THE FARMER TAKES A WIFE, THE WIFE TAKES THE FARM

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ABSTRACT: The discussion of nineteenth-century agriculture has often failed to include farm women who own and operate their own enterprises. Accordingly, this paper attempts to address this deficiency by focusing on one particular woman who owned three farms in succession in Warren County and Sussex County, New Jersey. Using data from the 1850, 1860 and 1870 censuses of agriculture, population census data, wills, deeds and newspapers, this research examines the life history and farm ownership of Anna Tuttle Warhass after the death of her husband in 1844. These archival data are used to form a socioeconomic and farming profile of one nineteenth-century female farmer. This profile is then employed to make comparisons with other known individuals within the community of female farm operators in mid-nineteenth-century Sussex County.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of a farm is the stereotypical family farm worked primarily by a married couple and their children. The farms were purchased by men who then cultivated the land to produce the crops for home use or sale. Women were expected to tend to the dairy operation, producing butter and cheese in their role as "farm wives". Thus, discussions of nineteenth-century agriculture often fail to include farm women who own and operate their own enterprises. In part, this failure stems from the tradition that well into the nineteenth century, women had no rights to land in most states unless they were single. When they married, their husbands alone held legal title.

Prior to specialization in agriculture, when farm households were self-contained productive units, the economic and productive interdependence of all members of a family diluted the meaning of women’s economic status. In general, previous and continuing research on the role of women in farming focuses on the home manufacture of dairy products, and the changing role of women during the transition from home to factory production of butter and cheese (McMurry, 1995; Haney et al., 1988; Jensen, 1987; 1986; Sachs, 1984; Haney, 1983; Hansen, 1982; Ryan, 1981; Cott, 1977; Smutts, 1971). While of considerable importance and interest, such concentration on the housewife’s responsibilities in the dairy detracts from inquiry into the backgrounds of independent farm women, obscuring their distinctive character and, in some cases, their crucial role in retaining agricultural land “in the family”. Thus far, information on female land owners appears intermittently in the historical record in the form of narratives describing the experiences of women farmers and as entries in census records which relate the numbers of female farmers at different times and places. In short, female farm owners and operators are a relatively unknown segment of nineteenth-century agriculture.

THE DATA

The primary resource used in this research is the untabulated data from the 1850, 1860 and 1870 agricultural products census records. These census records contain primary data related to agricultural products and agricultural land use in New Jersey. Information was collected every ten years specifically
from the agricultural community. These censuses are in addition to and separate from the census collected from the general population each decade. The information contained in the census records of 1850-1870 is arranged by year, county and political subdivisions of counties. Each record contains three pages of data. The top of the first page indicates the municipality, county, state, enumerator, day (always in June) and year the information was collected. Other information on the opening page includes: individual interviewed, whether individual is owner, rents for fixed money or rents for share of produce (1870 only); acres of farmland divided into two categories - improved (tilled and permanent meadows) and unimproved (woodland and "old fields"); value of farmland, farm implements and livestock; cost of building and repairing fences and labor costs (1870 only). The remainder of the document is an enumeration of the estimated quantity of farm products. Initial categories include: Grasslands, cattle, dairy products, sheep, swine, poultry and their related products, cereals (barley, buckwheat, Indian corn, rye and wheat), as well as fiber, sugar, broom corn, hops, potatoes and tobacco. In addition, orchards, nurseries, vineyards, market gardens, bees and forest products are recorded. All information is recorded for each individual listed on the first page of the document. Several persons can be included on one set of pages. Thus, a small municipality could be contained on one set. In general, though, several sets are required for each political division. There are problems related to this data source, which include the poor condition of the microfilm, legibility of the data and accuracy of the individual collecting the data. For these reasons, only limited quantitative analysis is attempted. The information presented is primarily qualitative. Additional sources include the 1850, 1860 and 1870 population census schedules as well as wills, property deeds, mortgage records, maps, local and regional newspapers, nineteenth-century agricultural journals and, where available, diaries. The data obtained from these archival records are then combined with a number of secondary sources such as county and town histories to form a socioeconomic and farming profile of nineteenth-century female farm operators in Sussex County. Since census data do not relate the means of farm acquisition, it is necessary to consult wills and deeds for the histories of farm ownership. Thus far, this research shows that the acquisition of land by nineteenth-century farm women occurred in one of the following ways: inheritance from a parent; inheritance from a grandparent; inheritance from a husband; dower right; designated caretaker of the farm for minor children; and outright purchase.

