indeed
Your next marketing leader?
Find them on Indeed

Department of Data

The biggest careers that have now vanished, according to data

The Department of Data started spelunking through archaic occupations in search of disappearing jobs — but it turns out the best answer is more obvious than you think.

Today at 5:00 a.m. EST

8 min Summary 125

(Washington Post illustration; iStock)

Column by Andrew Van Dam

What are some careers that used to be huge, but have now completely or mostly disappeared?

— Andria Tieman Michney in Boston

Get a curated selection of 10 of our best stories in your inbox every weekend.

Beautiful question! We've always had a soft spot for an obscure update from the Labor Department in which it announces which jobs no longer get broken out in separate counts — this year, pour one out for "breakfast cereal manufacturing." But for this question, we felt compelled to step back and look at the (really) big picture.

To get rolling, we needed to translate into modern terms the archaic and often anarchic occupations of the early censuses — shout out to drovers, hostlers, sextons, whitewashers, hucksters, "galloon, gimp, and tassel makers," and rag pickers.

Advertisement
indeed
Your next creative lead?
Find them on Indeed

Luckily, the yeoman data-drovers at IPUMS have already made sense of all those galloon-slingers for us — as far as we can tell, the job involves making fancy trim for dress uniforms? — and built a modern Rosetta Stone that translates all those occupations into definitions used in 1950. (They have versions that put it in more modern terms as well, but today we'll focus on the one that best fits Andria's question about archaic occupations.)

Based on how they would have been classified in later years, galloon makers become craftspeople, "carriage and wagon makers" could become mechanics, "showmen and employees of shows" could become entertainers, and "gentleman" — an actual job, one performed mostly by men in New York and Pennsylvania — becomes a miscellaneous manager.

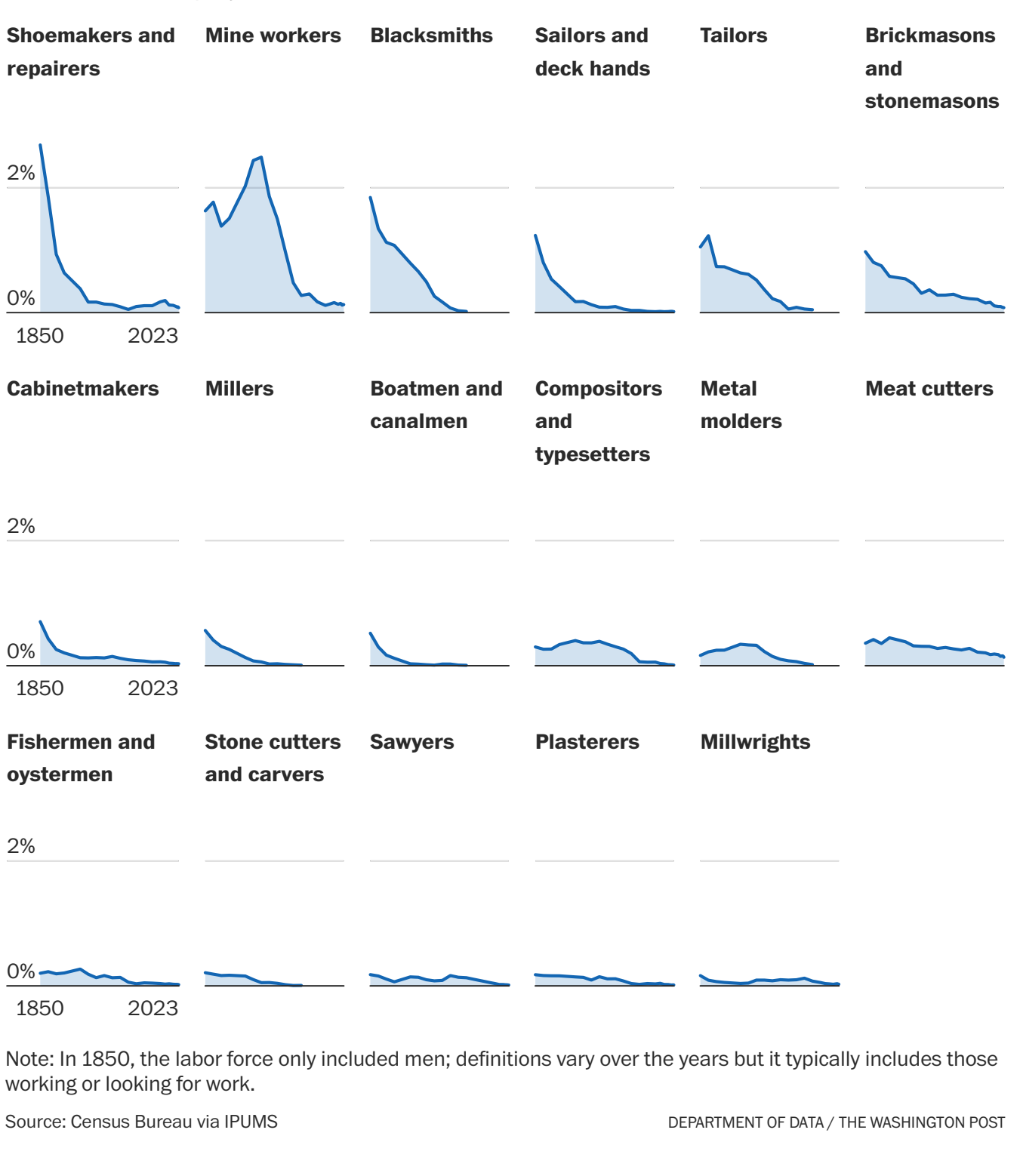
Regrettably, gentleman seems to have vanished as a job description — our friends at Indeed can't find any evidence of companies hiring for that position, though we'll let you know if it ever pops up. But with gentleman only accounting for about 1 in 2,000 jobs, it never fit Andria's request for rare jobs that were once huge anyhow. For that, there's really only one answer: farmer.

