

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Cotton Comeback

Cotton farming in the South was huge before the Civil War. By 1860, the United States garnered the lion's share (77%) of the world cotton market. This figure plummeted to 10% by the start of the War in 1861, however, and did not rebound to its pre-war level until 1879, well beyond the end of the Reconstruction period.

Production of cotton crept upward during the economic crash of the post-war period. Eventually, cotton staged a comeback as the chief cash crop again for Southern farmers. By 1925, North Carolina was producing 1.1 million bales of cotton, or more than a half billion pounds. As the 1920s came to a close, this State was the national leader in the production of cotton textiles.

Cotton farmers had to overcome environmental obstacles in order to produce a successful cotton crop. One ongoing headache was crab grass. Not only was it an annoyance, it robbed cotton plants of nutrients that enabled them to flourish.

Farmers battled crab grass far and near, for example, in Ansen County near the South Carolina border in 1915, according to published reports, and as far South as Overton, Texas in 1880. Newspapers documented a crab grass problem in Bucklesberry, too, although there were years when it was not as worrisome:

1879, June 5: "Cotton is growing finely all over the county—and also crab grass, unless the farmer is extra vigilant. Farmers don't like to be told about being in the grass and we will call no names, but we saw a small patch last Friday near the A. and N. C. Railroad about one mile from Falling Creek in which it was hard to tell what crop was being cultivated—grass or cotton. S. I. [Samuel Ivey] Sutton and Josiah Sutton, Jr. from Bucklesberry, were in to see us on Saturday and one of them reported the other one badly in the grass. The other one reported that the whole of Bucklesberry was in the same fix, but that one more week of good weather would bring him safely through." (*Kinston Journal*)

1883, July 12: "The crops in the Bucklesberry section of this township are remarkably fine, and comparatively free from grass, with a few exceptions." (*New Berne Weekly Journal*)

Another factor that would make or break a cotton crop was moisture. As with other crops, high yield cotton crops are dependent upon optimal rain. Ag experts have determined that fields need to be well-watered until the opening of the first cotton bolls. Bucklesberry farmers had seasons of too much water at times, however, and cotton crops took a hit:

1903, August 18: “The continued rains have damaged cotton crops considerably. A few sunny days would be appreciated by all.” (*The Daily Free Press*, Kinston)

1922, June 23: “Continuing rains have caused further damage to crops...Reports tell of deluging precipitations at Grifton, where fields were inundated, while in the Moseley Hall and Bucklesberry sections and in the vicinity of Hillcrest, three miles from here, farms were ankledeep in mud and water today. On the farm of Dr. Thomas H. Faulkner the cotton crop was completely ruined, the owner said. On many plantations and farms...cotton [has] been damaged 50 to 70 per cent, and there were no growers in the district today optimistic enough to hope for more than a half a crop. Washouts were reported to have damaged highways and railroads, and small streams were high.” (*Greensboro Daily News*)

There is more to share on cotton farming in Bucklesberry of yesteryear. A second article to follow will discuss competition among the farmers regarding who produced the first cotton blooms of the season and who grew the cotton stalk with the greatest number of bolls, among other topics.