

The Errors of a Land Gone Weary:

James Madison's Address to the Agricultural Society of Albemarle

By Derek Litvak

Whilst all are sensible that agriculture is the basis of population and prosperity, it cannot be denied that the study and practice of its true principles have hitherto been too generally neglected in the United States.

– James Madison, May 12, 1818

Introduction

James Madison spoke these words almost two hundred years ago in an address to the Agricultural Society of Albemarle in October of 1817, further marking his place in history.¹ The meeting was attended by more than thirty area farmers who carefully listened to Madison's *Address*.² Impressed by his words and reason, the Society immediately adopted two resolutions. The first thanked Madison for delivering such an "enlightened and important address"³ and called for 250 copies of the *Address* to be printed for further distribution. The second resolution required the secretary to forward a copy of the *Address* to the state Agricultural Society of Virginia.⁴

Why were these men and fellow Virginian planters so impressed by Madison's words? Certainly Madison's importance as a political figure was an influencing factor in the favorable

¹ Thomas Mann Randolph to James Madison, October 14, 1817, in *The Papers of James Madison: Retirement Series*, ed. David Mattern, J.C.A. Stagg, Mary Parke Johnson, and Anne Mandeville Colony (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 1:142.

² Andrea Wulf, *Founding Gardeners: The Revolutionary Generation, Nature, and the Shaping of the American Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 205.

³ Peter Minor to James Madison, May 13, 1818, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 285.

⁴ Peter Minor to James Madison, May 13, 1818, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 285.

reception of his ideas. After all, he was a prominent Virginian who not only played crucial roles in the creation of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, but served two terms as president of the United States. However, his fame as a Founding Father does not completely explain the impact of his speech.

The effect Madison's speech had on those men, and others later on, is further explained by the deteriorating state of Virginia agriculture during this time period. Since its colonization in 1607, the lands of Virginia were plagued by excessive cropping, mostly of tobacco, as well as improper and harmful agricultural practices. More than two hundred years later, the state of Virginia felt the consequences of this history, and in many respects, continued down the same beaten path. As Andrea Wulf notes in her book, *Founding Gardeners*, Virginia's agricultural time seemed to be coming to an end.⁵

By the time Madison gave his *Address*, Thomas Jefferson had purchased the territory of Louisiana, the War of 1812 was fought with Great Britain, and many battles were fought against the Native Americans in the south. All of this led to a boom in the availability of fresh fertile lands to the west and south. The price of cotton rose constantly from 1815 on, allowing a wave of Virginia farmers to leave the exhausted soils of their home state in search of virgin lands which promised fortune. All of this occurred about a decade before Madison traveled from his estate of Montpelier to Charlottesville, where the Albemarle Society met.⁶ While Virginia's history of agricultural dominance and downfall has a much longer trajectory, there is no doubt the decade preceding Madison's *Address* was one of the most difficult for Virginia's planters.

⁵ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 203.

⁶ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 203.

Relatively little was written on this speech, and Madison's role in agricultural reform is recognized by only a handful of historians. The final chapter of Wulf's book examines certain aspects of Madison's life related to agriculture, eventually leading up to an analysis of his speech at the Albemarle Society and its significance. Steven Stoll also dedicates a few pages of his book, *Larding the Lean Earth*, to Madison's *Address*, as does Benjamin Cohen in *Notes from the Ground*. Besides these references, there are some works that speak on the matter of agriculture in Virginia and touch on reform-minded planters such as Madison. Among these major works is historian Avery Odelle Craven's book, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606–1860*. Published in 1925, this older text is a landmark book that documents many parts of Virginia's agricultural history, including early efforts for reform, and is often cited by any work dealing with the agricultural history of those states.

In a 2011 interview, Wulf remarked that Madison was the “forgotten father of environmentalism,”⁷ and she was the first historian to assert such a position. Consequently, there is no supporting literature on Madison's potential environmentalist leanings. Her claim that Madison is a “forgotten environmentalist” is best considered within the broader agricultural history of Virginia along with additional scholarship on this topic.

While Madison's *Address* was an important and somewhat influential speech in its day, it was also a part of a larger movement by progressive planters in Virginia to promote reform in agriculture. Madison's *Address* added to the history of agricultural reform in Virginia, and he is among a class of planters who might all enjoy the title of “forgotten environmentalist.”

Understanding the place of Madison's *Address* within the intricate web of Virginia's agricultural

⁷ Erika Howsare, “James Madison, father of environmentalism,” C-Ville, http://www.cville.com/James_Madison_father_of_environmentalism/#.UzGH9XnS7aM.

history and failed progressive attempts reveals the importance of his speech. Though Madison's speech turned heads and grabbed the attention of people an ocean away, it does not prove that he was the founder of American environmentalism.⁸

Regardless, Madison's *Address* was a critical part of the progressive process, and deserves recognition for its unique features. His speech aimed to drive his fellow planters towards improved agricultural methods that were less harmful to the land and more productive long term. Madison believed that the ability of "cultivating the earth, and of rearing animals, by which food is increased beyond the spontaneous supplies of nature, belongs to man alone."⁹ With this in mind, there is no excuse that the people who dedicated their lives to the land easily and consistently neglected proper agricultural practices.

In order to properly put Madison's contributions in context, it is necessary to spend time exploring the agricultural exploits of other men that lived alongside him. This review of his peers and circumstances demonstrates that Madison does not deserve of the title that Wulf gave him. Madison's place in Virginia's agricultural history is determined by analyzing other planters, letters, books and newspapers.

