The modern concept of free labour - at its most pared down as the right of the labourer to take up and leave jobs of their own free will - emerged in the 1820s in the northern United States. Court decisions in various states distinguished between indentured servitude and free labour, making clear that the former no longer could be equated with the latter. For an expansive treatment of the legal developments of this issue, see Robert J. Steinfeld, *The Invention of Free Labor: The Employment Relation in English and American Law and Culture*, 1350-1870, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

440 Berlin, *Freedom*, 3; Christopher L. Tomlins, *Law, Labor, and Ideology in the Early American Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 291; William E. Forbath, “The Ambiguities of Free Labor and the Law in the Gilded Age,” *Wisconsin Law Review* 4 (1985): 798-799. Forbath argues that the structures were in place before the Civil War, erected in large part by abolitionists, but that the full flowering of this concept was not until the Gilded Age courts made it manifest. Politically, most European American males had the franchise by 1830. Northern courts were ruling in favour of workers’ rights to leave a job. The concept of ownership in one’s own labour power and one’s freedom to contract it out or withdraw at will was established.

441 Foner, *Free Soil*, 17.


445 Bercaw, *Gendered*, 34, argues this point well.

446 See Foner, *Free Soil*, xxviii-xxx & xxxii, for a strong, lucid argument on the gendered quality of free labour ideology; Berlin, *Freedom*, 2-4, for a rather trifling remark on the matter.

447 See Amy Dru Stanley, “Conjugal Bonds and Wage Labor: Rights of Contract in the Age of Emancipation,” *The Journal of American History* 75 no. 2 (September 1988): 471, 493. Married women could not contract, and only piecemeal, state by state, did they achieve legal control over their wages (by 1887 two-thirds of the states had such laws). But having title to her earnings did not give the married woman the right to choose when and where to work; “her husband retained his proprietary claim both to her person and to her domestic labor.” Moreover, as the courts adjudicated cases it became clear that in deciding which portion of her labour belonged to her and which to her husband, the rulings usually assumed “her labor belonged to her husband.” Unless she kept her earnings strictly separate, they were ruled to be his.

448 Single women wage workers were at least independent as far as control of their earnings went (ignoring the reality of what might be called the women’s or married women’s penalty: lower wages for women because they were either married or going to be); and as wage earners they paid their full share of taxes. Independent, tax-paying, having an alienable property in their labour power, yes, but because women denied suffrage and the fully legitimated right to employment.

449 Foner, *Free Soil*, xxix. He argues: “The ideology of separate spheres never described the actual lives of most American women. But by identifying the workplace as the world outside the home, it had the effect of rendering women’s actual labor virtually invisible.”

450 Young New England women were the mainstay of the early textile mills, although they were increasingly replaced, in the late 1840s-1850s, by immigrant families, men, women and children. In the shoemaking industry, putting out work brought women, usually married, into the trade, helping their husbands. By the late 1840s-1850s, alongside the putting out system, centralized manufactories emerged and then expanded, and they employed large numbers of young women. But many non-farm women of the labouring poor in the northeast worked in the sweated trades within their own homes or at some form of


452 It all seems to be unlikely to some present day male historians, too


454 Benjamin F. Butler, Major-General, Commanding, New Orleans to the Hon E. M. Stanton, Secretary of War, Nov. 14, 1862, in United States, Secretary of War, *War of the Rebellion*, 592.


458 Brigadier General James S. Wadsworth in testimony before the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, January 1864, quoted in Bercaw, *Gendered*, 34.

459 Bercaw, *Gendered*, 34.

460 Bercaw, *Gendered*, 35. Bercaw reveals clearly the violation of the tenets of free labour that not only the contracts themselves but the drawing up of them produced and that it was the women, children and the elderly who suffered. She does not raise the point that it was the femaleness of the workforce which permitted northern white males to usurp the prerogatives of the free labourer.


462 Bercaw, Gendered, 36-39, for insight into the variety of ways the former slaves, women and men, in Mississippi, attempted to institute their own vision of work within freedom.


464 See for example, a letter from William French to General Clinton B. Fisk, head of the Freedmen’s Bureau in Tennessee, August 8th 1865, in Berlin, Free At Last, 329-331, on behalf of former slaves on a plantation first abandoned by its owner then reclaimed by him after the surrender. The freedpeople had continued to work the land, raising sufficient crops and products to support themselves. The former owner wanted his land back and the freedpeople to return to working as before the war - or they were to leave his property. The freedpeople had heard of Fisk’s plan for their settlement in their own homes, with prospect of land of their own; they were, French wrote, unanimous in their desire for such a settlement.