THE RESEARCH AREA

This research is part of study primarily concerned with technological change and economic restructuring in the metropolitan New York milkshed during the nineteenth century. The area for the overall study includes northwestern New Jersey, eastern Connecticut and Massachusetts and eastern New York State. However, for the purposes of this particular paper, the study area is restricted to Sussex County, New Jersey, and the subject is primarily women farm owners.

Statewide agricultural statistics compiled by the United States census bureau do not separate numbers of farmers by gender until 1870, at which time there were 32,077 male farmers and 114 female farmers listed for New Jersey. Tabulations derived from the 1870 agricultural products census indicate that there were 1,433 male farmers and 32 female farmers in Sussex County. In 1850, male farmers numbered 1,584, with 53 females listed. Average farm size for all farms in Sussex County throughout the period of the study is 150 acres. The major commodities are dairy products, primarily butter, with fluid milk becoming more of a factor with the expansion of the railroad network in the mid-1860s. By 1870, the census schedules included information on gallons of milk sold, as well as pounds of butter and cheese. Prior to 1870, it is more difficult to determine which farmers were dealing in fluid milk. Such information can be projected from inventories and farm sale advertisements, but it is qualitative data at best, and makes meaningful comparisons prior to 1870 tenuous. In addition to dairy products, Sussex County farmers raised Indian corn, oats, buckwheat and rye and kept swine and some sheep throughout the period in this study. Indian corn was the basic...
source of animal food and fodder, with consumption estimated between 40 and 55 bushels per animal. The addition of oats and hay to the diet of the farm animals enabled the farmer to increase farm production. Surplus grains were sold on the open market.

Sussex County farm women most likely acquired a farm through the inheritance of all or a portion of the farm from the husband, or from the orphans court as dower right when the husband died intestate (or without a will). When farms were already operating with little capital, more often than not, the surviving widow was forced to sell all or part of the property to satisfy creditors. Thus, the tenure for female ownership was short, and on the average lasts less than ten years. In other words, women who are listed on the agricultural census schedules in 1850 are not likely to be listed again in 1860. When the farm was productive, and the widow was able to continue the operation of the farm for “the care of minor children”, the oldest son (sometimes as young as 16 years) would take part in the operation of the farm until the youngest sibling came of age, at which time the farm would be divided into shares, with the surviving widow receiving the one-third dower right. Clues for this occurrence can be found in the agricultural census schedules when the widow is shown to own a smaller plot of land, and a surviving child (or children) appear in the census for the first time.

THE WOMEN WHO OWNED AND OPERATED THE FARMS

Throughout the 20 year period included in this study, over 122 women owned and operated farms at various times in Sussex County. Seven of these have been selected as examples and are briefly discussed below. Their selection was based on their tenure as agricultural land owners and only those women who actually held title to the land for a minimum of ten years between 1850 and 1870 were considered. The discussion begins with Anna Warbass, who although she only farmed in Sussex County for 10 years, had considerable farm experience prior to moving into Sussex County. She represents the entrepreneurial spirit of women in nineteenth-century agriculture and is used as a basis for the discussion.

Anna Tuttle Warbass, Widow of James R., was born in Minisink, Orange County, New York on September 4, 1803. Shortly after her birth, the family located in Wantage Township, Sussex County, New Jersey where Anna eventually met and subsequently married James R. Warbass on July 3, 1823. The couple relocated in Independence Township, Warren County, in 1839 where James purchased 250 acres from Lindley W. Wooley for $6,000.00. James died in 1844, leaving Anna with their seven children, the youngest of whom was but three years of age. In his will probated on September 12, 1844, James Warbass bequeathed to his beloved wife, Anna, all his personal property "together with the use of the farm until our youngest child arrives at the age of 21". He directed that the farm be sold then “to best advantage at public auction” with one-third of the money from the sale given to Anna, and the remaining two-thirds to be divided among their surviving children. An inventory taken in November of 1844 shows that Anna took over the farm with 11 cows, four horses, two beef cattle, a yoke of oxen, sheep, swine and poultry as well as farming implements. Also listed were farm products, including butter valued at $190.00.