Understanding the history of Virginia's agriculture is essential to comprehend these related topics, including the disputed originality of Madison's conclusions. From its beginning, Virginia's agriculture was shaped by, centered on, and eventually destroyed by tobacco. There

⁸ Mordecai M. Noah to James Madison, September 1, 1818, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 352-353: In this letter, Noah, writing from New York, informs Madison that a "Mr. Miller," who pays particular attention to written works by Americans, would like permission to print Madison's *Address* in London for the English public, with Noah stating "the importance of such publications in England in a domestic as well as political point of view is too obvious for comment." Noah could possibly be referring to John Miller, a London-based publisher and bookseller of American writers.

⁹ Address to the Agricultural Society of Albemarle, May 18, 1818, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 260, 269-270.

are many other working parts to this story, but coming to grips with tobacco, and its ripple effect throughout Virginia's agricultural history, is an ideal starting place.

The Gift and Curse of Tobacco

Settled in 1607, Virginia is the oldest inhabited British colony. From its birth, the colony of Virginia had one main goal: profit. However, Virginia lacked precious metals, such as gold or silver, and there were few valuable items that could be sent back or traded with the Old World and ensure colonists a steady source of income. As a result, Virginia quickly became an agrarian society that depended on finding a crop with the potential for colonists to make a living. Tobacco quickly became that crop.¹⁰

Not only did tobacco provide colonists with a comfortable life and source of income, but in many cases, a real possibility to make a fortune. The demand for tobacco in England rose rapidly, creating a constant demand with two major impacts on Virginia planters. First, a tobacco farmer was generally secure in planting the crop because there was an existing market to sell it. Second, and more importantly, rising demand meant tobacco was more profitable than any other crop. In the early years of colonization, a planter of tobacco could make up to six times the profit that any other crop produced.¹¹

In addition to these factors, tobacco had a higher yield per acre than other crops. In a time when trees were cut down by hand, farmers could clear less land for tobacco while profiting

¹⁰ Avery Odelle Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606–1860* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 29; Stacy L. Lorenz, “‘To Do Justice to His Majesty, the Merchant and the Planter’: Governor William Grooch and the Virginia Tobacco Inspection Act of 1730,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 108, no. 4 (2000): 350, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4249871>.

¹¹ Craven, *Soil Exhaustion*, 30-31.

from its high selling price. The crop also had a comparatively low weight and was cheaper to ship than most other commodities. Due to these advantages and the overwhelming popularity of agriculture, Virginia accelerated into a single-crop system, leaving little attention or land for other crops. Tobacco was so important and entrenched in Virginia that when prices dropped in the eighteenth century, Governor William Grooch implemented an inspection system in 1731 which favored the highest quality tobacco and saved the colony's cash crop.¹²

Despite all its advantages, tobacco had equally detrimental effects. Planters could only count on three to four good harvests of tobacco before soil depletion forced them to find new lands to cultivate. In most cases, the old and dried up tobacco lands were converted to wheat fields, or more often, corn, which also had its drawbacks. Besides causing an insatiable appetite for fresh land, tobacco enjoyed high prices that did not last. By the early eighteenth century, falling tobacco prices prompted farmers to plant a larger quantity in an attempt to continue to profit from the depreciating crop. Before 1700, land grants of 2,000 acres were a rarity in Virginia. However, by 1729 grants ranging between 2,000 and 40,000 acres were commonplace. By mid-century, estates with more than 100,000 acres existed. As farmers planted larger areas of land with tobacco, the exhaustion of Virginia's lands increased at an exponential rate. Craven describes how "the very conditions which made it the dominant crop, determined that its production should be at the expense of the soil."¹³ Additionally, a rapidly growing population

¹² Lorenz, "To Do Justice to His Majesty," 345.

¹³ Craven, *Soil Exhaustion*, 30-35, 60-62

required more food, and many Virginia planters were compelled to plant corn and wheat as the population reached 250,000 in 1750.¹⁴

This history led a dedicated few Virginia planters to add new agricultural practices their repertoire. The ruinous monoculture, or single-crop system, tobacco imposed on Virginia was fully recognized by the nineteenth century. The excessive cultivation of tobacco during Virginia's agricultural history, along with improper and destructive practices, are a "long train of abuses" on the part of Virginia planters towards the lands they farmed.¹⁵ These abuses included, but were certainly not limited to, ineffective plowing, a lack of use of manure and proper care by overseers. These and other issues were addressed in the years following the Revolutionary War, as the newly created United States began to develop into a strong nation. Men such as Madison worked towards spreading new ideas to the public that could lift the agriculture of Virginia back out of the dust. However, Madison was not the only, nor the first, progressive-minded planter to attempt change.

The Farmer Washington

Decades before Madison delivered his *Address*, George Washington attempted to implement some of the very changes later advocated for by Madison. After serving two terms as the first president of the United States, Washington retired to his Mount Vernon estate where he resumed the life of a private citizen and farmer. However, even before his retirement, Washington attempted to change his agricultural methods. Washington's efforts are a clear sign

¹⁴ Benjamin Cohen, *Notes from the Ground: Science, Soil, and Society in the American Countryside* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 136-137.

