

## **Agricultural Societies as Antecedents of the FFA**

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### **Abstract**

This research focused on the predecessors of the FFA by outlining the history and purposes of agricultural organizations formed since the late 1700s. The major conclusion of the study was that the past two centuries of American agricultural history is rich with efforts to educate and improve agricultural practices through organized groups of farmers and other rural leaders. Early in the development of agricultural societies, experimentation and successful practices were shared with others in the local organization and works were often published in journals or newspapers for educational and informational purposes. Regular meetings and fellowship was also a major focus of the early groups. The national organizations that formed later such as the Grange, included the fraternal, social, and educational aspects while maintaining a focus on the economics of farming.

The boys' and girls' club movement provided opportunities for youth to meet, learn, and participate in agricultural competitions. The center of activities for youth organizations quickly shifted from community groups to agricultural education programs in the public schools. Clubs that formed within agricultural education programs in Virginia soon united to create the Future Farmers of Virginia. The FFV and FFA that followed initiated the use of certain symbols, colors, and ritual ceremonies that can be traced directly to the agricultural societies. This research identified many agricultural societies and youth clubs that had a profound influence on the development of the National FFA Organization.

## **Introduction**

There are many interesting and unique aspects to the FFA. These include degrees of membership, a creed, opening ceremonies, the unique office of sentinel, and official colors. Leaders of the FFA had to create all of these unique features for an organization that, at the national level, has been in existence since 1928. Many different influences may well have gone into influencing those leaders. Where did that influence come from?

Rural sociologists have long recognized the need of basically isolated farm people to establish organizations for the social aspect of interacting with each other. In many instances, the same organizations have been used for additional purposes. Among these purposes have been the establishment of cooperatives, the creation of economic clout through larger numbers, and the support of education. Educational support and activity came in the form of lobbying efforts, informal meetings for adult members, and the establishment of fairs.

Agricultural societies were some of the most prominent of the primarily rural organizations. It is the purpose of this project to determine the source of many of the unique aspects of the FFA, including a determination of the role played by agricultural societies in creating those unique and long-standing features.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Long before the FFA was started there existed literally hundreds of agricultural societies in the United States. By 1867 it was estimated that over 900 such societies were flourishing (Nordin, 1974). Several such societies were in existence in the 1700s. The activities these societies supported show a lineage that can be traced to the founding of the FFA. Causes supported by the societies varied from social to agricultural to educational.

Many famous Americans such as Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson were members of agricultural societies. Franklin and Washington belonged to the Philadelphia Society for the Promotion of Agriculture. Madison and Jefferson were members of the Albemarle Agricultural Society.

The agricultural societies were located all over what was then the continental United States. Only the country's boundaries limited their existence. They were located in rural as well as urban areas. The causes, as well as the educational activities, they supported were both informal and formal. They were as informal as simply serving as discussion groups where gardens and home farm problems were the topics. They were as formal as performing rituals in the form of a fraternal organization, lobbying on behalf of public education, and sponsoring fairs.

In different ways the agricultural societies provided a lineage to the FFA. It is true that everything has an antecedent. For the FFA the principal antecedent was the numerous agricultural societies.

## **Purpose and Objectives of the Study**

The basic purpose of the study was to determine several influential agricultural societies on the development of the FFA. The specific objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To identify prominent agricultural societies in the United States from the 1700s to the period just before the founding of the FFA.
2. To determine the objectives of prominent agricultural societies in the United States during the same time period.
3. To determine agricultural societies influence on the FFA.

## **Research Procedures**

Historical research methodology was utilized to accomplish the objectives of the study. Both primary and secondary sources were used to obtain the information needed. Primary sources included journal articles, minutes of meetings, newsletters, bulletins, a constitution, and books. Secondary sources included magazine articles, proceedings, and books. Information was collected at numerous sites including the Library of Congress, National Education Library, the National Agriculture Library, and various land-grant universities and state libraries. All references were subjected to both internal and external criticism, which tests for accuracy of materials and to determine if the material examined was authentic.

