

LAND OF THE BRIGHT LEAF: YELLOW TOBACCO, ENVIRONMENT, AND CULTURE  
ALONG THE BORDER OF VIRGINIA AND NORTH CAROLINA

by

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(Under the Direction of Paul Sutter)

ABSTRACT

Bright tobacco became the staple crop along the Piedmont border of Virginia and North Carolina around 1840. Although regional farmers had long cultivated tobacco, bright tobacco was a new variety of the old staple, and its culture transformed both land and people. Bright tobacco was a product of established tobacco culture, environmental conditions, and consumer preferences. The new crop brought amazing benefits: it grew best on the poorest Piedmont soils, land unsuited to other crops, and it sold for astonishingly high prices. Bright tobacco also supported a local manufacturing industry that produced chewing tobacco and cigarettes for national and global markets. But bright tobacco eventually impoverished both land and people. The crop's culture led to severe soil erosion, deforestation, a dependency on commercial fertilizers, overproduction, and indebtedness. Bright tobacco culture's environmental foundations also shaped regional race relations before and after emancipation. Regional African Americans' prospects for landownership and independent labor, and white perceptions of black land stewardship, depended to an extent on white conceptions of crop and environment. Bright tobacco's story was ultimately a tale of the degradation of land, landowners, and labor, but the

crop's decline had its roots in regional farmers' desires for permanence, improved agriculture, and sustainability.

INDEX WORDS: Tobacco, Southern environment, Agriculture, Soil, Erosion, Slavery, Fertilizer, Agricultural reform, Virginia, North Carolina, Piedmont, Deforestation

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DEDICATION

To Margaret, for keeping me sane - and to Ethan, for the happy insanity. I love you both.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My family's long history with tobacco is at least partly to blame for this dissertation. I grew up in tobacco country. Fields of emerald green turning to golden yellow in late summer lined local roads, I was quite familiar with the sticky tar that coats one's hands and clothes during priming (harvest), and I still have a deep aversion to tobacco rows longer than fifty yards or so. School started back from summer vacation only after Labor Day so that children could help their families prime, modern trailer-like bulk curing barns and older log tobacco barns crowded the edges of fields and dirt roads, and, rather than the ubiquitous southern firefly, I remember the sphinx moths whose larvae feed on tobacco leaves filling the evening sky. I am in part a child of tobacco fields and auction warehouses, and this dissertation is the fruit of that upbringing. Although I ceaselessly complained about tobacco work growing up, here I would like to thank my extended family for their inspiration, and for their appreciation of the value of work that takes place on paper as well as labor on the land.

No one at the University of Georgia has done more to bring this dissertation to fruition, or to shape my scholarly life, than my advisor Paul Sutter. He patiently encouraged me to ask bigger questions and to provide more thoughtful answers. He has that rarest of talents: the ability to compliment without creating complaisance and to criticize without fostering resentment. I have never met a historian more dedicated to his craft or his students. Other scholars contributed their thoughtful comments over the course of the past five years. I was blessed with an unusually gifted committee. Despite hectic schedules and the demands of many other students, professors Kathleen Clark, Shane Hamilton, John Inscoe, and Allan Kulikoff all

made this a better work, and held me to a high standard. The staff of the Virginia Historical Society provided valuable feedback at a 2009 Mellon Fellows Colloquium; and comments on presentations at the 2009 Southern FARES conference, a 2009 graduate student workshop at the University of Georgia, the 2010 meeting of the American Society of Environmental Historians, a 2010 Workshop in the History of Environment and Agriculture, and the 2010 Graduate Association for African American History Conference at the University of Memphis all shaped this dissertation's final form. Individual conversations with Jim Giesen, Tim Silver, Claire Strom, Mark Hersey, Chris Manganiello, Levi Van Sant, Tom Okie, Philip Harrington, Leonard Lanier, Kathi Nehls, Michele Lansdown, Tim Johnson, and Jesse Pope also influenced my thinking. Archivists at the University of Georgia's Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, the Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia, the Virginia Historical Society, the University of North Carolina's Southern Historical Collection, the Georgia Historical Society, Duke University's Special Collections, the Southeastern Branch of the National Archives and Records Administration, and clerks at the Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania courthouses made research a pleasure. The University of Georgia's interlibrary loan librarians also provided yeoman's service unearthing rare pamphlets, newspapers, and books on my behalf.

A number of organizations provided generous financial support that made much of the following research feasible. The Willson Center for Humanities and Arts furnished a Graduate Student Research and Performance Grant to fund research travel, as well as the Janelle Padgett Knight Graduate Award that allowed me to present my findings to an audience of my peers. The Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill provided a Joel R. Williamson Visiting Scholar Grant, the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences at the

University of Georgia furnished a Research Award, the university's graduate school provided a Dean's Award in Arts and Humanities, and the Virginia Historical Society granted an Andrew W. Mellon Research Fellowship. Although not directly tied to this dissertation, a two-year research fellowship from the Wormsloe Institute for Environmental History proved the most helpful of all, as it provided invaluable time away from the classroom. This funding made the dissertation easier, but the most important support for this project came from a dedicated advisor, a supportive history department at the University of Georgia, and my understanding – and patient – family and friends. All of the people listed above deserve much of the credit for this dissertation, but I alone am responsible for its flaws.

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## CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: HOW DID SUCH A POOR LAND MAKE PEOPLE SO RICH, AND HOW  
DID THEY SO QUICKLY BECOME POOR AGAIN?

*“Their life is yellow tobacco”* - John Ott (1885)<sup>1</sup>

As a child I grew up near Virginia’s Chesapeake Bay, and I vividly remember road trips to visit my grandparents who lived on the western edge of the commonwealth’s Piedmont. The last hour of our journey wound through rolling hills dotted with spare farmsteads, small fields of tobacco, and mobile homes. The log barns once used to cure tobacco - before propane barns made them obsolete - were everywhere, overgrown in fields, peeking around modern structures, and moldering in the woods. Although I loved visiting the region, I could imagine few places more “southern” in rural character, poverty, gullied land, and reliance on a single crop. This sleepy, agrarian countryside conjured up images of a land that time, and progress, forgot. Then, when I was ten, my family moved close to my grandparents. In my new school I learned that the region’s prospects had not always been so bleak; I saw pictures of great crowds of tobacco wagons lining the streets of local towns to unload crops; I read of vast plantations as large as any in the South; and I listened to stories of the frenetic energy of tobacco auction warehouses, where farmers, industrialists, and auctioneers gathered to make tremendous profits on golden tobacco. What I saw in the landscape that surrounded me and what I learned of the region’s past left me with a question that became the root of this dissertation: how did such a poor land make people so rich, and how did they so quickly become poor again?

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<sup>1</sup> Ott, in Robert Ragland, *Major Ragland’s Instructions How to Grow and Cure Tobacco, Especially Fine Yellow* (Richmond, VA: Southern Fertilizing Company, 1885), 2.

To get at that question we must take a careful look at the region during the nineteenth century. Beginning around 1840, bright tobacco became the staple crop along the border of the Virginia and North Carolina Piedmont. Regional farmers had cultivated tobacco since the mid-eighteenth century, but bright leaf was a new form of the old standby, and its culture transformed how people used the land as well as how they thought about tobacco and themselves. The new crop brought amazing benefits; it grew on the poorest of soils, it sold for astonishingly high prices, and it required relatively little in the way of new farm machinery or buildings. The crop also stimulated a manufacturing industry that transformed a raw agricultural product into chewing tobacco, and then cigarettes, destined for regional and national markets. Bright leaf made a poor region rich. But the crop also carried consequences. It eventually led to massive soil erosion, deforestation, and indebtedness. Within a few decades bright leaf transformed from savior to destroyer. This transformation in part created the sleepy southern region that so impressed my youthful imagination.

This is a story of the rise of a crop culture, that of bright leaf tobacco (also known as yellow tobacco or, more recently, flue-cured tobacco). It is also a tale of the decline of the environment that accompanied this form of tobacco cultivation, from severe erosion to deforestation to insect infestations. It is a miraculous story; some of the poorest land in the South produced, for a time, one of its most lucrative crops. In a transformation akin to alchemy, sandy, weak earth grew tobacco crops that made select farmers rich in a single season. Yet almost as quickly this poor earth melted away in summer thunderstorms, flowing through gullies and in vast sheets into the region's creeks and rivers on its way to the Atlantic. Growers understood these dangers, yet they believed that their cultivation methods made agronomic sense. This study seeks to understand not only the material relationships that connected crop,

land, and people, but also the mental calculations and justifications that accompanied tobacco farming. Why were people willing to destroy the land they lived on in order to raise bright leaf? How did they justify their actions? What general lessons can agricultural and environmental historians draw from bright tobacco's tale?

In exploring these questions, this dissertation focuses on the birthplace of bright tobacco - three contiguous Piedmont counties, Halifax and Pittsylvania in Virginia, and Caswell in North Carolina - from the origins of bright leaf culture around 1840 until the nadir of local farm fortunes at the end of the nineteenth century. The decision to root this study in three counties along the border of Virginia and North Carolina was grounded in environmental and agricultural considerations. Farmers, like agricultural pests, storms, floods, and droughts, rarely limited their actions based on county or state lines, and the emergence of bright leaf culture took place with little regard to these political boundaries. Despite this ecological reality, there are good reasons to focus on the three counties in question. Areas of Pittsylvania, Halifax, and Caswell all developed substantial bright leaf cultures before the Civil War, and these were the only three counties in the nation to do so to any significant extent. Although bright tobacco cultivation spread southeastward following the war, especially by the 1880s, the three county region (known locally as the Southside or the Border) remained the densest concentration of bright leaf farms until the Great Depression.<sup>2</sup> In addition, planters and farmers with the environmental and agricultural knowledge that fueled this expansion remained centered around Danville (in southern Pittsylvania County), as these bright leaf ambassadors spread techniques that originated

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<sup>2</sup> A note on terminology: the geographical term Southside is often used in Virginia history to refer to the counties of the Tidewater (or eastern) portion of the commonwealth south of the James River. The residents of Virginia and North Carolina in the district surrounding Danville, the principal town of Pittsylvania County, also referred to their immediate region as the Southside during the nineteenth century, and continue to do so. In this dissertation, the term Southside refers to the counties in question. This text also occasionally refers to the region as the Border, another common nineteenth century label.

on the sandy uplands of the Dan and Staunton rivers to other portions of the American South. The most vocal bright leaf advocates and boosters came from these three counties, and the auction system that grew to dominate bright tobacco sales was developed in Danville. In short, these three counties were the first to produce bright leaf, the largest producers over a substantial period of time, the most important in terms of creating and spreading the crop culture, and the first to suffer the consequences as the dangers of bright leaf monoculture became impossible to ignore near the end of the nineteenth century.

An examination limited to three counties also presents an opportunity to examine a crop culture on an intimate level. Only through detailed examination of particular crop cultures in particular places can we begin to understand the environmental logic (or illogic) of specific agricultural systems. These details reside at the heart of rural and agrarian history; historian Orville Burton declares that “we cannot take that material foundation [crops and environments] for granted as self-explanatory. Rather we have to come to terms with its complexity before we can explain culture, to see the frame into which culture fits, to gauge words and thoughts within the material context from which they were generated.”<sup>3</sup> Agricultural history that seeks to examine specific places, then, is as reliant on knowledge of the land as is good agricultural practice, for as agrarian and philosopher Wendell Berry has observed, “The land is too various in its kinds, climates, conditions, declivities, aspects, and histories to conform to any generalized understanding or to prosper under generalized treatment.”<sup>4</sup> This dissertation avoids a synthetic history of tobacco culture - these exist in abundance - in search of the relationship between farmers and landscape that shaped both a place and a people. This does not mean that this

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<sup>3</sup> Orville Vernon Burton, “Reaping What We Sow: Community and Rural History,” *Agricultural History* 76, 4 (Autumn 2002): 634.

<sup>4</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, 3rd. ed. (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1996), 31.

dissertation ignores bright tobacco's ties to the broader region, nation, and world. There are points in this story that wander beyond the borders of Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania. This narrative does, for example, venture across the Henry County line into the Leatherwood Valley, follows bright leaf as it makes its way down the Roanoke River or across the countryside to market, looks at chewing tobacco marketing across the nation, and briefly explores the global reach of the cigarette. These excursions are an important part of bright leaf's story, and though I seek first and foremost an intimate look at farmers and their land, I attempt to remain cognizant of the connections between producer, middleman, and consumer that contributed mightily to the formation of a regional agriculture.

The chronological boundaries of the study also demand a brief discussion. The beginning point of the dissertation is relatively easy to justify; around 1840 a handful of farmers in these three counties began to raise bright leaf with some consistent success. The spread of traditional tobacco culture into the region forms a brief backstory, but this work's true argument begins with the farmers who successfully developed bright leaf. The ending point circa 1900 requires a little more justification. In some ways, the Great Depression, with the Soil Conservation Service's identification of the three counties as agricultural and - though the label was not contemporary - environmental problem areas, and the 1933 tobacco quota system imposed by the Agricultural Adjustment Act, seems a natural denouement. While I briefly tackle New Deal responses to bright tobacco's problems in the epilogue, the conditions that led to these troubles were firmly in place by the last decade of the nineteenth century. Regional farmers were already experiencing severe soil erosion, the iron tentacles of fertilizer debt, slumping bright tobacco prices, and few obvious alternatives by the 1890s; SCS officials merely identified and labeled an ongoing

condition. Ending the story once the cycle of poverty was firmly in place permits greater attention to what led to the crisis in the first place.

There are shelves of books on tobacco in the southeastern United States, and many of them devote the bulk of their attention to Virginia or North Carolina, yet there are surprisingly few studies focused on bright tobacco as a crop rather than as an industrial input, i.e. the raw material for cigarette companies.<sup>5</sup> The bulk of tobacco studies focus either on the emergence of southern tobacco agriculture and its attendant societal structures in the Tidewater of colonial Virginia and Maryland, or on the development and growth of the tobacco manufacturing industry, personified by the proliferation of “Big Tobacco” in the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> The few

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the most influential or interesting general histories of American tobacco cultivation over the past century and a half include Robert L. De Coin, *History and Cultivation of Cotton and Tobacco* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1864); E. R. Billings, *Tobacco: Its History, Varieties, Culture, Manufacture, and Commerce, with an Account of its Various Modes of Use, from Its First Discovery Until Now* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Co., 1875); Paul Avery Werner, *TobaccoLand: A Book about Tobacco; Its History, Legends, Literature, Cultivation, Social and Hygienic Influences, Commercial Development, Industrial Processes and Governmental Regulation* (New York: Tobacco Leaf Publishing Co., 1922); Joseph Clarke Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom: Plantation, Market, and Factory in Virginia and North Carolina, 1800-1860* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1938); Joseph Clarke Robert, *The Story of Tobacco in America* (New York: Knopf, 1949); Wrightman W. Garner, *The Production of Tobacco* (New York: The Blakiston Co., 1951); Jerome E. Brooks, *The Mighty Leaf* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Co., 1952); Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Jordan Goodman, *Tobacco in History: The Cultures of Dependence* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Iain Gately, *Tobacco: A Cultural History of How an Exotic Plant Seduced Civilization* (New York: Grove Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> For representative examples of the first group of histories, see Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975); Paul Clemens, *The Atlantic Economy and Colonial Maryland's Eastern Shore: From Tobacco to Grain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980); Gloria L. Main, *Tobacco Colony: Life in Early Maryland, 1650-1720* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982); T. H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Planters on the Eve of the Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); Russell R. Menard, *Economy and Society in Early Colonial Maryland* (New York: Garland, 1985); Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Lorena S. Walsh, “Plantation Management in the Chesapeake, 1620-1820,” *Journal of Economic History* 49, 2 (June 1989): 393-406; Lois Green Carr, Russell R. Menard, and Lorena Walsh, *Robert Cole's World: Agriculture and Society in Early Maryland* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Lorena S. Walsh, *Motives of Honor, Pleasure and Profit: Plantation Management in the Colonial Chesapeake, 1607-1763* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), and for the second, see Benjamin W. Arnold, “History of the Tobacco Industry in Virginia, 1860-1894,” in Herbert Adams, ed., *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1897): 9-86; Richard B. Tennant, *The American Cigarette Industry: A Study in Economic Analysis and Public Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971); Nannie May Tilley, *The R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Robert F. Durden, *Bold Entrepreneur: A Life of James B. Duke* (Durham, NC: Carolina

books that have focused on tobacco culture in the Virginia and North Carolina Piedmont have generally examined the region's agriculture through the lens of labor struggles in the post-Civil War South. Lynda Morgan, Crandall Shifflett, Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie, and Evan Bennett have all explored the transition from slave to free labor in the tobacco belt, and whites' subsequent efforts to define and racialize agricultural work, though none have paid serious attention to the particular role of the demands of bright leaf or the importance of specific environmental conditions in shaping labor, race, and economic relationships, an omission this dissertation works to remedy.<sup>7</sup> Frederick Siegel's history of Danville, Virginia, does explore the importance of bright leaf in the changing social structures of the town, but his study ends at the conclusion of the Civil War, at the very moment when bright tobacco cultivation dramatically increased, and his analysis is geographically restricted to the town and the surrounding portions of Pittsylvania County.<sup>8</sup>

The recent work of Barbara Hahn has focused on the creation and development of bright leaf. In her 2006 dissertation, "Making Tobacco Bright," Hahn provides a thorough exploration of how institutions shaped the very definitions of American tobacco. Hahn strives to show that, among other forces, Virginia's inspection system, federal taxation, warehouse practices, and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) all shaped perceptions of distinct types of tobacco that were not necessarily reflected in the plant's genetics. While Hahn's focus on

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Academic Press, 2003); Robert R. Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and Allan M. Brandt, *The Cigarette Century: The Rise, Fall, and Deadly Persistence of the Product That Defined America* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Crandall Shifflett, *Patronage and Poverty in the Tobacco South: Louisa County, Virginia, 1860-1900* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982); Lynda Morgan, *Emancipation in Virginia's Tobacco Belt, 1850-1870* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992); Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South: Virginia, 1860-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); and Evan Bennett, "King Bacca's Throne: Land, Life, and Labor in the Old Bright Belt since 1880," Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick F. Siegel, *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness: Tobacco and Society in Danville, Virginia, 1780-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

institutions is both fresh and revealing, throughout her dissertation she downplays the importance of local environments in bright leaf's development. Interested as she is in bright tobacco after it became an integral part of large manufacturing concerns, she pays very little attention to the crop before 1880, or to the counties where it originated. With her overriding focus on how human culture and constructs shaped tobacco, she pays almost no attention to the ways in which bright leaf affected the land and people. Hahn's is a story that takes place in boardrooms, inspection warehouses, government offices, and on factory floors, not one that played itself out on the land.<sup>9</sup> There is no "environmental history" of tobacco to date - bright or dark - but in many ways the first half of Nannie May Tilley's magisterial *Bright Tobacco Industry* (1949) still comes the closest to an environmental history of bright leaf, though because her main concern was explaining the creation of a commodity base for the emergence of large-scale cigarette manufacturing, she, like Hahn, paid relatively little attention to the consequences of bright tobacco farming.<sup>10</sup>

What none of these studies do is examine tobacco as a medium through which people understood and interacted with the environment. Tobacco histories typically treat the crop as a commodity, an avocation, part of an expanding market system, or a consumer good. Missing is a consideration of tobacco as a living, evolving plant connecting people to place. With the exception of a growing body of literature on rice cultivation, southern agricultural history in general has followed this pattern of omission.<sup>11</sup> The story of tobacco suggests that southern

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<sup>9</sup> Barbara Hahn, "Making Tobacco Bright: Institutions, Information, and Industrialization in the Creation of an Agricultural Commodity, 1617-1937," Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006. See also Hahn, "Paradox of Precision: Bright Tobacco as Technology Transfer, 1880-1937," *Agricultural History* 82, 2 (2008): 220-235.

<sup>10</sup> Nannie May Tilley, *The Bright Tobacco Industry, 1860-1929* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1949).

<sup>11</sup> Selected examples of works that treat major southern staple crops as monolithic entities include Shifflett, *Patronage and Poverty*; Bertha S. Dodge, *Cotton: The Plant That Would Be King* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984); Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since*

crops - from cotton to corn - were no monolithic entities. Tobacco was defined to an extent by regional labor systems, market prices, transportation networks, and various private and public institutions, but it was also the product of specific places. Each field of tobacco varied, and every tobacco farmer gained certain understandings of soil, climate, and what it meant to work the land from that stand of plants. A tobacco grower's success was in large part the outgrowth of combining knowledge about a crop in general and a particular piece of earth. These variations were so significant because farmers drew their understandings of agricultural practice, land and labor management, even their self-worth as a farmer from their actions on a particular plot of ground. Agriculture, even within staple crop systems such as those that characterized the American South during the nineteenth century, was no featureless abstract thing, and bright tobacco culture provides an example of the variance present within all farming, regional or otherwise.

The relationships between Southside residents, bright tobacco, and the environment were firmly rooted in racially-defined (and racist) social and cultural systems, and thus part of the following dissertation is an attempt to reconstruct a hidden "black" history of bright leaf. Environmental history has generally underrepresented African Americans as agricultural and environmental actors in the American South (especially following emancipation).<sup>12</sup> Slave understandings of soil, cultivation methods, and tobacco biology proved important in the

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1880 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Goodman, *Tobacco in History*; Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1998); Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*; Gately, *Tobacco*; and Stephen Yafa, *Cotton: The Biography of a Revolutionary Fiber* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006). For the countervailing rice literature, see note 13 below.

<sup>12</sup> Some exceptions include Timothy Silver, *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests, 1500-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Mart Stewart, "What Nature Suffers to Groe": *Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); David S. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll, eds., "To Love the Wind and the Rain": *African Americans and Environmental History* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), though these works are disproportionately interested in the black environmental experience under slavery. The forthcoming studies by Jim Giesen on the boll weevil and Mark Hersey on George Washington Carver also promise to contribute to our understandings of African American environmental and agricultural knowledge.

development of the new crop and its manufacturing. These slave inputs were perhaps less formative than the transference of agricultural knowledge that took place in southern tidal rice culture (though that story is by no means settled), but they were substantial nonetheless.<sup>13</sup> Following emancipation, freedpeople remained tobacco cultivators, but racial struggles over social position, landownership, and political power shaped white perceptions of black agroecological knowledge and African Americans' access to land. White landowners characterized freedpeople as lazy and dumb, and used bright leaf's stringent cultivation requirements as an excuse to circumscribe black independence. Whites also pointed to the erosion that accompanied tobacco production as proof that African Americans were poor stewards of the land (ignoring similar problems on white-managed farms). Eventually, white farmers created a mythology of bright leaf's emergence that praised influential white planters, written tobacco instructional guides, and systematic book farming, while ignoring black contributions. Bright tobacco thus shaped not only the form of Southside labor, but also the ideology that undergirded it.<sup>14</sup>

A number of southern historians have demonstrated that particular agricultural systems shaped slavery and the post-emancipation experience, which differed in Deep South cotton

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<sup>13</sup> On African slaves' contributions to rice culture, see Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Knopf, 1974); Daniel C. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); Judith Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Judith Carney, "Out of Africa: Colonial Rice History in the Black Atlantic," in *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World*, Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan, eds. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005): 187-203; and Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), esp. 150-154. For a challenge to these arguments, see David Eltis, Philip Morgan, and David Richardson, "Agency and Diaspora in Atlantic History: Reassessing the African Contribution to Rice Cultivation in the Americas," *American Historical Review* 112, 5 (December 2007): 1329-1358

<sup>14</sup> Drew Swanson, "Black Hands, Bright Leaf: African American Environmental and Agricultural Knowledge in the Making of a New Crop System," paper presented at the Graduate Association for African American History Conference, Memphis, TN, November 11, 2010. Paper in possession of the author.

districts, Louisiana's sugar lands, the Lowcountry, and Piedmont tobacco fields.<sup>15</sup> This dissertation seeks to make the next step, arguing that the environmental foundations of a crop system played an important role in race relations. Planters' successes mating soil and seed types contributed to a thriving slave economy in the Southside even as slave populations in other tobacco districts declined, bright leaf's environmental demands encouraged white landowners to resist independent black labor following emancipation, and the postwar literature on agricultural techniques and the crop's history were charged with racial language derived from white conceptions of the environment and its degradation. This is not an argument for environmental determinism, for, despite U. B. Phillips's famous declaration, southern culture was not a direct product of the weather (or soil, or particular diseases).<sup>16</sup> Rather, this study is an assertion that culture - in this case, an agriculture - rests upon an environmental foundation that limits the possible and the shapes what is likely. In the case of the Southside, a culture of tobacco production and slavery met an environment particularly conducive to producing a high quality form of the crop, but only at great risk to the health of the land.

Whether black or white, the Southside population was largely rural and agricultural during the nineteenth century. Thus this dissertation seeks to examine relationships between southern people and the environment through their most common means of interaction well into the twentieth century: agriculture. Mart Stewart in particular has stated that southern

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<sup>15</sup> Some examples include Ronald Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor: From Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District, 1860-1890* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982); Joseph P. Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Morgan, *Emancipation in Virginia's Tobacco Belt*; Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*; J. William Harris, *Deep Souths: Delta, Piedmont, and Sea Island Society in the Age of Segregation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); and John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> For a full discussion of Phillips' determinism, see Mart A. Stewart, "Let Us Begin with the Weather': Climate, Race and Cultural Distinctiveness in the American South," in *Nature and Society in Historical Context*, Mikulas Teich et. al. eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

relationships with the environment have been peculiarly rooted in agricultural landscapes, a call to arms taken up by Jack Temple Kirby, Lynn Nelson, and Paul Sutter, among others.<sup>17</sup>

According to Stewart, the discussions of wilderness and preservation characteristic of western environmental history should take a backseat to agricultural landscapes in our study of the Southeast, since “the environmental history of the South has been an agrarian one.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Benjamin Cohen argues that “Any discussion of the environmental sensibilities of the early American Republic must not just *make reference* to agriculture, but should be embedded *within* it.”<sup>19</sup> In the South, one might apply Cohen’s statement to the entire sweep of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries. Accepting that human relationships with nature in the South often took place through agriculture means dealing with anthropocentric landscapes in more thoughtful ways. As historian James McCann has noted, declensionist narratives and prelapsarian ideals of the environment seem facile when attempting to explain human-induced change in a landscape that was itself a human-influenced artifact.<sup>20</sup> The thread of preservation that dominates many western environmental histories - be they histories of damming wild rivers or logging old-growth forest - is hardly a relevant model for understanding a Piedmont scrub forest that has been through a half-dozen cycles of field and long-fallow. The task then, as Kirby

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<sup>17</sup> For selected examples of calls for increased attention to the importance of agriculture in southern environmental history, see Mart A. Stewart, “*What Nature Suffers to Groe*”: *Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Mart A. Stewart, “If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian: Environmental History West and South,” *Environment and History* 11, 2 (2005): 139-162; Otis Graham, “Again the Backward Region? Environmental History in and of the American South,” *Southern Cultures* 6, 2 (Summer 2000): 50-72; Lynn Nelson, *Pharsalia: An Environmental Biography of a Southern Plantation, 1780-1880* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007); Paul S. Sutter & Christopher Manganiello, eds., *Environmental History and the American South: A Reader* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 1-4, 18-19; Jack Temple Kirby, *Mockingbird Song: Ecological Landscapes of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and Christopher Morris, “A More Southern Environmental History,” *Journal of Southern History* 75, 3 (August 2009): 591-594.

<sup>18</sup> Stewart, “If John Muir Had Been,” 147.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin Cohen, *Notes from the Ground: Science, Soil, and Society in the American Countryside* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 24-25.

<sup>20</sup> James McCann, *Maize and Grace: Africa’s Encounter with a New World Crop, 1500-2000* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

frames it, is to take the large body of southern agricultural history and “recast and extend. . .” it “as agroecological history.”<sup>21</sup>

Traditional interpretations of the regional relationship between people and the land have been highly critical; historians have long described southern agriculture in terms of decline. According to this model, the staple crop plantation system exploited people and the land, depleting Southeastern soils as planters marched south and westward like locusts, leaving the wreckage of slavery and erosion in their wake. This exploitation continued after the Civil War, as various forms of tenancy, debt peonage, and production for increasingly competitive world markets exacerbated the South’s environmental and social problems.<sup>22</sup> The history of bright tobacco complicates this narrative. It is true that by 1900 the Southside looked much like the cotton, sugar, and rice belts, with white and black farmers struggling to make ends meet as fertilizer prices rose, soil washed away, and market prices declined because of overproduction and the power of a monopsony in the form of the American Tobacco Company. But this

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<sup>21</sup> Jack Temple Kirby, “Virginia’s Environmental History: A Prospectus,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 99, 4 (October 1991): 449.

<sup>22</sup> Some influential interpretations over the years include: Hugh H. Bennett, *Soils and Southern Agriculture* (New York: Macmillan, 1921); Avery Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1926) [though Craven does argue that the antebellum Chesapeake temporarily reversed this decline]; Lewis C. Gray, *The History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, 2 vol. (Washington D. C.: Carnegie Institution, 1933); W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage, 1991, reprint), esp. 147-178; Clement Eaton, *A History of the Old South*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 207-229; Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery; Studies in the Economy & Society of the Slave South*, 2nd ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989); Shifflett, *Patronage and Poverty*; Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985). There have been a few studies that challenge the notion of southern agriculture as particularly inefficient and exploitative, including Carville Earle, “The Myth of the Southern Soil Miner: Macrohistory, Agricultural Innovation, and Environmental Change,” in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, Donald Worster, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 175-210; Jack Temple Kirby, “Virginia’s Environmental History: A Prospectus,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 99, 4 (October 1991): 455; Jack Temple Kirby, *Poquosin: A Study of Rural Landscape and Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 109-114; and Jack Temple Kirby, *Mockingbird Song: Ecological Landscapes of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), esp. chap. 3, though these works are disproportionately focused on the soundness and sustainability of early swidden agriculture and free-ranging stock systems.

impoverishment of land and people was not a linear process. For a substantial stretch of the nineteenth century, bright leaf promised a flourishing agricultural economy (at least for the white portion of the regional population). The emergence of bright leaf slowed emigration, boosted land values, and stimulated a regional manufacturing industry during the antebellum era; the crop remained an economic engine during the tumult of the Civil War; and bright leaf continued to thrive during the difficult periods of Reconstruction and the financial crises that followed the war. Bright leaf culture developed and expanded not because of its overwhelming appeal to greed and short-term gain (though these elements were present), but through appeals to agricultural and personal improvement in search of a basic economic and social sustainability. Bright tobacco culture called on farmers to study their land and their crops carefully, to read agricultural literature and employ the newest innovations, and to make their land more valuable through intellectual as well as physical labor. These messages were far from the debasing, exploitative agriculture of regional stereotypes. That these efforts eventually failed was as much a product of the Southside environment and plant biology as it was a result of the destructive nature of staple crop agriculture.

This dissertation's emphasis on farmer knowledge and the artisanal nature of bright tobacco cultivation should not be interpreted as romantic revisionism. In some ways this dissertation celebrates work on the land through the medium of agriculture as an essential way people once understood their surrounding environment, a moral knowledge expressed most powerfully through the writings of the modern agrarian Wendell Berry and environmental historian Richard White. Yet this study is also a critique of the ways in which such knowledge could fail to result in true conservation, the ways in which a true sense of place sometimes failed to result in "a moral superiority" that might have ensured "that those who live and depend on a

place will not harm it.”<sup>23</sup> Farmers and planters, their families, sharecroppers, renters, and slaves all shared an in-depth understanding of crops, the earth, and the environment, but these understanding were often far from complete, they occasionally clashed with short or long-term economic interests, and in other instances they were subsumed by greed and ideology. In short, understanding the environment and appreciating it and desiring its preservation were far from coterminous concepts. Just as the region’s nineteenth century Baptists and Methodists believed that knowledge of God alone was little assurance of salvation, people accrued a knowledge of nature absent any guarantee of good stewardship.

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This dissertation’s initial chapter examines the growth of traditional tobacco culture in the three counties from the first waves of Anglo-American settlement in the mid-eighteenth century to the 1840s. As tobacco moved from the Virginia Tidewater into the Piedmont of the commonwealth and North Carolina it remained a malleable crop. Early settlers carried ingrained ideas about tobacco, and at the same time adapted the crop to new locations. Even before the advent of bright leaf, local environmental conditions affected where tobacco grew and how farmers cultivated the crop. In many portions of the regional landscape, farmers had almost a century to establish a tobacco culture based on their understandings of the local environment prior to the development of bright leaf. This chapter explores this history and takes a careful look at the annual tasks associated with growing tobacco along the Border, from the selection of a seedbed to marketing the leaf. This detailed study is necessary to establish an agricultural baseline - only by knowing dark leaf culture can we understand the changes wrought by bright leaf.

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<sup>23</sup> Richard White, “‘Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?’: Work and Nature,” in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 181.

Bright tobacco culture - the subject of the second chapter - emerged in the Southside during the 1840s, combining seed selection, the properties of particular soil types, and new developments in tobacco curing technology. The evolution of yellow tobacco production depended on planter experimentation, but it was also reliant on the environmental and agricultural knowledge of slaves. This new crop was exacting and difficult to master, yet it produced amazing profits on land that farmers had long considered poor. Bright leaf also led to a robust regional manufacturing industry that converted the raw crop into various forms of chewing tobacco for regional and national consumers. Tobacco manufacturing relied on the same labor force (slaves) and much of the same environmental knowledge that fueled cultivation. Bright tobacco's birth brought together the region's nature - its soil, topography, and climate - and its culture - a long history raising tobacco, racial slavery, and curing practices - in creating a new agricultural staple that would dominate the Southside's economy and society for more than a century.

The third chapter examines potential resistance to yellow tobacco. Large scale changes in agricultural practice were rooted in more than just practical considerations; they also reflected a cultural milieu, and bright tobacco was no exception. During the last few decades on the antebellum period, Virginia and North Carolina farmers were bombarded by the messages of agricultural reformers. Writers and speakers in agricultural journals, local newspapers, the meetings of agricultural societies, and books all called for a more intensive, modern agriculture to stem westward migration and a relative loss of status and political power by the seaboard states. Farmers and planters in the three counties responded in two ways. They tended to diversify and intensify, experimenting with new breeds of livestock and new crop strains, while employing various conservation methods aimed at preserving soil fertility. They also turned

increasingly to a new variety of tobacco - bright leaf - that promised to make poor land profitable. In many ways bright leaf stood at odds with the message of agricultural reform; it called for planting steep land, tilling constantly, rejected manuring and crop rotation, and keeping fields in constant use. But it also met many of the goals of agricultural reform. Bright leaf provided a greater income per acre than any alternative, and the best crops could be made on abandoned or neglected lands, in many cases the very farms left by those who had GTT (gone to Texas). At the very point agricultural reformers called for a miracle to save eastern farming, bright leaf appeared providential.

In many parts of the South the Civil War was a powerfully transformative force. Several historians of tobacco have pointed to the conflict as a dividing line between two forms of tobacco culture, the death of the dark tobacco plantation along the Border and its replacement with sharecroppers tending small fields of bright leaf that eventually fed the insatiable maw of the American Tobacco Company and its progeny. In Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania, the war exaggerated certain antebellum trends, and altered local agricultural rhythms, but, rather than changing the existing tobacco world, it reinforced preexisting patterns. The war's disruption of traditional antebellum markets increased competition among tobacco sellers and manufacturers, and placed an even greater emphasis on leaf quality. As markets for fire-cured tobacco dried up, Danville manufacturers continued to purchase yellow leaf, often at good prices. The constraints of wartime reinforced the lottery prices of the prewar period; bright leaf was the tobacco of the future. This economic success created a powerful incentive for planters to solve the postbellum "labor question."

The fifth chapter turns from the disruptions of war to postbellum struggles over the shape of regional labor. White landowners sought both retention of the countryside and continued

control of black labor. These goals were firmly rooted in the demands - and planter's perceptions - of bright tobacco culture. Landowners believed that bright leaf cultivation and curing required more skill and artisanship than freedpeople possessed. As a consequence, former planters, often with the complicity of the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands and local courts, sought to impose a system of wage contracting that kept freedpeople bound to the land, and in many cases, their former masters. This white belief in the importance of controlling land and labor also found expression in frequent outbreaks of violence in the three counties. Played out in individual acts of violence and the organized mayhem of a vigorous Ku Klux Klan, bloody encounters in tobacco fields and town squares drew state and national attention, but not before cementing white monopoly of land ownership and tobacco production. Over the course of Reconstruction, plantations operated with wage labor dissolved and were slowly replaced by sharecropped and rented farms, but only once landowners believed that the new system insured their interests. The violence employed to protect white land ownership, control black labor, and ensure continued bright tobacco production during Reconstruction would reappear periodically throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.

Chapter six surveys the growing environmental difficulties that plagued the Southside during the 1870s and 1880s. Erosion, deforestation, and an increasing reliance on commercial fertilizers were characteristic of broad swaths of the row crop South following the Civil War, but they were especially problematic in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania. Largely because of the demands of bright tobacco culture, the three counties were more eroded, less forested, and their farmers bought more fertilizer than other regions of Virginia and North Carolina. These environmental and agricultural problems had an effect on Southside race relations as well. White landowners pointed to poor farm practices in their criticisms of African Americans,

ignoring the presence of these same problems on white farms. White tobaccoists and farmers also linked the vitality of the region's tobacco culture to the Danville riot, a racial struggle that took place in 1883, arguing that the violent oppression of black voters benefitted the town's tobacco economy. By the end of the 1880s, yellow tobacco dominated almost every facet of regional life, but it was a culture uneasy with its reliance on such an environmentally and socially demanding crop.

The final chapter examines the decline of bright tobacco's promise. By the turn of the century, Southside farmers raised more tobacco than ever before, yet declining market prices coupled with soil erosion and an attendant dependency on commercial fertilizers made tobacco culture less and less profitable. The rise of the cigarette and the American Tobacco Company's domination of local markets also worked to cut into farmer profits. Growers turned to agricultural organization in their efforts to better their situation, but the Grange, the Farmers' Alliance, and other local organizations could do little to improve Southside farm economics. Advice from a new source - USDA tobacco experts - also failed to better farmers' situations. These difficulties, combined with robust competition from new bright tobacco producing regions scattered across the Southeast, dimmed the crop's once bright prospects. As a new century dawned, Southside farmers were left with worn-out farms, empty wallets, and little hope of doing anything besides planting another crop of tobacco to make ends meet.

The story of the emergence of bright tobacco is a tale of promise proved hollow. Part of this failure came from the limitations of the land, and part from the incompatibility of certain human desires and the Piedmont landscape. Decisions that seemed to make a certain economic and agricultural sense in the end proved but steps on a path to poverty. The crop at first seemed to offer the Southside's white farmers all that they might desire: it worked well on their poor soil,

it brought high prices, and it meshed to a certain extent with their ideas about land and agriculture. Ultimately, yellow tobacco would prove the region's downfall, as it wore down land and impoverished farmers by the end of the century, leaving the region with few economic alternatives. The crop's promise proved even more illusory for the region's African Americans. Following slavery, strong tobacco prices hinted at the potential success of freedpeople, if only they could obtain land. These high prices, coupled with white landowners' notions of black agricultural abilities, led to some of the lowest black ownership rates in the South. Although its details were unique, by the early twentieth century bright tobacco culture had proven another route to the agricultural New South of tenancy, poverty, and ravaged land.

## CHAPTER 2

### ON THE BACK OF TOBACCO: SOWING THE SEEDS OF A PLANTATION CULTURE

Tobacco shaped the Euro-American settlement of the Southside from its earliest days. This chapter outlines this settlement and the agricultural development of the region from the mid-1700s to the 1840s. Over the course of a century, planters, farmers, and slaves built a rural landscape centered on the cultivation of fire-cured (or dark) tobacco, the traditional Chesapeake staple. This landscape was the product of an existing tobacco culture transported from the coastal plain of eastern Virginia and adapted to the Piedmont environment, and it would shape regional farmers' adoption of a new staple beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. The chapter also examines in detail the cultivation of dark tobacco that laid a foundation for the bright tobacco culture that would sweep the region prior to the Civil War. Dark tobacco fueled the birth and growth of the Southside, but local environmental constraints left planters and farmers searching for an agricultural alternative by the antebellum era. Bright tobacco would prove to be that replacement.

Early Euro-American assessments of the region praised the Southside's agricultural promise. The first detailed description came in 1728, when a party led by William Byrd II of Westover - a prominent planter and politician - surveyed the state line dividing Virginia and North Carolina. Byrd wrote glowingly of the region's thick forests and rich bottomland, and he touted the Southside as prime agricultural land.<sup>24</sup> Despite these favorable reports of the land

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<sup>24</sup> William Byrd, *History of the Dividing Line, and Other Tracts: from the Papers of William Byrd, of Westover, in Virginia, Esquire*, Volume 1 (Richmond: Thomas Wynne, 1866), 90-120; and William Byrd, *A Journey to the Land of Eden, and Other Papers*, Mark Van Doren, ed. (New York: Vanguard Press, 1928), 270-299. Earlier Euro-American explorers traveled through the region, including John Lederer, Thomas Batts and Robert Fallam, and

along the Border, settlement of the region progressed slowly following Byrd's expeditions, as the country between the Tidewater and the Southside was still sparsely settled. In 1738 there were so few Southside residents that the colonial Virginia government offered incentives to induce growth. A statute waived taxes for a period of ten years for any new landowner along the Staunton or Dan rivers (the region's two main waterways), reduced taxes thereafter, and provided for the automatic naturalization of alien settlers [see fig. 1.1].<sup>25</sup> Although the 1738 statute had little immediate effect on the population (or lack thereof) of the Staunton and Dan valleys, speculators, such as Byrd, used the incentives to engross hundreds of thousands of acres of the best bottomlands in the region during the 1730s and 1740s. The real influx of settlers into what would become Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania began around 1750, largely because of declining economic opportunity in the Virginia Tidewater. As eastern populations increased, the best lands were entirely taken by wealthier planters, and a number of small farmers sought their fortunes in the fresh lands of the southern Piedmont.<sup>26</sup> Many of the region's earliest settlers came from Tidewater tobacco counties, but Scots-Irish farmers who moved down the Valley of Virginia from Pennsylvania and into the southwestern Virginia and North Carolina Piedmont composed a substantial portion of post-1750 immigrants. Facing a shortage of the richest river and creek bottomland, these small farmers often patented the weaker soils of the region's

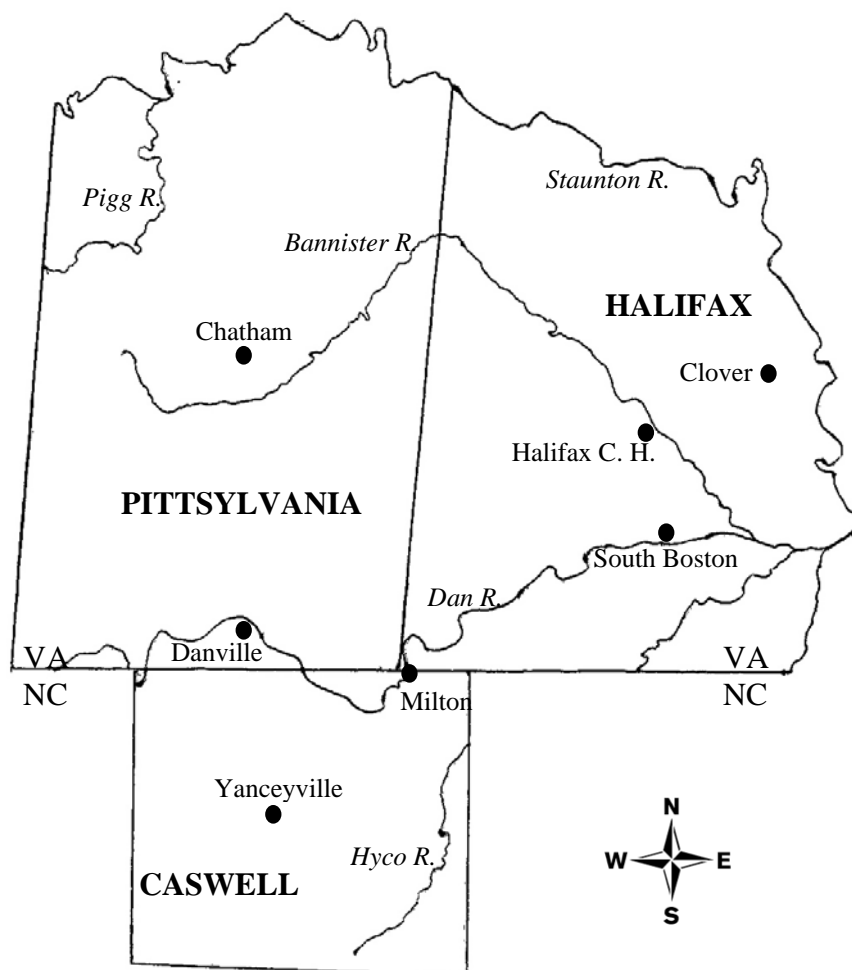
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James Needham, but their accounts of Southside geography and the environment were sparse. See Lyman Carrier, "The Veracity of John Lederer," *William and Mary Quarterly*, second series 19, 4 (October 1939): 440-441; John Lederer, *The Discoveries of John Lederer, in Three Several Marches from Virginia, to the West of Carolina, and Other Parts of the Continent* (London: Samuel Heyrich, 1672), 13-15; Ralph M. Brown, "A Sketch of the Early History of South-Western Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, second series 17, 4 (October 1937): 503-504; and Timothy Silver, *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests, 1500-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 72.

<sup>25</sup> Maud Carter Clement, *The History of Pittsylvania County, Virginia* (Lynchburg, VA: J. P. Bell Co., 1929), 37. The naturalization clause was likely directed at William Byrd's plan to settle Swiss emigrants on his extensive Eden tract in present-day southern Halifax County; but it might also have been influenced by the growing number of German settlers moving from Pennsylvania to Virginia.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-36; and Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 141-144.

uplands.<sup>27</sup> With the jaundiced eye of an Englishmen toward the Irish, traveler John Stuart described the inhabitants of Caswell around the time of the Revolution as “chiefly natives of Ireland, most wretchedly ignorant and uncivilized.”<sup>28</sup>



[Figure 2.1. Caswell (NC), Halifax (VA), and Pittsylvania (VA) Counties. Map prepared by the author.]

<sup>27</sup> Beeman, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry*, 21-23; and Clement, *The History of Pittsylvania*, 43, 46-47.

<sup>28</sup> J. F. D. Smyth (John Ferdinand Smyth Stuart), *A Tour in the United States of America: Containing An Account of the Present Situation of That Country* (London: G. Robinson, J. Robson, & J. Sewell, 1784), 236.

Although cultural differences separated these two waves of settlers, both groups quickly turned to Virginia's historic staple as the region's primary cash crop. The first Euro-American settlers in the three counties selected their farm sites with an eye toward tobacco cultivation. Desiring fertile alluvial soil and easy access to water transportation for heavy tobacco hogsheads, almost all of the region's initial residents sought out land along the numerous rivers and creeks that dissected the hilly landscape. Although these watercourses were not suitable to large boats, small bateaux could navigate most local waters even before internal improvements. Peter Wilson, one of the earliest recorded planters in Pittsylvania, selected a narrow spot in a bend of the Dan River sometime prior to 1750 where he could operate a ferry and farm.<sup>29</sup> Such frontiersmen as John Smith, Jr. and Benjamin Clement settled on good bottomlands along the Staunton River first surveyed in the 1740s, and began raising tobacco soon after carving out their homesteads.<sup>30</sup> In Caswell the first farmers arrived in the 1750s and 1760s, and almost all settled along the county's watercourses. The Hyco and Dan rivers and Country Line Creek were particularly popular locations.<sup>31</sup> Many of these first settlements in the three counties sat on the same sites as earlier Native-American villages, taking advantage of the open land of old Indian

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<sup>29</sup> Jessie Wilson, "Genealogy of the Wilson Family of Pittsylvania County, Virginia," unpublished typescript, Robert Hairston Papers, Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations (microfilm), Kenneth M. Stampp, general ed., (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1987) [hereafter cited as RASP], series J, part 11, reel, 9. The practice of early settlers monopolizing backcountry bottomland through surveying "water-hogging" tracts was a common one throughout Virginia. See James D. Rice, *Nature and History in the Potomac Country: From Hunter-Gatherers to the Age of Jefferson* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 222-224. A particularly illustrative regional example can be found in the plats of tracts settled along the junction of the Stinking and Bannister rivers in northeastern Pittsylvania County. See Land Plat of John Hawkins, November 8, 1751, Crenshaw and Miller Family Papers, folder 1, Southern Historical Collection (hereafter cited as SHC), Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; and Land Survey of Hawkins, Crenshaw, Roberts, & Smith Tracts, n.d., Crenshaw and Miller Family Papers, folder 5, SHC.

<sup>30</sup> Maud Carter Clement, *Frontiers along the Upper Roanoke River, 1740-1776: A Story of First Settlement* (Lynchburg, VA: J. P. Bell Co., 1964), 7-9, 13-18, 40-50; and William Walter Hoest, "The Plantation in a Regional Economy: Pocket Plantation, 1762-1785," MA Thesis, University of Virginia, 1977, 6-8.

<sup>31</sup> William S. Powell, *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County North Carolina, 1777-1977* (Durham, NC: Moore Publishing Co., 1977), 37-38; and Smyth, *A Tour in the United States*, 243-249. Such a high proportion of early settlers lived along watercourses that Halifax's first tax officials in the 1750s created their lists of tithables by simply surveying up each river and creek; see Wirt Johnson Carrington, *A History of Halifax County, Virginia* (Baltimore: Regional Publishing Co., 1969), 21; and Pocahontas Wight Edmunds, *History of Halifax, Volume 1, Narration* (self-published, 1977), 5-6.

fields and clearings such as the ones found along the Staunton and Pigg rivers and Sycamore and Cherrystone creeks.<sup>32</sup>

An emerging Piedmont tobacco culture was part of a shift in tobacco production that swept the mid-Atlantic in the middle and late decades of the eighteenth century. As tobacco cultivation grew in the Piedmont, the importance of the crop's culture lessened on the older lands of the Chesapeake. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, and accelerating after the Revolution, many Tidewater farmers, especially on the Eastern Shore of Virginia and Maryland and on Virginia's Northern Neck, turned to wheat as an alternative cash crop to tobacco. This shift occurred for a number of reasons. Tobacco cultivation on fresh Piedmont lands increased competition at a time when tobacco prices fluctuated (prices gradually increased but there were periods of severe recession, and especially steep price declines would occur during the French Revolution). Wheat culture involved less hoe and more plow work, which lessened Chesapeake farmers' dependence on slave labor. The Tidewater's connections to Atlantic trade also promoted grain cultivation after 1760: a series of European conflicts increased demand for bread, several poor weather years hampered other American and foreign grain-growing regions, and the rapid growth of the northeastern colonies fueled grain prices. Also contributing to this shift toward grain cultivation, eastern planters ranging from large masters, such as George Washington, to smaller landowners, saw in wheat the potential to diversify their agricultural practices.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Michael B. Barber and Eugene B. Barfield, "Native Americans on the Virginia Frontier in the Seventeenth Century: Archeological Investigations along the Interior Roanoke River Drainage," in *Diversity and Accommodation: Essays on the Cultural Composition of the Virginia Frontier*, Michael J. Puglisi, ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997): 138, 140; and Francis Hallam Hurt, *An Intimate History of the American Revolution in Pittsylvania County, Virginia* (Danville, VA: Womack Press, 1976), 44-45.

<sup>33</sup> Lorena S. Walsh, "Plantation Management in the Chesapeake, 1620-1820," *Journal of Economic History* 49, 2 (June 1989): 396-401; Paul G. E. Clemens, *The Atlantic Economy and Colonial Maryland's Eastern Shore: From Tobacco to Grain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 22-23, 168-205; and Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 120.

This Tidewater shift to wheat cultivation prior to the American Revolution was dramatic, but it did not entirely displace tobacco cultivation in the region. A few figures reveal the continued importance of the traditional crop on Chesapeake farms. According to Philip Morgan, in 1740 the value of the Tidewater's exported tobacco was fourteen times greater than the value of the region's grain. With the growth of wheat culture, the gap shrank over the ensuing decades, but in 1770, Tidewater tobacco exports were still worth three times as much as grain.<sup>34</sup> Allan Kulikoff calculates that as of 1775, two out of three residents of coastal Virginia and Maryland still raised tobacco on a regular basis.<sup>35</sup> Tobacco remained a crop with widespread appeal in the eastern portion of the colony, but the gradual decline in Tidewater leaf production after the Revolution accelerated Piedmont tobacco cultivation, where fresh land promised larger crops and good profits (at least initially). Tobacco's shift from the Tidewater to the Piedmont was a lengthy transition, but the latter region was the center of American tobacco production by the early decades of the nineteenth century.

Piedmont tobacco growers were subject to the forces of national and transatlantic trade, but they also had to deal with the material realities of raising tobacco in a new environment. And the Southside environment was quite different from the Tidewater or the Great Valley from which most regional settlers came. The Piedmont province of Virginia and North Carolina is located between the Tidewater to the east and the Blue Ridge Mountains to the west. Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania lie along the Piedmont's western edge, a landscape of rolling hills, deep creek and river courses, and the occasional low mountain. Although the region receives

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<sup>34</sup> Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 170.

<sup>35</sup> Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 120-121. For a similar observation on the prevalence of tobacco culture on a majority of Tidewater farms throughout the colonial period, see Lois Green Carr, Russell R. Menard, and Lorena S. Walsh, *Robert Cole's World: Agriculture and Society in Early Maryland* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 70-71.

moderate precipitation - between forty and fifty inches per year - it is a particularly well-drained landscape, dissected by numerous streams and rivers. Waterways dominate regional topography: the Staunton River drains the northern portion of Pittsylvania and Halifax, while the Dan drains the southern stretches of both counties and all of Caswell, before the two rivers combine to form the Roanoke in eastern Halifax. Water figures prominently even in the corners of the region farthest from the major rivers, as hardly a square mile of the three counties lacks a regular stream of some sort. With the exception of moderately rocky ridges such as Turkeycock, Smith, and White Oak mountains, these watercourses divide the Southside landscape into two basic types: bottomland and upland. Lying along the numerous creeks and rivers, Southside bottomland is dark and fertile, rich in organic matter deposited by periodic flooding. The region's upland is much poorer for agricultural purposes. It is composed of sandy loam of the Appling, Cecil, and Durham series. This sandy loam is the product of the weathering of ancient Piedmont bedrock; it is granular in structure, permeable, highly acidic, and overlays a subsoil of stiff red or yellow clay. These light soils drain well, but they are low in organic matter and thus in nitrogen, and their structure combined with their position on sloping hillsides make these topsoils highly erodible.<sup>36</sup>

This topography had a dramatic influence on the region's Euro-American settlement and agriculture. The rich bottomland soil attracted dark tobacco farmers, and the sandy upland topsoil - which proved poor ground for fire-cured tobacco - would eventually produce the best

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<sup>36</sup> N. M. Kirk, et al., *Soil Survey of Pittsylvania County, Virginia* (Washington D. C: Government Printing Office, 1922), 6-7, 11; John C. Nicholson, *Soil Survey of Pittsylvania County and the City of Danville, Virginia* (Washington D. C: Government Printing Office, 1994), 13-23; W. Edward Hearn and Frank P. Drane, *Soil Survey of Caswell County, North Carolina* (Washington, D. C: Government Printing Office, 1994), inserted soil map; R. C. Jurney, et al., *United States Department of Agriculture Soil Survey of Halifax County, Virginia* (Washington D. C: Government Printing Office, 1938), 9, 40; Wrightman W. Garner, *The Production of Tobacco* (New York: Blakiston Co., 1951), 89; and E. M. Rowalt, *Soil Defense in the Piedmont*, USDA Farmer's Bulletin 1767 (Washington, D. C: Government Printing Office, 1937), 2-4. For descriptions of Southside soil series, see the entries for Appling, Cecil and Durham sandy loams at the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service's website, <http://soils.usda.gov/technical/classification/osd/index.html>.

quality bright leaf in the world. This thin soil, with its lack of organic matter and its hillside and ridge-top situation, was a precarious resource held in place by the region's forest cover. The area's abundant rivers and streams provided water and local transportation networks, but the Roanoke River's drainage into the Albemarle Sound of North Carolina, with only limited access to the Atlantic, rather than into the Chesapeake Bay, retarded early economic growth. Rocky ledges and falls throughout the river system also hindered water transportation, limiting initial water traffic to small boats and canoes. These factors proved an early hindrance to the development of the Southside, but navigational improvements to the river system and the construction of new roads in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries connecting the lower Roanoke to Richmond and Petersburg transformed the waterway into a transportation thoroughfare.<sup>37</sup>

These environmental realities had to compete with early written accounts of the land. Byrd and other commentators wrote glowingly of the Southside's agricultural potential. Byrd lavished praise on the region's thick forests, replete with buffalo, deer, bear, and other game, and believed this abundance a sign of fertility.<sup>38</sup> He recorded flocks of passenger pigeons so large that "whenever they fly from the country, [they] darken the sun for quite a while, and when they want to rest in the woods, they break the branches because of their numbers."<sup>39</sup> He also praised the broad river and creek bottoms thick with stands of river cane.<sup>40</sup> He declared the Dan a

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<sup>37</sup> Frederick F. Siegel, *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness: Tobacco and Society in Danville, Virginia, 1780-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 12-13; Charles J. Farmer, *In the Absence of Towns, Settlement and Country Trade in Southside Virginia, 1730-1800* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), 29, 96; and Richard R. Beeman, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry: A Case Study of Lunenburg County, Virginia, 1746-1832* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 24-25.

<sup>38</sup> Byrd, *History of the Dividing Line*, 90-100, 104-105, 119; and Byrd, *A Journey*, 288, 293-299.

<sup>39</sup> William Byrd, *William Byrd's Natural History of Virginia, or the Newly Discovered Eden*, Richard Croom Beatty and William Mulloy, eds. (Richmond, VA: Dietz Press, 1940), 51.

<sup>40</sup> Byrd, *History of the Dividing Line*, 90-100, 104-105, 119; and Byrd, *A Journey*, 288, 293-299.

“Charming River,” and “perfectly clear.”<sup>41</sup> Byrd’s narrative made clear that he was impressed by the Southside’s floral and faunal abundance because he saw in these natural resources evidence that the land would support agriculture. A few years after his survey, Byrd attempted to establish a settlement near the junction of the Dan and the Staunton, which he declared a “Newly Discovered Eden.” After recording the region’s natural advantages, he reminded readers that tobacco was “the foremost crop which one plants in Virginia,” linking the compatibility of the historic staple with the new landscape in his sales pitch.<sup>42</sup>

This “new” land was not a howling wilderness, however, and Byrd’s optimism regarding the land’s agricultural potential came in part from evidence of past Native American farming. Occaneechi and Saura Indians had long lived in the Southside, but, beginning in the early 1700s, these groups moved their villages farther from encroaching Euro-American settlements, leaving the Southside as a sort of buffer zone between the English on Virginia’s coastal plain and the Appalachians and central Carolina Piedmont.<sup>43</sup> Everywhere he traveled, Byrd saw remnants of Native fields and villages. Near the southwestern corner of Pittsylvania, along the Dan River, Byrd discovered abandoned Saura Indian fields that were still open and covered in tall grass, “Truly a Land of Plenty, both for Man and Beast.”<sup>44</sup> The Dan and its tributaries were also lined with stands of river cane up to sixteen feet tall, covering ground that had recently been cleared.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Byrd, *History of the Dividing Line*, 101.

<sup>42</sup> Byrd, *William Byrd’s Natural History*, quote on 9.

<sup>43</sup> It is unclear if this movement was the product of disease epidemics, conflict with settlers, to facilitate trade, or some combination of these factors. Lederer, *The Discoveries of John Lederer*, 13, 15; Michael B. Barber and Eugene B. Barfield, “Native Americans on the Virginia Frontier in the Seventeenth Century: Archeological Investigations along the Interior Roanoke River Drainage,” in *Diversity and Accommodation: Essays on the Cultural Composition of the Virginia Frontier*, Michael J. Puglisi, ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997): 138-140; and Forest Hazel, “Occaneechi - Saponi Descendants in the North Carolina Piedmont: The Texas Community,” *Southern Indian Studies* 40 (October 1991): 6-9. On these buffer zones and their influence on nature and landscape in another portion of the South, see Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaw, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

<sup>44</sup> Byrd, *History of the Dividing Line*, 113.

<sup>45</sup> Byrd, *A Journey*, 277, 288, 297-298; Byrd, *History of the Dividing Line*, 101-102. For the importance of river cane in the Piedmont and the mountains and the plant’s adaptation to periodic disturbance, see Mart A. Stewart,

He was likewise impressed by the large expanses of recently cultivated land near the confluence of the Dan and the Staunton in eastern Halifax County. During the seventeenth century the Occaneechi Indians had inhabited a series of islands where the two rivers met, and Byrd believed these old fields some of the best land in the Piedmont. He described the peach trees and wild hops that grew on the river banks where the Occaneechi village once stood, noted the “brambles, vines and poke bushes” that were filling in the abandoned fields, and rode through clearings where “the grass grew as high as a horse and his rider.” Byrd’s account of these abandoned Southside fields emphasized the availability of land suited to agriculture, particularly the cultivation of tobacco.<sup>46</sup>

Despite Byrd’s glowing description of Southside land, the region’s defining agricultural characteristic was that it was not exceptionally fertile. The majority of Southside land, the hills and high ground between watercourses, was acidic, relatively deficient in nitrogen, and low in organic matter. Byrd’s assessment was in part a product of his desire to promote and sell land he owned in the region, and the fact that his travels by and large followed the rivers, where the best soil was located. The best land made fine dark tobacco, and was fertile enough to support continuous cultivation of the crop for a number of years, but the weaker uplands made thin, light, poor tobacco, and wore out quickly. The Southside as it developed became a patchwork landscape of fertile bottomland and much weaker upland, and regional cultivators would deal with these limitations in the decades to come.

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“From King Cane to King Cotton: Razing Cane in the Old South,” *Environmental History* 12, 1 (January 2007): 59-79; Timothy Silver, *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests, 1500-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 22; Donald Edward David, *Where There Are Mountains: An Environmental History of the Southern Appalachians* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 71-73; and Albert E. Radford, Harry E. Ahles, and C. Ritchie Bell, *Manual of the Vascular Flora of the Carolinas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 60.

<sup>46</sup> Byrd, *A Journey*, 270, 273, quote on 273.

Slavery was a common practice among the Southside's early settlers. As a number of historians have pointed out, the institution was not transferred from the Tidewater to the Piedmont whole cloth, but all of its component pieces arrived with the region's initial settlers, who quickly wove a plantation society in the hills.<sup>47</sup> The Piedmont's first white settlers owned fewer slaves than their counterparts in eastern Virginia or North Carolina, if they held any slaves at all, but the institution grew steadily in the Southside. Out of eighty-three wills recorded in Halifax County between 1752 and 1773, 45 percent (thirty-seven) listed slaves. Most area farmers owned fewer than ten slaves prior to the Revolution, but a few - such as Halifax's Edward Booker with twenty-two, and John Smith, Jr., of Pocket Plantation along the Staunton, who owned twenty-three slaves at the onset of the war - built sizable plantations. This bonded labor was almost always connected to tobacco production. A number of estate inventories of farmers who owned slaves also included tobacco notes, interest in tobacco crops, or quantities of cured leaf. In just two examples, Paul Chiles left eleven slaves and a little more than 4,500 pounds of tobacco to his inheritors in 1761, and Smith's slaves produced as much as 40,000 pounds of tobacco annually on his Pocket Plantation.<sup>48</sup>

The tobacco produced by Chiles, Smith, and their fellow Piedmont planters largely flowed overseas. From its commercial origins at Jamestown, colonial American tobacco was a crop destined for European markets. By the mid-eighteenth century, Europeans of all classes, ages, and both genders smoked pipes, chewed tobacco, dipped snuff, or lit cigars, and a number of cultures even celebrated tobacco consumption as a healthy or prophylactic habit. The bulk of

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<sup>47</sup> Beeman, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry*, 33, 67; and Siegel, *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness*, 16-21.

<sup>48</sup> Compiled from Marian Dodson Chiarito, *Will Book 0, 1752-1773, Halifax County, Virginia* (Nathalie, VA: Clarkton Press, 1982), 1-60; and Hoest, "The Plantation in a Regional Economy," 8, 33. For Edward Booker's will, see page Chiarito, page 41, and for Paul Chiles' will and estate inventory see pages 16 and 37. The percentage of slave ownership among recorded Halifax wills was probably higher than indicated, as a number of wills failed to enumerate property, leaving the "whole estate both real & personal" to a single individual.

Virginia and North Carolina tobacco (small amounts were consumed locally) moved down the region's rivers to Chesapeake ports, where it sold to Scottish merchants who carried the leaf to Glasgow or London. From there the weed was dispersed to Great Britain's towns and cities, or transshipped to the continent. Small amounts of tobacco even trickled into corners of the world as remote from the Chesapeake as Japan and Uganda. Tobacco taxes supported the English government (to the tune of 300,000 pounds sterling annually at the outbreak of the American Revolution), hauling tobacco kept the Scottish shipping industry afloat, and provisioning tobacco planters and farmers kept Scottish merchants in business. Virginia tobacco (as buyers called tobacco from the greater Chesapeake region) acquired an international reputation for consistent quality, and this transcontinental demand fueled the growth of the Piedmont.<sup>49</sup>

The region's largely agricultural economy, with its focus on tobacco production for distant markets, did little to promote urban growth prior to the Revolution. As early as the 1730s, William Byrd laid off the town of Eden along the southern bank of the Dan River, just west of its juncture with the Roanoke, in modern Halifax County. Despite his efforts to attract Swiss colonists to the proposed town, Byrd's plan never resulted in a physical settlement.<sup>50</sup> A few hamlets and villages developed, but without exception these small centers languished. Both Peytonsbury in Halifax (1759) and Chatham in Pittsylvania (1767) were founded as courthouse sites, but grew little after county divisions led to the relocation of their courthouses to more

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<sup>49</sup> Jacob M. Price, "The Rise of Glasgow in the Chesapeake Tobacco Trade, 1707-1775," *William and Mary Quarterly* 11, 2 (April 1954): 179-199; Iain Gately, *Tobacco: A Cultural History of How an Exotic Plant Seduced Civilization* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 80-105; Jordan Goodman, *Tobacco in History: The Cultures of Dependence* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 59-75; Jacob M. Price, *Tobacco Atlantic Trade: The Chesapeake, London, and Glasgow, 1675-1775* (Brookfield, VT: Variorum, 1995); and Eric Burns, *Smoke of the Gods: A Social History of Tobacco* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2007), 28-35, 93.

<sup>50</sup> Christopher E. Hendricks, *The Backcountry Towns of Colonial Virginia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 64-69. The proposed town of Eden should not be confused with Byrd's large tract of land by the same name farther upstream in North Carolina. For Byrd's glowing advertisement of Eden, see Byrd, *William Byrd's Natural History*. Byrd's Eden speculation came as he was planning to develop two other Virginia townsites, on the falls of the James and Appomattox Rivers; these settlements would become the cities of Richmond and Petersburg. See Pierre Marambaud, "William Byrd of Westover: Cavalier, Diarist, and Chronicler," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 78, 2 (April 1970): 145.

central locations. (To confuse matters, the first Chatham lost its courthouse to the hamlet of Competition in 1777, whose boosters also adopted the name Chatham. The first Chatham then became known as Callands.)<sup>51</sup> Following the Revolution, two towns on the Dan River, Danville in Pittsylvania County, and Milton in Caswell, would become entrepôts centered on tobacco warehousing and manufacturing, but their growth was slow prior to the 1830s.

Carville Earle and Ronald Hoffman have proposed a convincing theory explaining the general lack of urban development in the early plantation South, which they label “staple theory.” Earle and Hoffman credit the region’s shortage of towns and cities to an overwhelming reliance on agricultural staples, such as tobacco and cotton, which demanded little in the way of infrastructure or services.<sup>52</sup> In general agreement with this “staple theory,” Charles Farmer believes that a focus on tobacco undercut the growth of towns in the Virginia Southside. Tobacco demanded little but transportation arteries and storage facilities in the form of warehouses, especially during the eighteenth century when the vast majority of leaf was exported to Europe. Even the need for roads in the region was often obviated by the availability of water networks connecting the Piedmont to the Tidewater. If production needs did little to encourage urban growth, regional consumption was hardly more stimulating. Farmer, in support of Earle and Hoffman, credits the slave/plantation system with the ability to provide for most of its own needs, and the absence of a large middle class meant little demand for artisans and services. Country stores and roving peddlers supplied the majority of luxuries and other purchased goods, while the larger planters dealt with their factors in Richmond and Petersburg for manufactured

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 76-81.

<sup>52</sup> Carville Earle and Ronald Hoffman, “Urban Development in the Eighteenth-Century South,” *Perspectives in American History* 10 (1976): 5-78.

items such as furniture, silver, and carriages.<sup>53</sup> Country store account books and peddler records from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reveal that local residents purchased two main classes of goods: basic necessities that were often cheaper to buy than to produce, such as cloth, nails, salt, whiskey, pocket knives, and sugar, and the occasional luxury items, such as silk handkerchiefs, ivory combs, nutmegs, and ribbon.<sup>54</sup> Southside merchants such as Scotsman James Glenn typically exchanged finished goods for tobacco, which they transported to Petersburg or Richmond en route to European markets.<sup>55</sup> Although local farmers and planters were hardly self-sufficient, there was little in the way of the widespread demand for commercial goods and services necessary for the growth of large towns. This dispersed rural landscape was a product of tobacco culture, but it would also help sustain it. A lack of urban industry presented few alternatives to tobacco cultivation, and poor transportation networks meant that only agricultural crops with a high value to weight ratio (such as dark and later bright tobacco) were cost effective.

As rural tobacco culture expanded, the Southside's population grew as well. Although the region was slow to be settled in the early and mid-eighteenth century, the population grew rapidly after mid-century. By the first federal census in 1790, the three counties held a population of 36,397 people, a number that grew by almost 50 percent over the next two decades. As fast as the total population increased, the number of slaves increased even more

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<sup>53</sup> Farmer, *In the Absence of Towns*, 107-109; Hendricks, *The Backcountry Towns*, 83; and Joseph T. Rainer, "'Commercial Scythians' in the Great Valley of Virginia: Yankee Peddlers' Trade Connections to Antebellum Virginia," in *After the Backcountry: Rural Life in the Great Valley of Virginia, 1800-1900*, Kenneth E. Koons and Warren R. Hofstra, eds. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000), 62-73.

<sup>54</sup> For examples, see John Noble's Daybook, 1798-1827, entries for 1798, and John Noble's Ledger, 1803-1804, entries throughout, both in Wyllie Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society; and Diary of unidentified peddler, October 30, 1807 - January 22, 1808, Virginia Historical Society. For a full treatment of merchants and early backcountry consumers, see Ann Smart Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

<sup>55</sup> Archibald Glen to D. Buchanan, August 30, 1798; James A. Glenn to Isabella Glenn, October 28, 1798; and James A. Glenn to Isabella Glenn, June 17, 1799, all in Caswell County Historical Association Collection, folder 8, SHC. Glenn operated a country store in Halifax County, and carried hogsheads from the Southside to Petersburg, where he bought trade goods for the return wagon trip.

rapidly. In 1790 there were already more than 11,000 slaves in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania, a figure that almost doubled to 21,025 slaves by 1810. When residents organized Pittsylvania County in 1767, its white population owned only 271 slaves; by 1800, the slave population had grown to 4,200. The region's free population continued to grow until 1830, at which point depression and the opening of rich western lands contributed to the stasis or even decline of the white population in certain districts. This decline failed to affect slave populations, however, as the number of enslaved workers grew steadily through the beginning of the Civil War.<sup>56</sup> Slave populations expanded thanks in part to the continued viability of tobacco cultivation on the counties' stronger lands, and bright tobacco's development in the 1840s only increased this trend. By the end of the antebellum era, the Southside's commitment to slavery was closer to that of the Deep South than the Chesapeake, where slaves as a percentage of the population were in decline.

[Table 2.1: Combined free and slave populations of Caswell County, North Carolina, and Halifax and Pittsylvania counties, Virginia, from 1790 to 1860. Compiled from *Fifth Census; Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States - 1830* (Washington DC: Duff Green, 1832), 10-13, 84-85, 90-91; *Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States - Sixth Census* (Washington DC: Thomas Allen, 1841), 34-35, 42-43; *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850* (Washington DC: Robert Armstrong, 1853), 259-260, 307; and *Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1864), 358, 516-517.]

| Year | Total Population | Free Population | Slave Population | % Enslaved |
|------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------|
| 1790 | 36,397           | 25,114          | 11,283           | 31.0 %     |
| 1800 | 40,775           | 25,943          | 14,832           | 36.4 %     |

<sup>56</sup> *Fifth Census; Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States - 1830* (Washington DC: Duff Green, 1832), 10-13, 84-85, 90-91; *Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States - Sixth Census* (Washington DC: Thomas Allen, 1841), 34-35, 42-43; *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850* (Washington DC: Robert Armstrong, 1853), 259-260, 307; *Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1864), 358, 516-517; and Siegel, *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness*, 16.

| Year | Total Population | Free Population | Slave Population | % Enslaved |
|------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------|
| 1810 | 51,981           | 30,956          | 21,025           | 40.4 %     |
| 1820 | 53,777           | 30,326          | 23,451           | 43.6 %     |
| 1830 | 69,242           | 37,289          | 31,953           | 46.1 %     |
| 1840 | 67,027           | 34,129          | 32,898           | 49.1 %     |
| 1850 | 70,027           | 35,007          | 35,020           | 50.0 %     |
| 1860 | 74,839           | 36,247          | 38,592           | 51.6 %     |

Despite the limitations of the Southside environment, planters who were wealthy and keen enough to secure substantial tracts of fertile bottomland, who expanded their slave holdings, and who married into equally well-to-do families managed to parlay dark tobacco planting into lavish wealth. First among the wealthy families of the region were the Bruces of Halifax County. James Bruce moved to Halifax around 1780. He worked as a merchant buying tobacco from county farmers and reselling it on the Richmond and Petersburg markets. Bruce also ran a chain of country stores throughout the Southside and began buying thousands of acres of quality tobacco land in Halifax, Charlotte, and Mecklenburg counties, and planting in his own right. By some accounts, Bruce became the third millionaire in America by the 1830s, trailing only furrier John Jacob Astor and railroad magnate Stephen Girard. His son, James C. Bruce, built one of the finest Greek Revival Mansions in the South at his plantation Berry Hill on the banks of the Dan River, and was worth an estimated four million dollars by 1860.<sup>57</sup> Bruce's

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<sup>57</sup> John Goodall Bruce, *The Bruce Family: Descending from George Bruce (1650-1715)* (Parsons, WV: McClain Printing Company, 1977), 87-89, 92; "Bruce Family," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 11, 3 (January 1904): 330; Edmunds, *History of Halifax*, 247-248; Wirt Johnson Carrington, *A History of Halifax County, Virginia*, reprint of 1924 edition (Baltimore: Regional Publishing Company, 1969), 120-127; and Kathleen Bruce, "Materials for Southern Virginia Agricultural History," *Agricultural History* 4, 1 (January 1930): 12-13. In-depth material on

fabulous wealth and exorbitant lifestyle led one early twentieth century hagiographer to describe him as “a worthy representative of that noble class of country gentlemen who in the old times gave so much social distinction to Virginia.”<sup>58</sup>

The Hairstons of Pittsylvania and Henry counties were equally well off, and surpassed even the Bruces in terms of their slave holdings. Like James Bruce, George Hairston was a merchant who settled along the Dan in southwestern Pittsylvania County in the late 1700s, and by the early nineteenth century he had amassed 238,000 acres of land along the river at the base of the Blue Ridge. By the 1850s, George’s son Samuel, who planted tobacco in Pittsylvania, Halifax, and Henry counties as well as raised corn on several North Carolina plantations, had created perhaps the largest individual agricultural empire in the history of the antebellum South. Family biographer Henry Wiencek estimates that Samuel and his brothers and sisters controlled as many as 10,000 slaves throughout the South at the outbreak of the Civil War.<sup>59</sup> An 1851 article in the *Richmond Whig & Public Advertiser* declared Hairston the richest man in Virginia, and likened the grounds of his home plantation, Oak Hill, west of Danville, to paradise. The author declared, “I have travelled over fifteen States of this Union, and have never seen anything comparable to his yard and garden, except some of them in the Mississippi Delta - and none of them equal it. . . the public grounds [at Washington D. C.] were *nearly* as handsome as Samuel Hairston’s.”<sup>60</sup> Although his estimate was more conservative than that of Wiencek, historian Ulrich B. Phillips credited Hairston as the master of as many as 1,600 slaves in the 1850s, and

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the Bruce family’s wealth and activities can be found in the Bruce Family Papers, at the Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia, or on microfilm at RASP, series E, part 3, reels 7-30.

<sup>58</sup> “The Bruce Family (Continued),” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 11, 4 (April 1904): 441.

<sup>59</sup> Henry Wiencek, *The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 8-9, 49.

<sup>60</sup> Cosmopolite, “The Richest Man in Virginia,” *Richmond Whig & Public Advertiser*, February 7, 1851, p. 1. This article was reprinted for a wider circulation in the New Orleans journal *De Bow’s Review* in 1853 under the same title. See Cosmopolite, “The Richest Man in Virginia,” *De Bow’s Review* 14, 1 (January 1853): 70-71.

pronounced him “The greatest of the tobacco planters. . .”<sup>61</sup> Samuel’s mother Ruth owned almost as many slaves. An 1852 inventory of her estate totaled 1,135 slaves in Virginia and North Carolina.<sup>62</sup> In Henry County in 1860, roughly one out of every seven slaves - or 704 of 5,018 total slaves - belonged to a Hairston.<sup>63</sup>

Although James C. Bruce and Samuel Hairston were extraordinary examples of planter wealth and power, there were a number of other well-to-do tobacco planters who raised tobacco in the three counties. In addition to Bruce and Hairston, John Clark, Benjamin Garrett, William Sims, John Coleman, Ethelbert Coleman, John Edmund, J. L. Garland, and W. L. Stamps all owned more than one hundred slaves in their respective home counties by 1860. In fact, 566 masters - or almost 18 percent of all slaveholders in the three counties - were “planters,” as defined by the ownership of twenty or more slaves. A substantial portion of regional slaves lived and worked on large plantations. A full 19 percent (n = 7,342) labored on units of fifty or more slaves, and 4 percent (n = 1,378) resided on plantations with more than one hundred enslaved workers, veritable villages of black labor. Slave ownership was more concentrated in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania than in Virginia or North Carolina as a whole. Only 11.1 percent of

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<sup>61</sup> Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1918), 232-233, quote on 232. Cosmopolite credited Hairston with ownership of between 1,600 and 1,700 slaves, and the management of 1,000 more. Estimating Hairston’s slaveholding proves extremely difficult, as his plantations were spread across a number of counties in at least two states, and, for most of the antebellum period, Samuel managed hundreds of slaves technically owned by his elderly mother Ruth. Based on several searches of the census slave schedules, it seems safe to state that Hairston owned at least 1,000 slaves in Virginia and North Carolina during the 1840s and 1850s, and perhaps as many as twice that number, and managed several hundred more. Even the lower end of this range would make Hairston perhaps the largest slave owner in the South at the outbreak of the war. In his study of Deep South planters on the eve of the Civil War, Joseph Menn found John Burnside of Louisiana to be the largest sugar planter, with 940 slaves; Levin Marshall of Louisiana and Mississippi the largest cotton planter, with 932 slaves; and Stephen King of Georgia the largest rice planter, with 582 slaves. Menn’s study did not include South Carolina. See Joseph Karl Menn, “The Large Slaveholders of the Deep South, 1860,” 2 volumes, Ph.D. diss, University of Texas, 1964, 1:233-234.

<sup>62</sup> Hairston Family Plantation Record Books 1 & 3, Peter Wilson Hairston Papers, folders 104 & 106, SHC. Ruth’s holdings, managed primarily by Samuel, included twelve plantations in Henry, Patrick, and Pittsylvania counties in Virginia, and in Stokes and Davie counties North Carolina.

<sup>63</sup> Compiled from the United States Census Bureau Slave Schedule, Henry County, Virginia, 1860; and the Historical Census Data Browser, available at <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>.

Virginia slaveholders owned more than twenty slaves, and the corresponding figure for North Carolina was 11.7 percent (see table 2.2).<sup>64</sup>

[Table 2.2: Slaveholders in 1860 in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania counties. Compiled from Historical Census Data Browser.]

| County/State      | Total Slaveholders | Slaveholders with 20 or more slaves | % with 20 or more slaves |
|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Caswell           | 748                | 142                                 | 19                       |
| Halifax           | 1051               | 235                                 | 22.4                     |
| Pittsylvania      | 1413               | 189                                 | 13.4                     |
| Counties Combined | 3212               | 566                                 | 17.6                     |
| North Carolina    | 34658              | 4065                                | 11.7                     |
| Virginia          | 52128              | 5777                                | 11.1                     |

Although the Bruces, Hairstons, and similar wealthy planters throughout the three counties planted dark tobacco as a part of their economic activities, most also relied on other forms of income. Profitable dark tobacco cultivation was largely limited to the rich river bottoms of the larger rivers and creeks, and most upland soils were only productive tobacco land for two or three years following clearing. Planters would then plant corn on the thin soil for a few years before allowing the slopes to grow up in broom sedge and briars, followed by pine, black locust, and persimmon saplings. Samuel Hairston produced corn, cattle, cotton, and grain as well as tobacco, and his siblings carved out cotton plantations in Mississippi with slaves

<sup>64</sup> Compiled from the United States Census Bureau Slave Schedules for the northern and southern districts of Pittsylvania and Halifax counties, and for Caswell County, 1860, and the Historical Census Data Browser.

purchased with dark tobacco money.<sup>65</sup> Among his many enterprises, James C. Bruce ran nine country stores, several large flour and lumber mills, a plaster plant (for amending soils), a cotton manufactory, and a blacksmith shop. He also owned a wagon train, and he bought and sold real estate on a large scale.<sup>66</sup> Aside from alternative crops and livestock, one of the most common ways for dark tobacco planters along the Border to diversify their income was to manufacture finished tobacco products on their plantation or in an adjoining town. Wealthy planters existed throughout the three counties, but that wealth was based on varied economic activities, ownership of the richest bottomlands in the region, and the intermarriage of wealthy families.

Bruce, Hairston, and their fellow large planters were exceptional in terms of numbers, but their influence was far-reaching. They dominated the tiny manufacturing economy of the Southside, and they had control of some of the most fertile stretches of land in the three counties. The bulk of farmers and planters who raised tobacco did not have these advantages. Dark tobacco culture in the Southside existed within certain environmental limits - the amount of quality bottomland largely circumscribed the dark tobacco crop, and encouraged planters and farmers to search for alternative uses for the upland landscape. And the rural, agrarian nature of the landscape and its meager infrastructure centered on transporting tobacco led residents to seek a staple that fit within these existing systems. The Southside environment was just productive enough to support dark tobacco agriculture as practiced in the eighteenth century, but not rich enough to sustain a large population of tobacco farmers over the long-term. Despite Byrd's assertions that the Southside was a fertile tobacco country, a century of cultivating the crop, and the wealth dark tobacco produced among a select group of planters, the region's environmental

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<sup>65</sup> Wiencek, *The Hairstons*, 60-61, 91-92.

