

PRESENTING MR. IRA'S MASTERPIECE:  
TWO CENTURIES OF AGRICULTURAL CHANGE  
AT THE SHIELDS-ETHRIDGE FARM

by

FRANCES PATRICIA STALLINGS

(Under the direction of Dr. John C. Inscoc)

ABSTRACT

For two centuries, owners of the Shields-Ethridge Farm in Jackson County, Georgia adapted to changes in the larger agricultural scene. Following the pattern of other upcountry settlers, they first cultivated tobacco, then switched primarily to cotton when the region became immersed in the growing market. By 1900, the glutted economy began to show signs of recovery, enticing the farm's new owner, Ira Washington Ethridge, to fully participate in its growth. Transforming the farm into a complex of cultivation and ancillary businesses, Ethridge left a decided mark on the operation. With mechanization, though, the region's cotton production waned, leaving cotton-dependant farms like the Ethridge's to face crucial decisions. Today, the farm serves as a growing museum, one that can fill a void left by other living history farms that focus primarily on historic agriculture and not the social and cultural changes brought by mechanization.

INDEX WORDS: Migration, Frontier, Georgia, Agriculture, Sharecropping, Cotton Gin, Mechanization, Agrarianism, Historic Preservation, Living History, Ruralism.

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FRANCES PATRICIA STALLINGS

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FRANCES PATRICIA STALLINGS

Approved:

Major Professor: John C. Inscoe

Committee: Bryant Simon  
John C. Waters

Electronic Version Approved:

Gordhan L. Patel  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
May 2002

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate the final result of this research to my grandfather, Mr. Roscoe A. Stallings. At the age of ninety-six, his rapidly declining mental and physical health will not allow him to realize what an encouragement his life has been. Once a graduate student himself, his quest for genealogical treasures and countless stories told at the dinner table left me a rich legacy. Pop, I'm proud to carry on your love of history.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, I extend the greatest appreciation to the members of my thesis committee for their contributions to my overall graduate experience. Dr. John Inscoe, Dr. Bryant Simon and Professor John Waters have each stimulated thought, provided encouragement, and often managed to crack into my genetically thick skull. Anyone who manages to do *that*, deserves an extra nod. I was somewhat intimidated upon my arrival to graduate school, but I have thoroughly enjoyed the experience. I may not always be the loudest voice in class, or the first to argue a point, but I'm willing to wager few listen more intently than I do.

I have a number of friends who kept me nourished and light-hearted throughout the months of research. Not once did I come close to starvation, and though I will spend quite some time in concentrated exercise, I cherish the love baked into every cake.

Since my formal education began at the age of three, my parents encouraged and guided me, financed lenses to counter my dwindling eyesight, and instilled in me this nagging and insatiable curiosity. For all their love and patience, I am forever grateful. My father will be happy to know I can once again tee it up on Saturdays and help defeat our foes on the golf course.

Not three months ago, during one of our latest Southern cold snaps, I sat in the gin office at the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm and scrounged for numbers to complete part of my research. Bundled beyond mobility, I turned the gin ledger pages with gloved hands, praying Mr. Ira had the merciful foresight to scribble the 1935 bale tally in big red

letters at the top of a page. Finally, I found the number and wrote it down as well as my frozen hands allowed. Before retreating to the blessed warmth of the house (and a hot plate of food), I briefly wondered how many scholars are permitted such a wonderful experience. Though I was cold and long-since numb, few pleasures compared with sitting at the same desk occupied seventy years before by the very man I sought to study. Therefore, my greatest appreciation goes to Mrs. Joyce Ethridge and her daughter, Mrs. Susan Chaisson. Mere words cannot convey my gratitude for their allowing me use of the family documents, not only as a student, but as a descendant of Joseph and James Shields, the men who carved out this farm over two centuries ago. The ranks of academia would swell indeed, if everyone was fed and pampered this much.

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## INTRODUCTION

Lights, camera, action! Quite literally, we set the stage for a dramatic event. For three decades, the safe sat unopened in a corner of the gin office, its contents a mystery fueling unquenchable curiosities. Curiosity, though, accounts for most discoveries at the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm in Jackson County, Georgia. Some fifteen years ago, its owner, Joyce Ethridge, found an old trunk full of documents while rummaging around in the attic. Most dated back to the farm's early history, with some written just as hostilities ceased in the American Revolution. Since her discovery, and subsequent research to place the farm and its buildings on the National Register of Historic Places, countless other documents have been dusted off, including those of the early twentieth century spelling out her father-in-law's entrepreneurial spirit that guided the farm during an agricultural revolution. Popularly called Mr. Ira, he kept carbon copies of letters pecked out on a typewriter and rarely tossed anything in the trash, including used envelopes on which he scribbled notes. No wonder, then, that Joyce, her daughter Susan Chaisson and I looked forward to the safe's grand opening in February 2002.

The locksmith worked for more than half an hour, twisting the dial one way, then the other, and mercilessly banged on the door in order to loosen the interior mechanisms. Amidst the flash of cameras, the door finally creaked open, revealing tightly packed articles undisturbed for more than thirty years. Hidden inside were plats, Department of Agriculture documents relating to the farm's production, tax returns and even an unopened pack of cigarettes. Rarely are scholars granted the opportunity to safe-crack

their way into history, but that day merely illustrates the essence of each day I have spent researching the Shields-Ethridge Farm's two hundred-year history.

Over the course of two centuries, the farm reinvented itself on three distinct frontiers: cultivation, mechanization and, now, preservation. Therefore, to understand this farm's current role as a showpiece for the agricultural revolution, one must first explore its roots. While the primary interpretive period ranges roughly from 1898-1950, its agricultural beginnings stretch beyond even the nineteenth century. Patriarch Joseph Shields, a Revolutionary War veteran, removed his family from Virginia, following countless others to new lands on the Southern frontier. Traveling to Georgia on a great migratory road, he sought not a complete reordering of life, but assimilation into a familiar community. Planting tobacco immediately upon their arrival symbolized that continuity, as well as a level of autonomy in the local market. Nor did the family live on the mythical self-sufficient frontier. Tobacco gave way to cotton as ginning technology allowed the mass cultivation of the upland short-staple seed. Prior to the Civil War, the Shields family produced cotton only to supply cash needs and continued to maintain a large variety of stock and a diversified agricultural production. Finally, as the century drew to a close, the younger generations of the family took advantage of new railroad construction, guano application and the emergence of a strong upcountry economic market, which scholars have recently seen as a viable subject of inquiry.

By the turn of the century, however, patterns of inheritance whittled away at the vast amount of land accumulated during the late nineteenth century. The Shields patriarch at that time and the third generation to inhabit the land, Robert Shields, faced a personal and economic dilemma. His wife of forty years died as cotton prices plunged to

new lows during the 1890's. Though some of his other grown children lived nearby on their inherited tracts, Robert decided to invite his youngest daughter, Ella, and her new husband to live with him at the farm. He promised to deed them the home place and accompanying acreage in exchange for their care. Over the next half century, his son-in-law, Ira Washington Ethridge, transformed the cotton dependent farm into a complex of supplementary businesses, ranging from rebuilding cars to crafting furniture. His operation, though, depended on planting and ginning cotton in an era of increasing mechanization, weevil infestation, drought, depression, acreage reduction legislation and even fire. The longevity of his management in the face of such adversity signifies a keen entrepreneurial spirit and an uncompromising determination to succeed. Amidst bragging to Lummus Cotton Gin Company over his newest gin, Mr. Ira wrote, "it is made to keep up with this fast age that we are living in."<sup>1</sup> Ever vigilant in researching more efficient equipment for his operation, his death in 1945 paralleled the waning of another era, that of the early twentieth century agricultural revolution. From mid-century onward, agriculturists would either have to prevail, persist or perish.

The Ethridge farm, by remaining dependent on cotton, faced the consequences of advancements in ginning technology. Even by late 1940's, Ethridge Gin could no longer keep pace with new mechanical harvesters or high-capacity gins. Mr. Ira's son, Lanis, briefly experimented with picking machines, and even tried to modify his father's gin so that it could effectively process mechanically harvested cotton. In order to counter the technological advancements, though, the gin required a complete overhaul, and given the decline of local cotton production, Lanis realized the farm's ginning days were at an end. He gradually reduced the farm's reliance on cotton and, like many farmers in northeastern

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from I.W. Ethridge to Lummus Cotton Gin Company, November 1, 1930, Shields-Ethridge Papers.

Georgia, delved into cattle breeding. Upon his death in 1970, the farm faced yet another crossroads.

With agriculture changing at such a rapid pace, and lacking Mr. Ira's indomitable leadership, the farm's new owner, Lanis' widow Joyce, began a prolonged campaign to present her father-in-law's vision of agricultural production. Currently, the farm provides heritage education for countless school children and visitors who gather annually for the Mule Day celebration. Mule Day, though, is somewhat of a misnomer, as the primary period of interpretation encompasses roughly a half century in which the beasts of burden faded out of existence and the chugs and creaks of iron-wheeled tractors gradually took over production.

Too much of our history, academic as well as public, suggests an immediate reorganization of agriculture in the twentieth century. This is simply not the case. Living historical farms, of concern here, often ignore the transitional period that initiated visitors' quest for nostalgia in the first place. Freeman Tilden, who one might aptly call the Father of Interpretation, suggests "exposing the soul of things," so that visitors can form their own opinions and reach conclusive answers in their educational experience.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the soul of Southern agriculture suffered a severe, yet gradual, disruption during the early twentieth century, as argued by men such as the Nashville Agrarians. In *I'll Take My Stand*, Andrew Nelson Lytle likened the industrialization of agriculture to a "pizen snake," strangling the vitality of cultural values and morals intrinsic to rural life; "The progressive-farmer ideal," he wrote, "is a contradiction in terms."<sup>3</sup> Certainly,

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<sup>2</sup> Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage: Principles and Practices for Visitor Services in Parks, Museums and Historic Places* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957), 38.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Nelson Lytle, "The Hind Tit," in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* by Twelve Southerners (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930), 207, 234.

agriculture and industry, city and country, have always been at odds, and as the twentieth century progressed, farms became more "town-oriented," through both technological advancements and the reorganization of agricultural production, such as the addition of commissaries, gins and other ancillary businesses.<sup>4</sup>

By no coincidence did agricultural museums and living historical farms emerge in the wake of the *I'll Take My Stand* manifesto. Though anti-modern ideology planted the seeds years earlier, the first calls for museums specific to farming arose simultaneously to what one agricultural historian called the "Great Disjuncture."<sup>5</sup> After the Second World War, living historical farms emerged in order to present a nostalgic celebration of "the values deeply rooted in rural life . . . a heritage of personal responsibility [and] strong family ties."<sup>6</sup> This is the very environment whose loss was bemoaned by the Nashville Agrarians. Scholars of rural history focus on "declension discourse," the rise and subsequent fall of rural communities, and ignore the reemergence of ruralist ideas in all their many manifestations, from the living historical farm movement to suburban sprawl.

The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, this compilation of evidence provides a documentary history of the farm as well as an illustration of its adaptation to changes in the larger agricultural scene over the span of two hundred years, a chance rarely granted with such a rich supply of resources. As such, this one family farm serves as an excellent case study of agricultural trends in the Georgia upcountry. The first two chapters chronicle that story. Secondly, as a fledgling living history farm, their interpretive programs have yet to be thoroughly organized. Chapter III serves the purpose of offering

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<sup>4</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The Creation of Modern Georgia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 103.

<sup>5</sup> John L. Shover, *First Majority- Last Minority: The Transforming of Rural Life in America*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Dekalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), xiv.

suggestions to Shields-Ethridge, and historic farms in general, about how to enhance their interpretation. Research reveals this farm's opportunity to present a unique addition to the living historical farm movement. While nostalgic waters run deep and tourists covet the sight of floppy-eared mules plying their ancient trade, Shields-Ethridge can illustrate that revolutionary agricultural phase that caused such a tumultuous backlash from anti-modernists and romantic agrarians alike. The mule and the tractor, a microcosm of the industrial/agrarian tensions, coexisted for decades before mechanization was complete.

My methodology was somewhat unorthodox, certainly a blasphemous departure from the historical norm. I learned quickly that formal interviews offered pitifully little to my study. Having spent almost four years now volunteering, and subsequently researching the farm, my greatest tools have been conversation and observation. No amount of reading can prepare one for explaining the intricacies of cotton ginning to an eight year old, or the art of convincing a young urban professional that grits do not grow on trees. My understanding of the farm and its operations came from what one researcher called "vernacular interpretation."<sup>7</sup> I came to this project with an agricultural background, but I lacked an empirical knowledge of the antiquities contained on this particular farm. In the end, that knowledge could only be facilitated by putting a hand on the crank and shelling the corn myself or resting beneath the shade of a tree, listening to old timers remember the whirs and groans of a cotton gin.

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<sup>6</sup> G. Terry Sharrer, "Hitching History to the Plow," *Historic Preservation* 32 (November 1980), 44.

<sup>7</sup> Stephanie Sue Foell, "Agricultural Museums: Interpretation and Authenticity," (MHP Thesis, University of Georgia, 1996), 44.

## CHAPTER I

"YES, THE CRACKER IS IN THE SADDLE":<sup>1</sup>

### THE SHIELDS FARM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The journey always began with loudly crunching wagon wheels on earthen Virginia roads. Children held tight as their fathers slapped the reins, prodding their beasts of burden onward. "We've gone to Georgia!" one might have dramatically called over his shoulder, but little could solace them as homes faded into the horizon. Like countless others, Joseph and Peggy Shields began a similar journey in the early 1790's, complete with delicately packed mementos and anxious youngsters scrambling in the back of the wagon. "[They] have always behaved themselves in a sober, Christian manner," wrote neighbors, and with that character reference tucked neatly in his pocket, Joseph Shields cast his eyes southward towards a bountiful supply of fertile land.<sup>2</sup>

As a Virginian struggling to survive in a dwindling economy, he could not ignore the potential of relocating to Georgia. Joseph traveled with his wife, children and possibly others to a land in which they sought not a new beginning, but assimilation into a familiar agricultural and cultural society and, therefore, his story is typical of most settlers to the region. By the late 1760's, Joseph Shields' father, Patrick, an individual of moderate wealth, divided his Halifax County lands in southern Virginia among his

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Angela Gary and Jana Adams, *Our Time and Place: A History of Jackson County, Georgia* (Jefferson, Georgia, Mainstreet Newspapers, 2000), 1-10.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Thomas Smith, Jane Bigers, and William Shields to anonymous, November 20, 1792, Early Records, Shields-Ethridge Papers, hereafter cited as SEP. Currently, the documents at the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm are not thoroughly organized, so noting them provides some difficulty.

children of legal age "for natural love and affection."<sup>3</sup> Of the eight heirs, seven were male, and as commonly occurred in an era of primogeniture, younger sons such as Joseph and his brother Robert shaped their own futures with little residual money or land. When Patrick died in 1770, Thomas, his youngest son, received a section of the plantation, leaving both Joseph and Robert without land though each received a proportional amount of their father's personal property. Joseph started his own family at that time, served in the Continental Army and faced the tightening economic noose in the wake of the Revolution. High taxes, extreme market fluctuation and land devaluation and infertility left many with shallow roots in the Old Dominion.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately for men like Joseph Shields, Georgia welcomed a wave of emigrants through headright grants and subsequent land lotteries. Particularly beneficial to veterans and their widows, this dispersal of land helped swell Georgia's population during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>5</sup> Most of the initial land available was located in the northeastern regions of the state, the final destination along the great migratory road that drew from contributing paths in Virginia and the Carolinas.<sup>6</sup> Like many, the Shields family saw the opportunity as the proverbial pot at the end of the rainbow.

Settlers from Virginia, Pennsylvania and the Carolinas swarmed to the Georgia upcountry during the 1780's and 1790's. Among them were members of the Shields

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<sup>3</sup> The genealogical information used is gathered from Ilene Chandler Miller's *Littleberry Shields of Virginia and Georgia, 1764-1827, and his Descendants* (Yorba Linda: Sumway Family History Services, 1990), 48-55. Also, George A. Hill, *Hill and Hill-Moberly Connections of Fairfield County, South Carolina*, (published by the author, 1961).

<sup>4</sup> Carol Sue Ebel, "First Men: Changing Patterns of Leadership on the Virginia and Georgia Frontiers, 1642-1815," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Georgia, 1996), 257-259. See also, E.M. Coulter, *Old Petersburg and the Broad River Valley of Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> For information on the land system, see Amanda Johnson, *Georgia as a Colony and State* (Atlanta: Walter W. Brown Publishing, 1938), 176-177, 230-231, and 390-391.

<sup>6</sup> William C. Stewart, *Gone to Georgia: Jackson and Gwinnett Counties and their Neighbors in the Western Migration* (Washington, D.C.: National Genealogical Society, 1965), 1. Stewart's work compiles

extended family in Virginia, including a Patrick, Thomas, William, John and Samuel Shields, who first appear in Wilkes County, Georgia tax records in the mid-1780's.<sup>7</sup> Joseph Shields, however, remained in Virginia until the early 1790's, and was probably enticed to Georgia by his kinsmen. He sought not the first available land, but a tract suited to permanent agricultural settlement. He purchased his first two hundred acres along the Walnut Fork of the Oconee River in what was then Franklin County, and supplemented his holdings with various tracts during the next decade. He resided in Oglethorpe County until 1798, when he and son Patrick purchased adjacent properties from Samuel Gardner in Jackson County.

By 1802, he and Patrick had settled on their lands; Joseph owned 398 acres and two slaves and Patrick, 218 acres and one slave. Members of Kirkpatrick's militia district elected Patrick, then only twenty-seven, as Justice of the Peace.<sup>8</sup> Joseph, satisfied with the prospects of his new land, initiated the sale of the original Walnut Fork tract in 1802. In November of that year, he received a letter from John McConnell, who offered to "procure the attendance of the county surveyor." However, they came to an impasse concerning the correct property line. McConnell wrote, "I wish to come to a friendly honourable decision . . . as friendship has ever been the theme between us [and] I hope it will ever continue."<sup>9</sup> Within the year, though, they entered an agreement, leaving Joseph

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county and 1820 census records, chiefly for genealogical purposes, but does make note of the migratory patterns of the initial settlers.

<sup>7</sup> *Wilkes County, Georgia Tax Records, 1785-1805*, in two volumes, ed. Frank Parker Hudson. (published by the author, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Jackson County Tax Digest, 1802; Frary Elrod, *Historical Notes on Jackson County* (Jefferson, Georgia: 1967), 62. Use of the term 'district' refers to the local militia district. Initially, the militia districts were often referred to by an individual's name, either the locally elected Captain of the district, and later the Justice of the Peace. Boundary lines changed upon creation of new districts or consolidation of existing districts. The Shields-Ethridge Farm is located in G.M.D. 245, currently known as the Jefferson District. Historically, their property was listed in the districts of Kirkpatrick, Mayo, Shields, Oliver, Moore, Allen, Cunningham, Knox, Mitchell, Stewart and Strange.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from John McConnell to Joseph Shields, November 13, 1802, Early Records, SEP.

to focus on cultivating his lands along the Middle Fork of the Oconee River. Here, he carved out a farm still in existence today.

The region in which the Shields settled attracted many of Jackson County's earliest settlers (see Appendix B). Situated in an ideal location, the fertile land nestled along and between the Mulberry and Middle Oconee Rivers also positioned these pioneers near the initial county seat of Clarksboro. Even when county fathers relocated the courthouse further inland to Jefferson, the forks region continued to be a hub of activity, as it lay between the new county seat of Jackson and the growing town of Athens in adjacent Clarke County. Early settlers established, and in some cases, reestablished networks of kinship and familiarity. Joseph and Peggy Shields migrated to the Georgia upcountry not alone, but to join an extended family and possibly other Virginia friends and neighbors. Bethsalem Presbyterian Church in Oglethorpe County accepted their transfer of membership and noted their departure for Jackson County. Church records reveal that Joseph left with a Thomas, Patrick and Samuel Shields, probably his brothers or nephews.<sup>10</sup>

Other members of Bethsalem moved to Jackson County as well, along with those of another Oglethorpe County congregation. John McElhannon of New Hope Presbyterian Church settled near the Shields', and it is possible that Joseph Shields sold his isolated Walnut Fork property in order to be near members of a familiar community. The Beavers family of Oglethorpe County also arrived in the late 1790's. In 1803, patriarch Robert Beavers contracted with neighbors Robert and Benjamin Johnson to construct a bridge suitable for "horsemen and waggons" across the Middle Oconee River

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<sup>10</sup> Groves Harrison Cartledge, *Historical Sketches of Presbyterian Churches and Early Settlers in Northeast Georgia* (Athens, Georgia: 1960), 121.

downstream from the latter's mill.<sup>11</sup> Patterns of marriage developed among the Shields, Beavers, Johnson, Howse, Chandler and McElhannon families and continued throughout the nineteenth century.

Joseph Shields and his two sons, James and Patrick, undoubtedly struggled to clear and cultivate the virgin landscape. However, the county's population expanded rapidly during this time due to ceded Indian lands and its grants of land in various lotteries. At the county's formation in 1796, the population tallied at 350 residents, in 1800 had swelled to 7,147 and by 1810, there were 10,569 residents, a number that remained fairly constant until Reconstruction.<sup>12</sup> Communities developed in the area encompassing Jackson County as early as 1784. Many, such as Groaning Rock, Talasee and Yamacutah began as Native American villages later jointly occupied by pioneering whites. By 1796, other pockets of settlement emerged at Snodon (present day Winder), Stonethrow (Gillsville) and Thomocoggan (Jefferson) and Clarksboro. Forts Early, Strong, Daniel and Yargo provided a circumference of defense from the retreating Native American population, as the western boundary of the county also doubled as the eastern boundary for the Cherokee Nation.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Contract between Robert Beavers and Edward Adams, and Robert and Benjamin Johnson, November 14, 1803, Early Records, SEP.

<sup>12</sup> Elrod, *Historical Notes*, 137. The county population decreased in 1820, however, due to significant acreage reduction. In 1811, the creation of Madison County shaved off portion of the county and in 1818, the counties of Hall (western border), Gwinnett (southwestern border) and Walton (southeastern border) all took land from Jackson. At that time, the county no longer bordered Indian territory and the county seats of Gainesville, Lawrenceville and Monroe became centers of commerce. Also, E. Merton Coulter, "The Birthplace of a University, a Town and a County," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 46 (June 1962), 121.

<sup>13</sup> There are now three county histories available. The first, *The Early History of Jackson County* (Atlanta: Foote and Davies, 1914), edited by W.E. White, contains the writings of prominent resident G.J.N. Wilson. The second work, *Historical Notes* by Frary Elrod uses Wilson's experiences as the basis for his book, but also references county records and census material. Finally, members of the *Jackson Herald* staff compiled writings from the local newspaper in *Our Place and Time*, which supplements Elrod's work and further updates the county's history.

Though the family lived on the periphery of white civilization, the frontier by no means lacked communal activities. As J.M.C. Montgomery observed in 1820, the rivers and creeks claimed the densest populations.<sup>14</sup> The Shields must have participated in such time-honored events as log-rollings, corn shuckings, house raisings, hog killings, quilting parties and gander pullings, what Steven Hahn calls "habits of mutuality."<sup>15</sup> One early log-rolling event at William Dunson's home near Groaning Rock has become part of local folklore. Idalone LeCain, "an eighteen year old beauty endowed with Herculean physical strength" and renowned for her log-rolling abilities teasingly implied she would marry the first man able to break her concentration during an event. One young man, William T. Brantly, joined the contest and upon unsuccessful attempts to distract her, offered his hand.

