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James Bennitt: Portrait of an Antebellum Yeoman

BY ARTHUR C. MENIUS III*

The morning of April 17, 1865, was so warm and sunny that its beauty impressed even the senses of those who had endured four years of fratricidal warfare. Two small groups of warriors—the escorts and staffs of Union General William T. Sherman and his Confederate adversary, General Joseph E. Johnston—approached each other on the road between Hillsborough and Raleigh. Their mission was to negotiate the surrender of Johnston's troops. Some five miles west of Durham's Station the two officers encountered each other.

Johnston suggested that the two generals should retire to a "nice farm" which he had seen nearby. Soon they arrived at a small, oak-shaded yard surrounded by a board fence. The grounds, primarily covered by a fine green lawn, contained a few flowers, some shrubbery, a number of diminutive cherry trees then in full bloom, a house, a kitchen, and a smokehouse.

The generals entered the yard and asked permission of the elderly couple who lived on the property to use the house. The building that had attracted Johnston's attention was an unpainted frame structure consisting of a main room and an attic to which a shed room, "divided into two parts," had been appended. Although plain and unpretentious,

the house, however, was scrupulously neat, the floors scrubbed to a milky whiteness, the bed in one room very neatly made up, and the few articles of furniture in the room arranged with neatness and taste.¹

In this simple abode, the home of James and Nancy Bennitt, Sherman and Johnston would conclude on April 26, 1865, the largest surrender of the Civil War.

For sixty years the Bennitts had resided in the rural piedmont region of North Carolina before being thrust ever so briefly into the center of national affairs. The Bennitts would have been remembered for little else than as the namesakes of a Civil War site had they not left something more—a small group of personal

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¹W. T. Sherman to J. W. Draper, November 6, 1868, John W. Draper Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; *Harper's Weekly*, IX (May 27, 1865), 332; Deposition of Joseph Johnston Duke, May 7, 1945, in Bennett Place Files, Historic Sites Section, Division of Archives and History, Department of Cultural Resources, Raleigh, hereinafter cited as Duke deposition; M. M. Buford, "Surrender of Johnston's Army," *Confederate Veteran*, XXVIII (May, 1920), 171; E. N. Hatcher, *The Last Four Weeks of the War* (Columbus, Ohio: Author, 1891), 330; Jared N. Young (ed.), "General Sherman on His Own Record: Some Unpublished Comments," *Atlantic Monthly*, CVIII (September, 1911), 296.

papers.² The collection includes three dozen bills and receipts, a muster roll for the Orange County militia from 1845, and a homemade valentine from the 1850s. James Bennitt's business dealings are recorded irregularly but in great detail in several small volumes. In the first,³ bought in 1823, little is noted save payments on one large loan. A second, dated 1855, was apparently a practice ledger for Bennitt's grandchildren. Accounts from the 1870s were recorded in the margins of the 1873 *Atlantic Phosphate Company Almanac*.⁴ The most important document in the collection, however, is the "pocket book" in which Bennitt made minutely detailed entries from 1839 to 1849.⁵

The information contained on the 160 pages of this leather-bound volume provides a basis for reconstructing the life of a yeoman farmer of the Old South. James Bennitt's accounts form a significant exception to the dearth of such records for the antebellum southern yeoman. They suggest a portrait of a family working hard and ingeniously to advance themselves economically. The gains they made perhaps indicate that the yeoman class may hold the key to understanding the society and economy of the South before the onset of the conflict which to a large degree ended in James and Nancy Bennitt's living room.⁶

James Bennitt, son of William Bennitt of Chatham County, was born between 1805 and 1810.⁷ The elder Bennitt, apparently a landowner of modest means, paid taxes on only one white male poll in 1815.⁸ Nevertheless, his household was large, consisting of five males and four females in 1820.⁹ Nothing is known about the childhood of James Bennitt or how he learned reading, writing, and the trades he later practiced.

The young Bennitt was soon drawn to the activity in Orange County, which adjoined Chatham to the north. In the county seat of Hillsborough he acquired his first ledger. In it he proudly wrote his own quaint inscription:

²James Bennitt Papers, Manuscript Department, Duke University, Durham, hereinafter cited as Bennitt Papers.

³Bennitt Papers; hereinafter cited as Bennitt's first account book.

⁴*Atlantic Phosphate Company Almanac*, 1873 (N.p.: N.p., 1872[?]), hereinafter cited as 1873 *Almanac*. The practice ledger will be hereinafter cited as "1855" account book.

⁵This document will be hereinafter cited as Bennitt account book, 1839-1849. The convoluted nature of the entries in this book, in addition to the great deal of data manipulation required to make sense of them, preclude citation by page or date.

⁶For more discussion of the relevant historiography on the subject, the reader is directed to Arthur C. Menius III, "The Bennett Place," 1979, unpublished report on file in the Historic Sites Section, Division of Archives and History, 22-44.

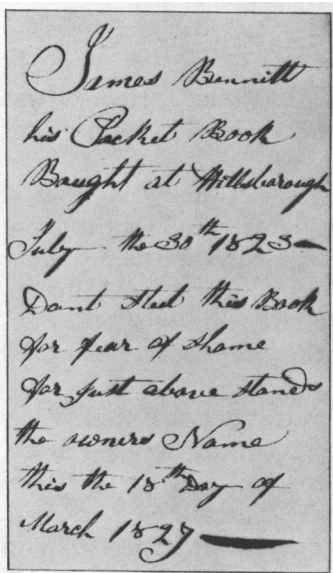
⁷The 1860 census reported Bennitt's age as fifty-three years, while a decade later his age was listed in the census as sixty. Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Orange County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, 82, microfilm of National Archives Manuscript copy, Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh. All further citations to the unpublished United States censuses will be shortened to year, schedule, county, and page number; all are on microfilm in the State Archives. Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: Orange County, Population Schedule, 28.

⁸Treasurer's and Comptroller's Records: County Settlements with the State, 1815 Chatham County Tax List, State Archives.

⁹1820 *Federal Census of North Carolina* (Tullehoma, Tennessee: Dorothy Williams Potter, 56 volumes, 1971), 13, p. 20.

James Bennitt
 his Pocket Book
 Bought at Hillsborough
 July the 30th 1823—
 Dont steel this Book
 for fear of shame
 for just above stands
 the owners Name¹⁰

It is not certain when James Bennitt settled permanently in Orange County. An 1829 receipt gives his residence as Chatham County. Bennitt paid poll taxes in Orange County as early as July, 1834. He paid \$7.00 for rent on the Hogan plantation in the northern county on May 28, 1834. The previous autumn he was in debt to Mary Hogan for \$23.00. Thus, he may have been renting a portion of



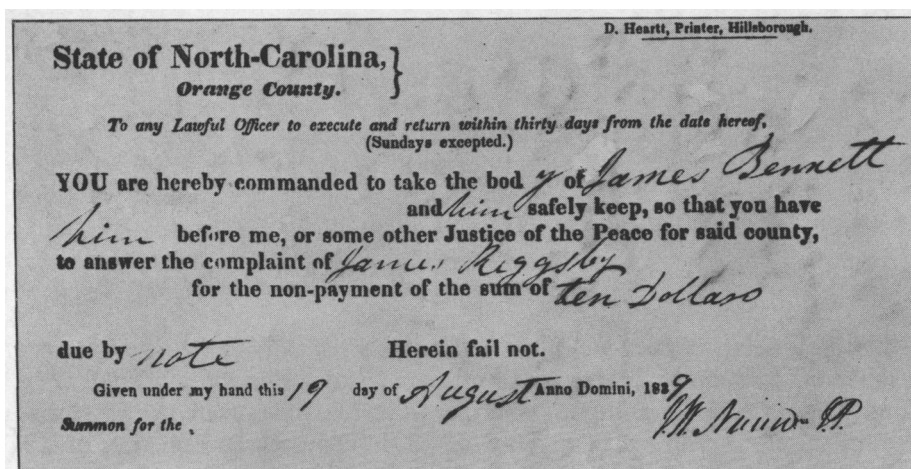
Opening page of James Bennitt's first ledger, acquired at Hillsborough on July 30, 1823. From James Bennitt Papers, Manuscript Department, Duke University.

that tract in 1833, if not earlier. Bennitt possibly remained on the Hogan property until he purchased a farm in 1846. On the other hand, during some of this period he could have been a squatter, as settling on land without legal formality was a common practice in the antebellum South.¹¹

As he acquired a family, Bennitt no doubt sought to purchase a tract of land in order to provide them with a sense of stability. On May 21, 1831, Bennitt took Nancy Leigh Pierson, a thirty-year-old Orange County widow, as his

¹⁰ Bennitt's first account book.