Although unschooled in farm management, having spent her married life caring for the children and overseeing the dairy, Anna proved herself able to manage the entire farm, paying off the mortgage and purchasing a small adjoining farm in less than a decade after James’ death. In 1853, upon the death of her father-in-law, Joseph, Anna purchased the Warbass farmstead in Lafayette Township and returned to Sussex County. The Warren County farm, less the two-sevenths belonging to David R. and Samuel Warbass, minors, was sold to Elias H. Warbass, oldest child of James and Anna, for the purchase price of $8,000.00. These proceeds were divided among Anna (1/3) and four children, Ruth Duzenberry and Vincent Warbass, both in Sussex County, Elizabeth Newman of Stark County Illinois and Joseph Warbass of Van Buren County, Iowa. With her share of the money, Anna purchased Eden Farm, as it was known in Sussex County, which
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contained 240 acres, for $11,588.64, or 58.00 per acre. In 1860, she sold 116 acres to her son, Joseph, for $7,000.00.

The 1860 agriculture products census lists four milch cows, each of which produced an average of 125 pounds of butter during the reporting year of 1859. This is considerably above the county average of 108 pounds of butter per cow, indicating that Anna Warbass was a skilled dairy woman. Written and oral histories for Lafayette Township indicate that Anna sold milk to the inhabitants of the surrounding countryside, but little direct evidence for this exists, as she died in 1865, prior to the time any official records were kept regarding sales of fluid milk from the farm.

In her will, Anna Warbass directed that, upon her death, Eden Farm was to be sold, either privately or at a public sale, and the proceeds divided among her living children. The 148-acre farm was advertised on November 9, 1865, but was sold privately to Samuel Warbass on March 20, 1866 for $13,369.00. He continued to work the farm, and is listed in the 1870 agriculture census as producing 5000 gallons of milk and 200 pounds of butter from 25 cows.

Anna Warbass made a comfortable living on Eden Farm. The inventory of her household possessions is considerable, and includes such items as "one dozen wine glasses and one glass decanter", a "silver cake basket" and "one full set gilt-edged china". Her furniture was made of mahogany, she had carpeting on the floors and pictures on the walls. Her household possessions were valued at $784.27, and outstanding loans and interest, due at her death, totaled $12,364.26. The total inventoried value of her personal estate is listed as $13,148.53.

Mary Ayers, Widow of Isaac, was farming 200 acres in Frankford Township which she acquired through inheritance prior to 1850. The farm was located on a main road, and the property included a stream. She had four adult children, two sons and two daughters. One son, David B. Ayers worked as a "farmer" on the land held by Mary. According to the 1850 agriculture census, Mary owned 12 milking cows which produced enough milk for making 1,920 pounds of butter, an average of 160 pounds per cow. She also raised oats, buckwheat, corn and rye, kept three horses, one sheep and 15 swine. In Frankford Township in 1850, the average size of all farms was 189 acres. The average number of cows per farm was 17, with each cow producing an average of 119 pounds of butter per year. Although Mary was unable to read or write, she evidently was a competent farmer. Her farm was larger than average, but she kept fewer cows than her male contemporaries. These cows were either of good grade, or were well fed and cared for, for they produced more pounds of butter per cow than the township average. Throughout the decade, Mary gradually transferred property to her oldest son, David B. Ayers, and scaled down her farming activities. At the time of her death in 1859, she owned 30 acres, including the homestead, and had reduced the herd to 6 cows valued at $131.00 and one heifer valued at $20.00. Her inventory also listed one horse, a butter tray and ladle, milk pans, milk pails and a churn machine, which indicates that she actively engaged in farming activities until her death.

