The Shields-Ethridge Farm: The End of a Way of Life

(Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm Foundation)

“What is that?" A ghost village appears on a drive through northeast Georgia. The collection of gray buildings with red tin roofs of peculiar sizes and shapes beckons. Should you stop and read more about the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm, you may imagine the ghost fields of cotton that once grew around these abandoned buildings. You may conjure the click of wagons, coming along the same road you drove, bringing cotton to the gin. You may even think you smell sausage being cooked after hog butchering. This was once a sharecropper’s village, where the seasons of planting and ginning cotton determined the way of life for fifty years.

The story of this place is the story of Ira Washington Ethridge, an entrepreneur who guided the farm through an agricultural revolution. It is also the story of sharecroppers, who in exchange for a house, cotton seed, and fertilizer, planted and picked cotton and paid the Ethridges a share of their crop. Today the cotton gin is quiet. The commissary, where sharecroppers could buy supplies, looks as if someone just closed and locked the door. Hoes, oxen yoke, and ploughs rust in the blacksmith's shop.

What froze this place in time? What clues tell the history of this place? Let's begin the story. Never mind the din of the helicopter overhead. Those are land prospectors, looking for green space to buy and subdivide. But we have time to explore. The history of a harsh and sometimes heroic existence can be read from the buildings and landscape on the Shields-Ethridge Farm.

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Where this lesson fits into the curriculum

Time Period: 1900-1940

Topics: This lesson could be used in units on the transformation of agriculture in the U.S.; the era of the Great Depression; and the impact of the New Deal on farms in the southern U.S.

Relevant United States History Standards for Grades 5-12

This lesson relates to the following National Standards for History from the UCLA National Center for History in the Schools:

US History Era 7

- **Standard 1B:** The student understands Progressivism at the national level.
- **Standard 1C:** The student understands the limitations of Progressivism and the alternatives offered by various groups.
- **Standard 3B:** The student understands how a modern capitalist economy emerged in the 1920s.

US History Era 8

- **Standard 1B:** The student understands how American life changed during the 1930s.
- **Standard 2B:** The student understands the impact of the New Deal on workers and the labor movement.

Relevant Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

This lesson relates to the following Curriculum Standards for Social Studies from the National Council for the Social Studies:

Theme II: Time, Continuity and Change

- Standard B: The student identifies and uses key concepts such as chronology, causality, change, conflict, and complexity to explain, analyze, and show connections among patterns of historical change and continuity.
- Standard C: The student identifies and describes selected historical periods and patterns of change within and across cultures, such as the rise of civilizations, the development of transportation systems, the growth and breakdown of colonial systems, and others.

Theme III: People, Places, & Environment

- Standard H: The student examines, interprets, and analyzes physical and cultural patterns and their interactions, such as land uses, settlement patterns, cultural transmission of customs and ideas, and ecosystem changes.

Theme V: Individuals, Groups, & Institutions

- Standard C: The student describes the various forms institutions take and the interactions of people with institutions.

Theme VII: Production, Distribution, & Consumption

- Standard A: The student gives and explains examples of ways that economic systems structure choices about how goods and services are to be produced and distributed.
- Standard B: The student describes the role that supply and demand, prices, incentives, and profits play in determining what is produced and distributed in a competitive market system.
- Standard H: The student compares basic economic systems according to who determines what is produced, distributed, and consumed.
- Standard I: The student uses economic concepts to help explain historical and current developments and issues in local, national, or global contexts.

Theme VIII: Science, Technology, & Society

- Standard B: The student shows through specific examples how science and technology have changed people's perceptions of the social and natural world, such as in their relationship to the land, animal life, family life, and economic needs, wants, and security.
- Standard C: The student describes examples in which values, beliefs, and attitudes have been influenced by new scientific and technological knowledge, such as the invention of the printing press, conceptions of the universe, applications of atomic energy, and genetic discoveries.

Relevant Common Core Standards

This lesson relates to the following Common Core English and Language Arts Standards for History and Social Studies for middle and high school students:

Key Ideas and Details

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-12.2
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-12.3

Craft and Structure

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-12.4
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-12.6

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-12.7

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-12.10

Teaching with Historic Places

The Shields-Ethridge Farm: The End of a Way of Life

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

About This Lesson

This lesson is based on the National Register of Historic Places registration file "Shields-Ethridge Farm" [http://www.shieldsethridgefarminc.com/pdfs/NR-Shields-EtheridgeFarm.pdf]; the master's thesis of Patricia Stallings ("Presenting Mr. Ira's Masterpiece: Two Centuries of Agricultural Change at the Shields-Ethridge Farm"); Ian Firth's "Landscape Master Plan for the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm;" oral interviews with children of sharecroppers, neighbor farm children, and Susan Ethridge Chaisson (granddaughter of Ira Washington Ethridge); Ethridge family photographic albums; and source materials on cotton farming in upland Georgia, sharecropping, the Great Depression, and the Agricultural Adjustment Act. It was published in 2012. The lesson was written by Martha Lentz Walker, Shields-Ethridge Farm volunteer educator and edited by the TwHP staff. This lesson is one in a series that brings the important stories of historic places into classrooms across the country.

Objectives

1. To describe the role cotton farming played in the South after the Civil War;
2. To explain the work sharecroppers did throughout the year to produce a cotton crop;
3. To identify some of the factors that brought about the end of the sharecropping system in upland Georgia;
4. To research agricultural change in the local community and to plan an exhibit based on such research.

Materials for students

The materials listed below can either be used directly on the computer or can be printed out, photocopied, and distributed to students.

1. Four maps showing the cotton belt in the 1920's, the location of the Shields-Ethridge Farm, a site plan of the farm, and the sharecroppers villa;
2. Three readings about sharecroppers on the Shields-Ethridge Farm and the efforts of Ira W. Ethridge to reinvent the farm using technology and business principles;
3. Five photographs of the gin, schoolhouse, and sharecroppers at work

Visiting the site

The Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm is located eight miles from Interstate 85 in northeast Georgia, 50 miles east of Atlanta. The farm is open to the public by appointment. To arrange a visit, contact the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm Foundation at http://shieldsethridgefarminc.com/

Getting Started

(Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm Foundation)

What do you think is going on in this photo?

Photo Analysis Worksheet

Step 1:
Examine the photograph for 10 seconds. How would you describe the photograph?

Step 2:
Divide the photograph into quadrants and study each section individually. What details--such as people, objects, activities--do you notice?

Step 3:
What other information--such as time period, location, season, reason photo was taken--can you gather from the photo?

Step 4:
How would you revise your first description of the photo using the information noted in Steps 2 and 3?

Step 5:
What questions do you have about the photograph? How might you find answers to these questions?

Setting the Stage

The history of the Shields-Ethridge Farm is tied to cotton. This crop was in great demand in 1810, when Joseph Shields began growing "upland" cotton, the type of cotton grown most in the United States. The fertile land along Walnut Fork of the Oconee River had been cleared in 1790, when Shields and his sons bought 200 acres in what is now Jackson County, Georgia.

Cotton was and is the most important vegetable fiber used in producing textiles. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 made it practical to grow cotton in the Piedmont section of Georgia (the area between the state's Coastal Plain and the Appalachian Mountains). The gin could clean the heavily-seeded upland cotton much faster than human hands. By 1804, the South's production of cotton was eight times greater than it had been in the previous decade. By 1860, textile mills in the North imported all of their cotton from the South. The southern production of cotton was also being consumed overseas by England and France who received more than three-fourths of their cotton supply from the American South.

Cotton farmers like Joseph Shields and his sons had enough land to benefit from this suddenly profitable crop for the next 50 years. They also had the second requirement for productivity: labor. By 1860 the Shields owned 20 slaves to plow, plant, and harvest the cotton. The Shields increased their land holdings to 496 acres by 1860.[1]

Before the Civil War, Georgia was one of the leading cotton producers in the United States, but the war changed the cotton industry. The Shields farm produced a small quantity of cotton prior to the Civil War, but when the war ended, both sons returned to Georgia to rebuild the farm and concentrate on cotton production.

The war devastated the economy of the former Confederate states. Due to the emancipation of slavery, former black slaves had farm labor to offer, but did not have the funds to buy their own farmland. Many destitute white farmers also found themselves in this predicament. White, southern farm owners had the land and supplies to continue their production, but were without the necessary labor. Sharecropping was formed as a solution to this problem. When the farm owner and the laborer entered into a sharecropping contract, the farm owner agreed to lend the laborer farm land and supplies, but the laborer would then owe the farm owner a percentage of his crop. Many of the laborers who joined the sharecropping system ended up in a continuous cycle of debt and were therefore, tied to the land and the farm owner until they could pay off their debt.

