Historical Context
of the
Alexander Farm Tenant House
Cornelius, North Carolina

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Introduction

The Alexander Farm Tenant House is located in northern Mecklenburg County west of the town of Cornelius. It was built ca. 1900 by white farmer John Bell Alexander, whose family had owned their farmland since the time of the American Revolution. The Alexander farm had several tenant houses over the years on either side of what is today West Catawba Avenue, but only one remains. This housing type is significant as a representative of the homes of unlanded farmers, both Black and white, who raised cotton, the primary cash crop throughout the Piedmont and southern United States. Many tenant houses were small humble structures like the Alexander Farm Tenant House. Three tenant houses resided in by Black farmers were identified in a 2002 survey of rural Black properties in Mecklenburg County, and today only the Alexander Farm Tenant House is extant.[1]

The historical context of the Alexander Farm Tenant House encompasses four general topics: agriculture in Mecklenburg County in the century after the Civil War to the 1960s, Alexander family history leading up to the farming activities of J. Wilson Alexander; information on probable tenants of the Alexander Farm; and the experience and realities of tenant farm life. The research is presented chronologically to weave the history of Mecklenburg County agriculture with activity on the Alexander farm. Particular attention is made to agriculture on the Alexander farm from the 1920s, when J. Wilson Alexander became a prominent farmer and political figure in Mecklenburg County, to the 1960s, when he retired from farming and tenancy drew to a close.

[1] The two other identified tenant houses were the Tib Morehead Tenant House and the Washam Farm Tenant House. Stewart Gray and Paula Stathakis, "Survey of African American Resources and Sites in Mecklenburg County," Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 2002.

Agriculture in Mecklenburg County, 1865-1910

Figure 1 *A group of Black men, women, and children stand in a cotton field near Charlotte in 1900. E. W. Day, "Land of Cotton," 1900, Library of Congress, https://lccn.loc.gov/2004666304, accessed April 7, 2022.*

Writing almost a century later, Rosser H. Taylor, chair of the Department of Social Sciences at Western Carolina Teachers College, summarized the state of agriculture in North Carolina following the Civil War:

> With the return of peace, the farm lands of the State were further depleted, the labor supply was uncertain, money scarce, and credit difficult to obtain. With small capital, and in the case of tenant farmers, none, the people must continue the farm regardless of unfavorable conditions. In order to obtain supplies from the time-merchant while the crop was in the making, farmers were required to grow cash crops which required fertilization. Wornout lands would not produce without manure and there was little capital and opportunity for clearing fresh lands.[2]

For many farmers, the initial years after the war followed an uncertain path with an upended system of farm labor and housing. The ideal of "40 acres and mule" to be provided to formerly enslaved Blacks failed to materialize. Unlanded farmers regardless of race found it difficult to purchase their own property, as the large white landowners retained their former plantations. Unwilling to submit themselves once again as laborers and desiring their own homes and tracts to farm, the farm tenancy system developed.[3]

The typical tenancy arrangement had a landowner, almost always white, providing housing, land, seed and fertilizer, and work stock for a portion of the crop produced by the

[2] Rosser H. Taylor, "Early Practices in State, Fertilizer Sale and Use," *ESC Quarterly* 7, No. 2 (Spring 1949), 55.
[3] United States Department of Agriculture, Rural Business-Cooperative Service, *Black Farmers in America, 1865-2000: The Pursuit of Independent Farming and the Role of Cooperatives*, RBS Report 194 (October 2002), 3.

renter. In return, the tenant had their own residence and land to farm. The farm tenant system would dominate Southern agriculture and remain largely unchanged for over a half century. The number of tenants in North Carolina nearly doubled in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, from 53,000 in 1880 to 93,000 in 1900, with a third of white farmers and three-quarters of Black farmers were renting land and housing by 1890.[4] As noted by historian Pete Daniel, "In many ways the South in 1900 was like an underdeveloped colony that looked north for credit and ideas."[5]

In 1900 Mecklenburg County remained largely rural, with two-thirds of its population outside of the Charlotte city limits. However, within the next two decades, Charlotte exploded in growth from a small city of 18,091 in 1900 to a regional center of commerce and transportation with a population of 46,338. Comparatively, the rural and smaller town population outside of Charlotte declined by nearly 10 percent. Unlanded farmers flocked to the cotton mills and other textile industries, of which by 1902 half of Southern production was located within 100 miles of Charlotte. This period marked the peak of farming in Mecklenburg County, with 4,339 farms recorded in 1910 and 94 percent of its area associated with agriculture.[6]

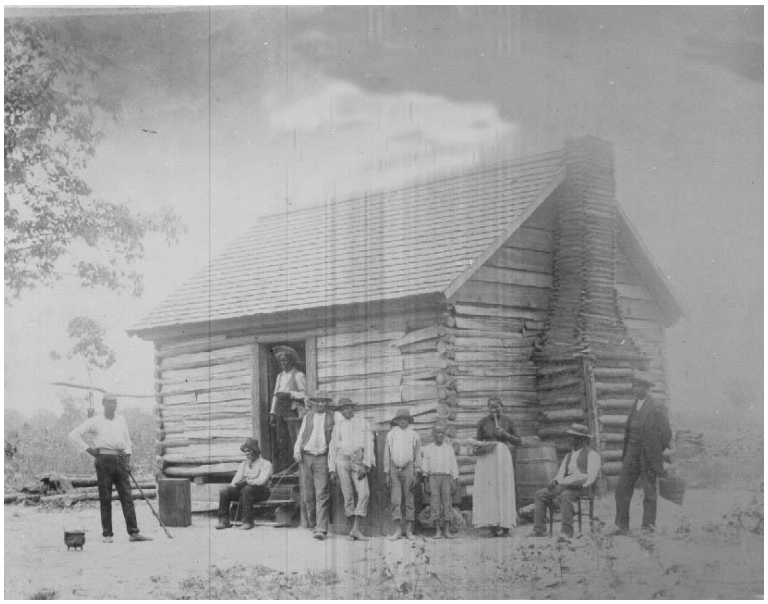

Figure 2 *This photo shows a typical sharecropper or tenant farmer's home in Mecklenburg County around 1900. Tompkins Papers, Robinson-Spangler North Carolina Room, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library, https://www.cmstory.org/exhibits/robinson-spangler-north-carolina-room-image-collection-tompkins-papers/sharecroppers-home, accessed April 22, 2022.*

[4] Richard Mattson and Frances Alexander, Historic Structure Report: Construct Road on New Location, Northcross Drive Extension from NC 73 in Huntersville to Westmoreland Road in Cornelius, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, October 2019, 28.
[5] Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), xv.
[6] Stewart Gray, "The McAuley Road Farmland," Landmark Designation Report, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 2006.

Alexander Family History

Alexander Farm Tenant House is located on land which had been in possession of the Alexander family since the eighteenth century, when Amos Alexander came to Mecklenburg County from Maryland. He was a descendent of Samuel Alexander, son of Scotch-Irish immigrants William Alexander and Mary Maxwell Alexander.[7] Amos Alexander established himself as a notable landowner in northern Mecklenburg County. An examination of his will, probated after his death in December 1813, showed the extent of his estate. Amos enslaved at least a dozen persons—Jack, Barb, Bess, Nance, Bill, Ag, Cato, Ben, Chester, Will, and Melah were named in his will. His farm included a dwelling house, barn, loom house, orchard, pastures, fields in which were grown wheat, corn, and fodder for livestock, and likely cotton. The Alexanders kept cattle, horses, sheep, and hogs. Heirs received feather beds and other furniture, farm and blacksmithing tools, and other items.[8]

Son Eli Alexander had been born in Mecklenburg County in 1784, the first generation of the Alexander family who claimed North Carolina as their home state. Eli married Margaret Cultilda "Peggy" Alcorn, who had emigrated from Ireland as a young girl. They had eight children, the youngest of whom was Eli Bell Alexander born September 8, 1830. Eli died in 1834, and his estate was divided between Peggy and his seven living children. His will indicated that Eli was equally as successful as his father—Peggy received 170 acres of land where they lived, two enslaved child servants, household furniture, books, farm tools, and livestock including two horses. Three adult children received land and cash, while the four minors had their education provided for as well as interest in property when they came of age. That all but one of Eli and Peggy's children remained in Mecklenburg County—son William Simeral Alexander moved to Sumter County, Alabama, around 1847—shows that through inheritance and marriage the Alexander family were prosperous landowners.[9]

Eli Bell Alexander married Dorcas Prudence McAulay on January 10, 1850, the daughter of Hugh McAulay and Nancy Davidson Alexander McAulay. Eli and Dorcas had six children, including John Bell Alexander born July 16, 1863. After Dorcas died in 1870, he remarried twice, to Margaret Blakely and Mary Amanda Goodrum. Eli Bell Alexander died in 1903. The settlement of his estate involved the filing of several land transactions to family members which had been made over the previous twenty years. John Bell received at least 105 acres either directly from his father or from siblings.[10]

[7] Descendants of Samuel's younger brother Joseph Alexander also settled in Mecklenburg County, most notably Hezekiah Alexander and John McKnitt Alexander.
[8] Mecklenburg County Will Book A, Pages 63-65.
[9] Mecklenburg County Will Book G, Page 181.
[10] Mecklenburg County Deed Book 179, Page 516; Book 179, Page 520; Book 188, Page 208; Book 198, Page 58.

