Declension or resolution?: Rethinking rural capitalism in Deerfield, Massachusetts

Quentin Lewis
(University of Massachusetts Amherst)

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INTRODUCTION

[SLIDE] This is the E.H. and Anna Williams house. It sits near the north end of the mile-long street that makes up the rural village of Deerfield, Massachusetts. It is a large house, one of the largest on the street, and has a Federal-style façade, as well as the standard New England "back house" and barn (Hubka 1984). Though it is distinct amongst the other stately houses on the street, both for its size and its architecture, it is not out of place in Deerfield, which for over 100 years has promoted and interpreted its own history as a New England town with house museums, libraries, and other exhibits. Historic Deerfield's website promises those visitors "An Authentic New England Experience" and invites visitors to "[w]alk along a living street in the footsteps of countless generations". Together, the village's distinct houses, most of which date from the 18th and early 19th centuries, form a kind of unity that takes the tourists and visitors who flock to Deerfield back into a generalized idyllic past. That past has been almost universally depicted as a rural golden age populated by yeoman farmers living simple and communal lifeways, tied together by kinship and stoicism, and (perhaps most importantly) untrammeled by the chaos and discord of modernity. Under this narrative, the village was founded as an "outpost" in the wilderness, but through community, sacrifice, and hard work, succeeded in "subduing" that same wilderness. Later on, industrialization disrupted the village's bucolic rhythms, fragmented and alienated its inhabitants, and forced its decline. The Williams house of today stands as an actively visited monument to a more "authentic" time (essentially the Colonial and Federal periods) from which we have sadly fallen into a vaguely dangerous and ever-accelerating modernity. **[SLIDE]** In

his book *The Country and the City* (1976) a different Williams (Raymond, this time) reminds us to be suspicious of declension narratives where the rural world is concerned. He argues that though urban and rural are handed down to us from previous historical moments, capitalist social relations have forced the reconstitution of rural (and urban) cultural identity. Capitalist economic relations incorporate city and country as divisions of labor, but culturally, they come to index all manner of binary formations—intellectual versus manual labor, technology versus nature, the future versus the past. Under this framework, rural living is juxtaposed against the modernity of city living, and is therefore always seen as being in decline or retreat. Even capitalisms most ardent critics routinely fell into this trap. In 1848, in *The Communist Manifesto,* Marx and Engels remark that capitalism had already "rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life". What they, and others have often failed to see is the ways in which people living in the rural world have actively constituted the history of capitalism, rather than being passive victims in a romantic tragedy. The rural world presented at the E.H. and Anna Williams house, and in Deerfield more generally, is discursively constructed within this romantic framework, but in what follows, I want to use the Williams house to show the danger of reifying the idea of rural decline as a necessary condition. Instead, I want to argue for a dynamic conception of "rurality" that takes into account the role of class and power in the constitution of modern social relations, and the role of material culture in maintaining and disrupting those relations.

HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

[SLIDE] Raymond Williams reminds us that it is necessary "to put these ideas [of rural decline] to the historical realities: at times to be confirmed, at times denied." (1973: 291) To begin with, it is necessary to articulate a slightly more detailed history of Deerfield than the tragic romanticism of decline would suggest. The land on which the town currently sits was originally the homeland of the Pocumtuck people. A series of conflicts, dubious land claims, and inter-European and inter-Native conflict in the 17th century led to the scattering of many Pocumtucks from the area, though some continue to live nearby up to the present (Bruchac 2004). The English settlement began in the 1660s, as residents set up a community that traded for Beaver pelts, timber, and agricultural products. Because of its location, at the confluence of the Deerfield and Connecticut Rivers, the village prospered throughout the 18th century by sending agricultural surpluses to urban areas further south, which in turn shipped them to British plantations in the Caribbean as part of the trans-atlantic trade. Much of this trade was dominated by a group of families known as "the River Gods" (Sweeney 1984), including the Williams family. These early families were primarily organized around patriarchal kin-based relations which mobilized familial labor and obligation to produce social surplus that could be sold at a profit on the English world system. The Williams's of the Connecticut River Valley parlayed their substantial agricultural wealth into elaborate and culturally distinctive Georgian mansions throughout southern New England (St. George 1988).

