

# **Georgia**

**(Historical Essay on Agriculture and Rural Life)**

Provided by the University of Georgia (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”

2001

## GEORGIA

The history of agriculture in Georgia is comprised of many issues, which diverge but can be defined by one word: soil—abundance, fertility, misuse, abuse, and ultimately, conservation and regeneration.

Before the arrival of Europeans in Georgia, the land was occupied by two Native American nations, the Creeks and the Cherokees. Both were primarily agricultural peoples. The Cherokees lived in the northern mountains of Georgia, while the Creeks lived in the middle and southern areas and also on the coastal islands. Both nations obtained food by farming corn, beans, melons, and fruits. They also husbanded the nut-bearing pecan, walnut, and hickory trees, which grew wild, and hunted and fished in the abundant forests and rivers.

In 1732, an Englishman, General James Oglethorpe, obtained a charter for land between the Altamaha and Savannah rivers. The next year he founded the city of Savannah and for ten years served as the governor of the colony of Georgia, named in honor of King George II. Thus it can be said that in 1733, Georgia's colonial agriculture started in a narrow 30-mile-wide strip of coastal land between Savannah and the Altamaha River. By 1760 this strip stretched to the St. Mary's River on the Florida/Georgia border. The low tidewater area developed first with the sea islands producing crops of indigo, corn, potatoes, and other vegetables. By the end of the colonial period the islands were producing extremely valuable cotton.

A salt marsh about five miles wide separated the islands from the mainland, and livestock spurned the grasses growing in the marshes. However, the brackish marshes were an excellent refuge for birds and aquatic life. Navigable creeks used for inland transportation cut the marshes. On the mainland behind the marshes the soil was of uneven quality, and the swamplands produced pines and cypress trees. Interspersed in the swamps were ridges or "hammocks" which supported hardwoods such as hickory, walnut, and oaks. These trees were used for lumber, shingles, and barrel staves. Once cleared of trees, the low ridges produced crops of corn, potatoes, and indigo. Behind the salt marshes, some ten to twenty miles inland, rice was grown along the rivers. This land was considered the most valuable in the colony. The lands avoided for general cultivation were the inferior sandy soils where mainly pine trees grew.

The task of bringing cultivation to a wilderness was strenuous. Because General Oglethorpe limited immigration to European Protestants, many of the settlers were from the British Isles or northern Europe. Only a small portion of the early settlers had agricultural skills. Because the climate proved enervating to the white settlers, many of them wanted to import workers from Africa, but this was prohibited in 1741. The prohibition extended even to hired servants, thus depriving free Blacks from settling in the colony. Despite the ban, slaves began to be used surreptitiously in Georgia. By 1748 the ban was virtually ignored throughout the colony, and in 1750 the prohibition on

Blacks in the colony was repealed. With the supply of Black labor, profits from cotton and rice increased, eclipsing the experimental cultivation of mulberry trees for silkworms, olive trees, and other products. Georgia became a producer and exporter of indigo, pork, and rice as well as lumber and naval stores from the forests.

During his years in Georgia, General Oglethorpe successfully defended the colony from Spaniards and Indians in Florida, secured trade with the Cherokees, and successfully laid the foundation for a stable society in Georgia. He was, however, financially troubled due to his personal sponsorship of the military defenses of Georgia. In 1752 he and his fellow trustees of Georgia relinquished their charter, and Georgia became a royal province.

As a Royal Province, Georgia flourished due to the continuing stream of immigrants willing to work the fertile soil and plant crops suited to the land. Because Georgia's royal governors had control of lands and there was a large supply of Black labor, the number of large plantations increased swiftly. The population grew from 1,700 whites and 420 Blacks in 1751 to 33,000 people by 1776, with Blacks making up 45% of the population.

The population was also moving inland from the coast. Several treaties with Native Americans gained land cessions to the west. Many of the new settlers came from North and South Carolina and even Virginia, crossing the Savannah River at Augusta and moving into the lands being acquired by treaty from the Indians. By the end of the American Revolution the population of Georgia was estimated to be 50,000. The size of the plantations grew, but land under cultivation continued to be small.

The period after the American Revolution saw a decline in the production of indigo and rice. The loss of slaves to the British and the damage to plantations and equipment contributed to this decline. The withdrawal of British subsidies to growers of these products as well as competition from the British East Indies further hastened the loss of their importance. With the coastal area losing economic importance and with the population growing in the upland to the north, Augusta became a focal point. As settlers moved into the area they noticed that the land improved rapidly in fertility. The sandy-soiled pinelands changed into forests of oak and hickory.

After the Revolution new crops became important: cotton, tobacco, and sugar cane. Tobacco had been grown for decades in Georgia for home use, but after the Revolution exports to Europe increased to such an extent that attempts at commercial processing (powdered for snuff, cut for smoking, braided for chewing) were tried. Tobacco became the principal money crop, grown on the majority of farms north and west of Augusta well into the 1800's.