## **Findings**

There were literally hundreds of agricultural societies established. It is virtually impossible to identify them all as some only lasted a short period of time and had no records surviving them. It is also difficult to identify only the most important. What becomes the criteria for important? Is it the largest? Is it the most politically potent? Or is it only the ones who survived for many years and have abundant records? The societies described are ones that have records available, are meant to be representative of the hundreds of societies established, and some have a direct or indirect lineage to the FFA. The first to be described is a national organization called the United State Agricultural Society, which was influential in giving agricultural education departments an administrative home.

### United States Agricultural Society

The United States Agricultural Society was formed in 1852 at a convention called by 12 state agricultural societies (True, 1929) with the general purpose of

... to embody in one central Association, the valuable information already obtained by various local Societies, and to establish a more intimate connection between them; to correspond with foreign Societies, and to diffuse a knowledge of their most important Agricultural improvements and discoveries; and, in various other ways, to aid the promotion of this noble art. (Wilder, 1853, p. 159).

At its very first meeting in 1852 the United States Agricultural Society discussed encouraging the establishment of a Department of Agriculture as a Cabinet level agency. It took several years of meetings and the passage of many resolutions before President Lincoln signed the legislation establishing the United States Department of Agriculture (Proceedings, 1880).

From its earliest meetings the United States Agricultural Society endorsed educational programs for agriculture. This endorsement was especially true for higher education. At the 1856 annual meeting in Washington, DC the Society passed a resolution endorsing the same resolution passed by the Illinois General Assembly supporting the “Encouragement of Practical and General Education among the People.” (King, W. S., 1856, p. 22) The resolution went on to specifically endorse the industrial university and the granting of land to establish such universities.

The early and successful support of the United States Agricultural Society for both the United States Department of Agriculture and the Land-Grant Act gave both agriculture and education a significant boost. The Department of Agriculture would provide a great deal of assistance to agricultural education teachers before passage of the Smith-Hughes Act and Land-Grant universities would provide a departmental home for numerous departments of agricultural education.

In addition to educational and lobbying efforts the United States Agricultural Society recorded the existence of state and local agricultural societies. It recorded 941 such societies in 1860 (True, 1929, p. 23).

### Philadelphia Society

The Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture was started March 15, 1785 (Minutes of the Philadelphia Society, 1854). As an organization it had been preceded by the American Philosophical Society, which was founded in 1744 (True, 1929). According to the laws of the organization:

The Society’s attention shall be confined to *Agriculture and Rural affairs*: especially for promoting a greater increase of the products of land within the American states.

The Society shall annually propose *Prizes*, upon interesting subjects relative to actual experiments and improvements, -and for the best pieces written on proposed subscriptions. All claims of prizes shall be sent in writing, and when read, the Society shall determine upon every prize, which of the claims are most worthy to be selected for the definitive judgement on a future comparison of them.

This Society shall promote the *establishment of other Societies*, or offices of correspondence, in the principal places in the country. The friends of Agriculture shall be invited to assist us with information of experimental and incidents in husbandry. The members of those Societies shall be requested to attend our meetings as often as they come to Philadelphia.

*Premiums and Prizes* are equally due to persons residing in any of these states, according to the merit of their respective exhibitions. (Minutes of the Philadelphia Society, 1854, pp. 2-4)

The Society encouraged such approved practices as using oxen instead of horses, recovering gullied and worn out fields and to establish timber in fields too worn out for tillage, and to encourage the use of hedge-rows (Minutes of the Philadelphia Society, 1854). In 1785 a prize was established “For the best experiment made of a course of crops, either large or small on not less than four acres, agreeably to the principles of the English mode of farming” (Minutes of the Philadelphia Society, 1854).

### South Carolina Societies

On August 24, 1785 the South Carolina Society for Promoting and Improving Agriculture and Other Rural concerns was founded in Charleston. Some 10 years later its name was changed to the Agricultural Society of South Carolina (True, 1929).

The Pendleton Farmers’ Society was founded in 1815 (Pendleton Farmers Society, 1908). Pendleton, South Carolina is just a few miles from Clemson. By 1819 the Society’s purpose was reported.

The great object of this Society is the agricultural improvement of the district, by directing the attention of their brother farmers to the various branches of rural economy, and by the introduction of the most modern and approved system of husbandry; and surely it is obvious to all, that such improvement is necessary to our welfare and prosperity. We are the largest, and it is believed, the most populous district in the State; but our importance is reduced by a want of information on many essential points, and particularly on agricultural subjects.

