

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

JESSE H. JONES, Secretary

BUREAU OF THE CENSUS

J. C. CAPT, Director (Appointed May 22, 1941)
WILLIAM LANE AUSTIN, Director (Retired January 31, 1941)
PHILIP M. HAUSER, Assistant Director



SIXTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES: 1940

AGRICULTURE

ABANDONED OR IDLE FARMS

**Number and acreage, with classification of those
reporting acreage by cause of nonoperation
and by year of abandonment**

Statistics for counties and a summary for the United States

A special study

Prepared under the supervision of
ZELLMER R. PETTET
Chief Statistician for Agriculture

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LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
BUREAU OF THE CENSUS
Washington, D. C. April 30, 1943

SIR:

I transmit herewith a special compilation from the Census of Agriculture Returns of the Sixteenth Decennial Census entitled "Abandoned or Idle Farms." The study gives information on the number and acreage of abandoned or idle farms, with classification of those reporting acreage by cause of nonoperation and by year of abandonment, with statistics for counties and with a summary for the United States.

Provision for the Sixteenth Decennial Census was made in the Act providing for the Fifteenth and subsequent Decennial Censuses. This recording of the abandoned or idle farms represents one of the expedients used by the Bureau of the Census for enumeration control. Enumerators were instructed as follows: "Farms not operated in 1939 and on which no operations are contemplated in 1940, if used for agricultural purposes (including grazing) within the past 10 years, are to be recorded on the Abandoned or Idle Farm List."

The collection and compilation of these statistics and the preparation of this report were under the supervision of Z. R. Pettet, Chief Statistician for Agriculture, assisted by Sherman S. Slick, Assistant Chief Statistician, and Hilton E. Robison, Principal Statistician. Acknowledgment is due C. E. B. Holland for tabulation of the data, Lois Hutchison for the assembling of the data and preparation of tables, and H. A. Tucker for the arrangement and presentation.

Respectfully,

J. C. CAPT,
Director of the Census

Hon. JESSE H. JONES,
Secretary of Commerce

SIXTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES: 1940

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Part 1.—New England, Middle Atlantic, and
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2.—West North Central States
3.—South Atlantic States

Part 4.—East South Central States
5.—West South Central States
6.—Mountain and Pacific States

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Part 2.—Southern States

Part 3.—Western States

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III.—Color, Tenure, and Race of
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IV.—Farm Mortgages and Farm
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V.—Work Off Farm, Age, and
Years on Farm

Chapter VI.—Cooperation, Labor, Expenditures,
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VII.—Livestock and Livestock Products
VIII.—Field Crops and Vegetables
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X.—Value of Farm Products

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A Separate Composite Map Showing Irrigation by Drainage Basins.

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Cows Milked and Dairy Products.—Number of Cows Milked, Milk Produced, Disposition of Dairy Products, and Number of Cows Kept Mainly for Milk Production, Classified by Number of Cows Milked, by Counties; with Related Data for Other Classes of Livestock and Livestock Products for the States and also for the United States (one volume).

Special Cotton Report.—Cotton Harvested by Number of Bales Harvested, and by Counties, with Acreage and Production of Cotton, and Value of Farm Products (one volume).

Special Cross-line Acreage Report.—Farms Reporting and Acreage by Place of Enumeration and by Location of Acreage, with Relationship to All Farms, by Counties: 1940 and 1935 (one volume).

Drainage Monograph.—A Comparison of Agriculture Within and Outside of Drainage Enterprises in the Alluvial Lands of the Lower Mississippi Valley (paper bound).

Irrigation Monograph.—A Tabular and Graphic Presentation of Specified Irrigation Census Statistics (paper bound).

¹ Agriculture volumes I and II and the volumes "Irrigation of Agricultural Lands" and "Drainage of Agricultural Lands" are comprised of State bulletins. Separate bulletins for each State are available. Separate chapters of Agriculture volume III are also available.

