

Class Rivalries in Frontier Kentucky and the Applicability of Jeffersonian Agrarianism

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The former British colonists of North America looked toward the territory west of the Appalachian Mountains and east of the Mississippi River as a place with boundless resources and opportunity. The land that composed modern Kentucky emerged famous for its rich soil and promises of wealth. Daniel Boone and his sponsored expeditions by the Transylvania Company, coupled with the immense propaganda distributed by wealthy land speculators, spurred fevered interest in the new territory. Letters from immigrants, travelers' accounts, and newspapers only added to the hunger for Kentucky land. Farmers rapidly populated the Kentucky territory in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and sought to live in the "promised land" to fulfill their agrarian dreams of a successful farm. Land policy struck a controversial chord in the Bluegrass frontier, however, as squatters caused tension among speculators, and confusion about land claims only exacerbated the problem. Further claims added to the confusion when Virginia promised soldiers of the French and Indian War, along with the Revolutionary War, western territory. Because of Virginia's lack of efficiency and complexity in its Kentucky land policy in the late 1770's, disputed claims resulted--furthering class tensions. Inefficient land policies enacted in Kentucky by the Virginia General Assembly guaranteed the success of the Virginian landed elite at the expense of the yeoman and poorer planter, thus revealing class struggles that jeopardized the practicality of Thomas Jefferson's agrarian ideology.

Kentucky historiography necessarily involves parallel developments in Colonial Virginia, along with demographic expansion in the Appalachian frontier. Thomas Abernethy's research into colonial land policies in *Western Lands and The American Revolution* demonstrated the process behind land acquisition in the latter 18th century, while his *Three Virginia Frontiers* shed light on class antagonisms in Kentucky preceding its independence from Virginia. Comparatively, Allan Kulikoff's *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* took a more sociological approach--establishing how the growth of capitalism had demonstrable affects on land acquisition and class relations in the western frontier during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This study will attempt to incorporate political and sociological

perspectives to show how applicability of Jefferson's agrarian dream in frontier Kentucky had its limitations.

The yeoman farmer that headed west into Kentucky envisioned a future based on agriculture and opportunity on the land. They sought a tract of land unto which they could raise a crop, while simultaneously stay convinced that when they could not farm anymore, their children would till the land. A predominate class amongst Colonial America, the yeomen owned the means of production, and if needed to, participated in commodity markets to sustain familial strength.¹ Yeomen growth relied heavily upon land accessibility, for self-sufficiency rested on its availability. As the American economy grew, the yeomen had to evolve their behavior to compete with large-scale planters and wage-laborers.² Capitalist expansion thus changed the degree of economic independence the yeomanry retained, for continued American growth meant a maturing capitalist system. The hard-working, independent yeoman farmer became the model from which Jefferson believed the "seeds of democracy" would shape the American frontier.³

In Jefferson's only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he explained the ideological strength of the yeomen; "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."⁴ Thomas Jefferson espoused the hard work and morality associated with those who tilled American land and fed its citizens. Although published in 1781, Thomas Jefferson's support of the yeoman farmer had also been seen in his draft constitution of Virginia in 1776, where he advocated the appropriation of fifty acres to "every person of full age neither owning nor having owned"⁵ such property. Not only had Jefferson supported the cause of the yeomen, but he had also shown his progressiveness when he proposed universal male suffrage and religious freedom in the 1776 Virginia Constitution.⁶ Jeffersonian Republicans believed in an agrarian democracy that placed the farmer's needs ahead of wealthy capitalists, whom the Federalists had been associated with. The independent, self-sufficient farmer--with his family and tract of land--became the goal for thousands of pioneers who chased the agrarian dream in Kentucky.

¹ Allan Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 34.

² Ibid, 35.

³ Thomas D. Clark, *Agrarian Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1977), 7.

⁴ Everett E. Edwards, *Jefferson and Agriculture* (Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1943), 23.

⁵ Craig T. Friend, *The Buzzel About Kentuck: Settling the Promise Land* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 77.

⁶ Frank Shuffelton, *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Jefferson* (Cambridge: University of Rochester, 2009), 36.

