Tobacco Towns: Urban Growth and Economic Development in Eastern North Carolina

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In the decades following Reconstruction, southerners sought not only to repair a landscape decimated by the Civil War but also to achieve a measure of economic independence traditionally absent below the Mason-Dixon line. Long subjects of a colonial economy controlled in distant boardrooms, southern entrepreneurs worked feverishly in the late nineteenth century to close the yawning gap between the agrarian South and the more urbanized, industrialized North. Disciples of the New South built railroads and erected factories at an unprecedented pace but nonetheless moved to towns and cities in relatively modest numbers. In his magisterial *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, C. Vann Woodward notes that "the Southern people remained, throughout the rise of the 'New South,' overwhelmingly a country people, by far the most rural section of the Union." North Carolina, one of the states purportedly affected most by the post-Civil War industrial movement, had just 3.9 percent of its population classified as urban in 1890, far below the national average. By 1900, not a single city in the Tar Heel State claimed a population of twenty-five thousand, and only six claimed a population greater than ten thousand.[1]

Much of the limited urban growth that occurred in post-Civil War North Carolina owed to the increased manufacturing of tobacco, the South's oldest staple crop. In the late nineteenth century, the state's dominance of the expanding tobacco industry resulted from several factors—declining cotton prices that induced Tar Heel farmers in the Piedmont to plant more tobacco, technological developments that initiated the mass production of cigarettes, improved railroads that connected North Carolina with national and international markets, and the bold entrepreneurship of men like James B. Duke and R. J. Reynolds, who formed vast monopolies and drove less ruthless competitors from the field. The success of Duke and Reynolds brought Durham and Winston, the communities in which they located their enterprises, to the forefront of the state's emerging urban network.

1. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 139 (quotation).

From 1880 to 1900, Winston's population grew from 443 to 10,008; Durham, which had been omitted entirely from the 1870 census, claimed a population of 6,679 by the turn of the twentieth century. Just as the iron and steel industry dominated the economy of Birmingham, Alabama, and textile production controlled life in the mill towns dotting the hills of the Carolinas and northern Georgia, the tobacco factories literally and figuratively towered over the cityscapes of Durham and Winston, North Carolina.[2]

The burgeoning tobacco industry also shaped the development of a number of smaller and lesser-known communities in eastern North Carolina. These towns grew rapidly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and became the principal marketing centers for tobacco cultivated in the state's inner Coastal Plain. This study considers the four communities that grew and prospered most because of the tobacco boom—Wilson, Kinston, Greenville, and Rocky Mount. (Although they developed into less prominent marketing centers, such communities as Goldsboro, Tarboro, Williamston, Farmville, and Robersonville similarly grew along with the tobacco trade.) In all of these areas, the continued significance of agriculture underscored the strong ties between the city and the countryside in the nation's most rural region. To a remarkable extent, life in those communities followed the seasonal changes associated with the cultivation and marketing of a single agricultural product. In short, Wilson, Kinston, Greenville, and Rocky Mount became "tobacco towns" in the New South, and their development remained closely linked with the crop for decades.[3]

Widespread cultivation of tobacco commenced in the North Carolina Piedmont in the mid-1800s, largely owing to the introduction of a new variety of the crop. European consumers (especially the French) criticized the dark, heavy leaf raised and fire cured in the United States and expressed interest in tobacco with a milder flavor. Farmers in Maryland, Kentucky, and Ohio experimented with new soils, crop genetics, and curing methods but made limited gains. The soil and climate of southern Virginia and northern North Carolina, however, favored farmers who perfected the production of an aromatic yellow leaf that revolutionized the tobacco industry. Ironically, while a tobacco plant growing in rich tidelands soil produced a dark, heavy leaf, the same plant growing in less desirable siliceous soil lacked several nutrients and yielded the thin yellow leaf sought by Europeans. Thus, an area of relative poverty in the North Carolina Piedmont proved to be the

2. Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 130-139; Howard N. Rabinowitz, "Continuity and Change: Southern Urban Development, 1860-1900," in *The City in Southern History: The Growth of Urban Civilization in the South*, ed. Blaine A. Brownell and David R. Goldfield (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977), 108.

3. The close ties between the tobacco towns and the surrounding agricultural hinterland confirm one of the major themes in David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

center of a tobacco boom that enriched the region for generations. The Old Bright Belt, as it came to be called, encompassed Pittsylvania, Halifax, and Henry counties in southern Virginia, as well as Vance, Granville, Durham, Person, Orange, Alamance, Caswell, Guilford, Rockingham, Forsyth, and Stokes counties in northern North Carolina.[4]

The perfection of bright tobacco depended upon new and improved curing techniques, as well as on proper soil. Forsaking the old practice of curing tobacco over slow-burning wood fires, farmers throughout Virginia and North Carolina experimented with a variety of fuels and procedures to produce the crisp, aromatic yellow leaf favored by buyers. The optimal method adopted by farmers after much trial and error involved the combustion of charcoal instead of wood for fires and the use of flues, or ducts, to convey heat within the tobacco barns. While farmers kindled fires outside the barns, flues inside distributed heat throughout the structures and eliminated smoke and fumes. According to a popular legend in the North Carolina Piedmont, a slave named Stephen working on the Caswell County farm of Capt. Abisha Slade in 1839 accidentally discovered the efficacy of using charcoal in the curing process. Having fallen asleep while tending the fire and awakened to see the last embers dying, Stephen supposedly rekindled the flames using charcoal logs, thereby producing the brightest yellow leaf that area inhabitants had ever seen. The story may have been apocryphal, but Captain Slade immediately became an impassioned advocate of using charcoal to produce bright tobacco—and with spectacular results. In 1857, the Slade farm sold twenty thousand pounds of tobacco at the Lynchburg, Virginia, market at a record price of thirty-five dollars per one hundred pounds. An awed newspaper reporter asked, "Can the cotton fields of Louisiana, the sugar plantations of Cuba, the rice fields or the turpentine Districts of the Carolinas, boast of larger profits?"[5]

The story of Captain Slade's success spread rapidly throughout the North Carolina Piedmont, and successful and struggling farmers in the region soon retooled to grow bright tobacco. When domestic manufacturers began using the yellow leaves as wrappers for twists of plug tobacco, market prices for the new product shot even higher. "Many persons have taken to growing tobacco within the last year or two who probably never raised a plant before," commented the editor of the *North Carolina Planter* in 1858. By 1860, bowing to the requests of their readership, both the *North Carolina Planter* and the *Southern Planter* published instructions for the cultivation and curing of bright leaf tobacco. Regarding the latter, the journal editors instructed their subscribers to use small

4. Nannie May Tilley, *The Bright-Tobacco Industry, 1860-1929* (1948; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1972), 8-13.

5. Tilley, *The Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 14-26; Tobacco Institute, *North Carolina and Tobacco: A Chapter in America's Industrial Growth* (Washington, D.C.: The Tobacco Institute, 1971), 28 (quotation).

quantities of charcoal, maintain high temperatures night and day, build barns with several windows to ensure adequate ventilation, and use thermometers to monitor temperatures in the barns. Armed with an exact blueprint for curing, even farmers in remote areas mastered the procedures that made growing bright leaf tobacco profitable. By the mid-1860s, acreage in the North Carolina Piedmont sold at a price twenty to thirty times greater than it had only a few years before.[6]

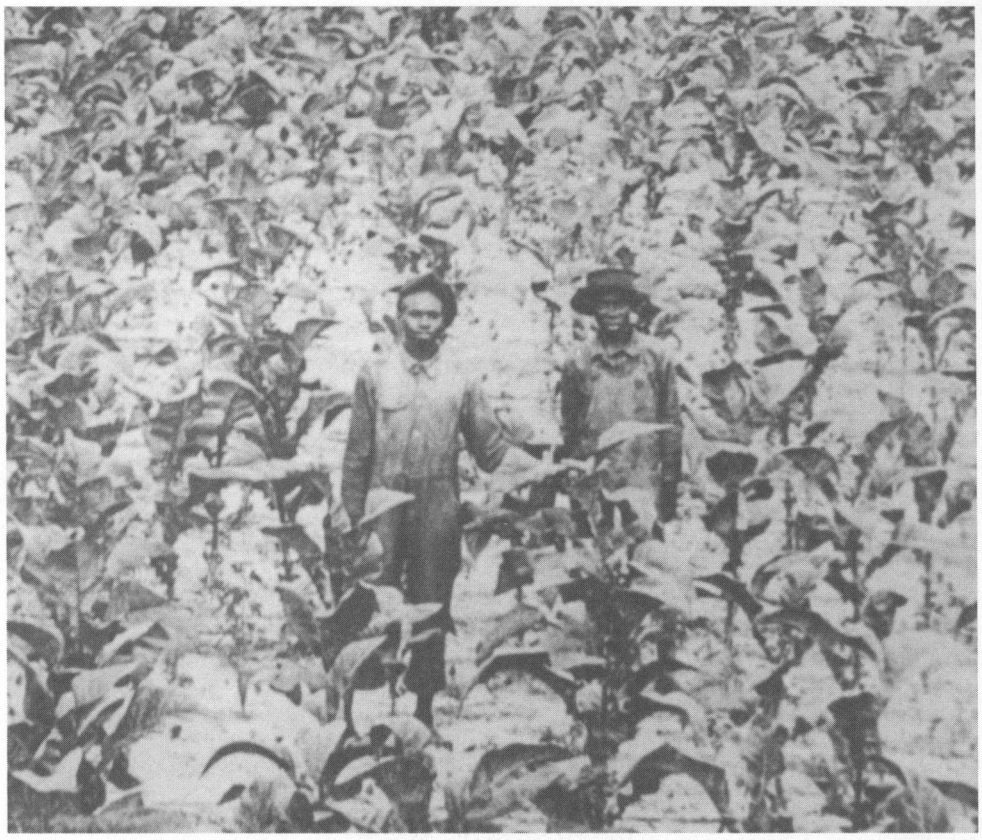
Prior to that time, Wilson, Kinston, Greenville, and Rocky Mount languished as tiny mercantile centers for a developing trade and transportation system in the midst of an agricultural hinterland. Cotton initially attracted settlers to the region and remained the most important crop until it was supplanted by tobacco in the 1880s and 1890s. In the Cotton Kingdom, the number of slaves increased along with the rate of agricultural production. In 1860, slaves constituted a majority of the population in Pitt, Lenoir, and Edgecombe counties and between one-fourth and one-half of the population in Nash and Wilson counties. Although only about one out of every twenty Coastal Plain farmers owned more than twenty bondsmen by the time of the Civil War, the institution of slavery had become a key component of eastern North Carolina agriculture.[7]

In the postbellum countryside, sharecropping, tenant farming, crop liens, and debt peonage replaced slavery, quickly assuring the mastery of antebellum planters and limiting economic opportunities for freedmen. The forceful restoration of white supremacy, frequently achieved through violence and intimidation, left eastern North Carolina in the hands of a Democratic Party dedicated to the establishment of Jim Crow segregation. In the 1880s, local governments in Wilson and Kinston led the way in creating separate public school systems. When the North Carolina Supreme Court disallowed the allocation of tax revenue to white-only schools in 1886, these towns pioneered the conversion of public schools to private academies. When Republican presidents Benjamin Harrison and William McKinley appointed African American postmasters in Wilson and Rocky Mount, local whites successfully fought to have the appointments rescinded and pressured the postmasters to resign.[8]

6. Barbara Hahn, "Into the Belly of the Beast: The 2002 North Carolina Flue-Cured Tobacco Tour," *Southern Cultures* 9 (fall 2003): 34; Tilley, *The Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 27-35.