[SLIDE] It was at this time that what has come to be known as the E.H. Williams house was first constructed by a man named Ebeneezer Hinsdale. The oldest standing

fragments of the house in Deerfield date to around 1738. The original house was a probably a relatively modest Georgian style two-room, and Hinsdale lived in it until his death in 1763. After that, the house passed through a short series of owners, until it was purchased by E.H. Williams in 1816 (Bograd 1989: 15).

E.H. Williams, who was born in Roxbury, Massachusetts in 1761, did his birthright proud. His family had deep roots in Deerfield, being some of the oldest and wealthiest residents of the village, and he had spent time there as a youth. He was educated at Harvard, probably studied law, and was already quite wealthy by the time he moved back to Deerfield in 1789. Over the next 26 years, he and his family lived in a variety of houses on the street and he and his tenants farmed land adjacent to the river. [**SLIDE**] In 1816, his father died, and the inheritance he received allowed him to move his family, and he purchased the Hinsdale house that same year. Williams prospered throughout this time, and utilized his agricultural success by diversifying into a wide variety of economic activities. Aside from straight agriculture, he engaged in land speculation, localized investment mortgaging and banking, financing a local newspaper, and serving as justice of the peace, town recorder, and state senator, to name a few roles. Williams, his family, and his servants and tenants lived in the house from 1816 until his death in 1838, and, aside from some modernizations by subsequent owners, the house today is in essentially the same configuration as it was in 1816.

RESEARCH AT THE WILLIAMS HOUSE

[SLIDE] The E.H. and Anna Williams house presents an interesting alternative to the Golden Age vs. declension narrative that populates much of Deerfield's public and discursive space. Archaeology (see Reinke and Paynter 1984, Reinke et al 1991) and documentary research (e.g. Miller 1986, Rassam 1998, Gordineer 1981, Spears 1985, Proper 1991) have revealed the ways in which E.H. Williams operated as a rural capitalist, and utilized control of strategic resources (particularly space) to bolster, and maintain his social position. Rather than being a passive victim of a disappearing way of life, or seeking to hang on to an outmoded set of social relations, what is becoming clear is that Williams actively embraced and constructed modern, capitalist social relations and lifeways. Archaeological approaches, in particular, have focused on landscape changes at the site, and field schools led by Robert Paynter, and his students Rita Reinke, Ed Hood, Susan Hauteneimi, and others in conjunction with historic Deerfield have explored these changes using remote-sensing and excavation-based intensive surveys of the homelot. In particular for this discussion of rural capitalism, three arenas of material culture have emerged that reveal the contours of Williams social role: Improvement Farming as seen through agricultural features, modernist materiality as seen through ceramics, and displays of power as seen through architecture.

[SLIDE] Improvement farming was revealed during excavations in the summer of 1984 and 1990, when a compact floor of cobbles was found to the north of the driveway. These cobbles can probably be tied to Williams' occupation of the house through the presence of annular ware (Reinke et al 1991: 8-9). Though the purpose of

this stone floor remains somewhat elusive, a similar feature has been found at Mt. Vernon, and has been described as the remains of a "stercorary"—a structure for storing manure (Fusonie and Fusonie 1998). Excavations in this area also revealed the footings of a large barn occupying a space near the current barn. This barn was probably 40 ft x 90 ft, and would have been one of the largest barns in the village when it was constructed. Older houses in Deerfield have many fewer out-buildings, and this stercorary is the only one that has been archaeologically documented in the region.

These features point toward Williams role as an improvement farmer, and specifically his engagement with the Connecticut River Valley's stall fed oxen trade. **[SLIDE]** This scientifically and economically demanding procedure involved valley farmers purchasing oxen raised and pastured in the hill towns and fattening them over the winter. Earlier beef cattle raising involved pasturing, but under this regime, stalls were built in barns to house a single animal, and narrow enough to prevent them from moving enough to lose any of the weight they would put on. It was necessary to measure animals weight, amounts of grain, and keep a strong eye on market prices in order to make sure all three would coincide with the driving time in the spring. This allowed grain produced in the valley to "move itself", as cattle could be driven overland to markets in the urban centers of the east and west (Garrison 1996: 65-66). The process of feeding oxen in a stall was a scientifically precise one. But this process was not uniformly undertaken. Only wealthy farmers could afford to build large barns (and stercoraries), purchase large enough herds, and keep enough credit around to make the whole process run smoothly even in bad weather years.