To promote these praiseworthy objects, to increase the real comfort and happiness of every farmer in the district, and to make him respectable and independent, the Farmers’ Society was instituted.

The Society know that practical farmers are not literary men; the style or manner of communication is perfectly immaterial; and the Society, as a body of plain farmers themselves, want plain facts in plain language. (Pendleton Farmers’ Society, 1908, pp. 203-205)

Several educational points of discussion were posed by the Society concerning the topic of agriculture. The questions revolved around the topics of manure, soils, tillage, stock, grasses, fruit trees, vermin, and bees (Pendleton Farmers’ Society, 1908).

Some of the prominent members of the Pendleton Farmers’ Society were John C. Calhoun and Thomas Clemson. The Society recognized outstanding crop production. In 1887 the champion corn producer for one acre was Z. Y. Drake of Marlboro County, South Carolina with 255 ¼ bushels, in 1906 it was J. A. Tindal of Clarendon County, South Carolina with 182

bushels. Both Drake and Tindal were rewarded with honorary membership in the Society (Pendleton Farmers' Society, 1908, p. 88).

### Farmers' Union

On August 28, 1902 an application was made for chartering the Farmers' Educational and Co-operative Union of America in Rains County, Texas. The first local Union was founded in the Smyrna Schoolhouse September 2, 1902. The Farmers' Union constitution indicated its purpose was to aid member Unions in marketing and obtaining better prices for their products (Barrett, 1909).

The Preamble of the organization stated its overall specific, but rather diverse, purposes and objectives.

To enable farmers to meet these conditions and protect their interests, we have organized the Farmers' Educational and Cooperative Union of America, and declare the following purposes:

- To establish justice
- To secure equity
- To apply the Golden Rule
- To discourage the credit and mortgage system
- To assist our members in buying and selling
- To educate the agricultural class in scientific farming
- To teach farmers the classification of crops, domestic economy, and the process of marketing
- To systematize methods of production and distribution
- To eliminate gambling in farm products by Boards of Trade, Cotton Exchanges, and other speculators
- To bring farmers up to the standard of other industries and business enterprises
- To secure and maintain profitable and uniform prices for grain, cotton, live stock, and other products of the farm
- To strive for harmony and good will among all mankind and brotherly love among ourselves
- To garner the tears of the distressed, the blood of martyrs, the laugh of innocent childhood, the sweat of honest labor and the virtue of a happy home as the brightest jewels known. (Barrett, 1909, p. 107)

### Boys' and Girls' Clubs

Many early youth organizations centered around specific commodities such as wheat, pigs, poultry, and others. The most popular of these appeared to be corn. One reason for this popularity could have been the corn exhibit at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis. It was something of a national sensation as it was composed of "pyramids made up of 1,000 little

pyramids, each containing 10 beautiful ears of white or yellow corn, straight-rowed, symmetrical, uniform.” (Crosby, 1904, p. 489) The exhibit and the publicity surrounding it helped inspire corn clubs in several states. The states included Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, Texas, New York, and Indiana (Crosby, 1904).

Edwin Osgood Grover wrote a forerunner to the FFA Creed which was dedicated to the Boy’s Corn Clubs of Virginia. It was called the Country Boy’s Creed and started with the sentence “I believe that the Country which God made is more beautiful than the City which man made; that life out-of-doors and in touch with the earth is the natural life of man.” (The Country Boy’s Creed)

Stuart (1913) reported that potato growing was a good club work activity in North and West states. He recommended a one-eighth plot of land for 10 to 18 year old children.

True (1929) reported 20 institutions for the period of 1905-1910 had established an extension division or department. He further reported that boys’ and girls’ club work was one of the most important areas of work for the extension administrative units.