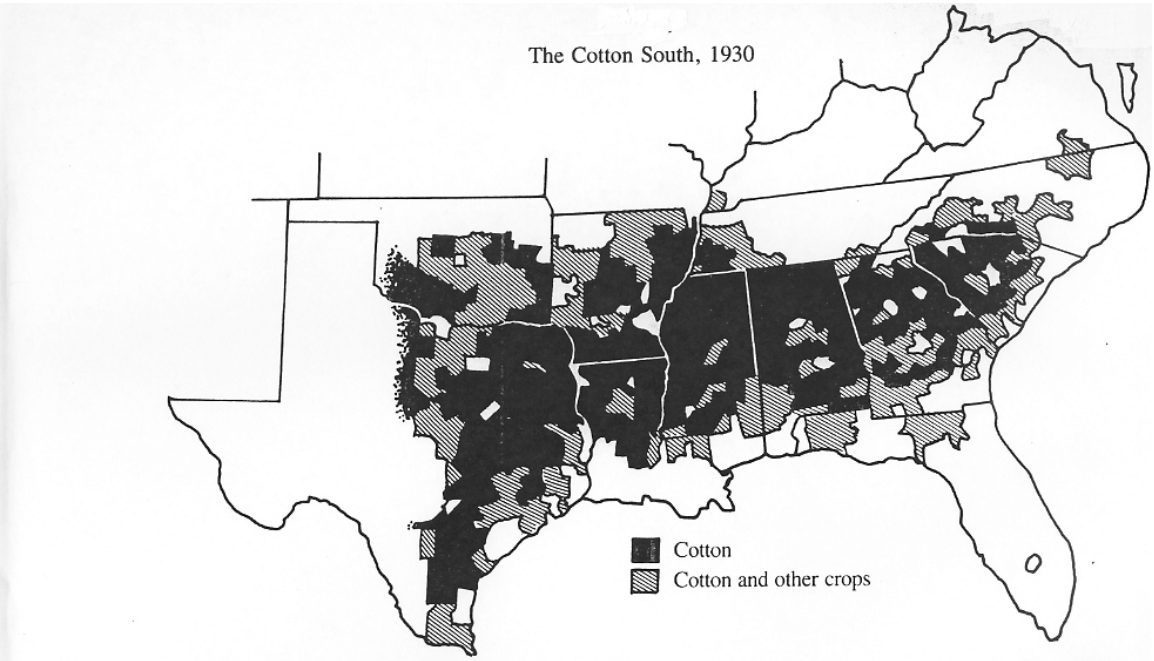
Reconstruction in Jackson County meant rebuilding the capacity to produce cotton. The Shields faced two problems: repairing the cotton fields and finding field labor. For the Shields, the sharecropper system was the solution. Many former slaves continued to work on the Shields farm after the Civil War alongside poor white farmers who also sharecropped for the Shields. Under this system, the Shields brothers did well for the next 30 years. More land was acquired, and by 1890, the farm had grown to 1000 acres.[2]

Robert Shields, grandson of Joseph Shields, inherited the family residence, which had been built in 1866 from hand hewn heart pine. Robert's daughter, Susan Ella, and her husband, Ira Washington Ethridge, moved in to care for Robert in 1896. When Susan Ella's father died in 1910, the home place and 114 acres were deeded to Susan Ella and Ira. The name "Ethridge" was now added to the farm, whose future was still tied to the cotton trade. Cotton still ruled the

south, but prices for cotton fluctuated so wildly that cotton was called a “gambler’s trade.” Ira Washington Ethridge would gamble on cotton during the next 40 years, but he also “hedged his bets” by building a village to withstand the fickle cotton economy. It was a sharecroppers’ village, and all the structures built by 1920, except for some tenant houses, are still intact at the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm.

Locating the Site

Map 1: The Cotton Belt



SOURCES: Adapted from Charles Johnson *et al.* (comps.), *Statistical Atlas; Fifteenth Census, 1930: Agriculture,* county tables.

Questions for Map 1

1) On a map of the United States, find and name the "Cotton South" states shown on Map 1. Why do you think these states were called the "Cotton Belt" in 1930?

2) Given their location, what characteristics do you think these "Cotton Belt" states share? Does your state share these characteristics?

3) States in the "Cotton Belt" get an average of 60 inches of rain a year. How does the average rainfall in your area compare with the "Cotton Belt" states?

4) Is cotton grown in your state? What factors can you think of that might explain why cotton is or is not grown in your state?

Locating the Site

Map 2: The State of Georgia

(Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm)

Questions for Map 2

1) Comparing Map 2 with Map 1, where is Georgia situated in the Cotton South?

2) Find the Shields-Ethridge Farm on Map 2. The farm is located in the Piedmont region of Georgia. This area in the northern part of the state has hills and mountains and was once forested with oak, pine, and hickory. The coastal region of the state is flat and sandy. How do you think cotton farms in the Piedmont area would differ from those in the coastal area?

3) Interstate 85 runs just eight miles to the north of the Shields-Ethridge Farm today, and is a major corridor between Greenville, South Carolina, and Atlanta, Georgia. How do you think the proximity of a major highway might affect the area surrounding the farm?

Determining the Facts

Reading 1: Sharecroppers and the Crops

From 1910 until 1945, Susan Ella and Ira Washington Ethridge lived in a "plantation plain" house in Jackson County, Georgia. Houses in the plantation plain style generally were two stories tall and one room deep, with a front porch and chimneys on each end. Joseph Shields had bought the land on which the house now sits in 1790. In 1810, he began growing cotton. Joseph's grandson, Robert, inherited the family residence after the Civil War. The house he built in 1866 was constructed mostly with hand-hewn pine and square nails. In the late 1890s, Robert's daughter, Susan Ella, and her husband Ira moved in to care for Robert; they acquired the house and 114 acres when Robert died in 1910. The name "Ethridge" now became part of the farm's name.

The future of the Shields-Ethridge Farm still hinged on the cotton trade in the early 20th century, as it had in the 19th. The Civil War devastated the Southern economy. Sharecropping developed as an economic survival system across the South. Destitute farmers with no land worked for landowners who had no cash to pay wages. The system varied from place to place, but generally sharecroppers either worked for a portion of the crop or paid a portion of the crop to the owner.

Many formerly enslaved individuals voluntarily continued to work on the Shields farm as sharecroppers. Others returned after a brief time away. Many of their descendants later sharecropped on the farm. Other sharecroppers were "dirt farmers," poor white men who had no land of their own. The tenants who worked the Shields farm lived in small houses scattered across the property, near the fields where they worked. Different parts of the farm were referred to by the names of sharecroppers, indicating that some sharecroppers worked on the Shields-Ethridge Farm for many years.[1]

On the Shields-Ethridge Farm, the owner provided each sharecropper with a house, cotton seed, fertilizer, a mule, and a plow. In return, the sharecropper and his family worked a portion of the farm, usually 10 to 15 acres, and paid the Ethridges one-half of the cotton crop. Thirteen simple L-shaped houses sprang up around the 150 acres belonging to the Ethridge family. The arrangement of the sharecropper houses across the Shields-Ethridge farm reveals the shared culture of black and white sharecroppers. Although few of the houses remain, their original placement promoted sharing in work and play. Sharecroppers and their families lived by the cotton clock. Growing cotton ruled their lives.

The shrubby cotton plant required 200 frost-free days to grow, as well as 50 to 60 inches of rain. Geographically, Georgia enjoyed the weather and fertile soil needed. These conditions produced a cash crop that supported both the Ethridges and the sharecroppers. Located in the "upland" region of Georgia between the coast and the mountains, Shields-Ethridge Farm scheduled the planting of cotton seed to begin in April. Mules dragged a special plow, usually a single-blade called a "bull tongue," preparing the fields for planting.

As the plants grew, workers thinned and weeded them throughout the spring. In the early summer, when the plants were taller, the cotton needed "chopping," which consisted of removing weeds from around the cotton stalk. "Mopping" the plants with a mixture of arsenic and molasses killed boll weevils. In the late summer, the stalks were heavy with cotton capsules

called bolls, each filled with fluffy cotton fiber and sticky seeds. Weeding required great care to prevent damage to the stalk. By now the plants were waist high, and everyone waited for the bolls to ripen through the end of the summer and into early fall. Even in July, when croppers "laid their crop by" (waited for the plants to bloom) there was much work to do.

