

The Role of the Plantation in Southern Agriculture

JOHN FRASER HART
Professor of Geography
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, MN 55455

“The plantation is largely a thing of the past, and yet it is of the present. We do not live in the past, but the past is in us.” Those words were spoken in Atlanta more than 60 years ago by Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, the great historian of the plantation, but they ring just as true today as they did when first he uttered them (Phillips, 269). The thesis I plan to present in this paper is a simple corollary: the plantation is now completely dead, and it survives in name only, but the name alone works magic. That magic has been a powerful force in the plantation areas of the South. The plantation tradition was a burden between the Civil War and World War II, it was a boon for a brief period after World War II, and it has lost much of its significance as agriculture in the plantation areas of the South has converged with agriculture in other parts of the nation, but the name still evokes strong emotions within the region. The plantation, like John Brown’s body, may lie amouldering in the grave, but its spirit goes marching on.

I must begin with a disclaimer. I probably differ from the other participants in this symposium because I know that I do not know what a plantation is. If we have X participants, then I expect we will have at least X plus one working definitions of a plantation, because I may use more than one myself.

I think we must recognize that the word “plantation” has no

JOHN FRASER HART

generally accepted definition, and it means quite different things to different people, emotionally as well as intellectually. I feel certain that we will be talking past each other at this symposium, because we will be using the same word but assigning quite different meanings to it. I am not especially bothered by the thought that we will be talking past each other, just as long as we realize that we are doing so. I hope we can accept and respect the working definition used in each paper, and I hope we will not waste our time quibbling over definitions, because we will not and need not be able to agree on one, and we certainly will not be able to legislate one here that will gain general acceptance, but it would be foolish to assume that each of us means the same thing when he uses the word.

I will not pretend that I have made an exhaustive survey of the various meanings that have adhered to the term “plantation,” but I will suggest that the term suffers from the same weakness that has vitiated the term “urban”—the idea incorporates a loose bundle of traits, but the number, nature, and interrelatedness of the traits in that bundle have varied both in time and in place, and it is quite incorrect to assume that any single trait could be used as an acceptable surrogate for the entire bundle (Hart, 1975, 169-170). For example, the bundle of traits that comprised a tobacco plantation in seventeenth century Tidewater Virginia was not the same as the bundle that comprised a Delta cotton plantation two centuries later, and it may be more confusing than helpful to have given the same name to both. Confusion is compounded by the fact that early British settlements overseas were called plantations, and the British Colonial Office originally was known as the Plantation Office!

Phillips, the historian, does not seem to have bothered about definitions, as far as I can tell, but he clearly took a Victorian, perhaps even Darwinian, view of the plantation system, which he saw quite favorably as a progressive and highly desirable transfer of the principle of division of labor from the factory to the fields. His plantation seems to have been a large landholding worked by a large labor force that was generally in a state of bondage, whether indentured servants or slaves. The workers toiled in gangs under close supervision to produce a staple cash crop that required simple routine labor virtually year-round.

Prunty may have been guilty of misrepresentation when he quoted the paper in which Phillips said that “the plantation system . . . only survives in a few fragments” (Prunty, 459), because Phillips seems to have had trouble making up his mind whether the plantation system truly was dead. Prunty quoted his 1910 paper accurately, to be sure, but seven years earlier Phillips had written that “the most successful grain farms in the West are really plantations” (Phillips, 68), and even in the South, he said, “model plantations are to be found here and there, which are most attractive as patterns. . . . The Georgia Convict Farm serves as an example in its community” (Phillips, 69). As late as 1925 Phillips described a visit to a plantation that was called a ranch because “that is the fashion in California,” and he concluded his essay with the assertion that “the plantation system now flourishes in California and Colorado, . . . and it is idle to expect its early demise in the ‘black belt’ of the United States” (Phillips, 250, 268).

Phillips believed that the essence of the plantation system was the application of the principle of division of labor to agriculture. Geographers, with their predilection for things tangible, and especially for things visible, have been inclined to emphasize traits derived from this division of labor, such as 1) the mansion of the plantation owner; 2) the layout of the houses, or “quarters,” in which the workers lived; 3) the size of the property; and 4) the crops produced on it (e.g., Rehder).

The first geographer to write on the southern plantation was Merle Prunty, who began by asserting that a plantation incorporated six interdependent elements, but concluded that “the basic element in plantation occupance is . . . the large landholding” (Prunty, 460, 489). The only one of Prunty’s six elements that is distinctive enough to serve as a diagnostic trait, except on a regional basis, is “location in some area of the South with a plantation tradition.” Although this criterion has more than a tinge of circularity, perhaps it is not inappropriate to begin by asking what parts of the South actually do have a plantation tradition.