7. William S. Powell, *North Carolina through Four Centuries* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 328-330; Mary Hollis Barnes, "A Brief History of Greenville," in *The Architectural Heritage of Greenville, North Carolina*, ed. Michael Cotter (Greenville, N.C.: Greenville Area Preservation Association, 1988), 4-5.

8. Charles Piehl, "White Society in the Black Belt, 1870-1920: A Case Study of Four North Carolina Counties" (Ph.D. diss., Washington University, 1979), 298-314; Eric Anderson, *Race and Politics in North Carolina, 1872-1901: The Black Second* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 330; Robert C. Kenzer, *Enterprising Southerners: Black Economic Success in North Carolina, 1865-1915* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 102.



After the Civil War, free blacks in eastern North Carolina had limited economic opportunities, and many toiled at the mercy of landowners as sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Undated photograph of two young African American men in a tobacco field from Tabitha Marie De Visconti Papers, Manuscript Collections, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina.

The political challenge to white supremacy peaked with the Fusion movement, an alliance of Republicans and Populists that ousted Democrats from state and local offices in 1894 and 1896. African Americans in eastern North Carolina enjoyed unprecedented political power when the Fusionists gained control of the state legislature and rewrote many town charters. Wholesale changes in the municipal governments of Rocky Mount and Kinston gave blacks a stronger voice in local affairs, and Greenville became the statewide symbol of racial upheaval after state-mandated gerrymandering left the city council in the hands of an African American majority. Led by former governor Thomas Jarvis, Greenville Democrats spread erroneous stories of black policemen arresting white citizens and portrayed their town as the victim of a Fusionist cabal. Throughout eastern North Carolina, whites vowed to safeguard their communities against the fate

befalling Greenville and armed themselves for a white supremacy counteroffensive in 1898.[9]

The Democratic Party's determination to reclaim political power in 1898 sparked a violent race riot in Wilmington, North Carolina. However, as historian Joel Williamson has observed, "the riot that happened in Wilmington could have happened in a score of eastern North Carolina towns, and it very nearly did." That autumn, the Red Shirts, a paramilitary white supremacist group, traversed eastern North Carolina and stoked the flames of racial hatred. In Wilson, whites armed with Winchester repeating rifles gathered at major downtown intersections and listened for the signal—a factory whistle or the ringing of the courthouse bell—that blacks rumored to be assembling at a baseball field were marching on the central business district. While the attack never came, one Wilson woman commented, "It is well enough that the negroes know that the whites are prepared." No violence in the tobacco towns rivaled the Wilmington outbreak, but tensions remained high for months thereafter. Citizens of Rocky Mount and Tarboro organized white supremacy clubs, and in 1900, North Carolina effectively disfranchised black voters by attaching a literacy test to the state constitution. Democrats in the eastern part of the state, with a greater percentage of blacks in the population, were especially determined to reclaim power and terminate the threat to white supremacy.[10]

White residents of the tobacco belt viewed the future with cautious optimism but feared that freedmen would depart and deprive the region of much of its labor supply. Beginning in the early 1870s, hundreds of African Americans left eastern North Carolina to work in the South Carolina and Georgia turpentine industry. At the end of the decade, thousands of black exodusters left the region for Indiana. "The exodus feeling is worked up to a fever heat," reported the *Kinston Journal* in December 1879, "and in some sections nearly all are leaving." Complaining of oppression and economic exploitation, thousands more African Americans left North Carolina for Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas in the 1880s. An estimated fifty thousand African Americans, a vast majority of whom came from the inner Coastal Plain, had left the state by 1890. The white gentry of eastern North Carolina feared that the recent depopulation threatened the stability of the region. A prominent Rocky Mount businessman confided to a colleague that a

9. Helen G. Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina, 1894-1901* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 102; Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 194; *Eastern Reflector* (Greenville), August 16, 1898.

10. Williamson, *The Crucible of Race*, 195-196 (first quotation); H. Leon Prather Jr., "The Red Shirt Movement in North Carolina, 1898-1900," *Journal of Negro History* 62 (April 1977): 177; Piehl, "White Society in the Black Belt," 170 (second quotation); Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933), 124.

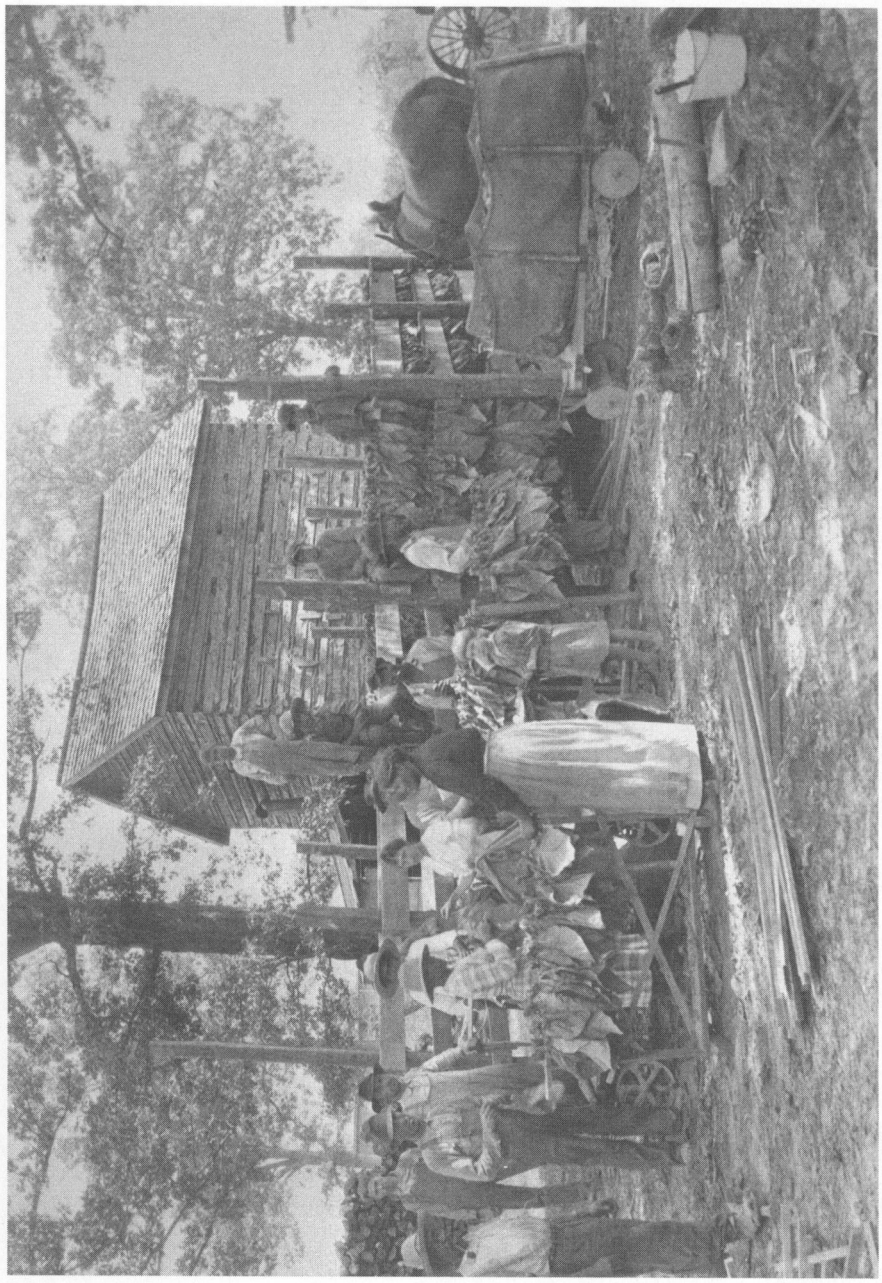
rash of fires in African American neighborhoods "are clearly retaliation" for the activities of "Exodus agents." Besides worrying about a shrinking labor force, area farmers and urban merchants saw a calamitous decline in cotton prices. Crop values reached a high of 25 cents a pound in 1868 before declining to an average of 12 cents in the 1870s, 9 cents in the 1880s, and a low of 5 cents in 1894. The one-two punch of severe labor loss and rapidly falling prices left farmers gravely concerned about the future of cotton cultivation. An economic crisis seemed imminent.[11]

Desperate for a new cash crop, eastern North Carolina farmers followed the lead of their prosperous Piedmont counterparts who were planting tobacco fence post to fence post. Although the paucity of records makes it difficult to be certain, tobacco cultivation east of the Piedmont may have begun in 1878, when Arnold Borden harvested several acres of the crop in Wayne County. Thomas York, a Nash County farmer who had recently relocated from Granville County, transported tobacco to market in 1883. In 1885, Thomas V. Avent, a prosperous farmer who lived near Rocky Mount, harvested an unprecedented seventy acres of the new crop. Observing that Nash County farmers successfully grew tobacco in the same sandy soil that predominated in Pitt County, Leon F. Evans hired a Granville County adviser and planted tobacco on his farm west of Greenville in 1886. His crop not only brought a handsome profit at harvest time but also won a prize for the best tobacco sold that year at the Henderson, North Carolina, market. By the mid-1890s, tobacco challenged cotton as the primary cash crop throughout the Coastal Plain.[12]

Tobacco production in the eastern Coastal Plain increased as farmers and others working in agricultural occupations balked at the persistence of five-cent cotton. When the price of cotton dipped to 4.59 cents per pound in 1894, officials of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad launched a campaign urging farmers to plant more tobacco. The railroad's managers published supportive editorials in the *Southern Tobacco Journal* and distributed twenty thousand copies of a pamphlet titled, *The Tobacco Planter's Guide* for novice growers of the crop. Soon residents of eastern North Carolina towns joined in the tobacco boom by raising the crop on

11. Robert Hinton, "Cotton Culture on the Tar River: The Politics of Agricultural Labor in the Coastal Plain of North Carolina, 1862-1902" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1993), 170; Frenise A. Logan, *The Negro in North Carolina, 1876-1894* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964), 123 (first quotation); Joseph H. Taylor, "The Great Migration from North Carolina in 1879," *North Carolina Historical Review* 31 (January 1954): 22-23, 31; John G. Van Deusen, "Did Republicans 'Colonize' Indiana in 1879?" *Indiana Magazine of History* 30 (December 1934): 335-346; Thomas H. Battle to Elias Carr, February 17, 1890, Elias Carr Papers, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina (second quotation).

12. City of Goldsboro, *Goldsboro Centennial Celebration, 1847-1947: One Hundred Years of Progress and Achievement, Official Souvenir Program*, 1947, p. 27; Tilley, *The Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 141-144; *Eastern Reflector*, September 24, 1890, May 17, 1893, November 13, 1895.



In the 1880s and 1890s, following a serious decline in cotton prices and the severe loss of labor as thousands of blacks in eastern North Carolina left the state for more prosperous jobs, farmers in the region followed the lead of their prosperous Piedmont counterparts and began planting tobacco. Photograph, ca. 1926, of Nash County tobacco workers at a curing barn in eastern North Carolina from the State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.

