

Alabama

(Historical Essay on Agriculture and Rural Life)

Provided by Auburn University (no author attribution) as part of “Preserving the History of United States Agriculture and Rural Life: State and Local Literature, 1820-1945. A proposal submitted to the National Endowment for the Humanities, Division of Preservation and Access on behalf of the United States Agricultural Information Network”

July 1995

ALABAMA

From statehood in 1819 until the end of World War II, nothing influenced Alabama's economic, social, and political life more than agriculture. The literature of agriculture and rural life found in the collections of Auburn University and sister institutions in the state document the fact that the state's agrarian history is intimately woven into its cultural and social history.

Before the Civil War, climate, soil, and market demand fostered cotton cultivation, which brought with it slavery and a paternalistic social order. After the war, white and black tenant farmers replaced slave labor, the price of cotton dropped, and grass-roots agrarian unrest followed. Government and business interests combined to gain control of agricultural policy during the early twentieth century, which they retained through the end of World War II. By that time, mechanization, rural to urban migration, and crop diversification had altered Alabama agriculture, but farm and forest products remained central to the state's economy and those who had an economic interest in them exerted their political voice.

Extensive white settlement of Alabama followed the War of 1812 and the defeat of the Creek Nation. Most of the settlers came from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, pushed by land exhausted through the over cultivation of cotton and drawn by the rich soil of the Tennessee Valley and the Black Belt. They brought with them slave labor and the plantation system, which were readily transplanted into Alabama. Steady demand for cotton made it the nation's leading export during the first half of the nineteenth century and solidified the planter elite's sense of self importance. On the eve of the Civil War, however, Alabama was only one generation removed from the frontier and most of the state's farmers owned few, if any, slaves.

After the war, tenant farming replaced slavery as the state's primary source of agricultural labor. This system suited itself to the state and region's lack of capital. It provided work for landless laborers who knew farming but had no other skills, no means to acquire them, and no money to invest in land and equipment. It required the landlord to provide the tenant with a share of the crop rather than wages. It allowed the landlord to assume the role of furnishing merchant, which further reduced the tenant's share of the crop and required that even less money change hands. Simultaneously, the opening of the Suez Canal lowered the demand for southern cotton and a deflationary federal money policy worked to the disadvantage of tenants and other debtors.

Perhaps Alabama's best known agriculturist was George Washington Carver whose distinguished career at Tuskegee Institute in Macon County led to many advances in agricultural science. His works Experiments with Sweet Potatoes (1898), Farmers' Manual and Complete Cotton Book (1903), and Help for the Hard Times (1910) placed him in the mainstream of agricultural education. Newspapers and magazines regularly devoted space to agricultural matters and one of the state's first major periodicals devoted exclusively to agricultural concerns was the Rural Alabamian, founded in 1873 by noted Mobilian Charles C. Langdon.

The inequities of the tenant farmer system made Alabama ripe for the grass-roots agrarian reform movements that appeared in the United States during the later nineteenth century. These included the National Grange (primarily a social and educational organization) and the Agricultural Wheel, which advocated political action. The Farmers' Alliance was most significant of all, both in the state and the nation. Its platform called for nationalization of railroads and direct federal intervention in the commodity market. In Alabama both blacks and whites joined the Alliance, though local chapters generally remained racially separate. During the 1890s, the Farmers' Alliance developed into the People's or Populist Party, which won some significant but short-lived victories at the national and state levels.

A number of the state's agricultural magazines were sponsored by these agricultural organizations. The Grange published four major periodicals: Alabama Grange, Southern Plantation, Southern Argus, and Alabama Farm Journal. The Agricultural Wheel, a radical agricultural society published the State Wheel. The Farmer's Alliance had several official publications, including the Alliance News and the Alliance Advocate.

With the passage of the Hatch Act in 1887, a national system of experiment stations to encourage agricultural research was inaugurated. Isaac Tichenor, president of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Alabama, created what was to become the Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station as early as 1872. The Experiment Station issued regular annual reports, bulletins, and circulars as well as a plethora of other publications.

