

1996

## Landlords and Tenants: Sharecropping and the Cotton Culture in Leon County, Florida, 1865-1885

Clay Ouzts



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Ouzts, Clay (1996) "Landlords and Tenants: Sharecropping and the Cotton Culture in Leon County, Florida, 1865-1885," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 75 : No. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol75/iss1/3>

Landlords and Tenants:  
Sharecropping and the Cotton Culture in  
Leon County, Florida, 1865-1885  
by CLAY OUZTS

I N 1875 the poet Sidney Lanier visited Leon County, bordering Georgia in northern Florida. Lanier left a favorable account of the red-hill countryside surrounding Tallahassee, the state capital. He described the area as having long fences which marked off pastures, ancient live oaks and other hardwoods spread across the rolling hills where "ample prospects, [came] before the eye."<sup>1</sup> Almost ten years later a northern observer remarked that the region was "exceptionally attractive" and that it was one of the "most desirable localities imaginable for several characters of farm industry."<sup>2</sup> Promotional literature in the 1890s continued to depict Leon County as a farmer's paradise. Attempting to attract immigrant workers and farmers, the state Bureau of Immigration published a glowing report in the mid 1890s which placed Leon county on an agrarian pedestal: "The rich agricultural . . . land of this county . . . is better suited to practical farming, dairying and fruit-growing than any other section," read the report. "Men of practical knowledge in agricultural pursuits will immediately recognize in the surroundings, the conditions incidental to success, comfort and profit."<sup>3</sup>

Such enthusiastic accounts masked the actual state of agricultural affairs in the county during the post Civil War era. Like much of the South, and the cotton belt in particular, Leon County was agriculturally and economically depressed. The region's experience

---

Clay Ouzts is a doctoral student in history at Florida State University and instructor of history at West Georgia College. He would like to thank William Warren Rogers and Joe M. Richardson for their advice and assistance.

1. Sidney Lanier, *Florida: Its Scenery, Climate, and History*, (Philadelphia, 1876), 105. The quotations that follow remain as close to the original as possible.
2. W. C. Steele, *Letters From Tallahassee* (Tallahassee, 1885), 5-6.
3. *Leon and Wakulla Counties* (author and publisher unknown, 1894), Florida Room, Florida State Archives (hereinafter, FSA), 37.

was typical of prevailing conditions in northern Florida, the southern extremities of Georgia, and southeastern Alabama.

The cotton culture was partially to blame for the region's miseries. The farmer's post-war obsession with cotton set in motion a destructive one-crop agricultural pursuit, fed by the labor of freedmen through the deplorable system of sharecropping. Farmers in the latter half of the 19th century were never able to use their land to its full potential. Consequently, cotton growers experienced little success, comfort, or profit. In post-war Leon County the lives of planters, farmers, and freedmen were as uncertain and unpredictable as the white staple they so passionately planted.

On the eve of the Civil War, Leon County's economic outlook was optimistic. Businesses were expanding, cotton production was up, and so were cotton prices. Plantations increased in size and number, existing structures were improved, and new roads and rail connections were established. Yeoman farmers prospered as well, and Leon was Florida's richest county. In 1860 almost three-fourths of the country's 12,343 inhabitants were slaves who worked the fields of 354 farms and plantations producing cotton. During the 1859-1860 growing season farmers produced a bumper crop of 16,686 bales of ginned cotton, the largest amount ever yielded in the county and state.<sup>4</sup>

The Civil War completely disrupted Leon County's cotton culture. Although the small engagement at Natural Bridge in 1865 was its only scene of conflict, Leon County saw its economic base crippled by the war. Throughout the period, living conditions for blacks and whites steadily deteriorated. In 1863, as the Confederacy crumbled at Vicksburg and Gettysburg, one Bradfordville resident predicted to her son in Virginia a bleak future for her country,

---

4. In 1860 Leon County was the most populous county in Florida, with approximately 3,194 whites, 9,089 slave, and 60 free blacks. Florida's total population for that year was 140,424. Leon County produced almost one-fourth of Florida's total cotton output of 65,153 bales. The *Eighth United States Census, 1860*, Productions of Agriculture, Schedule 4; *Agriculture of the United States in 1860*; Compiled From the Original Returns of the Eighth Census (Washington, 1864); *Population of the United States in 1860*; Compiled From the Original Returns of the Eighth Census Under the Direction of the Secretary of the Interior (Washington, 1864); William Warren Rogers, "A Great Stirring in the Land: Tallahassee and Leon County in 1860," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 64 (October 1985), 159-60.

state, community. "It seems to me," the mother wrote prophetically, "that our ruin is inevitable and fast approaching."<sup>5</sup> Nearly two years later, as the war drew to a close, Ellen Call Long from Tallahassee remarked in her diary that the "world is upside down."<sup>6</sup>

By 1865 earlier optimism had turned to gloom and despair with the demise of slavery and the Confederate cause. The people paid a heavy price for fighting in the Confederacy. Over 200 households in the county lost a son, brother, father, or husband in the war. Other veterans returned home crippled and disabled. Plantations were in a state of deterioration. Abandoned fields were hidden in a maze of weeds and brush, while neglected crops rotted in those that were planted. "The plantations are mostly waste," commented an editorial in Tallahassee's *Semi-Weekly Floridian* in 1867: [The] fences, gin houses, buildings gone . . . the implements of agriculture destroyed, and stocks of cattle and work animals greatly depleted. The complete failure of the present crop has left the planters penniless; and without money to . . . purchase . . . implements, horses and mules, a cotton crop is an impossible achievement.<sup>7</sup>

Harvesting a cotton crop was made even more difficult by emancipation. When the war ended, large numbers of former slaves abandoned the plantations to discover and experience their new found freedom. Helen Edwards recalled that the slaves on her father's plantation near Leon County left soon after the surrender: "When news came of the surrender . . . Father had Sam [a slave] to ring the plantation bell which called [the slaves] together. He told them they were free but he made arrangements for those who wanted to stay on the place and finish the crops they had started. He offered to pay the men \$10.00 a month and feed them, and the