The plantation tradition was established before the War of the Rebellion, and we must go back before the war in order to identify the areas that have a plantation tradition. Even though we might not be able to agree about what a plantation *is*, I suspect that there would be little argument with the proposition that a large antebellum land-

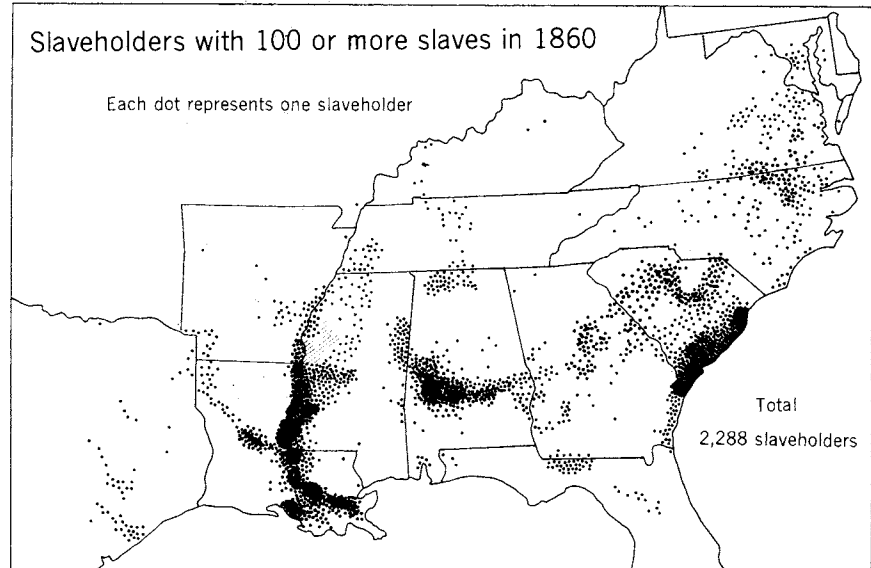


Fig. 1. Slaveholders with 100 or more slaves in 1860.

holding worked by large gangs of slaves *was* a plantation, so I turned to the census of 1860. That census published data on the number of slaveholders in each county in the South, and classified them by the number of slaves they owned.

The slaveholders who owned 100 or more slaves in 1860 were remarkably concentrated in three principal areas: the lower Mississippi Valley and its tributaries and distributaries; the Black Belt of Alabama; and the Sea Island coast of South Carolina (Fig. 1). Essentially the same pattern appeared on the map of slaveholders who owned 50 to 99 slaves in 1860, although the concentrations do not stand out quite so starkly, and other areas are more nearly comparable (Fig. 2).

The 1860 census also published data on the number of farms of three acres or more in each county, and classified them in various size categories. The South had more than 80 percent of the nation's farms of 1,000 acres or more in 1860, a clear indication that large landholdings were vastly more important in the region than in other parts of the country. The Alabama Black Belt stands out, as does a cluster of counties in Georgia south of Athens, and smaller pockets are scat-

PLANTATION ROLES IN SOUTHERN AGRICULTURE

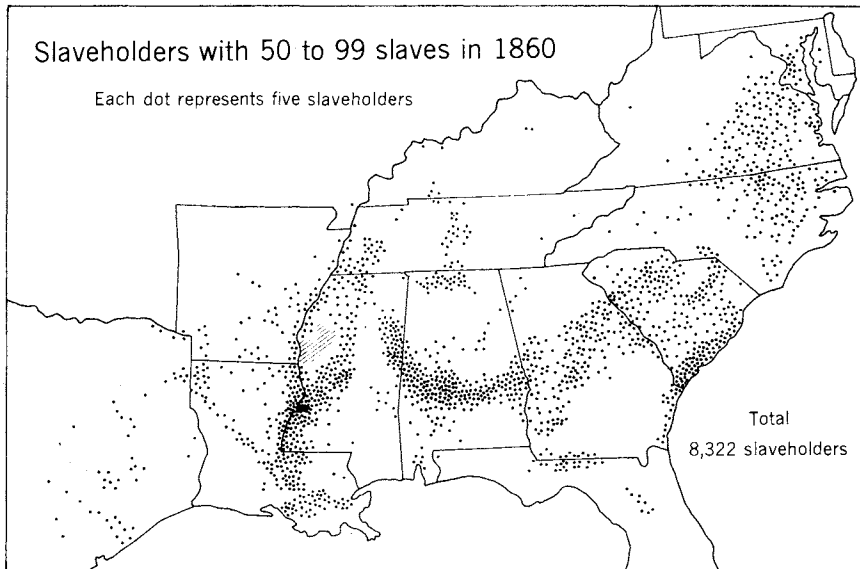


Fig. 2. Slaveholders with 50 to 99 slaves in 1860.

tered elsewhere (Fig. 3). The lower Mississippi Valley is less impressive than it was on the map of slaveholders, and the Sea Island coast much less so.

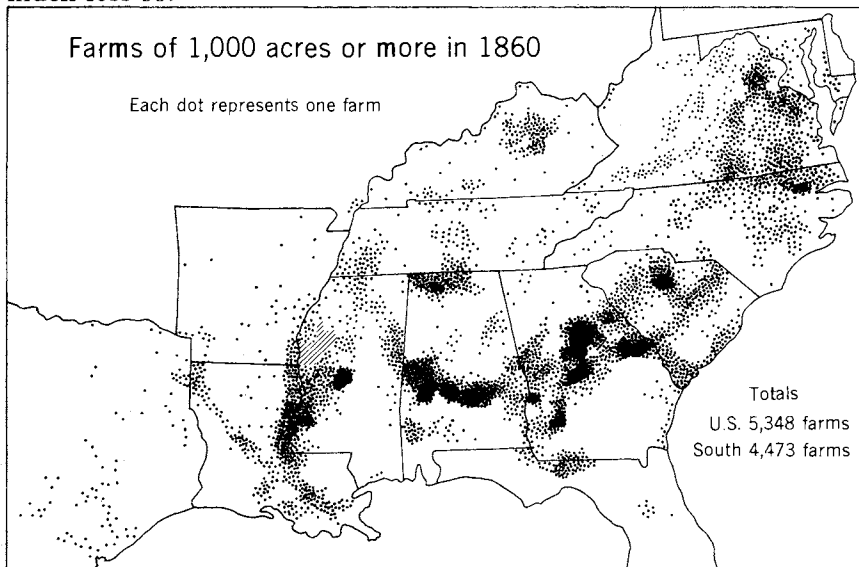


Fig. 3. Farms of 1,000 acres or more in 1860.