¹⁵ Susan Dunn, *Dominion of Memories: Jefferson, Madison, and the Decline of Virginia* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 23; Declaration of Independence.

of his membership in a group of “early conservationists,” as described by historian Charles Turner. It was among Washington’s “favorite objects... to recover my land from the gullied & exhausted state into which it has been unfortunately thrown for some years back.”¹⁶ Though Washington, unlike Madison, was not speaking in front of crowds of people in order to affect change, his efforts were meaningful.

As early as the 1780’s, Washington sought the help of others in his personal agricultural reforms. Washington exchanged letters with the English agriculturalist Arthur Young about his experimentation with new methods, results, and observations about the agricultural world around him. When Young inquired about the practices of farmers in Washington’s area, he later reported with a heavy heart, “There is, perhaps, scarcely any part of America, where farming has been less attended to than this State.”¹⁷ Virginia, Washington commented, once had valuable and fertile lands, but years of abuse at the hands of planters left the soil of the state in shambles. Washington observed that after tobacco could no longer grow, planters often followed the same routine of abuse with Indian Corn, before switching again to the cultivation of wheat. Every switch yielded a smaller harvest for each new crop. The lands were allowed to rest for about a year and a half, after which the whole process was repeated until the soil was no longer usable.¹⁸

¹⁶ Charles W. Turner, “Virginia Agricultural Reform, 1815 – 1860,” *Agricultural History* 26, no. 3 (July 1952): 80, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3740409>; George Washington to William Pearce, July 13, 1794, *PGW: Presidential*, 16: 341.

¹⁷ George Washington to Arthur Young, November 1, 1787, *Letters on Agriculture From His Excellency George Washington, President of the United States, to Arthur Young, Esq., F.R.S. and Sir John Sinclair, Bart., M.P., with Statistical Tables and Remarks, by Thomas Jefferson, Richard Peters, and Other Gentlemen, On the Economy and Management of Farms in the United States*, ed. Franklin Knight (Washington: The Editor, 1847), 21-22.

¹⁸ George Washington to Arthur Young, November 1, 1787, *Letters on Agriculture From His Excellency George Washington, President of the United States, to Arthur Young, Esq., F.R.S. and Sir John Sinclair, Bart., M.P., with Statistical Tables and Remarks, by Thomas Jefferson, Richard Peters, and Other Gentlemen, On the Economy and Management of Farms in the United States*, ed. Franklin Knight (Washington: The Editor, 1847), 21-22.

The lack of regular crop rotation, along with the heavy use of Indian Corn, were particularly noted by Washington. Washington stopped growing corn after he realized its detrimental effects on land. The crop was prone to erosion, causing planters' lands to simply wash away. Washington gave it up, despite the inconvenience it posed in feeding his livestock and slaves. He also experimented with different types of crop rotations in order to find a system that not only halted the exhaustion of soil, but reversed it. Eventually he incorporated different crops such as potatoes, along with several various types of grasses to allow the land to fallow.¹⁹

Washington was not oblivious to the harm that planters caused. In 1786, he remarked that the system of agriculture that was employed in his state was hardly worthy of being recognized as a system; it was "as unproductive to the practitioners as it is ruinous to the land-holders."²⁰ During this time, planters such as Washington took it upon themselves to learn about their land and to attempt their own reform movements. These men tried to improve their agricultural practices over time by paying more attention to their land and employing different methods. It was not long before they turned from private efforts and correspondence to a more visible and public effort. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, these like-minded men came together to discuss the state of agriculture in Virginia and offer advice to each other and the public.

Arator and the Overseer

In 1803, John Taylor of Caroline County, Virginia, published a series of articles on the state's agriculture. Taylor wrote these articles in order to inform his neighbors and fellow planters of the crimes committed against Virginia's lands. From his home estate, Hazelwood, which overlooked the Rappahannock River, Taylor assumed the name of Arator, which is Latin

¹⁹ Craven, *Soil Exhaustion*, 87-89.

²⁰ George Washington to Arthur Young, August 6, 1786, *Letters on Agriculture*, 16.

for “Farmer.” He wrote a total of 64 essays on agriculture which were published in a Georgetown newspaper. His essays, which covered a wide range of separate yet interconnected agricultural topics, were later compiled and published as a book in 1814. As Benjamin Cohen noted, Taylor’s *Arator* essays represent the beginning of a shift from individual reform efforts to a more cooperative movement.²¹ Fifteen years before Madison, Taylor was paramount in laying the foundation for Virginia’s agricultural reform.

Taylor was the first of many Virginia planters to recognize the larger problems of faulty agricultural practices, put the pieces together, and present them in a coherent form. He concluded his first essay by stating it was the practice of many, as part of the state’s backwards “agricultural progress” to move on to new lands instead of improving old ones. Such an “exhausted country” could not hope to reach a fraction of its former glory if it was drained and abandoned by farmers.²²

Before progress could be made, in Taylor’s opinion, the planters of Virginia first needed to recognize that there was a problem. But at this time, there was still little change in agricultural practices. Despite the private improvements made by some men, a mass spreading of knowledge and change had not yet occurred. Taylor saw that it was important that “a patient... know that he is sick, before he will take physic,” and it was equally important for the facts of the “ill health of agriculture”²³ to be recognized. The very first aspect Taylor addressed was the fundamental issue of land fertility. Taylor saw the issue as the predominant element of Virginia agriculture, for agriculture is an art that should work toward improving nature beyond its base state. However,

²¹ Craven, *Soil Exhaustion*, 99-100; Dunn, *Dominion of Memories*, 24; Cohen, *Notes from the Ground*, 45-46.