In 1860, more than 32 percent of free American workers — meaning they weren't enslaved — either owned a farm or labored on one. It was the single most common job in almost every state for which we have data. Today, farmers' share of the workforce has plunged to just 0.3 percent.

There are less than a quarter as many farmers today as there were in 1860, which doesn't sound like "disappearing" until you realize the U.S. workforce grew more than 20-fold in that period.

Factories replaced cobblers, before factory jobs went overseas

Share of U.S. employment



Note: In 1850, the labor force only included men; definitions vary over the years but it typically includes those working or looking for work.

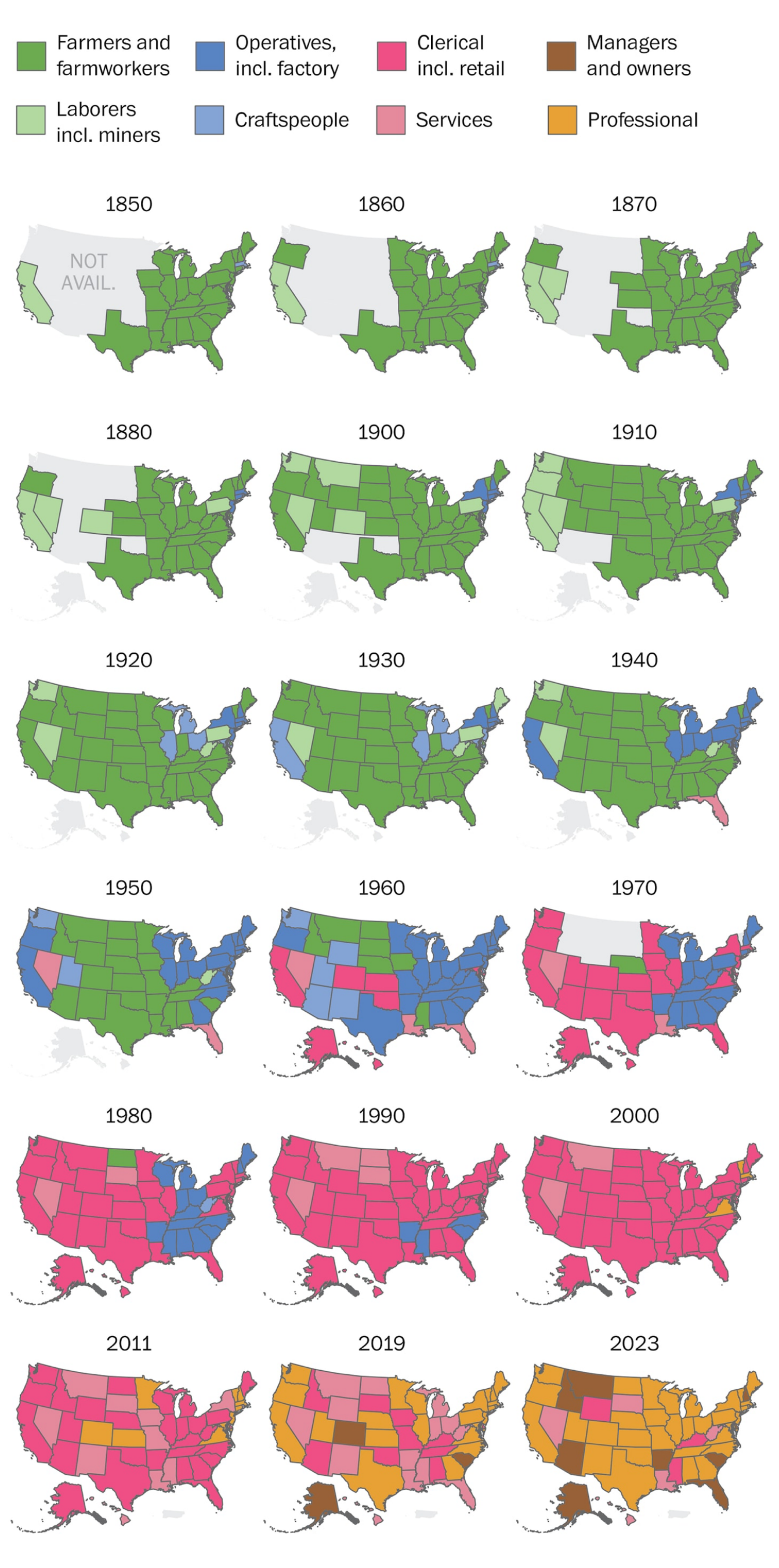
Source: Census Bureau via IPUMS

DEPARTMENT OF DATA / THE WASHINGTON POST

Map the biggest occupations in each state over time, and you see a nation of farmers give way, especially after the Dust Bowl and the matériel-hungry world war that followed, to a nation of factory workers.

By the 1990s, factory hands had passed the torch to shopkeepers as plants shuttered and retail jobs proliferated. And in the latest data, retail clerks have — amid what's sometimes called a "retail apocalypse" caused by online retailers — been supplanted by professionals, a broad category encompassing many white-collar jobs.

Largest occupational category in each state



Source: Census Bureau via IPUMS NHGIS

DEPARTMENT OF DATA / THE WASHINGTON POST

Other disappearing jobs tell a similar story. Miners, an occupation that looms almost as large as farmers in the American identity and rhetoric, have disappeared almost as completely. They once made up as much as 2.5 percent of the workforce — now they make up about 0.1 percent. Other occupations may not be as surprising.

In 1860, shoemakers and blacksmiths were among the most common jobs in America. About 1.3 percent of the U.S. workforce worked the bellows back then, making smiths about as common as restaurant servers today. By 1980, the village smithy was about as close to extinction as the spreading chestnut tree beneath which he stood — they no longer even show up in our data.

