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King Bacca's throne: Land, life, and labor in the Old Bright Belt since 1880

Evan Patrick Bennett

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KING BACCA’S THRONE

Land, Life, and Labor in the Old Bright Belt since 1880

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Evan Patrick Bennett
2005
APPROVAL SHEET

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Evan Patrick Bennett

Approved by the Committee, June 2005

Cindy Hahamovitch, Chair

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Pete Daniel

National Museum of American History
To Rachel
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My parents, George and Christine Bennett, deserve my deepest appreciation, but for more than supporting this dissertation, of course. I am sorry that my father did not live to see it completed, for without knowing, he taught me about the past and its power to rest in the heart. (It was not without reason that his stories of life on that Arkansas cotton farm remained vibrant five decades after he left it.) I thank them both for their moral and spiritual support. I also thank the rest of my family for their support over the years. Yes, I am finally done with school.

Finally, to my wife Rachel, to whom this work is dedicated, I thank you for your tireless love and support. A dissertation is a pitiful gift, but it is what you have asked for (more than once). So, here it is.
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ABSTRACT

In the late nineteenth century, bright tobacco came to dominate the agricultural production of the Virginia-North Carolina Piedmont. As the cultivation of bright tobacco spread, it created a new economy and social order centered on small, family-operated farms. For over a century, tobacco remained at the center of the region's economic and social order, even as numerous economic, technological and cultural forces reshaped the realities of tobacco agriculture. This dissertation explores the effects of these forces on the lives of the region's farm families. While many historian's have described tobacco farm life in terms of inexorable decline, this work takes pragmatic creativity as its theme; instead of viewing farm families as the hapless victims of industrial rapacity and government mendacity, it argues that tobacco farm families have shown themselves to be infinitely creative in responding to the shifting demands of a global tobacco economy. At the same time, this work jettisons the notion that tobacco farming is inherently retrograde, and argues, instead, that tobacco farm families have adapted to new technologies as they became available. In total, this work suggests that the farm families of the Piedmont have had a stronger hand in shaping their world than existing accounts of the transformation of southern agriculture over the last century, and especially since World War II, might suggest.

The dissertation is divided into three sections: land, labor, and life. The first examines the changes in the geography of tobacco brought on by both technological and economic developments and the expansion of federal programs into the countryside. The second section first documents the centrality of family labor to the production of bright tobacco by the beginning of the twentieth century before examining the rise of the use of hired farm labor in recent decades. The third section examines the impact of changing federal policy and economics on farm families lives by exploring how tobacco farm families helped to shape federal tobacco policy and by examining how farm families have used off-farm work to maintain viable farms.
KING BACCA'S THRONE
INTRODUCTION

KING BACCA: BRIGHT TOBACCO AND THE MAKING OF THE OLD BELT

"Oh, you'll find a corn field or two somewhar along," he replied, "but it's lanky, slipshod kind of crop at best, for tobaccy's king down here, an make no mistake."

- Ellen Glasgow, The Deliverance (1904)\(^1\)

The decline of the South's tobacco industry in recent years has been a compelling story for numerous writers and artists. National and regional newspapers, photographers, filmmakers, and others have taken in scenes of dilapidated tobacco barns, struggling farm families, and dying auction sales and composed a moving, composite elegy for a vanishing culture. One cannot view Jesse Andrews' photographs of tobacco farm families in Pittsylvania County, Virginia, or screen Cynthia Hill's sympathetic 2003 film, Tobacco Money Feeds My Family, without a developing a sense that something is being lost. Photographer Cindy Blanchard captured this mood well in her 2002 photograph of eighty-three-year-old Charmie Tuck bringing in his tobacco crop with his mule Kate outside Scottsburg, Virginia (Figure 1). "I really enjoyed watching a bit of history disappearing with the age of machinery," she commented about taking the picture. Striking anachronisms, Tuck and Kate are shadows of a past that is at once so close and

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\(^1\) Ellen Glasgow, The Deliverance: A Romance of the Virginia Tobacco Fields (New York: Doubleday, 1904), 5-6.
FIGURE 1
CHARNIE AND KATE IN THE TOBACCO PATCH

Source: Cindy Blanchard, Richmond Times-Dispatch, 28 November 2002
yet fading forever.²

That southern tobacco farm families have faced a series of challenges in recent years is undeniable. On the whole, tobacco production has fallen sharply in recent years, as small farmers have found themselves less able to make a living. At the same time, tobacco farm families have had to adjust to the new tools brought on by a technological revolution in machinery and chemicals, and, more importantly, the increased capitalization required by these technologies; stagnant tobacco prices have forced the redeployment of farm families’ labor resources into off-farm labor and pressed them to find new solutions for seeing their crops from planting to harvest; and cheaper bright leaf abroad, especially from China and Brazil, has eroded support for the New Deal-era federal tobacco program that, for over seventy years, provided the stability of guaranteed minimum prices for families’ crops. Farm families throughout the South report that they feel their ties to the past slipping, and the general feeling that the future holds little promise is palpable. Given the immediacy of these farm families’ fears, it is little wonder that observers latch on to these frustrations in their reports.

These impressions of resonate with many who have no ties to tobacco, even with many who have little but antipathy toward the crop. So great has been the power of this image of farm families sundered from tradition, that billions of dollars have been allocated to growers to ease the transition away from tobacco, first in the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement between tobacco manufacturers and states’ attorneys general, and more recently in the form of cash payments in exchange for the elimination of the federal

tobacco program. In both cases, public health officials supported payments in the hope – not always realized – that growers would use the money to reduce their dependence on tobacco.\(^3\)

For all of their pathos and power, however, accounts of the decline of tobacco agriculture over the last decade largely lack historical context. Consciously or not, these reports together compose this history of tobacco in romantic terms. Much like other narratives of the decline of modern agrarian life, these stories of turmoil along Tobacco Road present idealized small farm families in danger of losing their mythic relationship with the land and each other as the overweening power of global capitalist agriculture and the state policy shaped by its priorities. Missing from the stories of struggling tobacco farm families is any mention of how they themselves shaped the policies they now confront. Divorced from the narrative of decline is any sense that these anxieties may not be all that new.\(^4\)

This dissertation provides context for these stories by exploring the longer history of tobacco farming in a specific region of the South. It also challenges the assumptions that have supported the politics of tobacco agriculture in recent years. Rather than inexorable decline, this work takes pragmatic creativity as its theme; instead of viewing farm families as the hapless victims of industrial rapacity and government mendacity, it

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\(^3\) For details of the Master Settlement Agreement, see “Multistate Settlement with the Tobacco Industry,” Legacy Tobacco Documents Library, http://www.library.ucsf.edu/tobacco/litigation/msa.pdf. For the politics of the tobacco program buyout, see chapter 4.


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argues that tobacco farm families have shown themselves to be infinitely creative in responding to the shifting demands of a global tobacco economy. At the same time, this work jettisons the notion that tobacco farming is inherently retrograde, and argues, instead, that tobacco farm families have adapted to new technologies and techniques as they became available. The purpose of this work is not to question the validity of depictions of recent hard times - the number of farm families forced to give up tobacco over the last decades makes it clear that they are being squeezed by current conditions - or to suggest that farmers have cloaked themselves in the American agrarian myth to deflect criticism, although they have done this very well at times. Rather than impugning tobacco farm families, this work suggests that they have had a stronger hand in shaping their world than existing accounts of the transformation of southern agriculture over the last century, and especially since World War II, might suggest.5

5 So far, most studies have drawn the broad outlines of the history southern tobacco agriculture. These studies focus largely on the forces that have shaped tobacco agriculture, but have less to say about how farm families have responded to and shaped these forces. The best synthetic work has been done with regard to bright tobacco, the type of tobacco grown in the region this work examines. Pete Daniel’s Breaking the Land remains the key work for understanding the transformation of bright tobacco agriculture since the late nineteenth century. Nannie May Tilley’s The Bright-Tobacco Industry provides an exhaustive account of the development and course of bright-tobacco agriculture in the years before the New Deal, while Jack Temple Kirby’s Rural Worlds Lost places bright tobacco agriculture in the context of the reconfiguration of southern agriculture since. Anthony Badger’s Prosperity Road, meanwhile, explores the specific development of federal tobacco policy during the New Deal, and is probably the most sensitive to the power growers held in shaping state policy. Eldred Prince and Robert Simpson’s Bright Green, focuses on bright tobacco in a specific place (South Carolina), but Prince and Simpson concern themselves largely with retracing the outlines in a local place rather than exploring how the local might reshape our understanding of the larger forces. Recent work by Adrienne Petty on the small farmers of eastern North Carolina sheds greater light on the processes of change on the local level. Pete Daniel, Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Nannie May Tilley, The Bright-Tobacco Industry, 1860-1929 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948); Jack Temple Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); Anthony J. Badger, Prosperity Road: The New Deal, Tobacco, and North Carolina (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Eldred E. Prince and Robert R. Simpson, Bright Green: The Rise and Fall of Tobacco in South Carolina (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000); Adrienne Petty, “Standing Their Ground: Small Farm Owners in North Carolina’s Tobacco Belt, 1925-80,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2004).
FIGURE 2
THE OLD BELT

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This dissertation explores farm families’ role in shaping policy by closely examining the history of bright tobacco agriculture in a specific place: the bright tobacco belt of the Virginia-North Carolina Piedmont (Figure 2). Commonly known among those who work in tobacco as the Old Belt, the region is the home of the bright, or flue-cured, variety of tobacco. With the possible exception of stock car racing, bright tobacco is the region’s most famous export. As the primary ingredient in American cigarettes, bright leaf has linked smokers around the world to the rolling hills and country crossroads of the Piedmont for over a century. During this time, the culture of the Piedmont became the culture of bright tobacco.6

Neither the economy nor the culture of bright tobacco was immutable, however. Often depicted as an ancient crop with timeless work regimens, the demands of bright tobacco agriculture shifted regularly across the twentieth century, especially in the years following the New Deal. Shifts in demand, technological innovations, and a federal policy changed the ways in which families grew, cured, and sold their tobacco. These changes effected important changes in the landscape, the organization of labor, and the order of life in the region. Organized around these three themes—land, labor, and life—this dissertation explores what farming the golden leaf in a century fraught with change

6 Tobacco is a highly-adaptable plant and there are a number of “varieties” grown in the American South. Each is distinguished by how it is cured and/or how it is used. There is some overlap in where these are grown, but most have distinctive growing regions. Bright tobacco has the largest growing area, stretching from Virginia to South Carolina and pocketed in Georgia and Florida. Abutting the bright tobacco belt to the north is the quickly-disappearing dark tobacco belt that covers portions of Virginia and Maryland. Often called fire-cured tobacco, dark tobacco is a heat-cured variety from which bright tobacco was adapted. It is used primarily in smoking tobaccos, but cigarette manufacturers buy some of the crop. Burley tobacco is, with bright tobacco, one of the two major American tobacco varieties. It is an air-cured variety that is grown primarily in Kentucky, but also in Tennessee, western Virginia, and western North Carolina. Burley tobacco is very popular for its amenability to added flavor, making it very versatile. Its primary use is in chewing tobacco and other smokeless tobacco products, but cigarette manufacturers also use a great deal of the crop. Other varieties of tobacco are grown regionally in the United States—Connecticut farmers grow a shade-grown variety used for cigar manufacturing, for example—but no region matches the American South in the extent of tobacco grown.
meant to the people who owned their fealty to King Tobacco (or "King Bacca" as local intonation might have it. Each part is designed to highlight one key theme in order to address specific historical arguments that have been made about bright tobacco agriculture. Approaching this work thematically allows for a closer examination of the major forces reshaping tobacco agriculture than a chronological narrative might. For example, the transition from unpaid family labor to hired farm labor, the subject of chapter three, is easier to reconstruct when considered separately from the other issues roiling tobacco agriculture – the debate over federal production controls, for example – at the same time. This, of course, creates artificial distinctions between processes and events that farm families experiences all at once, but this is the one of the trade-offs of using this narrative structure. Another is the tendency to repeat information from chapter to chapter. The transition to wage labor, to continue our example, was shaped by changes in federal policy while it, in turn, shaped changes in the landscape, for example, so it is an issue that appears in more than one chapter. Repetition is thus a necessary evil, but one I have attempted to keep to a minimum.

Part One, titled, "Land," is an attempt to correct the impression that the demands of bright agriculture shaped the Piedmont the late nineteenth century and fixed it in time. Over the last century, observers have depicted the Piedmont as a land of ancient fields and antique barns. This image, which, admittedly, is not wholly inaccurate, has remained powerful, shaping even recent scholarly accounts of the region, and feeding the image of the Piedmont as a place only recently ruined by progress. What this image ignores, however, is the ways in which changes in tobacco agriculture, technological innovations, and government policy have continuously reshaped the built environment, the cultural
ordering of the land—how the arrangement of farms and rural neighborhoods reflected local realities of power—and the physical condition of the soil itself. Paying attention to these changes in the landscape, it becomes clear that, far from being a timeless place, the Old Belt is instead the product of agricultural modernization.

The second part of the dissertation, “Labor,” moves from the land to the people on it, and how their work has been ordered. As with the previous section, this section addresses specific historical assumptions. The first of these is the long-held assumption that men are “farmers” and everyone else in the family is “help” in the tough seasons. This differentiation of work—reified by state through both policy and definition (especially in the census)—had little basis in reality on most tobacco farms in the Old Belt. Whether landowners or tenants, black or white, farm families in this region typically worked together in the fields all year round. While there certainly was a rough sexual division of labor—one more pronounced as one traveled up the socio-economic ladder—the line between house work and field work was blurry, especially for women. (It is not at all clear that “men’s work” was as broadly defined as women’s.) Women and children alike worked in the fields and, at times, controlled their own portions of the crops. This is not to suggest that there was a complete leveling of men’s and women’s social positions—as in the rest of the South, patriarchy remained (still remains) firmly entrenched—but that the demands of tobacco agriculture presented a challenge to the application of ideological categories to the realities of labor.

In fact, most tobacco farm families would not likely have recognized the neat divisions official records sought to impose. Farm women, especially, reveled in their ability to flout conventional notions of gender that would have relegated them to the
house. For these women, farm work was a source of pride. Indeed, for most who grew up on a tobacco farm, recalling the seasons in the fields is an act of fond recollection (now matter how hot and dirty the task being recalled). This close linkage of family and farm has been of more than simply a question of nostalgia, however, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. As critics took aim at tobacco, the image of the family tobacco farm became politically powerful, not only for growers, but also for manufacturers. In the minds of many, tobacco and family became inseparable.

This assumption, too, is flawed, as chapter three shows. While it is true that the unpaid labor of women and children sustained many Old Belt tobacco farms well into the late twentieth century, focusing on family labor alone ignores the myriad ways in which farm families have solved—and continue to solve—tobacco's seemingly insatiable demand for human sweat. For roughly two centuries, black slaves of all ages, men and women, worked the tobacco fields of Virginia and North Carolina, tackling the onerous tasks in gangs under the watchful eye of their white masters or their overseers. At that time, tobacco provided the foundation for an economic order in which the plantation, not the small farm, stood at the center. In the wake of emancipation—to which the rise of bright tobacco was concomitant—many planters attempted to replace gangs of slaves with gangs of hired hands. This experiment in wage labor soon folded, however, and planters opted to rent their land to tenants, both black and white. (Many more planters gave up their lands altogether, selling them off at "fire sale" prices, hastening widespread landownership by both white and black families.) It was only by the early twentieth century, as the transition to tenants and the growth in the number of landowning farm
families dependent on the work of family members, that the family unit had moved to the center of the tobacco economy of the Old Belt.

This is not to say that family members was the exclusive source of labor on what might fairly described as family farms. Swapping labor, a practice that expanded as tobacco production shifted to small farms, was a common practice in most rural neighborhoods. White and black families, tenants and landowners, regularly worked together in the fields and at the barns. (Many tenant families, especially sharecroppers, worked with their landlords in their fields as part of their rental obligations. While not truly “swapped” in the sense that they could expect reciprocity, their labor was unpaid and not considered to be wage labor by Old Belt denizens, who usually discerned between “hands” and “croppers.”) Swapping labor served important economic and social functions. In addition to building ties between neighbors and kin, it propped up the family as the basic unit of tobacco production by making it possible for families to get through the most intense seasons without the costs of hiring farm hands.

The erosion of rural community in the second half of the twentieth century – itself the result of a number factors affecting the broader American countryside, including outmigration to urban areas and the transition to off-farm work – demonstrates how important swapped labor was to the region’s farm families. With fewer neighbors with whom to share work – and fewer family members as a result of the same pressures – farm families increasingly turned to hired farm workers. The practice of hiring farm laborers had never completely ended, of course. Numerous families, especially those with enough material resources to keep women and children out of the fields and those without enough human resources to handle all the work, hired farm hands. The transition to hired labor in
the late twentieth century, however differed in important ways from these earlier practices. The quantitative difference was most obvious: once rare, hired workers became a regular feature of Old Belt tobacco fields by the 1980s. Qualitative differences, however, are more telling. Traditionally, farm hands were most often black, local people (men usually, but women and children, too) who had not only ties to the community, but to the land as well (some rented land or owned their own small farms). By the end of the twentieth century, most farm workers were most often male Latinos (often Tejanos or Mexicans) who had come either through the nation’s East Coast migrant labor stream or under the auspices of the federal government’s H-2 farmworker program. This shift, which did not take place overnight, but proceeded with the shifting of local, national, and global labor markets, demonstrates that the supposed uniqueness of Old Belt tobacco farms – namely, the characterization that they are the last bastion of family farming – must be qualified. Hardly living dioramas of an idealized agrarian past, Old Belt farms instead demonstrate the ability of individuals and families – landowners, landless farmers, farm workers – to adjust to a shifting world.

The third and final part of the dissertation, “Life,” shifts this argument from the work of tobacco agriculture to its economics and politics. Similar to their ability to survive in the midst of shifting labor markets, Old Belt tobacco families have rather successfully navigated, difficult political and economic currents over the last century.

Since the 1910s, the state has been an integral part of the tobacco economy. Farm practices, crop inspection, and, most importantly, crop prices, and dozens of other aspects of farm life have been shaped by federal policy. The introduction of federal production controls and price supports in the 1930s was the most important development for the
world of tobacco farm families. For decades, overproduction and low prices were the bane of their lives; the New Deal’s tobacco program made tobacco more profitable than it had been in a half century, and kept prices high for another half or more. The program was a boon for growers, especially since they were able to exert a great deal of control on its implementation. By design, the program sought the buy-in of all growers – they held regular referenda to determine if it would be implemented – and growers used this opening to shape favorable policies. At the same time, they used the political clout of their elected representatives to protect – and ultimately dismantle – the program as it fit their needs. This level of political activism belies a third historical assumption about modern American agriculture: that farm families have been forced in a position of simply responding to state and industrial initiatives. Instead, in tobacco agriculture at least, the process was much more of a negotiation – hardly one among equals, to be sure, and one that privileged certain growers over others – between farm families, the state, and industry. Hardly mere victims of a “rogue bureaucracy,” tobacco farm families had a hand in sowing the wind for the whirlwind they later reaped.7

Indeed, farm families have long exerted much more control over their lives than has often been depicted. As the last chapter shows, this control extended to how they ordered their economic lives. Southern peoples’ movement from the land has often been depicted as a mass exodus, driven by the poor economics of the countryside. There is much to suggest this assessment. The vast number of people who evacuated the land

7 Historian Pete Daniel uses the term “rogue bureaucracy” to describe the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the post-World War II era, when its policy of rationalizing the countryside to eliminate inefficiencies, from weeds to sharecroppers, radically reshaped not only agricultural production, but the lives of thousands of farm families. My point is not to quibble with Daniel’s depiction of the USDA and its policies, which indeed accounts for the power of large growers to shape policy. Instead, I suggest that the actions of tobacco growers of all sizes forced the USDA and other, semi-public agencies to adapt their policies. Pete Daniel, Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 61-87.
alone demonstrates its value. However, a close examination of the part-time labor of Old Belt farm families suggests that the push-pull factors were not always so clear. From the late nineteenth century on, rural people in the Piedmont split time between the farm and the factory, taking what was called “public work” as it suited their needs. In the middle of the twentieth century, the process shifted, as families began to take on full-time public work and farm on the side. Where the earlier division of time was usually rooted in economic need, the later division often had as much to do with holding on to their traditional culture as need. In either case, however, it becomes clear that farm families were much more autonomous than conventional wisdom might hold. Rather than automatons compelled by larger forces, they were rational actors that made shaped their own worlds.

In sum, it was not King Bacca alone that shaped the Old Belt; his loyal retainers had a hand in it as well. Understanding how they did this requires that we understand how the golden leaf became king and how the men and women who grew it ordered their lives to meet his commands.

*Making an Old Belt*

In 1728, William Byrd looked at the rolling hills of the Piedmont surrounding what he named the Dan River and saw an earthly paradise. Commissioned to oversee the survey of the much-contested line between Virginia and North Carolina, Byrd documented much of what he saw as he and his cohort walked the Dividing Line from the Outer Banks to the Blue Ridge. Located in the heart of the Piedmont, the Dan River valley was “exceedingly rich, both on the Virginia Side of the Line, and that of Carolina.” The land around the river, he believed, was “as fertile as the Lands were said to be about
Babylon, which yielded...an increase of no less that 2 or 300 for one. But this hath the Advantage of being a higher and consequently much healthier, Situation than that.”

Echoing earlier promoters of North America’s potential bounty, he argued that settlers “might, with the help of Moderate Industry, pass their time very happily there.” The land, he said, would support vineyards of the best wines, mulberry groves for the finest silks, as well as hemp, flax, cotton, peaches, apples, and rice. “In short every thing will grow plentifully here to support either the Wants or Wantonness of Man.” Convinced of the land’s potential, Byrd purchased 20,000 acres he named the “Land of Eden.”

Oddly, Byrd, a member of the Tidewater planter elite, wrote little about the land’s potential for producing Virginia’s most famous crop, tobacco. Yet within decades, the pernicious weed became the dominant crop of his hilly Eden. In the second-third of the eighteenth century, planters spread out across the rolling hills of Virginia’s central and southern Piedmont in search of new land on which to grow tobacco. By 1800, nearly 40 percent of the state’s slave population lived between the eastern fall line and the western mountain ranges. By the middle of the nineteenth century, one recent historian has explained, “The tobacco belt that embraced the central and southern piedmont was the most concentrated region of planters, slaveholders, and slaves.”

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On the eve of the Civil War, the tobacco economy was strongest in the section of the Piedmont south of the James River – Virginia’s famed “Southside.” The region was shaped by the global trade in tobacco. Manufacturers in the northern United States and Europe exported thousands of tons of leaves every year, providing the economic base of a plantation economy. The Piedmont’s plantations were smaller on average than those of the Deep South, but slavery was no less extensive. “Most of the planters,” one historian has written, “were in a middle group, farmers substantial but with limited acres and a moderate number of slaves.” Eight southern Piedmont counties alone accounted for almost one-fifth of the state’s nearly half-million slaves. Roughly two-thirds of the region’s slaveholders owned fewer than ten slaves. Large planters, however, made up a sizable and powerful minority. Roughly one-sixth of slaveholders owned more than twenty slaves. In 1859, Samuel H. Hairston, whose opulent home was said to rival Paradise itself, owned nearly 6,000 acres valued at just under $100,000. Slaveholding was also broad-based. In his study of Pittsylvania County, for example, historian Frederick Siegel found that nearly 65 percent of the county’s rural landholders owned slaves.10

The Old Dominion’s tobacco economy extended into the tier of North Carolina counties just south of Byrd’s Dividing Line. “The Virginia and North Carolina tobacco

district," according to historian Robert C. Joseph, "was an economic entity unaffected by the political boundary." Planters often had both economic and familial ties that crossed the state boundary. North Carolina planters, many of whom had come from Virginia, sold their tobacco on the markets at Danville, Petersburg, and Richmond, causing much of North Carolina's antebellum tobacco crops to be grouped under the general heading of "Virginia" tobacco. Slaveholding patterns in these counties were very similar to those in southern Virginia. While slaveholding was slightly less widespread in these counties, the distribution of slaveholders was similar.11

It is important to understand that the tobacco plantation economy of the Virginia-North Carolina Piedmont differed from that found in areas devoted to other crops. Tobacco production was intensive, focused on several acres, rather than extensive. Unlike cotton or sugar, prices for tobacco depended on not only the quantity but also the quality of the leaves. Planters, therefore, did not grow broad fields of tobacco, but small plots of usually no more than fifteen or twenty acres.

Despite the relatively small size of individual tobacco fields, the crop nevertheless placed a burden on the land. Soil in the fields wore out as and ran off as tobacco robbed it of nutrients and planters persisted in running rows down hill to prevent standing water from drowning the plants. Most planters were more than willing to trade soil for leaves, however. "Tobacco required fresh land, and was rapidly exhausting, but it returned more

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11Joseph, The Tobacco Kingdom, 62. The counties considered here are Caswell, Granville, Person, and Rockingham, all of which border Virginia and lie in the center of the Piedmont. Slaveholders in these counties accounted for 2,872 of an adult white population of 16,209. Of these slaveholders, 63.4 percent (1,820) owned less than ten slaves, while 15.5 percent (444) owned more than twenty. While these figures demonstrate that these counties had relatively strong plantation economies, tobacco was by no means the only product these plantations produced. Granville County, especially, produced a great deal of cotton, and many of the large growers here focused on cotton production. Compiled from 1860 Federal Census, United States Historical Census Data Browser.
money, for the labour used upon it, than anything else,” Frederick Law Olmstead wrote of his visit to a Virginia plantation, “enough more, in [the planter’s] opinion to pay for the wearing out of the land. If he was well paid for it, he did not know why he should not wear out his land.”

Or, Olmstead might have added, his slaves. Life for slaves on Piedmont tobacco plantations was harsh. Living conditions were barely adequate and work regimens were back-breaking. “The big house was something to look at,” one former Person County slave remembered, “but the slave cabins were just log huts with sand floors, and stick-and-dirt chimneys. We was allowed to have a little patch of garden stuff at the back, but no chickens nor pigs. The only way we had of making money was by picking berries and selling them. We ain’t had much time to do that, ‘cause we worked from sunup to sundown six days a week.” Added to the physical rigors of slave life was the emotional torture of sundered families. The sale of slaves within the tobacco belt had long strained bonds of family and community that had developed during slavery’s long history in the region. In the second third of the nineteenth century, the strain grew only more wrenching, as a voracious demand for labor in the newly-opened cotton lands of the Deep South created a market for slaves that Piedmont slaveholders simply could not ignore. Hundreds of thousands of Virginia slaves were sold out of state, ripping apart family networks that had developed over decades if not centuries. Most came from the Tidewater, but the Piedmont was also the starting point for many forced into the “Second Middle Passage.” “The majority of tobacco-belt slaves escaped the trade,” one historian

of the Virginia tobacco belt has explained, "but few if any remained unthreatened or
touched by it." Freedpeople’s quest to unite families lost to the trade after
emancipation revealed the trauma of the loss of husbands, wives, and children. North
Carolinian Mattie Curtis, who with her mother and father had been sold from her
birthplace in Orange County and sent along the "Tobacco Path" to a Granville County
planter, remembered her parents’ quest to find their fourteen oldest children, all of whom
had been sold away. "[T]hey never did find but three of them," she lamented.13

The presence, even dominance, of the plantation and slavery made the Piedmont
site of the evils of exploitative agriculture. At the same time, however, thousands of
white migrants sought their agrarian dreams to the south of the Shenandoah Valley, in the
foothills of the Blue Ridge. Along the fringes of the tobacco belt, German Moravians
and Scots-Irish settlers established subsistence farms on the rolling hills. In 1865, one
reporter noted that “the majority of the people” around Rockingham County “belong to
the class of small farmers,” whose fields created an “unvarying scene of rolling ground
covered with forest, and here and there, at long intervals, a clearing of one or two
hundred acres.” In the counties neighboring North Carolina’s tobacco plantation counties
over two-thirds of the farms were smaller than one hundred acres. In Forsyth County, for
example, less than twenty percent of the farms were over one hundred acres. Of course,
slavery was not unknown in these counties, but slaveholders were a decided minority.
Whatever tobacco farmers grew was for home consumption, not for market.14

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During the Civil War, staple agriculture largely disappeared from the Piedmont as planters turned their attention to growing foodstuffs for the Confederate cause. After the war, agriculture continued to lag as the region experienced a deep, decade-long agricultural depression, brought on, in large part, by the abolition of slavery. Between 1860 and 1870, improved acreage in the region’s plantation counties fell by roughly one-third. In many counties, tobacco production fell by more than half, bearing witness to the region’s declining productivity.15

Declining productivity, falling land values, and generally depressed conditions fostered a sense of anxiety in the Piedmont. In 1870, journalist Robert Somers noted that land offices in Richmond were filled with hundreds of papers offering land for sale, and commented that the state’s agricultural future was “the absorbing question” for Virginians. “How to get the estates formerly productive again brought into cultivation...occupies the minds of all classes with an intensity of interest to which no other public concern can be compared.” An 1876 pamphlet written to encourage growers not to give up on tobacco inadvertently betrayed anxiety about the number of people leaving the state for greener fields. “If a young man in Virginia has no capital to depend on but his own energy,” its authors wrote, “it is not possible for him to better his

1865-1866, ed. Henry M. Christman (New York: Viking, 1965), 104. The figures represent Alamance, Forsyth, Guilford, Orange, and Stokes counties. Of the 5,690 farms in these counties, 3,855 were smaller than 100 acres. In 1860, 26,489 adult whites (age 20 or greater) lived in the five counties; 2,228 reported owning at least one slave. Of these, 1,725 owned less than ten slaves; 154 reported owning 20 or more slaves. Compiled from 1860 Federal Census, United States Historical Census Data Browser.

15 In 1860, the twelve plantation counties listed in notes 4 and 5, reported a total of 1,870,410 improved acres; in 1870, this number had fallen to 1,258,169. Brunswick, Person, and Caswell counties reported declines of over 50 percent, while Campbell and Nottoway counties actually showed slight improvements. There is some challenge in comparing the 1860 and 1870 censuses, especially considering the potential unreliability of the 1870 census in the southern states. Nevertheless, the figures here are useful for establishing the pattern of destruction wrought by the war. Compiled from 1860 and 1870 Federal Censuses, United States Historical Census Data Browser. Tobacco production figures found in Kerr-Ritchie, Freedpeople in the Tobacco South, 93-97.
condition by going anywhere else in the country. If he moves West, every mile he goes
is that much farther from the market, which is the seaboard....If he goes North, the case
will be infinitely worse. If farther South, he will encounter a climate to which he is
unused, and gain nothing in soils over what he left at home.” The agricultural depression
only exacerbated frustration with the general upheaval of Reconstruction. One writer, in
comparing Virginia and North Carolina’s agricultural situation to that of France
following the Franco-Prussian War, declared, “Should we exhibit any less manhood? If
our general economy needs readjustment, we should set about this work at once; for
every year only adds to the difficulty.” For planters, tobacco’s declining fortunes
represented not just an economic problem, but a cultural crisis.16

Several problems confronted the Piedmont’s dark tobacco economy in the years
following the war. Declining productivity came just as the nation’s tobacco
manufacturers turned westward to Kentucky and Tennessee, where, due to the war,
tobacco growers had supplanted Piedmont planters’ position as the chief producers for
the world market. In the 1870s alone, Kentucky growers nearly doubled their production.
By the turn of the century, Kentucky’s massive tobacco crop – over 300 million pounds
in 1899 alone – drove down prices for dark tobacco, making it nearly impossible for
Piedmont growers to compete in the markets they once dominated.17

At the same time, the land itself appeared determined to repay planters for years
of abuse. In assessing the region’s decline, contemporaries regularly cited problems with

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16 Robert Somers, *The Southern States since the War, 1870-71* (1871; reprint, with an introduction and
Company, *The Position Tobacco has Ever Held as the Chief Source of Wealth to Virginia* (Richmond: n.p.,
1876), 19. Southern Fertilizing Company, *How Tobacco is Raised and Prepared for Market* (Richmond:

the land, which they linked to the changed labor situation. Without slaves to work it, they claimed, the delicate balancing act of maintaining the soil had foundered. Ignored and abandoned, once-productive lands turned to broom-sedge. Recent historians have similarly noted the linkage between the region's labor and land problems, while demonstrating that a combination of ecological factors only made matters worse. In the late 1860s, successive severe droughts burned both corn and tobacco in the fields just as the region fell in step with the rhythms of the postwar world. At the same time, the soil became increasingly inhospitable for tobacco. While growers blamed nutrient depletion for their problems, the decline was more likely the result of unseen invaders. Repeated use of the same fields introduced opportunities for various fungal organisms and microscopic worms called nematodes to multiply and wreak havoc on growers' tobacco crops.\textsuperscript{18}

The challenges of creating viable labor systems in the wake of slavery's destruction, however, posed the greatest problem for the Piedmont's tobacco economy. Unable to compel labor in the fields, planters had to adjust to the realities of free labor. At the same time, freedpeople had to adjust to their newly-won freedom. These adjustments, as recent historians have shown, unleashed a conflict over the meaning of free labor that embroiled the region for decades. Freed from their bonds, former slaves attempted to assert a level of independence outside of white control. When working for wages, they chafed at planters' attempts to reinstitute the labor regimen that had dominated slavery. Planter A. J. Hester, for example, met a great deal of resistance when he attempted to institute a system of bells to order the labor on his Person County

The "Negroes were prejudiced to this system at first; looked too much like slavery," a reporter explained. Whites, in turn, blamed the region's decline on freedpeople's unwillingness to work under white supervision. J.B. Killebrew claimed that "[t]he bulk of the crop" in one Virginia county, "...is grown by colored people, inexperienced and unskilled, who pay but little attention to the management of their tobacco." In general, he continued, "agricultural depression, low prices, and the scarcity of skilled labor have discouraged farmers; less fertilizers are used, less pains are taken, and the condition of the soil has been steadily declining for several years." 19

As he described the depression in some counties, however, Killebrew also documented an important change taking place along the Virginia-North Carolina line. "In Halifax County," he wrote, "...planters are attempting, with fair success, the production of bright grades." The note was minor, but it revealed a society in the midst of a dramatic change. Attracted by higher prices for lighter-colored leaf, growers not only in Halifax County but across the Piedmont attempted to grow bright leaf tobacco. Within a decade, the expansion of bright tobacco agriculture reshaped the Piedmont. Small-to-medium sized farms worked by individual families became the norm. At the same time, bright tobacco created a unique regional culture tied to the crop. Together, these two things -- family farms and tobacco culture -- defined the region for another century or more. 20


Bright tobacco actually had a long history in the Piedmont by the time Killebrew noted its expansion. First perfected in Caswell County in the 1830s, the crop differed from the Piedmont's famous dark tobacco only in the way it was cured. Instead of simply drying the leaves with strong fires, bright curing called for growers to use low levels of heat to effect a chemical change that turned the leaves a bright yellow before drying them with super heated air. In the 1850s, the attractive yellow leaves produced by this method became popular as wrappers for plug chewing tobacco because they withstood the pressure of the tobacco plug press without losing their color or texture.

