

# Rural Development Trends and Opportunities for Historic Preservation

..... James Lindberg

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than 80 percent of the nation's land area is rural. Some 56 million people live in rural places—about 20 percent of the total U.S. population. Historically, America's rural areas have been idealized as refuges of stability and tradition or mocked as isolated backwaters, far removed from the currents of modern society. Neither stereotype is accurate. Today rural communities are undergoing profound changes resulting from major economic, cultural, and demographic shifts.

These changes threaten our rural heritage, but in ways that often go unnoticed. Over the years, the transformation of the rural landscape has been slower, more isolated, and less dramatic than changes to urban neighborhoods and downtowns. Yet the impacts are equally significant. For example:

- Although they make up less than 1 percent of the population, America's farmers and ranchers are stewards of some 46 percent of the nation's land and the vast majority of our

settled "cultural landscape."<sup>1</sup> Not unlike independent merchants on Main Street, family farmers and ranchers are struggling to compete in a market dominated by corporate giants. Many are giving up or selling to developers. Farmland is disappearing at the rate of two million acres annually and many historic agricultural buildings sit empty.<sup>2</sup>

- Nearly 90 percent of the nation's 19,289 incorporated places are towns with fewer than 10,000 residents.<sup>3</sup> Many of these towns are fighting for economic survival, placing thousands of small Main Street commercial districts and many surrounding older neighborhoods at risk.

- Thousands of historic rural schools, churches, post offices, town halls, and other institutions have closed in recent years due to consolidations and population shifts. If uses are not found soon, many of these landmarks will disappear.

Despite this gloomy picture, there is reason for optimism. The economic forces behind these threats are causing

many rural leaders and policy-makers to re-examine their plans for the future. Business as usual isn't working very well. More and more rural communities are looking for new ways to create sustainable economies, based on local and regional assets. Historic preservation has much to offer to these efforts and much to gain in return.

As we consider how historic preservation can play an even larger role in helping to revitalize rural communities and preserve historic landscapes, it may be useful to review the demographic and economic forces that are affecting rural areas.

## What Is Rural?

Useful definitions of the term rural are elusive. Dozens of articles and papers have been written on subject, with little agreement to be found. Often rural is defined by explaining what it is not. The Census Bureau, for example, defines rural as those places *not* part of a town or city of 2,500 residents or more. The Office of Management and Budget defines rural as counties that do *not* include cities over 50,000 (Metropolitan Statistical Areas). By this measure, 2,052 of the nation's 3,141 counties are categorized as



non-metro and therefore rural.

Over the years the Census Bureau has tracked other categories related to rural areas. Until 1890, for example, counties with populations of fewer than six people per square mile were categorized as “frontier.” In 2003 a new census category was introduced: “micropolitan” counties. These are counties without a city of over 50,000 residents, but with at least one city of between 10,000 and 50,000 residents. In 2003 there were 674 counties that qualified to move from rural to the new micropolitan classification.

When both the micropolitan and metropolitan counties are added together, what are left over are those places that some call “deep rural” counties. This rural core includes about 17 million peo-

*Rural sprawl in northern Virginia. Photo by James Lindberg.*



*Abandoned farmsteads like this one in South Dakota can be found throughout the Great Plains states. Photo by James Lindberg.*

ple—six percent of the nation’s population—and covers much of the Great Plains, interior portions of intermountain West, as well as counties in the Mississippi Delta, central Appalachia, and northern New England.

## Rural Demographics

Contrasting “have” and “have not” scenarios are playing out across rural America. About one-third of the nation’s rural counties are in decline, characterized by high rates of depopulation and abandonment along with rising levels of unemployment, poverty, and crime. Other rural landscapes, including those on the exurban fringe and in “high amenity” recreation areas, are experiencing population growth

and sprawling development that threaten to eliminate the rural qualities that made them attractive to new residents in the first place.

The divide between rural winners and losers is becoming increasingly stark. “We are headed back to a rural America of the rich and the poor—of resorts and pockets of persistent poverty,” suggests Karl Stauber, president of the Northwest Area Foundation and a former Department of Agriculture official.<sup>4</sup> Here are some other statistics about rural America:

- There are only four states where a majority of the population lives in rural places: Maine, Mississippi, Vermont, and West Virginia.<sup>5</sup>
- Texas has the largest number of rural residents, followed by Pennsylvania and North Carolina.<sup>6</sup>
- The average rural resident is three years older than the average metropolitan dweller.<sup>7</sup>
- The Hispanic population is growing 10 percent faster in rural areas than in urban areas and is responsible for 25 percent of all rural population growth.<sup>8</sup>
- Rural household income is about 25 percent less than in metropolitan households.<sup>9</sup>
- 244 of the nation’s 250

poorest counties are rural.<sup>10</sup>

- While the number of drug-related homicides dropped by 50 percent in urban areas between 1990 and 2000, it tripled in rural areas during the same period.<sup>11</sup>

As these figures indicate, a significant portion of the nation's rural areas are struggling to overcome social problems similar to those found in many inner-city neighborhoods, including persistent poverty and rising levels of drug use and crime. These conditions present major challenges to rural development efforts.