²² John Taylor, “Number 1: The Present State of Agriculture,” in *Arator, Being a Series of Agricultural Essays, Practical and Political: In Sixty-Four Numbers*, edited by M. E. Bradford (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1977), 67.

²³ Taylor, “Number 2: The Present State of Agriculture, Continued,” *Arator*, 68.

while “arts improve the work of nature – when they injure it, they are not arts, but barbarous customs.”²⁴ For generations, Virginia planters bordered on and immersed themselves in barbarous acts against nature.

A direct comparison between the *Arator* essays and Madison’s *Address* is imbalanced because Taylor had more time and space to address a larger number of topics. However, noting some of the topics Taylor chose to speak on enhances the understanding of Madison’s *Address* fifteen years later in a larger context. Of these topics, Taylor’s opinions about the problems associated with overseers are particularly worthy of attention. Taylor devoted one of his essays to the topic of overseers, since these workers were a crucial part of the agricultural system in Virginia and a key reason for its decline.

Overseers were a part of Virginia agriculture since the day large plantations came into existence. From that point on, planters ceased to have an intimate relationship with the lands that were farmed; most of the labor cultivating Virginia’s land fell to the slaves. Though overseers existed before the boom of slavery in Virginia, their presence greatly increased with its coming. Overseers were often men who failed at farming themselves, and as a result, went from farm to farm working as modern-day supervisors. Generally, their pay was a proportion of the crop they were responsible for, and this custom led to years of soil exhaustion by overseers. This proportional payment system encouraged overseers to push their laborers to do anything and everything to develop the largest yield possible. The immediate crop was the overseers’ concern

²⁴ Taylor, “Number 2: The Present State of Agriculture, Continued,” *Arator*, 68.

since they usually left for a new farm after only one year of employment. The future of the lands they looked after was of no concern to them.²⁵

Since overseers were interested in producing a massive crop rather than the health of the land, their self-interest counteracted any push towards more progressive agriculture. Taylor remarked that progressive agriculture had many enemies, but reform was especially hindered by the “demon called ignorance, for whose worship the slave states have erected an established church, with a ministry, entitled overseers, fed, clothed and paid to suppress every effort for introducing.”²⁶ So committed to their own interests, overseers often failed or stopped the improvement practices their employers experimented with.²⁷

Washington’s attempts to implement his own agricultural changes highlight the faults of overseers. In 1793, Washington was once again experimenting with different techniques, crop rotation in particular. The system he devised that year required a fair amount of plowing to be done during the fall. After leaving very detailed instructions for the overseers, it was reported to Washington that absolutely nothing went as planned while he was away from the estate. One overseer “plowed a few days only as if it were for amusement,”²⁸ while another only recently started to plow. Angry and disappointed, Washington remarked that little could be expected of “such men when left to themselves.”²⁹ The following year, Washington informed his farm manager, William Pearce, that “the insufferable neglects of my Overseers in not plowing as they

²⁵ Craven, *Soil Exhaustion*, 38.

²⁶ Taylor, “Number 15: Overseers,” *Arator*, 127.

²⁷ Craven, *Soil Exhaustion*, 114.

²⁸ George Washington to William Pearce, December 18, 1793, *PGW: Presidential*, 14: 558-560.

²⁹ George Washington to William Pearce, December 18, 1793, *PGW: Presidential*, 14: 558-560.

ought to have done in the fall, begins now to be manifest,”³⁰ for he feared a possible total loss of crop.

Angered by the overseer system, Taylor announced to his readers that “unless this custom is abolished, the attempt to fertilize our lands, is needless.”³¹ No amount of change, in his eyes, could be properly implemented with the system of overseers, whose only concern was their pay. When the crop yields fell below their desired amount, overseers moved easily to other farms, only to be replaced by another self-interested overseer. Taylor observed that the system was so perfectly tuned to stripping the lands of their fertility that no other country could possibly compete with it.³²

Taylor’s *Arator* essays mark the beginnings of a far more active effort on the part of Virginia planters to introduce reform into the state’s agricultural practices. These compositions set the stage for Madison and gave new life to earlier reform attempts conducted by other like-minded progressives. Taylor also recognized and spoke publicly about problems that were not distinctly part of the land. His essay on overseers emphasizes the deficiencies of man in regard to agriculture. It was not long after Taylor wrote his essays that others took a more active role in agricultural writing and uniting with fellow progressive planters. Taylor was dedicated to doing something to bring agricultural practice to the forefront of planters’ minds and creating an awareness of the issues. The system as a whole, not just the involvement of overseers, was flawed. It was not working and had not for some time. Taylor, who was fond of metaphors, asked his fellow planters, “Could a physician correctly call the regular admission of a slow

³⁰ George Washington to William Pearce, March 23, 1794, *PGW: Presidential*, 15: 435.

³¹ Taylor, “Number 15: Overseers,” *Arator*, 127-128.

