The History of Agriculture in Alabama: A Historic Context

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Introduction

Webster defines agriculture as "the science, art, or practice of cultivating the soil, producing crops, and raising livestock and in varying degrees the preparation and marketing of such results."[1] Agriculture has played an important role in Alabama's history beginning as far back as 6000 B.C. with the American Indians who cultivated the first crops in the Alabama soil. As more Europeans settled in Alabama, word quickly spread about the state's agricultural merits, mostly due to the rich, fertile soils and the complex river system running throughout the state. The river system provided navigable transportation routes, with cities and ports springing up on the banks. Rivers also directed the paths of future major railroads and highways. Even though the state provided a favorable agricultural environment, not all farms evolved the same. Small subsistence farms barely large enough to support one family existed near massive plantations that grew many types of crops and supported hundreds of people. Antebellum Alabama saw the rise and complete dominance of cotton in the agricultural markets. Although after the Civil War farmers continued to grow cotton, it would not be as profitable as before since prices fluctuated so rapidly in the Reconstruction economy. It was not until World War II that diversification of crops became a reality and farmers began to experiment with cattle and hog production, peanuts, and timber. These trends continue to the present. Alabama's agrarian past shaped many aspects of life here and the traces of that past are still evident today.

Diversity defines Alabama's physical geography. Encompassing approximately 52,000 square miles, Alabama is bounded on the east by Georgia, on the south by Florida and the Gulf of Mexico, on the west by Mississippi and on the north by Tennessee. This diverse geography actually divides the state into six parts: the Tennessee River Valley in the northwest, the foothills of the Appalachians which extend down from the northeast, the Black Belt in the central part of the state, the Piedmont which separates the Black Belt from the Appalachians, the Wiregrass region in the southeast portion of the state, and the coastal plain or Piney Wood region which extends to the Gulf of Mexico. (See Picture A)

The southern terminus of the Appalachian Mountains extends into the northeastern part of the state. This rocky, mountainous region supported only subsistence level farms, small settlements and later mining operations. The Tennessee Valley, where the fertile soil once supported extensive cash crops, such as cotton, dominates the northwest. The hills of the Fall Line mark the end of the northern edge of the Coastal Plain and the beginning of the Cumberland Plateau and the Piedmont, which are characterized by low, gently rolling hills and a sandy soil underlain by red clay. South of this, extending across the state from the west to the east is the Black Belt. Named for the rich, black calcareous soil, this region was Alabama's primary cotton growing region and the wealthiest area in the state. The lower Coastal Plain and the Wiregrass region, is the relatively flat portion of the state, supporting piney trees and tough, coastal grass. Until the 1860s, many felt that the area was unhealthy for human habitation and the sandy soil prevented large-scale farms. The geographic make-up of each region influenced the type and size of farms found in each portion of the state.

[1] Merriam-Webster Online, www.m-w.com, December 20, 2002.

Chapter 1

Exploration to Statehood: Alabama from 1539 to 1819

Alabama's history rapidly changed from 1539 to 1819. The region that would become Alabama shifted from the control of one European nation to another, until the United States finally gained power. And while the citizens of the territory struggled to survive, they created a new agrarian state, whose rich soil and ample water supply sustained an abundant number of crops.

Native tribes inhabited the land that would become Alabama for 10,000 years before Spaniard Hernando de Soto first explored the area in 1539. De Soto encountered Native American tribes with complex social orders and extensive agricultural establishments. The four main tribes in Alabama were the Creek, the Cherokee, the Choctaw and the Chickasaw. The people of the tribes mainly farmed, "raising corn on river bottomlands and other fertile soils."[1] Not interested in colonizing North America, Spanish explorers instead searched for treasures like the kind found with the Incas in South America. They did, however, influence the agricultural practices of the Native American tribes by introducing horses, pigs, and cattle to the region.[2]

Another century and a half after the first Spanish exploration, a permanent European settlement came to the area. The French government initially settled the Gulf of Mexico at Biloxi in 1699; however, they soon realized that the lack of port facilities created a problem and shifted to Mobile, which from 1702 to 1718 was the capital of French Louisiana. The French government constructed Fort Louis on Dauphin Island. This new settlement slowly increased in size, with eighty wooden houses residing near the Fort by 1704.[3]

From their initial settlement in1702, French settlers introduced African slaves into Alabama to clear the land. Lieutenant Governor of the Colony, Jean Baptiste Le Moyne Bienville, wrote to the French government, asking for the importation of African slaves in 1701. He wrote again in 1707, stating that the regions up the Mobile River were fertile, but unhealthy during the period when crops would be cultivated. For this reason, the plantations were unable to support themselves. A lack of African slaves, horses and oxen hampered the colonists' efforts for a permanent settlement. By 1716, the French colonists committed themselves to using African slave labor.[4]

The main obstacle of farming in the Mobile area was the unproductive soil. Finding crops difficult to grow, many French settlers raised cattle. While cattle most likely roamed the countryside from the time of Spanish introduction, in 1701 the French made the first documented introduction of cattle into Alabama. By 1709, settlers raised over one hundred heads of cattle in French Lower Louisiana, which included Mobile. Once the French established themselves in the Mobile colony, they went about obtaining

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[1] National Park Service, De Soto National Historic Trail Study, (Department of the Interior, 1990) p. 22.
[2] Brooks Blevins, Cattle in the Cotton Fields: A History of Cattle Raising in Alabama, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998) p. 2.
[3] William Warren Rogers et al, Alabama: A History of a Deep South State, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1994, p. 27.
[4] James Benson Sellers, Slavery in America, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1950) p. 3.

cattle from other areas, "including Mexico, Texas, Florida, Cuba, and even the French in the Illinois country."[5]

The area that would become Alabama passed into the control of the British through diplomacy after the end of the French and Indian War in 1763. Britons saw economic potential in the area, with settlement being the key to this prosperity. Advertisements encouraged settlers to apply for land in the new area with acreage determined by family size. Heads of households were entitled to one hundred acres, while they received fifty acres for every other member of the family. Veterans of the French and Indian War received even more.

Actual immigration, in spite of land grants, did not live up to the expected numbers. Fewer planters than anticipated settled the area, with most settlers making a living as merchants to Spanish America. Those who did choose to farm in the area, in addition to a house and garden plot, often requested a land grant for farming near water sources, such as the Mobile Bay or especially the Perdido, Tensaw, and Middle Rivers, and occasionally the distant Escambia River.[6] Significant plantations developed on these rivers, with slaves imported from Africa, the Indies and other colonies to work on them.[7]

The American Revolution affected the British controlled territory of Alabama, but not for the worse. During this period timber became an important commodity. The colonies and the West Indies imported timber and timber products from their sources in New England.[8] The start of the Revolutionary War halted access to this traditional source, forcing people to find another supply of timber. The Wiregrass region in southern Alabama provided a variety of wood with the pine, the white oak, the live oak, and the cypress. These forests stretched across most of the southern portion of the state, growing naturally in the swampy area.[9]

By the nineteenth century, more and more settlers came to Alabama. Slowly Native American tribes ceded land to the United States. The U. S. Government established land grant offices to sell this newly ceded land to white settlers. Most of the new settlers were small farmers encouraged by the prospect of productive soil after depleting the soil in eastern states. These new settlers came mostly from Tennessee, Georgia, Virginia and the Carolinas, settling across the state, typically in the fertile river valleys. In general, those from Tennessee settled in what would become the northern portion of the state. Settlers from Georgia populated the southern portion of Alabama and the Black Belt. Settlers from Virginia and the Carolinas settled in the Coosa River Valley and the Black Belt.[10]

Struggle for survival was fierce on the frontier. Those who could afford it brought slaves to help clear the land and do the plowing. Yet, most settlers found self-labor the only labor available. Women and children worked in the fields, with starvation

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[5] Blevins, p. 3.
[6] "Colonial and Territorial Periods, 1519-1819 Context," Unpublished Context, Alabama Historical Commission, p. 30.
[7] "Colonial and Territorial Periods, 1519-1819 Context," p. 23.
[8] "Colonial and Territorial Periods, 1519-1819 Context," pp. 31-32.
[9] J. D. B. De Bow, Esq. "On the Forests and Timber of South Alabama," DeBow's Review, (November 1855) p. 611.
[10] Thomas Perkins Abernathy, The Formative Period in Alabama, 1815-1828, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1965), p. 40.

a constant concern.[11] With survival a persistent issue, dwellings were often hastily constructed and impermanent affairs. The perishable wood used in construction, means little of it remains today.[12] Settlers constructed single or double room log houses, chinked with clay and heated by stone fireplaces. Floors were often either packed clay or split logs. Sleeping quarters were built under the roof.[13]

Farmers mainly raised corn and cotton, with cotton becoming the main commercial crop after the invention of Eli Whitney's cotton gin in 1773.[14] Farmers raised cotton as a commercial crop in Alabama as early as the 1770s, however, as subsistence farmers moved inland, they needed a cash crop that could grow and would not spoil in the heat on the way to market. They found the answer with the Mexican or green-seed cotton. This short-staple variety of cotton contained sticky seeds that were difficult to remove. The other variety of cotton, the black-seed or long staple cotton contained seeds that could be removed by hand or a simple pair of rollers. The seeds of the short-staple variety could not be removed this way. The long staple variety of cotton, however, only grew on the coast.[15] Eli Whitney solved the problem by creating the cotton gin. The cotton gin was a machine of rollers and spikes that could clean fifty pounds of lint a day, making the production of cotton with slave labor very profitable.[16]

In 1804, the first cotton gins were introduced into the future Alabama. Abram Mordecai, who owned a trading post in what would become Montgomery County, established the first cotton gin-house in Alabama. He purchased the newly patented machine in Georgia and transported it by packhorses to the site where the Coosa and Alabama Rivers converged.[17]

From the beginning, the cotton industry associated slaves with the labor force necessary to harvest the cotton. In the counties of the Tennessee and Tombigbee River Valleys, slaves made up roughly thirty percent of the population by 1816. The work required an abundant, cheap labor source and slaves provided it. Few considered slavery immoral or unethical.[18]

The War of 1812 slowed the influx of new settlers into the state. The Creek tribe sided with Britain and began attacking white settlers. At Fort Mims, Creek raiders killed an estimated two hundred and fifty settlers. In 1814, Major General Andrew Jackson from Tennessee led troops into Alabama, finally destroying Creek power at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. With their surrender, the United States government forced the Creeks to cede most of their land.[19]

With the defeat of the Creeks and the opening of their land, "Alabama Fever" swept the nation.[20] A James Graham of Hillsborough, North Carolina wrote in 1817:

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[11] Rogers et al, pp. 57-58.
[12] "Colonial and Territorial Periods, 1519-1819 Context," p. 42.
[13] Rogers et al, pp. 57-58.
[14] "Colonial and Territorial Periods, 1519-1819 Context," pp. 38-39.
[15] Abernathy, p. 34.
[16] Rogers et al, pp. 95-96.
[17] Thomas W. Oliver, "King Cotton in Alabama: A Brief History," Alabama Heritage (Winter 1995) p. 17.
[18] Sellers, pp. 16-18.
[19] Rogers et al, pp. 49-53.
[20] Rogers et al, p. 54.

> The *Alabama Feaver* [sic] rages here with great violence and has carried off vast numbers of our Citizens . . .. There is no question that this *feaver* [sic] is contagious . . . for as soon as one neighbor visits another who has just returned from Alabama he immediately discovers the same symptoms which are exhibited by the one who has seen alluring Alabama.[21]

Settlers began to pour into the ceded areas. With cheap land available and cotton going for record prices, many moved to Alabama in the hopes of striking it rich. Most of these new settlers were relatively poor, only owning a couple of slaves, if they owned any at all. Few people of wealth were willing to make the move to Alabama, where the future was still uncertain.[22] Facing worn out soil and sagging economic conditions in the east, others took the chance, settling into the river valleys of the state.

The Tennessee River Valley, with its fertile soil and the Tennessee River providing transportation to the New Orleans market, quickly grew to one of the wealthiest cotton regions of the old South. Originally settled by small farmers, Madison County quickly grew into a plantation society.[23] By 1816, it was the most populous county in the state, with 10,000 white settlers, and 4,200 slaves noted in the census.[24]

Other counties of the Tennessee Valley, such as Lauderdale, Franklin, and Limestone, also experienced the cotton market boom. Only Jackson County, cut by the Appalachian Mountains, remained a mostly subsistence farm community. Huntsville soon became the unofficial capital of the Alabama Territory boasting "260 houses, principally built of brick; . . . a bank, a courthouse, and market house."[25] Most of this was attributable to the cotton industry. In 1819, one-third of the sixty thousand acres cultivated in Madison County was devoted to cotton production, with the rest planted with corn, wheat, rye, and other grains and vegetables. Madison County produced almost 4.5 million pounds of ginned cotton that year.[26]

On December 14, 1819, Alabama was admitted to the United States as the twenty-second state. The population of the state had grown to 127,901.[27] The majority of these citizens lived off the land. Already Alabama's agricultural future was becoming apparent. Cotton had already become the cash crop of the area. It would only be a matter of time before King Cotton took complete control of the state.

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[21] Quoted by Rogers et al, p. 54.
[22] Abernethy, pp. 35-36.
[23] Daniel Dupre, "Ambivalent Capitalists on the Cotton Frontier: Settlement and Development in the Tennessee Valley of Alabama," The Journal of Southern History, (May 1990) p. 219.
[24] Sellers, p. 17.
[25] Anne Newport Royall, Letters from Alabama, 1817-1822, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1969) p. 119.
[26] Dupre, pp. 220-221.
[27] Rogers et al, p. 54.

Chapter 2
The Antebellum Years and the Civil War: 1820-1865

With the induction of Alabama into the United States in 1819, the role of agriculture in the state changed. While necessary for survival during the territorial period of Alabama's history, after 1819, agriculture moved away from being solely for sustenance, becoming the most important industry in the state. Alabama was well suited for agriculture – containing rich soil, a temperate climate, and an extensive river system that supplied ample water and provided transportation to markets. White settlers came to Alabama on the promise of fertile soil, rising cotton prices, and a fresh start. Blacks came to Alabama against their will to support the state's agricultural system. Cotton grew well in the hot and humid south and unlike food crops, did not rot when transported far distances in hot weather. By 1860, every county in the state would produce cotton, yet the amount of cotton grown and the size and type of farms varied from region to region.