### National Grange

The Patrons of Husbandry, more commonly known as the National Grange, was started in 1867 (Nordin, 1974). The man who played a prominent role in its establishment was Oliver Hudson Kelly, informally called the “Father of the Grange.” Kelly was an employee of the United State Department of Agriculture, who had the responsibility of documenting the agricultural situation in the United States shortly after the end of the Civil War (Nordin, 1974; Patrons of Husbandry, 1992). What Kelly observed convinced him that farmers, both males and females, needed to organize and use some measures of collective bargaining. Similar to Masons, the Grange had various degrees of membership and used ritual at meetings (Nordin, 1974).

In the South, where Kelly had observed great suffering on the part of Antebellum farmers, it was the small white farmer who was the driving force behind the Grange’s establishment. In fact, the Grange was the first general farmer’s organization that was established in the South after the Civil War, where it started in 1870 (Saloutos, 1960).

Kelly’s original idea was to establish both an educational and fraternal organization; however, he quickly learned what farmers wanted was more of an economically based organization. By 1875 the Grange had succeeded in enrolling 761, 263 members in 45 states including the District of Columbia plus Canada (Nordin, 1974).

Grangers were concerned with both informal and formal education as evidenced by a statement in the Declaration of Purposes from 1874 “We shall advance the cause of education among ourselves, and for our children, by all just means within our power.” Informal education was encouraged by the reading of newspapers. In fact, the Grange encouraged the reading of certain newspapers and some Granges had a literary hour following meetings. In addition, larger Granges had their own libraries for their members’ use (Saloutos, 1974).

On the formal side of education, the Grange strongly advocated education from the elementary level through higher education. As the Texas State Master said in 1862, “. . . nothing increases debt, vice, superstition, and crime so much as ignorance.” (Nordin, 1974). They supported both private and public education. The overall one common theme was practical application of what was taught.

On the private side, Granger schools were opened in North Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. On the public side, Grangers worked at the local, state, and national levels for better schools. Grangers are credited with helping with the founding of Mississippi State University (Nordin, 1974; Saloutos, 1960). Grangers were supportive of vocational education, especially agricultural education (Howard, 1992).

The National Grange directly influenced certain parts of the early development of the Future Farmers of Virginia.

Henry C. Groseclose, a Virginia agricultural education leader and an active seventh-degree Grange member, was asked to develop a ritual and procedures for the new clubs. He utilized some Grange tools and the familiar Grange blue and gold colors. The ritual Groseclose wrote was adopted in 1926 in Virginia and two years later, at the formation of the national Future Farmers of America organization, it was accepted for use by all clubs in the country. (Howard, 1992, p. 138)

There are several common factors between the Grange and the FFA. Both organizations emblems have had a plow. Both organizations have used an owl. For the Grange the owl means watchful. For the FFA the owl means wise. The Grange and the FFA have used creeds that begin each paragraph with the words I believe. For example a creed used by the Grange has one paragraph that starts with the sentence “I believe in the goodness of rural life; I will do what I can do to make it still better.” (Creed of a Grange Lecturer, 1930, p. 7) Both organizations have been influenced by the Masonic ritualistic ceremony of opening meetings by a poll of officers reciting duties. All three organizations have an officer who guards the meeting room door. For the Masons the officer is called the tiler, for the Grange the officer is called the gatekeeper, and for the FFA the officer is called the sentinel.

### Virginia Societies

There were numerous agricultural societies in Virginia. One library reference listed over 100 (Brown, 1937). Two of the most prominent of those listed were the Albemarle Agricultural Society and the First Families of Virginia.

#### Albemarle Agricultural Society.

The Society was formed in 1817 (Objects, 1817). Former President, Thomas Jefferson, is credited with starting the Society (Cartensen, 1960) and suggesting numerous topics that could be covered at meetings of the organization.

1<sup>st</sup> and principally the cultivation of our primary staples of wheat, tobacco, & hemp for market. . . .The care and services of useful animals for the saddle or draught, for food or clothing, and the destruction of noxious quadrupeds, fowls, insects, and reptiles. Rotations of crops, and the circumstances which should govern or vary them according to the varieties of soil, climate & markets of our different counties. . . . (Jefferson, 1817, p. 1).

By October 14, 1817 immediate past President of the United States (since March of the same year) James Madison, was elected the first president of the Albemarle Agricultural Society (Randolph, 1817). The Society lasted until 1848.