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ABANDONED OR IDLE FARMS

Introduction.—Presented in this report is a tabulation of the abandoned or idle farms recorded at the 1940 Agriculture Census. In connection with the enumeration of farms and ranches, each enumerator was required to list the abandoned and idle farms in his district (see facsimile of Abandoned or Idle Farm Listing Sheet).

This recording of the abandoned or idle farms represents one of the expedients used by the Bureau of the Census for enumeration control. Another check on the enumeration was the identification by the enumerator, on a map of the enumeration district, of each place visited. The problem of enumeration control also involves the accounting for all lands, both farm and nonfarm, in each enumeration district. The recording of "cross-line" acreage (that part of the farm extending beyond the boundaries of the minor civil division in which the farm headquarters are located) helped in accounting for the farm lands (see Special Report on Cross-line Acreage). Nonfarm lands were accounted for only in part. In addition to recording the acreage in abandoned or idle farms it was suggested to enumerators that it would be helpful if they indicated on their maps any sizable tracts of nonfarm lands.

Although the primary purpose of this recording of the abandoned or idle farms in each enumeration district was to assist in the checking of the completeness of the enumeration, it was hoped that something could be learned as to the extent, cause, and date of such abandonment or idleness.

The 1940 Agriculture Census was the first for which a tabulation was made of abandoned or idle farms. At the Censuses of 1935, 1930, and 1925 enumerators were asked to report abandoned or idle farms, but these reports were used solely in connection with the checking of the completeness of the enumeration. Instructions on the reverse side of the 1935 Farm and Ranch Schedule included the following: "Farms abandoned or idle in both 1934 and 1935 are to be listed but no schedules prepared. * * * * * The list of abandoned and idle farms should be turned in with schedules when district is completed." In 1930 and 1925 the enumerators were instructed to record abandoned farms so that the number of such farms might be reported to the supervisors. The instructions for 1925 read: "While no schedules are to be secured for abandoned farms, you should keep a record of the number of such farms that come to your attention, so that you can report this number to your supervisor when you have finished the district."

Definition of abandoned or idle farms.—Abandoned or idle farms for which figures are presented in this report may be defined as places which had been farmed within 10 years preceding the census date and which, at the time of the enumeration, had been abandoned a year or longer with no indication that farming operations would be resumed during 1940. By "farm" is meant agricultural operations which would have sufficed to classify the place as a farm for Census purposes.

The instructions to enumerators in regard to the listing of abandoned or idle farms read as follows: "Farms not operated

in 1939 and on which no operations are contemplated in 1940, if used for agricultural purposes (including grazing) within the past 10 years, are to be recorded on the Abandoned or Idle Farm List."

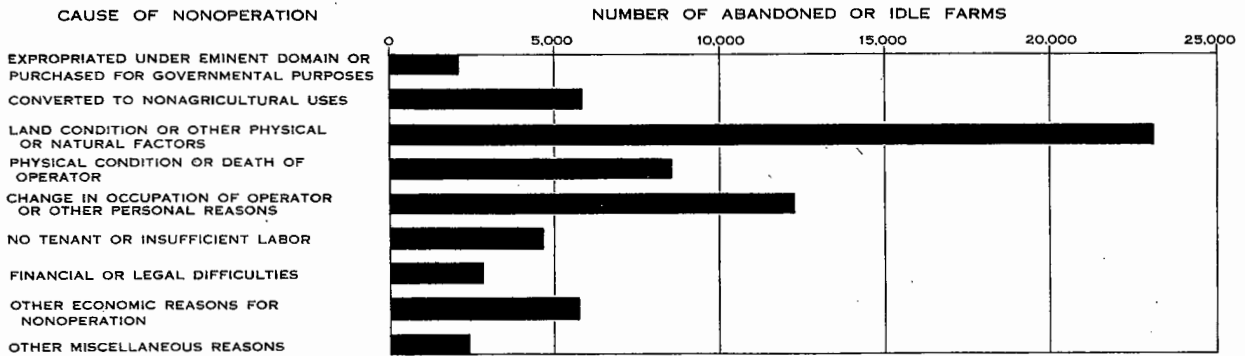
Number and size of abandoned farms.—Enumerators, at the 1940 Agriculture Census, listed acceptable reports for 76,704 abandoned or idle farms, or 1.3 for every 100 operated farms. Additional abandoned or idle farms, numbering 175, were reported without sufficient identification of their location for inclusion in the tables. Of the 76,704 abandoned or idle farms the area was reported for 76,252, amounting to 6,484,292 acres. This acreage is small compared with the idle land in operated farms, the idle or fallow cropland amounting to 56,928,656 acres in 1939.