¹¹ Receipts in Bennitt Papers; James C. Bonner, "Profile of a Late Ante-bellum Community," *American Historical Review*, XLIV (July, 1944), 667-668.



This summons, issued in 1829, authorized "any Lawful Officer" to arrest and hold James Bennett on a charge of "non-payment of the sum of ten Dollars." From James Bennett Papers.

bride.¹² A daughter, Eliza Ann, arrived in 1834 or 1835. Alfonso J. Bennett was born on May 2, 1836; and his brother, Lorenzo Leigh, may well have been his twin.¹³

As a family of five during the 1830s, the Bennetts, like so many families of their class, experienced considerable problems with debts. Creditors brought numerous cases against James Bennett before the Orange and Chatham County courts with considerable success. Between 1832 and 1839 he was the unsuccessful defendant in at least twenty suits for debts totaling almost \$300. On at least two occasions, the justices of the peace ordered that his property be seized so as to settle judgments against him.¹⁴

During 1839 James and Nancy Bennett made the crucial decision that seems to have marked the financial turning point of their lives. On the twenty-third of January Bennett mortgaged his inheritance, 40 acres of land in Chatham County and some livestock, to Jos. Bynum for \$256.25. The bill came due six months later, but no records have been found to indicate that Bennett repaid the principal. In any case, the borrowed funds apparently stood the Bennetts financially upright. Almost symbolically, James Bennett commenced keeping a

¹²Nancy Leigh had been married to Richard Pierson in Orange County on May 8, 1823. Catherine A. Jackson and others (compilers), *An Index to Marriage Bonds Filed in the North Carolina State Archives* (a microfiche index), State Archives, hereinafter cited as Jackson and others, *N.C. Marriage Bonds Index*; Eighth Census, 1860: Orange County, Population Schedule, 82.

¹³Bennett Genealogical Chart, Bennett Papers; Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of North Carolina, National Archives Microcopy No. 230, 1956, State Archives, hereinafter cited as Compiled Service Records; Eighth Census, 1860: Orange County, Population Schedule, 82; Tenth Census, 1880: Orange County, Population Schedule, 155.

¹⁴Receipts in Bennett Papers; Guion Griffis Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 617, hereinafter cited as Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*.

new account book late in 1839.¹⁵ This detailed, disorganized, and occasionally almost illegible daybook presents a picture of the Bennitts' life during the 1840s. The "pocket book," moreover, permits a minute case study of the operations of a small farmer and rural entrepreneur in the antebellum era.

When he made his first entry in the new ledger, James Bennitt was no less than thirty years old and owned neither land nor slaves. The financial stability he achieved over the ensuing decade can be demonstrated by compiling monthly and annual balances for his accounts, using regular credits and debits only (i.e., omitting land transactions and inheritances). By doing so, the following year-end balances result:

1840	+	\$13.34
1841	+	1.68½
1842	-	6.89
1843	+	15.20¼
1844	-	16.11½
1845	+	3.57¼
1846	+	5.57¼
1847	-	16.24¾
1848	-	1.95¼
1849	+	32.57¼

When \$1.00 could purchase four pounds of coffee and a pot in which to brew it, Bennitt's records showed a profit of \$30.74 for the decade, and his once common court appearances for debt ceased.¹⁶

By 1846 James Bennitt had made himself a sufficient credit risk to be able to obtain his own land. With a \$400 loan secured from James N. Patterson, Bennitt purchased from Willis Dilliard on February 18, 1846, a tract of 324⁹/₁₀ acres located along the Hillsborough Road in what was then eastern Orange County. Eight years later he made a final payment of \$230.60 and acquired clear title to the property. Bennitt soon thereafter sold 132¼ acres of the tract for \$251.30.¹⁷

When or whether the Bennitts erected the structures in which they lived in 1865 is unclear, for his accounts give no certain indication that he engaged in house construction at any time, save for the purchase of 5,000 shingles in February, 1848. A group of neighbors, however, may well have erected the simple buildings, as was often the practice in the rural South at that time.¹⁸

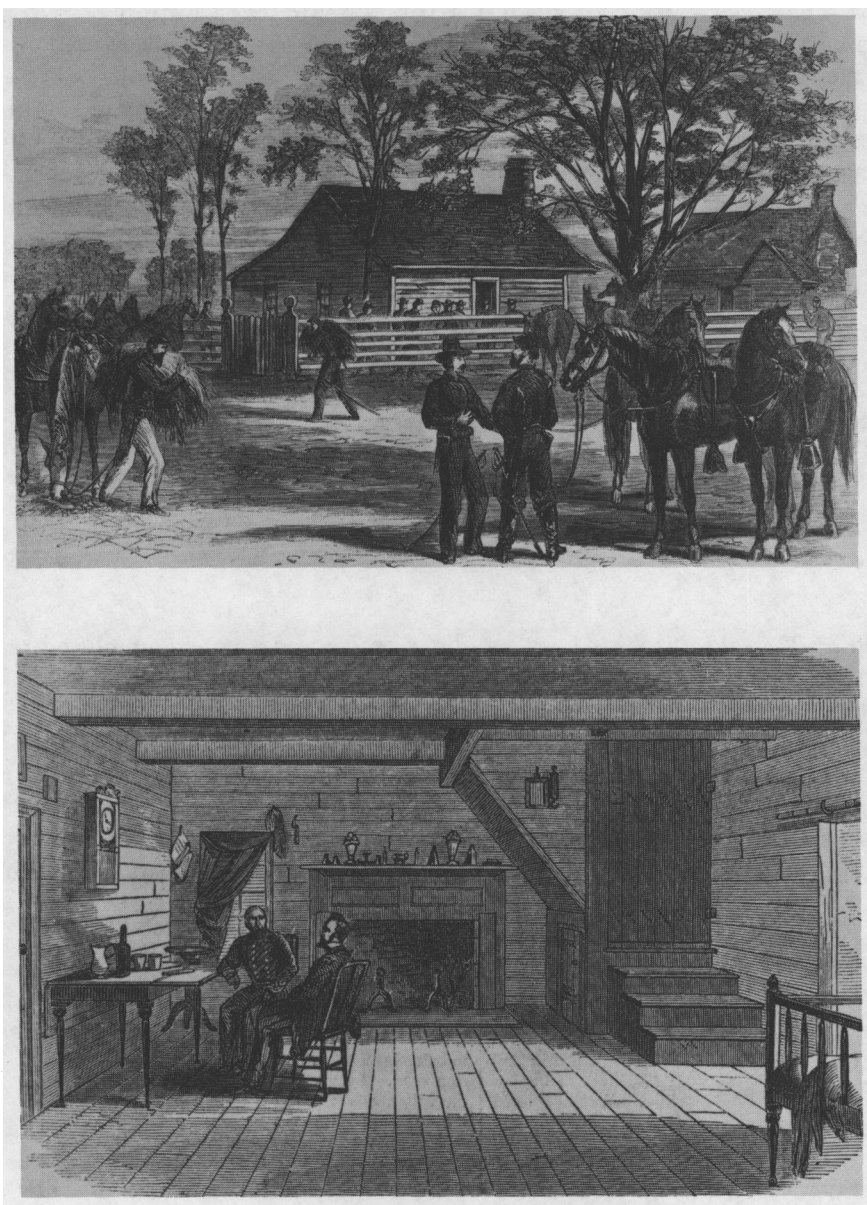
The Bennitt farm's tools were chiefly for hand use, and, judging from the frequency of sharpening and repair, Bennitt's most often used implement was the grub hoe, which was employed to prepare hills for planting corn, as well as for

