CHAPTER V.

SIZE OF FARMS AND ESTATES.

In studying the size of estates[86] for an early period either for the state of Wisconsin or Dane county, it is necessary to notice several chapters of contemporaneous history. To begin with, the movement of settlers to this district began at a time when wild-cat banking was at its height, when paper money was as easily made as paper cities, and both were offered on long time, easy terms, and small payments. Several of these paper towns contended for the location of the capital of the new territory, which had been cut off from Michigan in 1836, and within a few weeks it was located at the Four Lakes. This was by no means an accident, for although hardly a man on the territorial council had seen the spot, or even knew where it was, there were at least two men who knew very definitely—these were the governor of Michigan and the man destined to be the first governor of Wisconsin. Their powers of persuasion exceeded that of any of the rival aspirants, each of whom had the best possible site for the city which was variously located from Des Moines, Iowa, to Green Bay, Wisconsin. Be that as it may, the location of the capital city at Madison had a direct influence on the adjacent country, and during the same year a large amount of land was purchased, proximity to the new city being the main desideratum. The size of the purchases ranged all the way from single forties taken by men who carried the chain in surveying

[86] The term estate is used to mean the amount of land owned by one person. On the size of the estates, which is surely an exceedingly important item, involving as it does the subdivision or concentration as the case may be, in land ownership, the censuses are uniformly silent. In the report of the eleventh census (see "Agriculture by Irrigation," p. 1) this matter is disposed of by the naïve remark that "a person can have ~~but~~ one farm unless the estate is so large as to require a resident farmer upon each tract."

parties, to half a dozen sections gobbled up by eastern politicians, prominent among whom was Daniel Webster, who for a time owned the land on which Stoughton now stands. The average size of these purchases was somewhat above six hundred acres.

SIZE OF FARMS ACCORDING TO CENSUS REPORTS.

We will pass over a considerable number of years including the panic of 1837 and the period of slow recovery which followed, since they furnish nothing of importance to our subject. Sales practically ceased for a year or so; many of the large estates changed hands frequently and by 1850 few of them remained. During the early '50's the influx of Germans and Norwegians directly from Europe, having but little ready cash, resulted in a multitude of small purchases, and in 1854 the average purchase was ninety-two ocres; this was raised very materially above what it otherwise would have been by several extensive purchases by speculating companies. There are no figures available, but a study of the old entry-book, the various plats for the '60's, together with the manuscript census returns for 1870 show that these settlers added to their original homesteads an occasional forty or eighty. This is well indicated in the census reports, it appearing that the farms below fifty acres decreased in number about sixteen per cent., while those above that increased nearly sixty per cent. Again, in 1860 the farms between twenty and fifty acres not only ranked first in numbers but comprised by far the largest aggregate acreage, while in 1870 those from fifty to one hundred acres exceeded the smaller class in the aggregate area and also outnumbered them.

The census returns for 1880 and 1890 throw very little additional light on the question under consideration; there is, however, a steady falling off of the number of farms below one hundred acres[87] and a corresponding gain of those above that figure from 1870 to 1890. So far as the small farms are concerned this showing is no doubt correct and not wholly without meaning,

[87] See note at beginning of this chapter. It is impossible to discuss this subject without some comparison with the census returns, but it must not be forgotten that *estate* and *farm* are two distinct things, although they do not in the towns worked out minutely (see below), differ widely in number and are for the most part identical.