Phoebe Layton, Widow of William, farmed the 190 acres she inherited from William's estate in 1848 throughout the 20 year period of this study. The farm was located in Sandyston Township, and in 1850, was valued at $6,000.00. In 1860, the farm value had increased to $7,000, and by 1870, the value of the farm was listed as $11,760.00 (Table I). The farm was larger than average for Sandyston Township, where the average farm size was 132 acres.

Throughout the decades, Phoebe (who was 50 years old with 9 children living at home in 1850) increased her dairy herd from 11 in 1850 to 16 in 1860 and to 19 in 1870. Although the number of cows increased, butter production remained around 80 pounds per cow, and did not improve until 1870 when the per cow average was 180 pounds of butter annually, 60 pounds above the township average. Evidently, Phoebe did not engage in the sale of milk from the farm, choosing to continue with the manufacture of on-farm butter. Field crops included oats, buckwheat, Indian corn and rye. She also had horses and swine, but did not keep any sheep. In 1870, the farm was sold to John Layton, Jr. who reported 2500 pounds of butter from 18 cows in 1880. In keeping with the rest of the farmers in Sandyston Township, fluid milk was not produced on
Middle States Geographer, 1998, 31: 35-44

the farm.

Phebe Hendershot, Widow of John J., eked out a modest living on 85 acres of mortgaged land which she inherited at the time of John's death in 1831. Forty-eight acres of this farm were mortgaged for $569.64 just prior to John's death. The mortgage was due on April 1, 1833, and was paid in full by her brother-in-law, Peter Hendershot, including the interest ($604.32). This same year, Peter Hendershot purchased the entire farm from the sheriff for $743.33, a transaction that was not recorded until after Phebe's death in 1875. Peter Hendershot died in 1837, but bequeathed all monies owed him by John J. Hendershot plus the farm in trust for the use of Phebe Hendershot during her widowhood, unless she married, at which time permission to use and enjoy the farm would be null and void. Phebe Hendershot could neither read nor write, but, through the kindness of her brother-in-law, who by all accounts was a very successful dairyman, was able to continue to manage the farm, and produced an average of 100 pounds of butter annually from each of her four cows (Table 2). At her death in 1875, the inventory of her possessions includes 15 milk pans and strainers, two churns, butter pails, butter tray and ladle, cream pots and jugs, one milk cow valued at $45.00, one sheep and 28 chickens. Upon Phebe's death, according to the terms of Peter's will, one-half of the farm was bequeathed to the children of John and Phebe, and one-half to the children of Abraham Hendershot, a brother to Peter and John.

Elizabeth Emmons, Widow of Jacob S., owned 225 acres of prime farmland in Stillwater Township along the Paulins Kill, the major drainage for the western part of Sussex County. Several acres of this tract were purchased outright by Elizabeth between March 11, 1843 (16 acres for $480.00) and February 14, 1858 (8 acres $755.00). The 1850 population census lists Elizabeth as the head of household, age 48, occupation: farmer. At the time of the 1860 census, Elizabeth's household consisted of eight persons, including her sons Harmon (age 39, occupation: farmer) and Oliver, whose occupation is listed as "peddler" (age 33), Harmon's family, and an adult daughter. The household also included one domestic servant, one farm laborer. The household was little changed in 1870, except Oliver has evidently moved elsewhere, and, although wages ($1,000.00) are reported for the period, no farm laborers are listed. One of Harmon's sons, Nehemiah is listed as a farmer, who may have received wages. The farm value in 1870 is $124,625.00. Dairy herd size ranged from 16 in 1850 to 14 in 1870. Butter production in 1850 was impressive, standing at 113 pounds per cow. This decreased in 1860 to 70 pounds per cow and in 1870 to 64 pounds per cow. This appears to be a considerable drop in production, and it was thought that some of the milk was sold locally, or to a butter or cheese factory. However, if this was the case, it was not reported as such in the 1870 census where fluid milk sold is reported as a separate item. Exploring further, we find that in 1880, just before her death, Elizabeth reported owning 14 milch cows which produced a total of 2,750 pounds of butter on the farm. During this reporting period, butter production more than doubled. Indian corn, oats, buckwheat and rye were cultivated throughout the period and both sheep and swine were reported. At the time of her death in October, 1880, Elizabeth Emmons had an inventory of dairy items which included churns, milk pans, butter trays and ladles, butter pails, 162 pounds of tub butter (valued at $45.36), 240 pounds of butter in firkins ($60.00), 14 pounds of rolled butter (valued at $3.92) and 13 milch cows at $455.00. The inventory also includes 14 fat hogs ($168.00), several tons of hay, a number of bushels of rye, oats, corn, buckwheat and wheat, and farm related tools such as sheep shears and ox chains. The total value of her personal estate (including household goods) is estimated to be $3590.86. The farm was willed to Elizabeth's sons, Harmon L. and Oliver H. Emmons.

