

Landscape and the Planter Ideal:
Planter Class Formation in Fayette County, 1825-1860

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CONTENTS

Signature page	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Contents	iv
List of Illustrations and Tables	v
Abstract	vi
Permission for Public Access	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter One <i>Planter Class Formation in Fayette County: 1825-1836</i>	12
Chapter Two <i>Planter Class Formation in Fayette County: 1837-1860</i>	36
Conclusion	74
Bibliography	77

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS AND TABLES

Figure I	14
<i>Ames Elevation Relief</i>	
Table I	27
<i>Land Sales and Prices: 1825-1844</i>	
Table II	30
<i>Planter Land Transactions Above Average Price: 1831-1836</i>	
Table III	30
<i>Planter Land Transactions Below Average Price: 1831-1836</i>	
Table IV	41
<i>Value of Cotton Production and Slave Populations, 1830-1850, New Orleans Prices</i>	
Table V	50
<i>Land Deeds During the 1837 Panic</i>	

ABSTRACT

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by

Cailin Elise Meyer

Every cultural group interacts with and imprints upon landscapes in specific ways. By monitoring changes in the landscape over a series of years, changes in local societies and culture can also be followed. In order to better understand the relation between land value and social structure in LaGrange, Tennessee, a study consisting of 309 land deeds dating from 1820 to 1860 was conducted. This study found marked changes in the way LaGrange perceived its cultural landscape over the forty year period. During a settlement period lasting between 1820 and 1835, land prices reflected a regional standard whose value was heavily influenced by the importance of cotton sales and the availability of land. However, starting with the Panic of 1837, LaGrange planters began viewing land not as a capitalistic commodity, but as a symbol of social values and hierarchal status. With the onset of the 1837 agricultural depression, planters started artificially raising land prices to control how the outside world perceived their class status. By overpaying for land, the planter class simultaneously gained greater control of land boundaries and provided financial security for the smaller landholders. This action helped construct a social image of a wealthy, generous and honorable planter class. The landscape's social construction changed to reflect a specific class' social agenda, and landscape became tied to ritualistic public displays of wealth and reputation.

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Introduction

Human interactions and individual actions leave deep impressions on the landscape – impressions that often hold consequences for multiple generations. In turn, these modifications to the landscape leave behind evidence of cultural markers and cultural change.¹ Simply put, “the cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural landscape is the medium, [and] the cultural landscape is the result.”² Thus, changes in the landscape can be measured by investigating the culture and traditions of those who reside on the land. Alternatively, by studying changes in the landscape over time, historians can also draw conclusions about the cultures that implemented those changes.

Few historians would question the importance that land played in creating the economy, class structure, and culture of the antebellum South. But despite the critical role land performed in defining and maintaining a unique style of life, historians have typically overlooked the importance of land in the formation of the South’s planter class in favor of exploring the attitudes planters held towards slaves and slavery. Historians have devoted little attention to the functions that land held in Southern culture beyond the assumption that land equaled wealth. Specifically, the fact that culture impacts land use, land boundaries, and land values, is minimized in contemporary historiography.

During the antebellum period, Southern planters directly and indirectly expressed their cultural values in their use of Fayette County’s landscape. As the population rose in the rural town of LaGrange, Tennessee, the meaning of land shifted from that of a purely capitalistic commodity to a symbol of social values and hierarchal status. During the financial crises that occurred between 1837 and 1843, planters artificially sustained high

land values to demonstrate personal and class wealth to the community. In this manner, land ceased being a mere capital investment and became more a means of public display. Planters – defined here as slaveholding farmers who owned more than twenty slaves – publically bought land at high prices in order to demonstrate their elevated status to the community. By partaking in this ritual, they simultaneously elevated their reputation as affluent planters and altered the landscape.

Permanent settlement of West Tennessee began in the early 1820s. Within a decade, the impact of occupation had become evident on the landscape. From its beginning, Fayette County especially was marked by land speculators and planters as prime real estate for cultivating antebellum America's number one cash crop. White settlers "poured into the region, [and]...within one generation, the county emerged as part of a thriving cotton culture."³ By 1830, the western district had grown from "twenty-five hundred in 1820 to approximately one hundred thousand."⁴ To this end, land plats were first secured for surveying; forests burned or cut to make way for crops; fences planted to mark culturally significant boundaries; roads and canals established to make transportation easier. The landscape, in short, had to be tamed and cultivated to support the cultural uses that could sustain the population growth. In Fayette County in particular, the land was well suited for short-staple cotton, and numerous waterways made transportation and shipping cheap and accessible.

Given the importance of cotton production in generating wealth in the South, plantation land purchases – and thus land values – should have been determined by the quality of land available. Acreage with a higher growing potential held a superior value than sub-par or lowland parcels. Theoretically, this relation ensured that good land

would be controlled by the upper plantation class, while yeoman and middle-class farmers would subsist on lower quality of land. One would thus expect that land prices, based on growing potential, would have restricted which class purchased what land, which in turn would have limited the growth of the upper class. In this model, the upper class would never have lost control of the best farming acreage. With the best farmland permanently occupied, small landholders could not become capitalistically competitive in the cotton market.

This pattern never evolved in LaGrange, Tennessee. Despite variances in the growth value of land, growth potential held negligible influence over land prices. Fayette County benefited from the presence of the Wolf, Hatchie, and Looshatchie Rivers that run through its borders, resulting in nutrient-rich soil comparable to that of Georgia and Louisiana's cotton-growing regions. This same effect, however, also created "low-land" regions along the banks of the rivers. These regions were, and still are, prone to flooding, and they possess swamp-like attributes that negatively impact cotton production. But, while highland acreage sold earlier than lowland regions, it did not sell at significantly higher prices. Furthermore, prior to 1837, planters, small slaveholders, and non-slaveholding landholders alike all paid identical values for land purchases.

When Fayette County first became available for settlement, land still held a purely capitalistic value. Land was what grew short staple cotton, and short staple cotton was what fueled the Southern economy. Low prices for the commodity ensured that obtaining the land did not create a financial drain for even the smallest of farmers. Arguably, "[T]he price of land was not the critical determinant in the success of the authentic farm marker. An eighty-acre farm at \$1.25 an acre would cost him \$100,"

representing a small percentage of the total costs involved with maintaining a financially stable plantation.⁵ Thus, while large landholdings may suggest wealth, it did not mandate it. Beyond acting as a means to an end in regards to growing cotton, land's value resided primarily as a market force. Little, if any, social emphasis was put on the accumulation of land.

This understanding gradually changed due to two separate but interdependent factors. First was the relationship between parcel size and population. The more populous an area became, the less available space became as well.⁶ Thus, as migration continued into the 1830s, available land was quickly bought up and the average parcel size per farmer began to shrink. Upper-class plantations began imitating small islands, with the expanse of smaller land tracts representing an ocean. When the frontier land began to almost fully transition towards closed acreage, many members of the upper class began paying for land at higher than average values. However, this trend was not linked to any viable capitalist cause, such as cotton. Not all planters participated in this venture, and while the location of land played a part in purchasing decisions, it played a part in both the upper and lower classes. Thus, this period marks the beginning of a critical change in the attitudes concerning land values.

The second impact came in the form of the Panics of 1837 and 1839, during which time the previously noted pattern began occurring among almost all members of the plantation class. The economic conditions that resulted in these agricultural depressions caused a multitude of cascading financial issues for smaller landholders. As more and more farmers found themselves in debt, the number of land transactions increased to demonstrate the sudden financial distress. Concurrently, land prices should

have plummeted during these agricultural depressions – but in LaGrange, they rose. Upon analyzing the land transactions, it becomes evident that the party responsible for the largest number of land purchases and their high value was the planter class. They paid above average prices for a commodity that, in the midst of an agricultural depression, represented a liability rather than an advantage. By buying up the properties offered by struggling small landholders, planters achieved two goals. First, they drastically impacted landscape boundaries by suddenly controlling a large, previous unattainable portion. Second, by supposedly aiding the smaller landholders and, on occasion, fellow planters in their times of financial troubles, planters also experienced a rise in their own social reputations. Land transactions thus became a source of public display of individual planter wealth. Planters altered the cultural meaning of the landscape by moving land from a commercial commodity to a social measurement of prestige and reputation.

Land took on an entirely different association as planters began using it as extensions of their social power. In the midst of an agricultural depression, land prices rose to unsustainable heights – but only when the planter class purchased it. The LaGrange courthouse saw a rising number of trust deeds and practices of cosigning loans – with the planters acting in the favor of smaller landholders. Planters came to use land transactions as a public manifestation of their wealth, driven by the need to display their social status and prestige. These landholders sought to live up to a “planter ideal.”

The purpose of the planter ideal was to impact society’s perception of the individual. In antebellum Southern culture, power and influence originated from honor. In turn, honor was determined through a social contract involving the public’s judgment

of the individual's character. Southern identity thus depended on outward projections.⁷

Individuals became infatuated with expressing their superior status in order to gain social acceptance or honor.

The notion of the planter ideal expands on the concept of Southern honor developed by Bertram Wyatt-Brown and Kenneth Greenberg. Wyatt-Brown defines honor as culturally determined ethical standards that bind together a community or society through a social contract: "Honor is essentially the cluster of ethical rules...by which judgments of behavior are ratified by community consensus."⁸ Honor transcended economic class by applying to every member of the community – from planters to non-slaveholding planters to freemen and slaves. It acted as, "the moral property of...the community, one that determines the community's own membership."⁹ Greenberg expands on this premise by adding that, "the language of honor used by Southern gentlemen was embedded in a slave society."¹⁰ Southern honor developed due to the need to prove one's superiority to slaves who, due to their status as property, could never hold honor in the Southern white male's system (though slave societies undoubtedly had their own honor system). The easiest way to physically demonstrate this superiority was through terms of appearance.

While at some level everyone participated in the honor structure, planters could create unique expressions of public display. Their monetary wealth meant that they could make unmatched gestures of display and therefore control the status quo. The alteration of landscape's meaning stands out as just such a tool. In the early nineteenth century, buying land was a very public process. Land transfers were recorded in the local county deed books, noting the exact location and size of the parcel in question. They included a

sworn statement by the seller, stating his willingness and lack of indemnity to part with the land, and an agreement by the seller to the purchase in question. The entire entry was witnessed and signed not only by the two parties in question, but also by the entry taker and a handful of witnesses. Nearly every deed included the price for which the land was purchased. Furthermore, the deed books were kept open to the public at the county courthouse.