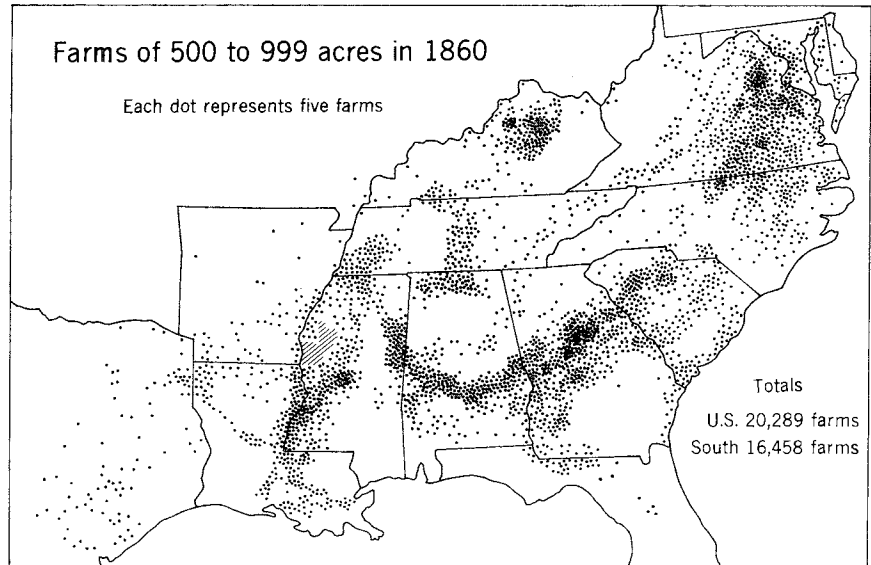


Fig. 4. Farms of 500 to 999 acres in 1860.

The South also had more than four-fifths of the nation's farms of 500 to 999 acres in 1860 (Fig. 4). The map is dominated by an almost continuous crescent that sweeps from Tupelo, Mississippi, around to Fairfield County, South Carolina. There were also concentrations of large farms in some northerly districts that had few large slaveholders, such as the Bluegrass and Nashville basins and the Virginia Piedmont.

Although dot maps may be visually exciting, they provide a less satisfactory base than density maps for further cartographic and statistical manipulation, and so it is regrettable that density maps cannot be compiled for 1860 because data are not available for the areas of counties in that year. Nevertheless, I tried my hand at combining the dot maps of large slaveholdings and large landholdings into a single subjective map of plantation areas in 1860 (Fig. 5). My three categories—positively, probably, and possibly—were selected intentionally to indicate the subjective nature of the map, yet it does suggest that in 1860 the plantation tradition was already fairly well restricted to such better farming areas as the alluvial valleys in the west, that arc from Mississippi to South Carolina, the Sea Island coast, and northerly outliers on the loess bluffs east of Memphis, in

Plantation Areas in 1860

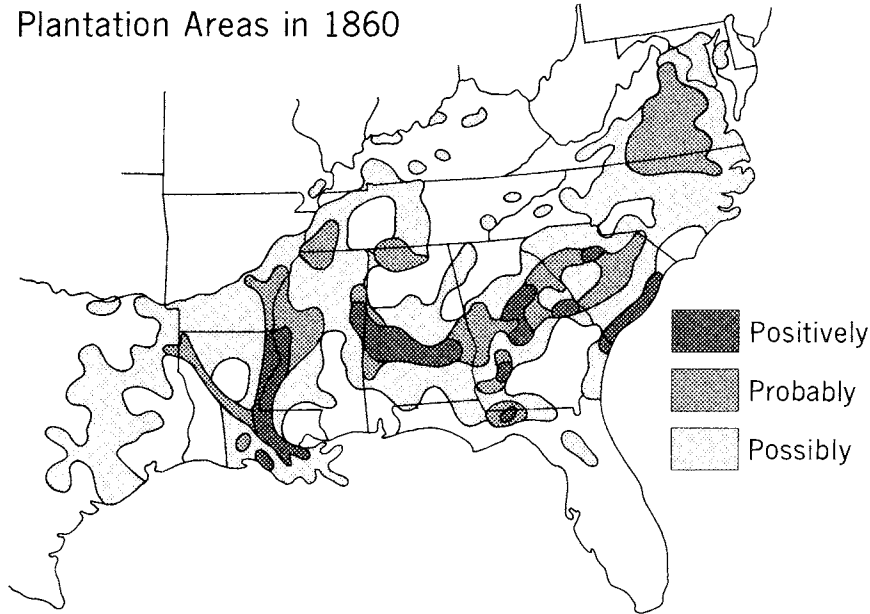


Fig. 5. Plantation areas in 1860 were identified subjectively by combining data on large slaveholdings and large landholdings.

the Middle Tennessee Valley, and on the Virginia Piedmont.