Figure 3 *The family of John Bell Alexander stand in front of their home near Cornelius, ca. 1902-1903. Pictured left to right are an unknown man, John Grier Alexander, J. Wilson Alexander, Bessie Viola Alexander, Lizzie Mock Alexander holding Macie Belle Alexander, and John Bell Alexander. John Bell Alexander, Find A Grave, https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/24755453/john-bell-alexander, accessed April 7, 2022.*

John Bell Alexander married Elizabeth "Lizzie" Goodrum on December 5, 1883. They had two children, daughter Bessie Viola in 1885 and son James Wilson in 1887. Lizzie Goodrum Alexander died in 1893. He remarried two years later to Ella Elizabeth Mock, also called Lizzie. Children John Grier and Macie Belle were born in 1898 and 1902 respectively. Family tradition held that in the 1880s John Bell built the family home at the Alexander farm. While son J. Wilson would become a prominent farmer in Mecklenburg County, the home where he grew up was fairly humble. He said of the house many years later, "Oh, yes, we've remodeled the house. You used to be able to look down at the floor and see chickens walking around under the house."[11] John Bell farmed his entire life into his later years. An injury from a fall on the farm in March 1939 negatively impacted his health, and he died at home a year later. Lizzie lived until 1945, and after her death the 104-acre Alexander estate was divided among John Bell's heirs: Macie Belle Alexander received 18.32 acres; the children of Bessie Alexander Westmoreland, who had died from the flu in 1920, received

[11] "Alexanders Are Devotion Study," *Charlotte Observer*, April 12, 1962.

28.93 acres; John Grier Alexander received 32.88 acres; and J. Wilson received two tracts including the 23.53-acre parcel with the farmhouse and Alexander Farm Tenant House.[12]

J. Wilson Alexander was born September 15, 1887, likely in the family home. He attended the local schools and Rutherford College in Burke County for four years, though he did not graduate. As he later recounted "but for a breakdown in his health a few months before the close of his senior term."[13] On April 26, 1911, he married Daisy Belle Rogers at her parents' home in Iredell County. Like the Alexanders, the Rogers family was able to afford to send their children to college, as Daisy attended Linwood College in Gastonia and worked as a teacher before she married. After the wedding dinner that night, J. Wilson and Daisy departed for their "new home near Gilead in Mecklenburg county, where they will begin at once to keep house."[14]

[12] Mecklenburg County Deed Book 1197, Pages 241, 244, 247, and 254.
[13] "Four College Men on Mecklenburg Board," *News and Observer*, July 7, 1926.
[14] *Charlotte Observer*, April 28, 1911.

The J. Wilson Alexander Farm

While the Alexander Farm Tenant House was built in the early 1900s before J. Wilson took over the farm's operations, its historical significance as an artifact of Mecklenburg County agriculture developed during his ownership. The prosperity of the Alexander farm contrasted with the humble appearance of the Alexander Farm Tenant House serves to highlight the differences in economic, social, and political standing between white farm owner-operators and Black tenants.

Like practically all northern Mecklenburg County farmers, J. Wilson Alexander grew cotton as his primary cash crop. His education at Rutherford College aided his understanding of the emerging scientific methods and new technologies being introduced to agriculture. He also was able to access government programs to aid farmers. In 1906 the USDA instituted the county agent program, and the Extension Service was created in 1914 to link land grant colleges and farmers, though agents largely worked with white owner-operators. Mecklenburg County farm agent Kope Elias held one of two fertilizer demonstrations at his farm the afternoon of August 28, 1928. The demonstration showed "the advantages of using 300 pounds of nitrate of soda to the acre for cotton fertilizer."[15] Access to such programs helped the Alexander farm become prominent in northern Mecklenburg County. According to Richard Mattson and William Huffman, "Small farmers and tenants could not take advantage of many of the new methods, because they lacked both the education and the access to credit need to carry out the new programs."[16]

At the end of the 1928 growing season, J. Wilson was proclaimed the champion cotton grower in North Carolina, producing 12,465 pounds of seed cotton and 4,082 pounds of lint on five acres of land. A *Charlotte Observer* article gave in-depth information about his methods and results:

> On the five acres Mr. Alexander used a fertilizer application composed of 600 pounds of superphosphate, 50 pounds of muriate of potash and 100 pounds of Chilean nitrate or soda per acre at planting time. Later he side-dressed the crop with 200 pounds of chilean (sic) nitrate per acre. As a result, he produced 2,493 pounds of seed cotton or 816 pounds of lint per acre. On a check plot adjacent, where he used 500 pounds of an 8-3-3 fertilizer at planting time, he produced only 1,580 pounds of seed cotton per acre.
>
> A careful record was kept of all expenses entering into the production and marketing of the crop. Labor, rent of land, fertilizer, picking, ginning and managerial charge and other items were accounted for. The total cost of handling the five acres where the heavy yield was made amounted to $397.55 or a cost of $79.51 per acre.

[15] "County Agent Will Give 2 Fertilizer Showings," *Charlotte Observer*, August 24, 1928.
[16] Richard Mattson and William Huffman, "Historic and Architectural Resources of Mecklenburg County," Multiple-Property Documentation Form, National Register of Historic Places (1990), E19.

> The returns from the lint and seed produced was $1,284.30 leaving a net profit of $886.75. This was a net profit per acre of $177.35. The cotton on this five-acre demonstration was produced at the low cost of about five cents per pound.
>
> On the adjacent plot where the 500 pound application of 8-3-3 fertilizer was used per acre, the value of lint and seed produced amounted to only $788.50 on a five acre basis. The cost here was $310.85 or $62.19 per acre and the total net profit for the five acres was $477.55. This made a profit per acre of only $95.51 and the cotton was produced at a cost of over eight cents per pound.[17]

Comparatively, as the article reported, the average amount of cotton lint produced per acre in North Carolina then was 212 pounds. J. Wilson had no intention of entering the contest when it was announced, but a boastful remark to a fertilizer representative during a product demonstration led to his participation:

> A group of farmers of northern Mecklenburg county were listening to a talk by a representative of the Chilean nitrate of soda educational bureau.
>
> "Exhaustive tests have shown it requires on an average a total of 69 1-2 hours to raise properly an acre of cotton," said the expert during the course of his talk.
>
> "Well, that may be so, but I don't believe it will take me nearly that long," declared one young farmer.
>
> The fertilizer man, who knew his statistics, immediately challenged his challenger. "If you think you can do it, sir," he said, "I'll be glad to furnish you free of charge the nitrate of soda upon the condition that you keep an accurate record of the time required to raise your cotton, your expenditures on it and other such facts—and if you do it in less than 69 1-2 hours the fertilizer won't cost you a cent."[18]

J. Wilson Alexander retained the title of state champion cotton grower in 1929 and 1930. He produced 5,726 pounds of lint cotton on five acres of land for net profit of $159.85 per acre. Son Pressly, a student at Cornelius High School, was also named North Carolina's champion corn grower in 1929. Father and son traveled through Mississippi and Florida on a tour sponsored by the Chilean nitrate soda educational bureau; the previous year, J. Wilson had visited Texas and Mexico as cotton champion.[19]

[17] "Mecklenburg County Farmer State's Champ Cotton Grower," *Charlotte Observer*, January 2, 1929.
[18] "Champion Cotton Grower Back from Trip," *Charlotte Observer*, February 25, 1929.
[19] "Alexander Is Cotton King," *Charlotte News*, January 2, 1930; "Alexander Is Champion Corn Lad of State," *Charlotte Observer*, February 17, 1930.