<sup>66</sup> Edmunds, *History of Halifax*, 247-248; Carrington, *A History of Halifax County*, 120-126; and Bruce, "Materials for Southern Virginia," 12. Extensive evidence of Bruce's milling business at Meadsville, Virginia, survive in a number mill account books and ledgers found in RASP, series E, part 3, reels 24 & 25.

constraints led to a search for a new form of agriculture. This pursuit birthed experimentation with bright leaf.

### **The Labors of Dark Tobacco**

The growing Southside world was an agricultural one, dominated by a single staple crop, and its distinctive culture created a landscape and a society that would shape the emergence of bright leaf. The tasks of the tobacco season governed the actions of planters, small farmers, merchants, and slaves alike throughout the Border. Planters often referred to tobacco as a “thirteen month” crop; its culture not only demanded work throughout the year, but the care of the previous year’s crop often overlapped with beginning a new one. For most Southside farmers, tobacco culture’s schedule governed the year’s division of labor. Workers could undertake some tasks, such as preparing and packing cured leaf, at relative leisure when other work slackened. Others jobs, like planting and harvesting, required farmers to work feverishly when the weather dictated. The slightest hesitancy during these crucial periods could mean the difference between a good crop and a complete disaster. The life of every farmer and slave on tobacco farms revolved around these cycles.<sup>67</sup> For the bulk of Southside residents, tobacco culture was their primary means of interacting with the environment, and their daily routines and understandings of the land shaped how they thought about dark tobacco, and, later, how they would adapt the landscape and their thinking to bright leaf.

For all tobacco growers, creating a plant bed was the first step in making a crop. Unlike corn or cotton, which farmers sowed directly into the field, workers started tobacco in a nursery

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<sup>67</sup> A number of historians have described the routines of traditional tobacco culture, but the author feels a repetition is warranted in this dissertation for readers unfamiliar with the existing literature. Subtle changes in tobacco culture with the emergence of bright leaf would prove critical to the fate of land and people. For straightforward, general summaries of Virginia tobacco culture as a whole in the early nineteenth century, see William Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay on the Culture and Commerce of Tobacco* (London: Vernor & Hood, 1800); Peter Minor, *The Cultivation and Management of Tobacco, from Plant Bed to the Prize* (Baltimore, MD: J. Robinson, 1822); and Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 32-50.

bed and then transplanted the seedlings to the field. Farmers took great care in selecting the sites for plant beds, which they located on new ground each season. Beginning in December and continuing as late as the end of February, farmers cut and cleared small patches of woods on southern facing slopes.<sup>68</sup> These plant beds were usually one hundred square meters or smaller, and they did best in the rich lands along small streams or in wet hollows. Many farmers were carefully attuned to soil type and microclimates that supported rapid seedling growth; they sought locations that grew hazels or alders, as these shrubs thrived on ground well suited to raising tobacco seedlings.<sup>69</sup> After cutting the timber and grubbing out stumps and roots, farmers usually burned the top few inches of the bed's soil in order to kill weed seeds, improve tilth (the soil's texture, especially pertaining to its suitability for planting seeds), and create an immediately available layer of nutrients for the tobacco seeds. Laborers built a portable fire using a set of hardwood skids with brush piled on top, and, beginning in one corner of the plant bed, they lit the brush and allowed it to burn for an hour or more, long enough to sterilize the first few inches of topsoil. Then they added more brush to the fire and moved the pile to the next section of bed using chains and iron hooks. This process continued until they burned over the entire plant bed.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> When a farmer began his plant beds seemed a matter of personal preference to some extent. Charles Coleman of Clover, in Halifax County, began a plant bed as early as mid-December, while his neighbor William Sims prepared his beds in late-January. In his influential treatise on raising tobacco, Peter Minor advised that plant beds could be created as late as March in a pinch. Charles Coleman Diaries, December 21, 1842, RASP, series D, reel 12; William H. Sims Farm Book, January 18 & 27, 1855, RASP, series E, part 1, reel 2; Peter Minor, *The Cultivation and Management of Tobacco, from Plant Bed to the Prize* (Baltimore, MD: J. Robinson, 1822), 3-4.

<sup>69</sup> Minor, *The Cultivation and Management of Tobacco*, 3-4. Although most plant beds were small, planters often made multiple beds, and sometimes raised many more plants than necessary to provide insurance against the failure of the first planting or to share with neighbors. In 1845, George Jeffreys of Caswell sowed four plant beds that covered 2,400 square yards. See Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, February 8, 1845, William Bethell Williamson Papers, folder 7, SHC.

<sup>70</sup> Samuel C. Shelton, "The Culture and Management of Tobacco," *Southern Planter* 21, 4 (April 1861): 210-211; William Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay on the Culture and Commerce of Tobacco* (London: Vernor & Hood, 1800), 7-9; Charles Coleman Diaries, December 23, 1842; and William H. Sims Farm Book, January 27, 1855.

Once the bed was burned over thoroughly, the farmer pulverized the soil as fine as possible to prepare it for seeds. Workers always mixed tobacco seeds - at nearly a half million per ounce, they are among the smallest of all agricultural seeds - with a substrate, usually ashes, to facilitate even coverage over the bed. A typical plant bed required two tablespoons of seed mixed with a gallon of ashes for thorough coverage. Many farmers also fertilized their plant beds with stable manure or guano to facilitate large, early seedlings.<sup>71</sup> Once they had sown the seed and harrowed in the manure, planters covered their beds with hog hair or a thick layer of brush. These coverings served a variety of purposes; they protected the young plants from frost, kept the bulk of insects - especially tobacco flies, which chewed holed in the tender foliage - away, and they helped the bed retain moisture during dry spells. Throughout the late winter and the early spring months, farmers kept a close eye on their plant beds; they weeded if grass became a problem, top-dressed the patch with fertilizer if the plants progressed slowly, and added or removed brush based on weather conditions.<sup>72</sup>

Just as farmers selected certain portions of the landscape for plant beds, they also used their knowledge of local environments in their placement of tobacco fields. Most fields were located in or near creek or river bottoms. Bottomland held a number of benefits: it was generally richer than the uplands, it typically retained moisture well, its proximity to water permitted primitive irrigation in emergency circumstances, and it tended to be flat and thus easier to

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<sup>71</sup> W.W.W. Bowie, "An Essay of the Culture and Management of Tobacco," *The American Farmer* 10, 2 (August 1854): 33; Shelton, "The Culture and Management of Tobacco," 211; Minor, *The Cultivation and Management of Tobacco*, 3-4; and Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, December 20, 1844 and January 15, 1845. For the small size of tobacco seeds, see Anne Radford Phillips, "Farm Women of Stokes County, North Carolina and the Production of Flue-Cured Tobacco, 1925 to 1955: Continuity and Change," Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1990, 55, n. 39.

<sup>72</sup> "Cultivation of Tobacco," *The American Farmer, and Spirit of the Agricultural Journals of the Day* 2, 51 (May 12, 1841): 406; Bowie, "An Essay on the Culture and Management of Tobacco," 34; Shelton, "The Culture and Management of Tobacco," 211; and Charles Coleman Diaries, January 21, 1843. Most of these steps in plant bed preparation and maintenance went back to at least the mid-1600s - see Carr, Menard, and Walsh, *Robert Cole's World*, 55-56.

cultivate than the surrounding ridges. The three counties' topography, laced with small rivers and their numerous tributaries, provided a substantial quantity of bottomland acreage suited to traditional tobacco cultivation. Although not all tobacco fields were located in bottoms, prior to the 1840s most planters sought this lowland if it was available.

Transplanting seedlings from the plant bed to the field could take place anytime following the last frost to the middle of July, depending on weather conditions.<sup>73</sup> During late winter or early spring, farmers worked their tobacco land several times with cultivating plows, breaking up heavy soil and turning under weeds on the old ground, and removing roots and rocks in new land. Hands then used hoes to make small dirt mounds in the plowed fields called hills; each hill would receive one tobacco seedling. Planters who chose to use manure on their tobacco lands usually applied small amounts directly to each hill, rather than broadcasting it over the entire field. This practice reflected both a shortage of fertilizer and of labor to haul it. Most planters relied on the natural fertility of new land or the lasting power of bottomland rather than manure, as too much manure tended to result in a harsh leaf that was slow to ripen. As William Tatham, an English expert on Virginia tobacco culture, recorded, "tobacco which is produced from manured or *cow-penned* land, is only considered, in ordinary, to be a crop of the second quality."<sup>74</sup> The crop's intolerance of heavy manuring worked against farmers' attempts to incorporate tobacco into systems of convertible husbandry, though planters must have found the

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<sup>73</sup> Like making plant beds, transplanting time was flexible within certain limits. Charles Coleman tended to start his planting during the last week of May, William Sims began his 1855 planting on June 1st, and Vincent Shelton Jr., of Pittsylvania did not finish his 1850 planting until July 16th. The limiting factor was days remaining until frost - farmers wanted to ensure their crop had time to ripen fully before cold weather set in. Tobacco was tremendously susceptible to cold, even a light frost could result in "the destruction of every plant" [Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay*, 23]. Charles Coleman Diaries, May 27, 1843, May 24, 1844, May 24, 1845, May 23, 1847, May 15, 1848; William Sims Farm Book, June 1, 1855; and R.D. Ricketts, ed., *A Diary Kept by William C. Shelton for the Year 1850: The Daily Journal of a School Master and Farmer of Pittsylvania County, Virginia* (Danville, VA: Virginia-North Carolina Piedmont Genealogical Society, 1995), 50.

<sup>74</sup> "Culture and Curing of Tobacco in Virginia: A Short History of the Types of Tobacco Produced in Virginia and Maryland," In *1880 Agricultural Census*, 203; Shelton, "The Culture and Management of Tobacco," 212; and Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay*, quote on 6-7.

plant's light demands for manure a blessing rather than a burden, especially given southern farmers' attachment to an extensive form of livestock husbandry.

After farmers had their tobacco land prepared, they waited for a good rain (or a "season") to transplant seedlings. A soaking rain loosened the soil and made planting easier, and it provided the moisture necessary for sustaining the young seedling through the shock of transplanting. Following the wet spell, all hands on the farm would draw plants from the beds and carefully move them to the fields in baskets or barrels. At the field they placed one seedling to each hill, using a short wooden peg to make a hole for the plant. Planting was a period of intense labor. The faster hands moved seedlings to the field, the better the plants could take advantage of the "season's" soil moisture, resulting in a higher plant survival rate. Quick work during planting meant a lighter workload over the next few weeks, as hands had to walk over the fields numerous times, replanting hills where the transplants had perished.<sup>75</sup>

Once the farmer was satisfied that he had a good stand of tobacco, the hands began cultivating the crop, a process that would continue until a few weeks before harvest. Cultivation undertaken with hoes and horse or mule-drawn shovel plows accomplished two purposes: it killed weeds that competed with the growing plants, and, if done properly, continually built up the hills to support the tobacco as it became heavier over the course of the season.<sup>76</sup> As in corn and cotton culture, tobacco cultivation was an exercise in vigilance. Over the course of a season

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<sup>75</sup> Bowie, "On the Culture and Management of Tobacco," 34; Minor, *The Cultivation and Management of Tobacco*, 5-6; "Culture and Curing of Tobacco," 203-204; and Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, May 5, 1845.

<sup>76</sup> "Culture and Curing of Tobacco," 204; and Bowie, "On the Culture and Management of Tobacco," 34. Despite the stereotype of southern farms as bastions of mule agriculture, in the Southside during the antebellum period horses seemed much more common as work animals. For example, in Pittsylvania, Halifax, and Caswell in 1860, horses outnumbered mules and asses an astonishing 10,479 to 2,458. Even oxen were a more common sight than mules, with 4,336 working the counties' fields in 1860. In the example of just one Halifax County plantation, in 1852 James C. Bruce's Berry Hill had ten oxen and twenty-nine horses (sixteen of which Bruce classified as working animals) but no mules. Aggregate figures compiled from Joseph C. G. Kennedy, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864), 104, 154, 158. Information on Berry Hill comes from James C. Bruce's Plantation Inventory, 1852, Bruce Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 16.

farmers cultivated around each plant several times, and even industrious hands could fall behind in the never-ending battle against weeds if unusual weather intervened. Planter William Sims worried about the state of his fields following a wet spell in the summer of 1855, lamenting that much of his tobacco land was “quite foul and grassy.”<sup>77</sup> Once the tobacco reached full height and was difficult to work around, farmers made one last cultivating pass, building up the hill to its final height, a process commonly referred to as “laying by.”<sup>78</sup>

Once the plants began to form flowers at the apex of the stalk, the tobacco was ready to be “topped.” During topping, hands broke out the flowering structure and small apical leaves, and often knocked several leaves off the bottom of the stalk as well (a process referred to as “priming,” as it left only prime leaves on the plant). The purpose of topping and priming was to force the plant to direct its energy into growing larger and heavier leaves rather than reproductive structures. Whereas un-topped tobacco grew tall and spindly, topped tobacco filled out short and squat. Each farmer had his own formula, but topped and primed tobacco plants generally retained eight to twelve leaves, depending on soil and weather conditions. Like many other tobacco tasks, farmers considered topping highly skilled work. They expected a topping hand to carefully examine each plant and determine the optimal number of leaves to leave based on appearance, season, soil type, and plant variety.<sup>79</sup> While topping added quality to the crop, it also created a problem. Breaking out the flowering structure encouraged tobacco to form axial branches, called suckers, where the leaves meet the stalk in the plant’s attempt to create a new

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<sup>77</sup> William Sims Farm Book, July 2nd, 1855.

<sup>78</sup> This term had old roots, going back to the seventeenth century Chesapeake. See Carr, Menard, and Walsh, *Robert Coles World*, 58.

<sup>79</sup> “Farmers’ Meeting at the Exchange Hotel,” *Southern Planter* 17, 4 (April 1857): 226; “Tobacco,” *The American Farmer and Rural Register* 1, 7 (July 1872): 226; Minor, *The Cultivation and Management of Tobacco*, 6; Shelton, “The Culture and Management of Tobacco,” 213; and “Cultivation of Tobacco,” 406.

flower. Hands had to repeatedly walk over the crop after topping, removing any suckers which might redirect vegetative growth away from the leaves.<sup>80</sup>

One of the most tedious and repetitive of tobacco tasks involved removing the hornworms that infested the crop throughout the summer. Tobacco hornworms are the larvae of the Carolina sphinx moth (*Manduca sexta*), and a heavy infestation of worms could consume a field of tobacco in a period of just days if left unmolested. The most common method of combating worms was to remove the finger-sized larvae and any unhatched eggs by hand, then workers crushed them between their fingers or under their heel, though some planters tried more innovative methods, from ranging insectivorous guineas and turkeys in their fields to having slave children with torches and paddles work the edges of the fields at dusk, swatting as many adult moths as possible before the insects could lay eggs.<sup>81</sup> Worming was often a gender or age specific task; planters typically relegated the work to women and children. Nancy Williams, who was a slave on a Caswell plantation, remembered worming as a child, and what happened when she missed a few worms one day: “Purty soon old Masser come ‘long, dough, an’ see dat I done been missin’ some of dem terbaccy worms. Picked up a hand full of worms, he did, an’ stuffed ‘em inter my mouth; Lordy know how many of dem shiny things I done swallered, but I sho’ picked ‘em off careful arter dat.”<sup>82</sup> Worming began as soon as the larvae appeared in the spring and continued through the harvest.

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<sup>80</sup> Charles Coleman Diaries, August 14, 1843. Recording the ubiquity of tobacco cultivation in Virginia, William Tatham noted in regard to topping and suckering: “Many of the Virginians let the thumb nail grow long, and harden it *in the candle*, for this purpose: not for the use of *gouging* our people’s eyes, as some have thought fit to insinuate.” Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay*, 18.

<sup>81</sup> Charles Coleman Diaries, August 10, 1848. Both of these alternative suggestions come from Minor, *The Cultivation and Management of Tobacco*, 7.

<sup>82</sup> Charles L. Perdue Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976), 322. Charles Coleman also recorded putting his “small hands” to work worming [Charles Coleman Diaries, August 20, 1843.]

Once the tobacco leaves grew heavy enough and began to yellow in the early fall, it was ready for harvest. Determining exactly when to harvest was one of the most difficult and crucial decisions a tobacco farmer had to make; If a grower harvested the crop before the plants were completely ripe the tobacco would cure poorly and spoil or bring a poor price at market, if he waited too long, the entire crop might be destroyed by an early frost. As former slave Gabe Hunt recalled, “[you] Got to pick dem leaves what’s jus’ startin to brown. Pick ‘em too soon dey don’t cure, an’ you pick ‘em too late dey bitters [brittle].”<sup>83</sup> Although tobacco culture manuals tried to provide advice on how to determine the perfect moment for harvest, they generally seemed to agree that only experience allowed farmers to accurately gauge when they should harvest their crop. In a typical passage, Tatham declared, “much practice is requisite to form a judicious discernment concerning the state and progress of the ripening leaf.”<sup>84</sup> For farmers who planted early and experienced favorable summer weather, tobacco could ripen as early as the end of August, but a late season that delayed planting could force hands to battle the coming of frost in October to get the crop safely in the barn.<sup>85</sup>

When the farmer determined the crop was ripe, he cut each stalk off near the ground with a long tobacco knife, and generally split the stalk for half the length of the plant to facilitate curing. Once they cut the plants, growers cured tobacco one of several ways. They could leave the crop in the field for a short amount of time to wilt and then hang it on outdoor racks to cure in the sun, they could transport the tobacco to log barns where it would be dried out over a period of several days using small wood fires built on the barn floor, or they could cure the leaf using a

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<sup>83</sup> Perdue Jr., Barden, and Phillips, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 148.

<sup>84</sup> Robert D. Key, “On Firing Tobacco through Flues, the Benefits of Cutting When Fully Ripe,” *Farmer’s Register* 4, 1 (May 1836): 42; A Plaster, “On Curing Tobacco,” *Farmer’s Register* 4, 5 (September 1836): 313; Caswell, “On Curing Yellow Tobacco,” *Southern Planter* 19, 8 (August 1859): 492; and Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay*, quote on 23.

<sup>85</sup> Ricketts, *A Diary Kept by William C. Shelton*, 72.

combination of these methods.<sup>86</sup> In both sun-curing and fire-curing, workers affixed the split tobacco stalks to wooden sticks that hung in the outdoor racks or tiers built in the log barns. Green tobacco is 80 to 90 percent water by weight, and the object of all of these curing methods was to remove enough moisture from the plant so that the tobacco did not rot or mold while preventing the leaves from becoming so dry and brittle that they crumbled to dust at the touch. Farmers sought to bring the leaves into a condition known as “case.” Tobacco in case was dry enough for storage but remained pliable. Fire-curing took several days depending on ripeness and conditions, while outdoor curing could take as long as several weeks. Once growers had sufficiently cured their tobacco, they placed it in a storage shed (if sun-cured) or left the plants hanging in the curing barn until they had time to prepare the crop for market.<sup>87</sup>

Although both sun and fire-curing remained in practice in the Southside into the antebellum period, the use of fires was the predominant curing method employed by most farmers by the 1840s. Barns enjoyed several benefits over outdoor curing: fires made for faster curing, barns provided more protection against the elements during the curing process, and if barn space was not needed for an additional cure, the leaf could remain in the curing barn until ready to be handled further. The typical tobacco barn in the three counties was built with rough pine logs and clay chinking, and was sixteen or twenty feet square. The structures had a packed dirt floor, one or two small doors, and were generally tall enough to accommodate five or more tiers of poles which supported the hanging sticks of tobacco. Poles were typically spaced about four feet apart horizontally, with each ascending tier roughly three feet above the lower one.

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<sup>86</sup> For the practice of “sunning” tobacco for a time before moving the crop to a barn, see Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, October 3, 1844.

<sup>87</sup> Minor, *The Cultivation and Management of Tobacco*, 9-10; Bowie, “An Essay on the Culture and Management of Tobacco,” 35; A Plaster, “On Curing Tobacco,” 313; Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay*, 37-38; and John Fraser Hart and Eugene Cotton Mather, “The Character of Tobacco Barns and Their Role in the Tobacco Economy of the United States,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 51, 3 (September 1961): 275.

Farmers built the small wood curing fires directly on the floor below the first tier of poles, and the smoke exited the barn through vents located along the ridge of the roof or in the eaves.

Farmers often erected their barns on the edge of the tobacco field rather than near the farmyard in order to facilitate the movement of tobacco from the field to the barn.<sup>88</sup>

Fire-curing in barns presented many advantages, but it also posed certain risks. Open flames in a wooden barn filled with resinous plant matter were obvious fire hazards, threatening at any time to burn up both the structure and the year's crop. This omnipresent threat of fire meant farmers usually watched their barns diligently throughout the curing process, often staying inside their smoky confines for hours on end to regulate the fires. A few years after the Civil War, when fire-curing still remained popular, a *Danville Register* article described the hazards of tending the curing fires. "They [farmers] have to watch their barns day and night, and get pretty well smoked, so that from the loss of sleep and red eyes and hard work, some of them are nearly as crazy as bed bugs."<sup>89</sup>

Once the crop was cured, it generally remained hanging in the barns until a lull in farm activity over the winter months. During cold snaps and periods of inclement weather, farmhands worked to prepare the tobacco for market. First, they removed the plants from the wooden sticks and stripped the individual leaves from the stalks. The process went best during damp weather when the leaves were pliable enough to withstand stripping without crumbling, or, in tobacco

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<sup>88</sup> Perdue Jr., Barden, and Phillips, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 148; Ruth Little-Stokes, *An Inventory of Historic Architecture, Caswell County, North Carolina: The Built Environment of a Burley and Bright-Leaf Tobacco Economy* (Yanceyville, NC: Caswell County Historical Association, 1979), 20, 106; Catherine W. Bishir and Michael T. Southern, *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Piedmont North Carolina*, Richard Hampton Jenrette Series in Architecture and the Decorative Arts (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 182-183. E. R. Billings, *Tobacco: Its History, Varieties, Culture, Manufacture and Commerce, with an Account of Its Various Modes of Use, from Its First Discovery until Now* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Company, 1875), 408-409; Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay*, 29-34; and Hart and Mather, "The Character of Tobacco Barns," 274, 288-293. Hart and Mather provide a particularly good examination of log barns. Their study focuses on flue-cured barns, but the basic form remained the same as during the fire-cured era.

<sup>89</sup> "Letter from the Courthouse," *Danville Register*, 5 October, 1870, p. 2.

terminology, when the leaf was in “order.” Once stripped, the ordered leaves were graded into classes. Although these grades were somewhat arbitrary and not legally binding, farmers and merchants generally referred to the best grade as leaf tobacco, followed in descending quality by fillers, lugs, and substandard tobacco (which went by various names, from “trashy” to “foul”). Farmers strove to ensure that each hogshead of tobacco was of consistent quality, as inspectors usually graded hogsheads based on the poorest quality leaves they observed when sampling. After hands sorted the tobacco into grades, they tied the leaves into small bundles referred to as “hands.” The typical hand was composed of four or five leaves with their tails and stems aligned, tied together at the stem end with another leaf. Farmers carefully stacked these hands in radial layers inside a wooden hogshead, and the whole mass was compressed (or “prized”) down with a lever or screw press until the hogshead was full. Just as the process of bringing tobacco to “case” was difficult, prizing tobacco in proper order was a tricky task. If farmers prized damp tobacco it would mold and spoil, if too dry, the leaf might crumble into dust when the hogshead was unpacked.<sup>90</sup>

Virginia law regulated the size of hogsheads, but over time improvements in prizing presses and a slight enlargement of the legal dimensions allowed hogsheads to grow heavier and heavier. Tatham also noted that many tobacco inspectors “winked” at planters who used hogsheads slightly larger than the legal dimensions. From an average of roughly one thousand pounds around the turn of the century, by 1822 Peter Minor estimated that the average Virginia hogshead weighed 1,350 pounds, and many enterprising planters hoped to pack as much as 1,500 pounds into the fifty-six inch tall by thirty-six inch wide container.<sup>91</sup> By the 1840s and 1850s,

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<sup>90</sup> Minor, *The Cultivation and Management of Tobacco*, 12; Charles Coleman Diaries, January 24, 1844; and Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, January 6 & May 24, 1845.

<sup>91</sup> Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay*, 47-48; Minor, *The Cultivation and Management of Tobacco*, 12-13. In 1800, legislation had restricted hogsheads to fifty-four inches in height.

well-packed hogsheads weighed almost 2,000 pounds, a staggering sum made more manageable by improved roads and a move to railroad freight in the latter decade.<sup>92</sup> As haulers and warehouses usually assessed fees for handling or inspecting tobacco by the container rather than by weight, farmers had a strong economic incentive to increase the amount of tobacco in each hogshead.<sup>93</sup>

Once prized, the leaf was ready for transport to one of Virginia or North Carolina's inspection sites, state-regulated stations where officials weighed the hogsheads and certified their quality. No tobacco could be exported without undergoing inspection. Tobacco buyers also gathered at these inspection stations, where they purchased inspected hogshead for transport to manufacturers in Richmond, Petersburg, the northeast United States, or Europe. Most tobacco moved across the countryside in one of three ways: by wagon, via "rolling," or by small boats known as bateaux. For farmers close to an inspection station, such as those in northern Caswell or southern Pittsylvania who took their crops to Danville, carried most of their tobacco in ox or horse-drawn wagons that could hold two hogsheads apiece. Planters transporting tobacco over longer distances, such as those in northern Pittsylvania who chose the Lynchburg market or eastern Halifax farmers who sometimes took their tobacco to Petersburg or Richmond, often "rolled" their tobacco to market. In this method, they drove short wooden pegs into the center of the hogshead's top and bottom lids, and these pegs fitted into a pair of wooden poles, creating a rig that could be pulled by a horse. To reduce the possibility of damage to the tobacco inside the hogshead, farmers usually affixed several bands of tough hickory around the body of the

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<sup>92</sup> In just a few examples of the increasing size of hogsheads, in 1841, Elisha Barksdale of Halifax sold a lot of hogsheads that averaged 1,700 pounds; in 1847 George Clement of Pittsylvania was selling hogsheads weighing as much as 1,820 pounds, and in 1841 James C. Bruce of Halifax sold several hogsheads weighing 1,960 pounds apiece. Carrington, Gibson, & Thomson to Elisha Barksdale, September 14, 1841, in the Peter Barksdale Papers, RASP, series F, part 3, reel 33; Receipt of George Clement, August 5, 1847, Pocket Plantation Papers, RASP, series E, part 1, reel 14; and Receipt of James C. Bruce, June 16, 1841, Bruce Family Papers, reel 12.

<sup>93</sup> Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 48.

hogshead to act as wheel rims. This method of transport was particularly popular among smaller farmers, as it was cheap and easy, and the farmer could simply discard the poles and ride his horse back from market once he sold his tobacco.<sup>94</sup>

Farmers who lived on local rivers had another option. They could send their tobacco down the Staunton, Dan, Pigg, Hyco, or Bannister on bateaux. Bateaux were narrow, flat-bottomed boats usually around fifty, but occasionally as long as eighty feet, which could haul five to twelve hogsheads with a two or three man crew. Improvements along the Roanoke drainage, including channels cut through the rapids and dredging the shallows, made the once impassible waters navigable during the early 1800s. Bateaux pilots plying these waters were often experienced slaves entrusted to work independent of any overseer for months at a time. During the winter and spring, the bateaux plied the local rivers, their pilots making arrangements with planters to pick up large crops, or they simply beached their boats at popular landing spots and blew a horn to announce they were available for work. At several sites along the Staunton and Dan merchants built short-term storage warehouses for the hogsheads of small farmers and planters without river access. Moses Gilliam's warehouse on the Staunton in Halifax was representative. In 1842, Gilliam stored a total of ninety-six hogsheads for twenty-four farmers, from one hogshead for small growers such as George Spencer and Eden Tally, to eight hogsheads for Dabney Raglin. Alternately, small tobacco producers could roll their hogsheads to the homes of large planters, such as James Bruce, who charged a fee to store their crops and ship the produce of a number of growers en masse. Once the bateaux were loaded, the river men would float local tobacco down the streams and rivers that combined to form the Roanoke to

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<sup>94</sup> Danville Tobacco Association, *100 Years of Progress, 1869-1969* (Danville, VA: Womack Press, 1969), 16; John Richard Dennett, *The South As It Is, 1865-1866*, Henry M. Christman, ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 88-89, 94; Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay*, 55-66; Hoest, "The Plantation in a Regional Economy," 12-15; Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 53-54; and Beeman, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry*, 35-37.

Weldon or Gaston, North Carolina. From there, most hogsheads traveled overland to Petersburg or Richmond, though a few continued on to the small ports of the Albemarle Sound, or north through the Dismal Swamp Canal to Norfolk. Tobacco that took the former route often moved via all three popular transportation methods: growers rolled the hogsheads from their farm to the river, bateaux pilots guided the crop to a North Carolina landing, and wagoners then hauled the tobacco to the inspection centers along the Virginia fall line.<sup>95</sup> After 1833, the Petersburg Railroad connected the falls of the Roanoke to the Virginia city, largely displacing the wagon trade.<sup>96</sup>

Despite the tremendous expansion of tobacco across the lower Piedmont of Virginia and into the North Carolina border counties by the last decades of the antebellum period, its culture remained much the same as when the crop first appeared in Halifax, Pittsylvania, and Caswell well before the Revolution. A few details had changed since the mid-1700s; more farmers cured with fire than sun, regional barns had slowly evolved into a standard architectural form, slaves cultivated a greater percentage of tobacco than ever before, and hogsheads had grown larger and heavier, but most elements of tobacco farming remained essentially the same. The crop cycle still followed the same seasonal rhythm, from plant bed to field to barn to market. A reading of tobacco essayists William Tatham (1800), Peter Minor (1822), and W.W.W. Bowie (1854)

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<sup>95</sup> Danville Tobacco Association, *100 Years of Progress*, 17-18; Clement, *Frontiers along the Upper Roanoke River*, 34; Hagan, *The Story of Danville*, 28, 52-52; Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay*, 63-66; Beeman, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry*, 37; Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 55-57, 63; Seigel, *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness*, 12-13; Dairy of George Washington Jeffreys, September 5, 1844; Receipts of James C. Bruce, January 5, 1843 & November 16, 1848, Bruce Family Papers, reels 12 & 14; David S. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 43-46; Account Book of Moses E. Gilliam, 1842-1843, 20-90, Spragins Family Papers, VHS; and Tobacco Shipping Ledger, 1817-1825, Bruce Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 24. Gilliam's warehouse also stored lesser quantities of manufactured tobacco, flour, and cotton.

<sup>96</sup> Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 64-65; and Aaron W. Marrs, *Railroads in the Old South: Pursuing Progress in a Slave Society* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), xv, map 1.

demonstrate the relatively static nature of tobacco culture over the span of a half-century.<sup>97</sup> The advent of bright tobacco would leave many elements of this traditional crop culture intact, but the changes it did make would produce dramatic shifts in the local economy and landscape.

### **Conclusion**

By the 1840s, the Southside was largely a settled, agricultural landscape. This countryside relied heavily on the cultivation of tobacco with slave labor. Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania were rural counties, with only a few centers that could be considered towns: Danville led the way with a few thousand residents in 1840, Milton was less than half as large, and Pittsylvania Courthouse (also known as Chatham) and Halifax Courthouse each held around three-hundred residents.<sup>98</sup> A ride through any of the three counties would have revealed similar scenes. Wealthy planters monopolized the river and larger creek bottoms, where their substantial frame or brick plantation houses, flanked by rows of small slave houses, watched over dozens or even hundreds of slaves who labored in the tobacco and corn fields. Among the most numerous structures were the log tobacco barns clustered around the edges of fields, vertical structures that emitted long plumes of smoke each fall. At certain points during the year, bateaux plied the waterways, laden with hogsheads bound for Danville, Milton, or headed down the Roanoke watershed on their way to fall-line markets, and wagoners and farmers rolling hogsheads made their way along the counties' dirt roads. Moving from the rich lowlands to the rolling hills that dominated the Piedmont uplands, our rider was more likely to see broad forested tracks and smaller farms, log houses and less productive fields. Free-ranging livestock roamed the woods

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<sup>97</sup> Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay*, 1-66; Minor, *The Cultivation and Management of Tobacco*; and Bowie, "An Essay on the Culture and Management of Tobacco."

<sup>98</sup> Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of Virginia; Containing a Collection of the Most Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes, &c. Relating to Its History and Antiquities, Together with Geographical and Statistical Descriptions* (Charleston, SC: Babcock & Co., 1845), 290, 429.

and roadsides, and the smaller farms had fewer or no slaves, though many still produced some tobacco.

Although the Southside remained a rural place, its environment had changed a great deal since William Byrd and his party had surveyed the state line in the 1720s. The buffalo and black bears were gone, deer populations dwindled due to over-hunting, and large portions of the thick woods that once covered the region's uplands had been cleared for fields, building material, and firewood. Of course not all wildlife had disappeared. Species such as rabbits and quail that relied on edge habitats and disturbance thrived as farms spread across the counties. James Bruce and his hunting companions killed several hundred quail apiece each winter during the late 1830s and early 1840s, and in just one day of hunting in 1838, the small party shot forty-four rabbits along Halifax field edges.<sup>99</sup> Likewise, George Jeffreys of Caswell found rabbits abundant on his farm in the 1840s, but noted that foxes were “too scarce,” as “there are too many fences - the excitement is too great . . .”<sup>100</sup> Many of the fish that had attracted settlers to the Dan and the Staunton in the colonial period remained in the rivers in the mid-nineteenth century. Robert Withers remembered heavy runs of Atlantic salmon, suckers, and black bass in the Staunton before the Civil War, and the fugitive slave Henry Goings recalled the schools of anadromous sturgeon that still swam up the Roanoke to its forks. These “sturgeon in large quantities,” along with rockfish and shad made the river “a splendid place for carrying on fishing to a very heavy extent.”<sup>101</sup> As late as 1858, Daniel Merritt commented on the wild abundance periodically on display along the Border. After a fall with “a fine red oak mast,” Merritt marveled at the

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<sup>99</sup> Daily Journal of James Bruce, 1838-1841, entries throughout. For similar accounts of small game hunting and the composition of game in the region, see Daniel Tatum Merritt's Diary, December 17, 1860, and February 6, 1863, VHS; Ricketts, *A Diary Kept by William C. Shelton*, 1, 14; Robert Enoch Withers, *Autobiography of an Octogenarian* (Roanoke, VA: Stone Printing & Manufacturing, 1907), 92-93; and Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, 1844-1845, entries throughout, William Bethell Williamson Papers, box 1, folder 7, SHC.

<sup>100</sup> Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, October 2, 1844.

<sup>101</sup> Withers, *Autobiography of an Octogenarian*, 89-91; and Henry Goings, *Rambles of a Runaway from Southern Slavery* (Stratford, Canada: J. M. Robb, 1869), 9.

“thousands & millions of wild pigeons in the land.”<sup>102</sup> Despite these remnants of natural abundance, regional life was centered on agriculture, or, more specifically, on a single agricultural crop.

Certain environmental conditions stimulated the spread of tobacco culture throughout the Border region. The geography and natural resources of the region helped shape its agriculture and society to a great degree. These environmental influences often took the form of limits rather than encouragements. The region’s abundance of animal life and vegetation that so awed early Euro-American explorers and settlers proved to cover relatively infertile upland soil; ground that included most of the southern Piedmont and that promised little in the way of agricultural productivity. Farmers forced to raise crops on small patches of productive bottomland turned to the high-value crop with which they had experience: dark tobacco. Early settlers’ decisions to grow tobacco were also influenced by the Piedmont’s climate (the season was too short to grow cotton), water transportation routes, and the availability of wood for building barns and curing fires. Like the regional shortage of rich soils, the direction of the Roanoke River’s drainage influenced Southside agriculture. Historians of the region have described the Roanoke’s outlet into the Albemarle Sound of North Carolina, with its narrow and dangerous outlets to the Atlantic, rather than into the Chesapeake Bay, as a retarding factor in the development of the Southside.<sup>103</sup> Although these critiques are true to a certain extent, the cost and inconvenience of the region’s major water route meant that farmers had to focus on high-value crops. Tobacco was one of the few agricultural staples that could still turn a profit after a journey to market that involved rolling, floating, and hauling a hogshead - which could weigh

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<sup>102</sup> Daniel Tatum Merritt’s Diary, March 8, 1858.

<sup>103</sup> Siegel, *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness*, 12-13, 165; Jack Temple Kirby, *Poquosin: A Study of Rural Landscape and Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 3-4; Farmer, *In the Absence of Towns*, 29, 96; and Beeman, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry*, 24-25.

almost a ton - well over a hundred miles. Like mountain farmers who converted their heavy corn into whiskey, a value-added product, Southside tobacco growers focused their agricultural efforts on a crop that it paid to transport to distant markets.

Despite these environmental and geographical conditions conducive to a particular form of agriculture, the Southside was not “destined” to become a tobacco kingdom. Tobacco’s evolution in the region also relied on the culture that settlers brought to the southern Piedmont. At least some of these first pioneers were enmeshed in a tobacco economy that linked North American agricultural landscapes to European consumers through Scottish merchants and British ports, a system developed in the Tidewater over the previous century. Small farmers and large planters settled along the Border with knowledge of and experience in tobacco cultivation - they knew the crop made money and they knew how to raise it. Previous settlement in the central and northern Virginia Piedmont also proved that tobacco farming west of the Tidewater paid. When farmers looked at their new land with an eye toward its promise, they thought naturally of where and how tobacco might fit in the landscape. The power of this cultural perception was evident in other regions of frontier Virginia. Planters and farmers in districts with rich soil, such as the Shenandoah Valley, also cultivated tobacco briefly during the early settlement period, before turning to more diversified farming that took full advantage of the valley’s fertility.<sup>104</sup> Tobacco proved a much more durable staple in the Southside because this cultural affinity for tobacco agriculture encountered an environment of limited resources. These same cultural experiences and environmental realities contributed to the regional shift to bright tobacco cultivation that would so shape life along the Border for the next century.

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<sup>104</sup> Warren R. Hofstra, *The Planting of New Virginia: Settlement and Landscape in the Shenandoah Valley* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 277-278; and Warren R. Hofstra, “Land Policy and Settlement in the Northern Shenandoah Valley,” in *Appalachian Frontiers: Settlement, Society, and Development in the Preindustrial Era*, Robert D. Mitchell, ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991): 121-123.

## CHAPTER 3

### LET THERE BE BRIGHT: THE EMERGENCE OF YELLOW TOBACCO CULTIVATION

The development of a new crop culture or new technology often comes with a creation story, a tale that points to a singular moment or event as the signal occurrence: physics has Newton's apple; upland, short-staple cotton culture is all but inseparable from the story of Eli Whitney's cotton gin; and the electric light bulb and Thomas Edison's discovery of a carbon filament go hand-in-hand. Bright tobacco's creation story involves the Caswell planter Abisha Slade, who grew tobacco in the Blanch community on a sandy ridge a few miles southeast of Danville, and his young slave, Stephen. According to the story, in the fall of 1839, eighteen-year-old Stephen was tending the traditional wood fires that were drying a barn of tobacco. At some point during the curing process, he fell asleep and the unattended fires died. Upon awakening, a panicked Stephen rushed to the plantation's blacksmith forge and carried several loads of charcoal to the dormant barn. The resulting coal fires heated the barn well above the typical curing temperatures for several hours before cooling off, and the tobacco that resulted from this high temperature - yet relatively smoke-free - curing turned out a bright yellow color. Stephen's master Abisha carried this charcoal-cured crop to the Danville market, where he sold the leaf to a manufacturer for forty dollars per hundredweight, and a tobacco expert was born. Abisha tinkered with the use of charcoal over the following years perfecting the system, and he traveled throughout Caswell and the southern reaches of Halifax and Pittsylvania - often accompanied by Stephen - spreading his coal-firing instructions to planters who sought a reliable

formula for curing yellow tobacco. Abisha's curing work, combined with new seed varieties and careful soil selection, created a new crop culture in the Southside.<sup>105</sup>

The Abisha and Stephen story appeared in its most influential guise in 1949, in historian Nannie May Tilley's magisterial study of the development of yellow tobacco, *The Bright-Tobacco Industry*. Following Tilley's account, almost all subsequent histories of flue-cured tobacco - from county volumes to scholarly tomes - have included the Stephen Slade story, codifying the tale through repetition.<sup>106</sup> Memorials to Stephen even include a roadside historical marker, that arbitrator of all legitimate southern history, commemorating the "discovery" of bright tobacco in the Slade barn. Before Tilley's account, the story had received little circulation. Prior histories did acknowledge Abisha Slade and his brothers Thomas, Elias, and

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<sup>105</sup> Tilley, *The Bright Tobacco Industry*, 24-26.

<sup>106</sup> In addition to Tilley's *Bright-Tobacco Industry*, works that include a version of the Slade story (more or less) include: Joseph Clarke Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom: Plantation, Market, and Factory in Virginia and North Carolina, 1800-1860* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1938); Jane Gray Hagan, *The Story of Danville* (New York: Stratford House, 1950), 51-52; Cornelius Oliver Cathey, *Agricultural Developments in North Carolina, 1783-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 125; S. Huntington Hobbs, Jr., *North Carolina: An Economic and Social Profile* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), 108; Clement Eaton, *A History of the Old South* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1966), 214; Joseph Clarke Robert, *The Story of Tobacco in America*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 183; Danville Tobacco Association, *100 Years of Progress, 1869-1969* (Danville, VA: Womack Press, 1969), 15, 55; William S. Powell, *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County North Carolina, 1777-1977* (Durham, NC: Moore Publishing Company, 1977), 469-470; S. N. Hawks, Jr., *Principles of Flue-Cured Tobacco Production*, 2nd ed. (Raleigh: North Carolina State University, 1978), 5; Ruth Little-Stokes, *An Inventory of Historic Architecture, Caswell County, North Carolina: The Built Environment of a Burley and Bright-Leaf Tobacco Economy* (Yanceyville, NC: Caswell County Historical Association, 1979), 3; Siegel, *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness*, 102; William S. Powell, *North Carolina through Four Centuries* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 310-311; Robert C. McAdams, "The Tobacco Culture of Wilson County, North Carolina," (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1996), 43; Eldred E. Prince, Jr., and Robert R. Simpson, *Long Green: The Rise and Fall of Tobacco in South Carolina* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 47; and Adrienne M. Petty, "Standing Their Ground: Small Farm Owners in North Carolina's Tobacco Belt, 1920-1982," (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2004), 19. Drawing on one of Tilley's early oral presentations of her research, Robert included a synopsis of the Slade story in a footnote in *The Tobacco Kingdom* prior to Tilley's publication. A notable exception is Cornelius Oliver Cathey, *Agricultural Developments in North Carolina, 1783 to 1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 125. Cathey mentions the Slade brothers as the progenitors of bright tobacco, and makes no mention of Stephen Slade, though he does date their activities to 1839. Cathey, in fact, does not include Tilley's work in his bibliography.

William as early bright tobacco experts, but they made no mention of Stephen and they generally dated Abisha's influence on regional tobacco cultivation to the early 1850s rather than 1839.<sup>107</sup>

In her recent dissertation, "Making Tobacco Bright," Barbara Hahn argues that Stephen's story is most likely apocryphal. Although Abisha Slade and his brothers figured prominently in antebellum and early postwar accounts of bright leaf development, Stephen and the blacksmith forge apparently made their first appearance in an 1886 newspaper article in the *Pittsylvania Tribune*, followed by a similar story a month later in the agricultural journal *Progressive Farmer*, accounts upon which Tilley relied in her study.<sup>108</sup> Aside from these brief references, until the publication of *The Bright-Tobacco Industry*, tobacco historians - including some of the Slades' acquaintances - made no mention of Stephen as the accidental originator of charcoal curing.

Although its veracity may be in doubt, the *Progressive Farmer* account brought together several key elements of the development of bright tobacco culture in an overt fashion.

According to the article, a "Captain John Lee" approached an older freedman at a Danville tobacco auction in the spring of 1886, and "gave a cheer" which "was taken up by the crowd . . ." A reporter inquired as to the reason for the excitement, and was informed that the freedman was "Stephen Slade . . . the first man to cure bright tobacco." The reporter spoke with Slade, who told him that the curing was in fact an accident; after the application of charcoal, the tobacco

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<sup>107</sup> Examples include Robert L. Ragland, "A Scrap from the History of Yellow Tobacco," *Southern Planter and Farmer* 37, 5 (May 1876): 344; J. B. Cameron, *A Sketch of the Tobacco Interests in North Carolina* (Oxford, NC: W. A. Davis & Co., 1881), 9-10; B. W. Arnold, *History of the Tobacco Industry in Virginia from 1860 to 1894*, Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1897), 32; J. B. Killebrew and Herbert Myrick, *Tobacco Leaf: Its Culture and Cure, Marketing and Manufacture, a Practical Handbook on the Most Approved Methods in Growing, Harvesting, Curing, Packing and Selling Tobacco, Also of Tobacco Manufacture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Orange Judd Co., 1909), 10-11; Carl Avery Werner, *Tobaccoland: A Book about Tobacco; Its History, Legends, Literature, Cultivation, Social and Hygienic Influences, Commercial Development, Industrial Processes and Governmental Regulation* (New York: Tobacco Leaf Pub., 1922), 42; Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, 2 vol. (Washington D. C.: Carnegie Institution, 1933), 2:757; and Franklin C. Erickson, "The Tobacco Belt of North Carolina," *Economic Geography* 21, 1 (January 1945): 58. For Abisha's brothers, see Tilley, *Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 23.

<sup>108</sup> Barbara Hahn, "Making Tobacco Bright: Institutions, Information, and Industrialization in the Creation of an Agricultural Commodity, 1617-1937," Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 2006, 236-238.

“‘kept on yallowin’ and yallowin’ tell it got clear up.’” Stephen followed this explanation, according to the reporter, with a declaration of his loyalty to the Democratic party and his fondness for his former master and the social status quo antebellum: “I wish he [Abisha] was alive today and I was his slave.”<sup>109</sup> The article referred to Abisha Slade as “Elisha Slade,” but confirmed 1839 as the year of the fortuitous accident.<sup>110</sup>

Whether or not the Stephen Slade story is true, the tale has proven so durable because it captures several central truths of early bright tobacco culture. Stephen’s status as a slave represented a vital aspect of early bright tobacco experimentation - most early experts were slave owners who employed black hands in the management of their tobacco crops. It is also telling that Stephen’s discovery was an accident. Indeed, the story of his inadvertent nap mirrors popular antebellum accounts of the “lazy slave.” This representation allowed white tobacco growers to credit Stephen with the discovery of the importance of charcoal, while minimizing the importance of black expertise in the process of producing quality tobacco, a transformation that made the story entertaining rather than threatening for local planters. And though Stephen may have discovered the key to successful curing, according to the tale it took Abisha’s intelligence to master and systematize the process. As was the case with other antebellum southern crops, white “expertise” worked to hide black contributions to agricultural knowledge.<sup>111</sup> Thus when

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<sup>109</sup> “Bright Tobacco, An Old Negro the First to Cure It,” *Progressive Farmer* 1, 10 (April 14, 1886): 4. Ironically enough, “Captain John Lee” was almost certainly John G. Lea, a prominent tobacconist who spearhead a campaign of racial violence in Reconstruction Caswell as head of the local Ku Klux Klan. See chapter 5.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 4. Replacement of the name Abisha with Elisha was a common error in a number of subsequent histories. According to Tilley, there was no one by the name of Elisha Slade in Caswell County at the time. She speculates that Elisha is a hybrid of Abisha’s and his brother Elias’s names, though it seems just as likely that contemporaries mistook the rather unique name Abisha for the more common given name [Tilley, *Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 23].

<sup>111</sup> The classic case here is Lowcountry tidal rice culture, which geographer Judith Carney argues was based to a certain extent on black contributions rooted in their environmental knowledge and past agricultural experience. See Judith Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). Daniel Littlefield’s *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981) and Peter Wood’s *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Knopf, 1974) both make a similar

Captain Lee and his fellow auction-goers cheered Stephen, their acclaim was perhaps more for their memory of the Old South and the rise of a new regional cash crop - and their mastery over this culture - than it was for the ingenuity of a former slave. Stephen capped his fond tribute to the old order by asserting his continued loyalty to his deceased master and the antebellum political world, an assertion that the white crowd must have found comforting in the racially tense atmosphere of the 1880s South.

Stephen's tale is a classic creation story. As David Nye has pointed out, "Nineteenth-century Americans repeatedly told themselves stories about the mastery and control of nature through technology in which radical transformations of the landscape were normal developments." These stories were selective; they singled "out particular objects while deemphasizing or even deleting others."<sup>112</sup> Stephen's tale presents these themes. Charcoal curing became the force that transformed dark tobacco into bright, and black experience raising and curing tobacco became a happy accident rooted in a slave's carelessness. The story's focus on curing minimized the importance of seed and soil selection in creating quality bright leaf, while Stephen's nap hid generations of slave understandings of tobacco and its cultivation in the Southside environment. The story's acceptance likely owed a great deal to its simplicity; for as Nye argues, the popularity of period creation stories "arose from their apparent ability to explain historical events and fuse them with cultural values."<sup>113</sup> The article in the *Progressive Farmer* attached a date, place, and names to amorphous agricultural labors, environmental conditions, and social systems.

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argument. My research into a coastal Georgia plantation suggests that a similar process may have taken place in sea island cotton culture.

<sup>112</sup> David E. Nye, *America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2003), 10-11. I would like to thank Shane Hamilton for bringing Nye's analysis of creation myths to my attention.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

The farmers and warehousemen gathered around Stephen that day sought a creation story because bright tobacco, already an economic powerhouse during the antebellum period, had become the literal lifeblood of the region's countryside and towns following the Civil War. The elements of a bright tobacco culture that came to dominate Southside farming entailed subtle changes to the traditional routines of dark tobacco. Farmers selected varieties of seed for certain color and taste characteristics; they planted these seeds on new portions of the Piedmont landscape; and, like the Slades, they experimented with new methods of curing their tobacco. While none of these changes seemed dramatic departures from the tobacco culture that had existed along the Border since the mid-1700s, collectively these practices would alter both land and people over the following decades. Within a generation of Abisha and Stephen Slade, a Virginia writer could without exaggeration declare of regional cultivators: "Their life is yellow tobacco."<sup>114</sup>

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Around 1840, planters and farmers along the Border of Virginia and North Carolina began developing a new form of tobacco: bright leaf. This crop was characterized by a fine textured, mild-tasting leaf that cured to a lemon yellow color. From early experimentation on a few farms, the new crop spread across Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania Counties during the twenty years leading up to the Civil War. Bright tobacco brought exceptionally high prices at local and regional markets thanks to its attractive color and mild flavor, and the crop and its associated manufacturing enterprises stimulated an economic revival in the Southside. Underlying this agricultural transformation was an alteration of farmers' perceptions of tobacco as a crop and of the regional environment. In the search for lighter tobacco and greater profits,

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<sup>114</sup> John Ott in Robert L. Ragland, *Major Ragland's Instructions How to Grow and Cure Tobacco, Especially Fine Yellow* (Richmond, VA: Southern Fertilizing Company, 1885), 2.

old ways of farming and patterns of managing tobacco fell by the wayside, to be replaced by an agronomy that was simultaneously more intensive and extensive.

American attempts to produce yellow or fancy-colored tobacco predated the advent of Southside bright leaf by more than a century. All North American domesticated tobacco is *Nicotiana tabacum*, a native species of the nightshade family. *Tabacum* is an extremely plastic plant, expressing quite diverse characteristics on different soil types, and easily transformed through selective breeding. Soon after tobacco cultivation began in the New World, growers worked to shape *tabacum* to suit their desires, and a number of distinct varieties or strains of tobacco were the result.<sup>115</sup> Mid-Atlantic tobacco planters had long sought to grow light colored leaf, whether through seed selection, the exploitation of soil particularities, or curing methods. As early as the last decades of the seventeenth century, Virginia planters along the Rappahannock and the York rivers grew a particularly flavorful variety of tobacco, known as sweet-scented, that may have been lighter in color than the traditional Oronoko.<sup>116</sup> Through curing or cultivation experiments, planters throughout the Tidewater and Piedmont occasionally produced small quantities of tobacco that were lighter in color and of a milder flavor than the majority of dark tobacco, and these fancy lots sold for high prices at regional markets. By the first decades of the nineteenth-century, Maryland “kite-foot” tobacco had gained renown as a light-colored, smooth-tasting leaf. Growers along the state’s western shore perfected soil selection and curing techniques that reliably produced kite-foot, and carved out a niche in

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<sup>115</sup> Jordan Goodman, *Tobacco in History: The Cultures of Dependence* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3-4.

<sup>116</sup> Lorena S. Walsh, “Plantation Management in the Chesapeake, 1620-1820,” *Journal of Economic History* 49, 2 (June 1989): 396; Lois Carr Green, Russell R. Menard, and Lorena S. Walsh, *Robert Cole’s World: Agriculture and Society in Early Maryland* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 42; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 302; and Kulikoff. Other than a varietal name and accounts of its value, “No adequate description of it [sweet-scented tobacco] remains . . .” See Charles E. Gage, “Historical Factors Affecting Tobacco Types and Uses and the Evolution of the Auction Market,” *Agricultural History* 11, 1 (January 1937): 44.

international markets.<sup>117</sup> Following the war of 1812, the export market - especially in France - grew particularly interested in fancy grades of Virginia and Maryland tobacco (leaf grown in North Carolina was invariably included in the umbrella term, “Virginia tobacco”). Farmers in pockets across the Virginia Piedmont labored to discover curing methods that might produce lighter-colored leaf, and, in addition to tobacco, they cultivated fanciful descriptions of their produce. Planters in the late 1810s and 1820s described their tobacco as “pie-bald,” “calico,” “green streak,” “straw,” “fawn,” and “hickory-leaf color,” among other names, attempting to draw the interest of fancy tobacco buyers.<sup>118</sup> These attempts to produce bright tobacco highlight the historic interest in light-colored leaf, but they also demonstrate the scattered and inconsistent nature of tobacco cultivation and curing. Growers had a difficult time producing quality seed, finding soils suitable to light tobacco, and mastering a reliable curing method. Southside farmers would be the first to consistently combine all three elements in their search for yellow tobacco.

The first, and perhaps least discussed, element necessary for producing bright tobacco was the proper seed. Farmers had long employed a form of intentional selection when preserving tobacco seed for the following year. As the crop matured and topping time rolled around, planters selected a number of the hardiest plants to go to seed. Growers who were interested in producing yellow tobacco naturally selected plants that exhibited likely characteristics; they kept the seed “only of plants having the finest fibre and texture, and that ripened yellow on the hill.”<sup>119</sup> Over time, this annual selection process led to hundreds of

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<sup>117</sup> Thomas Emort, “Agriculture,” *American Farmer* 4, 20 (August 9, 1822): 157.

<sup>118</sup> P. W. Harper, “Desultory Remarks on the Making of Tobacco,” *Farmer’s Register* 3, 12 (April 1836): quotes on 712; Robert L. Ragland, “The Yellow Tobacco of North Carolina and Virginia,” *American Farmer* 3, 12 (June 15, 1884): 178; and Robert, *Tobacco Kingdom*, 41-43.

<sup>119</sup> Robert L. Ragland, *Cultivation and Curing of Fine Yellow and Shipping Tobacco from the Plant-Bed to Market* (Richmond, VA: J. W. Fergusson & Son, 1878?), 4. Ragland comments concerned antebellum seed selection practices. For similar descriptions, see Yellow Pryor, “Management of Tobacco,” *Farmer’s Register* 1, 10 (March 1834): 632-633; W. W. W. Bowie, “An Essay on the Culture and Management of Tobacco,” *American Farmer* 10, 2

tobacco varieties adapted to particular soil conditions. Growers also purchased promising seeds from neighbors. Some of these sought-after varieties acquired their own distinct names. Caswell's George Jeffreys acquired "one and all" seed from a fellow planter, and bought a "Pryor" variety (most likely "Yellow Pryor") from a plantation across the Virginia line.<sup>120</sup> Other varieties that produced yellow leaves on weak, light soil included "Daniel Jones" and "White Stem."<sup>121</sup> In a postwar seed catalogue, Halifax's Robert Ragland described "Yellow Oronoko" and Yellow Pryor as the classic antebellum bright leaf varieties, and he traced their evolution to farmer selections in the 1840s.<sup>122</sup>

Planters were adamant about the folly of attempting to produce bright tobacco without careful seed selection. Conscientious growers mated seed type to soil type. Samuel Shelton, a Henry County planter, wrote that, "there is a very great difference in crops, managed in the same way, arising from the different kinds of tobacco planted." He went on to illustrate that, when planted on similar land, narrow and broad leaf Oronoko varieties produced very different ripe tobacco. On relatively weak land the former produced "a finer and sweeter article than any other kind," while the latter turned out "decidedly coarser than the other" in the same fields. Rather, broad leaf Oronoko excelled in turning out large, dark tobacco on rich bottomlands.<sup>123</sup> Over years of trial and error, planters interested in growing bright tobacco learned - as a postwar commentator declared - that "no one but a novice would sow [dark tobacco varieties] for the fine manufacturing grade, or choose the fine varieties for heavy coarse stock."<sup>124</sup>

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(August 1854): 33; and Samuel C. Shelton, "The Culture and Management of Tobacco," *Southern Planter* 21, 4 (April 1861): 210.

<sup>120</sup> Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, February 26, 1845, William Bethell Williamson Papers, SHC.

<sup>121</sup> N. A. Venable, "Tobacco," *Southern Planter* 3, 5 (May 1843): 102.

<sup>122</sup> Robert L. Ragland, *Wholesale Catalogue of Reliable Tobacco Seeds* (Hycos, VA: R. L. Ragland Seed Co., 1894), 9-10.

<sup>123</sup> Shelton, "The Culture and Management of Tobacco," 209.

<sup>124</sup> Robert L. Ragland, *Tobacco, from the Seed to the Salesroom* (Richmond, VA: William Ellis Jones, 1880), 5.

Farmer's seed selection was an important factor in growing yellow tobacco, but the best seed failed without appropriate soil. The best soil types for producing smooth-tasting, light-colored tobacco, as described by modern soil scientists, were Appling, Cecil, Durham, and Granville sandy loam. These soil series all shared a similar structure. Their topsoil was a light-colored sand, typically a few inches to a foot deep, underlain by a stiff, bright red or yellow clay pocketed with disintegrating rock. This topsoil contained little organic material and was notably deficient in nitrogen. Water percolated rapidly through this sandy layer, where it then flowed horizontally across the surface of the denser clay, and the soil across both horizons was moderately to strongly acidic.<sup>125</sup> These sandy soils did not uniformly blanket the three counties. Soil types appropriate for growing bright tobacco covered roughly one-third of Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania counties, primarily the high ridges that lay between the region's numerous creeks and rivers. Pockets of sandy soil snaked through richer bottomland loam, weak soil often lay side-by-side with more fertile ground, and most farms included a variety of soil types.<sup>126</sup> As a postbellum tobacco historian described, "fine, bright tobacco land may be separated by only a few feet from a heavier clay soil, which will produce only a heavy manufacturing or export leaf."<sup>127</sup> These soil types were not unique to the three counties; belts of this sandy loam extended east and south into the corn and cotton region of North Carolina. But the hills along

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<sup>125</sup> E. H. Mathewson, *The Culture of Flue-Cured Tobacco*, USDA Bulletin No. 16 (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), 4; A. P. Brodell, *Cost of Producing Virginia Dark and Bright Tobacco and Incomes from Farming, 1922-1925*, Virginia Polytechnic Institute Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin No. 255 (Blacksburg: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1927), 4; E. M. Rowalt, *Soil Defense in the Piedmont*, USDA Farmer's Bulletin No. 1767 (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1937), 2-4; Wrightman W. Garner, *The Production of Tobacco* (New York: Blakiston Company, 1951), 88-89, 362; and W. W. Bowie, "An Essay on the Culture and Management of Tobacco," *American Farmer* 10, 2 (August 1854): 34.

<sup>126</sup> Tilley, *Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 13-14. For the localized nature of quality bright tobacco soils, see "Farmers' Meeting at the Exchange Hotel," *Southern Planter* 17, 4 (April 1857): 225.

<sup>127</sup> Warner, *Tobaccoland*, 174. For an early antebellum identification of the quality of these sandy, or "grey lands," see "Cultivation of Tobacco," *Farmer's Register* 2, 51 (May 12, 1841): 405-407.

the Dan, Bannister, Staunton, and Hyco rivers did contain the most abundant sampling of these soils among traditional tobacco-growing regions.

Even though bright leaf varieties thrived on “thin ridge-land,” like all other agricultural crops they required soil nutrients, including phosphorus, potassium, and nitrogen.<sup>128</sup> Indeed, yellow tobacco varieties were heavy feeders of phosphorus and potassium, but needed much less nitrogen than dark tobacco.<sup>129</sup> Soils with a great deal of nitrogen produced tobacco with a harsh, heavy taste, as tobacco plants converted excesses of the nutrient into a number of nitrogenous compounds - the most prominent of which was nicotine - that made for “biting, strong Tobaccos.”<sup>130</sup> Contemporary agriculturalists understood the toxic and stimulating - but not the addictive - properties of nicotine, but incorrectly believed that the substance was created during the curing process rather than in plant growth.<sup>131</sup> High concentrations of nitrogen also hindered the proper ripening and curing of bright tobacco. Planters found that curing worked most effectively on perfectly ripe tobacco, plants that were just beginning the process of senescence (the gradual deterioration of an annual plant prior to its death). Soils that contained a great deal of nitrogen grew tobacco with larger, heavier leaves and thicker stalks, traits that encouraged plant vitality. These robust plants continued to grow long into the fall harvest season and were slow to ripen, and thus farmers found them difficult to cure properly before the onset of frost, which killed the crop. Drainage was also an essential element of the structure of quality tobacco land. Tobacco was a crop that was notoriously intolerant of soggy ground, and plants subjected to standing water quickly wilted and drowned. The relative lack of organic matter in sandy

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<sup>128</sup> Samuel C. Shelton, “The Culture and Management of Tobacco,” *Southern Planter* 21, 4 (April 1861): 212.

<sup>129</sup> Garner, *The Production of Tobacco*, 108-109; and Mathewson, *The Culture of Flue-Cured Tobacco*, 4.

<sup>130</sup> Killebrew and Myrick, *Tobacco Leaf*, 80-84; and Augustus Voeleker in John Ott, *Tobacco in Virginia and North Carolina* (Richmond, VA: Southern Fertilizer Company, 1877), quote on 15.

<sup>131</sup> “Chemical Properties of Tobacco,” *Southern Planter* 20, 4 (April 1860): 216.

Southside soils, which contributed to low nitrogen levels, also led to the ground's rapid water percolation.<sup>132</sup>

Although antebellum farmers lacked modern understanding of soil nutrients, nicotine production, and plant biology, they quickly learned what soil types produced quality tobacco, and sought effective ways to select fields. As soil selection was vital to producing a quality crop, local planters and farmers became quite adept at identifying appropriate tobacco lands. A shortage of quality bottomland meant that dark tobacco growers had long experimented with the poorer ridge soils, and though these lands were relatively unproductive for most crops, sections of sandy land remained in grain and tobacco cultivation throughout the early nineteenth century, especially on marginal farms. Where the ridges were not in cultivated fields, the scrubby pine and hardwood forest served as wood lots and livestock range. Planters and farmers turned to this experience with regional soils when they sought the best land for raising yellow tobacco. A key indicator of sandy loam was the vegetative cover. Newly-cleared ridge land almost always made good tobacco, but old fields on the weak soil also produced a fine leaf, and growers sought grounds covered in such scrubby successional species as dogwoods, sourwoods, chinquapins, and hickory saplings.<sup>133</sup> Enterprising planters also discovered that even old fields too weak to re-grow woodland could make quality bright leaf; and they placed ground with sparse weed cover or broomstraw - that historic indicator of exhausted southern land - into cultivation once again.<sup>134</sup>

For many struggling tobacco farmers, bright tobacco's reliance on poor soil appeared all but providential. Overnight, ground that had been the least productive stretches of regional

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<sup>132</sup> Garner, *The Production of Tobacco*, 331-332; "Farmers' Meeting," 226; Robert L. De Coin, *History and Cultivation of Cotton and Tobacco* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1864), 258; and D. Layton Davis and Mark T. Nielsen, eds., *Tobacco: Production, Chemistry and Technology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Science, 1999), 128.

<sup>133</sup> Cameron, *A Sketch of the Tobacco Interests*, 44; and Shelton, "Culture and Management of Tobacco," 212.

<sup>134</sup> Mathewson, *The Culture of Flue-Cured Tobacco*, 5.

farms, suitable only for scratching out a few bushels of corn or ranging lean hogs, became the most valuable agricultural acreage in the Piedmont.<sup>135</sup> As tobacco experts from the late 19th-century marveled in retrospection, “this porous, spongy, sandy earth, destitute of humus, and incapable of growing any crop without the most abundant application of manures, became the corner stone of a new agriculture.”<sup>136</sup> It was a crop culture that seemed to defy normal agricultural strictures, turning poor land into valuable ground and old fields into assets. As one farmer noted, “A peculiarity of these lands, and one which greatly enhances their permanent value, is that, after being worn down by continuous and exhaustive cropping, and then turned out . . .” within a few years they could recover enough to “produce the finest cutters and smokers, which always command high prices.”<sup>137</sup>

But poor ridge soils alone were not sufficient to produce high-quality yellow tobacco. Perhaps the key element in bright tobacco production was the development of a reliable curing method. Between 1840 and the end of the Civil War, bright tobacco growers moved from the open wood fires and air curing favored by dark tobacco growers to the use of charcoal fires and then metal flue systems. Both new techniques heated tobacco to higher temperatures than open wood fires could, and both triggered biochemical changes in the leaf that brought out its yellow color. These curing technologies fixed tobacco characteristics developed through seed and soil selection, and, as they were perfected, they transformed yellow tobacco from a lucky occurrence to a repeatable agricultural staple. Bright tobacco thus brought together nature and culture. Soil types created by millions of years of geological forces met curing methods shaped by human

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<sup>135</sup> W. Edward Hearn and Frank P. Drane, *Soil Survey of Caswell County, North Carolina* (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1910), 9; Killebrew and Myrick, *Tobacco Leaf*, 11

<sup>136</sup> Killebrew and Myrick, *Tobacco Leaf*, 11.

<sup>137</sup> Thomas Whitehead, ed., *Virginia. A Synopsis of the Geology, Geography, Climate and Soil of the State, Together with Its Resources of Mines, Forests and Fields, Its Flocks and Its Herds* (Richmond: Virginia State Board of Agriculture, 1889), 46-47.

desires and generations of experience cultivating tobacco, with seeds - themselves the products of *tabacum*'s evolutionary biology and human selection - as the medium. In the confluence of these forces, yellow tobacco emerged as the product of a particular place and a particular people.

The use of flues to cure tobacco predated the bright tobacco boom by at least four decades. As early as 1809, various Virginia planters conceived of a system of flues that would carry the hot air of the curing fires through the tobacco barn without the accompanying smoke, which gave the leaf a darker color and stronger flavor. J. Robinson of Charlotte County (1809), Peter Minor of Albemarle County (1822), Thomas Gay of Goochland County (1824), and Edmund Pendleton of Louisa County (1826) all wrote of curing systems that utilized stone flues to carry heat throughout the tobacco barn.<sup>138</sup> In 1828, Halifax's Davis Tuck developed an improved flue system with a stone and iron firebox that opened to the outside of the barn, a series of sheet iron flues to carry heat inside the barn, and a chimney that vented the smoke. By sawing a few holes and installing these flues, farmers could convert their existing log tobacco barns into flue-cured barns. The farmer could stoke the fire without entering the barn, and Tuck advised that growers use a thermometer visible through a small glass window to carefully regulate barn temperatures. In all important respects, Tuck's 1831 patent described "an improved flue [that] was almost identical with the style" used throughout the bright tobacco belt well into the 1960s.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Robert D. Key, "On Firing Tobacco through Flues. The Benefit of Cutting When Fully Ripe," *Farmer's Register* 4, 1 (May 1836): 41-42; Minor, *The Cultivation and Management of Tobacco*, 16; Tilley, *The Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 18-19; and Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 44-45. Robert gives the date of Pendleton's invention as 1827.

<sup>139</sup> Robert L. Ragland, "A Scrap from the History of Yellow Tobacco," *Southern Planter* 37, 5 (May 1876): 343-344; Robert L. Ragland, "The Yellow Tobacco of North Carolina and Virginia," *American Farmer* 3, 12 (June 15, 1884): 178; Thomas Whitehead, ed., *Virginia, A Synopsis of the Geology, Geography, Climate and Soil of the State, Together with Its Resources of Mines, Forests and Fields, Its Flocks and Its Herds* (Richmond, VA: Virginia State Board of Agriculture, 1889), 45-46; Tilley, *The Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 20-21; and Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 45, quote in the latter.

Despite Tuck's forward-thinking flue system, regional planters were slow to adopt the flue as a tobacco curing technology due to the brief popularity of an intermediate curing method: charcoal fires. Popularized by Abisha Slade, charcoal curing combined traditional fire-curing techniques - open fires on the dirt floor of a barn - with an improved yet common heating source. Although Slade spread the charcoal curing method across the region, experiments with the fuel likely dated to at least the 1820s, as regional planters dabbled with curing techniques. By 1861, planter Samuel Shelton could declare (with some exaggeration) that the use of cordwood in curing tobacco "has been totally abandoned in all the fine tobacco-growing sections." Indeed, he stated, "to cure tobacco with chunks [of wood] is a disgrace to the tobacco-making community."<sup>140</sup>

Whether done by flues or charcoal, curing tobacco to a yellow color both solidified and altered existing relationships between tobacco planters and the Southside environment. Both curing methods used wood, the traditional barn fuel, but they did so in new ways. Both also placed a layer of simple technology between burning wood and curing leaf; in the case of charcoal it was the work of the collier's rick, in that of flue curing, a firebox and a set of sheet iron flues. Flue and charcoal curing required growers to heat their barns to higher temperatures for longer periods of time, using greater quantities of wood, and the process demanded that farmers pay careful attention to their barns throughout the process. Unlike wood fire curing, which essentially dried the leaf to slow decomposition, flue and charcoal curing methods relied on complicated formulas to develop and fix yellow leaf color. Both methods increased (slightly) the level of technology involved in curing tobacco.

The new curing methods proved much more demanding in terms of the attention and care a grower exhibited while tobacco was in the barn. Bright leaf experts developed elaborate curing

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<sup>140</sup> Shelton, "The Culture and Management of Tobacco," 215.

formulas that called for steadily increasing temperatures, often at the rate of only a few degrees per hour, and they demanded a curer's constant vigilance for days on end. The following small excerpt from the instructions of "R. J. S.," a Caswell farmer, are representative of the complexity of contemporary curing guides:

Continue this heat [90 degrees] for 12 hours, then raise it 10° and in 12 hours 10° more, the next 12 hours 5° (115°) at this stage apply charcoal for 6 hours, by which time the tobacco will be through the process of fermentation, and as yellow as it will be. Then pass up to 120°, which in 12 hours will cure the leaf, after which go up 10° every 2 or 3 hours, until you reach 150-60 or any higher heat within bounds of safety from burning, and continue until the stem and stalk are cured.<sup>141</sup>

The writer went on to note that his method demanded that "the strictest watch must be kept day and night."<sup>142</sup> Guides that furnished such exacting instructions must have challenged farmers, who worked with charcoal of varying quality, often without thermometers. Success under these systems and conditions would have been spotty at best.

As the above instructions intimate, curing continued biochemical changes that had started in the field. As mature tobacco ripened on the stalk, chlorophyll (green pigment) in the leaves slowly degraded. The act of curing tobacco, like that of aging beef, was an exercise in controlled decomposition. The gradually-increasing heat of the tobacco barn accelerated this chlorophyll degradation, revealing the yellow carotinoid pigments that existed in the leaves and which were normally masked by chlorophyll; and - if the leaf was harvested at the correct level of maturity and had grown in soil with an appropriate chemical composition - this process resulted in a bright yellow leaf. To provide a common analogy, this sequence of pigment unmasking was similar to the process by which deciduous tree leaves change color in the autumn. The heating process also converted plant starches into sugars and proteins into amino acids, transformations

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<sup>141</sup> R. J. S., "The Curing of Tobacco with Charcoal," *Southern Planter* 18, 10 (October 1858): 596. According to Tilley, these instructions were likely from one of the Slade brothers or a close neighbor.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, 596.

that imparted flavor and aroma to the curing tobacco. Yellowing and starch and protein conversion occurred simultaneously but independently, and, by happy coincidence for tobacco growers, peak sugar content and the point of high chlorophyll degradation coincided in most bright tobacco varieties. Once gentle heating removed the majority of the chlorophyll, heat exceeding 131 degrees Fahrenheit desiccated the leaf to the point that biochemical actions ceased, fixing the yellow color in the tobacco. This high heat also destroyed certain enzymes that, if left active, would slowly brown the cured leaves. Once curing fixed the color, only prolonged scorching heat, rot, or burning could alter the tobacco's appearance. Thus curing acted to accentuate certain biological qualities in the tobacco leaf; it could not "make" tobacco yellow or flavorful, but it could reveal colors and tastes that existed in the plant matter at the time it was harvested.<sup>143</sup> As with soil selection, antebellum planters did not understand the biochemistry of curing in the same terms that we do today, but they quickly developed a practical knowledge of the effects of various temperatures and rates of heating on particular tobacco varieties.

In her dissertation, "Making Tobacco Bright," Hahn credits institutional structures with shaping producer and consumer conceptions of tobacco, and the cultural technology of curing with the physical act of yellowing tobacco. Hahn's insights regarding the power of institutions are particularly perceptive - tobacco definitions did owe a great deal to inspection practices, auction grades, taxation, and federal variety descriptions - but her claim for the predominant role of curing in the production of bright tobacco obscures the vital importance of soil and seed types

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<sup>143</sup> D. Layton Davis and Mark T. Nielsen, eds., *Tobacco: Production, Chemistry and Technology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Science, 1999), 128, 131; S. N. Hawks, Jr., *Principles of Flue-Cured Tobacco Production*, 2nd ed. (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina State University, 1978), 191-195; and T. C. Tso, *Physiology and Biochemistry of Tobacco Plants* (Stroudsburg, PA: Dowden, Hutchinson, & Ross, 1972), 171-172.

in the creation of a new tobacco form.<sup>144</sup> Curing could only reveal yellow pigment created by biological processes that originated in particular soils, and could only convert to sugar the starches that existed in a given tobacco variety. As a biochemist explains in a recent text, yellow tobacco is made on the soil rather than in the barn: the “potential quality of tobacco is determined in the field . . . harvested leaves with poor quality characteristics are not improved during curing, even when curing procedures are ideal.”<sup>145</sup> It was no accident that bright tobacco in its modern form first appeared along the sandy ridges flanking the Dan River and its tributaries. Planters had experimented with flue-curing for several decades across Virginia, but it was only in the Southside that flues (and charcoal) met soil and seed types appropriate for reliable bright leaf production. Thus, bright tobacco is perhaps best described as a process rather than strictly as a crop, yet it was a process that was firmly rooted in local environmental conditions and within the biological constraints of seeds.

While bright tobacco culture made dramatic changes to seed, soil, and curing requirements, it modified many elements of dark tobacco cultivation little if at all. In general, these changes called for an intensification of cultivation methods rather than outright alterations to seasonal activities. Guides to raising bright leaf advised planters to plow their fields more frequently than normal, as the aeration of the soil increased percolation in addition to killing competing weeds. This plowing advice also called for the exclusive use of shallow shovel plows in cultivation, to prevent mixing the stronger (and less porous) clay subsoil with the thin, sandy topsoil. Topping also drew experts’ attention. Bright tobacco with too many or too few leaves could ripen too early or too late, or develop thin or overly heavy leaves. This was true for dark tobacco as well, but even more critical for yellow tobacco as coal and flue curing were more

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<sup>144</sup> Hahn, “Making Tobacco Bright.”

<sup>145</sup> Davis and Nielsen, eds., *Tobacco*, 131.

delicate acts than wood firing. Most critical was harvesting the crop at the peak of ripeness; green tobacco refused to cure properly, and over-ripe tobacco had no body and was almost worthless. Only tobacco that had just begun the process of senescence in the field would reveal its underlying yellow color in the barn, and only a trained eye could determine exactly when hands should cut the crop.<sup>146</sup>

All of these changes were a matter of degree rather than type. Treatises on bright tobacco stressed that only expert farmers could produce quality yellow tobacco, while any grower was capable of raising dark tobacco. Thus farmers who turned out bright leaf were “good” farmers, agrarians who intimately understood soils, plants, and weather, an expertise directly reflected in crop quality. As one contemporary writer advised of bright tobacco cultivation, “a great deal depends on the management, and . . . the finest crop on the hill may be butchered and ruined by bad management . . .”<sup>147</sup> With bright leaf cultivation, then, came a value judgement about the cultivator as well as the crop, and many farmers were anxious to prove that they were capable of mastering fine tobacco. These instructions, and the agricultural critique implicit in them, appealed to farmers’ pride as well as their pocketbooks. Successful growers such as Abisha Slade were acknowledged artisans as well as agriculturalists, and they commanded respect at agricultural meetings, on court days, and in local warehouses.

Although tobacco growers prided themselves on their ability to make fine yellow tobacco, the crop culture on many plantations relied on the agricultural and environmental expertise of black slaves. Most planters wrote and spoke as if they did not trust overseers, much less slaves, to make fine quality tobacco. As one Caswell planter wrote to another, “I have never seen many Overseers that I thought knew how to manage Tobo. well. it is seldom where they

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<sup>146</sup> R. J. S., “The Curing of Tobacco,” 595-596; Caswell, “On Curing Tobacco Yellow,” *Southern Planter* 19, 8 (August 1859): 492; and Shelton, “The Culture and Management of Tobacco,” 212-214.

<sup>147</sup> Shelton, “The Culture and Management of Tobacco,” 209.

have the entire management that they get good prices.”<sup>148</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, while traveling in the eastern tobacco belt, recorded similar sentiment regarding slaves. A planter confided in Olmsted that he made only coarse tobacco, as the “finer sorts required more painstaking and discretion than it was possible to make a large gang of negroes use. ‘You can make a nigger work,’ he said, ‘but you cannot make him think.’”<sup>149</sup> As a consequence of this attitude, some planters micro-managed tobacco cultivation in their attempts to control all aspects of crop production. After emancipation, Matilda Perry, who had been a slave in southern Pittsylvania County, recalled the close attention her master paid to his slaves’ tobacco work (in the racially charged dialect transcribed by a Depression-era Works Progress Administration writer). “[U]s black people had to look arter dat ‘baccy lak it was gold. Us women had to pin our dresses up roundst our necks fo’ we stepped in dat ole ‘baccy fiel’, else we’d git a lashin’. Git a lashin’ too effen you cut a leaf fo’ its ripe.” Her owner did not extend the same attention to his other crops. “Marse ain’ cared what we do in de wheat an’ corn fiel’, cause dat warn’t nothin’ but food for us niggers, but you better not do nothin’ to dem ‘baccy leaves.”<sup>150</sup> Jordan Johnson, a slave in neighboring Campbell County, told a similar tale. Slaves who failed to take care with the tobacco crop risked their master’s wrath. Johnson remembered a pregnant woman, Annie, who accidentally cut down a tobacco plant while weeding. Under the overseer’s harsh glare, she grew nervous and chopped off another seedling, “Ole hoverseer lif’ up dat rawhide an’ beat Annie ‘cross de back an shoulders ‘till she fell to de groun’.”<sup>151</sup>

Despite planters’ belief that slaves made poor tobacco hands due to inattention or incompetence, black hands were the true tobacco experts on at least some of the larger

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<sup>148</sup> D. Garland to John T. Garland, May 22, 1846, Caswell County Historical Association Collection, SHC.

<sup>149</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveler's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States, 1853-1861* (New York: De Capo Press, 1996), 70.

<sup>150</sup> Perry in Perdue, Jr., Barden, and Phillips, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 223-224.

<sup>151</sup> Johnson in *ibid*, 160.

plantations. Stephen Slade's role in the origin of bright tobacco curing may be apocryphal, but thousands of slaves shaped and guided the cultivation of the crop through the antebellum era. Slaves shepherded the plants from the plant beds to the fields, hoed and hilled the tobacco by hand, culled hornworms from the leaves when they appeared, topped each plant at the appropriate height, and judged when ripe tobacco should be cut. Masters gave instructions - perhaps based on input from experienced hands - but slaves executed them. Gabe Hunt, a former slave, recalled the complex judgments necessary in a number of daily tobacco tasks. When the tobacco harvest came, hands had "to pick dem leaves what's jus' startin to brown. Pick 'em too soon dey don't cure, an' you pick 'em too late dey bitters [brittle]." This expertise extended to the mechanics of harvesting the leaves as well. "Got to break 'em [leaves] off clean at de stem an' not twist 'em cause if dey bruised dey spile."<sup>152</sup> Likewise, topping quality tobacco was an exercise in experience and judgment. Hands had to quickly determine the appropriate number of leaves to remain on the docked plant, a calculation that factored in soil strength, plant health, a field's production history, seed variety, and weather conditions, among other variables. In a postwar pamphlet, tobacco expert Robert Ragland advised his white readers to seek out former slaves as topping tutors. He wrote, "Young man, if you don't know how [to top], get some old negro to show you."<sup>153</sup>

Processing tobacco once it had been harvested demanded just as much experience and environmental knowledge. Planters may have supervised most curing - though the tale of Stephen Slade challenges this assumption - but slaves typically sorted, packed, and prized the cured leaf. Planters desired hogsheads or loose lots of clean, well-sorted (leaves of similar

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<sup>152</sup> Hunt in *ibid*, 148. Hunt's owner apparently harvested the tobacco leaves in the field rather than cutting the entire stalk to cure, a method that became increasingly popular with regional cultivators after the Civil War.

<sup>153</sup> Robert L. Ragland, *Major Ragland's Instructions How to Grow and Cure Tobacco, Especially Fine Yellow* (Richmond, VA: Southern Fertilizing Company, 1885), 25.

quality packed together) leaves that were moist enough to travel without crumbling but too dry to rot (or, as they described this ideal condition, in proper order). Each stage of the post-curing labor involved assessments of leaf quality, color, and pliability. Black workers had to judge humidity, the tobacco's moisture content, and its general grade according to color and texture, all while factoring in the distance to market and the form of transportation. These calculations relied on experience and on slaves' intimate understanding of tobacco as a living and decaying plant.

Combining all of the elements of bright leaf cultivation to successfully and reliably produce yellow tobacco was a challenging undertaking that often involved a good deal of trial and error on the part of the planter. The efforts of George Jeffreys, a Methodist preacher who also farmed along Caswell's Hyco Creek in the eastern portion of the county, reveal some of the difficulties inherent in early efforts to master bright tobacco.<sup>154</sup> In the mid-1840s, inspired by the cultivation practices of his neighbors, Jeffreys became determined to make "fine high priced Tobo . . ."<sup>155</sup> Likening the complicated cultivation to the challenges of his ministerial laborers, he recorded a prayer in his diary "that God will give me a bright crop this year . . ."<sup>156</sup> Pleased with his determination to enter the ranks of bright tobacco growers, he resolved to "devote all my attention to its [bright tobacco's] culture & curing and then publish a pamphlet."<sup>157</sup>

Jeffreys planted Little Frederick, One and All, and an unidentified Pryor variety on his plantation, types that he selected based on his observations and the advice of neighbors. He apparently also understood the vital importance of planting on weak soil, as he moved his corn crop to the plantation's creek bottomlands, and planted tobacco on his upland fields, though

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<sup>154</sup> The following paragraphs are drawn from the diary of George Washington Jeffreys, 1845 entries, William Bethell Williamson Papers, SHC. Dates for direct quotations are cited below.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, January 20, 1845.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, January 9, 1845.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, January 20, 1845.

those lands were covered in “two important evils, the great nuisances of our farms viz broomsedge & gullies.”<sup>158</sup> He also followed cultivation advice that would become bright tobacco gospel over the following decades, as he relied exclusively on shovel plows to till his tobacco fields. Jeffreys had earlier employed dagon plows, which turn the land over to a deeper depth and slowed erosion, but he worried that mixing topsoil and subsoil would prove detrimental to producing fine tobacco. Like other regional planters, he believed that the sandy, thin topsoil contained the elements essential to growing bright tobacco, and that the clayey subsoil inhibited proper drainage. Jeffreys recognized the dangers of intensive tobacco cultivation using these methods on erosive lands, and planned to combat gullying with a crop of spring oats planted on the fields, in the hopes that the oats would hold the soil together during the region’s heavy spring rains. He also emphasized the vital importance of allowing tobacco to mature fully in the field before harvest. He wrote that, “As regards curing great attention should be paid to the yellowing of the Tobo as the first & most important process . . .”<sup>159</sup> In all of these techniques, he anticipated the regional yellow tobacco culture of the 1850s and 1860s.