Although plantations were concentrated in the better farming areas, the better farming areas that were identified by Barnes and Marschner in 1933 (Barnes and Marschner) do not show any particularly close relationship to the plantation areas of 1860. The Black Belt and the southern part of the Delta country were major plantation areas, to be sure, but the Blackland Prairie, the northern part of the Delta, and the Inner Coastal Plain were still waiting to be developed, and plantations were concentrated on the Piedmont and along the Sea Island coast in areas that have lost part of the agricultural esteem they once enjoyed.

The 1860 census published data on the acreage of improved and unimproved land in farms in each county. I divided the total acreage of land in farms by the total number of farms of three acres or more in an attempt to estimate the average size of farm in each county. The map of average size of farm in 1860 showed impressive regional homogeneity (Fig. 6). Large blocks of contiguous counties had similar

Average Size of Farm, 1860

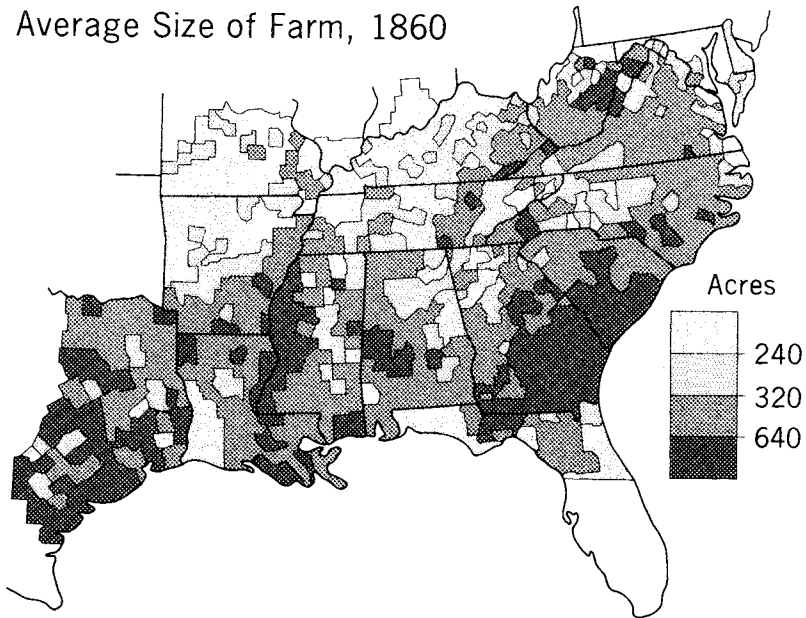


Fig. 6. The average size of farm in each county in 1860 was calculated by dividing the total acreage of land in farms by the total number of farms of three acres or more.

values, and the differences between regions in the South were appreciably greater than the differences within regions. Even more impressive was the large size of farms. Only the poorest counties in the hills had an average farm size of less than 160 acres, few plainland counties had farms that averaged less than 320 acres, and over considerable areas the average farm size was more than a square mile. Some of the high values in sparsely or recently settled areas hinted that appreciable acreages of farmland might remain undeveloped, however, and this impression had been reinforced by the experience of working with the data, because for many counties the acreage listed in the improved land column was much smaller than the acreage of unimproved land, which category included woodland, brush-covered land, rough or stony ground, and swampland.

The map of improved land per farm probably presents a more realistic picture of farm size in 1860 (Fig. 7). Improved farm land is roughly comparable to Level I agricultural land in the official land use and land cover classification system that has been developed by the

Improved Land per Farm, 1860

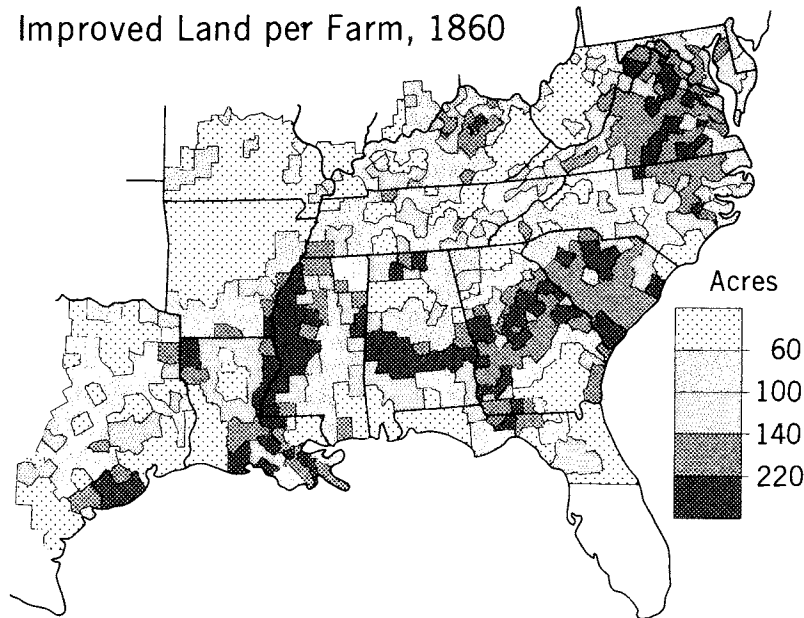


Fig. 7. The acreage of improved land per farm in each county in 1860 was calculated by dividing the total acreage of improved land by the total number of farms of three acres or more.

U.S. Geological Survey (Anderson et al.), or to what I have defined as “cleared farm land” (Hart, 1968, 418-419). It is not surprising that the areas with the largest acreages of improved land per farm in 1860 coincided nicely with the principal plantation areas, even though I had used total farm land rather than improved land to define the plantation areas. The major exceptions are in the hills, where slaveholdings were smaller, and in the Coastal Bend area of Texas, which might have warranted classification as a probable plantation area. I have the feeling, though, that my delineation of plantation areas in 1860 is not too far off the mark.

