

## EDITOR'S NOTE ON THE PARKER MANUSCRIPT

A manuscript copy of the paper by William Parker was given to John Komlos by Robert Gallman in 1985 while they temporarily overlapped at the University of North Carolina. Komlos was in the process of estimating food consumption trends in the United States in the antebellum period for his paper on the “Height and Weight of West Point Cadets” which was eventually published in the *Journal of Economic History*. Parker’s paper had handwritten annotations for a talk that he must have given in 1956 or 1957. It occurred to Komlos – several decades later – that it would be a pity if the study remained unpublished and Komlos contacted me about the possibility that the paper might appear in *Research in Economic History*.

As Editor, I turned for advice to Paul Rhode, who recommended publication, and suggested that we explore the Archives of the Yale University Library to see whether Komlos’s was the only or most definitive copy. After a little detective work (Tim Guinnane contributed here) a second almost identical copy of the manuscript turned up. Komlos notes that it is a mystery why Parker never published these results that must have taken some considerable effort to weave together.

Parker was a professor at the University of North Carolina and listed this affiliation as well as Resources for the Future when he wrote the paper. He was the Phillip G. Bartlett Professor Emeritus of Economics and Professor Emeritus of American Studies at Yale University when he died in April of 2000. Paul Rhode provides additional background information.

This paper brings into the public sphere a classic work by William Parker that has entered into the ongoing debates over the “antebellum food puzzle” but has previously circulated only as an unpublished working paper. This version dates to 1955 and is from William Nelson Parker papers, Special Collections, Yale University Library.<sup>1</sup> This paper provides estimates of per capita US food consumption in the period before the official USDA statistics. This work predates and pushes the numbers back further than the well-known analysis of M. K. Bennett and R. H. Pierce.<sup>2</sup> Over the period he considers, Parker shows American diets tended to shift away from molasses, cornmeal,

and pork toward refined sugar, citrus, and poultry and dairy products. Consumption of potatoes, wheat flour, and beef held roughly steady.

A key issue is the trend in pork consumption. The Census and state sources provide counts of the number of animals. But to generate meat production and consumption levels, one needs weights as well. So in this paper, Parker contributes to another controversy, one Lee Craig has deemed the oldest continuing debate in cliometrics. Namely, how much did hogs in antebellum and early postbellum America weigh? Estimating average slaughter weights quickly becomes entangled with issues such as the dressed-to-live-weight ratios, the regional differences in animal husbandry practices, and the changing seasonality of swine slaughter relative to the date of enumeration in the Census. Accounting for the hog-corn cycle adds to the complexity.

I recall a story that Gallman told about Parker and this paper, one which reflects on how the places of economic historians in the history and economics professions have changed. Apparently Parker presented this work before both the Econometrics Society and the American Historical Association in very short succession. In each case, Parker emphasized the material opposite from the audience's predilections – pushing the narrative historical side to the econometrics crowd and the statistics to the historians. As partial support for this recollection, I note that Parker did present a paper entitled “Trends in Food Consumption in the United States, 1870–1910: An Experiment in Econometrical History” at the Atlantic City meetings of the Econometrics Society in September 1957. According to the abstract: “The most striking results of the measurements are the indications of a declining per capita consumption of meat (resulting from a fall in pork consumption) and of flour (from a fall in cornmeal consumption). The data and the assumptions used to calculate the trend of pork consumption are fully set forth to illustrate the methods used.”<sup>3</sup> What was old is now new and noteworthy.

## NOTES

1. For the paper's place in the literature, note that Robert E. Gallman, “Dietary Change in Antebellum America,” *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (March, 1996), pp. 193–201, cites it in response to John Komlos, “Heights and Weights of West Point Cadets: Dietary Change in Antebellum America,” *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (1987), pp. 897–927. The Yale version has the same text as that Gallman possessed and circulated, but lacks the presentation notes. In the Parker collection finding aid, this item (no. 12) does not bear the warning accompanying item no. 42: “Preliminary Draft-not to be quoted or used in any way; to be read skimingly, it [sic] at all.”

2. M. K. Bennett and R. H. Pierce, "Change in the American National Diet, 1879–1959," *Food Research Institute Studies* 2 (May 1961), pp. 95–119.

3. *Econometrica*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (April, 1958), p. 320. This account is not definitive because Parker presented another paper, "A Statistical Framework for American Agricultural History, 1840–1910," at the St. Louis meeting of the Econometrics Society in December 1960 and I (Paul Rhode) have found no indication of presentations before the AHA.

Alexander J. Field

*Editor*

with contributions from  
John Komlos and Paul Rhode