

The Plantation in Antebellum Southern Agriculture

SAM BOWERS HILLIARD

*Department of Geography
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, LA 70803*

Discussion of the antebellum southern agricultural economy raises questions concerning the importance, areal extent, and character of the plantation. From its beginnings in the South (probably during the late 17th or early 18th centuries) to the present time, the plantation has invoked an image of southern life, and few studies of the South lack reference to it. Not surprisingly, this peculiar agricultural landholding type has been subjected to sustained scholarly inquiry, and some students of the South have devoted a lifetime to the task of unraveling its mysteries. Even less surprisingly, observations and conclusions are as varied as the researchers themselves.

The plantation's attraction for the scholar is understandable, for its presence in the New World represented a new chapter in man's agricultural endeavors. It quickly became identified as the major instrument for providing an abundance of tropical or semi-tropical agricultural commodities for world markets, and success encouraged its application throughout the tropical world. First identified as a supplier of sugar, it soon was producing a variety of other crops, most notably tobacco, indigo, cotton, rice, coffee, and bananas. So pervasive has been the plantation's influence that some writers see it as a fundamental aspect of tropical development, representing noth-

ing less than an invasion of the tropics by mid-latitude peoples specifically to exploit its agricultural potential.¹ Whether or not such a crass description applies to the antebellum southern plantation is questionable, but its contribution to the South's rural economy was substantial. Furthermore, its importance in perpetuating the institution of slavery *and* its crucial role in fostering the image of a privileged class make the plantation the key to understanding the South.²

The plantation in the southeastern United States has been described in detail, and though commonly identified as a southern phenomenon, it has been recognized over much of the nation, even as far away as California. Despite such attempts to identify plantations over much of the continent, it is difficult to demonstrate that the plantation's domain extended far beyond the southeastern states; only there was it a major element in the agricultural landscape, only there did it contribute significantly to overall agricultural output, and only there was the word *plantation* widely used to designate a type of agricultural landholding.

Despite its importance in the area's agriculture, there is much that we don't know about the plantation. For example, what was its role relative to other landholding types? What proportion of the production of rice, indigo, tobacco, sugar, and cotton did it produce? How important were provision crops on plantations? Finally, how do we characterize the southern plantation relative to its counterparts in the tropical lands outside the United States?

These questions arise primarily from lack of a clear, universally recognized definition of the plantation. Considerable confusion results even when the word is used, for it is commonly and widely used in historical contexts to denote any large agricultural enterprise, especially if located in the tropics. Further complicating the matter are the archaic use of the term to denote a colony that has been "planted" in some foreign land and the current use of the term by foresters to describe a tract of land planted to trees.

In searching for meaning to the word *plantation* it is revealing to turn to the studies that attempt a world view of the phenomenon. Landholdings called plantations have existed for centuries throughout the tropical world, and from the literature that deals with such

landholdings a number of elements have been identified as plantation characteristics. Definitions range from simple statements of size, usually either in acreage or labor force or both, to elaborate descriptions of organization, marketing techniques, or operating characteristics. Furthermore, scholars from different disciplines have identified different things as plantation traits, depending upon their own points of view.³

The ideal plantation was (and presumably still is) an agricultural enterprise of relatively large size organized to produce a cash crop for sale in national or world markets. In addition to size it differed from the family farm in that it was more market oriented, less diversified, more highly capitalized, and required a large labor force. Moreover, most students of the subject have recognized a distinct dichotomy between management and labor. In some cases, management was embodied solely in the owner, but in others overseers were employed. In any case, the relatively large labor force had its role fairly well defined by rules or by custom and should not be confused with the hired hands occasionally employed on the family farm. In most cases, the labor was used in simple tasks that required little skills. In addition to the labor involved in crop production, plantation crops usually required additional processing before they were sent to market, thus the plantation had a quasi-industrial function.

Definitions of the plantation commonly stress profit orientation, and the planter is pictured as one who was more concerned with the production of a cash crop to make money rather than diversified agriculture or agrarian ideals. "Capitalistic" is a term much used, implying a rather substantial monetary investment with clear expectation of return. In many cases, the operation was owned by investors far removed from the plantation site, thus the need for overseers or managers.