466 See Schwalm, Hard Fight, 175-176, 196 for discussion on the low-country former slaves’ refusal to maintain the ditches, banks and dykes necessary to the maintenance of rice-fields. The work reminded them too much of slavery. See also Rodrigue, “Freedmen’s Bureau,” 207-212, for the situation on Louisiana sugar plantations, where freedpeople accepted wage labour, but also sought to use their knowledge and labour power to their best advantage against planters who were reluctant to let go the traditions of slavery. Maintaining levees and ditches had earned slaves small sums of money or ‘credit.’ These perquisites together with garden plots, animals and wood cutting, the freedpeople struggled to retain because they made wage labour feasible.

467 Jones, Labor, 14, argues that the reproductive exploitation of slave women was also productive exploitation, extracted from them just as was their field and domestic labour.

468 Alex Montgomery, about his mother, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 4, 1528; Lula Cottonham, 112 years, in Rawick The American Slave, Alabama, 432-433.


470 Laura Montgomery, 87 years, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 4, 1556; see also, Dora Brewer, Dora Franks and Susan Snow, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pts. 1, 2 & 5; Hattie Cole, in Rawick, The American Slave, Texas Pt. 2, 779. See also Lizzie Grant, in Rawick, The American Slave, Texas Pt. 4, 1566-1568, for similar views about the unfree-ness of freedom.

471 Bell McChristian, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi Pt.4, 1385; see also, for example, Phyllis Fox and Frank Hughes, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pts. 2 & 3, 767, 1066. Staying on until at least that year’s crop was harvested, or for one year after freedom came to the plantation (and it arrived at different times across the South), was a common occurrence. It gave freedpeople a breathing space, a chance to consider their moves while at least having a roof over their heads and some food available. At the same time, they learnt how their former owner would deal with them as free labour, a revelation which frequently was an additional motive for moving on. South Carolina’s low-country
freedpeople were situated differently to the vast majority of ex-slaves, especially those in the cotton South. The South Carolinians had lived in the same area, often on the same plantations for generations and that mattered after freedom. See Schwalm, *Hard Fight*, 54-56.

472 Lucretia Alexander, 89 years, of Mississippi, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Arkansas*, Pt. 1, 34, 38; see also Rachel Bradley, c. 107 years, a slave in Louisiana, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Arkansas*, Pt. 2, 234-235; Hattie Hill, 85 years, slave in Georgia, and Eliza Jones, 89 years, slave in Tennessee, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Arkansas*, Pts. 3&4, 263, 144, for similar moves from house servitude to field work on freedom.


474 Ann May, in her 90’s. in Rawick, *The American Slave, Mississippi*, Pt. 4, 1464; see also, Ed Williams about his mother who, after the war, left the plantation where she had been a prime field hand, and went to cook for white families, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Mississippi*, Pt. 5, 2307, 2310.


476 Lyttleton Davidson, 80 years, slave in Louisiana, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Arkansas*, Pt. 2, 89.


479 See Schmidt, “‘A Full-Fledged,’” 219-250, for a detailed examination of the labour market thrust of Bureau policy.


483 Kisanna Middleton, 103 years, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Mississippi*, Pt. 4, 1480.


485 Schwalm, *Hard Fight*, 230. Bureau agents were unenthusiastic to downright opposed to what emerged as the typical South Carolina two-day work rent system of contract. Their disfavour arose from their concern that the planters were short-changing the freed people. They also believed that it interfered with the installation of the wage labour system and allowed the freedpeople to “enter the market economy on their own terms” via subsistence agriculture. The Bureau was willing to exploit lien laws and their own approval mechanism to end the work-rent system, but freedwomen and men would not acquiesce to Bureau dictates and northern visions of how they should conduct their lives. The work-rent agreements ceased to be put before the Bureau for approval.

486 Minutes of an Interview between the Colored Ministers and Church Officers at Savannah with the Secretary of War and Major-Gen. Sherman, Savannah, GA., January 12th 1865, in Berlin et al, *Free At Last*, 314.

487 Berlin et al, *Free At Last*, 305.


490 And surely here, as in England, by independent the bourgeoisie did not mean independent of wage labour but of government or charitable support.