- 
5. Susan Bradford Epps to Nicholas Ware Epps, July 25, 1863, Pine Hill Plantation Papers, manuscript collection 1, Robert Manning Strozier Library, Special Collections (hereinafter RMSL), Florida State University. See also John B. Myers, "Social Life and Recreation in Tallahassee During Reconstruction," *Apalachee* 8 (1968-1970), 20-21; Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, 1971), 257.
  6. Carolina Mays Brevard, *A History of Florida: From the Treaty of 1763 to Our Own Times*, ed. James Alexander Robertson, 2 vols. (Deland, FL, 1925), II, 127.
  7. Helen M. Edwards, who lived on her father's plantation in neighboring Jefferson County, claimed that the war broke his health and eventually killed him. "He was getting quite old when the war ended," recalled Edwards, "and could never adapt himself to the new conditions." Helen M. Edwards, "Memoirs," RMSL. See also, Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, January 4, 1867; Clifton Paisley, "Tallahassee Through the Storebooks: Era of Radical Reconstruction, 1867-1877," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 53 (July 1974), 49.

women \$6.00. They worked well at first [but] some soon became dissatisfied and left. [By] Christmas [1865] all had left, and how desolate it seemed without them! None of us had ever done any work. Mother had never cooked a meal in her life."<sup>8</sup> Edwards, like some other planters, made arrangements with the freedmen to remain and work on the plantation.<sup>9</sup>

Most of Leon County's planters and farmers were left to cultivate the remaining crops by themselves, but by late May 1765, they once again channelled their energies into cotton production. They had no other alternatives. Cotton was the only available glue that could hold the economy together. Experience had taught them that the staple produced cash, a scarce commodity in the post-war South. Increasingly, southerners turned to a one-crop agricultural system as they struggled to survive in a defeated South.<sup>10</sup>

The natural cycle of cotton production and rhythm of agricultural life in Leon County remained unchanged by war. Around mid-March cotton seeds were planted in freshly plowed fields. The rows were "chopped-out," or thinned with hoes and plowed about every 21 days until the bolls opened in July. Cotton picking commenced in August and lasted until late fall. The cotton was then ginned, baled, and sold. The minority who could afford it stored their bales until market prices increased.

The Tallahassee market was the major cotton outlet for planters and farmers. The hub of the town's activity, serving as a center for socializing and gossip, the market usually opened around mid-November and closed in late May. Most growers raising cotton in the northern portion of the county hauled it to Thomasville, Georgia, where middlemen then shipped it along the Savannah, Albany, and Gulf Railroad to Savannah. A few farmers shipped their cotton to Jacksonville along the Florida Atlantic and Gulf Railroad. Some cotton also went to the ports of St. Marks and Apalachicola, al-

---

8. Edwards, "Memoirs." See also, Clifton Paisley, *From Cotton to Quail: An Agricultural Chronicle of Leon County, Florida, 1860-1968* (Gainesville, 1968), 24-25.

9. Joe M. Richardson, "The Negro in the Reconstruction of Florida," (Florida State University, Ph.D. dissertation, 1963), 90.

10. Between May 31 and June 7, 78 farmers, 21 planters, and 4 overseers arrived at Leon County's courthouse to take Amnesty Oaths of loyalty to the Union. A number of farmers and planters remained unreconstructed and refused to take the loyalty oath. Leon County Amnesty Oaths, May 31-June 7, 1865, manuscript collection 106, Florida History Room, FSA; John Samuel Ezell, *The South Since 1865* (Tulsa, 1978), 68, 121; W. J. Cash, *Mind of the South* (New York, 1941), 149-50; Paisley, *Cotton to Quail*, 31.

though these outlets gradually dwindled in importance during Reconstruction. Factors shipped cotton from the initial ports of delivery to either Liverpool, New York, New Orleans, or Baltimore.<sup>11</sup>

Cotton prices per pound started out unusually high in 1865, although the amount grown was disappointing. To the surprise of many farmers, November prices for high-quality upland cotton reached an astonishing 50 to 54 cents per pound on the Liverpool market. The good news startled and pleased cotton planters. Cotton bales weighed on average 400 to 500 pounds each, and those financially able to withhold their cotton from the market until November stood to receive \$200 to \$250 per bale— a fine sum for desperate farmers who needed money.

Unfortunately, cotton prices were fickle. By January 1866, prices dropped below 40 cents a pound, and continued on a downward trend throughout the winter and spring. When the market closed in May, the price of cotton was only 18 cents per pound. This was followed by a massive crop failure in 1867.<sup>12</sup> The sudden drop in prices combined with a disastrous growing season constituted a severe blow to planters and farmers struggling to keep their farms and lives intact. The 1865-1867 crops were indicative of future trends. Never again would cotton sell for 50 cents per pound. Low yields and slumping cotton prices plagued Leon County's agriculturalists for the remainder of the century.

Several factors contributed to the declining quality of life for Leon County's rural citizens during the post-war years. Initially, the search for reliable and adequate labor caused tension and trouble between planters and freedmen. Planters blamed their wretched conditions and "drooping fortunes" on problems associated with the labor supply. By 1866 many freedmen were drifting back to their former plantations looking for work. Unfortunately, neither the planters nor freedmen understood the free labor system or the mutual responsibilities that came with emancipation. Some plant-

---

11. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, November 7, 21, 1865; February 2, 1866; *Florida Hill Country or Agricultural Attractions of Leon County, Florida*, promotional pamphlet, (Tallahassee, 1898), 16; Hampton Dunn, *Yesterday's Tallahassee* (Miami, 1974), 33. About 100,000 bales of cotton were shipped to Apalachicola in 1866. See Jerrell H. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet: Florida in the Era of Reconstruction, 1863-1877*, (Gainesville, 1974), 126.

12. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, January 5, May 8, 1866; I. A. Newby, *The South: A History* (New York, 1978), 279.

ers continued to treat their laborers like slaves by whipping them and working them in gangs, often called "squads" or "companies," from sunrise to sunset in the cotton fields. They persisted in employing overseers to supervise the progress of work by the freedmen, who were still referred to as "full" and "fractional hands."<sup>13</sup> Because of a lack of capital, ill-defined concepts of a free labor system, greed, and notions of white superiority, planters paid the freedmen extremely low wages.