When the cotton bolls finally burst open, the fibers dried, making the cotton ready to harvest about four to five months after planting. Picking cotton in the fall was a sun-up to sun-down job, with every family member moving through a sea of cotton to pluck the bolls. Moving row by row, pickers bent to pluck the boll from the stalk. They dragged sacks of cotton bolls behind them, sacks that were seven feet long. Picking cotton required bending and pulling for long hours. Babies went to the fields with their mothers, lying on the cotton sheets used to collect bolls. Lunch was often hoe cakes, corn meal flat bread baked before dawn in the sharecroppers' wood stove. It was back-breaking and hand-scarring work, as the bolls were sharp and cut into even callused hands. At night the work continued, as children were told to remove enough seed from the cotton bolls to fill their shoes before being allowed to go to bed.

Unlike cotton grown in coastal areas, upland cotton had short fibers and many seeds. That made it more difficult to clean, or "gin." Hand ginning took a very long time. One person could clean about one pound of cotton in a day by hand. By 1929 Ira Ethridge's mechanical gin would turn out 40 bales of cotton, each weighing 500 pounds. Clean cotton, called "lint," was ready to be marketed and spun. Sharecroppers looked forward to the day cotton went to the gin, when they could watch a year of work be weighed. Children of sharecroppers remember the privilege of going to the gin with their father. Wagons lined up with cotton to be ginned; afterwards those wagons, now loaded with cotton bales, headed to markets in Commerce, or Harmony Grove, or Winder.

Sometimes ginning would continue until January, when sharecroppers would "settle up" their account with Ira Ethridge, after the cotton had been sold. Each sharecropper received half of the money from the sale of his crop. From that amount, Ira Ethridge subtracted whatever the sharecropper had bought at the commissary during the year. These items would include fertilizer and insecticide. In good years, sharecroppers could set aside some money to buy their own land, but in bad years, they went deeper into debt.

January and February were months to repair equipment and ready the fields. The year began all over again, as farmers prepared the "bed" for cotton by pulling out old stalks before plowing the field. Then they plowed the earth and planted the seeds again.

The seasons ruled even the schooling of the children. In 1909 Jackson County built a new school just up the road from the Ethridge house, on property donated by Susan Ella Ethridge's single brothers. Called the "Bachelors' Academy," the school served white children from grades one through seven, who walked from neighboring farms to attend the two room schoolhouse. Black children walked to a school farther away until 1938. That year, white students began traveling to a consolidated school in Jefferson and black children began attending Bachelors' Academy. During cotton picking season, school days were shortened or cancelled, so that children could help harvest cotton.

Almost everything the sharecroppers ate, wore, or used during the year was home-made, except shoes. If the one pair of shoes each family bought at the beginning of the year wore out,

that pair was wired together to last. The new pair of overalls and an orange that the Ethridges gave each sharecropper and his family members at Christmas was an exception to the self-sufficiency of sharecropping.

Sharecroppers grew crops of corn, wheat, and vegetables around their homes, and raised chickens and pigs. January was a time for killing hogs and preserving sausage and hams in a smokehouse. Cows provided milk and butter. Families drew water from a well and planted fruit trees and berry bushes around their houses. Spring yielded “polk salad,” made from the tender green leaves of this wild plant. Blackberries, strawberries, and plums were gathered and canned. Fall provided pecans and black walnuts. Sharecropping families took advantage of everything they could in the environment for sustenance. And everyone in the family worked hard to use their resources wisely.

Nature also supplied house-keeping materials. Digging “white mud,” clay called kaolin, from the nearby creek banks provided paint for the fireplace or to brighten the inside of houses during spring cleaning. Cut and dried berry bushes and sourwood trees made brooms, which were used each week to sweep the yard clean.

Every family member had chores. Some chopped wood and stacked it for the stove and fire place. Others cleaned and filled coal oil or kerosene lamps. Someone needed to wash clothes outdoors in a large pot over an open fire, and then lay or hang them to dry in the fresh air. Children rose at 4 A.M. to feed livestock and milk cows. They set tubs of water out in the sun, so that they could bathe in warm water when they returned from the fields. Even the youngest child used a sawed off hoe to chop cotton from plants needing weeding, or carried a “pick sack” made of a fertilizer bag to pluck bolls.

An Ethridge family member recalled: “People used what they had, they worked for a living, and they were proud of their work.” Former sharecroppers on the Shields-Ethridge Farm remember singing in the fields while harvesting cotton, of jumping aboard the wagon to tamp down the raw cotton, or of shucking corn on rainy days. Many who remembered their childhood in a sharecroppers’ family counted having work to do as a blessing.

Questions for Reading 1

1) What does the term “sharecropper” mean? What was the agreement between the landowners (Ira Washington and Susan Ella Ethridge) and the sharecroppers on the Shields-Ethridge farm?

2) How did a year on the “cotton clock” develop? Draw a timeline to show the steps necessary to grow and harvest cotton.

3) Why was upland cotton hard to clean? What specific term is used to describe cleaning cotton?

4) Sharecroppers had almost no cash. How did they get along without money?

5) What were some of the children’s responsibilities? Which chores do you think you would have preferred? Which would be your least favorite?

Determining the Facts

Reading 2: The Sharecroppers' Village

Cotton still ruled the south in the early 20th century, but prices fluctuated so wildly that cotton was called a "gambler's trade." Ira Washington Ethridge would gamble on cotton during the next 40 years, but he also "hedged his bets." He built a sharecroppers' village to withstand the fickle cotton economy. All of the structures built by 1920, except for some tenant houses, are still intact at the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm.

It took a safe-cracking in 2002 to discover what a record-keeper Ira Ethridge was. At the direction of the Ethridge heirs, a locksmith attacked a safe that had sat in a corner of the gin office for more than 30 years. Inside the safe were Ira Ethridge's meticulous records, all related to the farm's production. Those records tell us a lot. Some suggest aspects of both black and white sharecroppers' lives in rural, upland Georgia during the early 20th century. Others record the decisions made by "Mr. Ira" as he responded to threats to the crop, a fluctuating cotton market, and mechanization.

The surviving buildings and equipment at the Shields-Ethridge Farm also help tell the story of Ira Ethridge's leadership and the shared culture of the community. The gin's concrete blocks and a water tower that still stands bear witness to a fire in the gin house on a September night in 1910. "Mr. Ira" rebuilt the destroyed gin with concrete. He also built the tower to provide readily available water, should another fire occur. The Ethridge Gin increased production by almost 47% between 1915 and 1921.

Ira Washington Ethridge announced his business goal when he designed a 1913 letterhead. It read, "I.W. Ethridge and Son, Planters, Ginners, and Dealers in General Merchandise." While cotton was the state's chief crop value, "Mr. Ira" understood what effect changes in the price cotton could have. Experts warned against growing only one crop. Rather than growing other crops, however, Ethridge diversified by building a business complex and self-supporting operations on the Shields-Ethridge Farm. "General Merchandise," the last part of the letterhead, served to keep the farm afloat in the tough days that lay ahead.

Ira Ethridge's sharecroppers' village was a busy place. During a period of relative prosperity, he added a number of buildings. By 1920, there was a mule barn, a grist mill and hammer mill in daily use, and an active blacksmith shop. Also, a commissary stocked supplies for sharecroppers and neighbors, the wheat house did double duty by storing wheat above and wagons below, the milking barn housed a dozen cows, and a smokehouse was full. That's in addition to the new gin and water tower.

A sawmill operated in the sharecroppers' village and neighboring farms paid for lumber. Ethridge charged other farms a fee for pulling a threshing machine by mule, and later by tractor, to harvest grain on their land. A large garage housed trucks that needed repairs and automobiles needing to be painted. Susan Ella Ethridge housed six cows in a milking barn and sold her butter. A barber shop also operated at the sharecroppers' village. Mr. Ira missed very few opportunities to diversify. By 1930, Mr. Ira's business complex was in full swing. Things were going so well that he built a five room servants' house within a few yards of the main

residence. Ruby and Rooster Shields lived there until their deaths; Ruby was the Ethridge cook and Rooster managed the gin equipment.