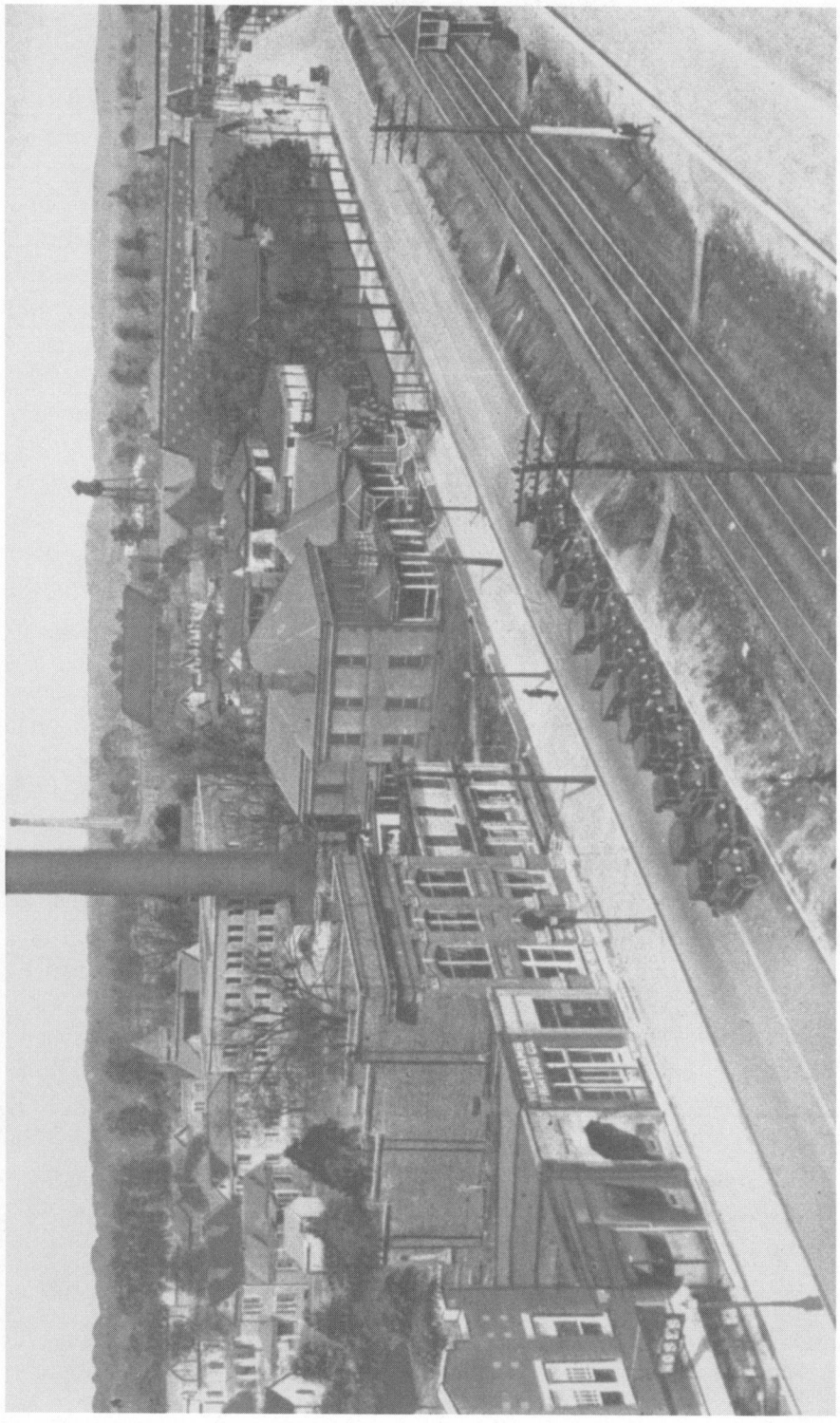
small plots just beyond the municipal limits. Noting that a local saloon owner planted twelve acres of tobacco just outside of town, the Rocky Mount *Argonaut* observed, "No difference what a man is occupied in, in Rocky Mount, he can't keep out of tobacco, for it is too good a thing."[13]

As part of the campaign by Dixie businessmen to forge a New South in the late nineteenth century, urban merchants and boosters played a crucial role in the rise of tobacco in the eastern North Carolina countryside. In Lenoir County, for example, farmers followed the lead of Kinston entrepreneur Jesse W. Grainger. As county commissioner, first president of the local board of trade, chief executive officer of the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad, president of the State Mutual Life Insurance Company, Lenoir County representative to the North Carolina General Assembly, and delegate to two Democratic National Conventions, Grainger was widely recognized as the town's wealthiest and most influential businessman. Concerned about declining prices for Lenoir County agricultural products, he argued that defeating the mounting agricultural depression required introducing the crop that was becoming popular in neighboring Nash and Pitt counties. In early 1885, he purchased five hundred dollars' worth of tobacco seeds, distributed them to area farmers for free, and promised to construct a warehouse in time for storage of the fall harvest. In later years, Grainger built additional warehouses in Kinston and successfully negotiated with James B. Duke's American Tobacco Company and the British-owned Imperial Tobacco Company to build local tobacco storage facilities.[14]

In Rocky Mount, a community historically and inextricably tied to the Cotton Kingdom, the shift to tobacco proceeded equally as rapidly. Even the owners of the Rocky Mount Mills, the second oldest cotton mill in the state, assented to the expansion of tobacco culture. Thomas H. Battle, manager of the mill and scion of Rocky Mount's most influential family, looked askance at the tobacco men streaming into the Coastal Plain, calling them "men who have been successful elsewhere, who have, maybe, loose business principles, and no means." Battle no doubt expressed many elites' distaste for grasping men on the make who came from a different location and social class, but he nevertheless supported the arrival

13. Tilley, *The Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 145; Scott Matthews, "Farm Tenancy and Race in the Tobacco Culture of Wilson County, North Carolina, 1866-1892" (senior honors thesis, Guilford College, 1995), 6; Piehl, "White Society in the Black Belt," 53 (quotation).

14. Talmadge C. Johnson and Charles R. Holloman, *The Story of Kinston and Lenoir County* (Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards and Broughton, 1954), 122-124; William S. Powell, *Annals of Progress: The Story of Lenoir County and Kinston, North Carolina* (Raleigh, N.C.: State Department of Archives and History, 1963), 56; Mike Kohler, *Two Hundred Years of Progress: A Report of the History and Achievements of the People of Lenoir County* (Kinston, N.C.: Kinston-Lenoir County Bicentennial Commission, 1976), 92-93; Lenoir County Historical Association, *The Heritage of Lenoir County* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Hunter Publishing Company, 1981), 39.



The shift from cotton to tobacco in Rocky Mount in the nineteenth century proceeded rapidly, as it had in other eastern Coastal Plain towns. Even the owners of Rocky Mount Mills, the second oldest cotton mill in the state, eventually supported the expansion of tobacco culture. Photograph, ca. 1921, depicting an aerial view of Rocky Mount from the State Archives.

of tobacco. Under his direction, the Rocky Mount Mills and the local bank (which his family controlled) invested heavily in tobacco-marketing enterprises.[15]

In Wilson, the leading cotton merchant similarly abetted the shift to tobacco. Alpheus Branch operated a small bank in Halifax County before moving to Wilson after the Civil War and opening a cotton brokerage firm. Branch prospered, noted a contemporary, "by paying Wilson farmers too little for their cotton and charging them too much for fat-back and fertilizer." In 1872, he and local attorney Thomas Jefferson Hadley founded Branch and Hadley, which later became the Branch Banking Company. Eventually, the firm became the Branch Bank and Trust (BB&T) Company, one of the leading financial institutions in the region. Branch continued to invest in cotton, but he also underwrote the growth of the tobacco industry in Wilson by lending money to farmers and local entrepreneurs for the construction and remodeling of warehouses.[16]

Newspapermen in the four towns likewise jumped on the tobacco bandwagon, exhorting farmers to forsake cotton for the crop that they guaranteed would bring a new era of prosperity to the region. In doing so, they followed the lead of southern journalists such as Henry W. Grady of the *Atlanta Constitution*, Henry Watterson of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Francis W. Dawson of the Charleston *News and Courier*, and Richard H. Edmonds of the *Manufacturers' Record*, who preached the gospel of a New South. *Wilson Advance* editor Josephus Daniels, who later became the publisher of the Raleigh *News and Observer* and the secretary of the navy under Woodrow Wilson, began touting the virtues of tobacco cultivation in the early 1880s. Wary of local farmers' dependence upon a single money crop, he urged the cultivation of a few acres of tobacco on each farm as a hedge against plummeting cotton prices. Increasingly convinced of tobacco's viability in eastern soils, he printed stories reporting the encouraging yields of those who devoted more acres to the crop. Initially, many Wilson merchants disputed Daniels's claims, warning against the rejection of a proven commodity and characterizing the turn to tobacco as needlessly risky. However, the successes of Wilson County farmers vindicated the newspaperman's arguments, and tobacco acreage increased throughout the region. Even after Daniels had departed for Raleigh, local boosters continued to echo his call for more tobacco. In 1890, the Wilson City Commission promised free land downtown and a five-year moratorium on tax assessments to

15. Thomas H. Battle to Kemp P. Battle, March 6, 1892, Battle Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Manuscripts Department, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (quotation); Piehl, "White Society in the Black Belt," 81.

16. Patrick M. Valentine, *The Rise of a Southern Town: Wilson, North Carolina, 1849-1920* (Baltimore, Md.: Gateway Press, 2002), 60, 97-100; Josephus Daniels, *Tar Heel Editor* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), 142-143 (quotation).

anyone who built a tobacco warehouse or factory. "Bestir yourselves, men of Wilson," exhorted the *Wilson Mirror* that year, "and don't let the ball quit moving!"[17]

Daniels's early efforts paled in comparison to the tobacco crusade spearheaded by David Whichard, editor and publisher of the Greenville *Daily Reflector*. Part-owner at age fifteen of the *Greenville Express*, which became the *Eastern Reflector* in 1882, Whichard quickly emerged as one of the community's most prominent citizens, serving as clerk to the board of aldermen, president of the local chamber of commerce, and president of the North Carolina Press Association. Citing the success of farmers in neighboring counties, Whichard argued that Pitt County landowners who failed to plant tobacco were personally responsible for Greenville's persistently sluggish economy. He began publishing a regular report on tobacco in the *Daily Reflector* (newspapers in neighboring towns quickly copied this innovation) and arranged for veteran tobacco growers from outside the region to hold workshops and demonstrations in Greenville. "There is no reason why tobacco cannot be as successfully grown here as anywhere else," he contended. Whichard continued, "Our soil and climate are adapted to the growth of the finest tobaccos, and we desire to see tobacco growing all over our county in a few years."[18]

Once tobacco cultivation increased appreciably, Whichard decried the fact that eastern North Carolina farmers regularly shipped railroad carloads of tobacco to markets in the Piedmont. In 1890, the opening of a new branch of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad, which ran from Halifax to Kinston via Scotland Neck and Greenville, only enhanced the town's attractiveness as a regional marketing center. Whichard asserted that exporting crops to warehouses in Oxford and Henderson simply cost Greenville businessmen money, and he stated, "there is no reason why this town could not be made one of the best tobacco markets in the State." The *Eastern Reflector* contained blank forms on which farmers could detail the number of acres of tobacco they were planting. Whichard collected the forms and submitted the information to buyers as proof that the increasing amounts of tobacco grown in Pitt County merited the construction of warehouses and other storage facilities in Greenville.