¹⁵ Chatham County Deeds, Book A-E, 310-311, microfilm copy, State Archives.

¹⁶ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

¹⁷ Bennitt's first account book, Orange County Deeds, Book 33, p. 482; Book 34, p. 572; Book 37, pp. 486-487, microfilm copies, State Archives, hereinafter cited as Orange County Deeds.

¹⁸ Duke deposition; Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 91; Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.



These exterior and interior views of James Bennitt's farmhouse, based on sketches by artist Theodore R. Davis, appeared as engravings in *Harper's Weekly*, IX (May 27, 1865), p. 332.

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cultivating other crops.¹⁹ Other hand tools on the farm included an axe, cotton combs, a spinning wheel, a shovel, a one-half-inch auger, two pairs of tongs, an iron wedge, a mattock, and a manure fork. The Bennitts also used claw hammers, scythes, a wheelbarrow, and a loom.²⁰

Local blacksmiths, including slaves, produced and repaired most of these implements and sometimes created new devices out of the remains of old ones.²¹ Bennitt usually paid these artisans, whose fees were generally quite reasonable, with produce from his farm. In 1846, for example, Bennitt required the services of a blacksmith fourteen times at a total cost of \$2.75, or an average of just less than 20 cents per job. Charges ranged from 5 cents for mending a lock, to 25 cents for shoeing a horse, up to a high of 35 cents for repairing his plow.²²

James Bennitt also acquired larger, animal-drawn implements. He continued to use horses to pull them even when the mule achieved greater popularity after 1850.²³ He possessed a crude type of turning plow, called a dagon, by 1840, if not earlier. A relatively standardized item such as this was probably purchased from a dealer rather than produced by a local artisan.²⁴

Bennitt turned to Orange County craftsmen, however, to help him build a wagon. In 1845 he resolved to put an end to the expense and inconvenience of renting vehicles from his neighbors by constructing his own. The conveyance cost Bennitt \$42.97 for parts and labor, but he soon began to reap returns by use of it. Through 1849 the wagon, besides saving several dollars a year in rental fees, brought in \$19.20 from hauling and lending, including \$1.95 for transporting 775 pounds of meal to Raleigh and \$5.50 for taking schoolchildren with their luggage to Hillsborough.²⁵ The sturdy vehicle apparently survived at least until 1879 when James Bennitt's estate included an "old one Horse Wagon" valued at \$10.00.²⁶ That some of Bennitt's implements survived him and the frequent repairs he had made to them demonstrate that the farmer took better care of his tools than did many of his peers.²⁷

The wagon was but one of several means that the ingenious Bennitt devised in order to generate needed income. Another profitable idea took advantage of

¹⁹ Hugh H. Wooten, "A Fourth Creek Farm from 1800 to 1830," *North Carolina Historical Review*, XXX (April, 1953), 167-175, hereinafter cited as Wooten, "Fourth Creek Farm"; Bennitt account book, 1839-1849; C. O. Cathey, *Agricultural Developments in North Carolina, 1783-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 129, hereinafter cited as Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*.

²⁰ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849; Inventory of James Bennitt's Estate, Orange County Estates Records, State Archives, hereinafter cited as Inventory of James Bennitt's Estate.

²¹ Frank Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), 137, hereinafter cited as Owsley, *Plain Folk*; Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*, 64; Lewis C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 2 volumes, 1933), I, 46, hereinafter cited as Gray, *History of Agriculture*.

²² Bennitt account book, 1839-1849; Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*.

²³ Seventh Census, 1850: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 437; Eighth Census, 1860: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 413; Ninth Census, 1870: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 493; Paul W. Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture, 1815-1860* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 113, hereinafter cited as Gates, *Farmer's Age*.

²⁴ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 795; Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*, 65; Owsley, *Plain Folk*, 116.

²⁵ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

²⁶ Inventory of James Bennitt's Estate.

²⁷ Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*, 70.

the favorable location of the Bennitt farm on the Hillsborough Road. The rustic entrepreneur purchased a keg of brandy on September 6, 1847, for \$5.00, which, combined with a 25-cent investment in a funnel and a quart pot, allowed him to sell the spirit to neighbors and travelers. Brandy sales from the keg totaled \$6.16, so the next year Bennitt repeated the successful venture using whiskey instead.²⁸ Such liquor sales by antebellum farmers were not rare.²⁹

After moving to the Hillsborough Road location the family also began to receive income from travelers who partook of the Bennitts' hospitality. On January 30, 1848, for example, a Mr. Cox paid 40 cents for breakfast; the next month a pair of visitors paid \$1.00 each for supper, lodging, and breakfast. Bennitt also sold horse feed and tobacco plugs to wayfarers.³⁰ Again the practice was not unusual—expecting payment from visitors was the rule, not the exception, in antebellum “southern hospitality.” Indeed, unpaid hosts were often reported to be cold and graceless.³¹

The Bennitts were engaged in shoe- and clothes-making by at least 1833. They crafted footwear for the same basic reasons that they engaged in so many diversified activities—to earn money during months in which crops were not being harvested and sold and to increase their self-sufficiency, thereby saving money. Each fall the head of the household purchased side leather, shoe leather, and shoe thread. Who actually undertook the cobbling, however, is unclear. James Bennitt or some members of his family probably made shoes, but on a number of occasions they paid others to do so. During 1848, 1849, and 1850 Barland's Jake, obviously a slave, occasionally worked for the Bennitts. He began by half-soling a pair for 10 cents and was graduated to making shoes for 40 cents a pair. The amount of shoe sales made by the family as compared to the value of cobbling supplies purchased suggests that the family used most of the footwear themselves.³²

The Bennitts peddled clothing much more actively than they did shoes. They sewed and sold clothes, moreover, with much less seasonal variability, suggesting that perhaps Nancy Bennitt was the manufacturer. The family sold pants, coats, and vests cut from store-bought patterns. The prices were much lower than those for the ready-made clothes available at the country stores. At such an outlet a coat could cost \$8.00 to \$10.00 as compared to \$1.50 when bought from James Bennitt. Although on the ledger for 1840 to 1849 the tailoring business seems to have lost a little money, the Bennitts made their own apparel out of the same supplies, an indication that the enterprise was profitable.³³

Despite these varied commercial ventures, James Bennitt primarily engaged in agrarian pursuits. His farm, therefore, provides an intriguing case study for

²⁸ A quart was the smallest amount of liquor that could be sold without a license. Johnson, *Antebellum North Carolina*, 96; Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

²⁹ Wooten, “Fourth Creek Farm,” 173.