Idalone was taken by surprise; her face turned pale; she had not time to think . . . Covering her eyes with her left hand, and resting her head on what she afterward called the 'dear old poplar log', she extended her right hand towards Brantly. He quickly grasped it, and before any one had time to think, he had leaped back over the log and there was nothing between them.<sup>16</sup>

Though most communal activities would not have resulted in such an immediate or dramatic marriage, these events certainly forged local cultural ties.

The communities also bonded together in times of hardship. Joseph Shields gave refuge to a neighbor's orphaned child, John Ragains, and in his 1818 will, called the boy his "grandson," bequeathing him his new saddle. Likewise, in his will, Robert Beavers ensured that daughters Charity and Betsy received "fifteen dollars each of the money I

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<sup>14</sup> J.M.C. Montgomery, "Collections of the Georgia Historical Society: Unique Comments by Georgia Enumerators, Fourth Census, 1820," ed. Lilla M. Hawes. *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 35(March 1951), 77-78.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Hahn, "The Yeomanry of the Nonplantation South: Upper Piedmont Georgia, 1850-1860," in *Class, Conflict and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies*, Edited by Orville V. Burton and Robert C. McMath Jr. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 38.

am to get for keeping Sarah Watson for the trouble they took with her."<sup>17</sup> Hard laboring individuals could conquer any task, but the first settlers, despite a steady growth in population, still faced the inevitabilities of living in relative isolation. Bands of wolves could easily snatch a child, and panthers and bears roamed freely. According to native G.J.N. Wilson, older citizens who remembered the pioneer settlements told tales of a beastly "wog."<sup>18</sup>

The most complicating issue of their early residence, though, came not with child-snatching wogs, but with Patrick Shields' death in 1807. Dying intestate at the age of thirty-two, he left a wife, seven orphans and an estate that took years to fully execute. Immediate care of the children apparently fell to brother James, who filed an Inferior Court motion declaring that "five of the orphans, and four small Negroes . . . must suffer for pork," unless they siphoned money from the bogged estate.<sup>19</sup> He also paid fifteen dollars, the cost of ten months schooling for "three scholars," George, John and Nancy Shields.<sup>20</sup> Further muddling matters, Patricks's widow Jane remarried in February 1811 to Thomas Thurmond.<sup>21</sup> Not long after the nuptials, an attorney filed suit in Inferior Court on behalf of the orphans so that they might choose their own guardians, namely their grandfather and uncle, James.<sup>22</sup> The court, "for more ample maintenance of the said

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<sup>16</sup> Elrod, *Historical Notes*, 24-25; Wilson, *Early History of Jackson County*, 206.

<sup>17</sup> Jackson County Will Book A, 14-15, 74-75.

<sup>18</sup> Though there seems to be no scientific basis for this critter, it sounds hideous enough to frighten those who believed in its existence. Wilson notes that it was first reported to the pioneers by the Indians and was described as a "jet-black, long haired animal about the size of a small horse, but his legs were much shorter, the front ones being some twelve inches larger than the hind ones...his tail was very large...and at the end of it there was a bunch of entirely white hair at least eight inches long...his great red eyes were very repulsive, but not so much as his forked tongue, the prongs of which were thought to be eight inches long...his bear like head contained a set of great white teeth over which his ugly lips never closed." White, ed. p. 46-47.

<sup>19</sup> Jackson County, Minutes of the Court of the Ordinary (1800-1822), 85.

<sup>20</sup> Receipt, Early Records, SEP.

<sup>21</sup> Miller, *Littleberry Shields*, 52.

<sup>22</sup> Jackson County Minutes of the Court of the Ordinary (1800-1822), 127.

orphans," granted the request.<sup>23</sup> Thurmond petitioned the court for what he thought was due him out of the deceased's estate and other petitions filed indicate he wanted his share of the estate to pay his debts.<sup>24</sup> However, in August 1811, he paid five hundred dollars to attorney Walton Harris for help in "releasing me from my confinement" and relinquished his share of the estate to Patrick's children.<sup>25</sup>

Time did not temper the animosity either, for in his will, Joseph Shields made specific provisions that the property bequeathed to Jane would revert back to her brother-in-law James at her death. Thomas Thurmond, on the other hand, received "the sum of one dollar and fifty cents in money and no more," probably to avoid the chaos his greedy nature might eventually cause.<sup>26</sup> Peggy Shields, in deeding Jane one slave later that year, vested the interest in the latter's son George, "so as to prevent Thomas Thurmond, the husband of said Jane Thurmond, or any other persons having any claim or demands."<sup>27</sup> Accentuating Patrick's tumultuous estate execution, orphan Polly married and her groom, John Beavers, sent notice to her guardians he intended to petition the court so that he might have his "proportional part."<sup>28</sup> Not only did the Shields family file motions and answer summonses at a dizzying speed, but they still had a farm to maintain.

Andrew Jackson passed through the county in 1818, his presence an attempt to safeguard tranquility between pioneering settlers and Native Americans. He complained to his nephew of suffering "the fatigues and privations of a campaign . . . in a

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<sup>23</sup> Settlement, Early Records, SEP.

<sup>24</sup> Jackson County Minutes of the Court of the Ordinary (1800-1822), 169.

<sup>25</sup> *Jackson County, Georgia Deed Abstracts, Books E-G* (1802-1822), ed. Faye Stone Poss. (Snellville, Georgia: 2000), 112.

<sup>26</sup> Jackson County Will Book A, 74-75.

<sup>27</sup> *Jackson County, Georgia Deed Abstracts*, 322.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from John L. Beavers to James Shields, January 2, 1811, Early Records, SEP.

wilderness."<sup>29</sup> Two years later, census enumerator J.M.C. Montgomery fussed that while the county was "generally healthy," the lack of "public houses" in the rural areas complicated his work. Forced to dismount and walk to homes, he wrote, "very many of the inhabitants live in the interior of their plantations without either gate or Barrs for entrance."<sup>30</sup> Despite the grumbling of those unaccustomed to the backcountry, this area was the "coming agricultural" region of Georgia, land which supported tobacco, corn, grains, cattle and eventually cotton.<sup>31</sup> In his pioneering study, Frank Owsley noted, "the agricultural immigrant [had] a tendency to seek out a country as nearly as possible like the one in which he formerly lived."<sup>32</sup> Climate and soil type often effected migration patterns because settlers wished to immerse themselves in the local market immediately upon their arrival. The cultivation of new crops meant spending valuable time in "experiment and intelligent observation."<sup>33</sup> The ability to produce familiar crops, cultivated by familiar methods gave settlers an economic as well as emotional security.<sup>34</sup>

Upcountry Georgia settlers, largely originating in Virginia and North Carolina, engaged in the cultivation of tobacco, and the vast influx of immigrants inaugurated a boom in production and created a broad market for the crop. Also used as a medium of exchange, tobacco became the region's first principal money crop and helped create a

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<sup>29</sup> Andrew Jackson, *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, in two volumes, ed. John Spencer Bassett. (Washington: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1927), 352-353. Also, Hugh M. Thomason, "Governor Peter Early and the Creek Indian Frontier, 1813-1815," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 45 (September 1961), 226.

<sup>30</sup> Montgomery, "Unique Comments by Georgia Enumerators," 77-78.

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Coleman, *A History of Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977), 110.

<sup>32</sup> Frank L. Owsley, "The Pattern of Migration and Settlement on the Southern Frontier," *Journal of Southern History* 11 (May 1945), 164.

<sup>33</sup> William O. Lynch, "The Westward Flow of Southern Colonists Before 1861," *Journal of Southern History* 9 (August 1943), 305-306.

<sup>34</sup> Ebel, *First Men*, 294.

society in which yeoman farmers asserted economic independence.<sup>35</sup> Farm documents reveal that the Shields participated in its cultivation as late as 1818 and the family kept records on the particulars of rolling tobacco, an early method of transporting the crop via hogsheads. Though closer towns such as Washington, Lexington and Petersburg in the Broad River Valley established tobacco warehouses by the early 1800's, James Shields and Patrick's son, George, rolled their hogsheads all the way to Augusta in 1817.

At that time, however, prices dropped, as did the aggregate number of hogsheads exported from Savannah.<sup>36</sup> While tobacco dominated the upcountry agricultural market, cotton production gradually increased, setting the stage for a late century change. Though Eli Whitney's gin often receives the distinction of thrusting the agricultural South into a cotton economy, upcountry settlers produced small amounts even before the Revolution, primarily for domestic purposes. Tobacco may have spurred settlers into the market, but cotton made them full-fledged agents, no longer viewed merely as a "useful appendage" to low-country planters. As one historian correctly contended, "Cotton was not an invading force . . . [but] an *invited* invader that created a kingdom for cotton in an already commercialized region."<sup>37</sup> Participating in the growing market, the Shields family owned and purchased cotton cards, and cultivated a patch as early as Joseph Shields' death in 1818.<sup>38</sup> Joseph's will also shows a variety of stock such as sheep, hogs and cattle, an inventory typical of the region. Though the farm produced a variety of goods for personal consumption, they did not live in the mythical self-sufficient frontier, but

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<sup>35</sup> Coulter, *Old Petersburg*, 102-108; Joyce E. Chaplin, "Creating a Cotton South in Georgia and South Carolina, 1760-1815," *Journal of Southern History* 57 (May 1991), 186-188; G. Melvin Herndon, "Samuel Edward Butler of Virginia Goes to Georgia, 1784," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 52 (June 1968).

<sup>36</sup> Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern States to 1860*, in two volumes. (Washington: Carnegie Institute, 1933), 757.

<sup>37</sup> Chaplin, "Creating a Cotton South," 190, 193-194. Also, James C. Bonner, *A History of Georgia Agriculture, 1732-1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1964), Chapter 4.

pursued marketing benefits in burgeoning centers of commerce.<sup>39</sup> While the area certainly lacked a bountiful supply of navigable transportation routes, evidence suggests the Shields family interacted with the larger economic community despite the logistical impediments.

The Shields family continued to grow, and family members of all ages contributed to the farm's production. By 1810, patriarch Joseph had four slaves, an adopted grandson, and newly married son James, who remained a part of his father's household. Ten years later, he had amassed seven slaves, so enough hands existed to transform his property from the "wilderness" of Andrew Jackson's despair, into a workable farm. An abundance of labor, both human and otherwise, potentially meant additional household income. Often, slaveholders hired out their charges to neighboring farmers, particularly those that had not invested in human chattel and by doing so reinforced community ties as well as their autonomy within the local market.<sup>40</sup> The Shields took advantage of this. In 1813, as administrators of Patrick's estate, James and Joseph rented out "the Negroes belonging to the heirs" of the deceased, bringing in a return of \$96.31.<sup>41</sup> Two years earlier, a neighbor wrote to Joseph Shields, "I wish to hire a horse from you to ride to Monroe . . . As I shall be gone two, or three days I will not ask to *borrow* of you, I shall be glad to *hire*."<sup>42</sup> Even if the farm, still in its infancy and

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<sup>38</sup> Jackson County Inventories, Appraisements, Returns and Sales (1800-1832), 489.

<sup>39</sup> Recent studies have attempted to breach this nostalgic view, including Forrest McDonald and Grady McWhiney, "The Antebellum Southern Herdsman: A Reinterpretation," *Journal of Southern History* 41 (May 1975); John C. Inscoe, *Mountain Masters, Slavery, and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); Bradley G. Bond, "Herders, Farmers, and Markets on the Inner Frontier: The Mississippi Piney Woods, 1850-1860," in *Plain Folk of the South Revisited*, ed. Samuel C. Hyde Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 73-99.

<sup>40</sup> Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 56-57.

<sup>41</sup> Receipt, Early Records, SEP.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from James Rosamond to Joseph Shields, November 11, 1811, Early Records, SEP.

unclear of much virgin timber, did not efficiently produce ample agricultural profits, the Shields family sought other sources of income.

In addition to supporting Patrick's children, James Shields began his own family in 1810, served as executor for his father when he passed away eight years later, and continued to pay on his brother's estate well into the 1820's. When census enumerator J.M.C. Montgomery knocked on his door in 1820, James reported a tremendous household, including seven slaves, three of his brother's children, an aging mother, a wife and four of his own children.<sup>43</sup> He also managed both his mother's property and that of his mother-in-law Jane Beavers, both of who drew southwest Georgia land lots in the 1820 lottery as Revolutionary War widows.

The family's partiality towards education and investment endeavors can be traced to these early years. While James' wife Charity was illiterate, he saw to it that his children and those of his brother Patrick were educated, a logistical nightmare during the first decades of the nineteenth century given the remoteness of the area. His correspondence indicates an adequate knowledge of business, language and a willingness to risk capital in greater ventures. In April 1836, he received an answer to a letter written the previous December, which inquired about the quality of Union County land in the north Georgia mountains. William Jackson responded, "corn is very scarce in union and land is dull . . . many people moved out."<sup>44</sup> Undiscouraged, he bought not only the Union County acreage but also Jackson's draw in the 1832 gold lottery for property situated in Floyd County. A decade earlier, he and Richard Beavers partnered for an Early County tract purchase for \$125. By 1850, he paid tax on the land in Floyd County

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<sup>43</sup> Federal Manuscript Census, Georgia, Jackson County, 1820.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from William Jackson to James Shields, April 17, 1836, Early Records, SEP.

and two lots of land in Early County in southwest Georgia.<sup>45</sup> Apparently more of an investment than incentive to move, James bought and sold various tracts of land (mostly lots), but continued to live along the banks of the Middle Oconee as his own family grew and that of his brother finally moved out.<sup>46</sup>

The money invested, however, did not all come from James' pocket. Money lending between neighbors symbolized "neighborly cooperation" and James participated in its exchange both as lender and borrower.<sup>47</sup> As a medium for exchange, the notes could pass from an individual to his creditors in order to pay off debt. Records show James Shields borrowed (and lent) money from neighbors and relatives at an alarming rate and his credit indicates he settled most promisory notes with regularity.<sup>48</sup> Three occasions in the 1840's, however, required third party intervention, two of which went to court. In 1841, he and a neighbor, Middleton Witt, borrowed \$200 from John King, whose note transferred to Christopher Kimbrel during the ensuing years. Shields and Witt refused to pay, appeared before the court and were ordered to pay the note, plus court costs.<sup>49</sup> In 1847, James and two other parties neglected to pay John W. Wood \$175 and interest from a note due in 1844 and again were summoned to appear before the court.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Jackson County Tax Digest, 1850. Also, Shields-Ethridge papers. The exact location of this southwest Georgia property is now known at this time. The tax digests alternate between Decatur and Early County and when James Shields appointed his son-in-law to sell these lots in the 1840's, he suggested it was in Baker County. Early County was formed in 1818 from Indian cessions, the land dispersed in 250 acre lots by the 1820 land lottery. The formation of Decatur County in 1823 and two years later Baker County also took portions of the parent county.

<sup>46</sup> The use of the term 'lot' refers to the tracts of land divided up for draws in the various land lotteries.

<sup>47</sup> Herndon, "Samuel Edward Butler Goes to Georgia," 128.

<sup>48</sup> To indicate that the note had been paid off, James would tear off the portion of paper with his signature on it.

<sup>49</sup> Jackson County Superior Court Minutes (1843-1844), 318-319.

<sup>50</sup> The Superior Court Minutes for this year are missing, but the petition requiring their presence in court can be found in the Shields-Ethridge Papers, Early Records, petition dated February 1847.

James tended to have difficulty with the larger debts, but he never liquidated his human capital, as the number of slaves on the farm increased steadily throughout the 1840's. However, he attempted to sell land at this time. Subsequent to the Kimbrel case, he appointed his son-in-law John G. Howse to sell his two southwest Georgia lots. By November of the following year, Howse had not found a buyer and suggested James appoint a Captain Flanagan since he was "starting down the country."<sup>51</sup> The lots do not disappear from the tax records until the early 1850's, though, and by then only one. James habitually took advantage of his lenders' generosity, at least during the 1840's. Son-in-law Joshua Cummings wrote to James in 1840 asking for the amount due him, as he "[expected] to start to Walker County . . . and shall need some money."<sup>52</sup> On yet another occasion, Cummings suggested his father-in-law send the note or "the balance due me" to John G. Howse who apparently took charge of the matter, the "said note often satisfying the garnishment served on you."<sup>53</sup>

During the decades following their marriage, James and Charity reared eight children, one of whom died during infancy and another who died without heirs at the age of twenty-two.<sup>54</sup> Of the surviving six, five went on to marry, some to wealthy landowners. Though James owned acreage in other regions of the state, none of his children ever settled on those lands. In fact, all remained in Jackson County, though his nephew George followed a common migratory pattern and eventually settled in Tishemingo County, Mississippi during the 1840's.<sup>55</sup> The extended family resulting from

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<sup>51</sup> Letter from John G. Howse to James Shields, November 1845, Early Records, SEP.

<sup>52</sup> Letter from Joshua Cummings to James Shields, October 13, 1840, Early Records, SEP.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, August 16, 1845, Early Records, SEP.

<sup>54</sup> Family Bible Records, SEP.

<sup>55</sup> Miller, *Littleberry Shields*, 52.

the Jackson County unions show a consistent interrelationship with the Rockwell/Mulberry community situated ten miles west along the Mulberry River.<sup>56</sup>

The Shields' oldest daughter, Harriet, married first in 1835 to a man relatively new to the community, John G. Howse. His family initially settled in the Mulberry Fork region, near the Shields, but then moved to the Mulberry community where he taught school, served as Justice of the Peace, paid tax on 850 acres by 1844 and over 1,100 acres in 1861.<sup>57</sup> Howse regularly corresponded with his father-in-law and, as aforementioned, served as his "true and lawful attorney" designated to sell land.<sup>58</sup> In fact, Howse would have drawn up the power of attorney for Flanigan himself, but was "out of paper."<sup>59</sup> The 1845 letter further reveals Howse attempted to contact his father-in-law without success and "thought it prudent to send Robert home" in order to forward the message.

Robert, the youngest of James and Charity's eight children, probably made frequent visits to his sister's home. In 1857, he married a neighbor's daughter, Nancy Hill. Like the Howse family, the Hills rapidly increased their acreage and slaves prior to the war. Nancy's father, William, accumulated eight hundred acres by 1850 and like the Howses, devoted large amounts of his acreage to cotton.<sup>60</sup> Living briefly near her

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<sup>56</sup> Mulberry, one of the early settlements of Jackson County, had store buildings and a post office near the river. It then thrived as a stop on the Gainesville, Jefferson and Southern Railroad (later Gainesville Midland) when it arrived in the 1880's. Rockwell (called Center Hill in the mid 1800's) was more of a crossroads, at the intersection of the Jefferson to Lawrenceville Road, and the road between Gainesville, Jug Tavern and Monroe. Situated along a rise about a mile south of Mulberry, Rockwell claimed the school, Masonic Lodge and Universalist meeting grounds of the area, as well as a grist mill along Cedar Creek, and later a felt hat factory during the Civil War. The Universalists first met here in 1839, and the faith continued to maintain a strong presence among the local families throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

<sup>57</sup> Elrod, *Historical Notes*, 146-147. Jackson County Tax Digests, 1844, 1861. The Mulberry Community, at least that portion south of the river, was in Georgia Militia District 243, also given the names Wilborn, Dalton, Hancock, Wetherspoon, Lay, Lyle and House.

<sup>58</sup> Appointment from James Shields to John G. Howse, November 17, 1844, Early Records, SEP.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from John G. Howse to James Shields, November 1845, Early Records, SEP.

<sup>60</sup> Jackson County Tax Digest, 1850. William E. Hill's land accumulation dispersed among his five sons during the 1850's, and in turn, they added to their own properties. By 1861, the family (minus son

parents, Harriet's sister Mary moved with her husband James Guffin to Mulberry just prior to the Civil War where Guffin later became a Justice of the Peace.<sup>61</sup> The extended family shared letters from friends and relatives as far away as Vicksburg, Mississippi, and frequent visits probably account for the significant number of intermarriages between a handful of families. Even Nancy's sister, Susan, married into the Wills family, neighbors of the Shields'.<sup>62</sup>

Robert Shields must have inherited his father's venturesome nature, at least during his youth. In 1852, his sister Virginia wrote that he had left for California, purportedly to pan for gold. If he did, indeed, make it as far as the gold fields, his success did not warrant settlement on the Pacific Coast. By 1857, he returned home to marry Nancy Hill and followed in his brother William's footsteps by purchasing approximately one hundred acres of his father's property in 1858. Between father and sons, twenty slaves worked the land in 1860 raising a variety of crops, including cotton, corn and grain.<sup>63</sup> Of the 186 property owners of Georgia Militia District (G.M.D.) 245 in 1859, only twenty-one exceeded ten thousand dollars in property and nineteen claimed more than ten slaves.<sup>64</sup> With fourteen slaves and an accumulated value of over twelve thousand dollars, James certainly ranked in the upper percentile within his district. Despite losing nearly two hundred acres to his sons in the 1850's, almost one-third of which was improved acreage,

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Alexander who worked as overseer for his father) farmed an aggregate 1325 acres stretching from the Mulberry River to Cedar Creek, a distance of one and a half miles. The Mulberry community was host to a number of extensive planters, and according to Steven Hahn's tabulations, G.M.D. 243 was the wealthiest of Jackson County's rural districts. Ironically, most of the well-propertied individuals attended the Universalist camp meetings, including Robert Moon and Dilmus Lyle, who owned 45 and 36 slaves, respectively, in 1861.

<sup>61</sup> Elrod, 70; Federal Manuscript Census, Jackson County, Georgia, Schedule I, 1850, 1860.

<sup>62</sup> The Wills family also provided a wife for Robert Shields' brother, William. In yet another twist, Nancy's brother Alexander, married one of John G. Howse's daughters, Margaret.

<sup>63</sup> Federal Manuscript Census, Jackson County, Georgia, Schedules II and III, 1860.

<sup>64</sup> Jackson County Tax Digest, 1859.

James increased his production of corn, wheat and sweet potatoes. While producing only one additional bale of cotton in 1860, his corn increased by 575 bushels, indicating his primary focus on home consumption.<sup>65</sup> Proportionally, however, both Robert and William devoted a larger acreage to cotton, though this probably indicates more of a family-unit farm system in which father and sons contributed to the aggregate production and domestic needs of the entire family.

Until 1865, the Shields farm relied on a consistent slave presence. Early tax digests show Joseph Shields as the owner of two slaves, and family documents reveal these to be Leah and her infant daughter Sophia, purchased in 1799. By 1810, four slaves worked the Shields' land and the number steadily increased, reaching a peak of sixteen on various occasions in the 1850's and early 1860's.<sup>66</sup> During these interceding years, the slave population gradually concentrated into a smaller percentage of the slaveholding population. In 1850, fewer than ten percent of Jackson County households owned more than ten slaves, and only 5.5% owned over fifteen.<sup>67</sup> That trend is consistent for landowning farmers as well. A comparison of the 1856 and 1861 tax digests for G.M.D. 245 shows only a slight wavering in both the total number of slaves and the average number of slaves per owner. The average acreage, however, decreased from 450.6 acres per owner, to only 404.9.<sup>68</sup> In both years, James Shields possessed greater than the average.<sup>69</sup> His total slave value gradually increased during the 1850's, compatible with

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<sup>65</sup> Federal Manuscript Census, Jackson County, Georgia, Schedules IV and III, 1850, 1860.