While Jeffreys understood certain precepts of bright tobacco culture, he was quite confused about other elements necessary to successfully curing yellow leaf. He believed that the region’s upland soil was well suited to the growth of light tobacco, but he also penned livestock on a portion of his tobacco ground to enrich the soil, efforts that surely proved counterproductive to producing a fine-bodied leaf with a smooth, sweet flavor. Jeffreys was equally uncertain about the best method of curing his tobacco. He practiced “sunning” his cut tobacco - leaving the plants in windrows in the field to begin the drying process before hands transferred them to

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid, January 10, 1845. Broomsedge is also commonly known as broomstraw or poverty grass, and is an early successional colonizer of old fields.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, January 20, 1845.

barns - and believed these curing methods alone could produce bright tobacco.<sup>160</sup> With his plant beds seeded in 1845, he wrote that he intended to “raise plant & cure the Tobo without fire & wood . . .,” efforts that surely failed to produce top quality leaf.<sup>161</sup> Jeffreys’s successes and struggles emphasize that the creation of a bright tobacco culture was a process rather than an instantaneous occurrence. Planter such as Jeffreys - or the Slades for that matter - struggled for years to perfect methods of cultivation and curing that led to barns full of bright yellow tobacco, and these early efforts were no doubt marked by more failures than successes.

The efforts of Jeffreys and his fellow bright leaf experimenters found positive reinforcement in regional warehouses and the local press. New agricultural products often experience a “honeymoon” price effect, as consumers are willing to pay inflated prices until production increases and satisfies the existing demand, but bright tobacco’s price advantage over dark tobacco continued throughout the antebellum period, Reconstruction, and well into the twentieth century. Traditional tobacco prices fluctuated throughout the 1840s and 1850s, responding to swelling and shrinking foreign and domestic demand and varying crop size; in general, after the Panic of 1837 prices declined through the mid-1840s, climbed gradually to a peak in 1856, and slid downward again following the Panic of 1857. Despite this variance, for every year during the period except 1856, common tobacco grades brought less than ten dollars per hundredweight on Virginia markets (and often far less). At the 1844 price nadir, average tobacco brought less than four dollars per hundredweight on the Richmond market.<sup>162</sup>

Determining the average value of tobacco sold in the Southside prior to the Civil War is a challenging task. There are good records of prices paid for bright and dark tobacco on the Danville market from 1869 forward - when yellow tobacco consistently commanded prices twice

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, October 3, 1844.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, January 20, 1845.

<sup>162</sup> Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 132-157, esp. 143.

as high as fire-cured leaf, but there are no corresponding figures for the antebellum and Civil War periods.<sup>163</sup> Even where receipts and accounts are available, planters, agents, and warehousemen often failed to differentiate between bright and dark tobacco in writing; everyone involved knew their own crop and the prices commanded by each type, and generally used the generic term tobacco to refer to either type. Thus it is impossible to give exact figures for each type of tobacco prior to the war, but we can make some educated deductions. An examination of receipts for well over 1,000,000 pounds of tobacco sold by Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania growers between 1840 and 1865 hint at the profit potential of yellow tobacco. While the average hundredweight of tobacco from this sample sold for \$7.04 - in line with Richmond prices during the same period, lots designated as bright leaf could sell for several times this figure. Some planters who experimented with making fine tobacco reaped handsome rewards - hundredweights of yellow tobacco raised by William Bailey brought \$45.25 (in 1859), Joel Hubbard's tobacco sold for \$28 (1858), George Clement garnered \$18 (1854), Joseph Totten found buyers at \$20 (1856), and Pleasant Womack sold several thousand pounds of bright leaf between \$38 and \$48 (1860). At \$48 per hundredweight, a farmer who could raise 2,000 pounds of tobacco (a reasonable sum for one hand at the time) might gross \$960 in a season, compared to only a little over \$140 for a cultivator who garnered the median tobacco price for the same weight of cured dark leaf. This was a substantial sum, as a typical farmhand would do well to make \$100 per year during this period. These and similar sales suggest that bright leaf brought

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<sup>163</sup> For postwar prices, see Arthur G. Peterson, *Historical Study of Prices Received by Producers of Farm Products in Virginia, 1801-1927* (Blacksburg: Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, 1929), 172, table 79.

two to three times as much money as dark tobacco during the antebellum era, and exceptionally yellow leaf - suitable for wrappers - had the potential to sell even higher.<sup>164</sup>

Newspapers, especially in market towns, called special attention to the extremely high, or “lottery,” prices paid for select lots of yellow tobacco. A *Milton Chronicle* article advised planters that carefully cured and packed yellow wrappers could bring between \$40 and \$100 per hundredweight in 1857, and another piece in the same paper the following year informed readers of a local planter who obtained \$60 per hundredweight from a Caswell manufacturer.<sup>165</sup> The *Danville Republican* touted similar prices for the best leaf, with “excellent tobacco” garnering prices five to ten times higher than typical dark tobacco.<sup>166</sup> And a *Virginia Echo* advertisement from 1859 pointed to a Halifax planter who received \$71 per hundredweight as an example of the limitless potential of bright tobacco.<sup>167</sup> In part, these extraordinary prices served to entice bright tobacco growers to a particular town or warehouse, and thus were not representative of the prices the average farmer could expect for good yellow tobacco; nevertheless, these reports did serve to create a mystique regarding bright leaf’s profitability. There was always a chance, however small, that a farmer could make a fortune on one extraordinary crop.

With this promise came a concomitant pressure. Planters who sought to become bright tobacco experts tied their farming ability to their tobacco’s quality, as reflected in the prices paid for their crop. Tobacco agents often played on this perceived tie between fine tobacco and expert farming to flatter or pressure planters. When William Bailey of Halifax sold some bright leaf for \$45.25 per hundredweight in 1859, his agent wrote “we think you now have a right to

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<sup>164</sup> The receipts were for 913 hogsheads and loose lots of tobacco. The average hogshead was in excess of 1,200 pounds during the antebellum period, and the loose lots varied in size from a few hundred to a few thousand pounds. For a complete list of the sources examined to compile these figures, see the Appendix.

<sup>165</sup> “To the Planters of the Tobacco Growing Sections of Virginia and North Carolina,” *Milton Chronicle*, February 12, 1857, 2; and “Tobacco,” *Milton Chronicle*, May 21, 1858, 2.

<sup>166</sup> “The Dan River Valley - Its Superior Products,” *Danville Republican*, July 24, 1856, 2. The article quoted prices as high as \$45.75 per hundredweight on the Richmond market.

<sup>167</sup> “Advertisement,” *Virginia Echo*, August 19, 1859, 3.

brag as well as some of your neighbors.”<sup>168</sup> Elisha Barksdale’s agent sold his crop for a respectable \$15 per hundredweight, but admonished Barksdale that he would have to do better if he wanted to raise the best bright leaf, as his crop was still “too dark for wrappers.”<sup>169</sup> Other agents challenged their suppliers more directly. Caswell’s John Garland, who was experimenting with bright leaf production in the late 1840s, received a receipt for tobacco sales from his agent that criticized his crop management. Garland’s agent wrote that “you Tobo. was prized too high in order . . . & two thirds of them [the hogsheads] were moulded & funky.”<sup>170</sup> These and similar communications between tobacco agents and planters associated tobacco quality with a farmer’s knowledge; good cultivators had a right to brag to their neighbors, while planters such as Garland who struggled to master the complicated steps necessary to produce and ship quality tobacco faced the scrutiny of their business partners and, by extension, their community. And to the extent that planters were judged on the quality of their tobacco, they often built their reputations on the unacknowledged expertise of their slaves, whose technical skills and knowledge were obscured by a conspiracy of neglect.

Newspapers’ and journals’ propensity to publish the names of the best growers highlighted the public nature of successful bright tobacco production. Articles dealing with high prices for fine tobacco invariably listed the growers who commanded such premiums, and almost always mentioned their county or community, further tying bright tobacco to particular individuals and locales. A typical article appeared in the *Virginia Echo* on August 19, 1859. The Halifax County paper gave the prices obtained that season by seven county bright leaf planters, ranging from Samuel Adams’s crop of three hogsheads that brought \$20.50 per

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<sup>168</sup> Williams & Carrington to William Bailey, June 17, 1859, William Bailey Papers, RASP, series E, part 1, roll 1.

<sup>169</sup> Receipt of Elisha Barksdale, September 10, 1852, Southside Virginia Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, roll 2.

<sup>170</sup> Receipt of John T. Garland, September 3, 1847, Glenn Family Papers, Caswell County Historical Association Collection, SHC.

hundredweight, to M. P. Tribble's crop of the same size that brought an average of \$44.62 per hundredweight.<sup>171</sup> With such publicity, certain regional districts - such as Mount Vernon in Halifax, the Caswell ridge land between Milton and Danville, and the Leatherwood Valley along the Pittsylvania/Henry line - developed reputations for producing the "finest manufacturing [tobacco] that grew" anywhere.<sup>172</sup>

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The labors of farmers and slaves in the Southside environment were instrumental in the creation of bright leaf, but the work in regional tobacco factories was equally important in the emergence of a distinctive crop culture. Bright tobacco production was the result of seed selection, the unique environmental conditions of the Southside, and curing methods developed by enterprising planters and their workers, but the spread of bright leaf cultivation also depended on consumer, and thus manufacturer, demand and innovation. Farmers had little interest in yellow tobacco if there was no market for the leaf. Local chewing tobacco manufacturers believed the showy, flavorful tobacco varieties could be popular with the tobacco-consuming public, and they quickly incorporated yellow leaf into their products and advertising. By the late 1850s, bright tobacco had become an integral input in local manufacturing enterprises, and spurred the rapid growth of Southside tobacco factories. Plugs produced in the three counties developed a national reputation for bright leaf tobacco products, and consumers as far away as California began to identify yellow tobacco with the countryside surrounding Danville. Developments in rural fields spurred industrial growth, which, in turn promoted increases in yellow tobacco cultivation, and tobacco manufacturers worked hand-in-hand with growers to improve bright leaf supplies.

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<sup>171</sup> "Advertisement," *Virginia Echo*, August 19, 1859, 3.

<sup>172</sup> "Visit to Mount Vernon," *Virginia Echo*, September 9, 1859, quote on 2; and Tilley, *Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 21-22.

Tobacco manufacturing in Virginia - and to a lesser extent in North Carolina - had a long history. There were 252 tobacco manufacturing facilities scattered across Virginia in 1860, with the greatest concentration in the district encompassing Richmond and Petersburg, historic centers of commonwealth industry.<sup>173</sup> That year Richmond alone contained more than fifty tobacco factories that employed roughly 3,400 workers.<sup>174</sup> Tobacco manufacturing along the Virginia-North Carolina line dated to at least the 1820s, when one or more small factories began operations in Danville.<sup>175</sup> At the outbreak of the Civil War, there were at least 53 tobacco factories of various sizes in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania, with the majority concentrated in or near Danville, Milton, and Yanceyville.<sup>176</sup> Within less than four decades of the founding of its first factory, Danville had grown to be the fifth largest tobacco manufacturing center in the world, trailing only Richmond, New York, Petersburg, and Lynchburg.<sup>177</sup> By 1860, Danville tobacco factories purchased more than three and a half million pounds of local tobacco annually, employed almost 500 hands, and produced finished goods worth \$610,332.<sup>178</sup> In the first ten months of 1854, the company of Sutherlin & Ferrell alone purchased 389,574 pounds of tobacco for \$37,574, and sold \$52,950.45 worth of manufactured tobacco.<sup>179</sup> These factories specialized in chewing tobacco production, and, by the 1850s, they began to focus on incorporating bright leaf into their traditional products. The close proximity of so many tobacco growers and the high

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<sup>173</sup> B. W. Arnold, *History of the Tobacco Industry in Virginia from 1860 to 1894* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1897), 58.

<sup>174</sup> Gregg D. Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 23.

<sup>175</sup> Clara Fountain, *Danville: A Pictorial History* (Virginia Beach, VA: Donning Company, 1979), 17; and Jane Gray Hagan, *The Story of Danville* (New York: Stratford House, 1950), 9.

<sup>176</sup> Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 166-168; and Powell, *When the Past*, 116.

<sup>177</sup> Suzanne G. Schnittman, "Slavery in Virginia's Urban Tobacco Industry, 1840-1860," Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1987, 27.

<sup>178</sup> Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 178.

<sup>179</sup> List of tobacco purchased and manufactured, November 1, 1854, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC. William Thomas Sutherlin, who was the primary investor in Sutherlin & Ferrell, began manufacturing tobacco in Danville in 1844. See "Maj. William T. Sutherlin," *Southern Planter and Farmer* 10, 10 (October 1875): 596.

quality of Southside yellow tobacco made regional factories unusually profitable on the whole. The rate of return among Danville factories was the highest in the state at 24 percent.<sup>180</sup>

Almost all regional tobacco factory workers were slaves.<sup>181</sup> The use of enslaved men and women dated to the first regional tobacco factory, established in Danville some time in the 1820s. Slaves were the most abundant regional laborers, they were subject to their owner's or leaser's control in a way that free laborers were not, and most slaves had experience and skill handling tobacco. According to a local writer, that first facility produced "boxes and little hooped kegs of plaited and twisted chewing tobacco, as black as the ebony faces of the Negroes who prepared the plugs and worked the presses."<sup>182</sup> Manufacturers often owned a number of their laborers, and they also leased slaves on annual contracts from local planters. By 1860, roughly half of the black work force was leased. Sutherlin & Ferrell leased a portion of their black work force, typically paying a slave's owner between 100 and 150 dollars per year, and promising to clothe, feed, and provide medical care for the slave.<sup>183</sup> Due to the variety of ownership and varied employment patterns, unraveling the factory labor forces is quite complicated. By way of example, at the census enumerator's 1860 visit, Sutherlin owned 39 slaves and rented 26 more; his partner Ferrell owned one worker; Sutherlin's brother John, who

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<sup>180</sup> Schnittman, "Slavery in Virginia's Urban Tobacco Industry," 28; and Diane Barnes, *Artisan Workers in the Upper South: Petersburg, Virginia, 1820-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 160-161.

<sup>181</sup> Schnittman, "Slavery in Virginia's Urban Tobacco Industry," 13; Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 197-201; Hahn, "Making Tobacco Bright," 101-102; Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, : University of Virginia Press, 1976), 153; Herbert R. Northrup, *The Negro in the Tobacco Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), 2; and Lynda J. Morgan, *Emancipation in Virginia's Tobacco Belt, 1850-1870* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 17-18; The records of the Wyllies, a Danville tobacco manufacturing family, indicate that at least some tobacco factories hired white boys for some jobs. See Receipt of Henry Boman, February 4, 1860, Wyllie Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>182</sup> Jane Gray Hagan, *The Story of Danville* (New York: Stratford House, 1950), 9; and John E. Edwards, "Danville, Virginia," *Christian Advocate* 60, 52 (December 24, 1885): 832, quote in the latter.

<sup>183</sup> Receipts of William T. Sutherlin, December 20, 1847, January 1, 1848, & July 1, 1848 (x2), all in William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC; and Schnittman, "Slavery in Virginia's Urban Tobacco Industry," 141. Schnittman has calculated that the average monthly lease for a male slave in Danville's factories was \$12.40, and for a female slave, \$9.00.

worked for the company, owned an additional nine slaves; and the company's ownership owned one slave collectively. Danville manufacturer A. S. Wyllie owned 42 slaves, but occasionally hired factory workers. Beverley Barksdale and Joshua Hightower, who owned a Halifax factory, collectively owned 93 slaves, though they were both active planters as well as manufacturers and likely used only a portion of their workforce in manufacturing. Barksdale and Hightower may also have leased slaves, but the census for the southern district of Halifax did not record leases.<sup>184</sup>

For these factory slaves, work routines were nearly universal. Almost all local manufactured tobacco during the antebellum period was chewing tobacco, and the transformation of cured tobacco leaf into a manufactured tobacco product was relatively uncomplicated. When hogsheads of tobacco arrived at the factory, slaves unpacked the leaf, sorted and graded the tobacco and removed any trash, and spread the leaves out to dry further. Workers accomplished drying in a number of ways, ranging from simple air drying to the use of mechanical tumblers. Once the tobacco was sufficiently dry, the laborers remoistened the leaf with water just enough to handle the tobacco without having it crumble, and they then removed the thick, tough central stem - or rib - from each leaf. Slaves next soaked the "stemmed" leaves in liquid flavoring agents - most commonly a mixture of rum or licorice and sugar - which also served as preservatives, and once again dried the tobacco. Hands then coated certain products with various spice mixtures. At this point the tobacco had taken on its final flavor, and factory workers turned to molding the product into standardized shapes. Workers hand-formed the tobacco into chewing plugs, a universal term for both plaited ropes ("twists") and small rectangular bars ("lumps"), wrapped the shapes in particularly attractive leaves, and then placed

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<sup>184</sup> Manuscript census slave schedules, southern district of Pittsylvania and southern district of Halifax counties, Virginia, 1860. For the Wyllie company hiring workers, see note 1 above.

these plugs into metal or wood molds and used mechanical presses that exerted pressure in order to set the shape. Finally, workers packed the finished plugs into wooden boxes for shipment to local merchants and distant markets. In addition to being race-specific, this factory labor was typically divided along gender and age lines. Young children ran errands and sorted tobacco, women and older children worked at the monotonous task of stemming, and male slaves usually formed the plugs and operated the presses, tasks that manufacturers considered skilled work.<sup>185</sup>

Although this factory work seems far removed from a slave's agricultural labor on Piedmont tobacco plantations, plug-making was in certain ways an extension of field labor. Almost all factory slaves had personal experience cultivating tobacco. Either they had worked in the fields prior to their leases to manufacturers, or, in many cases, they worked as both field laborers and industrial hands over the course of a single year, moving from field to factory floor as plantation labor slowed in the winter months. Like plantation work, factory labor required specific understandings of tobacco biology and environmental conditions. In the days before climate-controlled factory floors, workers who handled moisture sensitive materials, such as tobacco or textiles, relied on their experience and understandings of climate and material.<sup>186</sup> Stemmers had to use their sense of touch and vision to determine when appropriate moisture levels in the tobacco permitted stem removal without causing the leaf to crumble, and this experience often came from handling cured tobacco on the farm, where moisture levels were equally critical. The action of judging when tobacco should be taken from the curing barn, sorted, tied into hands, and packed in hogsheads was very similar to the judgment required by

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<sup>185</sup> This description of factory operations draws heavily on Schnittman, "Slavery in Virginia's Urban Tobacco Industry," 22-25, 161; and Barnes, *Artisan Workers*, 163-164. For the prevalence of chewing tobacco in local manufacturing, see Tilley, *The Bright Tobacco Industry*, 490-491. For the preservative role of flavorings in plug manufacturing, see *The American Tobacco Story* (Richmond, VA: American Tobacco Company, 1964), 17; and Hahn, "Making Tobacco Bright," 89.

<sup>186</sup> Gail Cooper, "Custom Design, Engineering Guarantees, and Unpatentable Data: The Air Conditioning Industry, 1902-1935," *Technology and Culture* 35, 3 (July 1994): esp. 524-531

stemming. Likewise, selecting plug wrappers entailed practice and an understanding of consumer demand, but it was also akin to the sorting and grading that took place on every plantation and farm before tobacco left for the market. Planters and factory bosses may have set the guidelines for handling tobacco, but it was often slave judgments that shepherded the leaf through the curing, packing, and manufacturing regimens. Throughout the manufacturing process, tobacco remained an organic product, subject to shifts in humidity and temperature, and plug production was reliant on careful handling. It seems likely that manufacturers leased local slaves for their factories precisely because these workers had experience with tobacco from the plant bed to the packing house; their environmental and agriculture knowledge was part and parcel with their industrial knowledge.

Charles Dew, in his influential study of the Virginia iron industry, *Bond of Iron*, has argued that slave ironworkers used their industrial knowledge to forge a better lives for themselves within the bounds of early southern industry. Slaves learned industrial skills that made them invaluable components of iron-making, and, as a consequence, extracted better housing, food, and more privileges from their masters. In addition, skilled ironworkers often garnered payment for their work beyond basic requirements. Dew claims that “the industrial skills that” these slaves possessed forced their master “to permit them to behave in ways he never would have allowed his field hands to act.”<sup>187</sup> Early bright tobacco manufacturing suggests a different, but equally intriguing, source of industrial knowledge. Whereas ironworkers acquired their abilities thanks to years of work experience in the forge, tobacco hands brought much of their tacit knowledge of tobacco with them from local fields and barns. Certain manufacturing skills were learned on the factory floor: pressing plugs, flavoring the mix, and proper stemming, yet slaves came to manufacturing with a knowledge of tobacco that supported much of this work.

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<sup>187</sup> Charles B. Dew, *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge* (New York: Norton, 1994), 262.

The early tobacco historian Joseph Robert argued that tobacco factory work was a particularly mild form of slavery, in which hands, like the iron workers Dew described, often received bonuses for meeting certain production levels, and “the exploitative evils otherwise inherent in any form of absenteeism” were kept at a minimal level by manufacturers’ desires to keep their skilled work force content.<sup>188</sup> Despite Robert’s claims, it seems likely that factory slaves suffered from many of the same indignities and hardships common among agricultural laborers, as their planter masters and their industrial bosses were in many cases one and the same person. Indicative of the nature of tobacco factory work, facility managers were sometimes described as “overseer[s].”<sup>189</sup> Robert himself acknowledged that manufacturers often employed harsh white overseers and used the whip when “The devil would set into a Negro.”<sup>190</sup> These industrial slaves typically lived on the factory grounds or in the facility itself, and thus were never far from their master’s or overseer’s eye.<sup>191</sup> Tobacco factory workers beset by harsh masters responded in ways similar to their fellow slaves on Piedmont plantations; they had ample opportunities to slow down their work, turn out poor quality goods, break tools, or, if conditions were intolerable, to run away. In 1861, one of Sutherlin and Ferrell’s leased slaves found either factory conditions or the separation from his Madison, North Carolina, home unbearable, and he stole away from the Danville facility. A planter in Bachelor’s Hall, west of the city, wrote Sutherlin that he had spotted the man traveling through the countryside, apparently homeward bound.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Joseph C. Robert, *The Story of Tobacco in America*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 88.

<sup>189</sup> For an example, see Advertisement, *Milton Chronicle*, November 1, 1849, p. 3.

<sup>190</sup> Robert, *The Story of Tobacco*, 89.

<sup>191</sup> Lorenzo Ivy in Perdue, Jr., Barden, and Phillips, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 153.

<sup>192</sup> Johnson H. Owen to William T. Sutherlin, March 5, 1861, William T. Sutherlin Papers, SHC.

Although they followed the same routines and produced similar products, not all local tobacco manufacturing enterprises were as substantial as those of Sutherlin and his fellow Danville manufacturers. As demand for bright wrappers grew, small factories sprang up across the rural portions of the three counties. In 1860, Caswell was home to eleven small and medium-sized factories, ranging in size from Zenith Page's operation, with nineteen workers, to the larger firm of Graves and Vernon, which had forty-eight hands. In total, county operations employed 352 workers (out of a total of only 466 people working in manufacturing) and produced \$345,400 worth of finished tobacco.<sup>193</sup> In addition to Danville's factories, rural Pittsylvania County was home to a number of smaller operations; between the city and the county, there were 39 facilities in 1860.<sup>194</sup> These country manufacturers included William Finney, who worked with leaf on his Museville plantation in the northwestern district of the county, and Samuel Swanson, who produced tobacco at a Swansonville facility.<sup>195</sup> Halifax was home to fewer tobacco factories, but Charles Clark ran a small operation, an unknown planter opened a twist factory at Oak Level in 1847, Philip Howerton ran a lump tobacco factory at Halifax Courthouse, and Beverly Barksdale III constructed a substantial brick factory at the crossroads of Brooklyn in the southwestern corner of the county in 1855.<sup>196</sup> Labor arrangements at these factories were just as complex as among Danville operations. Zenith Page owned only eleven slaves ten years

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<sup>193</sup> Powell, *When the Past*, 116, 129; and Historical Census Data Browser. For additional references to Caswell facilities, see Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 166-168, 177; Katherine Kerr Kendall, *Caswell County, 1777-1877: Historical Abstracts of Minutes of Caswell County, North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC: Multiple Images Press, 1976), 86; and Ruth Little-Stokes, *An Inventory of Historic Architecture, Caswell County, North Carolina: The Built Environment of a Burley and Bright-Leaf Tobacco Economy* (Yanceyville, NC: Caswell County Historical Association, 1979), 194. Little-Stokes claims that the five facilities in Yanceyville in 1860 averaged 144 workers each, though other sources strongly suggest that 144 total workers between the five factories was the more likely figure.

<sup>194</sup> Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 166-168; and Schnittman, "Slavery in Virginia's Urban Tobacco Industry," 47.

<sup>195</sup> Receipt of William Finney, September 22, 1863, Southside Virginia Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, roll 4; and Charles B. Motley, *Yes There is a Dry Fork Virginia* (Danville, VA: Bassett Printing Corporation, 1977), 92.

<sup>196</sup> Receipts of Philip H. Howerton, November 11, 1850, & May 29, 1851, Charles H. Cabaniss Papers, Duke; and Pocahontas Wight Edmunds, *History of Halifax: Volume I, Narration* (n.p., n.d.), 120, 171, 189. John Hatchett also operated a factory somewhere in Halifax in 1858; see Receipt of John J. Hatchett, September 29, 1858, Hatchett Family Papers, Duke.

old or older, and must have leased his remaining eight workers, and William Finney owned 32 slaves and leased two other hands, while leasing out three of his own workers to a fellow planter.<sup>197</sup> On an even smaller scale, it is certain that a number of tobacco farmers produced hand-made tobacco products, such as cigars, for home use and for sale to neighbors and friends.<sup>198</sup> These small and medium-sized tobacco factories sold products similar to those of Sutherlin and Ferrell, turning out twists and lumps destined for regional and national markets.

In her study of labor arrangements in the antebellum Virginia tobacco industry, historian Suzanne Schnittman concludes that “Tobacco manufacturers were more similar to their northern counterparts than they were to southern planters. . .”; they were “employers first, masters second.”<sup>199</sup> Although this may have been the case for the commonwealth’s largest manufacturers, small operators such as Finney and Page were anything but clear-cut industrialists. Among his many other avocations, Finney worked as a slave trader, operated an iron forge, and planted bright tobacco.<sup>200</sup> Indeed, the owners of most rural factories seem to have been agricultural opportunists; they were planters who turned to tobacco manufacturing to supplement their farm incomes, to diversify their activities, or to more fully employ an expanding slave population.<sup>201</sup> The history of these rural factories, as Barbara Hahn notes, has a “blurry quality,” as these operations were not always consolidated under one roof, they relied on owned and leased labor, and their planter owners were often involved in a wide variety of

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<sup>197</sup> Manuscript census slave schedule, Caswell County, North Carolina, 1860; and manuscript census slave schedule, northern district of Pittsylvania County, Virginia, 1860.

<sup>198</sup> The diary of Pittsylvania’s William Shelton documents just such production: Ricketts, ed., *A Diary Kept by William C. Shelton*, 88-89.

<sup>199</sup> Schnittman, “Slavery in Virginia’s Urban Tobacco Industry,” 103.

<sup>200</sup> William H. Edwards to William A. J. Finney, February 16, 1859, Philip Thomas to William A. J. Finney, January 12, 1859, both in William A. J. Finney Papers, RASP, series F, part 3, roll 34; and Jason Dowell to William A. J. Finney, July 29, 1854, Southside Virginia Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, roll 4.

<sup>201</sup> Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 197-201.

economic activities.<sup>202</sup> In these cases, tobacco manufacturing developed as an outgrowth of pre-existing tobacco cultivation, rather than vice versa, and it is thus possible to conclude that these individuals were - literally - planters first and factory owners second. Indeed, planters who opened factories invariably continued cultivating tobacco, and, if they failed at tobacco manufacturing they continued planting. The proliferation of regional tobacco manufacturing establishments during the antebellum period seems, at least in part, a response to the lucrative nature of bright tobacco sales. Planters who realized the demand for bright lumps and twists, and who could organize enough labor, were determined to capture a portion of the profit made from their raw produce. Many of the rural and urban operations were fleeting affairs, as planters realized factory operations were time consuming, they experienced difficulties with labor, or the expected profits failed to materialize. Of the twenty-nine Danville-area manufacturing facilities listed in the 1850 census, only six survived ten years later. The survivors were joined, however, by thirty-three new firms, as enthusiastic planters and merchants continued to chase bright tobacco wealth.<sup>203</sup>

Opening a small tobacco factory did not require a substantial capital investment. The essentials for manufacturing tobacco included a labor force - typically slaves from the owner's plantation or hands leased from neighbors; a structure to house the workers and the tobacco, such as an empty barn or storage shed; a few screw presses and molds to shape the final product; flavorings, with licorice as the most common; and wooden boxes to store and ship the finished tobacco. Although from the postwar period, an 1869 auction inventory of the defunct Stanfield, Hancock, and Featherston chewing tobacco factory in the community of Leasburg, in Caswell, illustrates the bare bones nature of these small regional manufactories. The factory building

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<sup>202</sup> Hahn, "Making Tobacco Bright," 60.

<sup>203</sup> Schnittman, "Slavery in Virginia's Urban Tobacco Industry," 47.

fittings included one hydraulic press, two screw presses, a set of scales, tobacco driers, levers for opening boxes, and a licorice boiler.<sup>204</sup> These equipment demands were modest enough that a number of large Southside tobacco planters could afford to enter tobacco manufacturing on a small scale, transforming their plantations into places of value-added production. A small facility located on a plantation actually provided the planter/manufacturer with advantages, as he could control at least a portion of the raw material used in manufacturing from seed to the final packing of the finished product. Thus, in modern business terminology, small manufacturers such as Finney were “vertically integrated,” an arrangement that firmly linked agricultural and industrial processes.

Along with patent medicines, tobacco products were one of the few common antebellum purchases that were consistently sold under a name brand, and local manufacturers large and small branded most of their products. Some local factory production went to county merchants, who retailed lumps, cigars, smoking tobacco, and twists in their stores, but the relatively small amount consumed in the three counties barely put a dent in regional production.<sup>205</sup>

Manufacturers shipped the vast majority of their products outside of the Piedmont - Philip Howerton sold boxes of his manufactured tobacco to Baltimore and Petersburg agents, small producer John Hatchett marketed his brands in eastern Virginia, and Sutherlin and Ferrell sold tobacco to merchants in almost every major American city, from New York to New Orleans to San Francisco. Thus, branding was an important device for linking tobacco products and the

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<sup>204</sup> “Public Sale Notice,” *Milton Chronicle*, September 16, 1869, p. 3. There was no indication of how long the company had been defunct, though its operations may have been halted by the war. For the similarity of antebellum and early postwar manufacturing facilities, see Tilley, *The Bright Tobacco Industry*, 489-490.

<sup>205</sup> For examples of local merchants documenting tobacco product sales, see Claiborne Store Ledger, 1855-1858, throughout, John F. Claiborne Papers, Duke; Account Book of William Clark Grasty, 1858, 138, 249, William Clark Grasty Papers, Duke; Journal of William Clark Grasty, 1859-1860, throughout, William Clark Grasty Papers, Duke.

Southside in distant consumers' minds.<sup>206</sup> Manufacturers had to ensure that consumers pleased with the quality of their product connected that satisfaction with their region, and returned to their brands when they next purchased tobacco. The typical plug of tobacco traveled from the manufacturer to an urban agent, then on to a wholesaler or jobber, who sold the plug to a store owner.<sup>207</sup> Branding helped manufacturers to keep a product identity, a provenance, through these multiple exchanges. Like winemakers intent on establishing territorial reputations, the Southside's manufacturers worked to link smooth bright tobacco products to the Piedmont hills surrounding Danville. And to a great degree, these brands expressed difference in produce that literally sprang from the soil.

Manufactured tobacco brand names ran the spectrum. A number of brands bore fanciful or catchy names; local examples included "Bette Walker," "Palmira 10," "A Bell Twist," "Azalia Twist," "Rail Road," and "Andersons Ice Cream."<sup>208</sup> "Negro Twist," a bright plug that Sutherlin and Ferrell marketed in the Fort Worth, Texas, area, testified to its southern origin in its name.<sup>209</sup> Other labels bore the names of the manufacturers themselves, making tobacconists pseudo-celebrities. Sutherlin and Ferrell marketed "William Thomas Twist" and "JMS Star" (after William's brother and partner, John M. Sutherlin), two of the company's highest quality yellow products, and other eponymous twists and bars - from "Reid" to "A. B. Watson" - abounded in

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<sup>206</sup> Receipts of Philip Howerton, November 11, 1850, & May 29, 1851, Philip H. Howerton Papers, Duke; Receipt of John J. Hatchett, September 29, 1858, Hatchett Family Papers, Duke; Receipts of William T. Sutherlin, January 21, 1860, January 31, 1860, & March 27, 1860, all in William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC; and Patton, Smith, and Putman to John Sutherlin, May 4, 1858, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

<sup>207</sup> Robert, *The Story of Tobacco*, 93.

<sup>208</sup> Sutherlin & Ferrell, List of tobacco purchased and manufactured, November 1, 1854, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC; Blow and March to John Sutherlin, July 23, 1858, and C. C. Anderson to William Sutherlin, August 11, 1863, both in William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke; and Receipt of John J. Hatchett, September 29, 1858, Hatchett Family Papers, Duke.

<sup>209</sup> M. Shilton to William T. Sutherlin, May 19, 1860, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC.

the marketplace.<sup>210</sup> Best quality bright leaf brands often bore names that emphasized their use of yellow or “fine” tobacco, their Southside origins, or that suggested their smooth taste. Among these illustrative brands were “Golden Pomegranate,” “Peaches and Cream Twist,” “Old Virginia Fancy Twist,” “Fine Star,” and “Yellow Bar.” (By the late 1850s, the terms “fancy” and “fine” had become all but synonymous with yellow color.)<sup>211</sup>

Both products named after local manufacturers and those touting the inclusion of bright leaf tobacco branded the Southside region along with a particular tobacco product. Like California fruit and vegetable growers in the latter part of the nineteenth century, who shipped their oranges and raisins in crates painted with scenes of the state’s sunny valleys and stunning vistas, Southside tobacco manufacturers attempted through branding to convince consumers that the best tobacco came only from their region.<sup>212</sup> Although these early tobacco brands did not include pictures of growers’ fields (as far as can be determined), their wording, to borrow from historian Douglas Sackman, “turned the landscape . . . into a brand.”<sup>213</sup> Whether they chewed “Negro Twist” or “Old Virginia Fancy Twist,” branding encouraged consumers in stores from Maysville, Kentucky, to Mobile, Alabama, to think about the origins of their tobacco.<sup>214</sup>

While branding associated certain tobacco products with Southside manufacturers and the Piedmont landscape, bright tobacco’s most powerful advertisement lay in the leaf itself. Brands

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<sup>210</sup> Receipt of William T. Sutherlin, August 20, 1859, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC; Receipt of John J. Hatchett, September 29, 1858, Hatchett Family Papers, Duke; and B. H. & O. H. P. Thomas to John Sutherlin, June 11, 1858, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

<sup>211</sup> Receipt of William T. Sutherlin, August 20, 1859, and Samuel Ayers to William T. Sutherlin, January 4, 1862, both in William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC; Williams and Cheatam to John Sutherlin, July 15, 1858, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke; and Jordan Goodman, *Tobacco in History: The Cultures of Dependence* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 100.

<sup>212</sup> For an analysis of California’s agricultural marketing, see Douglas Cazaux Sackman, *Orange Empire: California and the Fruits of Eden* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 84-116; and Steven Stoll, *The Fruits of Natural Advantage: Making the Industrial Countryside in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp.

<sup>213</sup> Sackman, *Orange Empire*, 87.

<sup>214</sup> For sales to merchants in these locations, see B. H. and O. H. P. Thomas to John Sutherlin, June 11, 1858, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke; and Receipt of William T. Sutherlin, June 26, 1860, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC.

adorned the crates that manufacturers shipped to the merchants, and served as a reference in transactions between store owner and customer, but the wrapper - the intact leaf wrapped around a finished lump or twist - on each individual plug acted as a visual representation of quality.<sup>215</sup> Manufacturers from Danville and other regional factories finished their products - from top-shelf plugs to middle-grade tobacco - with yellow wrappers. These yellow wrappers survived the pressing process without losing their color or texture, and the resulting golden plugs stood out amid the traditional dark twists and lumps that crowded merchants' shelves.<sup>216</sup> Even if consumers chose to discard the wrapper rather than chewing it along with the rest of the plug - as many did - it had served its purpose by attracting attention. As a combination of environmental (soil and seed) and cultural (curing and seed) expressions, yellow wrappers made Caswell, Pittsylvania, and Halifax products unique. Like the shiny peel of an orange or apple, golden yellow tobacco wrappers promised a flavorful plug, and, as was the case with fruit aesthetics, the bright leaf was perhaps more important for its appearance than its taste. Strong twist and lump sales in the late 1850s indicated that consumers found these wrappers and the bright fillers that were often inside them appealing.

Merchants made the consumer preference for bright products clear in their correspondence with manufacturers. Tobacco agent Jason Dowell in Baltimore asked Finney to send him fancy plugs, as "Bright tobs. are scarce."<sup>217</sup> Likewise, a Charleston retailer sent out a circular requesting Southside bright tobacco, declaring that "good bright medium Pounds, and fine bright Pounds . . . are much enquired after," and that "Of Fancy Pounds and Twists, we have

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<sup>215</sup> For the dominance of Danville-area bright leaf as plug wrappers, see Hawks, Jr., *Principles of Flue-Cured Tobacco*, 5.

<sup>216</sup> G. Melvin Herndon, *William Tatham and the Culture of Tobacco* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1969), 414; Evan Bennett, "King Bacca's Throne: Land, Life, and Labor in the Old Bright Belt since 1880," Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 2005, 25; Schnittman, "Slavery in Virginia's Urban Tobacco Industry," 24-25; and Blow and March to John Sutherlin, May 12, 1858, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

<sup>217</sup> Jason Dowell to William A. J. Finney, July 29, 1854, Southside Virginia Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, roll 4.

not a pound, and they are greatly needed, as enquiries are made for them daily, without the ability to furnish them. Shipments of these grades cannot be made too early.”<sup>218</sup> A Cincinnati mercantile made a similar observation, writing that they could “sell a thousand boxes [sic]” of “choise [sic] bright” tobacco, if a Danville factory could provide them.<sup>219</sup> An agent of the New Orleans company Patton, Smith, & Putman made clear the importance of bright wrappers in particular. He wrote that the company was interested in Sutherlin & Ferrell’s entire product range, but insisted that all “the wrapper in every instance [be] very bright & lively . . .” Patton, Smith, & Putman were convinced that yellow tobacco served well as its own advertisement, and suggested that consumers as far removed from the Southside as New Orleans were conscious of the reputation of bright leaf tobacco.<sup>220</sup> The Charleston, Cincinnati, and New Orleans markets were all located near tobacco production centers - Charleston was closer to the fire-cured tobacco belts of Georgia and eastern North Carolina than to the three counties; Cincinnati lay near the substantial Kentucky dark tobacco belt, which was rapidly expanding, as well as the new Burley district; and Louisiana growers cultivated their own distinctive perique tobacco, while New Orleans was a natural entrepot for western tobacco - but bright leaf manufacturers were beginning to make inroads in these antebellum markets through branding and their emphasis on a mild, smooth-tasting chewing tobacco.<sup>221</sup>

It was not only Southside manufacturers who used bright leaf in their manufactured products; Richmond and Petersburg factories competed for the three counties’ yellow tobacco as

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<sup>218</sup> S. Wyatt & Company’s Tobacco Circular, May 24, 1860, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC.

<sup>219</sup> Compton & Hughes to John Sutherlin, April 19, 1858, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

<sup>220</sup> Patton, Smith, & Putman to John Sutherlin, May 4, 1858, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

<sup>221</sup> Eldred E. Prince, Jr., and Robert R. Simpson, *Long Green: The Rise and Fall of Tobacco in South Carolina* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 15; Charles E. Gage, “Historical Factors Affecting American Tobacco Types and Uses and the Evolution of the Auction Market,” *Agricultural History* 11, 1 (January 1937): 48; John Van Willigen and Susan C. Eastwood, *Tobacco Culture: Farming Kentucky’s Burley Belt* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 11-12; and William C. Rense, “The Perique Tobacco Industry of St. James Parish, Louisiana: A World Monopoly,” *Economic Botany* 24, 2 (April-June 1970): 123-124.

well. Halifax growers in particular shipped a large portion of their best tobacco east. Among the buyers was James Thomas, Richmond's largest manufacturer, who sought Border bright tobacco as wrappers for his plugs. Like his Southside counterparts, Thomas's drew on bright leaf's yellow color as a particularly potent advertising device for his manufactured tobacco. Wrapped in "gold" leaves sourced along the Virginia and North Carolina line, Thomas's products dominated new western markets in the goldfields of California and Colorado during the late 1850s. Thomas's nephew also created a new plug brand, "Lucky Strike," that connected the discovery of golden leaf in Piedmont fields to prospectors' desires to strike it rich in gold fields of a different sort. The "Lucky Strike" plug line morphed into pipe tobacco and then the famous cigarette brand following the war, but the brand name originated in the same chewing tobacco manufacturing and marketing common among antebellum Danville and Richmond factories.<sup>222</sup>

As regional and national demand increased, manufacturers pressured growers in the three counties to concentrate on cultivating top-quality bright tobacco. Buyers from the larger factories roamed the sandy ridges above the Dan, Hyco, and Bannister rivers searching for bright crops, and making offers to farmers to purchase their tobacco as it hung in their barns. As enterprising growers heard of growing demand, they also wrote to prominent manufacturers touting their crops, promising leaf that could "compete with Slades best," "very fine" tobacco, and "yellow cured with coal."<sup>223</sup> Manufacturers' demand for yellow tobacco provided growers with strong profits, and also gave them some leverage in selling their traditional dark tobacco. Farmers sometimes insisted that buyers take their darker leaf along with their bright tobacco, as when Halifax's Thomas Barksdale refused to sell his yellow leaf to Sutherlin & Ferrell unless the

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<sup>222</sup> *The American Tobacco Story*, 17.

<sup>223</sup> Bird L. Ferrell to John Sutherlin, October 11, 1858, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke; Armistead T. Moore to William T. Sutherlin, April 26, 1860, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC; and John T. Garland to William T. Sutherlin, March 1857, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC.

company also bought his entire crop of dark tobacco at the extortionate rate of ten dollars per hundredweight, and John Garland demanded sixteen dollars per hundredweight for his entire crop, although only 4,000 pounds were yellow tobacco.<sup>224</sup>

Manufacturers sought bright tobacco just as avidly as planters sought high sale prices. Factory owners worked hard to build relationships with regional bright leaf growers, often visiting them on their farms to discuss business. Manufacturers such as Sutherlin made arrangements to purchase farmers' loose tobacco on site and paid for hauling the leaf to the factory, deals that eliminated the planters' need to buy or make hogsheads and hire wagoners or rollers. As one Caswell grower wrote to another, sale to local manufacturers saved "a good deal of time & expense," and thus allowed him "to make larger crops." Planters who had favorable arrangements with factory owners often recruited their bright tobacco producing neighbors to sell to the same manufacturer, the end result being networks of bright leaf growers tied (loosely) to particular factories.<sup>225</sup> Manufacturers also placed instructions on raising, curing, and packing bright tobacco in local papers. An 1857 article in the *Milton Chronicle* advised growers to take care with their yellow tobacco cultivation, and recommended that they pack fine wrapper quality leaf in small boxes rather than in hogsheads to preserve quality. As further enticement, the article promised potential sales for such wrappers from 40 to 100 dollars per hundredweight.<sup>226</sup>

By 1860, with the stimulus of strong bright leaf sales, tobacco was more important than ever to Southside farmers and planters. Federal census takers visited the region's farms that

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<sup>224</sup> Thomas Barksdale to John Sutherlin, May 10, 1858, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke; and John T. Garland to William T. Sutherlin, March, 1857, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC. Barksdale commanded twenty-five dollars per hundredweight for his bright leaf.

<sup>225</sup> John T. Garland to William T. Sutherlin, March 1857, B. Brown to William T. Sutherlin, May 35, 1860, & Armistead T. Moore to William T. Sutherlin, April 26, 1860, all in William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC; Thomas Lindsey to John Sutherlin, April 26, 1858, & Thomas E. Barksdale to John Sutherlin, May 10, both in William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke; 1858 and D. Garland to John T. Garland, May 22, 1846, Caswell County Historical Association Collection, SHC, quote in the latter.

<sup>226</sup> "To the Planters of the Tobacco Growing Sections of Virginia and North Carolina," *Milton Chronicle*, February 12, 1857, p. 2.

year, and they recorded that more than 90 percent (2,651) of the region's 2,936 farms grew at least some tobacco. This tobacco dominance is even more impressive considering that the census counted a number of newly-settled farms that had not yet produced a season's crops, tracts left idle while in the legal limbo of estate management, the farms of the elderly and infirm, and town small holders who owned only a few head of livestock and a garden.<sup>227</sup> All things considered, it seems safe to conclude that almost every capable Southside farmer produced tobacco, and, though the census did not differentiate between types of tobacco, that that crop was increasingly the more lucrative bright leaf tobacco.

The wide-scale adoption of bright leaf as the region's staple crop changed planters' conceptions of agriculture and environment. The crop's requirements led to an increasingly regimented agriculture, one in which growers labored on carefully selected plots of land, managed seed selection over multiple generations, and followed elaborate curing guides. All of these efforts worked to transform tacit knowledge into formal knowledge, with varying success. For bright leaf growers, tobacco was no longer a flexible and ubiquitous cash crop; rather, the new leaf was an intensive staple that demanded expert, professional farming. This crop culture also brought agricultural production and older ideas of land stewardship into increasing conflict. Planters understood that the sandy ridge land that made the best tobacco was ill-suited to sustained row crop agriculture; it was steep, erosive, and low in nutrients. In general these ridges were the most stable in pastures, forests, and mixed farming, a land use mosaic that most regional landowners had adopted prior to the emergence of bright leaf. Bright leaf made a certain economic sense - these lands became more valuable in tobacco cultivation than they had been under older practices - but farmers also worried that their practices threatened other aspects

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<sup>227</sup> Virginia Agricultural Census, Manuscript Schedules for Halifax and Pittsylvania Counties, 1860, NARA, T1132, rolls 6 & 7.

of farming. As bright tobacco farmers increasingly brought these soils under the plow, they embraced a system that treated portions of the landscape as mediums of tobacco production rather than as integrated portions of larger farms.

This agriculture also united tobacco growing and local manufacturing. Tobacco had always been a commodity bound for distant markets, tied to transatlantic trade and global demand, but local bright leaf manufacturing further connected field and factory. Farmers and planters, who were themselves often manufacturers, came to see their tobacco as an industrial resource, a plant raised and packed to suit Danville and Milton manufacturers and particular consumer tastes. As a consequence, manufacturers worked to associate bright yellow tobacco with the southern Piedmont landscape, an advertising connection that linked soil and leaf for merchants and consumers from New York to San Francisco. The success of these campaigns increased demand for bright leaf, and hastened growers' exploitation of the Border's sandy soil.

The region's farmers and planters were bright leaf crazy as the Civil War approached. They turned land and labor toward the crop, traded tips and techniques with neighbors and through newspapers and agricultural journals, and they increased production whenever practical. The October 21, 1859 issue of the *Virginia Echo*, a Halifax County newspaper, illustrated the prominence given yellow tobacco along the Border. In that issue, an article detailing the high prices obtained by county planter James Moody for a hogshead of tobacco on the Richmond market actually appeared before a description of a paramilitary attack on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.<sup>228</sup> In Halifax, for one day at least, it seems that John Brown took a backseat to bright leaf.

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<sup>228</sup> "High Prices for Tobacco," *Virginia Echo*, October 21, 1859, 2.

## CHAPTER 4

BRIGHT LEAF, BRIGHT PROSPECTS: AGRICULTURAL REFORM AND THE LURE OF  
YELLOW TOBACCO

American agriculture faced a crisis in 1840. A severe economic panic initiated a lasting depression in 1837, and, over the following six years, farm prices plunged to historic lows as credit dried up. Tobacco farmers did not escape these economic miseries. The general depression that lasted through 1843 spurred interest among American farmers in programs of agricultural reform and intensification, and improvement movements gained traction in communities from New England to the South. This reform impulse was particularly vibrant in the older sections of the Atlantic seaboard that faced competition with fresh western lands as well as general economic troubles; from Vermont to Georgia, reformers worried about farm survival and sustainability.<sup>229</sup> It was against this national backdrop that bright leaf tobacco culture expanded along the Border during the antebellum period, gradually displacing dark tobacco from the region's farms and plantations.

More than just favor for traditional tobacco cultivation practices and a general rural inertia hindered the transition from one form of tobacco to another; the southern agricultural reform impulse played a role as well. In fact, bright leaf culture emerged at a time when many regional agriculturalists sharply criticized the methods of southern planting and farmers' over-

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<sup>229</sup> Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 456-457, 463-465. For a general theory of the connection between economic depressions and agricultural innovation, see Carville Earle, "The Myth of the Southern Soil Miner: Macrohistory, Agricultural Innovation, and Environmental Change," in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, Donald Worster, ed., reprint (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 175-210. Steven Stoll makes similar connections between changing agricultural practice and the earlier depression of the 1820s. See Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 40-54.

reliance on such staples as tobacco. By the 1840s, Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania counties had an active contingent of modernizing planters and farmers intent on spreading the message of agricultural reform across the Southside. As in other sections of the country, southern agricultural reform was a widespread yet rather amorphous movement intent on making southern agriculture more profitable and sustainable; in Virginia, the reform movement originated among large planters in the Tidewater region in the early nineteenth century and slowly spread into the Piedmont, gaining steam as farm prospects dimmed following 1837. Along the Border, the message of agricultural reform challenged the development of bright tobacco, but, in the end, reform advice also encouraged the new crop's diffusion.

In some regards, the growth of bright tobacco culture flew in the face of this reform movement: the soil and ripening demands of bright tobacco encouraged farmers to plant on poor, steep land, to forgo crop rotation, and to devote their time and energy to curing leaf and clearing land rather than fencing and manuring. In certain ways, however, the crop satisfied modernizers' critiques of dark tobacco culture. The new crop brought land that was formerly all but worthless into profitable cultivation; raising and curing yellow tobacco demanded that farmers understand regional soils and the elaborate art of charcoal or flue-curing, a focus on expertise and artisanship that appealed to reformers; and, most importantly, the premium prices bright leaf commanded made marginal farms suddenly profitable. This profitability allowed many people to stay put on their lands rather than migrating to the richer lands of the Old Southwest. As if by miracle, the new tobacco variety made many small and formerly poor farms pay. Following the Civil War, bright tobacco culture would contribute to many of the conditions that antebellum reformers feared - from catastrophic soil erosion to a decline in farm diversity and profits - but the reformers' message actually stimulated the prewar growth of the crop.

Virginians' antebellum interest in intensified agriculture was part of a larger southern trend most evident in the upper South, and, though spurred on by the Panic of 1837, the movement had historic roots in regional thinking. Although southern agricultural reformers drew much of their inspiration from the writings of such eminent British agriculturalists as Jethro Tull and Charles Townshend, Virginia had more than its share of agricultural experimenters, including *philosophes* George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. The first of a new breed of "scientific" agricultural reformers was John Taylor, of Caroline County. A lawyer, Revolutionary officer, nephew of Edmund Pendleton, member of the Virginia House of Delegates, and a United States Senator by the age of thirty-eight, Taylor was also one of the first systematic American agronomists. His 1813 book, *Arator*, called for manuring with vegetable matter, excluding animals from croplands, and producing feed specifically for penned livestock. Claiming that "our country is nearly ruined," Taylor envisioned a land made wealthy and fat if farmers would only deign to follow his reforms. Although his agricultural advice proved influential among wealthy Virginia planters, most of Taylor's assumptions regarding soil fertility were technically incorrect. Some of Taylor's methods did benefit soil fertility, though he rarely understood the science behind the results. For example, he asserted that vegetable matter alone was capable of restoring fertility if left on cropland, and *Arator* called for farmers to raise more clover, but at the time no one understood that as nitrogen-fixing legumes, clover plants utilize bacteria on their roots to transform atmospheric nitrogen into a usable form, which allows other plants to draw more of the element from the ground.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> John Taylor, *Arator; Being a Series of Agricultural Essays, Practical and Political* (Georgetown, D.C., 1813), quote on 82; Jack Temple Kirby, *Poquosin: A Study of Rural Landscape and Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 65-67; David R. Montgomery, *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 126; Garret Ward Shelton and C. William Hill, Jr., *The Liberal Republicanism of John Taylor of Caroline* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), 69-88; and Benjamin Cohen, *Notes from the Ground: Science, Soil, and Society in the American Countryside* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 42-47.

The work of Tidewater agronomist and planter Edmund Ruffin was even more influential than Taylor's reform efforts. Like Taylor, Ruffin believed the salvation of southern agriculture lay in intensified farming. He understood that much of the Atlantic seaboard's arable land suffered from some degree of soil exhaustion brought on by careless or exploitative agricultural practices, and he was particularly concerned with the sustainability of southern agriculture and the compatibility of modern farming methods with the institution of slavery. Ruffin believed that a Malthusian crisis faced the region, as old farming methods and a focus on non-edible farm crops, such as cotton and tobacco, prevented food production from keeping pace with rapid population growth. This situation could only result in one of two outcomes: general poverty or out-migration to the fresher lands of Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas. As a solution to the ills of traditional agriculture, Ruffin touted a series of reforms which included crop rotation, a movement away from a general reliance on tobacco and cotton, manuring, the extensive use of cover and leguminous crops, an end to the common range, and the use of marl - the fossilized remains of marine life - to lower soil acidity.<sup>231</sup> The point of all of these prescriptions, stated Ruffin, was not "to draw from the land the greatest *immediate* production and profit," but, rather, to ensure "the greatest *continued* products and profits" from the southern landscape.<sup>232</sup> He espoused his views in an influential agricultural journal, *Farmer's Register*, which he published

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<sup>231</sup> Edmund Ruffin, *Nature's Management: Writings on Landscape and Reform, 1822-1859*, Jack Temple Kirby, ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000); Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*, 150-160; William Mathew, *Edmund Ruffin and the Crisis of Slavery in the Old South: The Failure of Agricultural Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), pp.; Kirby, *Poquosin*, 61-85; Drew A. Swanson, "Fighting over Fencing: Agricultural Reform and Antebellum Efforts to Close the Virginia Open Range," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 117, 2 (2009): 106-108; Cohen, *Notes from the Ground*, 85-94; and Montgomery, *Dirt*, 129-130. For a good general biography of Ruffin as a reformer, see David F. Allmendinger, Jr., *Ruffin: Family and Reform in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), and for Ruffin's political career, see Betty L. Mitchell, *Edmund Ruffin: A Biography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).

<sup>232</sup> Ruffin, *Nature's Management*, 323, emphasis in the original.

on his Prince George County plantation beginning in 1833, and in a widely-read treatise, *An Essay on Calcareous Manures* (1832).<sup>233</sup>

Agricultural reformers tended to have conflicting feelings concerning tobacco as a crop. On the one hand, tobacco provided a decent return that funded reform efforts on many farms, and it remained one of the few profitable crops in the Virginia and North Carolina Piedmont. On the other hand, tobacco represented the staple-crop system that undermined reformers' calls for diversity. In other words, tobacco itself was not inherently a bad crop, but Ruffin and his cohorts believed that the mentality that invariably accompanied tobacco farming prevented agricultural growth and sustainability. Ruffin labeled the plant part of the "exhausting culture" that depleted the South and forced the region's children west, and he called for eastern farmers to reject tobacco and cotton monocultures in favor of more diversified and sustainable systems, and reformer John Hartwell Cocke declared the crop "the Bane of Virginia Husbandry."<sup>234</sup> Regional modernizers, such as Halifax reformer James Bruce, echoed Ruffin's and Cocke's advice. In an 1847 address to his fellow agriculturalists, he urged Southside planters and farmers to sell their tobacco and slaves and invest their profits in intensive farming and local industry.<sup>235</sup> Both Ruffin and Bruce understood the appeal of short-term dark tobacco profits - Bruce himself remained a substantial tobacco planter through the Civil War - but they feared that the staple crop system was unsustainable.

As with Taylor and Ruffin, one of Southside landowners' greatest fears was the specter of population out-migration. A large agricultural population, declining soil fertility, the

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<sup>233</sup> Avery Craven, *Edmund Ruffin, Southerner: A Study in Secession*, reprint (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 61; and Edmund Ruffin, *An Essay on Calcareous Manures* (Petersburg, VA: J. W. Campbell, 1832).

<sup>234</sup> Ruffin, *Nature's Management*, 325; Joseph C. Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom: Plantation, Market, and Factory in Virginia and North Carolina, 1800-1860* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1938), 24-31; and John Hartwell Cocke, "Tobacco, the Bane of Virginia Husbandry," *Southern Planter* 18 (1858): 716-719.

<sup>235</sup> Address of James C. Bruce to the Mecklenberg and Granville Agricultural Clubs, July 14, 1847, 7-15, Bruce Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 14.

accretion of the best Piedmont lands in the hands of well-off planters, the enticement of a gold rush in Georgia, and the availability of new land in the Old Southwest combined to push or pull small farmers and the landless westward. White populations in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania actually declined between 1830 and 1840, and only increased marginally over the next two decades.<sup>236</sup> Departing planters put their lands for sale in the local papers and headed west, despite claiming that their abandoned grounds were “as fine TOBACCO LAND as any in the country.”<sup>237</sup> An 1841 article in the *Milton Chronicle*, entitled “Going to Texas,” encapsulated local unease over out-migration. The piece warned of the inherent hazards of moving to the Old Southwest, and displayed the Piedmont paranoia over population loss. The anonymous author cautioned would be emigrants that poverty, sickness, and even death awaited those bound for Texas, where a harsh climate and Indians challenged newcomers - according to the article, the logical decision was to remain in the Southside, where poverty at least came accompanied by a modicum of safety.<sup>238</sup>

The letters and private diaries of regional planters expressed similar concerns. In the mid-1840s, George Jeffreys of Caswell’s Hyco Creek district lamented that a neighbor, William Bethell, was planning to move, a decision made even more troubling because Bethell had recently married Jeffreys’s daughter. Jeffreys wrote in his diary that he had “had many painful & gloomy reflections about Mr. Bethells buying land in Louisiana - My Lord has it come to this .

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<sup>236</sup> Compiled from *Fifth Census; Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States - 1830* (Washington DC: Duff Green, 1832), 10-13, 84-85, 90-91; *Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States - Sixth Census* (Washington DC: Thomas Allen, 1841), 34-35, 42-43; *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850* (Washington DC: Robert Armstrong, 1853), 259-260, 307; and *Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1864), 358, 516-517. See table 1.1.

<sup>237</sup> Advertisement, *Milton Chronicle*, May 22, 1844, p. 4. For similar, see advertisements in *Richmond Enquirer*, November 11, 1832, p. 1; and ....

<sup>238</sup> “Going to Texas,” *Milton Chronicle*, August 3, 1842, p. 2.

.. [?]"<sup>239</sup> Likewise, George Clement's son Charles abandoned his Pittsylvania home for the gold fields of Sacramento in 1850, where he wrote home about the opportunities for young, single men on the West Coast.<sup>240</sup> And in 1859, Pittsylvania planter Peter Hairston wrote his brother George, who was thinking of relocating to the Texas cotton lands. Peter criticized George's plan, pointing out the advantages of his present location in a sarcastic counter-factual passage:

I think your desire to go to Texas perfectly natural and rational. Your large and expensive family and total want of means to provide for them under a new country desirable; where they can have plenty of elbow room - As to some 40 or \$50,000 worth of Bank Stock, one hundred negroes and several thousand acres of land - you know they are nothing - There in Texas every man you meet would be your friend doing every thing they could to promote your interest and you would have every comfort provided for you without any trouble on your part, in all of which respects you know how badly off you are where you now are. And then when people go to a new country, they are always so well satisfied and never cast any longing looks back to the country they left.<sup>241</sup>

Jeffreys's, Hairston's, and Clement's worries reflected broad concerns about the future of Southside economy and culture. These fears made the profitability and sustainability of regional agriculture a vital issue; planters hoped intensified agriculture would make Piedmont farms as appealing and valuable as fresh western lands, and keep Virginia's and North Carolina's sons and daughters at home.

The campaigns of Ruffin and like-minded reformers met with some success during the antebellum era, but, as the poverty and erosion of the postwar tenant South so vividly displayed, reformers' efforts ultimately failed. Even before the outbreak of the war, reform efforts were largely limited to particular southern districts, most of which were located in the upper South.<sup>242</sup> Historians of southern agriculture and the environment have bandied around a central question concerning this southern improvement movement and its demise for quite a few decades now.

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<sup>239</sup> Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, January 30 & February 17, 1845, William Bethell Williamson Papers, box 1, folder 7, SHC.

<sup>240</sup> Charles J. Clement to George Clement, April 24, 1850, Pocket Plantation Papers, RASP, series E, part 1, reel 15.

<sup>241</sup> Peter Hairston to George Hairston, March 22, 1859, Hairston Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>242</sup> Mathew, *Edmund Ruffin*, 196-197.

Why was the agricultural improvement movement, personified by John Taylor and later Edmund Ruffin, unable to rescue southern agriculture from its worst ills? Or, to phrase the question in a different manner, why were Depression-era government officials, such as the Soil Conservation Service's (SCS) Hugh Hammond Bennett, forced to ask similar questions and produce similar criticisms of southern agriculture during the 1930s as Edmund Ruffin had in the 1830s?<sup>243</sup>

There have been a number of postulations explaining the arc of southern agricultural reform, the first coming well before Bennett began his critical examination of southern fields and forests. Avery Craven, in *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland* (1926), posited that the agricultural reformers were relatively successful in Virginia and Maryland, and that the Civil War was the crisis that undermined their makeover of southern agriculture.<sup>244</sup> A decade later, Arthur Hall challenged Craven's claims that Virginia reform efforts were widespread, arguing that a general failure of agricultural organization prevented wholesale adoption of erosion control methods and crop rotation.<sup>245</sup> Long after Craven and Hall, Carville Earle definitively refuted Craven's notion that the advice of reformers was significantly more ecologically sound than the traditional long-fallow agriculture that characterized southern farming, but he avoided addressing Craven's assertion that agricultural reform was widely adopted by Upper South farmers.<sup>246</sup> The same year, William Mathew's *Edmund Ruffin and the Crisis of Slavery in the Old South* (1988) echoed Hall, claiming that most small and middling farmers, and probably the majority of large planters as well, never

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<sup>243</sup> For an eloquent phrasing of this question in extended form, see Lynn A. Nelson, *Pharsalia: An Environmental Biography of a Southern Plantation, 1780-1880* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 1-12.

<sup>244</sup> Avery Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1926).

<sup>245</sup> Arthur R. Hall, *Early Erosion-Control Practices in Virginia*, USDA Miscellaneous Publication no. 256 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1937).

<sup>246</sup> Earle, "The Myth of the Southern Soil Miner," 175-210.

encountered or put into practice the tenets of improved farming.<sup>247</sup> Mathew contended that very practical considerations, such as high costs, the limited availability of amendments, and shortages of labor, made Ruffin's plans mere pipe dreams. *Larding the Lean Earth* (2002), by Steven Stoll, also pointed out several of the inherent weaknesses in the programs of southern reformers. The very core crops of sustainable husbandry - leguminous crops and pasture grasses - grew poorly in the hot weather and acidic soils that prevailed throughout much of the South. Until the advent of new strains and varieties of these crops in the twentieth century, Ruffin's call (echoing Taylor) to cover the earth in clover could have had little impact on the southern Piedmont, much less the plains of south Georgia or the sand hills of eastern South Carolina.<sup>248</sup> In the most recent examination of this debate over agricultural reform, Lynn Nelson (*Pharsalia*, 2007) has argued that the programs of agricultural reformers could work in central Virginia. What these plans could not do, however, was maintain southern planters in the style to which they had grown accustomed (or the style of their neighbors, whom they envied).<sup>249</sup> To borrow from the agrarian Andrew Nelson Lytle, a farm geared around sustainable husbandry was "not a place to grow rich; it [was] a place to grow corn."<sup>250</sup> Yet most Southside farmers were not content to grow only corn . . .

### **Farming on Paper**

So what then was the fate of the agricultural reform effort in the Southside? Reform's message certainly circulated widely in the region. Southside planters and farmers who looked to print sources for advice were bombarded with the messages of agricultural reform. Agricultural journals were among the most popular sources of farm advice during the antebellum period.

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<sup>247</sup> Mathew, *Edmund Ruffin and the Crisis*.

<sup>248</sup> Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*.

<sup>249</sup> Nelson, *Pharsalia*.

<sup>250</sup> Andrew Nelson Lytle, "The Hind Tit," in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 205.

These journals combined editorials, how-to articles, and political guides, along with comments from subscribers, and local newspapers often reprinted journal articles alongside their own essays on modern farming. Among the journals to which the region's planters and farmers subscribed were the *Farmer's Register*, published in Prince George County, Virginia, by Edmund Ruffin; the *Southern Planter* out of Richmond; and Baltimore's *American Farmer*. Twenty-four agriculturalists from Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania were among the initial subscribers to the inaugural volume of the *Farmer's Register* in 1833; influential agriculturalists including Robert Wilson, William Hatchett, and Abisha Slade took the *Southern Planter*; and, in 1849, the editor of the *American Farmer* noted that a large number of Pittsylvania farmers were among the recent subscribers.<sup>251</sup> These agricultural journals not only counted Border residents among their subscribers; they regularly carried articles about the three counties and pieces written by Southside planters and farmers.<sup>252</sup> These articles touted the various reform campaigns, from the use of marl and manure to crop rotation and the need for a fence law to close the common range, and a high percentage offered either tips on tobacco cultivation or recommendations to avoid its culture altogether.

A number of local farmers, especially among the more prominent planters, also belonged to agricultural societies that emphasized modern farming methods. These societies subscribed to

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<sup>251</sup> "List of Subscribers," *Farmer's Register* 1, 12 (May 1834): 771, 773, 775; Account Book of Robert Wilson, June 30, 1854, Robert Wilson Account Books, oversize volume SV - 1896/75, SHC; Receipt of William R. Hatchett, January 1, 1855, Hatchett Family Papers, Duke; "Payments to the *Southern Planter*, from April 1st to May 1st, 1852," *Southern Planter* 12, 5 (May 1852): 154; and "The Cry is Still They Come!," *American Farmer* 5, 3 (September 1849): 83.

<sup>252</sup> For selected examples, see E., "Remarks on the Soil and Cultivation of a Part of the County of Halifax," *Farmer's Register* 5, 2 (June 1837): 117-120; R. N., "Which is the Best Route for a Railway to the South-West?," *Farmer's Register* 4, 6 (October 1836): 369-374; "Halifax, VA, August 12th, 1838," *Farmer's Register* 6, 7 (October 1, 1838): 442-443; Edmund Ruffin, "Extracts from Private Correspondence," *Farmer's Register* 1, 4 (September 1833): 216-218; George Read, "Agricultural Intelligence - Report of Seasons, Crops, &c.," *Farmer's Register* 1, 10 (March 1834): 636; A Young Planter, "To the Editors of the Southern Planter," *Southern Planter* 3, 5 (May 1843): 107; "The Coming Crop," *Southern Planter* 16, 1 (January 1856): 5; Thomas Walton, "Magnum Bonum Plums," *Southern Planter*, 17, 9 (September 1857): 548; G. T. N., "Great Yield of Wheat," *Southern Planter* 11, 11 (November 1851): 340-341; and "The Silk Culture," *American Farmer* 1, 4 (June 1839): 29.

agricultural journals for the benefit of their members, and met on a regular basis to discuss modern farming techniques, alternative crops, agricultural labor, and farm economics. County and local organizations that advocated modern farming methods included the Caswell Agricultural Society and the Clover Agricultural Association, and some prominent planters belonged to larger regional or state organizations, such as the Virginia State Agricultural Society (VSAS).<sup>253</sup> Regional reformers not only participated in these larger agricultural societies; in several cases they headed them. James Bruce became president of the Union Agricultural Society of Virginia and North Carolina in 1854, and John Edmunds of Halifax - along with Edmund Ruffin and future governor Henry Wise - was a founding member of the VSAS in 1851. In 1859 the VSAS elected Edmunds as its president.<sup>254</sup>

Edmunds's 1853 address to the VSAS, reprinted in the *Southern Planter*, provides an illuminating window into the intellectual origins of the Southside reform movement. His speech addressed the soil resources of the commonwealth, and argued that only a systematized approach to agricultural education would "let [southerners] develop those resources that the physical and material greatness of the Old Dominion shall be commensurate with her ancient renown and her historic glory."<sup>255</sup> Edmunds's speech drew on an astonishing body of contemporary American and European agronomic literature. He cited regional authorities such as Ruffin (*An Essay on Calcareous Manures*) and professors from the University of Virginia, but he also drew on a wide

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<sup>253</sup> William S. Powell, *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County North Carolina, 1777-1977* (Durham, NC: Moore Publishing Co., 1977), 477; Diary of Charles Coleman, Book 1, August 1, 1844; Receipt of James C. Bruce, October 1, 1853, Bruce Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 16; and Account Book of Robert Wilson, December 31, 1857, Robert Wilson Account Books, oversize volume SV-1896/75, SHC.

<sup>254</sup> *Address of James C. Bruce, Esq., President of the Union Agricultural Society of Virginia and North Carolina*, pamphlet, 1854, in Bruce Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 1; "Progress of Agriculture," *Southern Planter* 11, 2 (February 1851): 37; and "John R. Edmunds of Halifax," *The Virginia Echo*, October 21, 1859, p. 2. Three farmers from Halifax and Pittsylvania, including Bruce and Edmunds, served as judges at the 1853 VSAS annual farm exhibition in Richmond ["Virginia State Agricultural Society," *Southern Planter* 13, 8 (August 1853): 227-230.]

<sup>255</sup> John R. Edmunds, "Address of John R. Edmunds, Esq. before the Virginia State Agricultural Society, November 3, 1853," *Southern Planter* 13, 12 (December 1853): 11.

variety of texts from Scotland, Germany, France, England, and the American Northeast, including John Norton's *Elements of Scientific Agriculture*, Mary Somerville's *Physical Geography*, Justus von Liebig's *Organic Chemistry*, Cuthbert Johnson's *Farmer's and Planter's Encyclopaedia*, J. B. Boussingault's *Rural Economy*, Henry Coleman's *European Agriculture*, David Low's *Elements of Practical Agriculture*, and various articles from the *Transactions of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland* and the *Edinburgh Quarterly Journal of Agriculture*.<sup>256</sup> Although Edmunds's erudition was no doubt exceptional, his access to and use of such wide-ranging sources illustrates the connections of agricultural reform in the Southside to the broader movement in the South and beyond the region. Edmunds and his fellow reformers were no simple parochial squires; they were concerned with conditions in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania, but they connected those worries to agricultural literature and movements across the state and the globe.

Regional modernizers such as Bruce and Edmunds advocated agricultural reform along the Border and also traveled to adjoining counties to address reform issues. In 1847, James Bruce gave a keynote speech to a gathering of the Mecklenberg (VA) and Granville (NC) agricultural clubs, in which he advocated intensive farming and industrial development. Bruce pointed to slavery as an institution that weakened modern farming efforts, though he placed the blame on slaves themselves rather than the economic calculations of masters. Bruce declared

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid, 1-10. See John P. Norton, *Elements of Scientific Agriculture: Or the Connection between Science and Art of Practical Farming* (New York: C. M. Saxton, Barker, & Co., 1850); Mary Somerville, *Physical Geography* (Philadelphia, PA: Blanchard and Lea, 1853); Justus von Liebig, *Organic Chemistry in Its Applications to Agriculture and Physiology*, Lyon Playfair, ed. (London: Taylor and Walton, 1840); Cuthbert W. Johnson, *The Farmer's and Planter's Encyclopaedia of Rural Affairs: Embracing All the Most Recent Discoveries in Agricultural Chemistry* (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co., 1851); J. B. Boussingault, *Rural Economy, in Its Relations with Chemistry and Physiology to the Details of Practical Farming* (London: H. Bailliere, 1845); Henry Coleman, *European Agriculture and Rural Economy: From Personal Observation*, 2 vol. (Boston, MA: Phillips, Sampson, & Co., 1850); and David Low, *Elements of Practical Agriculture: Comprehending the Cultivation of Plants, the Husbandry of the Domestic Animals, and the Economy of the Farm* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1847).

that “The truth is, so far, no moral incentive has yet been found strong enough to stimulate the negro to energy or industry, and we are almost persuaded to believe that he is the genuine son of Canaan . . .” Bruce concluded his address with a call for club members to heed the message of agricultural reformers as an avenue to escape the evils of slavery.<sup>257</sup> These concerns over the place of slavery would continue to plague the reform movement over the course of the antebellum period, and contributed to the popularity of bright tobacco, which did not challenge the institution in the same way that other agricultural alternatives did. By 1854, Bruce had risen to the office of president of the Union Agricultural Society, a club composed of prominent Virginia and North Carolina planters. In an 1854 address, he reiterated his belief in the importance of agriculture that drew on scientific studies of soils, weather, and amendments, and particularly praised the growing use of guano to rehabilitate old fields. Bruce warned his audience that the particularities of the southern environment, from hot summers to high soil erosivity, would make northeastern versions of sustainable husbandry difficult, but he admonished listeners to do their best to bring diversified farming to the southern Piedmont.<sup>258</sup>

### **Reform on the Ground**

An essential question remains. To what extent did regional planters and farmers implement these calls for modern, intensive farming? Hard figures in answer to this question are difficult if not impossible to obtain, but there is a good deal of circumstantial evidence that landowners across Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania put agricultural reform ideas into widespread practice during the antebellum period. Although most reform-minded landowners seem to have been wealthy planters, a few were small farmers. These agriculturalists

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<sup>257</sup> Address of James C. Bruce to the Mecklenberg and Granville Agricultural Clubs, July 14, 1847, 7-15, quote on 8, Bruce Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 14.

<sup>258</sup> *Address of James C. Bruce, Esq., President of the Union Agricultural Society of Virginia and North Carolina*, pamphlet, 1854, in Bruce Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 16.

implemented contour and deep plowing, ditched and terraced hillsides to slow erosion, rotated crops, worked soil amendments into their fields, experimented with new and improved breeds of animals and plants and new types of agricultural machinery, and worried over the best form of labor on a modern farm. All told, the agricultural reform impulse in the antebellum Southside seems stronger and more widespread than historians have argued was the case in the South in general. Many reform practices were expensive, and thus wealthier planters probably practiced improved agriculture to a greater degree than their poorer neighbors, but reform advice and practice saturated the region to varying degrees. The Southside farmer who had not heard reform advice and contemplated at least some of it must have been isolated indeed. That these efforts came to little over the long term was due more to the persuasive lure of bright tobacco, and its particular demands on soil and people, than to a more general failure to attempt a reform of Southside agriculture.

Some evidence for the implementation of agricultural reformers' advice can be found in regional plantation records and recorded cultivation practices. One of the classic stereotypes of prewar southern agriculture is its reliance on shovel plows for soil preparation and cultivation.<sup>259</sup> If the Southside is typical, historians may want to rethink this characterization. For at least a few decades prior to the Civil War, shovel plows were only one of many ground-breaking tools

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<sup>259</sup> Leo Rogin, *The Introduction of Farm Machinery in Its Relation to the Productivity of Labor in the Agriculture of the United States during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1931), 52-57; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, 795; Avery O. Craven, *The Growth of Southern Nationalism, 1848-1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1953), pp; Earl W. Hayter, *The Troubled Farmer, 1850-1900: Rural Adjustment to Industrialism* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1968), 4-5; Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South*, 2nd ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 56-57; and Earle, "Myth of the Southern Soil Miner," 199. Avery Craven pointed to the diversification of plows in the Chesapeake in 1926, in *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland*, 91.

employed on regional farms.<sup>260</sup> Shovel plows were shallow, light instruments that skimmed the surface of the ground, turning over only a few inches of topsoil. Frequent shovel-plowing pulverized topsoil and created a hardpan several inches below the surface, both conditions which promoted soil erosion during hard rains, as the loose topsoil liquefied and sloughed off the hard clay below. Despite this characterization of southern tillage practices, evidence from the Southside - ranging from farm equipment inventories to blacksmith records - suggests that most antebellum dark tobacco growers used a wide variety of plows. Although these records are biased toward large plantation where the records survived, they are supported by scattered sources from smaller farms. After the early 1800s, almost every farm with surviving records contained medium-depth dagon (or Cary) plows, coulter plows designed to cut through roots and move soil to the base of established crops, and subsoil plows forged to break up lower soil horizons without turning over topsoil, in addition to the classic shovel plows.<sup>261</sup> The large subsoil (or “iron beam”) plows in particular were heavy and expensive pieces of machinery designed to minimize soil erosion. Their narrow shank cut through hard packed ground to loosen the soil up to two feet in depth, an aerating action that promoted deep drainage and good tilth.<sup>262</sup> A comprehensive 1852 inventory of Ruth Hairston’s numerous plantations in the Piedmont of Virginia and North Carolina reveal the abundance and diversity of plows on some farmsteads. Between her twelve tobacco plantations, Hairston owned an astonishing 282 plows of all shapes

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<sup>260</sup> At least one historian has argued that antebellum Virginia farms exhibited a greater diversification of plows than the South in general, though this statement was made in regard to the Tidewater only. See Rogin, *Introduction of Farm Machinery*, 54-55.

<sup>261</sup> For selected examples, see Hall, *Early Erosion-Control*, 13-15; Accounts of George Clements with Joab Oaks, 1836-1850, in Pocket Plantation Records, RASP, series E, part 1, reel 11; Account of Melchesidick Spraggins with B. Blankenship, 1823, and Account of Melchesidick Spraggins with Joseph Crews, 1830, both in Southside Virginia Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 1; Account Book of William Grasty, 1836-1846, William Clark Grasty Papers, Duke; Account of Elisha Barksdale with Isaac Kirk, July 2, 1841, Southside Virginia Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 2; E., “Remarks on the Soil,” 119; Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, January 9, 1845, William Bethell Williamson Papers, box 1, folder 7, SHC; and Hairston Family Plantation Record Books 1 & 3, 1852, Peter Wilson Hairston Papers, Box 8, folders 104 & 106, SHC.

<sup>262</sup> Hall, *Early Erosion-Control*, 13-15; “Deep Land Culture,” *Arator* 1, 11 (February 1856): 336; and “Agricultural Warehouse,” *The People’s Advocate*, June 27, 1856, p. 1.

and sizes.<sup>263</sup> Whether forged on the plantation by slave blacksmiths or purchased from regional manufacturers, these plows (along with the ubiquitous hoes, shovels, and mattocks) served as the primary tools of interaction between the Piedmont soil and those who worked the land. Shovel plows were cheap and common, but a substantial portion of landowners felt the more expensive, deeper plows were a necessary expenditure.

Area planters put these plows to a number of uses advocated by agricultural reformers. Such planters as William Sims, William Grasty, and Charles Coleman cut ditches across the slopes of their fields to slow erosion and promote even drainage and placed brush and stumps in burgeoning gullies, and other planters used their coulter plows to cut contour furrows around hillsides rather than plowing straight up and down slopes.<sup>264</sup> Beginning in the 1840s, landowners also built terraces and dug deep contour ditches to control erosion, though historian E. M. Rowalt has argued that these earthworks were often too shallow or too narrow to function effectively.<sup>265</sup> Planter James Bruce's terracing system was perhaps the best example of these early efforts. Bruce had his slaves dig substantial ditches throughout his fields along the Dan River in southern Halifax. These ditches had wide embankments along their downhill side to direct runoff around the slope and into natural ravines or depressions, and Bruce left the earthworks uncultivated so that grass and shrub growth could stabilize the soil. Although his terracing and ditching measures were extreme in their expense and labor demands, Bruce's

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<sup>263</sup> Hairston Family Plantation Records, Books 1 & 3, 1852.

<sup>264</sup> Charles Coleman's Diary, Book 1, October 10, 1842, December 15, 1842, & April 16, 1843, Charles Coleman Diaries, RASP, series D, reel 12; Farm Journal of William Sims, January 6 & February 19, 1855, William Bailey Papers, RASP, series E, part 1, reel 2; Account Book of E. A. Coleman, 1840s, entries throughout, Papers of Ethelbert Algernon Coleman, UVA; Journal of William Clark Grasty, 1849-1851, 1, 248, William Clark Grasty Papers, Duke; and G. Melvin Herndon, "The Significance of the Forest to the Tobacco Plantation Economy in Antebellum Virginia," *Plantation Society in the Americas* 1, 3 (October 1981): 430-431.

<sup>265</sup> E. M. Rowalt, *Soil Defense in the Piedmont*, USDA Farmer's Bulletin 1767 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1937), 17-18.

efforts reflected a widespread ideology of soil conservation through drainage construction.<sup>266</sup>

These efforts were all too necessary in the southern Piedmont, where Stanley Trimble has calculated that rainfall rates, slope, and soil types combined to make regularly cultivated fields five hundred times more erosive than land covered by original forest.<sup>267</sup>

This emphasis on soil conservation and erosion control was also present in period rental agreements and labor contracts. Landowners sometimes stipulated that farm renters pay close attention to their cultivation to ensure that precious topsoil remained in tobacco and corn fields rather than washing into streams and gullies. When Wyatt Wallace agreed to rent a Pittsylvania farm from George Clement in 1845, he promised to keep up the property's buildings and fences, cut only the timber necessary for farm upkeep, and "to cultivate the land well and in the best possible manner so as to keep it from washing."<sup>268</sup> William Terry's 1841 contract to serve as overseer on Elizabeth Spraggins's Halifax plantation contained similar language. Terry swore to supervise Spraggins's three slaves and "to Cultivate the Land to the best advantage to prevent washing it."<sup>269</sup> William Armistead of Caswell imposed exceptionally detailed restrictions on H. C. and Parham Moon in an 1846 rental agreement. Armistead required that the Moons keep the plantation's fields in a three year rotation (tobacco, wheat, wheat); he forbid the sale of hay, wood cutting, and free-ranging stock; and he demanded that the crops "be well cultivated, the

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<sup>266</sup> Hall, *Early Erosion-Control*, 21; and E., "Remarks in the Soil," 118. For similar efforts in the South Carolina Piedmont during the antebellum period, see Arthur R. Hall, *The Story of Soil Conservation in the South Carolina Piedmont 1800-1860*, USDA Miscellaneous Publication No. 407 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), esp. 23-27.