but not so much can be said of the larger ones. Here we have a group from one to five hundred acres inclusive, and in 1890 nearly three-fifths of the farms in Dane county fell within these limits, but it signifies next to nothing beyond the bare fact that farms had on the average increased in size. Within these wide limits are comprised the hundred-acre farms which are by no means few, the hundred-twenty-acre, the hundred-sixty, the two-hundred, and the two-hundred-forty acre farms all of which are commonly met with, not to mention the half-sections which appear in every township. All of these are dumped promiscuously together as though it were of but slight consequence what changes happened so long as the acreage remained above the hundred mark, yet the average for the year 1890 was one hundred twenty-four acres; thus the major part of all farms are, so far as classification is concerned, within this wholesale grouping. However, there are a few above and below these limits that reveal some general tendencies. For example, there were four farms above five hundred acres in 1860; in 1870 these had disappeared; in 1880 there were forty-three of the size mentioned, while in 1890 they had dropped to twenty-eight. Turning to the other end of the list we find the number of farms of twenty acres and less decreasing until 1880 and then increasing some twenty-five per cent. by 1890. These results are not beyond explanation. The small farms were not suitable to wheat culture and especially when that crop began to fail these little farmers got rid of their few acres as best they could and went farther west or gave up farming altogether. With the advent of the tobacco industry the small farm was given a new lease of life, and odd scraps, or even portions of large farms were brought up and turned into tobacco farms. It is not so easy to speak definitely regarding the unusually large tracts.

As stated, there were four farms of over five hundred acres in 1860. The number is small at most, and part of these consisted of poor, undesirable land which had hardly advanced beyond government price. The lack of any further tendency toward concentration in ownership is of more consequence than the mere disappearance of these four large pieces by 1870.

As explained in another connection the value of land failed to respond to the general rise in prices during the period of greenback inflation, and hence was not a favorite object of investment,

railroad bonds and the like taking precedence. The soldiers were inclined to do business on a larger scale than they had been contented with before, and this tendency was manifested in at least two lines; they either sold their small farms and went west or they bought out their neighbors and so increased their acres. These causes together with financial changes resulted in a rise in the price of land finally, and by 1880 the large farms of over five hundred acres had risen to forty-three, the greatest number since the early days of speculation. The average size of farms for the county at this date was one hundred twenty-eight acres. The falling off of large farms during the period since 1880 will easily come within the more detailed discussion of the different parts of the county.

SIZE OF ESTATES IN A FEW REPRESENTATIVE TOWNS.

The data on which the following comparisons are based are taken from the manuscript census reports of 1870, from the Dane County Atlas, by Foote & Company, of 1890, and the Atlas by L. W. Gay & Company, 1899. These are fortunate dates, the first being about on the dividing line between the wheat period and the time of diversified farming, and the atlases dropping in so closely to the census dates since that time.[88]

Eight towns chosen with reference to physiographic and social conditions have been considered separately at these dates: Albion and Christiana in the southeastern, Vermont and Perry in the southwestern part of the county, the others variously located. The estates are divided into seven groups, which happens to be the same number used for farms in the census, the main difference being the more minute classification of the estates of over one hundred acres.

The towns of Albion and Christiana lie almost wholly within the rich Trenton limestone area which has proved to be the choicest tobacco district of the state. Vermont and Perry are in the "driftless" portion of the county, are rough and broken, and in consequence have gradually turned to dairying. Vienna and

[88] The federal census reports do not give town returns, and the manuscripts are not to be had subsequently to 1870 because of the mortgage statistics and kindred matter which is thought to require secrecy. The state census reports contribute nothing of value on the subject.

Fitchburg are fairly representative of the mixed-farming district. York was taken because of its wholly disproportional share of the sheep of the county, while Dane is kept in the table as an example of negative results which are likely to obtain where the classification is on too broad a scale.

Table showing size of estates in representative towns for the years 1870, 1890, 1899.

Where Located.	Year.	No. of Estates.								
		Under 10 acres.	10 to 20.	21 to 39.	40 to 79.	80 to 159.	160 to 320.	Over 320 acres.	Total No each year.	Average in acres.
Mixed Farming Towns.										
Dane	1870	0	1	0	34	85	45	1	166	135.4
	1890	.....	.....	9	51	86	45	2	193	115.8
	1899	.....	.....	7	43	78	38	3	169	138.8
Fitchburg	1870	0	1	0	22	86	47	6	162	141.74
	1890	2	2	6	43	82	48	4	187	122.8
	1899	2	1	6	43	84	43	5	184	124.8
Vienna	1870	0	3	1	23	68	61	4	160	143 9
	1890	1	14	5	36	57	57	4	174	132.4
	1899	1	7	5	38	71	53	3	178	129.4
York	1870	0	0	0	26	77	58	4	165	138.6
	1890	0	1	3	55	71	53	3	186	122.9
	1899	0	2	2	49	77	52	2	184	124.3
Tobacco Towns.										
Albion	1870	2	6	2	31	86	34	2	163	137.7
	1890	23	59	23	100	98	19	3	325	69.06
	1899	20	61	29	97	109	15	1	332	67.9
Christiana	1870	0	4	4	14	51	46	2	121	185.7
	1890	5	55	29	70	92	27	0	278	81 9
	1899	8	61	25	67	106	24	0	286	76.7
Dairy Towns.										
Perry	1870	0	2	1	17	71	55	4	150	154.5
	1890	4	21	6	45	83	45	3	207	111.
	1899	4	10	5	37	74	52	4	186	123.2
Vermont	1870	0	0	0	23	92	40	1	156	149.6
	1890	5	5	9	45	89	50	1	204	114.04
	1899	2	2	5	31	86	48	5	179	129.5

