Agriculture

The basic and historic industry in the South has been agriculture. This fact has had an enormous bearing on the development of a distinctive regional culture and economy. From the first English settlement at Jamestown in the opening decade of the 17th century to the present the South's principal economic focus has been upon agriculture. Throughout its history agriculture in the South has experienced four or five distinctive phases of change. Each new era made social, cultural, and economic impressions upon the southern people.

Most British emigrants who approached the American shores were ambitious to reestablish in the New World an Old World pastoral society and agricultural economy. Soil and climate conditions, the forest cover, and difficult access to transportation all contributed to the shaping of distinctive agrarian fortunes and fresh ways of life in the early colonial South. Imperative from the outset was the necessity to develop both subsistence farming and commercial planting. For both types of farmers land became the necessary foundation for economic and social well-being. It was the catalyst that spread Anglo-American civilization over the wide expanse of virgin southern hinterlands.

Soon after initial English settlement the great baronial, river valley plantations appeared, with access to water transportation. Almost simultaneously the great land companies came into existence, hoping to encourage immigration and to speculate in almost unlimited claims of backcountry lands. Land policies were a major factor shaping the spreading settlements. With the expansion of the Atlantic coastal civilization a mixture of plantations and yeoman farms came to characterize the economy. Both depended heavily upon four basic staple crops: corn, tobacco, rice, and indigo. The latter was soon succeeded by Sea Island, or black-seeded, cotton. These crops, with the exception of corn, either took a heavy toll on the thin Tidewater lands or were too regionally and environmentally restricted to permit successful transmission to the upcountry. In time, however, tobacco was transported beyond the Appalachians to become an important cash crop in pioneer Kentucky and Tennessee. Short-staple cotton supplanted the Sea Island variety and was ideally suited to the lands of the developing South.

By the mid-18th century an ever-increasing proportion of the southern population shifted their dependence from commercial crops to the subsistence ones. Two exciting chapters in southern agricultural history involve the growing of corn and the rolling back of the cattle- and hog-droving frontiers. The early Anglo-American immigrants developed a fondness for corn and pork products.

The spread of agrarian culture is reflected in modern geographic and economic studies, which materially revise early notions about the maturing of the agricultural economy across the South. Sam B. Hilliard's recent *Atlas of Antebellum Southern Agriculture* (1984) conveys a dramatic sense of the changing phases of regional farming and labor. This and other recent studies sharply revise earlier ones that did not do justice to the region's production of livestock and foodstuffs.

Advance of Agricultural Frontiers. The opening of the trans-Appalachian frontier in the Upper South in the latter quarter of the 18th century drew a stream of agricultural emigrants away from the depleted Tidewater and lower Piedmont lands of the Atlantic Seaboard. The western rivers and their valleys held fresh promise for farmers. Traditional agricultural patterns were spread across the mountains but were adapted to a distinctive new way of agrarian life. In Kentucky, for instance, commercial, staple-crop farming was devoted to grain, tobacco, hemp, and livestock production. This pattern also prevailed in the Bluegrass region of Tennessee.

During the first half of the 19th century a major migration to the recently vacated Indian lands of the Atlantic and Gulf coastal South occurred. This movement was stimulated by opportunities to exploit the cotton producing lands of the Old Southwest, the quieting of Indian and international claims, and the ready adaptation of staple crops. Cotton became the principal staple cash crop because of both the nature of the land and the recent invention and perfection of the mechanical cotton gin. On this sprawling, fertile southern frontier at least three layers of human economic and pastoral history existed by the time of the Civil War. All across the region herdsmen or cattle grazers and hog drovers pursued a moderately labor-intensive way of life and pastured their herds and droves on the vast virginal domain. Some of these low-caste forerunners of Anglo-American civilization moved on with the expanding frontier until no more public lands remained to be exploited; others settled down to become yeoman farmers or sharecroppers.