Previous research on antebellum Fayette County – and West Tennessee in general – has been limited. Existing studies focus on the impact of cotton on land and their capitalist effects on emerging classes. Lawrence G. Gundersen traces the development of Tennessee land from a so-called “survivalist state,” in which yeoman and gentry planters coexisted within a realm of relative self-sustainability, to a fully functioning, bank oriented capitalist market. Gary T. Edwards focuses on the relationship between West Tennessee and cotton production in his study of yeoman planters. Edwards hypothesizes that yeoman farmers were unable to grow large amounts of cotton due to the inherent risk in raising non-edible crops should the market fail.¹¹ As such, larger plantations held an obvious advantage over their yeoman neighbors and thus controlled the cotton market. The relationship between Southern farmers and their shared environment plays a critical role in understanding the connections between cotton, landscape, and human involvement, a fact that Jamie P. Evans partially addresses in his study of the relationship between population numbers and parcel sizes. He found that between 1830 and 1850 the average parcel size decreased as the number of land owners increased, creating an inverse relation that was reversed later in the next decade.¹² Evans argues that this relation was

due to the massive influx of migrants who then moved on for better land prospects elsewhere, thus leaving Fayette County land to planters.¹³

In part, this study continues where Evans left off, but with a focus on how forces at the national level impacted and shaped the environment and culture at the local level. Like Evans, the base of this study consists of the roughly 21,000 acres of present day Ames Plantation, which rests to the northwest of LaGrange, Tennessee and to the southeast of Somerville, Tennessee.¹⁴ The area is split between the counties of Fayette and Hardeman. As previously mentioned, during the antebellum period, LaGrange and Somerville were the primary population centers in rural West Tennessee. The study area is located on the northern border of the South's upland cotton producing region. The population represented on Ames Plantation offers a viable statistical representation of LaGrange's population.

Due to the relationship between settlement, cotton production, and local development, the study's time parameters cover the decades between 1820 and 1860. The study thus covers initial area settlement, the peak of population, and the effect of the pre-Civil War environment on local conditions. Sources consist primarily of land deed records. Of the 323 deeds collected on the Ames area, the study used 309 deeds dated between 1820 and 1860. Land deeds provide multiple clues to the economic and social conditions of the area in question. Deeds list the names of the buyer and seller, as well as a handful of witnesses; the amount of land being transferred and the price of the land in question; and the location of the land in regards to local landmarks and acreage. Using that data allows one to understand how the landscape was altered over the period. Thus, land deeds help establish class conditions and give clues about the initial shape of the

landscape, and how that landscape was impacted over time through ownership exchanges. These deeds were broken into groupings by decade, and then by individual year, in order to track changes in the average price per acre. Anomalous prices were marked and further analyzed, but were not included in average prices due to the fear of skewing baseline data. The language of the deeds themselves were also analyzed, and broken into sub-groups of regular transaction deeds, wills and willed land transactions, cosigned loans, and deeds of trust. The frequency of the occurrence of each of these subgroups was also noted.

When available, other primary sources were used to develop the social context surrounding land transactions. In particular, personal letters, personal recollections and interviews, county courthouse minute books and newspaper advertisements were used to fill in cultural gaps where secondary information was not available. However, it is important to note that primary documents of this type are limited, and often in poor condition. Even in the case of land deeds, some land transfers took place behind closed doors, off the record, and were not recorded in the deed books. The conclusions within this study are based on what few sources were available.

The purpose of this work is two-fold. First, it introduces another mode of analysis into the rhetoric of Southern honor and social contracts. As noted by Wyatt-Brown and Greenberg, every white male actively participated in the culture of honor. But land offered the planters specifically a unique method of increasing their reputations that was not accessible to other classes. Planters could spend money, and spend it excessively – and by doing so, tangibly demonstrate their sense of self-worth by doing something no

other class could. The agrarian depression in the late 1830s gave planters the perfect opportunity to change LaGrange's awareness of just what land could mean.

Secondly, this paper highlights the importance of an often ignored but inescapably valuable resource to the study of the South. Although it is a silent one, the landscape is an inescapable, timeless witness to the changes of history. Every human action affects the natural environment; every day humans alter the space that surrounds them. For the agrarian South, the importance of landscape cannot be overstated. Cotton made the South rich, and slaves acted as the South's agent in reaching that prosperity. But without purposefully altering the land, in ways specific only to the South, the antebellum Southern economy would have never developed. History would have looked markedly different. Landscape changes, and with it, changes everything.

¹ Carl O. Sauer "The Morphology of Landscape," *Land and Life*, ed. J. Leighly (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1925), 29-42.

² Carl O. Sauer "The Morphology of Landscape," *Land and Life*, 349.

³ Gary T. Edwards, "Venerate the Plow: Agricultural Life in Antebellum Fayette County, Tennessee," *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers*, Vol. LI, (Memphis: The West Tennessee Historical Society, 1997), 88.

⁴ Gerald M. Capers, *The Biography of a River Town: Memphis, Its Heroic Age* (New Orleans: Hauser-American, 1966), 56.

⁵ Thomas LeDuc, "History and Appraisal of U.S. Land Policy to 1862," *Land Use Policy and Problems in the United States*, ed. Howard W. Ottoson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1963), 26.

⁶ Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," (M.S. thesis, University of Memphis 2000), 46-83.

⁷ Kenneth Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 24- 50.

⁸ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), xi.

⁹ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, xv.

¹⁰ Kenneth Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery*, xi, 24-50.

¹¹ Gary T. Edwards, "Venerate the Plow: Agricultural Life in Antebellum Fayette County, Tennessee," 89.

¹² Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," 76 - 88.

¹³ *Ibid.*, iv.

¹⁴ In the early twentieth century, successful entrepreneur Hobart Ames obtained over 20,000 acres from remaining and absentee heirs of antebellum plantation owners; his purchases included the plantations of several of La Grange's most prosperous planters. The Ames Plantation exists today as a research and education center to the University of Tennessee, and actively seeks to keep its history of plantation farming alive by documenting the lives of its past owners.

Chapter One:

Planter Class Formation in Fayette County: 1825-1836

In the winter of 1824, Micajah Clark Moorman made an arduous journey of one hundred seventy miles from Russellville, Alabama to Memphis for the sole purpose of investigating possible land purchases. In Alabama, Moorman was a known planter, a member of a rich class of cotton producers owning more than fifty slaves and several hundred acres of land. He boasted of a proud, upper class English heritage as a great-grandson of Quakers who, in the late 1600s, had immigrated to Virginia and purchased large landholdings.¹⁵ Moorman himself was born and lived at his family plantation home in Virginia before marrying and moving to the Alabama frontier. He was, however, apparently unsatisfied with his Alabama plantation and sought better prospects elsewhere – more than likely anything that would sustain or increase his standard of living. Like many other slave owners and cotton producers, Moorman sought virgin, fertile soil in which to grow his short staple cotton crops. He found it in Fayette County, Tennessee, roughly forty miles east of Memphis.

We can only guess at what ran through Moorman's mind when he first saw West Tennessee's landscape. The Tennessee territory had opened to expansion only six years before with an 1818 Chickasaw Treaty.¹⁶ Memphis itself contained only a sparse population until the 1840s, better representing "a tough and uninviting hole overrun by the scum of the river" than a proper southern city.¹⁷ Fayette County would not officially exist until 1824, the same year Moorman travelled to investigate the area.¹⁸ Its wilderness would have been widely untouched by improvements. Roads were almost nonexistent or little more than beaten dirt paths. Early accounts of

the area, such as those found in courthouse minutes or personal diaries, often mention the presence of wolves killed for their pelts, the need to mark and burn new roads, the building of bridges, and the distinct lack of any mills or dry good stores closer than the riverfront.¹⁹ It was, in short, the very embodiment of “frontier” during the 1820s, even more so than Moorman’s existing plantation home in Russellville, Alabama, and far removed from the civilized landscape of his Virginia birthplace.²⁰

While his reactions to the raw landscape cannot be judged, Moorman’s reasons for moving his plantation to Fayette are far easier to comprehend. Fed by three river systems and their tributaries, the soil of West Tennessee –Fayette County in particular – was remarkably rich in nutrients and far more comparable to the plantation regions of Louisiana and Mississippi than to the more mountainous, rocky terrain of Tennessee’s eastern portion. This phenomenon created the perfect environment for growing short-staple cotton – the then number one produced cash crop of the United States. Stories soon flew about the region’s amazing growing capabilities as letters back East noted that, “The First Rate Lands on the Hatchie, Looshatchie and Wolf Rivers ... are believed to be more suitable for Cotton than any other lands in the Purchase...Land of good quality average in products from & to 10 Bills of Corn per Acre, and from 1000 to 1500 lbs of Cotton.”²¹ With cotton yields promising more than \$900 an acre, it is no surprise that yeoman farmers, small slaveholders and planters alike began flocking towards West Tennessee’s newly opened lands.²²

Apparently pleased with the potential he saw, Moorman purchased nearly 2,000 acres of prime, highland Fayette County land, returned to Russellville, and became an absentee landowner overnight. He would also die an absentee landowner,

Figure I
Ames Elevation Relief

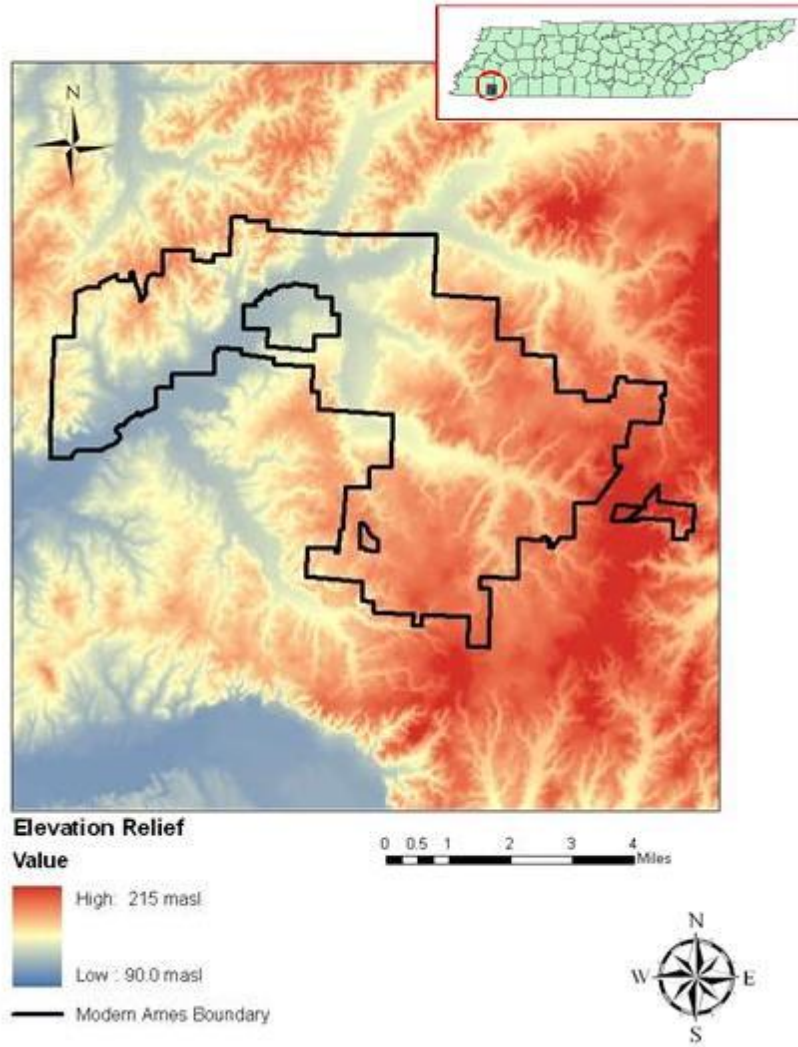


Figure 1 Elevation Relief of Ames Plantation Boundary Lines by Dusty Long and Anna Lunn.

passing away at his home before he could complete moving his wife and seven children northward.²³ While the exact time of his death is unknown, his last act greatly impacted the development of a major town in Fayette County called LaGrange. His family completed the journey without him. John W. Jones, the husband of Moorman's second eldest daughter, Martha, stepped up to become the family patriarch, and would turn Moorman's land into one of the largest plantations in Fayette County.