Although some scholars would quarrel on minor points, there is general agreement on the basic characteristics listed above.⁴ Is it plausible, then, to conclude that the tropical plantation was a distinctive landholding type with specific identifying characteristics that were present wherever plantations occur? Further, is it possible that the antebellum southern plantation is but a poleward extension of that plantation phenomenon? The southern plantation certainly conforms to most of the established criteria; it was a relatively large

landholding engaged in producing labor intensive crops for sale; in most cases there was a clear labor-management distinction, and the crops were produced for extra-regional markets; in fact, most of the elements that characterized the tropical plantation were present. Yet, detailed study of landholdings called plantations located in various parts of the South reveals marked differences from place to place and among specific landholdings, a fact that leads us to the basic question posed here. Does the southern plantation fit the tropical plantation stereotype, or are the deviations so marked that major revisions are in order?

In trying to unravel the complexities of southern agriculture, it is tempting to attempt an interpretation without using the word *plantation*, simply viewing the entire system of landholdings as a continuum ranging from small plots of a few acres up to multiple units of several thousand acres each. By eliminating the use of the biased term one might find fresh insight and interpretations of the South or attempt revealing comparisons between the South and other parts of the country. Such attempts at quantitative objectivity, however, are not very successful. The plantation concept has been woven so thoroughly into the ideological fabric of the South, both past and present, that it cannot be ignored. Southerners thought of themselves as either planters or farmers. Owners of large tracts referred to their holdings as “plantations”; Northerners wrote of “planters” and “plantations”; and foreign travelers repeatedly called attention to the existence of both “planters” and “plantations.” Furthermore, scholars who have studied the organization and function of agricultural enterprises report a marked distinction between the relatively small, family-owned-and-worked landholding and the large, highly commercial unit found in certain parts of the South. Apparently, the distinction was more than a difference in size; fundamental differences in the organization and purposes were involved. Another way of saying it is that, as we go upwards in scale more things change than simply size. The southern landholding type called a plantation is not simply a large farm; it is much more.

Most southern plantations encompassed relatively large tracts of land; their success depended upon gangs of slaves; and most sought external markets—all characteristics of the stereotyped tropical plantation, but the southern plantation existed in a semi-tropical

environment where mid-latitude provision crops were produced easily, and the orientation toward European markets was less intense. Many planters managed their own farms and grew a variety of crops; together they formed, in many respects, a prestigious landed gentry who also had many characteristics common to the owner of a family farm, particularly in the matter of subsistence.

Except for a few, most landholdings were nearly self-sufficient, and some produced more than one cash crop. Furthermore, absentee ownership, a hallmark of the tropical plantation, was much less prominent among southern plantations. In fact, the resident owner commonly exercised strong control over day-to-day operations. Many were quite literate, and their journals reveal a surprising concern for garden crops, orchards and vineyards, provisions, and livestock improvement—in short, they were philosophically and practically devoted to an agrarian way of life, not unlike their neighbors who were commonly identified as farmers.

In defining the plantation, scholars sometimes choose to contrast the highly commercialized, profit-oriented plantation with the *hacienda* of Mexico or the manorial estate of medieval Europe, both of which existed in an agricultural setting in which resident ownership and adherence to the agrarian ideal as a way of life characterized such landholdings.⁵ The plantation has been recognized as an important element in the European colonization of the Caribbean, South Asia, and Africa, while the *hacienda* and the manorial estate could be found in the mid-latitudes of Europe and North America and, to a lesser extent, in mainland Latin America. Although such distinctions seem fairly clear when contrasting units in other parts of the world, questions emerge when the antebellum southern plantation is considered. It seems to fit rather poorly into existing definitions, often exhibiting elements common to both the plantation and the estate. In fact, it is quite possible to find examples of both the plantation and the estate in the antebellum South. The striking contrasts, for example, between the show plantations of coastal South Carolina or the Natchez District of Mississippi, replete with manor house, resident owners who daily directed plantation operations, and wives who presided over a bevy of house servants and the hundreds of “field factory” plantations owned by businessmen in Charleston or New Orleans ramrodded by overseers who worked hundreds of slaves are too great