All these buildings mark a time of relative prosperity. But in 1921 and 1922 the boll weevil, also called the "winged devil," destroyed entire fields of cotton throughout upland Georgia. The Ethridge Gin's production of cotton bales decreased 51% during that period. Despite this reversal of fortune, Mr. Ira kept searching for a way to control the boll weevil's damage. Sharecroppers on the Shields-Ethridge Farm learned to "paint" cotton stalks with insecticide. By 1929 Jackson County had routed the boll weevil. Cotton production rebounded.

Encouraged by the increased supply of cotton, Ira Ethridge decided to upgrade his gin. He bought the latest model from Lummus Cotton Gin Company in 1929, a "three 80" consisting of three gin stands containing eighty saws each. The three 80 could gin 24 bales in 6 hours 36 minutes, increasing production greatly. It was the best available in 1929. The Ethridge Gin reached the peak of its production in its first season. The three 80 gin shut down in 1964, but its presence speaks loudly of Mr. Ira's tenacity.

Records from the gin office suggest much about life in the Sharecroppers' Village. One historian mined these facts from papers stored within Mr. Ira's safe:

- There was an equal division of black and white sharecroppers on the Shields-Ethridge Farm in 1930. In addition to working cotton, sharecroppers also labored in the wheat and corn fields for 75 cents a day.
- Some sharecroppers were as entrepreneurial as Mr. Ira. James Johnson operated a barbershop from his house. Others helped in the grist and saw mill. Each year sharecroppers received a cash advance of $5.00, which was added to their annual bill, along with medical bills and drivers' licenses.
- Mr. Ira donated $10 and a coffin to the families of sharecroppers who died.
- Some sharecroppers never got ahead. Others consistently "settled" their bill at the end of the year. An example of a successful sharecropper was Augustus Shields, a former slave with no property in 1883. By 1910, Augustus was married and labeled a "general farmer," rather than a laborer.

Questions for Reading 2

1) Why did experts warn against growing only cotton? How did Ethridge diversify?

2) What effect did the boll weevil on cotton crops in Jackson County in the early 1920s? What impact did that have on the Shields-Ethridge Farm? How did Ethridge fight back?

3) What businesses did Mr. Ira create at the sharecroppers' village? Who used these businesses? How do you think they helped the farm be self-sufficient?

4) What difference do you think the sharecroppers' village would have made in the way sharecroppers interacted that would not have been true without the village?

5) Looking back also at Reading 1, how do you imagine life as a sharecropper? What would you like best? Least?

Determining the Facts

Reading 3: The Shrinking Village

With things going so well in 1929, what happened to the sharecroppers' village in the next decade? Why was the life of this industrial and agricultural complex so short?

The story from here on is complex. Market forces beyond Mr. Ira's control would soon affect every small cotton farmer in the South. Profit from cotton production depended on two factors: supply and demand. Supply was affected by how much cotton could be planted, harvested, and ginned. Demand depended upon competition from other countries, requirements of cotton mills, and availability of other fibers (such as synthetics). There was some irony in how the equation worked. Increased efficiency in ginning soon caused the cotton supply to exceed demand. Innovation in productive techniques increased output as the purchasing power of wage earners fell during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Cotton prices fell from 18 to 6 cents a pound in October 1929. By 1936 the US produced only 37% of the world's cotton, half the market it dominated in earlier years.

During the worst economic slump in U.S. history, one in four men was unemployed throughout the country. At the Shields-Ethridge Farm, however, twenty-five sharecroppers worked throughout the Great Depression. Each sharecropper worked less than 10 acres each, but managed to feed his family.

A cash-poor country became more desperate. The 1932 Agricultural Adjustment Act restricted the supply of cotton to raise prices. The federal government paid farmers not to plant cotton. As a result, the price of cotton went up to 15 cents a pound in 1936. However, the reduced acreage through the Agricultural Adjustment Act also decreased the need for labor. Fewer sharecroppers worked reduced cotton acres.

In addition, increased mechanization further reduced the demand for human and animal labor. The rapid changes in farming labeled this period "the agricultural revolution." Tractors were replacing mules, as they could work five times the acreage a mule could plow. The Rust cotton picker, invented in 1936, decreased the need for human cotton pickers by 75%.

Synthetic alternatives to cotton also began to command more and more of the fabric market. The Great Depression produced consumers who wanted clothes to last. In 1940 a much tougher nylon was first produced, following research by the DuPont Company. Rayon, a fiber made from wood pulp, also was a popular synthetic by the 1940s. The sale of natural fibers declined dramatically with the advent of nylon, rayon, and other synthetic fibers developed soon after.

Sharecroppers had developed a wide range of skills to contribute to the agricultural/business complex at the Shields-Ethridge Farm. Now they faced hard choices. Some stayed, expanding the work they did for pay from blacksmithing to auto repair. Sharecroppers who knew when to use fertilizer and when to apply insecticide, as well as which seed was the best to plant had little work in these low cotton demand days. Some sharecroppers joined a great migration from farm to city in search of a more dependable source of income and better pay.

Slowly, a way of life ground to a halt. Mr. Ira died in 1945. By 1950 the commissary closed; the gin shut its doors in 1964. The Shields-Ethridge Farm no longer grew cotton after 1969. Today most days at the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm are quiet. Ira Washington Ethridge's grand daughter and her family live in the homestead. The buildings, equipment, and records remain in place. The story they have to tell has only been partially revealed. Many questions remain for the records kept by Mr. Ira. Still, a subtle picture is emerging, in which the sharecropper village appears to have fostered a shared culture during an agricultural revolution in the United States.

An active and communal life has returned to the farm. A foundation started in 1994 is assisting in restoring buildings that had been vacant for 50 years. Volunteers and preservation professionals are creating a museum. The farm's 60 or more buildings, located on 143 acres of the Heritage Foundation property, make up this museum. The Bachelors' Academy is no longer home to buzzards, or the teacher's house to squirrels. On select days, visiting children sit at old desks within the schoolhouse, race down the field toward the commissary and the blacksmith shop, draw water from a well at the teacher's house, watch mules plough the field, and help plant cotton seed.

Questions for Reading 3

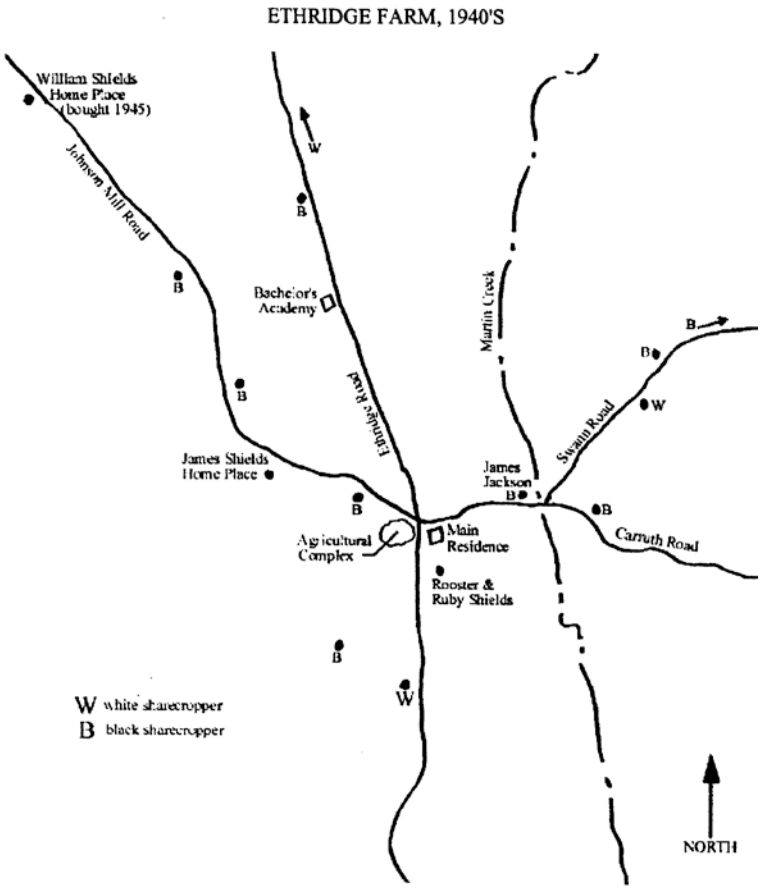
1) How did the Agricultural Adjustment Act benefit Mr. Ira and the sharecroppers? In what way did the act contribute to the problems?