Farmers in Caswell and surrounding counties began to adopt the techniques necessary for producing them. After the war, demand for the yellow leaves increased as tobacco production normalized. Prices skyrocketed. In 1874, the proprietors of Danville's Planters' Warehouse announced that "FINE WRAPPERS are scarce and in great demand," and offered farmers upwards of a dollar per pound for their best leaves. (By way of comparison, lugs, the leaves from the lowest parts of the plant, garnered between five and thirty-five cents per pound, while average leaves from higher up the plant bought in between eight and eighteen cents.) In the 1880s, demand for bright tobacco grew as consumers increasingly favored the once-disdained cigarette. (To a world of cigar smokers, plug chewers, and snuff takers, the little white sticks had seemed utterly foreign and thoroughly unmanly.) Traditionally, cigarettes had been made with strong Turkish varieties, but American consumers preferred a lighter flavor, leading manufacturers to use the more mellow bright leaf tobacco instead. Tobacco brokers and warehouse owners soon encouraged growers to alter their techniques to produce bright rather than dark tobacco. H.A. Reams, for example, complained to Granville County planter Isaac Davis
that all the tobacco he had sent was “miserable dark and damaged,” and advised him that 
“[i]f you will send me something that is colory I will get you good prices.”21

Adopting bright tobacco, however, was not simply an evolutionary change for the 
Piedmont’s growers. Instead, it was a conscious decision that required a great deal of 
planning and investment. Even for experienced tobacco growers, nothing was simple or 
cheap about growing the new crop. To cure the tobacco properly, farmers had to build 
new curing barns or update their existing barns to accommodate metal flues. In 1879, a 
set of flues cost between $50 and $75, making either option relatively expensive. More 
daunting than installing the new technology was using it properly. Part art, part science, 
curing offered each grower a unique set of challenges. Despite attempts to create a 
uniform formula, soil quality, rainfall, air temperature, and a dozens of other variables 
made curing a skill acquired largely through trial and error. As Pittsylvania County 
planter J.W. Leftwich explained in the late 1860s, no one, “without knowing the exact 
condition of all circumstances [can] prescribe the degrees of heat & time necessary to 
apply them to accomplish a certain result.” Growers had to surmount the learning curve 
quickly, for a bad curing could destroy an entire year’s work – and profits – in mere 
hours. The costs and risks associated with the crop forced growers to determine if bright 
tobacco was worth the gamble.22

21 Broadside, 1874, Planters’ Warehouse, Danville, Va., Advertising Ephemera Collection – Database 
#A0160, Emergence of Advertising On-Line Project, John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising & 
Marketing History, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, 
http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/eaa/. H.A. Reams to Isaac Davis, 17 January 1880, Samuel Smith Downey 
Papers, Records of Ante-bellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution to the Civil War, Series F, Part 
3, Reel 7.

22 Tilley, The Bright-Tobacco Industry, 68. J. W. Leftwich, “Treatise on the Cultivation and Curing of 
Bright Tobacco in Pittsylvania County, Virginia,” Leftwich-Shepherd-Bowles Families Papers, Accession 
Number 27988h, Personal Manuscripts, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va. (hereafter Leftwich-Shepherd-
Bowles Papers, LVA)
Plenty of interested parties readily gave growers the encouragement they needed to make their decision. Guides explaining how to grow and cure the leaves flew off the region’s printing presses. Planter Robert L Ragland, whose Halifax County plantation became famous for its wide variety of tobacco seeds, was the most prolific and influential of bright tobacco’s promoters, authoring a number of pamphlets, including *Tobacco, from the Seed to the Salesroom* (1880), which also ran in serialized form in the region’s newspapers. Written, Ragland said, “for beginners, and those having but little experience in tobacco culture,” the pamphlet, which also ran in serialized form in a number of newspapers, revealed a level of civic mindedness on Ragland’s part. At the same time, it missed no opportunity to drum up business for Ragland’s tobacco seed business. In what might be seen as a bid for synergy, Richmond’s Southern Fertilizing Company published a number of Ragland’s pamphlets along with ads for their best guano. The Virginia-Carolina Chemical Company similarly published pamphlets that reported growers’ successes using their fertilizers and insecticides and included pictures as proof. Market-town newspapers seeking to bring business to town encouraged the trade in bright tobacco by publishing the latest tobacco prices, advice from noted planters and warehousemen, and news from other markets. Some went further and published separate guides to encourage local development of the crop. W.A. Davis, publisher of the Oxford *Torch-Light*, put out two guides that included instructions for growing bright tobacco, detailed accounts of the experiences of dozens of Old Belt tobacco growers, warehousemen, and manufacturers, and sales pitches that touted the region’s potential for farmers willing to grow bright leaf. “The young man who intends to make agriculture his business, can find no where so inviting a field for profitable employment as is offered in
Granville," one pamphlet exhorted. "The opportunities presented were never better than now." Just before the 1884 planting season, the Gold Leaf, a tellingly-named newspaper published in Henderson, North Carolina, a booming market town on the east end of the Piedmont, went so far as to send out a "number of packages" of tobacco seeds "together with back numbers of the paper containing articles on the subject of tobacco raising" in hopes of seeing "the fruits of its labor return many fold in the beneficial results to the farmer who adopts the cultivation instead of the all-cotton system."23

Such promotional literature focused largely on the profitability of growing bright tobacco. One guide bragged that Wake County native R.G. Chappel had forsaken his cotton-growing roots to buy prime tobacco land in Granville County because "there is much money to be made in raising fine tobacco." Williamsboro farmer W. H. Green, the guide further explained, expected to make at least $2,175 from the combination of tobacco, corn, wheat, oats, livestock, and other "small crops" produced on his farm. "This farming will compare favorably with that of any section in America," the author concluded, "and there is enough room in the country for 10,000 farmers who can do just as well, if they will come here and exercise the same push and good judgment."24

It is impossible to measure the direct impact these publications had on farmers, but it is clear that word of bright tobacco's potential spread rapidly, encouraging

23 Robert L. Ragland, Tobacco, from the Seed to the Salesroom (Richmond: Wm. Ellis Jones, 1880), 10. For serialized form, see The Farmer and Mechanic (Raleigh, N.C.), 4 March 1880. A fine example of chemical companies' attempts to encourage tobacco can be found in, Virginia-Carolina Chemical Company, Tobacco (Richmond: Virginia-Carolina Chemical Company, 1915). Nearly every edition of market town newspapers contained some information from the local market as well as reports from other markets. For examples, see Danville Weekly Border Express, 23 August 1876 and Henderson Gold Leaf, 3 November 1887. J.B. Hunter, Useful Information Concerning Yellow Tobacco, and Other Crops, as Told by Fifty of the Most Successful Farmers of Granville County, N.C. (Oxford: W.A. Davis, 1880), 41. Gold Leaf, 21 February 1884.

24 Hunter, Useful Information Concerning Yellow Tobacco, 17, 27.
hundreds of farm families to turn their attention to the crop. "Granville County at once became famous for its yellow leaf," the editor of the Southern Tobacco Journal explained, "and reports went abroad of planters who made from $500 to $600 per acre." As early as 1883, bright tobacco raised as far north as Amelia County commanded "equally as good prices as if raised in the 'bright tobacco belt'." In Danville, tobacco sales exploded, growing fourfold between 1869 and 1899 and topping out at a record 54 million pounds. "[W]hile in 1867 one warehouse furnished ample space for the transaction of all this business," Harper's Weekly reported in 1887, "the ten immense establishments of to-day are hardly sufficient to accommodate it."  

Danville was not alone in its growth. Auction warehouses and tobacco factories popped up all around the Piedmont to support the bright tobacco trade. Towns like Winston (which later merged with neighboring Salem to form Winston-Salem), Durham, and Reidsville joined - and in many cases surpassed - Richmond as centers of tobacco production. Oxford, South Hill, Henderson, and dozens of other places became famous for their bustling auctions. Tobacco linked town and country, connecting not only the yellow leaves with their markets, but also people with public work in the factories and warehouses. As rural as the Old Belt might be, it was not remote.

The expansion of bright tobacco was a boon to Piedmont towns, but its impact on the countryside was more profound. As tobacco agriculture spread, it reshaped the organization of the land and the region took on a signature appearance. This is not to say that tobacco homogenized the landscape – the region's topography was too varied for that...
but it fostered a general pattern of development that marked the entire region and set it apart from others. The thousands of curing barns that farmers erected were only the most obvious signs of a changed landscape. The number of farms grew, the average farm size decreased as smaller farms became the norm, and the arrangement of the land shifted as growers chose their tobacco fields, built new outbuildings. At the same time, the number of families working the land on shares grew, the production of home supplies declined, and pressures on the land increased. In short, bright tobacco remade the countryside to fit its demands.

Not all of these changes occurred at the same pace, of course, and their direction depended on where one looked. Generally speaking, changes occurred as large landholders adopted tenancy as a means of securing labor and small farm families reoriented their work towards market production. In both cases, the family's dominance as the basic unit of tobacco production became the central factor in the reorganization of the countryside. While seemingly mundane and natural, the rise of the family as the center of tobacco production was neither unimportant nor inevitable.

The transition to family labor was perhaps most striking in areas once dominated by plantation agriculture. The Civil War ended slavery in the plantation belt, but the planters who remained demanded control over both their land and those who worked on it. Most planters, therefore, hired wage laborers in the years immediately following the war. Conventional wisdom held that it was foolish to turn control over one's land to tenants, especially black tenants. Pittsylvania planter William T. Sutherlin, for example, complained that planters' "habit of...entrust[ing] the cultivation of their farms to ignorant
and unskilled tenants who make nothing but common tobacco” was the root cause of declining prices in the late 1880s.\(^2\)

By the 1890s, however, it became clear that landowners were turning aside from such counsel and taking on tenants. To be sure, the use of tenants never fully replaced wage labor, but reliance on it decreased by the turn-of-the-century. By 1910, tenants worked a little over forty percent of the Old Belt’s farms; in some of the former plantation counties, tenants worked more than half of the farms. Most tenants were sharecroppers who worked the land for half the crop, but renting land on a two-thirds or one-quarter basis was not uncommon.\(^2\)

Rising tenancy reflected Old Belt planters’ increasing attention to bright tobacco production. For planters, it made more sense economically to turn their production over to tenants who would help shoulder the risk involved in seeing a crop from planting to harvest. As an inedible cash crop, bright tobacco, like cotton, proved to be perfect for

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\(^2\) For opinions about tenants see, Robert L. Ragland, “Farm Labor,” in Southern Fertilizing Company, Tobacco: The Outlook in America for 1875 (Richmond: Clemmitt & Jones, 1875), 27-30. Henderson Gold Leaf, 17 March 1887. Continued reliance on hired labor, however, was not just a function of planters’ desire to control their workforces. The transition to tenancy was stunted, in part, because freedpeople refused to enter into such agreements. Determined to evade white oversight, some freedpeople combined wage work with small landholdings to establish a degree of freedom. As a result, the use of wage labor was most pronounced in counties with high rates of African American landownership. In 1899, African Americans owned 35 percent of the farms in Nottoway County, for example, where farm labor expenditures averaged $33.89, seventh most among Old Belt counties. In Charlotte County, which had the highest average labor expenditures ($50.66), blacks owned roughly 19 percent of the farms. Compiled from 1900 Federal Census, United States Historical Census Data Browser. For African Americans’ land acquisition strategies, see Sharon Ann Holt, Making Freedom Pay: North Carolina Freedpeople Working for Themselves, 1865-1900 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), especially chapters 2 and 3, and Kerr-Ritchie, Freedpeople in the Tobacco South, chapter 8.

\(^2\) In 1910, 82.6 percent of Old Belt tenants worked on shares, but renters, those who provided their own tools and stock thus received two-thirds or three-quarters of the crop, made up considerable percentage of tenants in some counties, especially those where access to land (measured by the percentage of black ownership) was fairly easy. (The Pearson’s r for a comparison of the percentage of tenant farms worked by sharecroppers and the percentage of farms owned by African Americans is -0.65, indicating a fairly strong inverse relationship between the two.) In these counties, landowners often purchased small tracts suitable for home production, but needed tobacco land to rent. Since they likely owned their own work stock and tools and needed no home on the land, renting for a greater share of the crop was more common. Compiled from 1910 Federal Census, United States Historical Census Data Browser.
sharecropping. Tenants could use it to obtain credit and landlords did not have to fear that tenants would eat the profits or feed them to their livestock. Further, as historian Nannie May Tilley has written, “tobacco is a hand-made crop with a high income per acre, thus insuring the landlord a maximum return.” At the same time, the deferral of payment until the end of the year worked as a form of labor control, ensuring that tenants would not leave for the region’s burgeoning cities as laborers often did. Many planters also compensated for a loss of direct control of those working their land by including precise stipulations about other work to be done in the rental contracts.\textsuperscript{28}

Despite its similarities to tenancy in other regions, tenancy in the Old Belt differed in some important ways. The Old Belt had a rolling topography and soil conditions could vary greatly within the space of only a few miles. Not all land was well-suited to bright tobacco, so even landowners rented land to cobble together enough acreage. This created intricate webs of land tenure that are masked by tenancy rates calculated from census returns. As historian Sharon Ann Holt has shown in her close study of freedpeople in Granville County, individuals counted as tenant farmers by the census often owned pieces of land that were either too small or had the wrong soil for growing tobacco. So intricate were these webs that some growers rented their land to others while working rented lands themselves. “I have been renting land pay $\frac{1}{4}$ for rent,” explained Sampson White, a black farmer from Pittsylvania County. “I also work a farm of my own and has been for 9 years. I work men for a part of the crop and they pay $\frac{1}{2}$ the fertilizer bill and gets $\frac{1}{2}$ of the crop. I work land of my own and rent land and rent out

land to others the above is the terms.” While there were, no doubt, thousands of landless sharecroppers in the region, tenants did not make up as large a landless class as they did in places like North Carolina’s Coastal Plain, where tenancy more strongly marked class distinctions.29

The number of farms worked by white tenants also set the Old Belt apart from other regions. Most Old Belt tenants were white (59.6 percent in 1910), but the demographics varied greatly across the region. In Yadkin County, at the far western end of the Old Belt, more than 90 percent of the tenants were white, while at the eastern end, in Warren County, only 25.9 percent were white. While black farmers did not make up the majority of tenants, their numbers were disproportionate to their representation in the population as a whole. In 1910, 40 percent of Old Belt tenants were black, but African Americans worked only 29 percent of the region’s total farms. The high rate of white tenancy altered the traditional linkage between race and tenancy that marked many plantation areas, mitigating to some degree the harshness of the line separating landowners from tenants. This is not to say that class distinctions did not exist; wealthy planters often disdained poor white sharecroppers. Nevertheless, ties of family and community often linked landowners and tenants. Promoters’ accounts of the region often played up the perceived lack of social distance between tenants and landowners to attract new residents. “There are many renters living in these sections who have remained without ever saying a word as to renewing their leases — so well pleased have they and their landlords been with each other that the idea of changing never occurs to either until

the renter, in a few years, has made money enough to purchase and stock a small farm,” boasted one publication.  

No less important than the switch to family units on large landholdings was the transition many traditionally subsistence farmers made to market production. In response to high prices, small landholders also turned their attention to bright tobacco. From relatively sleepy Forsyth County, reports noted that “[m]any new men have gone into the business this year and older planters have enlarged their operations.” “The introduction of coal curing, and more recently of flues,” the report continued, has completely revolutionized the whole system, the result of which is the abundant production of fine yellow tobacco…” In Alamance County, tobacco production in 1890 was 30 percent higher than it had been ten years earlier; by that same year, Rockingham, Stokes, Forsyth, and Surry counties were all among the top tobacco-producing counties in North Carolina. The number of farms grew rapidly, as native farmers bought good tobacco lands and newcomers moved to the area to grow the crop. Oddly, the very thing that had once made these regions inhospitable to plantation agriculture made them ideal for bright tobacco. Given enough fertilizer, the bright leaf could thrive on the infertile, dry soils that marked the region. In fact, bright tobacco’s promoters insisted that the combination of poor land and fertilizers made the leaves grown on these lands “the wonder of the agricultural chemist, as well as the envy of less fortunate rivals.”

30 Compiled from 1910 Federal Census, United States Historical Census Data Browser. Hunter, Useful Information Concerning Yellow Tobacco, 39.

As word of the prices being offered for bright tobacco spread, thousands of farm families spilled into the region hoping to get good tobacco land. This drove land prices up all across the Old Belt. In 1880, J.B. Killebrew reported that “[l]ands worth from $1 to $3 per acres in 1860, now bring from $20 to $100, and old fields, worn out fifty years ago and grown up in pines...are now often sold for $50 per acre.” Between 1880 and 1910, more than 30,000 new farms sprang up in the Old Belt, a product of both new lands coming into cultivation and the break up of larger holdings. During the same period, improved acreage more than tripled, while the region’s population almost doubled. Within a generation, the Piedmont had become a distinct region.32

As they became more enmeshed in the production of bright tobacco, farm families—tenants and landowners, black and white—created a unique culture that linked life, labor, and the golden leaf. The rhythms of bright tobacco agriculture shaped life on a tobacco farm year-round. Requiring upwards of 430 person-hours of work per acre, the crop demanded resources, time, and precious labor. A 1922 study found, “the size of the tobacco crop is largely determined by the amount of family labor available.” Every member of the family had a stake in the family’s crop and a responsibility to work in the fields. Male and female children alike were brought up to work the crop. As these children became adults, tasks became increasingly sex-segregated, but both women’s and men’s labor remained essential for the production of the golden leaf. While farm families might hire help during the busy seasons, most got through by sharing labor with neighbors and kin. As families and neighbors worked daily in the crop and with each

32 Killebrew, Report on the Culture and Curing of Tobacco, 111. All statistics compiled from 1870-1910 Federal Censuses, United States Historical Census Data Browser.
other, they established bonds linking family, community, and bright tobacco that helped shape both personal and regional identities around the crop.\textsuperscript{33}

Preparations for a year’s crop began before the previous year’s was on its way to market. Throughout the late fall and early winter, families – often older sons – cut timber for the next year’s curing fires, a job that might continue whenever there was extra time. In January or February, families prepared seed beds where the tiny tobacco seeds could germinate before being transferred to the fields. Alamance County native Sallie Walker Stockard recalled her father taking his axe, mattock, hoe, and rake “deep in the woods” to make the seed bed. The process was intricate and required a great deal of care. After clearing and plowing a plot of ground, farmers burned leaves and other forest debris to kill off weeds and grass and their seeds. They then applied fertilizer to the area, scattered the seeds, tramped down the ground, and then covered the ground with canvas or cheesecloth to protect the seedlings from the elements. Older sons and neighbors often helped with this daunting task. In 1926, Bedford County grower Perry Miller, his twin brother Guy, younger brother Ed, and two hired hands spent a combined eight days between January and March constructing, plowing, fertilizing, burning, seeding, and covering the seed bed for a relatively small tobacco crop on Perry’s father’s farm. Since farmers rarely, if ever, used the same seed beds, this process had to be repeated every year in a new place.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{33} “Resume of the Attached Preliminary Report on Cost of Virginia Dark Fire-Cured and Bright Tobacco for 1922,” General Correspondence of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, Record Group 16, National Archives, College Park, Md. (hereafter cited as Gen. Corr. Sec. Ag., RG 16, NA)

As the plants in the seed bed grew to transplanting size, families did the important work of plowing and fertilizing the fields. Farmers generally had their favorite lands for planting tobacco, and reused these year after year. They first harrowed the fields to break the ground into a fine powder, added fertilizers, and plowed the land again into orderly rows. Breaking ground took a good deal of strength, and laying out straight rows took practice, so adult male farmers or their older sons usually worked the plow while younger sons helped to spread the fertilizer. On the Miller farm, for example, twenty-two-year-olds Perry and Guy Miller did the majority of the plowing; fourteen-year-old Edward never took a turn behind the mule that year. No doubt his day would come.

In May or even early June, transplanting began. This backbreaking task served as a child’s introduction into the world of bright tobacco. Sallie Walker Stockard remembered “girls in calico bonnets, each with a basket on her arm, taking the plants to the fields, dropping them one by one” along the furrows. Young seedlings would not survive in soil that was either too wet or too dry, so families had to time their work with the rains. A crop could be easily lost or delayed if the sun and rain failed to cooperate.

Planting opened a hot summer’s worth of work for everyone on the farm. Plants that did not take in the first transplanting had to be replaced with viable seedlings, a difficult task given the thousands of plants it took to cover even a small field. More tiresome was the nearly constant cultivation required to keep the fields clear of weeds until the plants were tall enough to shade the ground. “The first working should be given as early as possible after planting, or as soon as there is any indication of growth

35 Ledger, 1922-23, Miller Papers, VHS.
36 “Daughter of the Piedmont,” Misc. Papers, SHC.
manifested,” grower J.W. Leftwich counseled. “It should not be postponed any longer than 10 or 15 days after planting under any circumstances. After this the land should be kept in a light soft condition as nearly like it was at the time of planting as possible, and the last working should be given as soon as the first plants have achieved topping size.” This task, because of its light nature, often fell to farm children old enough to handle the hoe.\footnote{Leftwich, “Treatise on the Cultivation and Curing of Bright Tobacco,” Left-Shepherd-Bowles Papers, LVA.}

Topping, the act of removing the plant’s terminal, seed-bearing bud in order to concentrate growth in the leaves, was a major milestone. Plants had to be topped at just the right time so that each plant would have enough leaves to produce a large crop, but not so many that the quality of the leaves would suffer from lack of nutrients. Robert L. Ragland wrote that topping was so important that it “should be the work of experienced and trusty hands – men who can top, leaving any required number of leaves on a plant without counting.” As Ragland’s language suggests, adult male farmers usually topped the plants.\footnote{Robert L. Ragland, \textit{Tobacco, from the Seed to the Salesroom}, 14.}

Removing the terminal bud, however, prompted the plants to produce ancillary buds, commonly known as “suckers,” that could, if left alone, undermine the benefits of topping and rob the leaves of important nutrients. Like chopping weeds, the task of removing these often fell to farm children. Row by row, week by week, they cleaned every plant of suckers and horn worms, summer’s other unwelcome guests. “The arduous task of worming & suckering in a crop of much size is never finished until the crop is saved,” wrote J.W. Leftwich. Thousands of veterans of the tobacco fields could
attest to this truth, as everyone on the farm had helped pull suckers and kill worms at some point. Caswell County native H.G. Jones explained that tobacco farm children could often be recognized by their hands, green from the suckers and worms.\(^{39}\)

Harvesting season began as early as August and ran into October. Sociologist Margaret Jarman Hagood explained that “[t]he urgency of this crucial time demands every hand from the youngest child who is able to hand leaves to the oldest grandparent who because of age might be relieved from other field duties.” Getting the tobacco from the fields to the warehouse floor consisted of a number of tasks, many of which were often, though not always, divided along lines of age and gender. Grown men and older boys took on the task of picking the leaves, while younger boys were responsible for driving the leaves to the curing barn on wooden sleds. At the barn, farm women and girls tied the leaves in groups of three or four and hung the strings on tobacco sticks in preparation for curing.\(^{40}\)

Curing was the most critical step in the cycle of preparing a crop, and came after families filled the barns with ripe tobacco. Farmers confronted myriad challenges and dangers. As Sallie Walker Stockard explained, farm families had to pay close attention to the curing barns. “The heat must not be too low nor too high,” she wrote. “If it were too low the tobacco would cure a darker brown than desired; if too high the tobacco would be too light in color. Sometimes overheated flues set the barns afire, so the curing process had to be watched carefully.” Learning how to cure the leaves came largely from


\(^{40}\) Margaret Jarman Hagood, Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), 86.
experience, although seasoned growers regularly aided others not as familiar with the process. Thousands of formulae, commonly known as “recipes,” floated through the Old Belt, as budding entrepreneurs attempted to market their knowledge. In 1891, one newspaper advised readers to beware of two men charging farmers fifteen dollars for an ultimately worthless curing formula. “[I]nstead of curing bright,” the paper warned, “it makes a nice black vapor.”

The need for constant attention and adjustments gave farm families many sleepless nights during the curing season. Sallie Walker Stockard remembered her father tending the curing fires overnight. “With a bunk for a bed he stayed at the barn every night watching the fire and keeping a steady slow heat in the long tin flues.” As in Walker’s family, the responsibility for watching the barns overnight usually fell on the male head of household or other male relatives, but it was not uncommon for the entire family and neighbors to spend hours by the barns socializing, sharing local news, singing, and cooking everything from sweet potatoes to Brunswick stew. “Once the tobacco barn was ready for curing,” one North Carolina woman recalled, “I would spend some nights there with my great uncle who was the person responsible for seeing that the leaves turned out a golden flue-cured color. The fun part of this time was roasting potatoes and ears of corn in the fire used to cure the tobacco.” North Carolina’s famous barbecue, in fact, is largely a product of the thousands of hours farm families spent around their barns. Harvest time, from the bringing in of the leaves to the long nights in front of the curing

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barns, was much more than a time to get the crops ready; it was also an important time for the development of a unique culture among tobacco-farming families.42

While farm families usually relied on their own labor to raise their tobacco, many neighbors shared labor during the harvest. "Priming the tobacco, hauling it to the barn on sleds, tying the leaves to tobacco sticks and hanging the sticks in the barn, as well as the actual curing, often make it necessary to hire help or exchange labor with neighboring farmers," explained one study of North Carolina tobacco farms. "When at the end of the season the plants matured and a motley yellow came over the green leaves, cutting was scheduled," Sallie Walker Stockard recalled. "Such a day was a great event. The Boone family, with whom we exchanged work, came over to help."43

Work swaps and seasonal hiring were critical to the production of bright tobacco, but farm families got much more than a few extra hands when neighbors came to help. In many ways, sharing labor was a social occasion that offered neighbors opportunities to strengthen bonds of community. Work swaps might cross racial lines, but the social aspects of these swaps, like the afternoon meal prepared by the farm women, remained segregated. These swaps also took place between neighboring owners and tenants, although this was more common in areas where their economic conditions did not create great social distance.44


44 Hagood, Mothers of the South, 90.
After sorting and grading, farm families carried their bundles of leaves to the towns that dotted the Old Belt’s landscape. Farmers sold their tobacco by putting it up for auction on the floor of one of the several warehouses that dominated the towns. Large brick buildings with vast floors lit by skylights, warehouses had followed bright tobacco’s expansion across the Old Belt. Danville was home to the first loose-leaf auctions and remained the chief auction market, but by the 1880s Durham, Oxford, South Hill, and dozens of other towns were taking in leaf across the region.

A town’s warehouses ran on an auction schedule established by a local board of trade, but they often vied with one another for farmers’ business by promising the lowest auction fees, the fairest scales, or the best selling environment. “Cooper’s Warehouse...is the best place to sell Bright Tobacco for the Highest Prices known for years,” read an 1889 advertisement for one of Henderson, North Carolina’s, largest warehouses. “Every farmer who sells with us is our ‘friend and pet,’” the ad continued. “Never listen to the whisperers by the wayside, who make empty promises and are interested in other markets or houses, but drive to the old reliable Cooper’s Warehouse...where a cordial greeting and the highest prices of the season await you on all bright tobaccos. We have the location, the best facilities for receiving, shipping and handling leaf tobacco, and about all, we have the largest wealthiest, strongest and most liberal corps of dealers in the State, and are determined to have your tobacco if money and liberal prices will get it.”45

At the time of sale, farmers lined up their piles of tobacco on the auction floor and waited for the auctioneer to make his way through the piles. “An auction sale of tobacco

45 Gold Leaf, 14 February 1889.
is one of hustle and motion," wrote one observer. A small cadre of buyers representing domestic and foreign manufacturers and independent leaf buyers followed the auctioneer from pile to pile, handling the leaves and answering his sing-song chant with winks, nods, and other signs to indicate their bids. Once sold, the tobacco was tagged with the winning bid and moved off the floor by the black workers who kept the warehouses moving. The auctioneer by then had moved on, dispatching other piles at upwards of three to four hundred per hour. For farm families, the fate of an entire year’s work was decided in seconds.46

The auction system offered farmers some benefits. Most importantly, it paid farmers cash on the spot for their crops. In a region dependent on credit and plagued by a chronic lack of currency, the benefits of immediate cash payments cannot be overlooked. The auctions were also competitive, which, in theory, should have benefited farmers. However, it was here that farmers’ complaints about the system began. Some accused buyers of colluding with warehouse owners and auctioneers to keep prices low, a charge that all denied. Many growers also expressed frustration with the speed of the auctions, questioning the auctioneer’s ability to get the best prices while selling hundreds of piles per hour. At the same time, many complained that buyers purposely downgraded the value of their leaves by using secret, proprietary grading scales. Such a system, they argued, made it impossible for farmers to know how to arrange their tobacco to get the best prices. “When he has laid his much sought for ‘yellow leaf’ in well arranged order at the feet of the organization he has to step aside, while the mock competition begins,” one grower explained in 1887. “[T]here with his hands in his breeches pockets and

without a word to say, [he] stands [in] pitiful, helpless, disorganized isolation, watching the farce as it proceeds between the keen-eyed Jew with his beloved ‘baucksheesh’ and the calculating Gentile with his ‘immortal dollar’ winking and blinking at the auctioneer when they can catch his swiftly revolving orb; as soon as he receives the mouse’s share he is politely bowed out, and kindly told to call again.”

Even more infuriating to farmers were local speculators who bought tobacco, re-sorted it, and sold it for higher prices. Commonly known as “pinhookers,” most of these speculators had grown up raising tobacco, worked around the markets, and used their knowledge of the markets to work the system. Many independent leaf dealers, agents who made their living reselling tobacco to manufacturers, in fact, had begun their careers as speculators. Despite the fact that many shared a common background, farmers vilified pinhookers as leeches who became wealthy from others’ labor. An 1891 account of Danville’s markets captured this feeling well. After the war, the author began, “a marvelous change came over Danville. The war-prices paid for tobacco soon drew to it a crowd of tobacco speculators from both Virginia and North Carolina.” “Fortunes were made in a single year,” he continued. “Men who came there on foot a few years before, rode back to see their poor relations in phaetons. Wood choppers and haulers turned pinhookers, and in a few years built palaces.” These speculators, he complained, “soon banded together and became an army of pinhookers and tobacco sharps, veritable hawks, who pounced down upon farmers as they landed in the warehouses, and would often pluck fifty dollars out of him before he could say ‘Jack Robinson,’ by buying his tobacco

47 Gold Leaf, 1 December 1887.
and selling it right before him.” This ability to work the system made farmers painfully aware of their vulnerability on the markets.48

Growers, of course, had recourse to low auction prices. If they believed the winning bid was too low, they could refuse the bid and try to auction their tobacco at another warehouse. Refusing a bid, however, could be costly. Warehouse owners made their money by charging sellers a percentage of the sale price and a number of other warehouse fees. If a farmer refused a bid, he still had to pay the warehouse fees out of his pocket. In addition, offering the tobacco at another sale guaranteed only another set of warehouse fees, not a higher price. Add this to the costs of moving the tobacco and the potential costs of staying in town an extra day and it is clear why many farmers simply took what buyers offered. Walking away with money in hand, no matter how little, was better than losing more on a long shot.

Marketing days, like harvest time, were a great social occasion for those who farmed tobacco and much fanfare surrounded the opening of the markets. Community leaders used the occasion to celebrate the golden leaf’s economic benefits while shopkeepers held sales so farmers could prove them. Local politicians and itinerant clergy alike used marketing days to appeal for farmers’ votes and souls, respectively. Entire farm families often came to town to market tobacco, but auction time created a decidedly masculine atmosphere. Male farmers who came from great distances often slept in bunkrooms over the warehouse floors. These men filled the streets after the markets closed, giving places like Durham’s Rigsbee Street a distinctive masculine atmosphere. Most entertained themselves by listening to street-corner musicians, testing

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their aim in makeshift shooting galleries, or dining in bustling cafes filled with farmers in town for the sales. Others, however, found more fun in illicit pursuits. Bootleggers and prostitutes found plenty of business in the market towns, sometimes traveling from market to market as the season progressed.49

Whatever the entertainment, market towns demonstrated the importance of tobacco to the entire region. It was central to the economy, for sure, providing a livelihood for thousands both on and off the farm, but it was also at the center of life, community, and culture. It was not for nothing that the entire Virginia-North Carolina Piedmont came to be known as the “Bright Belt”: no one could have imagined the place without its most important crop.

However, its fame as the exclusive home of bright tobacco was challenged almost as soon as it started. In the late nineteenth century, cotton growers in eastern North Carolina began to give up the white fleece for the golden leaf, and by World War I, the auction houses in Wilson had supplanted those in Danville as the busiest in the world. As this region came to dominate bright tobacco production, the Piedmont came to be known as the Old Bright Belt. Being surpassed was a bitter pill for many, but they could do little but watch their crop spread out across the Coastal Plain’s wide open, fertile fields.

The expansion of bright tobacco to other regions altered the perception of the Piedmont. What had been seen as a growing and vibrant region was, by the 1930s, depicted largely as a land time had passed by. “The Old Belt countryside...,” wrote author Leonard Rapport in the early 1940s, “gives the impression of being an old and

somewhat weary land,” where the woodland floors often revealed “plow rows of fields long cleared, cultivated, harvested, and abandoned to broomsedge and woods – and forgotten.” This image has remained powerful, not least among those who age their farms not in years but in generations. These usually assert the less negative versions of the story, the ones that highlight the continuing power of tradition, but these, too, portray region as a historical set piece of sorts. 

The Old Belt has not been in a time warp, however, and it is certainly not the same place it was a century or even a decade ago. The institutions created by tobacco in the late nineteenth century proved to be resilient and the persistence of the economy, geography, and culture of bright tobacco has blinded us to the ever-shifting realities of life in the Piedmont. If we look closer, though, we see that pliability was the key to its resiliency.

50 Federal Writers Project of North Carolina, “Gamblers All,” 15-21, Hamilton Papers, NCSU. This study adopts Rapport’s “hazy” boundaries when defining the Old Belt. For statistical purposes, I include the following counties: North Carolina – Alamance, Caswell, Chatham, Davidson, Durham, Forsyth, Granville, Guilford, Orange, Person, Randolph, Rockingham, Stokes, Surry, Wake, and Yadkin; Virginia – Brunswick, Campbell, Charlotte, Franklin, Halifax, Henry, Lunenburg, Mecklenburg, Nottoway, Patrick, and Pittsylvania. While farmers in all parts of these counties did not grow tobacco, tobacco dominated the local agricultural economies.
Land
CHAPTER I

LANDSCAPE AND CHANGE IN THE OLD BRIGHT BELT

For those who earn their living from the soil, land is never an afterthought. It is, instead, a constant source of concern, a customary subject of conversation, and a regular object of praise or scorn, depending on the latest crop. Farmers measure land in more than acres. A series of cultural lenses filter the empirical attributes of a parcel – its size, its soil, its location, its history – and determine its true worth. All land is not suited to all uses, and what one considers worthless another finds desirable. Culture also shapes land use and the resultant landscapes in which farm families live. How fields are divided, where crops are placed, how and where barns are built, and dozens of other features that may appear haphazard to outsiders make perfect sense in the context of a given region’s agriculture. Landscape, one geographer has written, “is not only how the place looks but also how the appearance echoes the aspirations, values, experiences, and shared understandings of the place’s occupants.”¹

Given the social and cultural bases of landscape development, it is clear that rural landscapes are hardly static and timeless. Instead, like society itself, they are mutable, shifting and changing in response to varied pressures. In the late nineteenth century, for example, increased demand for grain and meat combined with new technologies for transporting, packing, and marketing agricultural produce to reshape the landscape of the

American Middle West from a land of nomadic Indian tribes – who, to be sure, shaped
the landscape in their own ways – to one marked by family farms. Landscape change
often proceeds rapidly, as in the Midwest, but as a landscape matures change may come
more slowly. Nevertheless change is constant.²

Just as wheat and corn production shaped the Midwest in ways that reflected the
demands and priorities of capitalist agricultural production, tobacco created in the Old
Belt a landscape that reflected the culture of bright tobacco. Small farms proliferated,
reflecting not only tobacco’s intense work regimens but also a culture that praised close
attention to the crop, prioritized the quality of a crop over its quantity, and privileged one
way of organizing labor over other systems. Separating Piedmont tobacco agriculture
from the landscape is impossible. According to geographer Stephen S. Birdsall the Old
Belt is a “patchwork landscape” of tobacco patches, tended pastures, fallow fields and
woods dotted by curing barns, “some modern and some unused for decades,” shaped by
decades of tobacco production. “To the untrained eye, the particulars of the landscape
forms appear uncoordinated and without overall structure. In fact, each element reflects
the prime importance of tobacco to the livelihoods of hundreds of farmers.” King
Bacca’s realm reflected his power.³

By its very name the Old Belt conjures images of a mature region where the
landscape is largely settled, and its persistent symbols of tobacco’s power – the emerald
fields and ancient barns, for example – have led many to confuse a long-used shorthand
(given initially in the 1890s to distinguish the Piedmont growing region from the
expanding growing area of the Coastal Plain) for reality. In 1915, one observer inferred

³ Birdsall, “Tobacco Farmers and Landscape Change in North Carolina’s Old Belt Region,” 67.
an ancient link between the land and tobacco, blaming the golden leaf for the region's poor soil. "Tobacco has done our soil incalculable harm," the extension agent wrote, "that is to say, the crop in time past has been so profitable as to induce the farmers to violate every rule of good farming." In 1929, another observer explicitly linked the land's condition to its historic linkage to tobacco. Noting the "old rows and ditches used in slavery days" covered by second-growth forests, the Person County extension agent described the land as a creation of old techniques. "This old system kept up until the land was washed away and then more land was cleared for tobacco and other crops," he explained. And this trope remains a common way for describing the Old Belt's features. In his 2001 essay, Stephen S. Birdsall differed from earlier observers by grounding the Old Belt's landscape in the spread of bright tobacco in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but he maintained their sense that the region remained a sort of pristine antique, little changed from its formation. "Landscapes created by generations of families in the original region of flue-cured tobacco farming have changed little for more than a century."

