CHAPTER THREE

The Demise of the Plantation

For the last thirty-five years the most progressive men in the country districts of the South have been moving to nearby towns or to the Northern cities. This is disastrous to agriculture, and a reverse tendency should be set to work. . . . A new plantation system must offer profitable and attractive careers to well-equipped men, or the pine thicket and the sedge field will continue to be conspicuous features of the landscape in the cotton belt.

Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, “The Economics of the Plantation” (1903)

I was “bawn an’ bred” in the cotton belt, and thought it a goodly land until riper knowledge taught me that my red hills were niggard for all pecuniary purposes.

Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, Life and Labor in the Old South (1929)

REGIONAL VARIATION IN THE VIABILITY OF THE PLANTATION SYSTEM

During the twentieth century the plantation system in the American South took two divergent directions. One route led to mechanization and modernization, the other to decline and the demise of plantation agriculture. There was significant regional variation in what happened to the plantation. In some regions, the plantation became extinct, but in others it survives in new structural and spatial forms. Generally, scholars have failed to recognize the great geographical variations in the viability of the plantation system between 1900 and 1940. By focusing almost exclusively on the impact of the Agricultural Adjustment Act and mechanization, they miss one of the most critical changes in Southern plantation agriculture during the first half of the twentieth century, its decline. In the 1930s, the agrarian South was far from homogeneous. There were regional differences not only in crops and types of farms but also in the viability of agriculture.
According to Mandle, “the period from World War I until 1940 was one in which an incremental chipping away at the structure of the plantation economy occurred. The structure remained intact with the planters continuing to control large numbers of dependent workers in the production of the cotton staple.” Mandle also credits blacks with instigation of the “chipping away.” Blacks began to escape from the plantation system by migration to cities and to resist planter tyranny by formation of collective bargaining organizations such as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. The great migration that commenced during the First World War is assumed to have been in response to the pull of jobs in Northern cities which were opened to blacks by industrialists because of the loss of foreign immigrant labor.\(^1\) That the great migration could also have been instigated by changes in the plantation system is not considered.

O. E. Baker thought that the viability of agriculture was not necessarily durable and that study of the “dissolution of an agricultural region” was “likely to be one of the most fruitful in . . . geography.”\(^2\) Carl Sauer conjectured that in an agrarian society, “there may arise loss of productive energy . . . between primary producers and those who are carried as the leisure class. There may be a shift of comparative advantage to another people and area.” Between the end of the Civil War and the onset of the First World War, the plantation system in the lower Georgia Piedmont, Alabama Black Belt, and Natchez district reached what Sauer would have termed a “cultural climax,” a peak followed by “stabilization, and . . . cultural decline.”\(^3\)

The contrast in the regional viability of the plantation system is portrayed in Arthur Raper and Ira Reid’s *Sharecroppers All*, which appeared at the close of the Great Depression and was the culmination and synthesis of a genre of studies on the social and economic problems of the rural South published by the University of North Carolina Press. Raper and Reid compare the situation of an elderly sharecropper, Seab Johnson, and his wife, Kate, who live on a decrepit estate on the lower Georgia Piedmont in the vicinity of the Barrow family’s Sylls Fork Plantation, with that of one of their children, who is a sharecropper on a plantation in the Yazoo Delta in Mississippi.\(^4\) Seab and Kate subsist in two rooms of a crumbling, antebellum big house (fig. 3.1). A column of the old mansion leans, the upper half of a chimney has collapsed, and the driveway is a gully. Five unoccupied rooms of the house are filled with fertilizer sacks, mildewed cotton, pea hulls, and other rubbish. Of the many outbuildings that once surrounded the big house, only the smokehouse remains. On what was once a plantation that averaged a hundred bales of cotton annually, only two bales are harvested
from eight of the best acres. One goes to the absentee landlord to pay cash rent. The surrounding landscape is one of neglect and decay. Abandoned fields are covered with broom sedge and pine trees. Networks of red gullies and remains of chimneys that mark the sites of former tenant houses are scattered throughout the fields. The scene is repeated across the countryside: “red gullies shine under the sun where prized green fields once were; the big houses have been swallowed up by the pines. With few exceptions, the scattered families still on the land are renters and spend as much time getting berries and rabbits for their tables as in growing cotton to sell.” In contrast to “their place on the map,” Seab thinks of the Yazoo Delta, where his sharecropper son lives. The land is so rich that it can produce a bale of cotton per acre without fertilizer, and it is so level that the rows are a mile long. In addition, mechanization of cotton production is well under way in the Delta with the introduction of tractors.\(^5\)

During the latter part of the depression, Dorothea Lange traveled widely across America with Paul Taylor, her husband. She was a photographer for the Farm Security Administration and its predecessor, the Resettlement Administration, and he was a researcher for the Social Security Board. In *An American Exodus*, a book based on their travels, a distinction is made
between the “Old South,” where plantations were in “decay,” and the alluvial Mississippi Valley (the “Delta”), where “large plantations . . . survived more vigorously . . . than anywhere in the Cotton Belt.”

Raper and Reid and Lange and Taylor accurately portray the variations in the viability of the plantation which existed across the South at the time of the depression. In some regions the plantation was virtually extinct; in others it was in rapid decline; and in others it remained viable. So great and rapid was the decline in agriculture across the lower Piedmont from North Carolina into eastern Alabama after the First World War that the United States Department of Agriculture conducted a special study of the phenomenon. Between 1919 and 1924 harvested cropland in the fifty-nine counties studied decreased 29 percent, from 5,632,000 to 3,980,000 acres. The relative decline in cotton was even greater; it dropped 40 percent, from 3,083,000

FIG. 3.2. The disintegration of the lower Georgia Piedmont plantation landscape. In 1937, a chimney was all that remained of a Greene County, Georgia, plantation big house. That the site of the former yard and gardens was plowed to plant a small patch of cotton indicates the continual search for fresh land in the wake of erosion and increased need for commercial fertilizer. Although such solitary chimneys were sometimes called Sherman’s sentinels, those that stood in the 1930s were artifacts of the demise of agriculture near the end of the New South era, not relics of the Old South left in the wake of the Union army’s pillage across the lower Georgia Piedmont more than seventy years earlier. Dorothea Lange, FSA Collection, Library of Congress
MAP 3.1. Plantations in 1940. Despite the inclusion of plantations operated with wage labor together with those with five or more tenants, the number declined significantly in most plantation areas of the eastern South between 1910 and 1940 (source of data: U.S. Bureau of the Census [1948]).

TABLE 3.1 Number of Plantations in 325 Southern Counties, 1910 and 1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number of Plantations 1910</th>
<th>Number of Plantations 1940</th>
<th>Difference 1910–1940</th>
<th>Percentage Difference 1910–1940</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>7,287</td>
<td>1,801</td>
<td>-5,486</td>
<td>-75.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>2,674</td>
<td>2,499</td>
<td>-175</td>
<td>-6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-74</td>
<td>-88.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>6,627</td>
<td>1,840</td>
<td>-4,787</td>
<td>-72.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>2,480</td>
<td>2,292</td>
<td>-188</td>
<td>-7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>7,960</td>
<td>6,668</td>
<td>-1,292</td>
<td>-16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>1,775</td>
<td>1,513</td>
<td>-262</td>
<td>-14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>5,105</td>
<td>1,737</td>
<td>-3,368</td>
<td>-66.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>1,413</td>
<td>647</td>
<td>-766</td>
<td>-54.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>3,468</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>-3,109</td>
<td>-89.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>-68</td>
<td>-34.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>39,073</strong></td>
<td><strong>19,498</strong></td>
<td><strong>-19,575</strong></td>
<td><strong>-50.1</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1916; [1948].
acres to 1,472,000. The landscape depicted the degeneration. Johnson and Turner, the study’s authors, described the decay: “Most of the larger houses that might once have been seen on larger land holdings have burned or been ruined through neglect. Some landowners have been unable to look after their property, others have deliberately neglected their property. In either case much of the land is idle without occupants” (fig. 3.2).