Figure 4 *J. Wilson Alexander was declared the champion cotton grower of North Carolina for the 1928 growing season. He and a child are standing on a bale of cotton, one of nine grown on five acres of land, alongside D. W. Eason, agriculture teacher at Cornelius High School. Charlotte Observer, January 2, 1929.*

In many ways, J. Wilson Alexander was the modern yeoman farmer—he owned his land rather than rented, his family was involved in running the farm but not wholly responsible for its operation, and he had the time and means to be active in the community. He was politically active in the county Democratic Party. In 1926 J. Wilson was elected to a seat on the Mecklenburg County Board of Education, which he held for twelve years. His reasons for running were "personal and geographic," as he believed a college-educated person should be elected to the position and that no one from Lemley Township had yet been elected to the position.[20] He also made several attempts for the county Board of Commissioners but met with less success. In 1938 J. Wilson was elected to the state House of Representatives. He served only one term as the office required too much time away from his farm.[21]

Both J. Wilson and Daisy worked to make their farm a successful operation. She made sure the family was well fed. As J. Wilson later recounted, "I've seen her go out in the field with a lantern to dig potatoes before daylight. Her fried chicken was hard to beat. Her cooking was so good she spoiled me."[22] The entire family worked on the farm. Son Jay, who graduated

[20] *Charlotte Observer*, July 2, 1926.
[21] "Report Alexander Not to Run Again," *Charlotte Observer*, March 15, 1940.
[22] "Love That's True: Alexanders Are Devotion Study," *Charlotte Observer*, April 12, 1962.

from Erskine College in 1941 and had served in the military during World War II, had been accepted to law school at the University of North Carolina. While on leave in 1946, he helped with the corn harvest. As the *Charlotte Observer* later described it in an article about farm accidents,

> Then there is J. Wilson Alexander of Huntersville, Route 2. Mr. Alexander was a major in the last war and flew a B-29 on some of the most dangerous missions of the entire conflict. He came through without a scratch but, while at home on leave in January, 1946, decided to help with the corn harvest. He got his hand too farm down in the corn shredder and lost an arm.[23]

Jay's daughter Junemarie said that John Lee Potts, a tenant who worked as a farmhand, pulled her father from the machine. If he hadn't, she said, he would have lost more than just his forearm.[24] The day after he was released from the hospital, noted his obituary, he began law school.[25]

By the 1950s, it seemed reporters for the *Charlotte News* and *Charlotte Observer* had J. Wilson Alexander on their list of farmers to call for comment on agricultural news. When the General Assembly debated a bill to make daylight savings time permanent in 1956, J. Wilson provided the farmer's point of view:

> Farmer J. Wilson Alexander of Davidson predicted plenty of inconvenience if stores in town ever close at what would be about mid-afternoon by sun time.
>
> "We're always having breakdowns in machinery late in the afternoon and just manage to get into town now in time for replacement parts to keep on working for another two or three hours."[26]

In October 1963 he was one of two county farmers interviewed by the *News* about the poor weather conditions impacting crops. In his nearly eight decades of farming, he said, "There has never been a drought to compare with this one. Our crop already is burned up. And we can't prepare the land for next year's crop." Of a spring on the property, which he said had never been dry, "The spring has been here for as long as I can remember. It never ran dry until this year. It's been dry as dust for 30 days. Things are critical out this way."[27] John Kilgo, who wrote the "Our Town" column in the *Charlotte News*, was a frequent visitor to J. Wilson and other elder farmers. In September 1965, Kilgo stopped to see J. Wilson, who he described as "wearing the smile of a proud young man" despite his 78 years. J. Wilson told

[23] F. H. Jeter, "Farm Comments," *Charlotte Observer*, October 27, 1947.
[24] Susan V. Mayer phone interview with Junemarie Rainwater, May 3, 2022.
[25] *Charlotte Observer*, August 11, 1990.
[26] "Early Rising Farmers Nix Daylight Saving," *Charlotte News*, April 2, 1956.
[27] County's Farms in Critical Stage," *Charlotte News*, October 28, 1963.

him, “Man, I’ve got some of the best cotton this year that you’ve ever seen. I’ve already picked 800 pounds off one acre, and believe I have 1,200 more pounds on it yet.”[28]

J. Wilson Alexander also put his agricultural expertise to use outside the farm. He served for seven years on the board of manager for the Mecklenburg County Sanatorium, superintending its farm which grew vegetables and pork. He also was elected to the county Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation committee, which helped manage yearly cotton acreage allotments. J. Wilson also had interest in furthering agricultural education, serving for twelve years on the board of trustees at North Carolina A & T College.[29]

[28] John Kilgo, “Our Town,” *Charlotte News*, September 23, 1965.
[29] “Agriculture at Sanatorium Pays Its Way,” *Charlotte Observer*, May 16, 1960; “Alexanders Are Devotion Study”.

Farm Tenancy in Mecklenburg County after 1920

With 62 percent of farms operated by tenants in 1920, Mecklenburg County ranked ahead of 85 of the 100 North Carolina counties. Statistics from the U. S. Census in 1910 and 1920 show that tenant farming was more prevalent than owner-operated farms, with sharecropping the primary financial arrangement up through 1940. One-third of farmers in Mecklenburg County were Black, and only a tenth of all Black farmers owned their farms; comparatively, 55 percent of white farmers were owners or owner-operators. By 1930 tenant farmers were half of the 15.5 million people farming in the South.[30]

The tenuous economy of Southern agriculture alarmed government officials, and study of farm tenancy by the federal Department of Agriculture and universities were widespread through the 1920s and 1930s. University of North Carolina researchers Carl C. Taylor and C. C. Zimmerman published comprehensive findings on the social and economic conditions of North Carolina's farmers in 1922. The USDA compiled bibliographies of scholarship focused on farm tenancy. Sociologist Margaret Jarman Hagood interviewed over 100 white women on Southern tenant farms in the 1930s as part of her dissertation research at the University of North Carolina. In 1939 she traveled through thirteen Piedmont counties along with photographer Dorothea Lange, who captured numerous images of both Black and white tenant farmers, for the Farm Security Administration.[31]

[30] Edgar T. Thompson, "Food Needs," in Edgar T. Thompson, ed., *Agricultural Mecklenburg and Industrial Charlotte* (Charlotte: Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, 1926), 195; Mattson and Huffman, E10.
[31] See Carl C. Taylor and C. C. Zimmerman, comp., *Economic and Social Conditions of North Carolina Farmers* (1923); Louise O. Bercaw, comp, *Farm Tenancy in the United States, 1918-1936, A Selected List of References*, Agricultural Economics Bibliography No. 70 (Washington, DC: United States Agricultural Department, 1937); Margaret Jarman Hagood, *Mothers of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939).

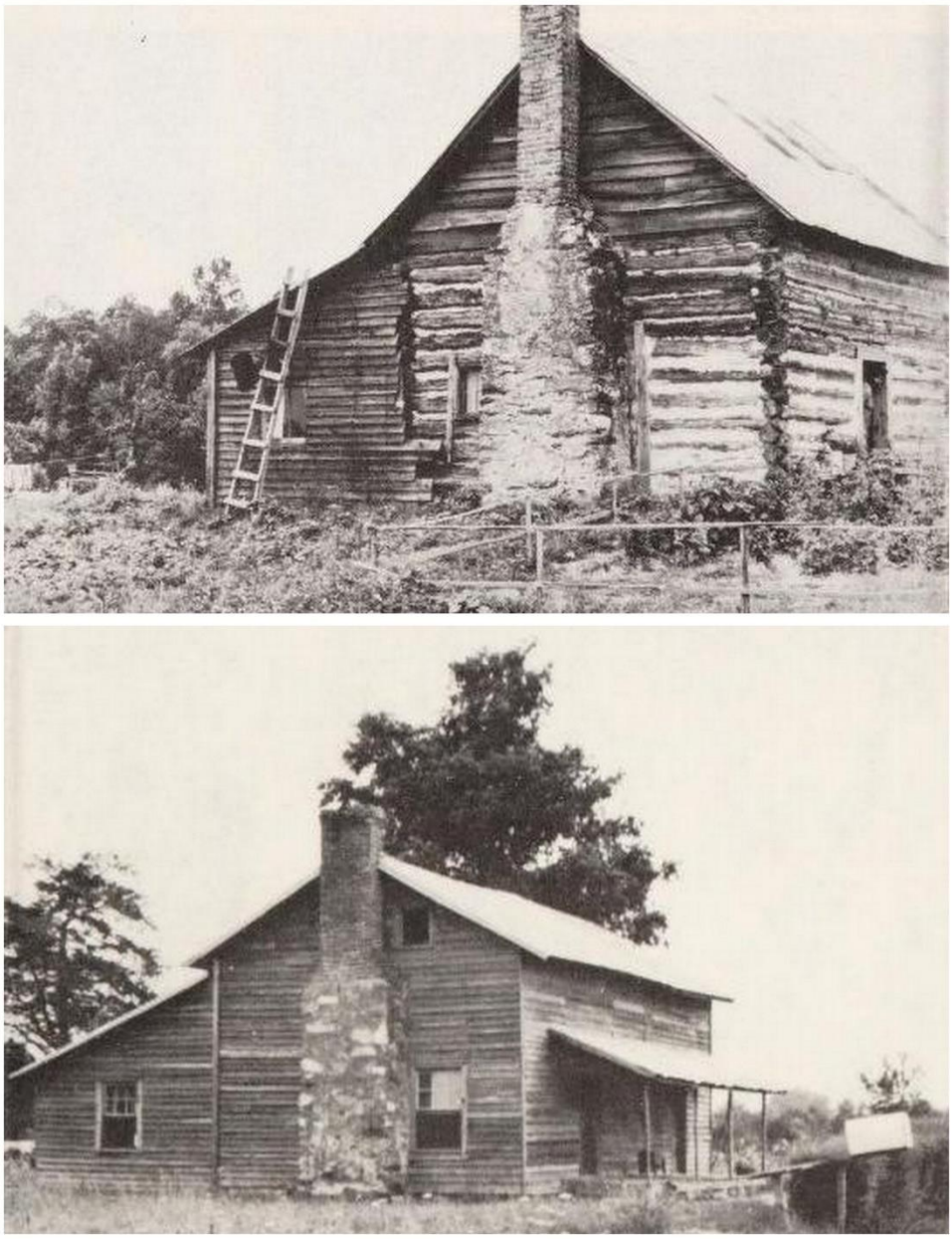

Figure 5 *Featured in Hagood's Mothers of the South, these photos of a Black tenant house (top) compared to a white tenant house (bottom) illustrated the impact race had upon tenancy conditions. The Alexander Farm Tenant House resembles the structure at bottom, though it is unknown whether the house was built for a specific class or race of tenant.*