<sup>66</sup> Jackson County Tax Digests, 1850-1864.

<sup>67</sup> Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism*, 297.

<sup>68</sup> These numbers contain only Jackson County, non-town properties. Fortunately, these two digests distinguished between the two.

<sup>69</sup> For the 1861 comparison, I included both Robert and William's property, as it was part of the original farm and purchased from their father.

prices on the larger market as well the coming of age of several younger slaves.<sup>70</sup> From 1854 onward, slaves consistently accounted for more than half of his total value.

The lengthy residence of slave woman Sophia is perhaps one of the more fascinating finds in the family documents. From the earliest reference at the time of her purchase as an infant in 1799, to being listed as the head of a post-Civil War household, Sophia emerges as a dominant member of the Shields' slave community for well over half a century. First found in a bill of sale signed by Willis Gunnel, infant Sophia traveled with her mother and new master to Jackson County where they remained as members of the Shields' household. In his will, Joseph bequeathed Leah to his wife, Peggy, to "dispose of at her death as she pleases."<sup>71</sup> Almost immediately, Peggy deeded Leah to daughter-in-law Jane Thurmond. Joseph Shields also names Sophia, now a mother. Ownership of Elviry, her mother and "their increase" transferred to James, but Joseph was not above separating families. A closer look into the appraisement of the estate reveals Sophia as being the mother of two children, Elviry and Spencer, a young boy who in the will was bequeathed to Joseph's adopted grandson, John Ragains.<sup>72</sup> Ragains lived in the vicinity, so contact could still be maintained.

It is unknown who fathered Sophia's children. If he lived within the Shields' slave community most likely he was named Jack. Of the four males listed in Joseph's will, only Jack was not labeled *boy*. It is unclear where the delineation between *man* and *boy* or *woman* and *girl* occurred, but Joseph's failure to call Jack a boy and an appraisement of eight hundred dollars suggests he was a mature male. The 1820 census shows only

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<sup>70</sup> Many historians, in tabulating numbers of slaves, averages per household, etc. rarely account for the ages of slaves, obviously a determinant of agricultural production. While James Shields owned 12 slaves in 1850, placing him in the top ten percent of countywide ownership, seven were under the age of ten. By 1860, he owned fifteen with six under ten.

one grown male slave in the household with Peggy and her son James, and he is listed in the same age group as Sophia. Furthermore, the will stipulated Jack be returned to the care of James at the death of his mother. If Sophia and Jack were married, they were not separated by their owner's will, for the aging Peggy continued to live with her son until her death. Thus, the slave couple would have no trouble continuing their family.

James left no record as to the purchase of human capital, but census records indicate the presence of several mulatto slaves and Joseph's will mentions a "yellow boy Simon." For instance, post-war censuses list Jarvy (a probable child of Sophia) as mulatto, as are her children, Elbert, Nancy and Sarah, the latter of which was born *after* the Civil War. Jarvy appears to have been a favorite of the family as well. In 1870, she and her children, who attended school, lived with Charity and Virginia Shields and in an 1880's photograph, Jarvy can be seen on the porch. Elviry, another daughter of Sophia, is labeled a mulatto as is Dicy, whose age, sex and color correspond to one slave on the 1860 census. James made few provisions in his will concerning the distribution of property, other than to say that each of his children previously received an "advancement" of one slave. However, he did specify that the "increase of said Dicy if any I desire shall follow the mother."<sup>73</sup>

While slave households are often the most difficult to ascertain, one certain family unit on the Shields Farm was that of the Jordans. A post-war labor contract names slave woman Dicy along with her three young sons, Samuel, John, and James. In the

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<sup>71</sup> Jackson County Will Book A, 74-75.

<sup>72</sup> Jackson County Inventories, Appraisements, Returns and Sales (1800-1832), 489.

<sup>73</sup> Perhaps remembering the difficulties faced with brother Patrick's will, James bound the shares given to his daughters, Harriet Howse, Mary Guffin and Elizabeth Betts (formerly Cummings), so that their portion "shall not be subject to alienation" by their husbands. John G. Howse referenced this in his own will, naming the "estate of James Shields" as the property of his wife, Harriet. Jackson County Will Book B, 67-70.

1880 census, she lived five houses down from Robert Shields, named as the wife of James Jordan, and the three boys as their sons. By this time, though, six other children had been added to the household.<sup>74</sup> No marriage record exists for Dicy and James Jordan in Jackson County, so they were possibly "married" before starting a family in 1860. Born about 1837 according to a post-war census, three males on the 1860 slave schedule approximate James Jordan's age.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, research indicated that the few Jordan families of Jackson County did not live in this area, nor did any own slaves. No bill of sale was found for Jordan, so it is possible his choice of surname was for Biblical purposes.

The Civil War significantly affected the white male influence of the Shields' immediate and extended family. Indeed, the loss both natural and war-related is astonishing. James's two sons, Robert and William enlisted in the 16<sup>th</sup> Georgia Cavalry Battalion, organized in the summer of 1862. Two of Robert's brothers-in-law and a nephew entered the same company, as did Nancy's brother-in-law, James Wills.<sup>76</sup> Hardship followed on the battlefields, hospitals and prison camps. In August 1862, James and Charity lost two grandsons, only days apart, to disease in Richmond, Virginia

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<sup>74</sup> This assumes the boys belonged to both of them. The 1880 census provides a column for kinship in relation to the head of the household, and the boys were all listed as sons, not step-sons, etc. This also assumes the census taker bothered to verify the relationships given race relations during the Reconstruction period.

<sup>75</sup> Slave schedules should be used with a certain amount of caution. It is unclear how the census taker received the information whether by the owner or the slaves. Certainly, the color issue must have been a sensitive one, and the accuracy of attaching race is suspect. In the latter censuses, however, the census taker would have approached the head of the black household, and color would have been ascertained personally. What is not known is how the black families responded to the census taker. Did they want to admit being "mulatto" perhaps out of concern for employment or personal reasons? Or were they even asked? It is even possible the enumerator wrote what he saw, and certainly that is no guarantee for accuracy.

<sup>76</sup> They were Nancy Hill's brothers, Alexander A. Hill and Cicero S. Hill, and Marcus C. "Mack" Howse, grandson of James and Charity Shields.

and over the course of the war, Nancy lost three of her five brothers.<sup>77</sup> The home front proved no less devastating. At age seventy-eight, James Shields died in 1863, outliving his son-in-law John G. Howse by only a few months.<sup>78</sup> In addition, Nancy's father had passed the previous year. Few male influences survived to place dependence on, save the nine male slaves, only three of whom were over the age of ten.<sup>79</sup>

Economically, the farm suffered as well. James Shields' estate appraised at \$17,000 in July 1863 with \$13,300 in slaves and \$2,821 in other assets. Included were four horses, one mule, seventeen hogs, one lot of sheep, one lot of cattle, three bales of cotton, seventy bushels of corn and one lot of beans. A comparison of these assets with an estate auction in 1874 reveals both the war-time inflation and post-war economic depression. A clock valued at fifteen dollars in 1863 only managed to sell for five in 1874. A lard can worth six dollars when appraised brought only fifty cents at the sale. Moreover, a mule could bring as much as \$250 during the war and merely \$30 a decade later.

Inflation, high prices and drought exacerbated the men's absence, both temporary and permanent. In August 1862, the Jackson Country grand jury wrote "we are grieved and appalled at the distress which threatens our people."<sup>80</sup> By 1863, the Confederate government asked for one-tenth of agricultural production, a tithe few had to spare. The Confederacy assessed widow Charity Shields on her accumulation of wheat, corn, oats,

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<sup>77</sup> William L. Howse and Henry J. Howse both died and are buried in Richmond, Virginia. Starling E. Hill died in prison camp, and Moses R. and John P. Hill both died of disease. Of the two surviving brothers, Cicero suffered a partial arm amputation.

<sup>78</sup> John G. Howse did not serve in the Confederate Army. However, he visited three of his sons camped near Richmond during the summer of 1862.

<sup>79</sup> William apparently received several furloughs or resigned from his cavalry unit after his father's death. He witnessed the will of his brother-in-law John G. Howse in April 1863. Furthermore, the birth dates of two of William's children suggest he was home (at least temporarily) during the final two years of the war.

cured fodder, cotton and wool. Charity, then seventy-six, along with her daughter and son's wife must have been determined to keep the farm afloat. By the end of the year, limited labor produced three bales of cotton, granting a much-needed return of \$258.<sup>81</sup> The family, however, possessed a remarkable resourcefulness, for in 1863 they paid five hundred dollars for a Confederate bond, none of which was ever cashed.

In August 1865, Charity signed a labor contract with four former slave women.<sup>82</sup> In it, she granted Jarvy and Dicy "each five bushels of corn" and all seven freed persons named "[board] and houseroom," and "no more wages" than agreed upon. In exchange, the former slaves would "faithfully serve...Charity Shields and her family in any capacity that she may require . . . or have heretofore been in the habit of doing."<sup>83</sup> Witnessed by neighbors, Charity, Sophia, Jarvy and Dicy each signed their mark. Family tradition suggests the return of two bales of cotton harvested by Charity and her freedwomen provided sufficient funds to construct the main residence, a "plantation plain" two-story dwelling, in 1866. High cotton prices immediately following the war certainly lend credence to this story, as does the favoring of female freed persons in the harvesting process.<sup>84</sup> No diaries or letters survived to outline the lives of these women on the farm,

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<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism*, 124. For more on the Upcountry during the Civil War see pages 116-133.

<sup>81</sup> Jackson County Inventories and Appraisements, Book D (1860-1868), 678.

<sup>82</sup> It is interesting that the short-term contract only includes women and children. Whether the men were even asked to return is not clear. What is apparent is that very few of the male slaves, particularly the most valued, did not appear in the immediate vicinity in the 1870. Only Marcus is found living next to his former owners. George Shields, his wife and two daughters are listed as living with an elderly white family, Johny and Mary McCulloch, about four houses down.

<sup>83</sup> Labor contract, August 10, 1865, Early Records, SEP.

<sup>84</sup> Willard Range, *A Century of Georgia Agriculture: 1850-1950* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1954), 90-91; Ralph Shlomowitz, "Origins of Southern Sharecropping," *Agricultural History* 53 (July 1979), 568.

but no doubt they suffered the emotional ravages of death and privation and fought to persevere within a dwindling economy.<sup>85</sup>

The agricultural and economic transformation of the upcountry economy began prior to the Civil War. Though cotton replaced tobacco earlier in the century as the chief crop of exchange, upcountry farmers diversified their production, relying heavily on field crops such as corn and grains. Limited by logistical and natural impediments, the region's economic market became decidedly local in nature.<sup>86</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that yeoman farmers jealously eyed their planter neighbors in the lower piedmont. Often considered uncouth by plantation belt society, upcountry farmers immersed themselves into a broader market and with that, achieved economic and political power. As one editorial of the local paper noted:

The epoch of the Cracker is here [and] he is not the Cracker of olden times. He is becoming an intellectual force. He has become a political force . . . he is learning how to vote . . . A new element has arisen with a power in its hands. It is the Cracker . . . His is not the blood of a knight of the realm or of a Norman conqueror, but of one who conquers the forces of Nature...This is the blood that has the divine right to rule the land, because it supports it. Yes, the Cracker is in the saddle. And it is time.<sup>87</sup>

Indeed, they preferred a local market, and by doing so retained political and economic control, creating a unique socio-economic class that overwhelmingly favored the Populist revolt later in the century. As Steven Hahn asserted, "ownership of the means of production and the ability to secure family subsistence formed the basis" of ideological and cultural independence.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> An excellent account of women and their slaves during the war can be found in Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South During the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

<sup>86</sup> Julius Rubin, "The Limits of Agricultural Progress in the Nineteenth-Century South," *Agricultural History* 49 (April 1975).

<sup>87</sup> Qtd. in Gary and Adams, *Our Time and Place*, 1-10.

<sup>88</sup> Steven Hahn, "The Yeomanry of the Nonplantation South," 33.

The "Cracker" hailed in the editorial managed to swing himself into the saddle in part by key advancements in cotton ginning technology. Prior to the Civil War, plantations accounted for most gins, and those public gins that did exist were located in larger centers of commerce. Chiefly driven by animal power, antebellum gins required excessive labor, a luxury not afforded to the yeoman farmers of the upcountry. Plantation owners maximized labor output by reserving fair days for picking and poor weather for ginning. However, with the advent of a steam powered gin, an advanced packing system, increased utilization of fertilizer, and creation of a market for cotton byproducts, the number of public gins increased, and with it, the acreage devoted to cotton.<sup>89</sup>

By the end of the war, the new Shields patriarchs worked to put their agricultural productions in order. William inherited a sizable tract of almost four hundred acres, but Robert's inheritance had yet to come. In addition to working the ninety-six acres purchased from his father in 1858, he rented the home place land. According to returns, Robert finally received his land outright upon completion his father's estate execution in 1874. At that time, his acreage increased to 256 acres, compared with the 528 owned by brother William. In an era when average farm size decreased across Jackson County as well as the state, Robert purchased additional land adjacent to his farm until 1890, by which time he had acquired 529 acres.<sup>90</sup> Thereafter, he gradually provided land to his grown children, but maintained a large portion of his original property. Records reveal his steady rise up the economic scale. Approximate five-year intervals between 1871 and 1890 show minimal fluctuation in the per capita wealth of G.M.D. 245 taxpayers. Even

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<sup>89</sup> Charles S. Aiken, "The Evolution of Cotton Ginning in the Southeastern United States," *Geographical Review* 63 (April 1973); Lynette Boney Wrenn, "Cotton Gins and Cottonseed Oil Mills in the New South," *Agricultural History* 68 (Spring 1994).

with a mere ninety-six acres in 1871, Robert Shields ranked just above the average in his district. By 1880, when per capita wealth increased to \$868, tax digests show Robert's total value at \$3,473. His \$5,511 peak in 1886 overshadowed the \$1,113 average value of the district. In fact, of the 159 property owners of his district, only nine had a greater property value and seven, more land. This is a significant increase from his holdings of 1875 when, out of 73 property owners, 24 had a greater value and 33 owned more land.<sup>91</sup>

During 1869, Robert worked fifty acres of improved land, producing a variety of crops, mostly corn, rye, and potatoes. By 1879, however, he had diversified his production. He devoted an equal amount of his tilled land to cotton and corn, about half as much to rye and individual acres to sweet potatoes and orchards of apples and peaches. He also produced 350 pounds of butter and estimated that 300 dozen eggs had been laid during the year. Though inheritance and procurement of additional property doubled his improved acreage, proportionally Robert devoted more to cotton. By 1879, the farm yielded thirty-three bales of cotton, a substantial increase over the four bales produced in 1869. Possibly, the farm contained a gin as early as 1874, as Robert's brother-in-law Alexander A. Hill, operator of a gin in the Mulberry community, purchased gin equipment from James Shields' estate. Moreover, an 1899 plat reveals the location of a gin house (see Appendix C). In any case, following the trend of his upcountry counterparts, Robert Shields became absorbed into the cotton economy during the late nineteenth century.

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<sup>90</sup> For regional statistical records for this time period, see Roland M. Harper, "Development of Agriculture in Upper Georgia From 1850-1880," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 6 (March 1922). For Jackson County, Steven Hahn provides a number of tables in the appendix to his *Roots of Southern Populism*.

<sup>91</sup> Jackson County Tax Digests, 1871-1890. In his tabulations Steven Hahn found that the Jefferson District, consistently ranked second in total per capita wealth. Minish's District (G.M.D. 255) topped the list.

While no records exist as to Robert's manner of production, or whether he practiced new suggested methods of breaking ground, he did partake in the "guano craze."<sup>92</sup> Though not always a determinant of success, Georgia led the South in fertilizer purchases during this period.<sup>93</sup> "Guano sheds are numerous," wrote a reporter for the *Jackson Herald* on an inspection of the progressing Gainesville, Jefferson and Southern Railroad. "They have [it] piled up as high as a good sized house, and the farmers are taking it right away just as fast as it comes." Certainly, the arrival of railroads in the post-war era aided in the transportation of goods. The Northeastern Railroad paralleled the northern boundary of the county, passing through Harmony Grove, and the main branch of the GJ&S followed the southern periphery of the county. Not to be overlooked, though, Jefferson received a spur during the 1880's, much to the delight of its citizens. The local paper reported, "It is our road; it is the mighty power that is rapidly nearing Jefferson and will soon bind our town fast to the living world with arms of iron and completely revolutionize old Jefferson and the county through which it passes."<sup>94</sup>

As for labor, former Shields slaves continued to work at the farm as wage workers rather than sharecroppers. As Steven Hahn found, while Jackson County had a high percentage of blacks, most worked as paid laborers and despite finding themselves in debt, upcountry croppers and tenants frequently changed places of employment.<sup>95</sup> Robert

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<sup>92</sup> Jackson County Annual Returns Book E (1867-1875), 584. For information for late nineteenth century application of science to agriculture, see Range, 120-123.

<sup>93</sup> John Solomon Otto, *Southern Agriculture During the Civil War Era, 1860-1880* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 84.

<sup>94</sup> *The Jackson Herald*, April 7, 1882. For more on the development of railroads in northern Georgia, see Peter S. McGuire, "The Railroads of Georgia, 1860-1880," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 16 (September 1932), 179-213. The GJ&S narrow-gauge faced financial problems in the 1890's and fell into receivership. By 1904, the line north of Monroe became known as the Gainesville Midland Railroad. The GMRR standardized its lines two years later, and when service ceased in the 1950's was the last of Georgia's railroads to use steam locomotives.

<sup>95</sup> Steven Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism*, 156,164. J. William Harris also questions old attitudes of peonage, contending there was a higher level of mobility than previously thought. Mere debt, he insists,

paid for "colored" labor and tax digests show him hiring more workers into the 1880's when his farm value peaked.<sup>96</sup> In 1883, for example, all four employees had once served the family as slaves, Leon, Jarvy, Mack and Guss Shields, but the names of laborers often changed from one year to the next. The number of hands gradually decreased as Robert's children came of age and tended their own plots of land. However, even into the mid twentieth century, descendants of the Shields slaves returned to the farm that once bonded their ancestors. Moreover, some of the former slaves seem to have done well, though their status in the tax digests immediately following the war mirrored many of their black neighbors, "due search made and no property found." By the mid-1880's, however, Jarvy and Mack paid their taxes in full.

Jarvy appears to have been the most savvy of the freed men and women. At the sale of James Shields' estate in 1874, she purchased several items including plow gear, a meal tub, spider, one heifer and six chairs, totaling over eleven dollars. This would not seem to be a great exchange of money except that the estate in its entirety auctioned at just four hundred dollars. The next year, the county taxed her on eighty dollars in property. Two other former slaves appear to have done well also. Augustus "Guss" Shields, found in his owner's 1863 estate appraisal, was rarely seen on the books until two decades later when the 1883 digest shows him as having no property. However, by 1910, he was married, labeled a "general farmer" as opposed to a laborer and, most interestingly, was the head of a very literate family. Not only can he read and write, but

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does not constitute debt bondage. "The Question of Peonage in the History of the New South," in *Plain Folk of the South Revisited*, ed. Samuel C. Hyde Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 104.

<sup>96</sup> Federal Manuscript Census, Georgia, Jackson County, 1880, Schedule II.

so could his wife and four daughters.<sup>97</sup> And in 1895, John Jordan, son of Dicy and James, was the only man of color registered to vote in the Jefferson District.

Between them, Robert and William Shields farmed nearly one thousand acres by the early 1890's. Robert's will, written in 1900, indicates he had already given three sons, John, James, and Emory their respective portions. Interestingly, the home place did not go to one of the boys, but to the youngest daughter and her husband. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Shields family adapted to new agricultural trends, from their first crops of tobacco, to a diverse production supplementing a heavy interest in the cotton economy. In the larger agricultural scene, overproduction, lack of diversification and deficient agronomic practices exhausted the cotton market. However, this farm had yet to experience the greatest transformation of all. As if on cue, a tenacious young man named Ira Washington Ethridge stepped onto the scene and accepted the challenge of a "revolutionary new century."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 1910, Schedule I.

<sup>98</sup> Range, *A Century of Georgia Agriculture*, 167.

## CHAPTER II

"THIS IS ONE OF THE FINEST GINS WE EVER SAW":<sup>1</sup>

### MR. IRA AND THE AGRICULTURAL REVOLUTION

In November 1896, the *Jackson Herald* reported, "The Death Angel visited the residence of Mr. Robert Shields, and wafted the spirit of his most beloved one to its ever resting place."<sup>2</sup> Nancy Shields' death merely exacerbated a waning feminine spirit within the household. Five years before, Robert's daughter Elizabeth died of consumption after moving back in with her parents during a turbulent marriage. In 1894, his unmarried sister Virginia passed away, a member of the household since their mother's death in 1873. Alone for the first time in his life, Robert must have wondered what would become of his golden years, particularly with his youngest daughter, Ella, set to marry at the end of December. He wrote to her within the year, asking, "I want to know whether it will suit you to come live with me." Perhaps fearing that she and her new husband, Ira Ethridge, would not accept the offer, he enticed them with rent-free land and "rations for one year."<sup>3</sup> Robert intended the home place and accompanying 114 acres to pass to Ira and Ella in exchange for their care.<sup>4</sup> Armed with one mule and \$750 in cash, Ira moved into his father-in-law's home in 1898, planted his roots, and embarked on an industrious career that survived depression, agricultural legislation, drought, fire and even pestilence.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from I.W. Ethridge to Lummus Cotton Gin Company, November 1, 1930, SEP.

<sup>2</sup> *The Jackson Herald*, November 20, 1896.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from J. Robert Shields to Mr. and Mrs. I.W. Ethridge, September 24, 1897, SEP.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson County Will Book C, 328-330.

Robert Shields' opinion of his son-in-law remains a mystery. Certainly, he favored his youngest daughter and must have been encouraged by her adventurous groom. Ira Washington Ethridge was the eighth of nine children born to Sampson and Nancy Betts Ethridge.<sup>5</sup> Born in 1869, Ira grew up in the little community of Auburn in neighboring Gwinnett County where his father had settled decades earlier with four brothers.<sup>6</sup> Not much is known of his early years, except that he attended business school in Kentucky, graduating in 1892. By the time he returned home, Auburn, situated along the Seaboard Airline Railroad, prospered with gins, mills and factories. Surely, Ira saw the difference business made to the surrounding area. Even Jug Tavern, some ten miles east of Auburn, shed its quaint title and became the city of Winder, burgeoning as a stop on the SAL.

Ira's practice ledgers from school show an early propensity for perfection and skill in accounting and penmanship, with pages dedicated to scrawling out his signature. He first came to Jackson County in 1895, signed a teaching contract with Ebenezer School in the Jefferson District and during the following year signed with Galilee School. While teaching in the area, Ira probably lived with his brother Scott, husband of Robert Shields' oldest daughter, Emma.<sup>7</sup> Ira and Ella must have met through their siblings or at community socials held at Galilee Church, of which the Shields were members. Immediately upon his arrival to the farm, Ira Ethridge swarmed looking for activities to occupy his time. He helped his father-in-law with cotton crops and continued teaching at Galilee School, earning a dollar and a half per pupil per month.