I had somewhat less confidence in the figures on total farm size in 1860, because few counties averaged less than 200 acres per farm, which seemed rather high. Examination of data for other states, however, indicated that the 1860 census data probably were accurate, and so I concluded that farms in the South were nearly double the size of farms in the Middle West in 1860 (Fig. 8). Farm size in the South began to decline dramatically after the Civil War, and by

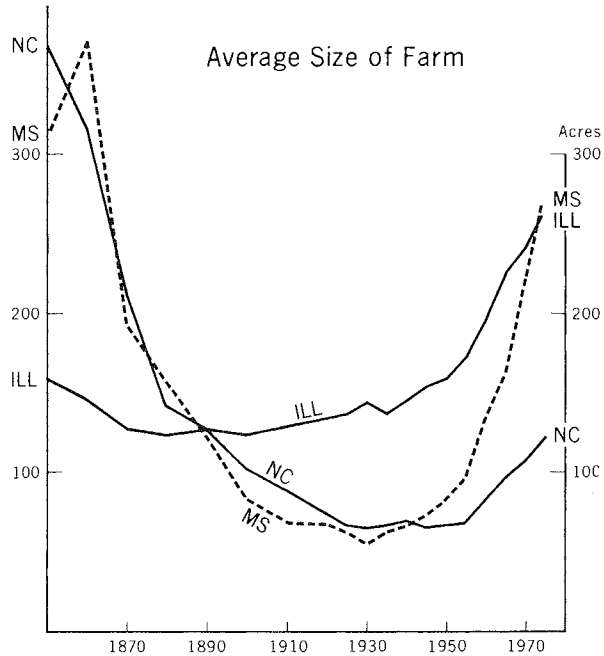


Fig. 8. The three states of Illinois, Mississippi, and North Carolina illustrate variations in average size of farm between 1950 and 1974. Illinois is representative of the Middle Western Corn Belt, Mississippi of the plantation South, and North Carolina of the nonplantation South.

World War I farms in the South averaged only about half the size of those in the Middle West.

By 1930 the South had become the region of 40 acres and a mule; few counties indeed had an average farm size as large as 100 acres. Now everyone knows that data on farm size in the South in 1930 are misleading, because the census used an unrealistic definition that classified tenant and sharecropper units as separate farms, whereas in fact they were merely subdivisions of larger landholdings that were managed as units. The plantation had left a legacy of landholdings too large for successful operation by a single individual, given the technology of producing the dominant crop, cotton, and the landowner was forced to rely on tenants to work his land. Prunty has described the transformation of landholdings between the Civil War and World War II, and I have nothing to add to his account for that period (Prunty).

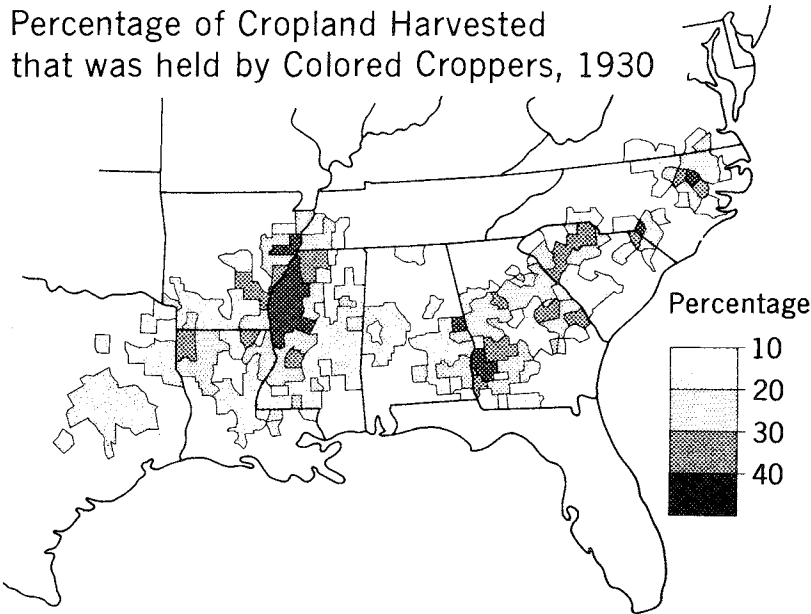


Fig. 9. Percentage of cropland harvested that was held by colored croppers in 1930.

I am compelled to wonder, however, why those who have railed at the inadequacies of census data have failed to use the detailed information that has been available on type of tenure by race for each county in the South. I elected to use cropland harvested, rather than number of operators or total farm land, as the base for my calculations, but it looks to me as though the census provides a rich treasure trove of useful information that scholars have not yet begun to mine.