³² Taylor, “Number 15: Overseers,” *Arator*, 127-128.

poison a system of medication, because he used the best constructed lancets, caudle cups, syringes and clyster pipes in killing the patient?”³³

The Rise of Agricultural Societies and Publications

The earliest known agricultural society dates back to 1774 in Williamsburg. As time went on, private agricultural reform coalesced into a more public effort by concerned Virginia planters. While the meetings often discussed matters besides agriculture, they were a gathering place for forward-thinking farmers. By the early nineteenth century, agricultural societies were forums where concerned farmers discussed the issues of land and soil improvement.³⁴

By the year 1817, agricultural societies became more widespread. These local societies were so popular that a state society, the Society of Virginia for the Promotion of Agriculture, was founded in 1818. Craven describes how these local societies tended to act, operate, and think in the same manner; they all discussed how to improve Virginia’s agriculture. The Agricultural Society of Albemarle is a perfect example to illustrate what a typical society during this time looked like and how it functioned.³⁵

The Society of Albemarle was first organized on May 5, 1817, and had its first meeting on October 7 of that year. The Society stated their reason for creating the group was the “deficiency of Knowledge in the theory and practice of rural economy.”³⁶ These men realized they had something to learn about agriculture and came together to rectify the problems they faced. Following this statement of purpose, the Society listed its interests and pursuits. Among

³³ Taylor, “Number 15: Overseers,” *Arator*, 126.

³⁴ Craven, *Soil Exhaustion*, 104.

³⁵ Cohen, *Notes from the Ground*, 135.

³⁶ Address to the Agricultural Society of Albemarle, Editorial Notes, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 257.

them were the cultivation of crops, crop rotation, manures, and other matters that would relieve their stressed lands from the hardships inflicted by generations of agricultural decline.³⁷

During the same period that agricultural societies emerged throughout Virginia, the publication of agricultural articles and papers increased. The *Agricultural Museum*, first printed in 1810 in Georgetown, was the original agricultural newspaper in the nation. It predated Baltimore's slightly more successful *American Farmer* by almost nine years. Editor Reverend David Wiley explains why he established such a paper in the *Agricultural Museum's* first article. Like the men who formed agricultural societies, Wiley believed that there needed to be an effective form of communication in order to discuss the issues of agriculture. Wiley found ordinary newspapers to be unsatisfactory for the purpose of facilitating meaningful dialogue about agriculture in Virginia. The newspapers were so polluted with “politics, and so devoted to party purposes,”³⁸ that they could not remain a proper place for farmers to collect information.

This concern for a practical and judicious method of spreading agricultural knowledge to the farmers of Virginia was paramount to Wiley. As he saw it, this was the beginning of an agricultural revival during this time. The exhausted soils of Virginia finally seemed to be coming to life again, and “the desert has been literally changed into a fruitful field.”³⁹ However, there were limits to this transformation as well. As most farmers were fixed in tradition and correspondingly slow to change; they needed information about the experiments and success of

³⁷ Minute Book of the Agricultural Society of Albemarle, *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1918, Vol. I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1921), 263-265.

³⁸ Claribel R. Barnett, “‘The Agricultural Museum’: An Early American Agricultural Periodical,” *Agricultural History*, 2, no. 2 (April 1928): 99, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3739456>; Introduction, July 4, 1810, *The Agricultural Museum: Designed To Be a Repository of Valuable Information to the Farmer and Manufacturer, and the Mean of a Fare Communication of Sentiment, and General Interchange of Ideas, on the Important Subject of Their Occupations*. Vol. I, ed. David Wiley (Georgetown, Washington D.C.: 1811), 1-3.

³⁹ Introduction, July 4, 1810, *Agricultural Museum*, 1.

their fellow planters. The agricultural societies began to address the issue of dispensing information to a larger number of people. These societies were still plagued by a lack of “free communication of ideas,”⁴⁰ and a mode of expressing themselves to a larger public. Without this communication, the progress of common farmers towards more effective and sustainable agricultural practices continued to slow, and the potential influence of these societies was wasted. As Wiley put it, a “man of Science may have access to the books of other countries – he may be able to derive important instruction from them.”⁴¹ A newspaper such as his was more accessible and a better agent of spreading change. Wiley’s motives mirror those of John Taylor’s earlier attempts, both wishing to affect the common farmer and put forth improvements that “ignorance can understand, and poverty practice.”⁴²

Madison Adds His Two Cents

By 1818 when Madison delivered his *Address*, agricultural reform efforts were increasing around him. With decades of first-hand farming experience, he personally suffered the effects of the declining state of Virginia agriculture. Madison put in a fair amount of research into the sciences that related to agriculture which later had a profound effect on his *Address*. He

⁴⁰ Introduction, July 4, 1810, *Agricultural Museum*, 1.

⁴¹ Introduction, July 4, 1810, *Agricultural Museum*, 1.

⁴² Taylor, “Number 20: Manuring,” *Arator*, 147.

implemented his research not only in his private reform, but also when constructing his own “agricultural treatise.”⁴³

Madison’s *Address* was not entirely different from what was said in years past. He discussed many of the same matters that people such as John Taylor had. However, Madison’s *Address* is set apart from the rest by what is below the surface. Taylor’s *Arator* essays are an earlier attempt to delve deeper, and Madison continued this by drawing conclusions and presenting his arguments in new ways. Madison’s research and scientific influence are evident in his *Address* from the beginning.