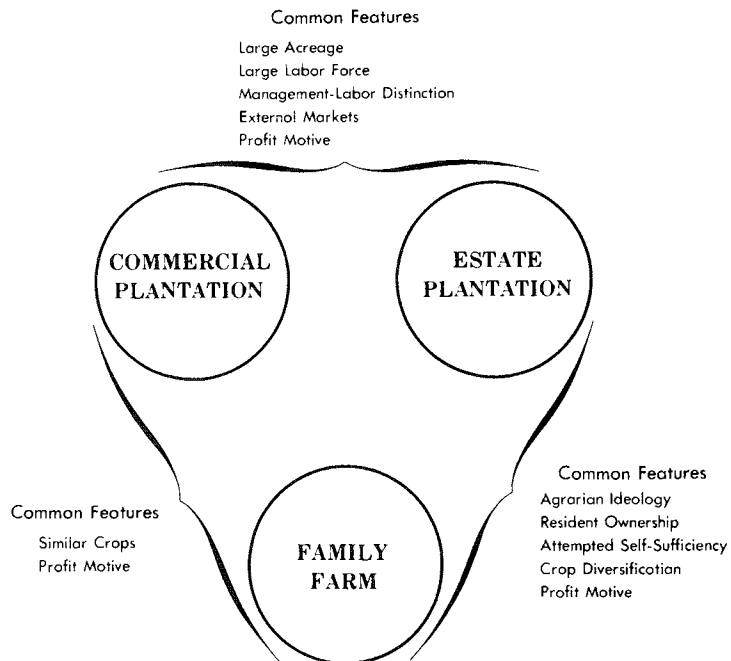


Fig. 1. Three basic landholding types in antebellum South.

to be ignored. Despite their common identification as plantations, both should be recognized as different landholding types. The show plantations provided substance to the “moonlight and magnolia” myth which abounds in southern literature, while the highly commercial organization were closely akin to the sugar plantations in Barbados or Jamaica.

A clearer picture of the antebellum agricultural system is gained if we postulate the existence of three basic landholding types in the antebellum South, which I propose that we label the *commercial plantation*, the *estate plantation*, and the *family farm*. Of the three types, the commercial plantation came closest to exemplifying the tropical plantation (Fig. 1).

The commercial plantation achieved dominance only where conditions were optimal. It was a capitalistic, market oriented, farm factory in the fullest sense. Its owner cherished few ideals above that of making money. Profits were under constant scrutiny; bonuses were offered for high production; and any overseer who could not deliver was replaced. Always located with east access to ports, the southern

commercial plantation came closest to fulfilling the classic, tropical plantation ideal. It was found in much of the Deep South but was best exemplified in the sugar plantation of southern Louisiana where it accounted for most of the sugar produced. Most sugar plantations were overseer-operated, and many were but single holdings in multi-unit complexes.

Although similar in size, the estate plantation represented a large agricultural organization with somewhat different emphases. Like the commercial plantation, it was profit oriented and money-making was an essential ingredient, but with a resident planter who valued the agrarian way of life and who cherished ideals of patronism and community leadership, a different type of organization emerged. The estate planter took pride in a well-ordered operation where the family, the slave force, and the stock were well cared for. He shared the farmer's pride in independence, thus self-sufficiency was a laudable goal. Not all were wealthy, in fact, many lived modestly, but some eventually achieved an enviable life style with estate houses, gardens, house servants, and other amenities commonly associated with wealthy agrarian living. It is easy to dismiss any recognition of such ideology as a product of parochial nostalgia, but the evidence is too pervasive to dismiss. Such estates were by no means in the majority, but their existence is unquestionable.

The third landholding type, for want of a better term, may be labeled the family farm. Its counterpart was found all over the eastern United States, though the southern farm was larger than was commonly found elsewhere, and it may have exhibited somewhat different crop and livestock emphases. Although some farmers owned a few slaves, slavery was not essential to the operation, and many farmers were opposed to slavery. Farm labor and management remained within the family, absentee ownership was non-existent; the farm was, on balance, more a way of life than a money-making operation. It would be foolish to assert that farmers were not motivated by the desire for profit, yet their goals were a far cry from those of the businessman-turned-planter who might own several units and who bought and sold plantations like common stock. In fact, the word *profit* is confusing because it had different meaning for the farmer and the commercial planter. The farmer saw profit as income that accrued from the sale of surplus goods and in the appreciation of his property,

which in some ways represented wages for his own labor, but to the latter it represented a return on his investment. A farmer might be pleased at the end of a year that resulted in well fed stock, a full larder, healthy family, and \$100 or \$200 cash, but the astute planter would insist on profits that represented a 6 or 8 or 10 percent return on his investment.

Each of the categories proposed represented a distinct landholding type with its own spatial organization, landscape pattern, and goals. At the same time, it must be recognized that the three part model represents an ideal and that many landholdings did not conform precisely to one of the three basic forms. For example, an estate planter might gradually accumulate additional holdings, in which case they functioned as overseer-operated commercial plantations. In other cases, individuals began as young farmers but became planters in time. In fact, one of the perennial problems in assessing the relative importance of the three types is time or stage of development. The antebellum period was a developmental one in which a considerable upward mobility permitted farmers to become planters as their worth increased. Records reveal individuals who began as farmers with one or two slaves yet amassed sizable fortunes in a lifetime of effort. Thus an individual might correctly be classed as a farmer in 1825, but by 1850 had moved into the estate planter class. Throughout the antebellum South heads of households commonly accumulated sizable estates in land and slaves that were parcelled out to heirs as their inheritance.