Statehood, along with the ceding of Native American lands, encouraged settlers to flock to Alabama. Many came from the eastern shore states, where over-farming exhausted the prime farmland. With the Indian Removal Act of 1830, Congress cleared the way for the removal of Native Americans from their traditional land. Three treaties – Dancing Rabbit (1830), Cusseta (1832), and new Echota (1835) – removed the Choctaws, the Creeks, and the Cherokees respectively from their domains, opening the way for a new wave of emigration. The population rose from 79,000 in 1819 to 309,527 in 1830.[1]

Most pre-statehood settlement occurred in the Tennessee Valley in northern Alabama. According to 1820 census records, Madison County, in the heart of the Valley, was the most populated county in the state and where the plantation system, which came to dominate Alabama agriculture, took root in the state. After the War of 1812, the price of cotton climbed steadily until it reached twenty-five cents a pound in 1818. Settlers, sure they could make a fortune from cotton flocked to the Valley, which many at the time viewed as the best cotton-producing region of the state. The federal government established a land grant office in Huntsville, as well as in other places across the state, to sell acres of unsettled land on credit. Land speculation became rampant with farmers buying more land than they could possibly till. Most farmers believed they could pay off their debts with a couple of successful cotton crops or if nothing else, by selling of a small portion of their land. Many constructed houses and planted fields on land they did not own.[2] In 1819, when cotton prices dropped, many were unable to pay their outstanding balances, forcing them to leave their farms.[3]

In 1819, Alabamians began their state's history with a land bill from the United States Congress that extended credit to farmers for up to eight years or allowed farmers to relinquish portions of their land back to the federal government, keeping only the land for which they already paid. This would unfortunately start a pattern that many cotton

[1] Jeff Mansell and Melanie Betz, "Plantation Houses of the Alabama Canebrake, Alabama," (National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Nomination, 1993), Section E page 11; and University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, United States Historical Census Data Browser, (ONLINE, 1998, University of Virginia, http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/., Dec. 17, 2002).
[2] Dupre, pp. 221-222.
[3] Dupre, p. 221.

planters were unable to break well into the next century. When cotton prices rose, farmers would extend themselves in the hopes of making a fortune the next year, only to see prices drop with the overproduction of cotton and their personal debts increase, starting a cycle of poverty many never escaped.

Wealthy planters from the East, who often came with slaves, settled in the most fertile areas of the Tennessee Valley, where land was expensive, but productive. Many small family farmers settled up in the hills and mountains of the northern portion of the state, eking out a living in the rocky soil. These farmers had little in common with their Tennessee Valley neighbors; they owned small farms, growing what they needed while producing little in the way of cash crops. The mountains' wealth would not be discovered until the 1850s, when the coal and iron deposits would be mined.

Many thought the yeomen and "poor whites"[4] who lived in the mountains "plow a little, hunt a little, fish a little, but mainly passed their time . . . communing with their hounds and a jug of what, with a feeling for words, had been named 'bust-head.'"[5] In reality, mountain farmers survived by growing corn, cane, and vegetables. Farmers also raised sheep, hogs, poultry, and cattle. Hogs were easy to raise in the region, where winter forage allowed for free range of the animals. Also, unlike beef, pork could be preserved for months, whereas beef had to be eaten immediately, therefore often limiting it to the well to do. [6] Not all farms in the region were small. The Robert G. Griffith Sr. farm in Blount County consisted of 400 acres in 1850. Griffith's principle crop was corn, but he also grew wheat, barley, oats, and Irish and sweet potatoes and raised seventy-five hogs, six horses, one mule, four milk cows, four work oxen, and eight other cattle.[7]

During the early settlement period, settlers ignored the Black Belt; the heavy, clay soil was difficult to plow, water was scarce, and the area was thought to be unhealthy. The introduction of a new type of cotton that grew exceptionally well in the Black Belt changed this. Suddenly the Black Belt possessed many possibilities. Heavy plows and the drilling of deep wells solved some of the problems of the Black Belt, making it habitable.[8] Beginning in the 1830s, the Black Belt became the primary cotton growing region of Alabama and contained the large plantations associated with the antebellum period. (See Picture 2.1)

South of the wealthy Black Belt region laid the unfertile Wiregrass and Piney Woods regions of the state. These regions, with their sandy soil and swampy land, were unsuitable for large farming operations and maintained the smallest populations in the state.[9] In an 1855 article in DeBow's Review, J. D. B. De Bow wrote of the Wiregrass region, "The agricultural uses of this country are not great. It is very sparsely sprinkled over with small farmers, who have fine water, health, and fine stock range, but with little fertility of soil."[10] Although small farms could be found in the area, and some cotton was grown, for the most part, the Wiregrass was unable to support large-scale agriculture.

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[4] Many sources for the antebellum period befine yeoman as small landowners who farm their own land and "poor whites" as landless farmers who squatted on land.
[5] W.J. Cash, The Mind of the South, (New York: Vintage Books, 1941) p. 25.
[6] Blevins, p. 16.
[7] Robert Gamble and Trina Binkley "Robert G. Griffith, Sr. House, Blount County, Alabama" (National Register of Historic Places Nomination, Listed 2000) Section 8 p. 2.
[8] Mansell and Betz, Section E p. 11.
[9] United States Historical Census Data Browser.
[10] De Bow, p. 611.

The exception was raising cattle. While cattle raising had been ignored in most parts of the state in favor of cotton, in the Piney Woods and Wiregrass regions cows still roamed freely. The warm weather and sparse undergrowth made the Piney Woods and Wiregrass regions ideal for raising cattle, as winter shelter and additional food would not need to be provided. Also, since southern Alabama lacked large plantations, few farmers insisted on fencing in cattle to prevent them from entering into cotton fields. [11]

The Wiregrass and Piney Woods regions also supported the state's timber industry. The natural forests of southern Alabama featured pine, cypress trees, cedars, and oaks. Not only was it plentiful, it was close to the Mobile port.[12] But, splitting timber and distilling pinesap into turpentine were labor-intensive jobs that few were willing to take on.[13] Therefore, the timber and turpentine industries did not take off until the invention of crosscut saws in the 1880s.

Regardless of other crops raised, cotton became the lifeblood of Alabama agriculture, responsible for many aspects of Alabama's society and her people. English and American textile mills needed the cotton to produce cloth, and some made fortunes overnight from this crop. The aristocracy of the cotton kingdom controlled politics and government. Social interactions, including marriage, was based on how many bales one's family grew. What one could buy depended on the price of cotton. "King Cotton" became the dominant crop across the state and across the South in the nineteenth century. Traveling across Alabama in 1828, Captain Basil Hall of England wrote:

> Every flaw of wind from the shore wafted off the smell of that useful plant; at every dock or wharf we encountered it in huge piles or pyramids of bales and our decks soon choked up with it. All day, and almost all night long, the captain, pilot, crew and passengers were talking of nothing else; and sometimes our ears were so wearied with the sound of cotton! cotton! cotton! that we gladly hailed a fresh inundation of company in the hopes of some change – but alas! Wiggin's Landing, or Choctaw Creek, or the towns of Gains or Cahawba [sic] or Canton, produced us nothing but fresh importations of the raw material. 'What's cotton at?' was the first eager inquiry. 'Ten cents! Oh that will never do!' From the cotton in the market they went to crops in the fields –the frost which had nipped their shoots – the bad times – the overtrading – and so round to prices and prospects again and again, till I wished all the cotton in the country was at the bottom of the Alabama![14]

Planters cleared fields for cotton as fast as possible and production of the crop soared. With the high demand for cotton and the possibility of making a fortune from that demand, a cotton empire arose within the state. Plantations for wealthy cotton planters sprang up, particularly in the Tennessee Valley and the Black Belt region. While

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[11] Blevins, pp. 15-16.
[12] De Bow, p. 611.
[13] Robert Arthur Gilmour, "The Other Emancipation: Studies in the Society and Economy of Alabama Whites During Reconstruction" Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1972, p. 20.
[14] Captain Basil Hall, Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828, (Edinburgh: Cadell & Co, 1829) Vol. 3 of 3 vols. pp. 310-311.

many might call their farms a plantation, a true plantation was dictated by size, social status, and geography. A plantation is defined as: a landholding large enough to be distinguishable from a family farm, at least 250 acres; a distinct division of labor and management; specialized agricultural production, such as focusing on one cash crop; distinctive settlement forms with a focus on spatial relationships; and a relatively large amount of cultivation put into each acre.[15] These plantations became self-contained communities. Plantations could be as large as 1,000 acres, with about a third of the land reserved for raising cotton and the rest used for timber, pastureland, and gardens. One could often find a master's house, slave quarters, barns, sheds, animal pens, a smokehouse, a gin house, a blacksmith shop, and a spring- or well house on a well-equipped plantation.[16]

While plantations often possessed land and money, planters often depended more on outside sources to fill the needs of their plantations than small farmers did. They often insisted on planting cotton, to the exclusion of other crops, except for the years when the price of cotton dropped extremely low. As soon as the price went up, they often returned to cotton. Many supplies could easily be purchased and shipped home by the same river system used to ship cotton out. In some ways, planters did not have a choice in the matter. They often purchased supplies on credit, with their creditors insisting on their raising cotton. Cotton was more profitable than corn or other cereal crops and the state lacked the milling facilities to ground wheat and oats.[17] Many argued that it was foolish to buy food products that could easily be grown on one's own farm. Charles Lyell felt that farming only one crop was financially uncertain, with too many factors that could wipe out a farmer. In the Wetumpka Argus in 1845, he wrote:

> He wouldn't sell a chicken, nor a dozen eggs, nor a bushel of peaches, nor a colt for any consideration. He is above that! He raises cotton—he does. He rides in a six hundred dollar carriage, for which he is in debt. His daughters strum a piano that never will be paid for. He buys corn which he could raise for ten cents a bushel and pays sixty cents for it, after 2 ½% is paid to the commission merchant. He could raise his own tobacco yet he pays $3 a pound for Richmond scented. He could raise his own hogs yet he patronizes Cincinnati. The consequences are disastrous. Being the possessor of one staple, he fluctuates with the market of that article. He takes the 'Price Current'—he pays postage, he gobbles down the English news like a cormorant. If he sells today, he'll lose—therefore he'll wait for better advices. He is mixed up in cotton and is a gambler therein. Meantime he wants money—drafts on his factor. He wants cotton goods and clothes for his plantation which he could make at home. He orders them and feels 'large'. The year closes and he is up to his eyebrows in debt. This is a result of his non-calculating, not even guessing, the

[15] Charles S. Aiken, "The Fragmented Neoplantation: A New Type of Farm Operation in the Southeast," Southeastern Geographer, Nov. 1970, p. 43.
[16] Rogers et al, p. 97.
[17] Albert Burton Moore, Ph.D., History of Alabama, (Tuscaloosa, AL: Alabama Book Store, 1951), pp. 276-277.

> difference between farmers and planters is that one supports a family and the other supports pride until pride gets a fall.[18]

While planters tried to be self-sufficient, many, especially those with large slave holdings found it necessary to purchase the large amount of corn and pork needed to feed everyone.[19]

Land where cotton would grow was in high demand. Access to water, as well as access to transportation, such as a river and later the railroad, were required, particularly for the larger farms and plantations. An advertisement placed in the Southern Advocate on January 3, 1837, exemplified what many looked for:

PRAIRIE LAND FOR SALE

> We will sell, on good terms, if early application be made, Five Hundred and fifty seven 56-100 Acres of Timbered Prairie Land, lying in Perry county, 10 miles S. E. of Marion [on the edge of the Black Belt], and well situated in point of navigation, Mills, &c. 50 acres cleared, and a never failing well of as good free stone water as is in any country . . .. Suffice it to say, the climate, fertility of soil, and health of the country cannot be surpassed by any.[20]

While some searched for large tracts of land to begin plantations, most of the people of Alabama did not fall into this category. According to the 1860 Census record, only about six percent of free people in Alabama owned slaves, and most of those owned less than ten slaves.[21]

Small farmers made up the majority of people in Alabama during the antebellum period, and rarely had the luxury to focus solely on one crop. While planters' largest crop was cotton, for small farmers, corn was the staple crop and their primary source of bread and feed. Cotton was a money crop; small farmers planted a couple of acres of cotton, but only for extra money to purchase what they could not produce themselves. Besides corn and cotton, small farmers also grew fruit, vegetables, and in some instances, tobacco. They also kept a small assortment of livestock, often for their own use, though sometimes raised enough pork to sell locally. These small farmers knew little about soil conservation. After several years of cultivating a field, the rain would eventually carry the most fertile soil down into the river valleys, leaving the small farmer with unproductive land. [22]

After the 1830s, as settlers from Virginia and the Carolinas settled the Black Belt, this region of the state became the center of cotton production in Alabama, and the production of cotton in the Tennessee Valley began to drop off. This change resulted from several factors. First, many people who settled in the Tennessee Valley were from Tennessee, and more inclined to produce cereals and live stock, such as they produced in

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[18] Quoted by Charles S. Davis, The Cotton Kingdom in Alabama, (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1974) p. 182.
[19] Moore, p. 276.
[20] "Prairie Land for Sale," Southern Advocate (Huntsville, AL), January 3, 1837.
[21] United States Historical Census Data Browser.
[22] Moore, pp. 277-278.

Tennessee. Secondly, compared to the cotton raised in the Black Belt, cotton from the Tennessee Valley was viewed as inferior and sold for less. Black Belt Planters paid careful attention to their picked cotton, ensuring it was free of trash and treated carefully so as not to be damaged, conditions that brought down the price received for cotton. Cleanliness, brightness, and staple or length of fiber determined the price a grower would receive for his cotton.[23] The large planters were also more likely to have been from eastern plantations and have more experience with raising cotton than their Tennessee Valley counterparts. Finally, the Black Belt had higher quality ginning facilities than in northern Alabama.[24]

Without modern machinery, farming, particularly cotton farming, was a labor-intensive industry. While large plantations made farming financially profitable, it required many people working in the fields. The use of black slaves solved the question of where to find the necessary labor pool. Records suggest that slavery existed in Alabama as early as 1702, and increasing after 1716. In 1808, the United States Congress placed a ban on the importation of new slaves into the country, though the practice continued to some extent. Domestic slave trading became a common practice in the South, with slaves traded from state to state. The natural increase in population guaranteed the continued use of slave labor, even without new imports. Slavery continued until January 1, 1863, when, during the Civil War, President Lincoln passed the Emancipation Proclamation, ending slavery in all rebellious states. The thirteenth amendment of the United States Constitution, ratified December 18, 1865, further prohibited slavery in the rest of the country.