Common to these and other descriptions of the Old Belt is the assumption that the region's features have changed little over time. Only fleetingly did the Person county agent note in 1929 that some of the practices he abhorred continued to reshape the land up "to the present time." While Birdsall noted that the transformation of American agriculture after World War II had altered tobacco growing profoundly, he argued that it "did little to alter the essential characteristics of many tobacco landscapes even while

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modifying their particular features." This perspective is not without evidence to support it. Today, farm sizes remain small, field configuration follows traditional patterns, and mud-chinked tobacco barns, though under the dual pressures of entropy and suburban development, dot the countryside: all reminders of the region's long relationship with bright tobacco. It is hardly a wonder that observers like Birdsall have stressed the region's continuity.5

This focus on the region's sameness, however, misses the ever-changing relationship between tobacco agriculture and its environment. The demands of tobacco agriculture sculpted the landscape over the last century, altering its form, reworking its function and changing its landmarks as farming practices and cultural priorities evolved. The forces driving this evolution varied. Some worked obliquely. Shifts in consumer preferences made small but meaningful changes to the landscape by altering demand on the auction floors which, in turn, forced farm families to adopt new practices. Others, like the introduction of new technologies and techniques, effected change more directly. These ever-shifting forces prevented the sort of stasis that many have assumed for the Old Belt. In fact, it might be more correct to say that the more things appeared to stay the same, the more they changed.

Close examination of three aspects of the Old Belt's landscape makes the region's ever-changing nature clear. The built environment - especially the barns that have distinguished the region in the minds of many - is probably the most obvious locus of change, but the arrangement of farmsteads, which might be understood as the social and cultural architecture of the landscape, also demonstrates the effects of the changing

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economics, technologies, and priorities of bright tobacco agriculture. Finally, the history of the land itself bears witness to the Old Belt’s constant flux. Indeed, nothing reveals the pressures reshaping the region better than the soil that provided the foundation for its famous tobacco. Rapid, massive change was not a constant in the Old Belt, but time did not stop nor did history cease in this place. Someone returning to Caswell or Halifax counties today after decades away would indeed recognize the place, but it would hardly be the place they remembered.

The Built Environment

Tobacco barns are icons of the Old Belt. Tall, square buildings made of chinked logs or finished lumber with pitched metal roofs and covered work areas resembling porches, Old Belt barns were often mistaken for small houses. Every farm required at least one to handle the year’s curing, but many had more in order to ease movement of the leaves from the fields. Indispensable as they were, barns were more than utilitarian structures. Each was a center of work and community. Everyone of a certain age who ever lived or worked on a tobacco farm, it seems, has a recollection of times spent around the barn during curing season. Caswell native H.G. Jones remembered the fire pits as a “wonderful place to bake sweet potatoes, apples, etc., but definitely not a place to step when barefooted. Only time I ever rode a T-Model to Yanceyville (nearest doctor) [was] with my aching foot sticking out the side of the car.” Virginian William Hawthorne, a generation younger than Jones, recalled sleeping next to the barn on the moveable shelter his father built to accommodate the family less wincingly but with equal fondness. Well
into the 1970s, the tobacco barn remained a central place in the lives of many Old Belt families. 6

In some ways, it is true that the architecture of Old Belt tobacco barns changed little over time. In 1872, one observer described the Virginia tobacco barn as “totally unlike any other building under the sun. Square as to the ground plan, its height is usually twice its width and length.” Nearly a hundred years later, geographers comparing tobacco barns across the nation used similar language, describing flue-cured tobacco barns as “small, square, and distinctive.” Comparing illustrations of the barns leads to similar conclusions. The plate of a Virginia tobacco barn from J.B. Killebrew’s 1880 report on U.S. tobacco manufacturing (Figure 3) closely resembles those photographed in the mid-twentieth century (Figure 4). The relationship of form to function accounted for much of the similarity of construction over the years; while designers seemed constantly in search of a better tobacco barn, the basic structure continued to meet the demands of curing. 7

Farmers did alter their barns, however, as techniques changed and new technologies became available. The region’s first curing barns were mud-chinked log structures based on those used for curing dark tobacco. Adhering to a long-

6 H.G. Jones to Shelby Stephenson, 1 May 2002, in author’s possession. Special thanks to Professor Jones for sharing this letter with me.

FIGURE 3

VIRGINIA TOBACCO BARN, c. 1880

FIGURE 4
TOBACCO BARN, c. 1960s

Source: Postcard, in author's possession
established technique, growers nailed entire plants to tobacco sticks and hung these on horizontal tier poles that began at about six feet off the ground and extended to the ceiling in roughly three-foot intervals. They then built orderly charcoal fires on the barn floor to cure the tobacco. As flue-curing became increasingly popular in the late nineteenth century, farmers sawed holes into their barns and built masonry furnaces that fed the flues through the barn. Generally built on or near the ground, flues ran to the opposite end of the barn and back, where they returned the exhaust to vents installed on the same side as the furnaces. The simplicity of the design forced no changes in the classic barn architecture. The addition of open-sided sheds on the sides of the barn, built to give cover to not only the furnaces, but those tending them as well, stood out as the only major alteration to the traditional design.8

Small changes like these demark the evolutionary process of barn design. While small, the changes had meaning for those involved in tobacco agriculture. In the late nineteenth century, for example, growers in eastern North Carolina took advantage of the expansion of the southern timber industry and introduced the first frame tobacco barns made from milled lumber. While some claimed these new barns were less heat-efficient as the traditional log barns Old Belt growers used, they nevertheless became something of a status symbol. Trying to explain why farmers in new tobacco growing regions produced more per acre, an Old Belt editor noted chided growers for not keeping up with new technologies. “[O]ur planters of this western section are trying to stick to the old methods of cultivation and curing while the planters down east...test all modern appliances to their satisfaction, [and] hence get the latest improvements in the line of

implements, barns &c[.] Watch out. Don’t let the old rut hold you in its course to your
detriment.” Adopting new tools was often expensive, of course, and growers happy with
their log barns were apparently reluctant to replace barns that were perfectly workable.9

Similar small, but noticeable, evolutions undermined notions of the stasis of the
Old Belt’s built environment. Numerous forces drove these changes. By the 1930s,
lower lumber prices, declining raw timber reserves, and low interest government loan
programs led many to build frame barns when replacing their log barns (Figure 5). Wood
scarcity also prompted growers to replace their fire-pits with coal stokers or oil-burning
furnaces. In the late 1930s, a North Carolina observer noted that “[w]ood is becoming
more scarce in some sections,” prompting “a few of the more prosperous growers” to
install oil-burning furnaces. A 1938 magazine article about Virginia’s tobacco farms
similarly reported the increased use of “new and improved systems of curing on many
farms,” including “electrically-operated coal stokers, oil-burning heating systems, and
even all-electric heating systems.” Labor shortages during World War II further pressed
growers to replace their traditional heat sources with coal and fuel oil powered systems.
These units, one extension agent reported, could be placed in a log barn with “no extra
work done to it.” The relative unobtrusiveness of new technology and the slow pace of
technological adoption – William Hawthorne reported that his family did not switch from
wood to oil until the mid-1950s – made the transition barely discernible to most
observers. But farm families nevertheless noticed these changes and their impact on
traditional farm life. One North Carolina woman recalled that the introduction of oil

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9 Yadkin Valley News, 20 November 1891.
FIGURE 5

BUILDING PLANK BARN TO REPLACE EXISTING LOG ONE NEAR CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA, 1939

Source: Farm Security Administration Photographs, Library of Congress.
(Call Number LC-USF34-019878-E)
FIGURE 6

MODERN BULK CURING BARN

Source: BulkTobac Company Website (http://www.bulktobac.com)
burners eliminated the nights spent around the fires and the “fun part of this time” spent “roasting potatoes and ears of corn in the fire used to cure the tobacco.”\textsuperscript{10}

Following World War II, farmers adopted new technologies relatively slowly – in part because of the high cost – but as new equipment became available they could hardly see how they did without it. Tractors cut the time needed to plow a tobacco field from days to hours; mechanical transplanters made dropping plants by hand a thing of the past; an array of chemicals eliminated the need to chop weeds, pull suckers, and pluck worms all summer. The harvest changed, too. In the field, early mechanical harvesters allowed pickers to ride behind the tractor and pull leaves as they passed through the field. At the barn, mechanical stringers – sewing machines that stitched leaves to the sticks – replaced hand-tying. And in time, wooden barns, like mules and tobacco pegs, became relics of a bygone era.

In the late 1960s, farmers began to replace their wooden barns with metal bulk curing barns designed to cut down on the labor and energy needed for curing. Similar in size to a small mobile home, bulk curing barns featured a series of leaf racks that could be fed in through one end (Figure 6). Growers placed their leaves into the racks, slid the racks into the barn, and began the curing process using propane-powered furnaces. The adoption of bulk barns reshaped the harvest in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. No longer did women and girls spend hours handing up and tying or sewing leaves; young men no longer experienced the rite of passage of climbing the tier poles to hand up sticks laden with green leaves. The bulk barns did not take all the work out of curing, of course, but

they lessened the demand and shifted the cultural organization and gendered divisions of work. In addition to reducing the labor needed to cure a barn, bulk barns eliminated the need for the complicated curing formulas that had made curing as much an art as a science. An electric- or propane-powered heat exchanger cures the leaves by heating the barn in a pre-set cycle. “All I have to do is come back here and set them for what I want them to do,” boasted one grower of his bulk barns.\(^{11}\)

Extension service researchers and industry engineers developed the first bulk barns in the late 1950s, but it was not until after 1968, when the USDA allowed growers to sell their tobacco without first tying it into the traditional bundles called “hands” that the use of bulk barns spread across the Old Belt. The so-called “loose-leaf” method of marketing had originated on the auction floors of Georgia and Florida, but manufacturers had been reluctant to promote its spread into the northern belts because of the costs involved in refitting their manufacturing processes to handle loose leaves. Growers, however, seeking to reduce their labor costs, voiced support for the shift and quickly took advantage of their ability to bring their tobacco to market without bothering with the time-consuming work of tying hands. As the market shifted to loose-leaf marketing, so did growers. As one buyer explained, “No one is interested in tied tobacco when most of the offerings are in the untied form,” leaving those who continued to tie with little option but to accept lower prices. Bulk curing spread quickly and by the early 1980s, it was the

metal bulk barns outsiders mistook for houses, not the vanishing wooden barns that had cast shadows on the land for so long.\textsuperscript{12}

By the 1990s, metal curing barns had almost completely supplanted traditional wooden barns. Tobacco manufacturers, hoping to reduce the number of deadly compounds called nitrosamines created by the combination of nitrous oxides released by burning propane and alkaloids found naturally in tobacco plants, pressed growers to replace their propane furnaces with electric heat exchangers in order to eliminate the gasses created by curing fires. In 1999, the Tobacco Industry Leadership Group, an oversight organization made up of manufacturers, announced they would stop buying tobacco cured with direct-fire propane heaters in 2001 and implemented a program to assist growers in retrofitting their barns to handle the heat exchangers. In 2001 the USDA Commodity Credit Corporation announced that they would support tobacco cured in propane-powered bulk barns at only half the rate of that cured in barns using heat exchangers, essentially forcing growers' hands. While heat exchangers used the same sort of indirect heat that barn flues had supplied – and the introduction of propane

\textsuperscript{12} The expansion of loose-leaf marketing was no small event in the Old Belt because so many of the manufacturing processes had been built around tied tobacco. Providing price supports for untied tobacco in the belts outside Florida and Georgia – the USDA’s mechanism for allowing growers to sell loose-leaf tobacco – had been debated for some time before the 1968 policy change. In 1962, Representative Horace Kornegay received a number of form letters that opposed the “experiment” with loose-leaf marketing and argued that it would be “detrimental to tobacco growers, tobacco warehousemen, and to the companies which redry leaf tobacco.” It is not clear who created the letter, but Kornegay received other letters from warehousemen opposing the new method and the USDA found that many warehousemen opposed the change. At the same time, however, the USDA cited support from a number of growers’ organizations and argued that “the weight of producers’ views reflected appears to be overwhelmingly in favor of the proposal.” See John C. Curin to Horace Kornegay, 20 April 1962; Charles K. Waddell to Horace Kornegay, 29 August 1962; U.S.D.A. Announcement, May 1962, all in Horace Kornegay Papers, Collection 3811, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (hereafter cited as Kornegay Papers, SHC). “Meeting with Old Belt Growers, South Hill, Virginia, April 2, 1968,” American Tobacco Company Meeting Minutes, http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/bqq80a00, Legacy Tobacco Documents Library, University of California, San Francisco (hereafter cited as Legacy Library, UCSF). For outsiders’ mistaken assumptions about bulk barns see, Jack Temple Kirby, \textit{Rural Worlds Lost}, 346.
furnaces had undone – wooden barns were not well-suited for the high temperatures created by the new equipment and a number of Old Belt barns fell to a fiery fate. The versatile wooden barns that had withstood so many changes in technology, it seems, no longer had any place in tobacco agriculture.13

Observers are inclined to wax nostalgic over the disappearance of the Old Belt’s wooden tobacco barns. “We are losing what was once a signature feature of the Upper Piedmont landscape,” lamented a 2003 editorial in the *Winston-Salem Journal* that reported the creation of a web site devoted to traditional tobacco barns by the North Carolina Historic Preservation Office. Noting estimates that fewer than 50,000 of the wooden structures remained statewide (down from an estimated half million at mid-century), the editorialist concluded that “thousands more sink into ruin every year, taking with them a part of North Carolina’s heritage.” There is no denying that the barns are distinguished landmarks that silently testify of the region’s long history with tobacco (Figure 7).14

But, as this editorial correctly noted (perhaps too sanguinely), the “old log barns were doomed when tobacco was still king....The success of the tobacco industry and the march of progress did the barns in.” As important as these old barns are to the Old Belt’s image, the reality is that they have not been important to tobacco agriculture for some time. They are relics of times past, not unlike the dated coal stokers and rusting leaf stringers that often idle in their shadows. Next to the bulk curing barns that have

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FIGURE 7

DETERIORATING LOG TOBACCO BARN, BRUNSWICK COUNTY, VIRGINIA, 2005

Source: Photo by author, April 2005
replaced them, the Old Belt’s traditional wooden barns remind us of a reminder that the built environment is continually shifting with the demands placed upon it.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Rearranging the Land}

The transition to bulk barns altered not only the built environment but also the order of the landscape. By necessity, tobacco barns had traditionally been placed in close proximity to the fields. On larger farms with multiple unattached fields – a common arrangement given growers’ practice of using only specific fields for tobacco – or numerous sharecroppers, a number of barns might often be scattered around the farm. Farm Security Administration photographer John Vachon’s 1941 image of the rolling landscape of Halifax County, for example, captured the dispersal of tobacco barns across the countryside (Figure 8). The adoption of bulk barns, by contrast, had a centralizing effect on the arrangement of Old Belt farms. Rather than locating barns based on the arrangement of their fields, growers placed their bulk barns in central locations and used tractors to bring the leaves to the barns. “I got all my barns here in a central place,” one grower explained. “I can bring the tobacco here, cure it and then hold it in the pack barn I built until I can take it to market.” Convenience certainly was a factor. This same farmer expressed relief that he no longer had to get up early to check on all of his barns. “All I have to do is come down and check them before I go to bed and check them when I get up.” Cost was also a consideration. Averaging several thousand dollars each, bulk barns demanded that farmers use them as much as possible. An idle bulk barn represented a much greater capital expense than an idle wooden barn. Technical considerations, such as a reliable source of electricity, also contributed to the

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Winston-Salem Journal}, 30 November 2003.
FIGURE 8

TOBACCO COUNTRY, HALIFAX COUNTY, VIRGINIA, 1941

Source: Farm Security Administration Photographs, Library of Congress
(Call Number LC-USF34-062743-D)
centralization of the curing process by making it more efficient to locate a number of
barns near each other.\textsuperscript{16}

This rearrangement of the geography of the harvest was just one aspect of the
subtle reordering of tobacco’s geography over the last century. Despite its image as a
nearly unchanged constant, the order of the Old Belt’s landscape — the distribution of
land, the arrangement of farms, and the use of land on these farms — has been ever
shifting. This is not to say that land use was in constant upheaval, of course, but as the
realities of tobacco agriculture shifted, so did the arrangement of the land. The
rearrangement of farms because of mechanization and new technologies, the
disappearance of tenancy, rural electrification, paved roads, and other results of
modernization were not simply modifications of particular features that did “little to alter
the essential characteristics of many tobacco landscapes,” as one geographer has argued,
but were instead fundamental to the reworking of the Old Belt’s landscape. In other
words, the Old Belt landscape did not retain essential characteristics in spite of these
developments, but evolved as these reshaped it.\textsuperscript{17}

Agriculture inherently transforms landscapes as humans alter the land and
arrange the infrastructure of agricultural production to fit the demands of growing,
harvesting, and distributing the crops they handle. In the late nineteenth century, growers
and others shaped the region’s landscape around the demands of bright tobacco, creating
a patchwork of fields, pastures, and wooded lands. Most farms were small and tobacco
generally took up only a few acres. Crop rotation was rare since conventional wisdom

\textsuperscript{16} Greensboro Daily News, 26 September 1976.

\textsuperscript{17} Birdsall, “Tobacco Farmers and Landscape Change in North Carolina’s Old Belt Region,” 65.
held that bright tobacco grew best on marginal land. This gave the landscape a level of stability. Durham County native Elmer Johnson explained that his father’s seventy-acre farm “was about equally divided between open fields, pasture land, and woods.” “The fields,” he added, “had been farmed, it seemed, for years without much care,” and little attention to crop rotation.¹⁸

The region’s patchwork landscape was not simply the product of farming practices, however. What appeared to be a neutral landscape shaped by agricultural concerns alone was in reality one in which the placement of fields, the location of barns, and the arrangement of farms were as much subject to local patterns of power. While the Old Belt as a region lacked the sort of stark inequities that marked other regions of the South – it had “few ‘big house’ plantations and few Tobacco Roads,” one observer noted – inequality ordered the land as powerfully as “natural” considerations like soil fertility or topography. While the realities of land tenure could often be complex, widespread tenancy undercut the seeming evenness of the landscape. Between 1880 and 1940, tenancy rates for the Old Belt as a whole hovered around 40 percent, but varied with time and location. (As we shall see in chapter four, tenancy increased as one traveled west to east, and was highest in the region’s former plantation counties.) Farms operated by tenants, especially those worked by sharecroppers, tended to be smaller than those worked by owners, and consisted of more marginal land. Tenants, in turn, pushed this land to its limits by producing as much tobacco as possible in order to have something to show for their labor at the end of the year. At the same time, tenants and croppers alike

possessed few resources to dedicate to land improvement. Nor, given the regularity with which tenants moved from one farm to another, did they have much inclination or economic motive to improve the land.19

Nowhere was this more obvious than in Caswell County, the birthplace of bright tobacco. While not necessarily a representative county, the conditions found there in the early 1940s demonstrate the consequences of tenancy on the landscape. Observed from above, the entire county appeared vexed by the problems of intensive farming: a lack of diversification; soil erosion; depletion of natural resources; and extreme poverty. In 1939, the county extension agent reported that county’s poor condition had “become a matter of public concern.” Viewed more closely, however, it became clear that the county’s problems correlated roughly with the economic order of the land. A 1941 survey of the county’s farms found that, while problems existed across the tenure spectrum, their severity was often a factor of the size of the farm. Small and medium-sized farms faced the worst extremes of the tobacco economy. On small farms, those with less than thirty-five acres of cropland, the problems of “erosion and soil exhaustion are especially serious,” the report found, while medium-sized farms (those with thirty-three to sixty-five acres of cropland) “corn for grain and lespedeza for hay provide inadequate quantities of feed for numbers of livestock, which, in turn, provide inadequate products for home use.” By contrast, the county’s largest farms, only about 15 percent of the total number of farms, were much better off. These farms had “more adequate land

19 WPA Writers’ Project of North Carolina, “Gamblers All”, 19, Hamilton Papers, NCSU. Between 1880 and 1940, tenancy in the Old Belt counties ranged between 37 percent (1880) and 46 percent (1930). Average tenancy rate calculated by dividing the number of farms worked by either cash renters or sharecroppers by the total number of farms as recorded in the decennial census returns between 1880 and 1940. Compiled from United States Historical Census Data Browser. Survey by Sidney Frissell answered by S.R. Blair, 28 February 1928, Tobacco Growers’ Cooperative Association Papers, Collection 3322, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (hereafter cited as TGCA Papers, SHC).
resources,” the study found, which made it “easier for these operators to secure needed
capital.” They were not without their problems, the study found, but most had to do with
underutilization of natural resources, not overuse.20

The landscape of Caswell County, then, was shaped not only by the demands of
tobacco production, but how these demands were filtered through the economic and
social status of those growing it. On small farms, the lack of land made farming more
intensive. The survey, for instance found that “every acre of land” on one small farm
“has been in cultivation at some time in the past,” leading to “severely eroded” fields and
a “scarcity of tillable land.” Improbably, the farmer had used the land for twenty years
and “made a living for himself and a family of six” from whatever bounty the land had
given, wearing it further as time passed. Larger farms, meanwhile, less-intensive farming
put less pressure on the land, making these farms almost worlds apart from their smaller
neighbors. A 230-acre farm in another part of the county with 65.5 acres of cropland, for
example, had some problems with erosion in the steepest areas, “but a fairly good
cropping system has prevented this from becoming so severe as to make the land
unsuitable for production.” The farm had traditionally supported the owner and two
sharecropping families, the survey found, without pushing the land’s capacity to the
breaking point.21

Yet, the survey found, the ability of the land to support three farm families was
decaying, not because of the land itself, but because of the New Deal’s tobacco program,

20 “Narrative Report of the County Agent, 1939: Caswell County, North Carolina,” ESAR, RG 33, NA.
Robert E. Graham, Jr., Improving Low Incomes on Tobacco Farms: Caswell County, North Carolina
(Washington DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1941), 5-6, 41, 43.

21 Graham, Improving Low Incomes on Tobacco Farms, 6-8, 48-49.
which reduced the acreage on which farm families could grow tobacco. On this large farm, the two sharecropping families had normally grown four acres of tobacco, but production controls forced the landowner to cut each family's tobacco acreage by half. “The result is a lowered income and much idle labor,” the survey found. The changing realities of life on this one farm point us to the importance of factoring in political and economic constructions of the landscape, for as political and economic conditions change, so does the landscape. This farm’s sharecroppers, who had begun their tenure on the land under one political-economic paradigm, found themselves squeezed as another asserted dominance. And they were not alone: thousands of tenants and small landowners came under increasing pressure as the New Deal’s regulation of the tobacco market rippled back to the land.22

The New Deal tobacco program’s imposition of a cap on tobacco production through the allotment of acreage and the decision to assign these allotments to specific parcels of land rather than to the growers themselves forever altered the landscape of tobacco. On the regional level, it froze the extent of bright tobacco agriculture. A crop that had moved across the southeastern seaboard with nearly the speed of kudzu was frozen in place instantly. Locally, the changes were even more profound. By placing allotments — the rights to grow so much tobacco — with the land and, therefore, in the hands of landowners, New Deal planners forever doomed tenancy in tobacco agriculture. As landowners found themselves with less acreage to work, they had less need to hire sharecroppers and tenants and less land to rent out. Complaints that New Deal production controls were causing the displacement of sharecroppers and other tenants were heard almost as soon as the tobacco program came into being. In April 1934,

Graham, Improving Low Incomes on Tobacco Farms, 54.
Virginian R.C. Eliot complained that a "goodly num[er] of tenants on tobacco farms" had been displaced around Blackstone, creating a dire need for assistance. By 1940, the number of farms worked by tenants declined by about 6 percent. (The number of tenants actually increased in some counties; this was likely the result of landowners' decisions to seek out off-farm work and rent out their small allotments.)

Similar complaints continued for decades as growers agreed to cut allotments further to control production. During the war, the exodus of people from the land to war industries and the military compounded the effects of the tobacco program. Between 1940 and 1950, the number of farms worked by tenants declined by a fifth; in those counties nearest to the region's industrial centers, the decline was even more dramatic. In 1959, an elderly landowner complained that cuts were forcing her tenant -- and sole source of income -- to leave her and find work elsewhere. While the displacement of tenants in the Old Belt was not as rapid as it was in the cotton belts where, in the hands of large planters, the New Deal cotton program forced thousands of sharecroppers off the land, the restriction of acreage nevertheless squeezed those without allotments out of the business of growing tobacco. As these tenant families disappeared, so did the traditional tobacco landscape.

And it was not only tenants who were forced out, but landowners with small allotments soon felt the squeeze as well. Complaints that production limits were forcing small growers out of tobacco rolled in almost as soon as the program was rolled out. As

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allotment reductions continued, so did the complaints. In 1950, Orange County resident H.A. Bennett complained that the county was “loosing [sic] acreage yearly” because “acreage allotments are so small” that farmers were being “forced out.” By the middle of the 1950s, small growers were finding it even harder to compete and many had simply given up. One study found that over 10 percent of the allotments in North Carolina’s Old belt counties had gone unplanted. In 1957, the Lunenburg County extension agent reported that five percent of the county’s tobacco allotment had been placed in the Soil Bank after a 20 percent allotment cut had “left a large number of our growers with less than two acres of tobacco,” forcing many out.  

Pressure on small allotment holders only increased in the 1960s, as the federal government altered the tobacco program. In 1962, legislators introduced the lease-and-transfer system that allowed allotment holders to lease their allotments to other growers within the same county. This provided an incentive for small growers who were barely holding on to make what money they could by leasing their allotments. Leases in Guilford County, for example, averaged about $150 per acre in 1965, a tidy sum for doing nothing more than signing over your right to grow tobacco to someone else. Of greater negative impact was the adoption of an acreage-poundage formula for computing allotments. Implemented in 1965, the program was supposed to help small growers by replacing across-the-board acreage allotment cuts with poundage restrictions that would curtail the practice of overplanting to increase yields. The move came too late, though, as

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most growers had become dependent on overplanting; poundage restrictions for these growers were simply another cut that made it harder to continue growing the golden leaf.26

Within little more than a generation, state regulation of the bright tobacco economy had fundamentally reshaped the landscape as surely as any natural phenomenon. As federal tobacco policy made it increasingly difficult for small farm families, especially tenant families, to remain on the land, a region once dotted by small farms grouped into closely-knit rural neighborhoods emptied. Thousands of acres once planted in tobacco became pastureland, tree farms, or, in the areas around the region’s burgeoning cities, suburban neighborhoods. While it would be too much to say that the landscape has changed completely—rolling fields still dot the topography as sturdy farm houses and tumbledown tobacco barns are still shadow the land—it is certainly not the same as it was.

*The Ground Beneath Their Feet*

The tobacco program’s rearrangement of the land, it might be argued, was largely indirect. Federal programs reshaped the economic order of the land, some might say, but the results could hardly have been foreseen or intentional. Leaving aside arguments about the intentions of the program’s developers (which, as chapter five shows, were subject to intense political negotiation), their first goal was to improve tobacco prices. Whatever effect doing this had on the landscape of tobacco was of secondary concern. This is not to say, however, that the state did not take an active role in the physical geography of the land. Confronted with myriad problems, the federal authorities in the

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1930s began a series of projects to repair a land altered by tobacco agriculture. Their actions then and after point us to the constant flux of the land itself over the last century.27

Land often has a certain sense of permanence to it. In nature, changes in soil composition, topography, and, to a lesser extent, biomass move at a glacial pace (often literally). Human intervention, however, tends to speed up these processes as people alter the land to fit their needs. Few things aside from mining and other extractive practices speed the process faster than the application of systematic agriculture. As humans order the land into fields, manure the soil, and introduce new crops and animals, they necessarily make alterations to the topography, the soil conditions, and the flora and fauna of a given region. Not all agriculture is equally transformative, but all makes an impact. As historian William Cronon has shown for the Great Plains, for example, even the application of agricultural practices that seemed to mirror the land’s natural condition – grain farming and livestock raising – altered the land immeasurably by eliminating natural prairie grasses and pressuring bison herds. In the Old Belt, where growers applied both intensive row farming and an extensive monoculture, the changes were even

27 Historians have long debated the role of intentionality in the implementation of New Deal programs. Critics on the right, then and since, have derided it as creeping socialism, while assaults from the left have highlighted the New Deal’s focus on relief instead of reform and its unwillingness of alter the basic structures of capitalism to denounce its conservatism. The reality, especially in the agricultural program, as Anthony J. Badger’s study of the tobacco program in North Carolina, was much more complex. Those who hoped for widespread reform of the economic order of the countryside found themselves forced to negotiate with large, politically-powerful landowners, who had no intention of upsetting the existing order. The program was not designed to alter the cultural landscape by eroding the position of small landowners and tenants, but by designing the program around the desires of large landowners this was almost an inevitable consequence. This is not to say that it was unforeseen – bureaucrats and small farmers alike predicted some of the effects of the program as it was implemented – but it would be difficult to argue that it was intentional. See Badger, Prosperity Road, 229-235.
more drastic. By the 1930s, it might be said, the land was not the same that Byrd had traversed two hundred years prior.\(^{28}\)

The Southern Piedmont, especially that part south of the James River, has never been especially attractive as an agricultural region. This is not to say nothing grew there, but that making the land bring forth anything took more work than in other regions. Unlike Virginia’s Great Valley, Alabama’s Black Belt, or Mississippi’s Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, the land is relatively infertile and requires generous applications of fertilizers. The rolling topography has few broad plains, requiring growers to plant on hillsides. Tilted steeply toward the sea, the land holds little water, most of which passed quickly through the numerous small rivers and streams that crisscross the region. Planters who followed Byrd to the region found that it took large slave labor forces to keep the land productive.

Growers who wanted bright tobacco, however, believed that the land’s relative infertility was a virtue. While it took tons of fertilizer to grow, bright tobacco thrived on land containing less organic matter, which made the leaf grew fine and thin, making it the best for flue-curing. In the late nineteenth century, thousands of growers sought out good tobacco land, and having found it, refused to “ruin” it by rotating it with alternate crops. “Many of the farmers are under the impression that it take[s] poor land for tobacco and are keeping the land poor to get the best grade,” one extension agent complained. At the same time, farmers feared standing water would ruin their crops, so they aligned their rows along the pitch of the terrain to allow water to run off more easily. Unfortunately, water took good soil with it. A 1941 survey of one Caswell County farm revealed a common problem. “[T]he tendency is to grow as much tobacco as possible with little

\(^{28}\) William Cronon, Nature’s Metropolis, passim.
attention to the effects on the soil,” the survey noted. “No organized rotations are followed, and the land is washing very badly.” The destruction of the region’s forest cover only exacerbated the erosion problem. Growers cleared trees to open new lands, make firewood, and build fences, curing barns, and other buildings. The demand for wood for curing fires was the greatest pressure on the forest stocks. “It requires 4 acres of growing timber to supply wood for curing tobacco grown on one acre and in some sections of the County the wood supply is short,” the Halifax County agent reported in 1930, adding that “[t]here many acres that have become eroded to where they no longer produce profitable crops.”

Indeed, erosion made it increasingly difficult for many farm families to remain on the land. In 1939, the Caswell County agent reported that the “widespread exploitation of land resources through the one-crop system” had caused the abandonment of many farms in the county. Twenty years later, agricultural economists at North Carolina State University found that some twenty percent of the North Carolina Old Belt was classified as “severely eroded” and that unchecked erosion had “resulted in the abandonment of thousands of acres of once cultivated land.” Erosion, it seems, reshaped more than just the physical landscape, moving people along with topsoil.

Recognizing the long-term consequences of erosion, the federal government attempted to correct some of tobacco agriculture’s worst abuses. Extension agents pressed farmers to adopt crop rotation schemes and plant winter cover crops. They

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expanded forestry programs to encourage farm families to use woodland resources more carefully. In the 1930s, soil conservation became a keystone in New Deal rural reform efforts, leading extension agents to introduce efforts to help farmers grade and terrace their land. While agents often breathlessly reported growers’ eagerness to take land out of tobacco – for which they received money – their reports of growers’ willingness to implement other reforms was less happy. Growers resisted tinkering with their best tobacco fields, afraid that terracing them would ruin them. “Terracing the land and cultivating on the contour has been advocated for saving tobacco soils but has been adopted by a very small number of farmers,” the Halifax County agent moaned in 1937.31

As quickly as they had turned their attention to the problems of erosion, however, extension agents confronted another problem with the land, one that, in the eyes of farmers at least, was more troubling than erosion: disease. Tobacco had always been subject to a number of soil-borne diseases. In the 1880s, Granville wilt had appeared in Granville County, causing great frustration for farmers. Caused by a microscopic bacterium, Granville wilt caused individual plants and even whole fields to wither almost literally overnight. By the 1930s, dozens of other diseases yearly threatened farm families’ tobacco crops. Black shank, a disease caused by a water-borne fungus that attacks tobacco roots, appeared in Forsyth County in 1931 and quickly migrated to other

31 In 1936, after the first Agricultural Adjustment Act was ruled unconstitutional, the tobacco program was reconstituted under the guidelines of the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, which appropriated funds to pay farmers to divert tobacco acreage to other uses. Charles Pugh, “Landmarks in the Tobacco Program,” The Tobacco Industry in Transition: Policies for the 1980s, 31. “Narrative Report of the County Agent, 1937: Halifax County, Virginia,” ESAR, RG 33, NA.
areas. Around the same time, blue mold, a fungal disease that could damage plants at any time during the year, made its appearance across the belt.\textsuperscript{32}

The appearance of these diseases prompted state actors to take action. Extension agents tried to convince growers to adopt cultural practices that would curtail the spread of the diseases. “We have tried every way possible to get the farmers in the county to rotate their tobacco even if only a two-year rotation,” one agent reported in 1939. “Many are doing that this year, probably not because they want to, but they realize that if they do not the root[,] diseases already started will get worse and may even make a field worthless as far as tobacco is concerned.” At the same time, agricultural scientists developed disease resistant strains of tobacco to eliminate the impact of the diseases. Adoption of these varieties was not universal at first, but by the 1950s their use had become more widespread, in part because the Agricultural Conservation and Stabilization Service removed older varieties from the list of tobacco varieties they would support at parity prices. This tool – the ability to control what farmers planted through the checkbook – proved impressively powerful for altering tobacco agriculture.\textsuperscript{33}

On the whole, though, state program failed to alter the physical geography of the Old Belt in radical ways. Some land terraced here, trees planted there, a pasture restored


\textsuperscript{33} “Narrative Report of the County Agent, 1939: Surry County, North Carolina,” ESAR, RG 33, NA. As with loose-leaf and tied tobacco, the ASCS published lists of which types of tobacco would be supported at full parity prices and which would receive only half if purchased by the Stabilization service. The primary reason for making a distinction was the ASCS’s need to sell the excess crop it purchases to manufacturers. If manufacturers made it clear they did not want certain varieties of tobacco, the ASCS had to find some way to curtail the amount it was taking in. In 1963, for example, the USDA announced that Coker 316 and Ream 64, two varieties of tobacco, would be placed on the “discount variety list,” meaning the parity prices for any grown would only be half that of acceptable varieties. See U.S.D.A. Announcement, 30 November 1962, Kornegay Papers, SHC.
from oblivion: all were small steps toward remaking the landscape of tobacco. Bright tobacco, however, proved to be an imposing obstacle. At the end of the twentieth century, tobacco still made the landscape despite its waning power. Its only challenger, it seems, was the expanding urbanization and suburbanization of the Piedmont. The growth of metropolitan regions around Raleigh-Durham, Winston-Salem, Greensboro, Danville, along with the expansion of other towns really marked the biggest change in the land in recent decades. Like the built environment and the socially-constructed landscape, the Old Belt’s physical geography, too, proved not to be beyond the reach of history.