The map showing the percentage of cropland harvested that was held by colored sharecroppers in 1930 shows what might be called a family resemblance to the map of plantation areas in 1860 (Fig. 9). Certainly one could not have predicted the 1930 map from knowledge of the 1860 map, yet sharecropping had not spread far beyond the old plantation areas, with the exception of eastern Texas. Conversely, sharecropping was not important in some of the old plantation areas. Carolina rice and Louisiana sugar plantations turned to wage labor almost immediately after the abolition of slavery, because they required gang work through much of the crop year (Phillips, 265; Rehder, 149). The Black Belt of Alabama is another old plantation

JOHN FRASER HART

Percentage of Cropland Harvested that was held by Tenants, 1930

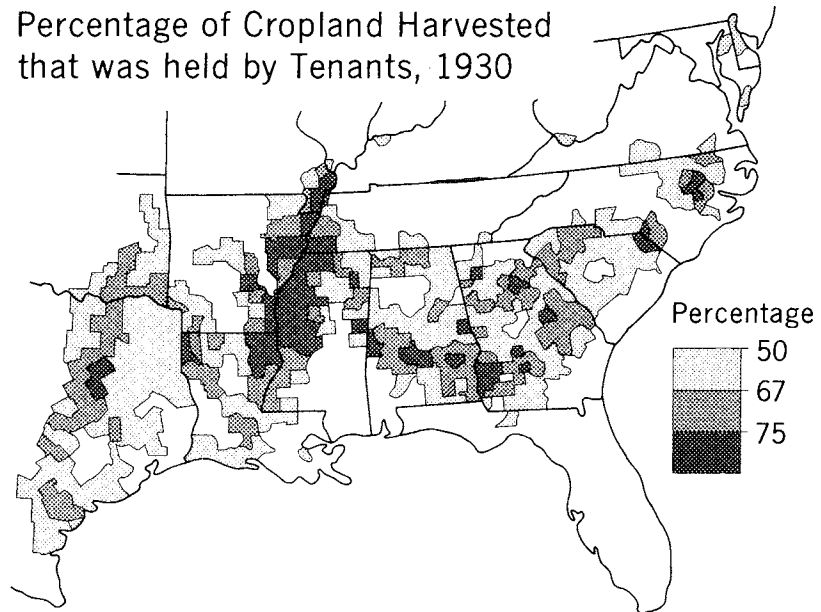


Fig. 10. Percentage of cropland harvested that was held by tenants in 1930.

area that had a low percentage of sharecropping in 1930, because the plantation landholdings in this area had turned to other forms of tenancy (Fig. 10). One of the more impressive features of the map of farm tenancy in the South in 1930 is the truism that you've got to have land worth renting before anyone will rent it from you—the land must be good enough to support both an owner and a tenant.

The map of farm tenancy seems to represent a kind of transitional phase between the map of the old plantation areas and the map of quality. It looks as though a tradition of tenancy had spread from the old plantation areas into adjacent areas of better farm land. The hills had a few freak counties, to be sure, but in much of Appalachia and the Ozarks tenants held less than half of the cropland harvested, and in many counties they held less than a quarter. Conversely, tenancy rates were high in the old cotton areas of the Piedmont, but otherwise they were highest in such better farming areas as the Blackland Prairies, the Delta, the Black Belt, and the Inner Coastal Plain.

The map of large farms in 1973 is not all that different from the map of farm tenancy in 1930 (fig. 11). This similarity is not surprising,

Average Size of Farm, 1974

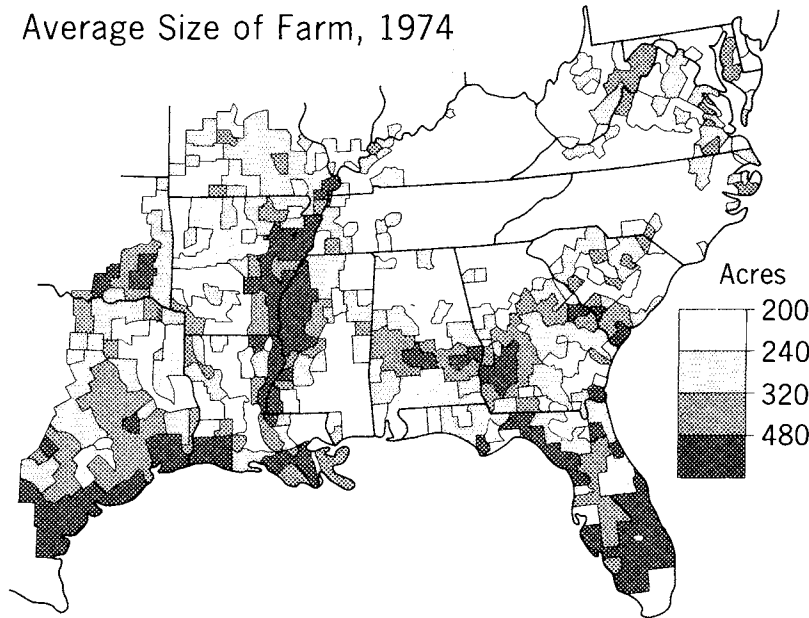


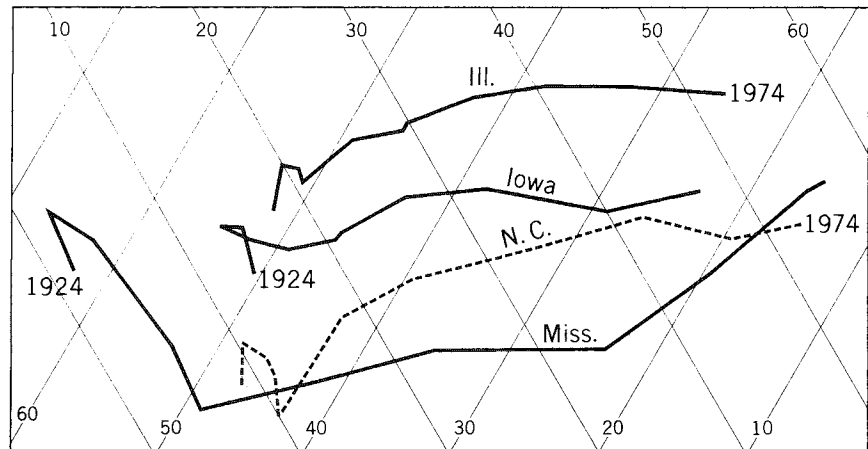
Fig. 11. Average size of farm in 1974. Only those counties with an average farm size of 200 acres or more have been shaded.

because the areas where most cropland was rented in 1930 were the areas where it was easiest for a landowner to get rid of his tenants and reassemble his property into one single large operation as soon as a technology had been developed that permitted the efficient operation of large farm units.