In fact, it is helpful to visualize the three units as steps in the increasing commercialization of American agriculture, the family farm being a 19th century manifestation of the European peasant farm and the commercial plantation, a forerunner of the large specialized unit of today.⁶ Transition from the family farm to the estate plantation involved an increase in scale but also a move toward specialization. The emergence of the commercial plantation marked the final step in the shift toward a modern commercial system.

Discussion of the plantation necessarily raises the perennial question of self-sufficiency, for the plantation's role in stimulating interregional trade has been a major theme in southern economic history. Traditional interpretation holds that the plantation was incapable of

supplying its own needs; hence a strong dependence upon other areas for food. Although the degree and extent of this dependence has been challenged, its existence is well established.⁷ However, when we consider the classic definition of the plantation, with whatever advantages that might accrue through crop specialization and large scale, this dependence should not be surprising. Plantations seldom were intended to be self-sufficient. They were organized to maximize profits through monoculture, and in an efficient, specialized agricultural system a given amount of labor spent on such specialty crops as cotton, rice, and sugar, produced more money for the purchase of food than if the same labor had been devoted to provision crops. In fact, the more a planter moved away from the ideals of self-sufficiency, the more successful he was as a planter. There is no question but that plantations in some parts of the South depended strongly upon purchase provisions, but most southern agricultural units, including many large holdings clearly recognized as plantations, achieved a high level of independence from external food sources. Thus, the southern landholding traditionally labeled "plantation" varied markedly in its level of subsistence. But if the proposed threefold model is found acceptable, the subsistence variability becomes clear, because subsistence levels ranged from the nearly self-sufficient farm through the estate plantation to the cash-crop plantation where purchased provisions alone fed the labor force.

The economic distinction, therefore, rests upon the relation to the market economy. Obviously, the commercial plantation had to have strong transport connections that assured access to both cash-crop and provision markets. In fact, differences among the three can be stated in terms of difference in emphasis, from subsistence to commercial economies, at the level of linkage to external markets. This emphasis ranged from the subsistence farmer who only sporadically marketed cash crops to the commercial planter whose existence depended upon full market access (Fig. 2).

It appears, then, that two fundamental variables were involved in the change from farm to plantation—size of operation and level of subsistence. By plotting models of each type in two dimensions, we get some idea of their relationships in terms of those two important variables (Fig. 3). Size certainly distinguishes the two plantation