Conclusion

A drive along U.S. Highway 58 from Reidsville to Oxford or along U.S. Highway 158 from South Hill to Danville can seem like a ride into the past. As the bustling towns fade into the rearview mirror and the rolling hills of the Piedmont open before you, the sight of a mud-chinked barn against the emerald green of tobacco fields can make you think that this it must have always been this way. A closer look, though, and reality sinks in: this land is not how it was. Those mud-chinked barns are abandoned, covered in kudzu, sinking under their own weight. Tobacco is rarer than it once was, and where it is grown, it is concentrated on a few large plots worked by migrant farm workers or guestworkers from Latin America. These folks do not live where it is grown, at least not year-round, like the farm families who grew the crop for so long.

Tobacco is still king of the Old Belt, but his throne has changed. Not radically, but over time; changing as the demands of the times changed. Shadows remind of what was past, but new realities make themselves apparent and remind us that no place is immutable. As the realities of tobacco agriculture changed, so did the landscape, just as
any workplace would change to reflect new ways of working. The assumption that the Old Belt remained unchanged for so long misses the nearly-constant retooling the land underwent to become what it is. As we shall see, the same might be said of the people.
Labor
CHAPTER II

THE FAMILY’S CROP: FARM FAMILIES AND THE CULTURE OF BRIGHT TOBACCO

There once was a crop called Tobacco; once there were sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, neighbors; there were popping and slapping sounds and stories swapped like work.
- Shelby Stephenson

In January 1921, as stump speakers, extension service agents, and other organizers fanned out across Virginia and the Carolinas to enroll farmers in the newly-formed Tobacco Growers’ Cooperative Association, Clarence Poe aimed his editor’s pen at the farm women of the tobacco South. “Now the fight is on to see how many farmers are willing to stand with their brother farmers in this contest, and how many are going to be slackers,” he wrote in the pages of The Progressive Farmer, the region’s leading agricultural journal. “If the farm women of the three states become thoroughly aroused there will be but few slackers. Without their help there may be a great many.” A native North Carolinian, a director of the Cooperative, and a tobacco planter himself, Poe believed that the new organization would fail without women’s participation, and he challenged farm women to become “missionar[ies] for cooperative marketing.” “You

must learn about the plans and talk them not only to other farm women, but to your
husbands, sons, and farmer neighbors.²

At first glance it may seem odd that Poe sought support for the Cooperative
among the farm women of the tobacco belt. After all, membership in the Cooperative
was limited to those selling tobacco, which, in most families, was the male head of
household. But Poe knew exactly what he was doing. Farm women’s work was central
to both the production of bright tobacco and the household economies of the families that
grew it. At the same time, women were integral to the family and community networks
that interlaced the rural countryside. By appealing to the women of the tobacco belt, Poe
hoped to build support for the Cooperative among entire farm families and communities,
not just among individual farmers.

The most ambitious and far-reaching effort to correct the abuses of the tobacco
auction system in the years before the New Deal, the Tobacco Growers’ Cooperative
(also known as the Tri-State Cooperative) attracted thousands of farmers from Virginia
and the Carolinas who hoped to make tobacco farming pay. Begun in the wake of a
disastrous harvest in 1920, the Cooperative promised to bypass the traditional auction
system by offering farmers the opportunity to pool their tobacco and sell it directly to
manufacturers as a group. Unfortunately for farmers, the plan never worked; by 1926,
the Cooperative was in receivership, a victim of grower apathy, internal mismanagement,
and powerful enemies.

Historians by and large have focused their attention on the Tri-State’s inability to
fulfill its promise to provide farmers fair prices for their crops. They have documented
the rise and fall of the organization and judged the Tri-State to be another in a line of

² The Progressive Farmer, 29 January 1921.
abysmal, if well-intentioned, failures to reform the system. This chapter does not quibble with this assessment; the organization indeed fell terribly short of its goal to reform the tobacco auction system. Instead, the chapter uses the brief history of the Tri-State to explore the centrality of farm families in the culture of bright tobacco. For nearly a century, black and white families formed the primary unit of production in the bright tobacco belt. Families not only worked in the fields together, but they sold their crop together, sharing in its successes and failures. Tobacco was not simply something families grew to make a living; it was a crop that ordered their entire lives.\footnote{Several historians have recounted the rise and fall of the Tri-State Cooperative. The first and most immediate is Nathaniel C. Browder, \textit{The Tri-State Tobacco Growers' Association: The Co-op that Failed} (1940; reprint, Raleigh: n.p., 1983). Nannie May Tilley's \textit{The Bright-Tobacco Industry}, contains an informative history of the association that focuses on the association's work in Virginia and North Carolina. For an account of the Cooperative's work in South Carolina, see Prince and Simpson, \textit{Long Green}, chapter 4.}

Nothing illustrates this better than the position farm women held at the nexus of market and home production. Like farm women across the nation, the farm women of the Old Belt, white and black, spent much of their time on the demands of managing the household and providing for the material needs of their families. They grew gardens, preserved foods, made clothing, did housework, and reared children. However, on most Old Belt tobacco farms, their labor was not limited to those tasks often deemed to be “women’s work.” Women worked in the fields year-round, providing a critical source of unpaid labor on most tobacco farms. This fact was largely ignored by those recording official statistics about tobacco farms, most notably the federal census, which assumed farm operators were men. For this reason, women’s work in tobacco has often been overlooked or underestimated. For those most familiar with tobacco agriculture, however, were more certain of the extensiveness of women’s work on the region’s farms.
Most tobacco never would have come to market without women’s work at every step and low prices placed the burden of maintaining the household squarely on farm women’s shoulders, the farm women of the bright tobacco belt necessarily had an interest in how well the crop sold at market. Organizers like Poe believed this put them in a position to determine the organization’s ultimate success or failure, and thus appealed for their help.4

Women’s Work

No one, it seems, was exempt from bright tobacco’s exacting regimens. Every member had a stake in the family’s crop and a responsibility to see it from spring to fall. For white and black farm women alike, this created a blurry line between home and field work. Unless they were well-off or had many children, they, too, worked in the fields. While many tasks were sex-segregated, it was not uncommon for farm women to take on the heaviest of labor. They planted seedbeds, prepared the fields, and moved the plants from the seed bed to the fields. “The whole family...took to the fields at planting time,” one son of tobacco farmers recalled. “Mama, who seldom worked outside the house, presided over the plant bed, pulling the plants carefully, and stacking them into the neat piles to be carried to the fields.” After transplanting, they chopped weeds, killed worms, topped plants and pulled suckers. “One real nasty thing I had to do was worm tobacco,” North Carolinian Betty Jackson remembered. “I could not pull the heads off of the big

4 A broad literature exploring the critical importance of farm women’s work to the operation of farm households has appeared in recent years. See, for example, Deborah Fink, Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992; Lu Ann Jones, Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Rebecca Sharpless, Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Melissa Walker, All We Knew Was to Farm: Rural Women in the Upcountry South, 1919-1941 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).
worms. Aunt Millie gave me a jar and told me to put the worms in it, and she’d kill them at the end of the row.”

Harvesting season simply ramped up women’s work. Tasked with preparing afternoon dinner for all those working in the fields, they also were expected at the barn, where they prepared the leaves for curing by tying them in groups and hanging the strings on tobacco sticks. “This part of the labor was often done by the women of the family,” Elmer D. Johnson remembered, “since it involved a little dexterity without too much back-bending labor.” Whether it fell to women because of some innate agility is unclear, but many girls learned the skill at the feet of their mothers, aunts, and older sisters. “We’d hand up tobacco leaves, three at a time, to be strung on a stick,” one woman recalled of her years growing up on a tobacco farm. Betty Jackson similarly remembered rising before daybreak to hand leaves before rushing to catch the school bus.

Curing was largely men’s work, but sorting and grading was largely the domain of women. “In the striphouse where the processes [of grading tobacco] are carried on,” Margaret Jarman Hagood found, “the mother is the star performer, the chief grader.” While the husband might direct the activities, she continued, “he is usually somewhat respectful of his wife’s ability.” As with stringing, some claimed women were better suited to these tasks the basis of biological assumptions—better dexterity or more discerning vision—but it is just as likely that farm families saw assigning this work to women as a commonsense solution to the family’s labor needs. For many tobacco

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farmers, the end of curing season meant it was time to sow winter wheat or harvest other crops. While the time-consuming work of grading would pull men away from this work, women could more readily combine it with their home-work. "I'd grade tobacco all day long and pack it down," recalled one North Carolina woman. "Then we'd tie it at night. You see, the pack house was right here at us, and the young'uns could stay at the house. That's the way we made our living."

Work swaps during these busy times helped farm women to establish relationships with neighbors. Sharing labor was a social occasion that offered neighbors opportunities to strengthen the bonds of community. As men, women, and children worked in the fields and at the barns, they told jokes, talked over local politics, and traded gossip. In so doing, they reinforced neighborhood communication networks that pulled them together. Margaret Jarman Hagood found that tasks done around the curing barns most easily facilitated such interaction. "To work in the striphouse is favorable to conversation and tall tale telling," she wrote, detailing her experiences visiting tenant farmers in North Carolina's Piedmont. "One daughter yelled 'You all shut up!' to several women working inside as the visitor approached a striphouse. They later confessed they had been telling 'mighty rough jokes.'" While conversation regularly flowed across lines of gender and age, the general sex-segregation of many tasks helped to build relationships between farm women.

Women's work did not end with sorting, but their role in marketing was less well defined. While farm families relied heavily on women's work to produce a crop of tobacco, the propriety of women coming to the market was the subject of some debate.

7 Hagood, Mothers of the South, 88. Quoted in Phillips, "Farm Women of Stokes County," 134.

8 Hagood, Mothers of the South, 90.
In the minds of many, tobacco market towns were no place for a lady, especially at night. Before the expansion of automobile ownership in the 1920s made it easier to travel between home and market, male farmers who traveled great distances to town often slept in bunkrooms over the warehouse floors. These men filled the streets after the markets closed. Most entertained themselves by listening to street-corner musicians, testing their aim in makeshift shooting galleries, or dining in bustling cafes filled with other farmers in town for the sales. Others, however, found more fun in illicit pursuits. Bootleggers and prostitutes found plenty of business in the market towns and sometimes traveled from market to market as the season progressed. In Kinston, North Carolina, male farmers in search of female company found it in Sugar Hill, “an old and established section with some attractive dwellings among its several dozen houses in the warehouse district.” Stories on manly debauchery were common in tobacco lore, leading many to shield their wives and daughters from going to market. North Carolina native Nevada Jane Hall “never went to the tobacco market when her father took the crop to be sold, because women who went to the market were sometimes considered huzzies.”

Despite this image, there is considerable evidence that women were common, if not regular, visitors to the markets. Market openings were great social occasions, and much of the fanfare that followed them was aimed at entire farm families, not just male farmers. Community leaders used the occasion to tout the golden leaf’s economic benefits while shop owners held sales to entice farmers prove them. Meanwhile, politicians and itinerant clergy alike pleaded with farmers for their votes and their souls. While some farm women came to town for the social events, others came with business

on their minds. It was fairly common for a wife to have claim over a certain portion of the family’s crop that she could sell for her own money. “The mother gets all except the landlord’s fourth from her patch, which brought over a hundred dollars this year,” Margaret Jarman Hagood reported of one tenant farm woman. Similarly, many parents allotted their children portions of the crop to teach them the economics of tobacco, and boys and girls alike went to town to sell their tobacco. “Misses Bettie and Helen’s six lots ranged from 22 ½ to 46, bringing them an all around price of $31.05,” one Virginia newspaper reported in 1929. “The young ladies claim they did all the work except, of course, the plowing.” Clearly men, women, and children all inhabited the space created by the tobacco markets.10

Whether or not a farm woman actually came to the market, she clearly had an interest in the outcome of the sale of her family’s tobacco. If tobacco failed to bring remunerative prices, women’s enterprises became more critical to the family’s survival, placing a greater burden on farm women. In many, if not most, farm families the mother served as manager of the household. Margaret Jarman Hagood expressed surprise at tenant farm women’s knowledge of farming matters, which extended “not only to the immediate condition of the current crop but to details of renting, credit, the sequence of operations, and to the basic data for making an estimate of how they will ‘come out this year.’” Most farm women, even many tenants, tended gardens and potato patches to supply for their family’s needs. Additionally, women regularly raised livestock (especially chickens) or cultivated truck gardens for market. One North Carolina woman explained her many jobs to a Federal Writers Project interviewer: “‘Course I tend the garden, do all the picklin’, cannin’, preservin’, an’ get the eggs, butter an’ garden truck

10 Hagood, Mothers of the South, 15. South Hill Enterprise, 7 November 1929.
ready for market." "We go to our smoke house for meat," she continued, "to the hen house for chickens an' eggs; to the cows for milk an' butter; send our own wheat an' corn to the mill for flour an' meal; have gardens an' orchards for vegetables an' fruit; in winter there's canned stuff, potatoes, plenty of cabbage, collards, an' turnips, an' our fire wood grows all 'round us."  

The significance of women's work to the production of bright tobacco and, more importantly, farm women's position at the center of the home economy made their participation critical to the success of any attempt to organize tobacco farmers. Organizers of the Tri-State understood this and sought women's support for the organization from the start. While some promoters of cooperation used the image of women working the fields to chide male tobacco farmers for failing to work for higher prices, others understood that reaching out to those women in the fields could make or break the Tri-State. With a sense of women's management of the home and an understanding of the communal nature of much farm work, the largely male leadership of the Tri-State consciously enlisted women in the fight for agricultural cooperation. Farm women, they believed, could argue their interest in the crop to convince their husbands to join and sell with the Cooperative while exploiting their connections with other farm women to spread the gospel of cooperation. According to Tri-State leaders, their ability to do both tasks made farm women critical, indeed invaluable, to the cause of cooperative marketing.

Farm Women and the "Co-ops"

The Great War brought boom times to farming families across the tobacco South. Driven by wartime demand for cigarettes, tobacco prices skyrocketed to previously unseen highs and farm families who relied on bright tobacco for their incomes celebrated their new-found prosperity. "Farmers can be seen hugging each other over the amazing prices they are getting, and pinch themselves quite frequently to see if they have been dreaming," one observer reported from the markets in 1917. Having finally received prices worthy of their labor, farm families rushed to catch up with the burgeoning consumer age, buying everything from automobiles to indoor plumbing.\textsuperscript{12}

Bright tobacco's golden days were brief, however. In 1920, despite warnings from buyers, warehousemen, and extension agents, farmers carried record amounts of tobacco to market at the very moment wartime demand evaporated and prices plummeted. Discontent flowed north from South Carolina to Virginia as the markets opened. In early December, one North Carolina official reported that "[t]obacco prices have declined from $5.00 to $10.00 on the [Oxford] market during the week," creating "some local agitation" for the markets to be closed. In Virginia, one observer reported that farmers were "very much wrought up over the low price of tobacco." While prices were higher than before the war, they were much lower than farmers had anticipated and only got worse as the marketing season wore on.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Southern Tobacco Journal, 11 September 1917, quoted in Nannie May Tilley, The Bright-Tobacco Industry, 389. Sales on the market floors of Danville, Virginia, the premier market in the northernmost bright tobacco growing area known as the Old Belt, are indicative of the increasing prices. In the years between 1900 and 1914, prices averaged just over 11 cents per pound. Between 1917 and 1919, this average price rose to nearly 41 cents per pound. Annual Market Statistics, Danville, Va., President's Report, 1984, Reel 2, DTA Records, 1878-1984, LVA.

\textsuperscript{13} E.G. Stokes to Secretary of Agriculture, 13 September 1920, Gen. Corr. Sec. Ag., RG 16, NA. E.G. Moss to J.H. Warren, 3 December 1920, TGCA Papers, SHC. The amount of tobacco marketed in the Danville warehouses increased almost 84 percent between 1919 and 1920, while the average price per pound fell by more than half from 55 cents to 26 cents. See Annual Market Statistics, President's Report,
The shock of the postwar plunge renewed calls for farmers to band together in marketing their crops. Over the years many voices had recommended cooperation as the solution to the problem of low prices. The Grange, the Farmers' Alliance, and the Farmers' Union had all opened cooperative sales warehouses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, only to see the mass of farmers continue to take their crops to commercial floors where warehousemen and buyers, hoping to silence calls for cooperation, waited with ready cash and easy terms. The repeated failure of farmers' organizations to compete with commercial warehouses turned many farmers against the notion of beating the warehousemen and tobacco buyers at their own game. On the eve of the disastrous 1920 harvest, one extension agent reported that he found it “very hard to talk cooperative warehouses to these farmers” because of their frustration with earlier cooperative schemes.14

Despite this history, demand for cooperative solutions rose out of farmers' frustration with the 1920 harvest. Leading growers hastily arranged meetings in Wilson, Danville, and other market towns throughout the fall to discuss the problem; in December, representatives from the bright-tobacco-growing states converged on Richmond to form the Tobacco Growers' Cooperative Association. Organizers hoped this new organization would overcome what they saw as the fundamental problem facing farmers: the rushed marketing of tobacco in the weeks following the harvest. They envisioned a system that would give farmers more power in selling their crops. Instead of being forced to sell to the highest bidder in a hurried and confused auction, farmers

would deliver their tobacco to the Tri-State, receive an advance on their crop, let the Cooperative sell the leaves for more money, and wait for the balance of the money due them. The scheme assumed the Cooperative would control enough tobacco to dictate the prices manufacturers would pay, which, of course, it never did.¹⁵

The low prices of 1920 created bitterness across the bright tobacco belt, but turning growers' anger into support for the Cooperative proved challenging. The Tri-State's charter required that fifty percent of the growers agree to market their tobacco through their warehouses for it to be binding, so organizers, aided by Extension Service agents on both the local and state levels, immediately began canvassing growers for signatures. Early results were promising. Within a year, 64,000 farmers from Virginia and the Carolinas had agreed to market their tobacco through the Cooperative. In addition, organizers succeeded in recruiting the support of a number of business and political leaders, including Raleigh News and Observer editor Josephus Daniels and Virginia Senator Claude Swanson, who signed up his own tobacco crop in 1921.¹⁶

It is impossible to paint a complete picture of the Cooperative's membership, but some general patterns can be discerned from the existing evidence. The Cooperative was most effective in convincing small to medium, independent farmers to join. These growers, unlike sharecroppers or renters, owned their land and could decide how they would market their crops. The 1920 price crash affected these farmers as much or more than any other group, in part because the low prices threatened to erode the gains they had made during the war years. The Cooperative had less success convincing large

¹⁶ For Swanson's support see, Swanson to M.O. Wilson, 26 November 1921, Box 8, Claude A. Swanson Papers 907-a, Special Collections, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville (hereafter cited as Swanson Papers, UVA).
planters—those who had large landholdings and grew tobacco using hired laborers, sharecroppers, or both—to join. These planters often had financial stakes in the warehouses supported by the auction system, and they did not take kindly to the Cooperative’s promises to see grass growing in the streets of Wilson and other warehouse towns. These planters regularly barred their renters and sharecroppers from joining the Cooperative despite court judgments defending their right to sell their shares however they pleased. Virginian E.A. Jackson, for example, reported that his landlord forbade him “to deliver any…tobacco to the ‘Co-ops’ until he was paid.” Jackson rebuffed his landlord and sold to the Tri-State, but others had little choice but to deliver their crops as directed by their landlords or other creditors.17

The Tri-State was unique in that it reached out to both black and white tobacco farmers. African American farm families were central to the bright tobacco economy, especially in eastern North Carolina and South Carolina, and organizers understood that excluding African Americans would simply be counterproductive. While it is impossible to determine the extent of black membership in the Cooperative, it is clear that organizers’ attempts to sign up black farmers were somewhat successful. “Both White and Negro Farmers in this County are successfully demonstrating that Tobacco can be marketed cooperatively,” one Extension Service agent reported in 1922. Despite the Cooperative’s openness to black farmers, most met in segregated locals and no black members rose to any sort of leadership in the organization. Nevertheless, its openness sets the Cooperative apart as one of the few bi-racial rural reform organizations between

17 Tri-State Tobacco Grower, November 1924.
the demise of the Populists in the 1890s and the rise of groups like the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union or the Sharecroppers Union in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{18}

The Cooperative had a relatively strong, centralized bureaucracy, but building support among average tobacco farmers nevertheless required hard work on the local level, organizing meetings, arranging speakers, and passing out literature. Grower anger was fairly easy to come by; harnessing it was another matter entirely. To gain support, organizers turned largely to traditional methods of publicity, giving the enrollment campaign the appearance of a religious revival or political rally. "They had big all-day meetings with picnic dinners and barbeque suppers and brunswick [sic] stews all over that neighborhood...," a witness to one of these campaigns remembered. "We used to go to all of them and listen to the speeches. I don’t remember what that man’s name was that came to our neighborhood, but he was a natural-born orator. The farmers just stood there with their mouths open to listen to him. It sounded like a good revival sermon before he got through and it went home the same way."\textsuperscript{19}

The Tri-State also benefited from the Extension Service’s willingness to provide the services of its county agents to the organization. Created by the 1914 Smith-Lever Act, the Extension Service employed county agents to educate farmers about the latest agricultural innovations. The Extension Service also supported home demonstration agents who worked to foster the development of modern domestic techniques among the nation’s farm women. By 1920, both county agents and home demonstration agents had begun to make inroads in communities throughout the bright tobacco belt. Defining their work broadly, the Extension Service directors of Virginia and the Carolinas jumped at the

\textsuperscript{18} Negro Extension agent’s report, 1922, Alamance County, North Carolina, ESAR, RG 33, NA.
\textsuperscript{19} Federal Writers Project, “Gamblers All,” 432, Hamilton Papers, NCSU.
opportunity to help farmers while expanding the Extension Service’s influence. They quickly dispatched their county agents and home demonstration workers to sign up farmers. The work generally followed the gendered division of labor constituted in the organization of the Extension Service; county agents largely worked to sign up male farmers while home demonstration agents approached women for support. These agents worked long hours convincing farmers and their families of the benefits of selling their tobacco cooperatively, and their labor clearly helped the fledgling organization get off the ground. “I ... put my shoulder to the wheel,” one agent reported in 1922, “and went to work with the farmer, doing what he asked, going where he requested, driving night and day, getting up meetings, making talks, familiarizing myself with cooperative marketing; and preaching cooperation, organization and loyalty.”

The Tri-State also found support from the region’s leading agricultural journalist, Clarence Poe, who lent his editorial page to the Cooperative’s cause. As editor of The Progressive Farmer, Poe had been trying for years to convince to organize farmers when the market bottomed out in 1920. In the Tri-State he saw the salvation of the region’s tobacco farmers and entreated them to support the organization. While he usually aimed his appeals at farmers’ pocketbooks, Poe was not above employing the traditional white southern rhetoric that conflated liberty and white manhood. “Even the ignorant Negroes in olden days did not accept slavery without protest, and thousands of them fought and struggled and died to escape,” he reminded his readers in 1921. “Surely our sturdy Anglo-Saxon Southern white farmers are not now going to be content with industrial

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slavery.” Employing racialized and gendered rhetoric, Poe hoped to rally farmers by reaffirming the Anglo-Saxon vigor of those willing to renounce the auction system while questioning the manliness of those who refused to leave the warehousemen behind. At the same time, he hoped to rouse their anger at having “to acknowledge somebody else as ‘master’ in fixing a price on the product of [their] own labor.”

The Tri-State’s leaders sometimes used similar language to appeal to white male tobacco farmers. In early 1922, for example, the editor of the *Tri-State Tobacco Grower* attempted to link the Cooperative’s cause to the post-Civil War South’s most potent symbol of white manhood: the Confederate soldier. “When our leaders who served under the Stars and Bars are with us still, pointing the way in the advance of 70,000 Southern fighters for economic freedom,” he wrote in a preface to a letter from General James Macgill, commander of the Second Brigade of Virginia Confederate Veterans, “all is well.” However, the Cooperative’s need and desire to attract both black farmers limited appeals to white farmers alone. Instead, the Cooperative’s leaders employed broader gendered republican rhetoric that contrasted the manliness of society’s “producers” with its “parasites.” Praising reports that President Warren Harding supported farmers’ cooperative efforts, the *Tri-State Tobacco Grower* reported that, “Every real Big Man in the United States is in favor of cooperative marketing. Only ‘pinhookers’ and men who make money out of the ‘auction’ system are against it.” Years later, as the Cooperative fought off attacks from without and within, its leaders again turned to this language by issuing “A Call to Southern Manhood,” that questioned farmers’ manliness for not standing up to the “powerful forces” arrayed against them. “Farmers of the Carolinas and

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Virginia," pleaded director J.Y. Joyner, "if ye be men, join me in whatever voluntary sacrifice and service may be necessary in this crisis to win the victory." 22

Such language was hardly accidental. The 1920 harvest created a crisis of confidence for male farmers. As historian Ted Ownby has argued, "the idea that a man's job was to gain a living from the soil" was one of "two central features of male culture" in the rural South. When prices plummeted, many male farmers took it personally and interpreted their inability to make a living as a personal failure. In the bright tobacco belt, tradition exacerbated the problem. As with any number of agricultural products, a number of cultural markers denoted success among bright tobacco growers. The quality of a farmer's crop, for example, largely defined his status among the larger community. A farmer who produced fine yellow leaves that brought in high prices was seen as a good farmer who managed his crop well, while a farmer known for bringing dark, mottled, or "trashy" tobacco to market was often derided as ignorant or undisciplined. Given the linkage of price and quality, male farmers, despite their knowledge of the auction's vagaries, still saw low prices as the result of poor farming or bad management, not a stacked market. While the 1920 bust energized many to attack the auction system, it demoralized others. The Tri-State employed such rhetoric to rile up these farmers enough to join the cause. 23

Poe and the other leaders of the Tri-State knew, however, that grower anger would go only so far. Smooth-talking warehousemen and tobacco buyers could quickly stamp out a farmer's cooperationist fervor with promises of higher prices and paeans to

individualism and the blessings of the free market system. "Does somebody try to fool you by talking about the farmer's 'signing away his independence' by agreeing to market his crops in cooperation with his brother farmers?" Poe asked rhetorically, acknowledging the pressure warehousemen and tobacco buyers would place on farmers. Aware that earlier attempts at cooperation had failed because organizers had been unable to get farmers to hold up under such pressure, the Tri-State's leaders attempted to build support for the organization in the home, turning to farm women for help.24

Poe assumed that women's concerns lay closest to the domestic sphere, and he pointed to the blurry line that separated the home economy from the tobacco auction market to remind farm women that low prices impinged on their attempts to provide for their families' physical, intellectual, and spiritual welfare. "[W]hen the farmer fails to get a decent price for his products," he wrote, "he takes it out of his standards of living. He must do so. He has to get along without the improvements he and his wife desire in the way of a better home, lights, paint, waterworks, together with better school advantages for the children." Poe hoped to spur women to action by reminding them of the burdens low prices placed on them and their families.25

The language of Poe's appeal to women was not entirely new or unique. The rural progressivism popular in the early twentieth century linked rural uplift with the domestic sphere and portrayed women's involvement as critical to solving the problems facing rural people. In reaching out to farm women, the leaders of the Tri-State, as well as many of its female supporters, regularly returned to such language. They hoped to engage women's interest by reminding them of the market's impact on their homes, their

24 The Progressive Farmer, 26 February 1921.
25 The Progressive Farmer, 29 January 1921.
families, and their ability to improve their standard of living. In June 1922, the *Tri-State Tobacco Grower* ran an article that highlighted the impact of low prices on farm families' ability to keep their children on the farm. "Tobacco growers have had few chances in the last fifty years to sell at a profit and in fifty years a million boys have left the farms of Virginia and the Carolinas. We have the system, but not the boys to blame." The solution the writer offered, of course, was cooperation. "With cooperative marketing you will have a chance every year to merchandise your crops, instead of dumping them, and the prices will be stabilized, and country life [will] become worth living." While gender neutral, such articles likely were aimed at farm women concerned about the migration of their children away from the countryside.\(^{26}\)

One of the first direct appeals to farm women appeared in July 1922, when a North Carolina farm woman pleaded with her fellow farm women to support the Cooperative. In her letter, Mrs. Ed Carraway couched her support for the Cooperative in domestic terms, describing the impact of the auction system on her family's ability to sell their crops for remunerative prices. Despite the fact that they owned their land, lived economically, and "worked in the crop rain or shine, early and late," she and her husband had "no fund to carry our children to a higher education." The market schedule, she argued, made selling disadvantageous for farmers and even threatened the moral fiber of the family. "Farmers not having the money to go to a hotel or nice boarding house were forced to eat in cheap places and camp in the camp rooms of a warehouse with hundreds of other men," she explained. "Now, under such circumstances, do you think your boy could go to these crowded markets eight times a year and come back home the boy he

\(^{26}\) "A Million Have Gone," *Tri-State Tobacco Grower, June 1922.*
was before he left? All this besides the uncertainty of prices on the market.” The Cooperative, she continued, was the only solution to the problem, as it would make the selling process less time consuming: “As I understand it, a load of tobacco will be unloaded, graded, a bill of sale given with check and receipted at once, and thereby save time.” Time saved and idle hands kept from the devil, a farm mother’s dream come true.27

In 1923, attracting women to support the Cooperative became an official goal of the Tri-State’s leadership when it became apparent that support for the organization was beginning to wane among male farmers. Recognizing the need to encourage women’s participation in the Cooperative, organizers introduced two forums for channeling women’s energies. First came the introduction of a “Farm Women’s Page” to the Tri-State Tobacco Grower. Edited by Mrs. F.C. Beverly, the page provided female readers a regular mixture of cooperationist entreaties, recipes, and domestic tips. In July 1924, the organization went further and secured the services of Elizabeth Kelly, former president of the North Carolina Teachers Association, “to aid in directing work among country women and their families for co-operative marketing and community improvement.” These women used different implements—one, the pen; the other, the automobile and local meeting—but both helped build support for the Cooperative among the farm women of Virginia and the Carolinas.28

27 Mrs. Ed Carraway to Editor, Tri-State Tobacco Grower, July 1922. In most instances references to women in the Tri-State Tobacco Grower use the title “Mrs.” and do not include the woman’s first name. For purposes of clarity, I likewise retain the title when referring to women correspondents.

28 “Farm Women’s Page,” Tri-State Tobacco Grower, August 1923. Mrs. Beverly was the first contributor to the page and became its editor in May 1924. “Strong Leader to Serve the Women of Our Association,” Tri-State Tobacco Grower, July 1924.
Mrs. F.C. Beverly was active in the rural reform movements that swept the countryside in the early twentieth century. For example, she founded the Whitmell Country Life School in order both to improve country children's educational opportunities and to teach the benefits of modern agricultural techniques. In her contributions to the "Farm Women's Page," she regularly tried to build support among farm women by linking domestic concerns to the problems of the auction system. In a fictional piece, for example, "Farmer John" answered a northern traveler's query about his wife's interest in the success of the Cooperative by recounting the disappointments of the auction system. "[M]any's the time I've come back home to Sarah with tears in my eyes—and 'chicken feed' in my pocket," he explained to the tourist.

Once in '98, I think it was, when two or three of the children had begun to take some notice of Santa Claus—I went to town with a big load of tobacco and a list of toys and goodies that Sarah had her heart set on havin' for the children's Christmas—but when I drove back home the next day—Santa Claus had been to a funeral, and he didn't hear none of the singin'—I didn't even have nuf shoes and stockings to go 'round, and Sarah had to make that full-sleeve jacket her pa'd give her before we was married do her another winter. You know I told you that woman had grit—well, then she had need for it, for the children was cryin' for candy and I had 'bout give up hope—but she came to the rescue of me and the children, in spite of her havin' to give up more than the rest of us, for she needed clothes and shoes to go to the Meetin' House, she needed a new cook stove bad, and 'twas nearly a quarter of a mile to the spring—let alone the carpet and table lamp she'd planned on puttin' in the parlor.

While many farm women likely needed no reminder of their plight, such a story sought to build support for the Cooperative by making them see the auction system as the cause of their misery.29

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As she did in this story, Mrs. Beverly regularly couched appeals for support of the Tri-State in terms that placed women's labors at the center of the solution to the problem of rural decline. “Do the women of the South have any influence, or should they stand off and say, ‘The man’s job is to market the crop’?” she queried in a 1923 article. “I contend that any problem affecting the economic and social betterment of the country is a joint problem, and requires the best thought of men and women in its salvation.” She encouraged farm women to think more broadly and “see cooperative marketing as a problem in citizen-making,” not simply as a narrow agricultural issue. The movement, she suggested, was not just about low prices, but about “everything that tends to uplift society.” She further asserted that women could help by learning about cooperative marketing and teaching its value to their family, friends, and neighbors. “We should study, then write about them, talk them, live them.” In a later article, she again told women their support was invaluable, not only to the success of the Cooperative, but to the entire reform agenda. “Shall this be left to the men alone?” she asked. “No, women are now citizens, and we shall share equally the failures and successes of our State and nation.” Farm women needed to help, she argued, but in ways that complemented the work of male farmers. “There is a responsibility on women that cannot be delegated to father, husband, or son. They have their own responsibilities and we must shoulder the woman’s part and do it in a womanly way. It is not womanly to stand off and complain of bad roads, poor schools, dead churches, corrupt politics. The blame is on us for such conditions, and it is certainly womanly to put our shoulder to the wheel and work with the men for betterment of these conditions.”


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Other female writers similarly appealed to farm women in the pages of the *Tri-State Tobacco Grower*. Like Mrs. Beverly, these writers often assumed that women had a special duty to buttress male farmers’ support of the Cooperative. Florence Hamer Stubbs, for example, reminded women that their support was needed in getting the Cooperative off the ground. “The *success or failure* of the farm man in this great effort depends to a great extent on the active interest and cooperation of us farm women,” she pleaded.

We must make the adjustment with them, we must make it possible and easy for them to make the adjustment, though it may mean some temporary sacrifices. We must help them over disappointments or grievances that may unintentionally and unavoidably come in the first year or two of the gigantic business undertaking. We must help them to see clearly, to act wisely, to keep the faith! It is our adjustment, our success or failure along with them. We cannot escape the responsibility but we may lose our biggest opportunity.

A similar letter from “A Virginia Woman” couched women’s obligations to encourage the organization’s male members in religious terms. “I beg you strong members to ‘bear ye one another’s burdens.’ Comfort your brothers that are weak, educate them, show them the error of their way, and bring them back into the fold before they have done something which they will always regret.”

Since the Tri-State counted only male growers as members, it is impossible to measure farm women’s responses to such appeals, but it is clear that many gave their energies in support of the Cooperative. Reports sent to the *Tri-State Tobacco Grower* indicate that the promise of cooperation sparked the interest of women across Virginia and the Carolinas. These women organized meetings for the locals, served as secretaries in the meetings, wrote letters, poems, and songs supportive of the Cooperative, and did

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hundreds of other tasks to build the membership and keep it faithful. In many cases, they formed the backbone of the organization as the Cooperative’s work faced increased challenges.

