Preface

Mention of the American South conjures vivid images, which are stronger than for any of the nation’s realms with the exception of, perhaps, the American West. Across mental landscapes of the South are a host of pictures, negative ones for many persons, which have been created and reinforced by both the popular media and scholarly works. Central to the images of the South are the plantation and a host of related features, ranging from the abuses of African American slavery to objects of mythical places. The plantation is also among the most misunderstood institutions of American history. The demise of the plantation has been pronounced many times by different scholars, but the large industrial farms survive as significant parts of, not just the South’s, but the nation’s agriculture.

Central to the survival of the Southern plantation, and also to the many pronouncements of its death, are changes in the geography of the large farms. During the century following the Civil War, the spatial arrangement of the Southern plantation changed twice. The emergence of tenancy after the Civil War produced major geographical alterations in the plantation, and the demise of traditional tenancy, which commenced in the Great Depression of the 1930s, was accompanied by a second spatial reorganization of the great farms. Although the plantation endures in the South, it does not survive in all the regions where it once flourished. In addition to spatial changes in plantations which made them seem to vanish, the regional demise of plantation agriculture also contributed to the premature pronouncements of the death of the agricultural system. Large expanses of the South where plantations once flourished are now essentially void of them. In other regions, however, the great farm exists in its modern geographical forms.

From the time of their importation into continental North America in the seventeenth century, blacks were intimately associated with the plantation. In 1900, after almost three centuries on the North American mainland, approximately 90 percent of the blacks, a population that had grown
to nearly nine million, were still in the South. And in the South virtually all blacks were still in the plantation regions. Then began the great twentieth-century intersectional migration of blacks from the rural South to the urban North and West. By 1970, 40 percent of the nation’s blacks were in the North, 7 percent in the West, and 53 percent in the South.

But what happened to the blacks who remained in the plantation regions? Most of the recent scholarship on contemporary African Americans has focused on large metropolises. Little attention has been shown to the African Americans who reside in the plantation South, their historical homeland. At the end of the twentieth century, several million of the nation’s blacks still lived in the countryside, small towns, and cities of the plantation regions. This population also underwent a profound redistribution. Not only did a rural-to-urban migration occur, but a microscale redistribution of blacks also took place within the countryside. Few blacks, however, remained on plantations, and less than 5 percent of the black labor force was even employed in agriculture.

This study has two principal themes. One is to trace the geographical changes in plantation agriculture between 1865 and 1970. The other is to evaluate the relationship of African Americans to the plantation during the thirteen decades of sweeping economic, social, and political changes from the first Reconstruction through the second. Although Southern agriculture is sometimes depicted as lethargic, almost static, from the 1880s into the 1940s, the changes, especially the landscape changes, were profound. The plantation landscape of 1865 had been so completely reordered by 1910 that few structures from the antebellum period survived. Another sweeping of the Southern plantation landscape began in the 1930s, accompanied by the severing of blacks from the institution to which they had been intimately bound since their importation to the North American continent. The new landscapes with their new settlement patterns are ones in which many blacks live just beyond the borders of contemporary and former plantations.

The current geography of the plantation regions is one that was created, not only by changes in the plantation system, but also by the civil rights movement and the “War on Poverty,” the second Reconstruction. The latter chapters, which interpret these events, are more detailed than the earlier ones, which analyze the New South plantation, its alteration, and its demise. My interpretation of the New South plantation is in the context of the voluminous body of literature treating alterations in Southern agriculture from the first Reconstruction through the Great Depression of the 1930s. Despite the relatively large numbers of studies on the civil rights
movement and the War on Poverty, none comprehensively examines the impacts of these events in the plantation regions.

Certain of the study’s topics, such as school desegregation, apply to the plantation South as a whole. To control the length and complexity of the study, I focus on cotton, historically and geographically the plantation South’s most important crop. The study employs the cotton plantation regions of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi as primary examples. Not only are these three states part of the core of the plantation South, but they also are among the Southern states with the largest relative black populations and have significant numbers of counties and municipalities in which blacks are the majority population. Many of the critical events of the civil rights movement, including Mississippi Freedom Summer and Martin Luther King Jr.’s Selma Campaign, occurred in these states. By 1990, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, together with Louisiana, led the nation in the number of black elected officials, most of whom held offices in the plantation regions. I do not pursue the story of plantation agriculture beyond 1970, because by that time almost all of the nation’s blacks were dissociated from the plantation system.

The manuscript was written during a period in which the terminology used for the United States’ largest minority group was changing. *African American* appeared to be superseding *black* as the preferred title. Earlier, in the 1960s, *black* replaced *Negro* and *colored*. Throughout most of the book, I employ *black*. *Black* fits the context of the period after 1966, when the term came into widespread use as a nomen that implied racial pride and alluded to political power. Original terms are retained in quotations, and the newer *African American* is employed in certain places in the text.