493 Stanley, “‘Conjugal,’” 480.
496 Gen. S A Hurlbut, letter in reply to Resolutions stemming from a mass meeting of black freemen of New Orleans, March 23rd, 1865, in Berlin et al, Free At Last, 323.
498 Schwalm, Hard Fight, 239.
499 Schwalm, Hard Fight, 239-247.
500 Superintendent of Negro Affairs in the 4th District of the Department of Virginia to the Head of the Department, February 28th, 1865, in Berlin, Freedom, 223.
502 Rosa Starke, in Rawick, The American Slave, South Carolina, Pt. 4, 148; Linley Hadley, born Mississippi, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 5, 128.
503 See July Ann Halfen about her father having to get some “white men to git [her] mammy out of jail an’ den my mammy and pappy stayed togedder till he died,” in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 3, 902-903; John Matthews about his mother’s and father’s enforced pairing under their owner and his mother’s choosing to live with another man subsequent to freedom in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 4, 1454; for separation because of abusive husbands, see for example, Annie Coley, about her own experiences with abusive husbands, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 2, 444; and George Weathersby about the cruelty of his father to his mother and their not re-marrying when freedom came, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 3, 2232, 2234.
504 Primous Magee, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 4, 1430, 1432.
505 Regarding serial monogamy and its frequency among slave-freed women, see Farnham, “Sapphire?”, 73-74.
506 Henry D. Jenkins, in Rawick, The American Slave, South Carolina, Pt. 3, 24. He and his brother were ashamed of what their father had done to their mother, so they would not take his surname as their own. The ‘D’ is the reminder of who he was (Dinkins).
507 Emily Dixon, c. 92-95, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 2, 623.
508 Bercaw, Gendered, 124.
509 See, for example, the deposition, June 19th, 1865, of Joseph Abernathy and Hustin Abernathy, regarding the ever-moving goal-posts of the labour contract they made with their former owner, in Berlin, Free At Last, 326-328. In the deposition, the Abernathy’s make clear their perception of themselves as the heads of their respective households, and that while they were the contractees, their family members would have worked with them on the crops. See Bercaw, Gendered, 124, 126. Bercaw states quite baldly that “[s]ingle women with children simply could no longer afford to work the crop.” She may be right; but although difficult, unless the children were babes in arms, a single woman with children (older? younger?) could have, probably would have, signed such contracts. Children from fairly early ages could be and were taught to work in the fields, although not everywhere. Six year olds could learn how to weed and pick cotton; girls and boys of ten or more could learn how to plough and hoe; see, for instance, William Pickens, quoted in Jones, Labor, 83. And contracts with only heads of households did not mean that only they were expected to work the crops. Such contracts were a means of cutting the planter’s costs whilst boosting their income by ensuring that the head of household, man or woman, would themselves ‘drive’ as many family members as possible to get as big a crop as they could. Children could be an asset, as most of the world’s labouring poor have known for millennia. Moreover, several of the WPA ex-slave narratives suggest that single mothers did indeed work on shares.
510 Bercaw, Gendered, 131; 226 nn. 38-39, for references.
511 Bercaw, Gendered, 124; Berlin, Freedom, Ser., Vol. 2, 46-47. See, for instance, in Berlin, Freedom, 230, the letter attached to the circular of Dec. 23rd, 1864, sent by Frank J. White, Lieut. Col. & Provost Marshal to Col. E. W. Smith, 28 Feb. 1865 for approval (the circular in question was sent to superintendents of labor in Virginia under White’s supervision). In the attached letter, White specifies the
wage rates for farm labourers: “Farm laborers (Male) per month twelve dollars/Farm laborers (Female) per month five dollars.”

512 Botume, First Days, 273, 277. She was quite scathing about the attitudes of freedmen towards their wives. Her views were very likely, as Jones asserts, steeped in bigotry, but for all that she reveals something of the relationship between some of the married freed couples - relationships whose structure of gender hierarchy would have been familiar to her (see also her comments on pages 220-221). But see also Bercaw, Gendered, 99-116, for a particularly nuanced approach to freed people’s sexual/marital relationships, their general tolerance for diversity in loving relationships and family structures. See also Schwalm, Hard Fight, 260-266 and the interlacing of culturally normative gender hierarchies within marriage (and beyond) and what she calls “the family politics of reconstruction”: the northern view of freed ‘unions’, involuntary child apprenticeships, the northern assertion of freedmen’s rightful dominance within his household.

513 Catherine Porcher to [her aunt], 22 Jan. 1870, quoted in Schwalm, Hard Fight, 229.

514 Bercaw, Gendered, 112-113.

515 Some freed women had worked in the fields as youngsters and then left when they married, see Nelly Gray, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 3, 85; Harriet Chesley, in Rawick, The American Slave, Texas, Pt. 2, 514. Other freedwomen never worked outside the home because their husbands earned enough, see Susa Lagrone and Willie Johnson, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 4, 223, 130-131; William Baltimore, in Rawick, The American Slave, Alabama-Washington, 19, 21.