17. Daniels, *Tar Heel Editor*, 151-152; Hugh Buckner Johnston et al., "Bits of Wilson History," typescript, 1979 (quotation), Wilson County Public Library, Wilson, North Carolina. On southern boosters, see Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 144-145; and Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 20-21. See also Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970).

18. *Eastern Reflector*, March 10, 1886, October 4, 1892; Henry T. King, *Sketches of Pitt County* (1911; reprint, Greenville, N.C.: Era Press, 1976), 235 (quotation).

Meanwhile, the relentless editor urged local businessmen to pool their resources and build the warehouses that he argued the town desperately needed.[19]

In 1891, a consortium of local businessmen heeded Whichard's call and opened the town's first tobacco warehouse. The Greenville Tobacco Warehouse handled over 200,000 pounds of the crop that year, and Whichard reasoned that increasing productivity called for the construction of even more facilities. A second warehouse, the Eastern Tobacco Warehouse, opened for business in 1892, during which area farmers sold more than one million pounds of tobacco in Greenville. The Planters Warehouse and the Star Warehouse opened in short order, and tobacco sales in the town surpassed 3.25 million pounds. Local businessmen organized the Greenville Tobacco Board of Trade that same year, recognizing the need to regulate the growing industry. By the end of the 1890s, Greenville's four warehouses handled millions of pounds of tobacco annually, and the town's boosters proudly boasted of their ranking as the second-busiest tobacco market in the New Bright Belt. With its 500,940 square feet of floor space, Farmer's Warehouse became the largest tobacco marketing facility in the world when it opened in 1904.[20]

By the turn of the twentieth century, Wilson was the most lucrative tobacco market in eastern North Carolina. In 1890, the lone warehouse in town handled over 1.5 million pounds of tobacco, and by 1900, more than fifteen million pounds of the crop passed through the town's five warehouses. Cigarette consumption rose dramatically by the time of the First World War. Wartime scarcity drove tobacco prices to new heights, and eastern North Carolina farmers prospered as never before. More than forty-two million pounds of tobacco changed hands annually in ten Wilson warehouses containing a total floor space exceeding seven hundred thousand square feet. The North Carolina town surpassed Danville, Virginia, as the nation's preeminent flue-cured tobacco market—a position that Wilson retained, with only a brief interruption, for the remainder of the twentieth century.[21]

While they grudgingly acknowledged superior sales in the Wilson and Greenville markets, tobacconists in Kinston and Rocky Mount hastily constructed their own warehouses to compete in the tobacco business. The opening of the Atlantic Warehouse, so-called because its owner claimed that it stood closer to the Atlantic Ocean than any of its competitors in eastern North Carolina, preceded

19. Thomas A. Williams, ed., *A Greenville Album: The Bicentennial Book* (Greenville, N.C.: Era Press, 1974), 70-72; *Eastern Reflector*, March 9, 1892 (quotation).

20. *Eastern Reflector*, November 13, 1895; Mary Jo Jackson Bratton, *Greenville: Heart of the East* (Chatsworth, Calif.: Windsor Publications, 1991), 41-42; King, *Sketches of Pitt County*, 190; T. E. Austin, "Tobacco Marketing Warehouses and Their Location in the Urban Landscape of the Eastern Flue-Cured Belt of North Carolina" (master's thesis, East Carolina University, 1977), 67.

21. City of Wilson, *Wilson Central Business Tobacco Warehouse Historic District*, report, 1984, pp. 6-7, Wilson County Public Library.

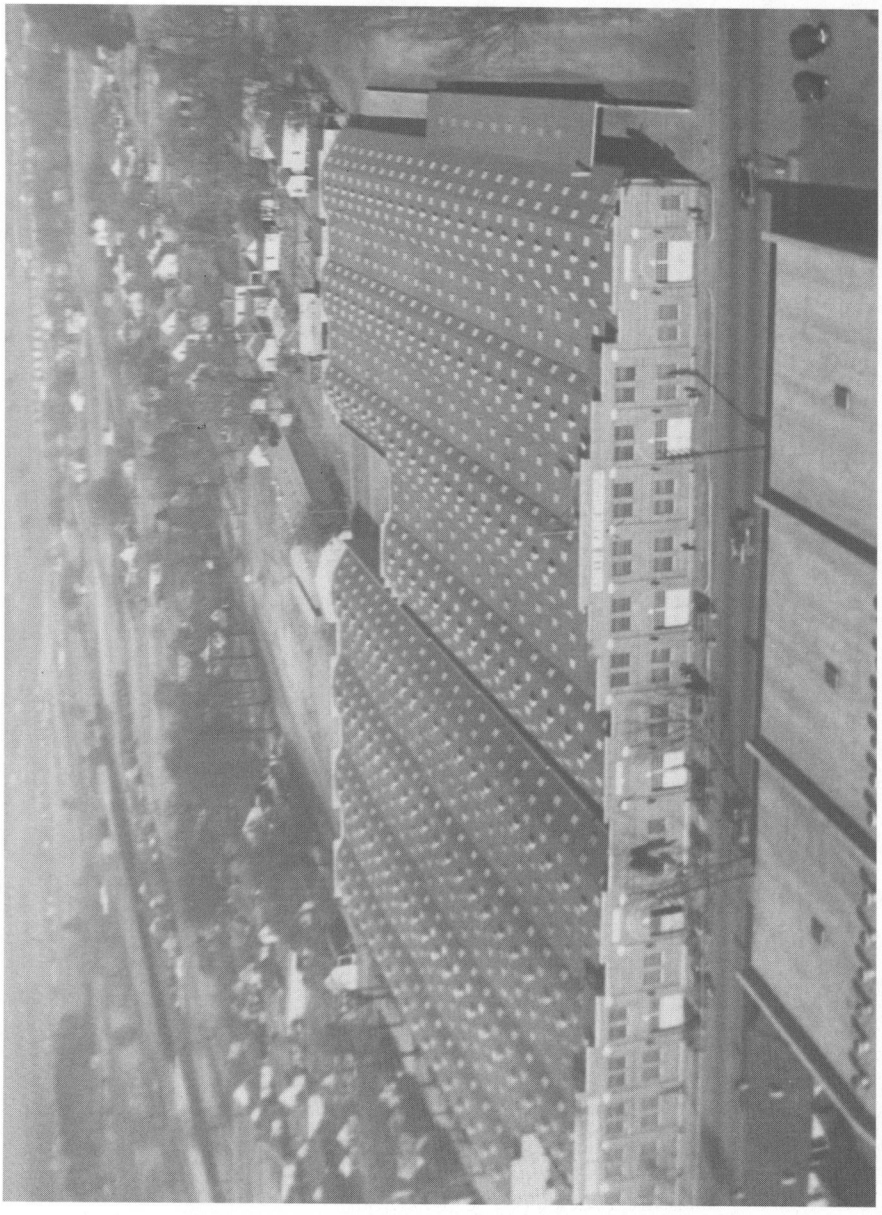
the construction of several other warehouses in Kinston. The Rocky Mount Warehouse opened in 1887, and four warehouses in the community handled more than seven million pounds of tobacco by 1895. The rapid construction of warehouses in all of the towns signaled the arrival of a new commercial activity and, local businessmen hoped, a panacea for the recent economic doldrums.[22]

Warehouse owners recognized that their profits increased in direct proportion to the number of farmers who sold their crops at auction, and the communities' competition for tobacco became fierce. The solicitation of business intensified in the summer as the fall harvests approached, but the drive to recruit and retain customers proceeded year-round. Because prices varied little from location to location, warehouse owners hoped to forge long-lasting bonds with the farmers by providing modern facilities, efficient service, congenial staffs, and, above all, the impression of fair treatment. Warehouse employees scoured the region, staying in touch with longtime clients and distributing leaflets to potential patrons at funerals, picnics, county fairs, fish fries, and religious revivals. Travelers in eastern North Carolina reported seeing tobacco warehouse signs affixed to fence posts and painted on barn roofs alongside ubiquitous advertisements for various brands of chewing tobacco. As Jonathan Daniels reported, "On all the highways are huge billboards advising the farmer to sell his tobacco in the Suchandsuch tobacco market which always gives a square deal and high prices."[23]

Before automobiles and trucks allowed for decentralization within urban areas, tobacconists built warehouses in or adjacent to downtown areas and near railroad tracks. The massive warehouses dwarfed their surroundings. Frequently covering entire city blocks, these structures dominated small communities' central business districts, areas that housed diners, retail establishments such as dry goods stores, and (occasionally) a few small factories. Constructed of wood, brick, or corrugated iron, the warehouses possessed steeply pitched roofs to combat the torrential downpours common to the region. Covered driveways allowed farmers and warehouse employees to load and unload the tobacco safe from the sun and rain. On the insides of the warehouses, only an occasional pillar interrupted the cavernous dirt floor space where tobacco auctions proceeded each autumn. A few

22. Kohler, *Two Hundred Years of Progress*, 92-93; Powell, *Annals of Progress*, 56-57; Johnson and Holloman, *The Story of Kinston and Lenoir County*, 124-125; Michael O'Quinlivan, "A Century of People, Purpose, Progress, Rocky Mount, North Carolina, 1867-1967," in *Rocky Mount, North Carolina Centennial Commemorative Book, 1867-1967* (Rocky Mount, N.C.: Rocky Mount, N.C., Centennial, 1967?), unpaginated; Barbara Hammond, *An Architectural Inventory of Goldsboro, North Carolina* (Goldsboro, N.C.: City of Goldsboro, 1987), 5.

23. "Tobacco Comes to Town," p. 220, folder 3, Leonard Rapport Papers, Southern Historical Collection, hereinafter cited as "Tobacco Comes to Town"; Samuel Thomas Emory, "Bright Tobacco in the Agriculture, Industry, and Foreign Trade of North Carolina" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1939), 81; Jonathan Daniels, *Tar Heels: A Portrait of North Carolina* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1941), 86 (quotation).