In the 325 counties included in the 1910 plantation census, the number of plantations declined by 50 percent from 39,073 to 19,498 between 1910 and 1940 (table 3.1). The decrease occurred despite the more inclusive definition of plantation for the 1940 census. The largest declines were in the eastern cotton belt. In Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina the number of plantations decreased 75, 72, and 66 percent, while in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi the declines were 7, 8, and 16 percent. Changes in number of plantations were not uniform among regions. A comparison of the distribution of plantations in 1910 and 1940 reveals significant declines in the Piedmont, the Alabama Black Belt, and the Natchez district (maps 2.2 and 3.1). Across the Coastal Plain of South Carolina and Georgia and the north Mississippi Loess Plains, the decreases were not nearly as great, and in the Yazoo Delta the number of plantations actually increased.

THE DECLINE OF PLANTATION MANAGEMENT

Reasons usually cited for the decline of Southern agriculture, including farm tenancy, soil erosion, and the cotton boll weevil, were actually more symptoms than causes of disintegration. Management failure was the underlying basis of the decay. Landowners increasingly ceased to exercise the attentive supervision that was critical to plantation agriculture. A major conclusion of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s 1930 study of the lower Piedmont was “a great scarcity of real ability to manage large holdings of farm land” under adverse conditions. “Any success” on plantations was “certain to mean that the owners live[d] on their land and carefully direct[ed] their tenants and hired hands.”

Gibson, who studied the Alabama Black Belt in the 1930s, thought that the decaying plantation big houses, abandoned fields, and eroded hillsides made it obvious that the region had “never offered many opportunities for people with professional training and ambition; hence, the bulk of the more promising ones . . . sought opportunities in the cities of Alabama and of the North and East.” During the depression Arthur Raper carefully analyzed the historical process of plantation occupance in two older cotton regions of the South. “When the plantation is flourishing, one finds a few large, well-built dwellings where
The owners live, and a great number of small, twisted, unpainted cabins which house the landless agricultural workers—usually wage hands and croppers. As the plantation deteriorates, the big houses go without paint, the roofs leak, the porches tumble down, one field and then another is abandoned to brambles and gullies. . . . As the plantation crumbles, most of the erstwhile owners and some of the more alert tenants abandon the scene.”

The demise of prudent plantation management on the lower Georgia Piedmont was an evolutionary process that originated after the Civil War with the difficulties planters encountered in the transition from a slave to a free labor force. Because centralized management is critical to the plantation system, deterioration of landowners’ ability or desire to exercise close supervision of farm operations resulted in decline of the plantation system. An increase in the number of absentee landlords and the growth of cash tenancy were signs of an impending leadership crisis. Ample evidence indicates that following the Civil War many planter families increasingly turned their attention from the land to other pursuits, including leadership roles in industrialization and urban development. Billings concluded that “the supposedly ‘new men’ of politics and industry in late nineteenth-century” North Carolina were actually members of “the landed upper classes” and “were the principal agents of industrial development.” In his study of post–Civil War Alabama, Wiener found that Black Belt planters played a major role in the growth of Birmingham, the only large industrial city of the New South. A coalition of industrialists and planters took “the Prussian Road” to a restrictive, closely controlled type of factory system.

A local journalist bragged in 1931 that Greene County in the Alabama Black Belt “gave to Birmingham Webb Crawford, the banker; William McQueen, the industrialist; Sam Murphy, the judge; and John McQueen, the lawyer; all four of whom made their mark in the Magic City and helped it to go forward.” Russell found that most of the economic leaders of Atlanta between its creation in 1847 and 1890 were born in the South, primarily in Georgia, and had family ties to the Southern elite. According to one resident, Atlanta was “a city fashioned and controlled by ‘native’ men . . . born and reared within a hundred miles of its streets.” The Washington, Georgia, weekly boasted in 1926 that the Danburg community in Wilkes County gave Atlanta “a number of distinguished sons,” including a prominent pediatrician and the superintendent of schools. Henry Grady, who as the editor of the Atlanta Constitution was one of the most vehement champions of an industrial “New South,” was reared in a majestic Greek-revival house in Athens.
Even urban planter families of old coastal cities lost their ambitious children. Charleston, with its “urban focused plantation society” of the Sea Island region,\(^\text{14}\) after the Civil War became a stagnant decaying city as new interior cities, such as Atlanta, Memphis, and Birmingham, grew. In 1940, Robert Goodwin Rhett, a member of Charleston’s elite, bemoaned that the “flower of the youth of Charleston” moved to the South Carolina Piedmont and to other states seeking better opportunities. “Their departure drained the city of much of its vitality.”\(^\text{15}\)

Although agriculture initially was the principal underpinning of Southern wealth, with growth of cities and economic modernization, planter families increasingly paid less and less attention to landholdings, especially ones in the older plantation regions. The concern for agriculture eroded with each successive generation. Planters’ children who left the land may have retained a significant interest in agriculture, but knowledge of and concern for farming declined with each succeeding urban-born generation, even though its members may have inherited estates. Contrary to the popular notion that planter families had nostalgic ties that kept them on the land, creation, preservation, and increase of wealth were more primary considerations than the family landholdings.\(^\text{16}\) Reasons given by planters for abandoning careful management of their plantations after the Civil War varied. However, a common theme was that children were not available to assume management because, educated for occupations other than agriculture, they had left the land. In 1881, the David C. Barrow family lived in Athens rather than on Sylls Fork or one of the family’s other three plantations. David C. Barrow Jr. was a faculty member and, eventually, chancellor of the University of Georgia. The experiences of three Hancock County planters are representative of those who ceased to manage their plantations. After the death of her husband, Edgeworth, in 1867, Sallie Bird rented Granite Farm and moved to Athens and then Baltimore, where she remarried and then died in 1910. Frank White successfully made the transition from a slave to a sharecropper labor force. White, who did not have any children to take over his plantation, in 1887 leased the land to “renters” because his “health became such as to interfere with close supervision.” In 1896, Moses Harris “moved family to town to educate children and practically abandoned plantation to renting.”\(^\text{17}\)

Brooks identified absentee ownership as a major problem across the lower Georgia Piedmont in 1911, with large numbers of “renters” and lack of adequate supervision common to plantations that landlords had left. “The share system [sharecropping] was used where the landlords still lived on their plantations and exercised supervision over the operations of the
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tenants . . . As time went on, more and more planters continued to move to
the towns and the renting system [cash rent] tended to supplant the share
system.” Describing Meriwether, Troup, and Coweta Counties in the western part of the region, Brooks wrote that the big plantations seemed to be
“on the wane in this district, great readiness being reported to sell lands at
fair prices to small farmers.” Raper found that absentee ownership was
greater in Greene County on the Piedmont, where agriculture was in decline, than in Macon County on the Coastal Plain, where it remained viable. In 1934, the 115 landholdings with 500 or more acres in Greene
County contained 117,000 acres, approximately half of the county. Thirty-six of the 115 were owned by absentee landlords.