A staunch supporter of the agricultural lifestyle, Madison believes that agriculture is the defining feature between “enlightened and refined nations,” and “rude and wretched tribes,”⁴⁴ arguing that agriculture is the basis of a developed nation and society. However, while agriculture and society were intricately bound in this way, they never advanced at the same pace. The rapid growth of society long surpassed the slow pace of agriculture, but this fact did not justify the imbalance between the two. If agriculture could not keep up with society, then the latter would have to make concessions to the former. Agriculture and society were much like the horses that pull a carriage; the speed of the horses must be matched, or the whole system comes crashing down. This uneven pace of development between agriculture and society and resulting upheaval characterized the state of Virginia agriculture for generations.⁴⁵

The notion that there is a balance between man and nature was influenced by Madison’s reading of science literature. According to Wulf, Madison read Denis Diderot’s “groundbreaking

⁴³ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 206-207.

⁴⁴ *Address*, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 260.

⁴⁵ *Address*, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 260.

Encyclopédia,⁴⁶ which implied an interconnected relationship between man and nature. Furthermore, Madison was familiar with Thomas Malthus's recent work, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, tying population growth to his assertion of a balance between man and nature. Madison drew on many different disciplines, including politics and chemistry, in order to “weave together a myriad of theories”⁴⁷ into a coherent argument about Virginia's agriculture. It is the scientific backing and recognition of the limits and balance of nature in Madison's *Address* that distinguishes it from its counterparts.

In the rest of his speech, Madison discusses what he believed were the seven most devastating errors on the part of Virginia planters. Spending varying amounts of time on each of these topics, Madison attempted to identify the problems and offer advice to rectify them. Much like his predecessors, Madison echoes some the main points that progressive planters spoke of for years. However, it is the way that he presents his arguments that sets him apart.

The first error Madison highlights is the practice of moving to new lands once the old ones dried up. As historian Susan Dunn notes, land came with the “promise of permanence”⁴⁸ during this time. Buying and cultivating land presented the opportunity for a person to plant their own roots into the soil and start a sedentary life that could be both steady and dependable. With the continuation of this old practice of field migration, “the mantra of land's permanence” was all but a self-induced delusion. Farmers were more concerned about obtaining whatever profit

⁴⁶ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 205-207

⁴⁷ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 205-207

⁴⁸ *Address*, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 270; Dunn, *Dominion of Memories*, 21, 25.

they could. They found it was “more expedient to abandon exhausted land,”⁴⁹ than to attempt to bring their dying lands back to life.

However, as Madison pointed out, this practice could only be sustained for so long. Even with the western parts of the continent opening up, land was not infinite. With so much of the land around him already exhausted from years of abuse, Madison observed that less fertile land was available, and the use of previously infertile lands was increasingly necessary. With cultivation of poorer quality lands rising, so did the inability of planters to make a profit. Spreading labor over tired land was an expensive tactic that failed to pay off in the end, yet planters were increasingly forced to resort to this method. As Madison observed, “it has not been a very rare thing to see land under the plough not producing enough to feed the ploughman and his horse.”⁵⁰

This problem was increasingly difficult to overcome or avoid. Virginia was the oldest of the states and therefore the first to endure the heavy hand of man. Scarcely any part of Virginia was unscathed by the time Madison gave his *Address*. The purpose of agriculture is to give man the ability to increase the production of food past that which naturally occurs. But the long history of Virginia’s agricultural decline quickly overwhelmed planters during this time. The errors of the past meant that those living in 1818 were forced to make do with the meager crops they managed to cultivate from the exhausted land.

The second error Madison addresses is improper plowing. With a system of agriculture that already took land for granted, improper plowing allowed more land to be taken from planters. Erosion proved to be just as much of a problem as soil exhaustion. In a way, erosion

⁴⁹ *Address, PJM: Retirement*, 1: 270; Dunn, *Dominion of Memories*, 21, 25.

⁵⁰ *Address, PJM: Retirement*, 1: 271.

can be classified as a form of exhaustion, and in certain respects a far more costly version. It is even more difficult to develop a small yield if a planter's land washes away out from under him. In a time where every bit of land was necessary for a change to make a living, Virginia planters could not afford to have their land robbed from them by the elements.⁵¹

Crediting Colonel T.M. Randolph with the introduction of horizontal plowing, Madison argues this practice was not only more protective, but also more productive. "Where the land is not only hilly, but the soil thirsty,"⁵² horizontal plowing enables more water to be trapped by the soil as it ran downhill, rather than to creating detrimental artificial valleys caused by vertical plowing. Madison announced that if this method of plowing was introduced to Virginian lands earlier, the "scars and sores now defacing them would nowhere be seen,"⁵³ and the productivity of the land could have doubled. Madison's emphasis on horizontal plowing is another indicator of his overarching theme of balance between man and nature. Before, the custom was to plow lines up and down the hilly lands, which in essence worked against nature. Horizontal plowing, however, allows planters to follow the contours of the land and worked with nature, instead of ignoring it.

The third error Madison highlights is the failure to use manures. The use of manures is a crucial method in sustaining lands and bringing older ones back into commission, which made it a common matter of conversation among progressive planters. Nonetheless, the practice of using manures was largely ignored by Virginia planters because it was viewed as overly expensive. Thomas Jefferson remarked that manure did not even enter the minds of farmers, "because we

⁵¹ Address, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 271.

⁵² Address, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 271-272.