Blacks believed that because they were no longer slaves they could decide when, where, and how to work, or whether to work at all. For some the abolition of slavery meant an escape from labor and toil in the fields. It also meant that they could assert their autonomy and independence by refusing to abide by their employers' regulations. Additionally, others were reluctant to commit themselves to labor contracts because they were holding out for promises of land— a mistaken but common belief among many southern blacks immediately after the war.<sup>14</sup>

The gang labor system was a constant reminder of slavery to blacks. George Noble Jones, owner of El Destino plantation, was in Savannah when he received a letter from his son, Wallace S. Jones, describing the negative attitudes their "hands" had toward gang labor and overseers. "There is general dissatisfaction expressed by hands with the head men of squads," commented the son. "The latter, it is claimed, are too dictatorial, and do not perform their share of the labor— a great deal of truth in the latter complaint."<sup>15</sup> Visitors continually reminded Leon County's planters that they should be kind and affectionate toward their workers so they could gain their respect, confidence, and gratitude.<sup>16</sup> The uncharted conditions of free labor and black freedom in the post-war South caused

---

13. Leon County's 1880 Agricultural Census listed overseer as an occupation. The *Tenth United States Census, 1880*, Productions of Agriculture. See also, Wallace S. Jones to George Noble Jones, November 2, 1871, in Ulrich B. Phillips and James David Glunt, eds., *Florida Plantation Records From the Papers of George Noble Jones* (New York, 1927), 37,193; *De Bow's Review*, February 1866, 197.

14. Richardson, "Negro in Reconstruction," 89. Richardson's work contains a useful discussion on labor problems, contracts, and the general plight of black laboring masses in post-war Florida, 97-103.

15. Jones to Jones, November 2, 1871, 193; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York, 1988), 103; Charles L. Flynn, Jr., *White Land, Black Labor: Caste and Class in Late Nineteenth-Century Georgia* (Baton Rouge, 1983), 59.

16. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, February 1, 1867; "The Freedmen," *De Bows Review*, November 1866, 491-93.

planters and freedmen alike to misunderstand their respective roles in the new society.

Blacks became scapegoats for the South's agricultural and social ills. Many whites unjustly assumed that freedmen were idle and lazy. They saw them as an unreliable source of labor which had to be coerced and compelled to work. One Leon County resident regarded freedmen as "idlers" and lambasted them for "squat[ing] about in the piney woods, in the towns and by the road-sides." He continued by surmising that "the great bulk of them live by killing stock and by general thieving. . . . At the close of the year, many of them are in debt through their idleness and extravagance, while the bulk of them have little or nothing to show for their year's work."<sup>17</sup> Such remarks lend credence to C. Vann Woodward's view of Southern attitudes immediately after the war. "The temporary anarchy that followed the collapse of the old discipline produced a state of mind bordering on hysteria among Southern white people," he wrote, and "the conviction prevailed that Negroes could not be induced to work without compulsion."<sup>18</sup> But some planters and farmers also had nothing to show for their year's work. In October 1865 C. J. Munnerlyn of Leon County succeeded in raising only one bale of cotton from 120 acres. With slave labor the same amount of land during an ordinary year produced somewhere between 50 and 75 bales.<sup>19</sup>

Some Leon countians, as did white Floridians in other regions of the state, threatened to import immigrants from Europe or other countries to replace freedmen as a labor source. "With such competition, Sambo must compete," argued one defiant resident, "or leave the labor market to the frugal and industrious Saxon."<sup>20</sup> Yet, attempts to attract foreigners to the cotton fields of Leon County failed miserably. By 1880 there was only one immigrant in the county from Africa, one from Ireland, three from France, and two from Prussia.<sup>21</sup> The whites' only recourse was to develop a pro-

17. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, January 8, February 1, 1867; *De Bow's Review*, February 1866, 198; Flynn, *White Land, Black Labor*, 7.

18. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York, 1974), 23.

19. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, October 24, 1865; E. Merton Coulter, *The South During Reconstruction: 1865-1877* (Baton Rouge, 1947), 93.

20. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, January 30, 1866; Coulter, *South During Reconstruction*, 103; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 213.

21. *Tenth United States Census, 1880*.

cess of work and wages with the existing labor pool— the freedmen. The result was a gradual shift by whites and blacks, with the aid of the Freedmen's Bureau, to the exploitative system of sharecropping.<sup>22</sup>

Many Floridians hoped that sharecropping would be a panacea, but the cure turned out to be worse than the disease. Sharecropping emerged as one of the great obstacles to progress in Leon County and the South. Under this system the freedman's desire for autonomy and independence and the employer's interest in producing crops and having a steady supply of labor merged. The sharecropping system, observed Gilbert Fite, was unsatisfactory to both landowners and workers, although it did bring them together and helped restore agricultural production in the plantation areas. Yet, the new economic arrangements severely compromised black freedom. Through sharecropping, landowners gained a high degree of control over their laborers. Thus, suggested Fite, sharecropping was much more than an economic system. "In many areas," he wrote, "these economic arrangements were the basis for social control of blacks and poor whites. Landlords and merchants not only controlled what was grown but how business and social relations were carried on."<sup>23</sup> Sharecropping originated not only because of economic necessity, but also as a means whereby the local ruling white elite could establish and maintain control over lower

- 
22. Ronald Davis, a New South historian, has argued that freedmen demanded the sharecropping system because it provided them an opportunity to assert their autonomy and independence. They wanted to run their family farms and daily lives. Therefore, suggests Davis, freedmen came to sharecropping largely on their own. Black independence exerted in founding sharecropping deteriorated as the lien system settled in, as cotton prices declined, and as freedmen were increasingly excluded from southern politics. Ronald L. F. Davis, "Labor Dependency Among Freedmen, 1865-1880," in Walter J. Fraser, Jr. and Winfred B. Moore, Jr., eds., *From the Old South to the New: Essays on the Transitional South*, (Westport, CT, 1981), 158-61. Historian James L. Roark in *Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction*, New York, 1977), 142, implied that blacks were willing to work in sharecropping arrangements, although they preferred other alternatives. "Freedmen sought independence, not gang labor and shares," he wrote. "If they could not own land, then they wanted to rent land, and if they could not rent, then they hoped to sharecrop." Sharecropping, continued Roark, offered blacks "more freedom than the labor gangs, but less than owning land or renting." See also, Joe M. Richardson, "An Evaluation of the Freedmen's Bureau in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* (January 1963), 225-26; Joe M. Richardson, "The Freedmen's Bureau and Negro Labor in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 39, (October 1960), 171-74.
23. Gilbert Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture 1865-1980*, (Lexington, 1984), 3-6.