The farmer's contact with nature also played a significant role as to why Jefferson viewed them as "God's chosen people." Because agrarians made their living off the land, they were believed to be "purer, more moral, and more respectful of God than their urban counterparts."⁷ Consequently, Jefferson believed that the yeoman farmers—upon which America had been founded upon—were key to future expansion. The agrarianism thought that flowed into the young republic had not been new; the attributes associated with the farmer in the agrarian model traced back to the Enlightenment Movement in Europe. Jeffersonian Republicans viewed farmers with the utmost respect, for the land's physical demands earned farmers moral superiority in the early United States. As the ideas of independence took hold, colonists who experienced lost fertility in their older settlements looked to Kentucky land for opportunity.

Kentucky's geographical features determined the nature of society and economy that existed within the territory. The limestone-based Bluegrass Region sustained successful agricultural enterprises, comparable to rural England.⁸ The Bluegrass area in Kentucky marked the most fertile land, and had been sought out by those who had either political connections in Virginia, or political ambitions in Kentucky—those who had enough capital to pay for the highly desirable Bluegrass soil. Kentucky's second distinctive region, or the Appalachian highlands, brought immigrants "into river valleys, pinched coves, and even onto hilltop plateaus."⁹ The population settling in the highlands became bound to a subsistence type of agriculture, with an "arrested mode of social life."¹⁰ Similarly to the eastern and northern regions, the soil of southwestern Kentucky ranged from rocky and clay to very rich.¹¹

Subsequently, the early settlers divided Kentucky lands into three classifications, judged primarily on its fertility. First-rate lands defined the central region, while second-rate lands—soils that were thinner and less productive—defined most of Kentucky. Third-rate land composed the mountainous plateaus of Kentucky. Publications soon surfaced highlighting limitless opportunity attached to all three types of land.

Ever since Daniel Boones' and John Finleys' explorations in 1769, many colonists had received a romanticized view of the Kentucky frontier.¹² The 1788 poem "The Banks of Kentucke" illustrated the heightened enthusiasm;

⁷ David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: Hopkins University Press, 2006), 67.

⁸ Clark, *Agrarian Kentucky*, 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Thomas Perkins Abernethy, *Western Lands and The American Revolution* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1937), 82.

Delighting in nature, with fond apprehensions,
I eagerly came to the banks of Kentucke.
O, never did art so much beauty discover,
To reward the long search of its most raptur'd lover,
As nature's luxuriant fancy spreads over
The gay fertile soil, on the banks of Kentucke.¹³

Adding to the image, John Filson described the first discoverers of Kentucky and how he viewed "their discovery of the best tract of land in North America, and probably in the world."¹⁴

Land salesman, pioneer, and Kentucky historian, Filson's *The Discovery, Settlement, And present State of Kentucke* dramatically added to the increased demand for Kentucky land—excerpts even made their way into the *The New-Jersey Magazine and Monthly Advertiser*.¹⁵ Before the book had been published in 1784 Filson retained approximately 13,000 acres of western lands,¹⁶ and extensive interest in Kentucky land certainly increased its value. Translated in French, and also distributed in Britain, Filson's book brought the story of Daniel Boone—famed Kentucky pioneer—to thousands. The book naturally served as an advertisement for his Kentucky claims—bringing the promise of wealth in Kentucky land to unprecedented numbers. Although questionably exaggerated in some instances, as a whole, Filson's work was able to capture the minds of a nation.

Virginia's governor, Lord Dunmore, sent the first wave of speculators to the trans-Appalachian area in 1773.¹⁷ A land speculator, to a frontiersmen, meant an eastern capitalist who bought large sums of territory—with the anticipation of land hungry settlers to come.¹⁸ As a result of the intense speculation and demand for westward land, the Virginia Land Law of 1776 had been established to have some sort of policy governing the acquisition of Kentucky lands.

Passed by the Virginia General Assembly, the 1776 law stated, "That no family shall be entitled to the allowance granted to settlers by this act, Unless they have made a crop of corn in that county, or resided there at

¹³ *Kentucky Gazette* "The Banks of Kentucke. Tune, banks of the Dec." (March 1788) American Periodical Series Online.

¹⁴ John Filson, *The Discovery and Settlement of Kentucke* (United States of America, 1784), 7.

¹⁵ *The New-Jersey Magazine and Monthly Advertiser* "The Discovery, Settlement, And present State of Kentucke" (Feb 1787) American Periodical Series Online.

¹⁶ Clark, *Agrarian Kentucky*, 5.