The Black Belt and Tennessee Valley, with the largest plantations, contained the highest concentration of slaves in Alabama, but slaves lived in all of the counties. Few farmers actually owned slaves, only one in ten.[25] Large slaveholders, those holding more than two hundred slaves, all resided in the Black Belt, but most slaveholders owned less than ten slaves. In the Black Belt, the number of slaves increased dramatically after 1840, making blacks the majority in this region. In the northern portion of the state, the number of blacks remained the same, while the number of whites increased.[26] According to the 1860 Census, only thirty-four slaveholders in the entire state could be classified as large slaveholders.

> Imagine a universe of ten slaveholders, eight owning two slaves apiece, one owning twenty-four, and the tenth possessing sixty. Obviously most slaveholders (80 percent) would own fewer than five slaves, but most slaves (84 out of 100) would reside in units of more than twenty. Such an imaginary model suggests what the numbers reveal. In 1850 . . . over half [of the slaves], 51.6 percent, resided on plantation of more than twenty bondsmen. The figures were more pronounced in the Deep South, and

[23] Oliver, p. 19.
[24] Moore, p. 273.
[25] Oliver, p. 18.
[26] Davis, p. 38.

> still more so in 1860, when fully 62 percent of the slaves in the Deep South lived in plantation units[27].

In Marengo County, in the heart of the Black Belt, slaves made up over seventy-five percent of the population, with fifty slaveholders owning more than one hundred slaves.[28] In Blount County, on the other hand, located in the hilly region of the state, only one slaveholder of 125 slaveholders in the county owned more than forty slaves. Of these 125 slave owners, over fifty percent owned less than four slaves.

Large plantations, where the majority of slaves resided, developed in a distinctive manner. "Grouped to the rear, and inconspicuous places, so as not to mar the beauty of the planter's home, were the Negro quarters and the out-houses, saw and grist mills, smoke houses, barns, gin houses typical of Alabama plantations."[29] Because of the large collection of slaves on plantations, entire villages often formed allowing blacks to have their social outlets. (See Picture 2.2)

The life of a slave varied depending on their role. Slaves, who worked in the master's house, often lived in the main house so as to be available to their owner at all hours. Field slaves, who made up the majority of slaves, lived in housing especially designed for them. These buildings were often frame construction, either as single room dwellings or in the "saddlebag" plan.[30] The "saddlebag" design is two separate rooms, each with their own doors to the outside, with a fireplace in the middle. While this was not the only design used, it was often economical for owners, as it allowed for two families to share a fireplace and chimney, often the most expensive part of the construction.

Slaveholders allotted food to slaves, but also allowed for small vegetable gardens to supplement their diets. These individual gardens provided slaves with greens, corn, peas and other fresh fruits and vegetables. Some slaves also owned chickens, purchased with money raised from work off their master's plantation, giving them eggs as well. Many slaves hunted for wild game to add meat to their diet.[31]

Slaves were the heart of the cotton industry in Alabama, doing almost all of the work to plant, grow, and harvest the cotton. As arguments against slavery became more and more common, slaveholders used this fact in defense of slavery. An article by Dr. Noah B. Cloud, editor of The American Cotton Planter and the Soil of the South, states:

> How often do we hear the remark that 'cotton is the only thing that brings money into the country.' It freights our steamboats and railroads; furnishes employment to thousands of men in its transportation and shipment, feeds the miner, the shipbuilder, the machinist, and many other artisans besides. What then would be the consequence of the cessation of

[27] Quoted by John Michael Vlach, Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993) p. 12.
[28] United States Historical Census Data Browser.
[29] Sellers, p. 20.
[30] Jonathan A. Farris and Trina Binkley, "Dry Forks Plantation, Wilcox County, Alabama," (National Register of Historic Places Nomination, listed 1999).
[31] Rogers et al, pp. 97-99.

its production? [It would be impossible to meet this demand without slaves.][32]

The cotton kingdom that developed within the state, and within the South as a whole, depended on the fertile lands of the Gulf States and cheap labor provided by slaves.

Even with small agricultural ventures outside of cotton, Alabama was a cotton state. The problems with this one-crop system, however, soon became apparent. Cotton is extremely hard on the soil and by 1840, once fertile fields were being abandoned as farmers moved farther west. In the 1830s agricultural journals and agricultural societies began circulating, encouraging farmers to consider farming as a scientific pursuit. These journals and societies encouraged diversification of crops for two reasons: 1) to protect the soil from depletion, and 2) to reduce the financial uncertainty of farming by raising multiple crops.

Agricultural journals encouraged crop rotation to prevent this from occurring. The American Cotton Planter suggested dividing acreage into four parts, planting cotton in the first section, corn in the second section, wheat or oats in the third, and allowing the fourth section to be used as pasture for cattle. The next year cotton would be planted in the field that had been used for pasture, using the same field for cotton only once every four years.[33] Others argued that cotton could remain the number one crop of planters with the introduction of improved types of cotton, allowing for farming more meat and bread, while not reducing a farmer's cotton output.[34]

Furthermore, only raising one crop forced a farmer to face economic uncertainty as the price of cotton varied from year to year. Many farmers considered cotton the only reliable cash crop; in spite of the fact many uncontrollable factors could impact the crop. In 1838, the cotton crop was harmed by an early frost. In 1845, caterpillars ravaged the crop.[35] In the years where there was a large cotton crop, the price dropped. Agricultural journals tried to show the benefits of other crops. Many felt that fruit growing could be extremely profitable in Alabama. Vineyards could be found in Montgomery and Autauga Counties and many planters had small orchards for their personal use. An August 1853 issue of American Cotton Planter listed the costs and profits of raising cotton in comparison to raising fruit on the same property:

For Cotton:		
Interest on one acre of land worth $25 @ 8%	$2.00	
Breaking up ground with double team	2.00	
Planting seed	1.00	
Barring off and scraping	1.50	
Ditching and breaking out middles	2.00	
Hoeing and scraping	1.00	
Picking 1,400 pounds of seed cotton @ $0.75	10.50	
Ginning and packing	3.00	
Hauling to market	1.50	
Total		24.50

[32] Dr. Noah B. Cloud, The American Cotton Planter and the Soil of the South, March 1859, p. 73.
[33] Davis, p. 174.
[34] Moore, p. 279.
[35] Davis, p. 39.

One bale of cotton (400 lbs.) @ 8 cents	32.00	
Net profit		7.50
For Fruit:		
Cost of land	25.00	
Cost of 70 trees, @ 25 cents	17.50	
Cost of setting out, @ 5 cents	3.50	
Total		46.00
Interest on $46 @ 8 percent	8.67	
Cost of Cultivation	5.00	
Total		8.68
Apples per tree, or 560 bushels per acres @ 50 cents	280.00	
Net Profit		$271.32[36]

These results may actually be too generous for most Alabama farms, as four hundred pounds of cotton per acre was much more than what most Alabama farms produced. On average, one acre of land produced 1,100 pounds of seed cotton, with 1,400 pounds needed to make a 400-pound bale.

Dr. Swasby felt that much of the reluctance to shift to other crops was due to farmers' unwillingness "to engage in any experiment not having for their chief object the increase of the 'number of bales per hand'!"[37] Many farmers refused to consider scientific farming methods. While the number of agricultural journals continued to climb, many farmers and planters not see their value. "One editor said, 'They will neither take an agricultural paper, read it when given them, nor believe in its contents if by chance they hear it read."[38] These journals discussed the advantages of diversification, the use of fertilizer, crop rotation, and selective breeding of livestock, yet many rejected these measures in actual practice. The reasons not to experiment ranged from being financially unable to take a chance to stubborn refusal to relinquish the old methods.

In October 1855, Alabama held its first State "Agricultural Fair and Cattle Show" in Montgomery. The fair, along with others like it throughout the state, was extolled as a way to learn practical farming methods from other farmers. Advertisements for the fair read:

> Contributions from the practical men, those who have tilled the soil, will be on display. Perhaps one has constructed a new and valuable instrument for plowing; and he brings it up to submit it to the judgment of his fellow planters. Another had turned his attention to the improvement of his seed and has obtained a specimen of corn or wheat or cotton which makes a heavier yield than he has been accustomed to, and he brings his sample to the fair that the public may reap the benefit of his industry. Another has devoted his thoughts to the improvement of his stock and presents the

[36] Dr. M. A. Swasby, "Profits of Fruit Culture in the South," American Cotton Planter, August 1853, pp. 248-250.
[37] Swasby, p. 248.
[38] Quoted by Elisabeth McTyeire Essler, "The Agricultural Reform Movement in Alabama, 1850-1860," Master's Thesis, Alabama Polytechnic Institute, 1948, p.6.

> evidences of his skill and the thousands who witness them have the benefit of his labors.
>
> The spirit of associated effort which the Fairs awaken in the agricultural part of the community is worth a great deal to the planting interest, and of course, therefore, to the country at large. There is no occasion so suitable for securing a feeling of unity as the week devoted to these exhibitions.[39]

These exhibits allowed for other farmers to see up close new machinery and methods being used in the area. Competitions were held for all types of agricultural, household and mechanical productions with prizes for the winner. The rivalry could become intense, yet added to the festive air of the gathering.

Agricultural journals and societies encouraged the use of new machinery as a way to improve farming. Farming was physically demanding work but most farms were too small to effectively use machinery and plantations owned enough slaves to complete the work without the use of machinery. The one type of machine all cotton farmers in Alabama depended on was the cotton gin. Most plantations, especially in the Black Belt, owned their own cotton gins, but most farmers took their cotton to be ginned in town. The types of gins available varied greatly, as descriptions of the machine often spread through word of mouth or crude drawings. The number of patents requested for cotton gins reflected these variations. In the 1830s, five patents were issued for cotton gins and seven patents issued in the 1840s. The number of patents jumped to fifty-three in the 1850s.[40]

The cotton gin was a dangerous, yet necessary part of the cotton industry. Five to six men worked at a cotton gin: a vacuum operator, the ginner, two pressmen, a gin foreman, and if the gin was steam-operated, a fireman. The vacuum operator sucked the unprocessed cotton out of a wagon. It would go through the ginning machine, separating the fiber from the seed. When enough fiber was produced, the cotton would be pressed into a bale, which the foreman would weigh and mark with the owner's initials.[41]

By the 1850s, the Cotton Kingdom was at its pinnacle. The price of cotton in 1850 was 12.34 cents a pound. It remained above eleven cents for the rest of the decade. Alabama became the leading producer of cotton in the country, making the possibility of change a difficult idea to foster.[42] All in all, Alabama was a cotton state. One visitor described it as a place

> where the people live in cotton houses and ride in cotton carriages. They buy cotton, sell cotton, think cotton, eat cotton, drink cotton, and dream cotton. They marry cotton wives, and unto them are born cotton children. In enumerating the charms of a fair widow, they begin by saying she

[39] Quoted by Essler, p. 37.
[40] William H. Phillips, "Making a Business of It: The Evolution of Southern Cotton Gin Patenting, 1831-1890," Agricultural History (Spring 1994) p. 82.
[41] Oliver, p. 20.
[42] Moore, p. 272.

> makes so many bales of cotton. It is the great staple – the sum and substance of Alabama.[43]

Too many farmers had only known the success possible with cotton and were unwilling to change. (See Picture 2.2)

The cotton industry affected almost every aspect of life in antebellum Alabama. Whole towns grew around cotton gins, merchants, and transportation routes, providing many planters their only social arena. The larger planters, besides having a house on their plantation, often kept homes in these cotton towns, giving them a place to stay when in town to purchase supplies and attend parties.[44]

In 1861, with the beginning of the Civil War, the state of agriculture in Alabama would be altered. As men went to war, fields went fallow. In April 1862, the Confederate Government passed a law that required all able-bodied white males between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five to serve three years of military service. Men could get around this law by paying a substitute to take their place. In September the law was amended to exempt planters and overseers who supervised twenty or more slaves. [45] This resulted in small farmers suffering more for the war effort.

Those who did remain to farm had to change their practices. With the start of the war, all Northern markets closed to Southern cotton. Union blockades prevented southern shipments of cotton to reach England. A blockade of Mobile Bay prevented the export of cotton or the import of supplies, except by blockade runners who made large profits for the risks they undertook to get cotton out and supplies in. For every fifteen bales of cotton grown in 1861and 1862, only one bale was grown in 1864 and 1865. Cotton prices rose from eleven cents a pound before the War to one dollar a pound in 1864. Few cotton farmers could take advantage of these high prices, their cotton trapped in storage by the blockades and their fields growing other crops. Instead of cotton, farmers raised food supplies needed by both troops and civilians. Many fertile fields became overgrown without the necessary labor or supplies for successful farming.

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[43] Hiram Fuller, Belle Brittan on a Tour at Newport and Here and There, (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1858) p. 112.

[44] Gene A. Ford and Trina Binkley, "Courtland Historic District, 1st Expansion, Courtland, Alabama," (National Register of Historic Places Nomination, listed 1998) Section 8, pp. 18-19.

[45] Rogers et al., p. 206.

Chapter 3

Post-bellum Agriculture
1865-1920

Dichotomies dominated Alabama agriculture during the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. While the interest in scientific farming practices spread, many farmers, due to lack of money and lack of interest, found themselves unable to practice the methods taught by agricultural colleges and experimental stations. By the end of Reconstruction, scientists preached the benefits of crop rotation, but merchants and landlords insisted on cotton as the only sure cash crop for the state. While most of the country grew in prosperity with the introduction of the Industrial Revolution, tenancy and sharecropping pushed many Alabama farmers farther into debt.

Reconstruction

The end of the Civil War brought a change in the economic situation of Alabama. Confederate soldiers returned to find a land devastated by war: fields lay fallow, fences and barns destroyed, livestock killed, and slaves emancipated. Both Confederate and Federal troops confiscated personal property. Investments in Confederate bonds and railroad stock were suddenly worthless. Slaves, previously an investment for both planters and small farmers, had been set free. The only thing many planters had left was their land, and even that dropped in value. Governor Patton estimated the state suffered $500,000,000 in property losses, including the loss of slaves.[1] While the northern mountains and the Tennessee Valley were the hardest hit, no portion of the state escaped unscathed. Many had nothing left. Starvation was not unheard of, particularly in the northern portion of the state, where the majority of the battles in the state occurred. Crops and livestock had been confiscated primarily in this region, and the land scarred by war. The agricultural system that Alabama depended on in the past was destroyed and a new system had to be developed to take its place.