In 1914, the Smith-Lever Act created a network of county farm agents based in the nation's land grant colleges. The Alabama Polytechnic Institute (later Auburn University) administered the state's extension service, with a separate black branch based at Tuskegee Institute and reporting to the white state director in Auburn. Later, county home demonstration agents were added to the extension service corps. Agricultural demands created by World War I strengthened the extension service. So did the appearance in 1920 of a state branch of the American Farm Bureau Federation, a private organization devoted to cooperative purchasing, cooperative marketing, and promoting the political interests of agriculture. Extension agents assisted in the organization and administration of the Farm Bureau at the county level and the line between government and private enterprise was blurred as the Farm Bureau and the Extension Service became powerful political allies. The literature of the day documents that critics consistently charged that the Extension Service and the Farm Bureau showed little interest in tenants, devoted their primary attention to larger landowners, and discouraged other farm organizations, particularly the more militant Farmers' Union.

The education of farmers and agricultural workers has historically been a major focus of three major academic institutions in the state--the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Alabama (later Alabama Polytechnic Institute and Auburn University), Tuskegee Institute, and Alabama A&M University. Each of these institutions released annual reports, catalogs, and bulletins during the period 1820-1945. Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute, wrote extensively on education in his lifetime, including *Up From Slavery* (1901), *The Successful Training of the Negro* (1903), and *Working With the Hands* (1904). Three excellent contemporary descriptions of agricultural education were given in J.A.B. Lovett's, *Alabama Agricultural Schools, Objects and Aims, Course of Study, Diplomas, Their Work Hindrances*,

Etc. (1906), Thomas Monroe Campbell's, *The Movable School Goes to the Negro Farmer* (1936), and the *Special Official Report of John O. Turner, State Superintendent of Education, of Experiment Station and Agricultural Schools of Alabama, for Scholastic Years 1896-7 and 1897-8, to His Excellency, Joseph F. Johnston, Governor of Alabama* (1898).

Numerous state documents offered statistical and analytical information for the period. The primary publishers were the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries and the Geological Survey of Alabama. Examples include *Report for the Years 1881 and 1882, Embracing an Account of The Agricultural Features of the State* (Geological Survey of Alabama, 1883), *Alabama, Her Resources and What She Is Doing with Them* (Alabama Department of Agriculture, 1901), and *Alabama Hand Book : Agriculture and Industrial Resources and Opportunities* (Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries, 1919).

Diversification, mechanization, and migration became increasingly important factors in Alabama agriculture beginning in the early twentieth century. The Extension Service vigorously promoted crop diversification. The beef, forest, and poultry products they stressed eventually surpassed cotton in market value. Diversification was aided by the boll weevil, which made total reliance upon cotton even more precarious than it had been. Furthermore, large-scale and more mechanically efficient cotton production in western states reduced the South's share of the market. Migration of blacks out of the rural South represented a major demographic shift and eventually helped push the region from labor-intensive to capital-intensive agriculture. By 1920 Alabama had approximately the same number of black and white tenant farmers, with the number of blacks dropping and the number of whites increasing.

Following a World War I high, agricultural prices began to drop during the early 1920s. Farm prices had long been depressed when the stock market crashed in 1929. The New Deal provided landowners with federal support to reduce commodities. Consequently, they lowered the acreage under cultivation by evicting tenants. At the same time, they used federal funds to mechanize, fertilize, and produce more on fewer acres. During World War II, demand for farm products encouraged diversification and provided capital for mechanization. Urban employment opportunities also lured labor from the farm to the city, making mechanization imperative to meet wartime demands for farm products.

From 1935 until 1945, Alabama agriculture underwent more change than it had in the previous one hundred years. Influential monographs published during this period include *Alabama Rural Communities: a Study of Chilton County*, by Irwin Taylor Sanders and Douglas Ensminger (1940), Albert H. Harrington's, *Peanuts : a War Crop on Alabama Farms* (1943), Jesse Rodgers Delbert Otis's, *Changes in Characteristics of Type of Farming Areas in Alabama, 1880-1940* (1944), and Walter Martin Kollmorgen's *The German Settlement in Cullman County, Alabama: an Agricultural Island in the Cotton Belt* (1941).