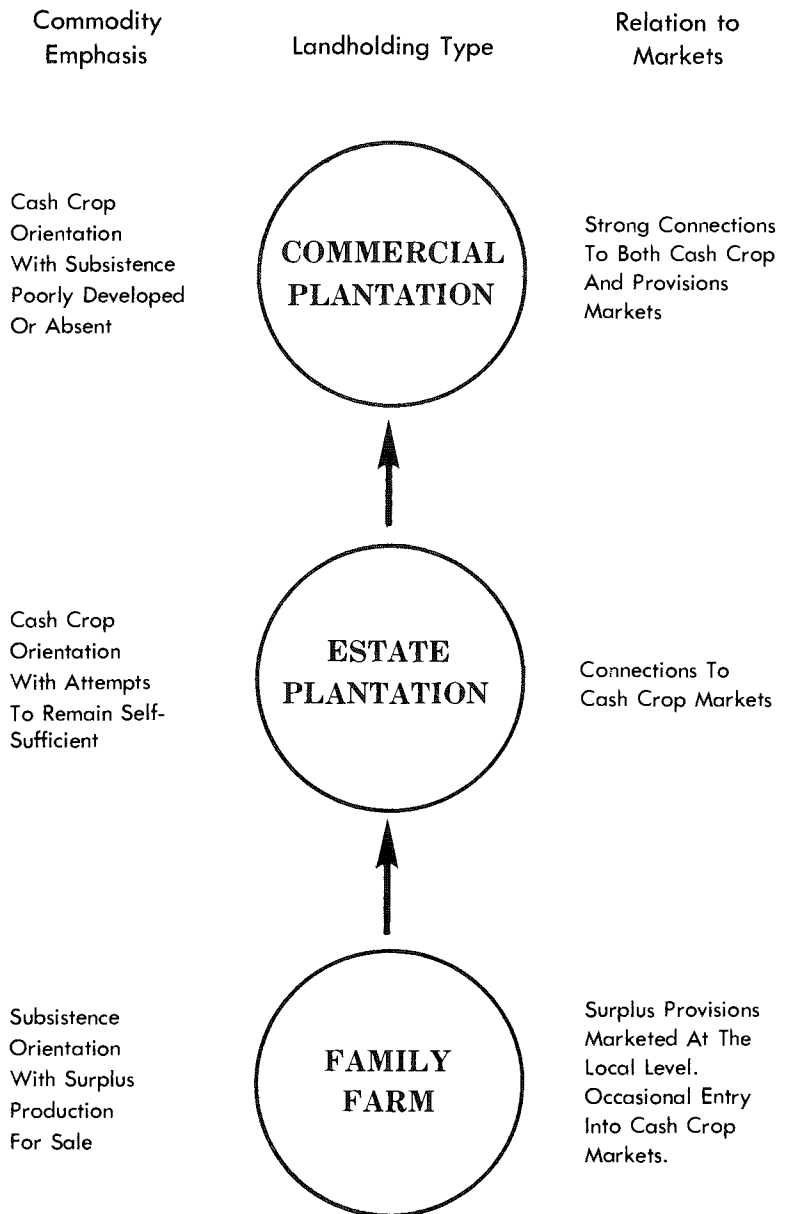


Fig. 2. Landholding types, commodity emphasis and relation to markets.

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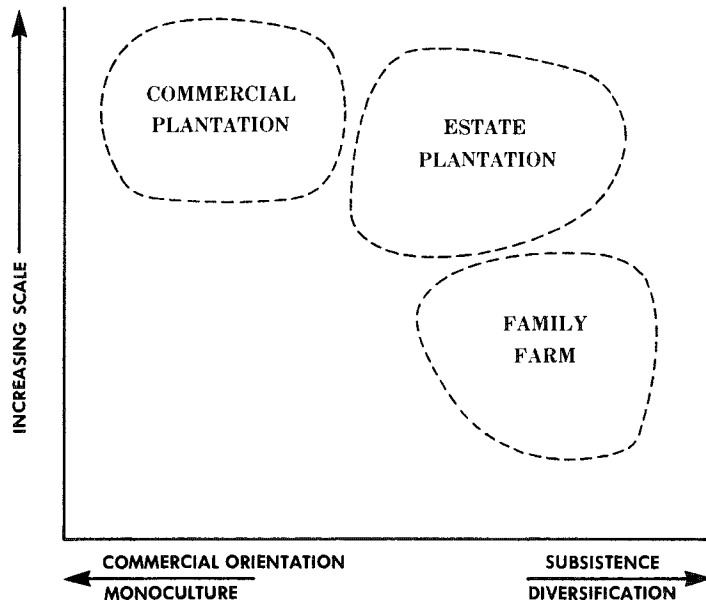


Fig. 3. Change from farm to plantation-size of operation and level of subsistence.

types from the farm. No threshold size (either acreage or labor force) is proposed here because cash crops and their acreage and labor requirements vary, but both certainly were larger than the family farm. More importantly, both plantation types depend upon a labor force other than that of the family, and in both there was a recognized distinction between labor and management, characteristics not found on the family farm.

Despite a number of features common to both plantation types, certain aspects of the organization and function of plantations served to distinguish the two, the primary ones being a greater attention to subsistence crops and a devotion to the ideals of agrarian life.

It is also worth noting briefly that the threefold classification probably also was reflected in social conditions. The shift from farmer to estate planter was marked by similar changes in life style, community involvement, and status, but if the planter resided within the community his emotional ties would preserve relations with neighbors, an identification with the community that was not characteristic of the commercial plantation.

Finally, the relative importance of each of the three depend upon location. The family farm almost surely outnumbered all others except for a few favored counties or parishes. In such areas, notably the Appalachians or the outer Coastal Plain, plantations were nearly absent. Major plantation areas lay along the coasts of Carolina and Georgia, favored spots on the Piedmonts and Inner Coastal Plains of South Carolina and Georgia, the Black Belt of Alabama and Mississippi, the Tennessee River Valley of Alabama, the Mississippi River Floodplain from Memphis to Baton Rouge, the Red River Valley of Louisiana, a number of natural levees in southern Louisiana, and scattered among the river valleys of East Texas. In general, the commercial and estate plantation distinction was also a spatial one. Commercial plantations were especially important in those areas where transportation routes were well developed permitting easy exportation of cash crops and food purchases, but in all areas both plantation types existed in close proximity to the family farm.

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