Advertisement
indeed
Your next product manager?
Find them on Indeed

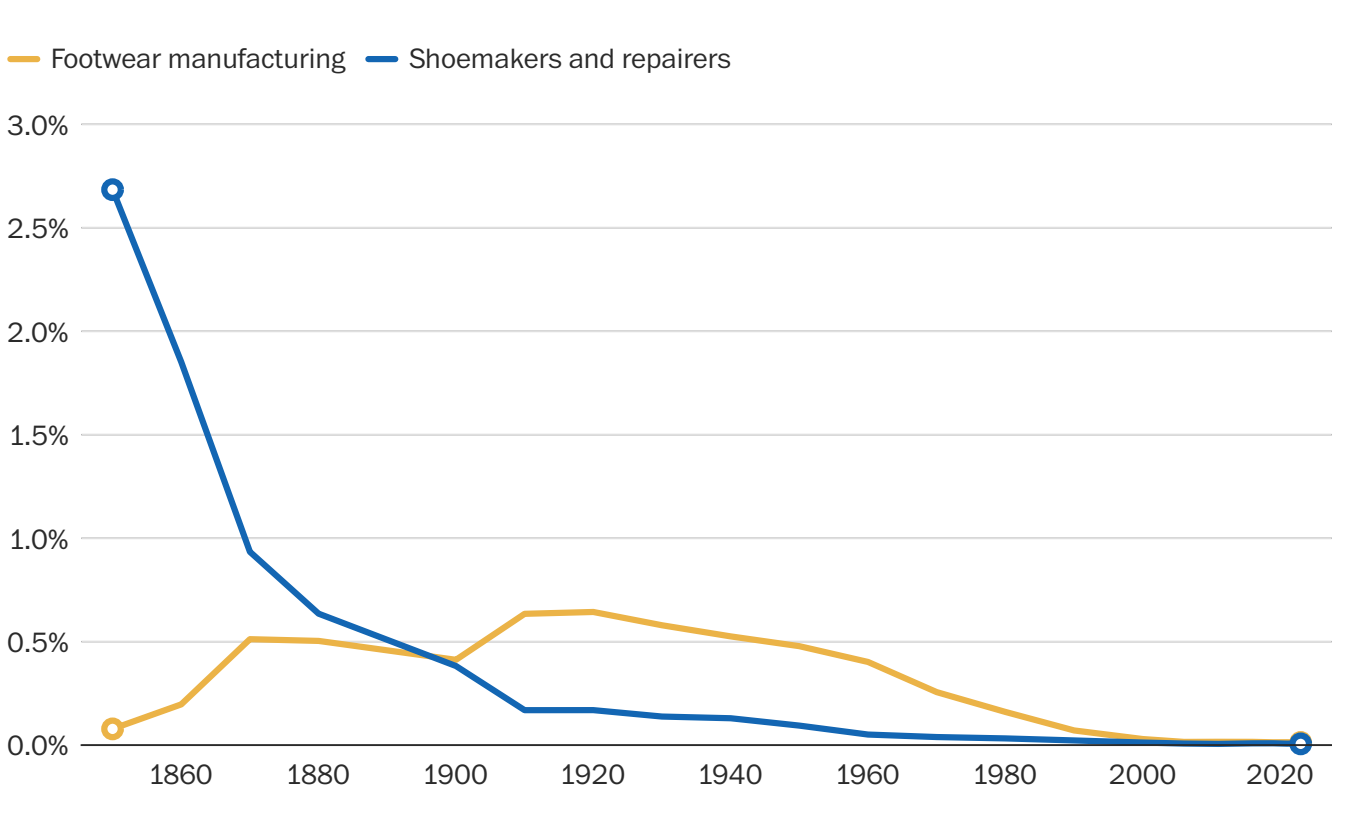
Shoemakers — including shoe repair but not shoe-factory workers — were even more common than blacksmiths. And while they haven't quite vanished, it's been more than a century since they made up a measurable share of the workforce.

We once had a shoemaker for every 50 workers or so, back when it was a slower-paced exercise — Maggie Vanderford at the University of Michigan found an incredible 1894 cobbler's diary that includes entries like: "Didn't hurry but took things very comfortable and the shoes came very fine."

When the great shoe factories of the Northeast swung into gear, America's cobbler caucus collapsed. Now their ilk has all but vanished.

Factories replaced cobblers, before factory jobs went overseas

Share of the U.S. labor force



Note: In 1850, the labor force only included men; definitions vary over the years but typically include those working or looking for work.

Source: Census Bureau via IPUMS

DEPARTMENT OF DATA / THE WASHINGTON POST

Similarly, tailors and sailors made up about 1 in 100 workers back in the day and are now almost impossible to find. We also had to say goodbye to millers, stonecutters, boatmen (as on a canal), stevedores and boardinghouse keepers.

Economists might call it structural transformation. As an economy becomes more productive, workers were pulled (or pushed) out of their older, slower jobs and, in theory at least, found more productive work.

Advertisement
indeed
Your next product manager?
Find them on Indeed

Improved farm machinery and methods meant we needed fewer farmworkers, so those folks moved into factories. More-productive factories meant we needed fewer factory workers, and many folks shifted to service-sector jobs such as big-box retail. Today, online sales have slashed our need for shopkeepers, and more of us have moved into information, finance and other white-collar jobs.