The abandoned or idle farms were much smaller than the operated farms, the former averaging 85 acres as compared with 174 for the latter. The proportion of abandoned or idle farms to operated farms was greatest in the northeast, approximately 1 abandoned farm for each 20 operated farms being reported in the New England and Middle Atlantic Divisions and in the State of Maryland. Relatively few abandoned or idle farms were reported in the East South Central, the West South Central, or in the West North Central States. Iowa among the States reported the fewest abandoned or idle farms relative to the number of operated farms, with approximately 1 abandoned or idle farm reported for every 2,000 operated farms. Only 98 abandoned or idle farms were reported in the State.

Abandoned or idle farms by cause of nonoperation.—A column was provided on the Abandoned or Idle Farm List for entering the reasons why the abandoned or idle farms were not operated. The heading for this column was as follows: "Reasons why not operated (as 'worn out,' 'purchased by State,' 'succession of drought years,' etc.)." The reasons listed by the enumerators were extremely varied. Some of the entries represented cause of abandonment, others merely the reasons for the continued nonoperation. Many of the replies were rather vague. For the most part the reasons given probably represented what the respondents considered the most important causes for the nonoperation of the farms. However, two abandoned farms in the same area may have been abandoned as the result of very similar circumstances yet one may have been reported as abandoned because of "poor land," the other because of "financial difficulties." Therefore, the classification of abandoned or idle farms by the reported causes of nonoperation may not represent the fundamental reasons for abandonment but will represent a summation of the opinions of the respondents. In setting up the classification by cause of nonoperation, it was not possible to set up groups which would be entirely separate and distinct. In many instances a report might have been included equally well under either of two classes. The classification by reason for nonoperation was limited to those abandoned or idle farms for which acreage was reported.

ABANDONED OR IDLE FARMS—INTRODUCTION

ABANDONED OR IDLE FARMS BY CAUSE OF NONOPERATION FOR THE UNITED STATES: 1940



BASE FIGURES SHOWN IN TABLE 1

The classification by cause of nonoperation was as follows:

Expropriated under eminent domain or purchased for governmental purposes:

Included under this classification were farms purchased by the United States, a State or local government, or expropriated under eminent domain and no longer used for agricultural purposes. Examples are farms bought by the United States, by a State, a city, etc., and farms taken into a National or State Forest, or Park.

Converted to nonagricultural uses:

This classification includes farms converted to residential sections, factory or camp sites, golf courses, airports, or to other nonagricultural uses; or held for conversion to such nonagricultural use; or farms used solely for residential purposes. Examples are oil lands, coal lands, factory sites, residential sites, resorts, gun clubs, golf courses, tourist camps, seasonal homes, or an indication that the "farm" was being used solely as a residence. This class also includes "restoration" lands, that is, lands being restored to grass under a governmental program.

Land condition or other physical or natural factors:

Included in this classification were reasons which indicated unfavorable physical condition of the land resulting from natural causes or destructive farm practices; also unfavorable climatic or other physical conditions. Reasons under this classification include such entries as: "Too poor," "rough land," "run-down," "worn-out," "grown-up," "drought," "erosion," "floods," "poor years," "too wet," "successive years of crop failure," "crops destroyed by insects," and the like.

Physical condition or death of operator:

Reasons such as "too old to work," "old age," "unable to work," "sickness," and "death of operator" were included in this classification.

Change in occupation of operator or other personal reasons:

Included under this classification were farms for which the reason for nonoperation indicated that the owner, or farm operator, had taken up some other occupation, had another income, had retired, moved away, was a nonresident, was not a farmer, or was dissatisfied or indifferent.