<sup>267</sup> Stanley W. Trimble, *Man-Induced Soil Erosion on the Southern Piedmont, 1700-1970* (Ankeny, IA: Soil Conservation Society of America, 1974), 26.

<sup>268</sup> Rental Agreement between George Clement and Wyatt Wallace, November 20, 1845, Pocket Plantation Papers, RASP, series E, part 1, reel 14.

<sup>269</sup> Contract between Elizabeth Spraggins and William Terry, October 12, 1841, Southside Virginia Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 1.

hill sides well trenched, the low grounds . . . be well drained.”<sup>270</sup> Although we cannot be certain that these strictures were always observed by tenants, these contracts indicate that concern for soil conservation was more than a passing preoccupation for the Border’s planters and farmers; at least in a few instances these issues were matters of such importance that landowners insisted on their codification through legal agreements.

A number of farmers also employed regular crop rotations to prolong soil fertility and reduce the soil pathogen load. Tobacco historian Joseph Robert has written that the typical dark tobacco farmer during the first half of the nineteenth century planted tobacco in a wheat, clover, corn, wheat, clover, tobacco rotation, thus raising leaf only one out of every six years on a particular piece of ground.<sup>271</sup> There is little indication that Border farmers followed such an elaborate rotation schedule, but most dark tobacco farmers did employ some sort of regular field rotation, rarely keeping tobacco on the same field more than two years in a row, except on the best bottomland. Corn and wheat were the most common crops rotated with tobacco, but Southside fields also grew oats, rye, flax, cotton, sorghum, grass hay, sweet potatoes, and cowpeas. John Edmunds’ crop rotation provides an example from Halifax. In the late 1830s, Edmunds followed a four-year cycle on his tobacco land, planting tobacco, followed by wheat, and then two years in clover.<sup>272</sup> Although he did not follow all of John Taylor’s advice, Caswell’s George Jeffreys derived his rotation of oats and tobacco from the *Arator*.<sup>273</sup> The region’s reform-minded farmers were particularly enthusiastic about the inclusion of clover and

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<sup>270</sup> Contract between William H. Armistead and H. C. Moon and Parham Moon, January 1, 1846, Philip H. Howerton Papers, Duke. Armistead traveled extensively out-of-state, but he made arrangements with a relative to ensure that the Moons followed the conservation terms of the contract. See William H. Armistead to Philip Howerton, May 12, 1848, Philip H. Howerton Papers, Duke. For a similar agreement from the same Caswell community, see Contract between Thomas Bruce and A. B. Spooner, July 25, 1853, Philip H. Howerton Papers, Duke.

<sup>271</sup> Joseph Clarke Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom: Plantation, Market, and Factory in Virginia and North Carolina, 1900-1860* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1938), 30.

<sup>272</sup> E., “Remarks on the Soil,” 119.

<sup>273</sup> Dairy of George Washington Jeffreys, February 21, 1845.

redtop in their rotations. These cover crops provided high quality hay for horses, cattle, and sheep, and their nitrogen-fixing ability increased a field's fertility. Clover in particular was quite an investment for all but the largest planters, as a bushel of seed could run as high as nine dollars during the 1850s. But, despite the high cost, area landowners such as Bruce, Sims, Coleman, Nathaniel Ragsdale, and Rufus Owen all regularly planted clover on their tobacco plantations.<sup>274</sup> Southside farmers' enthusiasm for clover - which proved difficult to grow on the region's acidic soils without the addition of expensive lime - illustrated the lengths they would go to for agricultural improvement.

Some planters looked beyond the boundaries of their property to maintain soil fertility. One of the most popular purchased amendments was guano, or the dried droppings of seabirds from the arid archipelagoes of the Pacific Ocean, where the extremely dry climate preserved the waste almost indefinitely. The Chincha Islands off the Peruvian coast had guano deposits 200 feet deep, veritable mountains of the phosphorus and nitrogen-rich droppings, dried to the consistency of chalk. American farmers experimented with using guano on their gardens and fields as early as 1824, but it was not until the 1840s that the amendment gained widespread popularity. Among the first regions to adopt guano was the old tobacco belt of the Virginia and Maryland Chesapeake, where farmers used it to restore nitrogen to their abandoned tobacco fields, and the fertilizer quickly spread west into the Piedmont. Guano was expensive, but it was also extremely high in nitrogen and phosphorus and gave worn out croplands an immediate boost

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<sup>274</sup> James C. Bruce to Josiah Wills, November 25, 1842, Bruce Family Papers, VHS; Daily Journal of James Bruce, entries for 1840, Bruce Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 22; Farm Journal of William Sims, March 3, 1855; Diary of Charles Coleman, Book 1, February 17, 1843; Smith & Maddux to Nathaniel Ragsdale, March 24, 1855, Ragsdale Family Papers, VHS; E., "Remarks on the Soil," 118; and Receipt of Rufus H. Owen, September 14, 1861, Owen Family Papers, VHS. See also, Hall, *Early Erosion-Control*, 10-11. Bruce ordered clover seed in lots as large as eighty bushels, indicating that he was reselling the seed to neighboring landowners. For regular purchases of small amounts of clover, timothy, and orchard grass seed by area farmers, see Journal (Account Book) of William Clark Grasty, 1859-1860, 15, 49, 51, 64, 312, 389, and throughout, William Clark Grasty Papers, Duke.

of fertility, a benefit for which some wealthier planter were willing to pay.<sup>275</sup> By the 1850s the Richmond and Danville Railroad had standardized shipping rates for “artificial manure” among its list of twenty-six fixed rate goods, and regional newspapers ran regular guano advertisements from local merchants.<sup>276</sup> Sales receipts indicate that planters only applied guano to limited portions of their land, as purchases were usually modest; regional planters and farmers usually bought a ton or less of the amendment at a time.<sup>277</sup> These small quantities indicate that planters either applied guano to a single field or portion of a field, or that they combined the purchased amendment with other forms of soil improvement.

A more common manufactured soil amendment along the Border was calcium carbonate in one of two forms: lime (calcium oxide) or plaster (calcium hydroxide). Whether derived from pulverized limestone or from the plentiful shell resources of the Chesapeake Bay, lime and plaster lowered soil acidity, and permitted farmers to plant crops such as clover, which demanded relatively neutral ground. Plaster and lime were cheaper than guano, but on highly acidic lands farmers had to apply heavy doses to achieve satisfactory results. Mathew claims that there was very little use of lime, marl, or plaster in the antebellum southern Piedmont, and points to a supposed lack of these substances as evidence that agricultural reform was not practiced to any significant extent in the region. At least in the Southside, Mathew’s claims

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<sup>275</sup> Shawn William Miller, *An Environmental History of Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 147-154; Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*, 188-190; Jack Temple Kirby, *Mockingbird Song: Ecological Landscapes of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 89; Montgomery, *Dirt*, 185-187; and Richard A. Wines, *Fertilizer in America: From Waste Recycling to Resource Exploitation* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1985), 33-53.

<sup>276</sup> Aaron W. Marrs, *Railroads in the Old South: Pursuing Progress in a Slave Society* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 114, table 3; Jim Ronlett to Philip Howerton, June 1, 1851, Philip H. Howerton Papers, Duke; “Advertisement,” *Milton Chronicle*, July 7, 1853, p. 4; “Advertisement,” *Milton Chronicle*, April 12, 1861, p. 3; and “Agricultural Warehouse,” *The People’s Advocate*, June 27, 1856, p. 1.

<sup>277</sup> W. H. Wesson to William Bailey, March 19, 1857, William Bailey Papers, RASP, series E, part 1, reel 1; Receipt of F. R. Cousins, October 14, 1859, F. R. Cousins Papers, Duke; Ledger, 1858-1860, 478, Account Books of J. H. Hargrave, Duke; Receipts of Philip H. Howerton, April 28, 1855, September 29, 1855, & May 1, 1857, Philip H. Howerton Papers, Duke; Account Book of William Grasty, 1858, entries throughout, William Clark Grasty Papers, Duke; Journal (Account Book) of William Grasty, 1859-1860, entries throughout, William Clark Grasty Papers, Duke; and Maddux & Co. to Nathaniel Ragsdale, March 24, 1859, Ragsdale Family Papers, VHS.

appear incorrect; the amendments seem to have been fairly common in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania in the decades leading up to the Civil War.<sup>278</sup> James Bruce operated a plaster manufactory in Halifax, and also imported plaster from the east for resale. In a two-month stretch of 1840 alone, Bruce purchased twenty-six tons of plaster from eastern Virginia.<sup>279</sup> Agriculturalists considered plaster, along with guano and clover seed, so essential to the success of Southside agriculture that it passed duty-free through the toll sluices and canals of the Staunton and Dan rivers during the 1850s.<sup>280</sup> Farmers intent on implementing agricultural reform needed these amendments to combat their acidic soils, and they were willing to pay for them.

Farmers without the funds to purchase outside amendments, or those who wanted to supplement their applications of guano and plaster, turned to materials present on their farms and in the surrounding forests to enrich their tobacco and grain fields. Most prominent among these fertilizers was barnyard manure. Livestock waste from winter pens, barnyards, and stalls had long been the lifeblood of English agriculture and the convertible husbandry of small northeastern farms, in which farmers penned and fed their stock throughout the winter to hoard waste, supervised their animals in the grazing of fallow ground following harvest, and kept

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<sup>278</sup> Mathew, *Edmund Ruffin*, 120-121. Lime and plaster seem to have been common stock in regional country stores, especially during the 1850s. For the purchase and use of lime and plaster by farmers and planters in the three counties, see Powell, *When the Past*, 476-477; "Advertisement," *Milton Chronicle*, April 4, 1850, p. 3; "Advertisement," *Milton Chronicle*, July 7, 1853, p. 4; Diary of Charles Coleman, Book #1, April 2, 1844; Johnson, Clark & Co. to Samuel P. Wilson, July 6, 1860, Samuel Pannill Wilson Papers, UVA; Samuel Carter to Philip Howerton, November 19, 1841, Philip H. Howerton Papers, Duke; Receipts of Philip Howerton, April 28, 1855, May 17, 1855, May 22, 1855, & May 1, 1857, in Philip H. Howerton Papers, Duke; and Journal of William Grasty, 1849-1851, 58, Account Book of William Grasty, 1858, 133, 179, 186, and Journal (Account Book) of William Grasty, 1859-1860, entries throughout, all in William Clark Grasty Papers, Duke.

<sup>279</sup> Kathleen Bruce, "Materials for Southern Virginia Agricultural History," *Agricultural History* 4, 1 (January 1930): 12; E., "Remarks on the Soil," 118; Pocahontas Wight Edmunds, *History of Halifax: Volume I, Narration* (n.p., n.d.), 247-248; and N. J. Whitfield to James C. Bruce, February 21, 1840, M. V. Campbell to James C. Bruce, March 12, 1840, and N. J. Whitfield to James C. Bruce, March 30, 1840, all in Bruce Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 11.

<sup>280</sup> Toll List of the Roanoke Navigation Company, October 19, 1853, Bruce Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 16. These three were the only items exempt from a toll. The fees on other goods ranged from five cents for a barrel of flour or pork to thirty cents per hogshead of tobacco.

livestock in confined “folds” overnight, which concentrated manure on specific portions of the landscape. But, as Steven Stoll has pointed out, this intensive recycling of manure was largely absent on southern farms large and small. In the South the practice of free-ranging stock, the poor performance due to climactic conditions of the high quality forage grasses needed to sustain penned stock, a general reluctance among southern planters to invest in convertible husbandry, and the relatively low cost of land and high cost of labor all served to hamper the accumulation and systematic application of manure.<sup>281</sup> In addition, heavy doses of barnyard manure produced poor quality tobacco - the leaves grew dark and heavy, were slow to ripen, and tasted harsh.<sup>282</sup> Despite these limitations, Southside farmers regularly used manure in some form or fashion, spreading it in spot applications if not across their entire arable ground. In a few examples, William Sims ordered his slaves to haul wagonloads of manure from his stables to his fields during the late winter, George Jeffreys placed his new plant beds on sheep pens rich with waste, and the small farmer Daniel Merritt, who owned no slaves, spread manure composted with leaves on his cornfields.<sup>283</sup> Stoll is likely correct in his assertion that the South in general lacked systematic, intensive manuring, but the practice probably existed throughout the broader region as it did in the Southside, as a supplement to other fertilizing and amending measures. Although these farmers failed to record their thoughts concerning the application of manure, it is likely that they viewed manuring as an activity that both facilitated soil conservation and made economic sense, but not as an activity central to raising tobacco.

Manure was not the only source of amendment found within the boundaries of the farm. Almost any organic matter worked into the soil improved its texture, moisture-holding ability,

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<sup>281</sup> Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*, 123-134.

<sup>282</sup> Garner, *The Production of Tobacco*, 331-332; and Killebrew and Myrick, *Tobacco Leaf*, 80-84.

<sup>283</sup> Minor, *The Cultivation and Management*, 4; Farm Journal of William Sims, March 3, 1855; Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, January 18, 1845; and Diary of Daniel Tatum Merritt, March 15, 1842 & March 25, 1842.

and fertility. Some farmers practiced green manuring: the plowing under of tobacco stalks, cover crops such as grass, or weeds to slowly rot in the topsoil.<sup>284</sup> Most tobacco producers also relied on the fertilizing power of wood byproducts. They used the calcium carbonate, phosphorus, and potassium released by burning wood to give new ground a boost of fertility, plowed ashes into acidic portions of cropland, scattered sawdust and wood chips on their fields after cutting firewood and fence posts in the winter, and coated their plant beds and even their tobacco seeds in ashes.<sup>285</sup> Other materials served as impromptu amendments as well. Landowners hauled straw from their grain crops back to their fields after threshing out the grain, or mixed the refuse with manure to create a rich compost. Other planters supervised their slaves in the labor-intensive task of transporting wagonloads of leaf mulch and pine needle from the woods to cleared land where they could be worked into the soil.<sup>286</sup> Although taken alone these spotty applications could not maintain soil fertility indefinitely, they did work with other amending practices to improve poor ground and increase or sustain crop yield.

Planters intent on boosting the productivity of their lands also kept a diversity of animals, sought out new breeds of livestock and strains of crops, and experimented with alternative cash crops and animals. Following a northern craze for Merino Sheep in the 1840s and early 1850s, the *Milton Chronicle* touted the breed as a potential alternative to hogs, cattle, and tobacco. The article declared that Merinos were growing in popularity in the Southside, and as an example of the breed's profit potential, cited a regional farmer who made between \$750 and \$1,350 each

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<sup>284</sup> Peter Minor, *The Cultivation and Management of Tobacco, From the Plant Bed to the Prize* (Baltimore, MD: J. Robinson, 1822), 4-5.

<sup>285</sup> Herndon, "The Significance of the Forest," 430-431; "Value of Ashes," *Milton Chronicle*, August 18, 1841, p. 4; and Diary of Charles Coleman, Book #2, January 10, 1848.

<sup>286</sup> Daniel Tatum Merritt Diary, March 15, 1842, and March 25, 1842, VHS; Farm Journal of William Sims, January 10, 1855; Diary of Charles Coleman, Book #1, January 10, 1845; and Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, February 20, 1845, William Bethell Williamson Papers, box 1, folder 7, SHC. According to Arthur Hall, these practices were relatively widespread across the antebellum plantation South: Hall, *The Story of Soil Conservation*, 14-15.

year from the sale of wool and lambs from his flock of 170 sheep.<sup>287</sup> In fact, in 1850 more than half of regional land owners raised some sheep, from small flocks of ten or fewer animals to John Sims's 300 head.<sup>288</sup> Area farmers also experimented with Oregon peas, goats, flax, and turkeys, and Pittsylvania and Caswell farmers experimented with that old southern agricultural alternative, silk, during the antebellum period, though their sericultural efforts came to little.<sup>289</sup> Farm families raised a wide variety of fowl as well; the Clarks of Halifax kept chickens, geese, turkeys, and ducks, and farm-raised birds of some sort graced their table more than once a week.<sup>290</sup> The most common avenue to stock improvement was through on-farm selective breeding and the introduction of a few "improved" breeds of traditional livestock. George Jeffreys's efforts were typical: in 1845 he made notes on the importance of carefully selecting sheep for fleece and meat traits, and he ordered several varieties of roosters to introduce new bloodlines into his plantation flock.<sup>291</sup>

James Bruce extended his livestock improvement efforts to the most ubiquitous and least managed southern domestic animal: the hog. Southern farmers and planters had long allowed their swine to roam the communal woods and roads of their neighborhoods. The animals provided for themselves throughout the year, rooting and rummaging for mast, roots, and garbage, and breaking through the occasional crop fence to pillage corn and wheat fields. Stockowners rounded up their animals in the late fall or early winter, selected a few hogs to slaughter for the year's pork supply, and cropped the ears of the remaining animals in proprietary

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<sup>287</sup> "Wool Growing in Virginia," *Milton Chronicle*, July 7, 1853, p. 1.

<sup>288</sup> Virginia Agricultural Census, Halifax and Pittsylvania Counties, 1850, NARA, T1132, rolls 2 & 3.

<sup>289</sup> Powell, *When the Past*, 111-112; "Oregon Pea," *Milton Chronicle*, May 16, 1854, p. 4; William A. Gilliam to William Bailey, March 13, 1860, William Bailey Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 1, roll 1; "The Silk Culture," 29; and "To Land Owners," *Southern Planter* 14, 10 (October 1854): 312.

<sup>290</sup> Cookbooks of Eliza Ann Clark, ca. 1840, and ca. 1852-1862, in Spragins Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>291</sup> Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, February 1 & April 19, 1845, SHC.

patterns before turning them back on the commons.<sup>292</sup> Bruce implemented a hog-raising system that combined these traditional uses of the common range with feeding and penning. He turned his hogs into the woods in the fall when white oak mast was heaviest, but penned his animals in the evenings and continued to give them “as much corn as they will eat.”<sup>293</sup> His efforts paid off in heavier hogs at killing time. Bruce’s surviving records from the antebellum period document the slaughter weights of eighty-two hogs; the animals averaged 161 pounds each.<sup>294</sup> Although far lighter than modern market hogs - which are raised in confinement, administered growth hormones and antibiotics, and have undergone decades of selective breeding - these weights compared favorably to those of other Border hog producers. A sample of 399 hogs killed by farmers in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania revealed an average weight of only 139 pounds each, making Bruce’s hogs almost 16 percent heavier than average.<sup>295</sup> His hog weights also bettered concurrent averages across the South. Historian Sam Hilliard’s examination of antebellum slaughter weights throughout the region found an average of 146 pounds for 11,212 animals.<sup>296</sup> Bruce’s system demonstrated the value of more intensive stock management, but the low carcass weights evident in the records of other regional landowners suggest that his efforts were atypical, and probably not worth the effort.

Enterprising planters and farmers also turned to machinery to aid in their agricultural labors. Tobacco remained a crop reliant on hand labor and draft animal work, but farmers built

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<sup>292</sup> Sam Bowers Hilliard, *Hog Meat and Hoecake: Food Supply in the Old South, 1840-1860* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 92-102; Kirby, *Poquosin*, 98-103; and Kirby, *Mockingbird Song*, 113-124. For a local reference to these practices, see Diary of Daniel Tatum Merritt, December 5-7, 1842, March 8, 1858, VHS.

<sup>293</sup> Daily Journal of James Bruce, October 29, 1838, Bruce Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 22.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid, December 20, 1838 & December 21, 1840; and Weather Notebook of James Bruce, December 16, 1858 & February 1, 1859, Bruce Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 24.

<sup>295</sup> Account Book of William Mitchell, 1859-1862, entries throughout, Southside family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 3; Diary of Charles Coleman, December 13, 1843, December 14, 1844, January 10, 1845, January 11, 1845, December 18, 1846, December 20, 1847, and January 1, 1849; R. D. Ricketts, ed., *A Diary Kept by William C. Shelton for the Year 1850: The Daily Journal of a School Master and Farmer of Pittsylvania County, Virginia* (Danville, VA: Virginia-North Carolina Piedmont Genealogical Society, 1995), 92; and Maria B. Owens, Pork Memo, 1840, Owen Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>296</sup> Hilliard, *Hog Meat and Hoecake*, 102.

or purchased wood and iron presses to pack their hogsheads as tight as possible, and sought improved plows to prepare their fields. The region's grain culture proved slightly more amenable to mechanization. Local merchants offered guano and lime spreaders for amending fields, mechanical reapers for harvesting ripe wheat and oats, and threshing machines for separating the seed from the chaff.<sup>297</sup> Three Halifax planters, Charles Cabaniss and neighbors Philip Howerton and Thomas Easley, built their own horse operated mechanical threshing machines. Cabaniss and Howerton and Easley marketed their inventions throughout the region, but seem to have been largely unsuccessful because their machines were both expensive and unreliable.<sup>298</sup> These pieces of equipment were costly and rare enough that even wealthy planters shared their use, as when Charles Coleman's neighbor, a Mr. Harris, loaned him the use of his threshing machine to process Coleman's wheat crop in 1843.<sup>299</sup> These mechanical farming aids remained uncommon in the Southside during the antebellum era, but their limited uses fit into the broader methods of agricultural intensification advocated by reformers.

Nowhere was the impulse to experiment and improve more evident than in the orchards and vineyards of planters and farmers across the region. Landowners large and small planted multitudinous varieties of apples, peaches, grapes, pears, cherries, apricots, and plums in stands that at once filled farm larders and served as displays of horticultural knowledge and husbandry.<sup>300</sup> Almost every plantation and farm house had its orchard located behind the farmyard, along the drive, or tucked into an oddly-shaped field corner, and landowners used the

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<sup>297</sup> "Agricultural Warehouse," 1.

<sup>298</sup> William Daniel to Charles H. Cabaniss, August 16, 1833, Charles H. Cabaniss Papers, Duke; and Advertisement Draft of Philip Howerton and Thomas Easley, November 12, 1851, Diagram of Threshing Machine, n.d., and List of Timber for "Thrashing" Machine, n.d., all in Philip H. Howerton Papers, Duke.

<sup>299</sup> Diary of Charles Coleman, Book 1, July 25, 1843.

<sup>300</sup> For examples of Southside orchard and vineyard culture, see Rebecca F. Barksdale to ?, June 1, 1855, Peter Barksdale Papers, RASP, series F, part 3, reel 33; Charles Coleman's Diary, Book 1, January 20, 1843, February 20, 1843, April 11, 1843, & April 14, 1843; Farm Journal of William Sims, 1855 entries throughout; and James Bruce's Daily Journal, 1838 entries throughout.

fruit fresh, made large quantities of cider, and fed the surplus produce to livestock. Farmers grafted these trees and vines themselves, selected likely-looking volunteers from a neighbor's stock, or, if as wealthy as William Sutherlin, they ordered saplings and cuttings from commercial nurseries. In 1856 Sutherlin ordered four varieties of apples, four of peaches, one nectarine, two plums, and one apricot to supplement his plantation orchard.<sup>301</sup> The substantial planter Elijah Hundley had a similar interest in apple varieties; in one lot he bought fifty grafted trees of sixteen varieties, including "English pippin," "Pryons red," and "green cheese."<sup>302</sup> Smaller farmers also planted as extensive orchards as possible. Daniel Merritt, a tanner and small farmer, owned no slaves during the 1840s and 1850s, but he planted a number of apples, peaches, pears, plums, and cherries on his small Halifax farm, and repeated his horticultural efforts after he moved to a farm on the outskirts of Milton in 1845.<sup>303</sup> Whether a large planter such as Sutherlin or a small farmer such as Merritt, landowners who invested their energy and money in fruit trees and vines made long-term commitments to improving the land that they tended.

Prominent agricultural reformers made demanding calls for diversified farming, but surviving records suggest that they attempted to implement their advice on their own farms. Both James Bruce and John Edmunds raised a number of cash and subsistence crops on their home plantations. In 1850 the two planters owned horses, dozens of milk cows, oxen, beeves, swine, large flocks of sheep, and they both grew wheat, corn, oats, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, and cowpeas. Vincent Witcher, an advocate of reform in Pittsylvania County, produced an even wider variety of farm products. In addition to the above crops and livestock, over the preceding year Witcher's slaves grew hops and flax, sheared wool, made butter and cheese, and gathered eighty pounds of beeswax and honey. Despite the diversity of all three plantations, Bruce,

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<sup>301</sup> Receipt of William T. Sutherlin, December 27, 1856, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, box 1, folder 2, SHC.

<sup>302</sup> Elijah Hundley's Journal #1, 1860 entries, Plantation Records of Elijah Hundley, UVA.

<sup>303</sup> Daniel Tatum Merritt Diary, entries throughout, VHS.

Edmunds, and Witcher still depended heavily on tobacco as a cash staple. In 1850 Witcher produced 12,000 pounds, Edmunds 38,500 pounds, and Bruce - who agitated against the crop's cultivation on a number of occasions - raised an astonishing 71,925 pounds of leaf.<sup>304</sup> Even reformers intent on escaping the clutches of tobacco could not give up the crop.

### **Charles Coleman's Woodlawn**

No planter epitomized Southside agricultural reform better than Halifax's Charles Coleman.<sup>305</sup> In the mid-1840s, Coleman was a substantial dark tobacco planter near the hamlet of Clover in the northeastern portion of the county, where his plantation, Woodlawn, lay along the bluffs of the Staunton River. Coleman was the master of a large estate; at his death in 1849 he owned 94 slaves and more than 2,100 acres. Although he was not a regional reform leader, Coleman was connected to the ideas of the reformers and to local groups of "modern" farmers, and he put those ideas into practice on his own land. He subscribed to regional newspapers and read agronomic texts such as "Chaptal's agricultural chemistry," which he judged applicable to "any country & . . . excellent."<sup>306</sup> He was also an active member of Clover's small agricultural club, which met in its members' houses. These public and intellectual commitments to agricultural reform paled beside Coleman's practical application of reformer's advice on his own plantation. Woodlawn served as a place of production and a vast experiment ground, where Coleman tried various conservation and efficiency measures, worked to mold fields and forests into more productive spaces, and sought both self-sufficiency and profit. Most importantly for

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<sup>304</sup> Virginia Agricultural Census, Halifax and Pittsylvania Counties, 1850, NARA, T1132, rolls 2 & 3.

<sup>305</sup> The following composite sketch of Coleman's farming activities is drawn from the Charles Coleman Diaries, 1842-1849, RASP, series D, reel 12. Entry dates are provided for direct quotations. In many ways, Coleman's agricultural intensification program mirrored that of planter William Massie of Nelson County, as described in Lynn A. Nelson, *Pharsalia: An Environmental Biography of a Southern Plantation, 1780-1880* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

<sup>306</sup> November 25, 1842. Coleman most likely refers to an English translation of Jean Antoine Chaptal, *Chimie appliquée a l'Agriculture* (Paris: Huzard, 1823).

the historian's purposes, Coleman kept an agricultural diary describing the successes and trials of intensive farming.

One of Coleman's principal occupations was increasing farm diversity. Woodlawn contained an astonishing variety of crops and livestock. Plantation slaves managed domestic animals of all sorts, including mules, hogs, horses, sheep, cattle, ducks, and chickens. Coleman's fields grew the traditional Southside staples: tobacco, corn, and wheat, but he also produced a number of other crops on a smaller scale, for both sale and domestic use. These lesser crops included sweet potatoes, rye, oats, flax, cotton, cowpeas, clover hay, watermelons, and turnips. The plantation garden was also critical to Coleman's plans for a diversified and independent estate. Among his vegetables were pumpkins, melons, English peas, peanuts, cucumbers, cymblings (squash), Irish potatoes, sweet corn, beets, asparagus, strawberries, salsify, sugar beans, red peppers, snap beans, cabbage, radishes, lettuce, collards, celery, and parsnips. As on so many reformers' farms, Coleman's orchard was a center of horticultural diversity and experimentation. He planted grape vines, rows of raspberry canes, figs, gooseberry bushes, apricots, plums, and a peach orchard, but his real obsession was with apples. In the spring of 1843, Coleman's neighbor, a Dr. Norton, taught him how to graft trees, and over the next five years he grafted and planted more than 200 apple trees of at least ten varieties. Coleman carefully recorded the numbers and location of each winesap and pippin, and clearly enjoyed experimenting with new varieties of fruit and grafting techniques. The interest Coleman exhibited in listing and describing crops and livestock reflected his belief in the importance of a diversified plantation. His comments on these efforts displayed pleasure in the intellectual exercises of intensive farming, but they also stressed the value of personal and plantation independence.

Coleman's efforts to increase Woodlawn's animal and plant diversity were mirrored in his campaign to improve the estate's soil and prevent erosion. He reserved the rich bottomland along the river for his principal crops, tobacco and corn, and rotated his fields on a regular schedule, alternating clover with crops that depleted nitrogen. Woodlawn's slaves spent a portion of each winter digging ditches to drain the low ground and cutting other trenches across the slopes of the higher ground to turn water off fields. Coleman also used fire to improve his estate. Regular burnings kept the plantation's pastures in good condition by killing back weeds, lowering soil acidity, and promoting palatable new growth, and slaves cut brush out of orchards and wood lots and burned the trimmings over plant beds or other sites that benefitted from ashes. Coleman purchased plaster, spread barnyard manure, hauled leaves and straw onto his fields, collected ashes to spread on his plant beds, and even saved the chaff winnowed from his wheat crop to plow into the earth. Obtaining an adequate supply of amendments was a constant source of concern. In the winter of 1843 he worried that "the manure turns out nothing like as well as we expected in the stable lot, nor will it, I fear, in the farm pen," and in response he built a manure composting pen, complete with a roof to block the rain.<sup>307</sup> Like many of his fellow planters in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania, Coleman was not content to simply plant a field until it no longer produced, and then abandon the old ground for new land.

Unlike James Bruce, Coleman seemed little concerned about the place of slavery in reformed southern agriculture. His diaries are remarkable for their dearth of direct references to the slave labor force that provided the muscle and grist that kept Woodlawn functioning. Coleman viewed his slaves as extensions of his will, simple beasts of burden who carried out his directives. The terms he used reflected this attitude. He invariably referred to the plantation's slaves as his "hands," and when describing such black labor as ditching or stripping tobacco, he

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<sup>307</sup> March 6, 1843.

invariably used the pronoun “we.” Typical entries began “We commenced cutting wood,” or “We killed hogs.”<sup>308</sup> His diary showed little worry over his slaves’ well-being or sense of community. When an unnamed epidemic struck Woodlawn in the summer of 1844, killing two slaves and reducing ten others to their sickbeds, Coleman made but a brief comment and failed to list the names of the dead or ill, despite the calamity of an illness that killed or incapacitated more than an eighth of his workforce. The same autumn, an escaped brush fire burned up the year’s corn supply and much of the plantation’s slave housing, and Coleman calmly noted that he planned to rent out a number of his slaves for a short time while he placed the estate back in order. Whether his slaves were laboring in the fields or dying of illness, Coleman reduced his bondsmen and women to another variable in the calculus of farming.

Like Ruffin, who regularly calculated the benefits of reform within the southern slave system, Coleman saw no contradiction between plantation slavery and agricultural reform, perhaps because of ingrained racial attitudes, but also no doubt because his activities at Woodlawn were successful.<sup>309</sup> Of course improvement measures at Woodlawn, from diversified crops to efforts to sustain soil fertility, were not without setbacks. Cutworms attacked Coleman’s corn; cockles invaded his wheat fields; hornworms infested the tobacco crop every year; powerful storms caused the Staunton River to periodically inundate bottomland fields, carrying away corn and tobacco; and, on the occasion mentioned above, a fire set to clear shrubby ground escaped and burned up Woodlawn’s stable, a full corn crib, and several slave houses. However, these difficulties and the cost of reform measures did not hinder the overall

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<sup>308</sup> December 21, 1842 & December 13, 1843.

<sup>309</sup> Ruffin actually envisioned agricultural reform as the key to ensuring slavery survival in the older section of the Atlantic South. He argued that it was general agricultural malaise that forced eastern planters to sell surplus slaves to western cotton and sugar lands, and declared that “Nothing can check this forced emigration of blacks . . . except increased production of food, obtained by enriching our lands, and the consequent increase of farming profits.” see Ruffin, *An Essay*, appendix C, 164.

success of Coleman's improvement efforts. Although his diary does not include the plantation's accounts, Coleman seemed to do better and better each year. By 1848, Woodlawn's herds and crops were more numerous and varied than ever, and these diversified activities did little to affect the plantation's tobacco production. Coupling reformer's advice with the traditional staple seemed to pose little difficulty for Coleman; his 1848 crop of leaf totaled 32,900 pounds, the heaviest of the decade. Coleman saw little incongruous in slavery coupled with agricultural reform: in his mind the two worked in Woodlawn's political economy.

Although Coleman's diary is concerned with the daily business of farming and not with the attitudes and ideologies of the diarist, it does exhibit his general satisfaction with efforts to improve the land he owned. As a prominent planter, Coleman sought profit, but he also desired permanence and even beauty. A sense of satisfaction permeated entries recording good harvests, orchard expansions, and projects to improve the landscape; Coleman's diaries exude a sense of moral good connected to careful and intensive farming. Reflecting Ruffin's calls for sustainable farming and planting, this "agricultural morality," exhibited in Coleman's diaries, and in the records and journals of a number of other regional farmers and planters, complicates the notion of southern planting as a simple calculation of profit.<sup>310</sup> Certainly some landowners depleted the natural resources of their lands and moved west, valuing the maximization of profit over the importance of place and permanence, but not all. Coleman is an example of an equally powerful conservatism, intent on bettering the agricultural landscapes of the South.

### **The Lure of Bright Leaf**

If the messages and methods of agricultural reform had made inroads in the antebellum Southside, what then were the effects of bright tobacco culture on these farm intensification efforts? The new crop seems to have significantly undermined reform efforts along the Virginia

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<sup>310</sup> Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*, 124-125, 133-134; and Mathew, *Edmund Ruffin*, 204-213.

and North Carolina line by both competing with and appealing to certain tenets of the reform movement. While yellow tobacco's cultivation methods directly conflicted with the soil and timber conservation efforts involved in agricultural intensification, the crop's culture also entailed following selected reform advice and countered farmers' concerns by producing healthy profits on marginal lands. In a cruel twist of irony, the crop that eventually contributed so much to regional erosion, stream siltation, deforestation, and declining agricultural prospects owed part of its popularity to an agricultural movement advocating farm sustainability.

Elements of bright leaf culture undermined the soil conservation efforts of agricultural reformers in undeniable ways. For example, farmers interested in making bright leaf cultivated their tobacco fields almost exclusively with shovel plows, with erosive consequences. Bright tobacco experts, such as the Love brothers of Pittsylvania County, argued that the key to successfully producing light-colored tobacco lay in the region's topsoil: deep plowing that intermixed the sandy surface with the red clay below led to lower quality leaf because it altered soil composition and slowed drainage. These soil traits were valuable in most cropland, but lowered the value of fine bright tobacco.<sup>311</sup> In the Southside the turn to shovel plows was not the product of a lazy or backward agriculture; rather, the return to this older technology stemmed from the needs of a particular tobacco variety. George Jeffreys's experiments plowing bright leaf land during the 1840s reflected the tensions between the conservation advice of reformers and the practices of bright leaf farmers. Jeffreys looked to his Caswell neighbors, such as the Slades, and tried to replicate their successful crops. He advocated shovel-plowing over methods of deeper cultivation in his diary, writing that "it [the shovel plow] gives as much loose dirt as

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<sup>311</sup> E. L. and E. P. Love, *The Art of Curing Fancy Yellow Tobacco*, reprint (Culler, NC: W. C. Phillips, 1892). This edition is a reprint of a pamphlet that first appeared in the late 1860s. While the Loves began publishing their pamphlets following the Civil War, they or their neighbors experimented with bright tobacco before the conflict, and their advice seems to have reflected prewar practices in many cases.

the one horse dagoes with this decided advantage that they do not turn over the soil but leave it where nature has placed it - on the surface . . .”<sup>312</sup> This shallow cultivation produced fields that grew very light tobacco, but it also posed serious risks. Frequent passes with a shovel plow left pulverized topsoil overlaying a clay hardpan. Heavy rains saturated the loose sand in the upper soil horizon, which then ran off the clay below, forming gullies or galled spots on hillside fields. Jeffreys was not blind to this reality; he commented on the gullying and sheet erosion that accompanied his new plowing campaigns, but believed that other elements of reform advice would help him overcome the dangers of shallow plowing. He wrote of his plans to plow out the gullies that formed, sow oats and other cover crops on the damaged areas, and keep livestock off the problem slopes until the land could once again return to production.<sup>313</sup>

The adoption of bright leaf also undermined crop rotation on Piedmont farms. Virginia and North Carolina farmers had long avoided heavy manuring or rotating their dark tobacco too frequently with such nitrogen fixing crops as clover and cowpeas, as excess nitrogen made for a harsh, heavy cured leaf. If dark tobacco farmers used manure and legumes cautiously, bright leaf farmers completely shunned the dung cart and these valuable crops in their rotations, as yellow tobacco was even more sensitive to excess nitrogen than was dark leaf. Bright leaf planted after clover refused to ripen properly, remaining green well into the fall, and was almost impossible to cure yellow. Other traditional farm crops, such as oats and wheat, fell out of favor in tobacco rotations as well. Although these crops did not fix nitrogen, they took up valuable field space and changed soil structures in ways that complicated making yellow tobacco. Bright leaf demonstrated reliable productivity year after year on the same ground, and farmers who switched a ridge top or hillside field from bright leaf to wheat for a few years lost a significant amount of

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<sup>312</sup> Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, January 29, 1845 & February 12, 1845, quote on the latter date.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid, May 6, 1845.

profit. In addition, decomposing organic matter left in the soil from the roots and stalks of these rotation crops increased the land's moisture retaining capabilities. This was a beneficial trait for most crops, but a detriment to bright leaf cultivation, in which the plants demanded rapid soil percolation to grow and ripen properly.<sup>314</sup> Crop rotation still occurred on Southside farms - farmers needed oats for their horses and mules, clover for their cattle, and wheat for their families' bread - but tobacco increasingly became a separate crop system divorced from farm subsistence and sustenance cycles.

Regional reformers had long been concerned about deforestation and timber shortages, and curing yellow leaf used more wood than producing dark tobacco.<sup>315</sup> As with dark tobacco, bright tobacco culture required farmers to clear woodland for fields, build split-rail fences to keep hogs and cattle from trampling the crop, erect log barns for curing the harvested leaf, and cut staves for hogheads. Construction of a typical tobacco barn alone used more than 150 logs, with each log sixteen to twenty feet long by six inches in diameter.<sup>316</sup> The new curing techniques involved in bright leaf placed an additional burden on the Southside's timber supplies. Bright leaf curing lasted significantly longer than traditional fire-curing, adding days to

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<sup>314</sup> Wrightman W. Garner, *The Production of Tobacco* (New York: Blakiston Company, 1951), 108-109, 331-332; J. B. Killebrew and Herbert Myrick, *Tobacco Leaf: Its Culture and Cure, Marketing and Manufacturing, A Practical Handbook on the Most Approved Methods in Growing, Harvesting, Curing, Packing and Selling Tobacco, Also of Tobacco Manufacture*, reprint (New York: Orange Judd Company, 1909), 80-84; E. H. Mathewson, *The Culture of Flue-Cured Tobacco*, USDA Bulletin No. 16 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), 5; and Tilley, *The Bright Tobacco Industry*, 181-182.

<sup>315</sup> For Virginia farmers' concerns about deforestation, see Swanson, "Fighting over Fencing," 110-117; and G. Melvin Herndon, "The Significance of the Forest to the Tobacco Plantation Economy in Antebellum Virginia," *Plantation Society in the Americas* 1, 3 (October 1981): 430-431.

<sup>316</sup> This calculation assumes a five tier barn sixteen or twenty feet square, with twenty foot walls, a fifth of which were composed of mud chinking between the logs, and does include the wood needed for rafters, shingles, eaves, or the door. It is based on descriptions in Peter Minor, *The Cultivation and Management of Tobacco, from the Plant Bed to the Prize* (Baltimore, MD: J. Robinson, 1822), 9-10; Shelton, "The Culture and Management of Tobacco," 215-216; Robert L. Ragland, *Tobacco, from Seed to the Salesroom* (Richmond, VA: William Ellis Jones, 1880), 3-4; Ruth Little-Stokes, *An Inventory of Historic Architecture, Caswell County, North Carolina: The Built Environment of a Burley and Bright-Leaf Tobacco Economy* (Yanceyville, NC: Caswell County Historical Association, 1979), 106; Catherine W. Bishir and Michael T. Southern, *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Piedmont North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 182-183; and the author's study of surviving barns.

the time farmers burned wood in their barns, and experts advised curers to build hotter than normal fires to create a bright yellow product. Estimates of the wood needed to cure a barn of tobacco vary widely based on the type of wood used, its seasoning, weather conditions, and the ripeness of a given crop; historic farmers and modern tobacco historians record from one to eight cords of wood per barn as the amount of fuel needed to cure bright leaf. To give an idea of just how much wood went into curing tobacco, one geographer has estimated that the average mid-nineteenth century family consumed 17.5 cords of wood per year. At the upper estimate of eight cords of wood per barn, curing just two barns of tobacco taxed the resources of local forests almost as much as the annual cooking, heating, and building needs of an entire family. Given the 20,204,052 pounds of cured tobacco reported produced in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania counties in 1860, if we take a contemporary calculation of 1,200 pounds of tobacco per barn and a moderate estimate of four cords of wood to cure each barn, then over the course of the year the region's planters burned 67,348 cords of wood heating their tobacco barns. This is a gross estimate to be sure - curing demands fluctuated due to weather, wood type, etc., and not all tobacco produced in 1860 was bright leaf - but it suggests the tremendous quantity of wood burned in the process of curing tobacco. Although there are no similar estimates for dark tobacco curing in the same region, commentators were uniform in their agreement that yellow tobacco used significantly more fuel.<sup>317</sup> The rising use of charcoal to heat bright leaf barns also

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<sup>317</sup> For various estimates of the wood needed to cure one barn of yellow tobacco, see J. D. Cameron, *A Sketch of the Tobacco Interests in North Carolina* (Oxford, NC: W. A. Davis & Co., 1881), 99; W. H. Snow, *Snow's Modern Barn System of Raising and Curing Tobacco*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: Isaac Friedenwald, 1890), 13; Anne Radford Phillips, "Farm Women of Stokes County, North Carolina and the Production of Flue-Cured Tobacco, 1925-1955: Continuity and Change," Ph.D. diss, University of Maryland, 1990, 35; Robert C. McAdams, "The Tobacco Culture of Wilson County, North Carolina," Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1996, 72; and Evan Bennett, "King Bacca's Throne: Land, Life, and Labor in the Old Bright Belt since 1880," Ph.D. diss, College of William and Mary, 2005, 78. For average estimated wood consumption during the mid-1800s, see Michael Williams, *Americans and Their Forests: A Historical Geography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 334. Tobacco production for the three counties comes from the 1860 agricultural census. Average production per barn comes from Samuel Shelton, "The Culture and Management of Tobacco," 216.

consumed more wood, as a given unit of charcoal produced less thermal energy than the wood that colliers burned to produce it.<sup>318</sup> Curing a barn of bright tobacco using charcoal could consume eighteen bushels of charcoal or more.<sup>319</sup> Whether growers used curing fuel in the form of charcoal or cord wood, bright leaf cultivation increased the demand for wood and put greater pressure on the counties' forests and wood lots.

If the culture of bright leaf ignored many reformer precepts, it embraced other elements of the agricultural improvement agenda. The new tobacco easily fit into the existing agricultural infrastructure, drew on available regional resources, appealed to reformer's ideals about farmer expertise, and was profitable on even the poorest of soils. Bright leaf posed obvious problems: it disrupted crop rotations, continued tobacco's dominance of local farm economies, and made erosion an even greater threat, but it countered these difficulties by making regional tobacco farms profitable. For these reasons, bright leaf became popular even with reform-minded Southside farmers and planters. Bright tobacco illustrated a commonly-overlooked aspect of agricultural reform: portions of the reform agenda that proved profitable were invariably the ones adopted, for reform's underlying *raison d'être* was the creation of profitable farms. Reformers preached a sustainability rooted in economics as much as in conservation, and along the Border early bright leaf culture was (temporarily) more successful than any other reform effort.

The widespread adoption of bright leaf cultivation shifted the geography of the Border countryside. In the 1830s and 1840s, dark tobacco had flourished in the region's rich bottomlands, while farmers and planters largely relegated their corn and wheat crops to the marginal uplands. This landscape arrangement was far from universal of course, but farmers

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<sup>318</sup> Williams, *Americans and Their Forests*, 341-344; and Donald E. Davis, *Where There are Mountains: An Environmental History of the Southern Appalachians* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 148-153.

<sup>319</sup> Anonymous farmer's notes on how "To Fire with Coal," n.d., Southside Virginia Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, roll 5.

with access to both bottomland and upland naturally preferred to plant tobacco - their highest value crop - on the richer ground. Faced with bright leaf's soil demands, in the late 1840s and 1850s, farmers moved their new tobacco fields onto the sandy ridges and slopes and planted corn (and less frequently wheat) on the heavy soils of the low grounds. For bright leaf farmers this shift seemed almost too good to be true: bright leaf brought a much higher price than dark tobacco on land formerly deemed all but useless, and by moving their grain fields to more fertile ground, they were able to produce more of these crops with no increase in labor. Indeed, George Jeffreys argued that farmers who turned their bottomlands along the Hyco River in Caswell to corn production could produce a crop every year for half a century before yields decreased.<sup>320</sup> The Border's typical sandy upland soils produced as little as ten bushels of corn or seven bushels of wheat per acre, compared to yields as high as sixty bushels and seventeen and a half bushels per acre, respectively, on the rich brown Congaree loam of bottomlands.<sup>321</sup> The shifting arable landscape that accompanied the expansion of bright leaf thus promised not only more profitable tobacco, but better corn and wheat crops as well. But this increase in productivity came with a clear price; farmers cleared and cultivated some of the most erodible portions of the Border landscape, and the results were soon obvious.

Although bright leaf cultivation entailed important modifications of traditional tobacco cropping practices, the new variety was familiar enough that many dark tobacco growers felt comfortable undertaking its production. Farmers had to make some changes: they learned the characteristics of their upland soils, how to read their new crop's growth and ripening, and

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<sup>320</sup> Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, January 10, 1845.

<sup>321</sup> W. Edward Hearn and Frank P. Drane, *Soil Survey of Caswell County, North Carolina* (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1910), 21, 26; R. C. Journey, et al., *Soil Survey of Halifax County, Virginia* (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1934), 17, 21, 33-34, 40-42; Kirk, et al., *Soil Survey of Pittsylvania*, 28, 33-34; "Farmers' State Club," *Southern Planter* 11, 3 (March 1851): 76. The early twentieth-century soil surveys of Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania list productivity figures for unfertilized soil series. New corn and wheat strains had slightly improved productivity, but erosion and agricultural use had also lessened soil fertility by the early 1900s, and thus the surveys should provide relatively accurate statistics for determining antebellum productivity.

elaborate curing formulas, but they also continued to use the same tobacco barns, transportation networks, and many of the same labor methods as they had with dark leaf. The switch to bright tobacco did not involve the purchase of new equipment (with the exception of flues on some farms), new labor arrangements, or substantial capital investment. For the most part, slave-owners worked their black hands in yellow tobacco as they had in dark, and small farmers without chattel labor could cultivate bright leaf as easily as they could grow the older variety. These similarities made the new crop appealing and comforting, offering all of the rewards but few of the uncertainties of more distinctive agricultural alternatives such as silk, grapes, or sheep.

These moderate transitions were especially palatable because they came from within the Southside's farms. The initial cultivation of bright leaf did not require expensive fertilizers, new machinery, or even rich bottomland; it demanded only stretches of relatively weak soil, an abundant commodity in the three counties. These minimal requirements in turn promised a basic sort of sustainability. While bright tobacco culture countered many tenets of reform wisdom focused on sustained production - from wood conservation to crop rotation - it offered in their stead the promise that farmers could profitably cultivate a cash crop on a single field almost indefinitely. This benefit was immediately apparent and universally understood.

Bright tobacco culture's emphasis on expertise and the artisanal nature of yellow tobacco production also appealed to modernizing farmers. Unlike some southern staple producers, who Ruffin complained were "land killers" out of general "*ignorance*," bright tobacco growers emphasized careful attention to land, crop, and technique.<sup>322</sup> Good bright leaf was the product of a careful and constant attention to detail: farmers had to select appropriate seed varieties, determine proper soil types, and follow elaborate curing regimes. Curing in particular demanded

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<sup>322</sup> Ruffin, in Mathew, *Edmund Ruffin and the Crisis of Slavery*, 57.

a farmer's experience and constant vigilance. The curer had to take into account the conditions of each barn of tobacco and the surrounding environment: high temperatures and humidity called for a cooler fire, windy days required adjustment to doors and flues, rain forced the farmer to add more wood to the furnace, and so on. The curer also had to account for the minute differences in each cutting of tobacco. As an assemblage of organic once-living matter, each barn of tobacco was slightly different - some cuttings were greener, some contained more tar, some housed heavy crenellated leaves while in other barns they were thin and light. The farmer had to adjust temperature and draft to best cure each crop.<sup>323</sup> A postwar tract captured the demands of early flue-curing. The pamphlet, written by the Love brothers of Pittsylvania, warned would-be bright leaf cultivators that expertise had to be coupled with a devotion to producing a quality finished product: "Many sleepless night have we passed in the barn, sometimes never leaving a curing from the time it was housed until the coals were in their last slumbering embers."<sup>324</sup> This appeal to the artisan nature of experience coupled with an emphasis on scientific technology - via flues and careful temperature regulation - was especially resonant with agricultural reformers. As Benjamin Cohen had argued, reformers were particularly enamored with a "Georgic" ideal of farm improvement - the notion that agricultural modernization must come from experience laboring on the land.<sup>325</sup> Technical advice concerning selective breeding, soil chemistry, and curing mechanisms were important to making bright tobacco, but these "book farming" innovations were made all the more appealing by bright leaf advocates' insistence that a farmer's experience remained the most important element of cultivation.

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<sup>323</sup> For examples of the detailed instructions provided to the region's antebellum bright leaf cultivators, see R. J. S., "The Curing of Tobacco with Charcoal," *Southern Planter* 18, 10 (October 1858): 595-596; "Caswell," "On Curing Tobacco Yellow," *Southern Planter* 19, 8 (August 1859): 492; and Samuel C. Shelton, "The Culture and Management of Tobacco," *Southern Planter* 21, 4 (April 1861): 209-217. The first two articles were written by Caswell planters, and the last by a Pittsylvania grower.

<sup>324</sup> Love and Love, *The Art of Curing*, 3, 6-8.

<sup>325</sup> Cohen, *Notes from the Ground*, esp. 17-48.

Bright leaf boosters also followed the agricultural reformers' models of disseminating knowledge. Experts in the new crop culture, such as Abisha Slade and his slave Stephen, traveled around the region during the 1850s sharing their techniques with interested farmers and planters and providing demonstrations of the curing process. Much like authors in period agricultural journals and speakers at agricultural club meetings, these authorities relayed practical advice throughout communities of interested farmers.<sup>326</sup> It was no coincidence that Jeffreys recorded his desire to publish a pamphlet once he had mastered the techniques of producing bright leaf, as the creation and dissemination of experiential knowledge figured prominently in the agricultural reform movement.<sup>327</sup> Robert Ragland remembered seeing Slade exhibit his bright tobacco at an 1856 Halifax County farmers' meeting, and another spectator recalled Slade exhorting growers, "Boys, if you have barns to cure, use charcoal! Use charcoal!"<sup>328</sup> Growers who adopted these methods engaged in a process with which reformers, from Ruffin to Edmunds, were familiar: these enterprising farmers applied outside expertise in an attempt to get greater profits from their land. Heeding reformers' calls for agricultural education and scientific production, bright leaf cultivators used their newfound expertise to add value to their product.

Reformers and tobacco farmers alike also appreciated the impact of bright leaf's expansion on the regional tobacco manufacturing industry. From small to large, the factories that emerged in Danville, Milton, Yanceyville, and at rural crossroads and plantations scattered across the countryside strengthened the local economy and the region's ties to tobacco culture. As these factories turned bright leaf into lumps and twists, they transformed a local raw

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<sup>326</sup> Tilley, *Bright Tobacco Industry*, 25-30.; and Seigel, *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness*, 102.

<sup>327</sup> Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, January 20, 1845.

<sup>328</sup> Robert L. Ragland, "A Scrap from the History of Yellow Tobacco," *Southern Planter and Farmer* 37, 5 (May 1876): 344; and Tilley, *Bright Tobacco Industry*, 26.

commodity into a value-added product. Despite reformers' emphasis on agricultural innovation, they were not adverse to industrial growth that drew on local resources, especially when the industry did little to threaten farm profits or labor forces. Indeed, local tobacco manufacturers worked hand-in-hand with local producers, purchasing local bright leaf directly from farmers, leasing or buying a planter's surplus slaves, and supporting efforts to increase local production and leaf quality.<sup>329</sup> Small planter-owned factories located on plantations were the epitome of several reform ideals: they transformed raw farm leaf into value-added twists and plugs through the use of investment and expertise. These operations brought the profits of urban industry to the countryside without challenging the plantation system. Like the northeastern improvers described by Stoll, who believed the combination of merino sheep production and local woolen mills would connect farm and factory to the benefit of both, Southside improvers, such as James Bruce, argued that tobacco manufacturing and farm improvement were mutually reinforcing activities.<sup>330</sup> Early bright leaf manufacturing was thus a manifestation of an agrarian industrialism in which the factory managers and the plantation owners were often one and the same.

This expanding manufacturing base and the increasing value of the region's tobacco crop stimulated internal improvements long sought by agricultural modernizers. Southside boosters had pushed for better roads, river channels, and railroad connections for several decades, and the lucrative nature of bright leaf, in manufactured and raw form, encouraged an even greater push to improve transportation networks. Locks and dredging in the Roanoke River and

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<sup>329</sup> For examples of these interactions, see List of tobacco purchased and manufactured, November 1, 1854, box 1, folder 2; John T. Garland to William T. Sutherlin, March, 1857, box 1 folder 3; Armistead T. Moore to William T. Sutherlin, April 26, 1860, box 1, folder 5; Bedford Brown to William T. Sutherlin, May 35, 1860, box 1, folder 6; all in William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC; Thomas Lindsey to John Sutherlin, April 26, 1858, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke; and Account Book of Robert Wilson, 1848-1861.

<sup>330</sup> Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*, 108-119; and Address of James C. Bruce to Mecklenburg and Granville Agricultural Clubs, 7-15.

improvements to the Dismal Swamp Canal in the 1820s had made water transport to Norfolk easier; the Franklin Turnpike, completed in 1840, brought tobacco from the western reaches of the state to Danville; and in 1842 a new stage road connected Danville and Lynchburg, speeding travel between the two important tobacco towns. Despite these improvements, Southside planters and farmers demanded a more direct overland route to Virginia's primary tobacco export cities: Richmond and Petersburg.<sup>331</sup> At the behest of planters, Pittsylvania County officials were instrumental in securing a rail connection between Danville and the state capital. Work began on the Richmond and Danville Railroad, which passed through the rich tobacco districts of Halifax on its way into Pittsylvania, in 1850, and the railroad was completed in 1858. The new line "excit[ed] much interest" among regional growers, who began using the railroad before its completion.<sup>332</sup> In 1855, the partially completed line carried 41,588 boxes of tobacco plugs, and, by 1857, planters and manufacturers had made the Richmond and Danville the busiest tobacco transportation route in the commonwealth, surpassing much older railroads and canals.<sup>333</sup> Completion of the Richmond and Danville Railroad did not satisfy regional transportation boosters. Danville interests built feeder roads connecting tobacco-producing districts in Pittsylvania and Caswell to the town's manufacturers; North Carolina growers sought an extension of the railroad through Caswell into their state (a spur would connect Danville to Greensboro during the Civil War); and northern Pittsylvania growers wanted a connection between their region and Lynchburg (the Virginia Midland Railroad would eventually connect

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<sup>331</sup> Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 63; Kathleen Bruce, "Materials for Southern Virginia Agricultural History," *Agricultural History* 4, 1 (January 1930): 12; Charles B. Motley, *Yes There is a Dry Fork Virginia* (Danville, VA: Bassett Printing Corp., 1977), 9; L. Beatrice Hairston, *A Brief History of Danville, Virginia, 1728-1954* (Richmond, VA: Dietz Press, 1955), 15-16; and Clement, *History of Pittsylvania*, 240-241.

<sup>332</sup> Siegel?; Motley, *Yes There is a Dry Fork*, 30-31; A. W. Barksdale to R. L. Barksdale, September 23, 1857, Peter Barksdale Papers, RASP, series F, part 3, roll 33, quote in the latter.

<sup>333</sup> Vincent Witcher, "Richmond and Danville Railway," *American Railway Times* 8, 3 (January 1856): 1; and Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 67-71.

Danville and Lynchburg by 1873).<sup>334</sup> In addition to transporting raw tobacco and manufactured plugs out of the region, the Richmond and Danville Railroad and improvements to local roads and rivers also brought finished goods, guano, and plaster into the Southside, facilitating exchanges that appealed to many reformers.<sup>335</sup>

The most appealing characteristic of bright leaf was the crop's profitability; unlike most agricultural alternatives, yellow tobacco produced profits from the weak Southside soils. Bright leaf cultivation "redeemed" the poorest uplands, transforming them from stretches of waste into the region's most important arable farmlands. This transformation did nothing to improve soil fertility, but it did "improve" the land in another way: the bright tobacco boom increased the economic value of poor land and the return on labor while allowing for the richer land to be used for diversified purposes. As bright leaf cultivation expanded in certain portions of Caswell County, land prices increased as much as sixty-fold, rising from fifty cents per acre to more than thirty dollars per acre over the course of just a few years.<sup>336</sup> The case of H. P. Womack demonstrated the potential effect of the booming tobacco economy on farmer thinking. In 1847, Womack left his Caswell home for land in Lincoln County, Tennessee, where he wrote that he was pleased with both the country and his new opportunities. Six years later, as bright tobacco prices gained steam, he wrote to his relative, Pleasant Womack, of his desire to return to Caswell to make his fortune. H. P. asked Pleasant to send him a description of available farms and land

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<sup>334</sup> "Remarks of Mr. Cunningham of Person on the Dan River and Yadkin Railroad," *Milton Chronicle*, February 22, 1855, p. 1; Edward Pollock, *Illustrated Sketch Book of Danville, Virginia, Its Manufactures and Commerce* (Danville, VA: John M. Hutchings and Son, 1885), 71; Durwood T. Stokes, "Charles Napoleon Bonaparte Evans and the Milton Chronicle," *North Carolina Historical Review* 44, 3 (July 1969): 253; Siegel, *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness*, 110-111, 153; and Robert, *The Tobacco Kingdom*, 70-71.

<sup>335</sup> Aaron W. Marrs, *Railroads in the Old South: Pursuing Progress in a Slave Society* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 113-114.

<sup>336</sup> Killebrew and Myrick, *Tobacco Leaf*, 11. See also, Hearn and Drane, *Soil Survey of Caswell*, 9.

prices, and he seemed intent on returning to his native county.<sup>337</sup> If the agricultural reform movement's most important goal was to preserve the viability of agriculture and rural populations in the old Southeast, then the profit potential of bright leaf held tremendous appeal.

The local press played an important role in touting the profitability of bright leaf. An 1857 *Milton Chronicle* article on Abisha Slade's amazing profits emphasized the rewards of remaining in the Piedmont and adopting the new crop. The paper informed its readers that, "It comes to us from unquestioned authority, that Capt. A. Slade of Caswell N.C., and his two brothers, have sold their entire crops of Tobacco, lugs included, to a Lynchburg manufacturer, for the extraordinary price of \$35 per hundred lbs." The anonymous author then calculated the return of this bright crop. "Capt. Slade, we are informed, estimates his crop at 18,000 or 20,000 lbs. It is the product of the labor of some ten hands. If it should turn out to be 30,000 lbs., he will realize from each laborer the unprecedented sum of \$700." At a time when prime slaves sold in the neighborhood of \$1,000, a profit even half as large as the *Chronicle's* speculative figure would have been a tremendous windfall. For readers who failed to connect this extraordinary return to the increased appeal of remaining in the Piedmont, the article elaborated on the diminishing need to emigrate in order to find profitable agricultural lands. "Can the cotton fields of Louisiana, the sugar plantations of Cuba, the rice fields or the turpentine Districts of the Carolinas, boast of larger profits?"<sup>338</sup> Similar price announcements appeared in other issues of the *Milton Chronicle*, despite the editor Charles Evans's advocacy of diversified farming. In 1855, Evans had agitated for the local production of "Meat! Meat!! More Meat!!! and less Tobacco," yet the appeal of extraordinary bright leaf prices demanded the attention of

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<sup>337</sup> H. P. Womack to Pleasant H. Womack, April 19, 1847, and H. P. Womack to Pleasant H. Womack, April 24, 1853, both in Hatchett Family Papers, box 2, Duke.

<sup>338</sup> "Extraordinary Prices Paid for Tobacco," *Milton Chronicle*, February 12, 1857, p. 3. Some of the details of this article were reprinted in the *Southern Planter*: "Farmers' Meeting at the Exchange Hotel," *Southern Planter* 17, 4 (April 1857): 225.

Evans and his fellow regional editors.<sup>339</sup> In his letter attempting to convince his brother George to refrain from moving to Texas, Peter Hairston pointed to these robust returns as an argument against emigration, writing that high tobacco prices meant a bright future for the Southside.<sup>340</sup> For reform-minded planters and farmers, the steep prices commanded by yellow tobacco provided valuable support for their claims that there was a future in regional agriculture.

These high prices, along with bright tobacco's fit within the existing farm landscape and the adaptability of the crop to marginal lands, attracted dark tobacco growers to the new staple. Across the three counties, planters such as William Bailey, Elisha Barksdale, Joel Hubbard, and William Sims continued to cultivate traditional tobacco varieties, but they also began to experiment with raising and curing yellow leaf. Likewise, tobacco manufacturer William Sutherlin and his fellow agricultural industrialists produced dark twists and chews, but they also sought local bright leaf, and many began to grow their own fine tobacco.<sup>341</sup> This bright leaf revolution attracted regional planters and farmers of all sizes, with neighbors of varying economic statuses experimenting with making yellow tobacco. In northern Caswell the large planter George Jeffreys learned how to cure his sandy land crop from Abisha Slade - who, with only ten hands he shared with his two brothers, was more middling farmer than elite planter, and both Charles Coleman - who owned almost a hundred slaves - and the yeoman Vincent Shelton, Jr. experimented with coal fires in their curing barns.<sup>342</sup> As the antebellum period drew to a

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<sup>339</sup> Evans, quoted in Stokes, "Charles Napoleon Bonaparte Evans," 254.

<sup>340</sup> Peter Hairston to George Hairston, March 22, 1859.

<sup>341</sup> Receipts of William Bailey, September 29, 1858 - May 19, 1859, William Bailey Papers, UVA; Receipts of Elisha Barksdale, September 1, 1841 - September 10, 1852, Southside Virginia Family Papers, UVA; Receipts of Joel Hubbard, April 16, 1840 - June 16, 1859, and John Tyree to Joel Hubbard, May 9, 1857, Southside Virginia Family Papers; Account Ledger of William Sims, 1828-1867, William Bailey Papers; Receipts of William T. Sutherlin, June 16, 1849 - December 30, 1859, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC; Receipts of Sutherlin and Ferrell, October 4, 1858 - October 18, 1858, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke; and Receipt of Philip H. Howerton, May 29, 1851, Charles H. Cabaniss Papers, Duke.

<sup>342</sup> Diary of George Washington Jeffreys, January 20, 1845 & February 26, 1845; Tilley, *Bright Tobacco Industry*, 22-25; Charles Coleman Diaries, date; and Ricketts, ed., *A Diary Kept*, pp.

close, bright tobacco and dark tobacco shared the Southside landscape, but a fundamental agricultural transition was underway.

Of course the development of yellow tobacco culture did not force farmers to abandon strict agricultural reform in favor of the new staple, but it did undermine the advice of Taylor, Ruffin, Bruce, and Edmunds by obliquely addressing some of the reform movement's most pressing concerns. Bright tobacco challenged intensification efforts that, if not impractical, were certainly quite difficult to implement on Piedmont farms. Farm inputs such as guano and clover seed were expensive: during the 1850s, one bag of guano (200 pounds) cost between four and five dollars, and clover seed brought as much as nine dollars per bushel.<sup>343</sup> In addition, crops key to the convertible husbandry practiced on many northern farms grew poorly in the Southside, from cool season pasture grasses to legumes. Perhaps most significantly, local farmers and planters had a strong historic attachment to tobacco. For more than a century they had staked their fortunes on producing cured leaf along the region's watercourses and hollows. Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania transportation networks, towns, plantations, and rural countryside had been shaped by tobacco, and it was to be expected that regional farmers would be reluctant to abandon or lessen their cultivation of the crop. Bright tobacco worked within the natural and built environments of the Southside, subtly modifying farm routines, field placement, and crop rotation. In the end the new variety would prove transformative, altering regional economics and ecosystems, but for all its fanfare in newspapers and at market, during the antebellum period the transition to bright leaf on local farms and plantations was a quiet revolution.

If the new tobacco type made a certain sense based on the rural built environment, many growers also found its culture fundamentally comforting in a way that other cash crops were not.

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<sup>343</sup> Receipt of Philip H. Howerton, September 29, 1855, Philip H. Howerton Papers, Duke; Receipt of F. R. Cousins, October 14, 1859, F. R. Cousins Papers, Duke; and Receipt of Rufus H. Owen, September 14, 1861, Owen Family Papers, VHS.

Bright tobacco was a less ideologically threatening form of agricultural alternative than grape vines, grain, or sheep. At a point in time when southern defenses of slavery grew more strident and unyielding, with such apologists as Virginia's George Fitzhugh declaring the institution a "positive good" rather than a "necessary evil," bright tobacco did little to challenge existing labor relationships.<sup>344</sup> The new tobacco culture did not ask planters to reduce their slave work forces, nor did it force white landowners who owned no slaves to purchase bonded labor. Unlike agricultural reform campaigns to refashion the southern plantation, bright tobacco promised to use black hands in traditional ways. Bright leaf relieved farmers of the need to ponder the viability of slaves as shepherds, viniculturists, stewards of manure, or silk weavers, and the crop eliminated questions of what to do with bonded labor during the months that wheat and barley fields all but cared for themselves. Bruce's worries about the future viability of slavery and Coleman's obvious efforts to ignore the issue were rendered less pressing by profitable tobacco culture within the bounds of existing farms, barns, and markets. Yellow tobacco thus refashioned Southside agriculture in a distinctly "southern" fashion, and local cultivators seemed comfortable with this new wine in old bottles. Although the spread of bright tobacco quelled a burgeoning agricultural revolution in the three counties, in part by co-opting agricultural reform goals, the Civil War would challenge the existing agricultural paradigm by restricting tobacco markets and, eventually, removing the labor base upon which the entire system rested.

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<sup>344</sup> George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!, or, Slaves without Masters* (Richmond, VA: A. Morris, 1857), xiii.

## CHAPTER 5

BRIGHT LEAF DURING THE CIVIL WAR: ADVERSITY AND OPPORTUNITY IN THE  
SOUTHSIDE

When General Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox on April 9, 1865, Confederate president Jefferson Davis was sitting in Danville tobaccoist William Sutherlin's mansion on the southern bluffs of the Dan River. Following the Confederate government's retreat from Richmond to Danville on April 3, Sutherlin offered his house to southern officials, and for seven days the structure became the center of the last capital of the Confederacy. Sutherlin - a major figure in both the city's wartime tobacco industry and regional military activities - demonstrated his wealth by spreading a gracious table before Confederate leaders and extending them every hospitality.<sup>345</sup> At the outbreak of the war, the small tobacco town seemed unlikely to one day find itself the seat of a fleeting nation - even if only for a week - yet the same geographical and environmental conditions that contributed to the growth of bright tobacco culture made the region an important source of supplies and men for the Confederate war effort, and one of the most vital links between Virginia's eastern front and the Deep South. The Richmond and Danville Railroad - which remained operational until the very last days of the war - hauled food, tobacco, and troops to the front lines, and connected the Confederate capital to more southern locales. The conflict also challenged the primacy of tobacco culture in

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<sup>345</sup> For a summary of the evacuation from Richmond to Danville, see Nelson D. Lankford, *Richmond Burning: The Last Days of the Confederate Capital* (New York: Viking Press, 2002), 71, 104-105; Cassye Averett Young, *The Last Capitol of the Confederacy, Danville, Virginia, as the President of the Confederacy Saw It on His Stay Here from April 3 to April 10, 1865* (Danville, VA: Danville Printing Co., 1955), 4-9; and Myrta Lockett Avary, *Dixie after the War: An Exposition of Social Conditions Existing in the South, During the Twelve Years Succeeding the Fall of Richmond* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1906), 47-52.

Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania, but it eventually cemented the place of bright leaf in the local agricultural and commercial landscape.

The Civil War presented both problems and opportunities for tobacco agriculture and manufacturing along the Border. Throughout much of the South, the war was a punctuated environmental disturbance “akin to a natural disaster” that lasted for four years.<sup>346</sup> Combat and its attendant societal reordering destroyed forests, gouged holes in the earth, consumed vast herds of livestock, and spread disease, in addition to killing off a portion of the human population. The conflict was less destructive in the Southside, behind the lines for most of the war, but it did at least threaten to change regional agriculture. Among the most serious difficulties were the closure of northern and foreign markets to southern tobacco, the conversion of several of Danville’s warehouses and tobacco factories into military prisons, pressure on farmers by Confederate and state authorities to produce foodstuffs in the place of tobacco as the war progressed, and ever-increasing diversions of white and black agricultural labor into the war effort. Despite these restraining factors, the war ultimately proved stimulating to bright leaf production. Regional growers and manufacturers remained well behind the front lines for the duration of the war, while fighting forced many of their competitors in cities such as Richmond and Petersburg to close or curtail production. A smaller market for regional tobacco products - essentially limited to portions of the Southeast - put pressure on all tobacco manufacturers and brought an increased attention to quality, and as a result, bright leaf’s reputation as the finest tobacco type led to high prices and increased market share. In many ways bright tobacco agriculture and the slavery (at least until emancipation) that so shaped it continued much as if

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<sup>346</sup> Lisa Brady, “The Wilderness of War: Nature and Strategy in the American Civil War,” *Environmental History* 10, 3 (July 2005): 422.

there was no conflict raging just a few counties to the east.<sup>347</sup> The Civil War neither doomed bright tobacco nor ensured that it would become the dominant form of regional agriculture, but the conflict did accentuate and even accelerate antebellum cultivation and marketing practices.

Historians have described Danville and the surrounding countryside during the Civil War in two quite disparate ways. Frederick Siegel, in *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness*, portrayed Danville as “a major economic beneficiary of the war,” and he attributed the boom largely to the expansion of the tobacco manufacturing industry.<sup>348</sup> Nannie Tilley, on the other hand, pointed to “disrupted manufacturing interests and lack of transportation facilities” in *The Bright Tobacco Industry*, turmoil that she believed “caused serious disturbances in the tobacco industry.”<sup>349</sup> The truth is probably somewhere between these two viewpoints. The constricted wartime market cut down on demand for dark tobacco, and pushed some traditional growers out of tobacco and into grain and livestock production. Tight wartime markets meant that only the best tobacco sold, and with its reputation for quality, bright tobacco was positioned to increase its market share. Thus bright leaf continued to sell well, with prices for quality leaf keeping pace with the war’s dramatic rate of inflation. More than anything, the conflict spread the reputation of the region’s bright tobacco and its manufacturers’ brands throughout the South, as Danville area “yellow leaf” appeared in markets from Atlanta to Mobile to New Orleans, continuing regional manufacturers’ antebellum marketing efforts.

The war and its result presented the white landowning farmers who controlled Southside tobacco culture with their most serious obstacle. Emancipation threatened the human foundation on which these tobacco growers had built regional agriculture; small farmers and planters alike

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<sup>347</sup> John Inscocoe has called for more studies of slavery and economy in portions of the South behind the battle lines. See Inscocoe, *Race, War, and Remembrance in the Appalachian South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 81.

<sup>348</sup> Siegel, *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness*, 153.

<sup>349</sup> Tilley, *The Bright Tobacco Industry*, 358.

may have planted tobacco, but large plantations utilizing slave labor were lucrative and expanding during the antebellum era, bucking the general trend in the rest of Virginia and North Carolina. At the same time, emancipation offered former slaves the opportunity to become tobacco farmers in their own right, working for their own futures. Although the war altered the antebellum pattern of growth, eventually creating a landscape worked by wage labor, sharecroppers, and renters, it helped build the reputation of bright tobacco and expanded the market for bright leaf products by creating severe competition among the South's tobacco producers, a competition that favored tobacco of the best quality. It was these wartime trends and the associated tobacco manufacturing that propelled the growth of bright leaf during Reconstruction. The issue of agricultural labor would loom large after Appomattox, but the Civil War reinforced the importance of tobacco in the regional economy, thus assuring that landowners would vigorously pursue answers to the labor question.

### **A War in the Marketplace**

If the majority of Caswell's, Halifax's, and Pittsylvania's white residents had had their way, there would have been no Civil War. The region's numerous slave owners valued the institution and resented northern interference in questions of southern labor and race, yet the general prosperity of the 1850s bright tobacco boom made tobacco planters and manufacturers - the bulk of political leadership in the three counties - reluctant to risk division of the Union under any but the direst of circumstances. Local leaders such as Sutherlin, the majority of whom were Whigs and moderate Unionists, feared abolition, but they also worried about the stability of a hastily assembled southern government, the loss of tobacco markets, potential changes to tax rates, and the general unrest of war.<sup>350</sup> As in other reaches of the commonwealth and the larger

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<sup>350</sup> Siegel, *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness*, 149-152; and "Maj. William T. Sutherlin," *Southern Planter and Farmer* 10, 10 (October 1875): 596.

South reluctant to commit to secession, the April 12-13 siege of Fort Sumter and Lincoln's April 15 call for 75,000 troops to quell the brewing rebellion resulted in a sea change in public opinion.<sup>351</sup> The Southside's white leaders threw their hats in with the Confederacy, and the region remained staunchly partisan throughout the course of the war. Pittsylvania County alone committed twenty-two companies to the southern cause, as communities sent their farmers, overseers, merchants, sons, and husbands off to the front, in units with such colorful names as the "Turkey Cock Greys" and "Pigg River Invincibles."<sup>352</sup> In all, "nearly four-fifths of the county's [white] men of military age served in front-line Confederate units" at some point during the conflict.<sup>353</sup> Halifax and Caswell men volunteered in similar numbers for the conflict.<sup>354</sup> Danville resident Robert Withers commented on the martial fever in the city as the troops boarded trains for the eastern front in 1861, and William Tredway, Captain of Company I in the 53rd Regiment of Virginia Infantry, recorded crowds of well-wishers sending soldiers off in a festive atmosphere. Soldiers paraded the streets, and "each man had at least one large trunk well packed as if taking a trip to the Greenbrier White [hotel]." The Richmond and Danville Railroad, the same line that carried guano and plaster into the Southside and tobacco out of the region, was now carrying its farmers and planters to the eastern front.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> Jeffrey W. McClurken, *Take Care of the Living: Reconstructing Confederate Veteran Families in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 12-13; Jack P. Maddex, Jr., *The Virginia Conservatives, 1867-1879: A Study in Reconstruction Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), 22; Richard Lowe, *Republicans and Reconstruction in Virginia, 1856-1870* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 10-11; and James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, reprint (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 273-274, 277-278.

<sup>352</sup> United Daughters of the Confederacy, *War Recollections of the Confederate Veterans of Pittsylvania County, Virginia, 1861-1865* (Chatham, VA: Randall D. Reynolds, 1961), 5-6; and Clement, *History of Pittsylvania County*, 246-247.

<sup>353</sup> Jeffrey McClurken, "After the Battle: Reconstructing the Confederate Veteran Family in Pittsylvania County and Danville, Virginia, 1860-1900," Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2002, 5.

<sup>354</sup> Edmunds, *History of Halifax*, 497-498; Carrington, *A History of Halifax*, 516-518; Alfred J. Morrison, *Halifax County, Virginia, a Handbook: Prepared under the Direction of the Board of Supervisors* (Richmond, VA: Everett Waddey Co., 1907), 86.

<sup>355</sup> Robert Enoch Withers, *Autobiography of an Octogenarian* (Roanoke, VA: Stone Printing & Manufacturing, 1907), 125; and UDC, *War Recollections*, 12-13, quote on 13.

Once the troops departed, the Border settled back into tobacco cultivation, shaped by a new set of political and economic constraints. The coming of war severely constricted tobacco markets; the Union naval blockade of southern ports hampered foreign trade by the summer of 1861, and only tightened over the following years.<sup>356</sup> This contracted market threatened reduced prices and a temporary halt to tobacco cultivation and industry. Pittsylvania's William Sours noted the lack of attention to local business as the threat of war loomed, writing that "all Business are at a stand and only warlike preparations are being made instead of the busy hum of machinery."<sup>357</sup> Many planters and their agents worried that there would be little demand for tobacco, and market conditions soon after the onset of hostilities seemed to support their pessimism. James Bruce managed to find buyers for his hogsheads in the spring of 1861, but at modest prices; his tobacco (probably dark leaf) sold for a little less than three dollars per hundredweight.<sup>358</sup> Around the same time, merchants Williams and Carrington of Richmond informed Halifax planter William Bailey not to expect strong sales of his leaf. They cautioned that a flooded market at the onset of the conflict, as planters dumped their 1860 crops on the market in hopes of making a sale before trade ground to a halt, meant his tobacco might bring as little as a dollar per hundredweight if he insisted upon an immediate sale.<sup>359</sup> Despite the general excitement and unease engendered by the war and fears of depressed markets, there were few immediate changes in the Southside's agricultural routines. Tobacco farmers continued their

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<sup>356</sup> Barbara Hahn, "Making Tobacco Bright: Institutions, Information, and Industrialization in the Creation of an Agricultural Commodity, 1617-1937," Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006, 113-114; McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 382-383; and J. G. Randall and David Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, 2nd edition (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath & Co., 1969), 440-442.

<sup>357</sup> William Sours to John Sours, February 12, 1861, Sours Family Papers, folder 21, SHC.

<sup>358</sup> Receipts of James C. Bruce, March 11 and April 11, 1861, both in RASP, Bruce Family Papers, series E, part 3, reel 19.

<sup>359</sup> Williams and Carrington to William Bailey, April 19, 1861, RASP, William Bailey Papers, series E, part 1, reel 1.

annual tasks; they plowed and prepared the land and planted their fields when the “season” wet the soil in the spring.

Within months the gloomy economic forecasts of the war’s initial days turned out to be wildly incorrect. Although the conflict limited the markets open to southern tobacco, it also created shortages in production, as tobacco cultivation in Virginia’s Tidewater, northern Piedmont, and much of Maryland was disrupted by war, and many farmers in more marginal areas shifted from tobacco to foodstuff production in anticipation of feeding the Confederate armies. Tighter wartime markets also placed a greater emphasis on quality, strictures that the Southside’s bright leaf growers and manufacturers were ready to meet. The correspondence and business papers of planter and manufacturer William Sutherlin highlight the opportunities the war created for bright tobacco. Sutherlin’s agents across the South noted that consumers demanded good bright leaf, and merchants from New Orleans to Columbus to Fredericksburg wrote the manufacturer requesting products that were as “bright as possible.”<sup>360</sup> A fellow manufacturer from Leatherwood along the Henry/Pittsylvania line wrote Sutherlin that it was the nature of a crowded market to select for the best product, and he advised Sutherlin to follow his lead and “get the fine wrappers if you can.”<sup>361</sup> A Lynchburg correspondent offered similar advice, stating of dark tobacco products: “nobody seems to want these grades . . . bright tobacco . . . is the sort that is wanted.”<sup>362</sup> In consequence of this growing preference for yellow tobacco products, Sutherlin’s sales expanded throughout the Deep South as the war progressed. In addition to New Orleans and Columbus, he soon had agents in Atlanta, Memphis, Augusta, and Mobile, as well as smaller towns such as Eufala and Huntsville, Alabama, and Albany and

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<sup>360</sup> Van Bienthussen & Crafton to William T. Sutherlin, September 7, 1861; Pemberton & Carter to William T. Sutherlin, September 9, 1861; and Hill & Warren to William T. Sutherlin, September 9, 1861, all in William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, folder 13, SHC. Quote in the latter.

<sup>361</sup> B. F. Grasty to William T. Sutherlin, August 20, 1861, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, folder 12, SHC.

<sup>362</sup> Thomas Samuel to Sutherlin and Ferrell, February 19, 1863, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

Americus, Georgia. Sutherlin was not alone in his efforts; even in rural reaches of the lower South his agents encountered other Danville salesmen hawking manufactured bright leaf.<sup>363</sup> Danville warehouse owners T. D. Neal and T. J. Talcott were among Sutherlin's Southside competition marketing bright leaf in the Deep South, though unlike Sutherlin, their company specialized in selling unprocessed yellow tobacco to southern manufacturers. In the spring of 1864, Neal and Talcott forged a partnership with an Augusta merchant to sell their tobacco across the Georgia Piedmont.<sup>364</sup> Wartime marketing also increased an antebellum trend, as Danville manufacturers sent wagon trains of their twists and lumps across the region, touting the fine color and taste of tobacco produced in the Southside. These wagon trains allowed manufacturers to cut out the middleman fees of antebellum tobacco agents, all while emphasizing quality.<sup>365</sup>

By late 1861, Sutherlin and his fellow bright leaf manufacturers faced a puzzling problem: demand for regional tobacco was so strong that they were having difficulty filling orders. Sutherlin's brand names - from "Yellow Bar" to "Old Virginia Fancy Twist" - touted his company's reliance on bright leaf, and his buyers scoured southern Pittsylvania, southwestern Halifax, and northern Caswell for quality crops.<sup>366</sup> As early as August of 1861, agent Johnson Owen warned Sutherlin that the business might have to cut corners to meet demand. He advised his employer that Atlanta consumers were less discerning than in other reaches of the South; the company might be able to use low quality tobacco for plug and twist fillers "if the Wrapper is

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<sup>363</sup> For examples of communications between Sutherlin and his agents in the field, see Johnson H. Owen to William T. Sutherlin, September 20, 1861; Johnson H. Owen to William T. Sutherlin, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, folder 13, SHC; W. W. Bunch to William T. Sutherlin, January 4, 1861, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, folder 15, SHC; and S. R. Neal to William Sutherlin, November 26, 1862, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

<sup>364</sup> "Advertisement," *Danville Appeal*, March 26, 1864, p. 4.

<sup>365</sup> For this practice during the antebellum era, see Joseph C. Robert, *The Story of Tobacco in America*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 94.