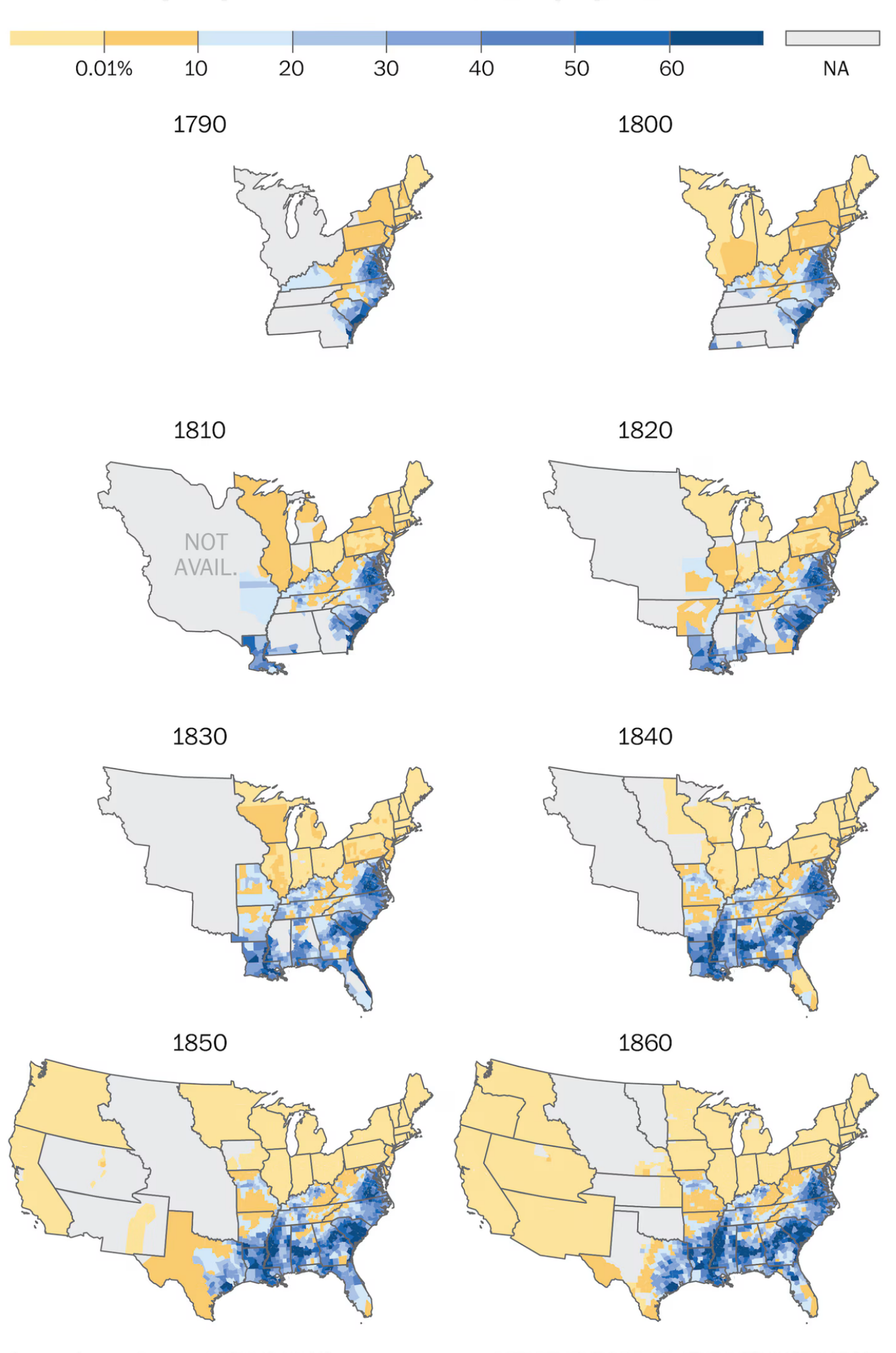
But aren't you overlooking an entire class of American workers?

As noted earlier, we have so far focused only on the population that wasn't enslaved. That lens, while often necessitated by the data, leaves out a group of millions of Americans who might also meet the definition of a type of work that was once all too common and has now disappeared.