While Mrs. Beverly encouraged farm women in the pages of the *Tri-State Tobacco Grower*, Elizabeth Kelly traveled around the region teaching women how to make themselves active in the local meetings. She encouraged them to begin auxiliaries and to involve the entire family in the organization. The program of one local’s meeting reprinted in the *Tri-State Tobacco Grower* records that the meeting consisted of a “Local Program” aimed at the local’s male members, an “Auxiliary Program” for women that included a time period for instruction in meat curing, an “Agricultural Club Program” for children that followed the 4-H Club’s format, and a “Social Program” that brought all of the groups together following their respective business meetings. A report about another local stated that its weekly meeting “was well attended by both men and women,” who all listened to the home demonstration agent’s presentation on the benefits of egg production.32

Not only did women attend meetings, some, with Kelly’s encouragement, developed meeting programs. Maude Barnard Browne submitted a meeting program to the *Tri-State Tobacco Grower* that included time for community singing, a Bible lesson, and several poetry readings in addition to discussion of regular business. The meeting’s theme, “Love of Fellow-men,” aimed to remind flagging members of their obligation to honor their contracts. A Warren County, North Carolina, farm woman echoed this sentiment in a song entitled “Come to the Co-op Meeting.” Set to the tune of the

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traditional hymn "There's a Church in the Wildwood," the song encouraged farmers to remain loyal to the Tri-State by hearkening to the promise of cooperation: "If the farmers would all pull together / There would be no more mortgage on the mule; / They would be as rich as city people / And could send their girls and boys off to school." Through their contributions, women broadened the Cooperative's vision by reminding members that their support of the Tri-State was about more than getting a few more pennies per pound for their tobacco.33

Women's participation, however, extended beyond creating programs and writing songs. A number of women held local posts, a move supported by the leaders of the Cooperative. "One of the best locals we have has a woman for secretary," the editor of the Tri-State Tobacco Grower reported in 1924. "She helps the chairman plan an interesting program for every meeting and members of this local do not break their contracts because they know what it is all about and have their eyes fixed on the goal." Mrs. A.W. Ferabee of Davie County, North Carolina, similarly served as her local's secretary and regularly submitted reports of her local's activities for publication. Women's participation through these activities gave the Cooperative much of the energy and focus it needed to maintain many of its local chapters.34

Despite the Tri-State's recognition of women's importance to the organization and the willingness of its leaders to include women in its leadership, supporters of women's involvement in the Cooperative's activities brought with them cultural


34 Tri-State Tobacco Grower, June 1924. For Mrs. Ferabee's reports, see Tri-State Tobacco Grower, March 1923 and July 1923.
assumptions about the proper channels for women’s work. While their field labor helped see the crop from seed-bed to market, their home work mitigated the burden of low tobacco prices, and many actually controlled some portion of the crop, farm women were largely seen as secondary, supportive actors in the production of bright tobacco. The proper forum for women’s activities, the Tri-State’s leaders believed, was in auxiliary organizations that would support the activities of the locals. “[T]he women should form organizations, or have auxiliaries to the locals, in order that they may assist in this movement,” Mrs. F.C. Beverly wrote in 1923. The next year, in its letter to the locals, the Cooperative’s headquarters staff suggested a similar channel for women’s interest in the work of the organization: “We wish to urge upon our members the importance of arranging for the women of our communities to hold special meetings of their own during the men’s business sessions and to aid the men, as only the ladies can in making a real success of the social programs which follow the important business of the local.” The leaders and supporters of the Cooperative believed women’s help was critical to the success of the organization, but felt this help had to be channeled through outlets that did not upset assumptions about women’s proper place in tobacco agriculture.35

The Cooperative’s policy regarding the tobacco grown by the wives and children of members also reflected organizers’ assumptions about women’s proper roles. A farm woman who controlled a portion of a crop signed over to the Cooperative, they believed, was obligated to sell her share at the Cooperative with the rest of the crop. “There is no reason why the tobacco sold by the wives and children of our members should be sold other than through the Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association,” they explained, “and

each member will be expected and required to deliver the tobacco grown by his wife and
children to the point which he has chosen as his delivery point.” When farm women
complained about the policy, Tri-State leaders offered letters like that from Virginian
Lillie Smith, who gushed over the first payment she received from the Tri-State after her
husband took her crop to be sold cooperatively over her protests, to diffuse their anger by
reminding them of the greater purpose of cooperation. “I am colored woman,” Smith
explained, “and hope that every colored woman and man will join the association at once
if they market tobacco, for we have fed Mr. Warehouseman for a long time, and his
auction gang.”36

Despite, or perhaps because of, cultural assumptions about the proper roles for
women in the Cooperative, farm women infused the Tri-State’s project with a missionary
fervor. The labor these women expended in bringing in their tobacco gave them a vested
interest in the price their families received for their crops, but their concern for the
success of the organization extended beyond the hope for a few more dollars at harvest.
They linked the Tri-State’s mission to the broader push for rural reform, making it a
vehicle for not only higher prices but also broader uplift. While many of the male leaders
also spoke of the Cooperative’s mission in such terms, it is clear that farm women
demanded that the organization follow through on its rhetoric.

It is very easy, however, to overstate the amount of support the Tri-State
Cooperative received. In reality, most tobacco farm families never joined the
Cooperative; many who signed the contract, did not remain faithful to it. A 1925
estimate of the total tobacco marketed through the Cooperative showed it handled about

16.5 percent of crop, a far cry from the broad-based support organizers had hoped to build across the bright tobacco belt. In earlier years support had been greater, but frustration with a payout system that never paid farmers all the money due them, concerted campaigns by warehouse owners to discredit the Cooperative’s leaders, rumors of poor accounting and corruption, and the outright intimidation of some members all helped to erode support for the organization over time.  

The challenges the Tri-State faced in keeping male farmers loyal to their contracts only made it more difficult to interest the mass of farm women in the Cooperative’s work. While the inclusion of women’s activities in pages of the *Tri-State Tobacco Grower* indicates that many farm women were active in the Tri-State, it also suggests that the Cooperative’s leaders believed that the organization needed to reach more women. “Take your wife to your local meeting,” the editor encouraged male farmers in 1924, “she should be more interested in co-operative marketing than you are because the success of our association means a better life for her and the children.” The promise of cooperation obviously had reached some, but not all farm women.

Even more disconcerting to the Cooperative’s leaders than apathetic farm women, however, was the prospect that some women willingly undermined the Cooperative’s goals. Some, like South Carolinian Amy Harris, were frustrated with rules that limited their ability to market their share of the crop. “I’m a poor girl and am 21 years old,” she wrote to the Cooperative, “and my father is a member of the Tobacco Association. I

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37 In 1925, the Danville Tobacco Association reported that the entire bright tobacco belt had produced 423,287,000 pounds of tobacco, of which an estimated 70,000,000 pounds had been delivered to the Cooperative. See President’s Report, 1925, Reel 2, DTAR, LVA.

38 *Tri-State Tobacco Grower*, June 1924.
want to know if I can sell mine on the outside. I want all of my money at the time....I think being I am 21 years old I ought to have the right to sell my tobacco.” Her appeal received the customary response that selling through the Cooperative would benefit her more in the long run.39

Other farm women, meanwhile, helped their husbands to sell their tobacco fraudulently outside the Cooperative. Despite laws that made it illegal for a farmer to knowingly sell his tobacco under another’s name, dozens of cases of farmers selling their tobacco in their wives’ names arose as farmers who had joined the Cooperative grew frustrated with the its system of paying for the tobacco over time. It is not entirely clear that farm women always supported these fraudulent sales—if a farmer wanted to use his wife’s name, there was little a wife could do to prevent him—but the complaints of some of the Cooperative’s members indicate that many believed that these women were responsible for undermining the Tri-State. “There are women, too numerous to mention,” one Virginia farm woman complained in 1925, “who are claiming that they own the team and everything (or allowing the men to say they do, which amounts to the same thing) in order to put the tobacco on the auction floor, and there are others who ‘claim’ to be hiring men of the family to make tobacco for them.” It is impossible to know the extent to which these farm women debilitated the Cooperative by allowing their husbands to sell tobacco in their name; nevertheless, their lack of support for the Cooperative was seen as unladylike, un-Christian, and counter to women’s “natural” interests in the improvement of their home and families. “I’ll say you are no Christians

39 Amy Harris to T.B. Young, Tri-State Tobacco Grower, September 1923.
who will do such things," the Virginia writer concluded, "or will even allow them to be
done by members of your family without doing all in your power to prevent it....\textsuperscript{40}

\textit{Conclusion}

An organization devoted to reshaping the economics of tobacco marketing is in
many ways an odd place to look to understand the centrality of farm families to tobacco
agriculture. Yet, the history of the Tri-State Tobacco Growers' Cooperative reveals that
farm women were central to the bright tobacco economy that dominated the Old Belt.
Farm women's labor was crucial to the production of the crop; at the same time, dealing
with the poverty of low prices fell largely on their shoulders. The Tri-State's organizers
and supporters understood this and they reached out to farm women to enlist their
support. They did so in terms that highlighted farm women's domestic concerns: the
challenges of providing for their families; the welfare of the children; their fears of falling
behind their urban sisters. Hundreds of black and white women responded to the
Cooperative's call-to-arms and helped to shape its rhetoric and its mission. No longer
just a marketing organization, the Tri-State became a missionary vehicle for providing
rural reform.

Not all, nor even most, farm women responded to the Tri-State's call for reform,
however. These women demonstrate that farm women's experiences and expectations
were varied. While denigrated as not being "true women" by some in the Cooperative,
they nevertheless were as integrally tied to tobacco agriculture. However, they believed
the ready cash offered on the auction floors best met their interests. As the Tri-State fell
on hard times and fell behind on its payments to farmers, such sentiment grew as farm

\textsuperscript{40} Letter from Mrs. W.E. Blankenship, \textit{Tri-State Tobacco Grower}, August 1925.
women recognized their families needed money in hand more than promises of a better future.

The fact that farm women could be in such a position of authority when it came to their family's crops demonstrates the unique relationship between families and tobacco. Male farmers, to be sure, held ultimate legal authority over the products of their land, but when it came to the family's crop, custom dictated that the family all have a part. This linkage of family and tobacco retains to this day a strong pull among those who have grown up with the crop. As we shall see, however, this bond of family and tobacco could not hold forever.
CHAPTER III
FROM FARM FAMILIES TO FARMWORKERS

In 1962, a USDA official declared that tobacco farming represented the last great link to the nation’s agrarian past. “Tobacco may be providing a last stronghold for the traditional ‘family farm’ in the United States,” wrote Stephen E. Wrather, the director of the tobacco division of the USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service. He offered an array of statistics to support his claim. According to Wrather, the number of tobacco farms was growing despite a dramatic decline in the number of farms nationwide; tobacco’s comparatively high returns per acre, meanwhile, allowed tobacco farm families to survive, even thrive, as growers of other crops found themselves squeezed out by the forces of consolidation and specialization. Indeed, he argued, tobacco farmers benefited twice: they could adopt new technologies without losing the unique culture of tobacco farming. “While personal attention is still the byword for the tobacco farmer, improved methods and equipment have enabled him to get bigger crop yields and a higher cash return per acre.” In other words, the continued labor-intensiveness and high costs of raising the crop were not burdens but blessings that guarded tobacco farm families from the dislocations so many other farmers faced. “What does the future hold?” Wrather asked in conclusion. “Indications are that there will be a continuing decline in the number of small and medium size farms and that fewer and fewer families will earn a
living from the land. However, the historical place of tobacco in American agriculture is expected to remain stable.\(^1\)

Wrather was not the first to note the persistence of family farming along tobacco road, nor was he the last to depict tobacco agriculture as an almost mystical link to the past. Journalists and other observers have long depicted tobacco farms, especially those in the Piedmont, as places time seemingly forgot. The Old Belt, one observer wrote in the early 1940s, “gives up slowly and reluctantly old songs, old sayings, old ways of thinking and doing.” Modern reporters seemingly cannot help from falling back on this same image, never failing to note tobacco’s long ties to the region. For their part, growers, aware of the image’s political power, have had little reason to debunk it. The emotional linkage of tobacco and family has made the image of the family tobacco farm all the more powerful and timeless. Against this backdrop it is compelling to grow wistful about the disappearing family tobacco farms of the Piedmont.\(^2\)

The problem with this image is how little it reflects reality. While it is true, statistically speaking, that tobacco farms are (and historically have been) relatively small, that they are largely operated by the families that own them, and have been in these same families for generations, they are not necessarily the family farms most imagine. Obscured by the small size and quaint beauty of these farms is the reality that tobacco

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farms are eminently modern agricultural enterprises. Moreover farm families have had to adapt to varied market forces, state policies, and technological innovations that have encouraged the rationalization and regimentation of tobacco agriculture. In other words, the farm families of the Virginia-North Carolina Piedmont have not been immune to the pressures farmers both in the United States and around the world have confronted as industrial priorities have reshaped how food and fiber are produced. In this light, the Old Belt's tobacco farms are not repositories for the agrarian past, but sites of agricultural modernism.

Nothing makes this more readily obvious than the transition from family labor to hired farm labor in the second half of the twentieth century. An immensely labor-intensive crop, tobacco has always required a steady supply of labor throughout the year. From the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, the majority of Old Belt growers met these labor requirements by using the unpaid labor of their entire families. By the 1960s, however, the dominance of family labor began to wane as rapid shifts in the tobacco economy and the consequent changes in federal policy later made it increasingly difficult for families to make a living from the land. Many turned to public work and farmed on the side. Others, however, expanded their production and turned to hired labor to work the fields. By the 1990s, nearly every Old Belt grower relied on some form of hired labor, often Latino migrant workers or Mexican guestworkers brought in specifically to work the fields. There is, of course, nothing unique in the use of hired farm labor, but this is quite the point. Tobacco farms are not icons of the agrarian ideal; rather they are examples of the power of agricultural capitalism that force us to rethink our notions of the American family farm.
Bright Tobacco and the Family Farm

In the Old Belt, family and tobacco have been almost synonymous, but the history of family tobacco farms is, predictably, much more complex than this might suggest. First, it is important to note that family tobacco farming itself is a product of the modern tobacco economy. The family farms of the Piedmont are products of history not timeless institutions. For over two centuries, chattel slaves, not independent yeomen, grew the bulk of the nation’s tobacco. Four years of bloody war freed the slaves, forever wrecking the dark tobacco economy they had supported. In its place developed another tobacco economy, one based on the yellow leaves chewing tobacco and, more importantly, cigarette manufacturers demanded for their products. Small landowners were among the first to make the transition as demand accelerated and prices skyrocketed. One observer noted the changes around Winston, where small, subsistence farms had been predominant. Tobacco production had been “small” and reliant on “primitive methods,” he explained, but the introduction of new technologies and techniques had “completely revolutionized the whole system” and led to the “abundant production of fine yellow tobacco.” Promoters heralded the high prices and seemingly endless potential of bright tobacco, drawing thousands of small farmers in search of land and opportunity to the region. “The young man which intends to make agriculture his business can find no where so inviting ... as ... Granville [County],” one booster exclaimed in 1880. “The opportunities presented were never better than now.” Within thirty years, the number of farms more than doubled and thousands of new acres were brought into cultivation.
Farm sizes, meanwhile, remained relatively small and families largely worked their own land without hired labor.\(^3\)

Not all landowning families worked their land, of course. Many larger landowners, some of them the descendants of the region’s antebellum planters, had no interest in working the land themselves and instead hired laborers or turned over production to tenants, often sharecroppers. Granville County planter Ed Currin, who established his tobacco plantation on land received from his father during the bright tobacco boom of the 1880s, for example, leased land to five tenant families – two white and three black – and hired anywhere between six and eighteen “hands” to work his own crop. While he managed his crop closely – “I was the boss of my land,” he told an interviewer in the 1930s – there is little evidence he did any work in the fields. Many smaller growers, too, rented land to tenants and hired wage laborers, but did not rely on their labor entirely.\(^4\)

Old Belt tenancy varied greatly with time and across the region. In general, tenancy increased between 1880 and 1910, declined as a result of the high prices brought on by World War I, grew again during the long agricultural depression of the 1920s and early 1930s, and began its slow decline in the 1930s as the federal tobacco program pushed prices upward. At the same time, tenancy increased as one moved west to east, and was concentrated most heavily in the region’s former plantation counties, where, in part as a result of the legacy of the plantation economy, economic disparities were

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\(^3\) Cameron, *A Sketch of the Tobacco Interests in North Carolina*, 14. Hunter, *Useful Information Concerning Yellow Tobacco*, 41. In 1879, Old Belt counties claimed 55,169 farms totaling nearly 2.7 million acres. By 1909, there were 85,206 farms totaling nearly 8.3 million acres. During this period, the average farm size fell from 151 to 97 acres. Compiled from 1880 and 1910 censuses of population, United States Historical Census Data Browser.

\(^4\) “Old Josh Dover [Ed Currin],” FWP Papers, SHC.
starker, land ownership was less broad-based, and there existed a larger population of landless workers. Most tenant families rented the land on shares, working the land for half of the crop and providing little but their labor, but a significant minority rented land for cash while providing their own implements and stock (see Table 1). In fact, it was not uncommon for landowning families to lease farms, both for cash and on shares, to expand their own crops or gain access to better tobacco land. Census enumerators counted any farm operated by a tenant as a tenant farm, ignoring the fact that some tenants owned their own farms. This means that some number of farms recorded to be worked by tenants may not have been worked by people that would meet the more traditional definitions presented here.

Table 1: Tenant Farms by Rental Agreement, Old Belt Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage of Farms Rented for Share of Crop</th>
<th>Percentage of Farms Rented for Cash</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from Decennial Censuses of Population, 1880-1940

By World War I, every phase of tobacco farming centered on the family, and family-operated farms seemed to be permanent features on the land. “In this area, the labor used in producing a crop is furnished almost entirely by the operator and his family,” one USDA study reported. “Thus the size of the tobacco crop is largely
determined by the amount of family labor available.” While the report captured the reality of family labor, its official distinction between adult male farmers’ work from that of their families distorted the reality on the vast majority of farms. The war was a boon to families across the Piedmont. Long beset by low returns for their crops, Old Belt farmers reveled in record high tobacco prices. Many paid off debts, purchased land, and bought everything, including the kitchen sink, to improve their homes. One Surry County observer noted that because of the high prices “most of the farmers are getting out of debt, and in many cases buying new homes.” The war economy, however, exerted pressure on these farms. Expanded industrial opportunities lured thousands of young men and women to seek better opportunities, destabilizing the labor supply on many farms. One county extension agent hinted at the desperation this sparked in many farm families when he reported that “[t]he young boys are not satisfied working some other man’s land...so many of their fathers are buying land in order to keep their sons with them on the farm.” It is impossible to know how well this strategy worked, but only so much could be done to make tobacco farming an attractive alternative to wartime industrial wages.5

Whatever stability landowning and tenant farm families had been able to attain during the war were quickly eroded by a disastrous market in 1920. Low tobacco prices had long challenged families, of course, but the drop in the market following World War I rattled growers as never before. Prices fell by nearly half in a year, panicking families that had extended their credit to buy new equipment, land, and the amenities that had

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long eluded their grasp. In the early 1920s, the farmers' cooperative helped prices some, but increases were largely the result of buyers bidding higher to undermine the cooperative. Prices fell again once the cooperative failed in 1925. "The...tobacco farmer is just as badly discouraged to day as they [sic] were in 1920 or any other year in the past," one North Carolina grower claimed in 1928. And things only got worse. Prices fell further in 1929 and continued to slide through the 1932 season, when they reached prewar lows. Many farmers sold their crops "below the cost of production," one extension agent reported, "leaving the average farmer in a rather poverty stricken condition." The depressed conditions placed increasing pressure on growers of all classes. Sharecropping grew and, according to one observer, "quite a few" landowners "sold out and left the country." Young men left home in search of "something better than farming" rather than enter the ranks of sharecroppers as so many of their fathers had done.6

The flight of sons and daughters from the land placed a great strain on farm families. Migration to the cities and towns of the Piedmont was not new, of course; the region’s tobacco, textile and furniture factories, as the next chapter shows, had been drawing in workers from the countryside for decades. The pace accelerated with hard times in the countryside, however. While many maintained ties with family on the farm, returning on weekends and during busy seasons to help, the exodus destabilized the labor situation on the region’s farms. "Most of our young men have gone to [the] cities," one

6 Sidney Frissell surveys answered by James Fulton, 24 February 1928, and S.T. Morris, 1928, TGCA Papers, SHC. In 1928, Frissell mailed surveys to farmers who had been involved in the organization of the Tobacco Growers' Cooperative Association in the early 1920s in order to document the impact of the decline of the cooperative in 1925. "Narrative Report of the County Agent, 1929: Stokes County, North Carolina," ESAR, RG 33, NA.
Virginia farmer complained. The pressure to take public work, another observer explained, “causes unrest and dissatisfaction” with farm work, leading more to “quit the farm…and labor in factories.” The “steady cash income” of the region’s factories, he later noted, caused the “farming population to drift” from the farms which, in turn, “unbalance[d] the situation.” Prices may have rebounded in the 1930s with the introduction of the New Deal’s tobacco program, but the foundation upon which the family farms had been built was shaken.  

The New Deal’s tobacco program fundamentally restructured the marketing of tobacco. In order to reduce overproduction, bring supply in line with demand, and thus raise prices, New Dealers instituted an allotment program that limited the number of acres of tobacco families could grow. If growers agreed to abide by the limits of the allotments they received guaranteed “parity” prices for their tobacco. Growers who refused to sign the reduction contract or grew more than their allotted acreage were subject to steep taxes on their entire crop. Based on a given farm’s average tobacco production between 1931 and 1933, allotments were assigned to the farm on which the tobacco had been grown, not the farmer who grew it, and could not be transferred from one farm to another.  

On the surface, the program was a resounding success. Tobacco prices rebounded and many growers were able to make a living from their lands again. Observers soon

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8 For background on the establishment of allotments see, Anthony J. Badger, Prosperity Road, chapter 3. The term “parity” became the popular in the 1920s, as farmers nationwide pressed for farm prices that would allow them to maintain purchasing power equivalent to non-agricultural sectors. See John D. Black, Parity, Parity, Parity (1942; New York: De Capo Press, 1972), 45-66.
noted that the reductions had loosened tobacco’s stranglehold on the region’s economy by encouraging increased home production of food crops. “[T]he ideal of a self-sufficing farm [has been] more nearly realized than ever before,” one extension agent reported. While he certainly overstated the power of the tobacco program, he nevertheless understood what it meant to farmers who had wrestled with debt and dependency on credit for so long. “The increase in prices which has resulted from the program has meant in many instances the saving of homes from foreclosure, it has meant the return to school of children who had been withdrawn for lack of adequate clothing and books, it has meant in many cases, the lifting of a burden of debt which has caused untold worry, amounting almost to hopelessness.”

The program was not without its detractors, however. Some simply detested the idea of federal controls on agriculture and made their objections known despite the program’s success in raising prices. North Carolina grower W.S. McKinney, who blasted the tobacco program as “obnoxious” and “unjust”, complained that his son’s three-and-one-half-acre allotment unfairly limited his initiative. He “has a wife, 3 bright little kids, two big mules that cost him 600 dollars, 2 tobacco barns, a share cropper who has a wife and 3 little kids[,] making ten on his farm,” McKinney explained. “How can he stand it?” Others agreed with the program, but not its implementation. Some complained it needlessly burdened the smallest growers and pressed for exemptions for small family farms. “Justice is justice,” expounded one grower, “[reductions] should not apply to the small farmer...[E]very man that already has a barn on his place should be allowed at least 3 acres” since this “is considered about the capacity of a barn.” Others argued that the allotment system was ill-fitted to conditions in the Old Belt, where, they believed,

9 “Narrative Report of the County Agent, 1935: Charlotte County, Virginia,” ESAR, RG 33, NA.
topography and tradition had combined to make agriculture more complicated than in other bright tobacco-growing areas. "90% of eastern [North Carolina] lands are cultivable, while not 30% of upper piedmont is possible tobacco land – and much of that low," one grower complained. "Why handicap the piedmont?" On top of all this, rumors of one grower getting a better deal than others swirled in every neighborhood, leading to protests that leaving allotment determinations in the hands of local committees opened the door for corruption. "[I]f the adjustment is left up to our Co. Agts. and their co-workers," one grower complained, "it will continue to be ruled by politics and graft. Some will get more favors than justly due them while the little fellow will suffer."¹⁰

Such complaints revealed that the New Deal's tobacco program was at best a limited means of salvation for farmers. In developing the program, New Dealers had concerned themselves largely with raising prices and gave little attention to its implications for the social and cultural structures of tobacco agriculture. (In fact, many viewed these structures to be backward and would have welcomed change as a positive good.) It quickly became apparent that New Deal policies had unintended consequences for the region's traditional labor system. Even government agents who loudly praised the tobacco program nonetheless recognized its profound effect on the region's family farms. "[I]t should be said that there are a large number of farmers with unusually small

¹⁰ W.S. McKinney to Josiah Bailey, 18 May 1938, W.L. Spoon to Josiah Bailey, 11 December 1937, Myrtle S. Jones to Josiah Bailey, 29 November 1937, Josiah William Bailey Papers, Special Collections, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (hereafter cited as Bailey Papers, Duke University). C.M. Tyson to Harold Cooley, 14 November 1935, Harold Dunbar Cooley Papers, Collection 3801, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (hereafter cited as Cooley Papers, SHC). These reductions required the approval of two-thirds of the growers, who voted the plan up or down in annual (later tri-annual) referenda held in the major market towns. Growers had to accept the plan in order to get guaranteed parity prices. For this reason, growers have overwhelmingly supported the referenda every year but one, 1938, when they voted down the 1939 plan and prices fell. Historically, the Old Belt's growers have been the most supportive of the program with typically more than 90 percent voting to accept the plan.
allotments who are indeed hard pressed to make ends meet,” one extension service agent explained. “In fact there is some doubt as to whether they can continue to operate on such a small allotment, especially in cases where large families are involved.”¹¹

Reductions especially hurt tenant families. Many landowners, in an effort to maintain their own viability, cut tenants’ acreage first and absorbed acreage they would normally rent into that which they normally worked themselves. One Caswell County grower, for example, cut his two tenants’ acreages in half, from four to two acres, which “result[ed] in a lowered income and much idle labor.” While this landowner did what he could to keep both families on his land, others simply stopped hiring tenants. With less tobacco to grow, landowners did not need and could not support the same number of sharecroppers. Between 1930 and 1940, the number of sharecropper-worked farms fell by over 15 percent. While not as harrowing as in other regions – in large part because of the limited extent of sharecropping in the region – it nevertheless sent many families scrambling for work. According to one observer, “tenants moved from one farm to another in order to get a larger acreage of tobacco…than their pro rata part would have been on [the] farm from which they moved.” When news got out that Eula Jones’ Wake County property was available to rent on shares, requests from interested tenants descended on her. “I have dozens and dozens of applications for farms every fall by people who are just begging for a place to live and work,” another large landholder boasted.¹²

¹¹ “Narrative Report of the County Agent, 1935: Pittsylvania County, Virginia,” ESAR, RG 33, NA.
¹² Robert E. Graham, Improving Low Incomes on Tobacco Farms, 54. From 1930 to 1940, the number of sharecroppers in the Old Belt fell from 40,189 to 33,863, a decline of 15.7 percent. Interestingly, the number of cash renters increased by over 24 percent during the same period. Some of these were sharecroppers who moved up the “tenancy ladder,” as it were, but most were likely landowners who simply rented additional land in order to get access to the allotment. Compiled from 1930 and 1940 censuses, United States Historical Census Data Browser. For sharecroppers’ search for land, see, for example, Troy
For tenants and landowners alike, the domestic dislocations were just as profound. With less tobacco to grow, families had less need for, and less ability to support, older children except in the busiest seasons. Families of all sizes, landowners and tenants alike, scrambled for additional income. Taking the advice of federal extension agents, some tried to diversify into other money-making agricultural enterprises, but more tried their luck with public work. In 1935, for example, over a quarter of Virginia’s Southside farmers reported working off the farm during the previous year. “We have a continued breaking down of farms into almost a ‘Henry Ford System’,” one extension agent reported from around Winston-Salem, “work in the factory part of the time or some members of the family work in the factories and some on the farm.”

Taking public work was not without its drawbacks, however, and not all families embraced it so readily. Public work destabilized traditional labor patterns. Time spent in the factory was time not spent in the fields, and in the labor-intensive world of tobacco farming this put more pressure on those at home. Besides that, older children who left the farm might never come back, not only leaving parents without needed laborers during peak seasons but irrevocably altering family relations. Person County grower S. T. Dunn, for example, complained that his small allotment would not be enough to support his children and worried that they would have to take factory work to survive. “I haven’t got but 30 acres of land,” he explained to Senator Josiah Bailey. “I live near a cotton mill & a weaving mill and I don’t want my boys to go to public work[.] I never have & I need


them & want to keep them.” While we cannot know what Dunn’s sons wanted — many young people relished the opportunity to leave the farm behind — it is clear that Dunn resented the specter of increasing encroachment of public work on his family farm. He blamed the tobacco program for aggravating the problem. “All I want is a crop for my boys to encourage them to stay with me. 4,000 lbs. of tobacco at 21 cents is not much inducement for six in a family to make any money.”

Fear that their children would not continue the family tradition of farming tobacco permeated Old Belt growers’ response to the New Deal tobacco program. While the region’s growers overwhelmingly supported the program, they did so, like Dunn, with nagging fears that the program endangered traditional patterns of labor and community that tied together families across generations. Experience has shown that their fears were overblown, but not irrational, for beginning in the 1940s, the erosion of traditional family farming systems accelerated. Pressed by labor shortages, farm families experimented with other forms of labor and adopted modern agricultural practices. This is not to say, of course, that family farming disappeared overnight. Indeed, family labor remained a critical component of Old Belt tobacco production for decades. Yet in the 1940s, spurred by the upheavals of World War II, labor patterns began to shift. The realities of tobacco agriculture — its nearly year-round labor regimen, its general resistance to technological innovations — made the process slower than in other crops, but the seeds were germinating nonetheless.

Transition to Hired Labor

World War II brought a new era of prosperity to the Old Belt. Wartime demand sent prices skyrocketing. In Danville, prices nearly doubled during the war. Wartime

14 S.T. Dunn to Josiah Bailey, 2 January 1938, Bailey Papers, Duke University.
rationing limited the translation of these high prices into consumer goods, but many
farmers paid off debts, purchased land, and improved what they could around the farm.
"From all indications farmers are not spending as much money unwisely this year as
compared with the first war period," one extension agent reported, proudly noting that
many of the black farmers he worked with "will receive a clear title or deed to their farm
that they never dreamed of so soon from the sale of tobacco this year." 15

The war years were not without their problems, however. Farm families across
the region experienced extreme disruption as wartime demand for labor accelerated the
pace of migration off the farms. Thousands of men and women left for the armed forces,
of course, but even more left for work in the factories and on the military bases that
sprouted up throughout the area. The exodus depleted farms of their prime workers,
leaving only older people and young children on the land. While they praised their
children's service to the war effort, farmers could not but complain about the loss of their
best workers. The Old Belt had never been a destination for seasonal migrant workers,
most of whom spent their time moving through eastern North Carolina towards Virginia's
Eastern Shore, so the loss of other traditional sources of hired labor – sharecroppers and
local farm laborers – to government or industrial work only compounded the labor
shortages. Farmers grumbled that they could not compete with industrial and
government wages. "It seems...that the farmer is ask[ed] to do more than his share when
he [has] to compete with public work that pay[s] so much more for labor," one farmer

15 From 1933 to 1939, prices on the Danville market averaged just over 21 cents per pound; from 1940 to
1945, the average price was nearly 37 cents per pound, making for an increase of roughly 75 percent. By
1945, however, prices had risen to over 45 cents per pound, easy doubling some of the best years of the
1930s. Compiled from President's Report, 1984, Reel 2, DTAR, LVA. "Narrative Report of the County
Agent (Negro), 1942: Rockingham County, North Carolina," ESAR, RG 33, NA.
complained, adding that “[l]ots of farmer[s] are talking about selling their farms and
going to defense projects.”¹⁶

To address the shortages, many farm families intensified their use of traditional
sources of labor. As in earlier decades, the relative proximity of industrial and military
centers to the region’s farms allowed some families to split time between field and
factory. Given the intensity of industrial production and the rationing of gasoline and
tires, however, this was an unreliable source of labor. Instead, most drew from more
local sources. Women and children became more conspicuous in the fields, as did older
people. Work swaps became more common as neighborhoods pulled together to see
everyone through. In Orange County, for example, one grower who owned a tractor
“arranged to plow for some who needed plowing in the spring for work which he would
need later in the summer.” In other cases, teenagers and younger children jumped at the
opportunity to make a few dollars working in the fields. “There seemed always to be
many children...who had only to be approached by the farmer who needed help or some
one else with the offer of a little cash and they would help very willingly,” one observer
reported.¹⁷

Many growers, meanwhile, invested in what labor-saving technologies they could
obtain to mitigate the pressures of labor shortages. Demand for tractors and other
equipment spiked, even as they became increasingly difficult to obtain. Growers
replaced the fire pits on their curing barns with coal- or fuel-operated stokers to obviate
the need to cut wood all winter. Others turned to the chemical defoliants and insecticides

¹⁶ J.W. Powell to Josiah Bailey, 5 October 1942, Bailey Papers, Duke University.
¹⁷ “Narrative Report of the County Agent (Negro), 1943: Orange County, North Carolina,” “Narrative
Report of the County Agent, 1943: Durham County, North Carolina,” ESAR, RG 33, NA.
extension agents introduced to save time chopping weeds and killing pests. One farm woman, overjoyed with her husband’s choice to try a chemical to control weeds in the seed bed, explained that it “looks like a blessing to us women. The Lord knows I ain’t getting any younger, and weeding a plant bed sure gives my bones a fit. It’ll give us more time, too, to take care of our early canning, and gives Jim more time to get a good garden started if we don’t have to weed over these beds a couple of times.” Labor-saving tools were a boon in many ways, but they also introduced new technological dependencies that reshaped tobacco agriculture for decades to come.  

Unable to obtain enough labor despite their best efforts, growers increasingly turned to government agencies for help in securing farm labor. The nation itself, they reminded their leaders, had an important stake in making sure agricultural production – including the production of tobacco for cigarettes – remained strong for the sake of the war. “I want to know how we can grow more food for the government [when] all of our boys are being drafted into the Army,” asked one farmer shortly after the U.S.’s entrance into the war. In response to pressure from growers, local extension offices instituted a number of measures, such as organization drives, to recruit as much local labor as possible. In Surry County, for example, the local agent organized “labor registrations” at the county’s schools in order to find workers. “[E]very boy and girl who would accept a job on a farm in Surry County was asked to register....After this survey was made and information compiled it was turned over to the U.S. Employment Service to use in helping farmers secure additional labor.” According to the agent, organizing the students in this way was a resounding success. “Several farmers reported that they harvested their

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18 Quoted in “Narrative Report of the County Agent (Negro), 1944: Guilford County, North Carolina,” ESAR, RG 33, NA.
tobacco and peach crops almost entirely by going to town each morning, loading up with boys and girls, taking them out to work and taking them back at night.” In Davidson County, the county agent reported similar success in coordinating Victory Farm Workers with local growers. “The Workers enabled the farmers to save hay on time, cultivate corn..., harvest small grain..., [and] harvest fall crops with as little delay as possible.”

Local initiatives like these were an important source of short-term labor for many small growers, but they could not solve growers’ longer-term, seasonal labor needs. Of the seventy-two workers the Halifax County extension agent placed with farmers in 1943, for example, only twelve worked for more than a month, the others helping only at harvest. While he had been able to place 10 state prisoners on farms for the summer, there simply was not enough labor willing to work long term on the farms, at least not for the wages farmers could or would pay.

