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ON THE LAND FOR LIFE: BLACK TENANT FARMERS ON TALL TIMBERS PLANTATION

by SUSAN HAMBURGER

Since the 1830s the Tall Timbers Research Station land in northern Leon County, Florida, supported agricultural pursuits ranging from antebellum cotton plantations to twentieth-century quail hunting to fire management studies. The continual thread from the 1830s to the 1940s is the black worker, who evolved from slave to tenant farmer. This study will concentrate on the continuity of occupancy on this land of selected black families from 1865 to 1900.

The property now known as Tall Timbers consists of nearly 3,000 acres of rolling red hills on the north shore of Lake Iamonia. It offers a variety of plant life, such as cypress and black gum swamps, grassland, pineland, and beech-magnolia hammock. Scattered among this vegetation are abandoned corn, cotton, and cane fields, which are remnants of earlier tenant farming.¹ In 1860 the major portion of this land was owned by Griffin W. Holland, a fifty-three-year-old Virginia-born planter who had 105 slaves (fifty-one males, fifty-four females) and twenty slave houses on his Woodlawn Plantation.² By 1880 the land passed to Eugene H. Smith who renamed it Hickory Hill

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1. E. V. Komarek, Sr., "A Quest for Ecological Understanding, The Secretary's Review," *Tall Timbers Research Station, Miscellaneous Publication no. 5*, 1977, 22; interviews with Henry Vickers by Bobby Crawford and Betty Ashler, October 8 and 22, 1971, and July 28, 1972 (hereinafter Vickers interview). Tapes and transcriptions are on file at the Tall Timbers Research Station Library, Tallahassee, Florida.
2. United States Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, unpublished slave schedules of Florida, 277; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, unpublished population schedules, Leon County, 42. Census schedules are in the Florida Collection, State Library of Florida, Tallahassee.



Typical tenant cabin near the Basin, 1913. Photos courtesy of Tall Timbers Research Station, H. L. Beadel photo album no. 1.

Plantation. Edward Beadel bought the property in 1895, which he then called Tall Timbers.³

Little is known about the specific agreements Holland and Smith had with the ex-slaves on the plantation. The blacks, many of whom stayed in their former homes after the Civil War, began making working arrangements with Leon County planters as early as May 1865.⁴ In addition to those freedmen living and working on their former plantations, nearly 5,000 blacks, mainly from the Carolinas and Georgia, migrated to Florida between 1865 and 1867. Most were attracted by homesteads, but others found work on the plantations.⁵

In tracing the continuity of five black families (Fisher, Nix, Stratton, Vickers, and Wyche) on the Tall Timbers property, the 1870 unpublished census schedules show that Gilbert Nix,

3. Tall Timbers Research Station Map, July 1969, Land Ownership 1860 and 1870, 1880 and 1890, 1900. Tall Timbers Research Station Map is in the Tall Timbers Research Station Library.

4. Joe M. Richardson, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Florida, 1865-1877* (Tallahassee, 1965), 55-56.

5. *Ibid.*, 75-76; Jerrell H. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet: Florida in the Era of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (Gainesville, 1974), 125.

twenty-three, and John Wyche, twenty-one, both illiterate farm laborers, were the earliest recorded members of these families living on that land.⁶ By 1880 all of the families appeared in the census.⁷ An examination of their birthplaces reveals that Gilbert Nix, his wife, Eliza, and John Fisher were born in Florida. John Wyche, his wife, Delilah, Hester Stratton, and Richmond Vickers were born in Georgia. Hampton Stratton was born in Virginia. Rachel Williams Fisher (John's first wife) was born in South Carolina. Richmond Vickers's wife was not listed in the 1880 census; he later married John Fisher's daughter, Lizzie.⁸