Taylor and Zimmerman surveyed farmers in three counties—Edgecombe County in the eastern part of the state, Chatham County in the Piedmont, and Madison County in western North Carolina—to understand the challenges facing farmers, especially tenant farmers and sharecroppers. Overall, they found that farmers grew too many exhaustive crops, including cotton, corn, tobacco, and truck produce, which required much fertilizer to replenish soil nutrients. Piedmont tenant farmers and sharecroppers in Chatham County focused on cotton and tobacco, had less livestock than owner-operators, and produced less food for home use, all of which limited potential income. Said the authors, "They thus not

only are practicing a system of agriculture which is ruinous for the future but are not making even personal gain while they are doing it."[32] The crop lien, they continued,

> is the curse of North Carolina agriculture. The landlords and owner-operators are by no means universally free from the crop lien and chattel mortgage, but the landless farmers are farming under this handicap in three times as great numbers as are the landed. Furthermore, the tenants and croppers use a much greater per cent of their credit for living purposes than the landlords and owners do. Their credit is not so much for the sake of an investment as it is for the sake of a stake to tide them over from season to season. This is not a business use of credit but a makeshift one year after another.[33]

Tenant farming was difficult to escape for farmers both Black and white. As Taylor and Zimmerman discovered, "The great number of tenants and croppers whose fathers were tenants and croppers and the few owners who rose to ownership unaided make it clear that it is not easy to attain the status of farm-owner in modern agriculture, and probably indicates that our number of tenants will probably continue to increase unless some means is discovered with which to assist them to the ownership of farms."[34] Tenancy clearly had a negative impact on both the families trapped in the cycle and society overall, as they lived in poorer houses with less sanitary conditions, had poorer health and a higher rate of child mortality, and were more likely to be illiterate and engaged with civic, religious, and social activities. Tenants were also more likely to require medical treatment, due to workplace or home injury, sickness, or poor nutrition. These hardships at times resulted in terrible consequences. Black farmer Luther Potts rented a tenant house from J. Wilson Alexander in 1942. One summer afternoon, Luther had an argument with his wife Creola, who was said by witnesses to have been drunk. She struck Luther with part of a cross-cut saw, striking him just below the knee, and he bled to death. Creola was arrested, and at trial was found guilty and sentenced to prison for 7-15 years.[35]

The differences in size, amenities, and conditions between the Alexander farmhouse and the extant tenant house highlight the divide between the lives of owner-operator farmers and the tenants. Large families in the small tenant homes, wrote Taylor and Zimmerman, "must eat in the kitchen, sleep in the sitting room or in other ways mix household functions."[36] They found that in Chatham County, white landlords were more likely to have separate sitting rooms, separate dining rooms, separate parlors, and indoor toilet or bathing facilities than tenants regardless of race. Even window and door screens, though

[32] Taylor and Zimmerman, 5.
[33] Taylor and Zimmerman, 5.
[34] Taylor and Zimmerman, 6.
[35] Taylor and Zimmerman, 6, 57; "Just A Whistle Stop for Convicted Negress," *Charlotte News*, August 13, 1942.
[36] Taylor and Zimmerman, 42.

seemingly mundane but an important tool in keeping flies, mosquitoes, and other troublesome pests out of a house, were less likely to be present in tenant houses.[37]

For both owner-operator and tenant farmers, another drawback of cotton farming was its inherent financial inflexibility. Since cotton was harvested in the fall, the large majority of a farmer's income came once a year. After paying crop liens and other debts, wrote Thompson, farmers "must then settle down again to the hardship of nine long, lean credit months." Even well-to-do farmers were subject to potential economic volatility—"Many Mecklenburg county farmers handle a king's ransom, but they hoard a beggar's pittance."[38] When J. Wilson Alexander was named the champion cotton grower in 1930, the *Charlotte News* said of his profitable crop, "That is no small thing to do in this day when farming everywhere is supposed to be on the brink."[39]

Thompson called out tenant farming as a problem impeding the progress of Mecklenburg County. He cited the work of W. B. Bizzell, president of Texas A & M University, who summarized the social and economic effects of tenancy on local economies and societies. Bizzell noted that tenants, regardless of race, typically struggled with a host of issues which made any efforts outside of their farm work nigh impossible. Moving from farm to farm each growing season made establishing roots in a community difficult, which led to lack of educational and political investment. The tenuous economy of a one-and-done cash crop like cotton, which had become a cyclical system that impacted all farmers from tenants to large landowners to cotton buyers and ginners, impeded investment in better farming practices or less exhaustive crops. Unable to improve their standing, tenant farmers were seemingly trapped in cotton farming.[40]

Tenant farming in Mecklenburg County offered a better experience than on the larger farms in eastern North Carolina, found Hagood. She observed, "the smaller number of tenants per landlord has resulted in more personalized relations between the tenants and landlords than are found where great numbers of tenants are controlled by one man and harsh economic practices are routinized and applied automatically."[41] J. Wilson Alexander had only a handful of tenants on his property, many of whom had grown up in Lemley Township. If the tenants did move frequently, it was to other farms in the area. Many possible Alexander tenants were recorded in the township in consecutive censuses.

[37] Taylor and Zimmerman, 42-43, 46.
[38] Thompson, "Food Needs," 97.
[39] "A Valuable Man," *Charlotte News*, January 10, 1930.
[40] Edgar T. Thompson, "Progress and Problems," in Edgar T. Thompson, ed., *Agricultural Mecklenburg and Industrial Charlotte* (Charlotte: Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, 1926), 315-316.
[41] Hagood, 8.

By the 1950s, many tenants were no longer farming, but instead worked in Charlotte or other nearby businesses. In a 1948 report for the USDA, Hagood and Taylor noted the increase of rural-to-urban migration:

> The extension of nonagricultural employment opportunities to farm residents has provided an avenue for moving off the agricultural ladder without the necessity for migrating. Since 1920 the developments in transportation have meant that an increasing proportion of farm resident workers could take nonfarm jobs and commute to them daily. By 1930, 14 percent of farm resident workers were employed in nonfarm jobs and the proportion grew to 33 percent in the next 17 years. [42]

Tenancy did provide a form of safety net in poor economic times, as when the nonfarm workers were out of work, they could return to agricultural work as laborers.

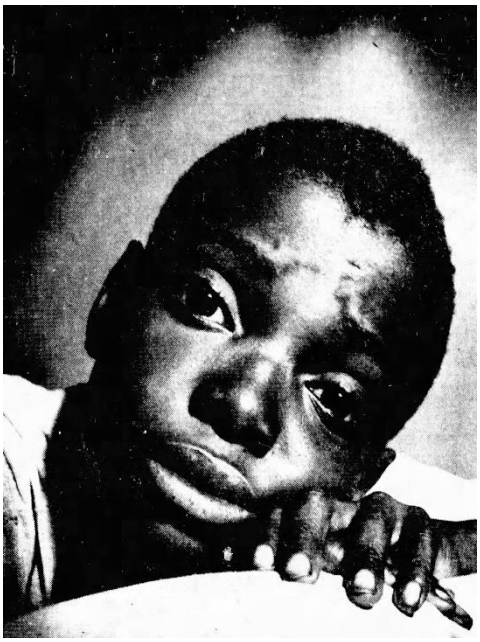

Figure 6 *This photo of Grady Ingram became a face of rural poverty in early 1954. Photo by Phil Dumbell, Charlotte Observer, January 1, 1954.*

The everyday lives of rural tenants received little notice from newspapers, and sadly it took tragedies to draw attention to the poverty in which many tenants lived. The day after Christmas in 1953, Denny Berry took his 12-year-old son Denny and friend Lawrence hunting in a field near their house. Sadly, young Denny was accidentally shot by his friend and died.[43] Several days later, *Charlotte Observer* writer Kays Gary encountered Grady Ingram, an 11-year-old patient at Good Samaritan Hospital in Charlotte. Denny had befriended Grady, who lived across the road from the Berry family. Grady was the second of seven children, and his mother Evelyn worked as a maid in Charlotte to support her family after her husband abandoned them. She left before sunrise each morning to catch the bus and arrived home after dark. Despite her best efforts, their home was what Gary described as "a hovel." He observed cracks in the wall, windows without screens, a front door held up by a makeshift hinge, and a hole broken through the floor. Rheumatic fever had damaged Grady's heart, and he suffered severe nose bleeds which kept him from attending school. He was typically bedridden, though he had no bed and slept on a pallet on the floor. Denny Berry took Grady under his wing, protecting him from teasing. As Gary noted,

[42] Carl C. Taylor, Louis J. Ducoff, and Margaret Jarman Hagood, *Trends in the Tenure Status of Farm Workers in the United States since 1880* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 1948), 15.
[43] "Country Boy Slain in Hunting Tragedy," *Charlotte Observer*, December 27, 1953.