³⁰ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

³¹ Paton Yoder, “Private Hospitality in the South, 1775-1890,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLVII (December, 1960), 425.

³² Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

³³ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849; Lewis Atherton, *The Southern Country Store, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), 84-85, hereinafter cited as Atherton, *Country Store*.

small-scale antebellum agriculture. As was true of the South as a whole, corn was the leading crop on James Bennitt's farmstead. The popularity of maize was due to its hardiness and versatility; it could be used as food for both man and beast. The farmer and his family consumed the grain on the cob, creamed, and roasted, or as bread, grits, hominy, mush, succotash, and whiskey. It provided shucks and fodder for the livestock and was used to fatten pigs before the slaughter.³⁴ Although the crop often received less careful attention than tobacco or cotton and was frequently consigned to poorer land, corn was quite hardy and thus still produced adequate yields. Corn, on the other hand, did demand a good deal of time when harvested.³⁵

Although farmers could plant maize as early as late March, which would allow the crop to mature before the summer drought, many failed to do so.³⁶ In fact, North Carolina producers generally planted in April or early May. Bennitt's late harvest time seems to indicate that he put out his crop no earlier than this. His initial sales of the season usually occurred in September. Bennitt apparently persisted in using heavy grub hoes to prepare hills for planting corn despite the general shift to row planting by mid-century.³⁷ After fertilizing the fields with manure or cottonseed, the farmer distributed a large amount of seed corn following the advice of a then popular jingle:

One for the blackbird
One for the crow
One for the cutworm
And two to grow.³⁸

Bennitt, like many of his contemporaries, raised not only enough corn for his family and livestock but a surplus to sell as well.³⁹ He sold maize as ears, meal, shucks, and fodder, in addition to pork and whiskey. During 1847, for example, he marketed eight bushels of corn for \$3.67½; one-third bushel of cornmeal for 20 cents; 198½ pounds of fodder for \$1.51¼; and 5 cents worth of shucks.⁴⁰ Bennitt was able to sell corn products throughout the 1840s, although 1839 to 1844 and 1847 to 1852 were years of high supply and low price. During 1847, for example, he sold his corn crop for 45⅑ cents per bushel, considerably less than the 60-cents-per-bushel average in Virginia from 1801 to 1860.⁴¹ The steady sales

³⁴Sam B. Hilliard, *Hog Meat and Hoe Cake: Food Supply in the Old South, 1840-1860* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 48, hereinafter cited as Hilliard, *Hog Meat*; Donald L. Kemmerer, "Pre-Civil War South's Leading Crop, Corn," *Agricultural History*, XXIII (October, 1949), 236.

³⁵Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 152-154.

³⁶Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 153.

³⁷Bennitt account book, 1839-1849; Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*, 129-130.

³⁸Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 814.

³⁹The impressive volume of trade in corn in antebellum North Carolina is discussed in Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 155; Raymond C. Battallio and John Kagel, "The Structure of Antebellum Southern Agriculture: South Carolina, A Case Study," *Agricultural History*, XLIV (January, 1970), 34, hereinafter cited as Battallio and Kagel, "Structure of Antebellum Southern Agriculture."

⁴⁰Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

⁴¹Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 812. The 1840s as a whole was a period of depressed prices for farm products. G. F. Warren and F. A. Pearson, *Wholesale Prices for 213 Years, 1720 to 1932* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1932), 85, hereinafter cited as Warren and Pearson, *Wholesale Prices*.

of the Bennetts' corn suggest that a relatively consistent demand for these products existed in the antebellum Piedmont.

The federal census returns reported Bennitt's corn production as 250 bushels in 1849 (census year 1850) and 185 bushels ten years later.⁴² Using an estimate based on the 1850 enumeration of 15 to 20 bushels per acre in Orange County, the farm's corn acreage probably fell between 12.5 and 16.7 acres in 1849.⁴³ Bennitt clearly intended to market much of his corn crop. An estimate of the amount of maize used by the family and their livestock indicates that the Bennitt farm produced about twice as much of the grain as was needed at home. This degree of overproduction, in fact, was rather higher than the average of his Orange County neighbors.⁴⁴

The Bennetts intertilled a number of lesser crops with their corn.⁴⁵ Commercially the most significant of these was the watermelon, a source of summer cash to which the family turned in 1845, when they sold \$13.53½ worth. Although none were sold in 1846, sales for the subsequent three years totaled \$10.84½. The customary unit of sale was the wagonload, which brought about \$2.00. James Bennitt and his family harvested the crop during July, August, and, occasionally, in September. The farm also produced peas and muskmelons, but these were usually reserved for home consumption.⁴⁶

James Bennitt's records indicate that oats may have been raised com-

⁴²Seventh Census, 1850: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 437; Eighth Census, 1860: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 413.

⁴³Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*, 133.

⁴⁴Basing his study on average annual corn consumption estimates of 13 bushels per adult human, 7½ bushels per horse or mule, 1 per cow, 4 per hog, .25 bushel for each sheep, Sam B. Hilliard constructed a formula to test for self-sufficiency in corn:

$$c = \frac{\text{Corn production in bushels}}{(13z) + (4s) + (7.5h)}$$

Where z = human consumption units, h = horses and mules, s = swine, and c is a self-sufficiency coefficient for which any figure over 1.000 indicates a surplus. For these calculations children under age fifteen count as one-half human consumption units each. For the Bennitt farm:

$$1849 \quad c = \frac{250}{(13 \times 3.5) + (4 \times 17) + (7.5 \times 1)} = 2.066$$

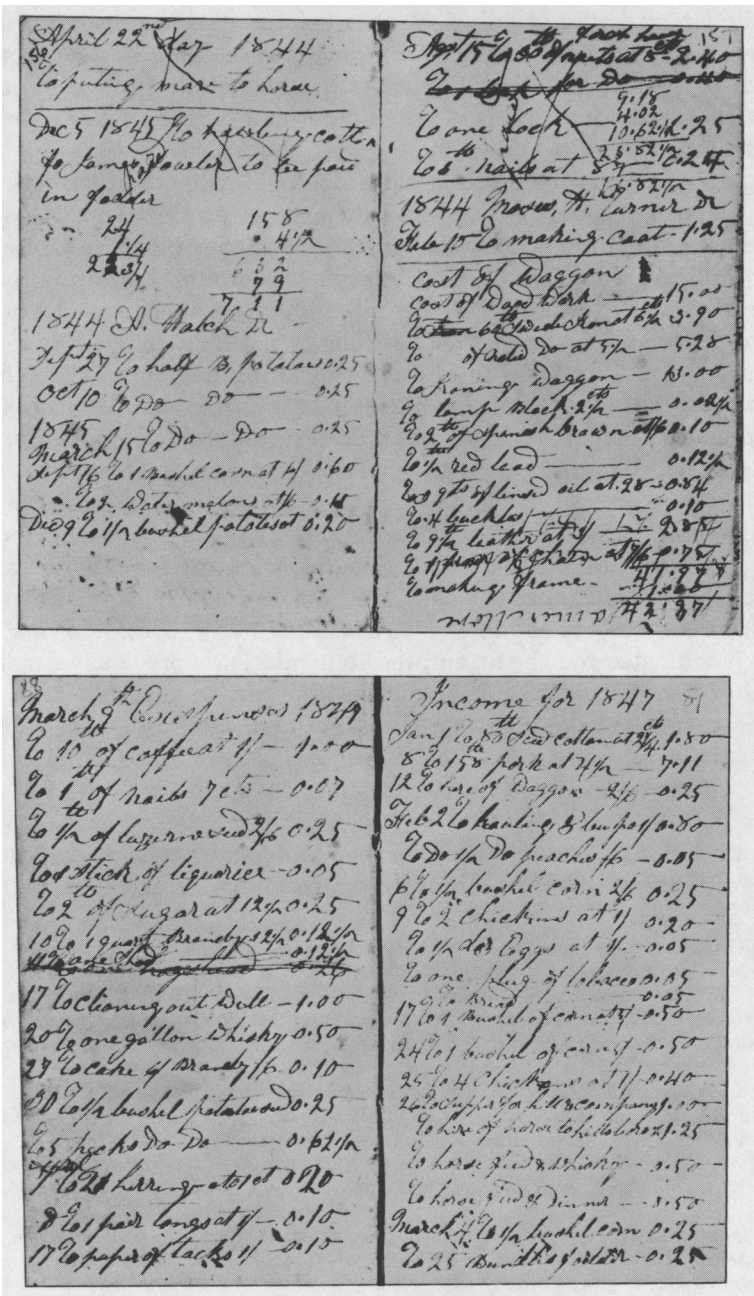
(If Eliza Bennitt, who may have been fifteen years old in 1849, is counted as an adult, then z = 4 and c = 1.961.)