In itself, the high percentage of land held by absentee landlords was not
the cause of the demise of plantation agriculture. What was critical was
failure to insure careful management of their properties. Raper concluded,
“Absentee landlordism is most harmful to a community when it persists
irrespective of the revenue received from the land; that is, when large tracts
are held for sentimental rather than economic reasons.” He also found that
deterioration of management was common even among resident owners.
These passive or “quasi-absentee” landlords, like absentee owners, paid
“very little personal attention” to “cultivation” of their holdings. The failure
of resident owners to manage their properties effectively was most prevalent in the “red land area,” the principal plantation section of Greene
County.

In 1935, the Georgia Agricultural Experiment Station published a lengthy,
detailed study of the lower Piedmont plantation region. Among the findings
were the concentration of a high percentage of the land in ownership units
of 500 or more acres, ownership of a large percentage of the land by a few
persons, a high percentage of absentee owners, lack of careful management
of properties by both resident and absentee owners, and decline of both
agriculture and the plantation system. Forty-one percent, 1,778,000 acres, of
the land in twenty-four counties of the lower Georgia Piedmont in 1932 were
in ownership units of 500 or more acres. Absentee ownership was even
higher than Raper found in Greene County. Less than two-fifths of the land
in the twenty-four counties was owned by resident operators. Administrators and executors of estates controlled 10.5 percent and banks and mort-
gage companies 7.7 percent of the land. “A material proportion of the land”
was “left pretty much to operation by tenants and croppers with only
occasional attention by owner or manager. Consequently, the farm opera-
tions on many of these holdings” was “very slip-shod.” Some resident
owners permitted destructive agricultural practices in an effort to drain
“every dollar possible in order to maintain standards and customs of living based on an outworn order of the old plantation period.” The cultivated acreage declined year by year. On many landholdings “only the especially favorable fields” were still farmed. “The big owner-operated plantation in the Lower Piedmont” was “the exception rather than the rule.” The striking conclusion was that “the old planters and their families and heirs” were “through with farming on the old estates.”

The relative importance of cash tenants is among the evidence that supports the premise that by the early twentieth century many plantations on the lower Georgia Piedmont had inept leaders. Richard Ely, Charles Galpin, and W. J. Spillman conceived the controversial “agricultural ladder” as a method of conceptualizing the relationships among farmers with respect to land ownership. The Midwestern family farm model that they developed held large-scale agriculture and farm tenancy to be economic and social evils. The paragon American farmer was a *family farmer* who owned no more land than he and his wife and children could till. Tenancy, which the mythical ladder was conceived largely to explain and justify, was tolerated but only because it was the sole route by which some young men could become farmers (fig. 3.3). After entering agriculture as a “hired man,” a young man could accumulate enough capital to purchase implements and work stock and climb to a higher rung and become a share tenant. As the young farmer matured, he was able to negotiate better terms and become the acme of renters, a cash tenant. Climbing up through part owner, he finally became a full owner, the apex of the agricultural ladder. Growth of cash tenancy, which gave a renter more freedom, and decline of share tenants indicated improvement in agriculture.

![Fig. 3.3. The agricultural ladder, 1880–1950](image-url)
On the lower Georgia Piedmont in 1910, a large percentage of the tenant farmers paid cash rent (map 3.2). In Meriwether County most cash tenants paid a “bale-per-plow” annual rent. Daniel interpreted this method of renting land in Meriwether as one that “encouraged initiative.” Therefore, he supported the Midwestern model. In his studies of Greene and Macon Counties, Georgia, Raper also found evidence that appeared to sustain the model. He thought that the role of a cash tenant approximated that of a landowner because he did not move often, owned capital goods, and had greater freedom. He also found that a “considerable number” of black and white cash tenants had been able to reach the apex of the agricultural ladder and buy farms. Plantation agriculture, however, is a different context for interpretation of the role of cash tenants (fig. 3.3). Like the traditional factory system, efficient, centralized management that closely supervised inexpensive, docile labor was vital to the plantation. The plantation system does not foster small family farms, and the New South–era plantation did not promote the progression of wage hands and sharecroppers up tenancy rungs toward land ownership. Unlike the Midwest, in mature Southern plantation regions large numbers of cash tenants were actually evidence of the decline of management and the consequent disintegration of agriculture. The context of Meriwether, Greene, and Macon Counties was the Southern, not the Midwestern, model. Raper concluded that “cash
renters reflect[ed] the disintegration of plantation farming,” for “fixed renting naturally emerge[d] on the acreage of absentee owners and of resident owners who care[d] little about their land.”

What was especially unfortunate about the growth of cash tenancy in the plantation South was that the centralized decision making, together with the planter philosophy that the labor force must be kept uneducated and submissive, did not prepare sharecroppers, share tenants, and laborers to function effectively as independent farmers. They lived in small, isolated worlds that rarely extended beyond the horizon. Although share and cash tenants were capable of successfully farming from year to year, their limited education, isolation, and lack of capital prevented most from responding rapidly and effectively to a major crisis. In addition, the local economic infrastructure of furnish stores, cotton ginneries, warehouses, and banks was not transformed to one of yeoman agriculture but remained that of the plantation. Although poor blacks and whites initially had more freedom as cash tenants, ultimately those on the lower Piedmont were in worse circumstances, for the deteriorating agricultural system eventually came crashing down around them.

By the second decade of the twentieth century the plantation system on the lower Piedmont had evolved to a stage in which management varied significantly from landholding to landholding. Some landholdings were carefully and efficiently overseen and were profitable; they were the embodiment of the ideal New South plantation. Such plantations were worked by sharecroppers and wage laborers. The largest had commissaries and cotton gins. Management practiced aggressive erosion control and maintained soil fertility through the annual application of commercial fertilizer. Fields were circled by numerous bench terraces, and, in addition to heavy applications of “guano,” crops were rotated to the extent that rotation was possible in an agricultural system that emphasized one commercial crop. A step down in management were plantations worked by a combination of sharecroppers and share tenants whose resident owners paid little attention to the operation. Mules and farm implements were sold to tenants who wished to buy them; the plantation was in transition from one worked by sharecroppers to one worked by share and cash tenants. Usually such plantations were owned by elderly persons who had no children or whose children had chosen occupations other than farming. In the absence of a manager, one of the tenants might be given primary responsibility for supervision of the plantation. In 1920, the agricultural infrastructure of the lower Piedmont was an intricate one that focused on small agribusiness complexes in towns, hamlets, and crossroads more than on
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FIG. 3.4. The disintegration of the lower Georgia Piedmont plantation landscape. Abandoned big house on Pharr plantation near Social Circle on the lower Georgia Piedmont in 1937. The house was constructed by slaves in 1840. Cotton is planted up to the house and covers the former sites of gardens, orchard, and auxiliary buildings. According to Dorothea Lange, who took the photograph, the plantation, which formerly had 150 slaves, was abandoned by the one remaining family member and was rented to small farmers. FSA Collection, Library of Congress

plantations. Such an infrastructure had evolved in response to the growing numbers of cash and share tenants. Although many landlords no longer provided the annual “furnish,” tenant farmers easily obtained it from one of the local merchants. The final stage in the transition was a landholding on which management had ceased to function (fig. 3.4). The land was leased to cash tenants who, in turn, might sublease to sharecroppers. Absentee ownership of such properties was high. The annual rent, which was paid after the crops were harvested in the fall, was collected by the landlord on one of his infrequent visits or by a local ginner or merchant who acted as the landlord’s agent.