Agricultural workers in the Florida fields about 1890. *Photograph courtesy of Florida Photographic Collection, Florida State Archives.*

class blacks and whites. Too, landlords supported the system in hopes that it would improve relations with their laborers, who had an interest in the crop. Instead, argued Steven Hahn, the “share system brought on a new stage in the struggle over the substance and meaning of class relations in the developing cotton economy— a struggle that quickly moved beyond the bounds of individual farms and plantations, divided whole communities, and left a decisive stamp on local and state politics for years to come.”<sup>24</sup>

Under the system landlords and workers entered into labor contracts to produce crops and share the proceeds. The contracts

---

24. Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890*, (New York, 1983), 164. Sharecroppers had little legal redress in the courts. In Georgia, for example, the state supreme court ruled in 1872 that sharecroppers had no decision-making prerogatives or legal rights to their crops. Only cash tenants had a valid claim of ownership to unharvested crops. The court declared that the tenant “ has a possession of the premises, exclusive of the Landlord, [the cropper] has not.” Continuing, the court said, “The one has a right for a fixed time, the other has a right only to go on the land to plant, work, and gather the crop. The possession of the land is with the owner against the cropper.” See Hahn, 159-160. See also Joseph P. Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880*, (Chapel Hill, 1992), 225-226.

were made on a yearly or monthly basis, although yearly agreements were the most common. Contracts existed under a variety of arrangements. Most of the freedmen in the county sharecropped for one-third of the crop. George Noble Jones promised to furnish his hands mules, farming implements, fertilizer, credit, and management in return for two-thirds of the cotton crop and a portion of the corn. The cash proceeds that his workers received for their toil was to be divided among themselves after deductions for debts and supplies bought on credit, which invariably depleted the worker's earnings. Other contracts specified that white landowners either rent their land to blacks as tenant farmers or pay them specified wages. In such cases laborers often had to provide their own tools, food, and livestock. P. L. Craigmiles, a Leon County planter, rented his plantation to former slave Thomas Hart and his family in return for one-half of the profits on their crops. Deviating from normal practices, he also agreed to provide them with food. In 1871 Dennis Butler entered into a contract with Susan Winthrop on the Betton Hill plantation in which he agreed to lease 40 acres and pick at least "three packed bales of cotton weighing five hundred pounds, each bale of fair average quality."<sup>25</sup> Sometimes freedmen entered into contracts with other freedmen. In 1868 Thomas Hart negotiated renting contracts with two other families of freedmen on the Craigmiles plantation.<sup>26</sup>

Problems associated with contracts often necessitated investigation by the Freedmen's Bureau. It was not unusual for both parties to violate the terms of agreement, and in many labor disputes bureau officials sided with white owners. Some whites cheated freedmen by refusing to pay specified wages, or by withholding their fair share of earnings from the crops. Sometimes freedmen became disgusted with their work, their employer, or the terms of the contract,

25. John Winthrop Papers, Betton Hill Plantation, box 5, 1871 RMSL (hereinafter Winthrop Papers). See also, P. L. Craigmiles to Major Cars, May 10, 1868, Bill Bradley Collection, manuscript collection 88-34 (hereinafter Bradley Collection), FSA; Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, December 15, 1865; January 8, 1867; Phillips, *Florida Plantation Records*, 37-38; "The Freedmen," *De Bow's Review*, November 1866; Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York, 1986), 85-86; Paisley, *Cotton to Quail*, 26-27; Tebeau, *Florida*, 267-68; Susan Hamburger, "On the Land for Life: Black Tenant Farmers on Tall Timbers Plantation," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 66 (October 1987), 155. During the period, wages averaged from seven to twelve dollars a month. Richardson, "Evaluation of the Freedmen's Bureau," 231.

26. Bradley Collection.

and left. In other cases planters who were desperate for labor tried to lure workers away from an original employer with better sharecropping arrangements. Wallace Jones complained to his father in 1871 that some of the neighboring planters were “trying to induce all the hands away from here . . . [with] offers for next year to give [them] 1/2 [of the] corn and 1/3 of [the] cotton.” George Noble Jones was infuriated when T. B. Simkins, a neighboring planter, tried to lure one of his laborers away from El Destino. “I infer that your purpose [is] to hold on to Cato Neyle, altho’ notified of my pre-existing contract with him.” Jones continued: “If planters do not respect each other’s contracts with the freedmen, it is evident that the freedmen will not respect their contracts with their employers. The precedent once established will render all contracts uncertain, and result in general inconvenience.”<sup>27</sup>

Harsh contractual terms conjured up images of slavery. In 1871 Susan E. Winthrop contracted six illiterate freedmen to work on her plantation in north Leon County. They were required to “work from sunrise until sunset and in all things to be subject to [her orders].” Absence from work was to “be paid for at the rate of thirty-five cents per day for all time lost.”<sup>28</sup> As late as 1882, 17 years after the end of slavery, freedmen were required to be “obedient” to their landlord and to “go to work very early, between daylight and sunrise.” They were permitted to “stop work every alternate Saturday at 12-o’clock when their crop [was] so that they [could] leave it.”<sup>29</sup>

Contracts came under severe criticism. In 1866 a writer to the Tallahassee *Floridian* lashed out at the written agreements and the labor system they fostered: “The system of *contracts* now existing in the South and enforced by the Bureau, is simply slavery in a modified form. What is the difference to the Negro whether he is paid for five dollars or for five thousand. . . . It is involuntary servitude [sic] in either case and a practical defeat of the Emancipation Proclamation.”<sup>30</sup> Such criticisms fell on deaf ears. When the century ended, Leon County’s blacks were still sharecropping and signing labor contracts.

27. Phillips, *Florida Plantation Records*, 182, 192; See also, Richardson, “Freedmen’s Bureau,” 168-70; Richardson, “Evaluation of Freedmen’s Bureau,” 226-27.

28. Winthrop Papers, box 5, 1871.

29. Mary Simpson Yarbrough Papers, Leon County, FL RMSL (hereinafter Yarbrough Papers).

30. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, August 27, 1866.