<sup>366</sup> Samuel Ayers to William T. Sutherlin, January 4, 1862, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, folder 15, SHC; and Elijah Torrian to Sutherlin and Ferrell, February 19, 1863, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

bright,” but he cautioned that such a trick would not work everywhere, as buyers in cities such as Memphis demanded only “good stock.”<sup>367</sup> Sutherlin seemed to take Owen’s advice, as he bought two and three-year-old crops and hail-damaged leaf, and he even tried to work with tobacco that had been cured poorly or packed in too high order (or too moist, a condition that often led to mold). Even this poor tobacco brought higher prices than bright leaf had at the war’s onset.<sup>368</sup> As the war progressed, area manufacturers faced additional problems as the Confederacy’s rail system became increasingly tied up with military traffic and licorice and other common tobacco flavorings became more difficult to procure.<sup>369</sup>

A public disagreement between Sutherlin and one of his business partners in 1863 provides a window into this inter-South trade and illustrates the tensions of the tight wartime market. James Millner, a small tobacco reseller from Pittsylvania County, entered an agreement with Sutherlin to market Danville-manufactured twists and plugs in Georgia. With Millner acting as the partnership’s Georgia agent and Sutherlin providing most of the upfront money, the two men purchased either 745 or 1300 (the number varies in the two accounts) boxes of low-grade finished tobacco, which they attempted to sell at a 100 percent profit on the Augusta market, relying on the reputation of Danville twists to make the sale. By all accounts, Sutherlin and Millner planned to parlay war shortages into speculative profits. The boxes failed to sell at the anticipated price, and each partner accused the other of dishonest dealing. Millner claimed that he was unable to sell some of the leaf, while Sutherlin asserted that Millner had sold the entire lot, lied about the quantity and price, and pocketed the difference. In March, after efforts

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<sup>367</sup> Johnson H. Owen to William T. Sutherlin, August 27, 1861, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, folder 12, SHC.

<sup>368</sup> Johnson H. Owen to William T. Sutherlin, January 18, 1862, and John Sutherlin to William T. Sutherlin, January 21, 1862, William T. Sutherlin, folder 15, SHC; and James M. Norman to William T. Sutherlin, June 1, 1862, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, folder 19, SHC. John Sutherlin advised William that tobacco was selling two to three dollars higher than it had twelve months previous.

<sup>369</sup> E. M. Gardient to William T. Sutherlin, August 19, 1861, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, folder 12, SHC; and Middleton & Son to William T. Sutherlin, June 20, 1862, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, folder 19, SHC.

at arbitration failed, Millner published a pamphlet in which he accused Sutherlin of besmirching his good name by blaming Millner for the poor sales. Millner claimed that Sutherlin used the deal to dump poor quality tobacco out-of-state, while trying to gouge his partner in the process, thus threatening the name of both Millner and Southside bright leaf (if Owen's and Sutherlin's plan to adulterate Atlanta-area manufactured tobacco was any indication, Millner had cause to question Sutherlin's attention to quality). He degenerated to name calling, referring to Sutherlin as a "knight of tobacco trash," and an "ass in a lion's skin," and in a last bit of bluster, predicted that "buzzards will roost upon his tomb."<sup>370</sup> Millner's attack brought into question Sutherlin's personal character, but also challenged the manufacturer's dedication to making first-rate manufactured tobacco.

In a business where quality of product and quality of character went hand-in-hand, Sutherlin felt the need to respond in kind to Millner's accusations. In his own pamphlet, he described market conditions in Georgia, claiming that inflation and scarcity had pushed the prices of manufactured tobacco to between seventy-five and eighty cents per pound, and with an honest effort Millner should have been able to get equivalent prices. According to Sutherlin, Millner displayed an "utter disregard of truth." An experienced local businessman and politician, Sutherlin used calm insinuations rather than brash diatribe throughout his pamphlet, though near the end of the publication he did resort to base race-baiting, accusing Millner of using his stolen profits to purchase a "*fancy negro girl*."<sup>371</sup> Although Millner and Sutherlin's argument was in some ways a petty squabble, their case illustrates both the ability of regional manufactures to find markets for their products during the war, and the difficulties inherent in the

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<sup>370</sup> James R. Millner, "To the Public," March 20, 1863, 3-5, 16, 23-24, in Confederate Imprints, reel 94; and John Sutherlin to William T. Sutherlin, January 19, 1863, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

<sup>371</sup> William T. Sutherlin, "A Reply to the Publication of James R. Millner, Dated March 20th, 1863," July 28, 1863, 3, 20, 27, 32, in Confederate Imprints, reel 95, italics in the original.

process. This public disagreement also demonstrates the assumptions of connections between personal character and the quality of an agricultural product that underlay tobacco cultivation and manufacturing. Both Millner and Sutherlin believed that the proper type of land made good bright tobacco, and only quality merchants were suited to make and sell that tobacco.

Responding to demand from manufacturers such as Sutherlin, many farmers and planters in the three counties still believed tobacco their most profitable option, and they continued to plant the leaf - especially the more valuable bright variety - despite Confederate appeals for increased food production.<sup>372</sup> Although total tobacco production trended down in 1861, the year's crop of bright leaf was exceptionally large. Anderson Willis of Caswell wrote Sutherlin that war rumblings had done little to limit planting in his neighborhood, where his farm alone cured around 30,000 pounds of bright leaf. He declared it "the best fire-cured [flue-cured] crop I ever made . . . we cured more fine Yellow than I ever did . . ." <sup>373</sup> Farmers with a long history of viewing tobacco as the only certain cash crop in the region clung to the crop as security in unsettling times, and Confederate officials complained that farmers spent too much time and energy on bright leaf and paid too little attention to producing food.<sup>374</sup> In 1863, farmer George Jones was serving in the army but still directing operations on his Pittsylvania farm through letters to his wife. He instructed her to continue selling tobacco despite requests from the Confederate government that farmers switch to foodstuffs, and stated "I had rather had it

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<sup>372</sup> Though hard figures are impossible to obtain, there is substantial anecdotal evidence of widespread wartime tobacco cultivation. For examples, see Hahn, "Making Tobacco Bright," 119-120; Probate inventory of John T. Muse, 1864, RASP, Southside Family Papers, series E, part 3, reel 3; Receipt of William A. J. Finney, September 2, 1863, RASP, Southside Family Papers, series E, part 3, reel 4; Receipt of Joel Hubbard, October 14, 1865, RASP, Southside Family Papers, series E, part 3, reel 3; Receipt of W. C. Tate, April 2, 1866, RASP, Southside Family Papers, series E, part 3, reel 6; and Daniel Tatum Merritt Diary, September 12, 1863, Virginia Historical Society. Though after the end of the war, tobacco receipts from late 1865 and early 1866 record the sale of 1865 crops started in plant beds in the winter of 1864/1865.

<sup>373</sup> Anderson Willis to William T. Sutherlin, August 28, 1861, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, folder 12, SHC. Anderson's letter also illustrated the wartime demand for bright leaf. He offered his crop to Sutherlin, but informed the manufacturer that there was another Danville buyer waiting in the wings.

<sup>374</sup> <sup>374</sup> James H. Brewer, *The Confederate Negro: Virginia's Craftsmen and Military Laborers, 1861-1865* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1969), 125.

[tobacco] than Confederate bonds,” as good leaf was appreciating faster than bonds at the time.<sup>375</sup> Caswell’s William Hatchett gave his brother similar advice, declaring that the region’s farmers should “make all the tobacco we can,” as in the constricted wartime market “the article is bound to sell high.”<sup>376</sup>

As the war progressed, both growers and manufacturers placed increasing emphasis on the importance of producing bright tobacco, relying on the quality of area leaf to outsell the cheaper produce of other southern regions. The Danville warehouse of Neal and Lucas assured farmers that, despite the blockade, demand for bright leaf remained high among the seventeen tobacco factories operating in the town, and promised that farmers who brought them “Bright wrappers” could command “good prices,” but their advertisement said little about lesser grades of leaf.<sup>377</sup> The account books of Robert Wilson bear out these claims. The Pittsylvania planter received premium prices for his entire crop in 1863, selling seventeen hogsheads of bright filler at eight dollars per hundredweight and six loose lots of moderately bright leaf for ten dollars per hundredweight.<sup>378</sup> Other planters did much better. A. Wellis of Caswell received seventy-five dollars per hundredweight for his 1862 crop of exceptionally yellow tobacco - the sort of profit that made farmers wealthy overnight.<sup>379</sup> A resident of Danville noted that the speculation in bright tobacco in its raw and manufactured forms created a boom in the town, claiming that, “The war-prices paid for tobacco soon drew to [Danville] a crowd of tobacco speculators from

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<sup>375</sup> George Jones, in McClurken, *Take Care of the Living*, 30.

<sup>376</sup> William R. Hatchett to Allen Hatchett, October 1, 1862, Hatchett Family Papers, Duke. Continued tobacco production could pay in other ways as well. When Caswell soldier and tobacco farmer Bartlett Yancey Malone was captured and imprisoned at Point Lookout Maryland, his father sent him a box of bright chewing tobacco which he parceled out and sold to his fellow prisoners for the healthy sum of \$55.70. Bartlett Yancey Malone, *The Diary of Bartlett Yancey Malone*, J. G. De Roulhac Hamilton, Henry M. Wagstaff, and William W. Pierson, Jr., eds. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1919), 53-54.

<sup>377</sup> “To Planters,” *Milton Chronicle*, June 28, 1861, p. 2.

<sup>378</sup> Account Book of Robert Wilson, 1861-1865, 112, Robert Wilson Account Books, Oversize Volume - 1896/77, SHC.

<sup>379</sup> A. Wellis to William T. Sutherlin, February 22, 1863, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

both Virginia and North Carolina.”<sup>380</sup> Although Danville was the center of this boom, some of the small rural manufactories, such as the one located on William Finney’s Museville plantation, remained active throughout the war.<sup>381</sup> This emphasis on the importance of quality production further accelerated the turn to bright leaf over the traditional dark Virginia varieties. Displaying this bright leaf fever, merchant John Booker of Richmond wrote his client William Sims of Halifax that good tobacco was selling well despite the war, but rhapsodized about a future of open access to northern and foreign markets: “Could the Blockade be Raised; what times, we should have. Glorious, Glorious, beyond conception.”<sup>382</sup> For manufacturers such as Sutherlin, contemporary profits were sufficiently “glorious.” By 1863, Sutherlin’s business was going so well that he contemplated spending \$110,800 on a cotton plantation, complete with sixty-five slaves and a full complement of farm equipment, near Montgomery, Alabama.<sup>383</sup>

Demand for tobacco in the southern states during the war reflected the mid-nineteenth century nation’s obsession with tobacco consumption. Whether as chewing plugs, snuff, pipe tobacco, or cigars (cigarettes would not become popular before the 1890s), Americans consumed the plant in enormous quantities.<sup>384</sup> By 1859, United States manufacturers produced roughly two pounds of finished tobacco products for every man, woman, and child (including slaves) in the nation. Almost all of this manufactured tobacco remained in the country, where it was supplemented by foreign cigars and an undetermined quantity of home-manufactured chew and cigars.<sup>385</sup> Foreign travelers often commented on the ubiquity of chewing, smoking, and spitting

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<sup>380</sup> Duval Porter, ed., *Men, Places and Things, as Noted by Benjamin Simpson* (Danville, VA: Dance Brothers and Co., 1891), 206.

<sup>381</sup> Receipt of William A. J. Finney, September 22, 1863, Southside Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 4.

<sup>382</sup> John Booker to William Sims, January 22, 1862, Bailey Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>383</sup> John Sutherlin to William T. Sutherlin, February 13, 1863, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

<sup>384</sup> Allan M. Brandt, *The Cigarette Century: The Rise, Fall, and Deadly Persistence of the Product That Defined America* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 25.

<sup>385</sup> This per capita estimate is based on a national population of 31,443,008 and \$21,820,535 worth of manufactured tobacco products. It assumes an average value of 30 to 40 cents per pound for tobacco products, a range drawn from

in the antebellum United States, from the rural South to the eastern cities. Charles Dickens, during an 1842 visit to the nation's capital, remarked with distaste on the omnipresence of tobacco in even the most formal settings. "In all the public places of America, this filthy custom is recognized. In the courts of law, the judge has his spittoon, the crier his, the witness his, and the prisoner his; while the jurymen and the spectators are provided for, as so many men who in the course of nature must desire to spit incessantly. In the hospitals, the students of medicine are requested by notices upon the wall, to eject their tobacco juice into the boxes provided for that purpose, and not to discolour the stairs."<sup>386</sup> This widespread usage continued during the Civil War. Union soldiers in particular commented on the ubiquity of tobacco in the South. As one Massachusetts soldier given to hyperbole wrote, "The little girls in these parts about seven or eight years old chew tobacco like veterans and babies smoke before they are weaned."<sup>387</sup> Tobacco was everywhere, used by almost everyone.

The outbreak of hostilities may have increased per capita consumption among the nation's men. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers from across the South (and the North as well) spent much of the war stationed in northern and eastern Virginia. These troops lived and fought near the Virginia and North Carolina tobacco belt, received many of their supply trains from Danville, and sought distraction from the alternating terror and boredom of the front in activities as varied as cards, sports, and religious meetings. Perhaps the most common diversion was the consumption of tobacco. As Bell Irvin Wiley, the famed historian of Civil War camp life observed, "It is doubtful if any single item except food, water, and letters from home was so

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wide reading. Price fluctuations outside of these estimates would vary the per capita figure, but the point that the nation consumed a great deal of tobacco would remain valid. See *Manufactures of The United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1865), 732; and Kennedy, *Population of the United States*, vii.

<sup>386</sup> Dickens, in Iain Gately, *Tobacco: A Cultural History of How an Exotic Plant Seduced Civilization* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 174.

<sup>387</sup> Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1952), 101-102, quote on 101.

highly cherished by Johnny Reb as ‘the delightful weed’.” He goes on to suggest that southern generals feared “an anticipated cut in tobacco” nearly as much as the enemy. Southside families also sent care packages that included tobacco to their relatives in service or in northern prisons, which they gratefully consumed, shared, or sold. The war thus provided the Southside with expanded marketing opportunities across the South due to the loss of competition from tobacco districts behind Union lines, and with a large and handy body of consumers in the form of troops serving in the eastern theater. Tobacco was a ubiquitous part of American life, and the Civil War only encouraged the habit.<sup>388</sup>

Although tobacco consumption was all but universal, not all regional residents supported the continued cultivation of a non-essential farm product during the trials of the war. Confederate officials expressed frustration at the prevalence of tobacco fields as the war progressed. Opponents of wartime tobacco production appealed to the patriotism of farmers, and condemned growing the crop until after the Confederacy achieved independence. Charles N. B. Evans, the editor of the *Milton Chronicle*, was among the most outspoken tobacco opponents. In the fall of 1863, an editorial in the paper declared continued tobacco cultivation kept food prices higher than would be the case if every farm turned to growing foodstuffs. The *Chronicle* laid the blame for high food prices on the tobacco manufacturer as well as the grower, noting that factory owners with wallets fattened by wartime profiteering were willing to pay inflated prices in order to feed their workers. According to Evans, “It would be a glorious deed for this Southern Confederacy if every Tobacco Factory in it were burnt to the ground and their very ashes

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<sup>388</sup> Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (New York: Charter Books, 1962), both quotes on 172; and Bartlett Yancey Malone, *The Diary of Bartlett Yancey Malone*, J. G. De Roulhac Hamilton, Henry M. Wagstaff, and William W. Pierson, eds. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1919), 53-54. The letters of a Wisconsin soldier suggested that bored troops even chewed tobacco (and spit) when in local churches. See John O. Holzhueter, “William Wallace’s Civil War Letters: The Virginia Campaign,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 57, 1 (Autumn 1973): 39.

scattered to the four winds of heaven . . . Our idea is that the people can do better without tobacco than meat and bread.”<sup>389</sup> The article reflected the realities of a conflict quickly turning in the Union’s favor, but it also emphasized the continued appeal of high-quality tobacco, even on a dramatically constrained market.

### **Obstacles of War**

Although tobacco remained an appealing cash crop throughout the course of the Civil War, grain production provided a profitable wartime alternative to tobacco cultivation, and there is substantial evidence that a number of farmers and planters in the three counties turned to grain cultivation out of either patriotism or practicality, while reducing their tobacco acreage - especially that of less-profitable dark tobacco.<sup>390</sup> Grains (corn included) were particularly attractive alternatives for several reasons: most farmers had antebellum experience raising wheat, corn, oats, and to a lesser extent rye; these staples kept well; the crops could be used for both human and animal consumption; and, as the war progressed, all types of grain found ready markets in regional towns and with Confederate quartermasters. Even districts devoted first to bright leaf often produced surpluses of grain. William Ayers of South Boston wrote the Danville quartermaster in 1862 that the Confederate government could procure “as much Corn in this neighborhood as you want . . .”; in South Boston and neighboring districts, commercial tobacco and grain cultivation were not mutually exclusive.<sup>391</sup> Unlike with tobacco, a failure to market

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<sup>389</sup> “Editorial,” *Milton Chronicle*, November 9, 1863, p. 2. See also, Durwood T. Stokes, “Charles Napoleon Bonaparte Evans and the *Milton Chronicle*,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 44, 3 (July 1969): 258.

<sup>390</sup> For selected examples of farmers and planters who made efforts to plant grain in preference to tobacco over the course of the war, see Elijah Hundley, Journal #1, Plantation Records of Elijah Hundley, Small Special Collections, University of Virginia Library; Williams & Carrington to William Bailey, March 28, 1862, Bailey Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society; Daniel Tatum Merritt Diary, Virginia Historical Society; Account ledger of John Sims and William Sims, 1829-1881, William Bailey Papers, RASP, series E, part 1, reel 2. William Sims made perhaps the most dramatic shift in production: his 1861 records record forty-one hogsheads of tobacco produced on his Halifax plantation, while his 1862 accounts listed none (though Sims did produce at least some tobacco throughout the course of the war).

<sup>391</sup> William Ayers to William T. Sutherlin, January 22, 1862, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, folder 15, SHC.

grain was not a complete loss, as farmers could feed the surplus to their livestock. In addition, increased grain production required little in the way of changes to farm layout and management; farmers simply planted their tobacco fields in wheat or oats, and, if storage proved necessary, they could temporarily stockpile grain in their idle tobacco barns. The three counties also contained an established infrastructure of gristmills, which could convert wheat and corn into value-added products: flour and meal. Five mills were located along the stretch of Country Line Creek between Milton and Caswell alone.<sup>392</sup>

Prior to the war, almost every tobacco farmer had raised substantial amounts of corn, oats, and often wheat as well (wheat was especially popular in Halifax County), in addition to lesser quantities of rye. In 1860, for example, farmers in the three counties reported the production of 1,455,674 bushels of corn, 605,731 bushels of oats, 531,857 bushels of wheat, and 6,042 bushels of rye [table 4.1].<sup>393</sup> Increased production of these crops required little additional investment in farm equipment. Most farmers already owned scythes and cradles (for harvesting wheat, oats, and rye), and the same shovel plows, coulter cultivators, hoes, and drags used in tobacco culture worked for raising grain as well. Farm wagons, rail cars, and bateaux hauled barrels of flour and corn just as easily as they had hogsheads of tobacco. In short, the region had a prewar grain infrastructure - though a small-scale one - and thus replacing a portion of tobacco production with grain posed no real difficulties as long as the price for the latter was high enough. This price threshold was key, as the region's poor hill soils produced low per-acre yields of all three major grains.

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<sup>392</sup> E. S. Yarbrough, "Yarbrough's Foundry," unpublished typescript, 1960, 2.

<sup>393</sup> Joseph C. G. Kennedy, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860, Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864), 104-106, 154-156, 158-160.

[Table 5.1: 1860 grain production in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania counties. Compiled from Kennedy, *Agriculture of the United States*, 104-106, 154-156, 158-160.]

| County       | Corn (bu.) | Oats (bu.) | Wheat (bu.) | Rye (bu.) |
|--------------|------------|------------|-------------|-----------|
| Caswell      | 403,288    | 116,888    | 110,227     | 1,846     |
| Halifax      | 533,012    | 229,790    | 237,518     | 731       |
| Pittsylvania | 519,374    | 259,053    | 184,112     | 3,465     |

Demand for livestock also increased during the war, as the conflict cut southeastern connections to the surplus pork and beef of Kentucky and portions of central Tennessee.<sup>394</sup> In particular, the market for meat swelled in the Southside, with its influx of northern Virginia refugees and its position as a supply base for Confederate forces fighting in the eastern theater. As early as the fall of 1861, there were at least localized shortages of pork despite the presence of swine on virtually every farm and plantation.<sup>395</sup> Some farmers increased their stock-raising efforts, selling pigs, cattle, sheep, and poultry on the Danville and Milton markets, or shipping their stock to Richmond on the railroad. Planter William Sims sold dozens of turkeys in Richmond for \$1.30 a head in early 1861, a price that justified the freight charges on the fowl; another Halifax farmer recorded cattle selling for as much as \$200 a head on local markets in 1864; and yet another planter sold nearly 4,000 pounds of beef on the hoof to the Danville Sutler's Department for thirty cents per pound the same year.<sup>396</sup> As the war drew to a close,

<sup>394</sup> Sam Bowers Hilliard, *Hog Meat and Hoecake: Food Supply in the Old South, 1840-1860* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 106-109. In 1860, Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania were all below the 2.2 swine per person ratio that Hilliard defined as the pork sufficiency line.

<sup>395</sup> James W. Richmond to William Bailey, June 27, 1851, Bailey Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society. Richmond was a drover from Scott County, Virginia, who offered to drive a herd of hogs to meet the needs of northeastern Halifax County.

<sup>396</sup> John Booker to William Sims, January 22, 1862, and John Booker to William Sims, August 15, 1863, both in Bailey Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society; Daniel Tatum Merritt Diary, October 24, 1863, Virginia

livestock products also occasionally served as cash - Pittsylvania County officials accepted bacon as payment for taxes due in 1865.<sup>397</sup> Throughout the war there was good money to be made in meat.

Large plantations had long kept large herds of hogs and cattle, but the war encouraged small and middling farmers to raise as many animals as possible, both to sell and for their own subsistence as inflation made provision dearer. Three examples serve to illustrate the diversity of animals on local wartime plantations and farms. An inventory of William Sims's Halifax plantation in 1863 included thirty-eight horses, sixty-three head of cattle, a flock of 191 sheep, and 165 hogs (Sims owned turkeys, and probably chickens as well, but they were not included in the inventory).<sup>398</sup> Pittsylvania's Berry Hill plantation, owned by Ruth Hairston, contained thirteen horses, thirty-seven cows, fifty-four hogs, and 103 sheep in 1865.<sup>399</sup> Sims and Hairston were large planters, but some smaller farmers also possessed a number of animals. When John Muse of northern Pittsylvania County passed away in 1864, he owned four adult slaves and six children, but his estate included five horses, fifteen cows, three oxen, sixty-six hogs, thirty sheep, thirty geese, and two beehives.<sup>400</sup>

Grain, hay, and livestock production may have been profitable alternatives to tobacco during the war, but this produce faced the danger of additional wartime taxes and confiscation, threats from which tobacco was exempt. In June of 1863, the Confederate government circulated an order to the region's quartermasters that imposed a 10 percent "in kind" tax on certain agricultural commodities. The order authorized government commissaries to inspect local farms

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Historical Society; and Receipt of Samuel P. Wilson, October 3, 1864, Samuel Pannill Wilson Papers, Small Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.

<sup>397</sup> Tax receipt of Samuel P. Wilson, November 6, 1865, Samuel Pannill Wilson Papers, Small Special Collection, University of Virginia Library.

<sup>398</sup> Account ledger of John Sims and William Sims, 1829-1881, William Bailey Papers, RASP, series E, part 1, reel 2.

<sup>399</sup> Hairston Family Plantation Record Book 2, Peter Wilson Hairston Papers, folder 105, SHC.

<sup>400</sup> Probate inventory of John T. Muse, 1864, Southside Virginia Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 3.

and take one tenth of the surplus grain, livestock, fodder, and fiber available on each property.<sup>401</sup> On Samuel Wilson's plantation in Pittsylvania, the quartermaster visited in 1863 and 1864, and confiscated bacon, corn, sorghum, oats, wheat, hay, and fodder, but did provide Wilson with a small quantity of salt in return.<sup>402</sup> A North Carolina agent's visit to Pleasant Womack's Caswell farm in 1864 garnered a similar variety of agricultural produce. The official took a portion of Womack's corn, fodder, oats, peas, wheat, cotton, and bacon.<sup>403</sup>

By the second half of the war, this tax-in-kind system failed to produce the quantity of foodstuffs necessary for the continued supply of the military, and the Confederate government resorted to more draconian measures. Quartermasters in the three counties were authorized to seize supplies from farms at below-market prices, or for IOUs, and in all cases to pay with Confederate paper money, which was depreciating at a rate that made the bills all but worthless. If farmers refused to yield the demanded crops or animals, officials were authorized to impress them without payment.<sup>404</sup> In a typical broadside advertising the new rules from November 13, 1863, quartermaster Jason Paxton, in charge of securing supplies from the southwestern Virginia Piedmont, laid claim to all surplus corn, rye, oats, hay, fodder, and straw in the district. Paxton instructed local farmers to deliver these goods to regional military stables, where they would receive government-established rates, ranging from \$1.30 for one hundred pounds of wheat straw to four dollars for a bushel of shelled corn.<sup>405</sup> Officials visited Samuel Wilson's plantation again

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<sup>401</sup> Colonel Larkin Smith, "Notice to Farmers and Quartermasters," June 13, 1863, Samuel Pannill Wilson Papers, Small Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.

<sup>402</sup> Commissary Receipts of Samuel P. Wilson, 1863-1865, Samuel Pannill Wilson Papers, Small Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.

<sup>403</sup> Tax in Kind Receipt of Pleasant H. Womack, July 7, 1864, Hatchett Family Papers, Duke.

<sup>404</sup> For an example of an impressment notice, see Impressment Notice, March 16, 186\_, in George Hairston Papers, folder 18, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library, UNC.

<sup>405</sup> Major and Quartermaster Jason G. Paxton, "To the Farmers of Campbell, Franklin, Henry, Patrick, Grayson, Carroll, Floyd, the Western Part of Pittsylvania and Halifax, and the Southern Part of Bedford Counties," Broadside, November 13, 1863, in Confederate Imprints, 1861-1865, reel 83; McClurken, "After the Battle," 64.

under the new rules, and seized wheat, oats, rye, hay, fodder, and wool.<sup>406</sup> Army officials also impressed mules and horses for cavalry and artillery units, further undermining local farmers' ability to cultivate their fields.<sup>407</sup> Quartermasters on occasion commandeered local fields more directly, as when they pastured horses and mules on plantations in northeastern Halifax County during the months before and after the Battle of the Staunton River Bridge in 1864. During the campaign, William Sims complained of the depredations of soldiers stationed on his property to guard the bridge. He lamented that "They take every thing on the plantation in the way of fruit & vegetables they can lay their hands on. I dont think by the fall I will have a potatoe."<sup>408</sup>

Danville resident Robert Withers remembered the thoroughness of the quartermasters' agents in his memoirs forty years after Appomattox. He described the "inspections of corn cribs and smokehouses all through the country by officers of the Quartermaster and Commissary Departments delegated for the purpose, and all surplus food [was] carried off."<sup>409</sup> These confiscations and taxes in kind certainly blunted the profitability of raising foodstuffs during the war, and added to tobacco's appeal.

The demands of the Confederate army also temporarily drew slaves from the fields and contributed to a shortage of white overseers needed to direct slave labor. Slave impressment was widespread in the three counties, as in the rest of the state, as southern officials demanded that planters loan their laborers to the cause. An October 3, 1862 act permitted Confederate officials

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<sup>406</sup> Commissary Receipts of Samuel P. Wilson, 1863-1865. The tax in kind continued under the new regulations as well, with quartermasters writing off 10 percent of seizures as tax, and issuing small payments of IOUs for the remainder of the seized goods.

<sup>407</sup> For examples, see Sallie J. Sims to William Sims, n.d. (probably 1864), and James Young to Phoebe Bailey, February 29, 1864, both in Bailey Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>408</sup> Benjamin Lines Farinholt to William Sims, July 31, 1864, and William Sims to Phoebe Bailey, August 17, 1864, both in Bailey Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society. Quote in the latter. Seizures and impressment of agricultural produce appears to have been carried out in a fairly uniform manner - that is to say that in the region privilege did not protect a well-to-do planter from impressment - as evinced by the fact that the Sims family had personal ties with General Lee, yet still faced food and slave impressments. For the family's familiarity with Lee, see Robert E. Lee to Maria C. Sims, May 16, 1862, Robert E. Lee Papers, folder 1, SHC.

<sup>409</sup> Robert Enoch Withers, *Autobiography of an Octogenarian* (Roanoke, VA; Stone Printing and Manufacturing, 1907), 209.

to impress slaves for military work - though it exempted slaves on plantations producing only grain - and promised masters of impressed slaves sixteen dollars per month in exchange for their service. The Southside's slaveholders faced a total of seven impressment orders during the remainder of the war; the commonwealth ordered the first three and the final four were direct orders of the Confederate government (and affected Caswell as well).<sup>410</sup> Among other tasks, impressed slaves built defensive works, laid and repaired railroad lines, worked in the Danville hospital and arsenal, and assembled rifles in Belhartz Hall's Pittsylvania firearms shop. Some of these work projects were quite large. The first commonwealth impressment in October of 1862 drew a total of 873 slaves from Halifax and Pittsylvania to labor on the earthworks surrounding Richmond. From 1862 to 1864, construction of an extension of the Richmond and Danville Railroad from the latter city to Greensboro, North Carolina, relied on as many as 2,500 slave laborers, at least 300 of whom were impressed in Pittsylvania County.<sup>411</sup> Prior to the Battle of the Staunton River Bridge in 1864, rebel forces had a reported three hundred slaves digging earthworks along the river, and Confederate officials also impressed slaves from the surrounding countryside to work on the fortifications surrounding Danville in the last year of the conflict.<sup>412</sup>

Local slaves' opinions of impressment went unrecorded, and likely varied, but white slaveholders' thoughts on the orders were quite clear. The profitability of wartime bright leaf production caused many planters to balk at slave impressment. Pittsylvania and Halifax planters complained that the war's demand on white labor - from soldiering to raising food - made the work of every slave necessary, and tobacco planters seemed particularly reluctant to part with

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<sup>410</sup> Brewer, *The Confederate Negro*, 8; and Blair, *Virginia's Private War*, 122-124. For an example of slave rentals to the Confederate government, see Hairston Family Plantation Record Book 1, 46, Peter Wilson Hairston Papers, folder 104, SHC.

<sup>411</sup> Brewer, *The Confederate Negro*, 41-42, 87-88, 141-142. This railroad spur allowed easier transportation of Caswell tobacco to Danville by the end of the war, and was the idea of a number of wealthy Southside planters and tobacco manufacturers, including William Sutherlin. See *Subscribers to the Piedmont Railroad Company*, February 8, 1862, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, February 8, 1862.

<sup>412</sup> William Sims to Phoebe Bailey, August 17, 1864; and Commissary Receipts of Samuel P. Wilson, 1863-1865.

their workers. Under each impressment order, Virginia's individual counties were given target numbers of slaves, and the southern Piedmont proved the worst region of the state in meeting the Confederacy's call for military workers.<sup>413</sup> The head surgeon of the Danville hospital, frustrated with his inability to hire or impress slaves from the surrounding countryside, sent the following complaint to the commonwealth's chief surgeon:

Having failed after diligent efforts to procure colored men and women in sufficient number to meet the demands of the hospital, I respectfully suggest the expediency of authorizing the Quartermaster of this Post to impress the hands of Planters engaged in cultivating tobacco. It would I presume be inexpedient to cripple the agricultural force of the farmers who are raising breadstuffs and other subsistence supplies, but there is a very considerable number of persons in this region . . . who have turned a deaf ear to every appeal to the patriotism and have appropriated their best hands to the production of tobacco during the present season. It would be fit and proper to make these men bear a share of the necessary burdens of the war.<sup>414</sup>

Many farmers were reluctant to yield their slaves to the war effort, but tobacco producers were the most militant. This reluctance to lease their hands to the government was due in large part to the continued profitability of bright leaf cultivation.

Equally troubling to many planters was the difficulty in finding overseers during the war. As adult males of fighting age who usually lacked the resources to purchase a substitute, the region's overseers were particularly susceptible to both martial fever and conscription. Planter William Sims hired a replacement for himself at the start of the war, but complained that two of his overseers were mustering for the army. Noting similar instances in the Black Walnut community, he worried that the impending war "has broken up almost entirely this neighborhood."<sup>415</sup> The shortage of qualified overseers only worsened over the course of the war, causing white planters and their wives anxiety over the state of agricultural production and their

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<sup>413</sup> Blair, *Virginia's Private War*, 100-101.

<sup>414</sup> Brewer, *The Confederate Negro*, 125.

<sup>415</sup> William Sims to William Bailey, March 15, 1861, Bailey Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

safety surrounded by so many slaves. Sims's aunt, Phoebe Bailey, wrote him in the spring of 1864, requesting that Sims assist her in locating a new overseer to help her run the Bailey's substantial plantation. Bailey's overseer had been drafted, the fourth time that had happened over the course of three years.<sup>416</sup>

### **Prisons and Shortages**

By the fall of 1863, Federal pressures on Richmond and the relative security of the Southside caused the Confederate government to order the majority of the Union prisoners in the capital transferred west to Danville. Danville's wartime prisons posed two challenges to local agriculture. A large body of prisoners consumed a good deal of food that might otherwise have fed local citizens or Confederate soldiers, and southern officials housed these prisoners in buildings used for tobacco handling and manufacturing. In November, roughly 4,000 prisoners of war traveled the Richmond and Danville Railroad in boxcars, and were put up in six tobacco warehouses or factories that town officials had cleared for their arrival. The Hollands, longtime tobacco industrialists, owned three of the buildings.<sup>417</sup> It is unlikely that the structures were available because of a decrease in the city's tobacco auctioning and manufacturing during the war; authorities probably confiscated the structures out of necessity, as tobacco-related buildings were the largest and sturdiest in town. A number of Richmond tobacconists and warehousemen - among them James Thomas, Jr., the capital's largest antebellum tobacco industrialist - moved

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<sup>416</sup> Phoebe Bailey to William Sims, March 1, 1864, Bailey Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>417</sup> James I. Robertson, Jr., "Houses of Horror: Danville's Civil War Prisons," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 69, 3 (July 1961): 329-331; W. H. Newlin, *An Account of the Escape of Six Federal Soldiers from Prison at Danville, VA: Their Travels by Night through the Enemy's Country to the Union Pickets at Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, in the Winter of 1863-64*, reprint of 1870 ed. (Cincinnati: Western Methodist, 1886), 9-10; Edward Pollock, *Illustrated Sketch Book of Danville, Virginia, Its Manufactures and Commerce* (Danville, VA: John M. Hutchings & Son, 1885), 46; and Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1976), 152. The various accounts of Danville's prisons alternate between referring to the facilities as converted factories and warehouses. Based on prisoner accounts of the prisons, especially references to multi-floor structures, they were the former.

their operations to Danville during the war to avoid the risk of the front lines. With tobacco storage and manufacturing space at a premium in the crowded city, it seems likely that government seizure of the warehouses interrupted the active business of the Hollands and other owners, perhaps forcing the city's manufacturers to buy more leaf directly from farmers or to partner with other manufacturers.<sup>418</sup>

Whatever the prisons' effects on tobacco storage and manufacturing, the facilities certainly increased the danger of epidemic disease and exacerbated local food shortages. By early 1865, the prisoner population had grown from 4,000 to almost 7,000 men, this in a town that held only 6,000 residents at the outbreak of the war.<sup>419</sup> This dramatic population increase, augmented by war refugees from northern and eastern Virginia attracted to the town's safe location, led to a number of serious sanitation issues.<sup>420</sup> Confined two hundred or more to a floor in the warehouses, with poor clothing, slim rations, and almost no access to clean water, Union prisoners rapidly succumbed to an epidemic of smallpox or a more gradual death by scurvy or dysentery. In his examination of the town's prisons, historian James Robertson calculated that out of the 7,000 men imprisoned during Danville's fifteen months as a detention center, there were only 3,000 survivors at war's end.<sup>421</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> Jeffrey McClurken, "After the Battle: Reconstructing the Confederate Veteran Family in Pittsylvania County and Danville, Virginia, 1860-1900," Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2002, 54-57; Tilley, *The Bright Tobacco Industry*, 36; and Siegel, *Roots of Southern Distinctiveness*, 153. Alternately, farmers and planters with enough barns may have stored cured tobacco on their farms for almost a year before having to clear their barns for the following year's crop, a practice that could have temporarily reduced the need for storage space in town.

<sup>419</sup> Robert Enoch Withers, *Autobiography of an Octogenarian* (Roanoke, VA: Stone Printing & Manufacturing, 1907), 195. Hesselstine incorrectly gives 2,400 as the maximum prisoner population in the town. See William B. Hesselstine, *Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1971, reprint of 1930 ed.), 169.

<sup>420</sup> For refugees in Danville and the surrounding countryside, see *Ibid.*, 191; Siegel, *Roots of Southern Distinctiveness*, 153; and United Daughters of the Confederacy, *War Recollections of the Confederate Veterans of Pittsylvania County, Virginia, 1861-1865* (Chatham, VA: Randall D. Reynolds, 1961), 81-84.

<sup>421</sup> Robertson, "Houses of Horror," 345. For accounts of the unsanitary conditions and disease, see *Ibid.*, 331-335; George Haven Putnam, *A Prisoner of War in Virginia, 1864-5* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), 33-35; Alfred S. Roe, *In a Rebel Prison: Or, Experiences in Danville, VA* (Providence: Rhode Island Soldiers and Sailors

Although conditions were harsh for all Union prisoners, black troops faced exceptionally difficult circumstances. Confederate authorities confined all black prisoners to one floor of prison number three, in especially cramped quarters. Prison officials forced black prisoners to labor on local defensive works, where they dug trenches around the city in the hot sun beside impressed slaves, work from which white prisoners seemed exempt. Prisoner Alfred Roe also claimed that black troops faced an added threat, as local planters who claimed prisoners were runaway slaves could take the men as laborers for their plantations - an action that planters may have used to recoup their loss of tobacco labor through impressment.<sup>422</sup>

Poor sanitation and overwork promoted the spread of such diseases as smallpox and dysentery, but malnutrition was also a chronic problem in the prisons. Food supplies moved through Danville regularly, traveling from the region's fields and pastures to the front lines at Richmond and Petersburg, but only subsistence amounts remained in the region by the last year of the war. George Putnam, a prisoner in 1864 and 1865, wrote of the Danville and Richmond Railroad, "the one-track road was very fully employed with the trains from the South bearing to Lee's army such supplies as were still to be secured in the almost exhausted Confederacy."<sup>423</sup> Faced with a general shortage of supplies for town residents and the unceasing demands of Confederate troops in the eastern theater, food for Union prisoners received the shortest shrift. Survivors recorded appalling fare during their detention. Prisoners ate rough cornmeal made from kernels and cobs ground together, the occasional ration of trashy rice infested with weevils and maggots, a few peas, slaughterhouse trimmings such as beef eyes and lungs, and on rare occasion the men were served a soup of "musty rice and spoiled cabbage." The men augmented

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Historical Society, 1891), 6; Newlin, *An Account of the Escape*, 9-10; and Withers, *Autobiography of an Octogenarian*, 198-200

<sup>422</sup> Roe, *In a Rebel Prison*, 10, 32-33. Roe is the only surviving prisoner to mention this practice.

<sup>423</sup> Putnam, *A Prisoner of War*, 36-37.

their slim rations with lice and the occasional trapped rat.<sup>424</sup> Supplies were so scarce that the guards often supervised prisoner foraging expeditions in the countryside surrounding the town, such as an excursion to gather persimmons that W. H. Newlin recorded during his stay in Danville.<sup>425</sup>

The demands of the Confederate army, the needs of the Danville prisons, and continued competition from tobacco production all contributed to food shortages and drastic inflation in the Southside as the war progressed. As early as the fall of 1862, prices for livestock and foodstuffs were on the increase. Halifax farmer and tanner Daniel Merritt complained of stolen hogs and corn as high as twelve dollars a bushel in his community, and by the following autumn, he recorded sales of sheep at forty dollars each and cattle at two hundred dollars per head. Likewise, William Sims bought sugar cane seed in hopes of producing his own molasses in 1863, when faced with prices of eleven dollars per gallon on local markets.<sup>426</sup> By 1864, a barrel of flour commanded 150 dollars on the Danville market.<sup>427</sup> High prices, poor quality, and small quantities of foodstuffs provoked some complaints. Even when faced with accounts of the conditions in Danville's war prisons, some county residents argued that Union internees were no worse off than the average Southside farmer. William Sours, a native of Pennsylvania who had moved to Pittsylvania County in the late 1850s, wrote his northern kin that he had little sympathy for the prisoners, as "so far as rations was concerned they got the same the soldiers got but corn bread and beef did not suit those who never lived on corn . . ."<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> Roe, *In a Rebel Prison*, 12, 15; and Robertson, "Houses of Horror," 336-338, quote on 337.

<sup>425</sup> Newlin, *An Account of the Escape*, 10-11.

<sup>426</sup> Daniel Tatum Merritt Diary, September 9, 1862, November 17, 1862, and October 24, 1863, Virginia Historical Society; and A. B. Cabarriss to William Sims, March 31, 1863, in Bailey Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>427</sup> Bird L. Ferrell to J. W. Ferrell, February 15, 1864, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

<sup>428</sup> William Sours to John Sours, October 9, 1865, Sours Family Papers, folder 21, SHC.

Inflation worsened as the war dragged on, and food prices climbed beyond the reach of many regional residents, as Confederate greenbacks became so devalued that one silver dollar bought seventy paper bills in Danville by the war's conclusion.<sup>429</sup> A Richmond merchant sent the following price list to a Halifax County planter in January of 1865, illustrating the extent of the food shortage and the severe lack of faith in Confederate currency:

|                |                                |
|----------------|--------------------------------|
| flour          | \$750-\$800 per barrel         |
| corn           | \$80 per bushel                |
| cornmeal       | \$90 per bushel                |
| peas           | \$65-\$90 per bushel           |
| dried apples   | \$65 per bushel                |
| dried peaches  | \$120 per bushel               |
| beans          | \$100-\$110 per bushel         |
| onions         | \$120 per bushel               |
| turnips        | \$25 per bushel                |
| Irish potatoes | \$40-\$50 per bushel           |
| sweet potatoes | \$50-\$60 per bushel           |
| beef           | \$4-\$5 per pound              |
| poultry        | \$5-\$6 per pound              |
| molasses       | \$50 per gallon <sup>430</sup> |

Other shortages also troubled regional agriculture. A limited amount of guano was still available, but by 1863 it was lower quality Mexican produce rather than the Peruvian article, and cost a prohibitive \$130 per ton. A dearth of civilian powder and shot also limited locals' ability to turn to hunting to supplement their diets, even though by the war's end a farmer complained that "The woods and fields of this vicinity are literally filled with game."<sup>431</sup> These inflated prices and a general lack of foodstuffs at any price created a good deal of hunger along the Border. Danville's warehouses held stockpiles of rations, but that food was for Confederate troops rather than civilians. Additional food supplies, meager though they were, went to the

<sup>429</sup> Avary, *Dixie after the War*, 150.

<sup>430</sup> Booker, Kerr & Lyon (of Richmond) to William Sims, January 21, 1865, Bailey Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>431</sup> "Advertisement," *Milton Chronicle*, April 10, 1863, p. 1; and "Game," *The Danville Daily New Era*, June 1, 1865, p. 1. At the outbreak of the war, prime Peruvian guano sold for fifty dollars per ton in Milton ["Advertisement," *Milton Chronicle*, April 12, 1861, p. 3].

thousands of Union soldiers incarcerated in Danville's prisons. According to Jeffrey McClurken, hunger and growing impoverishment in the countryside caused serious discontentment among area troops concerned about their families at home, though this situation did not lead to widespread desertion.<sup>432</sup>

By the beginning of 1865, the outcome of the war seemed all but certain. Despite general despair and ravaging inflation in the southern Piedmont, some tobacco planters and manufacturers continued to grow and process bright leaf, to the detriment of food production. Sherman's Georgia campaign and Union successes in eastern Tennessee cut Piedmont tobacconists off from much of the Deep South market, but bright lumps and twists still sold well in places that remained connected to Danville by rail, such as the Carolina and eastern Georgia Piedmont. In January 1865, agent Thomas Patrick wrote that "Tobacco is selling very well" in Augusta, despite the threatening presence of Sherman's army in Savannah, an observation confirmed by Augusta retailers requesting additional boxes of manufactured tobacco from Sutherlin the same month.<sup>433</sup> The Deep South addiction to Southside bright leaf remained strong even in the face of the Union army and defeat. Perhaps the most adamant declaration of local farmers' commitment to tobacco culture lay in their decision to plant a crop in the 1865 season. Although transplanting did not take place until after the surrender, planters and farmers had prepared their plant beds and fields throughout Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania during the last winter of the war. Although tobacco was firmly rooted in the region's past, Southside farmers

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<sup>432</sup> McClurken, *Take Care of the Living*, 32-33.

<sup>433</sup> Thomas Patrick to \_\_\_ Patrick, January 31, 1865, and Neal & Whittock to William T. Sutherlin, January 5, 1865, both in William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, folder 20, SHC.

also believed the crop to be the key to their future.<sup>434</sup> The Confederacy may have been coming to an end, but tobacco endured.

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The fall of Richmond finally brought the leading edge of the war home to the Southside in the first week of April. As Lee began abandoning his defensive lines near Petersburg, the Confederate government made plans to retreat to Danville along the Richmond & Danville Railroad. Along with the Confederate archives and perhaps as much as half a million dollars of gold and silver bullion, President Davis and his cabinet reached Danville on April 3rd, where they met in Sutherlin's mansion.<sup>435</sup> Davis's arrival sparked wild rumors in the Southside, with rampant speculation on the future of the Confederacy and the proximity of Union troops. Rural people - black and white - flooded the town on whispers of stockpiles of soldiers' rations in its warehouses, and were barely restrained by Confederate officials. Lee's surrender at Appomattox on the ninth spurred Davis to flee Danville, which he and the vestiges of the government did the next day. Upon departure, Davis ordered the main bridge across the Dan burned, along with the town's warehouses and stores, in order to slow Union forces and deny them supplies. Garrison commander Colonel Withers refused Davis's orders, in part due to requests from tobaccoists Sutherlin and T. D. Neal, but general looting broke out as crowds of refugees forced their way into the warehouses and the homes of the wealthy in search of food. A number of looters were killed in an accidental explosion while searching the arsenal, but Danville's commercial infrastructure, including its numerous tobacco factories and warehouses, survived the turmoil

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<sup>434</sup> Receipt of Joel Hubbard, October 14, 1865, RASP, Southside Family Papers, series E, part 3, reel 3; and Receipt of W. C. Tate, April 2, 1866, RASP, Southside Family Papers, series E, part 3, reel 6.

<sup>435</sup> Lankford, *Richmond Burning*, 86, 90, 104; and Young, *The Last Capitol*, 5.

largely intact.<sup>436</sup> By April 27, the Sixth Corps of the Army of the Potomac finished its march through Halifax and Pittsylvania along the Richmond and Danville line and occupied the town without opposition. The Corps printed a small newspaper on a confiscated press and informed the town of the rules of occupation, forbidding any resistance and in turn promising that Union troops would cease foraging in the surrounding countryside. Soldiers camped in the town itself, and on the surrounding hills of Pittsylvania and Caswell.<sup>437</sup>

Several Union soldiers stationed in Danville blamed local planters and agricultural practice rather than the war for food shortages, and were less than complimentary of regional farming methods, especially those associated with raising tobacco. W. H. Newlin, who escaped from a Danville prison late in the war, described the countryside for several miles along the Dan River west of town - once prime bright leaf land - as barren and desolate old fields grown over with a thick growth of secondary shrubs.<sup>438</sup> These barren stretches could have been either fields abandoned as part of regular tobacco cultivation practices or stretches of ground temporarily vacated as the war in the Southside heated up. Alanson Haines, of the Fifteenth Regiment of New Jersey Volunteers, was more directly critical. Haines's unit was part of the Union force that occupied Danville after Appomattox, and he and his fellow soldiers camped a few miles south of town in northern Caswell County. He described the region's farms as "miserably cultivated, and only with the view to get the most from it for the present crop, regardless of the future." Haines went on to connect locals' abuse of the landscape to their abuse of former slaves. He noted that desperate farmers and Confederate foragers had stripped clean all edible crops, and as a result,

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<sup>436</sup> Lankford, *Richmond Burning*, 104-105; Siegel, *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness*, 158-159; and Withers, *Autobiography of an Octogenarian*, 218-225.

<sup>437</sup> Siegel, *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness*, 159; "Warning to Marauders," *The Sixth Corps*, May 3, 1865, p. 2. The issues of The Sixth Corps newspaper contained messages emphasizing the importance of order and loyalty, and sought to prevent local opposition the occupation.

<sup>438</sup> Newlin, *An Account of the Escape*, 22-24.

“Colored men and boys crowded our camps, asking for employment, and saying nothing of wages if they were only fed.”<sup>439</sup> Lewis Foster of the Ninth New York Artillery, stationed in the town, made a similar observation, noting that “There are lots of Darkies with us in camp. They do all of the work for the boys; bring wood and water, and wash for us for their bread, which we can afford to give as we have plenty. They say the Rebs told them that the Yanks had horns and tails like cattle.”<sup>440</sup> Haines and Lewis equated poor stewardship of the land with the past dominion of masters over their slaves; a critique leveled at patterns of land use central to the production of bright leaf. These Union critiques of relationships between Southside landowners and the environment would do nothing to change the devotion of planters and farmers to bright tobacco.

These critical observations of the Southside landscape continued during Reconstruction. John Dennett, a correspondent for *The Nation*, passed through Pittsylvania and Caswell counties in 1865 as part of a trip chronicling the condition of the conquered South. Dennett was not impressed by regional agriculture; his account limned a rural landscape worn out by a long war, and feeling the effects of intensive bright tobacco cultivation. As soon as he crossed the Staunton River and rode south into Pittsylvania, Dennett encountered signs of severe erosion. He complained that even the road was often impassable “where the rain had cut deep channels and gulleys in the earth, or had washed bare the rough ledges of rocks.”<sup>441</sup> Across this eroded landscape, patches of old field had grown up in tangled forest. Crossing into Caswell County, he found the prospect gloomier still: “The country is the poorest I have yet seen, with crops that

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<sup>439</sup> Alanson A. Haines, *History of the Fifteenth Regiment New Jersey Volunteers* (New York: Jenkins and Thomas, 1883), 310-311, quotes on 311.

<sup>440</sup> Charles M. Snyder, “A Teen-Age G.I. in the Civil War,” *New York History* 35 (1954): 29.

<sup>441</sup> John Richard Dennett, *The South As It Is, 1865-1866*, Henry M. Christman, ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 93.

seem less abundant and healthy than those further north, and with less timber.”<sup>442</sup> Despite the poverty of the soil, throughout this desolate landscape Dennett found the presence of tobacco. He commented on the fine planters’ mansions surrounding Danville, noted Chatham’s stately courthouse where farmers gathered, and described meeting black wagoners driving their oxen back home from the Danville warehouses.<sup>443</sup>

Dennett’s observations on the Southside were far from unique in the years following the war. Edward Pollard, another regional traveler during Reconstruction, also had harsh things to say about an unnamed corner of the Virginia Piedmont. He lamented the region’s “galled hills and old fields, worn to exhaustion by the plough and hoe in the culture of tobacco and corn. It is a level and barren picture. The old field pines, the broom sedge and the persimmons are the memorials of ‘improvement’ under the past system of slavery.”<sup>444</sup> John Trowbridge, roaming the same region in 1867, expressed a similar sentiment. Of the rural countryside he noted, “A striking feature of the country is its ‘old field.’ The more recent of these are usually found covered with briars, weeds, and broom-sedge, - often with a thick growth of infant pines coming up like grass.” Trowbridge believed he knew the cause of the land’s impoverishment; he concluded that “Tobacco has been the devouring enemy of the country.”<sup>445</sup> George Bagby, riding the Southside’s back roads in the 1870s, connected the ragged regional landscape to bright tobacco culture in particular. He declared of southern Pittsylvania, “In the bright tobacco belt . . . there has been a great advance in lands, and an astonishing prosperity among individuals once very poor . . .” This economic success, however, came at the cost of land abuse. Bagby mocked

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<sup>442</sup> Ibid, 103.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid, 94-95.

<sup>444</sup> Edward A. Pollard, *The Virginia Tourist: Sketches of the Springs and Mountains of Virginia* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1871), 18. Pollard’s description was likely of the countryside closer to Richmond.

<sup>445</sup> John Townsend Trowbridge, *The South: A Tour of Its Battlefields and Ruined Cities, A Journey through the Desolated States, and Talks with the People, 1867*, J. H. Segars, ed. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006), 225. Trowbridge named no particular commonwealth locale in his description, rather he applied his remarks to all of the state’s tobacco district.

the tobacco region as the realm of the “sweet Virginia gulley, the rich Old Dominion gall, and the lovely scrubby blackjack [oak].” He noted that the Border was wealthier than the surrounding dark tobacco districts, but his critique of the regional environment suggested that bright tobacco threatened the foundations of its own success.<sup>446</sup>

Northern commentators in particular brought assumptions that the southern defeat in war stemmed at least in part from an inferior way of life; in agricultural regions this implied a critique of farm practices. These assumptions in large part drew on antebellum travelers’ characterizations of southern slave agriculture, with Frederick Law Olmsted’s *The Cotton Kingdom* serving as the classic example.<sup>447</sup> Haines, Dennett, and their fellow commentators held an incomplete understanding of the environmental and agricultural realities of bright tobacco cultivation. Their writing suggests that they knew nothing of the soil requirements of the region’s dominant crop, its value in comparison to agricultural alternatives, or its grip on the collective Southside imagination. These contextual understandings made all the difference in interpreting the landscape. Land that Union soldiers and travel writers viewed as hillside thickets alternately appeared as prime tobacco land in the eyes of Southside farmers. That is not to say that these critical observations did not represent a basic reality of the region’s political economy. This neglect - whether intentional or brought on by exigencies of war - had, if anything, accelerated during the conflict. Erosion, deforestation, and soil depletion did make all types of Southside farming less productive over time, even if bright leaf tobacco seemed to do well on ground far too weak for grain crops. Outside observers did misunderstand much about

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<sup>446</sup> Bagby, in James Tice Moore, *Two Paths to the New South: The Virginia Debt Controversy* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 9.

<sup>447</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveler's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States, Based upon Three Former Volumes of Journeys and Investigations by the Same Author* (New York: Mason Bros., 1861).

farming in the bright tobacco belt, but they did not completely misrepresent the agricultural realities along the Border.

### **Conclusion**

The end of the Civil War brought both threat and promise to the Southside. Slavery was dead, but northern and European markets were open to bright leaf once again, and the region's manufacturers had been hardened by the fierce competitiveness of marketing during the conflict. In the fall following the war's end, William Sours expressed both the promise of the bright tobacco economy amidst the rubble of the war and the growing discord of Reconstruction in a letter to his brother in Pennsylvania. Sours wrote,

Imagine the country devastated by two ravenous and belligerent armies of greater numbers than in former wars every thing devoured from sucking Pigs to lean milch cows, all grain and vegetables destroyed, and trodden under foot and all avenues of trade shut out with thousands within to feed and then you will only have a faint idea of real Hard times. but we think the nigger song of hard times come again no more will in cours of a year or two will be realised. excepting with the freed Nigger if they are not colonized will remain a lasting monument of root Hog or die Their condition today is a thousand times worse of than when they were servants and thousands of them already say so.<sup>448</sup>

Sours' confidence that better times were coming for whites was matched by Sutherlin's belief in the bright future of yellow tobacco. The industrialist greeted occupying federal forces with the same hospitality he had shown the fleeing Confederate officials. Sixth Corps commander General Horatio Wright dined and visited with the Sutherlins following the city's capitulation, and the manufacturer entertained General George Meade - of Gettysburg fame - and his entourage as they passed through the city en route to North Carolina.<sup>449</sup> Sutherlin's actions reflected his desire to return to the business of making and selling tobacco across the nation and the globe. Sutherlin survived the war with the bulk of his wealth intact - despite losing sixty-

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<sup>448</sup> William Sours to John Sours, November 19, 1865, Sours Family Papers, folder 21, SHC.

<sup>449</sup> Avary, *Dixie after the War*, 52-56.

three slaves - and by mid-June he had already reestablished his contacts in New York and London in preparation for sending manufactured bright leaf to the northeast and overseas.<sup>450</sup> For Sutherlin, his fellow manufacturers, and the region's bright tobacco growers, the end of the war meant a return to business.

The most significant result of the Civil War for Southside agriculture was that the conflict ultimately changed so little. The war that swept the South had the potential to remake the landscape. It could have turned farmers away from tobacco in favor of grain; cut off access to all markets; destroyed the barns, warehouses, and factories that made up the tobacco infrastructure; and changed farmers' thinking about relying on a single staple crop. The Civil War did none of these things. It did, however, free almost 40,000 slaves in the three counties.<sup>451</sup> After Appomattox, the African American half of the Southside population would work to determine just how much freedom they actually possessed, and their potential place within tobacco culture, while the white half would labor to resume agricultural life on antebellum terms. Both black and white Southsiders took for granted that bright tobacco lay at the center of that future. Despite this general confidence in the potential of production and marketing of yellow tobacco, a key question remained. What form would Southside tobacco labor take now that the slaves were free? And how would that new labor structure affect the landscape?

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<sup>450</sup> John Gilliam to William T. Sutherlin, June 14, 1865, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, folder 23, SHC; and Slave Schedule, Pittsylvania County, 1860. One of Sutherlin's first personal orders following the end of the war reflected his wealth. In October he sent off to New York for a number of cases of champagne, claret, and sherry, a cask of bourbon, a walnut bed, and Javanese coffee. See Receipt of William T. Sutherlin, October 31, 1865, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, folder 23, SHC.

<sup>451</sup> Compiled from HCDB. The exact figure from the 1860 census was 38,592 slaves out of a total population of 74,839.

CHAPTER 6

FIRE IN THE FIELDS: RECONSTRUCTING LABOR AND LAND FOLLOWING THE  
CIVIL WAR

In her 1929 history of Pittsylvania County, Maud Carter Clement recorded an incident that she believed summarized the struggles of Reconstruction along the Border. According to Clement, the following encounter took place in the town of Chatham sometime in the late 1860s:

On another court day when the town was full of men, armed as before, one of the negroes had some trouble with a white man and the blacks grew very ugly and sullen and gathered in a mass at the lower end of Main Street. The white men gathered at the upper end of the street and the divergent crowds began approaching one another. The white men were led by a man named Whit Bradshaw who carried a long pistol, and as he came opposite the courthouse he waved the pistol around his head, crying, "Clear the way," and brought his gun down to aim on the approaching negroes. The latter began running in every direction through alleys, behind stores, anywhere to get out of reach of those guns. But not a gun had been fired. The white people had no desire to hurt their former slaves. When they saw danger threatening they met it coolly and thus averted it.<sup>452</sup>

Despite Clement's assertion that freedpeople were both the source of danger and inherently safe from the potential of white violence, Pittsylvania's emancipated slaves had good reason to fear Bradshaw's pistol. Clement's channeling of William Dunning aside, black struggles for economic and social independence met harsh white opposition during the years following the war. Emancipation launched a long and tangled negotiation over exactly what form labor would take in the three counties, a struggle fought in the courts, at the polls, in the tobacco fields, and in the offices of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (hereafter referred to as

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<sup>452</sup> Clement, *The History of Pittsylvania County*, 255-256

the Freedmen's Bureau).<sup>453</sup> And it was a battle fraught with undertones of racial violence that no amount of historical whitewashing could erase.

As Clement's court day vignette illustrates, the specter of violence undergirded all regional labor struggles. The details and demands of bright tobacco cultivation exacerbated violent propensities as high tobacco profits encouraged landowners to secure labor. White landowners too poor to hire laborers raised their own small crops of tobacco rather than resort to wage work, and thus larger landowners turned to freedpeople as the only available source of tobacco labor, a decision encouraged by the historic regional association of tobacco and slavery. The seasonal rhythms of tobacco placed further tensions on labor relations. Tobacco demanded year-round labor, but certain crucial periods demanded timely work or a year's crop might be lost. The tasks of transplanting, harvesting, and curing bright leaf all required punctual and strenuous effort, and the uncertainties of free labor threatened white landowners' control over production. It was during these crucial periods when freedpeople had the greatest power to disrupt the system, and when white landowners were most likely to turn to violence in order to retain their control over labor, tobacco, and land: like planting and harvesting, night-riding and other confrontations became seasonal activities. Although Clement did not record the season in which the violent episode at the courthouse took place, similar instances suggest that the crowd of freedpeople might have gathered for winter contract-signing, or trouble during the tumultuous planting or harvest seasons. If the demands of the tobacco season provoked violence, then the physical landscape of the Border region made systematic aggression possible. The entire region - with the exception of the growing town of Danville - was rural, a sparsely settled countryside that hindered the effective organization of black wage workers and tenants, who were more

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<sup>453</sup> The Virginia branch of the BRFAL was established May 31, 1865, to mediate black and white relations during Reconstruction [Richard Lowe, *Republicans and Reconstruction in Virginia, 1856-1870* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 29.

scattered across the three counties than they had been as slaves. In the organization of a postwar landscape workers followed tobacco, and the crop - which experienced few economies of scale - spread across the landscape in small patches. This same rural geography that hindered black defense and organization aided the efforts of night riders, who attacked isolated cabins before melting back into the woods and fields.

Planters who sought to build a landscape around the needs of bright leaf turned their postwar energies to reordering the labor needed to work the land. The following chapter probes the dramatic ways in which labor relations changed in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania in the first few years following emancipation. Most local African Americans first moved from slavery to some form of wage labor and then on to sharecropping, shifts that reflected both struggles over racial control and the demands of bright tobacco, which remained the region's economic engine. This ordering of labor reflected conceptions of land and work that had begun to coalesce during the antebellum period. After Appomattox, the power of large planters appeared broken, but this change proved more illusory than real in the Virginia Southside. White landowners largely retained control of the landscape, and they would spearhead bright tobacco's expansion and the growth of the local tobacco industry in the decades to come. But first, they had to regain control of black labor freed by the war, a process they would undertake, in many cases, by any means necessary.

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At the conclusion of the Civil War, Pittsylvania, Halifax, and Caswell, like the rest of the South, faced a bleak prospect. Broad swaths of Southern infrastructure lay in ruins, Virginia and North Carolina's port cities had faced fire and federal occupation, agricultural pursuits had suffered from four years of general neglect while farmers were away at war, and slavery, the

basis of the region's agricultural economy, had been eliminated.<sup>454</sup> Livestock, another pillar of regional agriculture, suffered decimation from contagious diseases, such as glanders, spread by the massed horses and food herds of the Union and Confederate armies. Large planters retained their land in most cases, but the loss of their slaves erased a large percentage of their personal estates. Widespread southern bank closures restricted the credit available for rebuilding plantations or hiring labor. To compound these difficulties, an unusually high percentage of the region's soldiers had either died in the war or returned home as invalids.<sup>455</sup> Many a family faced the difficult task of the Merritts, who brought the body of their son James home to Halifax from its temporary burial place on the eastern front. His father Daniel wrote, "We brought James home and bur[ied] him . . . in back of the garden under a walnut tree[.] he [was] nearly decayed[,] head & feet & hands off[.] sad sight."<sup>456</sup> The destruction of war hit property as hard as it did lives; Benjamin Simpson, of Danville, described his father's situation at the end of the war as a typical one for local planters: "His property which mainly consisted in slaves, was swept away and all that he had left was about one hundred and fifty acres of land."<sup>457</sup>

Although the future seemed dim at first glance, the region's economic prospects were actually much brighter than those of much of the rest of the South. The three counties were behind the battle lines for the vast majority of the war, Union troops quickly repaired the Richmond and Danville Railroad, and towns such as Danville, Milton, and Halifax Courthouse escaped the burning and looting from both sides that befell so many southern urban areas. The culture of bright leaf that had continued through the course of the war promised an easy

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<sup>454</sup> Citations - use Sharrer, *A Kind of Fate*; Lankford, *Richmond Burning*; Ayers & Wright? *Woodward?*

<sup>455</sup> Kirby, *Mockingbird Song*, 128-129; Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, pp.; and Sharrer, *A Kind of Fate*, pp. A full 25 percent of all military-age men in Pittsylvania died in service over the course of the war. Almost half of the survivors were wounded or suffered from a serious illness. McClurken, *Take Care of the Living*, 4.

<sup>456</sup> Daniel Tatum Merritt Diary, May 29, 1866, VHS.

<sup>457</sup> Duval Porter, ed., *Men, Places and Things, as Noted by Benjamin Simpson* (Danville, VA: Dance Brothers and Company, 1891), 9-10. And taxes on land suddenly bereft of the labor necessary to work it created an added burden. See Tax Receipt of Samuel Hairston, March 7, 1866 (x2), Peter Wilson Hairston Papers, folder 54, SHC.

transition into Reconstruction, as the market for regional tobacco products expanded with renewed access to the North and foreign markets. Also key was the fact that tobacco remained a crop that farmers could produce with little in the way of capital or equipment. The economic hardship caused by the wartime destruction of expensive equipment, such as the sugar mills, cotton gins, and rice mills necessary for the production of other southern staples, had few parallels in tobacco cultivation.<sup>458</sup> If farmers had a standing tobacco barn and could organize enough labor to tend their crop, they could resume raising tobacco. Even a burnt barn was not an inordinate hardship - a few workers with axes and access to timber could build one in a couple of weeks. The main resources necessary for quality bright tobacco production resided in the region's soils and its farmers' (and former slaves') environmental knowledge, commodities that the war could not easily destroy.

A resumption of tobacco - especially bright leaf - production was enticing following the end of the war because demand remained extremely high. Just as farmers who were able to continue production throughout the war profited, growers who raised a crop during the first years of Reconstruction reaped tremendous gains at market. During periods of shortage bright tobacco prices shot above even wartime levels. In just a few representative examples from the first two Reconstruction years, Joel Hubbard of Halifax sold twelve lots of bright tobacco for as much as sixty-one dollars per hundredweight, W. C. Tate sold his crop as high as thirty-five dollars, Philip Howerton's tobacco sold for \$14.50, and a neighbor of William Hatchett hoped to

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<sup>458</sup> The necessity of expensive equipment coupled with the lack of capital in the postwar South greatly hampered more capital-intensive crop cultures. In just one example, Louisiana sugar producers needed \$25 million to cover operating expenses in 1867, money impossible to find during southern Reconstruction. See John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 59.

command fifty dollars per hundredweight for his entire crop.<sup>459</sup> All of these prices compared favorably with the best antebellum sales, and provided powerful incentive for farmers to continue (or begin) bright tobacco production in the cash-strapped region.

Emancipation, while certainly not unexpected by the war's end, dramatically upset antebellum labor relationships in the three counties. Some farmers tried to keep former slaves on their plantations, others quickly sought alternative forms of labor, and yet others remained indecisive, unsure of how to proceed in a tobacco economy without enslaved workers. Daniel Merritt, a small farmer and tanner in Halifax who had never owned slaves, expressed a general apathy in his diary, writing of his neighborhood in 1865: "negros are all free, some stay & some go."<sup>460</sup> Bird Ferrell, of Pittsylvania, was more worried. He wrote to a relative that "my freed Negros have all left me," and blamed his neighbors for promising the former slaves wages.<sup>461</sup> William Sims, of northeastern Halifax, put on a brave front; he boldly proclaimed that "I am glad the institution of slavery is broken up and I think we will be more prosperous and happy than we have ever been." Sims, who had owned 163 slaves on his Black Walnut plantation in 1863, laid out his 1865 labor plan, as well as his vision for a future of all-white agriculture. "I employ most of my negro men to work in the crops, none of the women except those about the house - five of the men I have driven off, as they were worthless, and I did not want them. I furnish all with food but charge the food to their husbands to be taken out of their wages. I expect next year to rent out all my land to good tenants and git rid of all the negroes. I want white servants mostly

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<sup>459</sup> Receipts of Joel Hubbard, August 2, 13, & 14, 1867, and Receipt of W. C. Tate, April 2, 1866, all in Southside Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reels 3 & 6; Receipt of Philip Howerton, February 6, 1866, Philip H. Howerton Papers, Duke; and William R. Hatchett to Allen Hatchett, April 9, 1866, Hatchett Family Papers, Duke.

<sup>460</sup> Daniel Tatum Merritt Diary, April 17, 1820 - November 22, 1866, entry on May 14, 1865, Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>461</sup> Bird L. Ferrell to J. W. Ferrell, November 23, 1865, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

about the house.” He prefaced his account with the complaint that too many of his former slaves remained on the plantation, despite his “wish all would go, but I cannot induce them to leave.”<sup>462</sup>

Although the disposition of labor was of vital interest to both white landowners and freedpeople following emancipation, the question of land ownership was of at least equal importance. Labor and land were the key components in tobacco production. Freedpeople in the three counties understood that access to land was instrumental to their ability to make a new life, and they pushed for a fair share of the countryside, but in this pursuit of land freedpeople met staunch opposition. Local whites vigorously resisted sharing their property; as one Pittsylvania County planter declared to a Union officer during the occupation, “I certainly do love a nigger as a nigger, but when they set up for white folks I’ve no use for them at all.”<sup>463</sup> For most Southside whites during Reconstruction, black desires to own land were attempts to “set up for white folks.” Even Freedmen’s Bureau officials and northern travelers in the region seemed to have little sympathy for blacks’ desires for land, or where there was sympathy, little to no ability to transfer property. Robert Withers, a Pittsylvania man who worked briefly for the Bureau, recorded the following story concerning a freedman who felt the federal government was obligated to provide the freedpeople with farms.<sup>464</sup> Withers overheard the freedman’s conversation with a Freedmen’s Bureau official:

“I came sir,” was the reply, “to ask you to lot me my land. They tell me the niggers is all free now and has to look out for their theirselves. I’ve got a wife and seven children, it’s

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<sup>462</sup> William H. Sims to Phoebe Bailey, May 25, 1865, in Bailey Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society. For Sims’s 1863 slaveholding, see Account ledger of John Sims and William H. Sims, 1829-1881, in William Bailey Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 1, reel 2.

<sup>463</sup> Withers, *Autobiography of an Octogenarian*, 229.

<sup>464</sup> Despite his early affiliation with the BRFAL, Withers was an ex-confederate colonel and staunch conservative who ran unsuccessfully for the governor’s office in 1868, and served as a Democratic U.S. senator from 1875-1881. In his office and on the campaign trail, Withers used appeals to racism to combat Republican and Readjuster calls for reform, equating a vote for either party with a vote for black political domination. See James Tice Moore, *Two Paths to the New South: The Virginia Debt Controversy, 1870-1883* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 137; and Lowe, *Republicans and Reconstruction*, 151-152.

now late in April and time corn was in the ground, and I want you to lot me my land so I can get to planting.”

The Colonel [Fletcher] looked surprised, but at once replied, “Why, I have no land to give you, your former master’s land still belongs to him, and so with all the other land. It still belongs to its owners, and the Government does not own an acre of it.” The negro looked at him in evident surprise, but said, “Didn’t you all set Master’s niggers free?”

“Yes,” said the Colonel, “but we had no right to take his land.” I never saw disgust and contempt more plainly expressed on the human face than they were on that of this negro. He said, “If you had the right to take Master’s niggers you had the right to take Master’s land too. And what good will freedom do the niggers if they get no land to work to make their bread?” This was evidently a poser and the Colonel could only reiterate his assurance that the Government owned no land that could be distributed to the negroes just set free.<sup>465</sup>

Although he was unable to counter the anonymous freedman’s logic, Fletcher was quite correct in his statement that the federal government had little to give in the way of commonwealth land. At the end of 1865, the Freedmen’s Bureau laid claim to just 75,653 acres in the entire state of Virginia, only 3,366 acres of which were located in the Piedmont. Even this meager amount would never become the permanent property of freedpeople. By the end of 1868 the federal government had returned all Virginia acreage to its antebellum owners or their families.<sup>466</sup>

Regional Bureau and army representatives were overwhelmed by the large number of freedpeople, such as the man who confronted Colonel Fletcher, who moved into the district’s towns looking for work and aid. Officials, such as Danville’s Captain J. F. Wilcox, urged freedpeople to sign work contracts with whites - often their former masters - and return to the countryside. Wilcox had little inclination (or ability) to requisition land, and seemed most concerned with keeping his branch of the Bureau operating smoothly and within budget. He also made a concerted effort to work with a local black organization, the “True Friends of Charity,” to

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid, 229-230. The Pittsylvania Bureau was at first located in one of William Sutherlin’s Danville houses (not the same mansion used by Confederate President Davis), though it is unclear if Sutherlin rented the building to the agency or if federal officials commandeered the structure. Either way, Sutherlin acquiesced to the BRFA’s actions in a desire to see the town return to business as usual. See William B. Payne to William T. Sutherlin, December 26, 1865, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, folder 23, SHC.

<sup>466</sup> Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*, 40.

place freedpeople with white landowners.<sup>467</sup> Part of Wilcox's inclination to encourage contracting centered on the Bureau's limited means and the extensive poverty of a large percentage of freedpeople. Lacking both the resources to provide significant aid and, seemingly, a belief that former slaves truly deserved land, Bureau officials distributed rations, gave out firewood, and arranged for medical care for the sick. Wilcox complained that his office could barely keep up with the demands of people "in quite a deplorable condition."<sup>468</sup>

Of a similar opinion as Wilcox, Caswell County farmer and sheriff John Flintoff believed freedpeople needed white supervision rather than their own land. He recorded that all his former slaves stayed on with him as laborers, but worried that "most of others are running about from home to home believing they are free - many of them are killed and dieing for want of money and protection - poor creatures - I have to ride often after them and arrest them for trial, for their fighting, stealing and other meanness they are very troublesome to the white people."<sup>469</sup> Although they exhibited a great deal of concern with freedpeople's behavior, both Flintoff and Wilcox seemed to have little sympathy for their aspirations to land ownership. As a Bureau official, Wilcox at least had the potential to work toward black land ownership, but his reluctance to do so was far from unique. As Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie noted in his study of free labor in the Virginia Piedmont, over the first few years following emancipation "the BRFAL was effectively transformed from an agency that had the potential to redistribute land into an agency that primarily supervised free labor relations."<sup>470</sup> Although they were to remain largely

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<sup>467</sup> Captain J. F. Wilcox to R. S. Lacey, January 20, 1866, Danville Letter Book, 27, BFRAL, RG 105, M1913, roll 71; and Bird L. Ferrell to J. W. Ferrell, November 23, 1865, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid; C. Thurston Chase to Orlando Brown, June 29, 1868, BRFAL, RG 105, M1913, roll 71; quote in Captain J. F. Wilcox to R. S. Lacey, December 20, 1865, Danville Letter Book, 7

<sup>469</sup> John Flintoff in Powell, *A History of Caswell County*, 228. See also Edward King, *The Southern States of North America: A Record of Journeys in Louisiana, Texas, the Indian Territory, Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia and Maryland*, Volume 3 (London: Blackie and Son, 1875), 554.

<sup>470</sup> Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*, 41.

unfulfilled, black desires for land ownership were not naive, for as Steven Hahn has observed, mirroring Wither's anonymous freedman's point, rumors of federal distribution of lands "derived powerful credibility from federal actions, [and] spread widely among African Americans in the southern countryside."<sup>471</sup> Government actions, such as General William T. Sherman's Special Field Order 15, which temporarily divided a strip of the South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida coasts among freedpeople, had created durable rumors that every black family would receive "forty acres and a mule." Federal actions raised the persistent question: if the government could free the slaves, why could it not liberate land for them as well?<sup>472</sup>

Of course a lack of land ownership did not entirely prevent freedpeople from using the landscape. Like almost all of the mid-nineteenth century South, unfenced portions of the three counties were commons available for transient public use. Following emancipation African-Americans continued antebellum practices, hunting deer and opossums in the woodlands, trapping rabbits along field edges, and fishing and musseling in streams and rivers. Freedpeople engaged in tobacco wage work or sharecropping could also range stock on the commons, where their animals foraged unimpeded over all unfenced lands. Sharecroppers often planted vegetable gardens, and even the landless might find an untended piece of ground on an abandoned plantation for a small food plot. Postwar contracts alluded to the ubiquity of gardening, as agreements such as the one negotiated between Robert Wilson and six freedmen defined the size and contents of laborers' gardens and house yards, and codified stock ranging practices.<sup>473</sup>

These gardens probably resembled their antebellum counterparts: interplanted masses of beans,

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<sup>471</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2003), 135.

<sup>472</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 70-71.

<sup>473</sup> Contract between Robert Wilson and David Wilson et al., February 20, 1869, Hairston and Wilson Family Papers, box 2, folder 32, SHC. For similar regional contracts, see Contract between William T. Sutherlin and John Kelly, January 13, 1870, and Contract between William T. Sutherlin, John Edwards, and Nat Jones, January 1, 1871, both in William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

squashes, okra, peas, and corn, ranged by chickens, plots that efficiently used small spaces to supplement diets of salted meat and cornmeal.<sup>474</sup> Freedpeople also continued to use wild plants as remedies for illness. Gabe White, who had been enslaved in southern Pittsylvania, remembered using herbaceous plants, such as “master weed,” mayapple, “Peter’s root,” and sweet William, to treat sickness, and William Williams, born in Caswell, recalled that sick slaves and freedpeople relied on “a nigger mammy who used roots and herbs.”<sup>475</sup> Certain portions of the landscape were probably more available to freedpeople than others, as swampy low grounds, large tracts of forest, and the mountains of the western edge of Pittsylvania were less developed than plantation districts. While these traditional land uses continued during Reconstruction, white landowners worked hard to restrict African Americans from the most profitable use of the Southside environment, bright tobacco farming on freehold land.

Postwar tobacco farms, like their antebellum counterparts, relied disproportionately on black labor, though this particular labor organization was not grounded in any particular economic logic. As far as southern staple crops went, tobacco benefited relatively little from economies of scale. Unlike sugar, cotton, rice, or even wheat, few bright or dark tobacco tasks could be made dramatically more efficient through massed labor.<sup>476</sup> Although this reality meant small white - or black - farmers who owned land could produce tobacco as easily as large landowners, the strenuous nature of tobacco work meant white farmers looked to induce or coerce black labor whenever possible. Tobacco cultivation was never “black work” in the same way that tobacco manufacturing was, but it did carry at least some connotations of slave days.

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<sup>474</sup> Slave narrative of William Williams, in Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, vol. XII, 115-116; Stewart, “*What Nature Suffers to Groe*,” 195-196; and Kirby, *Mockingbird Song*, 216-217; Scott E. Giltner, *Hunting and Fishing in the New South: Black Labor and White Leisure after the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), esp. 10-44.

<sup>475</sup> Perdue, Barden, and Phillips, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 310; and Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, vol. XII, 116.

<sup>476</sup> For an analysis of these economies of scale, see James R. Irwin, “Slave Agriculture and Staple Crops in the Virginia Piedmont,” Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1986.

As one Chatham area small farmer told a traveler passing through immediately after the war, “D\_\_n farming; it’s enough to kill a horse; it’s just fit for a nigger.”<sup>477</sup> William Sutherlin expressed a similar belief in the necessity of black tobacco labor, whether enslaved or free, in an 1866 address to the Virginia State Agricultural Society, though he predicted that African Americans were ill suited to freedom and would eventually disappear from the commonwealth.<sup>478</sup> While white planters and farmers of all sizes did not need coerced labor to make tobacco; they had become habituated to the idea of black tobacco hands.

Faced with the reality that land was not coming from the federal government, and encouraged or even forced by Freedmen’s Bureau agents, most freedpeople in the three counties signed labor contracts with white landowners during the first winter following emancipation. Virginia’s Bureau headquarters in Richmond allowed its agents to help freedpeople negotiate contracts if necessary, but encouraged officials to “leave them free to mak[e] their own bargains” if possible.<sup>479</sup> During the first few years, these local labor contracts took a variety of forms; there was no single contract type, and even within broad categories individual contracts often varied significantly in specific details. With this disclaimer in mind, there were three general models that encompassed most of the surviving contracts from Pittsylvania County. The first model was a wage labor one. In these contracts landowners promised to pay a specified wage to freedpeople over the course of a year, and in return expected the laborers to work under their

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<sup>477</sup> Dennett, *The South As It Is*, 95.

<sup>478</sup> Jack P. Maddex, Jr., *The Virginia Conservatives, 1867-1879: A Study in Reconstruction Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), 186.

<sup>479</sup> Circular Letter by the Virginia BRFA Assistant Commissioner, Orlando Brown, June 15, 1865, in Steven Hahn et al, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Selected from the Holdings of the National Archives of the United States*, Series 3, Volume 1, *Land and Labor, 1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 223-224. For BRFA forcing freedpeople to sign contracts, see the above volume, 27-28. In his tour of the South during 1865 and 1866, Whitelaw Reid reported that freedpeople in and around Lynchburg were extremely reluctant to sign contracts for more than a few weeks or a month at a time in late 1865, as most were convinced the federal government would redistribute land with the new year. Freedpeople in Pittsylvania, Halifax, and Caswell seemed much less resistant to annual contracts. Reid, *After the War: A Southern Tour: May 1, 1865, to May 1, 1866* (Cincinnati, OH: Moore, Wilstach, & Baldwin, 1866), 335-337.

direct supervision. Directed labor under these terms often resulted in large gangs of freedpeople working under a white overseer, much as they had as slaves before the war. The second model paid freedpeople an agreed-upon share of the crops at the conclusion of the contract, in return for either directed or independent labor. The final and least frequent model involved landowners who promised only provisions and housing in exchange for work. These contracts seem to have been reserved primarily for elderly or ill freedpeople, and usually specified that the person work when able. In the first two models, landowners usually agreed to provide housing and clothes, and in the case of share contracts the landowner typically promised to furnish seed, tools, and often draft animals. Most contracts also stipulated a stiff cash penalty if either side defaulted on any of the terms.<sup>480</sup>

Although all three models were present throughout the South in the years immediately following the war, Pittsylvania (and by all indications Halifax and Caswell as well) was unusual for its high percentage of wage contracts. For the 1866 crop season, 68 percent of the surviving 108 contracts in the Freedmen's Bureau records were for wages, 26 percent for shares, and 6 percent for provisions only (see table 5.1).<sup>481</sup> Scattered contracts in planters' papers support these percentages. In the months following the surrender, Sutherlin's Halifax farm manager hired freedpeople for wages, though he found it "quite a troublesome business"; Ruth Hairston hired at least 74 former slaves for monthly wages; and Robert Wilson agreed to pay wages or provide provisions for seventeen freedpeople on his farms in Pittsylvania and Caswell counties. None of these planters made share contracts.<sup>482</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> Contracts, Indentures, and Papers Regarding Cases, Danville Field Office, BRFal, RG 105, M1913, roll 72, #2-246.

<sup>481</sup> Calculated from Ibid. The 108 contracts include a few from Caswell and Halifax, but all arrangements were made in Danville. See the discussion of contract violations below for evidence of contract nature in Halifax.

<sup>482</sup> William B. Payne to William T. Sutherlin, December 26, 1865; Hairston Family Plantation Record Book 1, 59-60, Peter Wilson Hairston Papers, folder 104, SHC; and Contract between Robert Wilson and Joe Wilson et al, July 3, 1865, Contract between W. F. Walters and Robin Dickinson, November 11, 1865, Contract Between Robert

With several notable exceptions, historians dealing with labor contracts in different parts of the South have generally found that some form of share contracting dominated labor negotiations from the very beginnings of Reconstruction, and have concluded that this was the case primarily because of a shortage of hard currency needed to pay wage labor, coupled with black resistance to the tight supervision implicit in wage work.<sup>483</sup> Indeed, at odds with the notion that tobacco districts were bastions of small farms and relative yeoman independence, the preponderance of wage contracts was most similar to contemporary labor agreements in Deep South districts dominated by rice and sugar plantations or extremely large cotton operations.<sup>484</sup> This emphasis on wage work came in part from white conceptions of the nature of bright tobacco culture and African American agricultural abilities. Bright tobacco planters pushed for wage labor out of a belief that tobacco work was exacting skilled labor - they did not trust freedpeople

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Wilson and Doctor Douglas, December 26, 1865, Contract between Robert Wilson and Ellick and Phibby Boswell, January 4, 1866, and Contract between Robert Wilson and Peyton and Margaret Freeman, January 6, 1866, all in Hairston and Wilson Family Papers, folder 32, SHC.