2) What factors affected the supply of cotton and the demand for cotton between 1910 and 1940? Why is this period called an "agricultural revolution?"

3) Do you think it is important to preserve a farm like this? Why or why not?

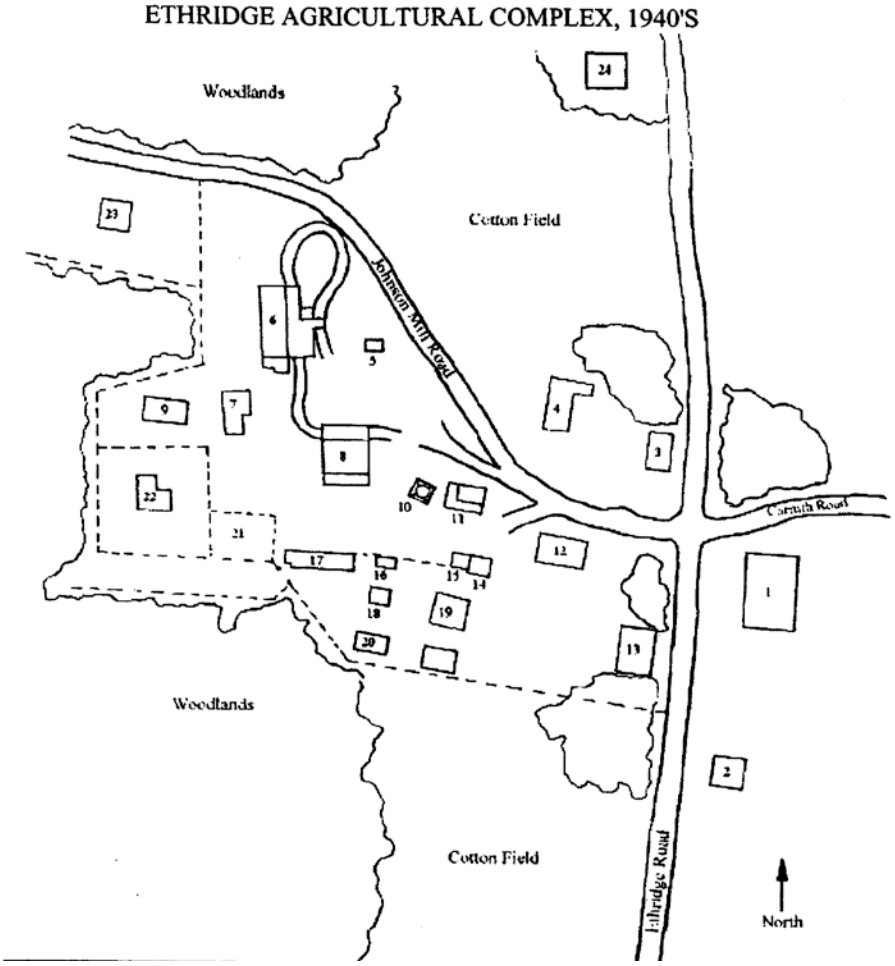
Visual Evidence

Map 3: Shields- Ethridge Farm, 1940



Base Map: Land Use - 1940's by Ian J.W. Firth in
Landscape Master Plan of the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm

Map 4: Agricultural Complex, Sharecroppers' Village, 1940



1. Main House
2. Servant's House
3. Commissary
4. Blacksmith's Shop
5. Gin Office
6. Cotton Gin
7. Seed House
8. Warehouse
9. Sawmill
10. Water Tower
11. Grist Mill
12. Garage
13. Wheat House
14. Corn Crib
15. Hog Pen
16. Feed House
17. Milking Bar
18. Concrete Crib
19. Mule Barns
20. Two-Stall Barn
21. Cemetery
22. Teacher's House
23. Preacher Riley House
24. Bachelor's Academy

Questions for Maps 3 & 4

1) Count the number of black and white sharecropper houses marked on Map 3. The distance between houses roughly represents the amount of land each had to farm. Does it appear that black and white sharecroppers farmed equal amounts of land?

2) Locate the Bachelors' Academy on Maps 3 and 4 and the Commissary on Map 4. The school was ¾ of a mile from the Commissary. Estimate how far children walked to school from each of the residences, both owners' and sharecroppers, assuming that the children walked along the roads. How far would they walk to buy candy at the Commissary?

3) What buildings in the agricultural complex section of the sharecroppers' village suggest other crops, besides cotton, that were grown on the Shields-Ethridge Farm?

Visual Evidence

Photo 1: Sharecroppers Going to the Cotton Fields, c. 1920

(Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm Foundation)

Questions for Photo 1

1) What can you learn about the sharecroppers from this photograph? Could you guess their age? Whether they are black or white?

2) Only one man in the photo is without a mule. Notice that he is using crutches. What injuries do you think a sharecropper might risk? Who do you think would have paid the medical bills?

3) What are these sharecroppers about to do? What is the season in the "cotton clock"? (Refer back to Reading 1, if necessary).

4) The wheat house is in the background of this photo. Locate it on Map 4. Where do you think these men are standing?

Visual Evidence

Photo 2: Sharecroppers waiting turn for Cotton Gin, c. 1920

(Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm Foundation)

Questions for Photo 2

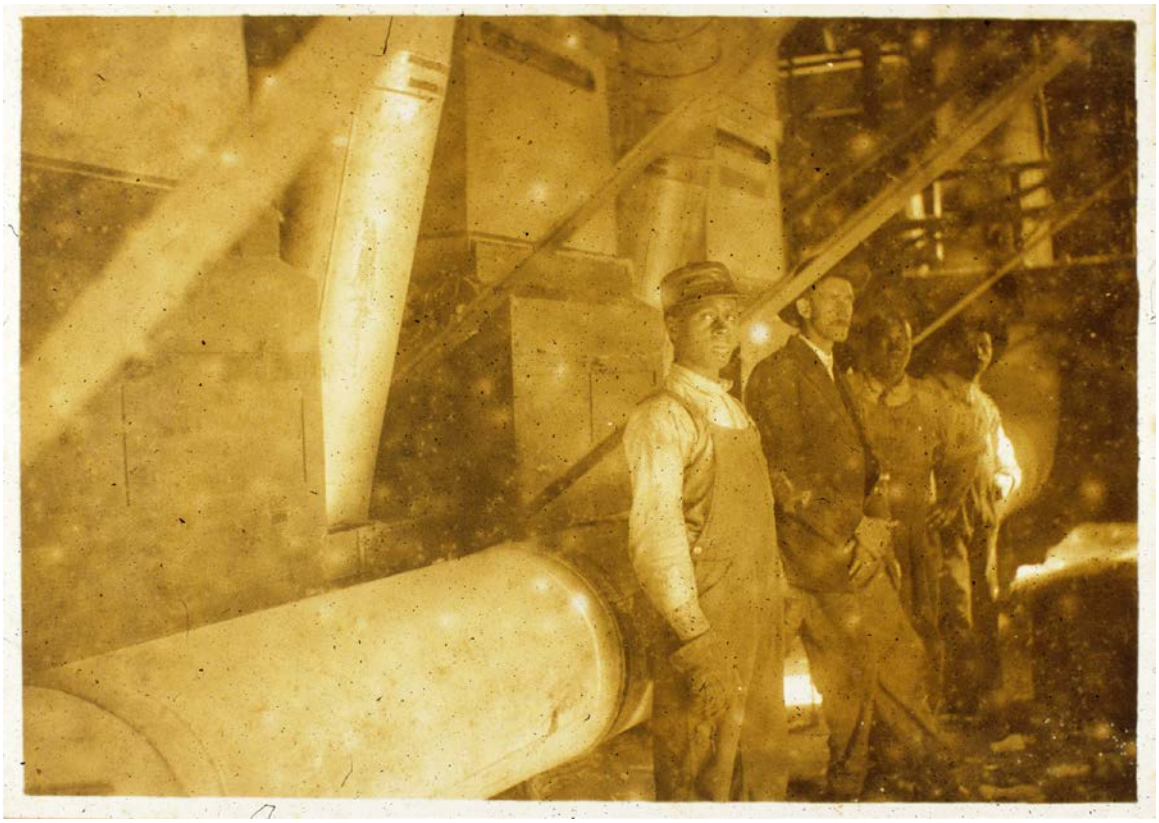
1) What time of year does it look like it is at the farm? What time of day do you think it is? What does that tell you about the harvest of cotton?