¹⁷ Thomas Abernethy, *Three Virginia Frontiers*, (Massachusetts: Peter Smith Pub Inc., 1940), 63.

¹⁸ Paul W. Gates, *The Jeffersonian Dream: Studies in the History of American Land Policy and Development*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 7.

least one year since the time of their settlement.”¹⁹ The law granted preemption rights for squatters, enabling settlers to establish a sizable force along the Kentucky countryside. Although the 1776 land law had been one of the first that established some sort of policy, its enactment caused crucial consequences that led to further land policy reform later in the decade. Firstly, squatters posed problems for speculators that had not yet found settlers to buy their land. Secondly, the settlers who started to establish farms, and fulfilled the preemption rights accorded from the 1776 law, had come in sufficient numbers to “protect their interests.”²⁰ Because Virginia, like other states after the Revolution, faced bankruptcy, it proceeded to dispose lands to recoup finances and establish a taxable resource.²¹ Lastly, the 1776 law, with its acceptance of squatters, had unleashed tensions throughout Kentucky between squatters and politician-speculators.

By 1776, with Virginia in possession of the Kentucky territory, three types of land claims existed. Military claims resulted from land promised to Virginia soldiers through service—tracing back to the practices of the French and Indian War and into the Revolution.²² Virginia Governor Patrick Henry, for instance, gave young men a reason to enlist by promising western lands, but there had also been claims taken out “without any warrant or title whatsoever.”²³ Lastly, the claims taken out by proprietary companies—like the Transylvania Company—encompassed the third type of claim.²⁴

Previous to the 1776 land law, the Transylvania Company, headed by Richard Henderson, filed large amounts of claims in Kentucky. Through manipulative treaties with the Shawnee and Cherokee, Henderson and his partners claimed nearly all of Kentucky.²⁵ Henderson sought to establish his own government and laws through purchasing the land.²⁶ The young nation, as well as Virginia, subsequently did not recognize his claim. Additionally, the early Kentucky pioneers—disheartened with Indian attacks—felt that the company had not fulfilled their responsibilities to protect them from Indian or British encroachment.²⁷ The Transylvania Company’s attempt to buy Kentucky countered Jeffersonian expectations that valued a democracy composed of yeomen farmers, and subsequently,

¹⁹ Clark, *Agrarian Kentucky*, 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Aaron M. Sakolski, *Land Tenure and Land Taxation in America*, (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1957), 69.

²² Robert Cotterill, *History of Pioneer Kentucky* (Cincinnati: Johnson and Hardin, 1917), 231.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Craig Friend, *The Buzzel About Kentuck*, 81.

²⁶ Thomas Abernethy, *Western Lands and The American Revolution*, 124.

²⁷ Cotterill, *History of Pioneer Kentucky*, 230.

Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry declared the purchase illegal.²⁸ As a result, early Kentucky settlers went to the doorstep of Virginia’s governor, Patrick Henry, for protection against Indians and British, in exchange for land reform.

Following the 1776 land law, the Virginia General Assembly in October 1777 passed a resolution that allowed any settler who had inhabited Kentucky land before June 24, 1776, have title to 400 acres. In 1779, the legislators of the General Assembly established a law that allowed any individual who had settled in Kentucky the year before, or “had raised a crop of corn, 400 acres as a settlement right and a preemption of 1,000 acres.”²⁹ To secure the preemption right guaranteed by the new law, a cabin had to be built within the first year.

Accorded to the provisions established by the land law of 1779, titles procured after that date could only be secured through treasury warrants. The act that established the land office in 1779 provided the possibility for individuals to purchase as much land as they wanted, but could afford.³⁰ Consequently, because large speculators did not have to improve upon or cultivate the land in a given time, poorer or less politically connected individuals were disadvantaged. The office also allowed investors to purchase Kentucky land on credit. Thereafter, land cost 40 pounds per 100 acres, and the way in which an individual gained it was complex to the yeoman or small planter not astute in legality.

