

George Washington and the First Census of Agriculture

Background

In 1791 President George Washington, received a letter from an Englishman named Arthur Young requesting information on land values, crops, yields, livestock prices, and taxes in the US. By personally conducting a mail survey and compiling the results, Washington was able to gather enough information to reply fully to his English correspondent. This was, in effect, the nation's first agricultural survey.

Between September 24 and November 18, 1791, Washington sent Young three letters that provided agricultural statistics on an area extending roughly 250 miles from north to south and 100 miles from east to west. The strip ran through an area which is today Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia, where most of the young country's population lived at that time.

Washington's reports to Young reflect some of the same concerns farmers have today. He worried that prices weren't keeping up with the cost of raising crops. He worried that some farmers weren't good stewards of the land. He worried about the cost of transporting agricultural goods to markets and improving those routes.

Washington asked Congress to establish a National Board of Agriculture in 1776, but Congress rejected the idea at that time.

The issue wasn't raised again until 1839, when Commissioner of Patents Henry Ellsworth persuaded Congress to designate \$1,000 from the Patent Office Fund for "collecting and distributing seeds, carrying out agricultural investigations, and procuring agricultural statistics."

In 1840, the first Census of Agriculture collected detailed agricultural information to provide the first nationwide inventory of agricultural production.

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) was established by Abraham Lincoln in 1862, and its first crop report appeared in July, 1863. The National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) traces its roots all the way back to 1863, when USDA established a Division of Statistics.

During the Civil War, USDA collected and distributed crop and livestock statistics to help farmers assess the value of the goods they produced. At that time, commodity buyers usually had more current and detailed market information than did farmers, a circumstance that often prevented farmers from getting a fair price for their goods.

P.A.S.S.

GRADE 6

Social Studies—1.1

Reading—1.1,3ab; 3.1b

Writing—2.7

Oral Language—1.2; 2.3

GRADE 7

Social Studies—1.1; 5.2

Reading—1.1; 3.1a

Writing—2.8

Oral Language—1.2

GRADE 8

Social Studies—1.1,2,5;

2.1,2

Resources Needed

overhead projector or
smart board

Today NASS is responsible for conducting the Census of Agriculture. The Census of Agriculture is a complete accounting of agricultural production in the United States and is the only source of uniform, comprehensive agricultural data for every county in the nation. From 1840 to 1920 the Census of Agriculture was taken every 10 years. Since 1925 the census has been taken every five years, in the years ending in 2 and 7. In addition, NASS field offices in every state produce a wide variety of reports throughout the year, along with an annual report. The reports are used by producers, researchers, the news media, people involved in financial markets and many others. These reports are compiled only for the top agricultural commodities from a sampling of state producers contacted at random. In contrast, the Census of Agriculture reports on every agricultural commodity produced in the state, based on surveys collected from every producer.

Activity

1. Read and discuss background and vocabulary.
2. Use an overhead projector or smart board to show students the excerpts from George Washington's letters to Arthur Young found on the issue pages included with this lesson.
 - Explain that the excerpts are examples of the way people spoke and wrote in George Washington's day and may be difficult to understand.
 - Read through each excerpt and discuss for meaning.
3. Provide copies of the issue pages.
 - Students will work in pairs or groups to answer the questions on the issue pages.
 - Students will use the census data provided with each issue paper to answer the questions and prepare statements that compare modern day agriculture in the US with agriculture in the United States in 1791.
 - Students will share their findings with the class.
 - Students will select the appropriate graph form and graph the information found on the charts. A guide to graphing is included in the "Resources" section.
4. Students will prepare discussion questions for classroom discussion of the issues. Some sample discussion questions follow:
 - Why was agriculture so important to President Washington, as leader of a new nation, that he personally conducted a survey to gather information about it?
 - Washington told Arthur Young that at that time labor was more valuable to the American farmer than land. Who were the laborers?
 - What special circumstances existed then that do not exist today? (slavery)
 - Who are today's agricultural laborers? (students, family members, immigrant)
 - What special issues surrounding labor exist today?
 - What has happened since 1791 to change farm labor and the value of land in our country? (industrial revolution, mechanization of much farm

labor, population growth making land more valuable, westward expansion, people moving away from the farm)

Lesson adapted from: "The Fact Finders," lesson plan from the National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA,
http://www.nass.usda.gov/Education_&_Outreach/Lesson_Plans/index.asp