Tobacco warehouses, built in or adjacent to downtown areas and near railroad tracks, often covered entire city blocks. By the turn of the twentieth century, Wilson had the most lucrative tobacco market in eastern North Carolina. By World War I, the ten Wilson tobacco warehouses contained a total floor space of over 700,000 square feet, and the town became the nation's preeminent flue-cured tobacco market. Undated photograph of Smith Warehouse, Wilson, North Carolina, from the North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

offices, livery stables, and crude overnight accommodations for farmers lined the periphery of the building. Large skylights and windows provided the sunlight necessary for buyers to assess the color of the tobacco leaves carefully. (Tobacconists thought artificial lighting inadequate, if not misleading, for grading the leaves.)[24]

Farmers rose early in the morning, usually well before dawn, to transport their crops to tobacco towns and seek payoff for their labor. Like carnival barkers, doormen at the warehouses beckoned farmers to choose their establishment. Business began when African American laborers transferred the "hands" of tobacco from wagons or trucks to special wheelbarrows, weighed and arranged the bundles by grade on baskets, and then placed them in rows on the floor under the watchful eyes of the white warehousemen. Tags affixed to each pile of tobacco identified its weight and the name of its seller. Farmers strolled around the warehouse, perusing piles of tobacco, trading stories with friends and acquaintances, and discussing prices for crops sold weeks earlier in South Carolina and Georgia markets. As the floor filled with people and produce, warehouse proprietors greeted old customers by name and worked the room in the fashion of small-town politicians ingratiating themselves with voters. According to keen observers of small-town southern life, the excitement prior to an auction resembled the air of anticipation on the county courthouse steps before the final tally of an election.[25]

At a designated time, the auctioneer, exporters, buyers from the major domestic tobacco manufacturers, and "pinhookers" (speculators who purchased the leaves for resale) commenced their march along the rows of tobacco. Buyers represented giant manufacturing firms such as the American Tobacco Company, Imperial Tobacco Company, R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, Liggett and Myers Tobacco Company, Universal Leaf Tobacco Company, Export Tobacco Company, and Dibrell Brothers Tobacco Company. Corporate buyers and pinhookers stared intently at the piles of tobacco, often leaning forward to finger and smell the leaves. Having already assayed the color and weight of each pile of tobacco, the warehouse owner related an appropriate starting price to the auctioneer. Buyers seldom spoke during the auctions and instead conveyed their bids with a wink, a nod, or a raised eyebrow. Bidding for most piles of tobacco lasted no more than ten or fifteen seconds, thereby allowing veteran auctioneers to complete hundreds of sales in a day. Auctioneers adopted distinctive styles, their nearly indecipherable chants seeming like so much gibberish to those unfamiliar with industry jargon. Appreciative crowds often gathered to view the spectacle, and warehouse owners sought to attract customers by employing flamboyant auctioneers widely known for their showmanship. Revered like "local gods," notes historian Pete Daniel,

24. Joseph C. Robert, *The Story of Tobacco in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 193-194; Emory, "Bright Tobacco," 79-80.

25. Robert, *The Story of Tobacco in America*, 193.

"auctioneers were the aristocrats of the tobacco warehouse culture." Expectant farmers huddled behind the buyers, watching and listening to determine the price brought by their piles. If displeased with the price for a pile of tobacco, farmers could refuse payment by "turning the ticket" (turning the tag face down on the tobacco or tearing off a piece of it) and either request inclusion in a later auction or take their product to another warehouse. If satisfied, farmers received a check within a matter of minutes. The check deducted a 10 percent per hundred-pound weighing fee, auctioneers' charges (fifteen cents if less than one hundred pounds; twenty-five cents if more), and the warehousemen's commissions of 2.5 percent of the total sale price. The farmer then left for home or remained in town to celebrate the successful conclusion of another year's labor.[26]

Farmers realized that selling tobacco in warehouses worked to the manufacturers' benefit and not their own. In a study of the South Carolina tobacco industry, where conditions were the same as in North Carolina, Eldred E. Prince Jr. concludes that "the tobacco auction system was the very essence of a buyers' market." At the mercy of market forces that nudged prices up and down each year and unable to determine what grade of tobacco buyers would seek at any given time, farmers could only haul their product to the warehouse and hope for the best. They could count on the warehousemen, who received a flat percentage of the final bid for their commissions, to urge generous prices. But the final result of sales depended upon buyers. Moreover, although farmers could always refuse bids they considered too low, a number of factors usually kept them from doing so. The farmers paid fees for each auction and had no desire to pay for lodging to remain in town and gamble on higher bids another day. Returning home with unsold tobacco meant running the risk of spoilage, an especially daunting prospect for the farmers who had conveyed crops to market at what they judged the most propitious time. In the vast majority of cases, therefore, resigned acceptance seemed the best course of action in the face of a disappointingly low bid.[27]

After farmers received payment, they cashed their checks at nearby banks and settled their debts with creditors. Having used their crops as security earlier that

26. Thomas Henderson, interview by Charles Thompson, October 28, 1999, Southern Oral History Program, Southern Historical Collection; Wilbur Wright Yeargin Jr., "The History of the Tobacco Auction System and the Tobacco Auctioneer" (master's thesis, Duke University, 1989), 63-64; Bill Mansfield, "The Development of the Bright-Leaf Tobacco Auctioneer's Chant" in *Arts in Earnest: North Carolina Folklife*, ed. Daniel W. Patterson and Charles G. Zug III (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 105-109; Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 210 (quotations); Skewarkian Junior Historian Club, *Smoke to Gold* (Greenville, N.C.: Era Press, 1978), 43; B. A. Botkin, ed., *A Treasury of Southern Folklore: Stories, Ballads, Traditions, and Folkways of the People of the South* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1949), 652-654.

27. Eldred E. Prince Jr. with Robert R. Simpson, *Long Green: The Rise and Fall of Tobacco in South Carolina* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 124 (quotation); T. J. Woofter Jr., *The Plight of Cigarette Tobacco* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1931), 43.

Farmers in tobacco towns arose before dawn to transport their crops to market. Beneath covered driveways, farmers and African American laborers transferred the bundles of tobacco from wagons or trucks to wheelbarrows, weighed and arranged them by grade, and placed them in rows on the warehouse floor. Tags affixed to each bundle of tobacco identified its weight and the name of its seller. Undated photograph, titled, "Waiting for the Tobacco Market to Open," from the North Carolina Collection.

year, they obtained credit from time merchants who typically charged annual interest rates of 25 percent. Tenants and sharecroppers usually paid their landlords, who waited eagerly inside the bank, before seeking out the doctors, lawyers, time merchants, fertilizer salesmen, agricultural implements dealers, used car salesmen, and other local businessmen whom they owed. Tenants commonly surrendered at least three-fourths of their payment to landlords, time merchants, and other creditors before concluding the day's business. If wives and children accompanied the farmers, the families probably went shopping downtown before heading home. If the farmers came alone, they likely remained in town to sample various leisure activities. After running a gauntlet of creditors and enjoying themselves for a night or two, few tenants and sharecroppers left town with much cash in their pockets or positive balances in their bankbooks.[28]

Warehouses became the epicenters of the communities during harvest season, which lasted from August to early November of each year. Local residents noticed increased activity in town as the first farmers brought their crops to market (by

28. Emory, "Bright Tobacco," 86.

Prior to the tobacco auction, farmers strolled around the warehouse, discussing crop prices and trading stories. At the designated time, the auctioneer, exporters, buyers from major tobacco manufacturers, and speculators carefully examined each pile of tobacco. The warehouse owner related a starting price to the auctioneer, after which bidding officially began. Photograph, ca. 1926, of the interior of a tobacco warehouse in Wilson from the North Carolina Collection.

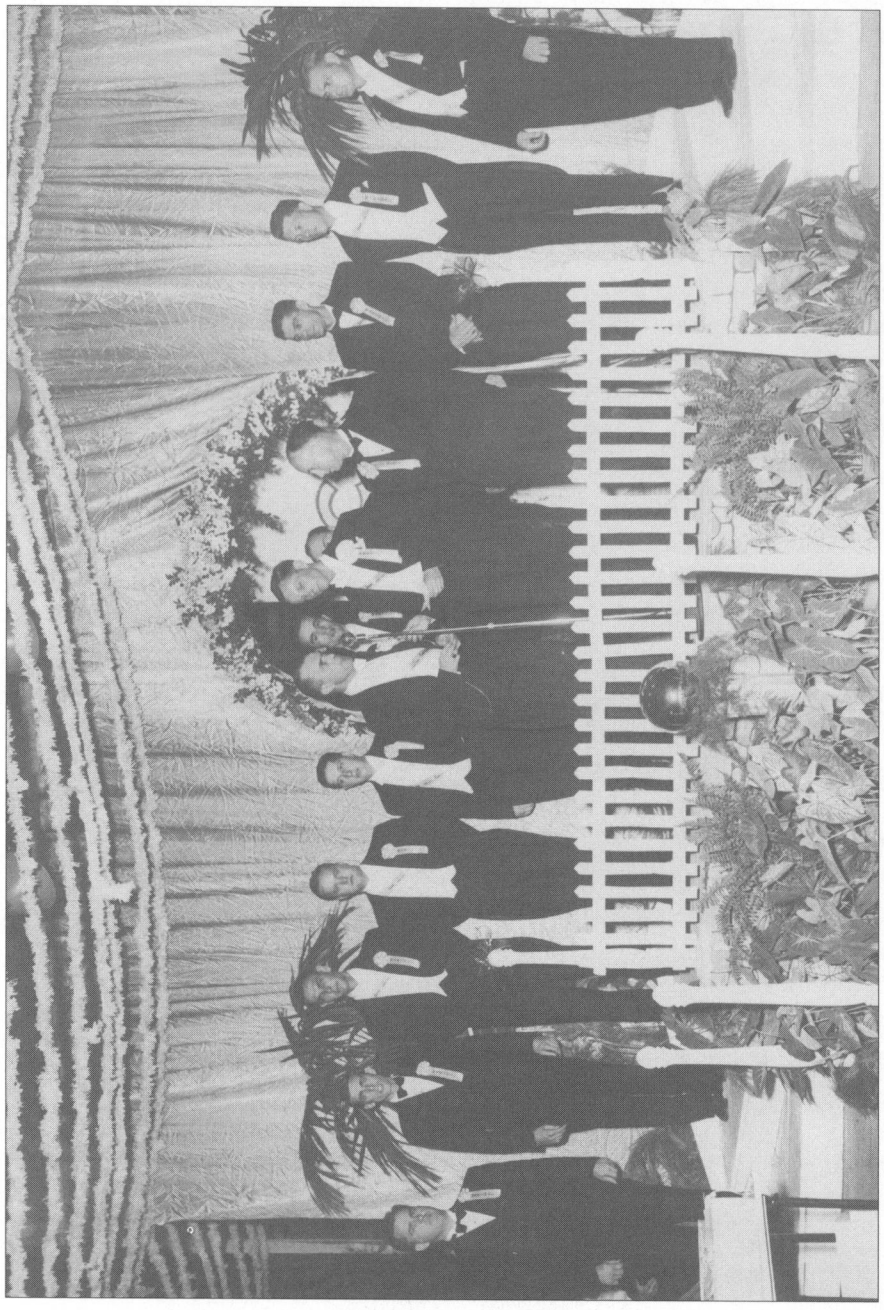
wagon in the nineteenth century and increasingly by truck in the twentieth), and even those residents who lived some distance from the warehouse district detected the telltale smell of freshly cured tobacco when wagonloads of the crop rolled into town. Each community staged parades and other elaborate celebrations to commemorate the selling season. The annual festival in Wilson featured a contest to select champion amateur and professional auctioneers. Judges evaluated contestants in categories such as "intelligibility," "eye action," and "hand action." Beginning in 1898, the local chamber of commerce staged the Greenville Tobacco Fair every November. A parade with horse-drawn floats, marching bands, and Spanish-American War veterans wound through the cheering crowds downtown. At the Pitt County Fairgrounds, crowds witnessed horse races and visited a stock pavilion and displays of manufactured items and farm produce at an exhibit hall. At the fair's midway, spectators ogled exotic dancers, "the Turtle Boy, one of the greatest curiosities of the 19th Century," and other novelties. During the Depression, many tobacco towns sponsored beauty contests featuring "tobacco queens."[29]

The most spectacular annual tobacco celebration occurred in Rocky Mount under the sponsorship of the Carolina Cotillion Club. The June German Festival, a black-tie affair for ten thousand invited guests, attracted revelers from a hundred-mile radius in eastern North Carolina. Jonathan Daniels called the affair "the first social event of the tobacco country, the biggest dance in the state, maybe in America—probably in the world" and stated, "It proves, undoubtedly, that there are 4,000 men with tuxedos and tails in the cash-crop tenant farmer land." Through the decades, the live music performed changed from classical to ragtime to jazz and swing. Nationally famous bands under the direction of Paul Tremaine, Ozzie Nelson, Jimmy Dorsey, Harold Stern, and Rocky Mount native Kay Kyser headlined the all-night affair. Fittingly, Carolina Cotillion Club members converted the vast interior of a tobacco warehouse into a ballroom for the occasion. The extravagance of the celebration underscored the importance of tobacco to the community and the region.[30]

Other businesses prospered, catering to the needs of outsiders in town at harvest time. Banks hired extra tellers and extended their business hours to accommodate the farmers, buyers, and warehousemen who needed cash for warehouse transactions. Retailers stocked their shelves to capacity during the fall and reduced orders at other times of the year. Used-car lots filled in August and emptied in December. Local entrepreneurs operated hogshead factories in the

29. "Can You Say 'Auctioneer'?" *Southern Tobacco Journal* 53 (June 1939): 6 (Wilson quotations); Bratton, *Greenville*, 51 (Greenville quotation). For the rise of tobacco queens as an effort to promote the bright leaf tobacco economy, see Blain Roberts, "A New Cure for Brightleaf Tobacco: The Origins of the Tobacco Queen during the Great Depression," *Southern Cultures* 12 (summer 2006): 30-52.