$$1859 \quad c = \frac{185}{(13 \times 3) + (4 \times 14) + (7.5 \times 1)} = 1.804$$

The Bennitt farm's per capita corn production of 61.67 bushels in 1860 was much larger than the southern average of 35.63 bushels per person. Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 157-160; Battallio and Kagel, "Structure of Antebellum Southern Agriculture," 32; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 812.

⁴⁵These crops included peas, beans, watermelons, muskmelons, and pumpkins. Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*, 133.

⁴⁶Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.



Representative pages from James Bennitt's leather-bound "pocket book." At top are entries from 1844 and 1845 showing receipts (for potatoes, corn, watermelons, etc.) on the left-hand page and disbursements (for the cost of a coat, a "Wagon," lamp black, etc.) on the right. At bottom are entries for 1847, with expenses on the left and income on the right. From James Bennitt Papers.

mercially in some parts of antebellum North Carolina.⁴⁷ His farm produced 150 bushels of oats in 1849 but only 50 a decade later. This decline corresponded to a 58.4 percent drop in oat production throughout the South, except for Virginia. The large per-person amounts harvested by the Bennitts in combination with the regular, albeit small, sales of oats noted in the account book strongly suggest that James Bennitt raised the crop for the market.⁴⁸

Although wheat was generally a more popular grain, the Bennitts grew considerably less of it than oats. Nonetheless, their production of 17 bushels of wheat in 1849 and 10 in 1859 was considerably higher than the Orange County per-farm-unit average of just over 4 bushels per annum. Following the practice of farmers in North Carolina, the Bennitt family probably sowed wheat during late autumn on land that had been used for corn. Since these fields received little real preparation for the winter crop, the spring harvest, for which a scythe and cradle were used, brought low yields ranging from only 9 to 15 bushels per acre. It appears then that James Bennitt never allotted more than a couple of acres to wheat production, with the yield thereof consumed almost entirely on the farm.⁴⁹

James Bennitt grew cotton until he acquired the Hillsborough Road tract in 1846. In 1840, for example, he sold 874 pounds of cotton for \$18.57. Later he began to concentrate more on the sale of cottonseed which was used as fertilizer and feed.⁵⁰ Bennitt's change in strategy after he became a landowner is significant, for it indicates that he attempted to insulate his precious farmstead from the worst of the fluctuations of the market. In order to keep his family farm secure Bennitt turned from cotton production to growing foodstuffs, such as corn, Irish potatoes, and oats, as both cash and subsistence crops. Thus, he could be relatively assured that in the worst of times his farm would be self-sufficient with regard to food.⁵¹

The potato, both sweet and Irish, proved to be an important crop in the Bennitts' operations, as it was on many North Carolina farms.⁵² The Bennitt farm

⁴⁷ Agricultural historians have generally consigned oats in the antebellum South to a lowly position, describing the grain as a wheat substitute and livestock food grown on poor land, which usually suffered in competition with wheat, corn, tobacco, and cotton. Hilliard, however, asserted that oats were commercially produced in North Carolina, and the Bennitt figures support him. Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*, 145; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 820; Gates, *Farmer's Age*, 172; Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 173.

⁴⁸ Seventh Census, 1850: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 437; Eighth Census, 1860: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 413; J. D. B. DeBow, *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850* (Washington, D.C.: Census Bureau, 3 volumes and compendium, 1853-1855), I, lxxxii; Joseph C. G. Kennedy, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860: Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864), iv; Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

⁴⁹ These facts seem to confirm Hilliard's hypothesis that wheat was widely grown, but only in small quantities. Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 164, 169-170; Seventh Census, 1850: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 437; Eighth Census, 1860: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 413; Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*, 136; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 818-820.

⁵⁰ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

⁵¹ Gavin Wright and Howard Kunneuther, "Cotton, Corn, and Risk in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History*, XXXV (September, 1975), 529-530; Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 65-66; Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 47, 62-67, hereinafter cited as Wright, *Political Economy of the Cotton South*; Warren and Pearson, *Wholesale Prices*, 28.

⁵² Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*, 40.

produced 150 bushels of sweet and 5 of Irish potatoes during 1849.⁵³ The sweet potato was a superlative crop featuring high yields and easy cultivation. This nutritious tuber, the most widely grown vegetable in the state, virtually never appeared at the marketplace.⁵⁴ Bennitt did, however, record occasional yam sales between October and April, but during the 1840s they totaled less than 5 bushels, worth only \$2.12½.⁵⁵ The farmer could begin digging his crop by mid-summer, but the main harvest occurred in early fall. Although some planters achieved yields as high as 816 bushels per acre, the average farmer could depend on only 100 to 200 bushels per acre.⁵⁶ The Bennitts apparently planted about one acre in sweet potatoes.

On the Bennitt farm Irish potatoes became a much more important market commodity than sweet potatoes, often making a sizable contribution to the family income.⁵⁷ Despite the small production listed for his farm in the 1850 census, Bennitt's account book discloses that his family often dug large quantities of this vegetable. During the 1840s Bennitt recorded sales of 309 bushels of Irish potatoes for \$141.64¾ and 29 bushels of seed potatoes for \$14.72½. The combined proceeds from these sales, \$156.37¼, accounted for more than one fifth of the farm's gross income for the decade. Farmers generally planted Irish potatoes in February, with the harvest occurring in May.⁵⁸ Prices ranged from a high of 60 cents per bushel in 1841 to only about one half that in 1848.⁵⁹

Other produce from the Bennitt farm included an inconsequential amount of hops—3 bushels in 1849—and the usual garden crops.⁶⁰ Small plots, usually containing one-quarter to two acres, could be cultivated from March to November.⁶¹ These family gardens, normally tended by the farmer's wife, rarely received good care due to the abundance of wild fruits and an insufficient appreciation of the dietary benefits of vegetables.⁶² The farm wife, burdened with many tasks, moreover, probably had little time to devote to it. James Bennitt recorded sales of such garden crops as cucumbers (including pickles), onions, squash, and turnips. Apparently cherries and apples also grew on the tract.⁶³

Livestock, of course, played a significant role on the Bennitt farm. The most important domestic animal was the hog; the Bennitts owned 17 at the time of the 1850 census and 14 at the next enumeration. During the 1840s they sold

⁵³ Seventh Census, 1850: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 437.

⁵⁴ Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 65, 174-175; Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*, 161.