Inertia causes organizations, including farms and agricultural regions, to continue to function long after leadership begins to decline. Buchanan argued that one of the characteristics of an agricultural region is the tendency to sustain itself as a result of accumulation of capital investments, special skills, and ancillary institutions geared to a particular type of agriculture.27 Precipitous demise of an agricultural region, though, can be produced by a major crisis with which an apathetic and inept leadership is
not prepared to deal. During the twentieth century the Piedmont cotton region confronted two major crises. One was the arrival of an insect, the boll weevil; the other was the development of competitive disadvantage for cotton, which necessitated modernization of production by the adoption of new technology.

THE COLLAPSE OF AGRICULTURE
ON THE LOWER GEORGIA PIEDMONT

The lower Piedmont plantation region survived civil war, emancipation of its slave labor force, and Federal occupation only to succumb a little more than half a century later to another invasion, that of a tiny insect, the boll weevil. The insect entered Texas from Mexico about 1892 and year by year, flying from field to field, spread across the South. By 1915 it had reached the Georgia Piedmont and by 1923 had spread to the northern limit of the cotton belt in southern Virginia.28 The migration of the boll weevil was carefully monitored and mapped by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Farmers were warned of the weevil’s impending arrival several years before the insect reached a cotton region.

The Department of Agriculture developed methods whereby farmers could control and economically cope with the insect. Weevil control, however, required cotton growers to make considerable changes in traditional farming methods and to invest more capital in a crop. As soon as cotton was harvested, stalks were to be cut and plowed under to destroy both weevils and winter hibernation places. To diminish the weevil population further, fields and areas bordering them were to be burned. During the growing season, weevil infestation was to be monitored. If infestation increased, insecticides such as calcium arsenate had to be dusted or mixed with molasses and mopped on cotton plants (fig. 3.5). In addition, new varieties of cotton which could be planted earlier than traditional ones were introduced. Because weevil populations became progressively larger during the growing season, earlier planting resulted in cotton growing beyond its most susceptible stage for weevil damage when populations were smallest. Heavier applications of fertilizer caused cotton to grow faster and to produce more fruit, which helped compensate for losses to weevils.29

That the boll weevil was expected on the lower Georgia Piedmont and educated farmers knew aggressive measures had to be taken if cotton was to remain economically viable is revealed in what a student at the state college of agriculture in Athens wrote in 1912:
That the Mexican cotton boll weevil will have entered Georgia within the next three years is as certain as it is that cotton will continue to be produced in this state. . . . If we shall meet this enemy in a manner to result in a minimum of loss, it is essential that we make preparation fast in the little time that may intervene. . . . It would be well for us to profit by the experience of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, for which they have paid so large a price. Active operation of the fundamental improvements in agricultural practice which has been worked out in the last few years in the path of the weevil is our strongest weapon against this steadily marching enemy.\textsuperscript{30}

Dissemination of weevil control techniques was primarily through newspapers, agricultural journals, and Department of Agriculture and agricultural college bulletins. Although educated planters and yeomen were aware of the threat the boll weevil posed, most farmers, including cash tenants and new landowners who had risen from the tenant class, were not. In Greene and Macon Counties, Georgia, only 10 percent of black families subscribed to agricultural papers.\textsuperscript{31}

The spread of the boll weevil across the South was a test of the health of
agriculture and the viability of leadership at local and regional scales. So devastating was the insect on the lower Georgia Piedmont that its invasion was likened to that of Sherman’s march across the region a little more than half a century earlier. In regions with competent management, including the Yazoo Delta and the northern portion of the Mississippi Loess Plains, cotton production survived the onslaught of the boll weevil (map 3.3). Cotton yields decreased for a few years after the arrival of the insect, but as control methods were employed, production recovered. At the close of the twentieth century, the boll weevil was not eradicated from much of the South, and cotton production still required that the insect be aggressively controlled.

Cotton regions that lost most of their competent and aggressive agricultural leaders prior to the arrival of the boll weevil underwent rapid decline from which they never recovered. The decline of cotton production and acreage between 1909 and 1929 was more pronounced in counties with the largest percentages of cash tenants. On the lower Georgia Piedmont, the insect initiated what became known as the “boll weevil depression.” A severe decline in cotton production followed the insect’s arrival. Hancock County produced 25,077 five-hundred-pound bales of lint cotton in 1914 but only 710 in 1922. In Oglethorpe and Wilkes Counties, production

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MAP 3.3. Percentage of change in cotton acreage, 1909–29 (source of data: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1913a, 1932a)
dropped from 26,403 to 2,828 and 33,760 to 2,492 bales. The suddenness and severity of the decline was even worse in Greene County, where production decreased from 21,479 bales in 1919 to 14,025 in 1920 and then plummeted to 1,420 bales in 1921 and 326 in 1922.32

A number of scholars have incorrectly assumed that the boll weevil is what destroyed much of the cotton economy as it spread across the South. The impact of the insect, however, was more a spectacular symptom of agricultural demise than a direct cause of it. When the insect reached the western edge of the lower Georgia Piedmont in 1915, the region was ripe for disaster, for the seeds that precipitated it were sown years before. Raper concluded that “for years the load had been accumulating” and the weevil was merely the “straw . . . which broke . . . cotton[‘s] back.” The scenario of demise began with management failure, which led to soil erosion and the decline of soil fertility. “With the land becoming poorer and poorer and the surpluses from farming smaller and smaller and the dependence upon cash crops greater and greater, the population movement of rural dwellers was already decreed long before the coming of the weevil.”33 A similar conclusion was reached by Hartman and Wooten. Decrease of agricultural land on the lower Georgia Piedmont actually began in the 1880s. “Although that decrease was more or less precipitous after the boll weevil invasion, it started as a natural consequence of exploitative land use practices prevailing under the cotton plantation system of farming.” That the decline of agriculture “was not the result of . . . the boll weevil invasion is indicated by the fact that the agricultural plant began to break down in seventeen of the thirty-five counties [of the lower Piedmont] before 1910.” In “all but 5 of the 35 counties” there were “decreases in area of agricultural land before 1920.”34

That much of the agricultural leadership and management capability disappeared from the lower Piedmont is illustrated by what the Wilkes County Agricultural Extension agent chided in 1927. Six years into the boll weevil disaster, Wilkes had “very little dusting machinery,” and “not more than one farmer out of sixty” had “carried on the boll weevil fight in the systematic way” that was “successful.”35 Because many landowners failed to fight the insect aggressively, much of the initiative originated with the owners of businesses that depended on cotton (fig. 3.6). Although owners of ginneries, furnish stores, banks, and other businesses that made up the agricultural infrastructure attempted to advise semiliterate farmers on how to control the boll weevil, they had no direct supervisory role except on their own properties.