<sup>483</sup> As Leon Litwack stresses, there were a multiplicity of postwar contract terms, but share contracting seemed popular in most southern regions from the crop season of 1866 on due to “nothing more than economic necessity,” Litwack, *Been in the Storm so Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 412. For some notable regional and national studies that reach this conclusion, see Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 87-103; Ronald Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor: From Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District, 1860-1890* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 99-102; Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 110-111; Ralph Shlomowitz, “The Origins of Southern Sharecropping,” *Agricultural History* 53, 3 (July 1979): 563-565; Joseph P. Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 148; and Barbara J. Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985). Lynda Morgan likewise concluded that some form of shares was the most common initial agreement in the Virginia Piedmont, while Kerr-Ritchie’s sampling of the same region found slightly over half of 41 early contracts were for wages. See Lynda Morgan, *Emancipation in Virginia’s Tobacco Belt*, 188; and Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*, 50-51. Stephen Hahn has stressed the importance of extended family group, or “squad,” labor agreements throughout much of the South in the first years after Appomattox. While the Pittsylvania contracts are often between a landowner and several freedmen, they are rarely larger than immediate family units. See Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 169-170.

<sup>484</sup> Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction*, 111. Indeed, the predominate form of early wage contracts in Pittsylvania was very similar to that of the sugar districts of Louisiana during Reconstruction, as recorded by Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*, chapter 3; and Howard Ashley White, “The Freedman’s Bureau in Louisiana,” Ph.D. diss, Tulane University, 1955, 129-130. Even in regions dominated by large plantations, such as the Georgia Lowcountry, sharecropping remained a popular alternative to wage labor. See William S. McFeely, *Sapelo’s People: A Long Walk into Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), 134-135.

to produce top quality tobacco without white supervision. These beliefs refuted historic black relationships with the tobacco landscape - especially slaves' roles in cultivating and curing bright leaf - but served to justify retention of the land. White landowners privileged their own understandings of agriculture and the environment over those of former slaves.<sup>485</sup>

[Table 6.1: Surviving contracts signed at the BRFAL Danville field office for the 1866 season. Compiled from Danville Contracts, Indentures, and Papers regarding Cases, BRFAL, RG 105, M1913, roll 72.]

| Total contracts | Contracts for wages | Contracts for shares | Contracts for provisions | Average annual wage |
|-----------------|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| 108             | 73                  | 28                   | 7                        | \$93.31             |

Compensation under most contracts was modest. Annual cash wages ranged from a low of thirty dollars for a female domestic worker to as high as \$180 for a skilled male field hand. In the Freedmen's Bureau contracts the average annual wage was approximately ninety-three dollars, or just under eight dollars a month, a figure that compared poorly to the average annual slave rental during the 1850s.<sup>486</sup> Of course wage figures in contracts can be a bit misleading. In some cases landowners expected the signer and family members to all work in the fields, in others only the head of the household was expected to work, and in yet others each family member signed his or her own contract. Some wage contracts promised monthly payment, but most stipulated payment via quarterly installments or in full at the end of the year. Share contracts were similarly variable. The most frequent arrangement was for half the crop, but in some contracts the freedman received as much as three-fourths or as little as little as a tenth of

<sup>485</sup> In this regard tobacco planters were like Louisiana sugar planters. See Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*, 2.

<sup>486</sup> See the discussion of slave leases in chapter 3.

the crop. Share agreements were also typically made with the head of household, but often involved the labor of multiple family members. In a typical example, William Sims of Halifax contracted with thirty sharecroppers in the Clover district in one year, almost all of whom represented family units. In some cases share agreements stipulated the laborer raise tobacco, but in many there were no written crop strictures. This relative lack of crop restrictions suggests that white landowners preferred to raise tobacco under wage labor, while allowing sharecroppers to raise less demanding staples, such as corn or wheat.<sup>487</sup>

Halifax planter Samuel Wilson's arrangements with African American men and women in 1866 illustrate the variety and complexity of Reconstruction labor contracts. In total, Wilson employed fifteen workers for the duration or a portion of the year. He paid ten workers cash wages ranging from twenty dollars to \$150, and he reserved payment until the end of the year (in fact, not settling with the freedpeople until May of 1867). Not all wage contracts were with individuals. Wilson paid Ruth Wilson and her daughter Nancy together, and made similar arrangements with Billy Wilson and his wife. Further complicating his accounts, Wilson arranged a share agreement with Stephen Millner, with the planter selling Millner's tobacco crop and keeping a portion of the proceeds. Samuel Wilson continued these labor contracts throughout Reconstruction, always favoring wage labor, but never resorting to a standardized contract.<sup>488</sup>

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<sup>487</sup> Compiled from Contracts, Indentures, and Papers Regarding Cases, Danville Field Office. The lone example of a freedmen receiving three-fourths of the crop was an unusual case. Landowner Robert Wilson promised Frank Saw the unusually generous terms in exchange for Saw's labor clearing new tobacco land. See Contract between Robert Wilson and Frank Saw, January 4, 1870, Hairston and Wilson Family Papers, folder 32, SHC. For Sims's contract arrangements, see "List of Tobacco Produced," n.d. (probably the late 1860s or early 1870s), William Bailey Papers, RASP, series E, part 1, roll 1.

<sup>488</sup> "List of wages paid, May 18, 1867," in Samuel Pannill Wilson Papers, Small Special Collections, University of Virginia Library. The description of Wilson's postwar contracts were drawn from twenty five labor receipts, ranging from February 8, 1868 to April 7, 1880, in Samuel Pannill Wilson Papers. Wilson was a substantial planter before the war; he owned 62 slaves in 1860 (the manuscript census mistakenly listed Wilson as just "Samuel Pannill"). [United States Census Bureau, slave schedule, northern district of Halifax County, Virginia, 1860]. The

An agreement between N. C. Miller of Pittsylvania and thirty-three freedpeople in 1865 demonstrated the harsh terms under which some laborers worked. Eighteen adults and their fifteen children committed to “do any kind of work [Miller] may require of us” in exchange for “one tenth part of the corn crop made on the place after fattening the pork.” Miller agreed to furnish some clothing, but he retained the right to dismiss any employee at his discretion and without penalty.<sup>489</sup> Robert Wilson, a notoriously harsh master before emancipation, drove a similarly hard bargain in 1869. Six freedpeople agreed to work for Wilson for the 1869 season in exchange for just one third of the crop, and none of the fodder. Wilson was not liable for feeding or housing the workers, explicitly writing that he had “nothing to do with it,” forbade them any visitors without his knowledge, prohibited black-owned livestock, and would only permit his workers to plant a watermelon patch if they cultivated one of equal size for their employer.<sup>490</sup>

Although these surviving contracts provide an intriguing window into early negotiations between freedpeople and white landowners, they by no means yield a complete picture of regional labor relationships. The majority of contracts may have been verbal agreements, and many of the ones that were written down have been lost over the intervening years.<sup>491</sup> The surviving contracts do, however, suggest a few things. First, they indicate that white landowners were interested in resuming relationships with freedpeople under terms that mirrored antebellum work as closely as possible. Wage labor tended to place freedpeople under white supervision to a greater extent than work for shares, an arrangement particularly enticing for white landowners

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records of Ruth Hairston show similar variability in contracts, wages, and credit on a single plantation. See Hairston Family Plantation Record Books 1 & 2, Peter Wilson Hairston Papers, folders 104 & 105, SHC.

<sup>489</sup> Contract between N. C. Miller and Laborers, August 9, 1865, Crenshaw and Miller Family Papers, folder 4, SHC.

<sup>490</sup> Contract between Robert Wilson and David Wilson et al, February 20, 1869, Hairston and Wilson Family Papers, folder 32, SHC

<sup>491</sup> For the prevalence of verbal contracts in the region, see Deposition of James Allen, January 4, 1866, in Contracts, Indentures, and Papers Regarding Cases, Danville Field Office, BRFal, RG 105, M1913, roll 72.

convinced that bright tobacco demanded special attention and expertise. These contracts also illustrated the unfortunate reality that in most cases freedpeople had to come to terms with former slaveholders (often their own previous masters). The vast majority of former slaves had no money, had little experience beyond tobacco and corn work, and received little encouragement to find employment outside of agriculture even if they were so inclined. Aside from Danville's tobacco manufactories, industrial jobs were all but nonexistent in the region.

Even individuals willing to brave all these obstacles in search of work elsewhere would have had to leave their friends, family, and the land they knew behind. Attachment to place has been an under-appreciated force in freedpeople's tendency to remain on or near the land of their enslavement. As Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie has noted, freedpeople were not simply rational economic actors, or, in his phrasing, "homo economicus." Former slaves often had an affinity for familiar landscapes that overpowered or conflicted with their pecuniary interests.<sup>492</sup> For many freedpeople, no doubt, a lifetime of labor on a particular piece of ground fostered a sense of attachment to the soil. William McFeely, in his study of Sapelo Island, Georgia, concluded that for a number of former slaves "the memory of the scene was as strong as that of the crime." Individuals that returned to the location of their enslavement "saw the place as separable from the oppression that had taken place there."<sup>493</sup> For most freedpeople the attraction of the land, pressures from local landowners and the Freedmen's Bureau to return to agricultural labor, and a lack of realistic alternatives were too much to overcome during the first post-emancipation years; they signed contracts in an attempt to survive.

This process of negotiation and mixed contracting took place across the South in 1865 and 1866, with share contracts eventually becoming the dominant form of labor agreement. A

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<sup>492</sup> Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*, 56-57, quote on 56.

<sup>493</sup> William S. McFeely, *Sapelo's People: A Long Walk into Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 82.

number of Reconstruction scholars have argued that share contracts were appealing to both landowners and freedpeople for several reasons. For landowners, sharecropping required little in the way of ready cash, a boon in the credit-strapped region; tenants who borrowed against their shares over the course of the year often ended up indebted to the landowner and thus were forced to sign a contract for the ensuing year; and sharecropping generally removed the onus and cost of direct management from landowners. Landowners also hoped that sharecropping would provide freedpeople with a greater incentive to care for the land, since unlike in a wage system their income had the potential to increase under good stewardship. For freedpeople, share contracts were appealing because they typically provided greater independence than wage labor. To a certain extent black families could govern their own labor division, work at their own rhythms, and direct their own agricultural activities.<sup>494</sup>

Landowner opposition to sharecropping in the three counties was staunch following the war, and persisted throughout Reconstruction. At the core of white preference for wage labor was a strong belief that blacks could not raise quality bright leaf tobacco without direct (white) supervision. John Ott, a bright tobacco booster for the Southern Fertilizer Company, summarized this viewpoint in an 1875 pamphlet on the state of tobacco culture. Ott argued that freedpeople were the best possible tobacco hands, but only if carefully supervised by white men, as “The negro, as a general thing, is destitute of that judgement and capacity essential to efficient management.” He recommended that tobacco farmers hire blacks as wage workers, set regimented work schedules, and pay wages in a mixture of cash and food. With a supporting letter from Halifax bright tobacco farmer Robert Ragland, Ott assured readers that black labor had a bright future under the wage system. He declared that “the negro, as a field hand or

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<sup>494</sup> For particularly lucid and concise summaries of these arguments, see Shlomowitz, “The Origins of Southern Sharecropping,” 570-575; and Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism*, 148-150.

domestic, will do work that no native or foreign white man will touch, and esteem it a privilege, after his week's work is done, to black your boots and drive the carriage to church."<sup>495</sup> With these beliefs in the drudgery of tobacco work and the skill necessary to produce a good crop, area tobacco farmers worked to impose a wage labor system that coupled tight control over daily work regimens with long-term assurances of continued black labor.

A careful analysis of the Pittsylvania wage contracts reveals a system of labor that combined the elements of wage and share contracts that most benefitted white tobacco growers: direct supervision of labor and indebtedness. The typical local wage contract stipulated cash payment at the end of the quarter or year, rather than on a monthly basis. While freedpeople worked under direct supervision of the landlord they were allowed to borrow against their wages, and as with the share system, often ended the employment period in debt. This form of wage contract allowed white landowners to tightly control black labor, and at the same time removed the necessity for large amounts of hard currency, all while tying black workers tightly to white landowners through a form of debt peonage.<sup>496</sup>

Evidence that this method of delayed-wage labor served to keep freedpeople bound to particular planters can be found in the Freedmen's Bureau records. In the autumn of 1868, twenty-five freedpeople filed complaints with the Halifax Courthouse bureau agent, charging their employer W. T. Dickerson with cheating them out of their wages. Dickerson apparently advanced his workers money and supplies against their wages over the course of the season, and at settling time the planter informed them that they were either due only a small cash payment or

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<sup>495</sup> John C. Ott, *Tobacco: The Outlook for 1875; with and Account of the Production, Consumption and Movement of This Staple in the United States . . . and Some Observations on Farm Labor in the South* (Richmond, VA: Southern Fertilizer Company, 1875), 27-31.

<sup>496</sup> These delayed-wage contracts were not unique. For example, they bear a strong resemblance to the system Henry Middleton developed on his rice plantation near Georgetown, South Carolina. See Eric Foner, *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 87-90.

actually owed him money. Due to illiteracy or an understandable distrust of Dickerson's calculations, the freedpeople sought a review by the bureau court. Following an examination of the landlord's books, the bureau officials concluded that the landowner's calculations were correct; thirteen of the twenty-five hands actually owed Dickerson money at the end of their contracts, in one case as much as sixty-two dollars. Although Dickerson did owe ten laborers some portion of their annual wage, on the balance the twenty-five freedpeople owed their employer almost a hundred dollars above their wages. Without a source of ready cash, the laborers in debt to Dickerson were forced to sign on with him for another season.<sup>497</sup>

Complaints such as those made by Dickerson's workers were so numerous in the district that the Freedmen's Bureau set up freedpeople's courts at the Danville and Halifax Courthouse field offices. These courts heard all sorts of complaints from freedpeople, but the majority pertained to contract violations.<sup>498</sup> Out of 324 cases heard in 1868, 192 (59 percent) involved freedmen and women accusing whites of violating written or oral labor contracts (see table 5.2). An additional seven cases (2 percent) involved landowners claiming that freedpeople broke the terms of the contract.<sup>499</sup> The disparity in these figures support Wilcox's assertion that landowners were much more likely than freedpeople to break contracts, as the latter considered the agreements "sacred."<sup>500</sup> As in Dickerson's case, the courts typically heard testimony from both

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<sup>497</sup> Halifax Courthouse Complaint Book, 1868, complaints #152-162, 200-206, & 234-240, BRFAL, RG 105, M1913, roll 97.

<sup>498</sup> These two courts also heard a limited number of cases from Caswell County, where there was no field office. Wilcox's replacement claimed the courts were needed because "Freedmen are not paid promptly and...advantage is taken of their ignorance." Danville Letterbook, notes in back, February 1, 1867, BRFAL, RG 105, M1913, roll 71.

<sup>499</sup> It is highly likely that an even higher percentage of the total cases involved contract disputes, as a number of cases listed only the names and races of the litigants and no case information.

<sup>500</sup> Captain J. F. Wilcox to Colonel Orlando Brown, January 26, 1866, Danville Letterbook, BRFAL, RG 105, M1913, roll 71.

sides, reviewed the books and written contracts if they existed, and issued a summary judgment.

Bureau agents only passed cases that involved violence on to local courts.<sup>501</sup>

[Table 6.2: Surviving complaints brought before the BRFAL courts in Halifax and Pittsylvania counties in 1868. The Pittsylvania records are incomplete. Compiled from Halifax Courthouse Complaint Book, 1868, BRFAL, RG 105, M1913, roll 97; Danville Letterbook, Cases Reported June, 1868, BRFAL, RG 105, M1913, roll 72. A few of these contracts involved landowners and freedpeople from Caswell County.]

| County       | Total surviving complaints | Total complaints involving contracts | Whites accused of contract violation | Freedpeople accused of contract violation |
|--------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Halifax      | 274                        | 153                                  | 146                                  | 7                                         |
| Pittsylvania | 50                         | 46                                   | 46                                   | 0                                         |

These complaints indicate that white landowners regularly and systematically abused the contract system. In the case of wage contracts, landowners, such as Elisha Barksdale and Richard Cunningham, often simply refused to pay freedpeople at the conclusion of the year.<sup>502</sup> Other landowners who had made share arrangements kept all of the crop or a greater percentage than agreed upon. This sort of deception was particularly common when it came to division of the tobacco crop, because of the nature of leaf sales. White landowners generally transported the crop to market, sold the leaf, and were then expected to divide the money with their tenants.<sup>503</sup>

Because the sharecropper was rarely witness to the sale, tobacco division was particularly ripe

<sup>501</sup> These figures are calculated from Halifax Courthouse Complaint Book, 1868; and Danville Letterbook, Cases Reported June, 1868, BRFAL, RG 105, M1913, roll 72. The Danville book only records complaints for a portion of the year.

<sup>502</sup> Halifax Courthouse Complaint Book, complaints #21 & 30.

<sup>503</sup> For examples of this process on a regional farm, see Receipts of W. T. Clark, May 9, 1867, June 6, 1867, and June 21, 1867, all in Peter Wilson Hairston Papers, folder 54, SHC. Clark served as a farm manager for Samuel Hairston, and collected small lots of tobacco from a number of tenants or sharecroppers and shipped the leaf to a broker in Richmond.

for abuse. In one example, a Mrs. Moon of Halifax divided the provision crops with two of her tenants, but simply refused to split the \$1,513.94 from the sale of nine hogsheads before the court ordered her to do so. In another, black sharecropper Allen Chappill used the Freedmen's Bureau to challenge landowner James King's monopoly of sales knowledge, asking the court to verify that King had actually sold their joint crop of tobacco for the amount he claimed. The court inspected King's sales receipts and ruled that he had divided fairly with Chappill.<sup>504</sup> A number of whites also refused to honor contracts because they claimed freedpeople did not work hard enough, left the farm too often, produced poor quality crops, or attended "political" meetings.<sup>505</sup>

Although contract enforcement was difficult in Pittsylvania and Halifax, the situation was even worse in Caswell (which had no Bureau office) by 1868. According to Assistant Commissioner F. W. Liedtke, stationed in adjoining Alamance County, Caswell contained no "Magistrate who dares to take up any Case against any of the Enemies of the present State Government." He went on to describe the case of freedman Peter Summers, denied his promised share of tobacco by landowner Bentley Page. Summers had no luck finding a justice of the peace or Freedmen's Bureau agents who could help him obtain his portion of the crop. Citing Summers's case, Liedtke asserted that in Caswell "a poor man has no chance of obtaining justice."<sup>506</sup>

Although a few white landlords, such as Sutherlin's Halifax farm manager William Payne, showed a willingness to prosecute freedpeople over contract issues, the Freedmen's

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<sup>504</sup> Ibid., complaints # 149, 150, & 243.

<sup>505</sup> See for example *ibid.*, complaint #106; and Bird L. Ferrell to J. W. Ferrell, September 14, 1868, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

<sup>506</sup> F. W. Liedtke to William W. Holden, September 22, 1868, in William Woods Holden, *The Papers of William Woods Holden*, 2 volumes, Horace W. Raper and Thornton W. Mitchell, eds. (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 2000), 1:374-375.

Bureau courts were largely an arena for former slaves to seek some sort of legal justice.<sup>507</sup>

Freedpeople made all but seven of the 324 complaints that survive from 1868. In forty-nine of the complaints (15 percent), former slaves filed against other freedpeople, rather than against whites. Most of these cases involved domestic disputes such as spousal abuse or infidelity, but they also encompassed petty theft and assault. The plaintiffs seemed to assume - probably wisely - that they had a better chance of receiving justice from the Freedmen's Bureau than by going through the white local courts, and for the most part agency magistrates seemed willing to adjudicate these matters. Despite the fact that freedpeople brought almost all the charges before the Bureau courts, the magistrates were just as likely to rule in favor of the landowner as the laborer or tenant. Out of 120 cases with a clearly recorded decision, sixty were ruled for whites and sixty for blacks.<sup>508</sup>

What the complaint records make plain is that freedpeople and landowners pursued their interests in decidedly different ways. Freedpeople who felt wronged took the matter to the Bureau courts, hoping agency officials would prove a sympathetic audience. White landowners who became disgruntled with wage laborers or sharecroppers usually took matters into their own hands; they kicked workers off their farm for sloppy work or acting "impudent," or, in a number of cases, simply assaulted them.<sup>509</sup> In essence, many landowners still viewed labor relations in antebellum terms, a worldview that refused to accept the legitimacy of black complaints or biracial contracts. The Bureau courts could provide some relief, but even if freedpeople had a

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<sup>507</sup> William B. Payne to William T. Sutherlin, December 26, 1865.

<sup>508</sup> Calculated from Halifax Courthouse Complaint Book, 1868; and Danville Letterbook, Cases Reported June, 1868.

<sup>509</sup> Captain J. F. Wilcox to R. S. Lacey, January 22, 1866, Danville Letterbook, 28, BRFal, RG 105, M1913, roll 71; for quotation, see Bettie L. Clark to Phoebe Bailey, September 4, no year (1860s), in Bailey Family Papers, VHS.

fair chance of receiving settlement justice their odds of receiving social justice were still all but nonexistent.

Although many labor disputes went through the Bureau courts, elements of the region's antebellum notions of planter paternalism still permeated many day-to-day racial interactions. Prominent men, such as Halifax's Elisha Barksdale, seemed to feel a conflicting responsibility to control and manage black labor for their own economic interests and simultaneously to look out for the well-being of freedpeople whom they believed too innocent or "ignorant" to do well under the conditions of freedom. During Reconstruction Barksdale served as an outside witness or legal counsel in several cases involving former slaves, often arguing on their behalf. In the 1868 case of Polly Jennings, convicted of killing her newborn child and sentenced to death, Barksdale successfully organized seventeen Clover-area planters (including Jennings' former master) who testified to her good character in a commutation petition to Virginia Freedmen's Bureau Commissioner Orlando Brown.<sup>510</sup> Barksdale also intervened in cases more directly related to struggles over field labor. When a Halifax farmer shot and crippled a sharecropper in a drunken dispute, Barksdale lobbied to have the white farmer's fine (\$150) transferred to the injured freedman rather than remanded to the county's coffers. In typically convoluted fashion, before working to provide for the black plaintiff, Barksdale had served as defense counsel for the white farmer, managing to get his client off with no jail time.<sup>511</sup> In a similar case, he was able to get the two hundred dollars a Halifax criminal court fined farmer Stephen Tucker for assaulting and shooting Charles Womack funneled to the freedman.<sup>512</sup>

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<sup>510</sup> Halifax Courthouse letterbook, 1868, November 30, 1868, BRFAL, RG 105, M1913, roll 97. For the Barksdale family's antebellum prominence in Clover's tobacco agriculture, see the Peter Barksdale Papers, RASP, series F, part 3, roll 33.

<sup>511</sup> Halifax Courthouse letterbook, 1868, October 5, 1868.

<sup>512</sup> *Ibid.*, November 28, 1868.

While these three cases demonstrated Barksdale's efforts to look after the well being of certain freedpeople, his was a paternalism firmly grounded in a belief in the superiority of the white landowner. In both shooting cases, Barksdale seemed untroubled that the white defendants received no jail time and only moderate fines for attempted murder. He also took direct action with his own black workers. In the same year that he took a legal interest in the cases of Jennings and the two injured freedmen, Barksdale was himself brought before the Freedmen's Bureau courts for violating a labor contract with freedman William Barksdale, likely a former slave based on his surname. The court found for William, releasing him from his contract with Elisha because the white planter "did not pay him regularly."<sup>513</sup> Elisha Barksdale thus simultaneously worked to care for freedpeople's interests and to violate their rights, conflicting actions that reflected an ideology of planter paternalism that seems to have survived the war and emancipation intact in certain circumstances.

Delayed-wage agreements, contract violations, and paternalistic gestures were common ways for landowners to obtain and control cheap tobacco labor, but whites in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania had other ways of coercing black work as well. For the first several years of Reconstruction, Bureau agents bound a number of destitute black children and orphans to white farmers. In theory these arrangements were only to be made with the consent of the parents or for children who would otherwise become wards of the state. Masters promised to clothe, feed, and shelter the child and to give instruction in a useful trade. Ideally the useful trade was a skill such as blacksmithing or bricklaying, but most apprenticeships listed farming or housekeeping in the appropriate blank. In return, the master obtained the labor of the child (who was often as young as six or seven) until the age of eighteen or twenty-one. The master also typically promised to pay the child a sum of money, from fifty to one hundred dollars, at the conclusion of

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<sup>513</sup> Halifax Courthouse complaint book, 1868, #21.

the indenture.<sup>514</sup> Despite contracts clothed in the language of artisanal apprenticeships, bound black children served under terms more akin to colonial indentured servants, in which “servitude was a labor system, not an educational institution.”<sup>515</sup>

Although the indentures spelled out the ideal purpose of these contracts, the surviving records from the Danville field office paint a much different picture of the reality. From September 1865 to the early summer of 1866, Danville officials bound out at least 201 black children to white masters. Many of these children were forcibly removed from families that vowed they could provide for them. When Captain Wilcox took over the Danville office from bureau agent P. J. Hawk, he was confronted with a number of petitions from parents desperately seeking the return of their children. He complained to his superior, R. S. Lacey in Lynchburg, that Hawk had “bound out several children without the consent of their parents,” but he reassured Lacey, “I have no doubt that in most of the cases, the children are better off where they are, than with their parents.”<sup>516</sup> Despite Wilcox’s blithe assertion, he pursued the claims and began to suspect that Hawk had been systematically binding out children despite their families’ ability to care for them. Two weeks later he sent Lacey a list of twelve children Hawk had bound out under suspicious circumstances, and declared the he believed there to be numerous similar cases in the county.<sup>517</sup> He may have seen the indentures as in the children’s best interests, but Hawk most likely bound them out to receive the five dollar fee the Bureau charged to draw up indentures. It is unclear if Wilcox ever nullified any of Hawk’s indentures, and the cases demonstrate the gross potential for abuse that accompanied the child apprenticeship system.

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<sup>514</sup> Compiled from indentures in Contracts, Indentures, and Papers Regarding Cases, Danville Field Office, BRFAL, RG 105, M1913, roll 72.

<sup>515</sup> Russell R. Menard, “Transitions to African Slavery in British America, 1630-1730: Barbados, Virginia and South Carolina,” in *Slavery in America: A Reader and Guide*, Kenneth Morgan, ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 31.

<sup>516</sup> Captain J. F. Wilcox to R. S. Lacey, December 13, 1865, Danville letterbook, 2 & 3, quote in 2, BRFAL, RG 105, M1913, roll 71.

<sup>517</sup> Captain J. F. Wilcox to R. S. Lacey, December 28, 1865, Danville letterbook, 11.

In essence, the apprenticeship system as practiced in the three counties proved little different than slavery. Masters held absolute sway over their indentured servants, directing their work with little or no supervision from the Freedmen's Bureau; they were even authorized to whip children "moderately" until the age of eighteen.<sup>518</sup> Unlike true free labor, neither indentured children nor their parents had any power to end the contracts or negotiate the terms of servitude. Even in Caswell, covered by a state-wide circular issued by North Carolina Bureau Commissioner Eliphalet Whittlesey ordering agents to bind out only orphans or children of consenting parents, the rules were often ignored.<sup>519</sup> Based on the details provided in the surviving indentures, black adolescents performed many of the same tasks that they had worked at before emancipation, laboring in the tobacco fields and as household servants, and received no real compensation outside their master's whims. An 1867 advertisement in the *Danville Register* starkly emphasized these connections between slavery and indentures. In the ad a local planter offered a reward to readers who might help him locate a thirteen-year-old runaway boy, "bound to me by the Freedmen's Bureau." Illustrating the advertisement was the same image of a fleeing black man used in the newspaper's runaway slave advertisements just a few years earlier.<sup>520</sup>

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Under all of these postwar contract negotiations, indentures, and Freedmen's Bureau complaint judgments, the threat of white violence always lurked. Throughout Reconstruction a certain percentage of the region's landowners were willing to use any means necessary to ensure an uninterrupted supply of black labor. While there was certainly a political element to this

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<sup>518</sup> Stetson Kennedy, *After Appomattox: How the South Won the War* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 38.

<sup>519</sup> Karin L. Zipf, *Labor of Innocents: Forced Apprenticeship in North Carolina, 1715-1919* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 74-76.

<sup>520</sup> "Advertisement," *Danville Register*, 25 June, 1867, p. 2.

racial violence, it often revolved directly around landowners' agricultural demands and the rhythms of the tobacco season. Farmers' success in maintaining ownership of the landscape fueled their desires for tractable and inexpensive labor.

Unable to accept black freedom, whites such as Pittsylvania farmer James Norman sometimes resorted to beating freedpeople who angered or offended them.<sup>521</sup> This violence escalated to murder on more than one occasion; Bureau agents reported a number of unresolved cases of whites killing former slaves during the first months following emancipation.<sup>522</sup> These outrages were especially prevalent around contract signing, harvest, and settling time, when landowners were intent on obtaining labor for the upcoming season, under pressure to get tobacco in before frost, or determined to retain as much of the crop as possible. Throughout the region, racial violence ebbed and flowed with the rhythm of the tobacco season. The following are a few typical encounters. During an argument at season's end, a drunken Richard Cunningham ordered his sharecropper John Brandon off his Pittsylvania farm without pay. When Brandon refused, Cunningham shot him in the stomach, permanently crippling the freedman. In Halifax, James Spencer shot at William Suttle "with intention to kill" around settling time. When Pittsylvania freedman Billy Tanner refused to sign with Robert Terry for the 1869 season, Terry struck him repeatedly with a tobacco stick, cutting open Tanner's arm and head. In Caswell, John Blackwell demanded that Griffin Cobb work on a Sunday during the tobacco harvest. When Cobb refused, an enraged Blackwell struck him, "and broke a wavy tobacco stick over" the freedman's head. When Cobb fought back, Blackwell ran to his house and retrieved a gun, firing at Cobb as he escaped into the surrounding woods. Cobb sought out

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<sup>521</sup> J. F. Wilcox to R. S. Lacey, January 7, 1866, Danville Letterbook, #18.

<sup>522</sup> See for example, *ibid.*; J. F. Wilcox to R. S. Lacey, February 5, 1866, Danville Letterbook, #34; Complaint of Griffin Cobb vs. John Blackwell, September 12, 1867, Greensboro Field Office, BRFAL, RG 105, M1909, roll 21.

Bureau intercession in the case because he feared Blackwell would kill him, “as he killed Littleton Gwyn after the surrender.”<sup>523</sup>

Some violence came out of a disbelief that a freedman would dare stand up to a white man. Emboldened by emancipation and the presence of the Freedmen’s Bureau, and determined to obtain some of their promised rights, quite a few freedpeople, such as Cobb, were determined to resist landowner oppression. This open resistance often triggered harsh reprisals. A typical example was the case of farm manager Edward Self of Caswell. Charged with killing a worker named Bouldin, Self blamed the incident on the freedman’s “impertinence.” Bouldin apparently questioned Self’s farming practices and honesty in front of the farm owner, a “rogue” Self “would not stand from a white man nor a negro.” After the disagreement Self laid in waiting for Bouldin and shot and killed him from ambush.<sup>524</sup>

Freedpeople who believed the Freedmen’s Bureau would protect them from these acts of violence often met with a rude surprise. Overextended and tasked with ensuring blacks remained faithful agricultural workers, the agency was frequently torn between guaranteeing freedpeople’s rights and supporting the landowners who the Bureau believed drove local economic growth. When cases involving murder or other violence came before local Bureau magistrates they without fail referred the incidents to local grand juries, who almost always dismissed the charges. Bureau representatives even occasionally moved from ignoring instances of racial violence to open complicity. Indeed, as one concerned visitor to Danville reported to Virginia

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<sup>523</sup> Letterbook Notes, October 5, 1868, Danville Letters Sent and Received, BRFAL, RG 105, M1913, roll 71; Halifax Courthouse Complaint Book, 1868, # 273; Pittsylvania Courthouse, Records of Outrages, #3, BRFAL, RG 105, M1913, roll 71; Complaint of Griffin Cobb vs. John Blackwell, September 12, 1867. By 1870, many landowners wrote provisions ensuring obligatory Sunday and night work during the harvest season into contracts. For examples, see Contract between William T. Sutherlin and John Kelly, January 13, 1870, and Contract between William T. Sutherlin, John Edwards, and Nat Jones, January 1, 1871, both in William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke.

<sup>524</sup> Depositions in the Case of U. S. Government vs. James Hunt, February 1, 1866, Contracts, Indentures, and Papers Regarding Cases, Danville Field Office.

superintendent Orlando Brown in 1868, Bureau agents and the federal troops under their command were sometimes the employers of violence to ensure freedpeople worked diligently.

Informing Brown of the disturbing occurrences in town, C. Thurston Chase wrote:

The whites declare that the “negroes are idle” and “won’t work.” They come in and report them to the provost-marshal - a Col. [inlegible - perhaps Captain Wilcox] - for idleness and insolence - The officers, at their discretion, send out men to punish the negroes. “Bucking & gaging” - “whipping” - “tying up by the thumbs” - &c were spoken of by the privates in 8th Pa. cav. as common modes of punishment. By all accounts the people through the country are determined to make their freedom more intolerable than slavery.<sup>525</sup>

That Bureau agents sometimes served as physical enforcers for white landowners must have further complicated freedpeople’s responses to their social and economic struggles.

Pittsylvania and Halifax witnessed their share of postwar violence, but Caswell’s tobacco fields and town squares were particularly bloody. With the greatest percentage of freedpeople of the three counties, several well-organized black political groups, and an active contingent of resistant landowners, Caswell rapidly devolved into a countryside of armed camps. When the new North Carolina Constitution of 1868 replaced the old Caswell Court of Pleas with a Board of Commissioners (which held the possibility of appointed black officials), the court authorities predicted violence and unrest in their last official statement: “The Constitution of our fathers, the constitution of our happiness, we drop a Tear of remembrance for thy many blessings and now bid thee a long farewell. We turn with fearful forebodings to the future. We see general lawlessness, a most fearful disregard of public and private obligations, great demoralization, the marriage not so sacredly regarded and observe a general feeling of uneasiness as to the future and a dread when the vilest of men are exalted the nation will mourn.”<sup>526</sup> Within five years of Appomattox, the violent struggles over the meaning of emancipation and labor in the fields in

<sup>525</sup> C. Thurston Chase to Orlando Brown, June 29, 1868, Danville Letters Sent and Received.

<sup>526</sup> Katherine Kerr Kendall, *Caswell County, 1777-1877: Historical Abstracts of Minutes of Caswell County, North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC: Multiple Images Press, 1976), 102.

Caswell spawned the assassination of a state senator, led to the impeachment of North Carolina's governor, and echoed in the halls of the United States Congress.

Although some Caswell violence took place in the context of personal relationships, such as the Self and Blackwell cases, other incidents centered around the formation of political and social organizations such as black Union Leagues and white Ku Klux Klan "dens." As early as 1865, Caswell freedpeople organized a Union League with the assistance of Albion Tourgee, a prominent Republican "carpetbagger" judge from Greensboro. The league lobbied for land redistribution and black suffrage, and most threatening to local whites, formed and drilled militias for the defense of the county's black population.<sup>527</sup> More than just organizations centered on ensuring black suffrage, Union Leagues formed from a combination of fraternal, religious, and defensive motivations, and, like most area freedpeople, the Leagues sought black landownership. League branches often had kinship, common employment, or church membership uniting adherents, as did Caswell's Leasburg League, which had twenty-nine members in 1868, most of whom had belonged to the Yancey family or had worked with the Yanceys as slaves on local tobacco plantations and in the Leasburg leaf factory prior to emancipation.<sup>528</sup>

Many Caswell whites resented any form of black organization, but they found martial activities especially disconcerting. In the summer of 1867, white farmer S. M. Lotten wrote to Freedmen's Bureau official William North at Greensboro, complaining of the prevalence and

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<sup>527</sup> "John G. Lea's Confession to the Ku Klux Klan Murder of John W. Stephens," July 2, 1919, North Carolina Historical Commission (hereafter cited as "Lea's Confession"). In this astonishing document, Lea testified to his participation in Stephens' assassination, describing the event in detail. Lea's confession was sealed by the Historical Commission and only opened following his death in 1935. Full text of the document was reprinted in "65-Year-Old Homicide is Solved," October 2, 1935, clipping in Caswell County Historical Association Collection, folder 24, SHC, and is available online at <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nccaswel/misc/confession.htm>, [last accessed February 12, 2009].

<sup>528</sup> Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 183. For the composition and motivation of Union Leagues, see Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 177-186; and Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 49-50.

intensity of league activities. Lotton worried that Caswell freedpeople “have been mustering and drilling their societies for what purposes I do know not.” He went on to claim that league members committed nightly depredations, actions local Bureau agents did little to stop. Near Milton “From early dawn till after midnight - nothing can be heard save the drum and fife and words of military command.” League members claimed portions of Caswell’s roads and fields for their activities, actions that threatened the white monopoly of the landscape. Lotten concluded his letter with a sexually charged allusion that would flavor many a postwar white racial appeal, warning that black parades “endanger in a number of cases the lifes of ladies who may be traversing the public highways.”<sup>529</sup>

Public rallies and political meetings in the county were prone to violent outbreaks. An 1868 Democratic Party barbecue in Yanceyville ended in an assault on nearby Republicans, an attack which included the severe beating of one black farmer and the shooting of another. Two weeks later a riot erupted in Milton when black organizer George Bow tried to recruit freedpeople to join a Grant Club. The threat of violence was so omnipresent that black minister John Cook, who reported the Yanceyville riot to Governor William Holden, felt it unsafe to remain in the county. He informed Holden, “I had to mak my escapt out of the PlaCe for fear of them [white Democrats].” He concluded there could be no true freedom for black people in Caswell without a “forest of the union Army.”<sup>530</sup>

Cook’s belief in the need for a “forest” of troops proved prescient, as local groups (or “dens”) of the Ku Klux Klan, often operating under sobriquets such as the Constitutional Union Guard, White Brotherhood, or the Invisible Empire, sprang up throughout the county in 1868 and

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<sup>529</sup> S. M. Lotten to William North, July 22, 1867, Letters Received, Greensboro Field Office, BRFAL, RG105, M1909, roll 19.

<sup>530</sup> J. E. Cook to William W. Holden, August 22, 1868; John W. Stephens to William W. Holden, August 29, 1868; W. J. Dawes to Jacob F. Chur, September 8, 1868, all in Holden, *Papers of William Woods Holden*, 1:358, 1:364-365, 1:369., quote in Cook to Holden.

1869.<sup>531</sup> Organized in Caswell by bright tobacco farmer John G. Lea, the Klan rode the countryside at night pulling freedpeople from their homes, beating them, burning their dwellings, and threatening worse if they did not sign work contracts and stay away from the polls. Both Tourgee and Caswell's state senator John W. Stephens testified that the Klan all but ruled the county, and had beaten hundreds of freedpeople and executed several prominent Union League members. Lea supported their statements, reveling in the way Klansmen had whipped Jim Jones, a justice of the peace, "and drove him out of the county."<sup>532</sup>

When interviewed by Work Progress Administration employees during the Great Depression, former slave Ben Johnson recalled an incident involving the Caswell Klan that encapsulated the secret society's tactics. Though Johnson's tale (presented here in the exaggerated dialect common in WPA ex-slave narratives) contains a number of apocryphal elements, it captures the essence of the violence and intimidation tactics employed by Lea's night riders during the late 1860s, and the determined resistance of many of the county's former slaves:

Sam Allen in Caswell County wuz tol' ter move an' atter a month de hundret Ku Klux come a-totin' his casket an' dey tells him dat his time has come an' if'en he want ter tell his wife good bye an' say his prayers hurry up.

Dey set de coffin on two cheers [chairs] an' Sam kisses his ole oman who am a-cryin', den he kneels down side of his bed wid his haid on de pillar an' his arms throwed out front of him.

He sets dar fer a minute an' when he riz he had a long knife in his hand. 'Fore he could be grabbed he done kill two of de Ku Kluxes wid de knife, an' he done gone out'n de do'. Dey ain't ketch him nother, an' de nex' night when dey comed back, 'terminated ter git him dey shot ano'her nigger by accident.<sup>533</sup>

<sup>531</sup> William Woods Holden. *Memoirs of W. W. Holden*, Vol. 2 (Durham, NC: Seeman Printery, 1911), 2:154-155.

<sup>532</sup> G. T. F. Gannaway to William W. Holden, December 28, 1868, and John W. Stephens to William W. Holden, August 29, 1868, both in Holden, Papers of William Woods Holden, 1:364-365, 1:442-443; Albion W. Tourgee to Jos. Abbott, May 24, 1870, available at [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/reconstruction/section4\\_tourgeekkk.htm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/reconstruction/section4_tourgeekkk.htm) [Last accessed February 13, 2009]; Myrta Lockett Avery, *Dixie after the War: An Exposition of Social Conditions Existing in the South, During the Twelve Years Succeeding the Fall of Richmond* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1906), 277; and "Lea's Confession," quote in the latter.

<sup>533</sup> Federal Writers' Project, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938, North Carolina Narratives*, vol. XI, part 2, pg. 11. Available at <http://memory.loc.gov/mss/mesn/112/015011.tif>.

The rapid spread of Klan activities in Caswell and neighboring Alamance so impressed John Pool, one of North Carolina's federal senators, that he wrote to Holden confiding that he had learned Nathan Bedford Forrest himself was riding the counties' roads at night, directing vigilante activities.<sup>534</sup> Although Forrest likely never rode with Caswell's white supremacists, Lea and his compatriots proved trouble enough.<sup>535</sup> In his posthumously published memoirs, Governor Holden lamented the power of the local Klan in the late 1860s. Relating the difficulties of convicting Klansmen, he described the violence wrought by night riders that intimidated many of their opponents into silence. "Some of these victims were shot, some of them were whipped, some of them were hanged, some of them were drowned, some of them were tortured, some had their mouths lacerated with gags, one of them had his ear cropped, and others, of both sexes, were subjected to indignities which were disgraceful not merely to civilization but to humanity itself."<sup>536</sup> While these night riders reigned supreme in Caswell, they did face obstinate opposition from the remnants of Union Leagues and their champion, Caswell's state senator, John Stephens.

A lawyer and tobacco trader originally from Rockingham County, Stephens moved to Yanceyville to pursue his tobacco business following Appomattox and became an active member of the local Republican Party. Stephens's character remains unclear. While he seemed exceedingly ambitious, temperamental, and incapable of getting along with his neighbors - white opponents labeled Stephens a thief and even hinted at matricide - he served as one of the

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<sup>534</sup> Edgar E. Folk and Bynum Shaw, *W. W. Holden: A Political Biography* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 1982), 214.

<sup>535</sup> Forrest did visit nearby Greensboro in February of 1870 to recruit black labor for two Alabama railroad projects. If anything, as Allen Trelease had pointed out, Forrest's visit probably angered local Klansmen with his attempt to appropriate black laborers. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 211-212.

<sup>536</sup> Holden, *Memoirs*, 141.

strongest supporters of Caswell freedpeople during the late 1860s.<sup>537</sup> He was instrumental, along with Tourgee, in establishing the Caswell Union League, and volunteered to serve as a Bureau agent in the county, working as a justice of the peace after 1868. In that same year, Stephens ran for the North Carolina Senate against Democrat Bedford Brown. Brown won, but the state legislature refused to seat him due to his connections with the former Confederate government, and Stephens was victorious in the second election.<sup>538</sup>

Wearing all three of his hats - Union League organizer, Freedmen's Bureau justice of the peace, and senator - Stephens managed to anger the Klan and many of his other white neighbors. In addition, if Stephens purchased tobacco directly from freedpeople his business actions would have contributed to his unpopularity with white farmers, though there is no concrete evidence that this was the case. Known for his "extensive popularity among the negroes," a tract sympathetic to the Klan claimed that "At the election, when he was chosen Senator, the colored vote of the County elected him. He did not receive the votes of twenty white men, and probably not more than half of that number."<sup>539</sup> George Anderson, a resident of Yanceyville, declared that Stephens was an official who "had a complete mastery over the negroes in the County & they were ready to follow his lead."<sup>540</sup> As justice of the peace, Stephens also provoked local landowners by attempting to strictly enforce Bureau-approved contracts. In his early twentieth

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<sup>537</sup> Stephens was nicknamed "Chicken" Stephens due to a conviction in Rockingham County for poultry theft, and he served time for a shooting related to the incident. Stephens's mother, who lived with her son at the time, died in 1869. The coroner's report ruled that she fell on a wash basin and cut her throat, but town gossip implicated Stephens in the death. See A. J. Stedman, *Murder and Mystery: History of the Life and Death of John W. Stephens, State Senator of North Carolina, from Caswell County* (Greensboro, NC: Patriot Press, 1870), 7-18, and Diary of Jacob Doll, June 30, 1869.

<sup>538</sup> Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 7-18; "Lea's Confession."

<sup>539</sup> First quote in C. E. C., "The KUKLUX: The Klan at Its Old Work in North Carolina," *New York Times*, 29 June, 1872, p. 1; second quote in Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 39.

<sup>540</sup> George Anderson to Edna Watkins, January 22, 1914, Watkins Family Papers, folder 1, SHC.

century recollection of Reconstruction in Caswell, Lea remembered Stephens as a thorn in landowners' sides, constantly "persuading the darkies to warrant the farmer."<sup>541</sup>

The Klan also accused Stephens of inciting the local Union League to violence. In 1869, Governor Holden appointed Stephens as his personal investigator into the growing Klan activity in Caswell, a commission that Stephens seemed to have interpreted as a mandate to directly combat the night riders. According to several reports, Stephens and Union League members began to strike at the very heart of wealthy Klan leaders' power, their tobacco crops. Rumor swirled throughout the county that the Union League aimed to "put down" the Klan with the "torch," and over the course of several nights a number of tobacco fields and barns of prominent Klansmen went up in flames, including William Lea's "entire crop of tobacco."<sup>542</sup> Caswell's landowners found these attacks disconcerting, as tobacco barns full of cured leaf were exceptionally vulnerable targets. Barns of bright leaf represented a year's labor, and attacks on the crop were symbolic of attacks on white landowners' control of the rural landscape. Indeed, Caswell's tobacco producers responded to these arson attacks with the same ingrained fear with which William Faulkner's townspeople treated accused barn-burner Flem Snopes in *The Hamlet*.<sup>543</sup> By assaulting the bright leaf landscape and its products, Stephens and the Union League threatened the core of white control over everyday life. The Klan responded with further acts of violence, beating and abusing league members. Local papers fueled the conflagrations, praising the work of the Klan, "those equestrian wonders of the times," and circulating rumors that Holden planned to send an army of black troops to occupy Caswell and adjoining Alamance. In this frenzied atmosphere, Lea organized a Klan meeting to judge Stephens for the tobacco

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<sup>541</sup> "Lea's Confession."

<sup>542</sup> Ibid; and Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 36-37.

<sup>543</sup> William Faulkner, *The Hamlet* (New York: Random House, 1940).

fires. Tried in absentia “before a jury of twelve men,” the Klan sentenced the senator to death, and Lea and his men began devising an assassination plan.<sup>544</sup>

The Caswell Klan carried out the assassination on May 21, 1870. Stephens was in a court day crowd listening to Democratic Party political speeches, including oratory from Bedford Brown, when he was lured to the courthouse basement under false pretext by a Klansman who feigned interest in running for the office of sheriff. A group of eight conspirators forced Stephens into a room used to store firewood, where Lea pulled a cord around the senator’s neck. Lea strangled the senator and held his body upright while a fellow assassin stabbed him twice in the throat and once in the heart. After an aborted attempt to lay the blame for the murder on local freedpeople by moving the body to a nearby Freedmen’s Bureau school, the Klansmen left the corpse locked in the basement room of the courthouse, threw the key into nearby Country Line Creek, and returned to their homes or melted back into the crowd.<sup>545</sup> Searchers led by Stephens’s family and local African Americans found the body the following day.<sup>546</sup>

The Stephens assassination convinced governor Holden that drastic measures were needed to combat the Klan in Caswell and Alamance. Drawing on the authority of a martial law bill spearheaded by Alamance Republican Senator T. M. Shoffner, Holden declared the two counties in a state of insurrection and suspended their citizens’ rights of *habeas corpus*. Placing Colonel George W. Kirk (a former Union officer) in charge of quelling the Klan, Holden authorized the use of troops recruited from the mountains of western North Carolina and eastern

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<sup>544</sup> “Run, Nigger, Run,” *Milton Chronicle*, 28 October, 1869, p.1; Avary, *Dixie after the War*, 274-275; Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 35; “John G. Lea’s Confession,” first quote in Stedman, second quote in Lea’s confession. The *Chronicle’s* claims about a black army did reflect one of Stephens’ earlier statements. Following the Yanceyville riot in 1868, he asked Holden to “send (Col) [troops] in preference to white, if you can,” John W. Stephens to William W. Holden, August 29, 1868.

<sup>545</sup> “Lea’s Confession”; Stedman, *Murder and Mystery*, 19-27; Diary of Jacob Doll, May 21 & May 22, 1870; and George Anderson to Edna Watkins, January 22, 1914. See also, Vanessa S. Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 13-14.

<sup>546</sup> Dairy of Jacob Doll, May 22, 1870.

Tennessee. Kirk marched into Caswell on July 15 with a force of 670 black and white soldiers.<sup>547</sup> Kirk's troops arrested more than a hundred suspected Klansmen (including Lea and several of his co-conspirators) over the next two weeks, and transported them to Raleigh to stand trial for the murder of Stephens and other acts of violence.<sup>548</sup>

Holden's victory over the Klan, quickly labeled the "Kirk-Holden War," proved fleeting. Local newspapers and conservative political leaders railed against the suspension of due process and Kirk's methods, accusing his troops of torturing their captives. After a stillborn attempt at a trial, the state remanded all of the arrestees to the Caswell and Alamance County courts, where they were promptly released. In a further blow against justice for Stephens and his fellow victims, in 1871 a "redeemed" North Carolina legislature voted to absolve the state's Klansmen of all crimes committed up to that point.<sup>549</sup> Holden's enemies lost little time blaming the governor for launching what they believed was an illegal domestic war. A movement by conservative legislators for Holden's impeachment quickly gained steam, and after a lengthy trial, the North Carolina Senate voted to remove the governor from office on March 22, 1871.<sup>550</sup> Holden's removal was the first successful impeachment of a governor in the history of the United States. Emboldened by their acquittal and Holden's impeachment, Lea and his

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<sup>547</sup> Holden, *Memoirs*, 1:122-123; William C. Harris, *William Woods Holden: Firebrand of North Carolina Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 287-290; Folk & Shaw, *W. W. Holden*, 216-217. The Klan would force Shoffner to flee the state shortly after passage of the bill.

<sup>548</sup> "Lea's Confession"; Powell, *When the Past Refused to Die*, 246-247; Harris, *William Woods Holden*, 291; and Archibald Henderson to Susan M. Fain, August 18, 1870, Archibald E. Henderson Papers, Duke. Events in Caswell lived on long after the end of Reconstruction, merging into the mythical corpus of literature on the violent aftermath of the Civil War. Lightly fictionalized accounts of Stephens's murder and the Kirk-Holden War can be found in Albion Tourgee, *A Fool's Errand, by One of the Fools* (New York: Fords, Howard, & Hulbert, 1879), and Charles Oscar Beasley, *Those American R's: Rule, Ruin, Restoration, by One Who Has Been R'd* (Philadelphia, PA: E. E. Wensley, 1882).

<sup>549</sup> "North Carolina," *Halifax Record*, 4 September, 1870, p. 2; Harris, *William Woods Holden*, 291-297; Holden, *Memoirs*, 1:175.

<sup>550</sup> Harris, *William Woods Holden*, 299-308; Trelease, *White Terror*, 223-225; and Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 285.

compatriots resumed their campaign of terror in Caswell, driving the last vocal members of the local Union Leagues from the county.<sup>551</sup>

In April 1871 the United States Congress passed the Ku Klux Act, authorizing the use of federal troops and the suspension of *habeas corpus* to combat Klan violence throughout the South. Stephens' assassination, the Kirk-Holden War, and Holden's impeachment figured prominently in the debates. Drawing on the power of the act, Tourgee spearheaded a campaign against the Klan in Alamance, the effectiveness of which caused the Caswell Klansmen to largely cease their operations. This breaking of the first Klan came too late to reverse the balance of power in Caswell, however. Lea and his fellow white supremacists had already accomplished the majority of their goals. The Union Leagues were broken, Stephens was dead, and white control over the county's land and black labor was as firm as at any point since 1865.<sup>552</sup>

Historians have often framed Stephens's assassination and the ensuing events as typical Reconstruction struggles over political and social power. These characterizations contain more than a grain of truth; Lea and his fellow landowners were concerned about Union League activities, black voting, and racial deference. But they were equally concerned about the continuance of a demanding bright tobacco agriculture when the crop was so lucrative. Like the violence that took place around contract signing season, planting, and harvest, Stephens's death was linked to the rhythms of the tobacco season. The Klan itself, when "trying" Stephens,

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<sup>551</sup> "Lea's Confession."

<sup>552</sup> Trelease, *White Terror*, 379, 408-409. Lea would go on to a career as a successful tobacconist in Danville following Reconstruction, and general white sentiment in the county supported the assassination of Stephens until well into the mid-twentieth century, when one local newspaper could still describe the Caswell Union League as "a sort of post-Civil War CIA which was, in its way, as devious an [sic] the Ku Klux Klan and even more menacing by the fact that it enjoyed the favor and backing of the Federal Government." See "Caswell Night Riders . . . Lea Family Played Large Part in Ku Klux Klan Affairs," *Greensboro Daily News*, April 6, 1941, and "Drama of 1870: 'Chicken' Stephens Executed by Klan," n.d. [1960s], both clippings in Caswell County Historical Association Collection, folder 24, SHC, quote in the latter.

framed his crimes not in terms of racial agitation or political usurpation; rather, the Klansmen argued that Stephens threatened farmers' livelihoods through the destruction of tobacco at a point when the crop was particularly vulnerable. When the local Union League, perhaps at Stephens's suggestion, burned barns of tobacco, it challenged not only white political and social dominance, it also shook the economic foundations of the Southside.

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By the time Klan struggles in Caswell wound down, the labor situation in the Southside had largely stabilized. Despite the opposition of influential planters like Ott and Ragland, by the early 1870s sharecropping was competing with wage contracts for the most common form of labor agreement in the three counties, though it is unclear exactly when and how this shift occurred. Sharecropping certainly resulted in part from determined black resistance to the delayed-wage contracts that mimicked the terms of bonded labor, coupled with freedpeople's desires to manage their own piece of ground. Perhaps enough African Americans echoed the desires of an anonymous Pittsylvania freedman who told northern traveler John Dennett that he and his friends wished local planters would let them work farmland on shares rather than wages.<sup>553</sup> Or, the move to sharecropping could have reflected revised calculations on the part of white landowners, who began to see the benefits (for themselves) of a shares system: decreased management costs coupled with retention of control of the tobacco crop through sharecropper debt. William Hatchett, who turned to sharecropping contracts soon after the war, argued that the system worked best for both landowners and freedpeople: "The hands work very well, as they know if they do not make a good crop, they will get a small share."<sup>554</sup> While the details

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<sup>553</sup> Dennett, *The South As It Is*, 96-98.

<sup>554</sup> William R. Hatchett to Allen Hatchett, April 9, 1866, Hatchett Family Papers, Duke.

remain fuzzy, the move to sharecropping was likely brought on by a combination of these factors.

Sharecropping terms had also stabilized somewhat by the early 1870s. Landowner A. E. Hairston's 1871 share agreement with cropper John Owen was a typical arrangement. Hairston promised to furnish the land, draft animals, and tools needed to raise a crop, along with money for half the necessary seed. In turn, Owen swore to take care of the remaining expenses and deliver half the crop to Hairston at the end of the season. Although the contract never mentions tobacco specifically, the details (especially splitting the cost of seed - tobacco seed was expensive and by the postwar period was rarely grown on the farm) suggest that Owen was promising to produce the crop.<sup>555</sup> Sharecropping arrangements eliminated some of the risk for white landowners, such as Elijah Hundley. By the early 1870s, Hundley rented his land to a number of sharecroppers. He received a portion of their tobacco at the end of the season, and made additional profit selling the croppers such necessities as bacon, flour, thread, molasses, and sugar on credit. Although the sharecroppers sometimes settled their debts with cash, they more commonly turned over a greater portion of their crop to Hundley.<sup>556</sup>

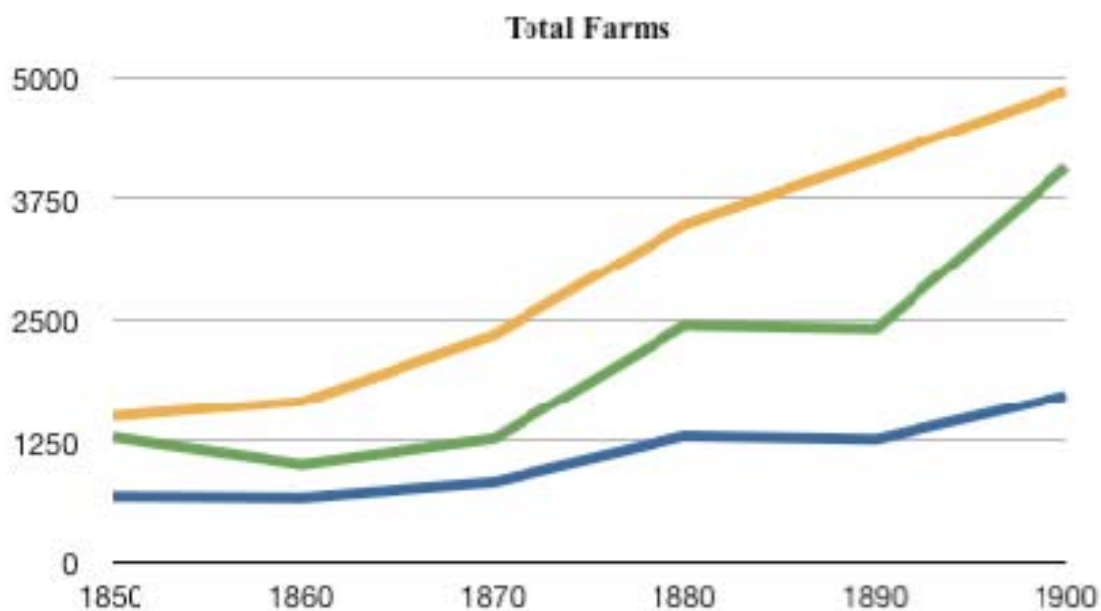
The 1870 census did not include a separate tabulation of farms operated by owners, sharecroppers, and cash tenants, making hard figures about Reconstruction sharecropping difficult to obtain. The census does, however, provide the data needed to calculate the number of farms and average farm size. Throughout the three counties, the number of farms increased by roughly a third from 1860 to 1870, and the acreage per farm declined by approximately one hundred acres. The statistics in Pittsylvania were typical of the three counties. From 1860 to

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<sup>555</sup> Indenture between A. E. Hairston and John Owen, January 1, 1871, George Hairston Papers, RASP, series J, part 11, roll 4.

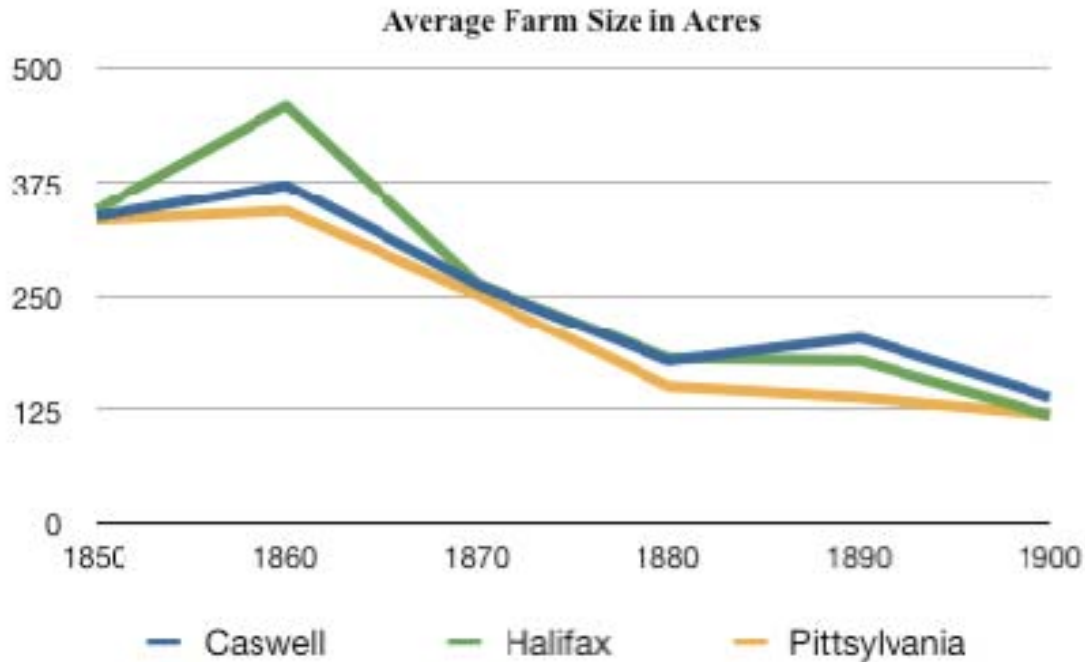
<sup>556</sup> Agricultural Journal, #2, 1872-1875 entries, Plantation Records of Elijah Hundley, Small Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.

1870 the total number of county farms grew from 1,680 to 2,366, while the average farm shrank in size from 345 acres to 253 acres (see fig. 5.1).<sup>557</sup> Since census takers enumerated farms based on management rather than ownership (e.g. a thousand acre farm separated among four tenants was recorded as four farms even if owned by one planter), an increase in total farms and shrinking farm size are strong indicators that large landowners were dividing their holdings among tenants.<sup>558</sup> Since the 1880 census did record sharecropper numbers and indicated that most tenants were in fact farming on shares, it seems safe to say that shrinking farm size in 1870 indicated a growth in sharecropped acreage rather than cash rentals or freedpeople obtaining their own small farms.



<sup>557</sup> Data compiled from *Historical Census Browser*, 2004, Retrieved December 19, 2008, from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>

<sup>558</sup> Susannah H. Jones, "Labor and Landownership in Halifax County, Virginia, 1865-1880," MA Thesis, University of Virginia, 1980, 2-3, 13; and Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 9-10.



[Figure 6.1: Farm numbers and size in the Southside from 1850 to 1900. Compiled and calculated from *Historical Census Browser*, 2004, retrieved December 19, 2008, from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>.]

Although the causation of the shift from wage labor to sharecropping in the Border is unclear, the particularities of bright tobacco culture and the region's environment certainly played a role in postwar labor struggles. Landowners believed that bright leaf remained a profitable crop, one worth struggling to grow, a belief that encouraged their efforts to control black labor. Landowners also understood bright leaf to be a demanding crop, one that relied on an intimate understanding of soil, weather, and seed, and this belief coupled with racist assumptions about black abilities led many whites to believe that freedpeople were unable to produce quality tobacco without white supervision. These assumptions gradually broke down over the course of Reconstruction, due in part to a growing realization among white landowners

that sharecropping arrangements entailed less effort on their part and meant greater profits. Freedpeople must also receive credit for their struggles to obtain land and independence. Despite facing difficult odds, they continued to seek land, challenged abusive labor contracts, and risked violence in pursuit of economic opportunities.

Landowners' control over sharecroppers grew in the 1870s with the passage of state crop lien laws. Passed by the Virginia General Assembly on April 2, 1873, "An Act to Secure Advances for Agricultural Purposes" gave landlords the first lien on crops tended by their tenants. In essence, the landowner was guaranteed his share of the tobacco crop before the sharecropper or any other lenders were entitled to a penny.<sup>559</sup> North Carolina passed a similar statute three years later.<sup>560</sup> These crop liens laws set in print the labor relationships hammered out through negotiation, legal action, and, frequently, bloody violence during Reconstruction, all but cementing labor relationships and patterns of land ownership in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania for decades to come.

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<sup>559</sup> *Acts and Joint Resolutions Passed by the General Assembly of the State of Virginia, at Its Session of 1872-73* (Richmond, VA: Shepperson & Co., 1873), 357-358.

<sup>560</sup> *Public Laws of the State of North Carolina, Passed by the General Assembly at Its Session 1876-77* (Raleigh, NC: M. S. Littlefield, 1877), ch. 283. This North Carolina statute was at odds with an 1869 law guaranteeing a tenant's right to a portion of the crop. See *Public Laws, 1868-1869*, 308-309.

## CHAPTER 7

## A BARREN AND FRUITFUL LAND: BRIGHT LEAF'S GROWING CRISIS

The year after General Lee's surrender at Appomattox, the young couple Henry and Julia Brumfield decided to raise bright tobacco for the first time on their 360-acre farm along Bearskin Creek, a stream near Chatham in Pittsylvania County. The decision paid off handsomely. The couple hired Beverly Halley, a freedman, on wages, and together the three - with the aid of one horse - raised bright leaf worth \$1,800 in their first year of cultivation. The Brumfields, with the help of their children and perhaps continued assistance from Halley, continued to raise tobacco on Bearskin Creek for the next fifteen years. By 1880, the family had exhausted their farm's extensive timber resources on fuel wood, barn building, and field clearance. Forced to move, the Brumfields found a tenant to work their deforested farm and relocated to a new site in the northeastern corner of the county that still had substantial tracts of woodland. At that point the Brumfields were employing standard bright leaf production techniques: they used sheet iron flues in their curing barns, covered their plant beds with unbleached muslin to keep insect pests off the developing plants, and built a separate barn in which they stripped cured leaves from the stalks for grading. Despite these developments, the family remained relatively small producers of tobacco.<sup>561</sup>

Tobacco manufacturer William Sutherlin also raised bright leaf following the war, but he followed a different path than did the Brumfields. Sutherlin owned twelve substantial plantations on the best bright leaf land along the Dan River, and he hired dozens of freedpeople

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<sup>561</sup> This description of the Brumfields comes from the unpublished manuscript "Bright Leaf: An Account of a Virginia Farm," written by family member Mary Brumfield Garnett in 1971. This paper is available in the Small Special Collections at UVA.

as wage laborers during Reconstruction. On his Danville-area properties for which records survive - Tar Heel, Sunny Side, Norwood, and Clover Dale - Sutherlin's farm managers supervised black workers in the production of thousands of pounds of bright leaf that served as the raw material for the landowner's manufacturing endeavors. Like many substantial landowners, Sutherlin continued to favor wage labor over sharecropping into the 1880s and 1890s, and his ledgers from these later periods resembled his industrial records; he carefully tallied farm inputs - fertilizer, wages, hardware, foodstuffs, and small loans to his workers - against tobacco production, and he kept a tight rein on his employees. One account of his agricultural enterprises declared that "all the appliances of labor-saving implements, fertilizers, &c., have been liberally provided, regardless of expense . . ." Sutherlin's farms operated as tiny kingdoms; he advanced his workers food and goods against their wages, and kept running balances for all his employees, further binding them to his estates.<sup>562</sup> These plantations fused the agricultural scale and discipline of antebellum estates with the business calculations of the postwar industry of which Sutherlin was a part.

The differences between the Brumfields and Sutherlin highlight at least two of the paths of postwar bright tobacco production. The crop benefited from few economies of scale, and almost every farmer in possession of a tract of land was a potential bright tobacco grower, whether they could muster the financial resources of Sutherlin, or only the more limited labor available to the Brumfields. Both paths to bright leaf production also illustrate the changing nature of cultivation on the ground. Certain cultivation techniques survived the war intact and would persist into the twentieth century, while environmental challenges and new thinking

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<sup>562</sup> William B. Payne to William Sutherlin, December 26, 1865, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC; Agreement between William T. Sutherlin and John Kelly, January 13, 1870, and Agreement between William T. Sutherlin, John Edwards, and Nat Jones, January 1, 1871, both in William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke; Ledger, January 1887-1890 and Ledger, 1880, 1891-1892, both in William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC; and "Maj. William T. Sutherlin," *Southern Planter and Farmer* 10, 10 (October 1875): quote on 597.

altered other production methods. The Brumfields' first farm suffered from a timber shortage - a common occurrence as more and more regional landowners raised bright leaf - and the soil erosion that often followed deforestation and intensive cultivation may have been a problem as well. This wood crisis ultimately forced the family to abandon the property for a more promising farm in another stretch of the county, but their removal did not ease agricultural pressures on the land, as a tenant farmer moved into the place that they vacated. Sutherlin's large plantations would have consumed timber as well, and his records demonstrate the increasing use of commercial fertilizers in the post-Reconstruction era. Planters increasingly spent large sums on specially formulated tobacco amendments, and often borrowed against their future crops, a trend that locked landowners into future tobacco cultivation. Sutherlin's farm management also highlighted the continued difficulty of Border African Americans in acquiring land. White landowners appreciated the profit potential of bright leaf and were thus less willing to part with land than planters in other regions of the cash-strapped South. The continued popularity of wage labor among landowners and the resulting debts incurred by many laborers reduced freedpeople's buying power. Rural blacks across the Border region were much more likely to hire out as wage workers for the Sutherlins and Brumfields of the world than to end up owning their own piece of Southside soil.

Erosion, farmers' growing reliance on commercial fertilizers, and deforestation characterized broad swaths of the post-Civil War South, but the patterns these environmental problems took in the Southside owed their details to bright tobacco culture.<sup>563</sup> The speed at which agricultural soils eroded was the product of local geology, topography, and the cultivation

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<sup>563</sup> Michael Williams, *Americans and Their Forests: A Historical Geography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 238-285, 358-360; Earle, "Myth of the Southern Soil Miner," 205-208; Trimble, *Man-Induced Soil Erosion*; Mikko Saikku, *This Delta, This Land: An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Floodplain* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 110-137; and Kirby, *Mockingbird Song*, 132-137.

techniques of bright leaf. Cotton or dark tobacco cultures, with their emphasis on fertile soils, would have taxed different portions of the Southside landscape, and resulted in different erosion rates on different stretches of the countryside. Likewise, fertilizer usage was not a uniform agricultural practice across the landscape; application rates, fertilizer composition, and the fields subject to artificial amendment varied across the region, and were tied to particular crops, terrain, and farmers' ideologies. Timbering was subject to similar variances. Expanding southern agriculture consumed woodlands through land clearance, but bright tobacco, with its fuel wood demands for curing, proved a particularly voracious consumer of forests. These environmental details specific to bright tobacco culture also shaped regional race relations. White landowners pointed to environmental problems on black-operated farms in defense of a virtual white monopoly of land, while ignoring or minimizing similar issues on white-managed farms.

Although growing concerns about erosion, deforestation, and the cost of fertilizers began to trouble regional farmers following the Civil War, other antebellum aspects of bright tobacco culture reoccurred. Bright tobacco boosters continued to tout the crop as an economic savior, and they devoted reams of paper to instructing farmers in how to produce quality bright leaf. Much as during the antebellum period, prominent tobacco manufacturers, seed producers, and fertilizer dealers pushed growers to raise more and more bright leaf, endorsements that often as not stemmed from their own economic interests. Bright tobacco also received valuable advertising from a new auction system that spread from its point of origin in Danville to cover the entire bright tobacco district. This "Danville System" sold loose tobacco in massive public warehouses, where labels and auctioneers placed a name and a monetary value on each farmer's bright leaf in public. Much like the newspaper articles and pamphlets of the antebellum era that

celebrated lottery prices, these public auctions encouraged farmers to raise more and better tobacco, and associated their agricultural skills with the price that their leaf brought.

As during earlier periods, local landowners also remained willing to use or exploit violence to consolidate their control over labor, landownership, and tobacco marketing following the conclusion of Reconstruction. An 1883 riot in the city of Danville expressed black and white political frustrations, as a racially diverse Readjuster Party seemed poised to gain power. But the violent event can also be seen as an expression of the racial tension explicit in the region's tobacco cultivation, marketing, and manufacturing. White tobacco manufacturers and black tobacco workers were involved in the riot, and local warehousemen and industrialists touted the suppression of black political aspirations as evidence that Danville remained the Border's premier tobacco center - a message directed to white landowners who controlled the marketing of the majority of bright leaf raised in the countryside.

A new auction system, increasing demand, and the sometimes violent control of labor combined to continue bright tobacco's expansion during and after Reconstruction. Danville, Milton, and Halifax warehouses teemed with loose piles of golden leaf, tobacco factories hummed in almost every town and hamlet, and tobacco fields spread across the landscape, popping up everywhere that the soil was suitable. By the late 1880s, farmers in the three counties raised more tobacco than ever before, and their crops were almost exclusively bright leaf.

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One of bright tobacco culture's most identifiable characteristics - the auction sales system - became entrenched during the postwar years. The region surrounding Danville and Milton had developed a unique system of tobacco sales during the antebellum era. At that time, Virginia and

North Carolina law required that farmers bring their tobacco in hogsheads for state inspection at established state warehouses, and these inspection warehouses also served as the primary taxing point for the crop. Inspectors certified that the tobacco was of good quality, and eligible for foreign export. Tobacco inspection was an early manifestation of state regulatory power, and this control stemmed directly from the crop's vital role in foreign trade dating back to the earliest days of the colonies. Virginia (and to a lesser extent North Carolina ) officials were concerned about the overall reputation of the region's produce, and viewed state supervision as the only reliable assurance of quality. While inspection may have been necessary to ensure the quality of exported tobacco, it was much less important for manufacturers who purchased their tobacco from local sources. These buyers connected crop with grower and thus had little use for a middleman in the form of a state inspector, especially when that middleman added to the cost of tobacco.<sup>564</sup> Danville-area growers and buyers during the 1840s and 1850s increasingly exploited a loophole in the law in order to sell their tobacco loose and bypass state inspection. Buyers and sellers claimed that all of the leaf that passed through Danville was destined for local manufacturers rather than for the foreign trade - a partial fiction - and hence the law mandating inspection and the use of hogsheads did not apply to their transactions. By one estimate, more than 90 percent of the Danville trade in 1850 was in loose form. Growers, buyers, and manufacturers all appreciated this loose sale system, as it bypassed some state taxes, allowed the sale of tobacco outside of the limited number of state warehouses, removed the need for thousands of costly wooden hogsheads, and provided greater flexibility in lot size.<sup>565</sup>

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<sup>564</sup> The best summary of the growth of the loose-leaf auction sales system remains Tilley, *The Bright Tobacco Industry*, 197-250.

<sup>565</sup> Robert, *Tobacco Kingdom*, 102-103, 108; Hahn, "Making Tobacco Bright," 84; Hagan, *Story of Danville*, 55; and Joseph Clarke Robert, "Rise of the Tobacco Warehouse Auction System in Virginia, 1800-1860," *Agricultural History* 7, 4 (October 1933): 177.

With these loose leaf sales came an auction system, a marketing method that revolutionized tobacco sales and that also worked to reinforce existing relationships between bright leaf growers, tobacco sales, and environmental knowledge. At auction, growers arranged piles of their leaf in rows on the warehouse floor, and buyers moved down the lines of piles, personally inspecting the quality of the leaf as auctioneers solicited their bids. This process began in 1837, when a national financial crisis closed Danville's sole state inspection warehouse, and growers began selling their leaf to buyers on the street. This practice remained popular after the state warehouse reopened, and the city's first facility dedicated to indoor auctioning - Neal's Warehouse - opened in the late antebellum period. For growers, this system stimulated competition among the various buyers and manufacturers' agents, an arrangement that potentially drove up prices. There were benefits for buyers as well. They could visually inspect the tobacco they were about to purchase, rather than having to rely on the word of the state inspector, or a small sample taken from a hogshead. Loose piles promised fewer cases of mold and bruised leaves than tightly packed hogsheads, and growers were unable to trick buyer with such practices as "nesting" - in which growers packed poor quality tobacco into the center of a hogshead where a casual inspection was unlikely to find it. By Reconstruction these auction practices came to be known as the "Danville System" of tobacco marketing.<sup>566</sup>

Following the Civil War, Virginia placed state inspectors in Danville's auction warehouses, where they inspected tobacco destined for interstate trade. Both farmers and warehouse owners complained that the inspectors graded tobacco too low, and charged high fees

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<sup>566</sup> Pollock, *Illustrated Sketch Book of Danville*, 32-35, 127; Bennett, "King Bacca's Throne," 43; Hagan, *Story of Danville*, 54; Danville Tobacco Association, *100 Years of Progress*, 54-56; and Pete Daniel, "Reasons to Talk about Tobacco," *Journal of American History* 96, 3 (December 2009): 664. Various dates are given for the opening of Neal's, but the consensus dates the warehouse's operation to the late 1850s, with the most likely date 1858. For at least a few years, The Virginia assembly granted Neal's legal sanction to sell loose lots weighing less than 1,000 pounds.

besides, and most warehouses insisted on having their own private inspector as well. In 1877, the Virginia legislature gave up attempting to supervise the Danville System, and caved in to pressure from warehouse owners by eliminating the state inspection of tobacco, openly permitting loose leaf auctions, and taxing the auction warehouses in more direct fashion. This action made the Danville System completely legal, but it also removed the remaining state oversight of loose-leaf auctions (limited as it was), and warehouse owners passed their new tax burden along to growers in the form of increased handling, storage, and commission fees. Despite the absence of state inspection, warehouses continued to employ their own inspectors to grade tobacco, and inspection fees actually tripled during the 1880s. These increases were nothing less than warehouse owners gouging farmers, under the guise of eliminating unnecessary state inspectors.<sup>567</sup>

By 1880 the auction warehouses in Danville, Milton, and surrounding towns had a well established system of operation. Farmers or landowners brought their tobacco to the warehouse as loose piles in large wagons. The warehouses often provided wagon lots for the vehicles, stables for farmers' teams, and bunkhouses where men from out of town could stay while selling their tobacco. Farmers come to town were notorious for their rowdy escapades. One local history claimed that "if they didn't wake up with a hangover in the local jail, they woke up in a hotel room without their billfolds - victims of their own sins and disreputable women." Inside the warehouses, officials weighed and inspected each lot of tobacco, and then placed the leaf on the auction floor with an attached tag that listed the grower's name and the weight of the pile. Buyers from regional manufacturers, Richmond or Petersburg operations, or speculators who planned to resell tobacco on other markets then purchased the pile from an auctioneer who roved the floor at set times selling the warehouse's current inventory. The fastest auctioneers

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<sup>567</sup> Arnold, *History of the Tobacco Industry*, 44-45; and Maddex, Jr., *The Virginia Conservatives*, 172-173.

reportedly moved as many as 150 piles of tobacco per hour. Once the pile was sold, the name of the buyer and the price was written on the tag, and the farmer was given a receipt that he could cash at the warehouse office.<sup>568</sup>

This auction system put farmers' agricultural skill and environmental knowledge - and, by extension, their worth as agriculturalists - on public display. Other growers as well as tobacco buyers wandered the auction floor studying the quality of each pile and noting the name on the attached tag. The auction itself placed a monetary worth on tobacco quality, and served as a measuring device of farmer expertise. Farmers who attended the auctions satisfied their most pressing questions: who made the best tobacco on a regular basis, and how much did they get for it? Auctions thus served to qualify a farmer's worth much as did the newspaper price announcements of the antebellum period, though the auctions reinforced these public claims to expertise in a much more visceral fashion.<sup>569</sup> Attendees could walk among the leaf, touch and smell the tobacco, listen to the auctioneer's chant as prices rose or stalled, and read for themselves the names and figures connected to each pile. The transition from state inspection of hogsheads to sale at public auction might seem minor, but this shift brought the physical leaf from the relative obscurity of the inspector's storeroom into the public purview. It cannot be coincidence that this shift occurred in a place and time when bright tobacco emerged as a crop

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<sup>568</sup> Cameron, *A Sketch of the Tobacco Interests*, 82-83; Kirk Munroe, "Danville, Virginia," *Harper's Weekly* 31 (January 29, 1887): 75; "Advertisement for Graves Warehouse," *Milton Chronicle*, May 27, 1869, p. 1; "Advertisement for Graves Warehouse," *Halifax Record*, December 6, 1871, p. 4; "Advertisement for the Liberty Warehouse," *Milton Chronicle*, January 20, 1875, p. 3; "Star Warehouse," *Danville Daily Post*, December 25, 1879, p. 4; "Advertisement for the Banner Warehouse," *Milton Chronicle*, December 9, 1880, p. 3; and Danville Tobacco Association, *100 Years of Progress*, quote on 66. For daily warehouse transactions, see various receipts from Pace's, Graves's and Hollands's warehouses, 1872-1878, in Southside Virginia Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 1. For the records of a Danville tobacco buyer who patronized a number of these auction warehouses, see Daybook of Captain Young, 1871-1872, Duke.

<sup>569</sup> Newspaper boosterism continued in the postwar period as well, with local papers often running articles on high auction prices. For examples, see "Tobacco," *Milton Chronicle*, September 2, 1869, p. 3; "That Fine Tobacco," *Milton Chronicle*, September 16, 1869, p. 2; "Danville Tobacco Market," *Milton Chronicle*, March 10, 1881, p. 3; no title, *Caswell News*, January 20, 1888, p. 3; and "Just as I Told You," *Halifax Advertiser*, September 12, 1885, p. 1.

characterized by the importance of quality above all else. Although it is an impossible impulse to quantify, it seems almost certain that many farmers returned to their farms after an auction weekend in Danville intent on improving both their profits and their public reputations as bright leaf producers. The auction system became part of a network of public reinforcements for “good” farming - as defined by a farmer’s ability to raise tobacco that sold for high prices - that also included newspaper articles, local agricultural meetings, and gossip.

The Danville auction system’s increased focus on associating crops with growers is somewhat antithetical to environmental history’s best known analysis of late-nineteenth century agricultural marketing. William Cronon has demonstrated that Chicago’s wheat trade gradually removed the physical grain from the view of buyers and sellers. An increasingly stratified classification system defined wheat by type; farmers received receipts for their crops when they delivered them to silos across the Midwest, where the grain was commingled with like grades from all over the region. Chicago’s buyers ultimately bought millions of bushels of grain sight unseen, relying on the perceived standardization of grading. On the market wheat became a tradable and somewhat abstract commodity rather than a tangible product of nature, agriculture, and science.<sup>570</sup> Bright tobacco would eventually be classified by specific grades; by 1930 the USDA’s Bureau of Agricultural Economics defined an incredible 450 possible types of bright leaf. This government categorization divided yellow tobacco into six main groups, each subdivided into seven levels of quality, with five possible colors, and eight additional special factors ranging from leaf size to storage potential. (Not all factors could be combined; for example a special factor of H [overripe] precluded tobacco from inclusion in group A [wrapper]). If anything, this incredible parsing of tobacco made it less likely that standardized and abstract trading would dominate leaf sales. Despite official definitions, these grades still

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<sup>570</sup> William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 97-147.

relied heavily on opinion, personal inspection, and the human eye.<sup>571</sup> The notion that bright leaf was an artisanal crop with limitless variation persisted well into the twentieth century, and comfortably existed side-by-side with ever more complicated forms of marketing. Bright tobacco illustrates one exception to the general agricultural trend of anonymous commodification that Cronon records, and it suggests that environmental historians must pay careful attention to specific agricultural systems when conceptualizing broader farm and market trends.