Why rationalize and improve farming? While improvement and scientific-based farming has a history stretching back into the 17th and 18th centuries (Garrison 1996: pgs), it came to take on an urgency after the chaos following the American Revolution, as well as the colonization of the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys that followed and the competition which that colonization produced.

Capitalism's dynamism and expansionary tendencies are inherently unstable. As David Harvey has documented, this is because capitalists are constantly seeking to, in Marx's words, annihilate space through time (Marx 1993: 524), and collapse spatial barriers in order to decrease turnover time, overcome the friction of distance, and expand markets, all of which lead to the expanded production of surplus value, but all of which produce social contradictions. One of the central problems of farming in capitalist societies is that the purchase of land for farming locks up value and inhibits capital's ability to, in Harvey's words "flow freely on and through the land" (2006: 361). Mismatches between market rhythms and agricultural rhythms, frictions of distance which add infrastructural costs to distribution of agricultural surplus, and ever-broadening scales of interaction through market expansions created tensions in early rural capitalist societies that often produced crises at various scales. Rational farming techniques became a way of resolve the contradictions between capitalist acceleration and agricultural cycles, because it unlocked value in previously locked-up land, and allowed for greater control of space and time. Oxen drives overland could move grain more quickly and to a broader area than grain shipped downriver. Scientific study of feeding, husbandry, and care of oxen would also produce fatter yields in shorter time than pasturing. As Harvey noted, this rationalizing agricultural process paved the way for the

dramatic expansion of industrial production (Harvey 2007: 391) in the 19th century, as exponentially greater surpluses flowed from countryside farms to city factories.

Smaller farmers who were unable to mobilize resources to do improvement farming had to leave their homes, or take jobs as tenants, and this new rural proletariat signal another aspect of Williams rural capitalism. Though Williams house and barn were in Deerfield village, and presumably managed by him and his family and servants, his largest land-holdings, located by the river, were operated by tenants beginning with two brothers named Bardwell, and followed by brothers named Wait. In these situations, tenants paid both taxes and rent for the right to raise grain on Williams's fields. In short, Williams had shifted from the familial-agricultural production of his ancestors, rooted in the British World system, and patriarchal labor relations, to what Paynter et al (2001) have called an "agro-business landscape" rooted in wage labor, and for the feeding of industrial production.

Rational farming, diversification, and tenant labor point to Williams' class position. But of course, class is not a possession (Wurst 1999). Class is a social process, and it is enacted through practices. Williams' rational agricultural allowed him to operate as a rural capitalist, but other practices bolstered and expressed his position. **[SLIDE]** One area where this can be seen is in the analysis of ceramics from the Williams house.

Information about the Williams ceramics comes from two sources. Firstly, Williams probate contained a substantial list of ceramics: then-modern whitewares, transfer-printed wares, and lusterwares. In addition, excavations in 1987 uncovered a small privy adjacent to the stercorary, with ceramics post-dating 1800, but capped by a layer of fill deposited after the house was sold to new owners upon Williams death in

1838. **[SLIDE]** This privy was filled with a variety of household goods, predominantly ceramics, but also including glassware, some small finds, and pipe stems (Bograd 1989: 17). Mark Bograd analyzed these ceramics and used them to problematize George Miller's economic scaling ceramic methodology (see Miller 1981). Bograd argues instead for a model that foregrounds Williams strategic purchasing of commodities as a formation process (1989: pgs). The ceramics consist predominantly of undecorated creamwares, but also contain a fragment of hand-painted pearlware, and a fragment of Canton porcelain.

As Bograd points out, decorated ceramics make up approximately 60% of the probated material, whereas the privy contains only about 20% decorated material. At a basic level, the mismatch between the privy ceramics and the probate ceramics suggests some sort of cultural process that produces discontinuity. We tend to think of privies as being relatively slow accretions of material over time, but I would like to suggest that rather than representing a "snapshot" of Williams status, this privy may be the Williams family "trading up"—throwing away older, statelier table wares in exchange for newer modern ceramics in a single episode, possibly upon renovating and moving into the new house. Futher analysis of comparable ceramic assemblages from Deerfield and the region might help to bolster or alter this supposition.