The rise of cotton was the dominant feature of Georgia agriculture in the 50 years after the Revolution. The Trustees had experimented with growing cotton, but the hand cleaning of the boll was tedious and prevented cotton from gaining much commercial success in the colonial period. By 1786 seed from a superior type of cottonseed was sent

to Georgia from the Bahamas and production soon increased. During the 1790's increasing shipments of this cotton helped planters recover economically from the declining indigo prices. Called Sea Island cotton because it was grown initially on St. Simons and Cumberland islands, planting quickly spread to other islands along the coast.

Another type of cotton known as "green seed" was able to flourish in a wide variety of growing situations including Georgia upcountry conditions. The problem with this variety, like that grown by the Trustees, was the difficulty of separating the seed from the fiber. The economic importance of green seed cotton began to boom with the invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney near Savannah in 1793. One of these gins could clean fifty pounds of lint in one day as opposed to one pound of hand-cleaned lint. By 1796 some 30 cotton gins were operating in Georgia. This invention was a key to the prosperity of the cotton economy, which flourished in Georgia in the nineteenth century.

While agriculture was the backbone of Georgia's economy, little was done to improve the land. The abundance of land and its relatively low cost deterred any scientific progress in improvements. Some few planters improved their own holdings, but the vast majority of Georgia farmers used the land, wore it out, bought more, moved there and wore that land out too. The soil produced wealth in a short period of time, but after its fertility was used, the farmer moved on. Instead of changing the system of cultivation, migration was the answer.

Illiteracy of the population was part of the problem. Farmers had distrust for books, science, and knowledge in general. Of the three main farming classes, small farmers owning less than one hundred acres were in the majority, and they were neither writers nor readers. Interestingly, in spite of a 50% illiteracy rate, Georgia's agricultural press was progressive and well respected in the South. By 1860 there were five agricultural journals being published in Georgia. The most prominent of these was the *Southern Cultivator*, established in 1843, and one of the outstanding agricultural journals in the country.

The middle class, farmers owning 100 to 500 acres and from one to thirty slaves, had a more leisurely life than did the small farm owners. They read such publications as the monthly *Southern Cultivator* (Augusta), the weekly *Field and Fireside* (Augusta) and the *South Countryman* (Marietta). Occasionally they wrote letters to the farm journals describing their experiments, successes, and failures on their land.

By the middle of the 1800's the disaster of agricultural land abuse was becoming evident. Due to clear-cutting the forests and the practice of plowing up and down hillsides instead of contouring, severe erosion left the land devoid of topsoil. Barren hillsides, huge gullies, and rivers brown with soil from the denuded land became more and more common.

In 1854 William Terrell, a wealthy Hancock County planter who was intensely interested in agriculture and perhaps hoping to slow abuse of the land through education, gave \$20,000 to the University of Georgia to set up an agriculture department. He was interested in fostering agriculture as a science with emphasis on analysis of soil and on chemistry and geology as relating to agriculture. Various societies were also established in Georgia to help agriculture. The *Southern Cultivator* was very important in promoting formation of active agricultural societies. Authors such as William White of Athens, who published *Gardening for the South or How to Grow Fruits and Vegetables* in 1856, began to fill the need for scientific agricultural literature. White's work listed many food crops he had seen or tried himself. The book was being read in new editions for fifty years after its publication.

The main source of plantation labor was slave labor with its attendant problems. In 1855 David Christy of Cincinnati published a small book, *Cotton is King*. Its major thesis was that cotton grown by slaves and greatly needed by the textile manufacturers in the slave-free states justified the institution of slavery. Thus cotton was indeed King. The title became a slogan espoused by large planters, manufacturers, and some politicians. A third, enlarged edition containing more pro-slavery arguments was published in Augusta, Georgia.

Cotton was a peculiar king. It dominated the social and economic organization of Georgia, reinforcing slavery as the foundation of plantation life. Yet cotton was only part of the agricultural production of the state, and most Georgians owned neither plantations nor slaves. In 1860 there were 31,000 farms of less than 100 acres. Farms between 100 and 500 acres made up the next largest category, numbering 19,000. Large plantations of 500 acres or more numbered around 3,500, and there were only 900 plantations of 1,000 acres or more. The population of Georgia in 1860 was 600,000 white people but only 41,000 of them owned slaves.

Some farsighted citizens began to realize the impending problems with Georgia's (and the South's) lack of self-sufficiency and the reliance on a cotton economy. Isaac Newton, U.S. Superintendent of Agriculture, urged the South to diversify. The *Impending Crisis of the South* published in New York in 1857 by Hinton Rowan Helper pointed out the lack of self-sufficiency in the South. The *Southern Cultivator* urged mixed husbandry. Most of the farmers and planters refused to heed these appeals.

In January 1861, Georgia was the fifth state to secede from the Union and join the Confederacy. The belief was prevalent that the abolitionist movement would no longer threaten slavery, and Southern agriculture would flourish with the North relying on the South's cotton, rice, tobacco and other agricultural products. Any conflict arising from secession would be short with the South gaining its independence in a series of quick defeats for the North.