⁵³ Address, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 271-272.

can buy an acre of new land cheaper than we can manure an old one.”⁵⁴ Yet to Madison, and many other progressive planters, manure was an essential part of agriculture. In the first of his eight essays dedicated to this matter, John Taylor announced with confidence that any “agriculturist who expects to reap good crops from neglecting his manures, is equally a fanatic with the religionist, who expects heaven from neglecting his morals.”⁵⁵

Madison echoed these words in his *Address*, though the matter of manures was blatantly ignored by Virginia planters. The longevity of land could no longer sustain such a flagrant disregard for manure. Moreover, manure was a critical component in the restoration of overused lands. It was this lack of deference on the part of planters towards manure that made Madison believe that “no one can be surprised at the impoverished face of the country.”⁵⁶

It is the final error that Madison believes was the most heinous crime of planters against nature: the continuous and unrelenting destruction of timber in the state. Madison realized the severity of this matter unlike his fellow countrymen, who gave little thought that the “fund” of trees was not inexhaustible, and that a “crop” of trees cannot be raised as quickly as one of wheat or corn. Even an outside observer recognized that Virginia planters had little regard for their woodlands. Writing in 1814, a traveler by the name of Thomas H. Palmer noted that when the land became “literally good for nothing,” planters subsequently chopped additional trees in order to make room for “future operations.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, June 25, 1793, *Letters on Agriculture*, 103.

⁵⁵ Taylor, “Number 20: Manuring,” *Arator*, 146.

⁵⁶ *Address*, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 274.

⁵⁷ *Address*, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 282; John Cook Wyllie, “‘Observations Made during a Short Residence in Virginia’: In a Letter from Thomas H. Palmer, May 30, 1814,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 76, no. 4 (October 1968): 392, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4247424>.

Madison states that the practice of excessive timber removal was far outdated. He recognized many of his fellow Virginians were set in their ways, and at the same time understood times had changed. As mentioned earlier, the clearing of land had to be done by hand. As Madison said, when the first colonists began to inhabit the continent, “they found the trees of the forest the great obstacle to their settlement, and cultivation.”⁵⁸ However, while the clearing of trees was a necessity, Madison charged that it was done at an excessive and unsustainable rate. Planters were so eager to clear their lands of trees that they cleared the land completely, even around their homes. At his own estate of Montpelier, Madison combatted this trend and made the forest the defining feature of his home. Guests to Madison’s home were greeted by the sight of a forest that was within reach, giving the sense that his estate was in tune with nature.⁵⁹

For Madison, time could no longer be spared living in the delusion that trees are an easily replaceable resource. Farmers everywhere needed to take the matter of tree sustainability into “serious consideration.” What remained of the forest in Virginia had to be used judiciously. Madison spoke of cultivating “plantations of the trees,” with particular emphasis on trees that grew at a faster rate and proved to be the most useful. A “crop” of trees must be planted in order for more to be available for future use. If action was not taken immediately for the preservation of what remained, in Madison’s mind, “this country...will soon be forced to understand the difficulty of curing it.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Address, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 282.

⁵⁹ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 205.

⁶⁰ Address, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 282-283.

Madison was intent on spreading knowledge of better practices and awareness, as well as a new view on nature. His attention to a balance in nature was a significant change in the collective wisdom of progressive farmers. His *Address* added a new layer to the existing paradigm of agricultural reform, which could take it in a new direction. Though he had bleak prospects of what to expect in the future, he solemnly concludes that “to this catalogue of errors in our rural economy, considerable as it is, many, I fear, might be added.”⁶¹

Preaching to the Choir

In the case of Madison’s *Address*, there was an overwhelmingly positive reaction to his speech. The response of the Agricultural Society of Albemarle was to have over 200 copies of the *Address* immediately printed in pamphlet form. Outside of the Society, Virginia, and the country, there was a reaction to Madison’s words.

After that day, Madison received many letters from other progressive farmers who praised his speech. Richard Peters, a Pennsylvania judge who founded and led the Philadelphia Agricultural Society, commented that he was not only impressed with the speech itself, but with the “Occasion which gave it Birth.” To him, agriculture was more than a “mere mechanical art,” which simply required the use of physical labor on the land, but one where “all the Aid, Science & Talent can bestow.” After reading Madison’s *Address*, Peters exclaimed that he saw “after a long night of darkness and obscurity, the Dawn of agricultural Light & Prosperity.”⁶²

While dedicated to their cause, progressive planters were always a small group compared to the totality of Virginia farmers. Historian Charles Turner pointed out that the “early

⁶¹ *Address, PJM: Retirement*, 283.

⁶² Richard Peters to James Madison, July 30, 1818, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 320.

conservationists”⁶³ were too few in number, while Craven notes there could be some local changes implemented in locations where there was enough progressives present.⁶⁴ However, the masses of farmers were slow to change and entrenched in tradition. Speaking about the farmers in Virginia, Washington commented that while the system of agriculture obviously was “ruinous,” it was still “pertinaciously adhered to.”⁶⁵ Unconvinced and suspicious of anything new, improved plows sat unused by farmers for almost a year after they arrived in one region of Virginia. For the average farmer, tradition continued to have a choking grip around both them and their land.

Years after giving his speech, Madison believed that there were improvements in Virginia’s agriculture. This belief was possibly hopeful optimism, or perhaps a shift in agricultural mentality close to him. The transition towards better practices was slow, and planters did not transform into “innovated farmers and environmentalists overnight.”⁶⁶

The *Agricultural Museum* shared the same ill-productive fate as the numerous agricultural societies that developed across the country. Its publication proved short lived, and after only a couple of years it ended “for want of support.” Claribel Barnett, a librarian at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, noted in her short essay on the periodical that it most likely never obtained a large readership in the first place.⁶⁷ This doomed the *Agricultural Museum* to not only stop publication, but also inevitably fail at its goal of spreading agricultural knowledge.