As the southern agricultural frontiers advanced, plain dirt farmers laid claim to modest landholdings, peopled the emigrant trails, opened fields and pastures in the virgin forests, built simple dwellings and barns, and established rural communities. All across new regions these yeomen established subsistence farming, created an uncomplicated economy, held fast to family ties and folkways, personified the image of much of the antebellum South, and formed the bulk of the population. Modern statistical charts and illustrative maps portray the pattern of economic and agricultural expansion in the South to 1860 and convey a sense of the vibrant dynamics of the southern agricultural civilization during these formative years.

Plantations and Farms. In sharp contrast to the panorama of the yeoman-farmer background and the limited production of commercial crops were the plantations, with their extensive landholdings and slave labor force. These sprang up principally in areas with more fertile and productive lands. Of necessity the plantation was a staple-crop, slave-labor, semicommercial enterprise. This type of farming in the South generated its own social, economic, and cultural characteristics. To a large extent the way of life on southern cotton, rice, sugar, and tobacco plantations tended to break much of the isola-

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tion in the region. In economic terms, the plantation required extensive management, the opening and maintenance of domestic and foreign markets, the organization of both supply and credit systems, and ready access to transportation facilities. The staple crops were readily adaptable to large landholdings, intensive use of labor, and commercial farming methods.

While rice, tobacco, and sugarcane growing were important regionally, short-staple cotton growing was central to most southern plantations after 1890. Highly adaptable to land, climate, and casual methods of cultivation and harvesting, cotton enjoyed the advantage of having both a domestic and an international market. The yeoman farm was also a producer of cotton, a fact that became more central to its operation after the Civil War.

In recent years economists, sociologists, and historians who have reexamined the available contemporary documentary sources have sharply revised older notions about the nature and diversity of antebellum crop production and its bearing upon earlier forms of rural farm life. The most important areas of regional self-sufficiency that have been reconsidered are the production of consumable crops, the volume of livestock, and the importance of the small and middle-sized farmer.

Whatever role the larger plantation and its more affluent owners may have played in regional commerce, politics, and social and cultural life, it was the yeoman farmer who opened large areas of the land, helped create counties and towns, "lived largely at home," and gave body and soul to southern rural life. From backcountry Virginia and the Carolinas to east Texas there sprang up a homogeneity of racial, social, and cultural agrarian organization. Remarkably, the South before 1860 nurtured two systems of agricultural economy and modes of life—the yeoman farm and the plantation.

The Civil War was a historical watershed of southern farming. Slavery was abolished, and the rural labor situation experienced drastic changes. Though plantations survived, they operated on a different scale. Their labor supply was disrupted, as they had to employ wage workers or sharecroppers. Time was required to reclaim the great cotton markets, and dramatic changes occurred in the financing of this type of farming.

Postbellum Agricultural System. In the postwar years the southern yeoman farmer was caught up in what almost amounted to an economic straitjacket. He was forced by a usurious credit-granting system to turn more and more to production of cash crops, especially cotton and tobacco. All farmers, large and small, were severely pressed to secure sufficient operating capital. A new form of agricultural production credit appeared, based upon crop liens and dependent upon merchants who furnished farm supplies. Both farmer and merchant in turn were thrown largely upon the mercy of wholesalers, manufacturers, extraregional grain and meat producers, and fertilizer distributors.

Between 1865 and 1925 most southern farmers were thrust upon a treadmill, producing sufficient staple crops to pay both inflated prices for supplies and the extortionate interest on crop liens. Both white and black farmers rapidly sank into the economic peonage of the staple-crop system of rising debts and falling prices. The farming operations of the individual tenant or sharecropper became almost primitive in nature. This system of southern farming was ultimately disastrous. Cotton was the predominant cash crop, and its days in the Upland South were numbered after 1920. The crop laid a heavy burden upon its impoverished producers and exacted a heavy toll from the land. Within three-quarters of a century the flagrantly careless methods of cotton cultivation destroyed an enormous amount of topsoil and left behind a deeply gullied landscape. So serious was this loss that by 1933 much of the South was a disaster area. Even more serious, however, each year more and more farmers were forced into the ranks of sharecroppers and tenants, a trend that continued until the New Deal.