Sharecropping and one-crop agriculture locked most black and white tenants (the number of white sharecroppers increased stunningly) into poverty, privation, and perpetual debt. Living conditions of black and white sharecroppers and tenants were deplorable. In 1885 one northern observer in Leon County noted that their homes were actually "huts . . . scattered irregularly over the land." Their houses were little more than "rudely built log cabin[s], with leaning [chimneys] of sticks and mud, surmounted by four balls of clay." The residences were a "type unlike the work of any other home builders with which I am familiar."<sup>31</sup> There were some attempts by landowners to improve the living conditions of their workers, but the general lack of capital greatly limited most efforts at enhancement.<sup>32</sup>

Wretched diets produced health problems, and in some instances, starvation. A scarcity of farm animals and farming implements, a dearth of money to purchase necessities, and a fixation with one-crop agriculture enhanced the prospects for malnutrition and alarming mortality rates.

The scarcity of livestock and worn-out farming implements reduced the ability to produce not only cotton but also food crops. Food production was additionally hampered by an adherence to the one-crop system of cotton cultivation. For many, earning money outweighed the necessity to put food on the table. "A large crop of cotton . . . and no food, is a bad policy of any people," advised the *Floridian* in 1867. Agriculturalists were encouraged to diversify their crops and to plant more corn for meal and fodder. Like the call to modify the sharecropping system, the plea for crop diversity was largely ignored. As a result, the food supply could barely feed the population. In 1868, one year after the major crop failures of 1867, the workers on P. L. Craigmile's plantation faced starvation. At their request he petitioned Major Cars of the occupation army for rations to feed his laborers: [My workers} are hard up now for something to eat and it is intirely [sic] out of my powers . . . to furnish them any more. I am just a new beginner here. [I] have had everything to buy and not much to buy with. . . . I have agreed to furnish all on the place but Rashions [rations], and let them have half of what they make— and they have worked vary well and has a good crop— and has it in [a] good fix, and I think they have about con-

31. W. C. Steele, *Letters From Tallahassee*, 5.

32. Winthrop Papers, box 2, 1871.

sumed what little Rations that they had to commence on. But if the Government will furnish them with rations from this [time] on they will get along vary well I think and make a fine crop . . . this year.<sup>33</sup> Such requests were common to Union commanders such as Colonel John T. Sprague of the occupation army. During that same year, he observed that “the food is not in the country, nor is there money to buy it, and the result will be that the freedman, as well as the white man, will be driven to the necessity of stealing it. Cattle and hogs roam free and they will be killed indiscriminately and then will come strife. Law, under such circumstances is of no avail and hunger is more sagacious and vigilant than the authority of a military force, or the posse of the county sheriff.”<sup>34</sup>

After the war, Leon County faced a livestock crisis. Horses, mules, asses, and oxen were vital to the cultivation of all crops. In 1860 the county contained 1,062 horses, 2,041 mules and asses, and 890 oxen. By 1870 the numbers had dwindled considerably to 427 horses, 1,296 mules and asses, and 320 oxen. Ten years later the livestock population on Leon County’s farms and plantations remained far below their pre-war status, although their number was slowly increasing. Even swine, an important food source, drastically declined in number from 23,266 in 1860 to 6,299 in 1870. By 1880 there were only 12,373 in the county—barely half of their pre-war total. The value of farms and farming implements also decreased during the 20-year period.<sup>35</sup>

The financial squeeze was most intently felt by the South’s laboring masses. Often, yeoman farmers found themselves teetering on the edge of tenancy. Lack of money was the primary culprit, and unfortunately, many farmers were forced to live their lives on

33. Bradley Collection; Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, March 1, 5, 1867. During the period, the Freedmen’s Bureau aided in distributing food to freedmen and refugees. Richardson, “Evaluation of the Freedmen’s Bureau,” 223-24; Richardson, “Freedmen’s Bureau,” 171.

34. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 129.

35. The value of farming implements in Leon County declined from \$94,363 in 1860 to \$45,819 in 1880. The value of Leon County’s farms declined from \$2,482,211 in 1860 to \$1,026,667 in 1880. *Agriculture of the United States in 1864* 18-20; *The Statistics of the Wealth and Industry of the United States Embracing the Tables of Wealth, Taxation, and Public Indebtedness; of Agriculture; Manufacturing; Mining and the Fisheries*, Ninth Census, Vol. III (Washington, 1872), 116-119; *Report on the Production of Agriculture as Returned at the Tenth Census* (Washington, 1883), 109. According to *De Bow’s Review*, “In Lieu of Labor,” July-August, 1867, 69, the inadequate supply of food was one of the greatest problems facing the south.

credit. Lien laws dictated that landlords and merchants be paid their portions before the tenants got their share. All the while, many local supply merchants charged outrageously inflated prices for materials purchased on credit. In return for credit, merchants placed a lien mortgage on the borrower's cotton crop. The lien became a powerful political, economic, and social weapon for those who chose to wield it.<sup>36</sup> Unforeseen natural disasters or financial setbacks often plunged yeoman farmers deeper into debt and drove them into the ranks of tenancy.

Financially, most sharecroppers, wage laborers, and lease tenants were trapped in an inescapable cycle of poverty and debt. In 1870 Andy Quash, a member of Alfred Chapman's labor gang on John Winthrop's Betton Hill plantation, picked three bales of cotton which bought \$260.94 on the market. Quash received \$86.98 for his third of the crop. He had accumulated a debt of \$80.44 to Winthrop during the year, and after settling his account with him was left with a meager balance of \$6.54. Within a matter of days Quash had spent his earnings and was once again deeply in debt. He broke even with the next year's cotton crop but had to ask Winthrop for money a few months later.<sup>37</sup> During his long stay at Betton Hill, Quash was never able to accumulate any savings. Instead, he became all but a slave to the system that exploited him, chained to the never ending cycle of indebtedness.

For Quash and many other sharecroppers and tenants, indebtedness became a permanent condition. In 1873 Theodore Turnbull, a planter and operator of a small mercantile business at Micosukee, entered into a contract with Titus Parrish for thirds on cotton and halves on corn. According to Turnbull's business ledger, Parrish owed him \$143.72 at the end of the year for products purchased at his supply store. The next year Parrish picked nine bales of cotton and almost eradicated his debt with profits from his shares. By the end of 1874 Parrish owed Turnbull \$108.59 for the purchase of additional products. With the proceeds from his 1875 cotton crop, he reduced his debt to \$15.13. Throughout the year Parrish purchased supplies and family necessities from Turnbull, including cotton packaging, flour, tobacco, meat and bacon, salt,

---

36. Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, (New York, 1992), 13.

37. Winthrop Papers, box 2, 1871.

soup, soap, syrup, corn, rum, whiskey, boots, clothes, and a suit. His store account increased to \$59.79.