The problem of getting sufficient farm labor was not, of course, unique to the Old Belt or even the tobacco belts as a whole. While tobacco farmers may have needed laborers for longer periods of time than other growers, farmers nationwide bemoaned their ability to attract a stable labor force. In 1942, the federal government signed a bilateral agreement with Mexico to establish a program for Mexican laborers to come to the United States to alleviate labor shortages. The success of this bracero program led farmers along the eastern seaboard to press for the expansion of the program. In March 1943, Congress responded by passing the Farm Labor Supply Appropriation Act, which

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20 “Narrative Report of the County Agent, 1943: Halifax County, Virginia,” ESAR, RG 33, NA.
allowed for local extension agents to coordinate farm labor supply with the newly-created War Food Administration’s labor division. This wartime program’s primary mission was to meet labor demands by matching the available domestic labor with demand. However, the act also provided for the employment of POWs and the importation of offshore workers from the Caribbean to supplement – and in many cases supplant – the nation’s existing migrant agricultural labor force.\textsuperscript{21}

Old Belt growers quickly took advantage of the program, albeit not on the scale of growers in eastern North Carolina. Extension agents arranged to have both German POWs and Bahamian workers work for landowners in a number of counties. Large landowners who typically relied on sharecroppers cried loudest for these workers. In Caswell County, for example, where, traditionally, sharecropping families worked more than half the farms, landowners bemoaned the exodus of sharecroppers and the dearth of workers to replace them. “[I]t was impossible to get any migratory labor,” the county extension agent reported in 1944, adding that, because the county was “strictly rural, there were not any part time laborers” available from the region’s towns and cities. Caswell landowners therefore jumped at the chance to hire laborers through the farm labor program. In 1945, the extension agent secured forty-six Bahamian workers at the request of fourteen county growers in addition to a number of German prisoners of war. The next year, thirty-two farmers sought the help of the extension agent who was able to secure fifty-eight laborers. “From July 26 to August 28 these Bahamians worked

\textsuperscript{21} For background on federal farm labor policy during the war, see Cindy Hahamovitch, \textit{The Fruits of Their Labor} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), chapter 7.
approximately 1000 man days in the harvesting of tobacco,” he explained. "This extra labor was highly beneficial to the farmers using it."²²

Old Belt growers continued to use the federal farm labor program until the government turned the importation of workers over to private management in 1947. Without federal support for the program, the cost of importing workers - growers had to pay recruitment costs, advance money for travel to the United States (both of which they could recoup from workers during the season), and provide housing and return transportation as the end of the season at no expense to the workers - was simply not cost effective for the majority of growers, who needed only a few hands during peak seasons. At the same time, New Deal allotment policies combined with tobacco’s resistance to mechanical harvesting - the need to handle leaves in a way that would not damage their appearance on the auction floor made implementing mechanized harvesting equipment nearly impossible until the late 1960s, when loose-leaf sales obviated the need to keep leaves pristine - to keep farms small. Unlike the vegetable growers along the coastal plain or the apple growers of the Shenandoah who needed dozens of workers and could not afford not to import them, the average Old Belt grower simply could not afford the costs of importing the two or three workers he might need. For most families, then, making do with what traditional sources of labor were available remained their only option.²³

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²³ The Farm Labor Supply Appropriation Act was renewed until 1947, when the government gave bureaucratic approval for growers to strike their own contracts for labor. In 1952, this policy was formally instituted in subsection h, part ii of the Immigration and Nationality Act (McCarran-Walter Act). This program, which was updated and renewed by the 1986 Immigration Restriction and Control Act, continued...
This is not to say that the labor situation was stable in the years following the war. Larger landowners who relied on tenants found themselves pinched by a dearth of people willing to work on shares. Out-migration had reduced the pool of available sharecroppers dramatically, while relatively high tobacco and low land prices allowed many to buy their own land. "The returning veteran along with good price tobacco has paid has roped in some of our 'Land Happy' speculators, as well as some of our land cramped farmers," one black extension agent reported, adding that a number of the growers he worked with had been able to purchase substantial tracts of land. Between 1940 and 1950, the number of owner-operated farms grew by almost ten percent, even as the total number of farms declined. Landowners complained constantly about the difficulty of finding "good tenants." North Carolinian W.C. Gentry placed the blame on the ready availability of off-farm work, explaining that, "Wages has got so high that it is hard for farmers to get tenants to work the land anymore." The only thing that prevented even more sharecroppers from leaving was the near-total exclusion of black workers from many of the region's industrial jobs, especially those in textile plants, until the late 1960s.24

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24 “Report of the County Agent (Negro), 1946: Halifax County, Virginia,” ESAR, RG 33, NA. Between 1940 and 1950, the number of owner-operated farms grew from 52,990 to 57,780 while the total number of farms fell from 92,790 to 87,531. The decline in tenant farms was more dramatic, falling over 23 percent, from 39,626 to 30,408. The steepest drops were in those counties where the tenant population had either easy access to off-farm work, easy access to land, or both. In Nottoway County, for example, the decline in tenancy, which fell by more than half during the decade (450 to 203), was largely due to people leaving for work on the nearby military installation or in Richmond and surrounding cities. Overall, county lost 23 percent of its farms (1,595 to 1,226) and experienced a slight decrease in population (15,556 to 15,479). Meanwhile, in Davidson County, the decline in tenancy was likely from a combination of people taking public work and buying land. Between 1940 and 1950, the number of tenant-operated farms fell by nearly 60 percent (681 to 276) while the number of owner-operated farms jumped by just over 19 percent (2,613 to 3,119). During the same period, the tenancy rate declined from 20.6 percent to 8.1 percent. Davidson County was a growing industrial center, and many landowners worked small tobacco crops on the side, successfully combining access to work with access to land. All figures compiled from 1940 and 1950 censuses of population, United States Historical Census Browser. For conditions in Davidson County, see, "Report of the County Agent, 1958: Davidson County, North Carolina," ESAR, RG 33, NA. W.C. Gentry
Indeed, nothing about tobacco agriculture was stable in the 1950s and 1960s. While the bright tobacco belt did not undergo the degree of rapid transformation that painfully reshaped cotton agriculture, farm families faced a number of crises. The most pressing was the continued reduction of allotments. By the early 1960s, federal administrators had cut allotments deeply in an effort to raise tobacco prices by reducing the amount of surplus tobacco being produced. In 1955 alone, regulators introduced a 20 percent cut in allotments, meaning that growers could grow and market only 80 percent of their allotted acres without paying heavy penalties. While growers were ultimately responsible for voting in the cuts, they did so only under the duress of knowing that there would be no price supports at all without approval of the plan. For many, like the larger growers represented by the Farm Bureau, putting up with deep cuts was simply the price of keeping the tobacco program and its guarantee of parity prices in place.25

For smaller growers, however, the costs were too high and many quit planting tobacco altogether. In 1953, over a fifth of Forsyth County's landowners with allotments left their land completely unplanted, and the situation was similar in other counties with ready access to public work. Others tried hiring sharecroppers, but many more leased their allotments to other growers hoping to pull together enough acreage to make a living. Before 1962, this system was quite haphazard since allotments had to stay with the farm

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25 For Farm Bureau support of the 1955 proposed cuts, see Carl T. Hicks to Carl Durham, 20 December 1955, Durham Papers, SHC. Hicks was the Chairman of the North Carolina Farm Bureau and, based on the recommendation of the Bureau's Flue-Cured Tobacco Advisory Committee, he pressed Representative Durham to support the cuts, arguing that "tobacco growers who want to keep our tobacco program sound" would support the cuts.

on which they had been established. The introduction of a lease and transfer program, which allowed growers to rent allotments without having the use the land on which the allotment had been established, caused allotment renting to increase dramatically. By 1972, about 30 percent of flue-cured allotments had been leased by one grower from another. When Congress terminated the program in 1982, estimates indicated that at least half, maybe even 70 percent, of allotment owners rented their allotments to other growers. While the system created a great deal of frustration among those forced to rent allotments, it nevertheless represented a good deal of income for many small landowners.\(^{26}\)

By the 1960s, it was clear that tobacco production was becoming increasingly specialized and moving away from family farming. Landowners faced pressure to

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\(^{26}\) C.E. Bishop, W.R. Henry, and A.L. Finkner, *Underplanting Tobacco Allotments: Factors Affecting Tobacco Planting Decisions in Forsyth County and the Northern Piedmont*, A.E. Information Series, No. 42 (Raleigh: North Carolina State College, 1955), 2. In North Carolina’s northern Piedmont counties overall, 7.3 percent of farms with allotments planted no tobacco in 1953. The counties with above-average percentages of farms with unplanted allotments (Forsyth, 21.8; Yadkin, 12.4; Guilford, 11.4; Durham, 11.2) were the most urbanized, while those with the lowest percentages of farms with unplanted allotments (Person, 0.8; Caswell, 1.5; Granville, 1.6; Vance, 1.6) were among the most rural and remote. Not all growers in these rural counties were growing their own allotments, but many found more opportunity to rent their land to other growers wishing to expand their acreages. In some of the more urbanized counties, much of the land was sold for development, so while the allotment remained attached to the land until it was absorbed by the ASCS for redistribution, there was little chance it would be used. The Old Belt as a whole had much higher percentages of unplanted allotments than other regions. The same study found that in North Carolina counties outside the northern Piedmont, only 4.3 percent of farms with allotments had no tobacco planted. Johnny D. Braden, “Economic Analysis of Tobacco Quota Transfers,” paper delivered at the National Tobacco Advisory Committee Meeting, 15 November 1972, Harry F. Byrd, Jr. Papers, Collection 10320, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia (hereafter cited as Harry F. Byrd, Jr. Papers, UVA). A study of the 1979 season conducted by the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service found that 58 percent of North Carolina’s 116,000 tobacco allotments were rented out by their owners. A 1982 General Accounting Office study found that nearly 70 percent of flue-cured growers rented their allotments. See Raleigh *News and Observer*, 16 February 1982, 7 May 1982. Allotment renting has been one of the most hotly-debated parts of the entire tobacco program. Lease and transfer had been implemented to allow growers who wished to expand their operations to do so while protecting small growers and maintaining the traditional boundaries of the tobacco belts. Growers forced to rent allotments complained that the system allowed many who were not farmers and had little connection to tobacco to profit unfairly at their expense. Over the years, growers had pressed unsuccessfully for rules requiring non-growers to return their allotments for redistribution. By 1982, enough frustration with the system had built up that Congress eliminated lease and transfer and replaced it with a system that requires the lessee to rent the land and not just the allotment, but allows renters to put farms together when counting acreage.
expand their tobacco production or diversify their operations, despite the romanticization of the family-run tobacco farm. No longer could a family expect to make a living farming five acres of tobacco. While the shift away from family units was faster and more pronounced in the tobacco-growing regions of the Coastal Plain, Old Belt growers, too, felt pressure to get big or get out. "The number of small farms," one observer reported, "is declining while the number of relatively large farms is increasing." While small landowners were not displaced overnight, the increasing difficulty of making a living from their small allotments was grinding and painful. One Virginia grower complained that his "small family size farm" was "fast going out of existence," as a result of federal policies that favored "large land owners and corporations." Other growers, meanwhile, saw federal policies as the last bulwark against the power of large landholders. "I wonder if you are aware that the young people are leaving the farm and that only older...people are producing most of the crops for Virginia," one Pittsylvania County grower wrote to Senator Harry F. Byrd, Jr. "I wonder how many very influential people own large farms...and will benefit greatly with no controls on what they produce." Whichever was correct – and to some extent both were – farming tobacco was increasingly inhospitable to family farmers.27

Only growers willing and able to cobble together enough allotments (owned or rented) to make large crops were able to withstand the challenges of declining allotments and increasing production costs. Doing this with family labor alone was nearly impossible, however, and securing hired labor was expensive. In response, growers

continued to adopt new technologies to reduce the amount of labor needed throughout the year. Guided by the Extension Service, growers applied a witch’s brew of chemicals to control pests (DDT, TEPP, TDE, chlordane, parathion), to reduce sucker growth (MH-30), and eliminate weeds (methyl bromide). They bought tractors and transplanters, leaf-stringers and bulk curers, all in an effort to reduce the amount of labor needed to prepare the fields, get the seedlings in the ground, and cure the leaves after harvest. Due to the intricacy of picking leaves as they ripened, new harvesting technologies came slower. In the late 1960s engineers at R.J. Reynolds and North Carolina State University developed the first mechanical harvester, but its use was limited by its high cost. Indeed, acquiring these innovations was not cheap, but many growers saw it as their only hope of survival. Within a generation, the most labor-intensive crop was becoming one of the most capital-intensive.\footnote{For the uses of these various chemicals, see “Chemicals Can Protect Flue-Cured Tobacco,” and “Well-Kept, Disease-Free Beds Produce Finer Flue-Cured Tobacco,” in American Tobacco Company, Producing Finer Flue-Cured Tobacco in John H. Hager Papers, Virginia Historical Society. This collection is an assortment of advertisements American Tobacco put together with help from the Extension Service and government experiment stations to tout the benefits of these chemicals. Many of the chemicals were designed to eradicate certain pests, but some, like DDT, were multi-purpose pesticides. MH-30 was the most controversial in the industry, as manufacturers said it damaged the leaves, but farmers persisted in its use. For the general euphoria surrounding the introduction of new agricultural chemicals following World War II see, Pete Daniel, Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s, chapter 4. In 1969, estimates from North Carolina indicated that mechanical harvesters cost between $3,500 and $4,500, a tobacco-stringing machine known as a “looper” cost between $1,400 and $2,000, and bulk curing barns cost roughly $3,000 each. At the same time, tobacco brought in an average of $72.79 per hundred pounds. See New York Times, 6 October 1969.}

Farming tobacco still demanded long hours of backbreaking work, but these hours were increasingly concentrated in the harvest season. A few workers could handle the average farm most of the year, but, as one expert explained, “assembling large harvest crews needed only for a few weeks during harvest became more and more of a problem for tobacco growers.” Harvest had always been the busiest season, but growers found it harder to secure traditional sources of extra labor – extended family and neighbors – to
see them through. By the mid-1960s, three-quarters of Virginia and North Carolina tobacco farms employed some sort of seasonal labor, usually migrant laborers moving up the eastern seaboard, but this was most concentrated largely in eastern North Carolina, where the consolidation of allotments by large landowners had displaced thousands of sharecroppers.29

Old Belt growers adopted the use of seasonal migrant farm labor more slowly. Up into the 1970s, the Piedmont, unlike the Coastal Plain, still had a sizable rural workforce and growers retained a greater ability to draw labor from the cities during the peak weeks of the harvest. This made the Old Belt something of an eddy in the migrant stream that flowed up and down the east coast. With enough local workers to harvest the crop, there was little to pull migrants away from main stream and into the Piedmont. A 1973 survey of Virginia’s Southside counties, for example, found that “most of the seasonal workers” were “drawn from the unemployed, part-time, unskilled workers, and a large number of family workers.” Despite this assessment, it was clear that in many counties these workers were less and less interested in part-time farm work, especially as opportunities to find more regular work in industry expanded. “I have an interest in a tobacco farm in Person County…and it is getting impossible to lease or rent tobacco

29 Charles K. Mann, “The Tobacco Franchise for Whom?” in The Tobacco Industry in Transition: Policies for the 1980s, 40. USDA Economic Research Service, Direct and Contract Hiring of Seasonal Farm Labor, Statistical Bulletin, No. 478 (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1972), 4-5. Using 1966 statistics, this report found that of those hiring farm labor, nearly 90 percent directly hired the workers, indicating that many seasonal workers were hired individually or as families. Tellingly, nearly half also went through labor contractors, likely indicating an increased reliance on migrant workers brought in by labor bosses.
acres...due to the scarcity of farmers and farm labor,” complained one landowner.30

As early as 1964, Halifax County growers found it necessary to recruit teenagers in South Boston, Virginia, to get enough labor for the fields. Growers in neighboring Mecklenburg went so far as to import teenagers from outside the county through a state program that was, according to state officials at least, beneficial to all involved. “We were able to supply our tobacco growers with a much needed labor supply, but more than that, a group of teenagers were trained in accepting responsibilities of work and earned a considerable amount of money to help defray the expenses of the coming school year.”

As late as 1974, some school districts, including Wake County, delayed the opening of schools to adjust for a late harvest. “For the last three years, the farmers could not have harvested the crops without school kids,” said the county extension agent, explaining the delay. In many cases, these students were not even the children of tobacco growers, but neighborhood kids drawn by the relatively good wages. While the reliance on teenaged labor was not entirely new – farm kids had long made extra money working other people’s fields on the side – the importance of these kids to the harvest indicated how difficult it was to secure labor, at least at the wages growers could afford or were willing to pay.31

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31 Virginia Employment Commission, *Virginia Annual Farm Labor Report: 1964* (Richmond: Virginia Employment Commission, 1965), 8. In this case, the Virginia Employment Commission and the local Sertoma Club had sponsored the job fair that signed up the teenagers. Virginia Employment Commission, *Virginia Annual Farm Labor Report, 1970* (Richmond: Virginia Employment Commission, 1971), 13. In some ways, this program was very much other migrant labor programs overseen by the state. Growers had to build state-approved dormitories for the teenagers and agree to pay them a certain wage. However, they
Hiring high schoolers worked for many small growers, but larger, specialized growers demanded a more reliable and, in their minds, more controllable work force. Banking on getting enough teenagers at the last minute simply did not make sense when one had a numerous acres of tobacco to handle, so Old Belt growers increasingly hired migrant workers. “It started with just a few five years ago,” a representative of the North Carolina Employment Security Commission explained in 1976. “Now there are an estimated 1,500 migrants in the central Piedmont alone.” Most of the workers were young Latino men for whom tobacco was simply another crop to be harvested. The differences in ethnicity and language compounded the workers’ status as outsiders and highlighted the shift away from the region’s traditional personalized labor relations.

Some growers attempted to make adjustments to work with the migrants, perhaps with some hope recreating the region’s traditional personalized labor relations. A few Yadkin County growers, for example, signed up for Spanish classes “to learn to work with the Puerto Ricans and Mexicans on their farms.” On most farms, however, labor relations became increasingly depersonalized as growers simply relied on the crew leaders that brought the workers north from Florida or Texas to communicate their instructions.  

Indeed, the use of these crew leaders demonstrated the extent to which tobacco labor had been loosed from its familial moorings. While some workers came of their own volition and others came as part of crews led by federally-registered labor recruiters, most had been recruited by so-called “freewheelers” who lured workers with promises of

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also had the obligation of supervising the workers outside of work. The program continued for at least three seasons. Raleigh News and Observer, 22 August 1974.  
32 Durham Morning Herald, 11 August 1976. According to this article, upwards of 75 percent of the migrant workers were Spanish-speakers, mostly of Mexican descent. Winston-Salem Journal and Sentinel, 4 May 1975. In this instance, most of the growers attending the class wanted to learn common phrases needed for tobacco work (e.g. “Do you know how to sucker tobacco?”), but this desire to overcome the language barrier, even at the smallest level, indicated that some growers were not yet ready to cede control over the labor in their fields.

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good money. The entire system, especially the use of freewheelers, had a long history of abuse and fraud, and allegations of such behavior by labor contractors soon surfaced in the Old Belt. In 1981, Caswell County authorities discovered twenty-five migrant workers living in squalor in an abandoned farm house on land they had been hired to work. The workers reported that the crew leader had taken a sizable portion of their pay - $20 upfront and 50 cents for each hour worked - and provided little in the way of food and shelter. They also accused the crew leader of holding them against their will. The farmer on whose land they worked protested that he had no knowledge of the conditions the workers were enduring. He lived on another farm a few miles away and said he believed the crew leader was responsible. “He seemed like a straight-forward guy. He said he had a license to [run a migrant work crew].” Clearly this grower had little contact with those working his tobacco, which was a far cry from the personalized family and community labor that had characterized tobacco agriculture for so long.  

In the 1980s and, especially, the 1990s, tobacco growers' reliance on migrant labor - legal and illegal - waned as they turned to imported foreign farm laborers to work their fields. Commonly known as “H-2 workers,” (so-named because of the subsection of the U.S. immigration law allowing for their importation), these workers come to the United States through the auspices of state-level growers' associations that receive permits from the U.S. Department of Labor to import workers after certifying that they cannot get sufficient domestic labor. The program, which has its roots in the World War

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II emergency farm labor program, had since 1952 allowed the importation of seasonal farm workers from other countries – Jamaica and the Bahamas largely at first, and, later, Mexico – but Old Belt growers had dropped out of the program after the war. Given a sufficient pool of local and migrant farm labor, they saw no need to bear the high costs of transporting and housing the workers. (Under the H-2 provision, growers have to pay the transportation costs of the workers and provide rent-free housing while on the farm.)

In 1980, however, Virginia’s Old Belt growers turned to the H2 program out of a desire to secure a more stable (and more pliable) labor force. Using the administrative offices of two growers’ associations that had been importing guestworkers for apple growers for decades, leading Southside growers began importing farm workers, almost all from Mexico. By 1983, they had imported thousands of the seasonal workers, who came in time for spring planting and left shortly after the autumn harvest. Growers argued that these workers represented a source of stability that they could not find by relying on local or migrant laborers. Pittsylvania County grower Tommie Willis, according to a report in the Washington Post, spoke of them as “insurance,” and claimed having them on his farm saved him the headaches of rounding up enough labor for his crops. “You don’t have workers when you need them unless you get Mexicans,” he explained.34

It was nearly another decade before growers in North Carolina’s Old Belt farmers began to import foreign guestworkers through the foreign labor program (known since 1986 as the H2-A program in reflection of its recodification in that year’s Immigration

34 Washington Post, 23 May 1983. This report indicated that between the 1980 and 1982 seasons, Virginia growers had imported between 1,200 and 1,500 workers, and that another 863 were expected during the 1983 season. These workers, the report claimed, filled about one-fourth of the available tobacco jobs.
Reform and Control Act). In 1989, tobacco growers statewide joined with farmers of other crops to form the North Carolina Growers Association and placed the state's first order for workers through the H-2A program. By 1997, North Carolina had become the largest user of H-2A farm labor, much of it in the tobacco fields. In 1999, a quarter of all H-2A certification permits were given to North Carolina growers; Virginia ranked third in the number of permits issued that year. (Nationwide, work in tobacco accounted for 42 percent of all H-2A certifications, double the next job category, vegetable harvesting.)

Like their Virginia neighbors, North Carolina growers cited the decreasing availability and reliability of domestic workers as the reason for the shift. They claimed few locals were willing to work in the tobacco fields and migrants were increasingly difficult to find. "We began using the H-2A program in 1993 after we had increasing problems recruiting workers who had been legalized by the 1986 immigration bill's amnesty program," one Guilford County grower explained. "We made the decision to go with the migrant workforce because our local labor had disappeared. So that is why we are in the H-2A program now. Our migrant labor, local migrant labor is disappearing also."

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36 "Statement of C. Stan Eury, President, North Carolina Growers Association, Inc., and Statement of Laura Smith, North Carolina Farm Bureau," Field Hearing on Issues Relating to Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Workers and Their Employers, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Workforce Protections of the Committee on Education and Workforce, House of Representatives, 12 September 1997, Newland, North Carolina, 9-10, 7. Virginia growers had long deflected criticism of their use of the H2 program by explaining that using the program was better than relying on the labor of illegal aliens, something they claimed North Carolina growers did regularly. It is difficult, of course, to know the extent to which growers employed illegal aliens, but in all likelihood growers on both sides of the Dividing Line did so.

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Critics have pointed out that the wages growers were willing to offer, not dried up migrant streams, were the biggest impediment to securing workers. In other words, no one was willing to work in the tobacco fields for the money growers were willing to pay. To these critics, the H-2A program is a way around the labor market’s own laws of supply and demand. “H-2A enables farmers – from small operators to corporate giants employing more than 600 workers – to effectively circumvent the free market, paying guestworkers as little as $6.39 an hour rather than raising hourly wages to attract U.S. workers,” investigator Barry Yeoman argued in a 2001 article.37

Additionally, what growers call stability, critics call coercion. The H2 program requires that workers stay with the grower to whom they are assigned by the sponsoring growers’ agency. If a worker leaves, he – they are almost entirely male – voids his contract and becomes an illegal alien. (This is not to say that many do not leave; estimates of desertion rates range upwards of 40 percent.) On the other hand, growers can send workers back for breaching their contract, a power that is ripe for abuse. Reports of workers being sent back for complaining about working conditions, wages, or injuries are rampant. As recently as April 2004, farm workers sued the North Carolina Growers Association for blacklisting workers who reported problems with their treatment.38

For its part, the growers’ organizations respond that they do their best to adhere the program’s requirements in the face of shifting Department of Labor policies, red tape, and, lawsuits that, according to Stan Eury, the acerbic president of the North Carolina

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Growers Association, are the result of "a huge conspiracy of liberal farmworker advocacy that includes litigation and media smear campaigns" against "law-abiding farmers."

They claim the system works better than the previous system of relying on migrant and undocumented workers and that the vast majority of respectable growers are made to suffer because of gross misrepresentations of the operation of the program as a whole. And, they claim, the program's guidelines ensure that workers on H-2A farms are much better off than those on non-regulated farms.39

Many H-2 workers would beg to differ. While there are certainly growers who are fair and build long-term relationships with workers – growers can request the workers they would like and a number workers return to the same growers every year – evidence shows that, on some farms, the working conditions are unsafe, the living conditions inhumane, and the wages below the federally-mandated minimum. Workers have even reported being compelled to labor in the fields at gunpoint. The realities of modern tobacco farm labor hardly resemble the world so many who grew up on tobacco farms remember.

The H-2A program makes it clear that the fundamental nature of tobacco labor has changed radically in the last century. While the region's tobacco farms remain largely family owned, they are no longer family operated, at least not in the traditional sense. Farmers, to be fair, often do a great deal of labor on their farms, but most have become managers overseeing large, mobile, temporary workforces who have no more stake in the crop than their wages. The popular image of the family tobacco farm remains powerful, however. While accounts of modern Piedmont tobacco farms

invariably mention the presence of hired labor in the fields, for example, the focus always remains on the fate of the families that own the farms. Given the political power it holds, growers are reluctant to dispel this image. In recent debates over how to dismantle the federal tobacco program – something growers, manufacturers, and politicians all support – small growers have skillfully used this image to demand a buyout for the allotments they will give up. Family farms, they argue, will disappear entirely as large growers put large acreages into production. While such predictions have a great deal of truth – small growers without the ability or desire to capitalize larger production will likely succumb to competitive pressure from big growers both in the U.S. and abroad – they are predicated on the assumption that small farms have remained traditional in nature.

The overwhelming dependence on hired labor on even the smallest farms, however, points us to the need to rethink what we mean when we talk about family farms. The majority of the Old Belt’s tobacco farms may be ostensibly family-operated, but they only faintly resemble the family farms that stood at the center of tobacco agriculture for so long. This shift has mirrored similar changes across the American countryside, as agriculture has become increasingly industrial in nature, and made farming tobacco less unique than it was. Farm families have driven this change, of course, but it has not come, as we shall see, without a sense of loss.
Life
CHAPTER IV

HOLDING THEIR OWN: GROWERS AND THE MODERN TOBACCO ECONOMY

In the late 1990s, auction houses across the Old Belt began closing up shop. In 2000 alone, fifteen North Carolina warehouses shut their doors; by 2002, there was only one warehouse left in Forsyth County, where dozens of burgeoning warehouses had once stood in the shadow of R. J. Reynolds' massive Winston-Salem factory. Buyers hoping to streamline production cut out the middle man and increasingly contracted with growers searching for some price guarantees in an era of declining allotments. By 2001, an estimated 80 percent of the flue-cured crop bypassed the auction houses and went directly to manufacturers. The auction system lay dying, a fact that most observed with a sense of loss. "I'm afraid the auctions are about gone, like the dinosaur," one longtime auctioneer lamented. "I thought the auction system was a good system. It worked for a hundred years." Time soon bore out his fears, although not exactly as he predicted. As part of a settlement of a lawsuit brought by growers alleging that manufacturers rigged their bids, warehouses introduced electronic bidding, and the sing-song chants that had made the auctions famous ceased. The auctioneers are silent; the end of the auction system is not far behind.¹

To many observing the decline of the market, the end of the auction is a time for sadness. The auctions seemed to be the epitome of a free and open tobacco market. At


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the auction, growers had, at least in theory, free and open access to the global tobacco trade. Except for the auctioneer, no middle man stood between a grower and his buyers. Anyone with tobacco could sell, anyone with money could buy. It was, to all who viewed it, a confusing wonder of capitalism, with all of the attendant pitfalls and promises. Growers may have cussed the system, but they seemed to relish its potential. Perhaps it is the feeling that selling tobacco will become predictable that makes so many mourn the end of the auction system.

The picture of the auction as a free-wheeling marketplace is an old one, but it hardly reflects the reality of the tobacco market in the years since the New Deal. By the 1930s, the unfettered operation of the auction market had proved disastrous for millions across the Tobacco South. Growers brought in more tobacco than the market could bear, driving down prices. Thousands of farm families lived in dire poverty; thousands more were leaving the land entirely, spilling into cities that had little to offer them. The state, newly emboldened by Franklin Roosevelt's attitude that government could, and should, ameliorate their condition, instituted reforms that shaped the market for the next seventy years. The visible hand of the state, not the invisible hand of supply and demand, regulated the market, controlling supply, augmenting demand, and setting prices. A grower still gambled, but the odds of him losing his shirt fell considerably.

For the most part, growers were happy with this system of regulation. Allowed to vote it up or down, they supported it by large majorities. The system provided a level of stability for farm families, who could know that they would receive at least so much for their crops. With its limits on where tobacco could be grown, the system also supported thousands of small growers at a time when their counterparts in other crops were
increasingly forced to get big or get out. Regulation, even critics had to admit, seemed to work well for the tobacco economy.

This is not to say that all was well for the tobacco industry in the second half of the twentieth century. The expansion of tobacco agriculture to Africa, Asia, and South America eroded U.S. growers’ global market share as foreign and domestic manufacturers alike turned to cheaper, unsubsidized foreign leaf. The link between smoking and cancer, first made official in 1964, added the burden of public scrutiny to the economic burden of competing in a global marketplace. The increasing power of anti-smoking interests in the 1970s and after only compounded growers’ feelings of isolation. By the 1990s, it was fairly easy to sympathize with growers’ complaints of being squeezed by global market forces, public antipathy, and a feeling that long-held family traditions were being cast by the wayside.

Growers were not, however, powerless victims beset by meddlesome federal regulators and overweening tobacco corporations. Growers helped to shape the federal tobacco program, prompted the state to become a buyer on the market, and partnered with tobacco companies against anti-smoking interests, all the while defending their rights to enjoy a regulated market and control their own fields. Even today, their ability to deploy federal policy in their favor remains potent. Nowhere is this better seen than in the $10 billion subsidy to allotment owners affected by the end of the tobacco program. Clearly, tobacco growers will adapt as their world changes. The Old Belt, however, will never be the same.
State regulation of tobacco production was the most important development in the Old Belt’s history. Before the 1930s, the tobacco market was unpredictable for growers. For decades, farm families planted their fields in the spring with little notion of how the market would be in the fall. Most, hoping to mitigate low prices with greater volume or, on the off chance the market was strong, cash in on high prices, planted as much as they could handle. Growers’ attempts to produce as much tobacco as possible led to perennial cries of overproduction from buyers, who pleaded with growers to focus on the quality of their leaves rather than the quantity. While such admonitions often irritated growers who believed buyers’ claims that there was too much tobacco were often little more than a ploy to keep prices low. Nevertheless, calls for reductions by growers’ organizations were common. Leaders of the Farmers’ Union in North Carolina, for example, advised growers to “cut out a crop now and then,” if they hoped to improve prices. In the wake of 1920’s large surpluses, organizers of the Tri-State Cooperative encouraged a one-third reduction for 1921. The Tri-State’s leaders even debated making reductions mandatory, but ultimately rejected the idea as impractical.\footnote{\textit{The Carolina Union Farmer}, 20 July 1911. Danville Tobacco Association Resolution, 7 February 1921, Reel 1, DTAR, LVA.}

They had good reason to doubt whether such controls could be implemented, of course. Growers, understandably, were reluctant to voluntarily reduce their crops unless they could be sure all others would follow along. The presence of sharecroppers, who saw only half the profits from their crops and would likely be unable to survive steep reductions, compounded the problem. In addition, the technical considerations necessary for measuring and enforcing controls presented an obstacle to effective control, as did the lack of enforcement mechanisms for penalizing growers who cheated. Aside from the
technical issues, growers' unhappy experiences with attempts to organize, especially the
Tri-State's failure in 1925, made it seem sure that anyone trying to convince growers to
reduce production would receive little more than cold stares. In the late 1920s, it would
have seemed impossible to get growers to sign up for anything.

By the early 1930s, however, successive years of miserable prices led growers
across the Old Belt to call for crop controls once again. In 1930, the newly-created
Federal Farm Board sponsored an effort to form a cooperative that garnered some support
among Old Belt growers. In 1931, North Carolina growers pressed the state, which had
already sponsored a "Live at Home" program to encourage growers to plant food crops
instead of tobacco, to impose mandatory tobacco controls, a move Virginia growers
applauded. "A number of tobacco growers in this section have expressed themselves in
favor of this or any other method that would curtail the size of the tobacco crop,"
reported the South Hill Enterprise. A meeting of growers in Boydton, Virginia, went so
far as to call for a fifty-percent reduction in tobacco acreage, provided growers in the
Carolinas and Georgia agreed to do the same. That same year, growers in Stokes County,
North Carolina, pledged to cut twenty percent of their crops.3

These efforts did produce some reduction in the crops coming to market, but not
enough to raise prices. Low prices in 1932 led federal authorities to add tobacco to the
list of commodities covered by the sweeping Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933.
Passed in the heady urgency of Franklin Roosevelt's first hundred days, the Act expanded
the state's reach into the nation's countryside as never before by establishing the
legislative groundwork for crop controls for the nation's chief commodities, including

3 South Hill Enterprise, 5 November 1931, 12 November 1931. "Narrative Report of the County Agent,
1931: Stokes County, North Carolina," ESAR, RG 33, NA. For background on these programs see Badger,
Prosperity Road, chapter 1.
cotton, rice, corn, and wheat; tobacco was the only crop on the list that was neither a food nor fiber, but its critical role in the rural economy of so many places, especially in the South, made its addition necessary in the eyes of New Dealers. Plans for controlling the extent of tobacco production quickly followed passage of the law.

The resulting federal tobacco program relied on carrots and sticks to get growers to reduce acreage. Each landowner was assigned an allotment based on past tobacco acreage. Each year, growers would then agree, through referendum, to limit their production to a certain percentage of this allotment. Growers who agreed to reduce production received guaranteed minimum prices for their crops, while those who did not or refused to live by their contracts incurred sizable penalties at sale time. While the original plan was invalidated when the Supreme Court declared the larger Agricultural Adjustment Act unconstitutional in 1936, the program established by the second Agricultural Adjustment Act in 1938 followed much the same pattern: growers who agreed to abide by their allotted acreages could expect to garner guaranteed, or parity prices. The program enjoyed widespread support across the tobacco South, but especially in the Old Belt. While managed by the state, the program was technically voluntary. Disincentives, not legal action, compelled growers to sign up their crops, and two-thirds of growers had to approve the controls in annual (later tri-annual) referenda before they were binding. In the Old Belt, approval of the program usually topped 90 percent.4

4 For a detailed account of the design and implementation of the tobacco program see, Badger, Prosperity Road, passim, and Charles Pugh, “The Federal Tobacco Program: How it Works and Alternatives for Change,” in The Tobacco Industry in Transition: Policies for the 1980s, 13-29. Growers voted down controls on the 1939 crop because delays in the announcement of the 1938 quotas had created a great deal of confusion and frustration. Low prices generated by a large volume of tobacco in 1939 convinced growers to vote for the program in 1940, and they supported it in every subsequent referendum.
They had good reason to support the program. Besides price supports, the allotment system froze tobacco agriculture in place. Before the 1930s, the Old Belt had faced increasing competition from growers further south who were giving up cotton as competition from western growers increased. Had the progress of bright tobacco agriculture not been frozen by the assignment of allotments to the land (rather than the landowners), the bulk of bright tobacco production likely would have expanded further south. Old Belt growers, with their small acreages, would have been harder pressed in their competition with large growers and, in all likelihood, would have had to turn to other crops. In some ways, then, the tobacco program was a savior for thousands of small Old Belt growers. This was hardly accidental. The architects of the federal tobacco program took the needs and desires of small and medium landowning growers in the Old Belt, an important Democratic political constituency, into account as they planned the system.

The program of allotments and parity prices was neither the first nor the last time the state intervened in the tobacco economy, however. Other programs joined the formal tobacco reduction program to create a larger government bureaucracy that shaped tobacco agriculture in important ways.