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<sup>5</sup> Ethridge Family History, SEP.

<sup>6</sup> This area is now in Barrow County, Georgia, created in 1914. See Myldred F. Hutchins, *The History of Auburn and Carl: Two Small Georgia Towns* (published by the author, 1981).

Ella's groom brought a vibrant and unique personality to the farm. Whereas Robert Shields left little to no written record of his accounts, Ira was the proverbial pack rat. Standing well over six feet, broad shouldered and slim, he commanded the attention of those in his company. Popularly called "Mr. Ira," he enjoyed motoring to Florida in the latest automobile, loved to attend barbecues held at the schoolhouse and hosted renowned fish fries down by the pond on his property. Despite his vigorous business activities, he found time to play the violin and listen to his player piano, testimony to a love of music that also initiated the purchase of an organ for Bachelor's Academy. His mind whirled with potential business ventures and the few surviving photographs of his early years on the farm show him commanding the scene, usually with one of his new machines. Always meeting customers with fresh, clean collars, he gained a reputation of professionalism. Blue-eyed, mustached and handsome, Mr. Ira busied himself for nearly half a century creating his masterpiece, "I.W. Ethridge and Son, Planters, Ginners and Dealers in General Merchandise."<sup>8</sup>

Those like Mr. Ira who possessed a vigorous entrepreneurial spirit must have been moderately inspired by the agricultural prospects for the new century. Calls for diversification, organization and application of scientific knowledge to farming went largely ignored during the "long depression" and subsequently, cotton prices fell during the last decade of the nineteenth Century. Though not "immediately apparent," prosperity was on the horizon of Georgia agriculture, and farmers finally began to heed

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<sup>7</sup> Like his younger brother's career, Scott diversified his holdings, owning not only farmland, but also real estate in the city of Jefferson. He developed a concrete block business and held the patent on the "Miracle Hi Lo", an ashlar-faced block utilized for a number of local buildings, including Ira's second gin house.

<sup>8</sup> Letterhead, SEP.

the appeals of experts.<sup>9</sup> Between 1900 and 1930, farm size increased in Georgia and the acreage fell into fewer hands.<sup>10</sup> Agricultural schools sprang up throughout the state as did experiment stations and cooperatives. Through these, the state sought better education for its farmers and took revolutionary steps to promote burgeoning theories pertaining to farm production. Despite the numerous appeals for diversification, though, cotton continued to provide the state's chief crop value. In 1905, Georgia ranked only behind Texas in cotton value and the average acreage devoted to cotton increased steadily in the first two decades of the twentieth century, reaching a peak of five million acres on two occasions.<sup>11</sup> The influence of man was limited indeed, considering the crop met its greatest challenge in a notorious little bug called the boll weevil.

In Olive Ann Burns' novel *Cold Sassy Tree*, young Will Tweedy recalls the bustling atmosphere of turn of the century Jackson County. "'Get you a railroad' and 'Get you a cotton mill' was what big businessmen in Atlanta advised to any town that wanted to grow. Already folks were talking about changing [Cold Sassy's] name to something . . . less countrified."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Jackson County stood on the precipice of a bright new era. By 1900, the main centers of commerce within the county, Harmony Grove, Winder and Jefferson claimed various factories, two cottonseed oil mills, one cotton mill and other miscellaneous mills.<sup>13</sup> Countywide, while the number of farms decreased during this time, total production and yields increased, its main crops being corn, wheat, and of course, cotton. By 1913, Jackson County ranked second in the state in agricultural

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<sup>9</sup> Willard Range, *A Century of Georgia Agriculture: 1850-1950* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1954), 157-166, 169.

<sup>10</sup> Amanda Johnson, *Georgia as a Colony and State* (Atlanta: Walter W. Brown Publishing, 1938), 836-839. See also, Kenneth Coleman, *A History of Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> Range, 169, 172.

<sup>12</sup> Olive Ann Burns, *Cold Sassy Tree* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1984), 69.

importance and led the state in 1907 and 1909 in the number of bales produced, and on various occasions in the ensuing years ranked in the top five cotton-producing counties.<sup>14</sup> The county's cotton production reached a peak in 1919, with 37,471 bales, and during the 1910's, 90% of farms reported the use of fertilizer, applying 200-600 pounds per acre.<sup>15</sup>

A number of factors contributed to the county's success. Foremost, the county supplied tremendous support for its farmers. In the early 1900's, the *Jackson Herald* ran a weekly article by the state Commissioner of Agriculture and agricultural fairs provided displays of new machinery as well as crop exhibits. Furthermore, Jefferson's Martin Institute, a privately endowed academy founded in 1818, formed an Agricultural Department which conducted a number of demonstrations, including a 1930 cotton-variety experiment specific to the clay-based soil of Jackson County.<sup>16</sup>

Given the larger economic market, Ira Ethridge's entrepreneurial vigor was fortuitous. The Gainesville Midland Railroad (formerly the Gainesville, Jefferson and Southern) extended its Jefferson line to Fowler Junction two miles west of Athens, joining there with the Seaboard Airline. This new branch included a stop at Arcade, some 2.5 miles from the Ethridge farm (see Appendix D). Farmers also began to reap the benefits of county road commissions established in the late nineteenth century. In 1902, Mr. Ira worked as overseer on a local road project, certainly knowledgeable of the power

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<sup>13</sup> Georgia Department of Agriculture, *Georgia: Historical and Industrial* (Atlanta: Franklin Publishing and Printing, 1901), 721-723.

<sup>14</sup> In 1996, *The Jackson Herald* ran a series of articles to celebrate the bicentennial of the county. The February 7 edition included Jana Adams' "Agriculture in the Years of 'King Cotton', the boll weevil and WWI," from which some of the general county agricultural information is derived.

<sup>15</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, *Jackson County, Georgia Farm Statistics, 1900-1960* (Athens, Georgia: Statistical Reporting Service, 1960). Also, United States Department of Agriculture, *Soil Survey of Jackson County, Georgia* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1915), 8-13.

<sup>16</sup> *The Jackson Herald*, May 7, 1931.

of navigable transportation routes. In this context, he took advantage of the dominant ideas of the day, even in the construction of his buildings.

Almost immediately to his arrival in 1898 he began laying the groundwork for his operation. Within ten years he constructed a gristmill, commissary, and cotton gin and over the next two decades, buildings sprang up at a dizzying speed (see Appendix E). "He liked competition," his daughter-in-law remembers. "If somebody built a gin, he wanted to build one a little bit better."<sup>17</sup> Given Mr. Ira's tendency to order catalogues and magazines whenever a new idea came to mind, no doubt he gauged the prevailing theories on farm building construction. Agricultural modernization had an appreciable effect on early twentieth century rural architecture.<sup>18</sup> When pioneer farmers first cut through the wilderness to new lands, they focused primarily on clearing fields for cultivation and providing the basic elements of survival. Evolving farmsteads often reflected haphazard agricultural development. Without the benefit of modern science, sanitation and efficiency were luck of the draw and animals received only the bare necessities. By the early twentieth century, however, agronomy, time-motion studies, veterinary science and governmental regulations forced the farmer to adapt his farmstead to encroaching modernization. Concrete in particular became a popular building material, which Mr. Ira utilized in a number of his structures and he even delved into the business himself. As landscape historian Ian Firth suggested in an analysis of the farm, "there was no clear spatial organization," but the buildings were not constructed by

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Ron Shapard, "Shields-Ethridge Farm: Preserving our Past," *Athens Magazine* 9 (May 1997), 90.

<sup>18</sup> For information on contemporary theories of early twentieth century farmstead architecture, see Isaac Phillips Roberts, *The Farmstead: The Making of the Rural Home and the Lay-Out of the Farm* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911); W.A. Foster and Deane G. Carter, *Farm Buildings* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1922); *Farm Buildings*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1944); and John C. Wooley, *Farm Buildings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1946).

happenstance.<sup>19</sup> Various elements of the operation occupied separate spheres within the yard, the gin sector being the most obvious.

The remodeling of the old Shields home place indicates Mr. Ira's passion for the trendy and modern as well. Inventories of catalogues reveal his interest in new architectural phases and scraps of paper show he often sketched new floor plan ideas. In the early 1910's, the "plantation plain" characteristics were replaced by a vernacular neoclassical structure under his supervision. He moved the old log kitchen to another location and added an attached cooking space to the rear of the home. His additions included a sunroom, full height columns to replace the old shed porch, and in typical Ira style, he stamped the date into the new cement floor. Ira also installed an iron fence around the yard in 1921, replaced the original nine over six window configuration with a single bottom pane and multiple upper panes consistent with popular architectural styles of the time.<sup>20</sup> By 1916, he had even constructed his own telephone line to Jefferson.

Mr. Ira's took many forms, from his constant rearranging of the house to the addition of new buildings across the road. In 1909, he took charge of the construction of Bachelor's Academy, a new county school just up the rise from his house, situated on land donated by Ella's unmarried brother Emory and their equally unmarried cousin, Alex Shields. Ira even organized social events and often ordered necessary supplies for school functions, such as the aforementioned organ. For one Christmas party, he ordered

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<sup>19</sup> *Landscape Master Plan of the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm*, prepared by Robinson Fisher Associates under the direction of Ian J.W. Firth, 1998, 13, SEP. Hereafter cited as *Master Plan*.

<sup>20</sup> Mr. Ira purchased the fence from a sale in Clayton, Georgia where it once decorated the grounds of the Rabun County Courthouse. All historic structure information pertaining to the farm is derived from the *Historic District Information Form*, prepared by Joyce Ethridge and Susan Deavers, and filed with the Georgia Historic Preservation Division of the Department of Natural Resources in 1989 and approved in 1992.

Japanese lanterns, initialed handkerchiefs, fifteen pounds of candy, dolls, blowers, whistles and "roman cannons."

Perhaps most intriguing, though, were the diverse ancillary businesses he embarked upon. While ginning cotton consumed his farming fervor and he certainly did not sneer upon planting and harvesting his own crops, he invariably explored new ventures, almost exclusively concentrated in the complex across the road. Letters from the early 1910's show a scrupulous attention to the new automobile market, as dealers kept him informed of the latest models, those that would surely "suit his purposes." He joined the Atlanta Motor Club and enjoyed puttering around in his latest car. In addition, he sometimes ordered stripped-down vehicles (mostly trucks), ordered parts, paints and rebuilt them from the skeleton up. The garage, constructed across from the house in 1923, even contained a room specifically designed for painting the cars. License plates, dating as early as 1914, and grill ornaments in the commissary stand testify to his modern sensibilities.

Ever-evolving letterheads, such as one inscribed "Proprietors: White City Farm," further illustrate his rather lofty expectations. Commissary records reveal his understanding of bargain hunting in the mercantile sector as he contracted with providers from Baltimore to Texas and consistently purchased tobacco products from R.J. Reynolds' in North Carolina. He kept abreast of prices and potential business deals, and with the railroad so close, squandered little time in retrieving freight. By the early 1920's, Mr. Ira's sawmill not only provided lumber for various customers, but for his tenant houses as well as speculation houses constructed in Rabun County. A brief foray into the furniture business resulted in his partnership with Zenus Roberts, a local

craftsman. With Mr. Ira ordering premium lumber and supplying other necessary items, Roberts manufactured various domestic furnishings. However, like other business ideas, this one lasted only a few years. He partnered with other investors for properties in Jefferson, was the largest stockholder in the town's first "picture show," briefly delved into concrete mixing, and invested heavily in a local bank that eventually failed. Even his wife, Ella, succumbed to the investment fever and had her own butter business, with her name carved into a wooden mold. Mr. Ira seemed to have a thumb in every pie, and though these side-businesses rarely brought a significant profit, at no time did the failures deter him from trying other ideas.

Despite what appears to be a preoccupation with other activities, Mr. Ira never abandoned the cotton ginning business. From his earliest days at the farm marketing the crop for his father-in-law, to his death in 1945, Mr. Ira devoted his business acumen to local markets. He oversaw the construction of the farm's newest gin, a steam driven machine built around 1900, which was meant to serve the family's production as well as that of neighbors. By 1903, he ginned 197 bales, increasing output to 265 bales two years later.<sup>21</sup> No doubt, his hopes escalated during this time as cotton prices and yields gradually increased. Between 1899 and 1909, the average yield for the county increased by 23% and cotton sold for thirteen and fourteen cents a pound.<sup>22</sup> Ira purchased an additional fifty-five acres from his father-in-law in 1899 and forty-five acres from neighbor Levi Martin in 1902, which increased his holdings to over two hundred acres.

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<sup>21</sup> Gin Tally, SEP. For most gin ledgers, a report of total bales was inserted on the first page. However, the report often did not account for those processed in March, April and even May. In conducting this research, I scanned the pages of the ledgers in order to ascertain the final number of bales ginned for each year, hereafter cited as Gin Tally.

<sup>22</sup> *Jackson County Farm Statistics*. The prices cited here are based on sales receipts found in the Shields-Ethridge papers.

However, Mr. Ira faced his first great challenge on the night of September 30, 1910, when a boiler sparked a devastating fire in the gin house. Just six months after his father-in-law's death, Ira's operation suffered the loss of machinery estimated at \$3,000, approximately \$500 in seed and four bales of cotton. As the *Jackson Herald* front page announced, "he carried no insurance and the whole is a total loss."<sup>23</sup> The timing could not have been worse with the heavy picking season expected to arrive with the first days of October.<sup>24</sup> As great a devastation as the fire was, the loss of his gin did not discourage Ira from moving forward and his diversity kept him in business. He continued to help his cousin Tom Ethridge in Auburn with their co-operated gin and by the mid-1910's had his own gin reconstructed, albeit with a few alterations designed to reduce the risk of a similar accident. First, Ira utilized brother Scott's concrete blocks for the wall structure. Second, a water tower was installed in the middle of the complex, and finally, he bought insurance to cover the machinery and building.

Indeed, Ira used the 1910 fire to bolster his determination to succeed. Between 1915 and 1921, Ethridge Gin increased production by almost 47%, ginning over one thousand bales for the first time in 1919 as countywide yields increased to 267 pounds of lint per acre.<sup>25</sup> During that same period, he purchased additional tracts of land, doubling his land to over four hundred acres. A 1918 photograph of the farm entitled "A Day at the Gin," shows a steady stream of wagons stretched across the road leading to the gin house. Mr. Ira's income grossed more than twelve thousand dollars in 1919, almost half of that derived from sales from cotton and seed. After expenses, he profited over \$6,000,

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<sup>23</sup> *The Jackson Herald*, October 6, 1910.

<sup>24</sup> Fewer records survive from this time, and as the gin office had yet to be constructed, it is plausible some documentation burned in the fire.

<sup>25</sup> Gin Tally, SEP. *Jackson County Farm Statistics*.

a substantial increase over his \$2,000 net profit the year before. Like most ginners, Ira took a toll (portion) of seed or excess lint in lieu of cash payment for both ginning expenses and the delivery of bales to a local warehouse for storage.

Just as Ethridge Gin embarked upon a new age, the local paper urged farmers to diversify, a blunt warning of the demonic eastward-bound boll weevil. Georgia staved off infestation until the late 1910's, taking drastic measures such as prohibiting cotton-related imports from western states as early as 1904.<sup>26</sup> Despite legislation and supplication, Georgia's yield in the early 1920's plummeted to levels not seen since Reconstruction and the valuable Sea Island cotton vanished altogether.<sup>27</sup> Jackson County first reported weevil sightings in 1919, but the effects would not be felt until the early 1920's. Between 1919 and 1924, countywide production plunged 57%. Ethridge Gin's most dramatic reduction occurred between the 1921 and 1922 seasons, showing a 51.3% decrease in output.<sup>28</sup> At this time, Mr. Ira intensified his almost manic habit of making notations in margins and the excess spaces of his ledgers. Included were various recipes to "poison the weevil," many probably heard over the radio or discussed with other planters beneath the shade of a tree. No doubt he religiously scanned his copies of *The Market Bulletin*, *Progressive Farmer* and *Country Gentleman*, searching for solutions to the infamous scourge. Weevil prevention continued into the next few decades. In 1939, Ira wrote to the Boyette Manufacturing and Spraying Company in Nashville, Georgia and inquired about a poisoning machine, and even during the early 1940's his son, Lanis, wrote of weevil sightings on the farm.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Johnson, *Georgia as a Colony and State*, 845.

<sup>27</sup> Range, *A Century of Georgia Agriculture*, 173.

<sup>28</sup> Gin Tally, SEP.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Lanis Ethridge to James Segars, July 10, 1943, SEP.

Effective control measures during the late 1920's offered a brief reprieve, however. By 1929, Jackson County saw cotton production rebound, but never again to pre-weevil levels. While Ethridge Gin produced a pre-Depression low of 425 bales in 1923, by 1927 it churned out over one thousand again.<sup>30</sup> The revived market encouraged Mr. Ira to upgrade his gin. A series of letters illustrate the ambitious nature that so transformed this farm during the early twentieth century. In 1929, he asked gin developers for the latest catalogues on machinery for his home place complex. The agricultural field continued to make significant strides in more efficient machinery during the early twentieth century and as the 1920's passed, Mr. Ira's old gin lagged behind its new counterparts. Lummus Cotton Gin Company in Columbus, Georgia received an order for a 3-80 saw outfit as well as a condenser, and orders were sent to Machine and Supply Company in San Antonio for a Cameron Automatic Trampler.<sup>31</sup> A new decade meant more efficient equipment for the farm and Ira Ethridge expected it to be installed by picking season. However, during the summer, he waged a letter war with Lummus concerning the particulars of the machinery and his gin building.

Lummus indicated that proper installation of the new gin required significant alterations to the gin house roof, changes Mr. Ira vehemently opposed. "I don't want to cut up my house," he replied in late June, and subsequently asked if a custom fit would be possible.<sup>32</sup> Four days later, he again responded to further suggestions about his roof. "I am not much for reading blue prints," he wrote, advising that Lummus simplify their

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<sup>30</sup> Gin Tally, SEP.

<sup>31</sup> These numbers refer to the specifics of the engine. In other words, there were three gin stands containing eighty saws each and they operated as one unit.

<sup>32</sup> Letter from I.W. Ethridge to C.T. Knight, March 23, 1930, SEP. Whether Kilgore bought the gin remains to be seen, but letters indicate that Mr. Ira found a buyer.

instructions.<sup>33</sup> The next few days showed little progress towards compromise. "It seems," he typed, "that it is very hard for us to get our minds made up so as to not act intelligently in regard to making changes in our gin plan."<sup>34</sup> On the morning of July 10, Mr. Ira stepped down to the gin house grounds and, while surveying the predicament, thought of altering the machine in order to "eliminate a double drive." Sitting down at his typewriter later that day he wrote, "By exchanging ideas with each other, sometimes our vision is enlarged."<sup>35</sup> He eagerly awaited Lummus representative C.T. Knight's arrival so that he could verify the feasibility of his new design. Upon Knight's approval, Lummus designed the engine to Mr. Ira's specifications, yet problems still plagued the installation.

By August 2, the parts arrived, but the plans had not. Agitated, Mr. Ira wrote, "It caused us a day delay by error on your part. I told the Agent that I paid you freight in advance and did not want to pay again."<sup>36</sup> Over the ensuing days, he bombarded Lummus with more letters, asking for further assembly instructions and more parts such as a belt distributor and a conveyor belt. To make matters worse, one part arrived bent, and when the workers attempted to straighten it, it broke. Nevertheless, by the end of August the shiny new engine chugged out its first bale of cotton, just in time for the heavy picking season. Minor mechanical difficulties periodically afflicted the operation, though. In late September, he wrote to C.T. Knight complaining about the middle gin

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<sup>33</sup> Letter from I.W. Ethridge to Lummus Cotton Gin Company, June 20, 1930, SEP.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., June 24, 1930, SEP.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., June 28, 1930, SEP.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., July 10, 1930, SEP.

clogging up. "We don't understand these gins yet," he wrote in exasperation. "We get very much dissatisfied some times and wished that we had not of bought them."<sup>37</sup>

Yet, the correspondence indicates that despite the difficulties, the new gin experienced heavier than expected volume. On November 1, Mr. Ira stepped into his office and typed yet another letter to Lummus.

[We] have a 3-80 Automatic system of your latest model installed this season at our home place. Naturally, it is of a greater capacity than the older models, because it is made to keep up with this fast age that we are living in. We have ginned as much as 24 bales in 6hr 36min, averaging per bale 16 1/2 minutes. *This is one of the finest gins we ever saw.* Customers say the same thing about it.<sup>38</sup>

One can only imagine Mr. Ira happily clicking away on his typewriter, a satisfied grin on his face. Apparent through his letters and business deeds, he knew the cotton trade and reveled in an efficiently produced crop.

The *Jackson Herald* reported a 40% increase in the number of bales ginned countywide prior to October 18 as compared to the crop of 1929.<sup>39</sup> During the 1930-31 season, I.W. Ethridge & Son ginned 1,162 bales, a 6.8% increase over the previous year.<sup>40</sup> Mr. Ira yet again increased his holdings, bringing his total acreage to over 650 acres by 1932. However, depression, governmental programs, drought, war and further technological advancements in cotton production conspired to change the agricultural scene even more. Though Mr. Ira did not realize it at the time, Ethridge Gin reached its peak during the first season with his beloved 3-80 outfit.

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<sup>37</sup> Letter from I.W. Ethridge to C.T. Knight, September 20, 1930, SEP.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from I.W. Ethridge to Lummus Cotton Gin Company, November 1, 1930, italics mine, SEP.

<sup>39</sup> *The Jackson Herald*, November 13, 1930.

<sup>40</sup> Gin Tally, SEP.

Farmers recovered from the initial effects of the boll weevil, but returned to their habitual overproduction of the crop that by then flooded the world market.<sup>41</sup> Since Reconstruction, experts called for similar measures, given extreme fluctuations within the market. The *Jackson Herald* reported on a 1930 Atlanta conference between agriculturists and government agents that suggested "Five Rules" for planters, including acreage reduction, diversification and cultivation of a higher quality seed.<sup>42</sup> Prices dropped to such an extent that legislation became necessary to quell further economic devastation. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal solution was the Agricultural Adjustment Act, an attempt to control prices through acreage reduction and subsidies. Though the Ethridges never relied on any one crop, cotton certainly accounted for a greater percentage of their income. Moreover, the local market determined Mr. Ira's ginning profitability and therefore any attempt to reduce production on a larger scale would impact his business that much more.

Ira Ethridge never cultivated the crop without attention to the larger market and did not limit himself only to Jackson County grown cotton. Of the 662 bales ginned in 1934, 15% of the cotton came from farms south of the Mulberry River in Barrow County.<sup>43</sup> Mr. Ira kept informed of the neighboring markets, particularly when he co-operated the Auburn gin with his cousin Tom Ethridge. He read the Winder newspaper and at one time served as a representative to the Georgia Ginners Association for the tri-county (Jackson, Barrow and Gwinnett) area. As early as 1915, the *Winder News*

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<sup>41</sup> See Range, 172-181.

<sup>42</sup> *The Jackson Herald* November 20, 1930.