Turnbull agreed to give Parrish credit on his debt if he cultivated a certain amount of corn and fodder for the livestock. In response, Parrish grew and harvested the crops and reduced his debt to \$29.43. Even though he harvested seven more bales of cotton in 1875, he still owed Turnbull \$31.93 at the end of the year. By the time the cotton crop was ready to pick in 1876, Parrish was \$92.64 in debt. He produced six bales of cotton in 1876 and finally settled his account in full with the proceeds. By 1877 he was once again in debt. The process continued until 1883 when Turnbull finally closed his store. Only once in ten years of sharecropping did Titus Parrish temporarily break out of the cycle of debt.<sup>38</sup> The fatal combination of sharecropping and crop-liens caused blacks and whites entrapped by the system to live in a "modified form of slavery," contended historian Lawrence Goodwyn. "It defined with brutalizing finality not only the day to day existence of most southerners who worked the land," he wrote, "but also the narrowed possibilities of their entire lives."<sup>39</sup>

Poverty, malnutrition, and perpetual indebtedness were made more pronounced by the influx of hundreds of freedmen into the county during the late 1860s and 1870s. Most of the newcomers found immediate employment on various farms and plantations as wage laborers, cash tenants, and sharecroppers. Some came because the Homestead Act of June 1866 had made it possible for them to acquire land in the state, although most of the tracts were in undesirable locations such as swamps and low-lying areas. There was resistance to black settlement of these areas in Leon County by white residents who balked at having African-Americans for landowning neighbors. They preferred, instead, that they remain in the agricultural labor force.<sup>40</sup> Other blacks passed through the county as they migrated to states further west and decided to settle in the region. A few came looking for new opportunities or lost relatives and friends.

Whatever the reasons, Leon County's black population swelled between 1865-1880 while the white population slowly dwindled. In

38. Yarbrough Papers.

39. Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York, 1976), 26, 28.

40. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 134.

1870, 12,341 blacks and 2,895 whites lived in the county. Ten years later the number of blacks had increased to 16,840 while the white population had decreased to 2,822 inhabitants. A total of 4,043 immigrants came to Leon County during the 15-year period. By far the greatest migration occurred from the former Confederate states along a north-south axis. Approximately 1,826 immigrants came from Georgia, followed by 852 from North Carolina, 517 from Virginia, and 439 from South Carolina. Alabama supplied an additional 204 immigrants. A small percentage of new arrivals were white northerners eager to find work or to own a farm or plantation.<sup>41</sup>

Population increases spurred the growth of additional farms in the county, which steadily expanded from 271 in 1870 to 1,789 in 1880. Many were situated on tracts of 40 acres or less and operated by tenants. Most of the new growth was due to the availability of land through the decentralization and division of large plantations by their owners who retained ownership. Land was also available for small farmers, usually whites, who had the cash or credit to purchase it. Shifting trends in rural life caused one agricultural expert visiting Leon County in 1880 to remark that "the great plantations of the past have either been allowed to go into disuse or have been cut up into smaller ones."<sup>42</sup>

Throughout the area, clusters of slave cabins gave way to the scattered shacks of poverty-stricken tenants and sharecroppers. On Craigmile's 300 acre plantation, 27 freedmen, constituting three families and three single individuals, built their dwellings. Tenant homes sprang up on most of the county's plantations, validating Colonel Sprague's earlier prediction that before long, "small farms will succeed in Florida, [while] plantations [will be] at an end."<sup>43</sup> By 1871 Leon County's black population was so great that R. D. Edmondson, a passer-by on a hunting trip, wrote in his diary, "[There

---

41. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian* January 11, 22, 1867; Frank Sherman to John Winthrop, January 24, 1883, Winthrop Papers, box 7; *Statistics of the United States at the Tenth Census* (Washington, 1883); *Compendium of the Tenth Census, Part 1* (Washington, 1883); *Tenth Census, 1880, Productions of Agriculture, Schedule 2*; *The Ninth Census, Volume 1: The Statistics of the Population of the United States* (Washington, 1872); Richardson, "Evaluation of the Freedmen's Bureau," 230-31; Coulter, *The South During Reconstruction*, 100-01, 108-09.

42. *The Ninth United States Census, 1870, 1870, Productions of Agriculture, Schedule 3*; *Tenth United States Census, 1880, Productions of Agriculture*; Alan J. Downes, "Change and Stability in Social Life: Tallahassee Florida, 1870-1900" (Florida State University, master's thesis, 1955), 9; Ezell, *The South*, 116.

43. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 129.

are] more Negroes . . . [in this area] than I ever [seen] anywhere before."<sup>44</sup> Thus, the depressed conditions in Leon County's rural areas were greatly enhanced by numerous sharecroppers and tenants, decentralization and breakdown of large plantation tracts into small farms, poor market prices, and a shortage of money. Collectively, these conditions meant a life of misery for most of Leon County's residents.

One-crop agriculture was not a profitable enterprise. Between 1870-1880, as the farming population increased and the number of small farms rose significantly, cotton production per acre remained low and unstable. In 1870 Leon County's residents picked 39,789 bales. By 1880 the number of bales had risen to 54,997, but this total was still far below pre-war levels. The increase was largely due to the growing amount of land placed into the cultivation of cotton. Still, pounds produced per acre were extremely low. The result was a surplus of cotton which caused a drop in its value.<sup>45</sup>

Many factors, in addition to labor problems and a scarcity of livestock, implements, and money, combined to make cotton cultivation a hazardous undertaking after the war. Cotton farmers had to contend with uncooperative weather, destructive insects, depleted soils, and low yields. There were also spiraling cotton prices, rising operation costs, droughts, hurricanes, and a punitive federal cotton tax in effect until 1868 that averaged about three cents a pound. In 1873 a major depression and panic swept the nation forcing farmers into further economic dislocation.<sup>46</sup> Even so, planters, farmers, tenants, and sharecroppers continued to plant cotton, since it was the only cash crop for which there was a demand.