Although there is no record of when the non-native people emigrated to Florida, it is known where their parents were born. Only Eliza Nix's parents were native to Florida; unfortunately neither her maiden name nor her marriage license is recorded to trace her family line. She was born c. 1857 and may have been a slave on Griffin Holland's plantation. The 1860 slave schedules show he owned four slaves— three mulattos and one black three-year-old female.⁹ Gilbert Nix's parents and John Wyche's parents were born in the Carolinas. Hampton Stratton's parents were born in Virginia. The parents of Delilah Wyche, Hester Stratton, and Richmond Vickers were born in Georgia. The birthplace of Rachel Fisher's parents was not listed in the 1880 census. The 1880 census enumerator listed John Fisher's father's birthplace as Virginia and his mother's as *Mard*. In 1900, both were listed as being born in *Mysaland*. (*Mard* could be Maryland and *Mysaland* may be *Nyasaland*, Africa.)¹⁰ Of these nine people, three were living in Florida during the 1865-1867 influx or later. John Wyche was in Florida by 1870, and the rest of the group by 1880.

From 1870 to 1900, and in some cases into the 1930s these five families lived on the Tall Timbers land as farmers and farm laborers, not as owners. During the period when sharecropping was increasing in the South, at least four families (Fisher, Nix, Stratton, and Wyche) rented rather than sharecropped. Renters

6. Ninth Census, 1870, unpublished population schedules, Leon County, 602.

7. Tenth Census, 1880, unpublished population schedules, Leon County, 6, 7, 11, 12.

8. *Ibid.*; Ninth Census, 1870, unpublished population schedules, Leon County, 602.

9. Eighth Census, 1860, unpublished slave schedules, 277.

10. *Ibid.*; Twelfth Census, 1900, unpublished population schedules, Leon County, Enumeration District 77, sheet 5.



Bill Jones and Jim Bob Fisher (John Fisher's son), 1914.

leased a parcel of land for a fixed rent rate; sharecroppers received a share (usually one-third) of the produce. The renter was an independent farmer who controlled the quantity and variety of crops to maximize his returns. The sharecropper's landlord determined the inputs and outputs and size of the plot leaving no control to the cropper. However, in a bad year the renter bore the brunt of financial loss if the prices for his harvest did not meet or exceed his rent. The landlord and sharecropper shared the risk.¹¹ Black farmers rented and sharecropped for a variety of reasons. Many white landowners refused to sell to blacks; others did not need to dispose of their land. Generally when blacks worked the land as tenants, they preferred sharecropping to renting because it offered more freedom than day or gang labor, more autonomy from a scrutinous landlord, and a reward for their effort.¹²

11. Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch, *The Rise of Sharecropping in the American South—1865-1900, A Preliminary Report*, Southern Economic History Project Working Paper 1 (Berkeley, July 1969), 24-25; Richardson, *Negro in the Reconstruction of Florida*, 171.

12. Gilbert C. Fite, "Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: An Overview," *Agricultural History* 3 (January 1979), 5; Ransom and Sutch, *Rise of Sharecropping*, 27.

In Leon County, there were no public lands which could be settled under the Homestead Act.¹³ The number of farms in Leon County decreased from 319 to 191 between 1860 and 1870, however, by 1880 they increased to 1,789, and in 1890 to 1,975. Between 1880 and 1890 the number of owner-operated farms increased from 378 to 465, the fixed-rate rentals decreased from 613 to 234, and the sharecropped farms increased from 798 to 1,276.¹⁴ More farmers were turning from renting to sharecropping.

The predominant crops grown in Leon County after the Civil War were cotton, corn, and sugar cane.¹⁵ In 1879, on approximately ninety-one rented acres, Hampton Stratton produced fifteen bales of cotton on forty-five acres, 200 bushels of corn on forty-five acres, fifty-five gallons of molasses from one-quarter of an acre of sugar cane, 150 bushels of sweet potatoes on one-half acre, and ten dozen eggs from ten hens. That same year John Wyche, on approximately thirty-six rented acres, produced five bales of cotton on fifteen acres, 200 bushels of corn on fifteen acres, fifty gallons of molasses from one-half acre of sugar cane, 150 bushels of sweet potatoes from one acre, forty bushels of oats from four acres, thirty-five dozen eggs from thirty hens, and twenty swine. Stratton's estimated value of farm production was \$1,035, Wyche's was \$600.¹⁶ Both Stratton and Wyche devoted only half of their major crops to cotton. The price of cotton, in particular, declined from \$0.2398 in 1870 to \$0.1153 in 1890, continuing the average decline of prices since 1864 when they peaked at \$1.015 per pound.¹⁷ With the consistently declining prices they were wise, intentionally or not, not to rely on one cash crop.