Ann C. Hall, Widow of Daniel, began farming 120 acres in Wantage Township after his death in 1848 (Table 4). Daniel Hall willed the farm to his two sons, Neuman (13) and Levi (5) with dower rights to Ann, who was given "full authority to manage the farm as she [saw] fit in order to provide for her children, and keep the farm for her sons when they are of age." According the inventory of her husband's estate, the farm was productive, and included 8 milch cows valued at $200.00. The total value of the personal property was $967.25. In
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**Table 1. Phoebe Layton: Farm Products 1850, 1860, 1870.**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Farm Size</th>
<th>Farm Value</th>
<th>Cows</th>
<th>Butter (pounds)</th>
<th>Oats (bushel)</th>
<th>Buckwht (bushel)</th>
<th>Corn (bushel)</th>
<th>Rye (bushel)</th>
<th>Wheat (bushel)</th>
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**Table 2. Phoebe Hendershot: Farm Products 1850, 1860, 1870.**

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**Table 3. Elizabeth Emmons: Farm Products 1850, 1860, 1870.**

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**Table 4. Ann C. Hall: Farm Products 1850, 1860.**

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<th>Farm Size</th>
<th>Farm Value</th>
<th>Cows</th>
<th>Butter (pounds)</th>
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<th>Buckwht (bushel)</th>
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**Table 5. Phoebe Hoyt: Farm Products 1850, 1860.**

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<th>Farm Size</th>
<th>Farm Value</th>
<th>Cows</th>
<th>Butter (pounds)</th>
<th>Oats (bushel)</th>
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40
1860, the household includes Ann, Neuman and Levi, all listed as farmers, and Sarah E., an unmarried daughter, whose occupation is listed as housekeeping. At this time, Ann is 60 years old. Sometime during the next decade, Neuman Hall establishes his own household, and is farming 106 acres in Wantage Township, and is exclusively engaged in the production of fluid milk. Levi Hall is managing the home farm and continues to produce butter on the farm. In 1881, Levi Hall retains the entire farm from his mother in consideration of $1.00 with a life right to Ann, which expires with her death in 1891.

Phoebe Hoyt, Widow of John, inherited 92 acres as her one-third dower right. She purchased additional land shortly thereafter, and, in 1850 was farming 160 acres in Wantage Township (Table 5). She reported 2000 pounds of butter from 18 cows in 1850. Agricultural crops included oats, buckwheat, corn, rye and some wheat. She also reported 10 sheep and 15 hogs. Her household consisted of her son Jared and a daughter Louisa. During the next decade, Phoebe sells off 40 acres of her farm, and drops her milking herd to 16 cows, from which she produced 1,600 pounds of butter. Although listed in the population census for 1870, Phoebe is not found in the 1870 products of agriculture schedule. Her son, Jared, however is listed, and has made the transition to fluid milk production, producing 3000 gallons of milk from 10 cows. Phoebe, at age 71, is counted as the head of the household, which besides Phoebe and Jared, includes two other daughters, Abigail (47) and Louisa (37).