To file a claim an individual had to “deposit at Richmond the necessary money and receive a land warrant.”³¹ The warrant only designated the “quantity of land and authorized its survey.”³² An official surveyor was present in every Kentucky County to mark the boundaries designated by the warrant; however, “trees, rocks, water courses, etc.,” marked boundaries for surveyors.³³ Because this made it almost impossible to locate land unless one was in Kentucky, speculators often times worked in pairs, and one remained in Virginia to maximize efficiency. Records of the survey returned to Richmond, where between six to nine months a deed was issued. Subsequently, thousands of acres of Kentucky lands were claimed numerous times—causing countless litigations. Further defects of the land policy enacted by the Virginia General Assembly grew apparent to Kentucky settlers in the following years.

Negative consequences following the 1779 Land Law grew apparent immediately following its enactment. The great migration into Kentucky in the winter of 1778/1779 compounded confusion over the land

²⁸ Aaron Sakolski, *Land Tenure and Land Taxation in America* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1957), 52.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

policy.³⁴ The emigration came chiefly from Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North Carolina; emigrants ranged from criminal and political outlaws, to surveyors, merchants, and lawyers. The low income pioneers with no political connections to Virginia, or elsewhere, and had settled in Kentucky, were “ignorant of the legal complexities”³⁵ associated with the Land Law of 1779. According to the law, claims by those who had settled in Kentucky after 1777 were not secure. To those who did not have treasury warrants and settled after 1777, “she would give nothing at all.”³⁶ Many settlers established homesteads on lands that had already been claimed. Since the inferior metes and bounds surveying method had been used, and other natural barriers marked boundaries, overlapping claims often occurred.

Shrewd speculators took advantage of the policies put into law by the Virginia legislature by a practice called “blanket” surveys.³⁷ Through this common technique, the holder of the warrant ran his lines along huge tracts of land inhabited by squatters or other settlers who thought they held claim to the land. One speculator made his entries on land that had already been entered, but never surveyed.³⁸ Nearly all the large-scale speculators had some friend either in the Virginia legislature, or Congress. These speculators found out that the flow of migration into Kentucky throughout the last quarter of the eighteenth century worked against them as migrants had been prone to construct a cabin and settle on any piece of land that seemed unoccupied. The complexity to acquire a title deterred many individuals from actually gaining one, and the confusion over claims added to class antagonisms.

One of the only ways in which disputed claims could have been legitimized was through “a public survey of all Kentucky prior to settlement.”³⁹ A survey conducted like this, however, would have been nearly impossible. For one, many settlers advanced into the Kentucky territory in the early confusion of the Revolutionary War years, before Virginia had established any sort of formal land policy for the territory.⁴⁰ Secondly, the geographical conditions of Kentucky made a large-scale public survey at this time extremely difficult. Since large portions of Kentucky lay claimed before 1785, the federal land policies of the Northwest Ordinance were not applicable to Kentucky, and subsequently, Virginia started selling Kentucky.

³⁴ Patricia Watlington, *The Partisan Spirit: Kentucky Politics, 1779-1792* (New York: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 31.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁶ Cotterill, *History of Pioneer Kentucky*, 232.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Watlington, *The Partisan Spirit*, 20.

³⁹ Cotterill, *History of Pioneer Kentucky*, 233.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

The land office in Virginia opened to the public on October 15, 1779.⁴¹ A resident of Spotsylvania County in central Virginia noticed in 1779, “People are running mad for Kentucky Hereabouts.”⁴² During the first weeks immediately after its opening, the land office dispensed massive quantities of Kentucky land. One individual gained the title to a million and a half acres, while another gained a million acres. It became a rare sight to see a statesman of Virginia or a “statesman-to-be of Kentucky who did not own a few thousand acres at least.”⁴³ When the land office in Kentucky finally opened its doors on May 1, 1780, it became clear that Virginia had given out too much land. One speculator angrily wrote that states “ought to be just, before they are generous.”⁴⁴ Not only had Virginia not been able to adequately protect the early settlers of Kentucky from Indian attacks, but the yeomen that supposedly planted the “seeds of democracy” had their claims squandered due to the legal complexities associated in obtaining one.