No tenant or insufficient labor:

This group included farms for which the reason for nonoperation indicated there was no tenant available, the farm was "not rented" or that there was no one to work the land, or no labor was available.

Financial or legal difficulties:

Such reasons as "bankruptcy," "foreclosed," "sold for taxes," "undivided estate," "owner not financially able to buy equipment," "unable to finance," "financial reasons," "livestock prohibited by city ordinance," and the like, were included.

Other economic reasons for nonoperation:

Included are such reasons as buildings, fences, or other improvements in need of repair or lacking, or livestock or equipment lacking provided there was no definite indication that these conditions represented financial difficulties; farming unprofitable; or the farm too small or with insufficient cropland. Some examples include: "Buildings run-down," "no buildings," "no fences," "no livestock," "no equipment," "farm too small," "not enough cropland," "unprofitable," and "poor roads."

Other miscellaneous reasons:

This group included such miscellaneous reasons as "farms held for sale," "letting land rest," or other reasons for which the reports were too few to justify separate presentation.

No reason or reason insufficient for classification:

Included here are those reports for which no reason for nonoperation was given, or for which the entry did not appear to represent a reason. Under this classification were included such entries as "just purchased," "just moved on," "just not farmed," "unknown," "open range," "not grazed," or "grassland."

Nearly one-third of the abandoned or idle farms were reported as not operated because of the condition of the land or because of other physical or natural factors. Slightly over one-quarter were abandoned because of the physical condition or death of operators, or because of changes in occupation or for other personal reasons. Approximately 1 in 6 was abandoned

because of economic reasons such as lack of tenant, insufficient labor, financial or legal difficulties, lack of improvements, livestock, or equipment, and the like. Only 1 in 10 of the abandoned or idle farms was abandoned because of conversion to nonagricultural use, including farms expropriated under eminent domain or purchased for governmental purposes. It is significant that financial or legal difficulties were given as the cause of abandonment for only 1 abandoned or idle farm in every 27. In many instances, however, financial difficulties were very likely a contributing cause.

Farms abandoned or idle because of expropriation under eminent domain or purchase by the United States, or by States, cities, counties, etc., averaged much larger than farms which had been abandoned for other reasons. For many States the average size of these farms was larger than that for operated farms. Farms abandoned because of the physical condition or death of operators and those abandoned because of change in occupation of operators or other personal reasons were appreciably smaller on an average than farms abandoned for other reasons.

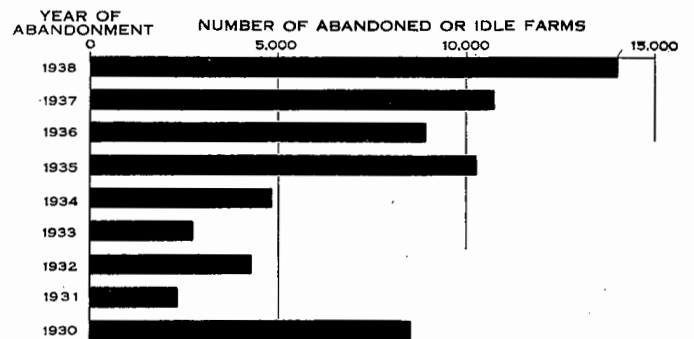
Abandoned or idle farms by year of abandonment.

Enumerators were asked to enter, for each abandoned or idle farm listed, the approximate year the farm was last operated. For acceptable reports, the entries for the approximate year last operated ranged from 1930 to 1938, inclusive (see the discussion under Definition of abandoned or idle farms). Tabulations were made showing the number and acreage of the farms reported as abandoned in each of these years. The approximate year the farm was last operated was taken as the year of abandonment. Only the abandoned or idle farms for which acreage was reported were classified.

When comparing the numbers and acreages of farms abandoned in the different years, it should be kept in mind that the figures are not strictly comparable. The numbers of farms reported as abandoned in the earlier years exclude any abandoned in those years upon which operations had been resumed by the time of the 1940 enumeration.