Large landholdings, which were the legacy of the plantation, facilitated the implementation within the region of the national trend toward farm enlargement, and by 1974 the average farm in the old plantation state of Mississippi was five whole acres larger than the average farm in the Corn Belt states of Illinois and Iowa. The legacy of the plantation, however, and the system of tenancy that succeeded it, gave the process of farm enlargement in the South a distinctive regional accent.

Part ownership has been the basic strategy for farm enlargement in most of the United States over the past half century (Hart, 1975, 85-88). A part owner farmer is one who owns part of the land he operates, and rents the rest. In the Middle West, for example, a few farmers who have wanted to enlarge their operations have been able

Percentage of Cropland Harvested Operated by Part Owners



Percentage of Cropland Harvested Operated by Tenants

Fig. 12. A triangular grid has been used to plot the percentage of cropland harvested that was operated by full owners, by part owners, and by tenants in four selected states at each census between 1924 and 1974. The basic trend for the half century, which is indicated by a more or less horizontal line, has been an increase in part ownership at the expense of tenancy, with little change in full ownership. A falling line shows an increase in full ownership at the expense of tenants, with little change in part ownership. A rising line shows an increase in part ownership at the expense of owners with little change in tenancy. Mississippi and North Carolina lagged behind the Corn Belt states of Illinois and Iowa in shifting to part ownership as a strategy for farm enlargement, because landowners in the South before 1960 were able to enlarge their operations by getting rid of their tenants and reconsolidating their tenant units into larger blocks of farm land.

to buy land outright and have remained full owners, but most farmers who have needed to expand have virtually been forced to rent land from others, partly because the farmer could not afford to pay the grossly inflated price of land, partly because the rapidly escalating price of land discouraged the owner from selling it. In 1974 part owner farmers operated about half of all the cropland harvested in Illinois and Iowa.

Farmers in the old plantation areas of the South were able to lag in adopting part ownership as a strategy for farm enlargement because they could reconsolidate before they had to rent (Fig. 12). In Mississippi, for example, many landowners were able to enlarge their operations by getting rid of their tenants and reconsolidating their land into the large farms that Prunty has christened "neoplantations"

(Prunty, 482). Before World War II the farmer in Mississippi could enlarge his operation by reconsolidating his tenant units, but by 1960 few such units were left to be consolidated, and since then the farmers in Mississippi have had to enlarge by renting rather than by reconsolidation. The state has shown the same sharp upsurge in part ownership at the expense of full ownership that occurred nearly half a century earlier in the Corn Belt, which had no plantation tradition, and no large landholdings that had been fragmented into tenant farms.

Since 1960 land tenure patterns in Mississippi have been converging rapidly on the national norm. The plantation legacy has facilitated this convergence, just as it has facilitated the convergence of the old plantation areas on national norms in other ways. Let us turn back to Prunty's six elements of a plantation, and begin by dismissing "location in some area of the South with a plantation tradition" as redundant (Prunty, 460). Certainly the other five elements—large landholdings, separation of management and labor, specialized production, distinctive settlement forms, and large input of cultivating power—make plantation areas distinctive within the region, but primarily because these are the only areas within the region that have begun to approach national agricultural norms. When the South is viewed from a national perspective it is mainly the former plantation areas that have been able to make the change over from 40 acres and a mule to large-scale modern agriculture.

For example, the old plantation areas have larger farms than other parts of the South, but their farms are not large by the standards of the Middle West. The old plantation areas have higher percentages of their land in part owner operations than other parts of the South, but these percentages are no higher than national norms. The old plantation areas stand out as areas of specialized agricultural production in the South, but not in the nation as a whole. The old plantation areas have higher farm income and more farm machinery and equipment than other parts of the South, but they are just about average for the nation.

One respect in which the old plantation areas do stand out, nationally as well as regionally, is their willingness to use hired workers, and their easy acceptance of a division of labor. Farmers in the Middle West are not able to divorce management from labor; the

planter may be a bit too free in accepting this divorce, but the size of his operation is not going to be constrained by any silly Republican notions about what a family farm is supposed to be. A farmer in the egalitarian Middle West may grudgingly accept the necessity of a hired man, but he feels twinges of guilt about having to have one on the place, and he vastly prefers to operate no more land than he and his son can handle. He holds to the Puritan ethic that hard work never killed anyone. The planter is not foolish enough to take the chance that it might. He knows that you are not supposed to work yourself to death, and it is perfectly acceptable in the old plantation areas to hire someone else to do the work for you.

An alternative way of identifying the value of the plantation tradition is to look at the other side of the coin and examine areas in the South that never enjoyed it. I selected North Carolina as the plainland state where the plantation tradition was weakest (Figs. 8 and 12). Farms in North Carolina still remain undersized by national standards, and farm size in the Tarheel State has not even started to converge on the national norm, as it unquestionably has done in the old plantation state of Mississippi.