The first of these programs was the Federal Grading Service, instituted to provide standard grades on all tobacco sold. Traditionally, grading had been a rather ambiguous process in which local knowledge trumped any true standardization. Good tobacco was seen, not described. This process left a great deal of room for dispute between buyers and sellers. Complicating matters was the fact that buyers used one set of criteria for grading, growers another. Federal grades were designed to bring some order to this
aspect of the market, not least so the state could assess the workings of the market with
greater precision. In 1916, Congress passed the Federal Warehouse Act to provide for
the inspection of agricultural warehouses. While this had little immediate impact on
tobacco warehouses, by 1925, the U.S. Department of Agriculture attempted to use the
law’s provisions to establish standard grades for tobacco. Hotly contested by
warehousemen and buyers, but welcomed heartily by growers, the grades represented one
of the state’s first attempts to bring some order to the market.5

The first federal graders went to work in 1929 on the auction floors in one market
town in each growing belt. Federal grading was, at first, voluntary and non-binding, and
growers had to pay to have their crops graded. For this reason, relatively few used the
service. At South Hill, Virginia, the Old Belt’s only market with government grading
that first year, only 19 percent of growers had their crops graded. This number
underestimates, however, the extent to which the service piqued growers’ interest. In
October, the South Hill Enterprise reported that “many farmers from a distance have
visited the market and conferred with the government graders in reference to the grading
work.” The county extension agent reported that a total of 355 growers had attended the
nine meetings held to explain the federal grading process. The following year, the arrival
of two graders on Henderson, North Carolina’s, auction floors generated interest from
growers. “Use of this service is steadily growing in favor,” the local extension agent
reported. “At the opening of the season very little tobacco was graded but the graders are
putting Government grades on from twenty to twenty-five thousand pounds per week.”
In Orange County, growers who had traveled to the New Belt market town of Smithfield
to see the graders at work petitioned the Mebane board of trade to apply for graders. The

warehousemen, "after long and deliberate consideration informed us that they did not favor it," the county agent explained.  

It is hardly surprising that the warehousemen rejected the proposal. They resented any incursions on their traditional domain and argued that graders could add nothing but another level of bureaucracy. The Danville Register opined that the arrival of federal graders, "fresh from the files of the Department of Agriculture, will add a touch of comedy to the tragedy of low prices which the farmers are finding everywhere."

Resistance only grew stronger in the 1930s when Virginia congressman John Flanagan proposed a bill to make grading a mandatory part of the New Deal's tobacco program. "We do not believe Government grading makes tobacco companies pay more for tobacco," one warehouseman explained. Buyers by and large agreed with this assessment. One claimed that compulsory grading "would represent a tremendous outlay on the part of the Government and would serve no constructive purpose." Rather than making the market more efficient, he continued, "it would seriously hinder and impede the orderly marketing of tobacco." Some of the fiercest resistance came from supporters of the federal tobacco program. J. Con Lanier, a powerful Greenville lawyer and planter who, as assistant to tobacco division head John B. Hutson, helped devise the allotment program, argued that the program was simply a ploy to undermine the auction system—something he and Hutson had steadfastly refused to do when planning the tobacco program. "The enemies of the auction system of selling tobacco are giving this Bill their hearty support," he boomed in a published flyer sent to members of Congress, adding that

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the proposal "is not being advocated for the benefit of the tobacco grower; it is merely an
attempt to make a political saddle horse out of the tobacco program for politicians to
ride."7

Growers soon made their voices heard, however, and they spoke overwhelmingly
in favor of the program. For too long, they complained, farmers had been at the mercy of
the buyers; the system had to be changed. "The practice of farmers having to dump their
tobacco on the warehouse floors, taking what they are offered without having any
conception of what it is worth from day to day should be stopped," one grower wrote.
Federal grading, supporters explained, created a level playing field for growers.
Members of the Granville County Pomona Grange believed that the service had a
"tendency to stabilize...prices and to protect farmers who are not familiar with
the...grades and prevailing prices." Another North Carolina landowner agreed, writing
that the system allowed him to send his tenants to market without having to worry that
they would not receive the best prices. "I have my crop graded and know that I was well
paid by doing so. A glance at the Government Daily Report[, and] one can tell what his
grade[s] of tobacco are selling for from day to day." Virginia growers who had worked
with the graders at South Hill praised the system’s ability to thwart pinhookers and shady
buyers by allowing grower to sell their tobacco “with out loss through speculation and
manipulation.” Growers made it clear that they did not “want the return of the old

7 *Danville Register* quoted in *South Hill Enterprise*, 10 November 1927. Central Leaf Company to Josiah
W. Bailey, 13 February 1935; C.W. Lea & Company to Josiah W. Bailey, 19 April 1934, Bailey Papers,
Enacted,” undated published flyer (c.1935), in Carter Class Papers, Accession Number 2913, Albert and
Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia (hereafter cited as Glass Papers, UVA).
auction system of tobacco,” but a regulated marketplace. Hardly victims of government intrusion, they were the state’s champions.8

Mandatory government grading ultimately became a reality on auction floors across the tobacco belts. Flanagan’s bill passed in 1935, but litigation held up implementation until the early 1940s. By the end of World War II, grading was in place, and it quickly became an integral part of the auction system. Grading Service representatives accompanied buyers and extension agents in their meetings with growers. In the mid-1960s, warehousemen protested proposals to reduce graders to part-time status. “I am sure you realize the tremendous importance of the Inspection Service to the marketing of tobacco,” the managing director of the Bright Belt Warehouse Association explained in a letter to the Secretary of Agriculture, “and unless relief is granted, it is our firm opinion that aside from the terrific economic hardship which will result to the employees of the Service, substantial damage will accrue in the markets which will be detrimental to the entire industry including growers, buyers, the price support program, and warehousemen.” Even the program’s onetime arch-foe, J. Con Lanier, came to see it as beneficial and necessary.9

What convinced Lanier of the system’s value was the evolution of the tobacco program during and after World War II. The tobacco program had been built on two pillars: production control and minimum prices. As long as a grower limited his


9 “Meeting with Old Belt Growers, South Hill, Virginia, April 2, 1968,” American Tobacco Company Meeting Minutes, http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/bqq80a00, Legacy Library, UCSF. F.S. Royster to Orville L. Freeman, 28 April 1966, Harry F. Byrd, Jr., Papers, UVA. For Lanier’s ultimate support of the program see, Badger, Prosperity Road, 254, n. 32.
production by staying within his allotment, he could receive a minimum price, commonly
known as parity, for his crop. During the early years of the program, parity was achieved
by making up the difference between the parity price and what a grower received by
providing direct subsidy payments. In 1939, however, the program shifted when British
buyers left the auction floors due to the exigencies of the war. Unwilling to let the
disappearance of these important buyers undermine the fragile tobacco program, federal
administrators worked out a plan for the government to purchase tobacco on the market
for later sale to Great Britain. This program continued during the war, with the U.S.
Department of Agriculture’s Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) buying leaf on the
auction floors and reselling this to Lend-Lease suppliers for sale abroad. Skyrocketing
demand during the war, however, made the need for parity prices nearly obsolete. Price
ceilings replaced price floors.10

The collapse of prices immediately following the war created a pressing need for
continuation of the wartime system. As with other successful wartime agricultural
programs, responsibility for managing the program quickly shifted to private enterprise.
In the summer of 1946, the Flue-Cured Tobacco Cooperative Stabilization Corporation, a
grower-owned cooperative, took over management of the program. Stabilization, as it
came to be known, purchased whatever tobacco manufacturers did not purchase at parity
prices using CCC loans, processed, stored, and then resold the tobacco to manufacturers
to pay off the loans. This arrangement fundamentally altered the position of the
government on the auction floors. Rather than a referee to negotiate between buyers and
sellers, the position to which it had assigned by the tobacco program, the federal
government now functioned as a buyer of last resort for growers, albeit through the

auspices of a private corporation. Stabilization may have purchased and processed the leaf, but it did so with federal dollars.

The federal government's new position as tobacco buyer soon revealed the critical need for standard grades. The Stabilization Corporation was tasked with buying all tobacco that failed to garner parity prices no matter its quality. For better grades, this was no problem; lower grades, on the other hand, presented a real problem. If Stabilization was forced to pay the full parity price on low-grade tobacco that it could not resell, the cooperative would have trouble paying back its loans. In response, a program allowing for sliding parity prices based on grade was established. Growers would receive one parity price for higher quality leaves and a lower price for lesser quality leaves. Making such distinctions called for a standardized scale. In order for the state to function in an environment based largely on local knowledge, the local knowledge had to be standardized and classified. Knowing good tobacco when one saw it could no longer suffice as a measure; instead, quantifiable measurements were necessary. The grades laid down by the state gave the market the legibility Stabilization needed to ensure that it was paying the proper prices for what it received.11

In time, it became apparent that simply grading crops was not enough. Stabilization found itself forced to purchase low quality tobacco that would not sell at any price. The program had worked reasonably well in its first decade. Most of the tobacco the cooperative purchased made its way back into the system relatively quickly. By the late 1950s, however, the program encountered difficulty finding buyers for its stocks. By

1959, only 28.3 percent of its 1955 stocks and 43.7 percent of its 1956 stocks had been sold, and the 1957 crop sat largely in storage awaiting buyers. The fate of the 1958 crop was no better: only 2.7 percent had moved in the five months it had been up for sale. The inability to move the stored tobacco took its toll on the cooperative’s finances. By 1959, Stabilization owed the CCC nearly $372 million in principal alone (about 37.5 percent of the money it had borrowed since 1946) and over $11 million in carrying charges for tobacco in storage. (Until the late 1960s, the cooperative leased redrying services and storage space from private interests.) Stabilization was not in immediate danger, affirmed L.T. Weeks, the cooperative’s general manager, but it had reached a “crossroads” that demanded “some careful and sound thinking.”

Much of the problem, Weeks explained, was the large volume of poor-quality leaves Stabilization was obligated by law to purchase but buyers were uninterested in purchasing, even at deeply discounted prices. “It is a recognizable fact that much of the tobacco Stabilization holds in its inventory is classified as undesirable.” Growers, he claimed, had become so used to the fact that all of their tobacco would sell that they no longer had any incentive to grow high quality tobacco. He cited five sources of poor quality tobacco: production focused on volume rather than quality; the use of unmarketable tobacco varieties; poor cultural practices; the use of unapproved chemicals; and poor preparation for market. He pleaded with growers to improve their work, warning that the program could not “continue in its present form on a sound basis” unless the problems were corrected.

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Stabilization was in a difficult bind. While it carried out federal policy, as a growers’ cooperative, it did not have the authority to compel growers to make any changes. Such compulsory measures had to come from the federal government. But even its options were limited. Little could be done to force growers to change their growing techniques. Extension agents might plead with growers to give attention to quality, but in an era of declining allotments and labor market tightness, most growers felt little compunction about growing as much as they could as efficiently as they could do it. “The Agronomy Committee feels that our tobacco farmers are fairly well informed but our big problem is to get them to use all of this information in their crop production,” one extension agent reported, adding that “the value of complete compliance to recommendations needs to be demonstrated. In addition the newer developments need to be brought to the attention of our tobacco growers, such as, new varieties, fumigation and cultural practices.” His complaint was common, but his solution was in many ways misplaced. Growers knew about new technologies, they simply used them in ways “experts” did not expect. New varieties controlled diseases, but also allowed growers to plant more tobacco per acre; new chemicals controlled bugs and suckers better than ever before, but gave growers the chance to increase their yields. Growers used these new technologies – most of which were introduced and underwritten by government agricultural research dollars in the hope of making life easier for growers – to undermine the support program keeping them afloat.  

Indeed, while the federal government program subsidized growers in an effort to reduce production, federal, state, and university agricultural engineers simultaneously had

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14 “Report of the County Agent, 1955: Lunenburg County, Virginia,” ESAR, RG 33, NA.
been helping growers increase yields in order to offset the loss of acreage. By the early
1960s, it was not uncommon to pull 2,000 pounds of tobacco from an acre of decent
farmland that might have strained to produce half as much a generation earlier. Even
Weeks had to admit that the pressures on farmers to bring yields up were great.

"Increased yields per acre have been made possible with more 'know-how,' new varieties
and research information. I have no quarrel with this. A tobacco grower who has not
increased his yield per acre since the tobacco program has been in effect has either been a
poor manager or has experienced extremely adverse conditions...." The state found its
only tool for easing this problem was a blunt instrument: acreage cuts. In 1957 alone,
federal authorities reduced acreage allotments by 20 percent, a painful cut that did little in
the long run to solve the problem. In 1965, Congress tried a finer tool linking acreage
and poundage when calculating allotments. This solved some of the problem, but not
without great pain to many in the region.15

The least painful solution was to stop forcing Stabilization to take in the kind of
leaf that would not sell. To do this, federal regulators devised the Variety Discount
Program. Enacted in 1957, the program gave Stabilization the ability to limit its liability
on less desirable varieties of tobacco by providing only 50 percent of parity. In other
words, a grower who marketed a discounted variety would receive only half the full
support price if Stabilization had to buy his crop. The goal of the program was to force
growers to quit using varieties manufacturers clearly did not want. A number of varieties
were added to the list initially and more were added later, most because some quality in

15 "Annual Report – 13th Stockholders Meeting, Flue-Cured Tobacco Cooperative Stabilization
Corporation, June 26, 1959," Tobacco Corr., ASCS, RG 145, NA.

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the leaf, often low nicotine content, had appeared in the manufacturing stage that led cigarette makers to reject it.

The Variety Discount Program marked an important shift in the state's position in the tobacco economy. For the first time, the state used its power to define the market’s standards, not simply prop up prices. By defining certain varieties as unacceptable, the federal government forced growers to change their practices virtually overnight. Like the tobacco program as a whole, force came in the form of severe disincentives, not coerced mandates. As the program evolved, it expanded to cover not only undesirable varieties, but also certain grades of tobacco that Stabilization found hard to resell. In time, support for certain varieties and grades was dropped entirely. While a rather pedestrian solution – and one that did not eliminate all of the problems Stabilization faced – the discount program nevertheless expanded the state’s role in governing the operation of the tobacco market. The federal government now regulated what growers produced, how much they produced, and the minimum price they could expect for their crops.

As might be expected, growers’ responses were varied. Switching varieties caused some discomfort for growers who had adopted varieties affected by the program in order to increase yields, reduce labor requirements, or combat various plant diseases. Coker 139, Coker 140, and Dixie Bright 244, three of the first varieties put on the discount list, had high yields, were designed to resist black shank and Granville wilt, they flowered late – meaning the leaves had more time to grow – and they produced fewer suckers. Released for planting in 1955, they appeared to be the solution to many problems confronting growers. All three also had comparatively low nicotine levels, however, which made them undesirable to manufacturers attempting to raise the nicotine
content of their cigarettes. Fortunately for growers, new breeds acceptable to manufacturers quickly replaced the discounted varieties, making the pain of the discount program only temporary.16

Not all attempts to place controls on production worked so easily, however. Beginning in the late 1950s, manufacturers put pressure on Stabilization and the federal government to end the use of maleic hydrazide (known commonly as MH-30) on tobacco. First synthesized in the late nineteenth century, MH-30 was discovered to regulate plant growth in 1949. Agricultural scientists soon discovered that it worked well for controlling the growth of suckers on tobacco. It could not have come at a better time for growers reeling from the increasing difficulty of securing farm labor through the summer months. Old Belt growers, already lamenting the increasing exodus of young people from the countryside, heartily accepted the new chemical wonder. “We are expecting an increase in the use of this material in the future,” one county reported in 1954. By the early 1960s, the product was in wide use across the nation. “If you told me to go anywhere flue-cured tobacco is grown in this country to find a grower that does not use MH-30, I wouldn’t know where to find him,” claimed one Wake County grower. “It’s an economic thing with us. We are trying to make a living.”17

Manufacturers, however, quickly made it known that they had no interest in buying tobacco treated with MH-30. As the New York Times explained, “cigarette companies and the dealers like MH-30 as much as Carrie Nation liked a good sipping

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whisky.” They claimed the chemical not only killed the suckers but damaged the leaves and made them “heavier, slicker, and harder to blend.” It also knocked the sugar-nicotine ratio out of balance, “adversely affect[ing] the flavor and aroma” and reducing the “filling power” of the tobacco. They hoped the chemical could be banned outright, as it had been in Canada and Southern Rhodesia, but short of that they pressed for a labeling system that would identify tobacco treated with MH-30.18

Since buyers were not happy with MH-30, neither was Stabilization. In a free market, growers simply would have had to stop using MH-30 when buyers refused to purchase tobacco treated with it. In the state-regulated market, however, no such compulsion existed. Stabilization had to buy all excess tobacco, even MH-30-treated leaf, whether or not it could resell it, so growers could still unload their leaf on the market. L.T. Weeks complained that the MH-30-treated tobacco it had been forced to buy had been nothing but trouble. “Regardless of the advantages from the use of MH-30…it is a fact that [its] use...caused many millions of pounds of tobacco to come into the inventory of Stabilization from the 1958 crops which would have otherwise have gone into trade channels.” Not only did it cause more leaf to come in, its special character also required Stabilization “to establish special factory grades” so it would not be mixed with other, non-treated tobacco. “To date,” he lamented, “not the first pound of this tobacco has been sold and no interest has been shown in it whatsoever.”19

Unlike with the undesirable varieties of tobacco, however, Stabilization found that its hands were tied when it came to MH-30. Congressional action was needed to add

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MH-30-treated crops to the variety discount program, but support for such a change was lacking. In 1960, the Tobacco Subcommittee of the House Agriculture Committee held hearings on MH-30, but concluded by directing the U.S. Department of Agriculture to study the problem further. Produced the following year, the USDA’s study agreed with manufacturers’ claims: MH-30 affected leaf color, altered chemical composition of the leaves, offered more challenges to manufacturing, reduced filling capacity, and adversely impacted taste. Nevertheless, the USDA ruled out proscribing MH-30 because a ban would irreparably hurt growers who had few other options. Unwilling to offend growers or manufacturers, the USDA concluded the report in true Washington fashion, suggesting that an “expanded research program should be developed to find methods of sucker control acceptable to both farmers and industry.”

Congress apparently had heard growers’ voices on the matter and refused to upset this constituency. Growers refused to give it up and quickly turned to their elected officials when it became clear that manufacturers were going to press for its prohibition. “Don’t let them outlaw MH 30 on tobacco,” was one grower’s concise message to North Carolina Old Belt congressman Horace Kornegay in 1962. Congressman Harold Cooley, who represented North Carolina’s tobacco-heavy fourth congressional district and sat as chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture, reported that he “received dozens of communications opposing outlawing” MH-30. “I have not received a single

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communication from a tobacco farmer which opposes the use of this labor saving chemical.”

For the most part, growers largely disagreed with manufacturers’ claims that MH-30 damaged tobacco. North Carolina grower John C. Williamson called MH-30’s opponents on their claims that it damaged the leaves. “I defy...any living man to make a positive identification or selection of MH-30 treated tobacco and hand-suckered tobacco in its cured stage,” he challenged. An anonymous writer pressed a similar point. “At first they claimed that MH-30 produced tobacco leaves that were ‘thick, toady, slick, and soggy;’ but, if that were a valid objection, the companies of course had the simple remedy of instructing their buyers not to buy tobacco which was ‘thick, toady, slick, and soggy.’ Now these same companies have shifted their position and admit that, as far as physical characteristics go, their buyers generally cannot tell the difference between MH-30 tobacco and other tobacco.”

Growers’ letters reveal that the entire issue was about more than whether they could use a given chemical. Age-old frustrations bubbled to the surface, revealing that the tobacco program had not eliminated the friction between growers and buyers. The anonymous writer argued that it was the chemical’s potential to cause a “reduction in filling capacity” that most worried buyers, not its effects on taste or aroma. Their talk about quality, he argued, was just a cover for their fear that “it may require more tobacco to make the same amount of cigarettes,” forcing them to buy more from growers.


22 John C. Williamson to Horace Kornegay, 8 March 1963; Anonymous, “Memorandum of Use of MH-30 on Tobacco,” undated, Kornegay Papers, SHC.
Williamson similarly chalked up their desire to get rid of MH-30 to manufacturers’ greed. “With the high profits and large dividends the companies are paying, we feel that the companies can make this adjustment without serious trouble,” he wrote. Farmers, he continued, “do not have the labor to hand-sucker tobacco.” Such charges that manufacturers wanted to buy even less must have resonated with growers already hurt in the late 1950s by reductions in tobacco usage caused by the addition of filter tips – which reduced the volume of tobacco in each cigarette by roughly a quarter.23

Objections to MH-30 also echoed decades of buyers’ complaints that growers produced too much low-quality tobacco, and it appeared to some that manufacturers were using the chemical’s supposed side effects as a ploy to reassert their ability, diminished by government grading, to depress prices by downgrading a grower’s crop. Growers’ letters seethed with resentment. One North Carolina grower taunted cigarette makers with their own slogans. Manufacturers, he wrote, “complain and depress the m[ar]k[e]t when they buy and are always talking about quality being inferior, but when they are selling it[’]s quite a different story. ‘It’s the tobacco end that counts,’ ‘Golden rich mellow tobaccos,’ Tobacco too good to filter,’ and so it goes, they all have their slogans. They don’t tell them it’s the same tobacco with MH 30 or disc[ount] variety not even to say anything about the stems or floor sweepings. I believe anyone can see it’s the same old trick of the trade used all down through the ages.” The anonymous defender of MH-30 blasted the companies for their complaints that chemically-treated tobacco created too many problems for the industry using similar language. “[W]e all know that these companies showed remarkable ingenuity in accommodating their blending processes to

23 Anonymous, “Memorandum of Use of MH-30 on Tobacco,” undated; John C. Williamson to Horace Kornegay, 8 March 1963, Kornegay Papers, SHC.
the use of ‘re-constituted’ or ‘homogenized’ tobacco (stem materials, sweepings, etc. which were formerly thrown away but which now make up a sizable per cent of some cigarettes).” 24

Growers’ vocal support for MH-30 obviously arose from a desire to assert control over the fields and the market, but complaints by buyers and Stabilization about the quality of the leaf coming to auction also struck a raw nerve culturally. Growers had always been sensitive to suggestions that they did not give enough attention to growing good tobacco. To call a grower’s tobacco into question or accuse him of taking shortcuts was deeply insulting. Their responses to manufacturers’ complaints about MH-30, however, betrayed deeper insecurities about the pace of change. While growers rapidly adopted MH-30 and defended the quality of the leaf they grew with it, they were still less than sure about the larger sea change in tobacco agriculture they had to navigate. One county agent picked up on growers’ frustration. Despite rising prices, he reported, “there is some question in the minds of many of our good tobacco farmers as to the quality of the crop as a whole.” To many, quality “doesn’t mean the same as it did in years past” in large part because of the new technologies and techniques farmers had to adopt to keep up. One grower, he continued, was dissatisfied with the variety of tobacco he planted, despite the fact that it garnered more than $1,400 per acre, “because the quality of the tobacco did not measure up to his idea of what quality should be.” Nor was this grower alone, but the “many... good tobacco farmers” were also “interested and concerned about these things.” Already under a great deal of pressure to adjust traditional measures of

quality to changing agricultural realities, they were especially sensitive to buyers’
criticisms.25

By the mid-1960s, it became apparent that growers were not going to give up
MH-30 and Congress was not going to ban its use. Since their problem would not go
away, in 1964 manufacturers joined with the state to mitigate it, forming the Sucker
Control Advisory Committee. The committee’s membership and research program alike
reflected the corporate-state cooperation that increasingly elided growers from direct
participation in the development of agricultural policy in the years following World War
II. It included representatives from the largest American tobacco manufacturers, Great
Britain’s Imperial Tobacco Company, the various companies that made MH-30 and
similar chemicals, and state and federal agricultural agencies. No individual growers or
representatives of growers’ organizations were on the committee; not even Stabilization
had a seat at the table. Nor did growers participate in the evaluation of sucker control
techniques. Instead, government agricultural scientists at the various state inspection
stations grew crops using various sucker-control techniques and manufacturers carried
out various tests on the tobacco, including visual inspections, physical and chemical tests,
smoke assessments, and residue analyses, to determine which method produced the most
acceptable tobacco. Corporate and state actors, the latter of which supposedly spoke for
growers, made decisions regarding MH-30 and other sucker-control products that
growers simply had to live with.26


26 Minutes of Sucker Control Advisory Committee Meeting, 24 March 1964, Raleigh, North Carolina,
http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/cnl44f00, Legacy Library, UCSF.
No suggestion to ban MH-30 ever came forth from the committee, however. The annual tests of MH-30 and other chemicals brought them to the conclusion that few chemical options were better and some were worse. While manufacturers made it clear that they did not like the chemical, they realized that they did not have the political clout to make growers go back to hand-suckering. So instead, they tried to manage the use of MH-30 and direct growers toward other chemicals designed to limit sucker growth that did not have the same side effects. The power of manufacturers to dictate practices in the fields was never total; they were able to exert some control by exerting economic pressure on Stabilization when it came to undesirable varieties, but the sheer number of growers relying on MH-30 limited their ability to force change.27

Manufacturers’ new tacit support for MH-30 was not solely the product of the internal politics of the tobacco industry, however. Instead, growing questions about tobacco safety pushed them to largely drop their public complaints. In 1967, already confronted with growing evidence of the link between smoking and cancer, manufacturers responded with alarm when they received news that a researcher was planning to release a report that indicated that, when injected into newborn mice, MH-30 led to the development of tumors. The last thing they wanted was a chemical widely used on tobacco to be linked to cancer, if only because it would bring increased scrutiny on their products. British buyers, who were trying desperately to overturn their country’s ban on chemically-treated leaf, worried that the study results would wreck any chance of the restrictions being loosened. American buyers, too, worried. “Although everyone

27 For the work of the Sucker Control Advisory Committee, see Minutes of Sucker Control Advisory Committee, 20 April 1965, http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/zml44f00, and Raleigh, North Carolina, and Minutes of Regional Sucker Control Advisory Committee, 27-28 April 1967, Raleigh, North Carolina, http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/hrq80a00, Legacy Library, UCSF.
there seemed to recognize the magnitude of the problem, no one seemed to know what, if any, actions could be taken,” reported one attendee of the April 1967 meeting of the Sucker Control Committee meeting. In a confidential memo about the study, an American Tobacco Company researcher warned that even the slightest hint of trouble with MH-30 would cause trouble for manufacturers. “[I]f a carcinogenic potential for a substance is ‘hinted’ even in some obscure experiments on mammals,” he reasoned, “the usual Federal Governmental Action is to declare a zero-tolerance for that substance ‘pending clarification’ of the possible implications...for man.” No way did manufacturers want their products held up because of questions about MH-30.28

Given their fears, manufacturers quickly changed their tune about the effects of MH-30. What had once been a detestable bane became a harmless tool. The industry trotted out its traditional tactics to defend MH-30. Shortly after the research appeared in the journal *Nature*, the Tobacco Institute’s public relations firm issued a press release that both questioned the research model and distanced tobacco from the results by noting that “despite a high incidence of tumors in the experimental mice, no pulmonary carcinomas were found.” “This would seem to cast some doubt on the significance of MH-30 on tobacco for human beings,” the response concluded. While it is unlikely that growers saw the industry’s response as a concession to their use of MH-30 (manufacturers made it clear well into the late 1970s that they were still concerned about the overuse of MH-30),

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it did signal that manufacturers wanted to present a united front when it came to tobacco safety.29

Indeed, the most powerful glue for holding together the “tobacco family,” as the broad coalition of growers, warehousemen, and manufacturers has been called, was the heightened feeling that the industry was under assault. The various campaigns to end or limit tobacco use reinforced the sense that growers and manufacturers had common interests. Having a common enemy led each to rally around the other, if only to protect themselves.

In the years following World War II, studies emerged showing a definitive link between cigarette use and cancer. There had long been evidence that tobacco use was not healthy, of course, but these studies brought renewed attention to the health problems of tobacco users, especially cigarette smokers. A 1952 Reader’s Digest article that compiled the results of a number of studies linking tobacco and disease prompted public panic. The following year, a study that found that 44 percent of mice exposed to cigarette smoke condensate developed tumors only fueled the fire. Neither of these reports had the impact of the Surgeon General’s 1964 report, Smoking and Health, which officially linked smoking to numerous health problems for the first time. This report initiated what has been a forty-year struggle to make tobacco control a public health priority.30

Manufacturers did their best to dodge the issue. In the wake of early reports, they attempted to allay public fears by adding filters to their cigarettes and making other cosmetic changes to downplay the risks of smoking. However, they soon found it better

29 Hill and Knowlton Informational Memo, 29 September 1967, http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/dsc34f00, Legacy Library, UCSF.

30 Tara Parker-Pope, Cigarettes, 109-124.
to respond by alternately ignoring and denying the results of the various studies. Attacking the methods of studies that linked cigarettes to disease, they grabbed at statistical straws to argue that none had conclusively correlated smoking and disease, and hired respected scientists, such as the one-time head of the National Cancer Institute, to downplay the risks. All the while, they buried the findings of their own researchers that corroborated the findings of outside researchers.31

To publicize their side of the tobacco debates, manufacturers created powerful lobbying and public relations organizations. In 1953, they formed the Tobacco Industry Research Council (TIRC) to combat studies linking tobacco and disease through coordinated media assaults on the research. In 1958, they created the Tobacco Institute to be the industry's voice in both the public and political arenas. Defining anti-tobacco forces broadly — from researchers investigating the health risks of tobacco use to legislators seeking increases in tobacco taxes to local leaders pushing for even modest smoking bans — the Tobacco Institute used the weapons of obfuscation, denial (some might say deceit), and, most importantly, deep pockets to press the industry's cause. Until it was disbanded in 1998 as part of the multi-state tobacco settlement, the Tobacco Institute was one of the most powerful industry trade groups in the nation.32

Increasing external pressure led growers and manufacturers to rally around one another. The Tobacco Institute and Tobacco Associates, Inc., a trade group for promoting flue-cured tobacco exports, bankrolled an organization known as the Tobacco

31 Parker-Pope, Cigarettes, 113-124.

Growers' Information Committee (TGIC). The TGIC was designed to serve as both the growers' voice and a clearinghouse to provide growers information about tobacco taxes, medical findings, and "other...existing or proposed punitive or discriminatory legislation...against tobacco or tobacco products." Membership in the TGIC was open only to "national, regional, state or local organizations" with an interest in the tobacco trade, including growers' groups and warehousemen's associations. Its first executive committee was a sort of who's-who of tobacco state notables, including Stabilization president Carl T. Hicks, who served as the TGIC's first chairman.\footnote{Certificate of Incorporation, Tobacco Growers' Information Committee, November 1958, Raleigh, North Carolina, http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/lmw5aa00, Legacy Library, UCSF.}

The important role Stabilization and numerous other growers' organizations – especially tobacco state Farm Bureaus – took in the TGIC allowed it to claim that it spoke for growers, but it would be misleading to characterize the TGIC as a growers' organization. Despite the Tobacco Institute's claim that the TGIC was "a grass-roots type of organization," it might be better described as a corporate vehicle for rallying growers. Nearly all of the TGIC's funding came from the Tobacco Institute and Tobacco Associates, Inc., and while it is unclear how much control these organizations exerted over the day-to-day operation of the TGIC, their fingerprints were all over its handiwork. TGIC newsletters and press releases relied heavily on Tobacco Institute sources, likely a necessity given its relatively small budget and staff. Quotes from TGIC officials regularly appeared in Tobacco Institute press releases, and officers from each organization spoke regularly at the others' meetings. This is not to say that the TGIC was simply a front for tobacco manufacturers – the committee clearly represented a broad constituency with a common interest in preserving the tobacco economy – but that
financial support for the organization was a product of manufacturers’ understanding that growers made a much more sympathetic public face than large corporations. With growers’ voices included, debates over tobacco expanded beyond public health to include the economic and cultural ramifications of tobacco control on the lives of thousands of farm families.\footnote{Tobacco Institute press release, 20 December 1958, \url{http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/gej30c00}, Legacy Library, UCSF. A financial statement from FY 1967 showed that the matching $25,000 donations the Tobacco Institute and Tobacco Associates, Inc., gave to the TGIC provided about 95 percent of its total revenues. See Quarterly Statement, October 31, 1966-January 31, 1967, Tobacco Growers’ Information Committee, Inc., \url{http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/ccj04f00}, Legacy Library, UCSF.}

In the late 1970s, for example, the Tobacco Institute designed a series of advertisements that highlighted the economic impact of tobacco on rural areas. One such ad depicted a lush tobacco field it described as “Tobaccoland, U.S.A.” Under a headline declaring, “This Good Green American Land Does a Lot More than Just Grow Tobacco,” the ad pleaded the case of tobacco farmers by pointing to the crop’s long history in America and the estimated 500,000 farm families involved in its production.\footnote{Tobacco Institute Advertisements, 1978, \url{http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/nuu92f00}, Legacy Library, UCSF.}

Through ads like these manufacturers capitalized on the romantic image of the family farmer, a tactic growers used readily for defending tobacco. Growers’ complaints about attempts to link tobacco to disease or control its use started early in the tobacco fields. Like manufacturers, growers often complained that their tobacco was unfairly singled out. They cited people – themselves, often – who had used tobacco for years with no apparent health problems and judged that scientists were simply wrong.

For the most part, however, their complaints about anti-tobacco advocates remained at a dull rumble. Sure that their elected representatives knew, and agreed with, their position on the issue, they wrote or said little. Most, it seems, were content to allow...
groups like the Tobacco Institute and the TGIC to speak for them. Allotment reductions, increased global competition, and other issues related to production concerned them more directly.

In the 1970s, however, growers’ turned up the volume, in part because federal support for their work became less sure. Anti-tobacco initiatives became more numerous and more effective as the link between cancer and smoking became more widely accepted, and some leaders began to question whether the government should be in the business of underwriting a cancer-causing crop. Growers felt increasingly isolated. President Jimmy Carter’s nomination of Joseph Califano to serve as secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) only compounded the feeling. Califano came to the job with the goal of making the nation smoke-free, and under his watch, HEW inaugurated a series of federal anti-smoking campaigns. Growers saw this campaign as a betrayal of the government’s support. Letters poured in from farmers calling for Califano’s job (or worse). The city council of South Boston, an important Virginia market town, went so far as to pass a resolution calling on Congress “to censure Secretary Califano for unjustly singling out one industry and to withhold from appropriations the funds cited by the Secretary for the use in his misguided program.” If Califano succeeded in nothing else, he lit a fire under the Old Belt’s tobacco farmers.\(^{36}\)

Complaints about Califano were mild, however, compared to the firestorms unleashed by proposals to change the tobacco allotment and price support program. In 1973, Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz suggested that quotas might be dropped for tobacco for the 1974 season. Predictably, his suggestion met a volley of dissent. The suggestion that larger growers could grow all they wanted sent a chill down the spine of

\[^{36}\text{Resolution of the City Council, South Boston, Va., 6 February 1978, }\text{Harry F. Byrd, Jr., Papers, UVA.}\]
small growers across the region. A Danville widow dependent on her allotment rental for income explained their fears well. “If this is done, many farmers would be ruined, and especially those in the Old Belt market,” she wrote. “With the program in effect the Old Belt has a problem of getting buyers. If controls are lifted, the tobacco companies would fill their orders down South, and the market here would suffer greatly, and I believe, eventually be eliminated.” Another grower put his fears more directly, “I am afraid the price of tobacco will get so cheap that we can’t make a living and pay our taxes on our land.”

Small growers were adamantly opposed to moving tobacco agriculture back to a free market, as their response to suggestions that allotment-leasing be expanded to allow leasing from one county to another made clear. By the 1970s, large growers, especially those to the east and south of the Old Belt, increasingly felt constrained by the allotment system. At the same time, growers began to feel the fallout from the technological revolution in agriculture – something most American farmers had experienced a generation earlier. The pressure to get bigger and capitalize on economies of scale bore down on growers. Many were forced to pay large sums in order to secure allotments within their counties. In many Old Belt counties, meanwhile, allotments were going unplanted and unleased because of the lack of demand in those counties. Large growers pressed for a change in the program to allow them to rent allotments from Old Belt allotment owners.