Moorman's story offers a prime illustration of the wide range of human forces that impact changing landscapes. The new treaty agreement with the Chickasaw in 1818 officially opened the frontier to settlement. With the frontier came the lure of fresh land perfect for cotton production. Furthermore, this land initially cost little out of pocket. These factors – all economic – offer a viable, capitalistic explanation for why planters moved west. Viewed in this light, land served as a commodity, exploited for its ability to produce profits. These factors do not, however, offer explanations for trends that developed after the settlement, and they do not explain planters' later shifts towards a different, non-capitalist market value. While capitalism acted as a primary guiding force for plantation owners, it was heavily influenced by a less noticeable social ideology. To fully understand the motivations of planters and their reasons for migrating and buying land, we must examine not only the economic world, but also the social world. To do that, we must first examine the forces and designs that initially impacted LaGrange's landscape – national and local causes of migration and settlement.

At the time of Moorman's arrival in West Tennessee, land prices were not affected by public displays of wealth. They were instead influenced by national economic policies that ensured low land prices for publically owned land, and thus low land prices for competitively owned private land.²⁴ Between 1824 and 1835, the combination of low population and large availability of acreage created a buyer-friendly market. They also created a market-oriented mindset towards land ownership. People bought land and became farmers because they were attracted to bourgeois hopes bolstered in America's continually growing demand for agricultural goods.²⁵ This mindset ensured that LaGrange's earliest population heavily favored large landholders with the means of buying hundreds of acres at once – either for cotton production, or to resell at a profit later.

Land transactions between 1824 and 1829 display one prominent pattern: consistently low levels of population. A digital representation of the immediate area notes only 31 surveyed and warranted properties.²⁶ Furthermore, only twenty-nine land deeds were secured for the LaGrange area during this period. These statistics are hardly surprising, given that West Tennessee only officially opened to exploration and settlement in 1818. The low population numbers, as noted earlier, were influenced by economic trends, but were also due in part by the daunting and time-intensive task of moving onto a frontier settlement this young. The physically, financially, and time exhaustive process of locating, entering, and surveying the land in question before a land grant could be issued no doubt played a significant role.²⁷

Due to the complicated relationships between Tennessee's boundaries, Chickasaw Indian ownership and the University of North Carolina's claims,

LaGrange's earliest land grants were necessarily issued to absentee owners, or owners who came into possession of land but had no plans to settle on it immediately.²⁸

Combined with the difficulties of finding and registering land purchases was the prospect of moving from a settled life to the frontier. Business and personal matters at home had to be settled before departure; returning was often not an option. Thus, between the time required to register the deed and the time it took to prepare a move, several land owners passed away or sold their interest before ever seeing their Tennessee property. This meant that the majority of land owners consisted largely of yeoman farmers and squatters, land prospectors and speculators – sometimes working for the University of North Carolina or East Tennessee College (both of whom owned thousands of acres in West Tennessee) and sometimes working merely for themselves – and the newly interested planter class.²⁹

Due to the low number of transactions taking place in the area immediately surrounding LaGrange, is it difficult to ascertain adequately any distinct patterns in land pricing and social class. What is evident is that the vast majority of farmers moving into this area were purchasing parcels of more than 100 acres.³⁰ In fact, of the twenty- nine land transactions situated around LaGrange, only six were below a hundred acres; seventeen were above 200 acres, six above 300, and eight above 500 acres.³¹ Even larger tracts of land, many reaching into thousands of acres in size, were still held by the University of North Carolina and by other large land speculators. This data provides a relatively uniform illustration of LaGrange's early demographics, demonstrating that most buyers were capable of purchasing large amounts of acreage at once.

This dynamic does not necessarily support the idea that every early landholder in LaGrange was of planter status. Across the nation, large land speculators, such as Samuel Polk and Samuel Dickens in LaGrange, purposefully bought up large land tracts ahead of settlement to then sell to migrating farmers at a profit.³² However, small landowners were not prevented from accessing or buying profitable land. In fact, many small landholders nationwide also bought more acreage than they could possibly use, simply to later sell it at an increased value.³³ Furthermore, the sheer amount of land available along the frontier – an enigmatic line that continuously expanded westward until well after the Civil War – combined with various congressional acts that set low minimum sale prices on public lands to ensure that small landowners always had options.³⁴ Anyone interested in getting land could do so from a variety of public and private sources. The sheer amount of land available guaranteed lower prices and inhibited the freezing out of small landowners from purchasing acreage. It also prevented the creation of tenant farming in the Old South.

But while small landowners were arguably present in LaGrange's early settlement, large landowners initially outnumbered them. This is seen when one follows the process of land ownership throughout the 1820s. Small landowners quickly sold their excess land as area interest picked up. In contrast, very few of the large landowners ever sold any acreage, excess or not. The few exceptions to this rule include the land speculators (who by necessity desired to sell everything they owned) and planters who died, leaving their land to be split among surviving heirs. Very few planters sold all of their property and moved elsewhere. Thus, as expansion continued, small landholdings naturally grew smaller while large plantations never

decreased in size. The number of planters therefore remained relatively steady while the number of small landowners continually increased between 1824 and 1835.

Due to the market-oriented mindset toward land in this early settlement period, the tendency of large landholders artificially inflating prices is not necessarily evident. Only certain planters paid more for their acreage than their neighbors. For instance, Joseph Cotton – a semi-large landholder along the southwest border of LaGrange – spent an average \$14.60/acre for his initial 151 acres.³⁵ Robert Cotten (no relation to Joseph) likewise purchased an additional 180 acres for \$8.89/acre.³⁶ Both J.J. Dillard and Daniel Johnson paid an average \$5.50 for all of their property.³⁷ But the pattern remains inconsistent. Just as many prominent landholders paid only an average, or below average, price for their land. David Jernigan, a prominent political staple in LaGrange, paid \$2.89 an acre for his initial 209 parcel.³⁸ John B. Pendergast obtained 600 acres for \$2.67 an acre. Even Micajah Moorman – who bought more acreage than any other interested party in the 1820's – paid only \$2.54/acre for the privilege.³⁹ The only common factor among the prices paid for land was that almost all of the land in question held the same growing potential.

Instead of concentrating on increasing their own landholdings, many members of the planter class focused on public participation in local government. Planters not only attended local courthouse meetings, but participated vocally in their proceedings and decisions. Oftentimes both the reporting jury and the chairmen of the meetings consisted entirely of the upper class, and only planters seemed to possess the necessary, constant time demand that these preparations and proceedings required.⁴⁰ And members of this elite class often found themselves named as

supervisors over local projects – such as the construction and maintenance of local roads and bridges – in disproportionately high numbers.

A planter's reputation depended on the public display of wealth and power. Furthermore, paternalism required the plantation owner - the master – to appear to be the central, governing force among individuals just as a father would to his children.⁴¹ Little else in the public sphere could enforce both aspects of this reputable image such as directing a legally ordained workforce consisting of not just a planter's own donated slaves, but those of his small slaveholding neighbor.⁴² By focusing attention on public works, the gain for planters was two-fold. Their social status rose not only because they appeared to play the part of the benevolent planter, but also because, in the public eye, their status was already high enough that they could command another man's property.

Another avenue for building one's reputation as a generous plantation owner possibly involved donating privately held improved land for public use. Most often, this was done by turning over private roads to the local government; maintaining a road privately no doubt required a vast amount of personal energy and time that few could afford. Instead, a planter could volunteer his time, or that of his slaves, towards the task of public road building and simultaneously increase his reputation as a generous landholder.⁴³ Less frequent was the donation of buildings built from private funds for public use, such as a series of mills erected by planter David Jernigan.⁴⁴

David Jernigan quickly became a staple small landholder early in LaGrange's existence. He is first mentioned in a court record in early January, 1821, as the grantee of an unknown amount of acreage about six miles north of the town.⁴⁵

Between January of 1821 and August of 1824, he issued five other land entries, all located along the northern ridge of the Wolf River. It is uncertain whether Jernigan simply lay claim to the area, purchased it from the public or purchased it from a speculator. Either way, by 1826 Jernigan easily held over 300 acres. Due to missing records, it is unclear how many slaves Jernigan may have held at this period, but a likely estimate would be between ten and twenty, making him a small slaveholder.

Despite being a smaller planter, Jernigan took multiple steps towards making himself a necessary attribute in the success of his neighbors' plantations. On the southwest corner of his property, Jernigan had access to one of the smaller tributaries of the Wolf River – probably nothing more than a fast-flowing creek – where he built and began operating a grist mill. Soon after opening the mill, court records indicate that Jernigan donated the site to public use.⁴⁶ The fact that Jernigan permitted his mill to be publically used by others is significant; it is not an action that seems to have been taken often. At least one other grist mill was built in LaGrange in the 1820s, and this one was not entered into the court records as being of public domain.⁴⁷ By paying for the construction of the first grist mill in LaGrange, and then donating its use to the community, Jernigan made an important “gifting” gesture to every yeoman, small land holder and planter in LaGrange, and thereby appeared publically generous – two important features of being a proper southern gentleman.⁴⁸

Over his twenty years of residence in LaGrange, Jernigan managed to seep into almost every facet of the small town's political and judicial life. The Courthouse Minutes keeper made note of his attendance at Fayette County's first court session on 6 December, 1824.⁴⁹ Soon after that first meeting, he was appointed an inspector of

election for governor in 1825.⁵⁰ In early 1826, Jernigan found himself named the County Magistrate, a position he would hold until 1829.⁵¹ And in between 1826 and 1829 he is frequently noted as participating in juries to inspect and build roads, as being commissioned to study the navigation of the Wolf River, and even elected to hold court of Pleas and Quarter sessions in 1827.⁵²

It can probably be inferred from his magistrate appointment, and from his continuous involvement in court proceedings, that Jernigan was a learned man with a legal background; possibly he was previously a judge somewhere else, as well.⁵³ The 1836 tax census lists Jernigan as holding at least 209 acres, valued at \$1,066.00, and owning fifteen slaves valued at \$7,900.00.⁵⁴ As his landholdings never greatly exceeded 300 acres, and he was not noted as owning a large number of slaves, it seems likely that Jernigan belonged to a middling class of plantation owners, whose primary occupation was in law and politics, while his plantation remained a secondary source of basic income.