Wages paid to farm laborers in Florida declined from an average of \$145 in 1866 to \$97 in 1868.¹⁸ There is no record of the cash or credit earnings of the other Tall Timbers renters,

13. A. A. Robinson, *The Resources and Natural Advantages of Florida* (Tallahassee, 1882), 143.

14. Clifton Paisley, *From Cotton to Quail: An Agricultural Chronicle of Leon County, Florida, 1860-1967* (Gainesville, 1968), 34; *Eleventh Census, 1890, Agriculture*, 128-29.

15. Robinson, *Resources and Natural Advantages*, 143.

16. Tenth Census, 1880, unpublished agricultural schedules, Leon County, ED 81, 3-4.

17. M. B. Hammond, *The Cotton Industry* (New York, 1897), 359.

18. Paisley, *From Cotton to Quail*, 25-27.

but they likely fared no better than most Leon County tenant farmers which was barely above the subsistence level.

As part of their tenancy, workers rented houses provided by the landowner. The typical structure was a "rudely built log cabin with its leaning chimney of sticks and mud."¹⁹ John Wyche lived in such a log house.²⁰ Wood-frame, double-pen weather-board houses later replaced the log cabins. These too were roughly constructed and lacked cooking facilities and indoor plumbing. The small size (roughly twenty-seven by twenty-eight feet) added to the overcrowding of the large families.²¹ Although the families stayed on the same plantation, they moved to different homesites during their tenure.²²

Family size in the late nineteenth century was necessarily large because of the high death rate and the opinion that each child would become a work hand. Farm laborers not only included male heads of households but also their wives and children. Richmond Vickers and his fourteen-year-old son, Richmond; John and Rachel Fisher and their children, Lizzie, sixteen, and Prince, ten; Delilah Wyche; Hester Stratton and her ten-year-old son, James; and Gilbert and Eliza Nix and their eleven-year-old daughter, Peggy, were farm laborers in 1880.²³ These five families averaged 6.2 people. The usual family consisted of nine to ten people at that time. By 1900 some families had added new members through birth and marriage and buried others. There were some instances of extended families. Richard Stratton and his recent bride, Hattie, lived with his parents, and Gilbert Nix's four grandchildren resided with him and his family.²⁴

Not all of the children worked on the farm; some attended school. Public education in Leon County began with the Freedmen's Bureau schools and the Constitution of 1868.²⁵ After 1869 schools for blacks and whites began to be organized

19. *His Letters from Tallahassee*, October 4, 1885 (Tallahassee, 1885), 5.

20. Vickers interview, October 22, 1971.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, October 8, 1971, and July 28, 1972.

23. Tenth Census, 1880, unpublished population schedules, Leon County, ED 81, 6, 7, 11, 12.

24. Twelfth Census, 1900, unpublished population schedules, Leon County, ED 71, sheets 1, 5.

25. Richardson, *Negro in the Reconstruction of Florida*, 114.

throughout the county.²⁶ The only evidence of a school at Tall Timbers is a listing of appropriations for the 1880 school year naming Hickory Hill as the recipient. This black school received \$18 per month for operations while the white school at Iamonia was allotted \$30.²⁷ These country schools held classes from 9:00 A.M. to noon and from 1:00 to 4:00 P.M., while the city schools in Tallahassee operated from 9:00 A.M. to 2:30 P.M. with a half-hour recess.²⁸ The school term usually lasted six months, but often the county superintendent of public instruction ordered schools to close as much as one month early because of lack of funds to continue to the end of the term.²⁹ The fate of the school at Hickory Hill is not known. Schools were closed due to poor attendance, loss of interest, and shifts in population. However, by 1890 there were thirty-four black schools in Leon County with an average attendance of 3,249 pupils (95.5 pupils per school).³⁰