## Areas of Growth: Rural Sprawl

The phrases “urban sprawl” and “suburban sprawl” are commonly used to describe how large metropolitan areas are expanding into previously rural countryside. A slightly different development pattern is what some label “rural sprawl.” A recent Brookings Institution study of growth trends in Missouri found that unincorporated “open country” areas in the state grew 50 percent faster than cities and towns. Seventy-one percent of all growth in the state's rural counties occurred outside the borders of established towns.<sup>12</sup>

Rural sprawl is generally more dispersed and often less noticeable than the construction of one-thousand-home subdivisions or new shopping malls. Yet the impacts on rural landscapes are equally significant. As land is divided into thirty-five, ten-, and five-acre farms and ranchettes, land prices and property taxes begin to rise and conflicts between residential and agricultural uses increase. Eventually, productive agriculture is no longer viable and the only possible future is more sprawl.

## Areas of Decline: Rural Abandonment

Nearly 700 rural counties lost population during the 1990s, including portions of northern Maine, central Appalachia, the lower Mississippi Delta, and a large swath of counties in the Great Plains stretching from the Canadian border all the way south into Texas. For many of these counties, the population loss of the 1990s was not a new trend. Most Great Plains counties have been watching their census numbers fall since the Dust Bowl days of the Depression. The slow slide has left 261 Great Plains counties—an area larger than Germany and France combined—with fewer

than six residents per square mile, which meets the old definition of a “frontier” county.<sup>13</sup>

## Economic Shifts

Behind these demographic statistics are several major economic changes. The “old economy” employers in many rural areas—agriculture, textiles, logging, and mining—are all in decline. More than 800,000 textile and apparel jobs were lost in the last decade, with most of the layoffs affecting small cities and towns in the southeast.<sup>14</sup> Farming, once the leading rural occupation, now employs less than 8 percent of rural residents. The number of farms has dropped from 6.3 million in 1930 to 2.1 million today.<sup>15</sup> Federal farm subsidies that reward large, specialized commodity producers have pushed thousands of farm families off the landscape.

With agricultural and resource dependent employment in decline, many rural community leaders are realizing that they must re-invent themselves economically. “Put simply, many parts of rural America face a make or break period in the coming years,” notes a rural expert from the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City.<sup>16</sup>

## Rural Development Strategies

In 2000 the Federal Reserve convened a meeting of more than 250 rural leaders and experts from across the country to discuss the future of rural America. A variety of strategies were presented, but “there was general agreement that a new path is essential if rural America is to seize its full economic potential.”<sup>17</sup>

Traditional rural development paths, such as industrial recruitment, no longer work very well. In the 1970s and '80s, communities in the South and West succeeded in drawing manufacturers away from the Midwest and Northeast with promises of cheap land and low-wage labor. Now those same incentives are causing many manufacturers to move overseas. As a result, the competition for the limited number of new plants is even greater. “Each year some 25,000 economic development committees from large and small cities bid for about 500 major plant sitings—a 50 to 1 ratio,” according to the Rocky Mountain Institute.<sup>18</sup> Even with massive financial incentives, recruited firms may leave after a few years.

In desperation, some rural communities have turned to more controversial develop-

ment alternatives, such as slaughterhouses, prisons, casinos, and even toxic waste dumps. Although new jobs may be created in these industries, they are purchased at considerable social, community, and environmental expense.

Among rural development professionals, there is a growing consensus that future economic vitality will result from developing local entrepreneurs, not chasing smokestacks and feedlots. “Creating a culture of entrepreneurialism may be the last best chance to rescue rural America from its long, slow slide to economic and political obsolescence,” observes Karl Stauber of the Northwest Area Foundation.<sup>19</sup> The knowledge-based “creative economy” that many urban areas are trying to foster will be just as important to rural areas in the future. “Increasingly, wherever intelligence clusters, in small town or big city, in any geographic location, that is where wealth will accumulate,” writes journalist Joel Kotkin.<sup>20</sup>

## Place-Based Economic Development

A key question is: How do rural areas develop, attract, and retain creative entrepreneurs? One response is to make rural

communities attractive places to live. “Rural places must continue to capitalize on quality of life attributes to capture high-skilled activities,” notes the Federal Reserve Bank’s *Main Street Economist*.<sup>21</sup>

The Brookings Institution economic study for Pennsylvania advises, “tailoring of state economic development initiatives to local and regional needs should allow rural areas to prosper in more distinctive niches—whether in heritage tourism or higher value agriculture—instead of pursuing the one-size-fits all solution of strip-mall sprawl.”<sup>22</sup>

One of the concepts often mentioned regarding the new rural economy is “place-based development.” The idea is that rather than focusing on specific economic sectors, such as agriculture or manufacturing, development strategies should build on the existing assets of rural communities: human, cultural, historic, and environmental. This is a familiar notion to historic preservationists, who have long advocated for greater appreciation of each community’s unique character.