<sup>43</sup> 1934 Gin Ledger, SEP.

reported, "Mr. Ira Ethridge, a prominent Jackson County citizen, spent several hours here Friday."<sup>44</sup>

His interest stretched even beyond state borders. Seated in a new Buick, Mr. Ira and Lanis trekked through the lower South in 1937, destined for Texas where Ella's brother James "Cam" Shields and a neighbor settled in search of a better cotton economy. Mr. Ira recorded his travels for the *Jackson Herald*. He focused on the agricultural practices he witnessed and even stopped to ask a Louisiana man plowing cotton "how many acres per mule" they planted. Initially unimpressed with Texas, he later inquired about productivity in the oil fields and noted that the area around Fort Worth was the "prettiest farm country you ever saw." He and Lanis drove all the way to New Mexico, fighting a band of grasshoppers that splattered against the windshield, before turning back towards Cam Shields' Edinburg, Texas home. Once there, Mr. Ira marveled at their report of success. "[They] thought they would get a bale per acre . . . on some of their lands," he wrote. "It is just simply fine, and [they] don't fertilize at all."<sup>45</sup>

Mr. Ira's agricultural acumen seemed almost prophetic at times. He experimented with varieties of seed, including Delta and Pine Land, Coker #5, and College #1, even before the Martin Institute experiment of 1930. The school's agricultural department, in cooperation with agriculturists and fertilizer companies, reported that the D&PL, Coker and College varieties produced significantly better yields in the clay-based soil of the county. Mr. Ira understood the necessity for scientific measures, not only concerning the quality of seed, but also in the planting of soil-building grasses and crops such as lespedeza and peas. The Georgia Department of Agriculture, in collaboration with

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<sup>44</sup> *The Winder News*, September 30, 1915.

<sup>45</sup> I.W. Ethridge, "A Part of What we Saw on Our Western Trip," original typed copy, SEP.

extension services, distributed a bountiful supply of pamphlets and form letters urging conservation practices and cooperation with new national farming policies. One such letter, sent by Jackson County agent W. Hill Hosch, urged the practice of terracing. Gullies and washes scarred a vast amount of Georgia's acreage.<sup>46</sup> In fact, Hux Gully in Jackson County was the second largest in the state.<sup>47</sup> By 1938, fields of the Ethridge farm had been terraced.

Civic-minded Mr. Ira wrote to government officials at the outset of the New Deal and inquired about recently passed legislation. In 1934, the USDA Cotton Section chief responded to a question of plant reduction. "If we fail to do this," wrote C.A. Cobb, "the campaign will be a failure and cotton again will go to 4 and 5 cents, which will destroy our farmers in the South."<sup>48</sup> During the same year, Mr. Ira also wrote to Georgia Senator Richard B. Russell, Jr. asking about the details of the Bankhead Act, which limited the amount of cotton a farmer could sell without being penalized.<sup>49</sup> The applications for tax-exempt certificates required historical documentation as to the number of bales, average weight of lint per bale, acreage planted and lint yields, which determined the acreage a farmer could plant pursuant to the new national farming policy.

One theme of Mr. Ira's tenure on the farm is his incessant record-keeping. He kept track of the production costs and efficiency of his machinery. For instance, a 14 hour and 40 minute day in 1929 yielded 42 bales of cotton at approximately 21 minutes per bale and, therefore, he had reason to brag to Lummus about the 16.5-minute bale produced by new the 3-80 outfit. Having contracted with Georgia Power to supply

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<sup>46</sup> Letter from W. Hill Hosch to the Farmers of Jackson County, February 22, 1934, SEP.

<sup>47</sup> Johnson, 849.

<sup>48</sup> Letter from C.A. Cobb to I.W. Ethridge, January 18, 1934, SEP.

electricity to his gin, he calculated how many kilowatts the average bale required. Snow reports, addresses, recipes for poisons, fertilizers and a cure for "dogs with the running fits" were scrawled into the margins of his ledgers. He wrote of the deadly Gainesville tornado of 1936, and noted the mysterious death of a Barrow County customer in 1935. Ira's son, Lanis, continued this habit. In one of the last available ledgers, the younger Ethridge penciled in the time, date and gruesome details of the car-bomb murder of local Solicitor Floyd "Fuzzy" Hoard.<sup>50</sup>

Enhanced by New Deal government regulations, Mr. Ira's record-keeping provides a detailed illustration of local cotton farming in the 1930's and 1940's. At any given time during the 1920's and 1930's, ten to thirteen sharecroppers worked the land with their families. In one cotton report, Mr. Ira listed twenty-five croppers that worked portions of his land from 1928 to 1933. Three of the croppers, H.C. Reynolds, Henry Jackson and Rooster Shields, and one tenant, Luther Griffeth, remained on the land for that six-year period. Some stayed for three years or so, and others, such as Goodman Beck, left after a single cotton season.<sup>51</sup> Required surveys for the AAA show that Ethridge Farm fields were relatively small, and most of the sharecroppers and renters worked less than ten acres each. Others, such as croppers Cornelia McCluskey and Got Shields, both African-Americans, worked approximately fifteen acres each.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Letter from Richard B. Russell, Jr. to I.W. Ethridge, April 23, 1934, SEP. Ira supported Russell, a native of Winder in neighboring Barrow County, in his Senate campaign of 1932, as evidenced by a form letter of appreciation dated September 27, 1932 as well as campaign paraphernalia found in the gin office.

<sup>50</sup> Jackson County saw more than its fair share of corruption during the mid twentieth century. Bootleggers and car theft rings characterized much of its news. Fuzzy Hoard was in the midst of establishing order to the situation when he was murdered. See G. Richard Hoard, *Alone Among the Living* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994); Gary and Adams, *Our Time and Place*, Part 4.

<sup>51</sup> Cotton Report, January 4, 1934, SEP.

<sup>52</sup> These numbers are taken from USDA Form No. BA 8b "Application for Allotment and Tax-Exemption Certificates," dated September 4, 1934 and June 25, 1935, SEP.

The arrangement of tenant houses along Ethridge and Johnson Mill Roads, suggest no particular spatial division between white and black sharecroppers, though by the 1940's, blacks significantly outnumbered whites (see Appendix F). Given the frequent turnover rate of employees, maintaining a segregated arrangement would have been difficult. Most of the thirteen houses present during the 1930's and 1940's were simple L-shaped structures built away from the main agricultural complex. Only two, those now called the Preacher Riley House and Teacher's House, were located near the center of the farm's activities.<sup>53</sup>

Mr. Ira reduced the farm's total cotton acreage, including that worked by the croppers, from 150 acres in 1933 to 107 in 1934. By 1935, he planted only 93 acres, "renting out" 57 to the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture pursuant to the Bankhead Act.<sup>54</sup> As manager, Ira received the majority of government parity checks and the tenants and croppers received a proportional percentage of the residue, according to the number of acres assigned to them. Mr. Ira supplied the tools necessary to farm, including the two dozen mules housed in the stockyard and each cropper received half of the money received for his or her crop. Commissary records show the majority of the inevitable indebtedness resulted from the workers' percentage of necessary fertilizers and insecticides.

In addition to their own crops, the croppers and their families, equally divided between black and white in the 1930's, worked as wage laborers in the gardens, wheat and corn fields for approximately seventy-five cents a day, and during World War II, Mr.

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<sup>53</sup> In 1938, Bachelor's Academy became a black school upon the countywide consolidation of white schools. White teachers would have resided with the Ethridge family or with neighboring families, but when the school served black students, Mr. Ira provided a house for them. The Teacher's House, estimated to have been built around 1912, probably served as a tenant house until 1938.

Ira often paid workers with defense bonds. Some, such as James Jackson, who also operated a barbershop out of his house, and Rooster Shields managed the gin equipment, and others helped in the grist-mill and saw-mill. This was deducted from their credit, as was the final fifty percent interest in their cotton crop. Evidence does not suggest as to whether the laborers' use of Ethridge Commissary was compulsory. In any case, they frequented it quite often, and received standard cash advances of five dollars, which added to their annual bill, as did driver's license fees and medical bills.

Ledgers show that those who survived the year without debt, barely did so. A "Psalm of Cotton" published in the local paper bespeaks of the dire situation of the croppers.

Cotton, thou art my shepherd, and I am in want; . . .  
Thou has caused me to live in a rented house in full view of the moon,  
while stars came twinkling through the cracks; . . .  
Thou annointest my head with ignorance, superstition, poverty and unpaid  
accounts; . . .  
Thou has caused me to go to the barn, bring out the old fertilizer sacks and  
my wife to make me a shirt.  
Now, behold me as I stand in the midst of my friends in my new shirt with  
these inscriptions in view: "Eighteen per cent acid phosphate" on the  
breast and "12-4-4" on the tail.<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, an 1881 editorial of an Apple Valley farmer could well have been written at this time. Upon settling bills, tenants and croppers realized they might as well "have been . . . carrying water from the creek to the branch to try to make the branch a creek."<sup>56</sup> Mr. Ira was prone to occasional generosity, though. Upon the death of family members, he often donated ten dollars or more, and on another occasion, the coffin for burial. Often manipulated by other farmers, parity and subsidy checks never appear on the books, as

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> *The Jackson Herald*, May 7, 1931.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Gary and Adams, *Our Time and Place*, 25.

Mr. Ira handed those directly to the laborers, and while ledgers show that some croppers never got ahead, others consistently settled their bill at the end of the year.

Regardless of the copious activities and businesses that consumed Mr. Ira's time, he maintained contact with the tenants and croppers that worked the land. The front of his business ledgers contain notes and scribbling, many of a personal nature. He wrote of a 1940 car accident in which cropper James Jackson was injured through no fault of his own. Ira also kept up with marriage dates, birthdays, and in the case of "Uncle" Cicero Chandler, a black cropper, his military service in World War I. One tenant, Lula Shields, pled "if you can't do eny thing else send the sheriff . . . Pa has bin drunk ever since Satday and we cant hardtey stay at home."<sup>57</sup> On another occasion in the 1930's, Mr. Ira intervened in a domestic dispute between Henry Jackson and wife Mag. Jackson's knife-wielding antics prompted Mr. Ira not to call local authorities, but to drive him to North Carolina where he could no longer harass his wife.

Two employees on the farm, Bruce "Rooster" Shields and his wife Ruby were particular favorites. In a photograph of the new gin installed in 1930, Rooster can be seen standing next to his owner. Rooster and Ruby also occupied the newly constructed servant's house, just a few yards away from the main residence. Even in his will, Mr. Ira stipulated that after his death they be provided with employment as long as they so desired.<sup>58</sup> Upon installation of the new gin, Mr. Ira wrote to "Dear Old Frank," a former black tenant, of the particulars of the machine.

I had your letter some days ago and was glad to hear from the old "TOP".  
There has been lots of changes up here since you left . . . Yes, we kindly  
need the old man up here to bring in stove wood, and look after mules,

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<sup>57</sup> Undated letter from Lula Shields to I.W. Ethridge, SEP. The wording of the letter indicates one of Lula's children wrote it.

<sup>58</sup> Jackson County Will Book D, 395-397.

cows, chickens, etc; you say that you are getting old, and feeble. Now look here, I bet you like to look at the good looking women as well as you ever did. When Frank Davenport gets to where he don't like to look at the women, then he is ready for the old master to call him to another world. How about that Frank?<sup>59</sup>

Though his early correspondence communicates a certain fondness towards workers, and accounts show some level of generosity, later records reveal an emerging petulance. Indeed, at times, he became downright ornery. Having advanced cash to neighboring tenants with the promise of their ginning business, he admonished one such payment delay in October 1941.<sup>60</sup>

Cornelius you got [this] cotton seed with the understanding that you were going to haul your cotton to our gin . . . and you haven't been here with the first bale yet. You don't seem to appreciate help much . . . I am sure you know I can give you plenty of trouble if I am a mind to . . . You know there is a law to take care of people that act as you about this.<sup>61</sup>

On another occasion, cropper Meddie Rakestraw sent a written request for an advancement of cash in 1939. Mr. Ira responded by sending a worker to "tell Meddie to come ask for himself."<sup>62</sup>

His growing impatience can probably be attributed to an impaired ginning economy. Drought, depression and acreage reduction legislation led to a significant decrease in the number of bales Ethridge Gin produced. In 1942, the Department of Commerce reported that of the eleven Georgia counties that produced over 10,000 bales, active ginneries in those counties averaged 818 bales each, with a state average of 563 bales. Jackson County, ranked seventh in total number of running bales ginned,

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<sup>59</sup> Letter from I.W. Ethridge to Frank Davenport, November 16, 1930, SEP.

<sup>60</sup> Pete Daniel, "Transformation of the Rural South 1930 to the Present," *Agricultural History* 55 (July 1981), 242 notes that some ginners [tied] their tenants and debtors to their gins." Though not in an official contract, Mr. Ira certainly expected a level of reciprocity from his own laborers and those on neighboring farms.

<sup>61</sup> Letter from I.W. Ethridge to Cornelious Nowell, October 21, 1941, SEP.

averaging per gin, 583 bales.<sup>63</sup> During that year, Ethridge Gin yielded a mere five hundred bales, a 29% reduction from the previous year while countywide cotton production decreased by 25%. This created a tight market for the twenty-two ginneries that stayed in business. Gins of this era needed 500-1500 bales annually in order to be cost efficient.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the reprimand and threatening of Cornelious Nowell resulted as much from necessity and frustration as it did from principle.

Mr. Ira's health deteriorated during the Second World War. He suffered from asthma throughout his life, and ironically, probably did not spend a great deal of time in the gin house. "Dad has been bothered with asthma . . . more than usual this winter," Lanis wrote to an overseas friend. "He doesn't say much but I can tell by the way he stays in he hasn't felt so good. You know he likes to be out and on the go."<sup>65</sup> On another occasion he noted his father "hardly ever has a full night's rest."<sup>66</sup> As the only child, Lanis stood to inherit his father's operation. Referred to "the boy," he assisted his father with operation of the gin and other machinery. During the war, however, he began managing the day-to-day affairs, particularly the secretarial work, though his father continued to control the overall operation.

While conducting business in town in early 1945, Ira Ethridge suffered a stroke. He lingered for a few days after being carried home, and died on March 12 at the age of seventy-five. The local paper responded with a flowering obituary: "as a friend and

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<sup>62</sup> Note from Meddie Rakestraw to I.W. Ethridge, August 9, 1939, SEP. Mr. Ira wrote his response at the end of the note.

<sup>63</sup> "Running bale" refers to the bale as it appeared from the gin, including the weight of bagging and ties. See note 28 in Michael Hovland, "The Cotton Ginning Report Program at the Bureau of the Census," *Agricultural History* 68 (April 1994); United States Department of Commerce, *Cotton Production in the United States: Crop of 1941* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942).

<sup>64</sup> Charles Aiken, "The Evolution of Cotton Ginning in the Southeastern United States," *Geographical Review* 63 (April 1973), 220.

<sup>65</sup> Letter from Lanis Ethridge to James Segars, March 11, 1943, SEP.

neighbor, the latchstring of his door was always in easy and convenient touch."<sup>67</sup> Mr. Ira came to the farm at the dawn of a new era, departed as another developed, and his death had as great an impact as his arrival. From 1898-1945, he adapted his operation according to colossal changes in the larger agricultural scene. Never one to shrink from a challenge, Mr. Ira embarked upon the "revolutionary new century" with sagacity and an ambitious nature. Perhaps he recognized, though, greater forces conspired to challenge agriculture again, this time to the extent that gentleman farmers faced greater difficulties in adapting and, consequently, had to make grim decisions concerning the future of their rural establishments.

While the production of crops such as corn and grains had become successfully mechanized during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cotton remained literally in the hands of laborers until World War II. Almost prophetically, Roland Harper wrote in 1922, "if a successful cotton-picking machine should ever be invented it would doubtless cause a great slump in the negro population."<sup>68</sup> Though historians and economists have debated 'push' and 'pull' labor migration semantics, the mechanization of cotton production and wartime labor reduction provided a final blow to romantic agrarianism.<sup>69</sup> Confiding to overseas buddies, Lanis wrote of the war's effect on the farm's labor supply: "[I] don't hardly know how to plan our crops on account of labor."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., December 15, 1943, SEP.

<sup>67</sup> *The Jackson Herald* March 15, 1945.

<sup>68</sup> Roland M. Harper, "Development of Agriculture in Upper Georgia from 1890-1920," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 6 (September 1922), 230.

<sup>69</sup> For some of these arguments see David Wayne Granger's dissertation, "The Impact of Mechanization and the New Deal's Acreage Reduction Programs on Cotton Farmers in the 1930's," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, 1973). Also, Robert Higgs. "The Boll Weevil, the Cotton Economy and Black Migration," *Agricultural History* 50 (April 1976); Gilbert Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture 1865-1980* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1984); Pete Daniel, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South: 1901-1969* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972); and Nancy Virts, "The Efficiency of Southern Tenant Plantations, 1900-1945," *Journal of Economic History* 51 (June 1991).

<sup>70</sup> Letter from Lanis Ethridge to James Segars, February 15, 1944, SEP.

Cotton production requires an excessive amount of labor, including thinning and weeding in the spring and finally picking in the fall. Early tractors and attachments paved the way for mechanization, but the development of a mechanical harvester proved to be the greatest obstacle.<sup>71</sup> With the price of cotton determined by its quality, developing a picker that effectively collected the fibers while reducing trash required changes to the plant so that the bolls grew higher on the stalk and foliated over a shorter period of time. "Farm organization patterns" and the historically conservative mindset of planters also required revisions.<sup>72</sup> Concerning the latter, cotton farmers inexorably linked the crop to hoes, mules and African Americans.<sup>73</sup>

Once the changes occurred, however, nostalgia took a back seat to efficiency. Indeed, if cotton could still be called king, at the very least it shared the throne with John Deere. Farms such as that of the Ethridge's, continued to utilize hand pickers until the lack of an abundant labor supply, coupled with inefficiency, drove them to reorder their agricultural production. Smaller farmers could not afford the exorbitant prices of new implements and, thus, many were driven out of business. As one agricultural historian wrote, "Some farms got big. Some tried to get big and went broke. Some got out and found alternative sources of income. Some small farms stayed in and got poor. In many a country kitchen, the family sat around the table, debating how to cope."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Gilbert C. Fite, "Mechanization of Cotton Production Since World War II," *Agricultural History* 54 (January 1980), 191. See also, Charles R. Sayre, "Cotton Mechanization Since World War II," *Agricultural History* 53 (January 1979); on the relationship between ginners and seed and oil mills, see Lynette Boney Wrenn, "Cotton Gins and Cottonseed Oil Mills in the New South," *Agricultural History* 68 (Spring 1994).

<sup>72</sup> Fite, "Mechanization of Cotton Production," 191-192.

<sup>73</sup> George B. Ellenberg, "African Americans, Mules and the Southern Mindscape, 1850-1950," *Agricultural History* 72 (Spring 1998).

<sup>74</sup> Don Paarlberg and Philip Paarlberg. *The Agricultural Revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2000), 26. Also, Gilbert C. Fite, "The Agricultural Trap in the South," *Agricultural History* 60 (Fall 1986).

In northeastern Georgia, reasonable alternatives came in the form of poultry and livestock production, and fields once snow-white with cotton turned to pasture. During the twenty-year period between 1939 and 1959, Jackson County's farm acreage declined and increasingly was concentrated into fewer hands. Furthermore, the number of tractors rose by an astounding 90%. In 1939, field crops constituted 76.9% of total sales. Twenty years later, poultry related production mirrored that same number, primarily due to the influence of poultry pioneer Jesse Jewell in adjacent Hall County. By 1960, less than three thousand bales resulted from fewer than six thousand acres devoted to cotton.<sup>75</sup> What mechanization began, the cow and the chicken completed with a successful *coup d'état* against King Cotton.

From the ginners' perspective, one of the most significant drawbacks of the initial mechanical pickers was the amount of trash collected with the fiber. Mechanical pickers accounted for only 6% of the nation's harvested cotton in 1949, but by 1968, that number rose to 96%.<sup>76</sup> In the 1940's and 1950's, agronomists worked to create a plant conducive to new machinery, which forced companies such as Lummus to develop gins that could remove "as much as 250 pounds of foreign matter in each bale without excessive damage to the lint."<sup>77</sup> Moreover, hand picked cotton spread the ginning season over the course of a few months, but mechanical harvesters condensed that time to a few weeks, forcing gins to process more lint in a shorter period of time. Planters and ginners felt the squeeze from the textile industry as well. Experts appealed for higher standards in ginning due to poor cotton quality sent to mills. In 1940, I.W. Ethridge & Son received a form letter

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<sup>75</sup> USDA, *Jackson County Farm Statistics*; Range, *A Century of Georgia Agriculture*, 279-286; James H. Shelton, "Changes in Rural Land Utilization in Georgia, 1920-1960," (M.A. Thesis, American University, 1964). The Ethridge farm eventually contained broiler houses, but not until the mid-1980's.

<sup>76</sup> Aiken, "The Evolution of Cotton Ginning," 211-215.

from the Cotton Manufacturers Association of Georgia warning that "when mills receive cotton which is not smoothly and properly ginned it means that either their waste increases or defects occur in the goods produced."<sup>78</sup> Experimental synthetic fibers such as rayon and nylon compelled planters and ginnerers alike to produce the highest quality lint possible.

By the 1960's, technology enabled gins to produce a bale in less than ten minutes, a substantial drop from Mr. Ira's 16.5-minute bale.<sup>79</sup> Records show that Lanis Ethridge tried to modify his father's gin with various components, but considering the sharp decline in production of local cotton and the cost of refitting the gin, he must have realized the days of Ethridge & Son were drawing to a close. Even during the 1940's Lanis doubted the feasibility of fettering the land in such a manner. Pondering to his friend Storey Ellington he wrote, "Don't think the cotton market is worth fooling with now, do you?"<sup>80</sup> He purchased his first bull for cattle breeding in the early 1950's, gradually reduced his cotton acreage, and briefly experimented with mechanical pickers in the 1960's. The gin chugged out its final bale in 1964, and production of the crop ceased altogether with the 1969 season. "Lanis took pride in the fact that he ginned a good bale of cotton," his wife remembers. "Growing cotton was his life . . . and it broke his heart to stop."<sup>81</sup> With Lanis Ethridge's death in January 1970, the farm faced yet another crossroads.

Why did the farm's economy dissipate so decidedly after Mr. Ira's death? A series of factors contributed, including those already exhausted by historians. Drought,

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<sup>77</sup> Sayre, "Cotton Mechanization," 111-114.

<sup>78</sup> Letter from the Cotton Manufacturers Association of Georgia to Walter S. Brown, director of extension in Athens, July 29, 1940, SEP.

<sup>79</sup> Aiken, 215.

depression, war, lack of labor and the infamous boll weevil all equally impacted production. More than that, though, Mr. Ira's longevity, demand for hands on operation, and larger than life personality left a cavernous void. A big man with big ideas, he dominated the farm's economy not only by his keen management, but also by his mere presence. As his obituary noted, "he was well versed in current questions and events and always expressed his views in no uncertain terms."<sup>82</sup> The Ethridge agricultural complex needed the continuance of his tenacity to adequately challenge the rapidly changing sphere of post-war agriculture. Quieter by nature, his son Lanis possessed an equal proficiency in business and an empirical knowledge of farming. In the new world of agriculture, however, the farm needed not so much the qualities Lanis may or may not have had, but those extraordinary qualities his father possessed. The mechanization of agriculture, the constant force that thrust I.W. Ethridge & Son into the "revolutionary new century" under a watchful eye, forced the owners to adapt once more. Thus, the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm opened its doors in order to preserve Mr. Ira's masterpiece.