The individual school registers, required to be kept by the teachers, are not extant.³¹ It is not known whether any members of the Tall Timbers families attended Hickory Hill school since the 1880 census does not indicate education or literacy. None of the parents could read or write.³² However, by 1900 six of the ten school-age children attended school (Henry and Corine Vickers, Gilbert, Jr., George, June, and Ella Nix). Hampton Stratton's twenty-five-year-old daughter-in-law, Hattie, and John Wyche's son, John, and his wife, Mary, could read and write.³³ Each successive generation in this community appeared to become more literate.

Along with a strong interest in education came an enthusiasm for independent black churches. They served not only as houses of worship, but also as the social and political centers

26. Francis A. Rhodes, "A History of Education in Leon County, Florida" (master's thesis, University of Florida, 1946), 40.

27. Minutes, July 3, 1879, Leon County Board of Public Instruction, Leon County Board of Education Office, Tallahassee, Florida.

28. *Ibid.*, September 4, 1879.

29. *Ibid.*, June 7, 1858.

30. Rhodes, "History of Education in Leon County," 52.

31. Minutes, September 4, 1879, Leon County Board of Public Instruction.

32. Tenth Census, 1880, unpublished population schedules, Leon County, ED 81, 6, 7, 11, 12; Twelfth Census, 1906, unpublished population schedules, Leon County, ED 77, sheets 1, 3, 5.

33. Twelfth Census, 1900, unpublished population schedules, Leon County, ED 77, sheets 1, 3, 5.

of black life.³⁴ To celebrate Emancipation Day on May 20 each year, workers halted farming operations to have picnics at the churches. One of the largest was held at Hickory Hill Church.³⁵ Some time after Edward Beadel's 1895 purchase of the land, his wife had a church built on the north side of State Road 12 for the tenants. There are no remains of that building.³⁶ It is not known whether an earlier church existed on the property. The Hickory Hill Primitive Baptist Church on the south side of State Road 12 replaced Mrs. Beadel's church. The people buried near the new church represent families who worked on Tall Timbers since the turn of the century although thirty of them were born in or before 1900. As far as can be determined, one descendant of the five selected families— John Fisher's great-grandson, Jim— is interred in the church cemetery. Others are buried in scattered, small, private burial grounds throughout the property. Instead of using tombstones, mourners marked graves with boards at the heads. None of the gravesites are now marked.³⁷

After 1900 these five families continued to live on Tall Timbers plantation with the other tenant families, an estimated total of twenty families of approximately 200 people.³⁸ At least for this one plantation, the tenant workers were a continuing presence. Further research on tenant farmers on Leon County plantations between 1865 and 1900 may reveal whether the Tall Timbers tenants were unique in their longevity on this property or if theirs was typical behavior. In any case, they were an integral part of Tall Timbers both in life and in death.³⁹

34. Richardson, *Negro in the Reconstruction of Florida*, 83.

35. Clifton L. Paisley, "Van Brunt's Store, Iamonia, Florida, 1902-1911." *Florida Historical Quarterly* 48 (April 1970), 362.

36. Vickers interview, July 28, 1972.

37. *Ibid.*, October 8 and 22, 1971.

38. *Ibid.*, October 22, 1971.

39. From 1895 to 1918 Edward Beadel owned Tall Timbers Plantation. Upon his death, Beadel's nephew, Henry L. Beadel, inherited the property where he lived until his death in 1963. Ownership then passed to Tall Timbers Research, Inc., a nonprofit scientific and educational corporation dedicated to studying fire ecology and wildlife management. Henry Beadel gave the research station thirty-four acres in 1958 to begin its studies. With the 1963 inheritance and subsequent purchases of adjacent land, Tall Timbers Research Station now exceeds 3,000 acres. Paisley, *From Cotton to Quail*, 79, 108; Komarek, "A Quest for Ecological Understanding, The Secretary's Review," 19-22.