The nonplantation areas have been dominated by the small, owner-operated, yeoman farms that are so greatly beloved by rural sociologists. These areas have been left in the lurch as stagnant agricultural backwaters because they have been severely handicapped by undersized farms that are too small for successful modern farm operations. Farms in these areas do not produce adequate incomes for their operators, many of whom have been forced to supplement their income by taking off-farm jobs. Considerable acreages of cropland have been abandoned in these areas since World War II (Hart, 1968, 424).

A Soil Conservation Service survey in 1975 found that Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida had 13 percent of the nation's land with high potential for conversion to cropland, but 35 percent of the land on which small ownership units posed a problem for such conversion (Dideriksen et al., 17, 59). In Carroll County, Georgia, for example, the average rural ownership unit in 1978 was only 61 acres, and only 125 properties were as large as 200 acres. The county is still saddled with far too many one-mule properties, and it would be

exceedingly difficult for an individual to assemble enough of them to make a farm of reasonable size.

The striking differences between plantation and nonplantation areas in the South, and the remarkable variations from one area to another, prompt me to make an exceedingly important digression. Certain clusters of counties stand out on map after map of the rural South, and these clusters have persisted through time. These persistent clusters suggest that the rural South consists of regions that are more highly developed, more distinctive, and better defined than regions in other parts of the United States (Hart, 1978). Here is an instance where factor analysis might actually be useful, instead of just another fishing trip. If such regions exist, as I think they do, they might justify some super-duper, grand-and-glorious, all-encompassing factor analysis to end all factor analyses in order to identify them.

These regions are physically distinctive, and in the first instance they can be identified in physical terms, as Barnes and Marschner have done. Some geographers might object, and they might demand consideration of other variables. Economics, landholdings, government policy, boll weevils, the list of other possible variables is almost endless, but within each region each of these variables has worked itself out in similar fashion, because individual farmers in the region have made similar decisions in response to each one. It is essential to know about and understand the operation of these other variables, to be sure, but they should not blind us to the fact that physical geography has provided the stage on which the human drama has been played. The basic geography of the rural South is its physical geography, and that physical geography has provided less, perhaps far less, room for human maneuver than in other parts of this country.

It would be foolish, of course, to ignore the role of human values in influencing the drama that has been played out on this physical stage, and two especially important human values have been associated with the plantation heritage of the South. I have already mentioned the traditional willingness to hire labor, which stems from the separation of management and labor on the plantation. An equally important tradition is the willingness of the planter to think big, to gamble on himself by going into debt, to operate more land than he and his family can handle with their own labor.

JOHN FRASER HART

These traditions are part of the magic associated with the name “plantation,” a name that still retains considerable glamor, at least within the region. In many ways the name “plantation” has the same glamor in the South that the name “ranch” has throughout the United States, and I devoutly hope that “plantation” will never be as corrupted as “ranch” has been corrupted.

“Plantation” is still a magic name for many people, a name full of romance and nostalgia, a name with powerful regional connotations. A modern “plantation” is merely a big farm that has been given a name that many Southerners consider romantic. Calling a big farm a plantation is rather like calling a janitor a sanitation engineer, but one probably should not object to fanciful names if they make people feel better. I do hope, however, that an emotional attachment to the name “plantation” is not part of the addiction to looking backward that has been the bane of the South—it is not easy to move forward when you are looking backward. I believe that the plantation traditions of thinking big, of separating management and labor, can point to the future as well as to the past. These traditions are beautifully consonant with the needs of American agriculture in the 1980s, and even though the plantation is dead, and may have been dead for quite a while, perhaps more than a century, the plantation heritage has given southern agriculture a tremendous advantage at a time when farms throughout the nation are being compelled to grow larger. May it continue to do so.

LITERATURE CITED

- Anderson, James R., Ernest E. Hardy, John T. Roach, and Richard E. Witmer. 1976. A land use and land cover classification system for use with remote sensor data. Prof. Paper 964. U.S. Geol. Surv. Washington.
- Barnes, Carleton P., and Francis J. Marschner. 1933. Natural land-use areas of the United States. 1:4,000,000. USDA Bureau Agric. Economics. Washington.
- Dideriksen, Raymond I., Allen R. Hidlebaugh, and Keith O. Schmude. 1977. Potential cropland study. Statistical Bulletin No. 578. USDA, Soil Conserv. Serv. Washington.
- Hart, John Fraser. 1968. Loss and abandonment of cleared farm land in the eastern United States. *Annals Assoc. Amer. Geographers*. 58(3): 417-440.
- Hart, John Fraser. 1975. *The look of the land*. Foundations of Cultural Geography Series. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.
- Hart, John Fraser. 1978. Cropland concentrations in the South. *Annals Assoc. Amer. Geographers*. 68(4): 505-517.

PLANTATION ROLES IN SOUTHERN AGRICULTURE

- Phillips, Ulrich Bonnell. 1968. *The slave economy of the Old South: Selected essays in economic and social history*. Edited and with an Introduction by Eugene D. Genovese. Louisiana State Univ. Press. Baton Rouge.
- Prunty, Merle, Jr. 1955. The renaissance of the southern plantation. *Geographical Rev.* 45(4): 459-491.
- Rehder, John B. 1978. Diagnostic landscape traits of sugar plantations in southern Louisiana. *Geoscience and Man.* 19: 135-150.