

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK takes its title from an old Protestant hymn, “We Gather Together,” often sung at American Thanksgiving church services. The hymn originated in seventeenth-century Holland where initially it had nothing to do with harvest from the fields. Instead it commemorated a gathering of a different sort, an assembly of soldiers and citizens celebrating the Anglo-Dutch victory over Spanish forces in the crucial Battle of Turnhout in 1597, which helped end Spanish rule over the Netherlands. The hymn was first published in a 1626 collection of Dutch folk and patriotic songs, *Nederlandtsche Gedenck-Clanck*, assembled by Adriaen Valerius. The verses are redolent of military, not agricultural, activity—“So from the beginning the fight we were winning”—yet it also seems apt for the seasonal harvest of life-sustaining yield from fields and forests, seas and streams.

In early America that harvest was often celebrated as a communal undertaking, the “we” working “together” for a common weal. Collaboration sustained life and community for generations as rural, agrarian—and white—America provided the foundation for a culture that persisted well into the nineteenth century. (The population of Black slaves was clearly not included in this communitarian ideal.) In January 1840, on the order of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, Henry Colman, the state’s commissioner of agricultural survey, convened a special meeting of legislators, government officials, and others interested in the current

condition of agriculture in the state. Commissioner Colman had called for the special session to gather ideas for enhancement of the state's agricultural yields. He was concerned that Massachusetts's harvests lagged behind those of newer states in the West, and that farmers had yielded their traditional economic primacy to manufacturing and trade interests.

Among the participants in this well-attended session was Senator Daniel Webster, public servant, gentleman farmer, and orator extraordinaire. He rose to demur, declaring that "Man may be civilized, in some degree, without great progress in manufactures, and with little commerce with his distant neighbors. But without the cultivation of the earth, he is, in all countries, a savage. Until he steps from the chase, and fixes himself in some place, and seeks a living from the earth, he is a roaming barbarian. Let us not forget," Webster urged, "that the cultivation of the earth is the most important labor of man." He concluded with his famous declaration: "When tillage begins, other arts will follow. The farmers, therefore, are the founders of civilization."¹

By the end of the nineteenth century advances by and for America's so-called "founders of civilization" were being admired by visitors to large public spectacles like Philadelphia's Centennial Exposition and the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In both cases impressive progress in agriculture and its associated mechanical inventions shared attention with other displays of "civilization," which prominently included the visual arts. The author Hamlin Garland was stirred by such attractions at the Chicago exposition and subsequently invoked an agricultural metaphor when he called for fellow creative artists to attend to local color in their work. "The fatal blight upon most American art," he wrote, "has been, and is to-day, its imitative quality, which has kept it characterless and factitious—a forced rose-culture rather than the free flowering of native plants." He rejoiced then to discover some who had escaped that fault: "To-day we have in America, at last, a group of writers who have no suspicion of imitation laid upon them. Whatever fault they may be supposed to have, they are at any rate themselves. . . . The corn has flowered and the cotton-boll has broken into speech."²

A generation later the poet Robert Frost chose a different crop analogy by which to explain his craft. He likened an author of "really good literature . . . [to] a fellow who goes into the fields to pull carrots. He keeps on pulling them patiently enough until he finds a carrot that suggests