30. Jonathan Daniels, "Tobacco Dance," *Saturday Evening Post*, September 6, 1941, 18, 63, 66, 69-70; Daniels, *Tar Heels*, 94 (quotation).



During the harvest season, towns in eastern North Carolina staged parades, auctioneer contests, horse races, and other elaborate celebrations to commemorate the selling season. One of the most spectacular of these events was the annual June German festival in Rocky Mount, an extravagant black-tie affair for ten thousand invited guests with live music performed by nationally famous bands. Photograph of the bandstand at the June German Dance, Rocky Mount, from "A Photograph Record, 1930s, 1940s, 1950s," Local History Collection, Braswell Memorial Library, Rocky Mount, North Carolina.

shadows of the warehouses and sold their goods to tobacco buyers. Peddlers hawked apples, razor blades, patent medicine, and other items on the streets alongside beggars, swindlers, confidence men, and armed thieves seeking farmers' newly acquired wealth. In their quest to save souls, sidewalk preachers urged farmers to go back home and forego the leisure activities offered near the warehouse district. Taverns abounded in the four tobacco towns at a time when all but a few counties in North Carolina remained dry. In turn-of-the-century Greenville, for example, saloons outnumbered churches thirteen to nine. When his crusade brought him to town in 1902, famed evangelist Sam Jones excoriated the citizenry for this scandalous situation. The "better element" of the tobacco towns also groused about increased activity in the local red light districts, the existence of which local clergymen attributed to the pernicious effects of the tobacco trade. Kinston's "Sugar Hill" attained special notoriety for its vice offerings, but prostitution thrived in neighborhoods near the warehouses in all the tobacco towns.[31]

Hotbeds of activity for a few months each autumn, giant tobacco warehouses stood empty for the rest of the year. From January through July, most of the men employed there worked at filling stations, performed odd jobs around town, or prepared seedbeds at their own farms. Warehousemen worked frenetically during the harvest season and did very little at other times, proudly proclaiming the following motto: "work like hell, drink like hell, and loaf like hell." Eager to make any money they could during the off-season, warehouse owners rented the space for storage of fertilizer, agricultural goods, and farm machinery, as well as for any other purposes they could conceive. Tobacco warehouses served as venues for cotillions, boxing matches, political rallies, farm machinery expositions, high school graduations and formals, reunions of Civil War veterans, and other special events. Adhering to the state's Jim Crow statutes, whites and African Americans invariably used the facilities at different times. In oral history interviews, black tobacco town residents remembered watching James Brown, Sam Cooke, and other headliners of the "chittlin' circuit" perform in vacant warehouses during the mid-twentieth century. Occasionally, a few white teenagers boldly crossed the color line to hear this music.[32]

While they were rarely in the warehouses during harvest season, African Americans assumed more prominent roles in tobacco towns after the auctions. Black men performed the necessary manual labor following the sales, transferring baskets of tobacco to factories called "stemmeries" or "prizeries" that were located near the warehouses. Under the watchful eyes of white supervisors, African

31. Kohler, *Two Hundred Years of Progress*, 68; Bratton, *Greenville*, 45; *Daily Reflector* (Greenville), September 25, 1902, in James S. Jenkins, *Viewing Greenville and Pitt County near the Turn of the Century* (Greenville, N.C.: The Author, 1965); Emory, "Bright Tobacco," 80-81.

32. "Tobacco Comes to Town," p. 214; Austin, "Tobacco Marketing Warehouses," 70.

Many eastern North Carolina towns sponsored beauty contests as part of their tobacco festivals. Photograph of Wilson's tobacco king and queen crowned during the Wilson Tobacco Festival, August 16-19, 1938, from the *News and Observer* files, State Archives.

Americans sat on long benches in the "stemmeries" and ripped stems away from tobacco leaves. Always seeking to increase profits through mechanization, tobacconists experimented with a series of automatic stemming machines. In 1927, a Greenville factory installed ten mechanical stemmers, and other firms in

eastern North Carolina soon followed suit. Four women feeding and monitoring the cutting machines could theoretically do the work of a dozen hand stemmers, but the machines proved disappointing because of excessive damage to the leaves and the frequency of mechanical breakdowns. Inventors repeatedly introduced new and improved models, but African American women and children continued to perform the lion's share of stemming work well into the middle of the twentieth century. In factories and fields, tobacco remained a labor-intensive product that resisted labor-saving efforts for decades.[33]

African American males performed most of the work in the remaining steps of tobacco processing. First, they loaded the half leaves of tobacco left after stemming into huge redrying machines originally developed for use in the textile industry. Next, workers packed the dried leaves into wooden hogsheads for storage and shipment to distant manufacturing plants. Laborers initially squeezed tobacco into barrels by hand, but this task became easier with the adoption of hydraulic presses by the 1920s. Tobacco companies stored casks in prizeries during the nineteenth century and in separate "redrying houses" in the early twentieth century. The redrying houses utilized steam power and, absent the cigarette manufacturing plants prevalent in larger cities, the huge smokestacks in the buildings symbolized New South industrialization in tobacco towns. Unlike auction warehouses and prizeries, which were located near central business districts, new redrying houses were situated on the edges of towns and away from the densely crammed wooden structures that caught fire with disturbing frequency. Brick redrying houses often held several million pounds of tobacco, so tobacco companies encircled them with wire fences and employed watchmen to patrol them around the clock. Cigarette manufacturers stored tobacco leaves for at least six months to allow for proper "ageing" and sometimes for as long as two or three years, depending upon the rise and fall of tobacco prices in world markets. Finally, workers loaded the hogsheads onto railroad cars for shipment to Durham, Winston-Salem, and other factory towns for manufacture into cigarettes and (less often) plugs of chewing tobacco.[34]

While giant manufacturers such as the American Tobacco Company and the Imperial Tobacco Company occasionally built prizeries and drying houses in eastern North Carolina tobacco towns, local businessmen frequently owned and operated these facilities and auction warehouses. These entrepreneurs, almost all of whom moved to tobacco towns from the surrounding countryside or from Virginia and the North Carolina Piedmont in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, parlayed their familiarity with tobacco culture into leadership

33. Tilley, *The Bright-Tobacco Industry*, 321-323.

34. Robert C. McAdams, "The Tobacco Culture of Wilson County, North Carolina" (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1996), 158-159.

After the auctions, black workers transferred baskets of tobacco to factories called "stemmeries" or "prizeries," located near the warehouses. There, employees sat on long benches and ripped stems away from tobacco leaves.

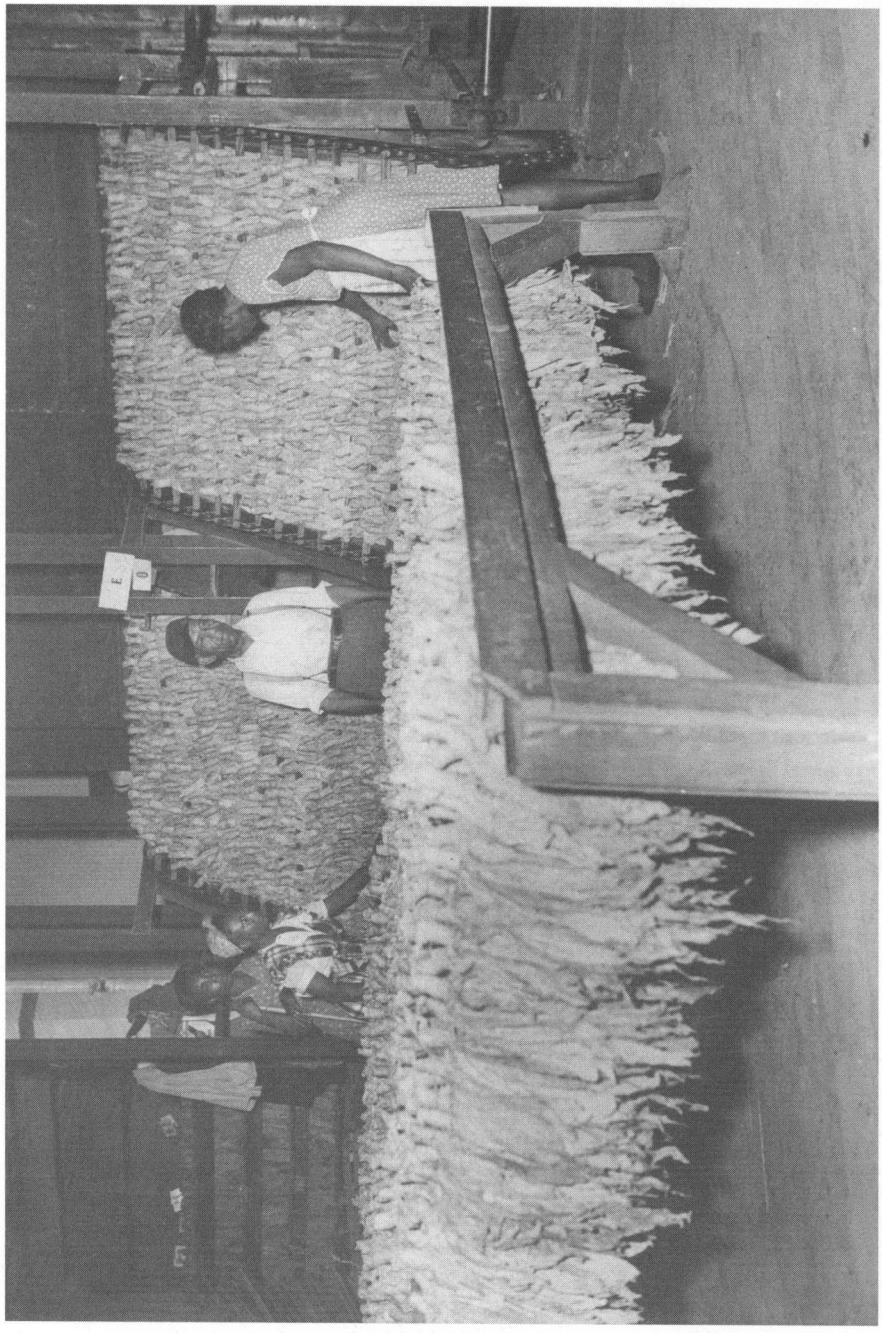
roles in their adopted communities. They were either tobacco farmers seeking to increase their profits by controlling another stage of production or veteran warehousemen from the Old Belt who believed their expertise could be lucrative in the development of the New Belt. These businessmen constituted an elite class whose wealth and prestige allowed them to dominate political and social life in the tobacco towns of eastern North Carolina. They held the majority of the seats in local chambers of commerce and boards of trade, occupied the key electoral positions in municipal government, worshipped together in the same churches, vacationed at the same beaches along North Carolina's Atlantic coastline, and lived in the communities' most exclusive neighborhoods. The leading tobacconists built ornate mansions along Caswell, Queen, Gordon, and Washington streets in

African American women and children performed most of the stemming work well into the mid-twentieth century. "Employees in the 'Hanger Room' of tobacco stemming and redrying plant" in Kinston, North Carolina, from the North Carolina Collection.

