**Days Worked for Wage Labor 1774-1860**

**Overview**:

Different occupations report wages and salaries for different time spans. Most professions report annual rates of pay, as in J.T. Main’s professional pay for the late colonial era or in the American Almanac entries from the 1830s to the 1860s. Teacher pay was recorded by the school year. Farm operators presumably worked a full year, though with their productivity differing by season.

Most hired labor, however, was reported by the day or month. We have little information on how many days or months they worked per year, and what secondary income they could find when not employed in their primary job.

Our reading of Lebergott, Main, and others leads us to believe that something close to a full-time employment of 313 days a year is our best guess for all employed persons, even wage labor. Our preference is to assume that in the early economy, with its extensive working at home, people put in a six-day week (the 313 days) year-round. Our main calculations, including those on income inequality, are based on this full-time assumption. Nonetheless, we recognize that other scholars may prefer to assume that for part of the 313-day year a person who hired out his or her labor got no pay. That might fit the conventions of national income and product accounting, which often omit some of the value of work performed in the informal sector or at home. Accordingly, we offer this interpretation of the likely locus of reduced hours and reduced implicit pay rates.

In what follows, the main reference is Stanley Lebergott, *Manpower in Economic Growth: The American Record since 1800* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964). These 313 days a year equal 6 days a week, every week of the 52.17 **weeks** a year.

**The Details:**

**Unemployment**: The issue is really only relevant for wage earners out for hire: “Slaves were not unemployed. Farmers were not unemployed. Self-employed carpenters, saddlers, weavers, fishermen were not unemployed. Taken as a whole, such categories accounted for nearly the entire labor force in 1800” (Lebergott, p. 171-2). Presumably, the same was true of male and female domestics. But that part of the labor force vulnerable to unemployment got bigger as wage labor became more common, and it was urban wage labor, especially up North where the cities lay (his p. 172). However, 1800 and 1860 were not crisis years (Table 4-3, p. 187). The average unemployment rates for the decades 1800-1809 and 1850-1859 were, respectively, 2% and 4.5% (Table 4-4, p. 189). This implies that non-farm hired labor (unskilled, the building trades, sailors and such) worked not 313, but 307 days per year in 1800, and 299 in 1860. This business-cycle figure may underestimate work loss since it does not include lost work due to exogenous work-cutters such as bad weather.

**Underemployment**: When it was off-season in any occupation, the fisherman could become a shoemaker, the farm laborer a weaver, the female teacher a domestic or shop worker, and so on. No doubt, these secondary occupations were of lower earnings capacity. Otherwise, they would have been their primary occupation. So, how does one adjust for the “underemployment” rate (something we have already done for male and female teachers)? Were off-season secondary jobs 10% less productive in off-season? Were they 20% or 25% less productive? And what was the length of the off-season or weather-induced layoffs?

Contemporaries repeatedly asserted “that 4 months’ work a year was lost because of bad weather” (p. 144), implying a reduction in 313 to 209 days per year, a 33% reduction in days worked at their primary occupation. “All outdoor operatives … wrote George Nettles in 1850, ‘are suspended during the 4 or 5 winter months’ but many go into the South for employment” (p. 170), implying a maximum reduction in the full-time 313 days per year to 183 days, a 42% reduction. This may have been true of grist mills, oil mills, and iron works (p. 171), but off-season secondary jobs took up much of the slack. If we take the maximum lost months figure of 42%, and apply the maximum underemployment figure of 25% to it (.42\*.25 = .105), then the 313 full-time days at primary work might be reduced to a primary job equivalent of 280 days (313\*[1-.105] = 280).

**Bottom Line**: We apply **280 days/year** to hired farm labor, hired **[rural]** non-farm male unskilled labor (but not female domestics), workers in the building trades (including ship building), and any other non-farm hired labor on daily or monthly wage contracts (except, of course, slaves). This would seem to correspond to the Weiss “narrow” definition of GDP.

**Qualification regarding urban unskilled**: Loss of work might have been worse for the urban unskilled. Did the urban unskilled have a secondary occupation when unemployed? Suppose not, so they became the vagrants and beggars. Do they get reduced by the four months, from 313 to 209 days, or by 33%? That seems very doubtful. Hired rural unskilled males, who had farm-related alternative employment in the off-season, earned ($127.86/161.40=) 79.2% of the pay that urban unskilled workers got, as a 13-colony average. Suppose, in an extreme, that the entire urban wage premium was a Todaro-type compensation for less regular employment, an overstatement. Then the urban unskilled work year was only 79.2% of the rural unskilled work year, or, in a **pessimistic** case, 0.792 \* 280 days a year = **222 days a year for urban unskilled labor**.