### First Families of Virginia (FFV).

The First Families of Virginia or FFV was both a formal and informal, but aristocracy based society. The formal FFV membership was only open to lineal descendants of ancestors who aided in the establishment of the Jamestown Colony in Virginia from 1607-1624 (Hereditary Register, 1973). In the colonies, as in England the key to social eminence was holding land. During colonial times the “. . . Governor looked to a few leading landholding families to preserve the peace and the status quo.” (Rouse, 1968, p. 45) Rouse went on to describe such prominent citizens as the first families of colonial Virginia.

Closely affiliated with the prominence of the FFV was the term planter. The term planter was used as early as 1624 when Jamestown adventurers were referred to as planters (Meyer & Dorman, 1987). Rouse (1968) reported “The term ‘esquire’ was used after the name of a man of highest rank. Gentlemen were addressed as ‘Mr.,’ for ‘Master.’ The term ‘planter’ by the year 1700 had come to denote social rank and was interchangeable with ‘gentlemen.’” (p. 45)

The more informal meaning of FFV gradually evolved to where non-Jamestown descendants would be considered as members. Basically, the term FFV came to mean aristocrat or eminent. Lineage to Jamestown nor formal votes were used as criteria. With the new informal meaning both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were considered to be members of the FFV (Farrar, 1956). The term planter has also been associated with both Washington and Jefferson.

### Future Farmers of Virginia (FFV)

The Future Farmers of Virginia, or the FFV, got its start in September of 1925 (Noblin, 1942) when four agricultural teacher educators at Virginia Tech sat around an oak table and discussed the need to establish a youth organization that would help give the rural students studying vocational agriculture more pride in themselves. The easy part was agreeing that such an organization should be established; the hard part was working out the details. Henry Groseclose worked on most of the details.

In the FFV Constitution written by Groseclose and later adopted by the Vocational Agriculture teachers in Virginia, it is pointed out that Washington and Jefferson serve as a model

for the Future Farmers of Virginia. “ The Future Farmers of America should follow the example of these great sons of early Virginia by using scientific knowledge, intelligence and enthusiasm to the end that agriculture may again be known as the profession of the real aristocracy.” (Groseclose, 1926, p. 2)

The three degrees of membership Groseclose (1926) described were Green Hand, Virginia Farmer, and Virginia Planter. The opening ceremony ritual also written by Groseclose showed a great deal of influence from both the Masons and the National Grange with a similar roll call of officers and a unique officer guarding the meeting room door. For the Masons it is the tyler, for the Grange it is the gatekeeper, and for the FFA it is the sentinel.

### **Discussion**

The implications for the study can be conceptualized by using the constant comparative method in analyzing the past 200 years of agricultural history in the United States. Just as the FFA formed as an educational organization for youth enrolled in vocational agriculture classes, early agricultural societies developed as a way for farmers, or others interested in farming and rural life, to improve agricultural production as well as conserve the land.

Many agricultural societies conducted fairs and exhibitions while offering prizes for agricultural implements, crop displays, and the showing of livestock. The societies also often conducted annual contests for the greatest production of certain crops on a set amount of acreage, improvements in animal husbandry, agricultural experiments, and written works on proposed subjects. These competitions can easily be related to the present Proficiency Award Program, Agriscience Recognition, and essay events sponsored by the National FFA Organization.

Youth clubs that formed in the early 1900s placed most of their emphasis, in fact, on the annual growing contest. Many clubs sponsored competitions for the most or best corn grown in a certain area of ground under specific rules. Of course, the crop depended on the type of agriculture in the region. By 1910, the U. S. Department of Agriculture even supplied a recommended format for record keeping and applying for the award.

Numerous teachers of agriculture formed boys' clubs or similar organizations to increase the efficiency of their instruction and to offer incentives for their students' accomplishments. Henry Groseclose, Harry Sanders, and Walter Newman, three of the four founding members of the Future Farmers of Virginia, all organized clubs while teaching high school agriculture in the early 1920s. As teacher educators, they along with Edmund Magill, developed the concept for the FFV.

This research concluded that previous agricultural societies and youth clubs played a role in the development of the FFV and FFA. The similarities include purposes, officers, ceremonies, degrees of membership, and competitions that prior organizations had endorsed.

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