

Politics and Economics

Politics and economics have a long, and somewhat adversarial, relationship. If the economy is good, the politics of those in power looks good. If the economic outlook is bad, those in power look bad. It is a simple equation that still surprises politicians when disgruntled voters turn them out of office.

For most of the commonwealth's history, agriculture dominated the economy. Kentucky has some of the best soil in the nation. The climate is conducive to growing crops. From the earliest days of settlement, Kentucky represented a paradise for farmers.

Both private and public interest in the expansion of the state's agricultural potential began early. Agricultural societies abounded in Kentucky. State government encouraged agriculture as much as the budget would permit. The state began to issue reports on the status of Kentucky farms and farming.

The Kentucky Bureau of Agriculture published extensive studies of horticultural statistics. An example is the 1880 *Annual Report*. C.E. Bowman served as the state's agricultural commissioner in the administration of Governor Luke Pryor Blackburn. According to Bowman, there could be no better state for farming than Kentucky. One purpose of the agricultural reports was to promote immigration to the commonwealth. The population growth of the state had remained constant, but thousands of acres remained fallow due to the lack of enough farmers.

Some of the positive points that Bowman's 1880 report impressed included the excellence of the state's water resources. Bowman boasted the commonwealth's rivers and streams "exceeded those of any other state in the Federal Union." The rivers provided an excellent transportation system for the removal of timber and minerals.

Farm products in 1880 Kentucky consisted of Indian corn, wheat, rye, barley, oats, tobacco, and hemp. Bowman refers to these crops as the "staples" of the state. He informed his readers the Blue-grass section of the state grew the best hemp. According to Bowman, the hemp of central Kentucky remained unexcelled for its "strength, brightness, and softness of fiber." The hemp yielded 1,000 to 1,200 per acre. Although hemp grew well in the central part of Kentucky, Bowman promoted the rest of the state as well-suited to the cultivation of hemp.

Interestingly, Bowman reported that tobacco production had been virtually abandoned in central Kentucky for half a century. Tobacco planters proliferated in other sections of the commonwealth. Blue-grass area farmers had given up major tobacco cultivation as early as 1830. Before the 1830s, tobacco had been one of the major staples of central Kentucky farming. The chief inspection station for tobacco in the state had been located at the junction of the Dick's and Kentucky Rivers, "within sight of High Bridge." Extensive tobacco cultivation had only been abandoned due to the conversion of lands to hemp and cattle production.

Bowman lauded the mineral resources of Kentucky to his readers. “The Almighty has been lavish in His bounties to Kentucky in many ways,” he wrote, “but in none more than in her extensive coalfields.” He noted that it was indeed ridiculous to think that Kentuckians might be huddled around a few dying embers of a wood fire on a cold winter’s night, when all around them they could have their homes heated with a nearly inexhaustible supply of coal.

One of Kentucky’s other mineral resources consisted of mineral waters. The waters that flowed from springs such as Blue Licks, Estill, Rockcastle, Crab Orchard, Paroquet, and Alum, made Kentucky a center of the spa industry. Ladies and gentlemen paid handsomely for the privilege of drinking sulfuric tasting waters thought to be good for the health.

In 1880, the *Kentucky Agricultural Report* stated that no state offered better inducements to the immigrant than Kentucky. The price of farm labor averaged ten to fifteen dollars per month for both “white and colored labor.” However, the *Report* also noted that the laborers did experience different treatment.

According to Bowman’s statistics for Kentucky in 1880, the state had a population of between 1,500,000 and 1,600,000. Whites made up 1,400,000 of the population, while blacks numbered 200,000.

One of the great boons to Kentucky agriculture during the nineteenth century came from the establishment of an Agricultural and Mechanical College. James Kennedy Patterson (1833-1922), President of the Kentucky Agricultural and Mechanical College (later the University of Kentucky) in Lexington, wrote an extensive, and informative essay in the *Report* on the benefits of having a school dedicated to teaching the agricultural sciences.

“Kentucky,” Patterson wrote, had an “allotment of 330,000 acres of the public domain” for the funding of an agricultural and mechanical college. Patterson stated, “Kentucky could no longer ignore the claims of scientific education. She has boundless stores of coal and iron beneath her surface. Her lands, if properly cultivated, would furnish subsistence to a population ten times as large as her present population.”

Patterson challenged the commonwealth’s educational system to graduate students in production, inventions, and be discoverers. The state had enough lawyers, clergy, and doctors. Patterson proudly pointed out that his college had graduated 78 students in 1877-78, but the institution had matriculated 118 students in 1879-80, with hopes for 160 students by the next year.

Thomas S. Kennedy, president of the Kentucky Horticultural Society, added his essay in the 1880 *Report*, urging the citizens of the commonwealth to plant trees. As early as 1880, the forests of Kentucky and throughout the nation had been reduced to such levels as to cause extreme alarm among educators. A continuous effort to replant the depleted forests of America had to take place or the supply of timber would be gone by 1920.

Kennedy warned his generation “Should we neglect our duty in regard to this matter of tree-planting, or procrastinate the performance of it for a few years, or even insufficiently provide for future demand, we will be guilty of a great wrong to the next generation, and will inflict upon them an injury that will check the growth and prosperity of the whole nation.” The need for a steady supply of timber, as well as the need for forests to protect the water supplies of the state, and the nation, had become all too apparent by 1880.

Vineyards are not a new agricultural innovation in Kentucky. One of the earliest successful vineyards in the United States had been located in the state. Wine production, as a result of numerous Kentucky vineyards, could be a major source of income for Kentuckians. However, the temperance movement endeavored to halt the full-scale production of wine in the commonwealth.

The *Agricultural Report* argued that vineyards could withstand any of Kentucky’s winters. The winter of 1878-79 had been a severe one. Temperatures had plummeted to 28 degrees below zero. The intense cold had destroyed peach and plum trees, but some of the hardy grape vines had survived. Although Kentucky had always been considered a traditional agricultural state during the nineteenth century, the *Report* of 1880 had urged the state’s farmers to diversify if they were to remain solvent.

Kentucky agriculture may have declined from its preeminent status during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it remains a backbone of the Kentucky way of life. The lure of the land remains a mystical bond for Kentuckians. Most Kentuckians can easily find a farmer in their ancestry. King tobacco may have been deposed from its throne, but agriculture can no more be relegated to the past than the memory of Daniel Boone could be expunged from the commonwealth’s collective memory.

The future holds many opportunities for a rebirth of Kentucky agriculture. New crops and new ways of farming are awaiting those who wish to make their living from the land. Just as the experts of the 1880s envisioned a bright new day in the commonwealth’s agriculture, the experts of 2009 and 2010 must have a vision of agriculture that will be practical, as well as sustainable. The state’s colleges and universities must carry on with their research on profitable farming.

While we may grow nostalgic for the agrarian past, we live in an exciting and innovative age. Technology, conservation, and good old-fashioned American hard work could make Kentucky a world leader in agriculture.