DISCUSSION

Despite the suggestion that Anna Warbass was selling milk from the farm as early as 1860, none of the women profiled above and active in farming in 1870 made the transition from the production of butter to the production of fluid milk, either to be sold to a local creamery, or to be shipped into the city on the railroad. In some instances, they were following the norm of the township in which they lived (no farmers in Sandyston or Stillwater Township produced fluid milk in 1870). Those who lived in townships where a number of farmers made the transition to fluid milk (Lafayette, Hampton, Wantage) did not choose to discontinue the on-farm production of butter as did some of their male contemporaries.

Seven women listed as farm operators in 1870 are producing fluid milk, but in all cases this is the first year they are listed in the schedules, and all are widows. It is probable that their spouses were engaged in the production of fluid milk prior to their deaths. In one instance, Jane Coddington's husband, David, owned a milk wagon, and was owed $150.00 from the creamery on August 31, 1869, the date of the inventory of his Wantage Township farm.

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Seven women listed as farm operators in 1870 are producing fluid milk, but in all cases this is the first year they are listed in the schedules, and all are widows. It is probable that their spouses were engaged in the production of fluid milk prior to their deaths. In one instance, Jane Coddington's husband, David, owned a milk wagon, and was owed $150.00 from the creamery on August 31, 1869, the date of the inventory of his Wantage Township farm.

Thus, the fluid milk reported in the 1870 agricultural products schedule is probably in part that which was produced prior to his death. In 1880, the farmer of record is Jane's 34 year old son, Linn, who produced 1000 pounds of butter from 12 cows, and no fluid milk. Her son Edward, farming 96 acres with 14 cows in 1870 also produced butter and reported no fluid milk. Evidently the sons did not follow the innovative lead of their father.

Albert Shaw also died just prior to 1870, leaving the farm to his wife, Maria, who reported 12,162 gallons of milk from a herd of 25 cows. Two farm laborers, Charles W. Shaw (17) and Richard Rickey (32), are listed as part of her household in 1870, but she did not report any wages paid at the time of the agriculture products census. Enoch A. Ayers died in 1867, devising the homestead farm to his wife Julia "during her life." In 1870, the 15 cows owned by Julia Ayers produced 8000 gallons of milk. Julia's household consisted of four other women. She evidently hired day farm laborers as she reports $250.00 paid wages. Neither of these women reported producing butter on the farm.

CONCLUSION

Anna Warbass maintained a high standard of living as a dairy farmer for twenty years after the death of her husband. She provided for her children and aided her sons in farming pursuits by effective management of both the Warren County farm and
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Eden Farm in Sussex County. With the exception of Phoebe Hendershot, the six women profiled above managed to productively work the farms, and turn them over to their children, either during their lifetime (Mary Ayers, Phoebe Layton, Anne C. Hall, Phoebe Hoyt) or upon their death (Elizabeth Emmons). There was little change in crops cultivated or livestock raised during the period under study, and butter production was generally in line with or above the county average. Phoebe Hendershot retained her home and farm through the aid of her brother-in-law, who clearly wished to keep the land in trust for the family. Although she kept far fewer milch cows than her contemporaries, her butter production was consistently about 100 pounds per cow, and she raised oats, buckwheat, corn and rye and kept one sheep and a number of hogs. At her death, the land was intact for the designated heirs.

The overall research on the dairy industry in Sussex County, New Jersey in the mid-nineteenth century shows that very often women followed the management systems already in place when they obtained ownership (Hildebrant, in progress). Some hired labor, and many shared the farm home with the oldest son and his family. Kinship, and preservation of the family farmstead appear to be important factors in all cases. Additionally, this research shows that farm location and economic status rather than gender are the important factors related to successful farm management.

REFERENCES


NOTES

1. Warren County Deeds, Book 17, Sheet 532
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3. Warren County Wills: Inventory, November 29, 1844
4. Warren County Deeds, Book 27, Sheet 129
5. Warren County Deeds, Book 48, Sheet 70
6. New Jersey Herald, June 11, 1853
7. Sussex County Deeds, Book P4, Sheet 473
8. Sussex County Deeds, Book Z4, Sheet 98
9. Sussex County Deeds, Book N5, Sheet 226
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12. Sussex County Inventory Book L, Sheet 342
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