After four years of war, many Alabamians wanted things to return to normal as soon as possible. Agriculturally, this meant returning to cotton. During the war, most farmers and planters devoted land to food supplies, with few acres for cotton. As the war progressed, the price of cotton had climbed due to the inability of southern cotton growers to get their crop past northern blockades to Northern or European markets. Many farmers stored their cotton during the war years, only to see it burned by fleeing Confederate troops or confiscated by Northern forces.

By 1866, the price of cotton reached $0.43 a pound.[2] However, few benefited from this high price. Due to bad weather, insect infestation, and limited resources, the crops of 1865 and 1866 were disastrous, wiping out many acres. Farmers with cotton lacked the necessary labor to harvest the crop. In 1867, State Senator A. L. Woodliff of Etowah County wrote to the governor that in northern Alabama “those that had farms & property & failed to make enough corn to do them last year . . . speak of leaving for

[1] Moore, p. 456.
[2] Gilbert C. Fite, Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture 1865-1980, (Lexington, KY: Kentucky UP, 1987) pp. 6-7.

Tenn."[3] Another gentleman wrote that "if Something [sic] is not done till another crop is made numbers . . . are bound to starve."[4]

In March 1865, the United States Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, more commonly known as the Freedman's Bureau. While the Bureau was in charge of all matters concerning former slaves, they also distributed rations to all people in the state. Records from the period show that the majority of food rations went to the mountain region of the state, even though this area contained the fewest number of blacks. (See Table 3.1) The destitution in this region lasted longer than in most parts of the state; many in the mountain region left the area in the hopes of finding employment elsewhere.[5]

Faced with economic hardships and an uncertain future, many Alabamians left the state. Almost every region of the state experienced a decline in its white population, with the exception of the Tennessee Valley. (See Table 3.2) In 1860, the white population of the state was 526,271; by 1870, it was 521,384. Articles and advertisements for Texas, Brazil, and other locations began to run in the papers. Ads for Texas boasted of farmland available for a low price, where labor could be found cheap and where farmers could make a fresh start. The Mobile Daily Advertiser and Register wrote: "Many families rendered destitute by the vicissitudes of war and an unmerciful Congress, are seeking new homes in the flourishing State of Texas, where land can be obtained at low prices, and the laborer is considered worthy of his hire."[6] Brazil, with slavery still legal, tempted some with the possibility of the old way of life.[7]

Contrary to the fears of most planters at the time, many blacks remained in Alabama. From 1860 to 1870, the black population of the state grew from 437,770 to 475,510.[8] The newly freed slaves concerned many by the end of 1865. Emancipation brought problems for the freedmen. They suddenly had their freedom, but little else. Few owned property or had the money to purchase property. To help freedmen purchase land, the United States Congress passed the Southern Homestead Act of 1866. Congress designed the Southern Homestead Act to break up aristocracy, prevent land speculation, and provide land for Negroes and poor farmers. However, of the 16,284 homestead applications, only 6,293 applicants received land.[9] Therefore, many returned to the fields as laborers out of necessity.

The Freedman's Bureau took responsibility for all matters concerning former slaves, including helping with the labor situation in Alabama. At the end of 1865, the Freedman's Bureau encouraged former slaves to sign labor contracts to work on farms for the upcoming season. As rumors spread that the United States government was confiscating Confederate land and would be giving "forty acres and a mule" to all former slaves, many freedmen refused to sign.[10] However, the United States government confiscated little land, and the land confiscated was rarely of good agricultural quality.

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[3] Quoted by Gilmour, pp. 56-57.
[4] Quoted by Gilmour, p. 68.
[5] Gilmour, p. 68.
[6] "Emigration to Texas," Mobile Daily Advertiser and Register, Feb. 8, 1867.
[7] Mobile Daily Advertiser and Register, Feb. 8, 1867.
[8] Gilmour, p. 43.
[9] Rogers et al, p. 237.
[10] Michael W. Fitzgerald, "'To Give Our Votes to the Party': Black Political Agitation and Agricultural Change in Alabama, 1865-1870," Journal of American History, Sept. 1989, p. 490.

By the beginning of 1866, many former slaves realized they would not be receiving Confederate land and began to enter into contracts with white landowners. These contracts required the approval of the Freedman's Bureau to ensure their fairness to blacks. While the Freedman's Bureau refused to force either party to sign the contracts, it did provide model contracts, that if signed, it promised to enforce.[11] Many white landowners had not yet accepted the idea of blacks as free citizens and the labor contracts reflected this.[12]

Often these labor contracts gave complete control to the employer. Nonetheless, neither party was happy with the contracts. Whites wanting the same control over their labor force as they had before the war, used gang labor and paid their workers after the crops had been harvested, guaranteeing the workers remained throughout the growing season. Blacks wanted their independence and to be paid on a weekly or a monthly basis.[13] Yet, both parties depended on the other with landowners needing the workers and workers needing jobs.

Even with the contracts, many planters searched for alternative employees to freedmen. Northern labor agencies advertised northern workers who could be moved down to the south to work the fields. Yet, few northerners wanted to take the place of slaves. Some planters discussed importing Germans or Chinese immigrants to do the work, but little came of these suggestions. Blacks, feeling their new freedom, tried to organize their labor. The Negro Labor Convention met in Montgomery in January 1871, to "devise means for the future welfare of the colored race . . ." in the hopes of improving their situation.[14]

Many white landowners feared blacks would not be willing to work now that they were free. Landowners, dependent on black labor in the fields, did not believe that white labor could fill its place. They also did not think they would be able to get the same amount of labor out of blacks now that they had the choice to work or not to work. A traveler through Alabama wrote:

> without slavery there can be no cotton: on a well-regulated plantation, in old times, of course the [slave] was made to work a heap harder than any man ought to work; well, a heap closer, anyhow; as for workin' harder, a [freedman] won't be drove to work more'n so much, like a mule in that respect. Now a [freedman] a'n't goin' to work from before daylight, from the time he can see a cotton-stalk, till nine o'clock at night, and a white man can't stand it, and of course it stands to reason that cotton-raisin's gone up.[15]

Part of the concern about black labor was due to the labor shortage that many farmers found themselves facing. Many blacks moved to cities in search of new opportunities and without the necessary labor, many whites also moved away from their farms and plantations. Advertisements for plantations for sale began to appear in papers.

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[11] Harold D. Woodman, "Post-Civil War Southern Agriculture and the Law," Agricultural History, (Jan. 1979: 319-337), p. 322.
[12] Rogers et al, p. 9.
[13] Woodman, p. 323.
[14] Montgomery Daily Advertiser, 01/04/1871.
[15] John Richard Dennett, The South as it Is: 1865-1866, (New York: Viking Press, 1965) p. 289.

One such ad running in November 1865, listed four plantations for sale within the Black Belt, and also stated: "other places too numerous to mention."[16]

One method of dealing with the labor shortage was the enactment of what would become known as the black codes. These collection of laws controlled labor conditions and the conduct of blacks in the state. According to these laws, a vagrant was a runaway, common drunkard, "stubborn servant," or "any person who habitually neglects his employment."[17] Vagrants could be fined $50 or sent to jail and hired out until the debt was paid. Apprentice laws soon followed the vagrancy laws, placing orphans and children whose parents refused to support them, into the custody of a suitable guardian. While these laws could apply to all, they were only enforced for blacks.[18]

Sharecropping and Tenant System

While most farmers' problems could be chalked up to forces outside of their control, many quickly blamed the labor situation. Landowners needed to hire a labor force to work their fields immediately after the war but they did not have the necessary cash to pay the laborers, thus the sharecropping and tenant systems.

The law described the two systems as such:

> In sharecropping, the laborer works an area of land for the landowner, and is paid with a portion of the crop. In the tenant system, the tenant rented the land from the landowner, and pays his rent to the landowner with a portion of the crop. The fundamental distinction between the relationships of landlord and cropper and landlord and tenant is in the fact that the status of a cropper is that of a laborer who has agreed to work for and under the landlord for a certain portion of the crop as wages, but who does not thereby acquire any dominion or control over the premises upon which such labor is to be performed, the cropper having the right merely to enter and remain thereupon for the purpose of performing his engagement; whereas a tenant does not occupy the status of a laborer, but under such a contract acquires possession, dominion, and control over the premises for the term covered by the agreement, usually paying therefore a fixed amount either in money or specifics, and making the crop performs the labor for himself and not for the landlord.[19]

This gave landowners the necessary labor force, while giving workers a reason to stay on a farm for the entire season and to work hard for the crop. Sharecropping and tenancy allowed for social control, as well as economic control, over blacks and poor whites. Landlords and merchants controlled what was grown and how business was conducted. Sharecroppers and tenants could not question the practice; doing so might result in being labeled a troublemaker and prevent them from finding farmland the next year.

Landowners also benefited from the tenant and sharecropping systems by the use of white labor. Before the Civil War, slavery in some ways protected small, white

[16] Montgomery Daily Advertiser, Nov. 22, 1865.
[17] Quoted in Rogers et al, p. 238.
[18] Rogers et al, pp. 238-239.
[19] Quoted by Woodman, pp. 324-325.

farmers, particularly in the Black Belt. During the antebellum period, most large planters with cash available purchased slaves. With emancipation, this was no longer an option, so many turned to land as the only profitable commodity left. Banks foreclosed on many farms for failure to pay off debts incurred during the war, forcing many white farmers to look for work on larger plantations. In the past, the idea of blacks and whites working together in the field was considered unacceptable. The sharecropping and tenant system of farming made this a possibility by working black and white farmers on separate fields on the same plantation.

The sharecropping and tenant system brought a new set of laws into being. Most croppers and tenants needed to purchase supplies before they harvested the crop. As cotton was the only source of security on loans, this left the merchant uncertain about the status of their debts. Laws soon passed that gave those who provided supplies a lien on the crop superior to all other liens, with the exception of the landlords'.[20] Problems with the crop lien system arose almost immediately. If the lien was only against the worker's portion of the crop, the crop may provide inadequate security. If the lien was against the entire crop worked by the worker, it left the landowner covering the price for the worker's debt. Crops were often too small to satisfy the demands of the workers, landlords, and merchants.[21] Laws passed to make the landlord's lien the superior loan, giving the landlord even greater control over their workers. Eventually almost ninety percent of farmers used the crop lien system to purchase supplies, often from their landlords.[22]

According to the Census records of the second half of the nineteenth century, the number of small farms within the state increased. This reflected more on the spread of sharecropping and tenant farming than of an actual increase in the number of landowners. The number of landowners decreased. The plantation system that survived on slave labor in the antebellum period continued, using croppers and tenant farmers of both races to provide the labor. This system of farming would survive long after Reconstruction and into the next century, creating two distinctive agricultural classes: landowners and workers.[23]

After 1880, cash tenancy began to replace crop tenancy. In 1880, of the 135,864 farms listed in the Census, 40,761 were rented for a share of the crop and 22,888 were rented for cash. In 1890, there were 223,220 farms, with 54,544 rented for a share of the crop and 74,330 rented for cash.[24] This was due in large part to ownership of land moving from large planters to merchants, banks, and cotton factors who insisted on cash as large landowners sold their land or were foreclosed upon.[25]

Only about half of southern farmers owned their own farms in 1900. This followed a trend from the Civil War of fewer and fewer farmers working land that they owned, particularly in areas where plantations dominated the antebellum period. According to the 1880 Census, owners cultivated less than thirty percent of farms in the Black Belt and less than fifty percent in the Tennessee Valley. On the other hand, owners

[20] Woodman, p. 327.
[21] Woodman, p. 328.
[22] Moore, p. 567.
[23] Gilmour, p. 114.
[24] United States Historical Census Data Browser.
[25] Fite, p. 6.

cultivated more than seventy-five percent of the farms in counties in the hill country, Wiregrass, and Piney woods region of the state.[26] While owning one's own farm was a step up from sharecropping or tenant farming, in terms of farm advances and profits made, farms worked by sharecroppers faired better, since they had the help of larger landowners.[27]

The tenant and sharecropping system affected all aspects of tenants and croppers lives. Houses, especially those provided to sharecroppers were often poorly constructed, with leaking roofs and no glass in the windows. In 1895, a black female sharecropper in Tuskegee, Alabama was asked if snakes crawled through the cracks in her floor. She replied "Oh, yes, they gets in sometimes, but I just bresh'em out."[28] The diets of croppers and tenants often consisted of pork fat and corn bread, with few vegetables consumed. Education for the children of tenant and cropper children seldom existed.

Many tenants and sharecroppers dreamed of landownership. Most of the landowners in the late nineteenth century were white. By 1900, blacks owned less than five percent of the farms in the state.[29] Since their emancipation, many blacks saw land ownership as offering them independence. Immediately after the War, without anything to their name, this was not possible. For those few black farmers who did purchase land, a system of help existed apart from the whites. Black banks organized to offer loans to black farmers wishing to purchase land and the Negro Cooperative Service offered advice on scientific farming to black farmers. Black farmers even had their own fairs promoting black farmers. (See Table 3.3)

Scientific Farming

In the last half of the nineteenth century, the Progressive Movement swept the country. While this Movement lacked cohesive ideas and often had contradictory views, its message of change influenced all aspects of life. The Progressive Movement's affects on agriculture were not radical. It encouraged farmers to practice diversified agriculture, scientific farming, and farm efficiency, and it spread these ideas across the country with new enthusiasm. Reformers preached that farmers could raise most of the things that they needed and should not just focus solely on cotton. By diversifying, it was thought southern farmers could break the cycle of poverty. George Washington Carver wrote "it is not unusual to see so-called farmers drive to town weekly with their wagons empty and return with them full of various kinds of produce that should have been raised on the farm."[30] Farmers were told to plant what they would need first and focus on cash crops second. This not only fed the farmer but also reduced the risks associated with one crop farming and prevented him from taking out loans to purchase food and household items. Agricultural journals encouraged farmers to raise fruits, vegetables and livestock for their own use.