A few years after Reconstruction's end, tremendous quantities of bright leaf flowed through Danville's warehouses, and the city was well on its way to becoming the largest tobacco market in the world.<sup>572</sup> Between the 1873-74 season and the 1879-80 season, Danville bright leaf sales expanded from 12 million pounds to more than 33 million pounds. By 1879, the city had eight major warehouses - substantial brick structures with as much as 28,000 square feet of auction floor - that each sold between 3 and 5 million pounds annually. An individual warehouse often had more than 100,000 pounds of bright tobacco on its floor at any given time during auction season. (By 1885, there were ten warehouses and annual sales approached 41 million pounds, and in 1899, sales would exceed 54 million pounds of loose leaf). These clearinghouses provided the raw materials to the city tobacco manufacturing district, which had grown to include at least thirty factories along the Dan River. These warehouses and factories soaked up almost all the tobacco grown in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania, and began to draw from emerging bright leaf districts in adjoining counties, including eastern Henry and Franklin

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<sup>571</sup> USDA Bureau of Agricultural Economics, *Standard Grades for Flue-Cured Tobacco* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1930), 8-10; and USDA Bureau of Agricultural Economics, *Proposed Classification of Leaf Tobacco Covering Forms, Classes, Types, and Groups of Tobacco* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1929), 4-9. Barbara Hahn argues that this typing and classification gave institutional approval to the idea of bright leaf, thus making amorphous tobacco variations into a rigidly defined agricultural crop. It seems equally likely to this author that the USDA grading campaign merely lent structure and definition to ongoing auction system practices that openly admitted that bright tobacco spanned a wide spectrum. See Hahn, "Making Tobacco Bright," 177-200.

<sup>572</sup> By the mid-1870's, Danville already claimed to be "the largest loose leaf tobacco market in the world." See *Dibrell Brothers, Incorporated, 1873-1973* (Danville, VA: Dibrell Brothers Inc., 1973), 5.

counties in Virginia, and Stokes, Person, Rockingham, and Granville counties in North Carolina.<sup>573</sup>

The agricultural landscape of the rural Southside changed almost as quickly as the region's market system following Reconstruction. As noted in the fifth chapter, the number of farms in the three counties increased following the war, while farm unit size shrank dramatically.<sup>574</sup> This was due in large part to the rise of tenantry in the form of sharecropping and farm rentals, as some landowners moved away from wage labor by force or necessity. In 1860, the three counties contained 3,401 farm units, with an average size of 386 acres each. By 1880, Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania had more than double the number of farms from two decades earlier - 7,284 - but the average farm size had shrank to just 168 acres. The percentage of farms under 100 acres in size grew from 38 percent (n = 1,290) in 1860 to 42 percent (n = 3086) by 1880. A substantial number - 1,431 - of these smaller farms recorded in the 1880 census were managed by sharecroppers.<sup>575</sup>

If farm size shrank with tenantry arrangements, then the size of tobacco plots under the control of individual families diminished as well, even as overall tobacco production increased. Most antebellum growers had only cultivated a few acres of tobacco, but some of the largest planters, such as James Bruce and the Hairstons, raised well over a hundred acres of leaf each season.<sup>576</sup> By 1880, many large landowners had relinquished direct control over tobacco production to their sharecroppers and leasers, who in turn cultivated a few acres of tobacco on

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<sup>573</sup> "Planters Warehouse," *Danville Daily Post*, December 25, 1879, p. 4; Cameron, *A Sketch of the Tobacco Interests*, 67-69; Munroe, "Danville," 75; Receipt of Charles Coles, January 20, 1875, Southside Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 5; and Danville Tobacco Association, *100 Years of Progress*, 49, 51.

<sup>574</sup> The distinction between farm units and farmland under one owner is an important one, as farm management and land ownership were often divorced.

<sup>575</sup> Figures compiled from the HCDB.

<sup>576</sup> In one 1848 shipment alone, Bruce shipped 54 hogsheads of tobacco, the produce of more than 100 acres under typical productivity. See Receipt of James C. Bruce, November 16, 1848, Bruce Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 14.

their small portion of the historic plantations. According to the 1880 agricultural census, the majority of regional farmers tended ten or fewer acres of tobacco during the 1879 season. A few larger operations persisted - Emanuel Girst, Sawyer Watkins, William Carrington, and E. B. Spencer tended fifty acres each in Halifax, where they were the county's largest growers; and John Chatten of Pittsylvania had the largest Border tobacco plantation, where he raised seventy acres of leaf. But the vast majority of bright tobacco was produced on relatively small agricultural units.<sup>577</sup> The days of thousand acre plantations with dozens of hands laboring in each field were past.

Small tobacco plots did not necessarily lead to more diversified or subsistence farming; indeed, agricultural records indicate that the Southside became *less* self-sufficient in the decades following the Civil War. Between 1860 and 1880 the population of the three counties swelled from 74,839 to 104,002 people, but, on the whole, agricultural output did not keep pace with population growth.<sup>578</sup> Farmers' production of corn, that staple of the southern farm, in the three counties had increased slightly over this period, from just under 1.5 million bushels to a little over 1.6 million bushels, and the number of mules almost doubled, but every other major agricultural crop and livestock type decreased. In 1880, Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania farms grew less wheat, oats, and rye, and fewer sweet potatoes than they had on the eve of the war. Their pastures held fewer horses, oxen, milk cows, and beef cattle, and less than a third of the sheep than in 1860. Even numbers of the ubiquitous southern hog had declined slightly; in 1880 there were 12,717 fewer pigs along the Border than twenty year previous. In fact, with more than two people to every hog (n = 49,107) in the region, the three counties could hardly have

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<sup>577</sup> Figures drawn from Virginia Agricultural Census, Halifax and Pittsylvania Counties, 1880, NARA, T1132, rolls 24 & 27.

<sup>578</sup> Population figures compiled from HCDB.

been self-sufficient even in pork.<sup>579</sup> What these basic census figures make clear is an ever-increasing reliance on tobacco as a cash crop. The region that had long been tobacco obsessed was all but dependent on the plant by the end of Reconstruction, as food crops and livestock lost ground to bright leaf.

Farm and field sizes grew smaller during the postwar decades, tobacco replaced grain and livestock, and tobacco culture fostered other, more subtle rearrangements of the landscape as well. Tobacco barns had long stood next to fields to facilitate the movement of leaf from cutting to curing.<sup>580</sup> As farmers moved the bulk of Southside tobacco from bottomland to the sandy ridges, new barns appeared on the slopes as well. An 1880 map of George Venable's Halifax farm along the Staunton River provides an example of the changing built environment of regional farms [fig. 6.1]. Venable's farm contained cleared bottomland, and the presence of a tobacco barn just above the bottom - where the structure could serve the low fields yet was protected from freshets - strongly suggests that the lowland was once the site of dark tobacco production. By 1880, Venable's tract contained a substantial stretch of cleared upland as well. His barn along the Staunton bluffs could serve the sandy land above, but Venable also owned a barn higher along the ridge, indicating that his tobacco production was concentrated on the hills above the river by that date.<sup>581</sup> The new geography of Venable's farm, and thousands of similar

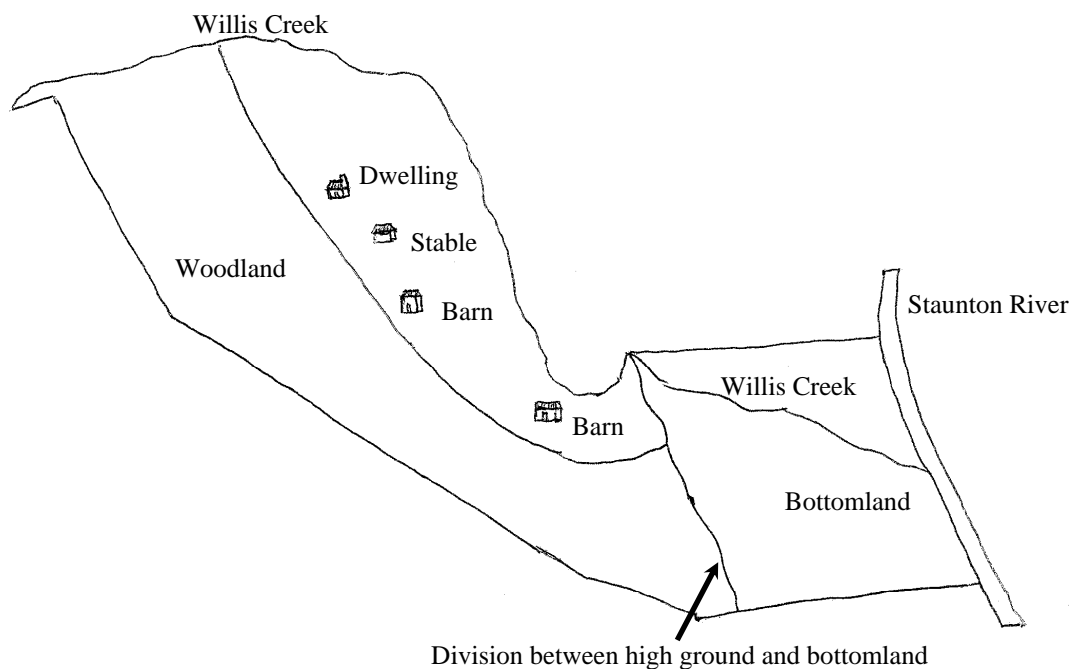
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<sup>579</sup> The preceding crop and livestock figures were calculated from Joseph C. G. Kennedy, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864), 104-105, 154-155, 158-159; and Francis A. Walker and Charles W. Seaton, *Report on the Productions of Agriculture, as Returned at the Tenth Census* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1883), 165, 174, 200, 209, 301, 321. Sam Bowers Hilliard gives 2.2 swine per capita as the pork self-sufficiency mark for the antebellum South. Even assuming an increase in hog weights through selective breeding and improved husbandry - assumptions that are far from given in the bright belt - the 1880 figure of 0.5 swine per capita meant the Southside must have imported a portion of its pork. See Hilliard, *Hog Meat and Hoecake*, 106-111.

<sup>580</sup> William Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay on the Culture and Commerce of Tobacco* (London: Vernor & Hood, 1800), 29-34.

<sup>581</sup> Survey map of George C. Venable farm, Halifax County Deed Book 68, 1880-1881, p. 302, Halifax County Courthouse, Halifax, Virginia. Surveys of Pittsylvania and Caswell deed books for 1880 revealed a number of similar maps. Clerks drew maps of land deeds in only a portion of cases, but the surviving maps from the three counties, along with other written accounts, recorded similar land arrangements as those on Venable's farm. See

farmscapes across the Border, presented environmental consequences. Landowners and tenants typically cut timber for new barns on site, and the construction of tobacco barns on the sandy ridges placed additional pressure on the most fragile portions of regional watersheds, as barn-building combined with cordwood production and clearance for agricultural land to denude upland forests.



[Figure 7.1: A survey map of the farm of George C. Venable in Halifax County, 1880. The total farm size was 179 1/4 acres, with all of the low ground and roughly half of the high ground in

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Deed Books 75 & 76, 1879-1880, Pittsylvania County Courthouse, Chatham, Virginia; and Deed Book NN, 1879-1881, Caswell County Courthouse, Yanceyville, North Carolina. For the dispersed pattern of postwar tobacco barns, see Catherine W. Bishir and Michael T. Southern, *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Piedmont North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 182-183, Evan Bennett, "King Bacca's Throne: Land, Life, and Labor in the Old Bright Belt since 1880," Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 2005, chap. 1; and John Fraser Hart and Eugene Cotton Mather, "The Character of Tobacco Barns and Their Role in the Tobacco Economy of the United States," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 51, 3 (September 1961): 290. For the prevalence of this agricultural geography in Caswell in particular, see W. C. Kerr, *Report on the Cotton Production of the State of North Carolina, with Discussion of the General Agricultural Features of the State* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1880), 61.

arable land. Note that both tobacco barns, which were almost always on the edges of the tobacco fields, were located on the high ground. Adapted from Halifax County Deed Book 68, 1880-1881, p. 302.]

Tobacco culture's pressure on timber resources was a recurring concern for many local farmers. Wood served as curing fuel, barn timbers, hoghead staves, wagon frames, hoe handles, sticks for hanging cut plants, and as a source of ash for plant beds, among other uses. The 1880 census estimated that farmers in the three counties consumed or sold well over a quarter of a million cords of wood each year.<sup>582</sup> As one agricultural historian has concluded, "An abundance of woodlands was more essential to tobacco planting than any other type of farming . . ."<sup>583</sup> Contemporaries agreed with this assessment. An article in the *Southern Workman* warned readers against the wanton deforestation of watersheds, concluding that, "the farmer or land owner can commit no greater mistake than the reckless cutting down of trees, or show no greater wisdom than in careful and systematic replanting."<sup>584</sup> The *Southern Workman* also advised that "Hill-side washings can be arrested by judicious tree-planting . . ." on the "worn-out lands of Virginia and the Carolinas . . ."<sup>585</sup> Likewise, a booster publication issued by the Virginia State Board of Agriculture in 1889 suggested that deforestation was a growing problem in the southern Piedmont. The book optimistically characterized regional wood resources as "considerable," but proceeded to caution its readers that the region could ill afford to export any timber. (This admission appears more revealing considering that the same tract promised that the Piedmont's poor soils were in fact "among the most fertile known.")<sup>586</sup> Farm families had to husband their

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<sup>582</sup> Walker and Seaton, *Report on the Productions of Agriculture*, 301, 321.

<sup>583</sup> G. Melvin Herndon, "The Significance of the Forest to the Tobacco Plantation Economy in Antebellum Virginia," *Plantation Society in the Americas* 1, 3 (October 1981): 439.

<sup>584</sup> "Forest Trees," *Southern Workman* 4, 9 (September 1875): 64.

<sup>585</sup> "Preservation of Timber," *Southern Planter* 42, 10 (October 1881): 590.

<sup>586</sup> Thomas Whitehead, ed., *Virginia: A Synopsis of the Geology, Geography, Climate and Soil of the State, Together with Its Resources of Mines, Forests and Fields, Its Flocks and Its Herds* (Richmond: Virginia State Board of Agriculture, 1889), 10, 20.

timber resources to ensure that they had enough wood to raise and cure their tobacco crops, and miscalculations could mean the end of farming on a given site until the woods could recover, as when the Brumfield family of Pittsylvania moved from the Chatham district to a new farm in the northeastern corner of the county around 1880 because they had stripped their old farm of fuel wood.<sup>587</sup>

A casual survey of the census figures concerning farmland somewhat muddies these assessments of the Southside's forests. Improved farmland (land in fields and pastures) in the three counties actually declined by almost 200,000 acres between 1860 and 1870, as local farms recovered from the Civil War and adjusted to changed labor arrangements. Improved acreage climbed slowly but steadily through the remainder of the century, and by 1900 improved acreage and total farm acreage once again stood near their 1860 levels. These numbers suggest a steady forest cover that actually grew during Reconstruction before receding to antebellum levels by the end of the century. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that all unimproved farmland was forest. A substantial portion of the "unimproved" farmland along the Border was not covered in timber. Rather, much of the land not in fields or pasture was abandoned cropland that had yet to re-grow trees. These abandoned and galled stretches of landscape were especially prevalent in districts of bright tobacco cultivation, where farmers kept their fields in cultivation until the land was too weak to produce even yellow tobacco, and thus was slow to revegetate when abandoned. Geographer Stanley Trimble estimates that between 15 and 35 percent of Southside land was deforested old field in 1880.<sup>588</sup> Census figures from ten years prior support Trimble's assessment. In 1870, only 73 percent of the unimproved land across the three counties was described as "woods" (unfortunately, this was the only year that census takers made such a

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<sup>587</sup> Garnett, "Bright Leaf."

<sup>588</sup> Stanley W. Trimble, *Man-Induced Soil Erosion on the Southern Piedmont, 1700-1970* (Ankeny, IA: Soil Conservation Society of America, 1974), 72.

distinction). The situation was particularly dire in Caswell, where 57 percent of unimproved lands were denuded of timber, leaving only a little over a quarter of the county's farmland in woods.<sup>589</sup> Lands so depleted were even slower to re-grow shrubs and trees than the average abandoned ground. These old fields were erosive eyesores that threatened surrounding cropland with their runoff. Severe flooding in Pittsylvania in the spring of 1887 demonstrated the hazards of deforested watersheds. Spring rains that year led to freshets that damaged bottomland crops, and even small streams rose high enough to wash away "fencing, crops, &c., on bottoms" across the county.<sup>590</sup>

Land surveys in the three counties provide a further, though equally muddled, glimpse into Southside forests. Surveyors delineated properties for sale by recording a series of markers around a tract's bounds; these points were usually trees, though they were sometimes rock piles or stakes - referred to as pointers - on open ground. Surveys listed marker trees by species, and thus the historian willing to wade through the survey books can compile a rudimentary list of tree species in any given year, and, from these lists, one can make some educated speculations regarding land clearance and ecological change. Such assumptions are fraught with uncertainty, however. Surveyors favored mature trees that would be easy to spot in future surveys, survey lines often followed field margins and thus recorded trees in land that was essentially open, and in any given year only a small percentage of land came under survey, and thus marker trees may not be entirely representative of the state or composition of a region's woodlands as a whole. Nevertheless, regional surveys tend to support contemporary observations concerning the changing Border landscape.<sup>591</sup>

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<sup>589</sup> Compiled from 1860-1900 census figures found at HCDB.

<sup>590</sup> J. L. M., "Letter from Pittsylvania," *Southern Planter* 48, 8 (August 1, 1887): 412.

<sup>591</sup> For a similar use of line markers in speculation on forest composition, see Robert D. Mitchell, Warren R. Hofstra, and Edward F. Conner, "Reconstructing the Colonial Environment of the Upper Chesapeake Watershed," in Philip

For the purposes of this study, the author examined all land surveys recorded in the three counties during 1880, and compared that marker data with surveys from a century earlier, when the region had been settled by whites and their slaves for only a few decades.<sup>592</sup> In total, the 1780 land surveys recorded exactly 1,000 line markers, and the 1880 surveys listed 1,151 markers. The most dramatic difference between the 1780 and 1880 surveys was the number of pointers used to mark land boundaries. Surveyors turned to trees as markers whenever possible, and, as many property lines remained the same over multiple surveys, even swaths of land under cultivation often had line trees left from previous surveys. Only in completely deforested areas would surveyors resort to making pointers to mark the line. In the 1780 surveys, 12.5 percent of all markers were pointers. By 1880, pointers represented 23 percent (264 of 1,151) of survey markers. The use of tree species commonly associated with old fields increased as well, even though surveyors would no doubt have resisted selecting small, successional trees as markers. Only three such trees were among the 1780 markers, one cedar, one persimmon, and one cherry. One hundred years later, 4.2 percent (48) of all line trees were old field species, including black and honey locusts, plums, and persimmons. White oaks and red oaks - species characteristic of mature Piedmont forests - dominated the 1780 line trees; 494 of the 1,000 markers were one of these two oaks. In 1880 these two species remained the most common markers, but they had become proportionally less common. White and red oaks made up only 26.5 percent of markers at that date. In their place was a growing percentage of hickories and post oaks (which together made up 10.6 percent of markers, up from 5.6 percent in 1780), species often indicative of a

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E. Curtin, Grace S. Brush, and George W. Fisher, eds., *Discovering the Chesapeake: The History of an Ecosystem* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001): 179-183.

<sup>592</sup> The following figures were compiled by the author from Deed Book 75 and Deed Book 76, Pittsylvania County Courthouse, Chatham, VA; Land Survey Book No. 1, part 2, Deed Book 67, and Deed Book 68, Halifax County Courthouse, Halifax, VA; Land Survey Book A and Deed Book NN, Caswell County Courthouse, Yanceyville, NC; and Marian Dodson Chiarito, *Old Survey Book 1, 1746-1782, Pittsylvania County, Virginia* (Nathalie, VA: Clarkton Press, 1988), 323-355. Halifax and Pittsylvania had reached their current bounds by 1780, but Caswell still included modern-day Person County, and a portion of the Caswell surveys likely came from the latter district.

younger forest or poorer soil. All of this data remains suggestive rather than definitive, but these land surveys do seem to support the notion that Southside forests were markedly different in extent and composition in 1880 than they had been a century earlier.<sup>593</sup>

Along with deforestation, soil erosion continued apace. Antebellum bright leaf growers had worried that bright tobacco cultivation techniques were particularly erosive, but postwar tobacco agriculture made few changes to limit erosion. Popular cultivation and curing guides continued to advocate the use of new ground for each season's plant beds, planting on ridge land, and shallow, frequent cultivation. These guides - and, it may be assumed, their techniques - were quite popular with regional farmers. E. L. and E. P. Love's *The Art of Curing Fancy Yellow Tobacco* went through several editions in the 1880s, and Robert Ragland's popular guide to raising and curing bright leaf (published under a variety of titles) appeared in six editions and had sold more than 100,000 copies (one for every man, woman, and child in the Southside) by 1885.<sup>594</sup> In a typical soil management passage, the Loves declared that "early, rapid and thorough cultivation is necessary to produce first class goods," and thus soil cover and retention took a backseat to frequent plowing, with obvious consequences.<sup>595</sup> They also cautioned farmers to not cultivate too deeply, as turning up the clay subsoil would reduce leaf quality. They warned readers, "don't stir up the clay, which is hostile to the growth of fine tobacco. A lump of clay as large as a hen's egg at the root of a plant of tobacco will cause it to grow coarse and mature late. It matters not how fine you break the top of the soil, the finer the better, but do not

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<sup>593</sup> The frequency of pines in the land surveys proved puzzling. The author had assumed that the use of pines as markers would increase with deforestation, as several species of pines are old field colonizers, but the opposite proved to be the case. Pines decreased from 18 percent of total markers in 1780 to just 9.1 percent of markers in 1880 surveys. The author speculates that surveyors were reluctant to use any but mature pines as they wanted to ensure durable survey lines, and thus a decrease in pine markers might represent a decline in mature pine stands rather than a decrease in total pine numbers. This percentage of pines as markers should in no way be taken to represent the percentage of pines in regional woodlands as a whole, but rather as a reflection of the preferences and prejudices of surveyors.

<sup>594</sup> Love and Love, *The Art of Curing*, 19-20; and Ragland, *Major Ragland's Instructions*, 35.

<sup>595</sup> Love and Love, *The Art of Curing*, 16-17.

plow deep enough to reach the clay.”<sup>596</sup> Such advice was sure to produce a finely powdered upper soil horizon with a hardpan layer below, a recipe for rapid soil erosion during rains.

As during the antebellum period, these cultivation techniques and their erosive consequences provoked worry in a number of farmers, and these concerns were difficult to reconcile with their enthusiasm for bright tobacco as a crop. From the early postwar days, bright leaf farmers made familiar complaints. A Granville County, North Carolina farmer, living in a district that was beginning to experiment with the new crop, wrote that “farms every where [were] going down . . .” as fields were “running away into galls and gullies . . .”<sup>597</sup> Ten years later, a farmer wrote of similar concerns from the oldest of bright tobacco districts, the Pittsylvania/Henry county line, where he worried about the “murderous policy pursued of cultivating a piece of new land until it will produce nothing more, and abandoning it to the rains and hot sun until it is gullied often beyond redemption.”<sup>598</sup> Even such enthusiastic bright leaf boosters as Ragland lamented the effects of soil erosion that often accompanied the crop. In 1879, he recorded that “the deterioration of tobacco lands is estimated as high as 15 per cent. per annum, especially the light soils on the rolling uplands and slopes. This damage is more than half the result of surface washing . . .” Ragland went on to assert that careful soil conservation techniques could control this erosion, but much like George Jeffreys - who lamented the damaging effects of his bright leaf experiments on the soil in the late 1840s - Ragland’s claims seemed based more on hope than on practical evidence.<sup>599</sup> A few years later a Brosville

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<sup>596</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>597</sup> Farmer, “Farm Accounts - Again,” *Southern Planter and Farmer* 2, 1 (January 1868): 35. See the following chapter for a discussion of the postwar expansion of bright tobacco culture.

<sup>598</sup> Viator, “A Letter from a Virginian,” *Southern Planter and Farmer* 40, 4 (April 1879): 185.

<sup>599</sup> Ragland in tenth census, 202. Also quoted in Tilley, *Bright Tobacco Industry*, 110. Tilley argues that soil erosion declined in the late nineteenth century as farmers employed better soil conservation practices, but there seems little evidence to support her contention [Tilley, *Bright Tobacco Industry*, 110]. Indeed, the Soil Conservation Service’s work in the Southside during the Great Depression indicated that erosion accelerated in the late 1800s. For more on this, see the epilogue.

(Pittsylvania) grower seconded Ragland's concerns. He wrote to the *Southern Planter* in 1887 that heavy spring rains had wrecked havoc in the bright tobacco district, as the storms caught farmers in the middle of their intensive cultivation period. The rains caused the land "to wash much worse than if it had not been broken up. In a great many places the [top]soil is all gone and holes washed out in the clay."<sup>600</sup> Geographer Stanley Trimble also points to the 1880s as the time at which soil erosion reached new heights along the Border, a condition he attributed to a large extent to expanding tobacco cultivation.<sup>601</sup> Planters such as Ragland and Jeffreys wanted to believe that soil erosion could be controlled, but at the same time they were unwilling to deviate from tillage methods that had proven successful at producing fine bright leaf, even as those techniques ate away at the region's sandy topsoil. This tension between the necessities of quality production and the need for soil conservation remained unresolved throughout the late nineteenth century, and highlights the role of a particular crop culture in explaining abusive soil practices in one region of the postwar South.

Environmental concerns along the Border were never far removed from issues of race. Some white landowners found in the region's freedpeople scapegoats for growing erosion and deforestation. The first part of this argument labeled African Americans as inefficient farmers. A number of regional planters argued that black farmers did not have the energy or intellectual capacity to produce the highest quality bright leaf without white direction, despite antebellum evidence to the contrary. These commentators stressed that the menial aspects of tobacco culture - the endless hoeing and transplanting and cutting - were well-suited for freedpeople, but that white decision making at key points - during curing and topping, for example - was key to making bright leaf. Thus they argued against the prevalence of sharecropping arrangements.

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<sup>600</sup> J. L. M., "Letter from Pittsylvania," 412.

<sup>601</sup> Trimble, *Man-Induced Soil Erosion*, 16, 91, n. 6.

Writing to the *Southern Planter* in 1867, “H” provided an example from Caswell County, which he declared representative. He outlined a case where a freedman and a white landowner controlled the same number of acres and hands, yet the landowner produced tobacco worth more than six times as much. “H” concluded that the black laborer “is as yet only fitted for the place of a hireling.”<sup>602</sup> Almost twenty years later, Charles Bruce echoed similar sentiments, declaring black workers “incomparable as a hired laborer,” but only “when under constant and vigilant supervision and strict discipline . . .”<sup>603</sup> Even pundits who did not openly question freedpeople’s ability as farm laborers decried the labor situation in the tobacco district in terms that implied that African Americans were poor stewards of themselves and by extension the land. Sutherlin, speaking before an agricultural meeting, expressed his worry that black laborers would soon be too few to fulfill the needs of Virginia’s landowners as “this limited supply was daily diminishing by reason of disease and death which has become incidental to that sudden abolition of slavery, which remitted the negro to a life of licentious liberty.”<sup>604</sup>

After characterizing freedpeople as inefficient farmers, white critics of black farming abilities then linked soil depletion and erosion to tenantry, ignoring the voluminous literature instructing tobacco growers of all colors and ownership statuses to engage in methods bound to damage the land.<sup>605</sup> Opponents of tenantry argued that renters and sharecroppers had little long-term stake in the land, no financial incentive to conserve wood or soil, and little promise of changing their economic status. They believed that these conditions led to an ethic of waste, or an “extensive” rather than an “intensive system” of farming.<sup>606</sup> A Prince Edward County

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<sup>602</sup> H., “Hints on the Labor Question,” *Southern Planter and Farmer* 1, 9 (October 1867): 574.

<sup>603</sup> Charles Bruce, “Southside Virginia and the Agricultural Interest,” *Southern Planter* 48, 5 (May 1, 1887): 254.

<sup>604</sup> “Evening Session,” *Southern Planter and Farmer* 1, 1 (February 1867): 44.

<sup>605</sup> This notion that tenants were particularly destructive land stewards is a persistent one. See Trimble, *Man-Induced Soil Erosion*, 69, for a typical discussion.

<sup>606</sup> Alfred J. Morrison, *Halifax County, Virginia, a Handbook: Prepared under the Direction of the Board of Supervisors* (Richmond, VA: Everett Waddey Co., 1907), 10; and Tilley, *Bright Tobacco Industry*, 110-111.

farmer's comments were representative of the sentiments of many Border landowners when he explained that portions of his farm were "badly worn out, having been rented out since the close of the war, and nearly everything carried off the place and not much returned to the soil."<sup>607</sup>

Although both white and black tenants existed in large numbers in the Southside, comments about tenants' destructive habits often bore racial overtones.<sup>608</sup> What these arguments ignored is the fact that tenants could hardly work the land harder than bright tobacco experts advised.

Tenants who strived to make the best quality bright leaf left behind eroded fields and timbered forests, just as did landowners who grew the crop. These problems that resulted from bright tobacco culture were no different in 1880 than in 1860. African Americans who emphasized subsistence crop production over tobacco cultivation (as suggested in "H's" example above) faced criticism as crude or inefficient farmers. Thus black tenants in particular faced an impossible situation - white critics claimed that they were not intelligent enough to raise high quality tobacco, but if they managed to produce top bright leaf then the same critics declared that the resulting ravaged land proved that blacks were poor stewards of the soil. White racism thus combined with the dictates of bright leaf crop culture to create a stereotype of black farming that ignored universal soil abuse throughout the Southside. This soil abuse was, in fact, blind to color or ownership status.

This debate encapsulated much of the African American experience with bright leaf following the Civil War. Despite the fact that slave labor and knowledge had been so critical to the development of the crop - from cultivation to manufacturing - white landowners and tobacco experts increasingly defined quality farming in terms of professional guides and land ownership,

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<sup>607</sup> Whitehead, ed., *Virginia, A Synopsis*, 42.

<sup>608</sup> Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*, 178. In 1900, the first year that the census enumerated tenants by race, the three counties actually had more white than black tenants, by a count of 3,456 to 2,439 [compiled from HCDB]. This in part reflected a slight majority white population and white landowners' continued desires to employ blacks as wage laborers rather than tenants.

almost exclusively white domains. In the eyes of Sutherlin, Bruce, and many other whites, black experience with bright leaf took a back seat to white stories about the crop and its culture constructed over the previous four decades. According to this body of cultural knowledge, white men - the most prominent of whom were Abisha Slade and Robert Ragland - developed and perfected bright tobacco with the inadvertent aid of their slaves, white boosters spread the crop's culture across the Southside, white auctioneers and warehousemen built a new market system, and white experts created pamphlets and guides that systematized cultivation and curing. Absent from these stories were slave contributions to planting, topping, or curing practices drawn from their long experience working with the crop. Bright leaf was the most profitable agricultural option for black farmers, be they sharecroppers, renters, or landowners, but the crop's culture was a white-dominated system, in which African American agricultural efforts were doomed to white criticism, if not open hostility. The notion that black farmers were incapable of quality tobacco production or were particularly poor land stewards worked to circumscribe black landownership and social opportunity.

Working within a landscape increasingly characterized by soil depletion and deforestation, white and black farmers across the Southside turned to commercial fertilizers to increase the land's productivity. While the impulse to apply these new fertilizers to old lands was common across the South and the nation during the second half of the nineteenth century, bright tobacco farmers quickly developed an especial reliance on tobacco "manures" that promised heavier crops and yellower leaf. Farmers across the Southside had long sought amendments that would increase bright tobacco production without damaging the quality of the leaf. The two most popular southern fertilizers, barnyard manure and Peruvian guano, turned yellow tobacco harsh and made the crop difficult to cure. In contrast, the new commercial

products billed themselves as specifically formulated for bright leaf cultivation. These fertilizers were an unprecedented commercial success. By the 1880 agricultural census a report noted that “in all the tobacco districts of south-side Virginia the use of commercial fertilizers is general.”<sup>609</sup> Tobacco growers in Virginia and North Carolina proved even more fertilizer-hungry than the typical southern farmer, a reliance fueled by their long-standing refusal to use manures produced on the farm. Over the course of the 1879 crop season, farmers in the three counties spent roughly twice the Virginia and North Carolina average on fertilizer. Whereas the typical North Carolina farmer invested \$13.40 in fertilizers, and the Virginia farmer paid out \$18.03, along the Border the average annual fertilizer expenditure ranged from \$32 in Halifax to \$35.68 in Caswell. In all, landowners and tenants in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania spent almost a quarter of a million dollars annually fertilizing their fields.<sup>610</sup>

On its face, the spread of commercial bright tobacco fertilizer seems difficult to reconcile with the crop’s nutritional demands. After all, it was poor agricultural soils and a general lack of humus and nitrogen that made Southside ridge land so suited to yellow tobacco production. Part of the answer to this seeming paradox lay in the continuous cultivation of bright leaf on the same fields for a decade or more. On these overworked stretches of ground, land often suffering from moderate to severe soil erosion, the nutrients in fertilizers did add needed elements to tobacco ground. On these sites farmers had worked the land until it was too weak to support even bright leaf. Commercial tobacco fertilizers - many of which still bore the terms guano or manure on their labels - were also specially formulated to feed bright leaf. The most popular brands contained substantial doses of phosphorus and potassium, but a much lower percentage of nitrogen, especially when compared to such traditional amendments as barnyard manure or

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<sup>609</sup> Killebrew, *Report of the Culture and Curing*, 202.

<sup>610</sup> Compiled from HCDB.

Peruvian guano.<sup>611</sup> A single 1886 issue of the *Halifax Record* contained advertisements for Bono Tobacco Fertilizer, British Mixture, Liebig Ammoniated Superphosphate, Flamingo Guano, Lister's Agricultural Chemical Works, Eagle Brand Guano, Capital Tobacco Fertilizer, Orchilla Guano, "Yellow Leaf" Tobacco Fertilizer, and Durham Bull Fertilizer.<sup>612</sup> As many of the brand names suggest, all of these amendments were formulated for bright leaf tobacco growers. These tobacco fertilizers encouraged plants to grow larger and faster, traits that had two main benefits for farmers. First, fertilized tobacco leaves were heavier than unfertilized ones, a characteristic that paid in a crop sold by weight. Second, phosphorus and potassium supplements encouraged tobacco plants to mature early (nitrogen had the opposite effect), which in turn permitted growers to cut their tobacco well before frost. Stiff doses of phosphorus and potassium also permitted tobacco plants to utilize additional nitrogen without developing a coarse texture or harsh taste.<sup>613</sup> Furthermore, these amendments fertilized ever-changing plant varieties, as such horticulturalists as Ragland continued to develop new strain of bright leaf that matured earlier and grew larger.<sup>614</sup> Fertilizer popularity in the Southside thus grew at the intersection of environmental degradation and agricultural improvement, as tobacco farmers sought to make better bright leaf while dealing with soil depletion and erosion.

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<sup>611</sup> Tilley, *Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 156-157; Mathewson, *The Culture of Flue-Cured Tobacco*, 11, 14; Cameron, *A Sketch of the Tobacco Interests*, 79; Ragland, *Tobacco, from the Seed to the Salesroom*, 10; Arnold, *History of the Tobacco Industry*, 24; Werner, *Tobaccoland*, 174; Love and Love, *The Art of Curing*, 14-15; Ag. Census, 201-202; Tilley; Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*, 111-112; W. F. Massey, "Fertilizer for Bright Tobacco," *Southern Planter* 57, 9 (September 1896): 393; and W. F. Massey, "Tobacco Fertilizers," *Southern Planter* 58, 4 (April 1897): 153-154.

<sup>612</sup> *Halifax Record*, April 23, 1886, throughout.

<sup>613</sup> John Solomon Otto, *Southern Agriculture During the Civil War Era, 1860-1880* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 89-90; Robert L. Ragland, *On the Cultivation and Curing of "Bright Wrappers"* (Richmond: VA: Clemmitt and Jones, n.d.), 3; Ag. Census, 202; and Milton Whitney, *Tobacco Soils of the United States: A Preliminary Report upon the Soils of the Principal Tobacco Districts* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1898), 15.

<sup>614</sup> By the early 1890s, Robert Ragland alone marketed forty-one varieties of tobacco, twenty-nine of which he classified as bright leaf. These included the descriptively named "Gold Finder," "Bullion," and "Oak Hill Yellow." See Robert L. Ragland, *Wholesale Catalogue of Reliable Tobacco Seeds* (Hyco, VA: R. Ragland Seed Co., 1894), available at Duke.

The proliferation of commercial fertilizer use among tobacco farmers almost invariably entailed an expansion of credit and debt relationships. Landowners and tenants, black and white, often took out fertilizer loans against the upcoming year's crop. Tilley has noted that, "As early as 1881 only 10 per cent of the fertilizers sold in North Carolina was purchased for cash."<sup>615</sup> Landowning farmers went in debt to fertilizer companies - such as Danville's Patassco Guano Company and Baltimore's Piedmont Guano Company - which in turn placed liens on the farmers' tobacco crops, livestock, and other agricultural produce as surety on the loan. Merchants who retailed guano in smaller amounts often followed suit, as did local auction warehouses, which simultaneously profiting from auctioning farmers' tobacco and selling them fertilizer for the following year's crop.<sup>616</sup> Both Virginia and North Carolina had homestead exemptions, laws which prevented creditors from seizing homes and land to fulfill debts, but fertilizer companies typically required that borrowers waive their exemptions in order to obtain credit. Though of dubious legality, this tactic was omnipresent.<sup>617</sup> Tenants were in an especially precarious position. Without a homestead to place at the mercy of the fertilizer companies or local merchants who served as middlemen, tenants, the majority of whom were black, were forced to find a landowner or patron to cosign their loan. To secure their own interests, landowners often demanded additional compensation from tenants. In a typical example, plantation owner Katherine Moses cosigned a fertilizer note for her tenants near Hurt, in Pittsylvania County. The merchants who extended the note reassured Moses that the tenants themselves took all the risk, as she "could take it [the cost of the fertilizer] out of their part of the

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<sup>615</sup> Tilley, *Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 167.

<sup>616</sup> *Ibid*, 167-168.

<sup>617</sup> For examples, see Contract of Lacy Lea and Gabe Bigalow, January 1, 1881, Archibald E. Henderson Papers, Duke; Contract of Wood Covington and R. H. Enoch, December 7, 1879 and Contract of Patassco Guano Company and J. L. Kersey and J. L. Law, April 21, 1880, both in Caswell County Deed Book NN, 1879-1880, Caswell Courthouse; and Ledger, 1876-1891, and Promissory Notes of A. G. Pritchett & Son, 1886-1890s, Pritchett Family Papers, UVA.

tobacco and run no risk . . .”<sup>618</sup> In Pittsylvania and Halifax tenants’ positions were further weakened by *Parrish v. The Commonwealth* (1884), in which the Virginia Supreme Court ruled that sharecroppers were mere employees who had no inherent interest in the land or its produce.<sup>619</sup> While bright tobacco culture following the war shaped land ownership patterns, largely encouraging whites to retain control of the countryside, the spread of fertilizer dependence further constricted tenants’ power over the land’s productivity.

Manufacturers of commercial tobacco fertilizers advertised the products of distant landscapes and at the same time sought to connect those exotic resources to local landscapes and people. Such ingredients as Peruvian guano and phosphate from mines along the southeastern coast of the United States traveled hundreds or even thousands of miles to reach the Southside, and manufacturers often stressed the origin, and hence the authenticity, of their ingredients. Brands such as Baltimore Phosphate and British Mixture declared that their products contained only “very superior” Peruvian guano or “high grade phosphate,” and questioned the quality of fertilizers produced by smaller companies.<sup>620</sup> Tobacco farmers often refused to take these claims at face value; they invested a great deal in commercial fertilizers and were concerned that they might not be getting their money’s worth. At the encouragement of farmers, Virginia and North Carolina both established state experiment stations in the 1880s with the explicit aim of testing commercial tobacco fertilizers, guaranteeing farmers that their phosphates and guano were indeed legitimate.<sup>621</sup> Much as manufactured tobacco advertising linked bright tobacco products

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<sup>618</sup> Haley Brothers to Katherine Moses, May 6, 1880, Katherine Spiller (Graves) Moses Papers, VHS. For similar examples of regional landowners securing fertilizer loans for their tenants, see Farm Ledger of Nathaniel R. Coleman, 1885 entries, Ethelbert Algernon Coleman Papers, UVA; and List of Tenants’ Tobacco, n.d. (mid-1880s), Samuel Pannill Wilson Papers, UVA.

<sup>619</sup> Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*, 165-171.

<sup>620</sup> Advertisement, *Pittsylvania Tribune*, May 23, 1879, p. 2; and Cameron, *A Sketch of the Tobacco Interests*, 112. For the importance of South Carolina phosphorus resources in the rise of southern fertilizer, see Helms, “Soil and Southern History,” 752.

<sup>621</sup> Tilley, *Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 168-178.

to the Piedmont landscape, fertilizer companies sought to connect their products to sites renowned for their fertility, be they Pacific islands or South Carolina mines.

While these fertilizer blends promised to bring the fertility of the globe to the Piedmont, companies also worked to ensure farmers that their products were particularly suited to the Border environment. To do so, they solicited endorsements from prominent local bright leaf growers. Brand advertisements and instructional pamphlet produced by fertilizer companies invariably included several testimonial statements from Border farmers assuring readers that commercial fertilizers helped maximize the productive potential of Southside tobacco soils. Like modern athletes who sign endorsement deals with particular companies, bright tobacco experts lent their name, and their assurances of quality, to fertilizer products. Advertisements simultaneously touted a specific brand of fertilizer as superior to all others, and encouraged a general belief that quality bright leaf could not be made without heavy applications of commercial amendments. Robert Ragland, the Halifax curing and seed expert, was by far the most popular spokesman; in fact the Southern Fertilizing Company, makers of the popular Anchor Brand tobacco fertilizer, published Ragland's popular cultivation guides. In addition to Ragland, such prominent local cultivators as William Sutherlin, Ed Pace, and John Lea (the Caswell Klan organizer) were among scores of local endorsers.<sup>622</sup> Enterprising companies also offered prizes for the best crops grown with their brand, and used the winning growers as advertising fodder.<sup>623</sup> Growers who lent their names and reputations to fertilizer companies sold their experience and expertise, but they also linked commercial inputs to the local environment

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<sup>622</sup> For selected examples of these endorsements, see *Danville as a Tobacco Centre*, pamphlet, 1879, 9, 16, Duke; "Gilham's Tobacco Fertilizer," circular, March, 1871, in William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, Duke; Cameron, *A Sketch of the Tobacco Interests*, 112; Robert Ragland, *Major Ragland's Instructions How to Grow and Cure Tobacco, Especially Fine Yellow* (Richmond, VA: Southern Fertilizing Company, 1885), 10, 12; fertilizer advertisements in the *Halifax Record*, April 23, 1886; and Tilley, *Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 158-159.

<sup>623</sup> For the Reidsville Fertilizer Company's contest for farmers who used their Broad Leaf brand, see Advertisement, *Milton Gazette*, May 4, 1893, p. 3.

through agricultural activities. Ragland, Pace, Sutherlin, and other endorsers had become the visible faces of tobacco cultivation through their success in the auction system or their published pamphlets, and their names carried assurances of quality connected to their reputations as “good” farmers. Through these advertising campaigns, bright leaf cultivators came to see the products of Peru and the southern Tidewater as integral components of local agroecosystems.

Heavy investments in expensive fertilizers transformed the providential nature of early bright leaf cultivation. Whereas reform-minded antebellum planters and farmers emphasized growers’ ability to use the Southside’s limited resources to produce a lucrative crop, the developing postwar culture, with its increasing reliance on commercial fertilizers, required significant investment. This new strategy posed obvious risks, as small growers were often only a bad thunderstorm or drought from going into debt. New bright leaf producers - who struggled to master the crop’s cultivation and curing - also faced the specter of higher input costs coupled with uncertain tobacco quality. Results at market remained highly variable, as grower Langhorn Scruggs experienced in 1871, when he sold lots of tobacco ranging from \$1 per hundredweight to \$20 per hundredweight.<sup>624</sup> A poor crop often led to financial hardships. Leatherwood Valley resident William Sours wrote his brother John of a neighbor who suffered from an all too common situation. The farmers had sold a poor crop of tobacco, the proceeds of which were fifteen dollars short of covering his fertilizer note.<sup>625</sup> In protest of the growing dependency on tobacco fertilizers, planter Charles Bruce concluded that a tobacco grower who relied on commercial amendments was “traveling a road which will surely land him in bankruptcy . . .”<sup>626</sup> Despite these pessimistic assessments, bright tobacco grown with the aid of commercial

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<sup>624</sup> Receipts of Langhorn Scruggs, May 24, 1871 and May 30, 1871, both in Southside Virginia Family Papers, series E, part 3, reel 3.

<sup>625</sup> William Sours to John Sours, May 6, 1877, Sours Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>626</sup> Charles Bruce, “Southside Virginia and the Agricultural Interest,” *Southern Planter* 48, 5 (May 1, 1887): 249.

fertilizers could still turn strong profits. According to one estimate, good bright leaf land sold for around \$40 per acre in 1880, tobacco hands demanded \$150 per year, and fertilizer cost as much as \$70 per ton, but experienced farmers on the best bright leaf lands could still clear more than \$130 per acre annually, a profit unrivaled by any agricultural alternative. While bright leaf growers had the potential to turn healthy profits, dark tobacco producers “received prices that were ‘scarcely sufficient to meet the cost of production.’”<sup>627</sup>

Fertilizers could temporarily reverse losses in productivity created by soil erosion or exhaustion (the two were often effectively the same in the Southside), but they could do little to address other environmental challenges to bright leaf culture. Insects and diseases threatened all Southside farmers with economic disaster, a threat that grew during the postwar years. Certain insect pests had long threatened tobacco in the three counties. Flea beetles cut small holes in tobacco leaves, damaging a crop’s value; wireworms bored into freshly transplanted seedlings, withering the plants or, on occasion, cutting them off entirely at ground level; hornworms munched mature plants with astonishingly rapidity; and budworms attacked the new foliage at the apex of maturing plants. While all of these pests had been present in regional tobacco fields for decades, bright leaf agriculture exacerbated their threat. The habit of bright tobacco farmers to plant their crops in the same field year after year promoted booming insect populations. All four species produce pupae that overwinter in the soil, thus the numbers of worms and beetles present in a tobacco crop owed a great deal to how long tobacco had been planted on a particular piece of ground. In addition, wireworms and hornworms also fed on such plants as oxeye daisy and horse nettle, common “weedy” species associated with poor tobacco land.<sup>628</sup> A number of

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<sup>627</sup> John Solomon Otto, *Southern Agriculture During the Civil War Era, 1860-1880* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 89-90, quote on 89.

<sup>628</sup> G. A. Runner, *The So-Called Tobacco Wireworm in Virginia*, USDA Farmers’ Bulletin No. 78 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1914), 9-10, 14; Billings, *Tobacco*, 437-439; American Tobacco Company (ATC),

tobacco growers recognized the prevalence of these insects in long-farmed fields, but the necessity of specific soils in the production of quality bright leaf meant few farmers were willing to abandon productive land.<sup>629</sup> Treatment methods could also exacerbate other agricultural problems. One of the most commonly-prescribed insect control methods - fall plowing for the purpose of crushing pupae where they rested in the soil - actually promoted further erosion.<sup>630</sup>

If insect pests remained a constant threat, a number of persistent and new tobacco diseases gave Southside farmers even greater cause for concern. Root knot had long been a problem in Virginia and North Carolina. The product of nematodes - microscopic worms living in the soil - root knot caused tobacco plants to wither and dry in the field. Tobacco mosaic also attacked bright leaf fields in the three counties, although the disease was inconsistently identified. The viral disease stunted plant growth and produced leaves with patchy, mottled surfaces; both results led to low prices for infected tobacco. In the 1880s a new disease, Granville Wilt (named for the North Carolina county where it first appeared in 1881), affected tobacco crops. Wilt, a bacterial infection, led to root decay, which caused plants to slowly wither and die. Although farmers did not understand that immediate causes of these three diseases, they did correctly associate them with particular pieces of ground. As with insect infestations, continuous cropping worsened all three plant diseases. Nematodes are present in almost all soils, but build to problematic levels when coexisting with the same crop year after year, while the

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*Flue-Cured Tobacco: Diseases, Nutrient Deficiencies and Excesses, Injuries, Pests, Cured Tobacco* (Richmond, VA: American Tobacco Company, 1958), 19-20; and Garner, *The Production of Tobacco*, 284-290.

<sup>629</sup> Instead, most growers advised tolerating infestations, some sort of mechanical control (usually picking off worms or attracting their mature forms - moths - with flames), or, less often, applying early pesticides, including arsenic compounds. See John Ott, "The Outlook for Tobacco," *Pittsylvania Courier*, May 27, 1876, p. 2; J. M. Baker, "The Tobacco Horn-Worm," *American Farmer* 7, 5 (May 1878): 161; Robert L. Ragland, "Cultivation and Curing of Fine Yellow and Shipping Tobacco from the Plant-Bed to Market," *Southern Planter* 39, 5 (May 1878): 232-233; William B. Alwood, "Current Notes - No. III: The Horn Worm - Tobacco Wire Worm," *Southern Planter* 51, 8 (August 1, 1890): 369; and R. L. Ragland, "The Tobacco Horn-Worm: Some Practical Facts Concerning Its Life History Learned from Experience," *Southern Planter* 51, 9 (September 1, 1890): 406-407.

<sup>630</sup> Ragland, "The Tobacco Horn-Worm," 407.

bacteria that caused Granville Wilt and the virus that led to tobacco mosaic both overwintered in the soil. Tobacco farmers typically responded to these threats much as they did to insect infestations: they suffered diminished returns but refused to take fields out of production.<sup>631</sup> As was the case with so many contradictions between traditional land management and bright leaf culture, farmers chose - sometimes willingly and other times with reluctance - to make the most valuable tobacco possible, despite the economic and ecological dangers involved.

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If environmental and economic difficulties in Southside fields brought increasing challenges to tobacco farmers, struggles over exactly who would farm the landscape and work in regional tobacco factories, and under what terms they would do so, were equally contentious. Violence, long a tool used by white landowners to keep black hands at work in fields and factories, continued to plague the Southside. Even when farmers and manufacturers did not initiate racial violence, they were quick to exploit bloodshed for the benefit of the existing tobacco culture.

Racial tensions endemic in the region since the start of Reconstruction came to a head once again in Danville in November of 1883. A riot between the city's black and white residents left four black men and one white dead, and a number wounded. The Danville riot took place three days before a crucial state election pitting the Readjuster Party - with its coalition of white

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<sup>631</sup> Garner, *The Production of Tobacco*, 244-246, 250-252, 262-264; ATC, *Flue-Cured Tobacco*, 8; Sharrer, *A Kind of Fate*, 63-65; Geo. F. Atkinson, "Nematode Root-Galls," *Southern Cultivator* 48, 4 (April 1890): 156-158; George B. Lucas, *Diseases of Tobacco*, 3rd ed. (Raleigh, NC: Biological Consulting Associates, 1975), 22; Tilley, *The Bright Tobacco Industry*, 186-187; Bennett, "King Bacca's Throne," 79; and H. D. Shaw and G. B. Lucas, *Compendium of Tobacco Diseases* (St. Paul, MN: American Phytopathological Society, 1991), 37-39. A Mecklenburg County farmer writing to the *Southern Planter* in 1895 illustrated the confusion that often accompanied tobacco diseases. J. D. Petty wrote that his crop had experienced "walloon" [mosaic virus] for the past three years, despite the fact that the land had produced quality yellow tobacco prior to the mosaic outbreak. Petty blamed poor fertilizer for the disease, rather than his continuous cropping practices. See J. D. Petty, "The Tobacco Crop. The Type to Make for 1895," *Southern Planter* 56, 2 (February 1895): 56.

liberals and black voters - against the conservative Democrats.<sup>632</sup> The previous year the Readjusters, headed by governor William Cameron and party boss William Mahone, had gained control of the Virginia General Assembly, and as part of statewide reforms, party officials had divided Democrat-dominated Danville into new, racially proportionate, wards. The city's black majority proceeded to elect a number of black officials, including "a majority in the twelve-man council, and four of the nine policemen . . ."<sup>633</sup> Speeches from members of each party concerning the new political landscape stirred local tensions during 1883, and a month prior to the riot, a number of prominent white businessmen signed a petition decrying the "misrule of the radical or negro party." *Coalition Rule in Danville*, popularly known as the Danville Circular, declared that black Readjusters were harming Danville's economic and social fabric - and its tobacco industry - by drawing "large numbers of idle and filthy negroes . . ." to the city.<sup>634</sup> The circular served to mobilize Democrats across the commonwealth, and raised racial animosity in the city to dangerous levels.

In the most influential interpretation of the riot, Jane Dailey characterizes the violence as an example of Readjuster-era political tensions in Virginia, brought to a head by struggles over racial deference and the control of public space. In particular, Danville freedpeople – especially women - claimed the right to use the city's sidewalks without stepping off to let whites pass, a public assertion that the city's white population, long used to black subservience, found repugnant. Black and white, male and female, Danville's residents strode city sidewalks determined to preserve their right-of-way, and failures to yield ground led on occasion to verbal and physical abuse. Dailey describes these sidewalk battles as "the open and public actions of an

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<sup>632</sup> Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 105, 119-125

<sup>633</sup> *Ibid.*, 113; and Charles E. Wynes, *Race Relations in Virginia, 1870-1902* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1971), 30.

<sup>634</sup> *Coalition Rule in Danville* (Danville, VA: n. p., 1883), 1, 3.

enfranchised and politically empowered people” and the countering resistance of white townfolk intent on reestablishing their social hegemony. It was just such an encounter between a white and black man that initiated the November 3 riot, as a fist fight drew an angry crowd that turned from punches to pistols.<sup>635</sup>

As Dailey asserts, the Danville riot was almost certainly influenced by Southside politics and racial animosity, but the event, like regional Reconstruction violence, was also shaped by local tobacco culture. The Danville Circular mentioned black political control of the city and a general lack of black deference in social relations as factors contributing to white anger, but it also made another, key assertion. Eleven of the twenty-eight businessmen who signed the circular were tobacco manufacturers or warehouse owners, and six more were general merchants who may have bought and sold tobacco on occasion. They laid out their concern in the pamphlet’s text: “It is well known that hundreds of the North Carolina tobacco raisers who live within a few miles of Danville, and used to sell their tobacco in our market, now go five times as far to a market in their own State, *on account of the negro rule in our town.*” The Circular’s authors asserted that North Carolina (and, by implication, Virginia) farmers would avoid spending the money they made selling tobacco in a town where black sheriffs patrolled the streets and black vendors sold food and other goods on the squares.<sup>636</sup> These Democratic businessmen worried that local politics would drive away white farmers and the landowners who marketed the tobacco raised by their black tenants. Compounding these worries, new

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<sup>635</sup> Dailey, *Before Jim Crow*, 103-131, quote on 104. See also Jane Dailey, “Deference and Violence in the Postbellum Urban South: Manners and Massacres in Danville, Virginia,” *Journal of Southern History* 63, 3 (August, 1997): 553-590. James Moore (*Two Paths to the New South*) describes the riot as a classic political struggle waged between Readjusters and Conservatives, with race as leverage, an interpretation that follows that of Walter T. Calhoun, “The Danville Riot and Its Repercussions on the Virginia Election of 1883,” in *Studies in the History of the South, 1875-1922* (Greenville, NC: Department of History, East Carolina College, 1966): 25-51.

<sup>636</sup> *Coalition Rule in Danville*, 4. Italics in the original. For another account of tensions over tobacco marketing contributing to the riot, see Danville Tobacco Association, *100 Years of Progress, 1869-1969* (Danville, VA: Womack Press, 1969), 62.

warehouses in North Carolina advertised Danville's "Negro rule" in an attempt to draw business away from the preeminent bright tobacco market.<sup>637</sup> Racial politics in Danville threatened Democratic control of the polls, and, perhaps of equal importance, tobacconists feared that it threatened profits generated from bright tobacco sales.

Scattered comments suggested that local African Americans - from political leaders to factory workers - understood their potential leverage over the city's white businessmen. In a speech a week prior to the riot, Squire Taliaferro, a local black politician, exhorted black laborers to flex their political muscle. He warned Danvillians that they needed black workers to man their tobacco factories and fields. As he phrased it, "if negro rule would cause Danville to sell a few more pounds of tobacco, they were going to have it . . ."<sup>638</sup> These assertions of the vitality of black factory labor mirrored Reconstruction struggles over the importance of black labor in tobacco fields, and, like those earlier struggles, violence was never far removed from public debates. Rumors swirled about the city that blacks involved in tobacco work were planning some sort of demonstration, and local farmers and factory owners may have feared that these actions would lead to the sabotage of tobacco manufacturing or cultivation to ensure continued access to the polls.<sup>639</sup>

The actions of one tobacconist are also suggestive of the connections between the riot and the tobacco economy. William P. Graves, a prominent tobacco warehouse owner, was among the white rioters. When he shot at and wounded the brother of a black Danville policeman, even as his victim was proclaiming his peaceful intentions, he may have been expressing frustration

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<sup>637</sup> Tilley, *The Bright Tobacco Industry*, 228.

<sup>638</sup> Danville Committee of Forty, *Danville Riot, November 3, 1883: Report of Committee of Forty with Sworn Testimony of Thirty-Seven Witnesses, &c.* (Richmond, VA: John & Goolsby, 1883), 22.

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, 27-28, 42. For the dominance of black workers in 1880s Danville tobacco factories, see Robert E. King, *Robert Addison Schoolfield (1853-1931): A Biographical History of the Leader of Danville, Virginia's Textile Mills during Their First 50 Years* (Richmond, VA: William Byrd Press, 1979), 28; and William J. Erwin, *Dan River Mills: A Story of 75 Exciting Years in Textiles! (1882-1957)* (New York: Newcomen Society, 1957), 10.

with black social assertions, as Dailey claims. But perhaps Graves was also asserting his mastery over African Americans as workers. Earlier in the year Graves had a run-in with one of his black warehouse workers, striking the man when he bumped him with a tobacco basket. The injured employee took Graves to court, where the embarrassed employer was forced to pay a fine.<sup>640</sup> On the factory floor and in the city's streets, Graves was a white man worried about social bounds, but he was also a tobacconist concerned with his power over laborers; he was thus intent on preserving his economic interests as well as his racial prerogatives.

Danville's Democratic leadership, writing as the Danville Committee of Forty, issued a pamphlet defending the results of the riot, in which they blamed the violence on armed and insolent blacks. Claiming that the white crowd acted in self-defense, the Committee of Forty declared that the riot had little effect on the subsequent elections, which proceeded in "peace and good order . . ." <sup>641</sup> As with the Danville Circular signees, a number of the Danville Committee of Forty were involved with tobacco marketing and manufacturing. Of the thirty-four committee members who appear in the 1880 census, fourteen were tobacco businessmen of some sort. These industrialists included the committee chairman, William Sutherlin, as well as the prominent manufacturers John Pace, J. M. Neal, and John Rison.<sup>642</sup> Among the ten witnesses interviewed by the committee who also appear in the census, six were tobacco farmers, dealers, or factory workers. That a large percentage of the committee and witnesses were involved with tobacco is no surprise; most Southside residents had some tie to tobacco culture. But an acknowledgement that these men were farmers and tobacconists serves as a reminder that tobacco permeated almost every facet of regional life. Both the riot and its subsequent

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<sup>640</sup> Dailey, *Before Jim Crow*, 112, 117, 123.

<sup>641</sup> Danville Committee of Forty, *Danville Riot*, 4-6, quote on 6.

<sup>642</sup> Danville Committee of Forty, *Danville Riot*, 6-7; "Meeting of Citizens," *Daily Register* (Danville), November 10, 1883, p. 3; and 1880 Census of Pittsylvania County.

explications were the product of men entwined in the cultivation, manufacturing, and sale of bright tobacco.

Whatever the rioters' intent, the results of the violence and ensuing debates were brutally clear. Democrats won local elections and swept back into statewide power. The riot proved supremely intimidating within Danville, where armed whites patrolled election-day streets. Of the city's 1,301 registered black voters, only 31 cast ballots. In the suburbs of North Danville and New Design the figures were similar; only four of 700 voters appeared at the polls.<sup>643</sup> Similar actions took place in Halifax, where a Readjuster observer wrote that local conservatives "have carried the election here by fraud, intimidation, shooting, and cutting the negroes."<sup>644</sup> Democrats had "redeemed" the Old Dominion, and regional tobacco producers, manufacturers, and warehousemen worked to exploit the political change.

In the aftermath of the riot, two warehousemen who claimed to have participated in the violence made clear their thoughts on the aims of white action. Their Banner Warehouse circular attempted to appeal to the region's white tobacco farmers by framing the riot as an action taken to preserve tobacco interests:

Virginia is safe  
And her people are free  
Danville is redeemed  
No more negro rule  
Banner Warehouse takes the lead in high price, as in everything  
else. Come to Danville with your tobacco and to Banner Warehouse  
go.  
Your interest will be protected.<sup>645</sup>

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<sup>643</sup> Calhoun, "The Danville Riot," 47. Moore claims a similar marked decline in total votes for Readjuster candidates in Danville. See Moore, *Two Paths to the New South*, 52.

<sup>644</sup> Wynes, *Race Relations*, 33. Despite questionable Democratic Party tactics, less than ten years earlier black political activity at the Halifax polls had been much more assertive. See John Rilly to H. H. Hurt, November 17, 1874, Southside Family Papers, RASP, series E, part 3, reel 6.

<sup>645</sup> Banner Warehouse circular, reprinted in Calhoun, "The Danville Riot," 51.

These warehousemen captured the complex relationship between power, violence, and control of the tobacco countryside. *The Independent*, a New York periodical, blamed the violence in Danville on racial tensions that plagued the South, and lamented the power of “the low white, with the shot-gun in his hand . . .”<sup>646</sup> In a *Harper’s Weekly* article several years after the riot, Charles Dudley Warner (who along with Mark Twain coined the term Gilded Age) attributed the incident to a struggle over the shape and form of the local tobacco industry, though Warner mistakenly believed the city’s tobacco workers to be white.<sup>647</sup> These two assessments of the Danville Riot need not be mutually exclusive. Political and social struggles linked to race were certainly factors in the bloodshed, but the white and black riot participants were by and large people who lived within and depended on tobacco culture. Even if the tensions of tobacco production and manufacturing did not inspire the riot, they shaped how some local citizens and distant commentators perceived the events that took place. Danville tobacco manufacturers and warehousemen framed the riot as a struggle that ensured that their city would continue to serve as the bright tobacco hub of Virginia and North Carolina for at least a few more years.

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The spread of bright tobacco following the Civil War continued many antebellum themes. Farmers continued to work to master the intricacies of bright leaf cultivation, from soil management to curing techniques, and successful production was still far from guaranteed. Raising yellow tobacco remained an exercise in tacit, experiential knowledge despite the thousands of pamphlets, guides, and articles that flooded the Southside with professional advice.

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<sup>646</sup> “Lawlessness, North and South,” *The Independent* 36 (February 28, 1884): 5. Albion Tourgee made a similar observation in a contemporary editorial. He declared the riot the product of inherent white racism: “the people did not change their nature as the result of war or any accident of political existence. The people of the South are a product of development; the result of generations of formative events.” See A. W. Tourgee, “Presidential Probabilities,” *The Continent; and Illustrated Weekly Magazine* 5, 110 (March 19, 1884): 377.

<sup>647</sup> Charles Dudley Warner, “The Industrial South,” *Harper’s Weekly* 31 (January 29, 1887): 75.

Bright leaf was also still a crop that was hard on both land and people. Yet despite all its hardships, yellow tobacco continued to hold a great deal of economic promise. While no crop could pay as well in the Southside, no other crop carried the same risks. Fertilizer loans combined with a poor season could drain a farmer's bank account just as quickly as the crop's intensive culture could erode a farm's soil and deplete its forests.

Regional growers did not enter tobacco cultivation blindly. To varying extents they understood the hazards of bright leaf agriculture, but, time and again, farmers chose to raise bright tobacco. It would be easy to argue that this decision was the result of greed, to say that tobacco farmers put profits before all else and steadily ruined the land and their future prospects. But this would ignore a number of constraints critical in farmers' decisions to cultivate bright leaf. A long local history of tobacco farming encouraged farmers to plant the crop with which they were most familiar, bright tobacco experts had assured growers that the crop was sustainable and the best use of Piedmont land, and fears of outmigration and agricultural decline created an atmosphere in which rural residents regarded a lucrative staple that allowed farmers to remain on their farms as an economic and societal savior. In addition, the erosion that came with several crops of bright leaf limited agricultural alternatives. Farmers who placed marginal land in tobacco fields could hardly be expected to go back to corn or wheat on those sites once they were even less productive. Once bright tobacco was well established in the Southside, many farmers must have believed that their options were more bright tobacco or nothing at all.

As during the antebellum period and Reconstruction, racial violence tied to the tobacco seasons and infrastructural patterns remained one of the weapons in white landowners' arsenal for retaining control over black workers and the tobacco landscape. The violence inherent in slavery had secured labor for antebellum plantation owners, Reconstruction-era violence had

stifled black dreams of widespread land ownership and ensured white landowners a regional farm workforce at low cost, and continued post-Reconstruction violence - typified by the Danville Riot - worked to maintain white dominance of polls, fields, and factories. Although these bloody events were political and social as well as agricultural and industrial struggles, the culture of tobacco, from its cultivation to its manufacturing, was never far from the minds of the blacks and whites involved. This violence was firmly rooted in the material realities of the region, an expression of the social and environmental framework of the Southside.

Despite erosion problems, deforestation, increasing fertilizer debt, and continued violence, bright tobacco remained the Southside's economic engine, and many farmers and businessmen remained optimistic that the crop could fuel regional growth indefinitely. A correspondent from the *Richmond Dispatch*, traveling through Halifax in the summer of 1885, captured this optimism. He wrote that the energy and industry of the countryside was attributable to:

. . . the magic of gold, the product of their golden yellow tobacco that you may now see piled in bright heaps, or hanging like yellow clouds in every barn you pass, or meet twenty times a day on the market roads, neatly packed high in covered wagons going to Danville, or South Boston, or Clover, where the auctioneer finds quick sales and large profits for the well-pleased planters.<sup>648</sup>

Ragland, though he had elsewhere admitted the difficulties and hazards of raising bright leaf, made a similar glowing assessment in an article for the Baltimore journal, *American Farmer*.

Describing the impact of yellow tobacco on the Southside, he wrote:

Twenty-five years ago, some of the poorest regions in what now constitute the yellow tobacco belt of North Carolina and Virginia, offered a scant living to the poor inhabitants dwelling in huts amid uninviting surroundings. But yellow tobacco came, and lo! what a change! The log houses have given place to neat and substantial, comfortable dwellings;

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<sup>648</sup> No title, *Halifax Advertiser*, July 18, 1885, p. 2.

commodious school houses and imposing churches erected; the very face of nature and all of the surroundings changed, bettered and beautified.<sup>649</sup>

Absent from Ragland's idyll are the gullies and rills of the Border hills, the poverty of poor black and white sharecroppers and wage workers, and the increasing debt of many Southside tobacco growers.

Hyperbole aside, the growing environmental, social, and economic difficulties associated with bright tobacco culture had done little to dampen Southsiders' enthusiasm for the crop by the 1880s. Key to this continued faith in yellow tobacco was its durable potential to create wealth. Even as fertilizer debts, soil depletion, and continued labor struggles made success far from a sure thing, bright tobacco continued to offer the chance of getting rich. A tobacco exposition held in Danville in 1887 reassured local farmers that the potential of yellow tobacco remained limitless. The first prize for a bright wrapper at the exposition garnered \$200, and the lucky farmer sold his entire lot for an astonishing \$660 per hundredweight (a rate that, given an average yield, translated to roughly \$3,300 per acre).<sup>650</sup> During the late 1870s and 1880s, bright tobacco cultivation in the three counties became a riskier venture; the economic margins grew tighter and the landscape became more and more degraded, yet yellow tobacco remained the most promising option for most farmers. As one commentator pointed out, "Of late years tobacco has certainly not been a profitable crop, except to those who have the proper soil for 'bright' tobacco, and have learned the art of making and curing it, which few have. If tobacco culture is to be continued, planters should turn their attention more to 'bright.'"<sup>651</sup> As during the

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<sup>649</sup> R. L. Ragland, "The Yellow Tobacco of North Carolina and Virginia," *American Farmer* 3, 12 (June 15, 1884): 178.

<sup>650</sup> No title, *Halifax Advertiser*, December 3, 1887, p. 2. According to one purchasing power calculator, \$3,300 in 1887 would equal \$76,800 in 2009. See Lawrence H. Officer and Samuel H. Williamson, "Purchasing Power of Money in the United States from 1774 to 2009," MeasuringWorth 2010, URL <http://measuringworth.com/ppowerus/>.

<sup>651</sup> Thomas Pollard, "Letter from Dr. Pollard," *Southern Planter* 43, 12 (July 1882): 7.

emergence of the crop despite (or, in part, because of) the message of antebellum agricultural reformers, the centrality of tobacco seemed only natural.

## CHAPTER 8

### THE DECLINE OF THE BORDER: BECOMING A NEW SOUTH

By the end of the nineteenth century, after six decades of bright tobacco cultivation, the crop permeated almost every corner of Southside life. Yet even as yellow tobacco dominated the region as never before, it held less promise for regional farmers. This bright leaf malaise was the product of four concurrent forces. Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania faced increasing competition from new bright tobacco districts; a new manufacturing trust, the American Tobacco Company, formed a monopsony over local markets which farmer organizations were unable to break; the rise of the cigarette as the dominant consumer bright leaf product limited top market prices; and environmental problems stemming from standard cultivation practices continued to make growing yellow tobacco more difficult and expensive, while limiting farmers' ability to turn to alternate crops. The turn of the century did not spell the end of bright tobacco cultivation in the Border, but it did signal the conclusion of the crop's most promising era.

Bright tobacco, long the exclusive staple of the sandy hill farms along the Dan and Roanoke, spread across the Southeast during the 1890s. Fields of yellow leaf appeared in places as distant as northeast Florida and coastal North Carolina. This diffusion was in part the result of efforts by Southside boosters to spread their crop, as seed producers, warehouse managers, tobacco manufacturers, and fertilizer agents all envisioned expanding profits. The agronomic work of Southside experts also contributed to the adaption of bright tobacco to new landscapes. By the century's end, more bright leaf was grown outside of the Southside than within the region for the first time, and the three counties would never again achieve their initial predominance.

Southside tobacco growers attempted to combat competition, environmental problems, and economic difficulties through organization. The Grange and then local chapters of the Farmers' Alliance supported growers' demands against warehouse owners, fertilizer suppliers, equipment manufacturers, and the American Tobacco Company, a trust formed by the largest cigarette manufacturers that came to dominate the region's tobacco markets during the century's last decade. Farmers also turned to these organizations to provide them with cheap fertilizer, cash loans, agricultural advice, and better plows. In the end these organizing efforts failed; tobacco prices declined and erosion continued. They did not address the root of the region's environmental problems - farming on fragile land - and they could not break the power of warehouse owners and tobacco manufacturers.

When the Grange and Farmers' Alliance failed to significantly better tobacco growers' situations, they turned to state and federal agricultural scientists to make tobacco culture more profitable. Bright tobacco growers were key in the creation of government soil surveys, which were an outgrowth of earlier cultivation literature produced by private tobacco "experts." Farmers believed that these surveys would help them locate productive land for bright tobacco cultivation, and combat competition from new tobacco producing regions. Soils surveys did benefit tobacco cultivation, but the bulk of the rewards went to the expanding tobacco districts east of Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania. The first county-level soil surveys in the nation mapped potential bright tobacco land on the North Carolina coastal plain, and hastened the ascendance of the Southside's competitors.

The rise of the cigarette as the dominant form of tobacco product, though incomplete at the turn of the century, transformed tobacco culture as well. Bright tobacco became a critical ingredient in American cigarettes. Smokers enjoyed the variety's mild flavor, and the chemistry

of flue-curing meant that bright tobacco transferred nicotine to the human body more efficiently than competing forms of smoking tobacco. While the cigarette ensured an expanding market for bright tobacco growers, it also undermined the economic position of the three counties that first produced the crop. Cigarette manufacturers were less concerned about premium quality than were plug producers, and an expanding market encouraged further competition from new tobacco districts in eastern North Carolina and South Carolina. Cigarette producers - synonymous with the American Tobacco Company monopsony (the control of a market by a single buyer) after 1890 - refused to pay premium prices for the best tobacco, and thus removed much of farmers' incentive to focus on quality rather than quantity.

The environmental problems that had plagued bright leaf culture since the antebellum era peaked at the end of the nineteenth century, as the crop spread to its greatest extent yet throughout the Border. Erosion continued to plague the region's hillsides, stripping topsoil from ridge fields and choking bottomland in silty runoff. The deforestation that accompanied widespread tobacco cultivation proceeded apace. Farmers worried about competition from new tobacco districts and decreasing crop prices planted more of their land in bright leaf and bought more and more commercial fertilizer, securing loans that required them to continue producing tobacco even as the crop became less profitable. Regional farmers' long history of cultivating tobacco also worked to weaken their willingness to turn to alternative crops, while decades of soil abuse made the success of such alternatives unlikely. Yellow tobacco had caught its cultivators on the horns of a dilemma; many farmers had turned to the crop because they believed that their land was unsuited to grow anything else, and years of diligently following tobacco cultivation advice left their land even less productive.

Competition, monopsony, cigarettes, and erosion changed bright tobacco calculus. The lottery prices of yellow tobacco's golden age faded away at the very moment that commercial fertilizer became a necessary addition to weakening land, and the ATC all but guaranteed that crop shortages would do little to elevate market prices. Southside tobacco growers quickly found themselves in a situation similar to that of other southern commodity crop producers, on a treadmill running faster and faster just to keep up. Tobacco cultivation would continue in the Southside into the twenty-first century, but it would never achieve its nineteenth century economic or agronomic promise.

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The last decade of the nineteenth century was a period of tremendous expansion of bright tobacco culture; eventually the crop appeared on farms from southern Virginia to northeastern Florida. During the late 1880s, bright tobacco cultivation had spread beyond the ridge land surrounding Danville and into adjoining counties in North Carolina and Virginia, where there were pockets of appropriate soil. Farmers in other parts of the impoverished South also took note of the profitability of the crop, and attempted its cultivation in their own locales with mixed success. Only sites with suitable sandy soil stood a chance of success, and, with a few exceptions, growers in other regions who procured the proper seed and followed proven curing methods still failed to produce bright leaf of as high a quality as that made in the heart of the old belt. Despite a less than perfect record, planters in other parts of the South persisted in their bright leaf experiments, and gradually developed seed types and cultivation methods that worked well in their regions. Their success flooded the bright tobacco market with leaf, and lowered prices throughout the South.

Southside producers and tobacconists were in part responsible for this increased competition. Key to the success of bright tobacco expansion were experts from Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania who had spurred the original development of bright leaf during the antebellum and postwar period. Boosters and businessmen who had a stake in the crop's success - including seed producers, such as Ragland, and warehousemen, such as Danville's Ed Pace - believed that the expansion of yellow tobacco cultivation could only benefit their bottom lines and the growth of the Border country. Farmers in the new regions bought seed, barn flues, and fertilizer from established Southside businesses, and tobacco from the new districts moved through the manufacturing facilities sprouting up in Virginia and North Carolina. This expansion would eventually challenge the Southside's bright leaf dominance, as the epicenter of yellow tobacco production moved south and east and such cities as Durham, Raleigh, and Winston Salem developed into warehouse and manufacturing centers.

The two most significant new areas of cultivation were eastern North Carolina and the northeastern coastal plain of South Carolina.<sup>652</sup> By 1890, bright tobacco began to displace corn and cotton as the dominant cash crop in the flat lands around Greenville and Wilson, North Carolina, where weak, sandy earth was the predominant topsoil.<sup>653</sup> Ed Pace opened the first regional bright leaf warehouse in 1890, an enterprise began at the urging of Ragland.<sup>654</sup> When farmers in the Pee Dee river basin of South Carolina looked for advice on how to begin bright leaf cultivation, they too consulted Ragland, who mailed instructions (probably copies of his popular cultivation pamphlet). Pace appeared in the Pee Dee district as well, serving as an

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<sup>652</sup> Garner, *The Production of Tobacco*, 39; Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 31-32; and Eldred E. Prince, Jr., and Robert R. Simpson, *Long Green: The Rise and Fall of Tobacco in South Carolina* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 46-47.

<sup>653</sup> Anthony J. Badger, *Prosperity Road: The New Deal, Tobacco, and North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 3; Robert C. McAdams, "The Tobacco Culture of Wilson County, North Carolina," Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1996, 1-2.

<sup>654</sup> McAdams, "The Tobacco Culture of Wilson County," 59-61.

outside judge in an 1886 tobacco-growing contest.<sup>655</sup> Other Border tobacconists attempted to spread bright leaf culture on a smaller scale. Representative were Halifax's R. B. Davis, who took up production in Catawba County, North Carolina, and Pittsylvania planters W. T. Dickinson and J. D. Wilder, who experimented with bright leaf culture near Asheville in the same state.<sup>656</sup> Likewise, a small bright tobacco district modeled on the Southside system developed along the border of Georgia and Florida in the years bracketing 1900.<sup>657</sup>

Border bright tobacco boosters could not export the Southside soil that was so suited to bright leaf cultivation, but they could export seed varieties and curing systems along with a degree of agricultural knowledge rooted in a particular southern environment that farmers in other regions could then modify to fit their particular locales. More than any other factor, the work of seed producers such as Robert Ragland made this expansion possible. Perhaps no farmer had done more work since the Civil War to promote bright tobacco, and by 1890, Ragland produced twenty-nine varieties of bright leaf tobacco, five dark types, two burley lines, and five cigar types of tobacco. Varieties such as Yellow Oronoko and Yellow Pryor predated the war, but Ragland also developed new varieties adapted to the soil types found in eastern North Carolina. Gold Finder, Bullion, and Oak Hill Yellow were among the varieties that gave potential bright tobacco farmers options matched to local soil conditions. Ragland made it clear that he sold environmental knowledge and experience as a plant breeder in addition to seed. Ragland's seed company had moved beyond basic seed selection; many of his seed lines were vigorous hybrids created by crossing two older lines of yellow tobacco. Ragland combined old

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<sup>655</sup> Prince, Jr., and Simpson, *Long Green*, 52-54, 57-58.

<sup>656</sup> Cameron, *A Sketch of the Tobacco Interests*, 28-29, 31.

<sup>657</sup> E. M. Nix, *Production of Bright Tobacco* (Savannah, GA: Seaboard Air Line Railway Company, 1915?), 6-7, 11; manuscript inventory notes of the Arthur M. Gignilliat Collection on Pineora (GA), Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA; Badger, *Prosperity Road*, 3; and Robert L. Ragland, "Nesbitt on Tobacco," *Southern Cultivator* 50, 1 (January 1892): 29. Ragland offered advice and seed to Georgia planters while W. H. Snow traveled through the region selling his modified curing barn system.

advice with his new plant material, cautioning would-be growers that despite plants “greatly improved by propagation of selections and judicious crossing” . . . “the soil must be adapted to the type, or failure is certain.”<sup>658</sup>

There was certainly a good deal of economic stimulus behind expansion. Bright tobacco prices that seemed poor to Pittsylvania or Caswell farmers, jaded by accounts of prime wrapper sales, seemed quite a windfall to eastern North Carolina cotton farmers suffering through their traditional staple’s price depression. New seed types coupled with commercial fertilizers made tobacco a viable alternative across vast swaths of the coastal plain. In locations such as Wilson County, North Carolina, sandy soils that were too deficient in nitrogen and phosphorus to produce even bright leaf became quite productive with the regular addition of guano and phosphates.<sup>659</sup> B. W. Arnold, a contemporary tobacco expert, described this eastward spread as the result of the new amendments: “The border counties of Virginia and North Carolina, covered for years with dwarf oaks, broomsedge and pines, were reclaimed by the use of commercial fertilizers, and were converted into the choicest lands for growing a particular variety of bright yellow tobacco.”<sup>660</sup> Thus the same developments that allowed Southside farms to remain productive in the face of soil erosion and depletion brought on by several decades of continuous cultivation also stimulated robust competition in the form of new bright tobacco districts.

The spread of bright leaf into North and South Carolina, along with the continued growth of burley tobacco (another distinct variety that found its way into plugs and cigarettes) in Kentucky and Tennessee, provided stiff competition for Southside tobacco growers. In 1880,

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<sup>658</sup> Robert L. Ragland, *Wholesale Catalogue of Reliable Tobacco Seeds* (Hycos, VA: R. L. Ragland Seed Co., 1894); and Robert L. Ragland, *Tobacco: How to Raise It and How to Make It Pay* (Hycos, VA: R. L. Ragland Seed Co., 1895), quotes on 4-5.

<sup>659</sup> McAdams, “The Tobacco Culture of Wilson County,” 25-27.

<sup>660</sup> B. W. Arnold, *History of the Tobacco Industry in Virginia from 1860 to 1894* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1897), 24.

South Carolina growers produced only 45,678 pounds of tobacco; by 1900, they raised almost 20 million pounds of bright leaf. Georgia farmers increased their production from 228,590 pounds to 1,105,600 pounds over the same period. The increases were even more dramatic in eastern North Carolina, where Wilson and Pitt counties were representative of this bright tobacco boom. In 1880, Wilson growers raised 8,745 pounds of leaf, but by 1900 the county produced more than 7 million pounds. And in Pitt, farmers raised their production from a meager 598 pounds, grown on only three acres, to almost 11 million pounds.<sup>661</sup> Partly as a result of this competition, bright leaf prices plateaued or even gradually declined through the 1880s, although bright tobacco prices remained well above those paid for dark tobacco on the Danville market. This price stagnation is more meaningful when one considers the added costs of the commercial fertilizers that had become a ubiquitous part of cultivation. As farmers' profits declined, the acreage that they planted in bright leaf in the Southside did not decrease. Rather, Southside farmers engaged in a common agricultural paradox; as each acre of bright leaf became less profitable, growers planted more and more ridge land in the crop in an attempt to maintain their income. During the 1879 season, Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania farmers sold a total of 24,162,039 pounds of tobacco. By 1899, when bright leaf had spread across widely scattered portions of the South, the three counties produced 35,799,650 pounds of leaf. Pittsylvania and Halifax remained the two leading tobacco counties in Virginia, but Caswell had dropped from the second to the seventh most productive county in North Carolina.<sup>662</sup>

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<sup>661</sup> Francis A. Walker and Charles W. Seaton, *Report on the Productions of Agriculture, as Returned at the Tenth Census* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1883), 8-9, 302; Robert P. Porter and Carroll D. Wright, *Report on the Statistics of Agriculture in the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895), 67, 445; and William R. Merriam, *Twelfth Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1900: Agriculture, Part II, Crops and Irrigation* (Washington, D.C.: United States Census Office, 1902), 545, 570, 566.