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<sup>80</sup> Letter from Lanis Ethridge to Storey Ellington, March 17, 1943, SEP.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Shapard, 91.

<sup>82</sup> *The Jackson Herald*, March 15, 1945.

## CHAPTER III

### INTERPRETING THE "PIZEN SNAKE":<sup>1</sup>

#### LIVING HISTORY AT THE SHIELDS-ETHRIDGE HERITAGE FARM

After his father's death in 1945, Lanis Ethridge gradually closed the doors to the buildings within the agricultural complex. Often, tenants left the land indebted to a system that rarely lent support to their plight, while war and increasing mechanization compelled others to do the same. By 1950, the commissary no longer sold plugs of tobacco or Rochell Apple Blossom Talc. The cotton gin ceased operation in 1964, leaving a pungent aroma of grease and the haunting sight of white lint stringing from the rafters. The blacksmith, antiquated by technological advancements, retired his hammer, and the lows of cattle replaced the purrs of a freshly oiled Titan engine in the local wheat fields. Once a thriving operation of tooting horns, whirring engines, and the distant clanging of a school bell, the complex faded into a ghost village of memories. The farm ascended to prominence on the heels of mechanization, and ultimately, mechanization left it adrift in a sea of untilled landscape.

Mr. Ira, the man behind the masterpiece, spent half a century revolutionizing Ethridge Farm. The famous Nashville Agrarians who wrote the *I'll Take My Stand* manifesto, would have been horrified at his unwitting attempts to accelerate the declension of rural society as they saw it. They might have even winked an "I told you so" when the farm's production waned. Nevertheless, the agricultural dilemma faced by

the Ethridge family represents the broader context of the agricultural revolution. Thus, when Joyce Ethridge inherited the farm in 1970, she made a crucial decision concerning its vitality.

Joyce came to the farm in 1944, a thirty-two year old bride of forty-five year old Lanis Ethridge. Lanis often joked about his age to buddies during the Second World War. Limited to only three gallons of gas per ration coupon, he said, "So you see the old man can't do much courting."<sup>2</sup> Regardless, the limited courting resulted in his marriage to long-time friend and Jefferson resident, Joyce Storey, a Shorter College drama major and well-traveled lady. After her husband died in 1970, she refused an offer to sell the farm, even though "it was such a price back then it would have boggled the mind."<sup>3</sup> Instead, she chose a different course. Out of duty to her two daughters, Joyce held tight to land that most saw as valuable real estate rather than a two hundred year legacy forged by hard work, fortuitous adaptation to agricultural change, and entrepreneurial efficacy.

In the late 1970's, Joyce began historical documentation in order to have the 1866 farmhouse placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Meticulously, she studied and archived the history and architecture of the house only to be encouraged to incorporate the entire complex in the nomination. Frustrated, she abandoned the work for several years until deciding to embark on the inclusion of all buildings. By 1992, her effort included 140 acres and over fifty structures, most concentrated in the main agricultural complex across the road from the house. Georgia's Office of Historic Preservation determined "these outbuildings represent the broadest assortment of 19<sup>th</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Nelson Lytle, "The Hind Tit," in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* by Twelve Southerners (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930), 234.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Lanis Ethridge to James Segars, January 19, 1943, SEP.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Tracie Newton, "Keeping the Farm Alive," *The Jackson Herald*, September 27, 1999.

20<sup>th</sup> Century domestic, agricultural and industrial buildings known to exist on a single farm in Georgia."<sup>4</sup> The Georgia Department of Natural Resources recognized it as a Centennial Farm in 1993, and during the following year, family and friends established a non-profit foundation, headed by a board of directors. Restoration of Bachelor's Academy in 1996 and the preparation of a landscape master plan constituted their first major accomplishments. Dilapidated and ignored since the 1950's, grant monies provided by the Historic Preservation Division of the GDNR funded part of the Bachelor's Academy project. Today, the schoolhouse serves as an orientation point for visitors and the most visible result of the farm's preservation efforts.

Encouraged by friends and even passers-by of the farm, Joyce sought to create an agricultural museum with the vast array of resources. With limited funding, lack of a full-time staff, and an open-by-request schedule, the farm keeps a low profile in the museum community. Open as a museum less than ten years now, Shields-Ethridge plods along with hopes of reaching out to a wider audience, though not to the extent of being hampered by bureaucratic red tape. One researcher called their manner of presentation "vernacular interpretation," a non-professional but effective method that buttresses authenticity by its use of personal insight and unscripted dialogue.<sup>5</sup> Determined by the educational needs of visitors, programming includes a hands-on experience, particularly for school groups. Children actively participate in shucking corn, rolling biscuits and separating cotton seed from its fiber. Their engagement facilitates the learning

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<sup>4</sup> National Register of Historic Places application filed with the Georgia Historic Preservation Division of the Department of Natural Resources in 1989 and approved in 1992. Joyce Ethridge prepared the application, aided by Susan Deavers, SEP.

<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Sue Foell, "Agricultural Museums: Interpretation and Authenticity," (MHP Thesis, University of Georgia, 1996), Chapter 7.

experience, and impresses upon them the laborious tasks faced by early twentieth century farmers.

Stressing education and the environment, the interpretive programs at the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm reach out primarily to school children and an audience captivated by the annual heritage celebration known as "Mule Day." Visitors watch as members of the Georgia Old Time Plow Club co-mingle with the North Georgia 2 Cylinder Club, quite a paradox, but one resonating the essence of the early twentieth century agricultural revolution. Guides explain the intricacies of threshing wheat, milling corn and ginning cotton while other volunteers demonstrate rural craftsmanship. Mule Day is about living history. However, the farm's mission transcends providing nostalgic entertainment for dot-com suburbanites, but "to provide and operate an educational and interpretive outdoor museum that uses historic preservation to increase awareness and understanding of Georgia's agricultural and natural history."<sup>6</sup> Shields-Ethridge provides a unique opportunity to view and understand developments of the early 1900's, as well as keeping the memory of ruralism alive. Indeed, as Joyce's daughter Susan Chaisson contends, "There are going to be kids who won't know what it's like to walk down a dirt road or draw water from a well."<sup>7</sup>

This simple comment speaks volumes about the romantic agrarian ideology and its heir, living historical farms. Nostalgia encroaches upon every element of modern life, from telecommunications to transportation. While fiberoptics redefined communication as much as the tractor redefined agriculture, nothing extinguishes the pleasure of opening a hand-written letter. Few of us, though, are willing to give up keyboards and mouse

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<sup>6</sup> Mission statement, SEP.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Newton, "Keeping the Farm Alive."

pads for a quill and parchment, or our gas-guzzling sport utility vehicles for a horse and wagon. The antiques are inconsequential to our modern lives, no matter how many cultural ties are severed in the process. The same may be said of agriculture. No sane farmer would trade an enclosed-cab New Holland tractor for a hot summer day plodding behind Old Irene, the ornery mule. It is a door we are unwilling to open and steps we do not wish to retrace. Even in the midst of the woebegone agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*, Stark Young admitted, "dead days are gone, and if by chance, they should return, we should find them intolerable."<sup>8</sup>

The absence of a largely rural society, then, leaves us with what has been called "romantic agrarianism."<sup>9</sup> In *I'll Take My Stand*, twelve southerners of various backgrounds wrote nostalgically of agrarian lifestyles and the intrinsic elements of rural life and preached against the rapidly changing sphere of agriculture. They saw the agricultural revolution of the early twentieth century as the death knell for individualism and the values associated with non-industrialized agriculture, such as strong kinship and community ties. Historians often mistakenly divide agriculture into two distinct categories, *modern* and *pre-modern* (meaning historic), which superficially suggests a clear contrast and an uneventful shift between the two. However, using the Shields-Ethridge Farm as an example, the change was deliberate and gradual, had its own intricacies and roots that stemmed out of the nineteenth century and that interim period should rightly be called *pre-modern* agriculture. This is not to suggest that historic

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<sup>8</sup> Stark Young, "Not in Memoriam, but in Defense," in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* by Twelve Southerners (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930), 328.

<sup>9</sup> David B. Danbom, "Romantic Agrarianism in Twentieth-Century America," *Agricultural History* 65 (Fall 1991). Danbom delineates between "rational" and "romantic" agrarianism. "Rational agrarianism" follows in the footsteps of Thomas Jefferson, which advocated a country bolstered by small farms and a rural society. Romantic agrarianism today consists of a "celebration of agriculture and rural life for the positive

agriculture never experienced scientific advancements or governmental intervention, but an explosive reorganization of production, policy, education, and technology occurred during the first half of the twentieth century. One could even argue that this agricultural revolution led to our loss of innocence.

The boom influenced everything from the world economic market down to the most basic elements of our culture, such as the way we portray farmers in films and music. Take, for instance, one of the latest examples in the Coen brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* The lovable, yet dimwitted, Delmar O'Donnell intends to use his portion of the non-existent loot to buy back the family farm. "You ain't no kind of man if you ain't got land," he says. Later, when another character asks him of female companionship, O'Donnell sheepishly replies, "I got to get the family farm back before I can start thinking about that." The film, while comically highlighting stereotypes, bespeaks the Southern story, from rural electrification to the loss of land in an age when agrarians waxed poetic about the past. The film proved a box-office success and its popular soundtrack helped reinvigorate bluegrass music. Agrarianism may only be a state of mind, but it is alive and well in our romantic sensibilities.

Agrarianism, however, has taken on a chameleon-like aura over the past two centuries. Today we see *agrarian* and *agrarianism* as inexorably linked to agriculture and even use the terms intermittently. The word brings to mind aesthetically pleasing landscapes dotted with cattle, neatly cut furrows and picturesque clapboard farmhouses. As one historian contends, however, agrarianism and its conjugates were not always held in the highest esteem. If one were to step backward in time and suggest to Thomas

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impact . . . on the individual and society." See also, Danbom's "Past Visions of American Agriculture," in *Visions of American Agriculture*, edited by William Lockeretz (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1997).

Jefferson that he promoted *agrarianism*, you would be well advised to duck. To men of his era, agrarianism meant "the forced equalization of the ownership of land," what we would essentially think of as socialism today.<sup>10</sup> Even during the mid-1800's, the word "became little more than a rubbery epithet."<sup>11</sup>

Not until the early 1900's did agrarianism shed its offensive skin and begin to be consistently correlated with agriculture and the celebration of rural life. Indeed, it often elevated farmers to a new pedestal, even though the superficial environment provided fodder for stereotypes. Wrote John Crowe Ransom:

In the country districts great numbers of these broken-down Southerners are still to be seen in patched blue-jeans, sitting on ancestral fences, shotguns across their laps and hound-dogs at their feet, surveying their unkempt acres while they comment shrewdly on the ways of God. It is their defect that they have driven a too easy, an unmanly bargain with nature, and that their aestheticism is based on insufficient labor. But there is something heroic, and there may prove to be yet something very valuable to the Union, in their extreme attachment to a certain theory of life. They have kept up a faith which was on the point of perishing from this continent.<sup>12</sup>

With *I'll Take My Stand*, agrarian and agrarianism emerged as common vocabulary in anti-urban, anti-modern ideology. The romantic agrarianism touted by the "Nashville Twelve" haunts our intrinsically fettered, materialistic world. Based on individualism and continuation of a back-to-the-land movement, "it is especially attractive to Americans because it appeals to cultural myths and values at the core of our existence."<sup>13</sup>

As a society, we have largely made our peace with urbanism, the squalor that appalled agrarians and social reformers alike. Urban America has gradually become a

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas P. Govan, "Agrarian and Agrarianism: A Study in the Use and Abuse of Words," *Journal of Southern History* 30 (February 1994), 36.

<sup>11</sup> Govan, "Agrarian and Agrarianism," 38.

<sup>12</sup> John Crowe Ransom, "Reconstructed But Unregenerate," in *I'll Take My Stand*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Danbom, "Romantic Agrarianism," 11.

more sanctified place or, at the very least, a necessary evil through revitalization. The new devil, though, comes from what John Miller calls "suburban mishmash."<sup>14</sup> He writes, "the suburbs have recast and redefined ugliness in the form of tract housing, commercial strip development and of course, the ubiquitous high art of the regional shopping mall." He further contends that suburbia serves as little more than an appendage of the city: "the fluid interdependency and indivisibility of urban and suburban America mock the artificial and often meaningless distinctions between city and suburb."<sup>15</sup> Largely speaking of the decline of an aesthetic American landscape, the words echo the romantic notions of the Nashville Agrarians. Both speak to a bleak and materialistic culture. Intentionally melodramatic, Andrew Nelson Lytle wrote, "the fatal step is to become a progressive farmer, for then he must . . . think first of a money economy, last of a farmer's life."<sup>16</sup>

Modern culture advocates the encroachment of suburbia and, in doing so, throws somewhat of a backhanded compliment to rural America. Those fleeing to the suburbs with a blind madness escape the city in order return to the countryside, or some semblance of it, and oddly enough prefer the mind-numbing commutes. Indeed, as Miller writes, "the countryside has become urban without becoming a true city . . . [and] in many areas the term countryside is more historic than real."<sup>17</sup> Developers take advantage of potential real estate values, particularly in the South, where historically conservative ideas of property ownership reinforce already lax zoning laws. "The dilemma," wrote

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<sup>14</sup> John Miller, *Egotopia: Narcissism and the New American Landscape* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Miller, *Egotopia*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Nelson Lytle, "The Hind Tit," 216.

<sup>17</sup> Miller, *Egotopia*, 13.

one critic, "was that in propelling the rural fringe market forward, it destroyed the very commodity that first attracted buyers to the countryside."<sup>18</sup>

Jackson County, Georgia, home of the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm, has been subject to the same paradox between flight to the countryside, and unrestrained local growth. As explained in the previous chapter, the county's cotton production fell below six thousand planted acres in 1959, and by the mid-1980's, not one boll grew from its soil. Cattle and poultry now claim the vast majority of agricultural acreage and most farms earn less than ten thousand dollars per year, indicating farmers have principle occupations beyond farming.<sup>19</sup> With land values soaring, encroachment of suburban sprawl and the addition of a new Jefferson by-pass, the rural landscape of the county has changed drastically over the past decade. On any given week, the local paper reports yet more re-zoning requests. More people result in the need for more schools, which in turn requires an increase in property taxes. Thus, farmers who own any respectable amount of land earn barely enough to cover their taxes. Unable to afford an agrarian lifestyle, they face a similar dilemma to that of farmers of the mid twentieth century, except developers now pay absurd prices to plant houses. Suburbia became the simultaneous answer to urban discontent and the glutted post-war land market enhanced by agricultural mechanization.

In convincing fashion, John L. Shover describes the transformation of rural America from the yeoman communities once constituting the bulk of the country's population to the present family farms that remain little more than a romantic anachronism. The nexus of this shift occurred at mid-century, a "Great Disjuncture," as

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Friedberger, "The Rural-Urban Fringe in the Late Twentieth Century," *Agricultural History* 74 (Spring 2000), 503, 507.

he describes it. In fact, more people fled the countryside towards urban centers between 1929 and 1965 than Europeans and Asians to the United States from 1820-1960, astounding numbers that receive pitifully little attention from scholars. He characterizes the Southern rural fringe population as rolling over itself, snowballing into what we call suburban sprawl.<sup>20</sup> Echoing Frank L. Owsley's study, the agriculturists are now the defenders on the run (instead of the herdsman), either selling out, scattering or being absorbed. Furthermore, the dwindling acreage near metropolitan areas provides the perfect vestige for hobby farmers, a phrase often used to describe all who farm as a secondary source of income.<sup>21</sup> Linguistically, though, hobby farming does not distinguish between those who wish to *purchase* a rural lifestyle and those who want to *preserve* it. While certainly a useful mechanism to conserve green-space, this quaint pastime denigrates the agricultural defenders who have but little choice to face the realities of encroaching development.

Surprisingly, though, academia lacked a field specific to the rural lifestyle until nearly a half century after the Nashville Agrarians wrote their self-expressive ballyhoo. Until the early 1980's, rural equated Frederick Jackson Turner's romanticized frontier school of thought. While historians such as Shover, James C. Malin and Gilbert C. Fite focused specifically on agriculture, few meaningful rural community studies existed, quite a paradox given the overwhelming rural population of the United States until the twentieth century. Often seen as an appendage to urban history rather than a distinct entity, the history of the countryside needed a "systematic study of human behavior over

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<sup>19</sup> United States Department of Agriculture Census, Georgia, Jackson County, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> John L. Shover, *First Majority-Last Majority: The Transforming of Rural Life in America*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Dekalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986).

<sup>21</sup> Friedberger, "The Rural-Urban Fringe," 509.

time in the rural environment." Robert P. Swierenga cited an institutional bias of urban-oriented academia as well as a historiographical tendency to view rural Americans as backward "reactionaries," or at best Lil' Abners, rather than part of a reasonable dissenting opinion.<sup>22</sup> While rural history blossomed into a legitimate field, its historians focused on the rise and fall of rural America, certainly the most obvious path of inquiry, and they continue to ignore the ideological continuity of ruralism in all its manifestations, including suburbia and, indeed, living historical farms.

If the agricultural revolution bequeathed our society romantic views of country living, then the latter created a need for a tangible link to the past. Our romantic sensibilities cause us to look upon agrarianism as spectacle, an ironic twist that would have baffled the Nashville Agrarians. They reflected on the roots of our value system and meant to bring understanding to a rapidly changing rural society. They did not view their reflections as romantic at all, but as a rational response to unrestrained modernization. Today, romantic agrarianism is a matter of cultural ideology, the quaint, yet intangible sentiments set forth in films and music. Just as suburbia gives a false sense of country living, our culture presents ruralism as a spectacle for us to view before begging a hasty retreat in our Tahoes. Living history farms, at best, are often viewed as a maverick field providing little analytic fodder for academics. However, these farms inherited the romantic ideals of the agrarians. As an integral part of our rural education, they deserve not so much a narrative history of the movement, but a study of their role in

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<sup>22</sup> Robert P. Swierenga, "The New Rural History: Defining the Parameters," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1 (Fall 1981), 212. See also Swierenga's "Theoretical Perspectives on the New Rural History: From Environmentalism to Modernism," *Agricultural History* 56 (July 1982); and "Agriculture and Rural Life: The New Rural History," in *Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History*, Edited by James B. Gardner and George Rollie Adams (Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1983).

our culture, both as a proactive agents in nostalgia, folklore and heritage education, and as a response to a society further removed from its rural roots. Plainly stated, living history farms provided an answer to modernization and are the legitimate heirs of romantic agrarianism. Historians spent the better part of the twentieth century wrangling with the opinions of those rebellious Vanderbilt litterateurs, but perhaps their manifesto is best understood and, indeed, illustrated in an agrarian ideology now entrenched in living history.

Remarkably, historians have yet to make this obvious connection, perhaps due to an institutional condescension towards avenues of public history. The first living history museum, Skansen, appeared in 1881 Sweden, and served as the archetype for the subsequent movement in America.<sup>23</sup> Focusing on rural life and folk culture, Skansen sought to celebrate Scandinavian heritage through open-air displays and demonstrations that animated endangered cultural practices. Inspired by the principles of heritage preservation, pioneering American preservationists responded to modernization and formed local and private organizations, such as the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, in order to save historic homes and districts, most of architectural or associative value. In addition, the federal government passed legislation, such as the Antiquities Act of 1906, and formed the National Park Service in 1916.<sup>24</sup> Both provided

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<sup>23</sup> There are as many definitions as there are exhibits, but perhaps the best description is that it is "a life-sized diorama realistically simulating life in the past". See Jay Anderson, *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1985), 45. There is no set standard for living history participants either. As two researchers of Colonial Williamsburg aptly described it, "living history means different things in different museums." See Eric Gable and Richard Handler, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 74.

<sup>24</sup> The best work on the early preservation movement in the United States is Charles B. Hosmer, *Presence of the Past: The Preservation Movement in the United States before Williamsburg* (New York: Putnam and Sons, 1965); see also Hosmer's *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-1949* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981); James Marston Fitch, *Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management in the Built World* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982; Warren Leon

tangible alternatives to the destruction of historic properties, and signaled an era in which modernism would not go unchecked.

Living history museums did not propagate in the United States, however, until the 1920's when Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller financed the creations of Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan and Colonial Williamsburg, respectively. These quintessential industrialists spurred the living history movement, a mocking criticism of the modern age in which they made their fortunes. The greatest irony was their preservation of memories that they acted as agents to make obsolete. In fact, while overseeing his Williamsburg project, Rockefeller had over two hundred would-be historic structures demolished in order to make room for Rockefeller Center in downtown Manhattan.<sup>25</sup> Despite the inherent agrarian-industrial paradox in America's first two attempts at living history, Greenfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg set the standard for participatory heritage tourism today.

Appeals for agricultural museums dated back to the mid 1940's, no doubt an epilogue to the calls of romantic agrarians. In 1945, Herbert Kellar suggested a setting in which visitors could witness historic agricultural practices in action, but the idea did not immediately appeal to curators.<sup>26</sup> Open-air villages like Williamsburg and early static agricultural museums, initially viewed as separate entities, became more closely associated with one another over time. Wrote one Swedish preservationist, "they [were] reinforced at the same rate as agrarian development . . . and at the same time as the entire

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and Margaret Piatt, "Living History Museums," in *History Museums in the USA: A Critical Assessment*, edited by Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 65.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, edited by Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

<sup>26</sup> Herbert Kellar, "Living Agricultural Museums," *Agricultural History* 19 (July 1945).

social situation in the industrialized countries [became] increasingly complex."<sup>27</sup> Their interdependency culminated in the creation of the Association for Living History, Farms and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM), a blanket organization formed at Old Sturbridge Village in 1970. Emerging in the 1950's and 1960's, Old Sturbridge Village, Plymouth Plantation, the Farmer's Museum and Upper Canadian Village used the idea of participatory museums to propagate living history farms.<sup>28</sup> With places such as Williamsburg focused primarily on men such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and their dissidence with the Royal Government, the lower social strata received minimal interpretive attention.

In the counter-cultural era of the 1960's, however, visitors yearned for a history to which they could relate, prompting many museums to reorganize their programs. "Ultimately," wrote Cary Carson, "it was not a handful of renegades from university history departments who set museum villages on their new course."<sup>29</sup> Indeed, as one public historian contended, historians "soon [discovered] that the public . . . [presented] history back to them as well."<sup>30</sup> The new social history rose in prominence during this time, bolstered research and lent academic credibility to a movement that celebrated grassroots individualism and the social values of ruralism.<sup>31</sup> Today, living history covers

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<sup>27</sup> Sune Zachrisson, "Evaluation and Reflection on Museums of Agriculture," *Museum* 143, no. 3 (1984), 122. See also, Darwin P. Kelsey, "Outdoor Museums and Historical Change," *Agricultural History* 46 (January 1972); John T. Schlebecker, "Curatorial Agriculture," *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Darwin P. Kelsey, "Harvests of History," *Historic Preservation* 28 (July 1976).

<sup>29</sup> Carson, "Living Museums of Everyman's history," *Harvard Magazine* 83 (Summer 1981), 23.