The South, however, with its agricultural roots was not equipped for war. Europe didn't intervene on behalf of the South as had been anticipated. And not all Georgians were prepared to give up everything for independence. In fact, 43% of Georgia's electorate voted against secession. A few people, such as Alexander H. Stephens, who later became vice-president of the Confederate States, saw a tremendous, futile, and disastrous war in the making. Heroism and courage were not enough to win the conflict. Georgia secessionists couldn't foresee that in May 1864 a powerful army of 62,000 would enter the state from the northwest, sweep though the center of the land, destroying crops, homes, and stock in the process, before arriving at Savannah in December 1864. The war ended four months later in April 1865.

Not only did the Civil War end slavery; it shattered agriculture in Georgia. Farmers, planters, and the now free field hands were in poverty. During the last third of the nineteenth century, Georgians had four major tasks: develop a new system of labor; develop a more diverse land-use system not so heavily dependent on cotton; utilize science in agriculture; and influence credit, marketing and prices via organized pressure groups. Coupled with these tasks was the fact that following the war Georgia, like much of the South, plunged into a deep depression, which lasted until the end of the century.

During the long depression the State Department of Agriculture encouraged agricultural diversity. Pamphlet literature began to appear in the form of manuals from the State Department of Agriculture. The department published a *Manual on the Hog* (1877), *Manual of Sheep Husbandry in Georgia* (1875) and *The Farmer's Scientific Manual* (1878). Tobacco appeared late in the diversification movement. It had been grown for home consumption since colonial times, but the commercial market was small. In 1886 J. T. Henderson, Georgia's Commissioner of Agriculture, published *A Manual of Tobacco Culture for Beginners*. By 1892 tobacco had a strong commercial foothold. The *Southern Cultivator* kept up its valiant editorial efforts encouraging livestock diversity, varieties of grasses and grains, and horticultural endeavors such as truck farming.

With the freeing of the slaves, labor to work the land was nearly nonexistent. Several methods were tried in efforts to remedy the situation. White Georgians went to work in their own fields, but there were too few of them to be effective. In addition, many were untrained for manual labor. The use of foreign immigrants was tried, but due to the southern climate, unfamiliarity with southern crops, and an "Uncle Tom" concept of the South, immigrants preferred to labor in the factories of the North or settle their own land under the Homestead Act of 1862. Laborsaving machinery was attractive, but the poverty-stricken Georgians had no money, and owning the equipment was usually just a dream. Eventually the solution, though not perfect, was devising a way to use the freedmen's labor. Contract labor, sharecropping, and tenant farming were all tried. Because landowners could not legally supervise the work of tenant farmers, lack of supervision and poor management by tenants led to a decline in agricultural productivity.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Georgia was showing signs of moving out of economic depression. The Spanish-American war of 1898 gave cotton prices a boost. The Boer War in South Africa, the Boxer Rebellion in China, the Klondike gold discoveries, scientific farming methods, and the growth of the United States' population at a rate surpassing increases in agricultural production all contributed to the gradual economic recovery. Census reports verified that by 1920 Georgia's farm production had increased from \$104,000,000 in 1900 to \$638,000,000 in 1919, a six-fold increase.

This was still mainly an all-cotton economy and its days were numbered. In the decades following 1920 several things helped to dethrone King Cotton. The boll weevil attacks in the 20's, 30's and 40's; the Great Depression of the 1930's; the agricultural programs of President Roosevelt's New Deal; and World War II led to a gradual diversification of agriculture in Georgia.

The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 and the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1936 paid farmers per acre for growing soil-conserving crops instead of cotton and for practicing soil-building measures. The majority of cotton growers in Georgia quickly adopted the new program, and cotton acreage continued to decline. World War II further limited cotton production in Georgia. Cotton exports dramatically decreased, field labor was hard to get, and the U.S. government needed food crops more than cotton. Production dropped to the lowest rate since 1869, and by 1945 cotton accounted for only 20% of Georgia's farm income. After the war there was little inclination to return to the cotton glory days of the early part of the century, though cotton cultivation has not entirely disappeared, unlike indigo and rice.

Crop diversification in the state had its stops and starts. A push to make Georgia the alfalfa state of the South failed. Corn has been grown, but as a cash crop it has never been able to compete with corn production in the midwestern states. Wheat, rye, sugar cane, and sorghum never gained much importance. But two crops, tobacco and peanuts, succeeded, courtesy of the boll weevil's negative impact on cotton growing. They were seen as alternatives to cotton, especially in southwest Georgia. By 1927 tobacco was the second most important cash crop. Peanuts had long been grown as hog feed, but the arrival of the boll weevil induced farmers to plant it for commercial purposes. Peanuts had a spectacular rise, and by mid-century they had surpassed tobacco as Georgia's second most important cash crop.

Georgia is the largest state in area east of the Mississippi River. Although today only one-fourth of the land is used for agriculture, more than 70% of the industrial jobs in the state depend on agricultural and forestry products. Major modern crops include cotton, peaches, peanuts, and pecans. Poultry and egg production, dairying, and livestock farming (cattle and hogs) account for more than half the value of farm products in the state.