516 Lizzie Grant, c. 90 years, in Rawick, The American Slave, Texas, Pt. 4, 1569; Phoebe Lyons, in Rawick, The American Slave, Ohio and Indiana, 402.

517 Jake Dawkins, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 2, 597; see also, for example, Joanna Hilly, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 3, 1022; Kisanna Middleton, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 4, 1480; Lyttleton Davidson, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 2, 89.

518 Mrs Lou Ferguson, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 2, 280.

519 Sarah Felder, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 2, 723.

520 E. B. Heyward, to Catherine Heyward, 5 May 1867, quoted in Schwalm, Hard Fight, 205.

521 Jones, Labor, 58-59.


523 Schwalm, Hard Fight, 206-207.

524 Eliza Jones, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 4, 144; see also for example, Rosina Hoard, in Rawick, The American Slave, Texas, Pt. 4, 1736-1737.

525 Martha Kelly, about her mother, in Rawick, The American Slave, South Carolina, Pt. 3, 83.


527 Mrs Lou Ferguson, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 2, 280; also see Lucy Gallman, in Rawick, The American Slave, South Carolina, Pt. 2, 101. Ms Gallman did not express either pleasure or displeasure about her work, but her phrasing suggests a sense of pride in being able to plow, split cord wood and do other farm work “just like a man.”

528 Hattie Hill, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 3, 263.


530 Jones, Labor, 52, 45, 53, 58-59. See Farmer, “‘Because,,'” 161-192. In Reconstruction Virginia, as Farmer discusses throughout, the northerners at the Freedmen’s Bureau sought to encourage all freedpeople, men and women, married or single, to take up waged work. Free labour’s ideology of independence combined with the Bureau’s desire to get freedpeople off government assistance quickly, before they became habituated to ‘hand out’ dependency, officially operated in a gender neutral fashion. But, Farmer writes, the lack of waged work for women, in the war torn state, and their resulting plight, especially that of those with children, prevented many Bureau officials there from adhering to closely to policy. Thus freedwomen with children, at least those who forced the Bureau to notice their situation, remained on government assistance longer.

126
Arkansas, 532 Bureau of the Census, married three times, and I never did have no town man. I was bawn in de country, I lived in de country. I just about everything here that was possible to do in the country or on the farm were under slaves, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 1, 21,161; Katherine Clay, daughter of a slave, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 2, 14; Mrs Lou Ferguson, in Rawick, The American Slave, Arkansas, Pt. 2, 279; Emily Dixon, in Rawick, The American Slave, Mississippi, Pt. 2, 623.

Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census, Population of the United States in 1860 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1864; reprint, Norman Ross Publishing Inc., 1990). The numbers of urban female slaves between 15 and 60, in these seven states, would have not exceeded 25,000 and more likely were under 20,000. The seven states were: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Virginia.

Bureau of the Census, Ninth Census - Volume 1, The Statistics of the Population of the United States (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1872; reprint, New York: Norman Ross Publishing Inc., 1990). The occupational data is broken down by sex but not by race; therefore, while unlikely, the figures may include some white females. These figures do not include the categories of farmer, planter, dairying, but are restricted to the category agricultural labourer. The seven states are: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, and Virginia.

See Census Office, Compendium of The Tenth Census, Part I, Appendix C, A volume in the Arno Press Collection: America in Two Centuries: An Inventory, ed. Daniel J. Boorstin, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1883; reprint, New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1976), liv & lx. The population count difference between 1870 and 1880 was so great as to “transcend...the known capabilities of human procreation.” Further in this Appendix, the author refers to the 1870’s Census superintendent’s own condemnation of the Act (1850) under which he had to organize the census as well as expanding upon his own condemnation of the men that Act permitted as enumerators.

For similar conclusions about the reliability of census figures and attitudes of census takers regarding women’s gainful labour in the North, see Carol Groneman, “She Earns as a Child; She Pays as a Man: Women Workers in a Mid-Nineteenth-Century New York City Community,” in Class, Sex and the Woman Worker, ed. Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie, Contributions in Labor History, no. 1, (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1977), 89-90.

See, for example, Lizzie Grant, in Rawick, The American Slave, Texas Pt. 4, 1569: “Well, I have done just about everything here that was possible to do in the country or on the farm to help my man make a living...trying to help feed my family of kids” [emphasis added].