The weather always affected the quality and quantity of the cotton crop. Between 1866-1868 inconsistent weather patterns that alternated between droughts and heavy rains severely disrupted cotton production, resulting in poor harvests. Too much rainfall

---

44. R. D. Edmondson, *Book of Travels*, manuscript collection 87-14, FSA, 7; Bradley Collection, Edmondson, 7-9, suggests that plantation decentralization and population growth in rural Leon County had a damaging effect on wildlife. Other evidence tends to support this assumption. See, *Leon County, Florida: A Descriptive Pamphlet, Published for General Circulation* (Tallahassee, 1881), 14; Edwards, *Memoirs*

45. *Compendium of the Tenth Census*.

46. The planters angrily responded to the cotton tax. See, Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, May 15, 25, 29, August 21, September 21, October 5, 1866; January 4, 1867; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 515.

was more damaging than too little.<sup>47</sup> In 1866 an overabundance of rain combined with humid conditions produced two enemies of the cotton farmer: grass and the army worm. Grass was a severe impediment to cotton production because it deprived the plant of vital nutrients and sunlight. "Planters are blue as the grass which is overrunning their plantations," wrote one observer in 1866. "For weeks there has been a struggle; fair weather would have given the victory to human muscle. But continued rains have defeated expectation, and now the universal complaint is that nature has asserted her sway and grass is decidedly in the ascendant. Thousands of acres are done for."<sup>48</sup>

Humid conditions also aided propagation of the army worm which bored into cotton buds and devoured immature leaves. In 1866 army worms played havoc with an already vulnerable crop. In 1868 one overseer wrote to his employer that he had seen "caterpillars" on the cotton plants. "I ordered . . . the first brood of them killed," he wrote, "which I think will save the Crop 3 or 4 weeks longer. . . . I hear of some Crops below Town [Tallahassee] having been eaten out already. When that is the case, it is a poor chance for cotton."<sup>49</sup> In 1879 another despondent planter wrote that his cotton crop was "sorry, very sorry," and it would "not make much more than 1/2 crop. Caterpillars finished [it] off pretty well by the 1st Sept."<sup>50</sup>

The soil on Leon County's farms and plantations was always in jeopardy. For years plantations and small farms were "mercilessly pillaged of their productive resources" by improper cultivation techniques. Meanwhile, the best soils washed away into the county's drainage basins. The abuse and misuse of the land caused Solon Robinson, an agricultural writer of the 1850s, to call Leon County's planters "land destroyers." During the post-war years everyone who farmed paid a heavy price for the agricultural extravagances of the past. The nutrient-lacking soils were a major cause of

---

47. Sometimes, too much rain was beneficial to planters. In 1876 John Winthrop sent eight bales of cotton on a steamer to New York for sale. Along the way the ship ran into heavy rains, and Winthrop's cotton was soaked. The wet bagging had to be removed. After new bagging was applied, the bales were reweighed, and Winthrop gained two extra pounds per bale. Winthrop Papers, box 13, November 8, 1876.

48. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, May 22, July 1, 1866.

49. D. F. Horgor to Wallace S. Jones, August 14, 1868, Phillips, *Florida Plantation Records*, 180; Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, January 8, 1867.

50. Yarbrough Papers. For more on the army worm, see Foner, *Reconstruction*, 140-41.

low crop yields in the Reconstruction era. By then most farmers had identified the problem and were taking measures to increase soil fertility and control erosion. Organizations such as the Leon Agricultural Society, the Patrons of Husbandry, and later the Farmer's Alliance, held meetings, distributed pamphlets, and published articles to help farmers improve the soil. In 1875 the Patrons of Husbandry advised all of Florida's farmers to: "quit butchering and scratching and burning up our land. If we have fine horses, cattle, sheep, and hogs [, we] must feed them. So with our land. And our genial climate, with its balmy winds and copious showers, will cause our land to produce its own feed if we will let it have it."<sup>51</sup> By the 1870s a number of farmers had taken the advice and were beginning to replenish their soils with materials ranging from chemical fertilizers, rock lime, and cotton seed hull ash, to guano and livestock manure.<sup>52</sup>

Farmers had little control over cotton prices. After the war the demand for American cotton dropped considerably as other countries entered the market. During the war foreign countries made great strides in cotton cultivation. In Egypt, India, and Brazil cotton became profitable due to cheap labor, untaxed production, and high yields. As foreign cotton flooded the market, world demand for the American staple dropped sharply, and so did prices. Foreign competition was so keen during the latter half of the 19th century that American farmers rarely profited from the enterprise. When the bumper crop that farmers had been anticipating for years finally came in 1878, the price per pound was so low that profits were minimal. During that year John Winthrop instructed his cotton factors in New York to keep his crop off the market until it reached 20 cents per pound. Letters from factors to Winthrop during the fall told the story of crumbling fortunes. On September 9, they regretfully recommended that Winthrop quickly put his cotton on the market since prices had taken a turn for the worse: "We have now to advise buying for your account a November contract 100 bales. Cotton at 10 90/100 [cents]— ten points below your

---

51. *Proceedings of the Second Annual Session of the State Grange of Florida, Patrons of Husbandry, Held in Live Oak, Fla., December 8th, 9th, and 10th, A.D. 1875* (Jacksonville, 1875), 14; Steele, *Letters From Tallahassee*, 6; Paisley, *Cotton to Quail*, 5-6, 42.

52. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, November 24, 1865, January 29, February 8, 1867; Winthrop Papers, box 7, 1883; Steele, *Letters From Tallahassee*, 29.

limit and we hope it will turn out satisfactory at the winding up. . . . Futures have fluctuated considerably."<sup>53</sup>

The situation had not improved one month later, as they explained to Winthrop. "We are having constant and daily surprises at the continued downward tendency in cotton." The unstable prices were especially distressing since "there [was] little doubt it [would] be the largest crop ever made in this country and the quality one of the best."<sup>54</sup> Cotton prices continued to fall for the remainder of the century, finally plunging to below five cents per pound in 1898—the cost of production.<sup>55</sup> The condition of the world market was always a source of anxiety for Leon County's agriculturalists.