[SLIDE] Finally, Williams' house also bore traces of this presentation, though in much more subtle ways. As soon as he purchased it in 1816, he undertook a staggering array of renovations to the house. He removed the central chimney to create an entry hall, raised the ceiling on the first story, added a two story ell, changed the decoration of the windows, added a fanlight above the front door, and completely reconstructed the roof,

all of which are consistent with Massachusetts Federal-period architecture. Federal-period architecture consciously referenced "democratic Greece and republican Rome" (Leone and Hurry 1998: 54), and rooted the new, and still unstable American nation in the oldest of European traditions. The other houses on the street would have seemed quaint by comparison. The ornate doors and facades of the River Gods, many of whom had sided with the British in the Revolution, were replaced with more stately and austere doors, windows, and decorations, signaling a new cultural logic.

[**SLIDE]** In addition, the Williams house appears slightly larger than the adjacent houses, and this is no accident. The south lawn, facing the rest of the older houses on the street, is subtly terraced, giving the impression that the E.H. Williams house rises slightly higher than it does. Archaeological testing on the south lawn has revealed that this terracing was done during Williams tenure at the house (Paynter et al 2001). Terracing has been associated with colonial gardens in the south and the rules of perspective (Leone 1984), but here we find a slight trace of it in rural Massachusetts. It is easy to say that Williams, as a rural elite, wanted to project his status through a larger, higher-looking house, but one wonders if there are other cultural logics in operation which have, as yet, not been explicated—is Williams attempting to enact some type of rural panopticism? (Leone and Hurry 1998). Further research into village architecture might shed light on Williams motives and external responses to them.

All of this evidence puts the traditional, "tragic" story of capitalism being foisted on the rural world into question. Williams was not clinging to an older way of life. He could have simply moved into the house in Deerfield, but instead, he renovated it almost beyond recognition. He threw away older, quainter ceramics in favor of the newer, more

stylized pieces. And he embraced the rationalized technologies of improvement farming over older agricultural practices. People like Williams helped ENACT rural capitalism, which, in turn, provided the basis for the industrialization for which New England became known in the 19th century, particularly in places like Lowell (Beaudry & Mrozowski 1989) and Holyoke. The story of rupture gives way to a story of process and and struggle. Though Williams was descended from the class of River gods, he was not one of them, and his emergence was predicted by their decline. As so many papers here have discussed, the disruptions following the American revolution created tensions that led to new social relations (see Kulikoff 1989 for a more thorough discussion). These disruptions, combined with contradictions within the patriarchal relations themselves, impacted rural society in New England at multiple scales, disrupting everything from households (Folbre 1985) to settlement patterns (Paynter 1982). This created tensions which allowed for a new class to emerge, rooted in more direct capitalist social relations, and devoted to the rational science of agro-business, in which Williams was situated.

CONCLUSION

[SLIDE] If we seek to travel back to a time of rural utopia, free from the inequality and din of modernity, we find no footing in early 19th century Deerfield. The material culture of the E.H and Anna Williams house, including the austere Federal architecture, elegant interiors full of beautiful ceramics, and stately farm outbuildings interface nicely with the image of bucolic, rural New England to which tourists and visitors have sought escape for over 150 years (see Brown 1995 for a history of New

England tourism). But these materialities belie a more complex picture than the standard image of the bucolic rural past—in Williams, we have a rural capitalist, seeking to utilize and control space to valorize capital and stave off crisis. We also have a gentleman farmer, buying and selling labor power, and using money to make money through investment. And we have a bourgeois modernist, creating a defiantly current home on a street of old homes, purchasing the latest table ceramics and destroying seemingly outdated wares. And this leads to new questions, which I plan to explore in my forthcoming dissertation. Hierarchy is not self-creating or sustaining—it is enacted for historical reasons, and must be continually propped up precisely because it is so precarious. What social forces required Williams to act out his role the way he did? What contradictions in his life and social position necessitated the cultural ameliorations he enacted? How did Williams servants and tenants respond to, and in whatever way they were able, critique Williams social role? They undoubtedly had a quite different view of the man who paid their wages and exploited their labor, and their lifeways and perspectives could be investigated archaeologically. In summation, the E.H. and Anna Williams house in Deerfield shows the ways in which concepts like decline need to be problematized and situated within larger frameworks of history and power, in order to understand the changing geographies, materialities, and identities of the modern world. Thank you.