Comparatively few farms were abandoned during the depression years. Only 12.4 percent of the abandoned or idle farms were abandoned from 1931 to 1933, inclusive, or only slightly more for the 3 years than were abandoned in 1930 (11.2 percent). Over one-half of the abandoned or idle farms were reported as abandoned from 1935 to 1938, the number abandoned in 1938 amounting to 18.4 percent of the total. There were no significant differences in the sizes of farms abandoned in the different years.

ABANDONED OR IDLE FARMS BY YEAR OF ABANDONMENT FOR THE UNITED STATES: 1940



BASE FIGURES SHOWN IN TABLE 1

Appraisal of the statistics.—The instructions to enumerators stressed the importance of securing complete coverage in the 1940 enumeration of farms and ranches. Each enumerator was provided with a map of the territory he was to enumerate. He was instructed to locate on this map each dwelling and each farm visited. It was also suggested that for rural areas, he outline on his map any sizable tract of land not requiring a farm schedule, this instruction reading as follows: "Whenever a sizable tract of land which does not require a farm schedule is encountered you will find it helpful to outline the tract on your map, giving its approximate size, and indicating its nature." If these instructions were followed, no abandoned or idle farms of any appreciable size should have been overlooked. It is possible, however, that places not locally considered as farms may not have been recorded as abandoned or idle farms even though there may have been sufficient agricultural operations sometime within the preceding 10 years to conform to the Census definition of a farm. Figures for abandoned or idle farms are probably somewhat short of the total number idle in 1940 which were abandoned between 1930 and 1938, inclusive. Shortage in the enumeration may have been offset to some extent by erroneous entries on the abandoned or idle farm list. Even though the figures for abandoned or idle farms may not have been entirely accurate, they will give an indication of the relative importance of abandoned or idle farms in different areas, of the reasons for abandonment, and of the date of such abandonment.

For many areas the number and acreage of abandoned or idle farms reported by the enumerators failed to explain, or explained only in part, decreases in number of farms and in land in farms between 1930 and 1940. This implies a possible shortage in the enumeration of abandoned or idle farms. It must be kept in mind, however, that decreases in numbers of farms and land in farms may have resulted from causes other than abandonment of farms. Consolidation in farms would result in a decrease in number of farms; and the exclusion of lands, such as woodland and wasteland, formerly in farms but which may never have been used for agricultural purposes would result in a

decrease of land in farms. Another indication that the enumeration of abandoned and idle farms may have been somewhat short is the relatively few enumerators who reported abandoned or idle farms. Reports of abandoned or idle farms were received at the 1940 Census for only 16,444 enumeration districts, yet farms were enumerated in 48,179 minor civil divisions, each of these minor civil divisions represented 1 or more enumeration districts.

There is a possibility that ownership tracts rather than individual farms were reported on the Abandoned or Idle Farm List. In some instances, such a tract may have represented only a part of what had been one farm or it may have represented several farms.

There is some evidence that a few of the enumerators may have used the Abandoned or Idle Farm List for reporting each place in their district for which they had not prepared a Farm and Ranch Schedule. Others apparently confused abandoned or idle dwellings with abandoned or idle farms. Before tabulating, each entry was checked to see if it represented an abandoned or idle farm in accordance with instructions to enumerators. Approximately one-fifth of the entries recorded on the listing sheets were not included in the tabulations because they represented erroneous entries. These included:

Farms for which 1929 or an earlier date was entered as the approximate year last operated.

Farms for which 1939 or 1940 was entered as the approximate year last operated.

Places of less than 3 acres when there was no indication that they may have ever conformed to the Census definition of a farm.

Farms, or farmsteads, for which there was an indication that all the cropland had been rented out.

Lands used by the owner or operator for pasture or grazing, or lands rented for pasture or grazing. A designation such as "open range," "in grass," "grassland not rented," or the like, was not considered sufficient evidence to justify crossing off an entry.

Stock-feeding places.

Places which had been absorbed by other farms or ranches.

Places recently purchased or rented if there was an implication that the place might be farmed in 1940.

Establishments which obviously did not represent places which had ever been farmed.