Participation in public works and local government provides one explanation as to why land value manipulations fail to show up clearly in the 1820s. However, an equally likely explanation was that the newly transported planter class remained just as busy as the lower classes with improving the land they already owned. No matter the size of one's slaveholdings, the task of improving forested land for farming use required a great deal of time and effort. Forested land had to be cleared and turned for planting. Fences had to be constructed and basic cisterns and living quarters built for both the landowner's family and the slaves. Enough subsistence crops either had to be planted and harvested to last the year, or had to be purchased from another source

– if the latter, a farmer would need either something of value or extended credit to procure them (cash being in very short supply in the rural areas at this time).

Furthermore, one could only plant as much cotton as one had cleared land for and which one could adequately harvest.

The necessity of improving new land before it could be used meant that cotton production had to build up slowly. The essential time required in this turning over of cotton production also impacted the number of slaves and the amount of new land a planter could purchase. Slave ownership and land ownership shared an equilateral relationship, as an excess of either could not work to their full potential without the other. Thus, even if a planter was well-established at his previous abode, he could not experience the same cash flow on the frontier. The means of using land purchases to promote public display simply did not exist.

This possibility comes into greater focus when one considers the case of John W. Jones. The second son-in-law of Macajah Moorman, Jones seems responsible for moving the Moorman family and “the remainder of [Moorman’s] slaves” to their new Fayette homestead.⁵⁵ But Jones spent his first years in Fayette County delinquent on taxes with no goods or chattel, seemingly absent from the local political scene, and for all appearances totally fixated with building up his inherited lands and caring not only for his own wife and child, but also for his aging mother-in-law and his wife’s five younger, adolescent siblings.⁵⁶ Whereas Jernigan had the means to not only continually purchase land on a yearly basis but to also devote a large portion of time to the public sphere – no doubt thanks in part to supplementation by his legal profession – Jones embodied the Southern gentleman in name and blood alone.

Much like Moorman, Jones' father sold his first plantation in Buckingham, Virginia and moved to North Alabama. Presumably this is where Jones, then twenty-two, met Moorman's daughter, Martha, and married her prior to the 1824 land purchase.⁵⁷ A "born financier" and "the best trader [members of the family] ever saw," Jones immediately took over financial control of Cedar Grove, his Fayette County estate; at the time of Micajah Moorman's death, his eldest son Robert was attending school in Virginia, and would not join his family until 1827, just after he turned nineteen.⁵⁸ John Moorman, the second son, was only nine years old when the family made their move.⁵⁹ With her two eldest sons either unable to help her or legally claim their inheritance, Widow Ester Moorman became entirely dependant on her second son-in-law. Her only other option was Elisha Harris, who married her eldest daughter Anne Eliza prior to 1824. However, before the move north, Harris reportedly lived in North Carolina, where his eldest son was born in August of 1824.⁶⁰ Even though he opted to move to Cedar Grove near the same time as Jones, Harris lived apart from the larger family, on the outskirts of the property, and appears to have been rather removed from his in-law's estate.⁶¹

Jones' inherited 2,000 acres lay just southeast of Jernigan's landholdings. Court records do not show who paid the final payments on the property, but the final title bond was registered in early 1827 – suggesting that the family had been established on the property for a few years, congruent with Moorman's death.⁶² Records indicate that Moorman's estate was not officially distributed until 1831.⁶³ By that time, both Jones and Harris had laid claim to 740 and 511 acres, respectively – representing 1,251 acres not included in the court's distribution.⁶⁴ The remaining

recorded 720 acres was split among Esther Moorman and her several younger children. By this time, nothing could stop the eldest son, Roger Moorman, from receiving his inheritance and building his own plantation; however, every acre except the 511 awarded to Harris remained under Jones' control.⁶⁵ It is not known if Roger opted to move to LaGrange after finishing his schooling.

Despite his absence from the political scene and his hazy tax records, by 1836 Jones' land was valued at \$11,120.⁶⁶ Furthermore, at some time over the previous seven years, he had acquired at least twenty-five slaves worth \$16,250.⁶⁷ It remains unclear where or when he obtained these slaves, but it is not impossible that at least some of them previously belonged to Micajah Moorman, and travelled with the family from Alabama.⁶⁸ By this time, all of Esther Moorman's children had married and moved on to plantations of their own, or into the city; the Jones household now consisted of himself, his mother-in-law, his wife and four young children.⁶⁹ Freed of his earlier burdening responsibilities – of providing for such a large, dependant extended family – Jones turned his full attention to his image as a proper gentleman. Much of the work had already been completed during his first seven years at LaGrange. It is at this time that anecdotes of “Captain Jones” began circling en masse in the small town.⁷⁰ Due to his earlier attentions, Cedar Grove was well positioned to weather the tumultuous years ahead.

The problem with continuously improving frontier land, however, is that it cannot stay a frontier land forever. While still retaining much of its rural feel, LaGrange found its landscape greatly altered, resembling more and more the eastern countryside. By the mid-1830s, LaGrange and Somerville had been transformed from

wilderness frontier land into very auspicious, if small, towns. An 1832 advertisement in the *Nashville Republic and State Gazette* described LaGrange as “a very flourishing village, where there are two good schools, male and female, and in a very wealthy and respectable neighborhood.”⁷¹ As opportunities for expressing one’s generosity by providing public service works dwindled, planters looked for new avenues in which to display their wealth and stature. Unfortunately for the planter class, the landscape so dramatically altered by improvements had also experienced an influx of newly arrived farmers.

The second wave of migration into Fayette County would begin in 1830. During this time, the final unclaimed parcels were swallowed by a mixture of small landholders and yeoman squatters. The remaining land speculators sold the rest of their interests and either settled down on their own plantations in LaGrange, or moved elsewhere. As interest in this “miracle soil” grew, so did its price tag; the average price per acre rose roughly \$2.00 between 1824-1829 and 1830-1836. This slight rise suggests that area interest artificially inflated prices for a short period following the migration boom across both the lowland and highland regions of LaGrange.⁷² During this time period, the price inflation may account for much of the artificially high prices paid by large slaveholders, rather than any class-wide attempts to display status.

Between 1830 and 1836, seventy-one land transactions took place on the northern edge of LaGrange, representing a 145% rise from the previous decade. Land transaction numbers experienced a slight increase per year, signifying the expected continual population rise in Fayette County. It is interesting to note that, at this time,

TABLE I
LAND SALES AND PRICES, 1825-1844

Year	Total Acreage Sold	Total Sale Value	Av. Cost Per Acre	Total Number of Sales
1825*	593.5	3236	\$10.69	4
1826	2725.5	\$7,591.00	\$3.69	8
1827	3398	\$10,467.00	\$2.76	7
1828	1190	\$4,749.50	\$4.16	7
1829*	440	\$1,050.00	\$3.09	2
1830	3479	\$17,370.00	\$5.22	9
1831	2170	\$12,377.34	\$3.55	5
1832	3434.5	\$20,957.53	\$4.97	9
1833	3205.5	\$17,023.00	\$4.91	14
1834	2734.75	\$15,723.87	\$4.36	13
1835	1156.5	\$4,408.00	\$5.12	5
1836	4204.5	\$27,173.43	\$5.84	15
1837	2650	\$15,648.00	\$6.92	18
1838	4153.063	\$38,640.00	\$8.26	12
1839	2647	\$12,366.00	\$6.09	9
1840	3556	\$13,017.00	\$8.62	7
1841	2812	\$11,695.00	\$10.66	7
1842	1066.5	\$11,515.82	\$8.54	4
1843	381	\$1,728.60	\$4.53	3
1844	1897	\$5,257.00	\$2.75	5

***Given the lack of quantitative data for these years, the figures presented are not assumed to be indicative of actual land value**

Source: Fayette and Hardeman County Deed Books, compiled by Cailin E. Meyer.

the highest fifteen prices paid per acre – ranging from \$60.00 to \$7.78 – most often involved upper-class slave owners as both the grantor and the grantee.⁷³ All manner of parcel sizes were exchanged within these fifteen land transactions, suggesting that the size of the acreage sold had minimal impact on the price. In fact, the largest amount paid, \$60.00 per acre, was issued for only sixty-nine acres in 1836.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the years in which these transactions took place also had no impact on the sale price [TABLE I].⁷⁵

Arguably, large slave holders began paying more for the highland acreage due to the simple law of supply and demand. With most of the prime acreage settled by the early 1830s, prices understandably rose to reflect the increase in population and the sudden lack of open acreage. If an aspiring planter wanted to move into LaGrange – again, at this time considered a small but rich town – he would have to contend with higher land prices. But it is difficult to see this supply-demand pattern clearly in the price fluctuations. For every planter who purchased land at inflated prices, another purchased it for market value or lower.

Planter George Anderson is an example of the former. After his initial purchase in 1829 (390 acres of southern highland property for \$2.18 an acre), Anderson consistently paid the most per acre than any other land buyer in LaGrange, reaching inflated prices of at least \$2.50 above market value for highland acreage. In 1831, he purchased a neighboring 640 acres to the east for \$4.69/acre.⁷⁶ And in 1832, he obtained a total 1,483.5 acres for a combined \$11,665.00; 676 acres for \$10.35/acre, and later an additional 807.5 acres for \$6.19/acre.⁷⁷ By 1833,

Anderson's deeded property consisted of 2,513.5 acres, making Anderson one of the largest planters in LaGrange.

Multiple farmers began overpaying for land at this time [TABLE I]. Other examples include Thomas B. Gilliam who, in 1830, purchased 154 acres far removed from his original, roughly 350 acres settled in 1827.⁷⁸ Gilliam paid \$9.74/acre – at least \$3.00 above the 1830 average - for the privilege of owning land completely separated from his homestead by no less than three other significant landholdings. Wiley B. Jones, brother of John W. Jones, moved into the area in 1836 and bought 228 acres for \$8 an acre.⁷⁹ And in 1824, Beverly Holcombe – a son of a North Carolina planter – purchased 735 acres of speculator Samuel Dicken's last holdings for the University of North Carolina for \$8.01 an acre.⁸⁰ All of these men shared one distinctive trait: they were all young landholders born into the planter class.

But while these particular planters began purchasing land at higher values, they represented only a portion of all buyers. The vast majority of transactions still took place below \$7.00 an acre, and, as seen in [TABLE III], planters were still prominent among those paying market price. The practice of using land sales as public displays, while growing, was not yet contingent throughout the entire upper class at this time.

