The Sociology of Agriculture

The typical American was a farmer who owned his own land. In the backcountry or in districts remote from transportation, a man could buy a large tract for little money and often on credit. Going into the forest with his family, the frontier farmer built a crude shelter and began to cut down the trees, usually at first merely girdling the larger ones so they would die and let in enough sun to grow corn between the stumps. His efforts the first year or two were devoted to survival, raising enough food for subsistence. As soon as possible, however, he grew a cash crop, usually corn or wheat, which he could take to market. As the years passed, he constructed a simple house of two or three rooms and a loft, built a barn, planted an orchard, and cleared more land at the rate of perhaps two acres a year. A farm of 30 cultivated acres and a cleared pasture was work of half a lifetime, but at the end a farmer was assured of a rude but ample subsistence. Meanwhile, he had greatly increased the value of his property. "They maintain themselves the first year, like the Indians," wrote an English traveler, "with their guns, and nets; and afterwards by the same means with the assistance of their lands; the labour of their farms they perform themselves; even to being their own carpenters and smiths: by this means, people who may be said to have no fortunes, are enabled to live, and in a few years maintain themselves and families comfortably." With little or no capital, with only his own labor and that of his family, the American farmer could in time become a property owner and achieve a level of existence respected by the society in which he lived. America, it was said was "one of the best places in the world for a poor man."[1]

What is meant by "subsistence" ?

What is a "cash crop" ?

How does this article infer that the typical "Indian" maintains themselves ?

Why is America said to be the best place in the world to be a poor man?

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[1] --Take from Ferguson, E. James The American Revolution: A General History 1763-1790. Homewood: Dorsey Press, 1974, pp25