

North Carolina

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

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NORTH CAROLINA

History celebrates the battlefields whereon we meet our death, but scorns to speak of the plowed fields whereby we thrive. . . . This is the way of human folly.

-- J. H. Fabre

Battlefields and plowed fields define southern culture. When we look back to the nineteenth-century South, we inevitably envision a plantation lifestyle brought to an abrupt halt by the American Civil War. Indeed, visions of the cotton plantation and the Civil War together characterized the entire region, both culturally and agriculturally, for generations of Americans.

Looking closer, though, we realize the agricultural South was not so monolithic. Parts of the Upper South looked to tobacco rather than cotton as their cash crop, while coastal regions in South Carolina and Georgia depended on rice and indigo. Yeoman farmers in the upland regions, growing crops for their families and the local market, did not share the same concerns as the planters closer to the coast who looked to the world market.

North Carolina occupies an interesting and unique place in southern agriculture. Although we typically think of the antebellum South as having a solid agricultural identity, the truth is far richer. The climate and soil led Virginia plantation owners to rely on tobacco. South Carolina had different soils and climate, leading wealthy planters there to plantations of rice and indigo. North Carolina's location between those two different growing zones prevented it from exploiting either group of

crops well, and most agriculture seems to have been of a relatively small scale. Furthermore, the state did not move into the plantation economy on the same scale as other southern states: in 1860, the South reported some three hundred owners of more than three hundred slaves; only three of those owners lived in North Carolina.

Other factors affected the way North Carolinians developed, both culturally and agriculturally. Like many southern states, North Carolina was sparsely populated. Not only did it not have many large cities, it also had few small towns. In 1820, the state had only seven towns with more than one thousand people, and the total urban population was slightly more than sixteen thousand. Most farm families lived comparatively isolated lives. Limited access between regions fragmented many inland areas, restricting opportunities to sell in broader markets and thereby discouraging the use of more advanced farming methods. Frequently, tobacco planters relied on the more established markets in neighboring states to serve as outlets for this cash crop. Ironically, many of the state's roads led to Virginia and South Carolina rather than east-west, further hampering the state's ability to develop its agricultural economy.

The four major crops grown in North Carolina -- corn, wheat, cotton, and tobacco -- exhausted the soil. Agricultural traditions and an economy based on slave ownership led planters and many farmers to abandon the exhausted land rather than purchase the nutrients required to maintain their existing holdings. Between 1815 and 1850, approximately one-third of its population left North Carolina, most heading west to unfarmed lands. That steady migration, both within the state and to new states, drained resources and limited participation in civic activities such as developing roads and public education -- and public education was crucial to those interested in reforming agricultural techniques.

By the Civil War, the state's geographic distinctiveness led to an economy strikingly different from those of its neighbors. Soil and climate discouraged the development of cash crops and large plantations, limiting the need for roads and towns. Isolation led to subsistence farming, and abundant land encouraged farmers and planters to exhaust the soil and move on, further discouraging civic development and thoughtful agricultural practices. North Carolina developed a reputation for being a state of lazy and unambitious farmers.

Despite what seems a bleak picture of backwardness, some North Carolina farmers began working in the mid-nineteenth century to develop progressive agricultural techniques. The easy availability of land and a stubbornness about learning new techniques through "book farming" meant change came slowly. Nevertheless, agricultural reform, which began in England in the late eighteenth century, immediately found scattered adherents and a gradually broadening base of support across the state. Over the first half of the nineteenth century, North Carolinians wrote books and founded journals to publicize agricultural reform. George W. Jeffreys' *Essays on Agriculture* (1819) brought the national concern for agricultural reform to a North Carolina audience. Ebenezer Emmons' five-volume geological survey, published under separate titles between 1852 and 1860, surveyed the state's soil chemistry with the conscious goal of helping North Carolina's farmers determine the best crops for their land.

Most journals, such as *The Farmer's Advocate and Miscellaneous Reporter* (Jamestown, NC), the *North Carolina Planter* (Raleigh), or the *Edgecombe Farm Journal* (Tarboro, NC) were short-lived, some ceasing publication when the Civil War began. Nevertheless, these journals present a significant view of the changes in North Carolina's agriculture: not only did the publishers believe in the importance of agricultural reform, they believed that a market for such information existed, significant enough to support such a publication. Additionally, agricultural societies sprang up to support the reform movement, and the trend continued until the advent of the Civil War.

The end of the Civil War pushed North Carolina's agricultural economy in new directions. Textiles, tobacco, and furniture developed as important industries for the state; North Carolinians founded nearly all the major companies in these areas. These industries drew on North Carolina's agricultural resources to develop products sold nationally and internationally. Many factors contributed to the growth of these industries, but important among them were the availability of labor from farm families. Mills were located in small

towns rather than cities, so farm families did not have to abandon farming in order for family members to work in the mills. Furthermore, mills paid regular wages all year around. For others, such as the farmers near High Point, mills became an alternative source of income when brightleaf tobacco from the eastern part of the state supplanted the demand for the heavier, darker tobacco from the western regions.

For those who remained in farming, however, the period following the Civil War was a hard one. A tariff imposed at the end of the war crippled many farmers, as did business combinations and discriminatory freight rates. Furthermore, the transition from a slave economy to a free economy, with the variety of rental and ownership arrangements also experienced elsewhere in the South, sometimes proved treacherous. Land was no longer abundant, and farmers and large landowners were forced to consider reconsider traditional agricultural practices.

In North Carolina, agricultural reform began to move in several directions. Leonidas LaFayette Polk, a relative of President Polk, perhaps exemplifies these directions best. Polk, noted for his work to help farmers navigate the ways of the new economy, was North Carolina's first commissioner of agriculture, serving for four years. Afterwards, he founded the *Progressive Farmer*, a magazine dedicated to teaching farmers better means of agriculture, which continues to be published today. His continuing interest in politics and the plight of farmers led him to work to unite the state's farmers to pressure the state legislature for reform. He joined the newly founded Farmers' Alliance when organizers visited the state, serving as the national vice president in 1887. Polk's interests took him to the Populist Party, presiding over their "industrial conference" at St. Louis in 1892. He was seen as the party's likely presidential candidate until his unexpected death that June, a month before the nominating convention.

The North Carolina College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, now North Carolina State University, also grew from the goal of developing progressive agricultural practices. Leonidas Polk was a strong and vocal crusader for the establishment of the College, ensuring that it was founded as a land-grant college rather than as an industrial school. The College took its mission seriously, with faculty writing to fill in gaps. Daniel Harvey Hill, Jr., then vice president of the College, co-authored

Agriculture for Beginners in 1903. The North Carolina Agricultural Experiment Station, allied with both the College and the State Department of Agriculture, began publishing a wide variety of bulletins and technical reports to support improved agriculture. Thus through teaching at the College, publishing, and extension activities, the College sought to improve agriculture for all its citizens.

Throughout North Carolina, citizens answered the call to build a new South, one that exploited the region's natural resources but kept industry and its wages in the state. Although North Carolina has responded well to the challenge, becoming one of the most successfully industrialized states in the South, it has also continually sought ways to retain its agricultural heritage.