

## GROSS FARM REVENUE IN PRE-CIVIL WAR ILLINOIS

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The purpose of this study was to estimate the annual agricultural income for Illinois for the period between 1839-1859. While the focus of the work was not directed toward business history, certain relevant facts emerge.

The Federal censuses of agriculture were used to set relative orders of magnitudes. The annual estimates were derived from trade and commercial reports for Chicago and St. Louis that either appeared separately or were reproduced in such journals as *Hunt's Merchant Magazine* or *Debow's Review*. Annual interpolations were then calculated, based on the assumption that exports from the state were a constant percentage of output for the years between the censuses. These total output estimates were compared with yearly reports of crop production which appeared in *The Patent Reports* and especially in *The Prairie Farmer*. The acreage estimates were based on regression analysis, using crop outputs and total improved acreage as reported in the censuses. These estimates were interpolated for the intercensus years, using Federal land sales plus Illinois Central land sales during the 1850s.

Conclusions may be summarized briefly as follows: first, wheat yields per acre given by contemporary reports were well within reach of the best or perhaps even the good farmers during good years. The same statement cannot be made for the reported corn yields. The computed wheat yields vary between 8.9 bushels per acre in 1852 and 20.5 in 1847. Corn yields varied between 15.5 bushels per acre in 1858 and 42.9 in 1855. These results are the most important for the business historian (assuming that agriculture is a business), for they permit him to judge the reliability of the many contemporary reports that have been preserved.

Second, the 1849 and 1859 crop years (7th and 8th Censuses) were not the best years of their previous decades. Both the 1847 and 1848 wheat outputs were probably 20 percent higher than 1849. The 1856 wheat output was somewhat higher than in 1859 and the 1857 output is estimated to have been more than 40 percent higher than that of 1859. With respect to corn, 1847 and 1848 were both better years than 1849; 1848 was better by as much as

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25 percent. Corn output in 1853 was almost as good as in 1859, and the corn output for 1855 is estimated to have been 140 million bushels compared to 115 million bushels for the 1859 crop year.

Third, census data need to be checked. Casual inspection indicated an error of more than ten percent in the number of "other cattle" (probably 100,000) for the Eighth Census as well as another error for the same census of approximately ten percent in the reported number of hogs (probably 200,000), yet almost no secondary sources indicate these errors.

Fourth, during the early 1840s the Patent Office made estimates of state grain outputs. A comparison with Indiana indicates that these estimates are not accurate. Corn outputs were probably underestimated for both states, as were the Illinois, but not the Indiana, wheat outputs. Other outputs were often greatly exaggerated. A comparison of the Indiana and Illinois estimates, together with the fact that Henry Ellsworth, the Commissioner of Patents, had large amounts of Indiana land for sale, raises suspicions.

Finally, farm output grew slightly faster in the 1840s than in the following decade. Illinois historians have generally not thought of the 1840s as a particularly prosperous era, but that conclusion seems to be in error.

It should be emphasized that while census data may be of value to the business or economic historian, he should take care to be sure that the reports do not contain obvious errors and that the census years are representative for the purposes of his study.