The heyday of New South agriculture was relatively brief on the lower Georgia Piedmont, lasting from approximately 1890 to 1920. Two factors
especially accelerated agricultural decline with the advent of the boll weevil: agricultural disinvestment and concentration of land ownership. The insect initiated an economic domino effect that destroyed a substantial part of the financial infrastructure. The most serious result of several consecutive years of paltry cotton harvests was destruction of the credit of many tenant farmers and in turn that of the merchants and planters who furnished them and banks from which the merchants and planters borrowed. The failure of small-town banks rippled up to regional banks, some of which also crashed or were badly shaken. "We do not know who is going to finance white and negro tenants on many gully-washed plantations," lamented an editorial in Morgan County's weekly just before Christmas, 1922. "The landlord is likely land poor and cannot help, while even if he waives the rent, no cotton factor or banker will lend a hand for the simple reason that the tenant can offer no collateral for monies advanced except an uncertain crop of cotton." In Greene County, both banks in Greensboro and the ones in Woodville and White Plains had closed by 1928.36

Capital investment in the agricultural infrastructure began to decline significantly after the arrival of the boll weevil. Few new tenant houses, mule barns, ginneries, warehouses, cotton oil mills, and fertilizer plants

FIG. 3.6. Advertisement in Greene County, Georgia, weekly newspaper sponsored by agricultural infrastructure businesses encouraging farmers to control the boll weevil more aggressively. By 1930, all of the four banks had failed. Herald-Journal, May 23, 1925
were built after 1920. Even with the partial recovery of cotton, by 1930 the lower Piedmont grew only enough to support one-third of the existing infrastructure, which was essentially used up with little new investment after cotton renewed its decline.\textsuperscript{37} When planters abandoned their landholdings, they sold work stock and farm implements. In 1926, 41 percent of the owners of 500 or more acres in Morgan, 47 percent in Hancock, and 53 percent in Putnam Counties had no work stock. In Morgan County, which with respect to topography and soil was among the best agricultural areas of the lower Piedmont, landowners with 500 or more acres who did not own work stock increased from 37 percent in 1920, just prior to the boll weevil disaster, to 60 percent in 1932.\textsuperscript{38}

Share and cash tenants lost the most. Unable to pay annual bills for planting seed, fertilizer, and food and clothing, they had to sell the mules and farm implements, which they had worked so long and hard to buy. Loss of work stock and equipment meant that the tenants either had to become sharecroppers or had to migrate. Because few planters had work stock and equipment with which to increase the number of sharecroppers and because many had no desire to operate sharecropper plantations, loss of work stock and farm implements meant that many share and cash tenants were finished in agriculture on the lower Piedmont. Johnson and Turner’s study confirmed “that the intensity of the decline in the . . . acreage . . . harvested . . . varied, in general, directly with the percentage of tenants . . . who were standing renters [cash tenants].” The conclusion was that an area that lost its renters could not easily replace them. “[The] renters furnish capital goods of a type that landlords worry most about. . . . There were about as many croppers in the 59 counties in 1925 as in 1920, a decline of only 6 per cent. . . . Other tenants, the more important class because of their ownership of work animals, declined much more—36 per cent. The effective strength of these other tenants to operate farm lands, as shown by the numbers of their work animals, declined even more.”\textsuperscript{39}

The decline of the plantation system on the lower Piedmont initiated a large exodus of blacks. Most who left for Northern and Southern cities faded into the swelling black urban masses, finding neither fortune nor fame. The lower Georgia Piedmont’s black population peaked just prior to World War I and the arrival of the boll weevil. During the 1920s, Greene County’s black population dropped from 11,000 to 6,628, a 43 percent decrease. The decline was 67 percent in the five minor civil divisions where most of the plantations were located. By 1933, 20 percent of the rural dwellings in Jasper, Morgan, and Putnam Counties in 1918 had vanished, and fewer than half of the remaining 80 percent were still occupied.\textsuperscript{40}
The exodus of large numbers of blacks from the lower Georgia Piedmont during the 1920s meant that the labor-intensive cotton system could not recover to pre-boll weevil levels. The editor of the *Madisonian* wrote in 1922, “Every negro who leaves Morgan County cripples our only industry just that much more and lessens our chance of making a crop. It is estimated that two to three thousand have already left the county.” The editor of the *Augusta Chronicle* also failed to perceive the desperate situation of poor blacks in the agricultural collapse and lambasted Northern industrialists who had begun to recruit cheap black labor. “From one end of this country to the other and to be iterated and reiterated by every newspaper and magazine in this land should be this tragedy, and a wholly unnecessary one, that is going on as regards the migration of common labor from the farm, thus taking out of agriculture its prime means of sustenance and the taking over of this common labor, which is equivalent to robbing agriculture by the industrials [sic] of this country and let the public press not mince matters as regards causation.”

Blaming blacks for the agricultural demise was an attempt to make them the scapegoats. Accustomed to an abundant supply of cheap labor, whites panicked when blacks began to leave in droves. But no serious effort was made to hold black labor by increases in wages, improvements to housing and schools, or amelioration of segregation. The editor of Greene County’s weekly newspaper placed the blame for the boll weevil disaster on the large white landowners. “The trouble is more or less with our people. It isn’t the fault of our possibilities, our climate, . . . our magnificent low-lands. . . . The negroes are leaving by the thousands. Maybe, after all, this will force the white man to go to work. He has been depending upon ‘old cuff,’ to make him a living and abusing the black man when he didn’t do it.”

Declines in cotton yields caused by the boll weevil meant that landlords had to decrease the rent of cash tenants. Most cash tenants in Meriwether County traditionally paid one and a half bales per plow, but after the arrival of the weevil, landlords had to lower the rent to one bale. In the early 1930s, “numerous renters” on properties of absentee landlords in Greene County had paid little or no rent since 1921. Some landlords decided that under conditions in which they received little or no rent it was to their advantage to terminate farming rather than to have the worry of a few tenants trying to eke out a living. Many simply “let their land lie idle, rather than guarantee a living to farmers . . . who, since 1920, [had] hardly in any year produced goods equal in value to what a landowner . . . had to expend.”

The high percentage of land in large holdings significantly affected the stability of agriculture on the lower Piedmont. Decisions by a few planters
in a county to reduce crop acreage or to abandon farming removed a considerable acreage. During the 1920s, the decline in agriculture was much less severe on the upper Piedmont, with its numerous small yeoman farms. Johnson and Turner speculated that had the lower Piedmont plantation region “been farmed mainly by those working the family size farms, . . . most of the land would [have been] occupied.”45 In 1940, the editor of the Greene County weekly described the effect of concentration of land ownership on agricultural demise more candidly: “The trouble with Greene County is that we have had too many large plantations. Too many white men sat around town on their ‘fannies’ while the nigahs did all the work. The nigahs didn’t know how to look after things, so they let the land wash away. When the boll weevil came, there was nothing left. We can’t go back to the old cotton system. We’ve got to make the people live at home on the farms, and you can’t do that with the plantation system.”46

Planters who continued to farm often reduced cotton acreage and attempted to diversify. The 6,000-acre Orr Plantation was one of the largest in Wilkes County and produced more than one thousand bales of cotton annually. In 1920, Orr employed about 150 tenants and planted more than 1,500 acres of cotton. Two years after the weevil arrived, the harvest dropped to eight bales. By 1926, the number of tenants had declined to 50 or 60 and cotton acreage to 500. Although cotton yields had improved, only two hundred bales were produced. To compensate for the loss in cotton, Orr grew more corn and wheat and raised pigs, which he sold for five dollars each. Loss of two-thirds of the tenants, however, meant that abandoned fields covered with broom sedge stretched across the great plantation. Six years after the weevil’s arrival, Orr thought that his “small kingdom” had become a “gigantic burden.”47

In the face of the onslaught of the boll weevil were well-managed farms and plantations that survived the agricultural collapse around them. A Wilkes County farmer who purchased a Feny Mule Back Duster and followed the Department of Agriculture’s advice on its use made twelve bales of cotton on 17 acres. Some of the neighboring planters who did not apply calcium arsenate properly and at the critical times made less than twelve bales on 100 acres.48 By the mid-1930s only ten large landholdings in Greene County remained genuine plantations. The ten “were without exception, operated by tenants under the close supervision of resident owners.” The ten were located in various parts of Greene County, and several were surrounded by vast abandoned landholdings that had once been prominent plantations.49 Across the lower Piedmont, Johnson and Turner encountered successful farmers who continued profitable cotton production:
There are farmers who seem able to grow cotton regardless of their negligent neighbors. By their efforts these men market cotton every year and do not miss in the years when prices are high because damage has been unusually severe to the crop as a whole.