The southern Wiregrass region of the state previously thought of as a poor area agriculturally, experienced a population growth in the 1870s due to its pine forests. Prior to the Civil War, some of the pine forests were harvested for lumber, but difficulty

[26] United States Historical Census Data Browser.
[27] Gilmour, p. 163.
[28] Quoted by Fite, p. 35.
[29] United States Historical Census Data Browser.
[30] Quoted in Fite, p. 69.

transporting the lumber and the belief that the entire area was unhealthy to humans prevented expansion of the industry. With advances in lumber technology, such as the advent of the circular saw and the mill pond, the pine forests of southern Alabama helped the lumber industry become the second largest industry in terms of employment and value added in the state, second only to mining. The yellow pine, which dominated the forests of the Wiregrass, is a soft wood suitable for construction. Also without wood preservatives, the expanding railroad industry needed to replace its wooden ties at a rate of 200 a mile each year.[31] By the mid-1880s, the turpentine industry came from the eastern states and into the Wiregrass region.[32] Briefly, the two industries intermingled but companies soon realized that the turpentine process formed excess resin and lowered the value of the lumber. Hence, the lumber and turpentine industry developed separately.[33]

With the removal of the forest, the cheapness of the land, and its high productivity with the administration of fertilizer, the Wiregrass attracted small farmers to the area. The building of the railroad also encouraged development and expanded the lumber industry. While many small farmers of the Wiregrass grew cotton, they raised more food products than in most parts of the state, many being almost completely self-sufficient. Livestock continued to be raised in the area and some experimentation with sugar cane occurred in the area.[34]

The number of livestock in the state rose during the last half of the 19th century, from 487,163 heads in 1870 to 875,976 in 1890.[35] (See Table 3.4) The Progressive Farmer wrote about two farmers in Alabama who switched from mainly cotton in 1912, to herds of purebred Hereford cattle. They protected themselves not only from the boll weevil, but also rid themselves of the problems incurred by tenants and sharecroppers, as livestock required less labor.[36] Poor farmers had one or two outbuildings in which to raise some livestock, but they seldom had that many animals. Surveyors in Alabama in 1895 and 1896 noted some black farmers owned "'A mule, an ox, and a pig made up the livestock' or 'The livestock consisted of a mule, two cows, and some hens,' while other families were described as having'one mule and a pig' or 'two hogs, three hens and a turkey.'"[37] For tenants and sharecroppers, a landlord's decision to switch to livestock often meant their displacement.

The arrival of the boll weevil into the state encouraged greater funding for agricultural research and finally pushed many farmers into diversification. The boll weevil is a small beetle that lays its larvae inside cotton bolls, destroying the boll as the larvae mature. At the turn of the century, the boll weevil entered Texas from Mexico and quickly spread across the southeast United States destroying cotton crops as it went.[38] By 1910, the boll weevil entered Alabama. When pesticides and poisons failed to stop the boll weevil, many farmers turned to other crops to supplement their cotton crop.

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[31] Wayne Flynt, Poor But Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press) 1989, p. 146.
[32] Moore, pp. 521-522.
[33] Flynt, p. 150.
[34] Moore, pp. 522-523.
[35] Blevins, p. 167.
[36] Progressive Farmer, (July 2, 1915) p. 625.
[37] Quoted in Fite, p. 36.
[38] Fite, pp. 80-81.

Alabama farmers began diversifying their crops after their first encounter with the weevil, particularly in southern Alabama. The Wiregrass region successfully moved away from cotton, turning instead to peanuts and hogs. At the turn of the century, Dr. George Washington Carver conducted experiments to find new uses for the peanut, but few Alabama farmers were willing to take the risk with a new cash crop while cotton was still king. When the boll weevil entered the area, it decimated much of the cotton crop. In 1915, Coffee County alone lost sixty per cent of its cotton to the bug.[39] As the demand for the legume increased, so did the number of acres devoted to the crop. R. C. Conner encouraged local farmers by converting part of his Enterprise Cotton Seed Oil Company to peanut oil production, the first in the state.[40] In 1917, Coffee County produced more peanuts than any other county in the country.[41] This dramatic shift caused the residents of Enterprise in Coffee County to erect a monument to the bug in 1919.[42]

The introduction of the peanut into the Wiregrass farm provided an economic incentive for farmers of the area to start raising hogs. At the turn of the century, many farmers were wary of raising hogs due to hog cholera, a highly contagious and deadly viral infection that could quickly spread through the entire herd. In 1906, researchers in Auburn invented an anti-hog cholera preventing the spread of the disease and encouraging farmers to take the risk of hog raising.[43] Peanuts could be turned into pork by inter-planting corn and peanuts. After harvesting the corn, the hogs would be allowed to eat the remaining stalk and the peanuts, fattening them for slaughter. Since hogs would eat almost anything, they became the cornerstone of diversified farming in the South.[44]

In the southern portion of the state, truck farming[45] thrived, particularly citrus fruit, but also strawberries, peaches, and pecans. While truck farming would never grow to rival cotton, it brought some prosperity to southern Alabama farmers willing to take a chance in the post-bellum period. As more and more people moved into cities, and the demand for fresh vegetables increased, so did the development of truck farming. Certain areas of the country even became known for a particular product, such as Mobile County with the potato. The sweet potato in particular grew well in the sandy loam soil of the coastal region.[46]

Prior to the 1880s, truck farming depended on water transportation to get produce to market, severely limiting the industry. As the railroad spread throughout the state and

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[39] Kathryn Holland Braund, "'Hog Wild' and 'Nuts: Billy Boll Weevil Comes to the Alabama Wiregrass," Agricultural History (Jan. 1979) p. 20.
[40] Braund, p. 27.
[41] Marion Bailey Brunson, Pea River Reflections: Intimate Glimpses of Area Life During Two Centuries, p. 185.
[42] Fite, p. 112.
[43] Braund, p. 24.
[44] Braund, pp. 23-24.
[45] Truck farming is the production of vegetable crops on a large scale, usually in areas well suited to these crops, and distribution of the crops to markets by road or rail over long distances. Smaller farms commonly provide produce to nearby cities. The word "truck" refers to the original practice of bartering goods rather than the use of a truck.
[46] T. N. Cowan, "How to Plant, Fertilize, and Cultivate the Sweet Potato," The Negro Farmer, (April 25, 1914).

refrigerated cars were introduced, proximity to navigable water became unnecessary.[47] Peaches, grapes, and strawberries sold particularly well in southern cities if they could reach the market while still fresh. The Rural Alabamian wrote: "For a large home market, or where the distance to be shipped is not over a hundred miles or so of a good continuous railroad" there is nothing that sells as well as the strawberry.[48]

While some farmers tried to branch out, most in the state stayed with what they knew and what lenders insisted on: cotton. This reliance on one crop practically guaranteed that many farmers would never be able to get out of debt. In good years when farmers raised a sufficient cotton crop, most other farmers reaped the same bumper crop and the price for cotton dropped. In years when cotton prices increased, farmers often had poor crops and still could not make the amount necessary to break the cycle of debt.

The constant growing of cotton resulted in poor soil that did not produce as much cotton, worsening the problem. As George Washington Carver wrote:

> The average Southern farm has but little more to offer than about one-third of a cotton crop, selling at 2 and 3 cents per pound less than it cost to produce it, together with the proverbial mule, implements more or less primitive, and frequently a vast territory of barren and furrowed hillsides and wasted valleys.
>
> Another mortgage may have been added as an unpleasant reminder of the year's hard labor. The Southern farmers, as a whole, have been too slow to admit that the old one-crop and primitive implements are quite out of harmony with the new, up-to-date methods and machinery. Indeed, many are not aware that such conditions exist, and are patiently waiting, starving-blindly and stubbornly refusing to believe that their ills and misfortunes are not due to legislation or social reforms.[49]

Tenant farmers and sharecroppers did not have the money to experiment with new crops and many banks and merchants refused to offer loans without the guarantee of planting cotton. Also, traditionally cotton was the path to wealth. Therefore, many small farmers planted their entire land in cotton in the hopes of eventually getting out of debt.

With the introduction of commercial fertilizers, almost any area in the state could produce cotton. The northern hill country of Alabama, prior to the Civil War consisted mostly of subsistence farms. With the use of fertilizers, the hilly wilderness soon began to produce cotton farms. The number of farms in the hilly region of the state jumped from 18,223 in 1870 to 50,533 in 1900.[50] Yet, at this same time, the mineral wealth of the area was discovered and more people moved away from farming into industrial occupations.

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[47] James L. McCorkle, Jr. "Moving Perishables to Market: Southern Railroads and the Nineteenth-Century Origins of Southern Truck Farming," Agricultural History, (Winter 1992), p. 46.
[48] Rural Alabamian, Febuary, 1873, p. 68.
[49] Quoted Linda O. Hines, "George W. Carver and the Tuskegee Agricultural Experiment Station," Agricultural History, (Jan. 1979: 71-83) p. 71.
[50] United States Historical Census Data Browser.

Agricultural Education

The need for education to promote scientific farming began to grow in popularity after the Civil War. In 1862, the United States government passed the Morrill Act, which provided a gift of 30,000 acres of public land for every member of a state's congressional delegation for the establishment of a college to teach practical agriculture, engineering and military training. Due to the war, Alabama did not apply for its grant of 240,000 acres until 1869, using the grant to establish what would become Auburn University.[51] Auburn profited from Federal educational policies for years to come: the Hatch Act in 1887 funded agricultural research, the Morrill Act of 1890 provided annual funds, the monies for demonstration and extension work came from the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, and the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 gave money to train vocational agricultural teachers.[52]

Many saw a need for increased agricultural research and to get this information out to the public. The Hatch Act of 1887 provided $15,000 annually to each state for the maintenance of an agricultural experiment station. Before the Hatch Act, colleges set up by the Morrill Act taught agricultural practices, but a shortage of qualified teachers or information to teach prevented meeting this goal. However, all of the schools had a chemistry professor and some type of chemistry lab. Knowledge of chemistry easily translated into research on fertilizers, which almost all southern farmers used.[53]

The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 created the Cooperative Extension Service, the purpose of which was to give instructions and practical demonstrations to local farmers in the areas of agriculture and home economics, encouraging crop diversification, and other scientific farming methods. These extension services, run out of the agricultural colleges, provided field demonstrations, publications, and other services. Agents of the extension service would go around the state promoting scientific methods to local farmers.[54]

While Auburn was the land-grant college for whites, there was no such school for African Americans until the Morrill Act of 1890. The Morrill Act stated federal support of "theoretical and practical higher education, including, agriculture, mechanic arts, home economics, English, mathematics, physical, natural, and economic sciences, to Negro youth in order to train them to engage in the pursuits and vocations of life," as well as requiring a state college for blacks in states where laws prevented blacks from attending the white state college.[55] The State Normal and Industrial School of Huntsville (later named Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College) fought to become a Land-Grant college, ensuring federal funding. The State Normal and Industrial School of Huntsville received Land-Grant status in 1891, raisings it's funding by over $2,000.

Although not a federally funded school, Tuskegee Institute was probably the best-known option for African Americans looking for an education, particularly in agriculture. The Alabama Senate established the Normal School for Colored Teachers at Tuskegee on February 21, 1881. While Auburn received funding from the federal government, Tuskegee did not, leaving the Institute scrambling for money. Like Auburn, Tuskegee developed an agricultural experiment station in 1896, with the purpose of "educating and

[51] Rogers et al, p. 331.
[52] Rogers et al, p. 332.
[53] Jane M. Porter, "Experiment Stations in the South, 1877-1940," Agricultural History, (January 1979) pp. 84-85.
[54] Fite, p. 82.
[55] Gene A. Ford et al, "Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University Historic District, Madison County, Alabama," (National Register of Historic Place Nomination, Listed 2001) Section 8, p. 12.

training colored students in scientific agriculture."[56] As part of educating black farmers, Washington began the annual Negro Farmers Conference as a way to present new methods and ideas. Washington soon realized many farmers could not attend the conference. In order to combat this problem, Tuskegee purchased a wagon to bring the demonstrations to small farmers in the area, eventually hiring the first black demonstration agent to run it. The "movable school" soon grew to include a home demonstration agent, a nurse and a truck instead of a wagon.

The Negro Cooperative Demonstration Service was a federally run extension program for black farmers in Alabama. Run out of Tuskegee Institute, this program was designed to teach African Americans the same information that the Extension Service was teaching to white farmers. These extension agents traveled around the state teaching scientific agricultural methods to black farmers, often at the request of landlords. Because of their connection with the often-white landlords, many black farmers did not attend the meetings, except when required by the landlords. The Negro Cooperative Agents often had better luck with African American landowners but black landowners never rose above fifteen percent before 1920.[57]

Tuskegee and Auburn published brochures and bulletins with details of research conducted. Many considered the bulletins an important function of an experiment station, as it disseminated the research to those who could use it. The bulletins from Tuskegee contained "simple cultivation instructions for farmers, a 'little of the history, botany, entomology and fungus diseases' of the plant for teachers, and recipes for housewives."[58] Auburn's bulletins often focused on a specific crop or problem in each addition, giving details about how the information could be used across Alabama.

While the bulletins from experiment stations were free, many farmers did not take advantage of them. To obtain them, a farmer had to be able to read, write, understand and be willing to consider new methods. Even those who could read and took an interest in the research would face the daunting task of understanding bulletins written in precise scientific language. While scientists wrote Auburn's bulletins, Tuskegee's bulletins tended to be written in a language that small farmers without a college education could understand, writing that the "United States Government, with all the money that it is spending on agricultural work and various kinds of extension projects finds it almost impossible to present in the simplest terms the elemental facts concerning common farm operations."[59] Actual demonstrations still worked the best and hundreds of local institutes too place across the state from 1880 to 1910.

Farmers' Associations

The Industrial Revolution brought widespread prosperity to most of the country; however, many Southern farmers, in spite of this fell deeper into debt. The price of cotton dropped to below $0.10 a pound and was averaging $0.05 a pound during the 1890s.[60] Many farmers blamed their plight on merchants and moneylenders tied to the

[56] Thomas Monroe Campbell, The Movable School Goes to the Negro Farmer, (Tuskegee, AL: Tuskegee Institute Press, 1936) p. 82.
[57] Karen Ferguson, "Caught in 'No Man's Land': The Negro Cooperative Demonstration Service and the Ideology of Booker T. Washington," Agricultural History (Winter 1998) pp. 34-35.
[58] Hines, p. 77.
[59] The Negro Farmer, April 25, 1914.
[60] Fite, p. 48.

country's powerful financial and transportation companies. Farmers saw themselves as dependent on these individuals and corporations to sell their product. Unlike most suppliers, they could not regulate the supply of their product or the cost of production. Weather, insects, and other factors all contributed to the uncertainty of farming.