2) Look closely at the wagon on the far right. Each wagon held about 600 pounds of cotton, or one bale. If the cotton was packed tightly, another bale could be loaded on top of the first. Do you think the wagon on the right is “double loaded”? Does it look like it has more or less cotton than the other wagons?

3) The owner is talking with a friend in the foreground. What do you think they might be talking about?

Visual Evidence

Photo 3: Inside the Cotton Gin, c. 1940



(Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm Foundation)

Questions for Photo 3

1) There are three gin "stands" in Photo 3; can you identify them? They are part of the Lummus three 80 (refer to Reading 2), which was the pride of Ira Washington Ethridge. Inside each of the gin stands were saws with 160 teeth. The saws were typically 8 inches in diameter and made of iron. The blades wore out quickly from the hard work of tearing apart the cotton. What do you think that is on the floor of the cotton gin?

2) Study the four men standing in front of the gin. Do you think they all did the same job?

3) Do you think a cotton gin would be a dangerous place to work? If yes, what possible hazards can you think of? If not, why not? (Refer back to Reading 2, if necessary.)

4) If you could visit the gin today, what would you like to see or hear?

Visual Evidence

Photo 4: Bachelors' Academy and Students, 1910

(Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm Foundation)

Bachelors' Academy was the school for white children who lived at the Shields-Ethridge farm and at neighboring farms. Built in 1909, the schoolhouse is a wood frame building sided with clapboard (overlapping horizontal boards) and covered with a tin roof. You can see mortared stacked piers supporting the schoolhouse (mortar is a bonding material commonly used in construction to hold bricks or stones together). The school contains two classrooms separated by a folding wall.

Questions for Photo 4

1) Some of the pictured children are children of farm owners; some are children of sharecroppers. Count the children and guess what their ages might be. Do you think they would all have been in the same grade? With only two classrooms, how do you think teachers taught the different levels?

2) What are the children wearing? Can you tell what are they holding in their hands? While you can't see their feet well, most are barefooted. Why do you think that is?

3) Refer back to Reading 1 and the chores that children did. Do you think school would prepare them for these chores? What other benefits might school have had for the children?

Visual Evidence

Photo 5: Shields-Ethridge Farm Commissary Today

(Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm Foundation)

If you visit the Shields-Ethridge Farm today, you will step inside the commissary where sharecroppers could purchase supplies on credit. When the crop came in and was sold, Mr. Ira subtracted whatever the sharecropper had bought during the year from the amount the sharecropper was paid for his crop. Inside the commissary today, you'll find coal-oil lanterns, nails, sacks of fertilizer, tack for mules, fabric for clothes, tobacco, and tools.

Questions for Photo 5

1) What were the most important supplies purchased at the commissary by sharecroppers? (Refer back to Reading 1, if necessary).

2) When tractors replaced mules at the Farm, what changes do you think the commissary would have had to make?

3) While sharecroppers were not required to shop at the commissary, they were allowed to buy on credit there. What difference do you think commissary credit made for sharecropper families and for Mr. Ira?

4) Compare the inside of the commissary with the store(s) where you usually shop. In which do you think it would be easier to find what you need? Why?

Putting It All Together

In *The Shields-Ethridge Farm: The End of a Way of Life*, students learned about an historic farm and its residents. Use the following activities to build on their knowledge of farm life, the history of agriculture, and historic farms.

Activity 1: The Slow Revolution

Ira Ethridge transformed a cotton dependent farm into a complex of supplementary businesses, but a combination of factors (increasing mechanization, weevil infestation, drought, depression, and fire) worked against him. By the late 1940s, the Ethridge gin could no longer keep pace, and today only the structures and the terraced fields remind us of a time when cotton was King. Ask students to write as if they were Ira Ethridge, using two "diary" topics: "My Victories" and "My Regrets."

After students complete their assignment, ask for volunteers to read their "diaries" to the class. Then, hold a class discussion about how much similarity and difference there was among their lists.

Activity 2: Hanging by a Thread

Cotton was a difficult crop to harvest and to clean, best done with the most refined of instruments: the human hand. After studying the rhythm of a sharecropper's year in Reading 1, ask students to imagine living in 1920 on the Shields-Ethridge Farm. Then select one of the following activities:

1. Write a story about picking cotton and what a day might be like when everyone was in the fields
2. Draw a chart showing the process of cotton farming, from preparing the field to getting the raw cotton to market.
3. Using cotton bolls, pick enough seed to fill a shoe. (Cotton bolls may be ordered from www.agclassroom.org/ut)

Activity 3: The Rebuke of History

A group of Southern writers, called the Agrarians, thought the "culture of the soil" to be the "best and most sensitive of vocations" (from the introduction to *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, 1930). They opposed Northern industrialism and called for return to a small-scale economy in rural America. Robert Penn Warren (1956) said that urban workers were "reduced to meaninglessness, with no sense of responsibility, no sense of past and place." Have students read *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* and opposing views by writers such as H.L. Menken. Have students hold a debate on two topics that continue to intrigue historians, drawing on these readings, as well as on this lesson's information on the life of sharecroppers on the Shields-Ethridge Farm:

1. Was the closing of the sharecroppers' village inevitable?

2. Was the closing of the sharecroppers' village for the best?

Activity 4: Sharecroppers: Farmers without Land

The abolition of slavery left owners without laborers and laborers without land. Sharecropping emerged as a way for large farms to continue to exist, while also providing a source of employment and residence for freed African Americans. Some see sharecropping as an economic bridge. Other scholars view sharecropping as exploitative, reflecting the absolute power of the landowner. Based upon the description of papers found within Mr. Ira's safe, ask students to construct questions they would use to guide research into the fairness or exploitation of the sharecropping system generally and also as it was practiced on the Shields-Ethridge Farm. After discussing and refining these questions, ask students to conduct research on sharecropping in the South and write a report placing sharecropping at Shields-Ethridge Farm within the larger context. Facilitate a class discussion about their findings.

Activity 5: Our Agrarian Past

Georgia is not the only state whose past was dominated by agriculture. Today fewer and fewer people farm, and a past once familiar is now uncommon. Hand tools and traction animal use are largely unknown to those born after World War II. Have students do one or more of the following:

1. Form small groups within the class. Assign each group an area within their community to research what was once farmland. Using town maps from the 1900s (or the most-recent period prior to 1900 when a portion of the area was farmed), show the change between then and now. Ask students to compile information with questions such as: How much land was under cultivation? What was grown? Who farmed the land? Where did they live? How did they market their crops? What has replaced agriculture as the community's main economy? Have each group create an exhibit to display their findings. Arrange to show the exhibits in the school auditorium and/or the local historical society.
2. If possible, help students identify and interview people who remember when the area was farmed. Have students compare the interviews with evidence from local records. Then, have them discuss what has been gained from the changes of the last century and what has been lost. Have students record and transcribe the interviews and offer them to the local historical society or library.
3. If there are farms in your area, have students work in groups to select one and research its history. Ask students to find out whether the farm is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and, if not, to determine whether or not they think it would qualify for listing. Students can search a database of National Register properties and learn the criteria for listing at www.nps.gov/nr. They can also contact their State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) for this information. Contact information for SHPOs nationwide is available at www.ncshpo.org. If the students identify a farm that they think meets National Register criteria but has not been listed, have them write a letter to their SHPO making the case and urging that a nomination be prepared. Older students could even draft a nomination to submit to the SHPO.

Some states have programs to recognize "century farms" or "centennial farms," which are farms that have been owned by the same family for 100 years or more. If any of the farms students identified fall into this category, have students find out if there is a state program and advocate for the farm's recognition if it has not been honored yet.

