Abstract
My dissertation is a history of soil conservation in the United States between 1890 and 1940. In a democracy founded, in part, on the principle of private property rights, how have Americans sought to protect the public interest in the private use of land? This is the central question that I seeks to answer. From the colonial period through the first decades of the twentieth century, the answer was to appeal to the enlightened self interest of individual land users. Faith was placed in farmers and grazers to recognize conservation's benefits and to adopt beneficial practices on their own initiative. By the start of the twentieth, while direct government intervention in private land use decisions remained beyond the political pale, there was growing public support for state sponsored research and education initiatives. Research and education alone, however, would prove insufficient to protect the land at the necessary scale. It would take the innovations of publicly financed programs of technical and financial assistance and creation of soil conservation districts during the New Deal to finally extend soil conservation measure across the American countryside. I tell this story through a narrative that traces the development of the intellectual, technological, and institutional frameworks for soil conservation at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). I pay particular attention to discussions of the origins of modern understanding of the soil in the nineteenth century; the work of the Bureau of Soils to classify and map the soils of the United States during the 1910s; the campaign for soil conservation led Hugh Hammond Bennett during the 1920s; the soil erosion and moisture conservation investigations initiated by the USDA in 1929; and the creation of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) during the 1930s.
Even larger numbers purchased lands at very low interest from the new railroads, which were trying to create markets. In the 1930s, techniques and technologies of soil conservation, most of which had been available but ignored before the Dust Bowl conditions began, were promoted by the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) of the US Department of Agriculture, so that, with cooperation from the weather, soil condition was much improved by 1940.[25]. Beginning with the 1917 US National War Garden Commission, the government encouraged Victory gardens, agricultural plantings in private yards and public parks for personal use and for the war effort. A popular Tin Pan Alley song of 1919 asked, concerning the United States troops