> So Denny, on days when Grady could not get out of bed, would come over and feed him his beans and bread and greens and sometimes sugar and then they would sit on the bed and talk about things little boys knew.[44]

On Christmas Day, Denny had brought to Grady beans and pie for lunch and dinner. The following day, however, Denny had not come to visit. It was that afternoon that Grady learned of his friend's tragic death, and the boy fainted and refused to eat. After six days, his mother called for the county to take the boy to the hospital in Charlotte. Once news spread about the young impoverished Black boy who mourned his friend, donations poured in. Cheered by the support, Grady finally ate. His mother wept, exclaiming, "He don't look like hurtin' Grady no mo… Oh, Lord, thank them!"[45] After three weeks in the hospital, Grady returned home. His family was now on welfare benefits, and his mother could stay home to care for him in his new bed. Additionally, a refrigerator was donated to the family, as a doctor had recommended ice to help stem Grady's nose bleeds. Sadly, Grady died in 1959 at age 16 from his heart complications.[46]

[44] "Grady's Will to Live Rekindled by Spark of City's Open Heart," *Charlotte Observer*, January 2, 1954.
[45] "Grady's Will."
[46] "'Momma, She Here'—For Grady It Makes Hovel a Home Again," *Charlotte Observer*, February 24, 1954.

Alexander Farm Tenants

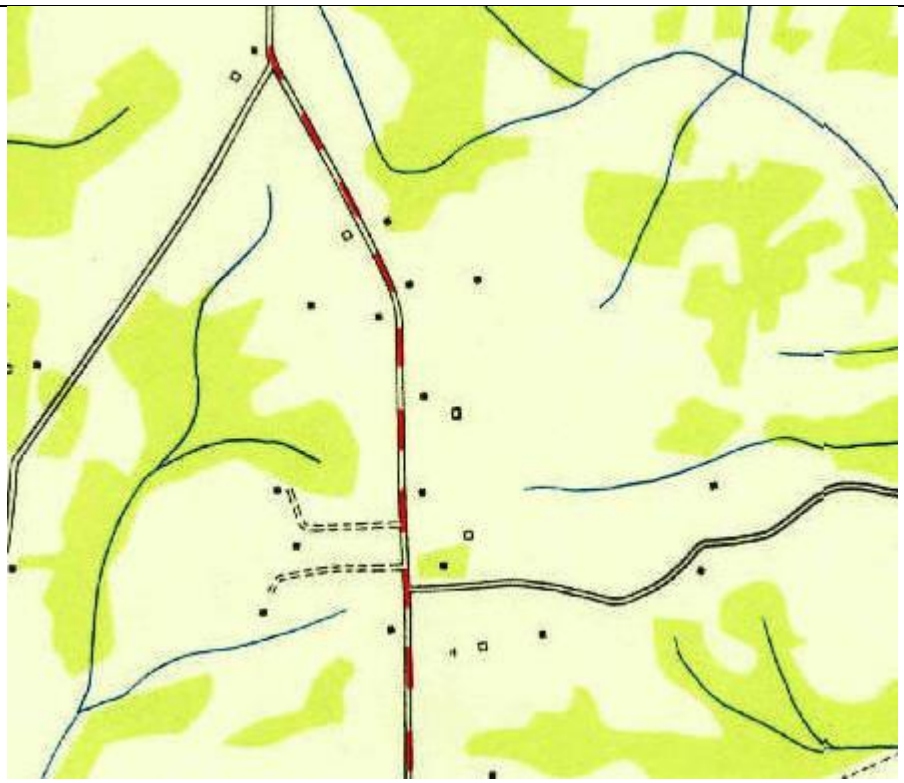

Figure 7 *This excerpt from a 1949 USGS Map shows that several houses, the filled squares, were located on Alexander land along what is today West Catawba Avenue. The J. Wilson Alexander House is located within the green block at the intersection of modern Westmoreland Road. The Alexander Farm Tenant House is located just to the north. Hicks Crossroads Quadrangle, North Carolina, 7.5 Minute Series, Map (Washington, DC: United States Department of the Interior, Geological Survey, 1949).*

No definitive list of tenants exists for the Alexander farm, but research has provided a roster of both Black and white families who lived or worked nearby as tenants. Two families, John and Carrie Norman and John Lee and Gaither Norman Potts, have been identified as living in the Alexander Farm Tenant House.

To compile this list, the population schedules of the U. S. Censuses for 1900-1950 for Lemley Township, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina were examined to locate farmers who rented property recorded near the Alexander farm. Unfortunately, the 1940 census was not recorded in order of dwellings visited, so it is difficult to ascertain the likely location of tenants in reference to owner-operators. But the 1950 census provided more precise location data, making it possible to determine the general location of tenant houses. Additionally, research in local newspapers made direct reference to tenants on the Alexander farm.

The Norman Family

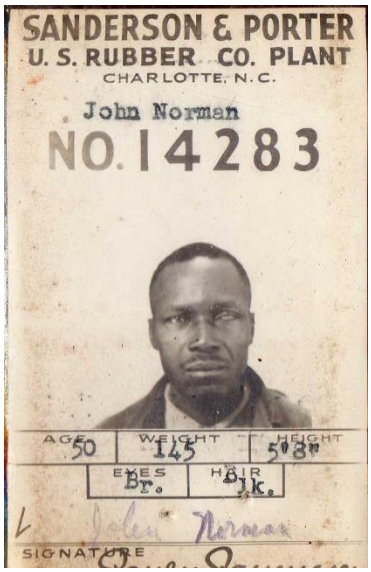

Figure 8 *John Norman worked at an ammunition plant in southwest Mecklenburg County during World War II. From Ancestry.com.*

John Norman was born on March 23, 1892, to Providence Norman and either Frances or Charlotte Norman. It is difficult to ascertain much information about his parents, though his father was born in enslavement in 1840. Providence appeared to have been a tenant farmer, for in the 1900 U. S. Census he rented a farm west of Charlotte. John married Camoline Hill on May 19, 1912, in Charlotte. Called Carrie, she was the daughter of Joe and Ada Williams Hill and was born July 1, 1892, in Mecklenburg County. John and Carrie lived in the Greenville neighborhood of Charlotte, where John worked as a laborer. At some point after 1918, when he registered for the draft, John had an injury to his left eye.

It was not until at least 1935 that the Norman family moved to Lemley Township. They appear in the 1940 U. S. Census. John was listed as a farmer working on his own account and lived in a rented house, which was the typical census designation for a tenant farmer. Their eldest children, son John and daughter Thelma, worked on the family farm while Carrie kept the house and raised children Gaither, James, Sarah, Edward, and Frank as well as granddaughter Joie Wheeler.[47]

The 1950 U. S. Census provided a clearer picture of the cycle of tenancy in which many farmers lived in after World War II. John and Carrie Norman were living in the tenant house, which was noted a tenth of a mile down the Cornelius road from J. Wilson Alexander. John was classified as a worker on a farm who had worked 8 hours the previous week. Carrie was a homemaker, and sons Ed and Frank were listed as unemployed. Two children were married and were also living in rented homes. John Jr. and wife Louise lived one-half a mile down a county road south of the Cornelius road on the right side. He had worked 60 hours the previous week on a farm. Daughter Gaither had married John Lee Potts, whose family were also Alexander tenants. They lived on the Cornelius road two-tenths of a mile from J. Wilson Alexander.[48]

In 1960 J. Wilson commented that a longtime tenant had abruptly left his farm after 23 years. It is possible that John Norman could have been the tenant mentioned, though it is not certain.

[47] 1940 U. S. Census.
[48] 1950 U. S. Census.

The Potts Family

John Lee Potts and his wife Gaither were the last residents of the Alexander Farm Tenant House. She died in 1988, and he followed four years later. They may have also used the surname Knox, as the 1960-1961 estate map drawn by J. Wilson Alexander identified the house as the residence of John Knox. Both John and Gaither were the children of tenant farmers.