The most unsettling side effect of spending thousands of hours swimming in census data is that you'll often glance at a variable or data point and see the banal, everyday reality of America's long economic reliance upon enslaved Africans staring right back at you. Along with requesting people's age and education level, early enumerators were out there asking, straight up, how many human beings respondents owned.

Enslaved Africans and their descendants made up about 13 percent of the population in 1860, according to IPUMS's collections of census data — which also allows us to map the spread of slavery in detail.

Enslaved people as a share of the population



Source: Census Bureau via IPUMS NHGIS

DEPARTMENT OF DATA / THE WASHINGTON POST

Many of the enslaved people were probably doing many of the jobs listed above. While we can track where they lived, we don't know much about exactly the work they performed — though we did find one uniquely helpful source.

The Louisiana Slave Database was the work of a lifetime for historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, who realized that English-speaking historians looking for data on enslaved people may have overlooked rich records kept by French and Spanish North Americans.

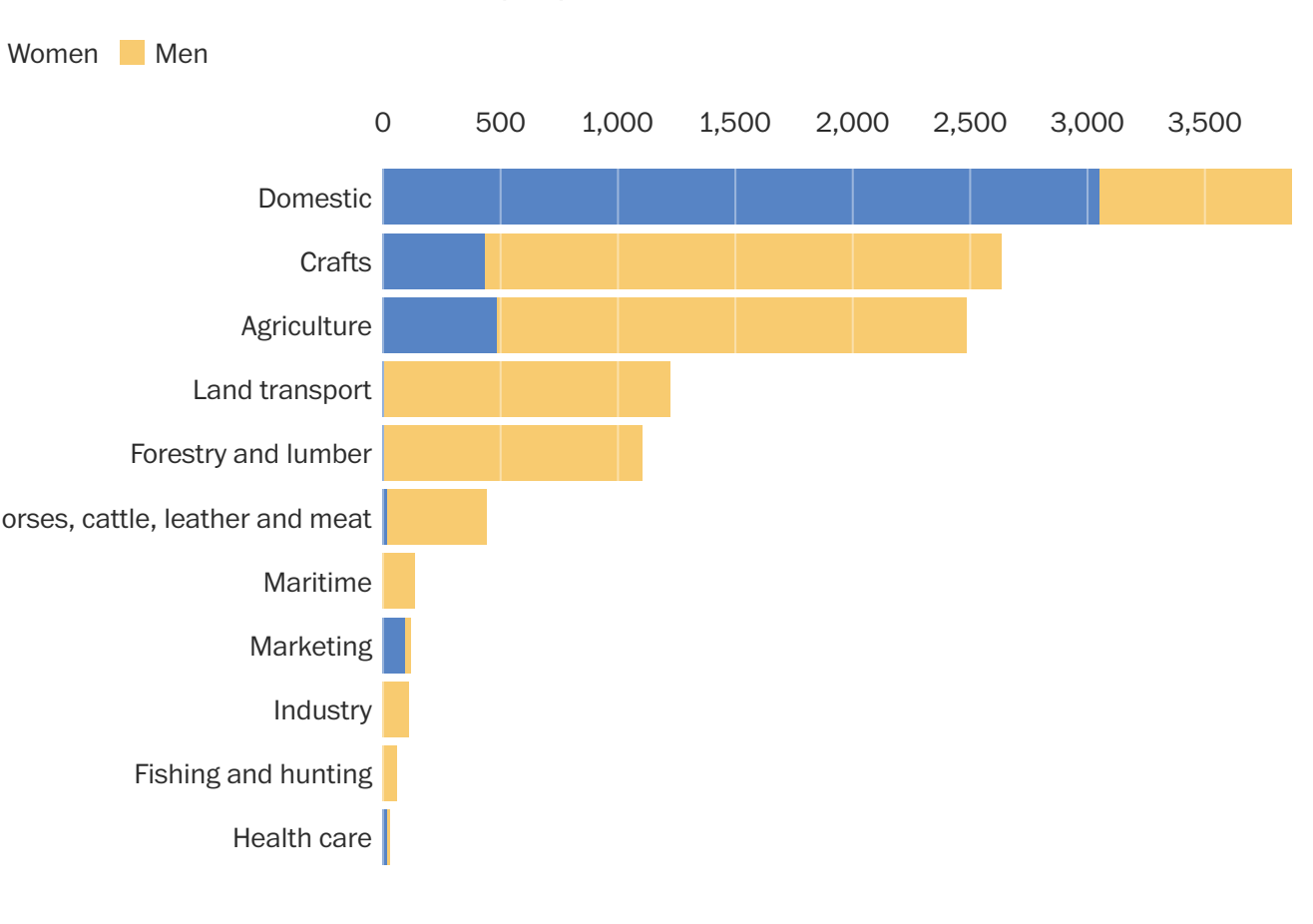
Advertisement
indeed
Your next product manager?
Find them on Indeed

