

The J. Wilson Alexander Farm

Alexander Farm & Homestead

The original plot of this farm can be traced to Amos Alexander (1813†) who settled here from Maryland with his wife, Margaret Cultilda “Peggy” Alcorn, an Irish national. Among their seven children who lived to adulthood, Eli Alexander inherited the farm. Eli’s son, J. Wilson Alexander (1883-1972), is where the contemporary history of the farmstead arises following the antebellum years and production of cotton following the incorporation of the 13th and 14th Amendments which prohibit the practice of slavery and establishing equal protection and due process to all American people regardless of state residency.

In place of the institution of slavery, tenant farming and sharecropping became the new economic institutions in which the agricultural south remained able to farm vast tracts of land with equal efficacy. As such, J. Wilson Alexander built tenant quarters across the farm which would house both Black and white alike to assist in labor on the farm in exchange for housing.

J. Wilson Alexander rose to prominence during the great harvest of 1928 in which he was proclaimed the champion cotton grower of North Carolina. Through his novel use of Chilean nitrate soda, he was able to yield a total of 12,465 pounds of seed cotton and 4,082 pounds of cotton lint within a mere five acres of land. Overhead costs accounted for, J. Wilson Alexander received a net profit of \$177.35 per acre. J. Wilson’s son, Pressly also received wide praise and secured the title of champion cotton grower in 1929. Consequently, both widely toured the American south advocating on behalf of the Chilean Nitrate Soda Education Bureau.

Following the great harvests of the late 1920s, the Alexander dynasty enshrined these grounds in the legacy of farming through their application of new theoretical agricultural technologies demonstrating both a shrewd proficiency while preserving the character of a yeoman farmer. J. Wilson Alexander maintained the staunch identity of a pastoral gentleman while forming critiques against crop quotas and price controls of The New Deal (1933-1939). The introduction of daylight savings time was another piece of federal legislation J. Wilson Alexander took umbrage with. Despite his skeptical orientation toward federal power, he agreed with the principles of expanding knowledge in agricultural advancements in the use of herbicides and pesticides developed during the Green Revolution.

J. Wilson Alexander farmed well into his 70s, and battled the boll weevil parasite scourge with success and failure. He was eulogized in 1972 by the *Observer* as a “man of the people who is still close enough to the soil to bring a kind of earthly practicality to otherwise pompous proceedings.”

Alexander Farm Tenant House

Tenant Farming In Mecklenburg County

The Alexander Farm Tenant House, which currently rests at the corner of Westmoreland Rd. and W. Catawba Ave. was built around the year 1900 by white farmer John Bell Alexander. It is a notable structure which represents the common frame home of many unlanded farmers, both Black and white. In 2002, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission identified three tenant houses in the area which were lived in by Black farmers. Among these three structures, only the Alexander Farm Tenant house remains.

Tenant farming was a practice in which the landowning farmer of the agricultural plot would offer housing, land, seed, fertilizer, and workstock in exchange for the prospective tenant's labor and assistance on the farm. With increasing industrialization and declining agricultural activity, tenant houses such as the Alexander Farm Tenant house would be merely rented in later years. Tenant farming was prominent throughout Mecklenburg County, with sharecropping being a common financial arrangement until 1940. One-third of the farmers in Mecklenburg County were Black, but only a tenth of those Black farmers owned their farms; conversely, the 55 percent of white farmers were either owners or owner-operators. By 1930, half of the 15.5 million farmers across the greater South were tenant farmers.

The economic arrangement of tenant farming often conferred an indentured status, and as such, there was significant difficulty in elevating one's station beyond tenancy. Tenant farmers and sharecroppers faced economic hardship due to the reliance on exhaustive crops such as corn, cotton, tobacco, and truck produce, all requiring fertilizer to replenish soil nutrients. Without rotating crops, this further depreciated the soil quality and contributed to soil erosion.

The Great Depression (1929-1939), accelerated hardships within the agricultural industry. The New Deal's Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938 brought about price controls and crop quotas, which directly affected and undercut the production of cotton in the 1930s. Additionally, developments in transportation and mechanized farming equipment led to the decline and end of tenant farming and family farms in Mecklenburg County. Tenant farmers often found better job opportunities in nearby Charlotte and commuted or left farm life behind altogether. Herbert Garrison of Pineville, who served on the county commission lost two tenant families remarking: "I don't blame them for leaving, but a farmer can't pay wages as high as some firms in the city. But losing this labor hurts the farmer."

John and Gaither Potts were the known last residents of this tenant house in 1988.

Farming & Agriculture In Mecklenburg County

The Rise and Fall of Southern Cotton Farming

Following the Civil War and the end of the antebellum South, farmers faced several obstacles including lack of funds, lack of labor, and difficulty obtaining credit. This uncertainty led farmers to harvest cash crops which relied heavily on the use of fertilizer and taxed the land. As systems of farm labor and housing changed, many unlanded farmers regardless of race had difficulty obtaining property of their own. Many former plantation owners maintained their stake in land and thus the landowner and tenant farmer relationship formed. As of 1900, Mecklenburg County remained largely rural, with two-thirds of its population residing outside the Charlotte city limits. However, within the next two decades, Charlotte more than doubled in population from 18,091 to 46,338. Unlanded farmers left for the city to work in cotton mills and within the textile industry.

The use of novel farming techniques arose as a byproduct of the 1906 USDA County Agent's Program, and a later extension service in 1914. Access to these agricultural outreach programs demonstrated the use of newer fertilizer mixtures in addition to chemical advancements in herbicides and pesticides. Cotton, the primary cash crop of the southern United States, was transformed by the use of these technologies. J. Wilson Alexander became the exemplar of these agricultural techniques. With his application of federally provided resources, in addition to knowledge gleaned from the local institutions of learning, namely Rutherford College, Alexander demonstrated the benefits of scientific crop management.

The New Deal (1933-1939) introduced by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt sought to address problems both arising from, and contributing to The Great Depression. Such aid included creating new lines of credit, helping tenant farmers secure credit to buy their own land, and building roads and infrastructure.

World War II led to rapid industrialization of the United States, and towards becoming the "arsenal of democracy." Tenant farmers of Mecklenburg County such as Alexander Farm Tenant John Norman responded to the war effort by working in an ammo plant in Charlotte. As if these massive changes were not enough, the encroachment of boll weevils from Central America into the United States would parasitize and reduce cotton yields. Expensive crop dusting of pesticides would offer limited refuge from the onslaught.

While agricultural technology improved the amount farmers could yield in an acre, it had the paradoxical effect of lowering the price of the crop as supply surpassed demand. With rising labor and ginning costs, the cotton industry in Mecklenburg County became imperiled. Lastly, the development of synthetic polyester became the greatest threat to cotton plantations throughout the south.