⁵⁵ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

⁵⁶ Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 175; Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*, 161; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 827.

⁵⁷ The Bennitts' experience with the Irish potato casts some doubts on L. C. Gray's assertion that the crop, grown primarily in the upper South, attained commercial importance only near major cities. Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 827; Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 175.

⁵⁸ Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 176.

⁵⁹ Seventh Census, 1850: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 437; Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

⁶⁰ Seventh Census, 1850: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 437.

⁶¹ Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 172-173.

⁶² Gray, *History of Agriculture*, I, 159-160.

⁶³ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

1,130³/₄ pounds of pork for \$43.12; 315¹/₄ pounds of bacon for \$29.30¹/₂; and 48¹/₄ pounds of lard for \$4.82¹/₂. Sales of hog products during the decade thus totaled \$77.45 or 10.7 percent of the farm's income.⁶⁴

Hogs were in many ways the most beneficial and widespread form of livestock in the antebellum South, which raised two thirds of the nation's swine in 1860. The problems encountered by hog producers typified the difficulties associated with all antebellum southern livestock—inadequate care, lack of markets, and poorly bred stocks.⁶⁵ After branding, farmers allowed their nondescript swine, generally called “land pikes” or “razorbacks,” to run loose in the woods for two or three years foraging for acorns, beechnuts, chestnuts, roots, and grass. During this time perhaps one half to two thirds of the animals disappeared, while natural selection acted in favor of hogs better suited for survival than consumption.⁶⁶ At the end of this careless period, the herdsman penned and fattened the pigs with corn, peanuts, sweet potatoes, and, occasionally, cooked hog food.⁶⁷ Despite this effort, southern hogs, averaging but 130 to 150 pounds each, weighed much less than those from the North.⁶⁸

The Bennitts also tended cattle on their tract. The census taker for 1850 found three “milch cows” and “four other cattle,” but by the next enumeration these figures had dwindled to two and one respectively.⁶⁹ The family raised cattle for domestic consumption, with sales of beef and dairy products occurring infrequently. Bennitt did, however, note the sale of hides at fairly regular intervals.⁷⁰ The Bennitts appear to have cared for their cattle much better than many of their contemporaries, some of whom were forced to buy butter despite owning a half-dozen bovines.⁷¹ The average farmer, who allowed his herd to run wild, produced only 19 pounds of butter per cow in 1849, but the Bennitts churned 150 pounds from only 3 milk cows.⁷² Their well-cared-for cattle were probably larger than the typical southern cow of that time, which weighed 500 to 700 pounds. Although these animals ideally needed no more than 15 acres to sustain themselves, they often required hay, green corn, and fodder as supplements to and substitutes for natural forage.⁷³

The Bennitts possessed lesser quantities of various other domesticated beasts before the Civil War. They seemed to have owned at least 1 horse throughout most of the period. In December, 1845, James Bennitt purchased 5 sheep for

⁶⁴ Seventh Census, 1850: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 437; Eighth Census, 1860: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 413; Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

⁶⁵ Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*, 180; Forrest McDonald and Grady McWhiney, “The Antebellum Southern Herdsman: A Reinterpretation,” *Journal of Southern History*, XLI (May, 1975), 147.

⁶⁶ Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 95, 98; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 844-845, 853; Gates, *Farmer's Age*, 217.

⁶⁷ Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*, 181-182.

⁶⁸ Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 101-102.

⁶⁹ Seventh Census, 1850: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 437; Eighth Census, 1860: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 413.

⁷⁰ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

⁷¹ Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*, 176.

⁷² Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 135; Seventh Census, 1850: Agricultural Schedule, Orange County, 437.

⁷³ Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 136-137.

\$1.10 each, but four years later none remained.⁷⁴ Late in 1844 he noted the purchase of a beehive, but apiculture must not have suited Bennitt or his family for he sold the hive within a week, making a 3-cent profit.⁷⁵

Poultry provided an important part of the farm's domestic and commercial products. Throughout the 1840s Bennitt regularly recorded the sale of chickens, normally for 10 cents a head. During 1847, for example, chicken sales totaled 35 birds for \$3.50. Eggs, however, were marketed infrequently.⁷⁶ The fowl were inexpensive to keep, often living on livestock droppings. Their products, like wild game, served as a supplementary meat and as a means of adding variety to the family's fare.⁷⁷

James Bennitt patronized the country stores to provide further variety for his family's table. In these purchases he demonstrated a partiality for seafood. Shad, which usually cost 12½ cents each, was a special favorite. Bennitt sometimes bought herring at only a penny per fish and oysters for 20 cents a pint. The availability of such foods in Orange County demonstrates the existence of a market in fish and shellfish from the coast to the interior of North Carolina.⁷⁸ The general stores also supplied the Bennett family with alcoholic beverages, coffee, lemonade, cakes, pies, molasses, sugar, salt, and cheese—in addition to credit.⁷⁹

Lacking slaves, the Bennitts depended on hired labor during peak periods of agricultural activity. The intermittent need for extra hands, moreover, dictated in favor of short-term wage workers.⁸⁰ Besides the artisan work already described, laborers, both free and slave, helped split rails, plant, plow, and harvest. Their pay varied from 25 to 50 cents per day.⁸¹

Through their diligent efforts the Bennitts managed to double their farm's value from \$400 to \$800 during the last decade before the Civil War. As a farmer and businessman, James Bennitt strove to spread his family's income as evenly as possible throughout the year by pursuing a variety of enterprises. Generally, however, he succeeded only in preventing destitute periods.⁸² His farm achieved self-sufficiency in food for both man and beast.⁸³ That the Bennitts produced their marketable surplus almost entirely in foodstuffs suggests that diversification reflected the natural conservatism of small and medium-sized agricul-

⁷⁴ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849. Seventh Census, 1850: Agricultural Schedule, Orange County, 437; Eighth Census, 1860: Agricultural Schedule, Orange County, 413.

⁷⁵ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

⁷⁶ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

⁷⁷ Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 46-47, 145.

⁷⁸ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849; Hilliard, *Hog Meat*, 48, 65, 200.

⁷⁹ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

⁸⁰ U. B. Phillips (ed.), *Plantation and Frontier Documents, 1649-1863, Illustrative of Industrial History in the Colonial and Ante-Bellum South* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2 volumes, 1909), I, 72-73.

⁸¹ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

⁸² Seventh Census, 1850: Agricultural Schedule, Orange County, 437; Eighth Census, 1860: Agricultural Schedule, Orange County, 413; Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

⁸³ Much current scholarship contends that self-sufficiency for food was a trait of the antebellum southern yeoman. Battallio and Kagel, "Structure of Antebellum Southern Agriculture," 32; Wright, *Political Economy of the Cotton South*, 39; Robert E. Gallman, "Self-Sufficiency in the Cotton Economy of the Ante-Bellum South," *Agricultural History*, XLIV (January, 1970), 6; Morton Rothstein, "The Antebellum South as a Dual Economy: A Tentative Hypothesis," *Agricultural History*, XLI (October, 1967), 376.

turalists who desired to preserve the security of their own farms. These advances did not mean that Bennitt ceased to be indebted; almost every journey to the local stores increased his unpaid balances. After 1839, however, he was eventually able to pay off each of his debts with goods, services, or cash.⁸⁴

The variety, ingenuity, and success of the Bennitts' many means of generating income contrast with the simplicity of their home and kitchen, suggesting that it and many other southern farms gave a frequently undeserved appearance of poverty to northern travelers.⁸⁵ The many products of the Bennitt farm, moreover, cast considerable doubt upon the notion that the nonslaveholders had less crop diversity than the owners of blacks.⁸⁶

Most importantly, the enterprises of James Bennitt and his family suggest the multiplicity of small-scale commercial activities present in the Old South. On a farm of considerably less than the mean acreage for a North Carolina agricultural unit, the Bennitts managed to engage in the sale of a variety of foodstuffs, livestock, liquor, shoes, tobacco, and clothing, in addition to providing transportation and lodging services. The Bennitts exemplify the petty capitalist nature of southern society before the Civil War. The economic system tied Bennitt and his contemporaries to the general stores, which provided marketing and credit systems for the yeoman.⁸⁷ That the Bennitts prospered, however modestly, within this system tends to indicate to some degree that poorly developed markets perhaps cannot be used so readily to explain the Old South's ills.