It became commonplace for settlers who tilled the land to see nearby cabins with no inhabitants; absentee speculators did this to fulfill the requisites of the 1779 Land Law. Wealthy speculators provoked animosity from poorer settlers living in the knob plateaus or less fertile regions—settlers unable to purchase the better quality land. Lawsuits only compounded the situation by making every acre of land subject to litigation. Therefore, because of the complexities of land policy and acquisition in the late 1770’s, Kentucky frontier life had been anything but communalistic and egalitarian. The maturation of Kentucky society surfaced class rivalries—jeopardizing the practicality of agrarianism. As settlement grew, and a more stratified society emerged, the Bluegrass Region’s wealth contrasted to the poverty of the “South Country.” Since Virginia’s constitution restricted suffrage to male property holders, and did not apportion representatives according to population, Kentucky eventually achieved separation from Virginia through a series of constitutional conventions held between 1784 and 1792.⁴⁵ In Lord Sheffield’s commentary about the issue of Kentucky admission into the Union, he demonstrated that the nation’s wealth was necessary in developing the territory into a mature society. Debates over internal issues within Kentucky showed the dichotomy between the yeomen and speculator-politicians. The conventions brought together the aristocratic elements from the Bluegrass region with the poorer echelons of the central and southern areas. With separation from Virginia achieved in 1792, Kentucky entered the Union as the fifteenth state. When statehood became a reality for Kentucky, the need for a

⁴¹ Watlington, *The Partisan Spirit*, 18.

⁴² Ellen Eslinger, *Running Mad for Kentucky: Frontier Travel Accounts* (Lexington, 2004), 57.

⁴³ Watlington, *Partisan Spirit*, 18.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Abernethy, *Three Virginia Frontiers*, 69.

constitution established two schools of thought that presided over politics in the 1790's.

The slaveholding planters supported the institutions of the "Old Dominion" in Virginia: "property qualification for voters, a legislature made up of two chambers, and a bill of rights."⁴⁶ The yeoman and small-scale farmer, however, advocated universal manhood suffrage. They also supported the division of counties into precincts where ballots were casted instead of "at the county seat by the old viva-voce method."⁴⁷ Thus constitutional questions pitted the interests of two classes against one another; the yeoman and small-scale pioneer planters had little confidence in their speculator turned politician leaders, since many felt little security over their land claims. The landless and poor farmers wanted the "aristocrats" out of office, and wished instead to "put honest farmers in their places"—nevertheless, the "more privileged elements" had not hesitated to say that farmers were too ignorant to hold office.⁴⁸ Although agriculture had not created class antagonisms in the colonial period, insecure land claims and extensive land speculation did.⁴⁹ Manufacturing and trade towns emerged within the thick settlement of central Kentucky, only increasing the number of low income laborers in the state. Nonetheless, this majority had a hallow victory in the 1792 constitution.

The constitution provided for universal male suffrage and cast ballot voting, but the Governor and Senate "were to be chosen by an electoral college."⁵⁰ The Governor, under the drafted constitution, appointed judges, justices, and most other officials. As a result, the privileged and upper classes in Kentucky were ingrained in all areas of government. The majority thought that the conservative minority had made large concessions, but in reality the yeomen's' lack of information safeguarded the position of the politician-speculator class. Since citizens of Virginia, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and as far as Great Britain had settled Kentucky, the politics there differed from the rest of the Union.

Kentucky became one of the first frontier democracies to have suffered from class tensions caused by insecure land titles and an entrenched squirearchy. Nearly every owner of the famed Bluegrass territory had political connections either in Virginia or in Congress. Indeed the yeoman and small planter classes achieved their goal, but the speculator turned politicians retained overwhelming power in an agrarian society that mostly benefited the aristocracy.

By romanticizing the Kentucky frontier as a place of limitless opportunity and abundant fertile soil, speculators like John Filson made

fortunes. The speculators who entered Kentucky oftentimes had political connections in Virginia, which enabled them to lay claim to the best lands in Kentucky. The settlers who later came in the 1780's and 90's and chased Jefferson's agrarian dream, found the only reasonably priced land to be on the second and third rated soils. Those who had been too poor to purchase productive Kentucky land usually worked as laborers in the growing central manufacturing towns. The General Assembly of Virginia, along with the rest of the young republic, failed to establish an efficient land policy that cared for the needs of the small-scale farmer. Since the release of Kentucky lands to the public in the 1770's, tensions between squatters, yeoman, and the slaveholding planters were embroiled in disputes over land claims. The wide array of litigation caused neighbors to question each other's claims, and in an environment such as that, antagonisms were certain to rise. The way in which Kentucky land had been claimed jeopardized the practicality of an egalitarian, democratic environment based around the yeoman farmer.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 70.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 72.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 77.