Extra Reading

- Adler, David A, *George Washington: An Illustrated Biography*, Holiday House, 2005.
- Benson, Kathleen, and James Ransome, *Building a New Land: African Americans in Colonial America*, Amistad/Harper Collins Children's, 2002.
- Bial, Raymond, *Where Washington Walked*, Walker & Co., 2005.
- Diouf, Sylviane, *Growing Up in Slavery*, Milbrook, 2002.
- Haskins, Jim, *The Geography of Hope: Black Exodus From the South After Reconstruction*, 21st Century/Millbrook, 2000.
- McMullan, Margaret, *How I Found the Strong*, Houghton Mifflin, 2005.
- Miller, Brandon Marie, *Growing Up in Revolution and the New Nation 1775 to 1800*, Lerner, 2003.
- Robb, Don, and Christine Joy Pratt, *This is America: The American Spirit in Places and People*, Charlesbridge, 2006.
- Watkins, Richard, *Slavery: Bondage Through History*, Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

Vocabulary

agriculture—the science or occupation of cultivating the soil, producing crops, and raising livestock

analyze—to study or find out the nature and relationship of the parts of

assess—to set a value on (as property) for tax purposes

census—a counting of the population (as of a country, city, or town) and a gathering of related statistics done by a government every so often

comprehensive—including much or all

contemptible—the state of being despised

correspondent—one who communicates with another by letter

data—facts about something that can be used in calculating, reasoning, or planning

husbandry—wise management of resources

livestock—animals kept or raised; especially farm animals kept for use and profit

statistics—a branch of mathematics dealing with the collection and study of numerical data; also, a collection of such numerical data

survey—to gather information

uniform—of the same form with others

Issue # 1: Cost of Labor

President George Washington to Arthur Young, 1791 (in response to questions about agriculture in the U.S.)

South of Pennsylvania, hired labor is not very common, except it be at harvest, and sometimes for cutting grass. The wealthier farmers perform it with their own black Servants, whilst the poorer sort are obliged to do it themselves. That labour in this Country is higher than it is in England, I can readily conceive. The ease with which a man can obtain land, in fee, beyond the Mountains, to which most of that class of people repair, may be assigned as the primary cause of it. But high wages is not the worst evil attending the hire of white men in this Country, for being accustomed to better fare than I believe the labourers of almost any other Country, adds considerably to the expence of employing them; whilst blacks, on the contrary, are cheaper; the common food of them (even when well treated) being bread, made of the Indian Corn, Butter milk, Fish (pickled herrings) frequently, and meat now and then; with a blanket for bedding: In addition to these, ground is often allowed them for gardening, and priviledge given them to raise dung-hill fowls for their own use. With the farmer who has not more than two or three Negros, little difference is made in the manner of living between the master and the man; but far otherwise is the case with those who are owned in great numbers by the wealthy; who are not always as kind, and as attentive to their wants and usage as they ought to be; for by these, they are fed upon bread alone, which does not, on an average, cost more than seven dollars a head pr. Ann. (Excerpt of letter from the George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799)

Summarize Washington's opinion of the cost of farm labor in the US in 1791.

Compare labor costs today in the different regions, as shown in the following chart.

Where are labor costs highest?

Where are labor costs lowest?

What observations can you make about the cost of labor today as compared with the cost of labor in 1791?

What trend do you notice in the labor force of then versus today?

What other trends do you notice in the data?

Hired Farm Workers: Wage Rates by Region and United States, 2002-2006

	Dollars per Hour					
	<u>2002</u>	<u>2003</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	
NORTHEAST I	9.36	10.12	9.81	10.19	10.20	
<i>Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont</i>						
NORTHEAST II	9.29	9.59	9.59	10.00	9.65	
<i>Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania</i>						
APPALACHIAN I	8.21	8.66	8.94	8.89	9.35	
<i>North Carolina, Virginia</i>						
APPALACHIAN II	7.50	8.04	8.14	9.03	9.30	
<i>Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia</i>						
SOUTHEAST	8.18	8.26	8.56	9.05	9.10	
<i>Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina</i>						
FLORIDA	8.67	9.53	9.14	9.33	9.42	
LAKE	9.73	9.70	9.77	10.35	10.35	
<i>Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin</i>						
CORNBELT I	8.90	9.34	9.98	10.10	10.63	
<i>Illinois, Indiana, Ohio</i>						
CORNBELT II	8.81	9.30	9.72	11.16	10.65	
<i>Iowa, Missouri</i>						
DELTA	7.77	7.48	8.17	7.70	8.32	
<i>Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi</i>						
NORTHERN PLAINS	9.32	9.31	9.76	10.12	10.20	
<i>Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota</i>						
SOUTHERN PLAINS	7.57	8.01	9.34	8.38	9.60	
<i>Oklahoma, Texas</i>						
MOUNTAIN I	8.13	8.24	8.84	8.91	9.55	
<i>Idaho, Montana, Wyoming</i>						
MOUNTAIN II	8.79	8.97	9.40	8.75	9.80	
<i>Colorado, Nevada, and Utah</i>						
MOUNTAIN III	8.25	8.18	7.75	8.28	8.50	
<i>Arizona, New Mexico</i>						
PACIFIC	9.47	9.62	9.81	9.62	10.85	
<i>Oregon, Washington</i>						
CALIFORNIA	9.35	9.13	9.28	10.12	10.10	
HAWAII	11.02	11.56	11.52	11.73	12.47	
US	8.93	9.05	9.30	9.61	9.95	