<sup>30</sup> David Glassberg, "Public History and the Study of Memory," *The Public Historian* 18 (September 1996), 23.

<sup>31</sup> Cary Carson, "Living Museums," 22. Carson's work is the best starting point in understanding the link between the new social history and living history museums. On the research interdependency of social historians and living history museums, see Jay Anderson "Living History: Simulating Everyday Life in Living Museums," *American Quarterly* 34 (Bibliography 1982), 299-303; Eric Gable and Richard Handler, "The Authority of Documents at Some American History Museums," *Journal of American History* 81 (June 1994); John D. Krugler, "Behind the Public Presentations: Research and Scholarship at Living History Museums of Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 48 (July 1991).

a wide ideological swath, and its drawing power influences the historical education of an interested public. It also survives as a cultural vestige for romantic agrarian ideals, albeit with a few caveats.

By virtue of its ruralist beginnings, the ALHFAM, while adding an invaluable dimension to heritage tourism, neglects crucial social and cultural elements. Foremost, the ALHFAM is nostalgic in nature, not necessarily a bad thing, but "they [ensure] that living history museums . . . continue to ignore the twentieth century."<sup>32</sup> Sites across the United States scantily interpret modernity, a conspicuous deficiency in relation to agricultural history. Due to the revolutionary nature of twentieth century agriculture, the failure of living history farms to address scientific conservation methods, agronomy, governmental programs and the agrarian-industrialist conflict is a serious and legitimate indictment. For instance, in the state of Georgia, the two most notable living history museums, the Georgia Agrirama and Westville Village, focus on community and rural life prior to 1900. In fact, the only living historical farm claiming an interpretive period during the agricultural revolution, Peinhardt Family Farm in Cullman, Alabama, does so without actively promoting mechanization.<sup>33</sup> However quaint the sight of a mule plodding through dusty, red furrows might be, visitors rarely get a sense of the early twentieth century upheaval that led to the decline and ultimate extinction of historic agriculture.

Several factors account for this. The cost of refitting equipment and operating pre-modern machinery is a luxury few can afford. Farms without extant mechanized tools would face the financial burden of replication, an exorbitant alternative to having a

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<sup>32</sup> Leon and Piatt, "Living History Museums," 71.

<sup>33</sup> See their websites at <http://www.agrirama.com> and <http://www.prn-inc.net/peinhardtlivinghistoryfarm/>.

blacksmith pound out a new plow blade. Pre-modern tools also require a level of empirical knowledge above that of historic agriculture and, moreover, present a hazard to those ignorant of their operating procedures. As John T. Schlebecker noted, "Agricultural changes have taken place with nearly blinding speed . . . Yet this period is precisely the period which living historical farms cannot show." Secondly, "nostalgia is greater" before the era of mechanized equipment.<sup>34</sup> As we enter the twenty-first century, though, we become further removed from what early living history organizers saw as a very recent past. In an era of computers and dot-com industry, the past is as recent as a typewriter, just as two-cylinder tractors or two-row plow attachments have gone the way of the yoke and oxen. However, living history farms still focus on mules and wagons, but just because pre-modern agriculture is less removed does not negate its historical significance.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the social implications of mechanized agriculture outweigh the need to explain the technical intricacies of equipment. Farms transformed from a "way of life" to a "business", and the agricultural revolution "broke a vast number of eggs to get the omelet we call modern agriculture."<sup>36</sup> The loss of heritage and traditions associated with historic agriculture left many adrift when the lifestyle no longer supported itself.

Furthermore, living history farms often lack the interpretation of history as a process. Change over time is the very essence of history, yet museums find it difficult to interpret what Cary Carson calls a "process-museum" or "time-lapse" history. A few sites have attempted to remedy this. For example, Historic St. Mary's City in Maryland exhibits not only a Native American village, but an early settlement fort, a colonial

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<sup>34</sup> John T. Schlebecker, "Social Functions of Living Historical Farms in the United States," *Museum* 143, no. 143 (1984), 148-149.

<sup>35</sup> L. Thomas Frye, "The Recent Past is Prologue," *Museum News* 53 (November 1974).

plantation and even pieces of a nineteenth century farm. Juxtaposed against one another, the layers illustrate the progression of local history. The "Dagwood sandwich" approach forces visitors to think about the nature of history as they traverse from one exhibit to the next.<sup>37</sup> Jay Anderson wrote that living history "demonstrates life over time; it can convey the logic underlying work, the seasonal significance of custom, and the temporal dimension of everyday life."<sup>38</sup> Museums select a particular period of time for interpretation, often consisting of a few years.

For example, in Williamsburg, programs continue to concentrate on the initial sparks of local revolutionary zeal. One does not leave the city without knowing Lord Dunmore's dissolution of the Virginia Assembly led to the dissenters gathering at Raleigh Tavern's Apollo Room. This continues to trap the visitor, and skillfully so, at a particular moment in time. Few sites enjoy the diverse rendering of Old Salem in North Carolina. Interpreting a period of roughly one hundred years, Old Salem utilizes its vast variety of architectural resources to interpret local Moravian history. Likewise, Historic Brattonsville near Rock Hill, South Carolina has a similar opportunity to interpret their site. Extant structures, built between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century, illustrate the South Carolina upcountry from the colonial period through the Early Republic and into the antebellum era. However, those museums that do show history as a process often lack depth, the interdependency of social, religious, or ethnic groups or the indivisibility of town and country.

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<sup>36</sup> Don Paarlberg and Philip Paarlberg. *The Agricultural Revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2000), 61, 115.

<sup>37</sup> Carson, "Living Museums," 29-31.

<sup>38</sup> Anderson, *Time Machines*, p. 77.

This highlights the second noteworthy criticism. While many museums have work to correct "history in a vacuum," one great deficiency remains. For years, critics charged living history museums of sanitizing, and thus distorting, "real history" by not presenting the less pleasing aspects of everyday life, including the prevalence of "smells, flies, pigs [and] dirt."<sup>39</sup> Reality, however, dictates that the visitor experience not be marred by knee-high manure, human refuse, or the odors tempered by Old Spice today. The issue that arises, however, is the dilution of cultural conflict. As Philip Burnham noted, "Certain subjects at historic sites are driven underground, if not forbidden outright: venereal disease; the sexual mixing of races; domestic violence...and your common, everyday garden variety of human failure."<sup>40</sup> In a much-cited criticism, Robert Ronsheim wrote, "the visitors need to perceive something of the complexity and unity of the culture the museum is trying to recreate."<sup>41</sup>

Living history farms, and museums in general, tend to be ethnically lopsided, often not an intentional omission, but a matter of society being segregated until only recently. This does not offer an excuse, but a call for more inclusive programming. Moreover, due to the nature of African-American history, the physical resources of its past rarely survive. For instance, in the 1850's, Ann Pamela Cunningham set out on her mission to save George Washington's home, not the homes of those that worked the land and built Mount Vernon. Slave cabins were seldom constructed with any architectural efficacy and therefore, few remain. Some sites, though, such as Carter's Grove in

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<sup>39</sup> For some of these criticisms, see Leon and Piatt, "Living History Museums," 73-74; Thomas J. Schlereth, "It Wasn't That Simple," *Museum News* 56 (January 1978); Stacy F. Roth, *Past Into Present: Effective Techniques for First-Person Interpretation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), chapter 2.

<sup>40</sup> Philip Burnham, *How the Other Half Lived: A People's Guide to American History Sites* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995), 206-207.

<sup>41</sup> Robert D. Ronsheim, "Is the Past Dead?" *Museum News* 53 (November 1974), 16.

Virginia, have experimented with replicating the structures in order to interpret slave life. Ironically, those who constituted the majority on plantations are scantily represented in interpretive programs.<sup>42</sup>

Inclusion, though, should not trump historical accuracy. While plantations across the South sometimes include the history of slavery, they often do so in the old "necessary evil" school of thought or as a paternalistic system. Unfortunately, this is particularly true at popular sites such as Monticello and Mount Vernon. Curators, unable to call the system oppressive, describe their respective owners as the tortured founders. Guides at Monticello gloss over Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings, and when mentioned, concentrate on how the master mentally flagellated himself over the issues of freedom and slavery. Consoling the public by suggesting Jefferson and Washington were "compassionate masters . . . smacks a bit of gift wrapping a lump of coal."<sup>43</sup> History abounds with controversy, and sanitizing it further entrenches stereotypes and myths. Like the initial interpretive programs at Greenfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg, these historic homes reflect the entrenched ideology of their curators.

The same, though less blatant, criticism can be made of living historical farms. John T. Schlebecker suggested this oversight has less to do with deliberate misleading of the public than museums' fear of giving offense and an African-American indifference concerning live representation of historical oppression.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, in a guide to African-American heritage sites, most if not all concentrate on the positive, more recent events

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<sup>42</sup> Burnham, *How the Other Half Lived*, 212.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 44. See also, Daniel P. Jordan, "To Follow Truth Wherever it May Lead: Dealing with the DNA Controversy at Monticello," *Cultural Resource Management* 22, no. 8 (1999). See also, Susan P. Schreiber "Interpreting Slavery at National Trust Sites: A Case Study in Addressing Difficult Topics," *Cultural Resource Management* 23, no. 5 (2000).

<sup>44</sup> John T. Schlebecker, "Social Functions of Living Historical Farms," 147. Burnham also addresses this issue in *How the Other Half Lived*, ch. 2.

such as the Civil Rights Movement and events of cultural celebration.<sup>45</sup> Is tourism the last vestige of *de facto* segregation? Whether the scarcity of minority visitors to so-called "white" heritage sites results from a lack of those sites to incorporate inclusively balanced programming or an aversion towards a painful past remains to be studied. Historical segregation has, in effect, restricted our current heritage industry. Regardless, it behooves living history museums to diversify interpretive programs, not as an absolution, but to present a more complete history for all visitors.

Schlebecker incorrectly asserts, however, that living historical farms in the South purposely ignore antebellum ethnic conflicts, preferring the *uncontroversial* post-bellum years. The Reconstruction and Jim Crow periods abound with controversy, and some would call them even more divisive and exploitative than slavery. "Farms simply cannot show certain elements of the American agrarian past," he writes.<sup>46</sup> However, as one site superintendent recently suggested, "We should not be afraid to preserve and interpret history because it is too sensitive, unpleasant, emotional or controversial."<sup>47</sup> If sites such as Williamsburg and Old Salem can address multi-ethnic society, including the African-American experience, living historical farms should heed their example.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps

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<sup>45</sup> Curtis, Nancy G, *Black Heritage Sites: The South* (New York: The New Press, 1986).

<sup>46</sup> Schlebecker, "Social Functions," 147.

<sup>47</sup> Rayford Harper, "Beyond Simply Black and White," *Cultural Resource Management* 19, no. 2 (1996), 6. Also, Frank Faragasso and Doug Stover, "Slavery and Resistance: Expanding Our Horizon," *Cultural Resource Management* 21, no. 4 (1998); Kate F. Stover, "Is it Real History Yet?: An Update on Living History Museums," *Journal of American Culture* 12 (Summer 1989).

<sup>48</sup> Williamsburg has taken the reigns in this arena, and worked diligently to create programs that reflect the multi-ethnic social structure within the colonial town. Some of these have even been criticized as too realistic. See Rex Ellis, "Re: Living History: Bringing Slavery Into Play," *American Visions* 7 (December 1993). See also; Cary Carson, "Front and Center: Local History Comes of Age," in *Local History, National Heritage*, ed. Frederick L. Rath Jr. et. al. (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1991), 100-102. Carson described one such program in which visitors received facial masks, each representing a different social class. Visitors were intrigued as they discovered how status determined dialogue and social interaction. "Perhaps by accident, perhaps not," writes Carson, "our . . . tour had stumbled on a most effective device to demonstrate to lay people the basic principle underlying modern scholarship since the 1960's, the notion that reality depends largely on who you are."

curators fear they must either offer vindication or condemnation of historical characters engaged in religious, ethnic or cultural conflict. Conflict, though, rarely results in immediate resolution and visitors might be better served if the controversies simply stood by themselves. The heritage tourism sought at living history farms, or any museum for that matter, should not be neatly compartmentalized into stark contrasts of good and evil.

Only one living history farm actively addresses the agricultural roles of African-Americans. Literally chartered with forty acres and two mules, Freewoods Farm near Myrtle Beach, South Carolina seeks to illustrate the lives of African-American farmers. Its plan, still in the initial stages, calls for the development of a living farm, a Wetlands Preserve and a Main Street, the latter of which would represent the setting where various components of the community interacted. While this latest addition to the living historical farm movement adds a rare dimension, it intends to replicate "life on small southern family farms owned and/or operated by African Americans *between 1865-1900*."<sup>49</sup> Despite Freewoods' pre-industrial bias, at least it endeavors to present farming as a multiracial occupation.

The Shields-Ethridge Farm has the unique opportunity to interpret an authentic portrait of Southern agriculture by virtue of its original buildings, recent history, and diversity of residents. The farm rose to prominence in an era of increasing mechanization, government farming policy, application of science, veterinary medicine and the boll weevil. Tenants and croppers left the land, often heavily indebted as they packed their belongings. The use of tractors increased as the mule gradually became an antiquated concept. Demands of the textile industry affected ginning technology and, consequently, ginning technology affected methods of production in the field. For half a

century, farmers, black and white, manager and tenant, struggled to cope with agriculture that spiraled beyond their control.

Living history farms today offer little explanation as to why they present what they do. The ALHFAM's mission includes interpretation of historic agriculture. As Jay Anderson wrote, they "specialize in providing visitors with an insight into *pre-industrial* causality."<sup>50</sup> Just as historians neatly compartmentalize agricultural history into *modern* and *everything else*, so do living history farms. The shift was not a clear delineation between mule and tractor. Often the two coexisted for a prolonged period until mechanization was complete. As explained in the previous chapter, full mechanization of cotton production took almost half a century, particularly in the development of a mechanical harvester. Technology, however, is not the most important factor. Historically speaking, the social implications outweigh the technical aspects. Living history farms extol the virtues of rural life, yet they ignore that period in which rural life was stripped of its intrinsic values. As early as 1911, one agrarian wrote, "The change is probably even more remarkable in the farmer's attitude towards the reasons that underlie his work, *although this shift does not appeal so much to the popular imagination . . .* He speaks a new language."<sup>51</sup> The Shields-Ethridge Farm can fill a crucial void by virtue of its vast array of resources, and illustrate that half-century of change in which the Vanderbilt Agrarians took up literary arms.

Equally important, though, few farms address post-bellum race relations, yet Shields-Ethridge can present that cultural element often neglected. From 1900 to 1950, African-Americans faced tremendous pressures in the South. Struggling to get by on

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<sup>49</sup> See the Freewoods Farm website at <http://aim.deis.sc.edu/freewoods>. Italics mine.

<sup>50</sup> Jay Anderson, *Time Machines*, 77. Italics mine.

farms like the Ethridge's, many made the difficult decision to leave their debts and homes behind. Some remained and carried their financial baggage into the next year, and others barely scraped by. The physical distance between planter and worker provided some autonomy, indeed, some control over their daily lives, a decided contrast from the spatial constraints placed upon slaves in the antebellum period. As one preservation consultant recently wrote, visitors "are asking questions, many questions, about a past that may be painful, but is also a source of pride."<sup>52</sup> In his landscape analysis of the farm, Ian Firth suggested utilization of the Preacher Riley tenant house as an orientation point.<sup>53</sup> The typical tour would guide visitors from the labor-intensive sphere of the complex up towards the main residence, enhancing their understanding of social strata and impress upon them the importance of labor.

Furthermore, Bachelor's Academy provides the opportunity for inclusive programming, as it served white students until county schools consolidated in 1938 and then black students until desegregation in the 1960's. One hope is to receive grant monies to expedite an oral history program, already begun. On a cold, overcast day in December 1999, white and black alumni wedged into the reconstructed desks and drank hot spiced tea as they recalled moments and memories from their childhood years spent in the dimly lit building. One elderly man recalled his mischievous "notching of the switch," whereby he used his pocketknife (imagine an innocent use) and cut diagonal slits into his self-retrieved weapon for punishment. When the teacher drew back to deliver the

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<sup>51</sup> L.H. Bailey, *The State and the Farmer* (New York: McMillan and Company, 1911), 13-14. Italics mine.

<sup>52</sup> Anne Farrissee, "Heritage Tourism: Telling the Rest of the Story," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 83 (Spring 1999), 102.

<sup>53</sup> *Master Plan*, 23.

dreaded blow, the switch snapped in half. Laughter erupted from the alumni, certainly echoing the snickers of amused schoolchildren from years ago.

In addition to the African-American experience, Shields-Ethridge can present another social class underrepresented on living historical farms. Not appreciated as historical subjects until recently, poor whites offer the final variable in the early twentieth century Southern social equation. While it is difficult to imagine a "Tobacco Road" historical village, museums could present the poor white story, much as Lillian Smith conceptualized in *Killers of the Dream*. In her parable "Two Men and a Bargain," Smith wrote, "It never occurred to Mr. Rich White that with a bargain the Negro could help him make money. It never occurred to Mr. Poor White that with a bargain the Negro could help him raise wages. For neither ever thought about the Negro as somebody who could help folks make money."<sup>54</sup> Ethridge Farm contained both white and black sharecroppers, and interpretation of that dimension would be rare indeed. With a number of extant tenant houses, one could foresee a potential differentiation between the social and cultural aspects of the races. As we become further removed from the inherent divisive issues discussed here, crucial historical elements can be addressed at living history farms. Their complexity makes them all the more viable as subjects of tourist attention and education.

"The agrarian South is bound to go," wrote Andrew Nelson Lytle, "when the first page is turned and the first mark crosses the ledger . . . it should dread industrialization like a pizen snake."<sup>55</sup> One can only envision the debate he might have engaged in with Ira Washington Ethridge. Bound to modernize his father-in-law's farm, Mr. Ira played an

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<sup>54</sup> Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1961), 157

<sup>55</sup> Lytle, "The Hind Tit," 234.

important local role in the agricultural revolution. He spoke the new language and translated it into an operation that, for a time, efficiently supported his livelihood and enhanced his standing in the community. Yet, he actively participated in transforming agriculture, a transformation that precipitated the decline of the agrarian way of life. "[Romantic agrarianism] may never be relevant to American society," wrote David Danbom, "[but] it will always be relevant to the American mind."<sup>56</sup> Living history farms still serve as "a symbol" for those facets of rural life, some mythical and some true, that so effectively draw nostalgic visitors to their gates.<sup>57</sup> Interpreting the "pizen snake" seems rather banal compared to the sentimental journey of self-sufficient farming. However, it explains the nature of our quest, our search for an extinct lifestyle and the ideology that gave birth to living historical farms.

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<sup>56</sup> Danbom, "Romantic Agrarianism," 12.

<sup>57</sup> James R. Short, "Comments on Museums and Agricultural History," *Agricultural History* 46 (January 1972), 131.

## CONCLUSION

Imagine two men sitting under the shady branches of a tree on a hot, sultry, Southern summer day. A Model-T Ford toots its horn on a nearby dirt road and in an adjacent field, a startled mule jumps off his furrowed course. On a distant hillside, a tractor carves terraces contoured to the landscape and croppers scratch their heads as they exit the commissary, pondering how they ever managed to owe *that* much money. The two men, unwitting agents in an agricultural revolution, squat beneath the tree and discuss the impending drought, local politics and the shiny new gin. "You hear about what those guys at Vanderbilt wrote?" one asks. "Sure did," the other replies. "They're right. Business and farming don't mix." The first one warily shakes his head and says, "I don't know. They sound a bit off their rocker to me." This is a scene yet illustrated on living history farms, yet the extant resources and valuable documentation at the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm scripted it long ago. Mr. Ira's masterpiece, that culmination of entrepreneurial vigor and concentrated labor by individuals of both races, deserves its day on the stage.

One should not be misled, however, by the apparent simplicity in such a proposal. The inclusive interpretation now expected at places like Williamsburg, formed over the course of several decades, reacting to both the desires of visitors and the new social history. Museums speak as part of and respond according to our broader culture. The Shields-Ethridge Farm provides us with a blank slate, then. In order to accomplish what agricultural museums have so long neglected, it must first gauge the current trends of

interpretation, understand what others lack, and look to the future with a determination that while some subjects may not be easy to discuss, those issues explain the very heart of the nation we have become. Museums must not try to absolve the past of its sins or pay a cultural reparation, but should strive to present an authentic illustration of the past, in this case the often harsh realities of early twentieth century Southern sharecropping and the cultural effects of agricultural mechanization.

Thus, the Shields-Ethridge farm faces its first great challenge. As a site for heritage education, the audience is limited primarily to school children and those who gather annually for Mule Day. Children provide wonderful fodder for the evolution of museum ideology as they often lack decorum in questioning facts and are apt to point out painful truths. For instance, in a tour group composed mainly of African-American children, one little boy interrupted my grist-mill discussion. He asked, "Were there any slaves here?" Initially, the question caught me off guard, as interpretation at the farm revolves around early twentieth century agriculture. I replied that no slaves lived on the farm since 1865, but I suspected he really wanted to know what role African-Americans played there. I then asked him if he knew what sharecropping meant. When he shook his head, I realized we both had valuable lessons to learn. We needed to diversify our interpretative programs, specifically to reflect the farm's racial demographics, and children should be exposed to a history in which different groups ignited change.

The second challenge concerns organization. By remaining in family hands, the farm will become only what its owners wish it to be. Currently, the two most powerful forces, Joyce Ethridge and her daughter Susan Chaisson, envision the farm as a small family-owned museum. With no intentions of allowing institutional intervention, future

generations of the farm will continue to determine the museum's direction. For instance, the 150 acres designated for museum use is surrounded by approximately 460 acres of farmland still worked by the family. According to their National Register application, this land "provides an appropriate rural and agricultural setting" for the museum complex.<sup>1</sup> In order to provide an authentic environment for visitors, the museum depends on future generations understanding the impact of decisions concerning their inheritances. With Jackson County suffering the pangs of unrestrained development, Shields-Ethridge has the potential to be a rare enclave of green-space, not just the museum acreage, but also the surrounding family property.

Again, the physical setting abounds with possibilities, but this does not suggest an immediate reorganization such as institutionalizing the interpretation or handing the museum over to the state. Just as Mr. Ira gauged the prevailing winds of agriculture in the early twentieth century, the owners need to study the museum field and determine the best course not only for the farm itself, but also for the museum community. Museums must speak their own language, and allow their ideologies to remain fluid and interdependent with audience and artifacts. The criticisms and suggestions set forth here are not meant to dictate what this farm *should* do, but what it *can* do. Given the trends of agricultural museums, the owners of the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm have the opportunity to create a unique sequel to Mr. Ira's masterpiece.