Hall spent years in courthouses and archives, collecting data on more than 100,000 men, women and children owned as property in and around what is now the state of Louisiana from 1719 to 1820. She retired in 1993 but, according to a remarkable New York Times obituary, spent the next seven years turning her collection into a computer database, back when such things had to be distributed on CD-ROM.

"I'm hoping this database will help smooth the path for others to make Africans concrete as human beings," Hall told the New York Times. "Someday, people will be asking this database questions that I can't even imagine right now."

One glimpse at the types of work enslaved Americans were forced to perform

Known broad skill sets of enslaved people in and around Louisiana, 1719 to 1820



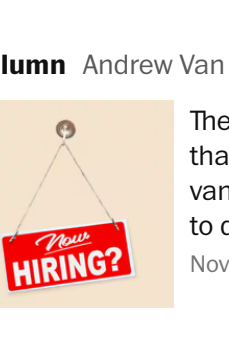
Note: Data comes from the lower portion of what would become the Louisiana Territory and later, in part, the state of Louisiana. Relatively few records included occupation, so this will not be representative.

Source: Louisiana Slave Database

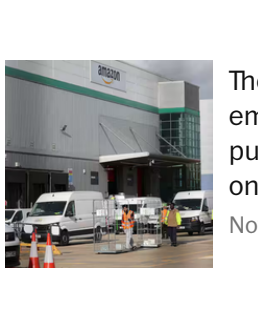
DEPARTMENT OF DATA / THE WASHINGTON POST

Most Read in Business

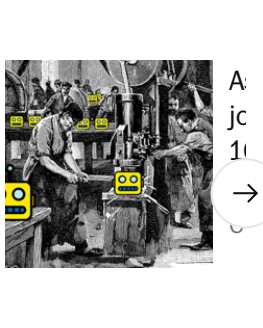
Column Andrew Van Dam



The biggest careers that have now vanished, according to data
November 3, 2025



The nation's largest employers are putting their workers on notice
November 1, 2025



For now we'll look at a nuts-and-bolts question Hall almost certainly imagined. Because for almost 9,000 enslaved people, Hall and her research assistants found listings of the skills they were said to have — including more than 2,000 agricultural laborers, 188 blacksmiths, 33 interpreters and two with the skills to be a "tooth puller."

The precise skills enslaved people were listed as having

Known specific skills of enslaved people in and around Louisiana, 1719 to 1820

Page 1 of 7

VALUE	TOTAL	WOMEN	MEN
Farm laborer	2,051	460	1,587
Domestic, housekeeper	1,603	1,100	499
Cook	1,185	898	287
Cart driver	1,026	4	1,020
Laundry	1,009	1,001	8
Pick and shovel	830	150	679
Carpenter	504	2	502
Sawyer or sawmill worker	296	0	296
Axeman	247	4	243
Woodsman	239	0	239
Commander	211	1	210
Seamstress	208	205	3
Coach driver	205	2	203
Lumber squarer	203	1	202
Blacksmith	188	0	187

Note: Data comes from the lower portion of what would become the Louisiana Territory and later, in part, the state of Louisiana. Relatively few records included occupation, so this will not be representative.

Source: Louisiana Slave Database

DEPARTMENT OF DATA / THE WASHINGTON POST

That gives us a rough look at what enslaved Americans might have been doing, but we can't measure it on a population level; what we now know as the Census Bureau didn't track America's enslaved population that carefully.

We really only have census data on enslaved people at all thanks to the Three-Fifths Compromise of 1787, which decreed that Americans would count as 60 percent of a human for tax and representation purposes.

Advertisement
indeed
Your next product manager?
Find them on Indeed

Hello, there! The Department of Data continues collecting