⁶³ Charles W. Turner, “Virginia Agricultural Reform, 1815 – 1860,” *Agricultural History* 26, no. 3 (July 1952): 80, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3740409>.

⁶⁴ Craven, *Soil Exhaustion*, 108.

⁶⁵ George Washington to Arthur Young, August 6, 1786, *Letters on Agriculture*, 16; Dunn, *Dominion*, 25.

⁶⁶ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 204, 210.

⁶⁷ Craven, *Soil Exhaustion*, 109; Cohen, *Notes from the Ground*, 214n8; Barnett, ““The Agricultural Museum,”” 101.

There was a certain inherent problem with these societies and the *Agricultural Museum* which, if left unsolved, condemned them to failure from their inception. The apparent was that the men that made up these societies and read the *Agricultural Museum* were already progressive farmers themselves. The *Agricultural Museum* felt the heavy hand of this problem early on. Even with the wisdom that Madison exemplified in his *Address*, he did not offer a solution to reach the common farmer. Enlightened planters made up a small percentage of the overall farmer population in Virginia. These men knew that for any real change to occur, the common lot of farmers had to be convinced that better agricultural practices were necessary.

Little could be done for the declining state of Virginia agriculture without the support of the general farming public. Progressive farmers in Virginia could make a small dent, but they could not touch the entirety of Virginia farmers. While they implemented new practices on their own lands, they could only hope that their neighbors would do the same. This unintentional and unavoidable disconnect hampered any progress that could be made at this time.

While ineffective during their own time, these attempts set the stage for future endeavors. They provided a starting point for the agricultural revival that soon took place in Virginia and in the rest of the nation. It took time for the whole movement to pick up speed and popular support, but a starting point is all that was needed to instigate change. As Washington remarked in 1794, “we must walk, as other countries have done, before we can run; Smaller Societies must prepare the way for greater.”⁶⁸

Joining the Club

⁶⁸ George Washington to John Sinclair, July 20, 1794, *PGW: Presidential*, 16: 395.

By May of 1818, Madison added another chapter to the growing tradition of heightened agricultural awareness in Virginia. Before his *Address*, prominent men such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson experimented with their own private agricultural reforms. Madison was also interested in such work, and by the 1790's he began to implement changes at his Montpelier plantation.⁶⁹ Men like Washington, Jefferson, and Madison soon made up the fledging agricultural societies and publications that had their heyday in the 1810's.

However, Madison's *Address* deserves to be looked at in a different light. As Andrea Wulf noted, Madison's speech was "more than just a list of practical advice."⁷⁰ It delves deeper into the agricultural problems that faced Virginia and the nature of man's relationship with the land. Madison's understanding of a balance between society and nature was far beyond that of his peers, both before and at the time of his speech. While men such as John Taylor scratched the surface of this deeper meaning, they still looked at nature in a subsidiary manner. Much like the soil they stood on, those men believed that nature was there to serve them.

In Madison's *Address* there is an evident turn toward a more modern view. Wulf summarizes Madison's realization excellently when she remarks that "in a world where many still believed that God had created plants and animals entirely for human benefit, Madison told the members of the Agricultural Society of Albemarle that nature was not 'subservient' to the use of man."⁷¹ Similarly, Steven Stoll characterizes Madison's understanding as "an astonishing fusion for the time."⁷² This switch in mindset is a radical step forward in the agricultural reform

⁶⁹ *Address*, Editorial Notes, *PJM: Retirement*, 1: 258.

⁷⁰ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 205.

⁷¹ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 206.

⁷² Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 37.

movement. Madison told his fellow Virginians that nature was not theirs for the taking, or more directly, it was not theirs to destroy. Madison did not accept that it was the sole right of man “to re-model the work of nature, as it would be re-modeled, by the destruction, not only of individuals, but of entire species.”⁷³ Madison presented a new view of nature and challenged the status quo.

However, Madison’s peers also challenged the status quo along with him. Though his progressive peers were few in number, they still earnestly endeavored to enact change. Madison’s *Address* was an important step in the movement, but it was just that, a step. Madison joined a cohort of men dedicated to spreading awareness and transforming Virginia agriculture. Wulf was correct to recognize the significance of this speech and its mark as a turning point for the agricultural reform movement, but incorrect to label Madison the “forgotten founder of environmentalism.”

This overstep puts Madison out in front of his fellow progressive planters, which is a concerning distinction. Understanding Madison, as well as his *Address*, in the context of other planters of his time is crucial to comprehend this entire topic.

Madison was among a class of planters who rapidly came to understand more about their role in nature and agriculture. Madison’s accomplishments were impossible without the help, whether directly or indirectly, of these men. The planters that made up this group that Madison joined were all “forgotten environmentalists.” Stoll compared Madison’s *Address* to “a kind of Constitution with Articles,”⁷⁴ a fitting assessment for a founding father who had such a pivotal role in the creation of this nation’s Constitution. Indeed, Madison wrote a constitution for this

⁷³ *Address, PJM: Retirement*, 263.

⁷⁴ Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*, 38.

collection of progressive planters; Madison's *Address* gave this group a code and design by which to live. With it, they could "form a more perfect" agrarian society, "promote the general welfare"⁷⁵ of nature, and secure for themselves and their posterity land which would be both prosperous and plentiful.

⁷⁵ U.S. Constitution, Preamble.

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