John's father Luther Bell Potts was born on May 2, 1896, in Mecklenburg County to Jacob Potts and Carrie Gibson Potts. His World War I draft registration card provides some indication of his appearance, being short and stout with brown eyes and black hair. His trade at the time in June 1917 was listed as working for Levi Knox, a Black farm owner-operator, of Cornelius as a farmer, indicating that he was already engaged in tenant farming. Luther was drafted and reported to Camp Meade, Maryland, for training in July 1918.[49] He returned to tenant farming in northern Mecklenburg County after the war. He married Creola McAuley, who was the daughter of nearby tenant farmers, and they had three children—Margaret, John Lee, and Annie Belle. They were listed in the 1930 U. S. Census as renting a farm near J. Wilson Alexander, though it is unknown whether they were Alexander tenants. Son John Lee attended school at the Caldwell Rosenwald School, so perhaps they lived on the east side of Huntersville as well. In 1942 they were renting farmland and a house from J. Wilson Alexander when Creola attacked and fatally injured Luther.[50]

John Lee Potts married Gaither Norman, daughter of Alexander tenants John and Carrie Norman. He worked on the Alexander farm as a hand as well as at a sawmill.

In the 1950 U. S. Census, John Lee and Gaither rented a house either near or on the Alexander farm, though they were not agricultural workers—John Lee dragged logs at a sawmill, and Gaither worked as a maid in a private home. Additional questions were asked of John Lee. The highest grade of school he had attended was seventh grade. In 1949 he worked 52 weeks and made $457, while Gaither earned perhaps $5 (the amount was crossed out and code 04 written in, so perhaps she earned between $400 and $499 that year).[51] John retired from working at sawmills. Gaither later worked at the Galley Fish Camp and Lake House Restaurant as the chief cook. Their obituaries list their address as

[49] "Fifteen Men to Camp Meade," *Charlotte News*, July 18, 1918.
[50] 1930 U. S. Census; *Charlotte Observer*, December 30, 1992; "Just A Whistle Stop for Convicted Negress," *Charlotte News*, August 13, 1942. The Potts family is listed as white in the 1930 census, but this was a mistake by the enumerator.
[51] 1950 U. S. Census.

18324 NC 73 in Huntersville, which was the mailing address of the Alexander Farm Tenant House.[52]

The Patterson Family

In both the 1900 and 1910 U. S. Census, the family of Black farmer Graham Patterson was listed adjacent to John Bell and Lizzie Mock Alexander. It is likely that the Pattersons were tenants on the Alexander farm. Graham Patterson was born around 1875 in Mecklenburg County. He married Lula McAuley on October 29, 1896, in Deweese Township. Graham was recorded as farm laborer in 1900, and the family residence was designated as a house rather than a farm. In 1910 he is listed as a farmer working on his own rented land, which typically indicated tenancy. The Pattersons moved to Cornelius by 1920, though ten years later they had returned to the Huntersville area to resume tenant farming. Graham retired from farming by 1940, and he and wife Lela McAuley Patterson were living in Davidson. Graham died in 1947.[53]

The Howard Family

While many of the tenants near the Alexander farm were Black, there were also white tenants who appeared in multiple U. S. Censuses in the area. Robert Rozzell Howard was born April 5, 1889, in Mecklenburg County, the son of Francis Leroy Howard and Mary Rozetta "Molly" Black Howard. He married Mary Ellen Turbyfill in 1910, and they lived in Cornelius where he worked as a weaver in one of the textile mills. By 1920 Robert had begun farming as a tenant and was listed in the census as renting a farm on Beatties Ford Road in Iredell County.[54]

The Howard family appeared in the 1930 U. S. Census in Lemley Township near J. Wilson Alexander. They rented a farm which Robert operated with the help of his 11-year-old nephew J. C. Donaldson. Mary and children Alda Mae, Jack, Evelyn, and Margaret also likely helped out as well. Though the Howards are recorded in the same area in 1940, it is apparent that they moved around at least every few years if not more frequently as they resided in a different house in 1935. Robert and his father-in-law George Turbyfill worked their rented farm while Mary and daughter Margaret kept house. Recorded next to the Howards was daughter Evelyn, who had married Kermit Wilhelm who worked as a card hand in a cotton mill.[55]

Robert died in Mooresville in September 1945 of a gunshot wound, though no obituary or news articles were found about this occurrence. Son Jack lived on Beatties Ford Road a couple of miles south of its intersection with NC 73. He worked at a sawmill, and Daisy was

[52] *Charlotte Observer*, December 30, 1992; *Charlotte Observer*, February 17, 1988.
[53] 1900-1940 U. S. Censuses.
[54] 1910-1920 U. S. Censuses.
[55] 1930-1940 U. S. Censuses.

a looper at a hosiery mill. Presumably, their children Phil and Michael were kept by their grandmother Rosa Pender as the Howards lived next door to Daisy's parents. As the 1950 U. S. Census has not been fully indexed for searching, the rest of the Howard family was not located. But it appeared that the children of Robert and Mary Howard had not continued tenant farming.[56]

The Berry Family

Black tenant farmer Anderson Berry was born in 1874 in York County, South Carolina, the son of Herman Berry and Ruth Marshall. He married Hattie Marshall, also a native of South Carolina and daughter of Haywood Marshall. They moved to Mecklenburg County sometime after 1900, but a more exact date has not been identified. By 1920 Anderson was engaged in tenant farming, likely renting from white farmer James T. Cashion of Lemley Township. In the next census in 1930, Anderson and his family are listed near white owner-operator John C. Blythe, though it is unclear whether they were tenants on the Blythe farm. Residing nearby was Black tenant farmer Abraham White, whose granddaughters Margaret Black and Pearline Black would later marry Denny Berry and Anderson Berry, Jr.[57]

In the 1940 U. S. Census, both Anderson Berry and his son Denny Berry were listed as tenant farmers in the vicinity of John Norman. Anderson and Hattie had rented the house and farm since at least 1935. By this time, Anderson was in his sixties, though he still worked long hours on the farm alongside son Anderson and daughter Vashtie. The house, which was surely small, had thirteen people listed as residents—Anderson, Hattie, children Anderson, Vashti, and Samuel, grandchildren Marshall and Mason Berry, and widowed daughter Kathleen Connor and her five children. Anderson died in 1948 of complications from diabetes. It appears that most of the family had moved to Charlotte by 1950 except for Denny, who was still tenant farming in Lemley Township about a mile south of the Alexander farm.[58]

The Dobbs Family

Black tenant Willie and Estelle Dobbs were recorded in the 1950 U. S. Census as renting a farm across the Cornelius Road one-tenth of a mile from J. Wilson Alexander, likely on the Alexander farm. Willie Lee Dobbs was born on September 22, 1910, in Edgefield County, South Carolina, the son of Pierce Alfred Dobbs and Mildred Smith Dobbs. He married Estelle Bell, a native of Winnsboro, South Carolina. They moved to North Carolina sometime before 1943 when daughter Lizzie was born. Willie would not remain in farming, as his obituary says he retired from Davidson College.[59]

[56] 1950 U. S. Census.
[57] 1920-1930 U. S. Censuses.
[58] 1940-1950 U. S. Censuses.
[59] 1950 U. S. Census; *Charlotte Observer*, March 10, 2000.

The End of Cotton Farming in Mecklenburg County

While the post-World War II period saw the definitive end of cotton agriculture in Mecklenburg County, its decline had begun decades earlier due to the invasion of the boll weevil; rising costs of land; erosion and weather; federal policies including crop quotas; mechanization in agriculture; and the decline in available rural labor. The Great Depression during the 1930s exacerbated problems facing the rural farmlands. Together, they contributed to the wholesale end of tenant farming as well as the near extinction of the family farm in Mecklenburg County.