Possibilities of controlling weevil damages are illustrated by the yields obtained by one Piedmont cotton farmer whose production on his weevil-controlled 335 acre farm has been so much more uniform than for his county of Wilkes that he has paid off the debt he had in 1920 with profits obtained in years when most cotton farmers have been getting deeper and deeper in debt.50

THE PINE THICKET AND THE SEDGE FIELD

When the New South plantation reached its apex on the lower Georgia Piedmont about 1910, the area was one of the oldest and most important cotton regions of the world. At least 2,500 of the 6,627 plantations the Bureau of the Census enumerated in seventy Georgia counties in 1910 were on the lower Piedmont, and tenant families toiled in red clay fields that stretched from horizon to horizon. In 1940, only 382 plantations survived (table 3.1; map 3.1). Nowhere is the theme of the decline of plantation agriculture as the result of lack of effective management more vividly depicted than in fictional literature. So striking was the decline of plantation agriculture on the lower Georgia Piedmont that writers of fiction captured it with vivid descriptions in enduring stories. Gone with the Wind, published in 1936, was written by Margaret Mitchell, in part, to explain contemporary reality, including the abandonment of plantations for Atlanta. The decadent early-twentieth-century landscape of the lower Georgia Piedmont was the genesis of the novel. In 1936, Mitchell wrote Henry Steele Commager concerning Gone with the Wind’s origin:

How happy I was that you were impressed by Rhett’s [Butler’s] remark about the upside-down world. . . . For in this paragraph lies the genesis of my book and that genesis lies [29] years back [in 1907] when I was six years old and those words . . . were said to me . . . by . . . my mother. I didn’t want to go to school . . . and I saw no value at all in education. And my mother took me out on the hottest day I ever saw and . . . [took] me [from Atlanta] down the road toward Jonesboro—“the Road to Tara” and showed me the old ruins of houses where fine and wealthy people had once lived. . . .

And she talked about the world those people had lived in, such a
secure world, and how it had exploded beneath them. And she told me that my own world was going to explode under me some day, and God help me if I didn't have the weapon [of education] to meet the new world.\textsuperscript{51}

Mitchell was prone to dramatization and probably enacted much of this childhood confrontation with her mother. She wrote \textit{Gone with the Wind} during the 1920s and essentially completed the novel by 1929, just prior to her thirtieth birthday. The plantation landscape from which she drew was the contemporary one that revealed the impact of the boll weevil. Mitchell incorrectly believed that the decadent New South Piedmont plantation landscape that she knew was that of the Old South near the end of a disintegration that began during the Civil War. Actually, the New South plantation landscape had few features that, even in 1907, survived from the Old South era. The landscape that Mitchell knew was the one reordered after the Civil War by the alteration of the plantation system to a tenant labor force and by the emergence of a railroad network, a central place hierarchy, and a new complex agricultural infrastructure (figs. 2.1 and 3.7).

Mitchell had worked as an obituary writer for the \textit{Atlanta Journal} and wrote \textit{Gone with the Wind} like an obituary. She knew the ending; all she had to do was explain it. The ultimate conclusion, however, was not in the 1870s, when she terminated the novel, but in the twentieth century, the time she knew personally. Not only did Mitchell have the corpse of the Georgia Piedmont plantation landscape from which to draw, but she had a host of persons on which to base her fictional characters. Scarlett O'Hara was taken from Annie Fitzgerald Stephens, Mitchell's maternal grandmother, who died in 1934. Annie, who was about the same age as the fictional Scarlett, had moved from a plantation in Clayton County on the lower Piedmont to nearby Atlanta as a young woman, and she eventually lived in a great Victorian house. She was hardly a loving matriarch. Family members, including Mitchell, whom she disinherited, remembered her “as grasping, possessive, and materialistic; . . . devoid of sympathy as a mother, friend, or landlord.”\textsuperscript{52}

Mitchell accurately depicts an exodus of planter families—the O'Haras, the Wilkes, and the Hamiltons—from the rural Georgia Piedmont to Atlanta after the Civil War. Scarlett marries her second husband, Frank Kennedy, and becomes a shrewd Atlanta businesswoman with a store, lumberyard, and sawmill. Although still possessing a love for Tara, she is an absentee owner who abandoned the family plantation and the past for Atlanta and the future. After Scarlett marries Rhett Butler, she becomes
even more of an urbanite with her new Atlanta mansion, which is elite compared with the crudely build, decaying big house on Tara which she left. The migration to Atlanta is important in the geographical symbolism of Gone with the Wind. Mitchell confirmed that Scarlett is the personification of Atlanta, a vibrant tumultuous city with a future. The disillusioned Ashley Wilkes, whom Scarlett thinks she loves but really does not, personifies the plantation, the past. Tara Plantation, which Scarlett regards as home, is really an illusory sanctuary. Toward the conclusion of the novel, Rhett Butler, whose role is that of interpreter of reality, tells Scarlett what the plantation actually is, a “white elephant in Clayton County.”

Erskine Caldwell, who briefly worked with Margaret Mitchell at the Atlanta Journal in the 1920s, was fascinated with other aspects of the decaying Piedmont plantation system, especially the severe poverty and desperate plight of people who were discarded. Tobacco Road, published in 1932, is set at the edge of the Piedmont near Augusta. The eroded fields are abandoned to broom sedge, pine, and blackjack. The boll weevil arrived, and a significant exodus occurred from the land. Jeeter and Ada Lester, who bear striking resemblance to Seab and Kate Johnson, whom Raper and Reid introduced a decade later, are destitute white tenants. Captain John, Jeeter’s

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FIG. 3.7. The “new” big house on the former Nolan plantation, Morgan County, Georgia, 1968. Although the Greek Revival structure may seem stereotypical antebellum, the cheaply constructed dwelling was actually New South, built about 1900 to replace the original big house, a Carolina-I across the highway. Charles S. Aiken
landlord, sold “all the mules” and went “up to Augusta to live.” He told the Lesters and the others who remained on the old plantation that “they could stay in the houses until the buildings rotted to the ground and that he would never ask for a penny of rent.” The Lesters are on the verge of starvation, but “nobody is taking on share-croppers.” A bitter Jeeter gripes: “My children all blame me because God sees fit to make me poverty-ridden. . . . I ain't had nothing to do with it. It ain’t my fault that Captain John shut down on giving us rations and stuff. It’s his fault. . . . I worked all my life for Captain John. . . . Then the first thing I knowed, he came down here one morning and says he can’t be letting me be getting no more rations and stuff at the store.” At the conclusion of Tobacco Road, the Lesters die in a house inferno, which caught from the broom sedge fire that Jeeter set to prepare the land for planting an illusory cotton crop. “There were several hundred acres of land to burn; the fields that had not been cultivated, some of them for ten or fifteen years. . . . He went to sleep . . . with a new determination to stir the earth and cultivate plants of cotton.”