The personal life of the Bennitt family is harder to piece together than its agricultural and business activities. Perhaps most intriguing is the family's interest in books, magazines, and education. Between 1845 and 1849 Bennitt bought a two-volume, 50-cent *Bible History* and such memorable tomes as *Brother Jonathan*, *The Young Brides*, *The Lady at Home*, *Pictorial Jonathan*, and *The Life of Murrell*. Schoolbooks, however, dominated both the Bennitts' personal library and the book offerings at the country stores, where Bennitt made his purchases. During the 1840s he acquired a number of spelling and arithmetic texts for the children. Later he supplied his grandchildren with a practice ledger and probably instructed them in its use.⁸⁸

Every January or December Bennitt purchased an almanac for 10 cents.⁸⁹ These annual publications, which furnished information about weather and agriculture, even to those who scorned "book farmers," flourished in antebellum North Carolina. They included practical, if often erroneous, instructions for herb cures, advice for planting and harvesting crops, and rules for successful animal husbandry.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

⁸⁵ Clement Eaton, *The Growth of Southern Civilization* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 153-154.

⁸⁶ Blanche H. Clark, *The Tennessee Yeoman, 1840-1860* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1942), 44.

⁸⁷ Atherton, *Country Store*, 9, 12-14, 42, 51-53; Fred M. Jones, *Middlemen in the Domestic Trade of the United States, 1800-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1937), 44-45.

⁸⁸ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849; "1855" account book; Atherton, *Country Store*, 81.

⁸⁹ Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

⁹⁰ Cathey, *Agricultural Developments*, 41; Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 753, 811.

NOVEMBER.												1840.																	
MOON'S PHASES.						EQUATION OF TIME.																							
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Full Moon, 9 0 36 E.						M. s.																							
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New Moon, 23 8 56 E.						1	16	17	5	16	14	9	15	57	13	15	28	17	14	44	21	13	47	25	12	38	29	11	17
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NOVEMBER.—The man will have a fine face, and be a gay deceiver. The lady will be large, liberal, and full of novelty.

BOOKS.—“It is chiefly through books that we enjoy intercourse with superior minds, and these invaluable means of communication are in the reach of all. In the best books, great men talk to us, give us their most precious thoughts, and pour their souls into ours. God be thanked for books. They are the voice of the distant and dead, and make us heirs of the spiritual life of past ages. Books are the true levellers. They give to all, who will faithfully use them the society, the spiritual presence of the best and greatest of our race. No matter how poor I am. No matter, though the prosperous of my own time will not enter my obscure dwelling. If the sacred writers will enter and take up their abode under my roof—if Milton will cross my threshold to sing to me of Paradise, and Shakspeare to open to me the world of imagination, and the workings of the human heart, and Franklin to enrich me with his practical wisdom, I shall not pine for want of intellectual companionship, and I may become a cultivated man, though excluded from what is called the best society in the place where I live.”—Channing.

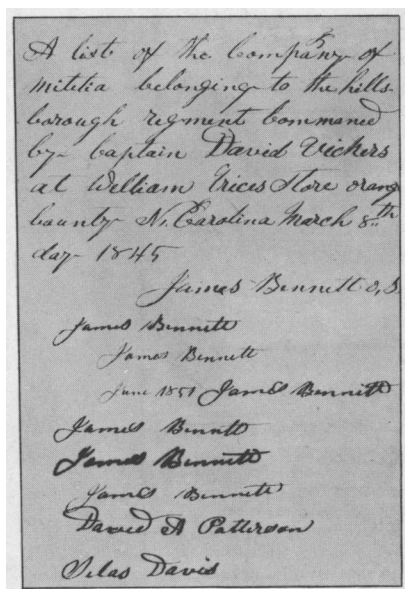
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This page from an almanac published in North Carolina is typical of the reading matter that flourished in the state during the antebellum period. James Bennitt was an avid reader of such publications. From *Turner & Hughes' North Carolina Almanac for the Year of Our Lord 1840* (Raleigh: Turner & Hughes, n.d.), p. 14, in Crabtree Jones Papers, Box PC 105.1, Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh.

James Bennitt also subscribed to a number of newspapers and magazines, regularly recording payments of "newspaper postage" in his ledger. From 1837 to 1841 he subscribed to a periodical entitled the *Saturday Chronicle* for \$2.00 per annum. Each February, beginning in 1841, Bennitt paid \$2.75 for his subscription to the local newspaper, the *Hillsborough Recorder*. Twenty-five cents sufficed for a year of *Wilson's Dispatch* in 1846; and in March, 1848, Bennitt began receiving a publication called the *Saturday Universe* at a cost of \$1.00 annually.⁹¹ That Bennitt bought books, received newspapers and magazines by mail, showed interest in the schooling of his progeny, and kept detailed business records demonstrated a substantial amount of intellectual attainment for his place and time.

These interests apparently improved his social status in a society in which a respected citizen was a man who worked hard, paid his taxes, obeyed the law, and drank in good humor. Bennitt must have achieved a measure of respect, for by 1845 he had been elected muster sergeant of his militia company. Such units usually demonstrated considerable consciousness of the existing social structure in the election of their leaders.⁹²



This "list of the Company of militia belonging to the hillsborough regiment Commanded by Captain David Vickers . . ." includes the recurring signature of James Bennitt. Bennitt, a sergeant in the unit, apparently affixed his signature to the list each time a muster was held. The dates of only two of the musters—March 8, 1845, and "June 1851"—are recorded on the face of the document. From James Bennitt Papers.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his apparent sophistication, James Bennitt was a ready customer for the patent medicines which flourished simultaneously with the rise of Jacksonian democracy.⁹³ He regularly paid 25 cents a box for Dr. Brandreth's Pills, a purgative that purportedly helped the blood remain pure,

⁹¹ Receipts in Bennitt Papers; Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

⁹² 1845 Muster Roll, Captain Vicker's Company, Hillsborough Militia Regiment, Bennitt Papers; Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 102, 120.

⁹³ John Duffy, "Medical Practice in the Ante-Bellum South," *Journal of Southern History*, XXV (February, 1959), 70.