The boll weevil entered from Mexico to the United States at Brownsville, Texas, in 1892. The insect advanced into the southern cotton-growing states at a rate of 40-160 miles per year, devastating local economies. By 1922 it had reached Mecklenburg County and the Atlantic Seaboard. Within a few years, a decline in the amount of cotton planted in the county was evident. Thompson noted that the boll weevil's arrival "seems to be forcing a reorganized agriculture in our rural communities."[60] The new pesticides and other technologies to combat the boll weevil were financially out-of-reach for most farmers, especially tenants trapped in a cycle of debt. Farmers had no choice but to grow cotton. For as Thompson noted, county agents and the Extension Service encouraged its cultivation, credit at local stores was based upon a farmer's planted acreage, and other factors tied farmers to cotton. He concluded that farmers would make no changes, "Under present circumstances they would rather gamble with the hazards of the cotton market than to fool away time with food and feed crops that they have trouble turning into cash at a fair price."[61] The local economy was built upon cotton, thus there was no ready market for farmers to produce and sell anything else—a paradox considering that only 15 percent of the food supply for Charlotte came from inside Mecklenburg County.[62]

Even prosperous farmers like J. Wilson Alexander were tied into the cotton economy, though he was able to afford fertilizers, pesticides, and other products to support his crops. He hosted a demonstration of DDT for fly control and Anmate, an herbicide for honeysuckle vines, given by county agent W. D. Reynolds in May 1946. The Alexander farm was featured in a 1950 tour of Mecklenburg County farms fighting the boll weevil infestation. J. Wilson reported that he sprayed his fields with insecticide seven times that growing season. The intensive methods were successful, as his farm netted 11,686 pounds of seed cotton and 4,841 pounds of lint cotton on 6.5 acres cultivated. A demonstration of Johnson grass

[60] Fabian Lange, Alan L. Olmstead, and Paul W. Rhode, "The Impact of the Boll Weevil, 1892-1932," *The Journal of Economic History* 69, no. 3 (September 2009), 678-688; Thompson, "Agriculture," in Thompson, ed., *Agricultural Mecklenburg and Industrial Charlotte* (1926), 174.
[61] Thompson, "Food Needs," 195.
[62] Edgar T. Thompson, "Agriculture," in Edgar T. Thompson, ed., *Agricultural Mecklenburg and Industrial Charlotte* (Charlotte: Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, 1926), 167.

herbicide, arranged by county agent George Hobson and conducted by a weed control expert at N. C. State, was held at the farm in June 1953.[63]

Into the 1930s, cotton production in Mecklenburg County gradually decreased as small family-operated farms were priced out of the market. Federal policies reduced the amount of cotton acreage planted in an attempt to raise prices. In comments to the *Charlotte News*, J. Wilson disagreed with the Federal Farm Board's proposal in 1931 that a third of the cotton crop be destroyed to manage prices:

> My belief is that the Federal Farm Board's proposal to plow up every third row of cotton is both wrong and foolish. If the Lord in His wisdom had not intended for us to make the cotton we have we would not have had it. Already the cotton farmers have reduced their acreage from ten to fifteen per cent, and have reduced their fertilizer 25 per cent, and in spite of that weather conditions have operated in a way to still make the crop a normal crop.
>
> My idea, if it is necessary to keep a third of this year's cotton off the market, is for the government, direct or through an arrangement with the country's bankers, to loan money on a half or a third of this year's crop. That should be held until January, 1933, causing each farmer, as a condition of the loan, to agree not to plant more than a 50 per cent crop next year.
>
> For the Southern farmer to destroy a third of this year's crop would bring a disastrous condition to the very class of people suffering most.[64]

Labor shortages during World War II also contributed to the industrialization of cotton farming. The Alexander farm may have faced a lack of workers during this period; for instance, tenant John Norman worked at a Charlotte ammunition plant in 1942. Larger commercial farms utilized newly introduced mechanized pickers and other apparatuses rather than unskilled labor. In the late 1940s, as noted by economist Yeonha Jung, 100 of the 182 manhours needed to produce a bale of cotton were spent during the harvest season. Spindle cotton pickers, first appearing in 1936, began commercial production in 1948. While only 10 percent of cotton picking was done by machine in 1951, by the late 1960s that figure increased to over 90 percent.[65] Cotton production shifted west to Texas and California, both of which had plentiful land for extensive agricultural undertakings.

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[63] "DDT Demonstration Given," *Charlotte Observer*, May 30, 1946; "200 Take Part in Field Tour," *Charlotte Observer*, September 22, 1950; "Farmer's Lint Yield Is Given," *Charlotte Observer*, October 14, 1950; "Boll Weevil Finds Pickings Somewhat Slim on Mecklenburg County Farms," *Charlotte News*, November 13, 1950; "Plans Exhibition on Weed Control," *Charlotte Observer*, June 14, 1953.

[64] "Cotton Champ Not Willing to Plow Up Part," *Charlotte News*, August 16, 1931.

[65] Yeonha Jung, "The Long Reach of Cotton in the US South: Tenant Farming, Mechanization, and Low-Skill Manufacturing," preprint, December 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325069738_The_Long_Reach_of_Cotton_in_the_US_South_Tenant_Farming_Mechanization_and_Low-Skill_Manufacturing, accessed March 18, 2022.

Finally, the development of cheaper synthetic fibers like nylon and rayon further eroded the cotton market.[66]

Prosperous farmers like J. Wilson Alexander were able to diversify their financial interests to counter the shrinking cotton market. He advertised a sawmill operation in 1938 and expanded to logging, likely with son Gene. He also was a shareholder of The Farmers Company gin and farm supply store at Cornelius, serving as the entity's president in the 1950s and 1960s. Comparatively, tenant farmers lacked the funds to better their situation in a similar manner, except to leave for jobs in Charlotte and other towns and cities. The children of tenant farmers found more opportunity through education at the Rosenwald schools at Cornelius and Huntersville in the 1920s and new county-funded facilities built in 1937. Torrence-Lytle High School alumni of possible Alexander tenants included Sarah Norman, Frank Norman, Bertha Berry, and Essie Dobbs.[67] After graduation, many left for jobs in cities rather than remain in the hard life of tenant farming. Said white owner-operator William Monroe "Buster" Boyd, a southern Mecklenburg County in 1957, "These youngsters just don't go for farm work. As soon as they reach manhood they're off to town for industry or public works. That leaves the farmers of today with nothing but kids and old people to do the work."[68]

[66] Susan V. Mayer, "Cornelius Cotton Gin," Landmark Designation Report, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission (2015), 17; Yeonha Jung, "The Long Reach of Cotton in the US South: Tenant Farming, Mechanization, and Low-Skill Manufacturing," preprint, December 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325069738_The_Long_Reach_of_Cotton_in_the_US_South_Tenant_Farming_Mechanization_and_Low-Skill_Manufacturing, accessed March 18, 2022.

[67] Torrence Lyttle opened as Huntersville Colored School. It was renamed in 1953 to Torrence-Lytle High School.

[68] "Sharecropping Dying," *Charlotte Observer*, July 29, 1957.

"Exit King Cotton"

Figure 9 *Crop-duster Josh Jordan of Candor sprays the cotton fields of J. Wilson Alexander. Charlotte Observer, August 22, 1959.*

Judging by local newspaper coverage, the 1960 growing season signaled the approaching end of cotton farming in Mecklenburg County. That year, there was about 3500 acres of cotton planted in the county, 500 less than in 1959. In August a boll weevil infestation was destroying cotton crops. Said J. Wilson of the condition of his 70 acres of planted fields, "I'd say at least one-third of my crop is infested with boll weevil and boll worm. I can't remember it being this bad except back in 1951." An airplane had sprayed the previous day of August 18, but he said, "I'm having as much trouble with the boll worm as I am with the weevil. You can't get to the boll worm with poison." He had replanted his cotton crop three times already—"The weevil will leave a mature stand and hunt a young crop like mine. That's another thing that's making this season so tough." Combined with the repeated spraying of pesticides, he said, "that gets expensive."[69]

To compound the problems, owner-operators were having trouble retaining tenants. The *Charlotte News* reported in August that tenants were moving to cities for higher paying jobs. J. Wilson commented that he had lost two tenant families in the preceding days, one which had been renting from him since 1938. He said, "I paid him off at 1 o'clock Saturday and he was gone an hour later." Other county farmers had similar experiences. Herbert Garrison of Pineville, who served as on the county commission, had also lost two tenant families. "I don't blame them for leaving," he noted, "but a farmer can't pay wages as high as some firms in the city. But losing this labor hurts the farmer."[70]

In November as the cotton harvest was underway, declared the *Charlotte News*, "Exit King Cotton." While 35,000 acres of cotton were planted in Mecklenburg County in 1930, that amount had precipitously dropped to only 3,863 acres in 1960. The largest cotton growers in the county were brothers Jim and Leightner Miller of Pineville with 200 acres each, followed by Garrison with 140 acres. Said Garrison, "This year's crop won't average over a

[69] "Weevils Take Heavy Toll of Mecklenburg's Cotton," *Charlotte News*, August 19, 1960.
[70] "Our Farmers Losing Labor to City Jobs," *Charlotte News*, August 19, 1960.

half bale to the acre. We had to replant about two-thirds of our crop because of the cold weather in the spring." J. Wilson replanted 67 of his 70 acres of cotton. Ginning costs had also increased as the number of gins shrank—it cost $10 per bale at one of the six gins in the county, compared to $2 at one of the countless gins earlier in the century. The cost of labor to pick cotton had also increased to $2.50 per hundred pounds.[71]

In the 1960s, J. Wilson retired from actively farming, and son Gene took over operations. His wife Daisy passed away in 1969 after a period of poor health, and J. Wilson Alexander died at home on February 1, 1972. A laudatory editorial by the *Observer* said of the noted farmer, "Leaders come in all varieties, and one variety now fading from the scene is the man of the people who is still close enough to the soil to bring a kind of earthy practicality to otherwise pompous proceedings."[72] Gene, who lived in Iredell County, continued the Alexander farming operation, though he shifted from cotton to cattle ranching. He was the last remaining farmer on the western side of Cornelius when he retired in 2013.[73]

[71] "30 Years Ago…" *Charlotte News*, November 5, 1960.
[72] "Mr. Alexander and Pomposity," *Charlotte Observer*, February 3, 1972.
[73] "Alexander Farm Poised for $110-Million Development," *Cornelius Today*, October 5, 2020, https://www.corneliustoday.com/alexander-farm-poised-for-110-million-development/, accessed April 1, 2022.