Kinston and in the Skinnerville neighborhood west of Evans Street in Greenville. Their counterparts in Wilson resided on West Nash Street, a tree-lined boulevard that Jonathan Daniels called "one of the four or five loveliest streets in the South." Philanthropic tobacconists also donated considerable sums of money for the construction of public libraries, hospitals, and other semipublic institutions.[35]

A prototype of the young man on the make who prospered in eastern North Carolina, Edward Bancroft ("E. B.") Ficklen started in the tobacco business in

35. Lenoir County Historical Association, *The Heritage of Lenoir County*, 42; Daniels, *Tar Heels*, 78 (quotation).



After the stemming work was completed, African American workers loaded the leaves into huge redrying machines. The caption for this photograph notes that "the tobacco leaves are removed from the drying racks and placed on the long 'climbing ladder,' part of the redrying machine. It takes an hour for the tobacco to run through this machine for the redrying process." The tobacco was then packed into wooden hogsheads for shipment. Photograph from the North Carolina Collection.

Danville, Virginia, and relocated to Greenville in the 1890s to be a commission buyer for a large firm. In 1896, he formed the E. B. Ficklen Tobacco Company and served as its president until his death in 1925. James S. Ficklen succeeded his father and directed the company's steady expansion for the next thirty years. Unlike the family patriarch, a hard-working businessman who kept a low public profile and shied away from extensive involvement in local affairs, Ficklen *fils* became a civic leader in Greenville and an influential force in the national tobacco scene. President of the Greenville Tobacco Board of Trade, chairman of the public library's board of directors, director of the Guaranty Bank and Trust Company of Greenville, and chief executive officer of the Wachovia Bank and Trust Company of Winston-Salem, he was elected president of the Tobacco Association of the United States, the industry's most important trade association. Louis Ficklen, the patriarch's youngest son, managed the family business from 1955 until 1963, when he engineered a merger with three other firms to form the Carolina Leaf Tobacco Company, the region's largest. The Ficklen family long lived in a mansion in Greenville's most exclusive neighborhood, west of downtown on Fifth Street. They became the principal benefactors of East Carolina Teachers College, which later became East Carolina University, underwriting the construction of the football stadium and some of the academic buildings on campus.[36]

Second only to Jesse Grainger in the early days of tobacco marketing in Kinston, Burwell Canady grew up in rural Lenoir County and maintained throughout his life one of the largest plantations (more than twenty-five hundred acres) in eastern North Carolina. After attending Wake Forest College, Canady moved to Kinston in 1873 and opened a foundry and hardware business. He also became one of the largest stockholders in the Orion Knitting Mills (later known as the Kinston Cotton Mill) and director of the Bank of Kinston. Recognizing the money-making potential in tobacco marketing, he opened the Atlantic Warehouse in 1896 and later invested in several other local tobacco enterprises. Active in local politics and government, he was elected alderman and mayor of Kinston as well as chairman of the Lenoir County Board of Commissioners.[37]

A native of Oxford, North Carolina, in the heart of the Old Bright Tobacco Belt, Ula "Dick" Cozart graduated from Horner's Military Institute and then entered the warehouse business with his father in Oxford. In 1891, he came to Wilson and worked for a local tobacco company. After operating a warehouse in Durham for a year, Cozart returned to Wilson in 1893 and opened the Centre Brick Warehouse with Capt. Tom Washington, another newcomer to Wilson.

36. Pitt County Historical Society, *Chronicles of Pitt County, North Carolina* (Greenville, N.C.: The Society; Winston-Salem, N.C.: Hunter Publishing Company, 1982), 299; "Ficklen Is President," *Southern Tobacco Journal* 52 (July 1938): 9.

37. Lenoir County Historical Association, *The Heritage of Lenoir County*, 166-167.

One of the founders of the Wilson Tobacco Market, a local trade association, Cozart also served as a lifetime member of the U.S. Tobacco Association's board of governors. A director of the National Bank of Wilson, he served for twelve years as a town alderman and a trustee of the Wilson City Schools. Like so many other newcomers to eastern North Carolina towns, he used his capital, entrepreneurial skills, and knowledge of tobacco culture to acquire great wealth, marry into the local gentry, and firmly establish himself as a leading man in the rapidly changing New South landscape.[38]

A few particularly ambitious tobacconists managed to conduct business in more than one eastern North Carolina town. Olthus Leeland ("O. L.") Joyner grew up on a farm in Pitt County, and his family began planting tobacco in the late 1880s. In 1891, after graduating from Kentucky University, he and a partner opened the Eastern Tobacco Warehouse. In 1903, he and several other farmers organized the Farmers Consolidated Tobacco Company, with headquarters in Greenville. Joyner served as president and general manager of the consortium, which operated several warehouses in the New Tobacco Belt—three in Greenville, two in Kinston, and one each in Wilson, Robersonville, and Washington. As a regular columnist for the Greenville *Daily Reflector*, he became widely known as one of the region's foremost experts on the tobacco industry. At the same time, Joyner continued to raise tobacco and cattle on the family farm.[39]

The tobacconists of eastern North Carolina prospered as economic middlemen between producers and industrialists. Similarly, the region's marketing centers thrived as the key locations where farmers sold their crops and middlemen prepared them for shipment to larger manufacturing centers. Content with performing a discrete function in the production of tobacco products, local businessmen seldom challenged the giant corporations that dominated the cigarette industry. The Wells-Whitehead Tobacco Company of Wilson, incorporated in 1900, enjoyed some success producing Carolina Bright cigarettes until the American Tobacco Company acquired it in 1903 and moved all of its machinery to Durham. Two other Wilson companies—the Ware-Kramer Tobacco Company, which manufactured White Roll cigarettes, and the Erwin-Nadal Tobacco Company, which made Contentnea and Plon Plon cigarettes—enjoyed modest sales prior to going out of business before the First World War. For the most part, businessmen in the eastern North Carolina tobacco towns quickly

38. Wilson County's 130th Anniversary Committee, *History of Wilson County and Its Families* (Dallas, Tex.: Taylor Publishing Company, 1985), 100, 177; McAdams, "The Tobacco Culture of Wilson County," 132-133.

39. *Eastern Reflector*, December 12, 1984; King, *Sketches of Pitt County*, 248; Barnes, "A Brief History of Greenville," 12; O. L. Joyner, "The Tobacco Department: The Growth and Development of the Greenville N.C. Tobacco Market," *Eastern Reflector*, November 13, 1895, North Carolina Collection, Joyner Library, http://digital.lib.ecu.edu/exhibits/tobacco/htmlFiles/GDTM.html.

recognized the futility of competing with long-established cigarette manufacturers and accepted their limited but highly profitable role in the industry.[40]

Tobacco provided a livelihood for hundreds of African Americans who occupied the opposite end of the social order in Wilson, Kinston, Greenville, and Rocky Mount. From the auction warehouses to the stemmeries and prizeries to the redrying houses, black men and women typically worked ten-hour days and five and one-half days a week for rock-bottom wages. Believing that sunlight and fresh air would dry out the tobacco, white supervisors in stemmeries closed and covered windows. Consequently, workers often tied handkerchiefs over their noses to keep from inhaling the stagnant air. Because of the extreme heat, the noisome odor permeating the cramped quarters, the tobacco dust filling the air, and the extremely low wages paid for mind-numbing piecework, stemmeries attracted only unskilled workers who could find no other employment. A few black men worked there, but samples of U.S. Census records indicate that more than 90 percent of the workers were women—an important exception to the Jim Crow prohibition throughout much of the South against hiring African American women for industrial jobs. (The Rocky Mount Mills, one of the largest employers in the region, hired only white women.) Some African American women who were unable to work all day in factories graded tobacco leaves in their homes. Census records fail to reflect accurately the number of children who worked as stemmers, mostly alongside their mothers on disassembly lines. However, oral histories and photographs document these youngsters' presence. White supervisors commonly forbade talking on the shop floor but allowed the workers to sing. Although factory owners interpreted workers' singing as evidence of their contentment, surviving accounts of African American workers emphasize the extremely unpleasant and unhealthy conditions they endured in the sweltering factories.[41]

Warehouse and factory owners employed a few of their workers as custodians or handymen throughout the year. But for the vast majority of African Americans,

40. Johnston et al., "Bits of Wilson History"; McAdams, "The Tobacco Culture of Wilson County," 151-156; Valentine, *The Rise of a Southern Town*, 189-191.