These planters buying at lower prices showed financial-minded concerns – the continuing trend of capitalistic-oriented business practices. But the handful purchasing land at artificially raised prices was another matter. They may have been responding to individual, case by case stimulus – issues that may not have been recorded through the language of the land deeds – but the possibility of this occurring

TABLE II
PLANTER LAND TRANSACTIONS
ABOVE AVERAGE PRICE, 1831-
1836

Year	Acres	Total Cost	Price Per Acre
1830	775	\$12,400.00	\$16.00
1830	154	\$1,500.00	\$9.74
1832	676	\$6,665.00	\$9.86
1832	807.5	\$5,000.00	\$6.19
1833	676.5	\$7,000.00	\$10.35
1833	39.5	\$320.00	\$8.10
1834	722.25	\$5,758.00	\$7.97
1834	735	\$5,888.66	\$8.01
1836	321	\$3,200.00	\$9.97
1836	228	\$1,824.00	\$8.00

Source - Fayette and Hardeman County Deed Books, compiled by Cailin E. Meyer.

TABLE III
PLANTER LAND TRANSACTIONS
BELOW AVERAGE PRICE, 1831-
1836

Year	Acres	Total Cost	Price Per Acre
1830	83	\$250.00	\$3.01
1831	245	\$760.50	\$3.10
1832	640	\$3,000.00	\$4.69
1833	112	\$150.00	\$1.34
1834	450	\$518.19	\$1.15
1835	640	\$1,920.00	\$3.00
1836	10	\$30.00	\$3.00
1836	413	\$956.00	\$2.31
1836	217	\$425.00	\$1.96

Source – Fayette and Hardeman County Deed Books, compiled by Cailin E. Meyer.

in every case is slim. Though the data is sporadic, they may mark the beginning of a cultural shift in the perception of land's material worth. A non-economic, cultural motivation must have spurred at least some of these exchanges.

These planters buying at lower prices showed financial-minded concerns – the continuing trend of capitalistic-oriented business practices. But the handful purchasing land at artificially raised prices was another matter. They may have been responding to individual, case by case stimulus – issues that may not have been recorded through the language of the land deeds – but the possibility of this occurring in every case is slim. Though the data is sporadic, they may mark the beginning of a cultural shift in the perception of land's material worth. A non-economic, cultural motivation must have spurred at least some of these exchanges.

Between 1824 and 1836, there is no correlation between fluctuating land prices and fluctuating cotton prices, suggesting that national economic conditions cannot explain the dichotomy. Nor did the acreage's location – highland, upland and actual placement – did not seem to affect prices. Furthermore, the variance in prices paid suggests that the economic factor of supply and demand also did not play a large role. Given the apparent lack of external forces influencing the prices land was bought and sold for, some measure of a cultural indicator must have come into play. One or both parties engaged in a mixture of superficial capitalist competition – the need to buy the proffered land before one's neighbor (and competitor) – and an almost subliminal display of a cultural status symbol. Land prices began to reflect on the status of the grantor on levels not previously affected.

At the time of Moorman's purchase in 1824, only forty cotton planters called LaGrange home and, with most of that population consisting of absentee landowners and speculators, the closing of the open range was not of concern. But with the attention of the planter-class focused on the local political scene or their own farms, the yeoman and slaveholding-class quickly took advantage of the remaining un-granted land. The number of landowners and the size of their landholdings obviously share an expected inverse relationship; the more landowners that exist within a certain radius, the smaller the average landholding will appear. Before long, LaGrange's odd-dozen planter-class families resembled medium-sized islands in a sea of smaller landholdings. The planter class found themselves momentarily stuck in limbo, unable to immediately adapt to the changing socio-economic environment of LaGrange. Having finally amassed enough wealth to continue improving their basic landholding size, they discovered that the land in question had become unattainable.

But the status quo would only remain equal for a few short years. The planters' situation would quickly change with the end of 1836 and the onset of the largest financial crisis America had experienced to date. The Panics of 1837 and 1839 would greatly alter the region's landscape and provide the planter class with the means to illustrate their financial and social superiority as southern gentlemen. By 1839, Moorman's fellow planters would be well on their way to regaining complete control of LaGrange's plantation landscape.

¹⁵ Jamie Evans, “Hanley Manuscript,” 1. The Hanley Manuscript is a collection of transcribed interviews conducted with local citizens at the turn of the century. Its prejudices have been carefully noted and considered in its use here.

¹⁶ Gerald Mortimer Capers. *Biography of a River Town; Memphis: Its Heroic Age*, 44.

¹⁷ Gerald Mortimer Capers. *Biography of a River Town; Memphis: Its Heroic Age*, 44.

¹⁸ *Old Times in West Tennessee*. Reprinted by University of Michigan Press (Memphis: W.G.Cheaney, Printer and Publisher, 1873), 273.

¹⁹ *Old Times in West Tennessee*. 273-283.

See also, Fayette County Courthouse Minutes, microfilm A.

²⁰ Russellville was incorporated in 1819. One can infer from Moorman’s timeline that he moved into the Russellville area just prior to its incorporation, suggesting that he was no stranger to frontier landscapes.

²¹ Lawrence G. Gundersen, Jr. “West Tennessee and the Cotton Frontier, 1818 – 1840,” *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers*, VII (1988), 31.

²² On the river markets, cotton generally sold for \$.9 per pound during a bad market season and with poor quality cotton. Given the nutrient rich soils of Fayette County and the larger value of high quality cotton, it is safe to assume that cotton producers gained more than \$900 per acre.

²³ Jamie P. Evans, “Hanley Manuscript,” 2.

²⁴ In general, national policies concerning land had three goals: to aid the settlement of the United States, create economically favorable conditions, and raise revenue. To these points, the government created a series of policies that regulated minimum standards for unit size and price of public land sales – prices that probably affected private land sales, as well. Examples include acts passed in the following years: 1785, 1796, 1800, 1804, 1820 and 1832. For more information, please see Douglass C. North, *Growth and Welfare in the American Past* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1966), 122-126.

Philip H. Overmeyer, “Westward Expansion Before the Homestead Act,” in *Growth of the American Economy* (2nd ed.), ed. Harold F. Williamson (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1951), 104.

²⁵ Douglass C. North, *Growth and Welfare in the American Past* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1966), 126.

²⁶ Jamie P. Evans, “Map of Ames Plantation, 1823,” provided by Jamie P. Evans, July 2009.

²⁷ Locating the property – or, if one was fortunate enough, the financial burden of paying a professional surveyor to do so in his place – required physically finding and marking the property’s boundary edges, and providing a rough description and location to the entry taker’s office. Entering the land required a three month- long clearance period to ensure that the land in question had not previously been claimed, and that no one challenged the new claim. After three months passed, the land still had to be officially surveyed and described – a more intensive version of locating the land. After surveying, both the warrant and survey were turned over to the appropriate government office, who then returned a land grant to the entry taker. The land owner could then file that grant with the appropriate local authorities. For more information, please see Jamie P. Evans, “Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee,” (M.S. thesis, University of Memphis 2000), 40.

²⁸ The history of Tennessee’s earliest land grants is tied up in previous actions taken by North Carolina after the American Revolutionary War. Lacking Desiring to pay their military veterans, North Carolina issued land grants for property west of their borders – specifically, in the region of Tennessee – under the assumption that their boundaries extended to the Mississippi River. The state then ceded the remaining territory to the federal government in 1784, who then in 1796 established Tennessee’s boundaries. However, in 1789 North Carolina “granted to the University of North Carolina all land claims which had been issued to soldiers of the Revolution who had died without leaving a will.” The University then sold these lands to interested parties as a source of income. For more information, please see Jamie P. Evans, “Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee,” 24-30, 40-44.

²⁹ Several speculators in West Tennessee partook in “John Armstrong grants.” The phrase refers to the rampant cases of grant fraud that occurred in the late 1700’s surrounding these and other territorial land grants. Dozens of duplicate warrants were issued, as were those with forged signatures. Military warrants were issued for non-military personnel, who then turned around and sold their warrants to the original

warrant issuer. One historian estimates that over 700,000 acres were involved in these scams. The name originates from John and Martin Armstrong, who illegally gained over 250,000 acres in the Tennessee territory from like schemes. For further information, please see Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," 37.

Prior to the naming of Tennessee as a territory, North Carolina issued thousands of land grants to Revolutionary soldiers as payment for their services. However, given that before 1820 much of the land in question was still occupied by the Chickasaw tribes, many of the soldiers sold their original deeds or died before seeing the land. North Carolina thus claimed the deeds of any deceased soldier who failed to leave a will, and gifted the accumulated property to the University of North Carolina. UNC then began selling the land to raise money for its institution.

³⁰ Data taken from relevant land deeds, 1824-1829. See Fayette County, TN Deed Books (Collective).

³¹ See Fayette County, TN Deed Books (Collective).

³² Douglass C. North, *Growth and Welfare in the American Past* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1966), 125.

³³ Douglass C. North, *Growth and Welfare in the American Past*, 125.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

³⁵ Fayette County, TN Deed Book J, p. 524, microfilm #40.

³⁶ Fayette County, TN Deed Book D, p. 120, microfilm #35.

³⁷ Fayette County, TN Deed Book F, p. 96, microfilm #37.

³⁸ Fayette County, TN Deed Book D, p. 37, microfilm #35.

³⁹ Fayette County, TN Deed Book C, p. 112, microfilm #35.

⁴⁰ Survey of Fayette County Courthouse Minutes, microfilm A.

⁴¹ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 3-87.

⁴² Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 3-87.

⁴³ It should be noted, however, that the frontier territory lacked any proper state agency that would usually take over the building and maintenance of infrastructure, such as roads and bridges. Without this state agency, planters had to take responsibility. On the one hand, the planter class had the resources to seize control in this manner, and to receive credit for their humanitarian efforts; on the other, if the planter class had failed to take action, then there was little chance that these projects would ever have been completed.

⁴⁴ Fayette County Courthouse Minutes, p. 6, microfilm A.

⁴⁵ The deed in question (Entry #495) appears to be missing from the county records; however, other deeds from this early time period reference the land in question, suggesting some form of ownership. Jamie P. Evans, and Dee Evans, "Family Group Record Documentation – Jernigan," 17 Nov 1992.

⁴⁶ Fayette County Courthouse Minutes 1825, microfilm A.

⁴⁷ In 1827, Amos David received permission to build his own dam on his property. There is no corresponding record stating that Amos opened use of the mill to the public. Fayette County Courthouse Minutes, 1827.

⁴⁸ The mill thereafter became known as "Jernigan's Mill," even after his passing and the subsequent selling of the land. It was often referred to in future land deeds as a boundary marker.

⁴⁹ Fayette County Courthouse Minutes, 1824.

⁵⁰ Fayette County Courthouse Minutes, 1825.

⁵¹ Fayette County Courthouse Minutes, 1826.

⁵² Fayette County Courthouse Minutes, 1828.