It will be seen that in 1870 the number of small estates, say below twenty acres, was about the same for the different towns, what difference there is, however, being in favor of the towns which still lead in this respect. This was on account of social rather than economic causes; the poorest of the foreigners sometimes dividing a forty into two or more pieces while the Ameri-

cans usually scorned such little patches. Running over the different groups for the year 1870, one can draw no particular inference respecting the different types of towns. It appears that the same kind of farming had resulted in farms of approximately the same size, and the variations that do occur seem to be the result of social forces, or mere chance. It is noticeable that in the tobacco towns the number of estates below forty acres increased from eighteen in 1870 to two hundred four in 1899; a very large increase; while in the case of estates of one hundred sixty to three hundred twenty acres the decrease is more than fifty per cent. and estates over three hundred twenty acres have all but disappeared. In dairy towns estates below forty acres show a decided falling off; the next larger group increases up to 1890 and then takes a considerable drop; in the remaining groups the increase in number is definite and almost uniform, though not very great. Thus the tendencies in the dairy district seem almost the exact counterpart of those in the tobacco district, the latter showing a movement toward small estates, the former toward those comparatively large. In the three towns characterized as mixed farming areas we find but few estates below forty acres and they seem to be disappearing since 1890. The medium-sized estates show a slight increase in number, while those which may be called large, that is above one hundred sixty acres, have declined in numbers in every instance. Dane remains, and here we have a paradox. The number of estates in each group, with the single exception of the one comprising those above three hundred twenty acres, decreased between 1890 and 1899.[89] When the plat of the town is seen this peculiar result is at once explained: there has been a general increase of size within each group, but it so happens that the larger share of the farms have their boundaries enlarged by the addition of a twenty or forty, and still stayed within the group, yet thirty-two estates disappeared altogether. The exception to the decrease seen in the largest sized estates is of no significance as the additional one is not extremely large.

It may be noticed further that in the town of Christiana the

[89] The first of the two groups is here omitted on account of the difficulty of distinguishing estates from wood-lots belonging to someone a few miles distant, often in another town or even another county, but there are few small estates in the town and the result could not thus be seriously changed.

average size fell from eighty-two acres in 1890 to seventy-seven acres in 1899. During the same period the change in the town of Perry was from one hundred eleven acres to one hundred twenty-three acres; yet if these two be averaged there is little meaning to the result.

No better illustration of the point in question could be found than the census figures for Wisconsin which show the average size of farms to be one hundred fourteen acres for the years 1860, 1870, and 1880, yet all sorts of changes must have been in progress.

It may be of some slight consequence to know that the size of estates in those two towns is on the increase, just as it may be of some avail for a dealer in fruit to know that the average price per bushel of apples, pears, and grapes taken together has fallen ten per cent., but before he makes further sales or purchases it will be necessary to inquire into the market. Thus before anything can be predicated as to the changes in landed estates it would seem desirable to know what is taking place under the various systems of farming within definite physiographic areas, and during periods of time which have some business significance, rather than to take arbitrary divisions of both time and territory, and adding together the like and the unlike, strike general averages, into which, and out of which, the economist and the historian may read results illustrative of pre-conceived notions.

It may finally be said that there is positively no tendency in this county toward either large estates or large farms.