41. Emma L. Shields, "A Half-Century in the Tobacco Industry," *Southern Workman* 51 (September 1922): 419-425; 1900 Census for Pitt County, North Carolina, Eastern North Carolina Digital History Exhibits, North Carolina Room, Joyner Library; Robert C. Weaver, "The Tobacco Industry in North Carolina," Box 1, folder "Theses on North Carolina Labor," Records of the Tobacco Unit, May-Dec. 1935, Records of the National Recovery Administration, Record Group 9, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland; Dolores Janiewski, "Sisters under Their Skins: Southern Working Women, 1880-1950," in *Sex, Race, and the Role of Women in the South*, ed. Joanne V. Hawks and Sheila L. Skemp (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), 27; Marion W. Roydhouse, " 'The Universal Sisterhood of Women': Women and Labor Reform in North Carolina, 1900-1932" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1980), 58. In *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), Dolores E. Janiewski describes the same situation in the Durham, North Carolina, tobacco factories. She explores the rural origins of these work patterns in "Women and the Making of a Rural Proletariat in the Bright Tobacco Belt, 1880-1930," *Insurgent Sociologist* 10 (summer 1980): 16-26.

jobs were available in tobacco towns only from late summer to early winter. U.S. Census records, local directories, and company payrolls indicate that many workers resided in tobacco towns temporarily, renting rooms (sometimes by the week) in boardinghouses or staying with relatives during the few months they worked in factories. They typically found lodging in the African American residential area near downtown, where they could easily walk to and from work. Many black members of the work force drifted off into the countryside during the winter to prepare for another cycle of tobacco cultivation as tenant farmers, sharecroppers, or farm laborers. Having temporarily resided in town for seasonal work, they returned to family farms for the rest of the year. Many African Americans traveled to northern cities looking for work in the winter months. In Rocky Mount, for example, blacks often went to Washington, D.C., in search of temporary employment. Many black tobacco workers tended the leaves twelve months a year, whether in the countryside or in town.[42]

Federal Writers' Project interviews conducted with veteran tobacco workers in eastern North Carolina during the 1930s capture the economic uncertainty and instability of their transient lives. Wilson tobacco packer William Batts dug ditches, sawed wood, and performed other odd jobs after the factories closed in the winter. He farmed in the spring and summer before returning to town in the fall, and his wife worked in a stemmery. "I didn't like de work in de warehouse," he confided to an interviewer. Batts added, "De scent of the tobacco was so strong dat it made me sick, even if I was raised with it, and I've spent my whole life around here and you can imagine that I'm used to de stuff." W. H. Etheridge, a stemmery worker in Wilson, recounted that he worked full time during the tobacco season but only earned approximately $600. The rest of the year, he remained idle. "If this town had as much doing all year as it does in the fall," he lamented, "we could all of us get a little something to do and life would be worth living." After explaining that he enjoyed the work and only regretted its impermanence, Etheridge recanted and said, "I say it suits me alright. That is not entirely true. There is no future to it. Everything it pays is required for living expenses, and it's a poor living at best."[43]

Some African Americans who permanently resided in the tobacco towns alternated work in warehouses and factories during the autumn with work in the tobacco fields during the other seasons. Each day, scores of African American men

42. McAdams, "The Tobacco Culture of Wilson County," 173-174; Lisa G. Hazirjian, "Negotiating Poverty: Economic Insecurity and the Politics of Working-Class Life in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, 1929-1969" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2003), 48-49.

43. "The Stake of Life," William Batts, interview with Mary A. Hicks and Ed Massengill, Wilson, North Carolina, June 1, 1939, p. 7393 (first quotation), folder 550; "One of Them Might Be President," W. H. Etheridge, interview with Stanley Combs and Ed Massengill, May 20, 1939, pp. 4408 (second quotation), 4409 (third quotation), folder 328, both in Federal Writers' Project Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

congregated at designated street corners early in the mornings until white farmers came by, loaded as many laborers as they could use into wagons or trucks, transported them to their farms, and brought them back to town in the evening. "So go down to the street early in the morning," recalled a black resident of Wilson, "you'd see old and young blacks just sitting on the corner waiting for the truck to come by to pick them up." Farm workers sat on street corners alongside black women, many of whom toiled during the tobacco season as stemmers, who waited for well-to-do white women to drive by and select them for domestic work as maids, cooks, laundresses, and the like.[44]

Black tobacco workers who remained in the towns year-round lived in African American communities that Jim Crow statutes and customs rigidly segregated from white residential neighborhoods. After whites had expropriated the better house-building sites in these communities, blacks could only gravitate toward the low-lying, poorly drained areas "on the other side of the tracks" near downtown. African American laborers lived in substandard housing, usually in one-room shacks and tiny duplexes. Shotgun houses, consisting of two or three rooms arranged in a straight line from front to back on narrow lots, served as low-rent tenements by the 1910s. Wealthy whites frequently invested in real estate in the densely populated African American enclaves, renting rooms and houses to black workers and families. Yet some African American professionals managed to acquire property. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a steady flow of rural black migrants arrived in eastern North Carolina towns seeking work in the tobacco industry and found lodging in neighborhoods such as East Wilson, West Greenville, and Crosstown and Happy Hill in Rocky Mount.[45]

Confined to discrete areas of the towns in which they lived, African Americans formed mixed-class communities. The majority of blacks worked in tobacco warehouses and factories and as day laborers, barbers, teamsters, draymen, and domestics. Teachers, clergymen, medical professionals, shop owners, and other businessmen formed the African American middle class. In Wilson, for example, real estate investor Samuel H. Vick, physician Frank Hargrove, undertaker Charles Darden, and contractor Oliver Freeman became the most prominent members of a black professional class that founded a number of successful mutual-aid, life insurance, and burial societies, as well as fraternal orders such as the Masons, Elks, and Odd Fellows. Vick developed Vicksburg Manor and

44. William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad, *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South* (New York: The New Press, 2001), 132 (quotation).

45. Catherine W. Bishir and Michael T. Southern, *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Eastern North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 344-345; Richard L. Mattson, "The Cultural Landscape of a Southern Black Community: East Wilson, North Carolina, 1890 to 1930," *Landscape Journal* 2 (fall 1992): 150-151; McAdams, "The Tobacco Culture of Wilson County," 173-174; Hazirjian, "Negotiating Poverty," 30-36.

other residential neighborhoods with small but well-appointed houses for the working class. Hargrove succeeded in founding Mercy Hospital, one of the first black hospitals in North Carolina, and Darden's unrelenting efforts resulted in the opening of Charles H. Darden High School for African Americans. These men built spacious homes on East Green Street that failed to rival the mansions of the white elite on West Nash Street but nevertheless set a standard for middle-class respectability in Wilson's black community.[46]

Although little capital was available for the operation of large-scale enterprises, African Americans managed to operate small businesses within their communities. Black residents of the tobacco towns patronized African American-owned cafés, theaters, barbershops, funeral parlors, insurance companies, dry cleaners, grocery stores, beauty salons, and pool halls. A few black physicians, dentists, and undertakers provided essential services. Small business districts for African Americans existed apart from the tobacco town's comparatively large central business districts. In Wilson, for example, a cluster of black-owned businesses thrived on East Nash Street, separated from the white downtown by the railroad tracks. Two blocks long and about one-sixth the size of the principal shopping area to the west, Wilson's black commercial and entertainment center contained a handful of modest one- and two-story wooden buildings. Greenville's black downtown spanned several blocks on Albemarle Avenue, adjacent to the railroad tracks that formed the western boundary of the town's central business district. "The Block," a portion of Albemarle Avenue that attracted throngs of black revelers from around the region on the weekends, contained nightclubs, oyster bars, dance halls, and the Plaza Theater. The black business district in Rocky Mount, which extended several blocks east of the railroad tracks paralleling Main Street, contained diners, barbershops, shoe stores, medical and dental offices, a mortuary, a pool hall, a photography studio, and a branch office of the Durham-based North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company.[47]

Vitality in black and white downtowns resulted from increased economic activity generated by the arrival of tobacco in the late nineteenth century. Within a generation, struggling towns in an impoverished region of North Carolina became thriving, bustling communities that enjoyed unprecedented growth and development. Urban boosters and businessmen played a leading role in introducing tobacco to the countryside, large landowners invested in tobacco warehouses and other facilities, and African American laborers moved regularly between farms and factories. The line between the marketing centers and the

46. Valentine, *The Rise of a Southern Town*, 146-147; McAdams, "The Tobacco Culture of Wilson County," 173; Bishir and Southern, *Historic Architecture of Eastern North Carolina*, 344-345.

47. Mattson, "The Cultural Landscape of a Southern Black Community," 155-156; *Daily Reflector*, February 24, 2002; Hazirjian, "Negotiating Poverty," 30.

countryside blurred. Warehousemen and factory owners arranged their schedules to fit the seasonal tasks of tobacco cultivation, as did others living in Greenville, Wilson, Kinston, and Rocky Mount. By the time of the First World War, the residents of these communities proudly proclaimed that they lived in urban places clearly defined as tobacco towns.

In the years following the Second World War, mechanization altered the tobacco business in factories and farms, creating important consequences for tobacco towns. Just as the introduction of mechanical harvesters and other labor-saving farm machinery forced small landowners out of business and ushered in a new era dominated by large agribusiness firms, the widespread adoption of new technology in stemmeries and redrying plants reduced the tobacco industry's seasonal labor needs. The 1964 Surgeon General's report linked tobacco use with cancer, thereby eroding confidence in the long-range prospects of tobacco farming and convincing some landowners to plant other crops. Claiming the need for greater efficiency in shrinking domestic markets, U.S. tobacco companies began contracting directly with farmers and eliminating auction sales in the 1990s. The auction system declined rapidly, and only about 20 percent of the nation's tobacco crop was auctioned in 2001. Just a few tobacco warehouses in Wilson and none in eastern North Carolina's other tobacco towns remained open by the end of the twentieth century.[48]

To offset the loss of employment opportunities, tobacco towns tried to attract new industries and diversify their economies. Their degrees of success varied widely, as evidenced by the contrasting situations of Kinston and Greenville. As late as 1960, Kinston remained the larger and more prosperous community, with 24,819 people to Greenville's 22,860. As tobacco sales fell precipitously thereafter, the Kinston Chamber of Commerce initiated a series of unsuccessful development schemes. The most spectacular Kinston failure, the Global Transpark Zone, lost millions of state and private dollars while failing to attract new businesses and a new regional airport. By the end of the twentieth century, Kinston's declining population, dying downtown, double-digit unemployment, and numerous blocks of boarded-up houses made it eastern North Carolina's most conspicuous urban failure. Greenville, by contrast, enjoyed a period of rapid growth and expansion. Enrollment at East Carolina University exceeded

48. Philip L. Martin and Stanley S. Johnson, "Tobacco Technology and Agricultural Labor," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 60 (November 1978): 655-660; John Fraser Hart and Ennis L. Chastang, "Rural Revolution in East Carolina," *Geographical Review* 68 (October 1978): 435-438, 450-456; Linda Flowers, *Throwed Away: Failures of Progress in Eastern North Carolina* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 39-40, 55; *Washington Post*, August 11, 2001; Hahn, "Into the Belly of the Beast," 25-50. On the impact of the 1964 Surgeon General's report, see Richard Kluger, *Ashes to Ashes: America's Hundred-Year Cigarette War, the Public Health, and the Unabashed Triumph of Philip Morris* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), especially chapter 8.

twenty-five thousand in 2003, and the university medical school combined with the local hospital to form the largest regional health-care facility in the state east of Interstate 95. Pharmaceutical factories and other high-tech industries contributed to the boom. In 2000, Greenville's rising population of 60,476 dwarfed Kinston's steadily declining total of 23,688.[49]

Greenville's ability to diversify its economy cushioned the blow as tobacco, once the lifeblood of the community, became less important to the local market. As in other tobacco towns, auction warehouses and factories still dotted the cityscape, and a handful of tobacco-related businesses remained, mostly as pale reminders of a past way of life. A century earlier, as southerners struggled to recover from the catastrophe of the Civil War, lay the economic foundations of a New South, reassert white supremacy, and dominate an African American labor force, the rise of tobacco in eastern North Carolina gave new life to the towns of the region. Local tobacconists acting as economic middlemen in a burgeoning industry refashioned Wilson, Kinston, Greenville, and Rocky Mount, as well as smaller nearby communities, into tobacco towns that grew rapidly and became the economic bellwethers of the state's inner Coastal Plain. No less than in Birmingham, Atlanta, Durham, and Winston-Salem, the transformation of these four towns constitutes an important part of the New South's history.

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49. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eighteenth Census of the United States, 1960*, vol. 1, pt. A (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1961); *Population and Economic Report on Kinston, North Carolina* (Raleigh: N.C. Department of Conservation and Development, Division of Community Planning, July 1960), 1-3, 8, 10, 22-23; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Twenty-second Census of the United States, 2000*, vol. 1, pt. A (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2001).