As the country became a more industrial nation, even monopolistic in nature, farmers continued to work independently. Farmers tried to solve this problem with the formation of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry. Founded in 1867, the Grange helped improve the social and economic life of farmers and worked "to enhance the comforts of farm homes and to improve rural social life, to oppose monopoly, to get better transportation facilities, to obtain improved education, to encourage crop diversification, and to establish business cooperatives as a means of eliminating middlemen and commission merchants."[61]

The Grange established cooperatives in the hopes of reaching these goals. Purchasing and marketing cooperatives got rid of the middleman by allowing local farmers to unite together to sell their product and purchase supplies, hopefully at a better price. Unfortunately, these businesses often failed, since the farmers did not possess the necessary capital to adequately fund the businesses nor have the necessary experience to run a successful business.

Originally started in the Midwest, the Grange was slow to spread into the South. Many feared that it either represented Northern ideas or the Ku Klux Klan. Even with these incorrect beliefs, the organization came to Alabama in 1872 with the help of Evander McIver Law, a Tuskegee Planter. By 1877, more than 14,000 Alabama farmers were members. The Alabama Grange started several local elementary and high schools, with an emphasis on scientific agriculture. The Mountain Grange High School in Morgan County was noted for its Greek, Latin, astronomy, and chemistry classes.[62]

While the Grange declined by the late 1870s, other farmers' organizations stepped up to take its place. The National Farmers Alliance followed in the footsteps of the Grange, with many of the same ideas to help farmers. Like the Grange, the Alliance soon found that cooperatives and exchanges required more capital than small farmers possessed. Therefore, the leadership decided that they needed the federal government's help to improve the conditions of farmers. The Alliance proposed that the federal government establish subtreasuries in each county where large amounts of commodities grew. Farmers would be able to bring their crop to the subtreasuries and borrow eighty percent of its value at one percent interest. Within a year, the farmer could redeem his crop by repaying the loan and the interest, and sell it on the market when the price rose. If the farmer didn't repay the loan, the subtreasury would sell the crop to pay off as much of the debt as possible.[63]

Many in the Alliance realized that they needed a say in the government to bring about their ideas. While many disagreed with the idea of a third party, a third party seemed the only way to elect officials who supported the Alliance's ideas. In 1891, the People's Party formed with the support of farmers and laborers. It never gained much

[61] Fite, p. 51.
[62] Rogers, et al, pp. 294-295.
[63] Fite, p. 57.

support in the South, where many feared that a third party would fraction votes away from Democrats and allow Republicans to win office and it slowly dissolved.[64]

These trends in agrarian unionism would continue in the state with many small groups forming and failing over time. Slowly they would move away from the planter's organizations of the Victorian Era that preached scientific farming towards the unions of the Great Depression that exhorted the rights of sharecroppers and tenant farmers.

World War I

By the outbreak of World War I, little had changed in Alabama agriculture. Cotton still dominated farms. While the scientific community begged for the reduction of cotton production, the number of acres devoted to the crop actually increased. Instead of diversifying, Alabama farmers became even more dependent on cotton, with cotton making up about fifty-five percent of the value of all crops in 1909.[65]

In the summer of 1914, it appeared that cotton farmers would have a record crop with prices reaching twelve to thirteen cents a pound. Then on July 31, 1914, the cotton exchanges closed indefinitely due to the outbreak of war in Europe. Cotton farmers watched the price of cotton plummet. In 1913, the United States exported over sixty-five percent of the cotton it produced to Europe. Farmers borrowed to plant their crop at $0.13 a pound; by the end of 1914, it was only bringing half that amount. Now with the European market closed, farmers faced economic ruin. Programs sprang up across the country, encouraging people to buy cotton clothes or a bale of cotton at $0.10 a pound to help the plight of cotton farmers.

With the drop in cotton prices, many who preached diversification hoped that their message would finally be heard. Farm journalists, politicians, and others begged farmers to reduce their cotton acreage. For many farmers, the war legitimized extension agents, who preached to farmers about their patriotic duty to diversify and raise more food crops. While farmers planted fewer acres in 1915, the price of cotton rebounded to $0.11 a pound, giving them a financial boost. By 1916, the wartime demand for cotton increased, giving farmers record income levels; it averaged $0.19 to $0.20 a pound.[66]

Even with the rise in cotton prices, the boll weevil and the outbreak of war worried many cotton farmers. The War required an increase in food production, which along with influence of extension agents and calls for diversification resulted in an increase in the number of cattle raised in Alabama. In the past, the State's open-range practices resulted in an inferior cow. With the adoption of midwestern techniques, Alabama cattlemen found the state conducive for cattle. The mild winters meant that cattle required less care and grazing pastures involved less labor compared to cotton.[67]

In the Wiregrass region, the prices received for hogs and peanuts also increased with the War as the demand for pork and peanut oil increased. With the rise in consumer costs, the Federal Government placed a maximum price on peanut by-products, as well as other commodities, stopping the profits farmers wanted. Due to the high production cost of the legume, many farmers complained about the act. Cotton had no such levy, and

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[64] John D. Hicks, The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1961) p. 208.
[65] Fite, p. 83.
[66] Fite, p. 94.
[67] Blevins, pp. 76-77.

with the decrease in production due to the boll weevil and the War effort, the price of cotton rose; therefore, many peanut growers in the Wiregrass region switched back to cotton after 1917.[68]

By the end of World War I, many Alabama farmers were experiencing a financial prosperity never before seen; but this would be short lived. With the end of the War, the decrease in demand for the War effort, and the return of productivity to European farms, the price of all farm products decreased in 1920. While the rest of the nation experienced an economic boom, Alabama farmers watched their savings dwindle.

[68] Braund, pp. 30-31.

Chapter 4

From War to Depression to War
1920-1945

The 1920s ushered in an era of prosperity for most Americans. The loss of competing European industries after World War I, easy credit, and technological innovations caused a long economic boom enjoyed by most, but Alabama's farmers did not enjoy the same prosperity. While the price of farm commodities rose during the war, its end brought a dramatic slump in prices and a drop in demand for cotton and other crops. Alabama farmers not only competed with farmers throughout the country, but also with foreign producers. In 1919, cotton brought about thirty-five cents a pound. By the fall of 1920, that price had dropped to thirteen to fifteen cents a pound. (See Table 4.1) While the number of farms in the state rose in the 1920s, their value decreased, and the number of tenant farmers increased.[1]

At the same time crop prices dropped, the price of raising crops continued to climb. After years of the one-crop system, most Alabama farms required large quantities of commercial fertilizers in order to raise a decent crop. Also, the price of living expenses, such as food and clothing rose, along with the interest rates charged on loans. All of this combined to mean farmers had to raise twice as much cotton as they did before the War in order to pay for the same amount of items. The increased price of doing business, along with the spread of the boll weevil caused more and more small farmers to give up farming and moved to cities in search of other employment.

In response to these problems, demonstration agents and state politicians once again encouraged farmers to decrease their cotton production, as well as experiment with other crops. While no organized demand for crop reduction existed, the amount of cotton produced did decline, more likely due to external factors than any specific plan. More farmers left the farm and the boll weevil reduced the yield by thirty-two percent in Alabama alone. Even with the reduction, cotton remained the main crop in fifty-eight of sixty-seven counties in the state, with corn being the main crop in the other nine counties.[2] The smaller crop helped cotton prices recover a couple cents, earning sixteen to seventeen cents a pound in 1921, still a far cry from the forty cents a pound demanded by farmers. During the early 1920s, cotton prices continued to slowly rise due to lower production and higher demand. Regrettably, as prices rose, farmers planted more acres of cotton in the hopes of making a profit. In 1926, cotton farmers produced a record eighteen million bales.[3]

This huge crop resulted in a cotton supply that far outpaced the demand. Cotton prices dropped to ten cents a pound. Already struggling farmers lost any savings they possessed. While politicians and reforms recommended programs to reduce cotton acreage, farmers still made their own decisions. The number of acres planted in 1927 predictably decreased; cotton acreage always decreased after a low-price year. This

[1] Rogers et al, p. 453.
[2] Charles S. Johnson, Statistical Atlas of Southern Counties: Listing and Analysis of Socio-Economic Indices of 1104 Southern Counties, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1941) pp. 43-54.
[3] Fite, p. 107.

resulted in small increases in price, encouraging farmers to plant more cotton, starting the process over again.

Labor Shortage

Faced with financial hard times in rural areas and the promise of financial independence in urban areas, many tenants and small farmers moved into the cities in the hopes of finding a better life. (See Table 4.2) Since Reconstruction, Alabama's landowners relied on cheap labor from poor black and white sharecroppers to harvest cotton even though sharecroppers and tenant farmers often sunk deeper in debt with each passing year. When the United States entered World War I, manufacturing of war goods dramatically increased and the immigration of cheap European labor stopped. Many manufacturing centers turned to landless farmers as a new source for hard workers. This trend continued even after the end of the War. African Americans in particular fled from the countryside into growing urban centers. The reasons for leaving varied, but most focused on the social and economic reasons: "a desire for better schools, the lack of court justice in Alabama, unfair crop settlements and high rents, poor living conditions, lack of freedom and control over their own operations, lynching and mob violence, and a desire to join family and friends."[4]

For many landowners, this move to the city threatened the status quo. Tuskegee's extension service worked to stabilize Alabama's farms, and retain black labor. Cotton farmers required a large labor force, and many white landlords saw the departure of blacks for city jobs as a threat to the economy. In 1923, thanks to donations from farmers, Tuskegee Institute purchased a Ford truck called the "Booker T. Washington Movable School on Wheels." [5] From the back of the truck, black extension agents conducted demonstrations on all matter of subjects to black farmers, while promoting Booker T. Washington's message "to buy land and to cultivate it thoroughly; to raise more food supplies; to build houses with more than one room . . .."[6]

Labor shortages encouraged some landowners to diversify into less labor-intensive products, such as livestock. The rising price that cattle fetched and the fear of the boll weevil also added to the increase in cattle in Alabama. In 1920, the number of head of cattle in Alabama reached one million, with most of the increase in the Black Belt region of the state where large open tracts of land existed. The cattle economy in the Black Belt took off in the 1930s with the founding of the Black Belt substation and the construction of the Selma Stockyard in 1929.[7] Ironically, while Alabama's cattle industry had its roots in the Piney Woods region of the state, the Black Belt and Tennessee Valley regions, with their knowledge of agribusiness, turned it into the profitable enterprise it became.

With the decrease in labor, some farmers moved towards mechanization, though the South still lagged behind farms in other parts of the country. In 1930, the percent of Alabama farmers with tractors rose from 1.0 in 1920 to 1.7 percent. Only wealthy

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[4] Blevins, p. 84.
[5] Rogers et al, p. 454.
[6] Robert E. Zabawa and Sarah T. Warren, "From Company to Community: Agricultural Community Development in Macon County, Alabama, 1881 to the New Deal," Agricultural History, (Spring 1998, pp. 459-487) p. 462.
[7] Blevins, p. 92.

farmers could afford these technological improvements, most small farmers barely managed to scrape by and these investments were luxuries outside of their reach. Agricultural publications and extension agents encouraged farmers to use science to get their land to produce the most from the least amount of labor, by using fertilizer, better quality seeds and machinery. The average investment by Alabama farmers in machinery remained low, even in comparison to other southern states. According to the 1900 Census, Alabama farms averaged only $39 in implements in machinery, less than the $44 in Georgia or the $253 in Iowa.[8]

Extension work continued at Auburn, though research focused on large, productive farmers rather than on helping poor farmers. Many small farmers could not take the financial risk or their credit lenders would not allow it. The message of diversification continued, with experiments into other possible cash crops for Alabama farmers besides cotton. In 1929, Auburn began a fisheries program with a focus on providing farmers an alternative income source through the raising of catfish. While the program started slowly, by the 1980s, catfish production was a major agricultural business in Alabama.[9]

The Auburn Experiment Station promoted the growth of soybeans. Introduced to the United States in the early 1800s, farmers did not begin planting the crop until the 1920s, mostly for use as hay, but also as a cash crop. Soybean oil is used in many edible products, such as margarine, shortening, and mayonnaise and can survive high drought and is insect resistant.[10] Soybeans required less fertilizer than cotton and could be harvested with existing machinery. An Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station bulletin from June 1918 stated, "the soy bean makes a valuable substitute in the feeding of horses and cattle and swine; that its hay is nutritious and liked by [live] stock; and that the crop can be harvested cheaply."[11] The author went on to accurately predict that soybean would "become a prominent part of Alabama's cropping system."[12]

Great Depression

When the Great Depression hit at the end of the 1920s, many farmers who barely survived suddenly faced a disastrous situation. In 1929, cotton brought an average sixteen cents a pound, and other crops and livestock also brought a reasonable rate of return. After the stock market crashed in October 1929, crop prices dropped, with cotton dropping to nine or ten cents a pound. Other crops experienced the same sharp decline. Most Southern farmers were accustomed to rough years, however faced with the decline in the economy along with a severe drought, many farm families were pushed to the brink of survival.[13]

The Great Depression brought with it high unemployment rates and a return to the farm. With the turn in the economic situation of the country, many people considered farming a way to ride out the hard times providing gainful employment and a healthy environment. Many who left the farm for jobs in the cities began to return to the

[8] Quoted in Fite, pp. 70-71.
[9] Rogers et al, p. 455.
[10] "Many Alabama Farmers to Plant Edible Soybeans," The Negro Farmer, May 1942, p. 4.
[11] E. F. Cauthen, "Growing Soy Beans in Alabama," Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute, No. 202, (June 1918) p. 81.
[12] Cauthen.
[13] Fite, p. 120.

countryside when laid off. The rural population of Alabama increased by over 63,000 between 1920 and 1930.[14] In urban areas, people planted small vegetable garden as a means of survival. One Birmingham woman stated, "everybody had chickens, hogs, and a garden."[15] A 1934 survey of one of the city's working class neighborhoods found 7,595 pigs and 1,996 cows.[16]

With the drop in agricultural prices, many farmers faced foreclosure. A study conducted of 4,750 farmers in southeastern Alabama who took out loans between 1917 and 1931 found that thirty percent with farms between 300 and 459 acres and thirty-nine percent of those with 780 to 1319 acres were foreclosed upon.[17] This not only hurt the landowners, but also any tenants or sharecroppers who lived on the land. One Alabamian wrote in 1934 that he had "never seen poverty so desperate among tenant farmers, white and Negro, as during the last twelve months . . .. Homes without a match or a cake of soap, men too weak from hunger to work, naked children, people taking their meals from blackberry bushes and plum thickets, tattered cotton rags for winter clothing."[18] A European traveler exploring America wrote:

> Even when I visited the better-off farms, I discovered that a very large percentage of them had kitchens with ovens burning wood --the poor cooking in pots and pans over a little fire on the hearth, as in the Middle Ages; that they were lighted by dim, smoking, smelly, oil lamps, that the washing of clothes was done by hand in antiquated tubs; that the water was brought into the house by the women and children, from wells invariably situated at inconvenient and tiring distances, for it appears to be one of the milder manias of the American farmer, to sink his well as far away as possible instead of near the front door, under trees, as the European peasant does. Ordinarily there is no icebox, so many products that might be grown to vary the horribly monotonous diet are out of the question: they could not be stored.[19]

Landowners turned many tenant farmers into wage laborers so the landowner would only need to support them during the busy seasons. The Federal Government began relief operations in order to help. While some landowners helped their tenants get on the rolls, most landlords and businessmen opposed the idea of relief for tenants and sharecroppers, particularly Blacks. Federal relief challenged the abominably low wages for agriculture in the South, paying recipients more than they could make working in the field.[20] They felt that relief rolls encouraged laziness and disrupted the social balance. Many landowners, believing it their responsibility to take care of sharecroppers and tenants who worked their land, found it a personal affront that their tenants would need

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[14] United States Historical Census Data Browser.
[15] Quoted by Robin D. G. Kelley, Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression," (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) p. 19.
[16] Kelley, p. 19.
[17] Fite, p. 122.
[18] Quoted by Fite, pp. 134-135.
[19] Odette Keun, A Foreigner Looks at TVA, (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1937) pp. 29-31.
[20] Fite, p. 136.

relief payments.[21] In reality, relief payments could be dreadfully low, excluding families with any opportunity of obtaining food, even insufficient amounts. In rural counties, families received as little as fifty cents a week, if they received anything. Statewide, relief was criticized by relief workers as "far from adequate measured by any decent standards."[22]

Franklin D. Roosevelt, when elected President of the United States in 1932, instituted the New Deal program as a way to help those affected by the Depression. One of the first programs inaugurated to help farmers was the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1933, created "to relieve the existing national economic emergency by increasing agricultural purchasing power."[23] Originally, the AAA provided price parity payments to cotton farmers who voluntarily did not plant cotton on all their land. In return, the program paid the farmers for the average yield of the unplanted soil.[24] Based on a five-year average, an acre that produced an average yield of 150 to 200 pounds would not receive more than five dollars, where an acre that produced over 400 pounds would not receive more than eleven dollars.[25]

By the time the bill passed in the spring of 1933, Southern farmers had already planted the cotton crop for the year. Since another large cotton crop would hurt farmers even more, the Secretary of Agriculture instituted a plow up campaign where farmers would plow up twenty-five to fifty percent of their acreage in return for a rental payment of approximately $11 per acre. Senator John Bankhead of Jasper spoke publicly of reducing the nation's cotton crop to nine million bales.[26] The program enjoyed some success; while not radically reducing the cotton acreage, it raised the price of cotton to ten cents a pound, giving cotton farmers twice the income they had the previous year. [27]

The program provided money to many Southern farmers, yet tenants and sharecroppers did not benefit from the program. Owners reaped the reimbursements of the program, but did not always share with their tenants. The life of tenant and sharecroppers always depended on the landlord. The landlord provided the land and in the case of the sharecropper, the seed, and the implements. In most instances, the landlords also kept the books; so many tenants and sharecroppers never knew how much debt they carried from year to year. As the price of cotton decreased, and the production costs remained the same, many landlords tried to make up the difference by furnishing less to their tenants and charging higher interest rates when they did. Countless studies found that most landless farmers went into debt or broke even at the end of the year. In one study, only 9.4 percent of the tenants received a cash profit.[28]

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[21] Harold Hoffsommer, Landlord-Tenant Relations and Relief in Alabama, (Research Bulletin, series 2, no. 9, Division of Research, Statistics and Finance, November 14, 1935) pp. 4-6.
[22] Quoted by Paul E. Mertz, New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1978) p. 52.
[23] Charles S. Johnson, Edwin R. Embree and W. W. Alexander, The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy: Summary of Field Studies & Statistical Surveys, 1933-1935, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935) p. 48.
[24] Mertz, pp. 21-22.
[25] "25,000,000-Bale Plan Offered," Huntsville Times, September 5, 1933.
[26] "Farmers Check Crop Progress," Huntsville Times, September 4, 1933.
[27] Johnson, Embree and Alexander, pp. 48-49.
[28] Mertz, p. 9.

With the introduction of the AAA's cotton plow up campaign, tenants and sharecroppers once again became dependant on their landlord. A local county committee administrated the program; large farmers and landowners often made up the committee. Landowners arranged the contracts for the plow up, and later for the acreage reduction, without regards to any tenants or sharecroppers on the land. Therefore, the landlord could make any settlement he wished with his tenants and sharecroppers, and then claim a portion or all of payment for liens incurred by the tenants.[29]

Alabama farmers, with a long history of agrarian unionism support, such as the Grange, joined this movement, as well as the Communist Party to bring about changes to their life. Many sharecroppers and tenant farmers in Alabama, particularly Black farmers, embraced the organizations, only to be met with violence for challenging the status quo.[30] The Communist Party sent union organizers throughout rural Alabama to encourage tenant farmers and sharecroppers to join the Croppers and Farm Workers Union (CFWU). Launched in Tallapoosa County, the CFWU supported racial equality and encouraged both white and black farmers to join. However, due to the long-standing racial segregation, many white farmers refused to join an organization with blacks. While the organization quickly grew to include over 800 members, white landlords strongly resisted the union, often violently.[31] Eventually changing its name to the Share Croppers Union (SCU), black sharecroppers continued their underground resistance to the status quo. While Communist Party leaders often encouraged demonstrations outside of bosses' houses, they quickly realized in rural Alabama that would be suicidal. Instead members were encouraged to use cunning while acting humble in public.[32] While open to white farmers, after three years in existence, the SCU had failed to recruit even one white farmer.[33]

Arkansas sharecroppers and tenant farms, in an effort to improve their lot, organized in 1934 into the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU). With federal crop control, diversification of crops and mechanization, fewer landlords needed tenants to work their land, forcing many sharecroppers and tenant farmers to leave the land to look for work elsewhere, or hiring them back as wage labor when needed. In an attempt to improve wages, shorten workdays, and stop evictions, the STFU organized a cotton pickers' strike. In Alabama, 15,526 white sharecroppers and 8,238 black sharecroppers left the farm in protest.[34]

In 1934, Alabama became one of the few southern states to initiate a rural rehabilitation operation, eventually becoming the largest program in the nation, with 30,000 families enrolled in the program. The state divided these families into two groups: group 1 was believed to be able to manage their own finances, whereas, group 2 would need supervision. The program enlisted the help of Auburn University's extension agents to monitor the second group.[35] Combining the extension agents and tenant farmers created unforeseen problems. Some participants described the agents as being "too silo-minded: They're interested only in better farming – more intensive cultivation.

[29] Harold Hoffsommer, "The AAA and the Cropper," Social Forces, (May1935) p.497.
[30] Flynt, p.328.
[31] Kelley, pp. 39-40.
[32] Kelley, pp. 43-44.
[33] Kelley, pp. 159.
[34] Fite, p. 155.
[35] Flynt, p. 297.

They like working with big, successful farmers," but the rural rehabilitation program worked with small farmers with limited resources.[36]

While extension agents taught farmers how to improve their crop yield, female home demonstration agents taught farmers' wives about the economical benefits of such projects as curb markets, canning operations, handicrafts, and mattress programs. The 1914 Smith-Lever Act required home economic demonstrations as part of the Extension Service. From the beginning these programs assumed traditional gender rolls for farm life, assigning male extension agents to teach men about scientific farming methods and female agents to teach women about home projects. Small farmers seldom had the luxury to divide work this way and due to the death of husbands and fathers, many women wound up running their own farms.[37]

By 1934, forty-five counties in Alabama had home demonstration agents helping women. In that year, farm income in those forty-five counties grew by more than $1 million due to the work of female dominated projects.[38] One of the most successful of these was the establishment of curb markets. Home demonstration agents started the first curb market in Gadsden in the early 1920s and by 1927, the eighteen markets in the state netted more than $300,000 for local farmers. The Work Projects Administration (WPA) constructed sheds to hold the events and agents helped farmers grow produce. Venders could only sell products that they raised themselves, preventing speculators.[39] In 1934, curb markets across the state earned $264,822 for local farmers.[40]

Home demonstration agents also taught women how to can foods, a program that caught on as a way to save money in the winter.[41] In an attempt to reduce starvation within the state, the state relief agency purchased 583 pressure cookers and established 1,091 canning centers across the state. Under the supervision of demonstration agents, farmers would bring whatever produce they had to the centers and be taught how to can. In 1933, one thousand people filled 112,538 cans.[42]

Another program designed to help Southern farmers was the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), located in Muscle Shoals, Alabama.[43] Signed by President Roosevelt on May 18, 1933, the act established a three-person panel designed to manage the program with the major objectives of soil conservation, reforestation, flood control, and improvement in agricultural practices.[44] Additionally, Section 23 of the Tennessee Valley Authority Act gave the TVA the directive to improve "the economic and social well-being of the people living in said river basin."[45] One of the ways to accomplish this was by giving TVA the authority to construct dams to provide inexpensive electricity to farms as well as encourage industrial development in the area.

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[36] Quoted in Flynt, p. 299.
[37] Mary S. Hoffschwelle, Rebuilding the Rural Southern Community: Reformers, Schools, and Homes in Tennessee, 1900-1930, (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1998) p. 105.
[38] L. O. Brackeen, "What Alabama Women are Doing," Progressive Farmer, May 1935, p. 45.
[39] Flynt, p. 302.
[40] Brackeen, p. 45.
[41] "Farm Wives Aid Larders by Canning," Montgomery Advertiser, July 3, 1938.
[42] Flynt, pp. 302-303.
[43] "Action Take by Roosevelt before Norris," Huntsville Times, May 18, 1933, p. 1.
[44] Fite, p. 148.
[45] United States, Tennessee Valley Act, Signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt May 18, 1933, Section 23.

The electrification of rural America was a major problem for the Roosevelt administration. In the 1930s, nearly ninety percent of urban dwellers had electricity, compared to only ten percent of those who lived in rural areas. Electric Companies refused to extend transmission lines out into rural areas, citing the high cost compared to the low demand. In 1935, the Rural Electric Administration (REA) changed this by giving loans for farmers to establish electric cooperatives in rural areas across the state. The federal government believed that by providing affordable electricity to the farm, the standard of living for farmers would rise while boosting the local economy, as farm families would now have the option to purchase electric appliances. By 1939, the REA established 417 rural electric cooperatives serving 288,000 households.

Not everyone was happy with these programs, and they did not have the effect that many intended. The Alabama Power Company sued TVA, arguing before the United States Supreme Court that the Government overstepped its Constitutional authority by entering into the electric utility business. When the Supreme Court upheld the right of the TVA to sell electricity, power companies began to run more lines in to rural areas in an effort to compete with the Government. Even with electricity available, many Alabama farmers could not afford to purchase electrical appliances.

The TVA also encouraged scientific farming, promoting many of the same ideas supported by extension services and agricultural colleges. The Tennessee Valley in Alabama once was a fertile farming community, but with the repeated plowing of hillsides and ravines in order to increase yields, topsoil washed away. A report from TVA in 1937 stated:

> Cotton land, for example, is commonly fertilized with commercial fertilizers, containing nitrates. The system is a vicious circle. As the land grows poorer the farmer must buy more nitrates. To buy them he must plough up the hillsides and grow more cotton. The more cotton he grows the lower goes the price. More land washing away, less money for the crop, more fertilizer needed, and less money with which to buy it.[46]

TVA demonstrated substituting alfalfa, vetch, and clover, which naturally add nitrogen to the soil for nitrates. Even with improved farming, many small family farms were unable to compete with the larger farms that were beginning to appear. Also, the crop limits of other New Deal programs made scientific methods impractical. (See Picture 4.1)

New Deal programs offered support to farmers to experiment with mechanization and crop diversity, though one study of the program found that over 49,000 Alabama farms did not have gardens, relying instead on purchasing food.[47] Governmental price supports reduced the risks of farming. Government lending programs offered an opportunity to borrow money for new equipment, something few farmers could do in the past. To many Alabama farmers, it did not make sense to keep relying on the less cost effective labor of sharecroppers and tenant farmers, when machines could do the work.[48] Mechanization in southern farming meant a reorganization of farms and workers. Machines could only be profitably used on large farms. While displacing many

[46] Agriculture and Conservation, http://newdeal.feri.org/tva/tva14.htm, Dec. 05, 2002.
[47] L. O. Brackeen, "Want Gardens as Part of AAA," Progressive Farmer, April 1939 p. 51
[48] Fite, p. 153.

sharecroppers and tenant farmers, the government supported the measure by claiming the low standards of living experienced by many farmers could be traced back to the fact too many people farmed who should find work elsewhere.

The Soil Conservation Service (SCS), created in 1935 as part of the U. S. Department of Agriculture, worked to prevent the spread of soil erosion in the country. After thirty years of increased migration and constant plowing of the topsoil, the Great Plains was experiencing an extreme draught. Without prairie grass holding down the loose soil, strong winds would blow up dust storms that stretched as far as the Atlantic Ocean. While Alabama did not experience as severe of soil erosion, years of planting cotton in open rows with heavy rains resulted in erosion and poorly producing fields. Southern states adopted legislation for soil conservation. However, like other New Deal programs, soil conservation hurt small farmers. By planting in improved soil, yields increased, driving the price down.[49]

With this movement towards modern farming methods, the size of farms increased, while the number of farms decreased. In 1920, 256,099 farms existed in Alabama; in 1940 that number dropped by more than 20,000 farms. The size of the farms, conversely, increased. This change in farm size signaled changes to come in the Alabama agricultural system.[50] (See Table 4.3)

As war broke out in Europe in September 1939, many Alabama farmers still suffered from the affects of the Depression. With the outbreak of war, the European market collapsed, leaving many farmers in worse financial straits than they had been before. Southern farmers still produced surplus cotton crops. In 1939, about 12 million bales of cotton, almost a full year's supply of cotton, were stored in government warehouses.[51] In 1939, European nations imported almost 6.5 million bales of American cotton. By 1940, farmers felt the effects of the war with Europeans imports falling to a little more than one million bales of cotton a year.