⁵³ Next to nothing is known about Jernigan's life prior to Fayette County, except for his relative time of birth and his first (and only) wife's name and birth date. Jernigan was born around 1789; his wife in 1782. They had four children together, three of which were born between 1819 and 1828. The eldest, David James Jernigan, was named as the executor of his will. He appears to have put most of the family plantation up for auction.

⁵⁴ There is some confusion over exactly how much land Jernigan owned in 1836. He is listed twice in the census, once owning 296 acres, again owning 209. Furthermore, just after the census was taken, he purchased additional acreage – the amount not recorded – from a J. Thornton. An 1842 article in a local newspaper printed following his death lists 300 acres of land to be sold at public auction.

⁵⁵ Jamie P. Evans, "Hanley Manuscript," 1.

⁵⁶ Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," 97.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵⁸ *The Goodseed Histories of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee*, (Woodward and Stinton Printing Co., 1973), 933.

⁵⁹ Jamie P. Evans, "Hanley Manuscript" 4.

⁶⁰ It is not known how or when Elisha and Ann Eliza met.

⁶¹ The early death of Anne Eliza no doubt played some part in that detachment. In March of 1828, Harris' young wife died, leaving him to care for their two young children. Hers is the only gravestone to mark the first Harris Cemetery on the original homestead. Harris legally obtained his 511 acres through a court decree three years after her death, and promptly sold them to Thomas B. Gilliam. It is not clear where Harris lived immediately after that sale, as his next land purchase did not occur until late 1836 or 1837.

⁶² Jamie P. Evans, "Hanley Manuscript," 4.

⁶³ Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," 99.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁶ Fayette County, TN, Tax List 1836, Microfilm Roll #3.

⁶⁷ Fayette County, TN, Tax List 1836, Microfilm Roll #3.

⁶⁸ Jamie P. Evans, "Hanley Manuscript," 3.

⁶⁹ Birth records obtained from the Jones family cemetery at Cedar Grove.

⁷⁰ Jamie P. Evans, "Hanley Manuscript," 5.

⁷¹ "Western District Land for sale." *Nashville Republic and State Gazette*. Friday, 8 June 1832. Provided courtesy of Jamie Evans.

⁷² With the Wolf River flowing direct north-west, LaGrange's region is split into two contrasting sections – a highlands and lowlands. The highlands consisted of fertile soil located on a small elevation and removed to the east of the river. The lowlands consisted of acreage directly east of and continuing west of the river. While both regions sported fertile soil perfect for growing short-staple cotton, the western lowlands were prone to seasonal flooding that could ruin entire crops. Evans explains that land situated inside this flood plain and the adjacent upland north-western highland areas were, "considered inferior to that south of the river and remained largely unclaimed prior to the initiation of settlement." Due to this lower value and affected production, this area was settled last and sported characteristically small land parcels. The majority of cotton producers living in this area were yeoman and squatters, with only the occasional small slaveholder with a larger acreage. The vast majority of the planter class – especially those who settled in the 1820's – purchased acreage in the highland regions.

⁷³ Data taken from respective Fayette County land deed records. The \$60.00/acre occurrence greatly offset the average price-per-acre, as it occurred only once; the next nearest price was \$16.00/acre, which eventually escalated down to \$7.78/acre over the course of thirteen more land deeds.

⁷⁴ The land in question, sold by the Morgan brothers to three collected investors, only benefits from having a road run nearby its property line. The acreage is small, and none of the three purchasers hold any land in the area. The three investors would eventually open up a general store on the acreage, and the acreage would come to be known in various forms as 'Reed's Landholding.'

⁷⁵ All seven years, from 1830-1836, fluctuated throughout the graph and showed no obvious patterns as to land value for these inflated prices.

⁷⁶ Hardeman County, TN, Deed Book K, 251.

⁷⁷ Fayette County, TN, Deed Book M, 324.

⁷⁸ It is not known how much Gilliam paid for this original parcel, as the original land deed has not been discovered. The land in question switched hands sometime between 1825 and 1827; prior to 1825, it was in the care of both a Francis Taylor – who was in 1826 – and Thomas Hunt. Hunt seems to have sold the land to Gilliam some time in 1827. It is also possible that he married one of the heirs of Francis Taylor or Thomas Hunt and thus inherited the property.

⁷⁹ Fayette County, TN Deed Book J, 122.

⁸⁰ Fayette County Court Records, 1 Nov 1841.

Chapter Two:

Planter Class Formation in Fayette County: 1837-1860

At the onset of 1837, LaGrange's landscape no longer resembled the wilderness that Micajah C. Moorman first saw thirteen years before. Multiple roads now ran through the countryside, linking the outskirts of the boundaries to the town. Forest and pasture alike moved aside to make room for a checkerboard of mismatched plantations, ranging from a few hundred acres to a few thousand. This increase in the number of parcels, and the appearance of the smaller plantations, signified a larger and more diverse population. Small slave owners and non-slaveholding yeoman now rimmed every boundary of the planter class. One hundred nine plantations covered over 20,000 acres immediately west of LaGrange. Most of these were less than 300 acres in size.⁸¹ All that would change within the next six years, however, as the socio-economic environment would once again shift to favor the richest of the landholders. Through the planter class' actions, the meaning of land for LaGrange's residents changed from a capitalist tool into a cultural marker of status and generosity.

Planters ultimately affected the landscape, and thus altered its cultural meaning, in three distinct ways. First they initiated the practice of raising land value by purchasing land at superficially increased values. Because purchasing land took place in a public sphere, this practice enabled them to increase the societal perception of their honor. They not only appeared concerned for the well being of their more unfortunate neighbors, but by arguably wasting resources on a worthless commodity, planters also demonstrated their financial status; it verified how unconcerned planters could afford to be financial matters.

Secondly, the practices of cosigning loans and signing trust deeds also began to reflect aspects of honor and social worth. Anyone who cosigned a loan or signed a trust agreement assumed a financial responsibility for his partner. These practices provided no material gains for the planter in question. However, the planter could expect his social perception to change. Much like the practice of manipulating land prices, society would view him as a more generous and thus more honorable individual, and also gave planters yet another chance to show their financial stability.

Finally, planters physically marked their landscape by building ornate manor houses. An incredibly public action, the manor house once again stated the freedom planters had to be financially frivolous. Manor houses, acting as literal material markers of status, enforced the planter ideal image by visibly setting a planter apart from the rest of the community.

When the cotton depression struck between 1837 and 1842, LaGrange's planter class did not respond by bottling themselves up in their own lands and financial assets, prepared to adequately weather out a storm in which their profits had no choice but to shrink. Neither did they take advantage of their neighbor's misfortunes and rob him blind of his land's value. Rather, the planter class, nearly as a whole, became involved in an elaborate ritual of purposefully over-valuing any land that they purchased, regardless of circumstance. This new tendency, alongside their continued support of trust deeds and acts of giving, added to their public image of men of respectability and honor.

This boosting of reputation occurred in two ways. First, by paying more for land during an agricultural depression, planters made an open statement that the depression was not affecting their daily business lives. It was below them and their interests –

though not so low as to not notice the recession's effects on their less fortunate brethren (and the occasional independent female planter). Since so much of Southern reputation dealt with maintaining respect and living in a certain image, the planter class could not afford to appear overly concerned with the possible destruction of their financial security. To do so, especially in a public arena, would be to seem weak.

Second, by giving more than what the land was worth, planters increased their reputation for being generous gentlemen. Generosity affected the social standing of planters just as much as the number of slaves a planter claimed. Not only was appearing generous another indication of financial security, but it addressed the specific ethics, morals, and attitudes a proper Southern gentleman was supposed to embody. The more generous a planter became with his land, slaves, and money, the more respect he demanded from his peers. And gaining and maintaining more respect from, and more respect than, his peers was a never-ending game.

Prior to the settlement of LaGrange, land value was determined by its growing potential. That is, the amount of cotton that an acre could grow played a crucial role in deciding its monetary value. While the amount of land a planter owned affected his social standing, land itself did not function as an independent modus of establishing reputation. It rather represented a passive expression of planter accumulation – the ability of the planter class to control a large amount of acreage. Thus, cotton played an exuberant role in not only financially stabilizing all southern farmers, but also in regulating land prices.

After settlement, however, land value took on a separate role for the planter class. To borrow an analogy from Kenneth Greenberg, the planter practice of buying high and

selling low became an acceptable form of non-violent, social dueling. The higher in social standing a planter was, the more he paid for additional land. This pattern did not evolve because of the Panic of 1837. Rather, it evolved after the farmland of LaGrange experienced a time of strenuous settlement by small slaveholders and yeoman farmers. Prior to this development, LaGrange was mostly settled by land speculators and the planters alone. The planter class merely used the Panic as a catalyst with which to reclaim “their” landscape in the most gentlemanly way possible.

Historians debate the causes of the Panic of 1837. The traditional theory places the blame with President Andrew Jackson and the infamous Bank War with Nicholas Biddle. Suffice it to say that Jackson and Biddle held very different views of proper economic policy, a disagreement that culminated in the destruction of the Second Bank. Not an economic expert, Jackson distrusted big businesses and, especially, the centralized control they symbolized. “[Jackson] soon removed all United States funds from the [Second Bank]... the federal deposits that Jackson had taken from Biddle were made available to several dozen state banks, who promptly used their new resources to start a credit boom.”⁸² As inflation rose due to the increased, un-backed printing of money, the credit game created a very unstable banking system that lacked the resources to sustain its growth.⁸³ The bubble “burst” when the federal government introduced multiple new policies that aggravated the issue. These policy changes, such as one that regulated that, “...on and after August 15, 1836[,] public lands must be paid for with gold and silver,” combined with the Second Bank’s increasing instability after 1836. The bank suspended specie payments in 1837, resumed them in 1838, suspended them again in 1839 and

ultimately failed in 1841.⁸⁴ The increasing disorder among the banks and the credit system created a collapse that culminated in the Panics of 1837 and 1839.

Other historians hold that the policies adopted by Jackson and enacted in 1836 could not possibly have created the crash, as it did not create the inflation bubble and speculation. Historian Peter Temin, in particular, argues that the sources used to create the traditional account are inherently biased and incomplete.⁸⁵ Instead, “a radical increase in the supply of money and the slow rise in the availability of goods to buy with it produced inflation in the 1830s; a rapid fall in the supply of money coupled with an increase in the production of goods produced the deflation of the 1840s.”⁸⁶ Temin finds that Jackson’s policies and Biddle’s business efforts had paltry effects, if any, on the depression – which, according to Temin, was a price deflation, rather than a production depression.