Perhaps more than ever before, historic preservation is well positioned to contribute significantly to rural economic development efforts. We can begin by pointing to a strong

track record, such as the proven success of the Main Street Program. Recent trends, including the emergence of the sustainable agriculture movement and the growing interest in protecting working landscapes, offer opportunities for new partnerships and increased impact in rural areas. Below are a few areas where historic preservation can help foster sustainable, place-based rural economic development.

## Supporting Sustainable Agriculture

A new era of agricultural entrepreneurialism is underway on the nation's farms and ranches. Tired of competing with subsidized agri-business, a growing number of farmers and ranchers are turning to agricultural practices that are environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable. Sustainable agriculture includes production for organic, specialty, niche, and direct local markets. These markets are growing. Consumer demand for certified organic food is increasing 25 percent annually and now represents nearly 2 percent of the total food market.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps even more important is the new emphasis on purchasing food that is grown locally, which helps to



preserve distinctive cultural landscapes and traditions. "Buy Local" networks are forming in many states, linking producers directly to families, restaurants, and groceries. The *Boston Globe* recently described how purchases from regional producer co-ops in western Massachusetts and Connecticut are helping "family farms stay in business, rather than selling to developers. Who would have known that by buying the southern Connecticut peaches, you were doing your bit to curb sprawl."<sup>24</sup> As urban markets for local agriculture products expand, so does awareness of the surrounding rural landscape, economy, and heritage.

Sustainable agriculture is generally small scale and well-suited to older farms and

*The number of farmer's markets has doubled since 1994, now totalling nearly 4,000 nationwide. These markets provide additional profits for producers and connect consumers to the local rural landscape. Photo by James Lindberg.*



*Residents of Cottonwood Falls, Kans. (pop. 966) came together to open the Emma Chase Cafe on Main Street, where free concerts are held every Friday night during the summer. Photo by Peter Grant.*

ranches that may retain historic structures. Sustainable practices are often based on “old fashioned” methods that utilize these older barns and outbuildings. A recent National Trust BARN AGAIN! survey of local producers found that more than 90 percent were using historic structures for their operations. Reusing older structures instead of building new helps lower capital costs, which is critical for new entrepreneurs. Sustainable producers can also feature historic structures in their marketing materials.

### Preserving Working Landscapes

Rural development leaders, conservation groups, and preservation organizations are

finding common ground in their desire to preserve “working landscapes.” Supporting economically viable farms, ranches, and forests not only protects scenic and cultural assets, it also helps to maintain a viable rural economy. “A growing number of New England communities are realizing that one way to preserve rural character and heritage is to take a stronger role in stabilizing and fostering active, productive family farms,” notes the New Hampshire Office of State Planning.<sup>25</sup> The acquisition of conservation easements that allow continued use of the land and historic structures for agriculture is one way to accomplish this goal.

In Rhode Island, Historic New England manages the 18th-century Casey Farm as a community supported agriculture (CSA) operation. About 200 area families purchase “shares” of the farm’s vegetables, fruits, herbs, and flowers each year, which guarantees enough income to pay for planting, harvesting, and maintenance of the historic farm landscape. Since the concept was developed in the 1980s, the national CSA network has grown to more than 1,000 farms, each providing a way for consumers to directly support local producers.

## Growing Main Street Entrepreneurs

“For much of the past half century, rural development has been driven by twin incentives aimed at business recruitment and retention. This strategy is no longer working so well, however, for one simple reason—globalization,” notes the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. “Now, more and more rural regions are turning their attention to the third leg of the development stool—growing more businesses on Main Street.”<sup>26</sup>

Of course the Main Street Program has been doing just that since 1980, creating some 67,000 jobs nationwide. By identifying market niches and matching business needs to affordable spaces in historic structures, even very small towns have found ways to create new businesses. Community-owned enterprises are another option for small towns. Rather than relying on outsiders to do it for them, local citizens band together to start and run stores that otherwise would not be available. The Powell Mercantile in downtown Powell, Wyo., is owned and operated by community investors who wanted an alternative to Wal-Mart. In North Dakota, a study found 25 active theaters in tiny rural

towns across the state; 60 percent were community-owned and operated.<sup>27</sup>

Regional strategies are working as well. North Carolina-based Handmade in America has established the Institute for Creative Economies to help rural communities grow new businesses around local heritage, arts, crafts, and traditions.