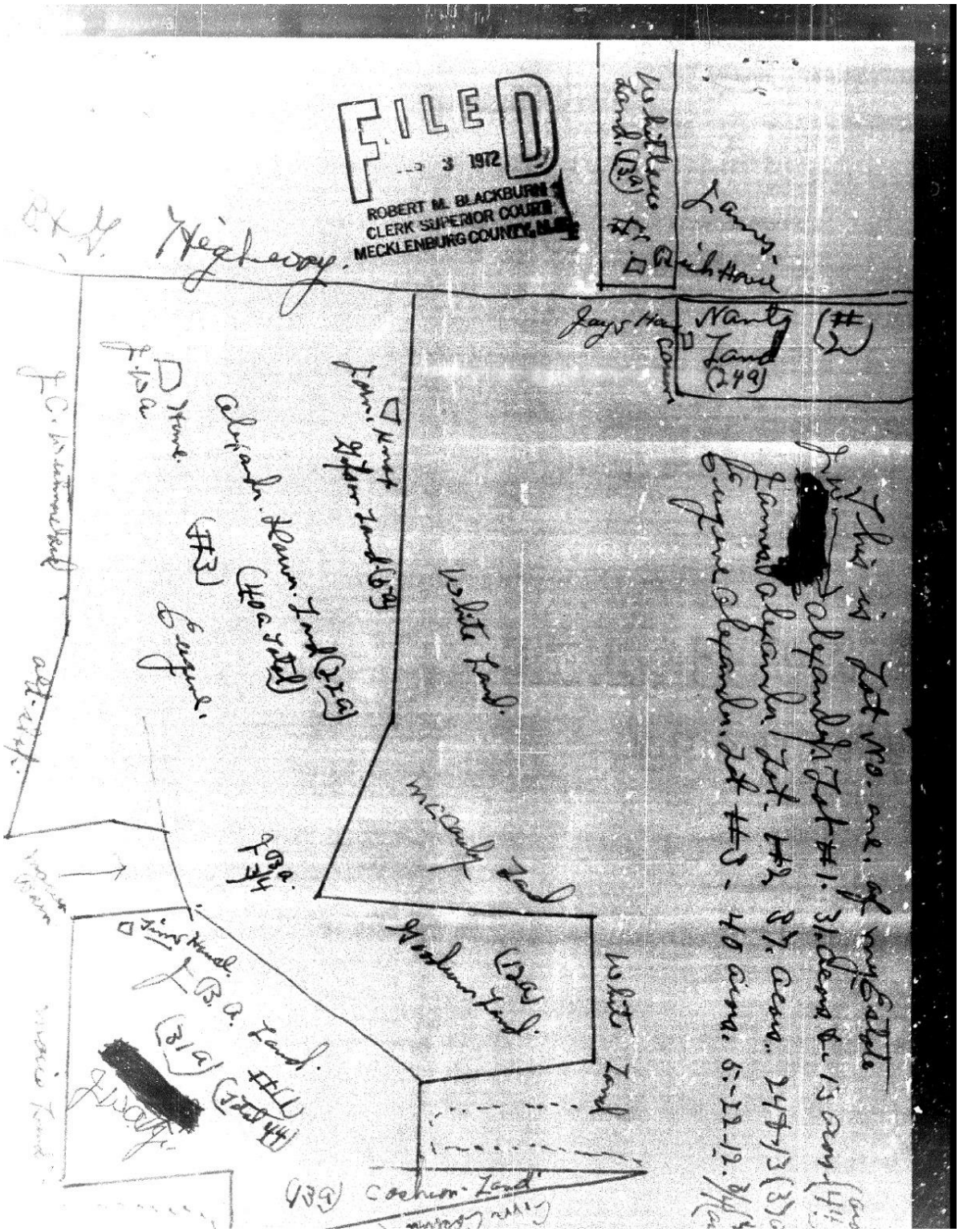

Figure 10 *J. Wilson Alexander drew this map in 1960-1961 to indicate how his property would be distributed among his heirs. The Alexander Farm Tenant House is labeled as the residence of John Knox. Mecklenburg County Estate File 72-E-333-23.*

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Miscellaneous Information

Tenant Farmers near the Alexander Farm[74]

Year	Name	Race	Page/ Dwelling Number	Address, If Given
1910	*Mary Alexander*	White	10A/153	Gilead Road
	Dave Cornelius	Black	10A/150	Gilead Road
	Graham Patterson	Black	10A/152	Gilead Road
	A. P. Little	White	10B/154	Gilead Road
	Charlie Clark	Black	10B/155	Gilead Road
1920	*John Bell Alexander*	White	4B/53	J. B. Alexander Road
	J. Wilson Alexander	White	4A/51	J. B. Alexander Road
	Author Isenhour	White	4B/53	J. B. Alexander Road
	Clyde V. Patterson	Black	4B/54	J. B. Alexander Road
	Mack A. Deaton	White	4B/55	Cornelius-Bethel River Road
	Jimmie L. Graham	Black	4B/58	Cornelius-Bethel River Road
	Henry T. Parker	White	4B/59	Cornelius-Bethel River Road
	William H. Jetton	White	4B/60	Cornelius-Bethel River Road
	Anderson Berry	Black	10A/155	J. T. Cashion Road
1930	*J. Wilson Alexander*	White	8B/138	
	Malissa Stevens	White	8B/133	
	Luther Potts	Black	8B/134	
	Robert J. Bolick	White	8B /135	
	Robert Howard	White	8B/136	
	Cad A. Gaston	Black	8B/137	
	Oscar Irwin	White	8B/139	
	Lucy McClain	Black	9A/141	
	Clyde Patterson	Black	10B/175	
	Anderson Berry	Black	11A/185	
	John Berry	Black	11A/186	
	Henry Berry	Black	11A/187	
1940[75]	*J. Wilson Alexander*	White	5B/81	
	Robert R. Howard	White	4B/64	
	Kermit Wilhelm	White	4B/65	
	Denny Berry	Black	4B/66	
	John N. Norman	Black	4B/67	
	John W. Brown*	White	4B/68	
	Anderson Berry*	Black	4B/69	

[74] Compiled from 1910-1940 U. S. Census population schedules for Lemley Township, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. The Alexander family heads of household for each census year are italicized.
[75] In 1940 the census enumerator listed property owner and renters in groups rather than as they were located along the route, so it is difficult to know the spatial relationship between respondents.

Year	Name	Race	Page/ Dwelling Number	Address, If Given
	Fannie Houston	Black	5A/71	
	Marvin Troutman	Black	5A/72	
	Carson Latta	Black	5A/73	
	Willis Howard	White	5A/74	
	Lonnie Wilson	Black	5A/75	
	Robert Davis	Black	5A/76	
	Fred Nance	White	5A/77	
	Thomas Reid	White	5A/78	
	Cliff Shinn	White	5B/79	
	Henry Knox	Black	5B/85	
	Clyde Patterson*	Black	6B/97	
	Luther Potts	Black	10B/174	

*Resided in same house in 1935.

Chain of Title of the J. Wilson Alexander Farm

Grantor	Grantee	Date	Book/ Page	Notes
Monroe B. Alexander and wife Addie Alexander; J. A. Goodrum and wife Lila A. Goodrum; J. D. McCauley and wife Amanda McCauley	John Bell Alexander and Mary Alexander (widow)	October 19, 1903	352/124	Lot no. 4 in the division of the land of Eli Alexander "upon which lot is located the dwelling house which was for many years occupied by the said Eli Alexander as his home," 23.5 acres
John Grier Alexander and wife, Abagail Shaver Alexander; Macie Belle Alexander (single);	J. Wilson Alexander	April 4, 1946	1197/254	"the same containing 23.53 acres, and being all of Tract C, as shown on the map of the J. B. Alexander

Elizabeth Westmoreland Renegar and husband, John Ray Renegar; Kenneth Westmoreland and wife, Elizabeth Oehler Westmoreland; Catherine Westmoreland (single) and Sarah Westmoreland (single)				estate lands"
Eugene H. Alexander and wife, Edith O. Alexander	E. H. Alexander Family Limited Partnership, a North Carolina Limited Partnership	December 16, 1999	10978/16	23.5 acres
Eugene H. Alexander, unremarried widower, and Eugene H. Alexander, executor the estate of Edith O. Alexander	E. H. Alexander Family Limited Partnership, a North Carolina Limited Partnership	November 4, 2003	16531/396	