Source: "Farm Labor, May 2007, Agricultural Statistics Board, NASS, USDA, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/current/FarmLabo/FarmLabo-05-18-2007.pdf>

ISSUE # 2: USE OF THE LAND

President George Washington to Arthur Young, 1791 (in response to questions about agriculture in the US):

An English farmer must entertain a contemptible opinion of our husbandry, or a horrid idea of our lands, when he shall be informed that not more than 8 or 10 bushels of Wheat is the yield of an Acre; but this low produce may be ascribed, and principally too, to a cause which I do not find touched by either of the Gentlemen whose letters are sent to you, namely, that the aim of the farmers in this Country (if they can be called farmers) is not to make the most they can from the land, which is, or has been cheap, but the most of the labor, which is dear, the consequence of which has been, much ground has been scratched over and none cultivated or improved as it ought to have been; Whereas a farmer in England, where land is dear and labor cheap, finds it his interest to improve and cultivate highly, that he may reap large crops from a small quantity of ground. That the last is the true, and the first an erroneous policy, I will readily grant, but it requires time to conquer bad habits, and hardly anything short of necessity is able to accomplish it. That necessity is approaching by pretty rapid strides. (Excerpt of letter from the George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799)

Source: The George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799

Washington criticizes farmers of his day for taking the abundance of land available for granted and not caring for it properly. American farmers had to learn the hard way that this resource was not limitless, although it may have seemed so in Washington's time.

Why was Washington upset? Did farmers change? If so, when?

Look at the chart that follows to find the yield per acre of wheat and some other crops since Washington's time. Prepare a statement describing the difference between now and then.

Prepare a statement describing the difference in yield surrounding an event in US history. (Civil War, Homestead Act, etc.)

Acreage and Production of Corn, Wheat, Oats and Barley, 1866 to 2006

year	corn acreage 1,000 acres	corn yield million	wheat acreage 1,000 acres	wheat yield million	oats acreage 1,000 acres	oats yield million	barley acreage 1,000 acres	barley yield million
1866	30,017	731	15,408	170	7,935	232	754	18
1871	42,002	1,142	22,230	272	11,061	306	1,348	28
1876	55,277	1,478	28,283	309	14,589	327	1,978	41
1881	63,026	1,245	36,795	406	16,916	446	2,201	49
1886	73,911	1,783	36,312	514	24,426	682	3,027	74
1891	78,855	2,336	41,090	678	27,756	837	3,590	94
1896	89,074	2,671	40,828	523	30,248	775	4,131	97
1901	94,422	1,716	50,847	763	30,891	800	4,963	124
1906	95,624	3,033	46,230	741	33,688	1,023	6,744	179
1911	101,393	2,475	49,894	618	37,149	886	7,613	145
1916	100,561	2,425	53,510	635	39,098	1,139	7,623	159
1921	103,155	2,928	64,566	819	45,539	1,045	7,074	133
1926	99,452	2,547	56,616	832	42,854	1,152	7,917	166
1931	106,866	2,576	57,704	942	40,193	1,124	11,181	200
1936	93,154	1,506	49,125	630	33,654	793	8,329	148
1941	85,357	2,652	55,935	942	38,161	1,183	14,276	363
1946	87,585	3,217	67,105	1,152	42,812	1,478	10,380	265
1951	80,729	2,926	61,873	988	35,233	2,278	9,424	257
1956	75,247	3,445	49,768	1,005	33,333	1,151	12,852	377
1961	65,405	3,598	51,571	1,232	23,886	1,010	12,806	392
1966	65,828	4,117	49,867	1,312	17,861	801	10,205	393
1971	63,819	5,540	48,453	1,640	15,734	878	*	*
1976	71,300	6,266	70,771	2,142	11,946	546	*	*
1981	72,719	8,235	80,642	2,785	9,407	510		
1986	69,200	7,072	60,700	2,092	*	*	12,000	611
1991	68,800	7,475	57,700	1,981	*	*	*	*
1996	73,147	9,293	62,850	2,282	2,687	155	6,787	397
2001	68,808	9,507	48,653	1,958	1,905	117	4,289	250
2006	70,648	10,535	46,810	1,812	1,576	94	2,951	180

*Census data not found for that crop that year

Data compiled from "Bicentennial Edition: Historical Census of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970,"

http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/past_years.html; and "Reports by Commodity," USDA—National Agricultural Statistics Service, http://www.nass.usda.gov/QuickStats/indexbysubject.jsp?Pass_group=Crops+%26+Plants