

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Cotton Comeback (Part 3)

The cotton comeback as the chief cash crop in the State during the late-1800s was nothing short of remarkable. It took more than a decade and a half after the Civil War ended, however, for the U.S. to regain its pre-War share of about 75% of the world cotton market. Not until 1880 did the nation approach cotton production levels that it experienced before the War began.

The rebound of the cotton crop during the Reconstruction era was painfully slow for plantation owners and farmers. Restoring and replenishing devastated farm land took years. But dealing with a significantly diminished labor force due to emancipation of black Americans may have been the biggest challenge in growing successful cotton crops. Facing poverty after the conclusion of the War, many small farmers sharecropped with freed black families as a means of economic survival.

Despite the severe post-War hardships, farmers in Bucklesberry were blessed with dark, rich bottom soil in the valley of the Neuse. Combined with steady rains, sheer grit and unrelenting hard work, they were able to grow cotton crops that produced some of the highest yields around, as reported in local newspapers at the time:

1880, November 18: “Wright Lassiter, a colored tenant on Mr. Thos. [Thomas] Sutton’s farm in Bucklesberry, reports that he has gathered from a one horse farm....eight bales of cotton and will get another. There seems to be no need of going to Indiana...” (*The Chatham Record*, Pittsboro)

1882, December 20: “Bucklesberry farming—W. R. Benton made 8 bales of cotton, averaging over 500 lbs., on 11 acres of land. Wiley Sutton (colored) made 8 bales on 10 acres, averaging over 500 lbs. Wright Lassiter, a colored man, and a subscriber to the JOURNAL, made 9 bales of cotton averaging over 500 lbs. and about 100 barrels of corn with one horse. The above was all done on the lands of Thos. [Thomas] Sutton, Esq., in Bucklesberry. Noah and Joshua Sutton in the same section made near 16 bales of cotton on 18 acres, averaging about 500 lbs.” (*The Daily Journal*, New Bern)

1903, July 24: “Mr. A. [Albert] H. [Hardy] Sutton has fourteen acres of the finest cotton we have seen and we think it can’t be beaten in the State. It will average four feet high and three and half fee broad. The land owners of our community can boast of having as fine land as there is anywhere. We have numbers of acres that will produce as much cotton as the great Mississippi Delta or the Brazos Valley of Texas...” (*The Daily Free Press*, Kinston)

The hard work of Bucklesberry farmers did not always generate the income they wanted from the sale of their cotton. There were years when they did not get top dollar:

1892, March 24: “Mr. Richard W. Sutton, who last year farmed on Mr. Jerry [Jeremiah, Jr.] Sutton’s plantation in Bucklesberry, raised...seventeen bales cotton....Mr. Sutton is a straight-forward young man. His word is his bond. It is ‘hard to down a working man,’ even with the low price of cotton.” (*Statesville Record and Landmark*)

On the heels of poor cotton sales and forecasts of low prices to come, farmers faced new planting seasons with mixed emotions and uncertainty:

1883, April 1: “Thos. Sutton, of Bucklesberry—‘The cotton crop on my place will be slightly reduced. I have a good will not to plant any. So far as I have been able to learn there will be no increase in my neighborhood.’ Joe Sutton [Josiah, Jr.]—‘I shall cut off about one sixth—can’t tell about others.’ Levi Hill—‘I shall plant about as usual but try to make more—I do this every year.’ J. [James] & D. [Dempsey] Wood— ‘We never go into cotton extensively—shall not do so this year. We try to make supplies, and let the balance be in cotton.’” (*The Daily Journal, New Bern*)

Cotton remained the primary cash crop well into the early twentieth century, although tobacco surged as the top crop by the end of the 1920s. The cotton comeback of the late-1800s eventually catapulted Bucklesberry farmers from economic despair to financial prosperity that they and their descendants have enjoyed for generations.