References and Endnotes

Reading 1

Reading 1 was compiled from Ian Firth, *Landscape Master Plan of the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm* (Athens GA: Robinson Fisher Associates, Inc., 1998); Frances Patricia Stalling, "Presenting Mr. Ira's Masterpiece: Two Centuries of Agricultural Change at the shields-Ethridge Farm" (Masters Thesis, The University of Georgia); Rob Shapard, "Shields-Ethridge Farm: Preserving Our Past," *Athens Magazine*, May-June, 1997; Oral Interviews with Rachel Watson, Sarah Bailey and Geneva Shields, Jefferson, Georgia, May 3, 2005; Oral interview with Susan Ethridge Chaisson, Jefferson, Georgia, April 12, 2005; G. C. Fite. *Cotton Fields No More, Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1984); A. Burton, *The Rise and Fall of King Cotton* (London: Deutsch, 1985); Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures Since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Jerry Pytlak, "The Economics of Cotton Farming," *The New International 5, no. 4* (1939); Diane Messick, K. Joseph, Natalie Adams, *Tilling the Earth: Georgia's Historic Agricultural Heritage: A Context* (Atlanta, GA: Georgia Department of Natural Resources, 2001; That Sitton, ed., *Harder than Hardscrabble: Oral Recollections of the Farming Life from the Edge of the Texas Hill Country* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Charles C. Bolton, *Poor White of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994)

[1] *Ian Firth,* Landscape Master, 15.

Reading 2

Reading 2 was compiled from Frances Patricia Stalling, *Presenting Mr. Ira's Masterpiece: Two Centuries of Agricultural Change at the Shields-Ethridge Farm* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia, 2002); Jack Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: the American South 1920-1960*, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: The Louisiana State University, 1987); James Giesen, "Cotton," *The New Georgia Encyclopedia* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2001); S. Konter,C. East,. (Eds.) *Vanishing Georgia*, (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1994); Denise Messick, J.W. Joseph, Natalie Adams, *Tilling the Earth* (Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Historic Preservation Division, Atlanta, Georgia, 2001); Gilbert Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1983); Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

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Additional Resources

After reading *The Shields-Ethridge Farm: The End of a Way of Life*, students will know more about sharecropping as a way of life in upland Georgia and the struggles of the landowner to build a sharecroppers' village that could withstand fluctuation in the cotton market and urbanization of the South. Students and educators who want to know more will find much useful information on the World Wide Web.

Booker T. Washington Papers

The University of Illinois houses the Booker T. Washington Papers, in which he discusses "white mud" (kaolin), recognizing its worth to the South. Read his May, 1911 account of the usefulness of this "native kalsomine" which is found on the Shields-Ethridge Farm, part of a vein in northeast Georgia.

FDR Speech on the Agricultural Adjustment Act, 1935

PBS's "American Experience" provides a transcription of Franklin D. Roosevelt's address on the Agricultural Adjustment Act, May 14, 1935. Roosevelt reviews the plight of farmers and the plan to adjust crop production.

GA Historic Preservation Division: Agriculture

The Historic Preservation division of Georgia Department of Natural Resources presents the agricultural heritage of Georgia. This resource includes information about landscapes, buildings, and an inventory of Centennial Farms on the National Register in Georgia. Several scenes from the Shields-Ethridge Farm are shown.

Photo Dossier on Sharecropping

A photographic dossier of sharecropping during the years 1935-1939 in several southern states is posted on this Indiana University website. Sharecroppers' houses and work life are captured in the photographs.

Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm

The official website of the Shields-Ethridge Farm provides in-depth content about the family members, historic buildings, agriculture, and history of the farm. The site also has information about visiting the farm in small or large groups, with the farm's mobile app, or for public events.

University of Illinois essays on sharecropping

The Modern American Poetry website treats sharecropping as a theme in American literature, referring students to numerous authors who wrote about the sharecropping experience. Writers included in the synopsis present another point of view from sharecroppers' accounts on the Shields-Ethridge Farm.

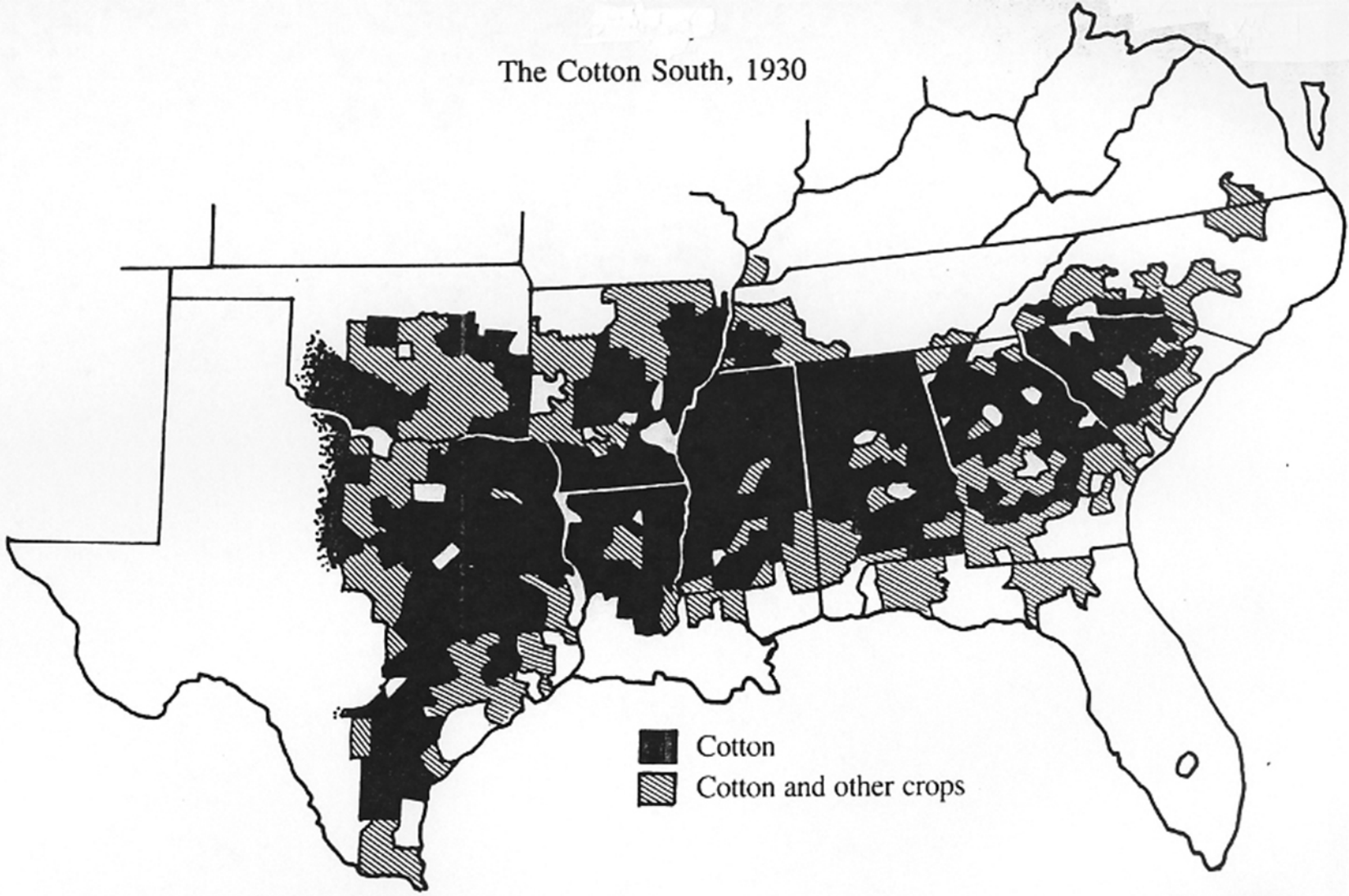
Vanishing Georgia Photographic Collection

The Georgia Division of Archives and History houses the "Vanishing Georgia" photographic collection of 18,000 historically significant photos. By searching the index for "sharecropper" or "cotton farming" the reader can view photographs taken in Georgia during the relevant time period.