Manuscript returns should clarify this. However, if the sample returns in Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 285-286, and the sample recounts of South Carolina census districts in 1880, in Appendix C, Compendium of The Tenth Census, lxxiii-lxxvi, are representative, then the assessment of the former were based on potentially unreliable data (see below). In both cases, married freed women, wives of sharecroppers and rural labourers were categorized simply as (house)wives. Ransom and Sutch, One Kind, 233-234, 221-226, 236; on these pages they argue strongly for a lower female than male slave participation in agricultural labour, though quite what they base their figures and argument on is less than clear, beyond their own gender beliefs. (They do not believe the accuracy of the numbers of male slaves claimed to be artisans by their owners; they do not appear to consider the specialist, but not necessarily skilled, jobs as having relieved men of field work; nor do they seem to recognize that numerous female slaves often worked in both house and field, as the occasion demanded.) They state that they “have assumed that 2 to 5 per cent of all adult males, 5 to 10 per cent of all adult females...were not members of the agricultural labour force” [emphasis added]. Likewise their statement regarding the rating of female field labour as “usually...three-fourths,” because they worked “relatively fewer hours” has a less than satisfactory basis. Their source for these facts is the 1867 US Department of Agriculture’s Report. Yet the evidence is clear that the northern men who went South (as likely the men who compiled the above report did) imposed their gender beliefs onto the slave plantation situation. They rated slave women’s field labour according to those beliefs, not on any past reality. Surely such a source needs testing against other, antebellum evidence.

Jones, Labor, 357 n. 47. The study Jones used is in Ransom and Sutch, One Kind. The tables are all given in her appendices, A-C; the 1870 sets are in Appendix B; Appendix C has those for the years 1880
and 1900, pp. 331-342. For a criticism of the original study by Ransom and Sutch and of Jones’ reliance on it, see Schwalm, *Hard Fight*, 272-273 n. 12. Schwalm does not raise the issue of the size of the study, yet it is surely its most obvious general limitation. Nor does she raise the issue of the unreliability of the 1870 census in the former Confederate states. She does however raise other problems with Ransom and Sutch’s research, most notably: “over-reliance on secondary sources” particularly Fogel and Engerman’s “much criticized work,” *Time on the Cross*; their use of Freedmen’s Bureau records without considering the biases and propaganda intent; and their not paying attention to the ways in which the myriad “variations in the farm and plantation economies of the cotton South affected” the quantity of labour done by slave and freedwomen.

540 Jones, *Labor*, 64.
541 That is, for instance, the 1880 census captures the numerical ‘reality’ of a person’s life for one day (if it does), in 1880. What it was over the previous ten years following that single day in 1870 or will be at any time during the next ten, until one day in 1890, is not recorded.
542 Joanna Thompson Isom, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Mississippi Pt. 3*, 1097; Laura Moore, in Rawick, *The American Slave, Texas, Pt. 6*, 2746. Ms Thompson Isom, married to Henry Isom, when she was 15, was quite forthright about it: “Ise had ten chillun; I didn’t want but two; dat wuz 8 too many; my husban’ died 19 years ago an’ I wouldn’t look at no man livin’; dere aint nuthin’ to dese men nowh, I tells you.” As for Ms Moore, she told the interviewer that “[w]hen de day comes dat I had thirteen children of my own, I wasn’t as happy” as when looking after someone else’s.
543 And male-centred historians.
545 Reading the WPA ex-slave narratives is a salutary lesson in gendered worldviews. Many, if not most, of the male ex-slaves who were or had been married sharecroppers or day labourers (both forms of farm employment requiring similar effort by their wives) did not mention any of the productive labour that their wives had done in the fields. Many of the female ex-slaves who had shared their lives with men, who had either sharecropped or done day farm labour, told of their own labours, whether in the fields or in the white folks kitchens. It is quite possible that those men who did not think their wives’ or sweethearts’ field work contributions worthy of the mention in 1937 would not have done so on those earlier occasions when the census takers came around.
546 Jones, *Labor*, 63-64; Schwalm, *Hard Fight*, 263. Schwalm does not raise this point specifically; rather she points to the link between northern policy which, in keeping with cultural norms, privileged males (as fathers and husbands) by establishing their authority over the family (and wives) and the Freedmen’s Bureau’s wage rates in which “[ex-slave men’s] field labor for the first time was valued more highly than that of [ex-slave]women.”
547 Thus, I would argue, the higher rates of pay for ‘men’s’ work/jobs: ploughing, mowing, herding and so on. Hoeing, labelled unskilled (even children can do it), was, on both sides of the Atlantic, primarily women’s work. It became marginalized and vulnerable to economic and technological change, if more slowly in the South than in England.
551 In this tendency they hardly alone; all historians, along with all scholars, are similarly affected. No one comes to their work with their mind a political, social or cultural *tabula rasa*; all strive to greater or lesser degrees to be as objective as possible - from within their own worldview.
552 We tend, culturally, never to assume that because men must work that that necessity prevents their enjoying job satisfaction.
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