Because few plantations on the lower Georgia Piedmont made the tran-
The vanishing New South landscape of the lower Georgia Piedmont. Abandoned two-story cotton ginnery and warehouse complex at Crawford in Oglethorpe County, Georgia, in 1965. The complex was constructed about 1910 and remained in business until the 1950s. The structures were razed in the 1970s. Charles S. Aiken

Position from the New to the Modern South, the cultural landscape long confirmed the decline of the old. Well into the second half of the twentieth century, the cultural relics and fossils of the New South plantation littered the landscape among the pine thickets and sedge fields, gradually disappearing as destruction and decay of big houses, tenant shacks, furnish merchant stores, and, especially, cotton ginneries, cotton oil mills, and other types of agricultural industrial buildings took their toll (figs. 3.8–3.11). Ironically, the landholding that serves as the classic spatial example of the transition from the Old South to the New South plantation also is a paradigm of the agricultural collapse. The Barrow family’s Sylls Fork Plantation failed to make the conversion to Modern South agriculture. Sylls Fork was never mechanized, and farming on the landholding had ceased by the end of the Second World War. So great was the agricultural demise in Oglethorpe County that by 1940 only twelve landholdings met the definition of plantation.\(^56\)

Sylls Fork passed from David Barrow to three ensuing generations of the family. The plantation’s demise was slow but persistent. In 1932, the original 2,365-acre landholding was divided into 1,684- and 681-acre tracts, and by 1942 both were covered by forest and abandoned fields (map 3.4).\(^57\) The landholdings, which sloped toward the Little River, exhibited severe sheet, rill, and gully erosion, despite the numerous bench terraces that circled some of its slopes. Although the landholdings were no longer organized as
FIG. 3.10. The vanishing New South landscape of the lower Georgia Piedmont. Abandoned furnish merchant store buildings at Maxeys in Oglethorpe County, Georgia, in 1966. During the boll weevil depression, the population of Maxeys dropped from 356 in 1920 to 209 in 1930. Charles S. Aiken

FIG. 3.11. The vanishing New South landscape of the lower Georgia Piedmont. Burdette Mill and Gin Company, Washington, Georgia, in 1966. The company remained in business until 1970. The agribusiness complex of which the ginnery building was once a part belonged to the Southern Cotton Oil Company at the time of its heyday in 1917 (see map 2.4). The three-story structure was built about 1890 and was originally designed to house a machinery arrangement that was transitional between the Old South gin house and press and the New South ginning system. The concept was that of the early factory system, with the process of cleaning, ginning, and baling cotton beginning on the top floor and proceeding downward. The far end of the building housed the cotton oil mill. The building in the background is the guano house shown on map 2.4. Charles S. Aiken
a plantation in 1942, a few small choice plots were still planted to cotton and corn by several blacks who farmed with mules and paid cash rent.

The agricultural collapse on the lower Georgia Piedmont in the 1920s greatly deflated land prices, and the economic depression of the 1930s decreased them further. A golden opportunity was created for the timber products industry, whose leaders foresaw the end of the nation’s virgin forest frontier before the end of the twentieth century. Land on which to plant rapidly growing pine trees could be purchased and leased excep-
tionally cheaply in the declining agricultural regions of the South. In 1944, the Barrow family sold the larger tract to a local company that planted the landholding in pine. That the old plantation brought only five dollars an acre, a low price even for the time, illustrates the disastrous impact of agricultural collapse on land prices. The Barrow tract changed ownership thrice over the next decade. In 1954, it was one of sixty-three tracts in Oglethorpe County, with a combined acreage of 18,797, purchased from Georgia Forest Farms by Champion Paper and Fiber Company (now Champion International Corporation). Champion and other timber products companies were attracted to the lower Georgia Piedmont and other declining plantation regions, not only by cheap land prices, but also by the large sizes of tracts, low property taxes, and probusiness county and state governments. Only five of the sixty-three tracts that Champion purchased in Oglethorpe County in 1954 were less than 100 acres, and the average tract contained 298 acres, substantially larger than the typical yeoman farm of the upper Piedmont or the 160-acre paragon Midwestern family farm.58

The landscape on Sylls Fork Plantation and across the lower Georgia Piedmont evolved from forest to fields and back to forest. When geographer J. Russell Smith visited the University of Georgia in the 1920s and gazed out across the Piedmont, he was struck by the magnitude of land use changes. “From the top of the State University buildings at Athens in the hilly country of North Georgia, one sees varied landscape of field and woods spread out in all directions. But professors at the University tell me that every bit of the woods covers land that has at some time been a cotton field.”59 The cultural process of landscape change, however, dramatically altered the physical character and the grandeur of the forest. In the late 1700s, just prior to its settlement, William Bartram described the great hardwood wilderness near the north branch of the Little River in the vicinity of the site of Sylls Fork Plantation as “the most magnificent forest [he] had ever seen. . . . Black oaks measured eight, nine, ten, and eleven feet in diameter five feet above the ground.” And “the tulip tree . . . and beech, were equally stately.60 Two centuries later the area is covered by a monotonous planted pine forest in various stages of growth, beneath which are the scars of two centuries of erosion.

THE DEMISE OF OTHER COTTON PLANTATION REGIONS

Like the lower Georgia Piedmont, other mature cotton plantation regions where planter management was in decline by the early twentieth century
are identified by high percentages of cash tenants and by catastrophic
effects of the boll weevil (maps 3.2, 3.3). In 1910, a large percentage of the
tenants in the Natchez district, the Black Belt, and the northeastern fringe
of the Mississippi Loess Plains paid cash rent. The weevil had a disastrous
impact in the Natchez district and the Alabama Black Belt, but cotton
production in the Yazoo Delta and large areas of the Loess Plains survived
the insect. The Natchez district and the Yazoo Delta were among the first
areas in the central South to experience what Richard Wright, a child
refugee from ravaged Adams County, Mississippi, remembered as “the
eveel boll weevil.” The insect reached the Natchez district in 1907 and one
year later spread into the Yazoo Delta. The effects of the boll weevil on the
two regions varied significantly. In Adams County, the location of Natchez,
cotton production dropped from 20,455 bales in 1907 to 14,124 in 1908 and
1,592 in 1909. Production remained below 2,500 bales until 1917, and the
county never again consistently produced more than 8,000 bales annually.
The decline of agriculture in the Natchez district was so severe that by the
Second World War it was considered a historic plantation area. In the
Yazoo Delta and other parts of the Mississippi Loess Plains the repercus­
sions from the boll weevil were less severe. The shock of dramatic crop
losses caused planters to adopt quickly the measures required to control the
insect. The Delta, which was still developing as an agricultural region,
substantially increased cotton acreage and production between the arrival
of the weevil and the imposition of acreage restrictions under the Agricult­
ural Adjustment Act in 1933 (map 3.3). The destruction of several consecu­
tive cotton crops by the insect created a scenario in the Natchez district
similar to that which occurred later on the lower Georgia Piedmont. Some
planters and merchants, who could not collect rent or furnish debts, be­
came bankrupt. The agribusiness infrastructure began to collapse, and a
great exodus of blacks commenced. In Mississippi’s six Natchez district
counties, the black population, which peaked at 93,327 in 1900, had de­
clined by more than a third by 1930. Cotton decreased from 255,000 acres
in 1899 to 86,000 in 1929 (map 3.3).