World of the Tenant Farmer

The Texas Beyond History website contains a unit in its curriculum called "The World of A

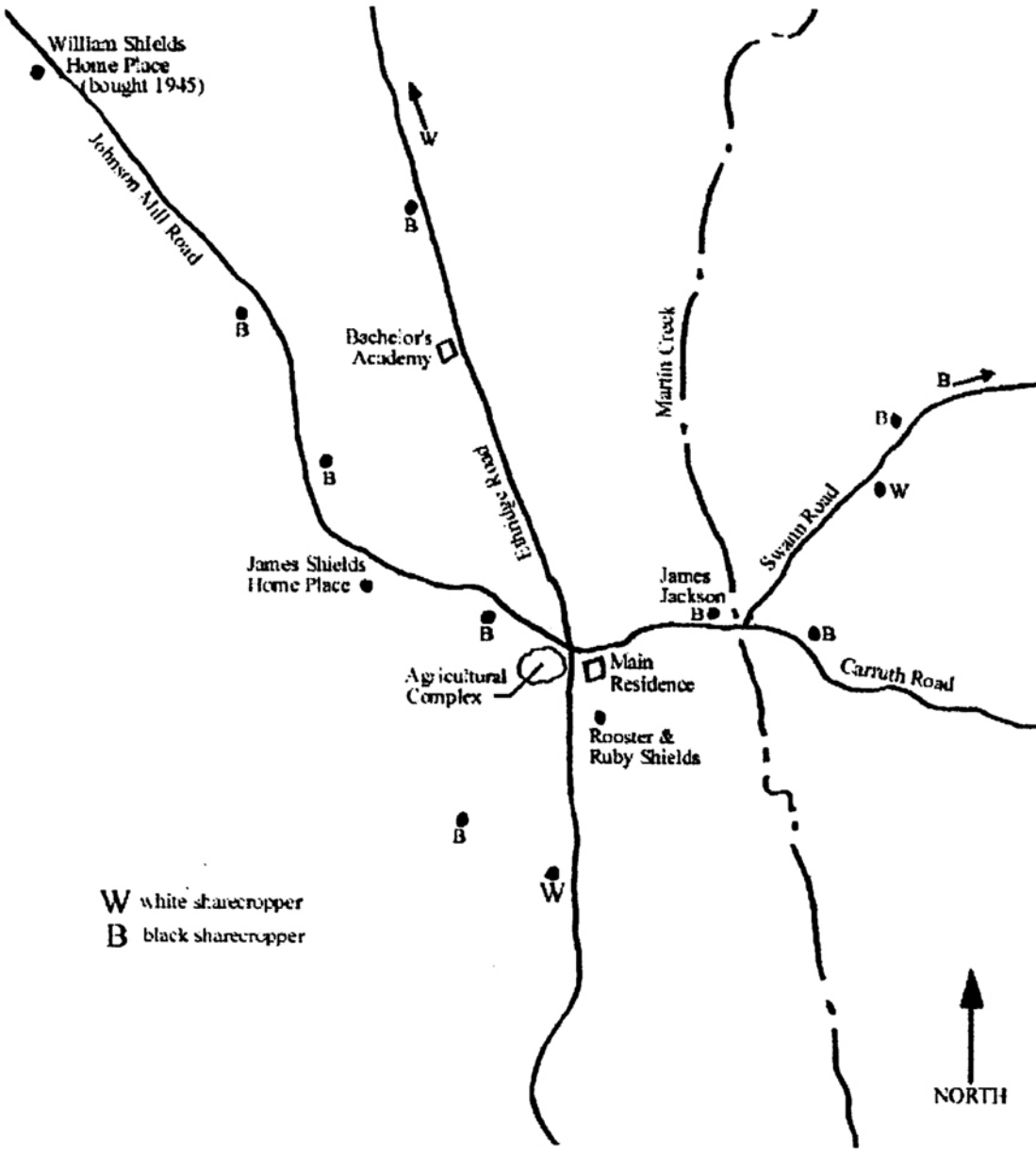
Tenant Farmer." Photographs of cotton, of tenant farmers, and of artifacts from the 1920s on the Osborn Farm are included. Interviews with tenant farmers, many Mexican, describe the daily life of the workers.



SOURCES: Adapted from Charles Johnson *et al.* (comps.), *Statistical Atlas; Fifteenth Census, 1930: Agriculture,* county tables.

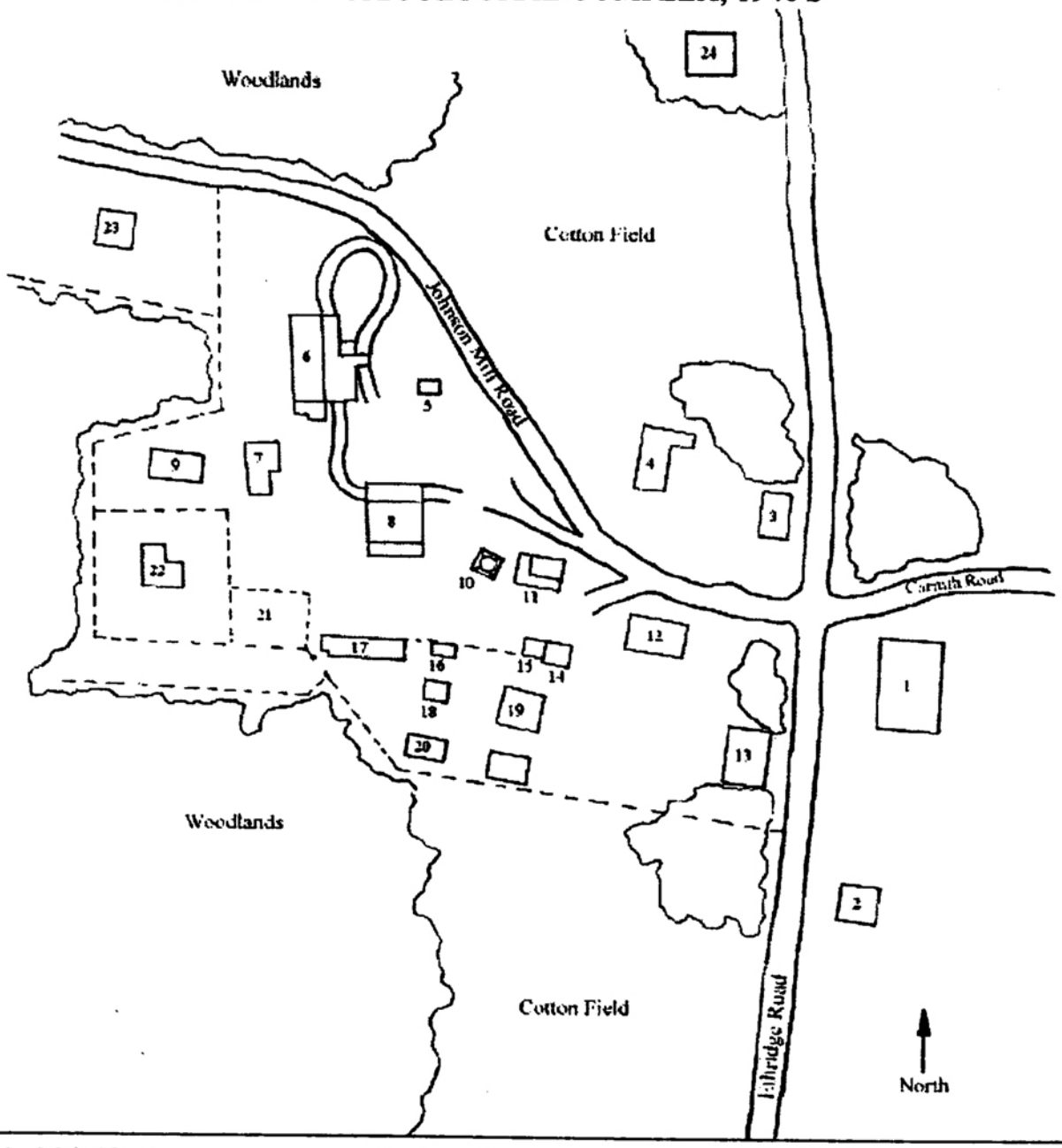

TENNESSEE
NORTH CAROLINA
SOUTH CAROLINA
Dalton
APPALACHIA
Rome
Marietta
ATLANTA
Athens
Stone Mt.
College Park
Augusta
Tallapoosa
ALABAMA
GEORGIA
LaGrange
Ocmulgee Nat'l. Mon.
Macon
Warner Robins
Savannah
Columbus
Oconee
Savannah
Ft. Pulaski Nat'l. Mon.
Flint
Ocmulgee
Chattahoochee
Albany
Altamaha
Ft. Frederica Nat'l. Mon.
Valdosta
North Atlantic Ocean
Gulf of Mexico
FLORIDA

ETHRIDGE FARM, 1940'S



Base Map: Land Use - 1940's by Ian J.W. Firth in
Landscape Master Plan of the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm

ETHRIDGE AGRICULTURAL COMPLEX, 1940'S



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7 - Seed House	15 - Hog Pen	23 - Preacher Riley House
8 - Warehouse	16 - Feed House	24 - Bachelor's Academy

Base Map: 1940's Farm Complex Layout by Ian J.W. Firth in
Landscape Master Plan of the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm


Carhartt
OVERALLS