Operational expenses on farms and plantations continued to rise. It was estimated in 1867 that one-third of the profits made on the previous year's crop would be spent on getting the next one in the ground. Later that year *De Bow's Review* calculated profits on an average 400-acre cotton plantation in the South. The journal concluded that operational costs combined with the costs of staple production exceeded \$11,000. In return the farmer-planter made \$5,400 on 75 bales weighing 400 pounds each at a price of 18 cents per pound. The result was a plantation debt of over \$5,000.<sup>56</sup>

For the average planter operational and production costs included, but were not limited to, wages and rations for labor, additional livestock, forage and fodder for farm animals, small farming implements, new machinery, repairs to old implements and machinery, wagons, cotton seeds, jute bagging, rope, cotton ginning, fertilizer, and barbed wire. After baling the cotton it had to be shipped to the market—at the planter's expense. On January 10, 1868, J. R. Cotten, a Leon County planter, sent 20 bales of cotton to the New York market. Cotton factors sold his bales for \$1,558.05. One-third of his profits went to pay freight, marine insurance, cartage, storage, labor, packaging, mending, fire insurance for 15 days, weighing, internal revenue taxes, government taxes, and commissions. These services and taxes cost Cotten \$511.52, leaving him

53. New York Cotton Factors to John Winthrop, September 11, 1878, Winthrop Papers, box 13; "Foreign Competition in Cotton Growing," *De Bow's Review*, September 1866, 298-99; Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, May 22, October 5, December 7, 1866, May 10, 1867; Ezell, *The South*, 125.

54. New York Cotton Factors to John Winthrop, October 5, 1878, Winthrop Papers, box 13.

55. Ezell, *The South*, 126.

56. "Cotton," *De Bow's Review*, November 1867, 563-65.

with a net profit of only \$1,046.53. This sum was barely enough to cover living, operational, and production expenses for the next year. Ten years earlier these same services for 38 bales cost George Noble Jones roughly one-fifth of his net profits.<sup>57</sup>

The inverse relationship between cotton prices and living costs caused the cotton business to teeter on the verge of bankruptcy. During the disastrous crop years of 1866-1868 a number of planters abandoned their agricultural pursuits, sold their plantations, and searched for opportunities in other lands. Newspapers were inundated with advertisements that announced the sale of plantations. "For Sale. My valuable Plantation and Beautiful residence three miles north of Tallahassee known as Live Oak," stated one newspaper advertisement on October 12, 1866. "Plantation for Sale," read H. C. Croom's announcement on October 2, 1866, "2,300 acres. . . . Also mules, oxen, sheep and hogs, milch cows, . . . pleasure horses, carriage and buggy, . . . wagons, cotton gins, [and] sugar mills."<sup>58</sup> George Jones contemplated selling his El Destino and Chemonie plantations in the fall of 1866. William H. Branch attempted to sell his Leon County plantation for 15 dollars an acre, but a year later, his landholdings were still up for sale since no purchaser was willing or able to pay that amount. Some northern investors did eventually purchase or lease some of Florida's sagging plantations. In Leon County, ten former officers in the Union army rented plantations. For example, the G. W. Parkhill plantation north of Tallahassee was leased by Major E. C. Weeks of the Florida Union Cavalry and subsequently farmed on a large scale.<sup>59</sup>

Yet, most of Leon County's planters and farmers remained on their land and tried to scratch a living from the soil. Some farmers were able to profit from agriculture despite the rising cost of living and the falling price of cotton. M. H. Johnson, of Leon County, recalled in the 1890s that he had experienced success in the farming business: "I will say this is one of the best countries I ever saw for a

57. Details from a Cotton Receipt, January 10, 1868, Cotten Family Papers, manuscript collection, 75-8, FSA, William J. Bailey Papers, 1866-1873, manuscript collection 6, Florida Room, FSA, El Destino and Chemonie Plantation Papers, 1822-1859, RMSL; Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, January 29, 1867; Winthrop Papers, boxes 1, 2, 7, 8, 13.

58. Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, September 11, 18, October 2, 5, 12, 1866, January 15, 1867; Edwards, "Memoirs." Downes hypothesized that many of the white residents who left the rural areas came to live in Tallahassee. Downes, *Change and Stability*, 22.

59. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet*, 133.

poor man. If a man will come to this country, buy a farm, stay at home and attend to his business, it will not be long before he will have a bank account. I started in 1877 with nothing, and to-day I am the owner of my farm, and do not owe a dollar." What was the secret to Johnson's success? He avoided planting cotton and instead operated a dairy farm just outside of Tallahassee.<sup>60</sup>

The cotton surplus of 1878 and an anticipated boom that never occurred were harsh reminders to planters and farmers that crop diversification was necessary. Accordingly, by the early 1880s the county's farmers began to improve their farming methods. New techniques of cultivation, such as crop rotation and terracing, averted soil erosion and reinvigorated unprofitable fields. Many turned to fertilizers to replenish their soil. When financially able, they purchased the newest farm implements and machinery. In 1883 Winthrop invested \$63 to buy six New Cox cotton planters, which were claimed to be vastly superior to the outdated southern plow. The Patrons of Husbandry and Farmer's Alliance distributed literature and held meetings and conferences to aid farmers. By the 1880s the Farmer's Alliance set up co-operative stores to give farmers better terms and prices than merchant stores. Ultimately, new developments in refrigeration and trucking enabled farmers to produce crops that were less dependent on the labor supply. By 1885 it was not unusual to find watermelons and cantaloupes planted alongside railroad tracks to facilitate shipment to northern markets. Many farmers diversified their crops and began to experiment with new ones, such as grapes, pears, Japanese persimmons, "pindars, goobers and chufas," and figs. In the late 1880s Leon County farmers also explored the production of ramie as an alternative to cotton. Like M. H. Johnson, a few entered the dairy business. One visitor to Tallahassee in 1885 remarked that the "abundant supply of excellent milk to be had in [the area], from real Jerseys, and other improved cattle, is a luxury one scarcely knows how to estimate."<sup>61</sup>

Even so, rising prosperity through crop diversification was limited to only a few farmers and planters. The basic pattern of one-

60. *Leon and Wakulla Counties*, 28.

61. Southerners called Japanese persimmons "kaki." Winthrop Papers, boxes 7, 9; Tallahassee *Semi-Weekly Floridian*, February 12, 1867; *Leon County, Florida*, 11; Steele, *Letters From Tallahassee*, 9-11; Tebeau, *Florida*, 297-98; Paisley, *Cotton to Quail*, 43; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South: 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951), 196-98.

crop agriculture continued. Because of tradition, habit, experience, and the need for cash and credit, King Cotton remained the dominant crop-irrespective of low prices.<sup>62</sup> Although new crops and improved agricultural methods appeared in the 1880s, they did not eliminate the ills of Leon County's stagnated cotton culture, which continued well into the 20th century.

---

62. Downes, *Change and Stability*, 11.