Certainly by the early 1800s, cotton had become the backbone of America’s economy. Vitalizing the slave society in the South, it also stimulated textile industries overseas and along the eastern seaboard.⁸⁷ It became the fuel for the refinement of steam power. Cotton prices influenced not only land value and the Southern economy, but also production in the North. When cotton prices began faltering in 1837, and fell further in 1839, the entire nation felt the effects. None felt the brunt of cotton’s downfall more so than those at the beginning of the chain – the cotton planters. While historians may bicker about the true impact of the depression on a national scale, there is little doubt that it held major implications for the cotton industry, and thus for the multitudes who depended on it. In fact, the cause of the Panic perhaps had more to do with cotton than

TABLE IV
VALUE OF COTTON PRODUCTION AND SLAVE POPULATION,
1830-1850, NEW ORLEANS PRICES

Year	Crop (Thousands of Pounds)	Average Price (Cents per Pound)	Value (Thousands)
1830	331,150	0.084	27,817
1831	354,247	0.09	31,882
1832	355,492	0.1	35,549
1833	374,653	0.112	41,961
1834	437,558	0.155	67,821
1835	460,338	0.152	69,791
1836	507,550	0.133	67,504
1837	539,669	0.08	48,510
1838	682,767	0.124	84,663
1839	501,708	0.079	39,635
1840	834,111	0.091	75,904
1841	644,172	0.078	50,245
1842	668,379	0.057	38,098
1843	972,960	0.075	72,972
1844	836,529	0.055	46,009
1845	993,716	0.068	67,573
1846	863,321	0.099	85,469
1847	765,599	0.07	53,662
1848	1,017,391	0.058	59,009
1849	1,249,985	0.108	134,998
1850	1,001,165	0.117	117,136

Source - Adapted from Alfred H. Conrad and John R. Meyer, "The Economics of Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South." Gerald R. Nash, Ed. *Issues in American Economic History* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and CO.,1972); 251.

with the National Bank, Wall Street, or Jackson's arguably miniscule understanding of economics.

Between 1831 and 1836, the value of cotton exports alone nearly tripled from \$35 million to \$71 million. This growth in the power of the South represented a multiregional interdependence on the cotton trade. With the aid of slavery, the South produced bale after bale of cotton, which was then shipped along the river channels – either south to the gulf and then overseas, or north to New England's army of textile manufacturing. There, Douglass C. North notes, the

...demand for textiles, leather products, clothes and shoes increased with the rising incomes in the new regions. The demand for machinery for farm implements and processing expanded in an equally dramatic fashion. This growing market for the manufacturers of the Northeast resulted in increased specialization, and the development of steam engines for land and water transportation. Earlier developments in the capital market, initially associated with shipping, foreign trade and cotton were now available to facilitate the financing of manufacturers.⁸⁸

Inevitably, all of these positive developments attracted the attention of the overseas economic power and stimulated capital flow from Britain to the United States.

Unfortunately, this interest faltered during the Bank War hiccup that began in 1833 and culminated in the Panic of 1837. The Specie Circular Act of July 11, 1836 inadvertently froze commercial exchange between Europe and America, resulting in the Bank of England raising rates to 5% and eventually refusing to discount American bills in early 1837.⁸⁹ The result was the Panic of 1837, which in turn would further jumpstart a chain of unfortunate events.

The 1837 Panic precipitated falling prices. Predictably, this significantly affected the cotton trade. Lawrence G. Gundersen notes that, "in March of 1837, the price paid for cotton in New Orleans was between 11 to 17 cents per pound, but within two months

the price had fallen to 8 to 8.5 centers per pound and some cotton went for ‘as low as 5.’⁹⁰ Cotton price recovery was slow and incomplete a year later, leaving southern planters ill prepared for the next market fluctuation [TABLE IV].

Trouble for southern planters continued when, in 1839, earlier cotton speculations of the Bank of Pennsylvania backfired and triggered a disastrous chain of events.⁹¹ Devastatingly low cotton prices – falling from a high of 17 cents a pound in Charleston to 7½ cents in 1839 – combined with the credit structure, a decade worth of expansion speculation, and faltering foreign investments (most notably, England) to create the Panic of 1839.⁹²

While cotton in Memphis struggled towards 9 to 11½ cents per pound in 1839, it plummeted to between 4 and 6½ cents in 1840 (6 to 8 cents in New Orleans).⁹³ According to Gundersen, the issue was not that no one wanted to buy cotton; in fact, he records that, in one page of an 1838 copy of the *Randolph Whig*, “there were three merchants vying for the planter’s cotton, but probably at low prices as they did not see to include their prices paid.”⁹⁴ Thus, while West Tennessee planters did have outlets for their ever growing staple, it was not one that offered a profitable window.

The fall of cotton prices directly affected everyone involved with the crop – particularly the plantation owners. As previously discussed, land held value only so long as one could get something out of it. Without the controlling power of cotton prices, acreage was a virtually useless asset; a farmer could instead grow subsistence crops, such as wheat or corn, but ultimately cotton was the only produce that brought in substantial and reliable net gains. And with the South’s primary produce piling up on the river docks in New Orleans, biding its time until a buyer could be found, land owners inexplicably

found themselves without a steady stream of income; their impervious cotton bubble had burst, leaving them high and dry.

This situation was exasperated by the “land bubble” created in West Tennessee. For migrants and bankers alike, the largest temptation of West Tennessee was the arguably below-market prices for land well suited for short staple cotton. In the decade leading up to the Panic, Tennessee

... was undergoing painful experiments with state banks, speculation and stay laws. Though originally predisposed to hostility against the bank of the United States... the dominant western portion of the state was yet quite willing to accept the benefits of a branch of the great bank, so long as times were good and credit was easy, and only gradually listened to and joined in the attack against the parent branch of that institution, which started in the year of Jackson’s inauguration.⁹⁵

The Southern emphasis on planting and the need for fresh land caused banks to focus on land speculation rather than investment capital. Unfortunately, most of those applying for these loans “were often farmers whose economic position did not justify the credit extended them.”⁹⁶ As explained by James Oakes, plantation life was not necessarily one of prosperity or stability. Farmers routinely sold land, moved around, bought new land, remained in place for an indeterminate number of years, and then were forced to start again.⁹⁷ The wealth of cotton farming was not found in bank notes or specie, but rather in the amount of land and the number of slaves one owned. When sufficient cash did find its way into their pockets, nearly all southern land owners immediately poured it into either acquiring more slaves or developing more land. Through this system, land and slaves literally translated into a tangible measurement of wealth.⁹⁸ It also meant that free moving assets *not* tied up in slaves or land were in short supply.

Therefore, when cotton prices in New Orleans fell to levels that planters could ill afford to accept, the effects resonated backwards on the only two viable remaining

resources. These ripples cascaded when the banks, urged by continuing national events and the dropping of the Specie, called in the numerous loans made to fiscally unsound farmers. Inevitably, many plantation owners had no choice but to liquidate one or the other – or sometimes both. As the primary means of acquiring loans to buy land was, in fact, using that land as equity, farmers found themselves without options. Even those in previously relatively sound financial standings suddenly found themselves using trust deeds and mortgaging their land to cover unexpected debts. Land in West Tennessee suddenly became painfully plentiful again, due to a national economic situation no planter had ever wanted to see.

Evidence of how the pinch of cotton prices and the credit freeze affected LaGrange lies in the land transfer records. As seen in TABLE I, despite the recessions, the number of land transactions remained relatively steady throughout this period. It was only after the Crisis of 1839 ended that land sales tapered down, an event due to population stagnation. But the continued stabilization of land sales is not necessarily an indicator of good market times. Again, if anything, the unstable planter lifestyle, coupled with the credit freeze and the lack of fluid funds, would make these land transactions more frequent. Rather, what is surprising is what prices the land sold for in a bear market – and who, in particular, did most of the buying.

It is at this point that the planter class began playing a significant role in maintaining the value, and thus the importance, of land. If cotton prices influenced the value of land – that is, if the fiscally profitable status of cash crops reflects land's only lucrative gains – then no profit oriented planter would purposefully decide to purchase more land during years of bad returns on cash crops. Non-capitalist values must have

played a role in the buyer's decisions. Planters used the national economic conditions to gain socially in the "short run" and commercially in the long run. During the agricultural depression, planters began paying for land at values almost double their actual market value. By overpaying small landholders, they created a specific cultural image of themselves in LaGrange's population. They appeared overly generous and concerned for the well-being of those in less fortunate circumstances. And once the economic distresses ended, they would find themselves with a larger control of the south's most important resource – a control over its landscape.

The concept of high land value during a cotton depression initially comes from comparing the overall acreage sold, the total amount spent on purchasing land, and the average cost per acre over the decade. Despite having a lower total expenditure for new land, a smaller amount of acreage sold, and a higher number of land transactions, 1837 still boasts a \$2.00 gain on average cost per acre when compared to 1836 (\$6.92 an acre, versus \$5.84 an acre) with a record eighteen land transactions – the most in a single year since Memphis' founding in 1819 [TABLE I]. This demonstrates the possibility that land value rose in the face of depressed crop sales during the 1837 crisis.

The 1837 values continued into 1838, where the value climbed again from \$6.92 to \$8.26 an acre over twelve land transactions. While not as significant a jump, the nearly \$1.50 rise is still noteworthy. Cotton prices, while nowhere near their pre-crisis levels, had still begun to increase, selling for 8 to 11 cents on Memphis markets (but, interestingly enough, for only 1 1/3 – 2 cents in New Orleans).⁹⁹ It is possible that the value increase during 1838 signified a belief in the recovery of the cotton market and better days on the horizon.

However, the worst was yet to come. Cotton prices stayed at a steady 9 cents in 1839, despite an increasing demand in overseas markets (especially England). Simultaneously, land values fell to an average \$6.09 an acre while the number of land transactions dwindled to only ten.¹⁰⁰ The sudden price drop accompanied growing unrest with cotton speculation in the North, demonstrating just how closely LaGrange was tied to national affairs.

The most significant land deed records occur between 1840 and 1842, a three year range when the effects of the Crisis of 1839 finally echoed down the trade line.¹⁰¹ Despite New Orleans markets selling cotton for between 7 and 5 cents over the period, land values increased without economic cause while the number of land transactions continued their slow, steady decline [Tables I, IV]. Land values in 1840 jumped to \$8.62 an acre over only seven transactions – another \$2.00 hike in the middle of a slow market. Following the trend, 1841 showed a remarkable \$10.66 an acre with seven transactions. Values in 1842 fell to \$8.54 over only four transactions. Contemporary scholarship marks 1842 as the end of the economic crisis, an end that parallels the continued dropping in land transaction numbers and the continued dropping of land value in LaGrange.

Admittedly, the increasing land value may suggest that the depression did not affect planters as much as historians previously believed. Since the values of cotton sold in New Orleans – and thus the effects of the subsequent drop in income – cannot be disputed, the only other possibility is that plantation owners in LaGrange were growing more staple crops, such as wheat or corn, than cash crops. But this idea loses credibility when one considers the growing potential of West Tennessee's land (perfectly suitable

for short staple cotton), the tendency for southern farming to migrate towards cash crops, and the previously booming market for cotton trade. Instead, it is probable that, alongside cotton, enough staple crops were *usually* grown to help balance out the dichotomy – for most planters. Even with staple crops as a stabilizing factor, however, cotton remained the number one motive for plantations. Furthermore, staple crops would likely have only brought stability to existing plantations, not given planters a reason to expand their holdings, much less raise the price by \$2.00 an acre.