While Alabama farmers experimented with diversification, cotton was still the dominant cash crop in the state. More and more people moved off the farm during the 1920s and 1930s, yet almost fifty percent of Alabama's population lived on the quarter of a million farms within the state.[52] The New Deal programs saved some farmers and cushioned them financially, however, most Alabama farmers still struggled to make ends meet and the closing of European markets was a hard blow. The increased demand by defense industries as the United States entered the war in 1941 saved cotton farmers.

Not only did American mills demand cotton to continue operating, but also the United States military required cotton for clothing, tents, bedding, and in almost all military equipment. The military used the cottonseed to produce oil for food, and livestock feed. Cotton linters, the cotton fibers still attached to a cotton seed after milling, could be used for plastic for warplane windows and noses, powder cockpit enclosures, cargo and flare chutes, rayon, X-ray and photographic film, and coating for rain coats. [53]

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[49] Roger Biles, The South and the New Deal, (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994) p. 52.
[50] Fite, p. 234.
[51] Fite, p. 164.
[52] Cronenberg, p. 56.
[53] Joe N. Poole, "Agriculture," Bureau of Public Administration, War Comes to Alabama. (Tuscaloosa, AL: Weatherford Printing, 1943) p. 68.

Wartime propaganda encouraged farmers to plant more cotton for the war effort. In 1943, the Federal government removed cotton acreage allotments.[54] Yet, cotton production required large supplies of labor. In the past, readily available, cheap labor delayed many Alabama farmers from mechanizing their farms. Now with the draft, able-bodied young men called to the war denied farmers a labor source and many farmers found other cash crops more lucrative. For those who stuck to cotton, a tractor revolution began during World War II, and would continue into the post war era. Demonstrators showed that tractors could do the work of ten mules for a third of the cost. In 1946, the McLemore brothers of Montgomery harvested an entire crop of cotton, planted, cultivated and picked entirely by machine.[55]

For decades many preached the practice of crop diversification; it started to catch on by the start of World War II. The war effort required a great increase in certain products, including farm products. Alabama's extension agents persuaded farmers to increase production to feed Americans and their Allies. Since the invasion of the boll weevil, more and more of southern Alabama turned to hogs and peanuts as sources of income. As the war progressed, propaganda urged farmers to plant more peanuts and soybeans to be harvested for their oil. In 1941, Alabama had a bumper crop of corn and legumes. Auburn's experiment station began to conduct experiments on the various uses of sweet potato, creating the "Alayam," breakfast foods, taffy, cookies, spreads, and garnishes. In 1943, Joe Poole, the state commissioner of agriculture and industries urged Alabama farmers to cultivate kudzu for use as hay, to build up the soil, and to prevent erosion.

The hog and cattle industries both flourished during the War. Prior to World War II, most people did not eat meat regularly, and if they did, it was most likely chicken. Not only did the military feed soldiers meat daily, but with more people earning larger incomes than before, they could afford to purchase meat on a regular bases. In 1941, Alabama farmers produced a record number of cattle.[56] The fact that the price of beef doubled from 1940 to 1943 helps explain this phenomenon. Cattle raising also required less labor than cotton, and unlike cotton, no government restrictions existed for cattle.

Besides the beef and pork industries, chicken production in Alabama began to increase. Prior to World War II, chicken production had been a relatively small operation. Many farmers' wives raised chickens for the eggs, using what they needed and selling the rest for a little extra income. Many families would raise what they needed. During the war years, food rationing became the norm. The U. S. military supplied meat to all of its soldiers and many civilians could afford to eat meat as well. The lack of meat in the civilian market encouraged the growth of the chicken industry. While it did not truly take off until the 1960s, the 1940s saw the movement of chicken raising from small farm undertaking into a commercial operation.

Others besides farmers grew fruits and vegetables for the war effort. Many people cultivated small "victory" gardens in their yards as a way to have fresh produce as well as save money. Curb markets sprang up in small towns, providing fresh fruits and

[54] Fite, p. 164.
[55] Allen Cronenberg, Forth to the Mighty Conflict: Alabama and World War II, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1995) p. 58.
[56] Cronenberg, p. 57.

vegetables in season. Many housewives used pressure cookers and Ball jars to can and preserve the produce for the winter months.[57]

By the end of World War II, Alabama's farmers experienced a new financial prosperity, and a change in the agricultural system of Alabama had begun. Farmers experimented with a greater diversity of commercial products, rather than self-sufficiency. Cotton, while still important had finally been displaced by other cash crops. Alabama farmers began to embrace mechanical farming and the move towards corporate farming, which would dominate the second part of the twentieth century.

[57] Cronenberg, p. 34.

Chapter 5

Corporate Agriculture
1945-present

World War II signaled the change in Alabama's agricultural system. The profitability of the War, along with innovations in farming technology resulted in a move away from the small farms worked by tenants. Large corporate farms became the profitable method of farming. While the number of farmers and farms dropped in the second half of the twentieth century, the value of lands and buildings per farm increased.

Many of the changes found on Alabama's farms resulted from new financial opportunities for growers. During World War II, many farmers finally saved some money. Prior to the War, many small farmers either broke even or went deeper into debt each year. Thanks to the War, many products fetched record prices due to the high demand. The diversity of commercial crops produced on Alabama farms also aided the farmers who no longer relied on the single crop system. Without having to pay high interest rates, many farmers saved enough to make investments in their farms.

Government agencies and commercial institutions encouraged farmers to invest. The agencies of the Farm Credit Administration supplied low interest loans and long-term capital to farmers. Commercial banks also began to offer loans to farmers during the prosperous forties. Prior to this period, many farm communities lacked commercial banks. Of those that did exist, many collapsed during the Depression. As the economy improved, many banks moved back into small, rural communities and offered loans to farmers. While these institutions offered more loans to farmers than previously, they only went to farmers with a track record of profitability and management skills. Farmers could no longer rely just upon their ability to grow crops, they also had to be business managers.[1]

Auburn and Tuskegee continued to produce scientific information concerning agricultural practice, but unlike previously, more and more farmers took advantage of the information. The fear of "book farming" disappeared.[2] A portion of Alabama's farmers took advantage of this opportunity and some even attended the colleges. These farmers, though, made up the minority. Most farmers in Alabama continued with the old ways until they went broke or found non-farm employment.[3]

Agricultural research proved the advantages of new farming methods, particularly mechanization. Cotton farming could not be made profitable using sharecroppers and tenants; only with large farms and the latest technology could someone make a decent living on agriculture. In 1946, the United States Congress passed the Research and Marketing Act. This act established a cotton mechanization research project in Mississippi. The project investigated the effects of mechanization on all stages of cotton production. In August 1947, the research program hosted the first conference on cotton mechanization.

Fewer Alabama farmers raised cotton after World War II, with competition from Western states and foreign markets, the crop was no longer as profitable. The high labor

[1] Fite, p. 182.
[2] Fite, p. 193.
[3] Fite, p. 183.

demand required for cotton production caused the high cost of Southern cotton. One of the biggest problems for cotton growers was weed control. Thanks to Alabama's warm, humid climate, weeds easily over took cotton plants and machines designed to control weeds often could not go out in to the field during periods of rain when farmers needed the most weed control. Many landowners hesitated getting rid of their work force for fear of needing them when machines could not be used. Not until the 1950s, with the advent of chemical weed control, could cotton growers move to mechanization for all aspects of cotton production.

These increasing demands of mechanization required a complete remodeling of Alabama's agricultural society. Small plots of twenty to forty acres farmed by a tenant or sharecropper were no longer practical; mechanization required larger fields. Many landowners fired sharecroppers and tenants and consolidated the fields. Planters still needed workers to run the machines. Unlike the previous tenant system of scattered dwellings, though, landowners housed employees near the machine shed, creating small farm villages. Often management would rent the land worked by the machines. Land ownership became less important than management and technological advancements. Those with the management skills and machinery rented the land from others, creating the large agricultural complexes necessary to make a profit. Even on smaller, family farms, the need for sharecroppers and tenants no longer existed.[4] The destruction in the 1970s and 80s of tenant houses trumpeted the arrival of modern commercial farms to Alabama.

While cotton, as the former king of Alabama agriculture, received plenty of attention, as the diversity of crops raised in the state increased, so did the type of machinery available. Pecan growers in Alabama purchased equipment to shake the nuts from the trees onto tarps for easy transfer into trucks. Grain and soybean combines decreased the number of workers needed as well.

Machinery increased the profitability of farming by reducing the number of laborers needed, but the new commercial farms needed to do more. Increased productivity was the key. Fertilizers had been used in the state since the end of the nineteenth century in order to produce cotton. New fertilizers, along with improved seeds, herbicides, and insecticides increased the output of crops. The average yield for an acre of land increased from two hundred fifty pounds in 1940 to four hundred fifty pounds in 1960. The number of acres devoted to growing corn in Alabama decreased, but the output increased due to new hybrids and improved fertilizers. In 1945, growers averaged fifteen bushels of corn per acre; by 1960, they averaged forty to fifty bushels.[5]

The number of acres devoted to growing cotton also decreased, replaced with a new king: soybeans.[6] In 1940, Alabama farmers produced 779,000 bales of cotton as opposed to 72,000 bushels of soybeans. By 1975, cotton decreased to 312,000 bales, while soybean jumped to 32,095,000 bushels, an increase of over 400%! (See Table 5.1) Prior to World War II, farmers grew soybeans almost exclusively for hay, or because they absorbed nitrogen directly from the atmosphere, plowed back under to act as fertilizer. Not until the 1930s, when German scientists developed a refining process which removed

[4] Fite, p. 189.
[5] Fite, pp. 191-192.
[6] Fite, p. 195

its undesirable flavor and odor did the uses for the soybean increase.[7] The oil can be used as a fat substitute, while the meat is high in protein. Soybeans are used in margarine, salad dressing, soaps, make-ups, paints and many other items.[8] The diversity of soybean products, as well as the legume's high protein content, made soybeans universally appealing.

The commercial poultry industry of Alabama barely existed prior to World War I. A handful of farmers sold some spring chickens, but never on a large scale. Instead poultry production was often the domain of farmers' wives, who sold eggs for extra money. Chicken, when consumed, was only eaten on Sundays. After World War II with a shortage of beef and pork, farmers learned that selling broiler chickens could be a profitable addition to a farm. Feed stores and feed companies promoted the industry by giving away free chicks with the purchase of a set amount of feed.[9]

The poultry industry in Alabama began on Sand Mountain near Albertville and in Cullman County and was in full bloom by the 1950s. Northern Alabama presented an ideal location for the poultry industry, with mild climates, growing markets and cheap labor necessary to care for the animals.[10] As the poultry industry grew, so did the number of machines created to aid farmers. J. A. Schofield of Perry County told Progressive Farmer: "We're cutting our labor bill in half and doing a better job" caring for 48,000 breeder hens using mechanical feeders, a partly mechanized egg gathering system and pit cleaners to remove manure.[11] The broiler and egg industry in Alabama is still primarily focused in the northern portion of the state, with some large production operations in the Wiregrass region.[12]

While cotton declined in importance to Alabama's farmers, the importance of livestock and grasses increased.[13] Never a significant part of agriculture, the dairy industry took off during World War II. Prior to this, many farmers did not attempt dairy production because they lacked the equipment necessary for pasteurization. Few manufacturing plants, which would require whole milk, such as cheese plants and creameries existed in the state. The War brought an emphasis on producing dairy for markets instead of for home use, increasing the percentage of milk sent to market from fifteen to twenty five percent.[14]

While the dairy industry increased, the cattle industry exploded in 1950, surpassing cotton as the state's leading agricultural commodity. The cattle industry thrived in the Tennessee Valley and the Black Belt region, particularly in Limestone, Madison, Morgan, Autauga, Greene, and Lowndes Counties. The Wiregrass, contrarily, experienced a drop in the number of cattle when in 1951 the Alabama state legislature ended the practice of open range cattle.[15] Banks and other lending facilities jumped on the cattle bandwagon. Prior to World War II, most lenders insisted on cotton to cover

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[7] Harry D. Fornari, "The Big Change: Cotton to Soybeans," Agricultural History, (Jan. 1979: 245-253) p. 246.
[8] Fornari, p. 248.
[9] Fite, pp. 200-201.
[10] Fite, p. 200.
[11] O. B. Copeland, "Machines Do All Jobs But Laying the Eggs," Progressive Farmer, July 1961.
[12] Alabama Maps, http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/alabama/agriculture/index.html, Dec. 9, 2002.
[13] Fite, p. 195.
[14] Blevins, p. 122.
[15] Blevins, p. 126.

loans; after the War many banks were willing to take a chance with the cattle industry. This allowed many small farmers to begin breeding cattle. In 1950, over fifty percent of Alabama farmers sold livestock.[16]

Besides raising cattle, Alabama farmers began to commercially-raise another creature: catfish. While Auburn conducted some research on raising catfish in the 1920s, the idea of commercially producing catfish was not explored until the mid- to late-1950s.[17] Catfish farms consist of using ponds of varying sizes to produce a crop of catfish. Alabama quickly became one of the top three catfish producing states in the country, turning old cotton fields into catfish ponds. In 1985, ten thousand surface acres of water were used in the state for the commercial catfish industry.[18]

From the first crops of corn and sweet potatoes of the American Indians to the catfish and cattle farms of the 21st century, agriculture in Alabama has certainly evolved over time as a shift from subsistence farming and plantations to the more modern agribusiness conglomerates of today has occurred. Diversification of crops is apparent and King Cotton no longer reigns. Unlike the farms of the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries that depended on growing crops for livelihood and survival, in the 21st century only a small percentage of Alabama's population is even involved in agriculture. Where once Alabama's economy depended on agricultural products grown locally, we now seek out other states and countries to provide us with staple agricultural products.

[16] Fite, p. 198.
[17] Linda Crawford, The Catfish Book, (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1991) p. 57.
[18] Oscar Cacho, Henry W. Kinnucan and Scott Sindelar, Catfish Farming Risks in Alabama, (Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station, Circular 287, Dec. 1986) p. 3.