Deep South, a classic, detailed study of the plantation society and econ­
omy of Natchez and Adams County, was conducted during the 1930s by
social anthropologists, who used the pseudonyms “Old City” and “Old
County.” The agricultural situation was similar to that of the lower Geor­
gia Piedmont. Land ownership was concentrated, absentee owners held a
significant proportion of the land, indifference prevailed in management
of plantations, and agriculture was in demise. Thirty-six families owned or
controlled nearly half of the total farmland and almost a third of the cultivatable land in Adams County. Seven of the thirty-six controlled a fourth of the farmland; one owned more than 30,000 acres. Some plantations were estates and pooled holdings of relatives managed by one member. The 1940 plantation census confirmed the concentration of land ownership. The forty-eight plantations enumerated in the county contained 46 percent of the land in farms and 41 percent of the harvested cropland.66

The deterioration of plantation management in Adams County was well advanced at the time of the depression. Half of the planters lived in Natchez and paid little attention to their properties. Even most resident owners were passive managers who “maintained little or no supervision of the actual work.” The large number of absentee and passive resident landlords encouraged cash tenancy. More than half (56.6%) of the tenants in Adams County in 1935 paid cash rent, ranging from six to ten dollars per acre of cotton. Rent was paid either in dollars or in an amount of cotton which approximated the monetary value. Tenants were given free use of pasture and woodland, additional evidence of the economic collapse of plantation agriculture. The few remaining well-managed plantations employed sharecroppers who “worked by the bell” and whose fields were examined daily by the owner or manager.67

Like the lower Georgia Piedmont and the Natchez district, by the early twentieth century the Black Belt was ripe for disaster. The plantation system had begun to disintegrate; more than half of the tenants in 1910 paid cash rent (map 3.2). The boll weevil reached the western portion of the Alabama Black Belt in 1911 and four years later had spread across the region. In 1916, the state agricultural college warned, “All cotton planters . . . in Alabama should plan to take up the fight against the boll weevil immediately, even if they have not yet been forced to do so.” Losses were “sure to follow if cotton culture” was “continued in the usual way.”68 Despite the warning, farmers did not promptly adopt or effectively use methods by which they could continue profitable cotton production. The scenario was similar to that in the Natchez district a few years earlier and the lower Georgia Piedmont a few years later. Several successive years of disastrous cotton crops destroyed much of the agribusiness infrastructure, beginning with tenant farmers who could not pay landlords and merchants and rippling up to local banks that became insolvent. Large landholders who survived the boll weevil depression aggressively managed their cotton plantations, shifted to less capital-intensive beef cattle production, or abandoned farming.
Between 1910 and 1930 the Black Belt’s Negro population decreased from 279,900 to 232,300. As in other plantation regions, loss of cheap black workers contributed to the further demise of agriculture. The state agricultural college made no recommendations as to economic and social improvements that might help planters retain black labor. It merely warned that retention of labor was “a matter of the utmost importance as land without labor to work it becomes nonproductive and unprofitable.” “But if the labor once moves out of a community, the fields are allowed to become brushy, the unoccupied cabins decay rapidly, roads are neglected, the value of land goes down. . . . The sections which have suffered most heavily from the weevil invasion lost far more because they let their labor go than from any direct injury done by the weevils.”

By the depression, large areas of the Black Belt, which a few years earlier were “fertile, gently rolling prairie with negro cabins standing in the open fields,” had become the landscape of which the state agricultural college forewarned. A Birmingham journalist wrote of Greene County in 1930, “Many colonial homes in the rural sections evidence the prosperity of former days, but their white owners, for the most part, long ago moved to the town or elsewhere in the state, and they now are occupied largely by negroes.” The fields had been “permitted to grow up in native grass pastures and considerable numbers of beef cattle” were “fattened on these for the market.” Another journalist described his trip across the Black Belt in 1940:

As you drive back through the prairies, rolling up and away, green as a pasture in the National Geographic, you begin to notice how many abandoned cabins there are. You stop for gas at a crossroads trading center and ask, . . . “How’s Business?” For an answer the clerk points across the road to three padlocked buildings. Each used to house a thriving supply merchant.

“People all moving out,” he says. “It’s hit us too. We used to have a couple of hundred croppers on our account that worked around here. Now about all we get is the gas trade from the highway.”

Two studies of Alabama Black Belt counties reveal the disintegration of the plantation system. Shadow of the Plantation, Charles Johnson’s classic analysis of Macon County, was published during the depression. In 1930, 3,114 black farmers lived in Macon County; in 1910 there had been 3,842. Cotton production plummeted from 36,768 bales in 1914 to 17,425 in 1934. Johnson depicted Macon County’s rural blacks as an isolated and back-
ward people trapped in a dying plantation system that white landowners had largely abandoned:

The white of the mansion house has gone, symbolizing, it would almost seem, the inevitable abandonment by the lords of the manor to the Negroes who still hang on, trying to nurse a living out of the earth. Foxtail and broomsedge, harbingers of senility, and the ubiquitous boll weevil, a new pestilence, keep this black labor alive, vainly fighting against the approaching final desolation. Everywhere there are the sad evidences of an artless and exhausting culture of cotton.

The hard white highways of Alabama have drawn a ring as distinct as the color line around these decaying plantations—each with its little settlement of black peasantry. Here they live almost within sight of the passing world, dully alive, in an intricate alliance with a tradition which has survived the plantation itself. The plantation of olden times has gone, leaving them a twin partner of the earth, and upon these two—black man and the earth—the proprietor himself, growing ever poorer, depends for the mutual preservation of all.

Morton Rubin’s *Plantation County* is a study of Wilcox County immediately after the Second World War. The agricultural history of Wilcox was similar to that of Macon. Wilcox’s black population decreased from 27,602 in 1910 to 18,558 in 1950. The county produced 30,849 bales of cotton in 1914 but only 7,656 in 1947. Rubin, a “Yankee, born and reared in Boston, of Jewish religion,” brought a refreshing detachment to his study, but he did not fully grasp the geographical situation of Wilcox County and the Black Belt, especially the scope of agricultural decline. Rubin conducted his study in the midst of the initiation of a set of economic, social, and political forces that would change forever the plantation and blacks’ relationship to it. Both blacks and whites were “on the threshold of a new technological and social era.” However, their “security system which depended on the full power of white supremacy and the paternalistic plantation owner” was “being shattered.” In its place, Rubin thought that “the government” was “taking over financial support.”

The severe impact of the boll weevil and other problems that plagued the Southern plantation regions caused innovative planters and farmers and agricultural scholars and bureaucrats to reevaluate the production system. By the mid-1920s, most believed that if cotton was to remain a viable crop in the South, a renaissance would have to come through the adoption of new labor-efficient technology. The need to mechanize pro-
duction was a second major crisis in Southern cotton plantation agriculture during the twentieth century. Regional variations in agricultural leadership and viability of the plantation system affected adoption of new technology just as they affected response to the boll weevil. Both the acceptance of new technology and failure to embrace it caused the number of plantations and persons who were intimately tied to the agricultural system to continue to decline.