Growers across the Old Belt, however, responded that such a plan would undermine their operations as surely as the elimination of controls. Petitioning

37 Regina M. Crawley to William L. Lanier, 2 January 1974; J.R. Yates to Harry F. Byrd, Jr., 1 January 1974, Harry F. Byrd, Jr., Papers, UVA.
Congressman Ike Andrews to fight any plan to allow inter-county allotment leasing, grower Jesse Edmonds asserted that cross-county allotment leasing "would greatly hamper the efforts of the Piedmont farmers to stay in competition with the larger Eastern tobacco farmers." "If farmers from other areas are allowed to compete with us for our local poundage," he explained, "we could easily be forced out." Dozens of growers signed his letter in support. Petitions from other growers followed. To Andrews, who responded that he would do all he could "to protect and promote the financial position of the farmers in our district," the message was clear: growers were not interested in free market reforms that would force them to compete with larger growers. Neither was Andrews, who assured Edmonds (in a handwritten postscript) that he knew the stakes. "I don't want all of our tobacco to move to the east, and it seems that this would likely happen."38

As the exchanges over Califano and the tobacco program suggest, the 1970s was an anxious decade for growers across the Old Belt. The decade was a rough one for growers all around, but Old Belt growers were especially vulnerable. Inflation, high energy prices, and increased competition from foreign countries eroded U.S. growers' global market share, and costs rose faster than returns. In 1975, Ike Andrews reported that growers in his district were "extremely frustrated and dissatisfied" because of low prices, increased quotas (meaning more tobacco was coming to market), and the volume of tobacco going into Stabilization (and thus garnering only parity prices). "We the farmers of [Virginia] are losing money, by the increase of products & labor to raise the tobacco with," one grower wrote. "This year I have payed [sic] double to raise my crop

that is not as large as I have had.” The problems increasingly divided growers into two
camps: those who wanted to maintain the program and its traditional protections (and
perks, one might add), and those who interested in imposing reforms to allow growers to
compete internationally. Very few, if any, suggested that the program should be ended,
however.39

By the end of the decade, the combination of issues facing the tobacco economy
seemed to come to a head. In 1979, a Government Accounting Office report that found
that most allotment owners were not growers tore back the façade that the program
existed to protect family farms. Added to the growing anti-tobacco sentiment, this
revelation eroded support for the program among representatives from non-tobacco-
producing states. An amendment to change the tobacco program fell only one vote shy
from being added to the 1981 farm bill. In 1982, tobacco state representatives worked
out a compromise that altered the allotment leasing program to require growers to lease
the land to which the allotment was assigned. The bill also eliminated Stabilization’s
ability to borrow money from the CCC and required growers to fund Stabilization’s
work. On paper, the government was out of the tobacco-buying business. Yet, the
tobacco program remained in effect; the U.S. tobacco economy was still regulated, and in
large part because of widespread support for regulation among growers.40

Despite their victory, the fate of the tobacco program continued to hang over
growers like a pall. The 1982 compromise had not really solved anything; tobacco foes
continued to call for an end to the program and global competitors continued to expand

39 Ike Andrews to Earl Butz, 4 August 1975, Andrews Papers, SHC. Logan Finch to Harry F. Byrd, Jr., 19
August 1975, Harry F. Byrd, Jr., Papers, UVA.

40Daniel, Breaking the Land, 267-270.
their planting and improve the quality of their leaf, making it harder for U.S. growers to boast about their superior product. By the mid-1980s, growers and politicians alike seemed to understand that the regulations that had protected them for so long might not last forever. In 1987, a North Carolina board assessed tobacco’s future and concluded that its “future is in jeopardy.” Subsequent studies all came to similar conclusions.41

Tobacco’s future increasingly fired debate among growers as to the continued necessity of the tobacco program. Large growers argued that it had outlived its usefulness and now only placed unnecessary obstacles in their way, preventing them from competing with foreign growers. Small growers countered that they could not survive without the program’s price supports and limitations on competition. By the 1990s, however, they, too, agreed that the program could not go on forever. Declining demand for subsidized U.S. leaf had made it harder to find buyers, driving prices down. For most of the decade, debates over how to end the program echoed in Washington and across the bright tobacco belts. Critics argued that the program should simply be eliminated, but growers and their legislators argued that such a rapid elimination would do irreparable harm to the rural regions of the tobacco states. The Old Belt, Virginia and North Carolina representatives argued, would be especially hurt since the small size of most farms there made competing with large growers or changing to other crops nearly impossible.

A possible solution first arose in late 1997, when the tobacco industry came to a multi-billion dollar settlement with attorneys general from a number of states. As part of the settlement, manufacturers would make annual payments to the states to provide for programs to ease growers’ transition away from tobacco. The settlement did not touch

the tobacco program, but provided a cushion for growers. When announced, the settlement drew mixed responses from growers; all were excited by the potential payout, but many voiced ambivalence about its meaning for their future. Some worried that buyers would simply reduce the prices they would pay for tobacco. "The companies are going to come out here and take it off of every pile on the auction floor," the owner of Danville's Holland's Warehouse complained in 1997. Whether they did or not, the settlement soon proved to be a great benefit to growers, even if some used the money to expand their tobacco operations.42

By the late 1990s, pressure to eliminate the tobacco program entirely continued to mount. Proposals for a buyout of growers' allotments became a regular feature; nearly every year someone introduced a bill to provide for the payments. In October 2004, Congress finally came to an agreement as to how to dismantle the system. According to the plan, growers and allotment holders would receive annual payments totaling $10 billion over ten years. Implementation of the program began in March 2005; government agents expected long lines for the sign-up.

Seventy-plus years of regulation came to an end with the stroke of a pen. The New Deal's most successful program was undone, not by anti-tobacco zealots, as those in the industry might call them, or free market fanatics, but by the growers who had supported the program for so long on terms they largely dictated. The end of the tobacco program, then, like its beginning and like its course over the decades, was the product of growers' power to shape state policy to fit their needs.

42 Steve McQuillen, "Tightening the Tobacco Belt," *Virginia Business* 12 (October 1997), 69.
CHAPTER V

"THE BEST CROP YOU CAN GROW": FARM FAMILIES, PUBLIC WORK, AND THE FATE OF TOBACCO AGRICULTURE

In 1990, The New York Times profiled Halifax County tobacco farmer David Conner and his 4,000-acre farm for a story about the continuing profitability of tobacco agriculture in the face of downward market pressures, increased taxes, and growing public opposition. A large grower, Conner had seventy-five acres of his land in tobacco in addition to a number of other crops. High tobacco prices in the early 1980s had prompted him to expand, but by the middle of the decade he had taken a job in town “just to maintain what I had” and advised his kids against coming back to the farm after college. By 1990, the economic outlook changed enough to allow two of his sons to come back to the farm, but Conner had not given up his in-town job or stopped counseling his sons about the frustrations of a career in farming. “I still tell my boys that the best crop you can grow on a farm is a 40-hour-a-week job in town,” Conner quipped. “That’s still true, but the second best crop you can grow is tobacco.”

Conner’s view of off-farm work and tobacco farming has been a fairly popular one in the Old Belt for generations. For more than a century, Old Belt farm families have balanced tobacco work with public work, taking jobs in town to support life on the farm or farming on the side to augment factory wages. Hardly isolated farm folk unaccustomed to the life of wage labor, Old Belt farm families were intimately aware of

the world of time clocks, supervisors, and paychecks. Rare was the Old Belt family that did not have some member contributing to the family income with off-farm wages. Not to be confused with the tens of thousands who left the land for good, these families understood the value of off-farm work, but, like Conner, refused to give up that second most valuable crop: tobacco.

The combination of tobacco farming and off-farm work has not followed a simple formula, however, and capturing the survival strategies families developed is nearly impossible, especially given the changing nature of public work in the Piedmont. Sometimes men took part-time or full-time jobs while women and children worked the land; other times, women and children took off-farm jobs to contribute to the household economy while the men farmed. There were nearly as many approaches to combining farm and non-farm work as there were families attempting it. The variability makes it impossible to measure its true extent using census records, which measured only the off-farm work of the men the Census Bureau assumed to head the region’s farms, as blunt an instrument of measurement there ever was. Nevertheless, it is possible to map broader patterns in the history of splitting time between farm and factory. For some, off-farm work was a means of making up for tobacco’s failings, for others tobacco was a way to augment off-farm wages, and for yet others farming tobacco was largely a matter of habit, a way to stay tied to the land and the family and community ties it represented. To be sure, these categories were hardly discrete and varied across time, and a family’s place in this schema depended on their outlook as much as any objective measurement. Nevertheless, for thousands of growers, landowners and tenants alike, public work provided a way of maintaining tradition.
Farming and Public Work in the Old Belt

The combination of public work and farming has a long history among the Old Belt’s tobacco growers. Industrial enterprises followed flue-cured tobacco across the Piedmont, and their histories have remained intertwined. In the late nineteenth century, the Piedmont’s tobacco fields fed dozens of warehouses and factories that turned towns like Durham and Winston (later Winston-Salem) from whistle-stops into burgeoning cities seemingly overnight. Textile and furniture mills quickly joined the tobacco factories, making towns like Burlington and High Point world famous. These small cities proved powerful magnets for attracting people from the countryside. Thousands of women and men, blacks and whites, left the fields to stem tobacco leaves, roll cigarettes, weave textiles, make cabinets, or simply build the infrastructure that kept it all moving. “Young man, stay on the farm,” counseled one newspaper editor, “…it is a great mistake for any young man to think he will be more respectable, or more highly esteemed, by clerking in a store than by laboring on a farm.” But his plea was in vain. By the 1920s, thousands of country people, either drawn by the promise of steady wages or forced by declining tobacco prices, had left the region’s farms. “A Million Have Gone,” one farm journal lamented in 1922, and countless more followed.2

Migration was not a simple one-way process, of course. While most split the farm with no thought of looking back, others divided their time between public work and farm work. For many farm families, one study of the Piedmont has noted, “the choice was not between farm or factory,” but “how to combine the two, how to incorporate one into the other.” Solutions to this dilemma were myriad. Often families sent one or more

person to work in the mills while others remained on the farm. One North Carolina woman recalled that her parents shared work at the Dan River Cotton Mill in order to make ends meet. In the winter, her father commuted from the farm to work in the looms, while in the summer, her mother took his place so he could work in the fields. Since the need for labor in some factories was tied to agricultural production, many families timed their public work with the seasonal demands of the farm. In the late nineteenth century, many tobacco factories operated only six to eight months out of the year, allowing many workers to retain ties to the land. In Winston, according to one historian, many of the town's "black factory workers remained firmly rooted to their homes in other areas." Durham's tobacco factories, another historian has noted, needed stemmers only in the months immediately following the harvest, allowing the black women who worked in the stemmeries to split time between farm and factory.3

In the 1920s, low tobacco prices precipitated a general exodus from the land in many areas of the Piedmont. Asked about the experience of his landowning neighbors, one Virginia grower responded that "two went to cropping, eight went to town." Another observer similarly noted an "unusual drift from farm to town." "It seems that every boy and girl in the County is trying to get jobs in town," he explained. "This condition applies to all classes of farmers from renters to large land-owners. I see farmers here,

who operate hundreds of acres, working for a salary for some corporation in the city, and their sons and daughters working in department stores, garages, offices, etc.” Not all who took public work migrated to town, however. The combination of expanded automobile ownership and better roads shortened the distance between farm and town and increased the number of families commuting between farm and work. A farmer could “make a tobacco crop in a comparatively short period of the year,” one observer explained, “and when he decides to quit tobacco[,] the improved roads enable him to work at the factories and live on the farm some twenty miles distant.”

Extension agents understandably lamented the exodus from farming to public work. It was their job, after all, to stem the flight from the land by encouraging progressive farming and rural uplift. Farm families, however, largely embraced public work with little compunction. Parents sometimes expressed reservations about the loss of their children and their labor, but for most, the line between farm and public work was very porous. They crossed it with little thought, seeing public work as one of many options for making a living. In her landmark study of Piedmont tenant farm women, sociologist Margaret Jarman Hagood found that both men and women regularly took on a host of jobs. “Most common,” she wrote, “was some source of income...earned by the husband from WPA or by working in a filling station on Saturdays, or running a grain mill during the winter, going to Canada to cure tobacco after his own crop was housed, hauling tobacco, driving a meat truck, doing farm work for a neighbor, or hunting or

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trapping in winter.” Hardly the ne’er-do-wells of popular image, the tenant families Hagood studied were quite savvy at making ends meet.5

By the time Hagood captured farm families’ varied approaches to making a living, finding additional work had become critical for many of the region’s farm families, for New Deal market reforms had, despite their intent, made it harder for many to make ends meet. In exchange for guaranteed parity prices, growers agreed to cut their tobacco acreages to bring supply in line with demand. While this dramatically improved the tobacco economy, it pinched many small growers who relied on tobacco as their primary source of income. Whatever benefit they saw from higher prices was swallowed by reduced volume and fixed production costs. It cost as much to cure two acres’ worth of tobacco as three, for example, meaning many small farmers lost whatever economies of scale they had. New Deal reforms, then, actually spurred the expansion of part-time farming. In 1934, over a quarter of male farm operators in Virginia’s southern Piedmont took work off the farm. Landowners made up the majority of those who worked off the farm, but over 40 percent were tenants. In fact, tenants reported working more days off the farm than landowners. Many more families relied on some off-farm income from the work of women and children. “We are having a continued breaking down of farms into almost a ‘Henry Ford System’,” one North Carolina extension agent reported, “work in the factory part of the time and farm part of the time or some members of the family work in the factories and some on the farm.”6

5 Margaret Jarman Hagood, Mothers of the South, 82.
6 In 1934, 27.6 percent of farm operators in Brunswick, Campbell, Charlotte, Franklin, Halifax, Henry, Lunenburg, Mecklenburg, Nottoway, Patrick, and Pittsylvania counties reported work done off the farm for wages. Of the farm operators who reported working off the farm, 45.6 were tenants. Landowners reported an average of roughly 67 days worked, while tenants reported roughly 83 days. The Census Bureau counted the off-farm labor of farm operators (head of household) only, leaving the off-farm work of farm women and children uncounted. United States Census Bureau, Census of Agriculture, 1935: Virginia
The expansion of employment opportunities brought on by the military and industrial demands of World War II only increased the number of farm families splitting time between farming and public employment. Wartime high prices enticed many to continue growing tobacco even as they spent longer hours on the job. One black county agent noted that “many of the people” around Durham “only do part time farming” and “depend on their one outstanding crop, tobacco, for partial livelihood.” Nor were they alone, but farm families throughout the Piedmont similarly divided their time. Farm operators in Virginia’s Old Belt counties, for example, increased the number of days they worked off the land. As around Durham, the pattern was most pronounced in counties adjacent to industrial centers. Like earlier generations, these farmers meshed public work and farming, but for an increasing number, public work became more important than growing tobacco, at least as a source of income.7

A close look at the patterns of off-farm labor during the war illustrates the increasing importance of regular off-farm labor to farm families. Before the war, off-farm work for farm operators had been more casual: a day or two doing hired farm work, or a month or two spent in the factory during the winter. In 1939, for example, nearly 39 percent of Old Belt farmers who took off-farm work worked less than a hundred days off the farm; at the same time, roughly 42 percent worked two hundred or more days off the

7 “Narrative Report of the County Agent (Negro), 1945: Durham County, North Carolina,” ESAR, RG 33, NA. Between 1940 and 1945, the number of hours Virginia Old Belt farm operators worked off the farm increased 3.5 percent. While the number of days decreased in some industrial counties, there was impressive growth in others where opportunities expanded. Around Danville, for example, the number of days spend in non-farm employment increased by nearly 28 percent. These figures, of course, do not count the labor of family members so it greatly underestimates the extent to which off-farm labor was supporting even those farm families where the farm operator retreated into full-time farm work. United States Census Bureau, Census of Agriculture, 1945, Volume 1, Part 15: Virginia and West Virginia. See the next paragraph for a deeper explanation of the changes.
farm. By 1944, however, more than 55 percent of the region’s part-timers worked more than two hundred days off the farm, while just more than a quarter reported working less than one hundred days. Fewer growers worked off the farm on the side, but those who did, worked more. This shift away from more casual labor among farm operators was due, in part, to the labor demands faced on their own farms, but it was also a product of the expansion of full-time off-farm labor among farm operators. In other words, the demands of wartime production forced some operators to refocus their energies on their own farms while enticing others to spend more time in the factory.⁸

The shift to a greater reliance on off-farm work during the war marked the rise of the modern practice of what might be called part-time farming. In the postwar years this became more common among Piedmont farm families. In 1954, nearly a quarter of the farm families in North Carolina’s northern Piedmont counties earned more money off the farm than on. “The importance of off-farm work…,” one study explained, “indicates that many families have been able to secure larger family incomes by combining farm and nonfarm work.” Expanded off-farm employment among male farmers (nearly 40 percent of whom worked off the farm at some point in the year) provided much of the growth in part-time farming, but women and children continued to employ diverse strategies when it came to public work. Often only one parent or older children took public work while the other parent remained on the farm. In 1958, the Davidson County extension agent reported that a number of farmers in his county “have gone to work in local industries and are leaving the tobacco crop to the rest of the family with their help after working hours and on the weekends.” By the mid 1960s, more than four-fifths of Old Belt farm

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operators reported that either they or one of their family members contributed to the household economy from non-farm work.⁹

The poor state of the tobacco economy forced most to find other work. “With the decrease in the allotted acreage during recent years, farmers are relying less on tobacco for a livelihood,” explained the Davidson County agent. “They are looking for other sources of income to meet the increased cost of living.” Record high postwar prices disguised real problems for small farmers. In the postwar years, tobacco allotments fell sharply and steadily, eating away at the number of acres growers could plant. One Virginia farmer, for example, found his nearly nine-acre allotment cut in half in just over a decade. His remaining 4.37 acres, he explained, was “not enough to make a living and to keep up the expenses on the farm.” Reductions cut smaller growers even deeper. “I am a farmer with a wife and 4 children and have only 77/100 tobacco acreage,” pleaded a North Carolina grower who asked, “why the tobacco allotments can’t be given to the farm familys [sic] that need them to make a living.” Since Piedmont farms were, on average, much smaller than those in other regions, the cuts affected the Old Belt more than other areas. Farm incomes lagged and thousands of allotted acres went unplanted as growers simply gave up. The number of farm operators fell by over 40 percent in the two decades following World War II. Of those that remained, one researcher argued, “a high proportion...would fall into the poverty category” without public work to subsidize their

⁹ Pasour, McPherson, and Toussaint, *Economic Opportunities for Adjustments on Tobacco Farms in the Northern Piedmont, North Carolina*, 10. “Report of the County Agent, 1958: Davidson County, North Carolina,” ESAR, RG 33, NA. Figures on household income contributions from U.S. Census Bureau, *1964 Census of Agriculture*, Parts 24 (Virginia) and 26 (North Carolina), Tables 4 and 7. Of the 51,773 Old Belt farm operators, 20,306 reported working of the farm themselves while 22,482 reported that other members of the household contributed to the family finances.
farming operations. Indeed, by 1964, more than 80 percent of the region’s farm families reported earning off-farm wages.10

Tobacco was too low to provide a living for small growers, but prices were good enough to tempt many to keep a crop on the side. Expansion of both the domestic and international markets for cigarettes following World War II sent demand for bright tobacco soaring. Throughout the fifties and sixties, prices at Danville averaged over 58 cents per pound; by the 1970s, prices rose to over a dollar per pound, topping out at $1.81 in 1982. High prices were not simply a natural result of heavy demand, however, but a product of the federal tobacco program. Parity prices – minimum prices the stabilization service agreed to pay for leaves the tobacco companies would not buy – created a price floor that helped to elevate prices. At the same time, crop size limitations imposed by acreage and poundage allotments constricted the market, keeping supply in line with demand and preventing the sort of bottoming out that had long plagued the market. Government policy designed largely to lift struggling farmers during the worst of the Depression continued to benefit their heirs by propping up prices.11

By the late twentieth century, many farm families grew tobacco to supplement off-farm income, not the other way around. One or two acres meant hundreds of dollars

10 "Report of the County Agent, 1958: Davidson County, North Carolina," ESAR, RG 33, NA. Aubrey W. Henry to Ezra Taft Benson, 8 January 1959; Clyde Tate to Ezra Taft Benson, 18 February 1959, Tob. Corr., ASCS, RG 145, NA. Pasour, et. al., Economic Opportunities for Adjustments on Tobacco Farms, 14, 17. The number of farm Old Belt farm operators fell from 89,283 in 1945 to 51,773 in 1964. Compiled from U.S. Census Bureau, 1945 Census of Agriculture, Volume 1, Parts 15 and 16, and 1964 Census of Agriculture, Parts 24 and 26. J. Gwyn Sutherland, The Effects of Tobacco Prices and Allotment Variations on Farm Organizations and Incomes, Northern Piedmont Area, North Carolina, 12. Sutherland’s claim was based on 1964 data that showed that 81 percent of the region’s farms had less than $10,000 in farm sales and over half had less than $5,000. 1964 Census of Agriculture. Of the region’s 51,773 operators, 42,788 reported that either they or a family member worked off of the farm.

11 Compiled from President’s Report, 1984, Reel 2, DTAR, LVA. The 1982 spike was caused, in part, by debates over the future of the tobacco program taking place in Congress at that time. In the 1980s and 1990s, prices remained relatively flat, but high enough to justify the effort.
in additional income for families trying to make ends meet. "You were trying to build your house, buy a car, and buy furniture," one farm woman explained when asked why she and her husband continued to farm long after taking full-time jobs off the farm. For many, tobacco money represented life's extras: a newer car, a vacation, or education for their children. For others, however, the money from their crop was the difference between making it or not. In the mid 1960s, while over 40 percent of farm families reported more than $2000 in off-farm wages, a persistent minority (12.4 percent) earned less than $500. While industrialization and city growth brought jobs to much of the Piedmont, some areas remained very rural and very poor. Well into the 1990s, many families continued to grow tobacco on the side to make ends meet. One North Carolina couple, for example, had "no savings" and thus were "counting on tobacco money to keep them going" once the husband retired from his long-time job in a machine shop. Their adult children similarly relied on tobacco for a living, combining their earnings with wages earned laying bricks to get by.\textsuperscript{12}

The economics of tobacco has fostered the combination of public work and farming. For many, public work was a way of making up for tobacco's shortcomings, while for others tobacco was a way to make a better living. The practice has ebbed and flowed over time with the economy, and has become less attractive as tobacco

\textsuperscript{12} Quoted in Anne Radford Phillips, "Farm Women of Stokes County, North Carolina," 105. In 1964, 22,156 of the Old Belt's 51,773 farm operators reported that their households brought in more than $2,000 in off-farm income, while 6,443 reported off-farm incomes of less than $500. (The median income in the South in 1964 was $5,327.) To be sure, some of those reporting little off-farm income were full-time farmers for whom farm wages represented their entire income. However, the widespread utilization of off-farm work by Old Belt farm families indicates that some number of these in lowest bracket either worked in low-wage or part-time jobs that could not provide sufficient income to make a living. Figures from 1964 Census of Agriculture. Median wage figure from data from U.S. Department of Commerce Surveys posted at http://www.usc.edu/schools/spdf/research/casden/research/data_folder/us_fainco.pdf. Greensboro News & Record, 24 October 1999.
agriculture, like agriculture more generally, has become more specialized and consolidated. Nevertheless, as late as 2002, over half of the Old Belt's farmers reported working off the farm at some point in the year. As in the past, the reasons and strategies were myriad. Some, like David Conner, could be described as farmers who worked on the side, taking work to augment their farm revenues with more-reliable sources of income. Of these, many worked seasonally in other areas of the tobacco industry: operating warehouses, grading tobacco, or auctioning the piles on the floor. The vast majority, however, were best described as workers who farmed on the side: holders of full-time jobs – over 70 percent of farmers who worked off the farm reported working more than 200 days – who farmed on the weekends and after hours. For some of these growers, especially in the Old Belt's more rural counties, tobacco money is a way of making ends meet. But economics alone cannot explain why so many continued to split time.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Weekend Farming and the Culture of Bright Tobacco}

Indeed, for many families it made more sense economically to lease out their allotments to full-time growers seeking to expand their fields. From 1962 to 1982, federal authorities allowed the lease-and-transfer of allotments from one farm to another within a county. A more restrictive program replaced this one after complaints that too many non-farmers were profiting, but until Congress ended the tobacco program 2004,

\textsuperscript{13} 2002 Census of Agriculture. 53.7 percent of the farm operators in the Old Belt counties reported working of the farm at some point in the year. Not all of these farm operators grew tobacco, of course, but this figure nevertheless points to the continued importance of combining farm and off-farm work in a region dominated by tobacco. If the tobacco farmers of Virginia and North Carolina as a whole are considered, 27.2 percent reported their primary occupations as something other than farming. While this is not a completely fair comparison – one can work off the farm, but still consider farming his/her primary occupation – it does give an idea of the continued popularity of splitting time. These figures count only farm operators not the off-farm labor of other family members, thus underestimating the continued importance of off-farm labor to many farm families' incomes.
there remained a strong market for renting allotments. In most counties landowners had little trouble finding larger growers interested in leasing their allotments and most earned as much or more money leasing their allotments than they would have by farming it themselves. By the early 1980s, allotment owners received upwards of $1,000 per acre per year for their allotments. Thousands of landowners happily leased out their allotments, pocketed the money, and thought little of tobacco the rest of the year. For many allotment owners, the monies from leasing their allotments served as pension of sorts or a life insurance policy. The economic value of these allotments tied up discussion of ending the tobacco program for decades because legislators were long unwilling to yank money from their constituents’ hands without compensation.\[14\]

Yet, the part-timers of the Old Belt did not follow this path, and indeed many rented allotments from others in order to make their own farming more profitable. Why? Part-time grower William Hawthorne explained, with a straight face, that he believes there is something in the leaves that makes tobacco’s growers fond of the crop. If this is true, Hawthorne and his family have certainly absorbed their share of this mysterious plant essence. Hawthorne and his family still grow tobacco in Virginia’s Southeastern Piedmont on land that has been handed down for generations. For William, his brother Bob and nephew Robert, the three men who currently oversee the farm, raising tobacco is largely a labor of love. Their leaves bring little more than they cost to grow, and all three hold full-time jobs doing something other than farming. Bob and Robert practice law in the area, while William teaches accounting at the College of William & Mary, some hundred miles from the farm. But they and their families return to the fields on weekends to grow the flue-cured tobacco that has long been a family tradition, hoping to teach the

\[14\] Raleigh News and Observer, 27 April 1981.
next generation the rhythms of bright tobacco agriculture that continue to pulse, however faintly, through the Piedmont. None had chosen farming as a career; they returned only when a family tragedy, the death of William and Bob’s brother, Tommy, pulled them back. Now all are reluctant to give it up. “We farm because our family always has,” Robert Hawthorne explained. “But even more we do it because no one wants to be the last person...to raise tobacco on this land.”

Families that, like the Hawthornes, continued to split time between public work and farm work often had more than an economic motive in making their decision to continue growing tobacco. Tradition and its meanings to family and community continued to draw them to the fields. Bright tobacco has defined the agriculture of the Piedmont for more than a century and, in turn, the region’s farm families have linked their lives to the golden leaves. Tobacco is not simply an agricultural commodity, but a marker of tradition and self-identification. “It’s just what we always did,” one part-timer responded when asked why he and his family continue to toil in the fields on weekends. “I despise it, to tell you the truth,” his brother answered. “But it’s the only time this family gets together. Tobacco and Christmas.” Another part-time grower similarly explained the linkage between family, tradition, and tobacco. “The reason I’m still in this [tobacco] is the family. If they said they wanted to get out of it, I’d be out of it.”

Given the cultural ties that bind these part-timers to the land, it has been tempting for observers to play up their links to the past and grow wistful for some lost agrarian past. Journalist Meg Medina documented the Hawthornes’ farm and, at some level, fell

15 Medina, “The Farm.” My account of the Hawthornes’ tobacco farm comes from Medina’s article and my own interview with William Hawthorne, 2 May 2003, in author’s possession.

into what might be described as a nostalgia trap. The ritual of the lunch break on a busy harvest day, she wrote, is "a family party, a time to joke, catch up on what's going on, work and complain together, ignore each other's faults (OK – maybe point them out mercilessly), and partake of Motrin. In short, it's a way of building family unity around shared work – as foreign a concept to today's Richmonders as the farmland of 'Green Acres' seemed to Zsa Zsa Gabor."17

Medina is not alone in taking this tack when exploring the declining but persistent tobacco farms of the Piedmont. Indeed, highlighting the persistence of family ties among the Piedmont's family farms has been and remains a commonplace among reporters and other observers. In the Virginia and North Carolina print media stories chronicling the persistence of small family farms have been a regular feature for decades. Most of these stories highlight the long family ties to the land, the persistence of family traditions, and the continuity of hard labor on the farm. Ross McElwee's 2003 film, Bright Leaves, offers good examples of the prevalence of these themes in other accounts of the fate of tobacco farming. In the film, McElwee discusses the legacies of tobacco agriculture with a grower who points out his grandson working on the farm. Ironically, amid all this discussion of tradition, Latino and African American farm workers pick leaves and clean up after the massive leaf harvester, working in the midst of a modern tobacco operation.18

17 Medina, "The Farm."

18 Bright Leaves, Film, directed by Ross McElwee (New York: First Run Features, 2003). This is not to say that all observers have missed the irony of farm families' mixture of tradition and modern labor practices. Photographer Jesse Andrews has carefully documented the overlap of tradition and modernization in his photographs of tobacco farm life in Pittsylvania County. Digging deeper than many others, Andrews interviewed and photographed many of the Mexican laborers brought in to work on the farms he studied through the federal H-2A farm labor program. See Jesse Andrews, Thirteen Month Crop.
The problem with this image is it ignores how completely modern part-timers' farming operations are. The Hawthornes, for example, lease land from former growers in order to get greater allotments. They buy seedlings from dealers who start the plants hydroponically, not in seedbeds. They work the farm on the weekends, but depend on a Mexican family brought in through the H-2A farm labor program to handle much of the day-to-day labor. While they tried and failed to dark-fire cure some of their tobacco in a traditional manner—William claims he holds the dubious distinction of being the last person in Virginia to burn down a tobacco barn—they otherwise use modern bulk curers to prepare their crops for market. Indeed, they, like hundreds of other growers, have considered abandoning the traditional auction market for direct selling to manufacturers. In other words, there is very little about the Hawthornes' or other part-time growers' farming practices that is traditional. This is not to say that family and tradition have not been central to many part-timers' decisions to continue farming, but tradition has rarely been allowed to trump progress.\textsuperscript{19}

While they are not truly ghosts of the past, part-timers are nevertheless important reminders of the resilience of the Old Belt's traditional agricultural economy. The central narrative of the history of the southern, indeed the American, countryside is the last century's exodus from the land. The simple truth that the nation's farm population has dramatically and steadily declined since the early twentieth century makes it tempting to assert that recent American history is a story of people moving off the farms and into the cities. The narrative is especially popular for describing the recent South, where the so-called "bulldozer revolution" paved over King Cotton's and King Bacca's respective

\textsuperscript{19} William Hawthorne interview.
realms with strip malls and subdivisions. While historians have debated the relative merits of the evacuation of the southern countryside, they have nevertheless placed it at the center of their respective analyses.20

Part-time farm families do not neatly fit within the general "farm to factory" narrative that historians have employed to describe the flight from the countryside. Instead, they remind us that the transition off the land has been for many an incomplete and still unfolding process embraced, in many cases, only reluctantly. While it is easy to grow too sentimental about these growers, their experiences nevertheless point us to the continuing importance of understanding that agriculture is at its core a cultural enterprise built on custom, tradition, and networks of family and community that are not necessarily obvious to the outside observer.

The coming decade will, in all likelihood, completely revolutionize the Piedmont’s tobacco economy, maybe even bringing an end to the small farms that have dotted the region for over a century. What this means to the families who have grown the crop and the culture they have built is unclear. Certainly there will be much to celebrate about the demise of King Bacca, but his death will not be without much weeping in his former domain.

20 The term "bulldozer revolution" was first coined by C. Vann Woodward to discuss the impact of urbanization and suburbanization on the South’s traditional rural geography. C. Vann Woodward, The Burden of Southern History, 3rd edition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 6.
CONCLUSION

OLD BELT, NEW WORLD

Echoes of the past reverberated throughout the Old Belt in the spring of 2005. In the fall of 2004, Congress passed new tobacco legislation, and, like their predecessors seven decades earlier, representatives of the U.S. Department of Agriculture had to rush to implement it. They scheduled community meetings, visited farms, and, in a new twist on the old practice of running newspaper articles, published guides to the new program on the World Wide Web. Like the revolutionary tobacco program of the 1930s, the new legislation was at once a source of excitement, trepidation, and confusion. The scene of harried county agents trying to answer anxious attendees' questions about a program they still had to master would have been familiar to witnesses of the earlier sign-up meetings. At a Brunswick County meeting called by the National Black Farmers Association (NBFA) to discuss the new legislation – one of several held by the organization across the Tobacco South – scores of growers pressed Farm Service Agency (formerly the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, successor to the Agricultural Adjustment Administration) agents for details. NBFA president and Mecklenburg County tobacco farmer John Boyd encouraged attendees to learn the facts about the legislation and warned them against heeding neighborhood gossip. "It's going to be tricky and we are going to have to work through the process. You are going to have to spread the word and come to these sessions and get information for yourself. If you get information for yourself, you don't have to worry about friends and family telling you
information that is not correct." Whatever changes time had wrought on rural communities, the grapevine was as functional, and error-prone, as always.¹

Whatever similarities the meetings of 2005 had with earlier sign-up campaigns, the purposes of each were nearly opposite. In the 1930s, county agents worked to convince growers of the benefits of adhering to production controls; in 2005, their job was to explain why eliminating these controls was a good thing. The goal of the earlier campaign was to sign up enough growers to support the tobacco program; the purpose of the latter was to register growers and non-growers alike to receive cash payments for the loss of the allotments their parents and grandparents had received for signing up. One generation supported the creation of the tobacco program, while another lauded its demise. Tobacco has always been the subject of interesting ironies.

The demand for a buyout reflected the shifting realities of modern tobacco agriculture. In the depths of the Great Depression, growers had eagerly sought the aid of the federal government to rein in the vagaries of a free market, but in an increasingly global marketplace – one in which China and Brazil, not North Carolina and Virginia, lead the world in the production of flue-cured tobacco – controls have become fetters. As one grower explained, "[T]he system that was invented for a different time worked well for many years, but it is now clearly broken." For those hoping to compete in the global tobacco economy, trade trumps tradition.²

¹ Richmond Times-Dispatch, 10 April 2005. The author was present at this meeting as well.

² Statement of Keith Parrish, Executive Director, National Tobacco Growers Association," The Necessity of a Tobacco Quota Buyout: Why It is Crucial to Rural Communities and the U.S. Tobacco Industry, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Production and Price Competitiveness of the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, United States Senate, 13 April 2004.
It will be some time before the full impact of the buyout can be measured. Some have said they will use the money to expand their farming; most, however, have said they will give up tobacco for good. It is clear that most, especially in the Old Belt, will not be able to continue without price supports. They simply do not have enough land to compete with the economies of scale overseas growers and even those in eastern North Carolina can create. Bright tobacco, within a few years, may have no place in the region that bore it.

For many around the country, the buyout was seen as a costly benefit; $10 billion, but the government would no longer be in the business of propping up a cancer-causing product. For many in the Old Belt, the buyout is less praised; the money will certainly be welcome in a region hard hit by other economic setbacks, but it will come at the cost of a loss of tradition, family roots, and cultural values. Whether this will be a net gain remains to be seen.

Whatever the case, the history of tobacco agriculture will likely continue somewhere, and there the adaptability Old Belt farm families have shown over the last century will likely be evident, even if it is not in the Old Belt. For this is the nature of agriculture, the culture of bringing fruits from the ground: it is nothing if not adaptable.
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