Tobacco, sugarcane, and rice were more regionally confined. They never equaled financially and socially the importance of cotton for the southern population. They, like cotton, depended upon widespread domestic and foreign markets, and in the case of dark tobacco, farmers were sorely pressed by the dominance of outside buyers. In the opening decade of this century the dark-tobacco farmers resorted to vigilante tactics in an effort to improve marketing conditions of their crops, resulting in the Black Patch War in Kentucky.

Editors of southern country weeklies and the regional farm journals cajoled and scolded farmers for their failure to grow more foodstuffs. They preached monotonous editorial sermons on the themes of increasing crop diversification, halting the wastage of the soil, and eliminating blind dependence upon nonconsumable crops. Stern critics were Charles Otken, George K. Holmes, W. H. Skaggs, and a score of later authors. Farmers themselves attempted to better their lots by creating organizations to exert political and economic pressures in alleviating oppressive conditions. Vain efforts were made by such groups as the "white cappers" of the cotton belt and the nightriders of the dark-tobacco areas.

Change in Southern Farming. The spread of the boll weevil menace across the cotton belt after 1900 raised bitter winds of change. World War I and the sequent depression in 1921 sounded further warnings that the old cash-crop system was a failure. The socially and economically devastating sharecropping system and the Great Depression of the 1930s hastened the demise of southern staple-crop farming.

The problems of sharecropping and ruinous credit granted by general stores and fertilizer trusts are no longer factors in southern farming. The multiplication of banks and savings and loan companies has made credit available on other bases. The introduction of the tractor, mechanical cotton picker, combine, haying machine, and the nonrow system of cultivation along with vastly improved chemical fertilizers has revolutionized southern farming. Added to the chemical and mechanical advances are the genetically improved plants adapted to southern soils and climate. The importation of new varieties of hardy grasses and the conversion of old cotton fields to grazing lands have dramatically reduced cotton produc-

tion in the South. Following the eradication of the Texas fever tick and the screw worm, the region has become a major cattle producing section. Introduction of large-volume hay balers has eliminated the use of a large labor force, and hay has now become a major southern crop.

After 1930 the southern agricultural economy underwent an almost miraculous change. None of the doomsayers of the old Farm Security days of the New Deal could have envisioned what was about to occur on the eroded acres of impoverished tenant-dredged farms. Never in the history of agriculture had there occurred such a sharp breaking away from the past. The problems of share and tenant farming largely vanished after 1940, and no economic, social, or cultural institution in the South was left untouched by the post-Depression and World War II revolution. The good roads movement, begun in 1916, was fully developed, the increasing influence of the federal aid programs was felt, the extension and experimental services became more effective agencies, and the old furnishing mercantile system gave way to cash grocery and chain-discount stores and to town and city merchants and implement dealers.

At last the great editorial and farm-agent dream of crop diversification in the South became a reality. The general application of the new sciences to farming ushered in a new age of agrarianism and transformed the rural way of life. A fast-growing and highly mobile segment of the southern population now classified by the U.S. Census Bureau as "rural non-farm" appeared, and the southern black population migrated from the farms to towns and cities. Today part-time farmers with the aid of the new machines and genetically improved crops can produce more with far less time and labor than their forebears could with endless toil.

See also EDUCATION: Rural and Agricultural Education; ENVIRONMENT: Land Use; Natural Resources; Soil and Soil Conservation; GEOGRAPHY: Plantation Morphology; / Cotton Gins; Sugar Plantations; HISTORY AND MANNERS: Frontier Heritage; INDUSTRY: Chain and Specialty Stores; SCIENCE AND MEDICINE: Agriculture, Scientific; / Ruffin, Edmund; SOCIAL CLASS: Migrant Workers; Socialism; Tenant Farmers; / Farmers' Alliance; Mitchell, H. L.; Sharecroppers Union; Southern Tenant Farmers' Union

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Cotton scene on Popular Street, Macon, Georgia, early 1900s