This advertisement for "Dr. Brandreth's Pills" appeared in the November 12, 1846, issue of the *Hillsborough Recorder*.

thereby preventing disease. Dennis Heartt, publisher of the *Hillsborough Recorder*, advertised and distributed the wonder drug locally.⁹⁴ During 1845 some manner of illness visited the Bennitt household for which a doctor recommended carbonate of iron, an uncommon drug at that time. That the Bennitts consulted a professional suggests that many other efforts to effect a cure had failed.⁹⁵

During the 1850s the Bennitts made some money by selling their excess land and gained a new neighbor in the form of the North Carolina Railroad, which passed through the southern edge of the Bennitt tract.⁹⁶ The two boys grew up and left home. Lorenzo Bennitt married Martha Shields on August 2, 1858.⁹⁷ Their union soon produced two children, Uberty Jane (who later changed her name to Roberta) and James Lorenzo.⁹⁸ Although no marriage records exist for Alfonso, by 1860 only Eliza remained at home; she, however, married Robert Duke, an obscure brother of Washington Duke, on October 18, 1861.⁹⁹

For the Bennitts the Civil War became a personal tragedy. Lorenzo enlisted in Company G, Twenty-seventh North Carolina Infantry Regiment, on May 12, 1862, and within three weeks became quite ill. He was dispatched to the hospital in Winchester, Virginia, where he died of pneumonia in October. His widow received \$134.03 in compensation and back pay.¹⁰⁰

Whether his brother Alfonso served the southern cause has not been established, but his father conducted a sale of Alfonso's property on March 28, 1863, an indication of his death. The inventory of that auction shows that the younger

⁹⁴ *Hillsborough Recorder*, December 19, 1844; Bennitt account book, 1839-1849; James H. Young, *Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicines before Federal Regulation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 76-89.

⁹⁵ Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 752; Bennitt account book, 1839-1849.

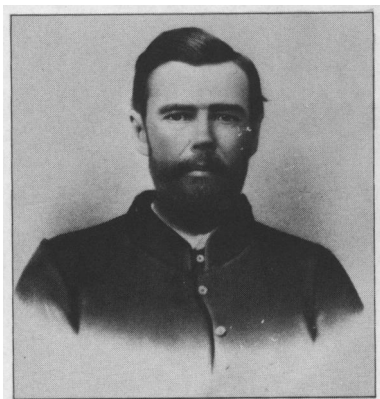
⁹⁶ Orange County Deeds, Book 34, p. 572; Book 35, pp. 46-47; Book 37, pp. 486-487.

⁹⁷ Jackson and others, N.C. Marriage Bonds Index.

⁹⁸ Bennitt Genealogical Chart, Bennitt Papers.

⁹⁹ Jackson and others, N.C. Marriage Bonds Index; Robert F. Durden, *The Dukes of Durham, 1865-1929* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), 3.

¹⁰⁰ Compiled Service Records.



Lorenzo Leigh Bennitt (ca. 1836-1862) was one of three children born to James and Nancy Bennitt. Photograph supplied by the author. The editors were unable to locate pictures of other members of the Bennitt family.

Bennitt avidly collected books but apparently did not engage in agricultural pursuits.¹⁰¹

James Bennitt's son-in-law, Robert Duke, signed up at age thirty-eight on March 2, 1863, as a private in Company E of the Forty-sixth North Carolina Infantry. Like his brother-in-law Lorenzo, he soon took ill and was confined in the hospital during most of 1864. Death found him in a Lynchburg, Virginia, infirmary in August, 1864.¹⁰² Eliza Bennitt Duke soon thereafter returned home with James, her child by Robert Duke. A second child, Nancy, was born out of wedlock in 1867.¹⁰³

The Civil War per se should have brought little change to the Bennitt farm, for the conflict produced an emphasis upon the same self-sufficient, foodstuff oriented production in which the Bennitts had long engaged,¹⁰⁴ but the postwar mutations in southern agriculture did manifest themselves on the tract. In 1869 the Bennitts owned but 1 horse, 1 "milch cow," 5 sheep, and 10 hogs. Their crop production included only 25 bushels of corn, 30 bushels of oats, 10 bushels of Irish and 50 of sweet potatoes. These figures represent an 86.5 percent decrease in corn and a 40 percent decline in oat productivity in the decade since the previous enumeration.¹⁰⁵

During the 1870s the aging Bennitts drew their income chiefly from the sale of potatoes, apples, and seed cotton. They also disposed of small parcels of land which they no longer could or desired to farm. In 1875 a tax collector credited James Bennitt with 175 acres, 1 horse, 3 cows, 6 hogs, and an aggregate value of real and personal property of \$676, less than one-half his 1860 net worth. Finally, in February, 1876, Bennitt entered into a sharecropping agreement for all his remaining farmland with Edward and John Leigh, almost certainly relatives of his wife.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Inventory of A. J. Bennitt's Estate, Orange County Estates Records, State Archives.

¹⁰² Compiled Service Records.

¹⁰³ Ninth Census, 1870: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 493; Population Schedule, 28.

¹⁰⁴ E. Merton Coulter, "The Movement for Agricultural Reorganization during the Civil War," *North Carolina Historical Review*, IV (January, 1927), 23-25.

¹⁰⁵ Ninth Census, 1870: Orange County, Agricultural Schedule, 493.

¹⁰⁶ Marginalia in 1873 *Almanac*; Orange County Deeds, Book 44, pp. 14, 15; Orange County Tax List, 1875, Duke Manuscript Department.

Articles of agreement between James Bennitt of the one
 part and Edward Leigh and John Leigh of the other part
 of the State of North Carolina and County Orange made by and
 between Edward Leigh and John Leigh they agree to tend
 my farm and agree to give the one third of the corn in the
 shucks they to have all the land they cleane up that has not
 been in tendance before two years for cleaning up
 they obligate cut split rails and do up
 the fence me to pay them one dollar for every
 hundred they split and put up to be paid out of
 of the crop given under our hands and seals
 this 2^d day of February 1876

James Bennitt
 Edward Leigh
 John Leigh

Test Eliya A Duke

[Signature]

Under this agreement, made on February 2, 1876, Edward and John Leigh pledged to tend James Bennitt's farm, to give him "one third of the corn in the shucks . . ." and to "cut split rails and do up the fence. . . ." In return Bennitt pledged to the Leighs "all the land they cl[e]an up that has not been in tend. . . ." The words "Proctor" and "Brown," written upside down on the document, appear to be penmanship exercises added at a later date.

James Bennitt remained a respected member of his community, serving on several county commissions to establish homesteads for the destitute.¹⁰⁷ He also apparently maintained his literary interests, becoming an early subscriber to Durham's first newspaper, the *Tobacco Plant*.¹⁰⁸ During February, 1878, Bennitt's entries in the almanac he then used as an account book ceased. It seems, therefore, that James Bennitt died during 1878. In the spring of 1879 his widow

¹⁰⁷ Orange County Deeds, Book 38, pp. 312, 322, 327.

¹⁰⁸ Marginalia in 1873 Almanac.

Nancy petitioned the county court for a year's allowance from his estate and was allotted \$226.45 worth of goods.¹⁰⁹ Nancy Bennitt hired a young laborer and continued to live on the property with her daughter and grandchildren.¹¹⁰ She apparently had died by 1884.¹¹¹

The popular and historiographical attention given to the planters and slaves in the Old South could easily lead one to believe that James Bennitt belonged to a class of people whose lives are of little significance.¹¹² The antebellum southern yeomen are neither as easy nor as romantic to study as the upper class and the slaves.¹¹³ These people of the "middling sort," however, perhaps hold the key to understanding the society and economy of the region.

¹⁰⁹ *Marginalia* in 1873 *Almanac*; Inventory of James Bennitt's Estate.

¹¹⁰ Tenth Census, 1880: Orange County, Population Schedule, 155.

¹¹¹ Hiram V. Paul, *History of the Town of Durham, N.C.* (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton and Company, 1884), xiv-xv.

¹¹² Bennitt has been held in such little regard that scholars have accepted and repeated grossly inaccurate accounts which claimed to tell his story. *News and Observer* (Raleigh), April 26, 1953; John G. Barrett, *Sherman's March through the Carolinas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 232.

¹¹³ Fabian Linden, "Economic Democracy in the Slave South: An Appraisal of Some Recent Views," *Journal of Negro History*, XXI (April, 1946), 140-189.