## Encouraging Cultural Heritage Tourism

Especially in areas without natural amenities such as mountains, lakes, or seashores, rural tourism is cultural heritage tourism. According to the Travel Industry Association of America, some 87 million people—nearly two-thirds of all American adults—took a trip to a rural destination within the last three years.

By combining what are often the two largest sectors in the rural economy, agri-tourism has great potential for rural communities. Growing numbers of producers are finding that tourism is an effective way to supplement farm and ranch incomes. A USDA study in Vermont found that one-third of the state’s 6,600 farms were involved in agri-tourism. Each farm received an average of nearly \$8,900 from tourism activities in 2002—an

86 percent increase from just two years earlier.<sup>28</sup> More than two-thirds of England’s farmers rely on tourist income of some kind to maintain their way of life. Ten percent take in overnight guests.<sup>29</sup> Properly managed, agri-tourism can help alternative and sustainable producers reach a larger market and strengthen connections between urban and rural areas.

Regional heritage areas and recreational trail corridors also offer great potential for place-based rural development. In Pennsylvania, the Lancaster-York State Heritage Region was established in part to promote and support local food producers, including many that operate historic farmsteads. The newly established Blue Ridge National Heritage Area in North Carolina will highlight local culture, craft, music, and agriculture. The Great Allegheny Passage, a rails-to-trails project connecting Cumberland, Md., to Pittsburgh, Pa., is bringing travelers to small “Trail Towns” along a 150-mile corridor.

## Conclusion

Added together, these and other place-based approaches to rural development are shaping a more hopeful outlook for

rural America. Many creative individuals and organizations are working hard to realize exciting visions for their rural communities and regions. They face daunting challenges, however. Now is a critical time for historic preservationists to encourage, support, and join rural development efforts. Working together, we can conserve our heritage and revitalize our rural communities.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marlow Vesterby and Kenneth S. Krupa, "Major Land Uses in the United States, 1997," U.S. Department of Agriculture, Statistical Bulletin 973.

<sup>2</sup> American Farmland Trust figures.

<sup>3</sup> 2000 U.S. Census figures.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Stauber, "Why Invest in Rural America—and How? A Critical Policy Question for the 21st Century," *Economic Review*, Second Quarter, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> 2000 U.S. Census figures.

<sup>6</sup> 2000 U.S. Census figures.

<sup>7</sup> Economic Research Service, USDA.

<sup>8</sup> William Kandel and John Cromartie, "New Patterns of Hispanic Settlement in Rural America," ERS Research Brief, June 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Economic Research Service, USDA.

<sup>10</sup> "Recommendations to the Millennial Housing Commission," National Rural Housing Coalition, June 30, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Egan, "Pastoral Poverty: The Seeds of Decline," *New York Times*, December 8, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> "Growth in the Heartland: Challenges and Opportunities for Missouri," The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Brian Hansen, "Crisis on the Plains," *The Congressional Quarterly Researcher* 13, no. 18, (May 9, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> *Rural America at a Glance*, 2005, Economic Research Service, USDA.

<sup>15</sup> Economic Research Service, USDA.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Drabbenstott, "Meeting a New Century of Challenges in Rural America," Center for the Study of Rural America, Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Drabbenstott, "Beyond Agriculture: New Policies for Rural America—A Conference Summary," Center for the Study of Rural America, Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> *The Economic Renewal Guide*, 3rd Edition (Snowmass, Colo.: Rocky Mountain Institute, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> Karl Stauber, "Why Invest in Rural America—and How?"

<sup>20</sup> Joel Kotkin, *The New Geography: How the Digital Revolution is Re-Shaping the American Landscape* (New York: Random House, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Jason Henderson and Stephan Weiler, "Beyond Cows and Corn: Rural America in the 21st Century," *The Main Street Economist*, Center for the Study of Rural America, Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, October 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Muro, "Greener Pastures: Rural, urban areas have common cause in fight to prosper," *Harrisburg Patriot-News*, May 2, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Economic Research Service, USDA.

<sup>24</sup> Anthony Flint, "Move over, organic. A new socially conscious food movement wants to reset the American table," *The Boston Globe*, August 15, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> "Preserving Rural Character: The Agriculture Connection," New Hampshire Office of State Planning, Revised Technical Bulletin, Winter 2000.

<sup>26</sup> "Main Streets of Tomorrow: Growing and Financing Rural Entrepreneurs," *The Main Street Economist*, Center for the Study of Rural America, Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, June 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Tim Kennedy, "Great Plains Little Theater Project," at [www.ndsu.nodak.edu/ndsu/gplt](http://www.ndsu.nodak.edu/ndsu/gplt).

<sup>28</sup> "Vermont Agri-tourism 2002," New England Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA, April 30, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Statistics from David Fisher, "More farmers are turning to tourist trade for livelihood," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 31, 2002.