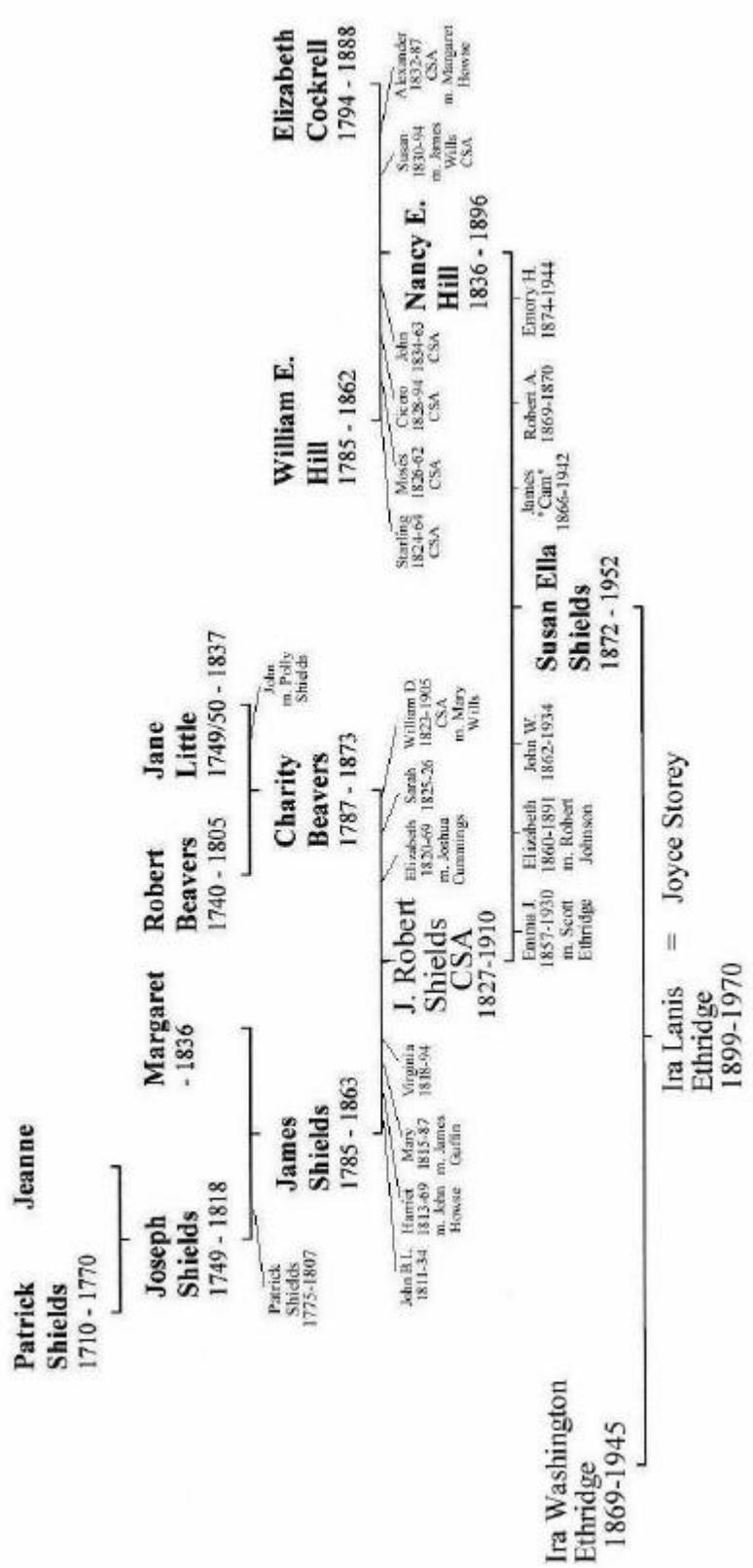
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<sup>1</sup> National Register of Historic Places application filed with the Georgia Historic Preservation Division of the Department of Natural Resources in 1989 and approved in 1992. Joyce Ethridge prepared the application, aided by Susan Deavers, SEP.

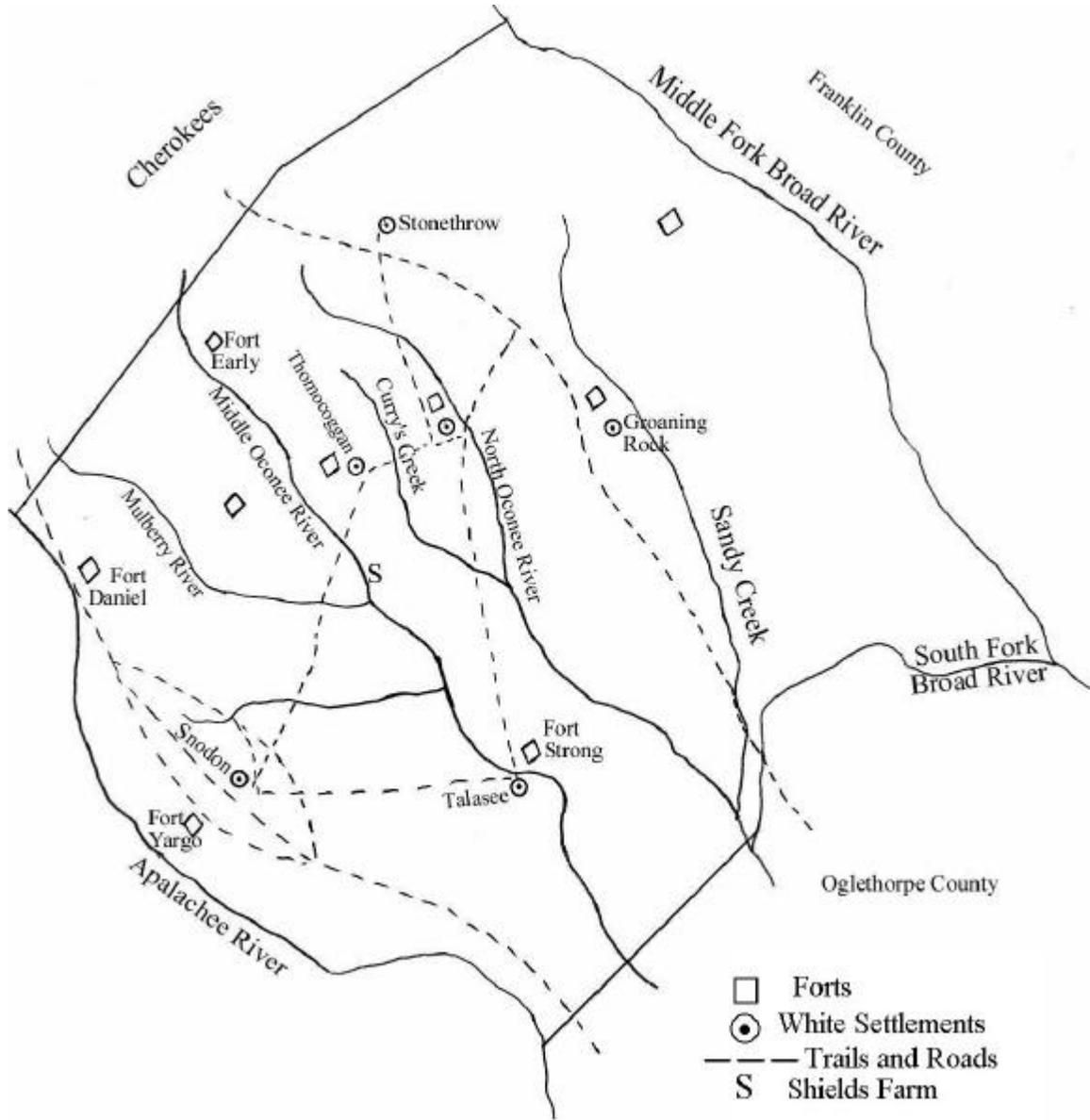
## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SHIELDS-ETHRIDGE GENEALOGY



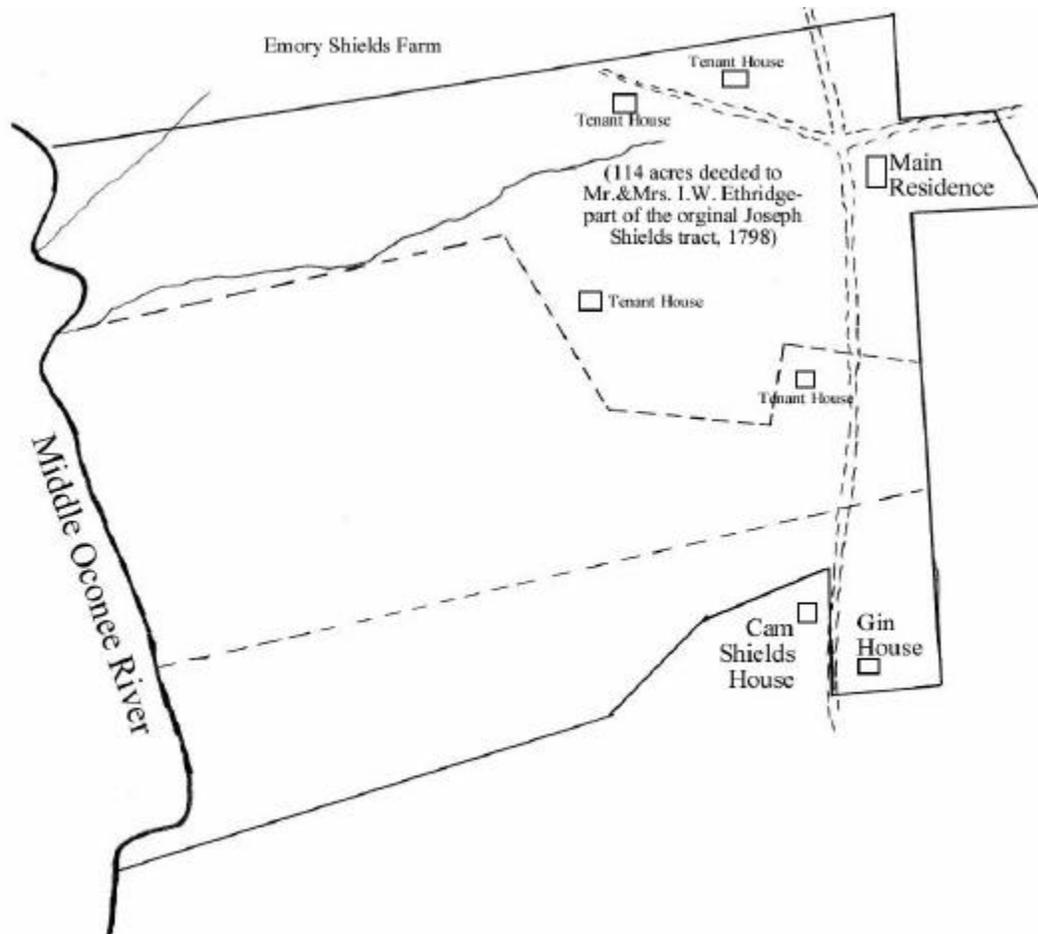
APPENDIX B  
 JACKSON COUNTY, 1796



Base Map: Jackson County 1796 by Frary Elrod, *Historical Notes on Jackson County*.

APPENDIX C

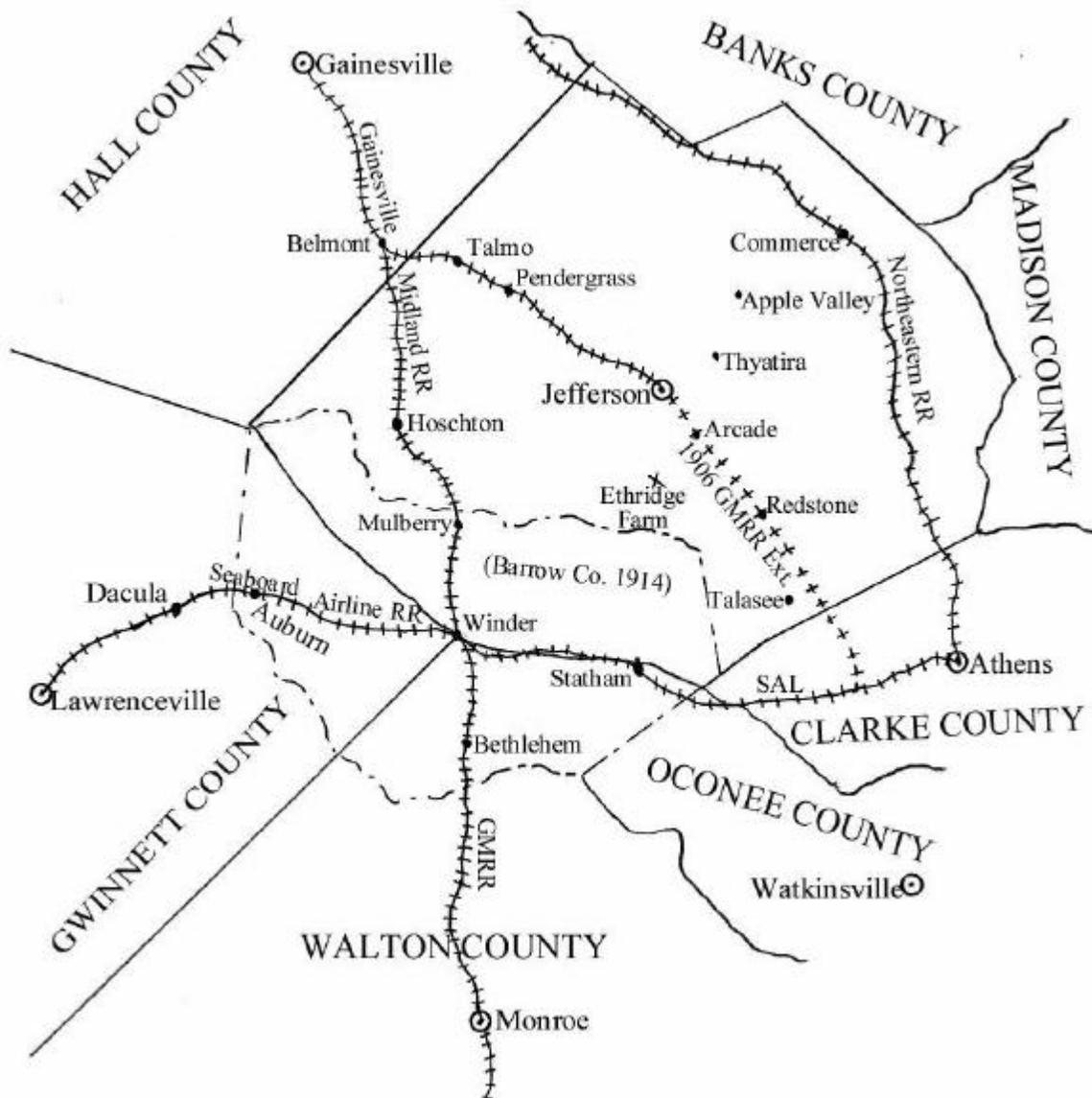
ROBERT SHIELDS FARM, 1899



Base Map: Plat surveyed March 21, 1899 by J.C. Bennett, for the purpose of dividing up the lands belonging to J. Robert Shields.

APPENDIX D

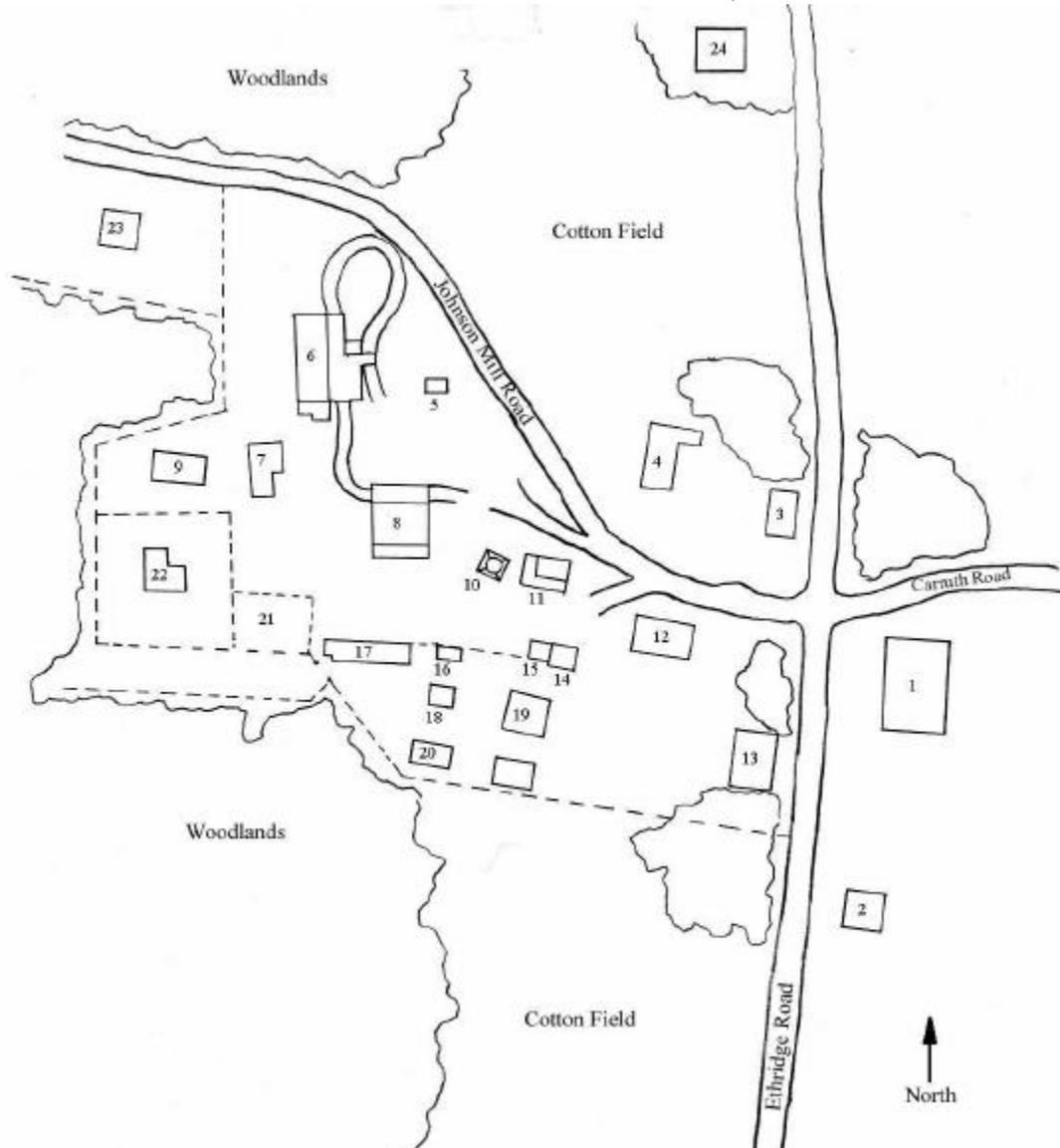
JACKSON COUNTY, 1904



Base Map: Hudgin's Map of Georgia, 1915  
Supplemented by Rand McNally Map of Georgia, 1885  
and Rand McNally, 1910

APPENDIX E

ETHRIDGE AGRICULTURAL COMPLEX, 1940'S

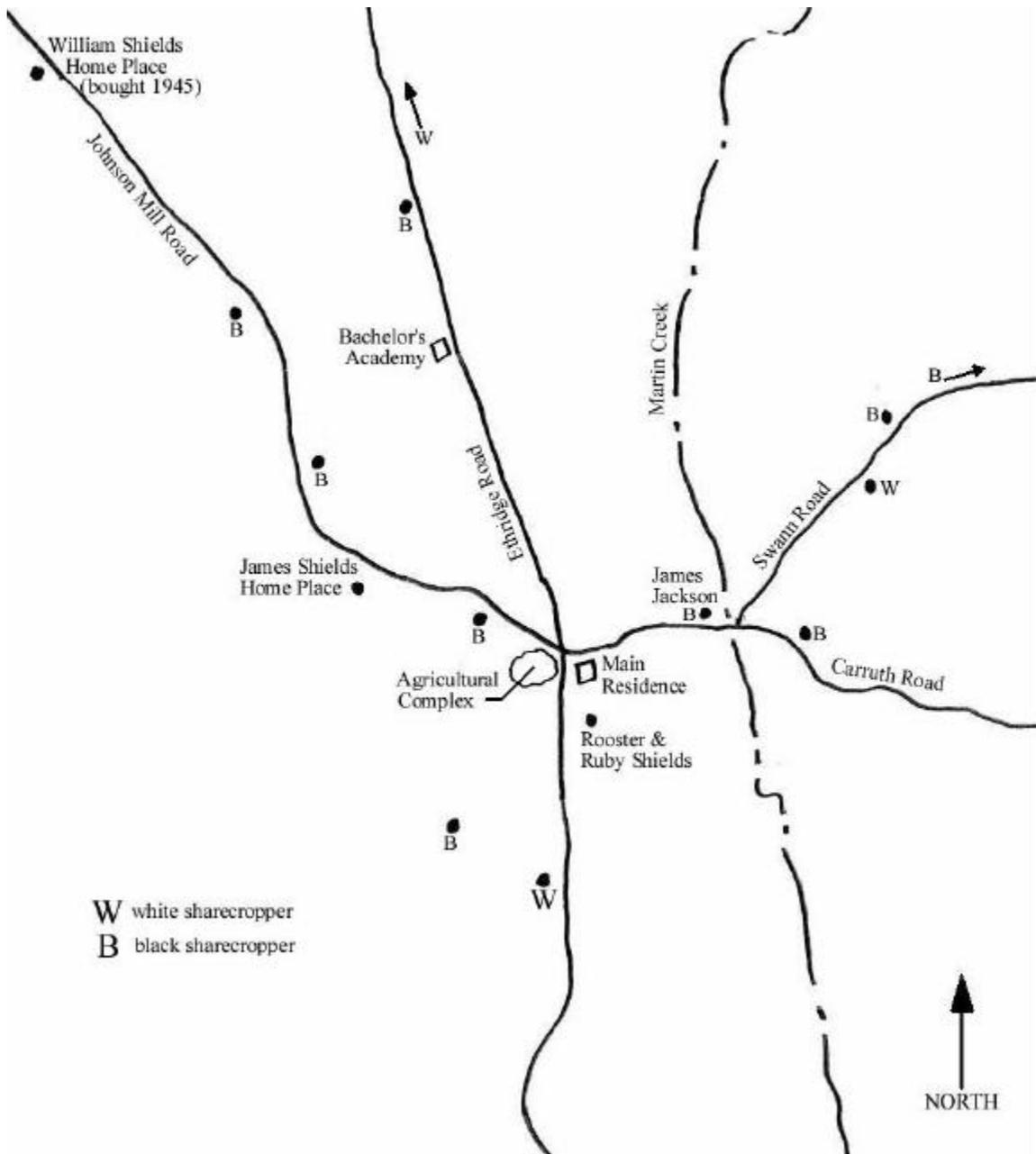


1 - Main House	9 - Sawmill	17 - Milking Barn
2 - Servant's House	10 - Water Tower	18 - Concrete Crib
3 - Commissary	11 - Grist Mill	19 - Mule Barns
4 - Blacksmith's Shop	12 - Garage	20 - Two-Stall Barn
5 - Gin Office	13 - Wheat House	21 - Cemetery
6 - Cotton Gin	14 - Corn Crib	22 - Teacher's House
7 - Seed House	15 - Hog Pen	23 - Preacher Riley House
8 - Warehouse	16 - Feed House	24 - Bachelor's Academy

Base Map: 1940's Farm Complex Layout by Ian J.W. Firth in  
*Landscape Master Plan of the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm*

APPENDIX F

ETHRIDGE FARM, 1940'S



Base Map: Land Use - 1940's by Ian J.W. Firth in  
*Landscape Master Plan of the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm*

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