<sup>662</sup> In 1879, the county figures were: Pittsylvania, 12,271,533 pounds; Halifax, 7,553,842; and Caswell, 4,336,664. The corresponding 1899 figures were: Pittsylvania, 17,088,550 pounds; Halifax, 13,077,200 pounds; and Caswell, 5,633,900. The tobacco crop fluctuated rather dramatically from season to season depending on weather conditions

These increasing production figures reflected continued expansion of the number of tobacco farmers in the three counties. Over the same twenty-year period, the number of farmers raising tobacco increased. This increase, even as the profitability of yellow tobacco slowly waned, reflected the popular - and well-published - perception that bright tobacco remained the most profitable regional crop, and a lack of promising agricultural alternatives. Industrial labor in the region offered little alternative employment for blacks or whites. Most of Danville's growth revolved around selling, storing, and manufacturing bright tobacco, with the sole exception of the Riverside Cotton Mills, a textile concern that organized in 1882 (and Riverside Mills hired only white workers during its initial decades).<sup>663</sup> Many tobacco opponents such as William Sours, a transplanted Pennsylvanian long critical of the Southside's tobacco dependency, had given in and begun to plant bright leaf by the mid-1880s. Sours rejected his former trade, blacksmithing, in favor of what he believed to be the most reliable way of making money in the Southside.<sup>664</sup>

By the turn-of-the-century, bright tobacco was no longer centered on the counties ringing Danville; it had become a southeastern crop, with farmers from Virginia to Georgia planting golden leaf and selling their produce in auction warehouses modeled on the Danville system. Bright tobacco fields appeared in most southern districts where the soil was generally sandy and

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and estimated market prices - the 1889 crop, for example, was slightly lower than that of 1879 - but the general trend in the last two decades of the nineteenth century was one of steadily increasing production. 1880 census, 1900 census. The first postwar census crop - 1869 - was markedly lower than the 1859 crop, but poor weather conditions were at least partly to blame. See Robert Somers, *The Southern States since the War, 1870-1* (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1871), 26-27.

<sup>663</sup> On Riverside Cotton Mills and its successor, Dan River Mills, see Julian R. Meade, *I Live in Virginia* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1935), 1-99, 245-310; Robert E. King, *Robert Addison Schoolfield (1853-1931): A Biographical History of the Leader of Danville, Virginia's Textile Mills during Their First 50 Years* (Richmond, VA: William Byrd Press, 1979); William J. Erwin, *Dan River Mills: A Story of 75 Exciting Years in Textiles! (1882-1957)* (New York: Newcomen Society, 1957); and Robert Sidney Smith, *Mill on the Dan: A History of Dan River Mills, 1882-1950* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1960). In the early twentieth century, textile production in Danville would rise as a serious rival to tobacco manufacturing, and Dan River Mills would for a time be the largest cotton mill in the world. During the nineteenth century, however, tobacco reigned supreme along the banks of the Dan.

<sup>664</sup> William Sours to John Sours, February 16, 1885, SHC.

weak, or could be adapted to tobacco culture with the appropriate combination of chemical fertilizers. This crop diffusion did little to lessen the importance of bright leaf in the Southside, however. Tobacco raised around Danville, Milton, and South Boston continued to bring the highest prices (though lower than before) even as competitors entered the marketplace; Southside soils remained peculiarly suited to bright leaf and the region's growers had the most experience producing the finicky crop. In addition, the growing popularity of a relatively new form of consumer tobacco - the cigarette - ensured a continued market for the increasing glut of yellow tobacco.

The cultivation practices that had characterized bright tobacco production, especially since the end of the Civil War, continued largely unchanged at the turn of the century. Farmers still sought new ground for plant beds, burned the soil, clean tilled their crops shallowly and often, and planted on ridge land. Contemporary manuals that attempted to systematize bright tobacco culture emphasized all of these practices, and even advised new methods that promised to further damage the landscape. A common early-twentieth century prescription called for farmers to plow their tobacco lands in the early winter. This tillage was supposed to expose the soil to freezing and thawing, which would improve the land's tilth and make it easier to work in the spring. Experts also believed that winter plowing worked to crush insect larvae and expose them to birds and the elements, lessening infestations the following season. Winter plowing may have accomplished these goals, but it also exposed the vulnerable soil to additional months of wind and rain, accelerating the erosion that already plagued Southside farms. Taken together, the continuation of older techniques and the new advice of tobacco professionals served to

maintain or even increase erosion rates that had reached disastrous levels in the 1880s. By the turn of the century, erosion and deforestation in the Southside had never been more severe.<sup>665</sup>

Erosion problems remained a grave concern as the century drew to a close, but Southside farmers' willingness to criticize bright tobacco practices seemed to decline. Tobacco had long had its opponents, farmers who argued in the regional papers and agricultural journals that the crop was a destructive force that consumed the soil as it hampered farm diversification. These voices grew noticeably quieter during the 1890s. The boosterist fawning over tobacco was such that a commentator in a Caswell newspaper could even blame grain farming for regional erosion problems without a hint of irony. The writer accused "continuous grain cropping without manures" of ruining the county's land, without mentioning the even more intense cultivation that took place on Caswell's ubiquitous tobacco patches (or the fact that local cereal cultivation was in the midst of a long decline).<sup>666</sup> Decreasing criticisms of bright tobacco culture did not reflect improved agriculture, but the opposite. Regional tobacco dependence had grown to a point where life without bright leaf was hardly imaginable.

Rather than focusing on the visible soil destruction wrought by tobacco, most commentators on the bright belt actually wrote of the crop as an improving force. Much like their antebellum counterparts they pointed to increasing land values and the economic stimulus of tobacco manufacturing as fruits of tobacco culture. The old tale of the alchemical transformation of poor, abandoned piney fields and broomstraw land into the most valuable soil

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<sup>665</sup> John Estes, *Tobacco: Instructions for Its Cultivation and Curing*, Farmers' Bulletin, No. 6 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1892), passim; Otto Carl Butterweck, *The Culture of Tobacco*, Farmers' Bulletin, No. 82 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1898), 13; Frank D. Gardner, ed., *Traditional American Farming Techniques: A Ready Reference on All Phases of Agriculture for Farmers of the United States and Canada* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2001, reprint of 1916 edition), 341-352; Mathewson, *The Culture of Flue-Cured Tobacco*, 5, 18-21; and Trimble, *Man-Induced Soil Erosion*, 16.

<sup>666</sup> No Title, *Milton Herald*, February 3, 1898, p. 3.

along the Border remained a popular topic.<sup>667</sup> To be sure, some of this was booster rhetoric (and places with modest prospects always seem to contain the loudest boosters), but assertions of tobacco's positive influence also stemmed from decades of reoccurring claims. Since at least the 1850s, tobacco experts, warehousemen, manufacturers, and not a few farmers themselves had been declaring bright tobacco the future of the Southside. The crop made money while it seemed to defy agricultural conventions, and it took farmers a long time to accept that bright tobacco culture, as practiced in the late nineteenth century, was fundamentally unsustainable.<sup>668</sup>

The use of commercial fertilizers both encouraged and complicated existing tobacco culture and its boosters by temporarily obscuring tobacco unsustainability. Phosphorus-rich commercial amendments kept Southside soils viable even in the face of continual erosion, but they also opened up vast southern and eastern lands for bright tobacco, competition that slowly drove down the price of yellow leaf. Fertilizers also wrought a subtle intellectual transformation among bright tobacco farmers. Whereas a slavish attention to the minute properties of local soils had long characterized successful growers, a universal use of fertilizers diminished the importance of this expertise. By masking the deficiencies of weak or depleted ground, or by making nitrogen-rich land more suitable to tobacco cultivation through the addition of phosphorus, these amendments transformed local soils from living, nuanced ground to a mere substrate amenable to the addition and subtraction of bagged nutrients.<sup>669</sup> The new calculus called on farmers to memorize fertilization rates rather than to study what sort of trees grew on the land or what the earth felt like underfoot. And the enormous quantities of fertilizers

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<sup>667</sup> For examples, see Arnold, *History of the Tobacco Industry*, 24; Whitehead, ed., *Virginia*, 46-47; and Morrison, *Halifax County, Virginia*, 15-16.

<sup>668</sup> For a typical article that ignored depressed prices and increasing competition, see "Tobacco Growing," *Southern Planter* 59, 4 (April 1898): 158-159.

<sup>669</sup> Helms, "Soil and Southern History," 726, 751-752. For a remarkably similar process in an erosive Western landscape in the twentieth century, see Andrew P. Duffin, *Plowed Under: Agriculture and Environment in the Palouse* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), esp. chapter 6.

advocated by some manuals surely strained farm budgets; an 1898 USDA Farmers' Bulletin called for the application of as much as two tons of phosphorus-rich commercial fertilizer per acre on bright tobacco land.<sup>670</sup> Granted, the growing disconnect between soil type and quality tobacco was far from complete; bright leaf from the sandy ridges surrounding Danville remained the highest-priced tobacco in the Southeast due in part to local soil qualities, but fertilizers dramatically narrowed the gap between the birthplace of yellow tobacco and the new districts of the eastern Carolinas.

Southside tobacco farmers seemed to believe that they had little control over the environmental conditions that troubled their livelihoods, and their efforts to challenge political and economic orders that threatened their profit margins were equally unsuccessful. From the 1870s to the 1890s, regional farmers formed several organizations to challenge the economic dominance of warehouse owners, fertilizer companies, and merchants. The first and most conservative of these organizations was the Grange, or "Patrons of Husbandry." The Grange was a national organization that promoted fraternal bonds among farm families and worked to advance rural interests.<sup>671</sup> Although the Grange was never as strong in the mid-Atlantic South as it was in the Midwest, it was particularly popular among the tobacco farmers of Halifax and Pittsylvania counties. Each county had more local chapters than any other Virginia county, with the exception of Augusta.<sup>672</sup> The Grangers were hardly radicals intent on overthrowing the existing agricultural and social order, instead they advocated moderate reform of existing systems. Border Grange governance reflected this moderation. Among the leadership of the local Grange were influential farmers and businessmen, such as William Sutherlin, who had a

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<sup>670</sup> Butterweck, *The Culture of Tobacco*, 17.

<sup>671</sup> D. Wyatt Aiken, "The Patrons of Husbandry," *Southern Planter and Farmer* 9, 7 (July 1872): 404-406. This article was reprinted from the *Rural Carolinian*.

<sup>672</sup> Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*, 144-145.

vested interest in much of the status quo. Instead, the Border Grange lobbied to regulate railroad rates and warehouse fees, two sources of economic annoyance to most Southside tobacco growers.<sup>673</sup>

The Border Grange's primary target of reform by the late 1870s was the Danville warehouse system. The city's warehouses had united to form the Danville Tobacco Association (DTA) in 1869. Ostensibly, the DTA's purpose was to cut down on private tobacco buyers - or "pinhookers" - and to ensure uniform weighing and sales practices. Pinhooking involved the speculative purchase and quick resale of tobacco, often accompanied by false information or some other sort of trickery, and the trade had existed on the edges of the warehouses since the earliest days of the auction system. A pinhooker might meet a farmer outside the warehouse, regale the man with tales of poor wrapper sales, and offer to buy his load for a modest price. If the farmer was gullible enough to agree to the sale, the pinhooker would then turn around and sell the leaf on what was, in reality, a strong day for yellow wrappers. In another popular tactic, a pinhooker purchased several poorly graded piles on the auction floor, sorted them into piles of top leaf and poorer quality tobacco, and generally made a profit on the resale. This trick took advantage of buyers' tendency to assess a pile based on the lowest grade of tobacco it contained. Although farmers almost universally acknowledged that pinhooking was an irritant, the DTA was less effective at controlling pinhookers than it was at achieving an unstated goal. In reality, the organization's most important function was to guarantee that all of the city's warehouses charged farmers the same fees. The association also apparently encouraged the major tobacco buyers to consult on their bids, removing a source of competition between the cooperating warehouses. The Grange characterized the DTA as a prime example of a trust that subjected regional growers to unfair market conditions. In an effort to combat the power of the DTA, the

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<sup>673</sup> "Maj. William T. Sutherlin," 597; and Maddex, Jr., *The Virginia Conservatives*, 172-173.

Grange went so far as to establish its own warehouse in Danville in the 1870s, but poor management forced its closure after only a few seasons.<sup>674</sup>

In the 1880s another farmer organization, the Farmers' Alliance, took up the Grange's agenda with renewed vigor. Like the Grange, the Farmers' Alliance was never as active in Virginia and upper North Carolina as it was in other portions of the South, but the organization did engage more directly in political activity than its predecessor.<sup>675</sup> The Farmers' Alliance was a national organization, and Alliance members on both sides of the Border had many similar desires as farmers across the South and the Midwest. Like the Grangers, Southside Alliancemen were particularly troubled by the political and economic power of the large businesses that they dealt with daily: the railroads and the tobacco warehouses. Alliance members believed that high shipping costs lowered the prices that tobacco buyers would pay for raw leaf, in addition to imposing a financial burden on farmers who shipped their tobacco by rail, and they constantly complained of the costs associated with selling tobacco in auction warehouses, and of the power of the DTA in particular. Among their demands of the Virginia and North Carolina legislatures were a commission to regulate railroad freight rates, lower litigation costs that would enable poor farmers to take their cases to court, and an end to taxes placed on tobacco. Unlike Midwestern Alliances, Southside farmers had little need for Alliance-owned storage facilities to combat low crop prices; they could store their tobacco in their barns for almost a year, waiting for an opportune time to sell. They did, however, clamor for an Alliance-owned auction warehouse where they could market their tobacco without paying the various fees and commissions charged by the public warehouses, and nine of these facilities eventually emerged across the Virginia and

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<sup>674</sup> Tilley, *The Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 397-401; Hairston, *A Brief History*, 30; Pollock, *Illustrated Sketch Book*, 124-125; and DTA, *100 Years of Progress*, 61-62.

<sup>675</sup> William A. Link, "Cavaliers and Mudsills: The Farmers' Alliance and the Emergence of Virginia Populism," M.A. Thesis, University of Virginia, 1979, esp. 1-21.

North Carolina Piedmont.<sup>676</sup> This idea did not emerge *sui generis*; Alliancemen drew on the Grange's unsuccessful warehouse of the previous decade for inspiration.<sup>677</sup>

White farmers in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania were willing to challenge the railroads and warehouse owners, but they were unwilling to engage in biracial politics (or organization) to do so. Wealthy and influential farmers dominated local Alliance chapters, and Alliancemen worked hard to assure their fellow white farmers that theirs was a thoroughly white organization. A Halifax paper sympathetic to the Alliance informed readers that "there is not a principle announced in this platform [of the Virginia Farmers' Assembly] that is not thoroughly Democratic."<sup>678</sup> A Caswell newspaper that served as an "Alliance Advocate" was more explicit. An editorial explained that all county Alliance members were white Democrats because "for years in Caswell county the Democracy has been fighting almost without hope of success against a heavy Radical majority, composed almost entirely of negroes."<sup>679</sup> Local Alliance chapters thus positioned their struggle against white business owners as a question separate from the postwar battles over black labor and land ownership. According to William Link, when the Alliance attempted to engage in Populist politics in 1892 and 1893, racial issues quickly doomed the organization in the Upper South.<sup>680</sup> As the Alliance made clear, the same racial animosity that fueled the assassination of John Stevens and the Danville Riot continued to influence local politics.

Although the DTA remained a foe of Southside Alliancemen, regional tobacco farmers had a new, more imposing opponent beginning in 1890: the American Tobacco Company

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<sup>676</sup> "Alliance Notes - What We Want," *Caswell News and Alliance Advocate*, August 29, 1888, p. 2; "Alliance Notes," *Caswell News and Alliance Advocate*, July 18, 1888, p. 2; "Platform of the Farmer's Assembly," *Halifax Advertiser*, February 19, 1887, p. 1; and Tilley, *Bright Tobacco Industry*, 411.

<sup>677</sup> Susannah H. Jones, "Labor and Landownership in Halifax County, Virginia, 1865-1880," M.A. Thesis, University of Virginia, 1980, 14-15.

<sup>678</sup> "Platform of the Farmers' Assembly," p. 1.

<sup>679</sup> "Alliance Notes," p. 2.

<sup>680</sup> Link, "Cavaliers and Mudsills," 60-66.

(ATC). The ATC, along with Standard Oil, was one of the nation's first mega-corporations, and it held a near monopoly on a product that would revolutionize consumer tobacco, the cigarette. American cigarettes first appeared in the 1850s, but they remained uncommon until the 1880s. The man most closely associated with the rise of the cigarette was James B. Duke, who owned W. Duke, Sons & Co. of Durham, North Carolina. Duke made his first cigarettes in 1881, and through mechanization, effective advertising, and aggressive business practices he came to dominate the early regional market. Chief among Duke's innovations was his early adoption of cigarette rolling machines, developed by Virginian James Bonsack, which sped up production while lowering the cost of making each cigarette. These machines were at first delicate and unreliable, but Duke persisted with the new technology until it was perfected. By the late 1880s, each Bonsack machine could produce 120,000 cigarettes over the course of a ten hour workday, whereas the best hand-rollers produced only 3,000 cigarettes during the same period.<sup>681</sup> W. Duke, Sons & Co. was so successful that Duke was able to arrange a merger of the leading American cigarette producers into a trust, the American Tobacco Company, with himself as president. At its creation, the ATC brought together five firms - Duke's company; Allan & Ginter of Richmond, Virginia; the Kinney Co. of New York City; W. S. Kimball & Co. of Rochester, New York; and Goodwin & Co. of New York City - that combined produced nine out of every ten cigarettes sold in the United States.<sup>682</sup>

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<sup>681</sup> Patrick G. Porter, "Origins of the American Tobacco Company," *Business History Review* 43, 1 (Spring 1969): 61, 63-70; Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1977), 249-250, 290-291; Robert F. Durden, *Bold Entrepreneur: A Life of James B. Duke* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2003), 16, 23-26; and Timothy M. Matthewson, "'Smoke Signals: Cigarettes, Advertising, and the American Way of Life' at the Valentine Museum, Richmond, Virginia," *Technology and Culture* 33, 3 (July 1992): 560-563. For the Alliance's fears of the ATC, see Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*, 195-204. For an early influential biography of Duke, see John K. Winkler, *Tobacco Tycoon: The Story of James Buchanan Duke* (New York: Random House, 1942).

<sup>682</sup> Durden, *Bold Entrepreneur*, 36-37; Porter, "Origins of the American Tobacco Company," 59-60, 74-75; and Leslie Hannah, "The Whig Fable of American Tobacco, 1895-1913," *Journal of Economic History* 66, 1 (March 2006): 50.

Despite a virtual monopoly on cigarette sales, the early ATC did not dominate the American tobacco industry to the degree that most historians assume. Indeed, the cigarette was a relatively minor form of manufactured tobacco well into the twentieth century. Cigarettes remained a novelty in the United States until the 1880s, when hand-rolled Egyptian and Turkish products became somewhat fashionable. The production of Duke and his competitors quickly overwhelmed these imported luxuries, but cigarettes remained a niche good among American consumers. As late as the 1910s, only 5 percent of tobacco products sold in the United States by weight were cigarettes. Plug chewing tobacco, snuff, and cigars continued to be the most popular forms of tobacco.<sup>683</sup> Historian Allan Brandt summarizes the slow rise of cigarettes succinctly: “the cigarette seems such a ubiquitous part of American Culture that it is difficult to imagine that it is really a twentieth-century phenomenon.”<sup>684</sup>

The ATC did not dominate the national tobacco industry during the 1890s, but the new company did wield inordinate power in the bright tobacco belt. As Duke and his fellow manufacturers pioneered mass-produced cigarettes, they found that bright leaf made an ideal substitute for the smooth-smoking Turkish and Egyptian tobaccos used in the first cigarettes. Yellow tobacco was both milder and more abundant than the imported varieties, and cigarette makers soon made their new product entirely from bright leaf. While poor quality manufacturing tobacco could be hidden in the middle of a plug, where it might go unnoticed by the average consumer, smooth tobacco became essential to the reputation of a cigarette brand.<sup>685</sup> Advertising for the cigarette brand Dixie Darlin’ emphasized the importance of bright tobacco in

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<sup>683</sup> Relli Shechter, “Selling Luxury: The Rise of the Egyptian Cigarette and the Transformation of the Egyptian Tobacco Market, 1850-1914,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35, 1 (February 2003): 58-60; Hannah, “The Whig Fable,” 44-45; and Durden, *Bold Entrepreneur*, 44. It was not until 1921 that cigarettes became the most common way that Americans consumed tobacco. See Herndon, *William Tatham*, 418.

<sup>684</sup> Allan M. Brandt, “The Cigarette, Risk, and American Culture,” *Daedalus* 119, 4 (Fall 1990): 157.

<sup>685</sup> Shechter, “Selling Luxury,” 60-61; Porter, “Origins of the American Tobacco Company,” 62; Herndon, *William Tatham*, 430-431; and Goodman, *Tobacco in History*, 98.

smoking products, relating the tale of a consumer who “had poisoned his lungs, destroyed his nerves and ruined his temper by smoking” lesser tobaccos. Upon switching to the bright leaf in Dixie Darlin’ he supposedly broke out in jubilant doggerel:

Tobacco is a glorious plant,  
No matter how I used to rant;  
I’ve quit my everlastin’ snarlin’ -  
I found the ‘cure’ in ‘Dixie Darlin’.’<sup>686</sup>

With the popularity of bright leaf as a cigarette ingredient ensured by customer preference and advertising muscle, manufacturers sought as much yellow tobacco as they could get. Buyers for cigarette manufacturers worked the Danville markets and the new sales centers opening in North Carolina towns, and quickly became the most important buyers of high quality yellow tobacco. Compounding this monopsony, by the turn of the century the ATC bought its way into plug manufacturing and became the largest purchaser of plug wrappers in the country, increasing its chokehold on yellow tobacco markets. By 1910 the ATC sold 85 percent of American chewing tobacco, monopolizing plug sales to almost as great a degree as cigarettes.<sup>687</sup>

Southside farmers were less worried about who was buying their tobacco than they were about the prices that buyers paid for their leaf. Growers might have been content to sell their crops to the ATC if they felt adequately compensated, but such was not the case. The ATC thoroughly exploited its control of the market in an attempt to force cigarette prices higher and raw leaf sales lower, with the aim of absorbing their small competitors and then completely controlling tobacco prices. When the Trust artificially lowered cigarette prices to drive their competitors out of business, their buyers paid less for bright leaf on the auction floor. When the ATC then restricted cigarette production to drive up the sale price, buyers further depressed the

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<sup>686</sup> Advertisement in Snow, *Snow’s Modern Barn System*, 35.

<sup>687</sup> Porter, “Origins of the American Tobacco Company,” 62; Mathewson, *The Culture of Flue-Cured Tobacco*, 2; Tilley, *Bright Tobacco Industry*, 306-307; Herndon, *William Tatham*, 430-431; “The Tobacco Market,” *Southern Planter* 59, 11 (November 1898): 515; and Whitney, *Tobacco Soils of the United States*, 8.

market by taking less leaf. The Trust also absorbed or forced out of business small tobacco manufacturers who offered tobacco growers alternative buyers. In the two decades following the creation of the ATC, the Trust gobbled up approximately 250 competing tobacco manufacturers. Even many of the pinhookers who bought tobacco outside of the warehouses saw the writing on the wall and went to work as buyers for the ATC.<sup>688</sup> The ATC's buying and sales tactics angered Southside growers, who felt as if the monopsony worked with the alliance of warehousemen to attack their profits from all sides. Frustrated farmers in Caswell complained of being "oppressed and in bondage to the tobacco combine for the price of our tobacco," and organized a small county Tobacco Growers' Association in a futile attempt to combat the ATC.<sup>689</sup> Reviewing the Trust's tactics, another opponent declared the ATC akin to a natural disaster of epic proportions. It was, he wrote, "by far the worst enemy the farmer has ever encountered. Far-reaching and disastrous to the tobacco grower, in its aim and results, its creation was a calamity to him in comparison with which drought, hail-storm and frost, all combined, sink into insignificance."<sup>690</sup>

In response to the increasing power of the ATC and the environmental/agricultural difficulties of tobacco farming, disgruntled Alliance members in Pittsylvania organized one of Virginia's most ambitious cooperatives in the early 1890s, in an effort to break away from the tentacles of credit relationships with merchants and fertilizer manufacturers. On August 16, 1890, members of twenty-three local Alliance chapters met in Chatham, and determined to form the Pittsylvania Central Alliance Trade Union (PCATU). The new cooperative rented an office and a warehouse, and established a general store in Chatham. County farmers could purchase a

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<sup>688</sup> For the ATC's marketing tactics in the 1890s, see Arnold, *History of the Tobacco Industry*, 27-31, 50-52; Winkler, *Tobacco Tycoon*, 97-99; Hannah, "The Whig Fable," 50; Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand*, 291-292; and Porter, "Origins of the American Tobacco Company," 59-60.

<sup>689</sup> "Meeting of Caswell's Tobacco Growers," *Milton Herald*, January 11, 1900, p. 3.

<sup>690</sup> A. K. Leake, "Anti-Monopoly," *Southern Planter* 53, 5 (May 1892): 292.

share of the cooperative for \$10, which capitalized the venture and granted them access to the store's goods, cooperative discounts on fertilizer and farm implements, and agricultural meetings. By June of the following year the PCATU had enrolled several hundred farmers, and was an active force in rural Alliance chapters scattered across the county, including Green Rock, Dry Fork, Hollywood, Swansonville, Ashbury, Caddo, Harpin Creek, Chatham, High Point, Callands, Lolo, and Wayside.<sup>691</sup>

Farmers in the cooperative sought a number of benefits. The PCATU store sold goods - from coffee and oranges to nails and Brazil nuts - to members for 10 percent less than most local merchants.<sup>692</sup> More importantly for tobacco producers (and almost all Southside farmers raised tobacco), the PCATU bought fertilizer in large quantities at wholesale prices, and passed these savings along to members. Between March of 1891 and April of 1892, the PCATU purchased well over 200 tons of fertilizer. Even more significant than the reduced cost of goods was the cooperative's policy of extending credit to its members. According to its records, unlike most merchants or fertilizer companies, the PCATU apparently did not require borrowers to sign a crop lien.<sup>693</sup> In addition, the cooperative store also provided small cash loans to needy members.<sup>694</sup> The cooperative planned an even more direct attack on the mechanisms of farm credit and debt; the union intended to build a fertilizer factory and a machine shop to produce

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<sup>691</sup> Ledger, August 16, 1890 - May 6, 1892; PCATU Share Receipt Book, February-March, 1891; and PCATU Share Receipt Book, March-June, 1891, all in Records of the Pittsylvania Central Alliance Trade Union, UVA; Link, "Cavaliers and Mudsills," 34. The best account of the PCATU is found in Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*, 199-204.

<sup>692</sup> PCATU Ledger, 35; and PCATU store daybook, April 1, 1891 - August 6, 1891, Records of the Pittsylvania Central Alliance Trade Union.

<sup>693</sup> PCATU freight ledger, 1891-1892, Records of the Pittsylvania Central Alliance Trade Union. Between the above dates the cooperative store received 404,000 pounds of fertilizer and two railroad cars of undetermined weight.

<sup>694</sup> PCATU store daybook, 1891.

agricultural implements in Chatham, in the hopes of bettering local agriculture while further lowering the prices of farm inputs.<sup>695</sup>

Cooperative records are relatively silent on the organization's larger political aims, though the PCATU seemed largely to have reflected the purposes of the state Farmers' Alliance. A cooperative ledger urged "the brothers to unite together in business . . .," but did not explicitly challenge the Southside's political or social status quo.<sup>696</sup> Like other branches of the local Alliance, this call for brotherhood did not extend to the region's black farmers and tobacco workers. In short, the union's primary goal seems to have been to provide its white members with less-expensive fertilizer and general merchandise, though the challenge to large merchants who controlled regional agriculture was implicit. Under-capitalization prevented the full realization of even these limited goals. The PCATU was never able to construct either the fertilizer plant or the implement factory that the organization had envisioned. Instead, the cooperative purchased farm machinery from outside sources and entered into agreements with the Durham Fertilizer Company and Venable's Fertilizers to furnish amendments at bulk rates.<sup>697</sup>

Although it was ultimately unsuccessful, the PCATU, like the Grange and Farmers' Alliance chapters before it, attempted to address the agricultural and environmental issues that made farmers' lives more difficult. The cooperative's overwhelming focus on affordable fertilizer reflected growers' belief that the best way to combat soil depletion and erosion was through purchased amendments. Likewise, the organization's attempt to build implements suited to tobacco culture reflected a historic local interest in modern machinery that might make farming more efficient (and in the case of better plows, less erosive). Cooperative meetings were

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<sup>695</sup> PCATU ledger, 24.

<sup>696</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>697</sup> PCATU, accounts of purchases (partial), records of the Pittsylvania Central Alliance Trade Union. The Durham Fertilizer Company specialized in selling directly to Alliance chapters, going so far as to market a "North Carolina Farmer's Alliance Guano" brand. See Tilley, *Bright Tobacco Industry*, 412.

a place to discuss strategies for combating the ATC and Danville warehouse owners, but they must also have been a forum for conversations about tobacco cultivation techniques, just as agricultural club gatherings had long served to disseminate farm knowledge. The PCATU was an organization for combating Pittsylvania farmers' economic and political difficulties, but it also worked (however briefly and ineffectively) to improve the relationships between farmer and land.

Ambitious as it was, the PCATU was short-lived. The cooperative collapsed in the fall of 1892. The PCATU's demise was the product of a failure of its members to meet their debts to the organization. Farmers who promised to pay their subscription fees often failed to follow through, and tobacco growers who purchased fertilizer on credit failed to settle their accounts. In some cases these defaults may have represented poor faith on the farmers' parts, but it seems likely that for many debtors the realities of a poor crop caught up with them. By September of 1892, the union was almost \$8,000 in debt to its creditors, the largest of which were the Durham and Venable fertilizer companies. Ironically, or perhaps tellingly, the PCATU succumbed to the same credit structure and market depression that plagued Southside tobacco farmers.<sup>698</sup>

Declining bright tobacco prices made farmers' concerns all the more pressing. Demand for yellow leaf was such that Danville market prices had muscled through the Panic of 1873 without a decline, in fact, bright tobacco prices increased steadily through economic turbulence of 1873 and 1874. Such was not the case with the more severe financial crisis in 1893. The ATC's efforts to restrict cigarette production combined with the crisis to depress bright tobacco markets. In 1889-1890, bright tobacco moving through Danville's warehouses averaged \$12 to \$13 per hundredweight, and this price was low enough to stimulate Alliance organization. In

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<sup>698</sup> Ibid; and Link, "Cavaliers and Mudsills," 39. For the ongoing difficulties of the PCATU in collecting membership dues, see PCATU ledger, 37, 41-43.

1893 the price fell to \$6.46 per hundredweight. Although this figure was still roughly double what a farmer could expect for dark tobacco, it made the margins tighter than ever for the average grower. Prices rose slowly toward the end of the decade, but farmers remained suspicious that the ATC had engineered the decline.<sup>699</sup>

Growers disenchanted by the failures of farmers' organizations held out hope that a new ally, the federal government, would improve their situation. The last decade of the nineteenth century marked a federalization of tobacco expertise, as government agencies gradually assumed control of tobacco studies and the dissemination of agricultural knowledge. Government tobacco research did not necessarily indicate the top-down power of the state through experts at the Department of Agriculture; rather, it was in part a reflection of popular farmer demand.<sup>700</sup> Farmer requests for government aid reflected the economic troubles of the 1890s, but they were also a continuation of historic tobacco culture. Bright leaf growers had long turned to tobacco "professionals" for advice, from the correspondents in antebellum agricultural journals to the mass-produced guides of the post-Civil War years. Tobacco publications from the USDA and other government agencies produced at the solicitation of growers were a continuation of a decades-old tradition.

Many farmers found the few government publications of the early 1890s to be of little use. Although copies of Robert Ragland's and the Love Brothers' detailed bright tobacco guides circulated the Southside, state and federal tobacco publications tended to be general and relatively unhelpful to the bright leaf grower.<sup>701</sup> John Estes's *Tobacco: Instructions for Its*

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<sup>699</sup> Peterson, *Historical Study of Prices Received*, 152, table 79; and DTA, *100 Years of Progress*, 51.

<sup>700</sup> The case of tobacco research support Elizabeth Sanders's argument that farmers were key instigators in the increasingly federalization of national and farm economics during the Progressive Era. See Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>701</sup> The most popular regional agricultural journal, the *Southern Planter*, gave a free copy of Ragland's bright tobacco guide to all of its subscribers in 1896. See "Publisher's Notes," *Southern Planter* 57, 4 (April 1896): 182.

*Cultivation and Curing* (1892) - the sixth number of the USDA's new Farmers' Bulletin series - was typical. Estes's brief guide furnished general advice on cultivating tobacco, but it failed to differentiate between varieties until it covered curing. At that point the author admitted that curing bright tobacco was "a somewhat difficult process, requiring practice to insure the best results," and left it at that. Estes also confessed that aspiring farmers could do little unless they matched tobacco varieties to appropriate soil types and climate, but offered no instructions on how to do so.<sup>702</sup> These shortcomings meant that *Tobacco* was a poor guide for the practical Southside farmer. Likewise, Otto Carl Butterweck's *The Culture of Tobacco* (Farmers' Bulletin No. 82, 1898) requested a comprehensive federal study of the requirements of various tobacco types, the sort of practical document that might aid aspiring growers.<sup>703</sup>

Commonwealth agricultural boosters took the lead in promoting more practical government studies. At the behest of growers, the Virginia State Board of Agriculture, anxious to promote and improve bright tobacco agriculture, approached USDA officials about a systematic soil survey of the tobacco belt. Milton Whitney, head of the Division of Soil Investigations, agreed to undertake such a survey if the Board would foot the bill, and state officials agreed.<sup>704</sup> Whitney's 1898 report attempted to provide farmers with a rational, systematic way of identifying soils types. Instead of defining quality tobacco soil by vegetative cover or topography, Whitney outlined a mechanical method of separating soil into its constituent particles. The report provided an illustration of the proper ratios of gravel, sand, clay, and silt in ideal bright tobacco soil. Whitney also furnished farmers with moisture readings

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<sup>702</sup> Estes, *Tobacco*, 7-8, quote on 7.

<sup>703</sup> Butterweck, *The Culture of Tobacco*, 5.

<sup>704</sup> Richard V. Gaines, "A Tobacco Experiment Station and Model Farm," *Southern Planter* 61, 7 (July 1900): 405. The USDA eventually took over funding of the tobacco soils survey, though it seems clear that the initial impetus came from the state board. See *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901), 56.

from forty-three locations scattered across the bright belt, and suggested that farmers use these figures as guidelines when searching for appropriate tobacco land. Whitney repeated a Southside truism - “the flavor and quality of the leaf are greatly influenced by the conditions of climate and soil” - but his methods of identifying these micro-environments differed greatly from the inherited techniques of regional farmers. Whitney’s report was indicative of the professionalization of agricultural knowledge that had come to dominate bright leaf production.<sup>705</sup> Whitney’s findings achieved mass-circulation in a USDA Farmers’ Bulletin (number 83) the same year, a more concise version of his preliminary report.<sup>706</sup> This Bulletin received immediate attention along the Border, where one newspaper editor encouraged his readers to take advantage of the systematic study to improve regional tobacco culture.<sup>707</sup>

Whitney’s studies of tobacco soils and farmer agitation for useful scientific guides eventually led to one of the USDA’s most ambitious agricultural programs: the county-level soil surveys. Whitney’s preliminary report called for mapping soils on a detailed, local level, asserting that such studies would benefit tobacco farming to a great degree.<sup>708</sup> After two years of looking at small, well-defined shade tobacco districts in Pennsylvania and Connecticut, the Bureau of Soils turned its attention once again to the bright belt of Virginia and North Carolina. Whitney pointed to these surveys of eastern North Carolina land - much of which the Bureau touted as prime bright leaf land - as a perfect example of the value of soil survey work.<sup>709</sup> Along with the work of Danville area bright leaf boosters, the general soil survey and the county-level soils surveys that followed in the early 1900s were key stimulants in the rapid growth of bright

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<sup>705</sup> Whitney, *Tobacco Soils of the United States*, 15-16, 43, plate IX, quote on 8.

<sup>706</sup> Milton Whitney, *Tobacco Soils*, USDA Farmers’ Bulletin, No. 83 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1898).

<sup>707</sup> “The Tobacco Soils Report,” *Milton Herald*, February 3, 1898, p. 4.

<sup>708</sup> Whitney, *Tobacco Soils of the United States*, 3.

<sup>709</sup> *Yearbook of the USDA*, 124-125, 128-130.

tobacco culture in the North Carolina coastal plain. This was not the result that Southside growers had sought.<sup>710</sup>

In addition to the accumulating studies of Southside soils, a new tobacco experiment station in Pittsylvania County conducted studies of the crop and reported its findings to interested farmers. Organized in the mid-1890s, the station near Chatham was funded by the USDA's Committee of Analytical and Agricultural Chemistry.<sup>711</sup> The Hatch Act (1887), which guaranteed state agricultural experiment stations federal funding, had stimulated some bright tobacco work at Virginia Polytechnic Institute at Blacksburg and the North Carolina experiment station at Raleigh, though the early trials were almost exclusively focused on fertilizer use and application rates. The Chatham experimental farm was the first station in the nation exclusively devoted to the study of tobacco (though it too was very interested in fertilizer studies). Although the findings of the Chatham station seem lost, all indications are that the experiment station concentrated on inviting regional farmers to view tobacco cultivation and fertilization techniques, a method of operation that likely appealed to bright leaf growers who held hands-on experience in high esteem.<sup>712</sup>

Although these efforts were encouraged by farmers, this federal tobacco work was indicative of an increasingly powerful and ambitious USDA, an agency on its way to becoming "the most dynamic portion of the national state in the early twentieth century."<sup>713</sup> James Wilson, the Secretary of Agriculture at the turn of the century, pointed to the linked work of the Bureau of Soils and tobacco field experiments as a prime example of the potential of the USDA's nascent farm programs. Wilson declared that tobacco studies showed the USDA to be "a bureau

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<sup>710</sup> Tilley, *Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 189-190. North Carolina's eastern counties were the first to receive detailed county soil surveys, largely due to the survey's origination in the requests of aspiring bright tobacco growers.

<sup>711</sup> Richard V. Gaines, "A Tobacco Experiment Station and Model Farm," *Southern Planter* 61, 7 (July 1900): 405.

<sup>712</sup> Tilley, *Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 168-178.

<sup>713</sup> Sanders, *Roots of Reform*, 391.

well organized and well equipped to carry on the work [of agricultural improvement] in a larger and broader field than has ever before been possible.”<sup>714</sup> The tobacco soil surveys were a rigorous scientific way of understanding a crop culture and transferring that knowledge to farmers, and “the success of their [field researchers’] work is attracting trained men, who look to this as one of the most promising fields for research work along economic lines.”<sup>715</sup> Wilson’s vision of the tobacco soil survey work as the launching pad for more general soil studies came to fruition in 1900, when the Bureau of Soils adapted the tobacco survey format to treat soil suitability to a wide range of crops.<sup>716</sup>

As soil surveys and the work of experiment stations strove to systematize and regiment bright tobacco production through the application of science, the growing association of bright tobacco with cigarettes gradually circumscribed tobacco prices and reduced crop variability. Whereas plug manufacturers could afford to pay lucrative prices for the best wrappers, which served as advertisement for and ingredient in top-dollar plugs, cigarette manufacturers were much more concerned with uniformity in tobacco. They wanted to produce consistent, identical cigarettes. Many cigarette brands were made entirely of bright leaf, and manufacturers could hardly pay lottery prices for their main ingredient. Besides, a cigarette’s paper wrapper hid the tobacco inside, making consistent taste the most important quality. The cigarette consuming public was less interested in a product that contained exceptional-looking tobacco than they were in purchasing a reliably mild product. As a consequence, ATC buyers sought abundant middle-grades of tobacco, rather than competitively bidding on the very best lots. This shift in purchasing did contribute to a decline in the average prices paid for bright leaf on the Danville market - the 1880s average price of \$11.10 per hundredweight fell to \$7.89 per hundredweight in

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<sup>714</sup> *Yearbook of the USDA*, 57.

<sup>715</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>716</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

the 1890s - but, perhaps just as importantly, it removed the potential for extremely high prices for select lots.<sup>717</sup> Farmers knew there was little chance of striking it rich with an exceptionally yellow crop of tobacco by 1900. This reality lessened the association of the best tobacco with the best farming practices, and encouraged standardized production methods that led to consistent crops. As one farmer wrote in resignation, “the day of the white [extremely light yellow] wrapper and cutter is passed, so far as fancy prices are concerned. Let us, therefore, produce what is wanted . . .”<sup>718</sup>

Manufacturers’ reliance on bright tobacco in cigarettes drew on some of the same physical and chemical qualities that made the variety so successful in plugs. Cigarette advertising’s use of brand names continued the plug trends of evoking the color or taste of bright tobacco. Companies such as Lorillard manufactured cigarettes and bright tobacco meant for cigarette rolling under such brand names as Golden Floss and Old Gold, and other brands alluded to their sweet flavor with names that included fruits or desserts.<sup>719</sup> Although this old-fashioned advertising remained a part of cigarette marketing, it was quickly surpassed by more sophisticated efforts, including names that evoked the exotic Middle East (R.J. Reynolds’ Camel cigarettes being the classic example), cash giveaways, endorsements by foreign actresses, and campaigns touting a particular brand’s health benefits or allure. Duke even sponsored a roller-skating polo team named after his Crosscut brand of cigarettes.<sup>720</sup> A number of manufacturers hired advertising agencies to design marketing campaigns (including the ATC), and they placed cards featuring attractive women, historical figures, or baseball stars in each pack of cigarettes to

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<sup>717</sup> DTA, *100 Years of Progress*, 51. The ATC and the rising popularity of the cigarette cannot exclusively be blamed for this decline, as the Panic of 1893 and high production throughout the decade undoubtedly contributed to depressed markets as well.

<sup>718</sup> F. M. Rogers, Jr., “Top Your Tobacco Right,” *Southern Planter* 52, 8 (August 1891): 414.

<sup>719</sup> P. Lorillard Co., *Lorillard and Tobacco: 200th Anniversary P. Lorillard Company, 1760-1960* (New York: P. Lorillard Co., 1960), 28-32.

<sup>720</sup> *Ibid.*, 29; Tilley, *Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 550; Goodman, *Tobacco in History*, 101-102; and Winkler, *Tobacco Tycoon*, 49-51.

promote brand loyalty.<sup>721</sup> Cigarettes advertising embraced the modern consumer world emerging in the late nineteenth century, a more elaborate and nuanced public arena than the world of Reconstruction plug tobacco advertising, and early cigarette advertising was well-ahead of its time. While advertising appeals to bright tobacco's country of origin and its botanical qualities carried some appeal, tobacco advertising had moved beyond the simple methods of Antebellum and Reconstruction-era plug manufacturers.

Bright tobacco imagery played a small part in advertising success, but the crop contributed much more to the rise of the cigarette through biochemical means. Since the early nineteenth century, scientists and some farmers understood that nicotine was a substance in tobacco and that the element had some affect on the human body. This understanding did not extend to a consistent conception of nicotine as an addictive substance, though a few experts classified the substance as "poisonous."<sup>722</sup> Despite the absence of a clinical understanding of addiction, nicotine served to lure consumers back for more. This proved a more powerful advertisement than manufacturers could have dreamed. Some of the same qualities that made yellow tobacco popular for chewing plugs and pipe tobacco - a smooth taste and relatively low levels of nitrogenous compounds such as nicotine - made the crop ideal for use in cigarettes as well.

Nicotine's addictive properties contributed to cigarettes' popularity, but this was the case with all tobacco products. Bright leaf cigarettes had an additional, initially unknown, advantage (at least for their manufacturers) over other forms of tobacco. Cigarette users were more likely to become addicted to nicotine than consumers who used other forms of tobacco. Tobacco dried at ambient temperatures or with low fires was alkaline (or basic), just like the nicotine contained

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<sup>721</sup> Goodman, *Tobacco in History*, 101-102; Gately, *Tobacco*, 205-206; and Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand*, 291-292.

<sup>722</sup> R. L. Ragland, "Chemistry of Yellow Tobacco," *Southern Planter* 48, 11 (November 1, 1887); 576.

in its smoke. Flue-cured tobacco (i.e. bright tobacco), on the other hand, was mildly acidic, a result of the biochemical transformation of tobacco under high heat. This minor difference had little affect on chewing tobacco or snuff made from yellow leaf, but it was of great consequence for smokers. The human body can draw acidic smoke more easily into the lungs, and as a consequence a cigarette containing bright leaf tobacco delivered more nicotine to the lining of the lungs than one made of alternative tobaccos, even though bright leaf itself was relatively low in nicotine. The cigarette thus proved a most efficient nicotine delivery device. By an accident of curing, then, bright leaf cigarettes proved more addictive than their competitors, even though by all accounts they tasted smoother and lighter.<sup>723</sup> Like the biochemical interactions that happened to fix high sugar content in extremely yellow bright tobacco, mating smooth flavor with an attractive appearance, flue-curing drew on plant biology and practical technology to create an end product that consumers “favored” over all competitors.

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The cigarette captured tobacco growers as neatly and completely as it did the consumer tobacco market. The ascendancy of the cigarette, as produced by the ATC and the large companies that followed the trust’s destruction, constricted bright tobacco markets and lowered the prices that buyers paid for leaf. More significantly, cigarettes stripped away the lucrative lottery prices of which growers once dreamed. The cigarette relied on bright tobacco, but it repackaged the agricultural product in a way that distanced field and consumer. The yellow leaf as plug wrapper kept the tobacco variety and its quality at the forefront of manufacturers’ and consumers’ minds, and both were willing to pay handsomely for the best article. Cigarettes, on

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<sup>723</sup> Edward M. Brecher et al., *Licit and Illicit Drugs: The Consumers Union Report on Narcotics, Stimulants, Depressants, Inhalants, Hallucinogens, and Marijuana - Including Caffeine, Nicotine, and Alcohol* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1972), 229; Goodman, *Tobacco in History*, 4-6, 98-99; Brandt, *Cigarette Century*, 24; and Gately, *Tobacco*, 210-211.

the other hand, stressed consistency, and hid tobacco inside a paper wrapper. Inside their packaging, all cigarettes looked the same. America's cigarette obsession would ensure that bright tobacco had a continued place in the Southside's fields to the present day, but it spelled the end of the crop's future as early tobacco boosters had envisioned it.

If the situation was bad for white farmers, it was particularly dire for the region's African American population. Almost four decades after emancipation, black residents of the three counties had made relatively little progress toward landownership. In 1900, African Americans made up roughly half the population of Halifax and Pittsylvania, yet owned only 4 percent of Halifax's acreage, and only 2 percent of the land in Pittsylvania.<sup>724</sup> The situation was equally unbalanced in Caswell. Despite the fact that almost 55 percent of the population was black, African Americans owned only 60 of the 1,745 farms in Caswell.<sup>725</sup> In his study of agriculture and society in a Piedmont county, Crandall Shifflett argues that, "Above all, the man-land relationship stood at the center of the social order."<sup>726</sup> This may have been so, but all such relationships were not equal, for as C. S. Lewis so eloquently put it, "what we call Man's power over Nature, turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument."<sup>727</sup> In the Southside tobacco kingdom, the limits of black access to the land were part of an exercise in social power. Declining tobacco prices and increasing input costs made tobacco less profitable for black sharecroppers and renters, lessening African Americans' ability to save money for land purchases, even as decreased profitability might have encouraged some white landowners to finally consider selling. The conditions that worked to impoverish white

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<sup>724</sup> Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*, 217, table 8.4. A 1906 auditor's report from Halifax estimated that black real and personal estates made up less than 8 percent of the county total, despite the fact that African American were 52 percent of the population [Morrison, *Halifax County*, 29].

<sup>725</sup> Calculated from HCDB.

<sup>726</sup> Shifflett, *Patronage and Poverty*, 99.

<sup>727</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 35.

tobacco growers - erosion, fertilizer debt, market monopsony, and the rise of cigarettes - further limited the economic opportunities available to Border African Americans.

The conditions that would characterize Southside bright tobacco production until the Great Depression were present in full force by 1900. Tobacco culture dominated almost every farm in the three counties, competition was fierce thanks to the expanding yellow tobacco districts of eastern North Carolina and South Carolina, commercial fertilizers were an expensive and ubiquitous farm input, market prices remained lower than during earlier decades, there were no more lottery prices for the best tobacco, and racial inequities accompanied regional agriculture. Farmers would make continued efforts to improve their situation; they tried new organization tactics, they continued to publish and read instructions on making better tobacco, and they sought new and better government research into tobacco cultivation.<sup>728</sup> Despite these efforts, the promising bright tobacco culture first created on the Southside's sandy ridges was effectively dead as the twentieth century began. In its place was an agricultural system that closely mirrored the cotton empire of the Deep South, with impoverished farmers beset by crop liens, increasing tenancy, low prices, and few alternatives.

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<sup>728</sup> World War I temporarily brought strong prices, as the army and navy provided soldiers with generous cigarette rations, but markets fell precipitously in the 1920s. One of the most ambitious early twentieth century organization efforts was the Tri-State Tobacco Growers' Cooperative, founded in the early 1920s. This cooperative enrolled thousands of farmers, but like earlier efforts it collapsed after only a few years. Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 35-36; Carrington, *A History of Halifax County*, 58-59; Prince, Jr. and Simpson, *Long Green*, 88-107; and Bennett, "King Bacca's Throne," 94-114.

## CHAPTER 9

### EPILOGUE

The year 1900 did not mark the end of bright tobacco in the Southside. Most regional farmers labored on, working to make a living from the crop they knew so well. Weather conditions, wars, and advertising worked to swing tobacco prices up and down, but the general declining trend of the 1890s continued until the late 1920s, when tobacco markets fell into the abyss of the Great Depression. Although the environmental concerns associated with regional agriculture were full-blown by the 1890s, farmers locked into bright tobacco production by a lack of alternatives did little to move away from the crop.

Erosion and deforestation issues continued to plague the Southside during the early decades of the twentieth century, as farmers persisted in their reliance on bright leaf as a staple crop. According to one geographer, by the 1930s the average plot of ground in the three counties had lost between seven and nine inches of topsoil to sheet erosion, among the highest rates in the Upper South.<sup>729</sup> A series of soil erosion surveys undertaken by the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) graphically illustrated the damage to the region's topsoil; according to the surveys, the vast majority of Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania land suffered from moderate to severe sheet erosion and gullying. Erosion was the worst on the ridges and uplands paralleling river and stream courses - prime bright tobacco land that had been under cultivation for more than half a

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<sup>729</sup> Trimble, *Man-Induced Soil Erosion*, 2-3. In many cases this was the entire layer of sandy topsoil, leaving farms with nothing but exposed clay subsoil. See Rowalt, *Soil Defense in the Piedmont*, 2-4, 5-6.

century in most cases.<sup>730</sup> Southside forests were similarly imperiled. One 1927 tobacco study declared that little woodland along the Border had any value as timber, and USDA soil surveys of the three counties made similar assessments. The majority of non-agricultural land was “cut-over land, abandoned crop land and fire-damaged woodland,” the legacy of decades of intensive tobacco farming.<sup>731</sup>

The identification of the Southside as an environmental and agricultural “problem” area during the New Deal brought the region into the national purview, but it merely highlighted conditions that had long existed in the old tobacco belt. An article in the 1936 volume of *Soil Conservation*, written by P. F. Keil, brought the erosion issues of the Southside to the attention of farmers and conservationists across the nation. (*Soil Conservation* billed itself the “official organ of the Soil Conservation Service,” and included the Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace, and the head of the SCS, Hugh Hammond Bennett, on its masthead.) The piece - “Two Centuries of Accruing Tragedy along the Dan River” - blamed poor agricultural practices for the sorry state of regional farmlands, declaring that “Until recently, little thought had been given to the idea of holding the soil and plant food on the farms; consequently the soils have washed away.”<sup>732</sup> Keil used the Schoolfield Reservoir on the Dan River in Danville as his central example of the destructive potential of local erosion. Built in 1904, the 1,150 foot long dam impounded a 540-acre reservoir that stretched more than three miles west of the city. By the

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<sup>730</sup> F. F. Nickels, E. F. Goldston, and E. P. Deatrick, *Reconnaissance Erosion Survey of the State of Virginia* (Washington DC: USDA, Soil Conservation Service, 1934); and G. L. Fuller, *Reconnaissance Erosion Survey of the State of North Carolina* (Washington DC: USDA, Soil Conservation Service, 1934).

<sup>731</sup> A. P. Brodell, *Cost of Producing Virginia Dark and Bright Tobacco and Incomes from Farming, 1922-1925*, Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin 255 (Blacksburg: Virginia Polytechnic Institute, 1927), quote on 44; Hearn and Drane, *Soil Survey of Caswell* (1910); Journey, et al., *Soil Survey of Halifax* (1938); and Kirk, et al., *Soil Survey of Pittsylvania* (1922). For another account of the low-quality of local non-agricultural land, see Ross O. Stevens, *Wildlife Conservation through Erosion Control in the Piedmont*, USDA Farmer’s Bulletin no. 1788 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1937), 5-7.

<sup>732</sup> P. F. Keil, “Two Centuries of Accruing Tragedy along the Dan River,” *Soil Conservation* 1, 7 (February 1936): 1-5, quote on 3.

time of Keil's article, 400 acres had disappeared, filled by silt from upstream runoff. In fact, most of the reservoir had silted so quickly that by the 1930s moderate-sized trees grew where seventeen feet of water existed at the dam's closing.<sup>733</sup>

Although Keil's descriptions of local erosion were accurate enough, he was much less precise about the relationship between tobacco agriculture, the nature of local soils, and environmental degradation. He did note that tobacco was the dominant local crop, and that its culture had existed in the Piedmont from the early years of white settlement. But rather than connect local erosion conditions to environmental and agricultural particularities, in keeping with the SCS's agenda of tackling rural poverty and land use issues across the nation he associated local problems with poor farming practices up and down the eastern seaboard.<sup>734</sup> Keil's representation of local soil and farm conditions ignored how and why bright tobacco had become the dominant crop, and the intellectual and agronomic struggles that had long dominated local discussion of how Southsiders could and should farm. His article removed the Border's problems from their material and social contexts, and instead made them part of an amorphous idea of laggard southern agriculture.

Efforts to address the region's problems were not limited to surveys and written critiques. The Southside was so eroded that the SCS selected a portion of the Piedmont landscape along the Bannister River in Pittsylvania as one of twenty-six demonstration districts scattered across the southeastern states.<sup>735</sup> Along with sites in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama, the Bannister River district was supposed to serve as a test bed where SCS scientists

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<sup>733</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>734</sup> Ibid; for the SCS and other New Deal conservation agencies' association of poor land with poor people, see Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. chapter 2.

<sup>735</sup> Rowalt, *Soil Defense in the Piedmont*, 7. Virginia held 4 demonstration districts, North Carolina 8, South Carolina 5, Georgia 6, and Alabama 3. Most districts were targeted at demonstrating proper cotton farming methods. A portion of the Dan River drainage in southwestern Pittsylvania composed another of Virginia districts, and may have operated in conjunction with the Bannister River district.

could demonstrate proper soil management techniques to southern farmers. With the resources and manpower of the SCS (which had Civilian Conservation Corps workers at its disposal), the Bannister River project invested a great deal of labor and money in slowing Southside erosion. Within the first year, farmers and SCS workers constructed more than 160 miles of contour terraces and 4,000 check dams designed to stem gully erosion (though officials estimated that the small river basin still had 25,000 unfilled gullies).<sup>736</sup> The district also oversaw the planting of approximately half a million trees in gullies and on worn out fields.<sup>737</sup> Descriptions of these efforts along with SCS advice for Piedmont farmers appeared in a local publication, the *Bannister River Banner*, that touted agricultural reform through resource conservation.

The journal must have had a familiar ring to Southside tobacco farmers. Although some of the advice that appeared in the *Bannister River Banner* reflected new soil conservation thinking, many of the articles would hardly have seemed out of place in antebellum agricultural improvement journals. Twentieth century science was evident in articles advocating the use of kudzu - an imported Japanese legume soon to become a pest across much of the South - to stabilize eroded hillsides; plans for the planting of contour grass strips dividing blocks of grain and hay; and in the large-scale transplanting of shortleaf pine, loblolly, and black locust saplings on marginal lands.<sup>738</sup> Much more common, however, were proscriptions that would have sounded quite familiar to James Bruce or John Edmunds. SCS writers called for Pittsylvania farmers to conserve local wood resources, to build terraces that would slow runoff, to plow deeply and along the contour, and to diversify their farms' production. Also akin to antebellum

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<sup>736</sup> "Engineering Department," *Bannister River Banner* 1, 6 (January 1935): 3; and "Gully Control Work," *Bannister River Banner* 1, 7 (February 1935): 6.

<sup>737</sup> "Forestry Department," *Bannister River Banner* 1, 6 (January 1935): 2; and "Forestry," *Bannister River Banner* 1, 10 (May 1935): 8.

<sup>738</sup> "Kudzu," *Bannister River Banner* 1, 8 (March 1935): 6; "Diagram Showing a Three Year Cropping Plan for a Strip Rotated Field," *Bannister River Banner* 1, 7 (February 1935): 4; and "Forestry," 8. On the SCS's love affair with kudzu, see Mart A. Stewart, "Cultivating Kudzu: The Soil Conservation Service and the Kudzu Distribution Program," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81, 1 (Spring 1997): 151-167.

reformers, SCS officials were reluctant to advocate an end to bright tobacco culture.

Publications such as the USDA Farmers' Bulletin 1767, *Soil Defense in the Piedmont*, admitted that much regional land could grow little besides yellow tobacco, and devised cropping plans for the old staple that excluded legumes.<sup>739</sup>

If the advice and criticisms coming from SCS officials were nothing new, the agricultural patterns they faced seemed equally entrenched. At the start of the Depression, most regional growers cultivated bright leaf in ways almost identical to those of the 1880s. Tobacco dominated the poorer upland soils, shallow plowing was the most common cultivation method, and commercial fertilizers remained a necessary input on most tobacco farms. SCS experts could offer no solution to a fundamental problem: bright leaf faced little competition for economic dominance in the Southside. Farmers who wanted to make living turned to tobacco as had their fathers and grandfathers, for, as a Virginia Polytechnic Institute study admitted, "Good bright leaf soils are somewhat deficient in nitrogen and it is usually not profitable to produce other crops on bright tobacco land . . ." <sup>740</sup> The *Bannister River Banner* and similar publications also did nothing to address racial and social relationships that cemented local agricultural practices. The SCS did not critique the dominance of white landownership or the credit relationships between sharecroppers and tenants, their landlords, and fertilizer companies. Soil scientists failed to tackle the inextricability of social networks, environmental conditions, and agricultural practices, a shortcoming that would continue to hamper the SCS's local demonstration district until its demise.

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<sup>739</sup> "Conservation in the Farm Woodlot," *Bannister River Banner* 1, 8 (March 1935): 3; "Erosion Department," *Bannister River Banner* 1, 12 (July 1935): 4; "Soils of the Bannister River Watershed," *Bannister River Banner* 1, 6 (January 1935): 6; and Rowalt, *Soil Defense in the Piedmont*, 45. For a contemporary observation that much of this advice was well-worn in the Upper South, see Hugh Hammond Bennett in Hall, *Early Erosion-Control Practices*, 1.

<sup>740</sup> Rowalt, *Soil Defense in the Piedmont*, 27-28; and Brodell, *Cost of Producing Virginia Dark and Bright Tobacco*, quote on 4.

The New Deal's most lasting impact on the Southside lay not in its soil conservation programs, but in a market management plan first implemented in 1933 as part of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). The AAA Marketing Agreement for Flue-Cured Tobacco, commonly labeled the quota system along the Border, set a limit on the acreage a farmer could plant in bright tobacco, and tied this tobacco allotment to farms where the crop was already raised. Tobacco growers agreed to these restrictions because the quota system also established a government supported price floor for tobacco, using funds exacted through taxes from tobacco manufacturers. The program set this price floor at the average figure paid for bright leaf between 1919 and 1929, a period of relatively strong sales, and buyers from the major tobacco companies promised to buy at least as much leaf as they had during the 1932-33 season. The Supreme Court ruled the AAA unconstitutional in 1936, but the Soil and Conservation Domestic Allotment Act resurrected the quota system's main features almost immediately. The program proved popular with landowning farmers, and, with modifications, remained in place into the twenty-first century.<sup>741</sup>

The quota system proved effective in keeping bright tobacco supplies lower than they had been in the 1920s, and thus stabilized prices, but the program dramatically reduced the number of sharecroppers and renters (disproportionately African American) in the old tobacco belt. Reduced and fixed tobacco acreage meant that landowners needed fewer laborers, and the cost of transferring quota along with land meant that landless farmers who wanted to raise tobacco - the crop with which most local people had the most experience - had to come up with even more money than before to purchase a farm. In the Southside, the quota system thus solidified a

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<sup>741</sup> Harold B. Rowe, *Tobacco under the AAA* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1935), 263-272, 282-300; Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 60; Goodman, *Tobacco in History*, 198; Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 110-133; Bennett, "King Bacca's Throne," chap. 4; and Badger, *Prosperity Road*, 195-204.

tenancy situation that dated to the Civil War: landowners had a great incentive to retain their property, while it became more and more difficult for the landless to become property owners. As Pete Daniel writes, in practice the quota system “swept people from the land.”<sup>742</sup> The Southside’s surviving tobacco farmers were disproportionately white and landowners.

Farmers in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania counties still raise flue-cured tobacco today, though there is less acreage than in past decades, and the decline in tobacco’s prospects is only accelerating. Between 2002 and 2007 alone, the number of tobacco farms in the three counties declined from 761 to 299, and acreage decreased from 13,786 to 11,817. Farmers produce more tobacco per acre than ever before, thanks to enormous quantities of fertilizer and new plant varieties, but even so there is significantly less tobacco produced along the Border than a century ago.<sup>743</sup> Although the quota system and tobacco’s relatively high value per acre kept small farms viable much longer than in most regions, flue-cured tobacco is today undergoing the same trend of farm consolidation that has swept national agriculture.<sup>744</sup> With tobacco’s association with numerous health problems, American demand for tobacco has lessened. Other developments were almost as critical: the quota system no longer supports prices, the old auction houses have closed and direct contracts with the tobacco companies have taken their place, and Hispanic laborers harvest the crop instead of African Americans and white family labor.<sup>745</sup> Beef cattle and large-scale poultry operations are the region’s other main

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<sup>742</sup> Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 117-120, quote on 119; Bennett, “King Bacca’s Throne,” 71-74; and Badger, *Prosperity Road*, 195-204.

<sup>743</sup> *2007 Census of Agriculture: Virginia State and County Data* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2009), 519; and *2007 Census of Agriculture: North Carolina State and County Data* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2009), 524.

<sup>744</sup> On the relative durability of small tobacco farms, see Adrienne M. Petty, “Standing Their Ground: Small Farm Owners in North Carolina’s Tobacco Belt, 1920-1982” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2004).

<sup>745</sup> Pete Daniel has described this process of farm consolidation for eastern North Carolina, where mechanization and flatter terrain led to larger farms and fewer farmers at an earlier date. See Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 256-270.

agricultural enterprises; most of the land is too poor to raise row crops for a global agricultural marketplace.

Bright tobacco's current decline is in keeping with the history of its first sixty years as a Southside staple. The crop experienced a meteoric rise followed by a long and steady declension. Bright tobacco culture worked to impoverish the land; there is no denying this fact. A tour of the Southside today reveals gullies hidden in the woods, vast stretches of red clay land where there is literally no topsoil left, and river and creek bottoms choked with sand that has run off the uplands. The rural economy has suffered as well. Bright tobacco made landowners money at first, but around the turn of the century, environmental problems, overproduction, competition, and marketing forces stripped much of the profitability from the crop. Correctly or not, most Southside farmers believed that it was too late to shift to a different form of agriculture after so much had been invested in bright leaf, and they soldiered on until they lost their land or went to work off the farm part time. Today a few hundred farmers raise tobacco where tens of thousands once labored.

Despite a reliance on tobacco from the Southside's initial Euro-American settlement in the mid-eighteenth century until the present day, the Border environment did not guarantee that the region would become a tobacco kingdom. The three counties did contain lowlands suitable to dark tobacco cultivation and numerous waterways for transporting hogsheads of tobacco to eastern markets, and their soils and climate were among the best in the South for producing bright leaf, but it took the arrival and persistence of a particular human culture to create the land of the bright leaf. The region's early farmers grew bright leaf in part because William Byrd and the pioneers who followed him emphasized the land's potential for tobacco culture, and because many of them came from an eastern Virginia society that had depended on the crop for more

than a century. That the Southside's thin, nitrogen-poor, sandy soil produced some of the best quality yellow tobacco in the world appeared providential, but it was a providence based on consumers' and manufacturers' cultural preferences for tobacco of a certain color and flavor. Nature, in the form of biochemistry, combined with culture, in the form of curing technology, also worked together to ensure bright leaf's popularity by creating a tobacco product that delivered addictive nicotine more efficiently than its competitors. But it was cultural preference that first made the crop popular.

The region's dominant culture combined with the Southside environment to form an agriculture that had harsh consequences for a substantial portion of the region's population. African Americans' situation in the Southside in the early twentieth century was similar to their plight throughout the rural South in general. Black residents of Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania faced limited economic opportunities, they encountered racism and stereotypes about their abilities as farmers, and they were less likely than whites to own their own land. This social and economic oppression was more than the result of amorphous southern attitudes or ideologies. In the Southside these realities reflected in part the demands of bright tobacco culture. White landowners and tobacco growers believed that their expertise was necessary to produce the best quality tobacco (despite black experience with the crop), and they favored the close supervision of wage labor over sharecropping, rentals, or land sales. In addition to racial prejudice, the lucrative nature of early bright leaf sales also made landowners extremely reluctant to sell land to African Americans, as whites feared giving away the goose that laid the golden egg. Universal environmental problems associated with bright tobacco cultivation also became racial characteristics in many whites' minds. White experts argued that soil erosion, deforestation, and farm monocultures were the result of African American tenants' poor

stewardship, when in fact these problems plagued all Southside tobacco farms. As bright tobacco profits declined around the turn of the century, these obstacles to black landownership eased, but becoming an independent tobacco farmer no longer held the same promise that it had twenty years earlier.<sup>746</sup> Bright tobacco and the environmental conditions that underlay the crop were not the sole forces shaping African American antebellum and post-Civil War experiences in the Southside, but they were important components of the region's racial dynamic at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Of course the pursuit of yellow tobacco ultimately proved a dystopian experience for many of the region's white landowners as well. Bright tobacco illustrates the way in which ideas of stability and permanence did not always equate with agricultural or environmental sustainability. Southside farmers turned to bright leaf in part because they sought an answer to agricultural decline; they wanted to remain on their farms and fashion a continuous living from their land rather than emigrate. Tobacco experts - from Abisha Slade and his fellow pioneers to USDA bureaucrats - promised that yellow tobacco could help landowners achieve this goal. In fact, reams of agricultural literature assured growers that bright tobacco was the crop best suited to the Southside environment. Despite a veneer of professionalism, advice from these expert sources often exacerbated regional erosion, deforestation, and soil depletion. Farmers wanted to believe this advice because they wanted to remain on their farms; although they did not think or write in terms of sustainability, they engaged in unsustainable practices in part because of their search for sustainability. The environmentally destructive form that bright tobacco culture took was not simply the product of lazy farming or unusually greedy farmers, it came out of a desire

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<sup>746</sup> On increasing black landownership during this period, and the subsequent out-migration of regional African Americans, see Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South*, 223-244.

to preserve a familiar lifestyle in a certain place, but it was no less destructive for those admirable aims.

Bright tobacco's story counters traditional accounts of tobacco as a staple crop, and highlights the vital importance of histories that pay attention to specific crop cultures. Despite a general belief that "tobacco exhausted the soil rapidly," yellow tobacco in the Southside (and elsewhere) was not an unusually exhaustive crop per se.<sup>747</sup> The plant's nutrient demands, especially for soil nitrogen, were relatively light. And clean tillage crop cultivation as employed by tobacco growers was a practice that produced erosion in wheat and corn fields as fast as in tobacco plots. Rather, the damage caused by tobacco farming came from the composition and location of the soils best suited to the crop's cultivation, and in the practices that made high quality leaf. The perennial shallow cultivation of sandy topsoil with little organic matter on steep slopes in a region prone to thunderstorms was a recipe for disastrous erosion. This destruction was compounded thanks to watersheds stripped of trees to fuel tobacco barns, winter plowing to kill insects and soften the soil, and an absence of systematic crop rotation. Thus it was not tobacco that was hard on the land, but the form of agriculture employed in making high-quality tobacco that led to gullied fields and sand-choked streams.

This dissertation also highlights the importance of "professional" expertise in shaping a southern crop culture. Historians may find the role of state agricultural societies, experiment stations, USDA programs, and the agricultural endeavors of the New Deal familiar, but Southside tobacco's story demonstrates a more diverse and local body of agricultural experts. These professionals affected bright tobacco's development and notions of best agricultural practice from the crop's earliest days. Abisha Slade, Samuel Shelton, and other yellow tobacco pioneers made their names as producers, but their fame depended more on their efforts to spread

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<sup>747</sup> Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 33.

their cultivation methods - as discrete formulas - to neighboring districts. Following the Civil War, a coterie of self-identified experts appeared, led by Robert Ragland, W. H. Snow, and the Love brothers, who claimed expertise in particular facets of bright leaf production. These men shaped cultivation practices, seed selection, and curing methods. The work of marketing boosters based in Danville complemented these efforts, as warehousemen recommended particular curing guides, touted the quality of local tobacco, and labored to spread bright tobacco culture to adjoining regions of the South. Tobacco in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania grew at the nexus of farmers' tactile knowledge acquired from experience with the crop and the advice of a professional class of tobacco experts who worked to define and better the crop as a commodity. The emergence of state and federal tobacco guides and experiment programs designed to "improve" bright tobacco and its culture in the waning years of the nineteenth century were not an imposition of outside expertise on regional farming methods; they were instead an organic outgrowth of an old Southside trend that dated to the crop's earliest years. In many cases the advice of USDA agronomists and private tobacco experts who were also growers worked hand-in-hand. These professionals eventually created a crop culture that treated the land as a medium on which to grow tobacco rather than as an organic thing, yet, ironically, this transformation stemmed from growers' desire to better understand their land.

In the Southside, neither nature nor culture alone made bright leaf possible or led to the degradation of the local environment. Some of the factors that contributed to the region's environmental problems were laudatory or desirable taken out of context: farmers sought to make a high quality crop, they wanted to stay on their farms, they followed the advice of professionals, and they took pride in their work. And the region's relatively infertile soils produced fine forests full of wildlife and moderate dark tobacco farms centered on bottomland

before the development of bright tobacco, even if they could not support a large agricultural population. That the Southside's unique combination of environmental conditions and human desires ultimately contributed to its problems with erosion, racism, and agricultural sustainability is not ironic, it is tragic.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

For a study of a relatively small place, this dissertation was blessed with rich historical records. There are a number of manuscript collections of planters and farmers from the three counties that have proved invaluable. While numerically biased toward larger plantations, these records, which include correspondence, account books, journals, legal documents, and receipts, provide important information about daily life in a tobacco economy. In a few instances, these collections span the full chronological sweep of this study, revealing how bright tobacco changed an individual farm and its people. In selected cases, these records also display the tensions that existed between bright leaf cultivation and more sustainable forms of agriculture. The financial documents that make up the bulk of many of these collections proved surprisingly informative. Farmers and planters often revealed few details of their agricultural enterprises in their correspondence, but a careful sifting of receipts, inventories, ledgers, and financial instruments proved tedious but enlightening. In just one example, no comprehensive study of the difference in market price between bright and dark leaf tobacco exists for the years preceding 1869. Though these sources cannot provide detailed records of the regional leaf trade in its entirety, plantation and farm records did yield the receipts for almost a thousand hogsheads of tobacco sold by Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania growers between 1840 and the end of the Civil War, a sample large enough to make educated conclusions concerning the economic calculus of bright

leaf cultivation.<sup>748</sup> These collections are strongest for Pittsylvania and Halifax Counties, and substantially thinner for Caswell.

Period newspapers also proved to be much stronger sources than I had first imagined. Although no unbroken run of more than a few years exists for any single paper, a decent number of papers survive for a number of towns in the three counties, including the important market centers of Danville and Chatham (Pittsylvania), Milton and Yanceyville (Caswell), and Halifax Court House. These newspapers provide valuable letters from farmers discussing bright tobacco agriculture, debates over “improved” farming, bright leaf market information, the sales pitches of regional fertilizer companies, and local opinions about everything from the necessity of internal improvements to the struggles over controlling black labor following the Civil War. In short, these newspapers provide a vital sense of local communities as they underwent a dramatic shift in agricultural systems. They inform us of what farmers read, and sometimes how they responded. Coupled with the numerous agricultural journal discussions about bright leaf, these newspaper pieces help explain how local tobacco culture fit into the broader agricultural trends in Virginia and North Carolina, and, in turn, how local environments shaped agriculture.

One of the richest mines of information lies in the pamphlets and agricultural journal articles written by bright tobacco boosters and “experts.” Exemplified by the postbellum works of Robert Ragland, of Halifax County, these guides outlined not only the daily routines of bright tobacco culture, but also laid bare the aspirations and fears of tobacco farmers. Ragland and his fellow boosters touted the new crop and with it new methods of farming, focused on a mastery of

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<sup>748</sup> For price differentials on the Danville market from 1869 onward, see Arthur G. Peterson, *Historical Study of Prices Received by Producers of Farm Products in Virginia, 1801-1927* (Blacksburg: Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, 1929), 172, table 79.

labor and nature, an understanding of psyche and *terroir*.<sup>749</sup> These works encouraged landowners to build better farms and make brighter tobacco, though their instructions often proved beneficial to neither aim. Unlike many sources, these instructional essays and pamphlets reveal both the realities of daily tobacco labor and the desires of farmers.

Other documents and records proved useful in writing this study as well. Former slave narratives shed some light on antebellum tobacco work. Travelers' accounts and several memoirs of Civil War soldiers provided the impressions of native observers and those from outside the region. The surviving records of the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands provided invaluable insight into agricultural labor, race relations, and the turmoil of Reconstruction in Caswell, Halifax, and Pittsylvania. And manuscript agricultural and population census schedules, along with the compiled census statistics, proved useful in describing broad regional trends and providing detailed information about the slave-holding, property ownership, and wealth of particular individuals. All of these sources combine to create a mosaic image of the southern Piedmont in the mid to late nineteenth century, and breathe life into the story of the rise of bright tobacco and the decline of the countryside.

### **Manuscript Collections:**

Caswell County Courthouse (Yanceyville, NC)

Deed Book NN, 1879-1881

Land Survey Book A, 1777-1783

Duke University Special Collections (Durham, NC)

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<sup>749</sup> Though not easily translatable, *terroir* generally refers to a landscape in its entirety. To speak of a wine's *terroir* is to describe the soil, wind, drainage, temperature, elevation, humidity, and a thousand other things that make its expression in a particular form possible. Though not commonly applied to southern agricultural crops, the term *terroir*, with its connotations of artisanal cultivation, nicely summarizes bright tobacco producers' ideas concerning the connections between landscape and leaf.

Account Books of J. H. Hargrave

Archibald E. Henderson Papers

Captain Young's Daybook

Charles H. Cabaniss Papers

F. R. Cousins Papers

Hatchett Family Papers

James A. Mitchell Papers

John F. Claiborne Papers

Peter Barksdale Papers

Philip H. Howerton Papers

Pocket Plantation Papers

William A. J. Finney Papers

William Clark Grasty Papers

William M. Jordan Papers

William Thomas Sutherlin Papers

Georgia Historical Society (Savannah, GA)

Arthur M. Gignilliat Collection on Pineora (Ga.)

Halifax County Courthouse (Halifax, VA)

Land Survey Book, no. 1, part 2, 1746-1901

Deed Book 67, 1879-1880

Deed Book 68, 1880-1881

Maryland Historical Society (Baltimore, MD)

Charles Coleman Diaries

National Archives and Records Administration, Southeastern Branch (Morrow, GA)

Virginia Field Office Records, Danville Field Office, 1865-1872, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands

Virginia Field Office Records, Halifax Court House Field Office, 1865-1872, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands

North Carolina Field Office Records, Greensboro Field Office, 1865-1872, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands

North Carolina Field Office Records, Hillsboro Field Office, 1865-1872, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands

Agricultural Census Manuscript Schedules, Halifax County, Virginia, 1850, 1860, & 1880

Agricultural Census Manuscript Schedules, Pittsylvania County, Virginia, 1850, 1860, & 1880

Pittsylvania County Courthouse (Chatham, VA)

Deed Book 75, 1879-1880

Deed Book 76, 1880

University of Georgia Library, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Collection (Athens, GA)

De Renne Family Papers

De Renne Historical Manuscripts

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, Southern Historical Collection

Caswell County Historical Association Collection

Glenn Family Papers

John Walter Stephens Murder Clippings and Videotape

Joseph Silas Totten Papers

Yarbrough Foundry Papers

Crenshaw and Miller Family Papers

Dabney Cosby Papers

George Hairston Papers, 1779-1950

Hairston and Wilson Family Papers

Jacob Doll Diaries

Peter Wilson Hairston Papers

Robert E. Lee Papers

Robert Wilson Account Books

Sours Family Papers

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Bruce Family Papers

Mary Brumfield Garnett "Bright Leaf, An Account of a Virginia Farm, 1971."  
(typescript, 1971)

Memoranda Book from Henry County, Virginia

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Papers of John Pritchett and C. A. Pritchett

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Samuel Pannhill Wilson Papers

Southside Virginia Family Papers

William Bailey Papers

Virginia Historical Society (Richmond, VA)

Bailey Family Papers

Bruce Family Papers

Chamberlayne Family Papers

Daniel Tatum Merritt Diary

Diary of Unidentified Author

Dunn Family Papers

Gilliam Family Papers

Hairston Family Papers

Katherine Spiller Graves Moses Papers

Owen Family Papers

Ragsdale Family Papers

Spragins Family Papers

Walter Coles Bruce Memoirs

Wyllie Family Papers

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*Christian Advocate* (IL)

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*Danville Appeal (VA)*

*Danville Daily New Era (VA)*

*Danville Daily Post (VA)*

*Danville Herald (VA)*

*Danville Register (VA)*

*Danville Reporter (VA)*

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## APPENDIX

## ANTEBELLUM TOBACCO PRICES

There have been no reliable calculations of price differences between bright tobacco and dark tobacco in the Southside prior to 1869. References to the lucrative nature of the new crop tended to be anecdotal, and took the form of newspaper articles profiling successful farmers, agricultural journal pieces, or warehouse sales flyers. For the purposes of this dissertation, I sought a more reliable - if still inexact - calculation of antebellum prices. By sifting through the financial papers of planters and farmers from the three counties I was able to locate records for the sale of nearly 1,000 individual hogsheads and loose lots of tobacco between 1840 and 1860. These records were typically in the form of loose sales slips, small scraps of paper furnished by the merchant or warehouse that purchased the tobacco, though in some cases farm ledgers listing sales have survived. Although these sales were not always clearly labeled as bright or dark leaf, in the instances that tobacco type was noted, a pattern became clear. Prior to the Civil War bright tobacco sold for two to three times as much as the traditional staple, and often went for much higher amounts.

The papers and sources that I consulted follow: Receipt of George Hairston, July 2, 1852, George Hairston Papers, Southern Historical Collection; William & Carrington to William Bailey, June 17, 1859; Receipts of William Bailey, September 29, 1858; May 19, 1859; Account Ledger of William Sims, 1828-1867, William Bailey Papers, University of Virginia Library; Receipts of James C. Bruce, July 15, 1841; August 16, 1841; August 4, 1846; May 3, 1847; May 7, 1847; July 21, 1847; August 6, 1847; March 11, 1861; April 11, 1861, Bruce Family Papers,

University of Virginia Library; Receipts of George Clement, January 12, 1843; February 1, 1843; April 20, 1843; May 16, 1843; May 30, 1844; December 12, 1844; June 14, 1845; August 8, 1845; August 22, 1845; November 12, 1846; December 19, 1846; April 15, 1847; April 22, 1847; September 4, 1847; April 21, 1848; May 9, 1848; July 16, 1848; August 2, 1848; November 24, 1848; June 8, 1849; June 21, 1849; September 13, 1849; September 19, 1849; August 20, 1850; October 15, 1850; n.d., 1850; August 18, 1851; August 30, 1851; September 18, 1852; August 8, 1854; August 15, 1854; September 7, 1854; July 28, 1859; Receipts of Elisha Barksdale, September 1, 1841; September 5, 1841; July 1, 1842; July 7, 1842; September 15, 1842; July 6, 1843 (2); July 7, 1843; May 2, 1844; December 16, 1844; June 4, 1845; November 19, 1845; August 27, 1846; September 15, 1846; May 4, 1847; June 16, 1847; June 24, 1847; July 22, 1848; March 2, 1850; September 10, 1852; Receipts of William Barksdale, n.d., 1850; February 7, 1851; Receipts of Rebecca Barksdale, July 14, 1852 (2); August 5, 1852; Receipts of Thomas Jones, March 11, 1840; April 13, 1840; August 25, 1856; July 28, 1860; Receipts of Thomas Jones and John Jones, April 13, 1840 (2); Receipts of Agnes Jones, August 20, 1855; September 15, 1855; Receipts of Martha Jones, April 13, 1840 (2); Receipt of John Jones, April 13, 1840; Receipts of Richard Jones, July 7, 1841; March 18, 1842; September 17, 1842; October 27, 1842; July 10, 1845; February 13, 1846; August 10, 1853; July 4, 1856; July 16, 1856; August 9, 1858; August 18, 1859; August 18, 1860; Receipts of Rebecca Jones, January 26, 1843; March 10, 1843; June 26, 1843; December 2, 1848; June 20, 1849; Receipts of Joel Hubbard, April 16, 1840; May 8, 1840; August 12, 1840; February 12, 1841; February 20, 1841; April 13, 1841; September 28, 1842; August 1, 1844; August 14, 1844; April 9, 1845; April 28, 1845; July 29, 1846; October 2, 1846; March 3, 1847; March 12, 1847; June 3, 1847; January 5, 1848; June 9, 1848; March 10, 1849; May 25, 1849; February 14, 1850; March 31,

1850; April 2, 1850; June 4, 1850; August 28, 1851; April 16, 1852; July 19, 1854; July 21, 1854; March 30, 1855; July 20, 1855; August 6, 1855; October 24, 1855; July 18, 1856; July 31, 1856; February 7, 1857; March 28, 1857; June 16, 1857; July 10, 1857; April 12, 1858; June 23, 1858; August 12, 1858; August 17, 1858; January 5, 1859; June 16, 1859; October 14, 1865; two receipts with no date, 1850s; Receipt of J. Clayton, April 13, 1840; Receipt of P. Owen, December 14, 1840; Account of Ragsdale & Carrington, February 19-May 14, 1857; John Tyree to Joel Hubbard, May 9, 1857, all found in the Southside Virginia Family Papers, University of Virginia Library; Receipt of William Bailey, September 23, 1852, in Bailey Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society; Receipts of Nathaniel Ragsdale, October 12, 1855; May 5, 1856; September 2, 1856; and February 25, 1859, Receipts of Ann Ragsdale, June 25, 1860; and August 9, 1860, all in Ragsdale Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society; Receipt of John T. Garland, September 3, 1847, in Caswell County Historical Association Collection, Southern Historical Collection, LRW Library, UNC-Chapel Hill; Receipt of George Hairston, July 20, 1854, in George Hairston Papers, SHC, UNC-Chapel Hill; J. S. Totten's Account Book, 1832-1858, 96-97, 125, 170, in Caswell County Historical Association Collection, SHC; Account Book of Robert Wilson, 1848-1861, and Account Book of Robert Wilson, 1861-1865, both in Robert Wilson Account Books, Southern Historical Collection, UNC; Receipt of Marshall Hairston, August 10, 1858 (2), Hairston and Wilson Family Papers, SHC; Receipt of William Long, May 10, 1849, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC; and Receipts of William Thomas Sutherlin, June 16, 1849; and December 30, 1859, William Thomas Sutherlin Papers, SHC.