Planters at this time had no economic reason to pay such high prices. Without a viable economic explanation to the increase of value, we must turn to examining underlying social connotations connected to the plantation lifestyle in order to discover the cause. In a time of economic trouble, planters saw the opportunity to publically display their financial stability. Land transactions show that planters used the depression's effects on small landholders to regain the land advantage. They also illustrate an embodiment of the planter's need to *appear* as part of a certain social class. No means other than spending superfluous amounts on valueless land better demonstrated this standing to the public. The rewards were two-fold; not only did planters gain extra wealth in the accumulation of a very public material object, but they received a reputation for having generously given to a less fortunate – a less well-endowed – farmer during a time of great need. In the act of going to the court house and publically attaching one's name to another's on bills of sale – available for public viewing – planters could guarantee a continuing respect and good reputation in the small town.

Upon examining the individual land transactions per year, that distinctive relation between class and land price once again arises. Unlike the previous occurrence of this pattern *before* the 1837 crisis, nearly every planter buying land during this six year stretch (1837-1842) paid artificially increased amounts. Furthermore, the amount of land involved in the transactions – amounts sometimes as small as 13 acres or less, and as large as 735 – did not create a change in this behavior. In comparison, land values without the planters' activities remained dismally low, and better reflected the reality of a bear market. In the middle of an era where cotton could not conceivably have paid for the labor required to produce it, planters were not only purchasing the land of their less fortunate, lower class fellows, but were doing so at almost indulgent rates.

Reconsider the seemingly innocuous \$2.17 drop in 1839. The price of \$6.09 an acre correlates closer to pre-depression prices (\$5.84 in 1836) than they are to 1837's artificial \$6.92 levels. On the surface, the fall in land value seems to parallel the existence of a severe agricultural recession – which it does. However, it does *not* clearly emphasize exactly how steep that recession was. One distinct difference separates 1839 from both 1836 and 1837: the number of specific individuals interested in buying land that could be considered securely in the planter class. In 1836, six of the fifteen buyers were planter-class individuals – those owning more than twenty slaves – purchasing land above \$7.00 an acre (an additional four planters bought land at non-inflated prices). In comparison, during 1837 *half* of all land transactions involved planters buying varying amounts of land at above \$7.00 an acre; a further three bought significant acreage above \$6.00 an acre [TABLE V]. In both years, all of the land transactions above \$7.00 an acre involved land owners with more than 20 slaves.

TABLE V							
LAND DEEDS DURING 1837 PANIC							
PLANTER LAND ACQUISITIONS: 1837				SMALL LANDHOLDER ACQUISITIONS: 1837			
Deed Number	Acres	Total Cost	Cost / Acre	Deed Number	Acres	Total Cost	Cost / Acre
1	25	\$250.00	\$10.00	1	125	\$600.00	\$4.80
2	400	\$1,200.00	\$3.00	2	75	\$375.00	\$5.00
3	90 1/4	\$900.00	\$9.97	3	325	\$2,000.00	\$6.15
4	179	\$1,500.00	\$8.38	4	8	\$50.00	\$6.25
5	210	\$1,683.00	\$8.01	5	275	\$1,375.00	\$5.00
6	6	\$75.00	\$12.50	6	144	\$1,050.00	\$7.29
7	141	\$1,128.00	\$8.00	7	200	\$100.00	\$0.50
8	160	\$1,600.00	\$10.00				
9	13	\$100.00	\$7.69				
10	175	\$1,100.00	\$6.29				
11	98.75	\$562.00	\$5.69				

Source - Fayette and Hardeman County Deed Books, compiled by Cailin E. Meyer.

Removing the influence of the planter class' land transactions greatly alters the average amount paid per acre. In 1839, the average price was \$6.09 [TABLE I]. Without those land transactions buoying land values, the average 1839 price per acre drops to \$4.50. Likewise, in 1837 the removal of the planter class' transactions reduces land value to \$4.76. The same pattern can be seen in 1838 (\$4.89), but cannot be accurately traced in 1840-1841, because only four of the fourteen transactions took place below \$6.00 an acre (the largest of which was for \$4.67 an acre.) What *can* be seen in 1840-1841, however, is that the *only* class purchasing land was the planter class.

This phenomenon – that of a suddenly spendthrift planter class – appears in the earlier depression years. In 1836, roughly half of the transactions took place with small landholders as the buyers, and half among the planter class [TABLE IV]. In 1837, only three of the eighteen transactions featured purchasing small landowners. Five of the twelve in 1838 can be classified as small slaveholders, while less than one third of the 1839 transactions involved planters with less than twenty slaves. In contrast, the number of small landholders *selling* land increased over the depression years until 1842.

Without doubt, the smaller landowners had the most to lose during depressions. While they produced significantly less cotton than their planter neighbors, they also lacked the financial stability those larger yields guaranteed. They were more likely to be in various forms of debt, through official bank loans, credit or to personal friends. The 1837 shrinking profit margin on what cotton they could produce meant that remaining cash or credit had to be sacrificed in order to stay above water. When cotton prices failed to recover adequately the following year, and with the second recession around the corner, small landowners faced a growing issue of piling debt.

With these conditions colliding with the national credit freeze, these small landowners became the most vulnerable to the banks. The planters, possessing if not the actual cash flow then at least more social credit that extended the lengths of their loans, were able to “liberate” these ailing small landowners from their troubles, thus allowing them to start anew – somewhere else. The fact that nearly all the planters who took advantage of the depression also purchased land at multiple times its actual value only served to further illuminate the chasm between the two social spheres.

The location of these additional lands played an intriguing role in the price value, but the price did not necessarily reflect the lands’ agricultural potential. Among the eighteen land transactions in 1837, twelve took place east of the river plain and among high elevations. Among those transactions, half involved inflated prices and seven involved large slave owners.

The other six transactions featured land located along the riverfront or the flood plain.¹⁰² These riverfront transactions sold for lower prices than those seen in the highlands, but not in every instance. Furthermore, of the six flood plain purchases, three sold for over \$7.00 an acre, while in the highlands, six transactions took place *under* \$7.00 an acre, and two sold for under \$5.00 an acre. Thus, while bottom land held a lower growth potential and *usually* held a lower value, this did not necessarily impact the land’s final sale price.

Likewise, the location of the land in accordance to the original plantation did not necessarily mean a higher price. In general, planters appeared more interested in available land located next to their own plantation. Of the eleven 1837 parcel locations that could be accurately geographically placed and involved planters previously located in LaGrange, only two involved planters buying land not directly adjacent to or close by

their previous property. However, this pattern occurs in land transactions involving prices above and below the \$7.00 mark, and the two 1837 transactions that were disassociated from original property sold for above market price. This pattern also occurred in 1838-1842.¹⁰³

It makes sense that plantation owners would rather amass land close to their current plantations, rather than deal with the hassle and risk of maintaining slave populations further from a master's influence. But some plantation owners demonstrated a willingness to not only buy land close to home, but also to pay extravagant amounts for the privilege. And the amount of land involved in that payment had little influence. Looking again at 1837, three of the highest priced transactions involved land parcels twenty-five acres or less: \$250 for twenty-five acres of prime highland; thirteen bottomland acres, \$7.69 each; and a measly six acres for \$12.50, the highest price paid that year [TABLE V]. In each of these cases, no indication was made to suggest the presence of any geographic (such as road or water access) or economic (such as a mill or other structures) causes for the land's value. As the addition of thirteen acres to any plantation could not possibly have made a noticeable contribution to production, these land deals in particular suggest a non-economic influence on land transactions.

By 1842, the effects of the depression era could clearly be seen on LaGrange's landscape. Gone were the multitudes of small parcels hedging in the planters' boundaries on all sides. The inverse relationship between parcel size and the number of plantations had reversed itself; few small landholders had survived the fall of cotton, and those that did were cramped along the banks of the river and its flood-prone acreage, leaving the east bank almost exclusively to six planter families.

After the depression, the number of land transactions dwindled more and more each year as the region's planters permanently settled their boundaries. With the crisis ending, the small landholding class becomes more prominent in the buying of land, but for largely reduced plat sizes at depression-level prices. The planter class, on the other hand, continued purchasing acreage, large and small, for inflated prices – from John Hunt's 125 acres for \$1,250 dollars in 1847 to Caleb Jones' 613 acres for \$13.05 an acre in 1851. Throughout the next eighteen years, this pattern would continue along both sides of the river, and by 1860 even the west bank would find itself locked into the care of family legacies. Large landholders once again controlled the majority of fertile upland territory in LaGrange.

But if the planter class were only interested in monopolizing the land for its own financial uses – an assumption that is not entirely without merit – then there was no need to do so with prices drastically above the fair market value. In fact, given the economic conditions for agriculture at the time, such payments could be considered foolhardy. Capitalistic and economic concerns were not the only forces determining the planter's decisions in prices paid for land. A second factor – appearance and the demands of social class – compelled the aristocratic planter class to pay per acre at rates far above land's actual economic value. In order to achieve this appearance, planters altered the meaning that land, as material culture, held. They paid high and sold low in order to create a very specific façade. By manipulating its value in the middle of the depression, planters simultaneously demonstrated that money was often of little consequence – thus displaying their financial security – while also appearing very generous to less fortunate neighbors.

It should be noted that an alternative explanation for LaGrange's inflated prices is the possibility of something akin to bidding wars erupting between planters. In this scenario, planters may have influenced land prices by offering more than their competition, effectively creating an atmosphere not unlike that of an auction. These instances would not necessarily have survived in the historical record, as only the winning planter's name and final price would be recorded on the land deed. On the surface, a bidding war suggests that planters were more economically minded than culturally, as they might have been more concerned about limiting cotton growing resources for the competition.

But the possibility of bidding wars is not necessarily incompatible with the theory of the planter ideal. A bidding war certainly holds aspects of the southern duel as discussed by historian Kenneth Greenberg. Whoever lost the war would have to live with the shameful knowledge that he held fewer resources than the winner. The winner's reputation is then tripled – first by winning the duel (the bidding war), second by demonstrating his wealth and resources to the public (and to the loser), and finally, by increasing his own landholdings while still aiding the unfortunate. Thus, the prospect of bidding wars demonstrates the extent to which planters used land and boundaries as expressions of culture.

It is equally possible that the increased prices planters paid were actually an indication of smaller landowners taking advantage of the wealthy. That is, small landowners were well aware of the gap between them and their wealthier counterparts. Armed with this knowledge, and under pressure to sell their property anyway, the less fortunate classes may have purposefully offered their land at greatly inflated prices.

Perhaps the planters, armed with a combative capitalistic mindset, agreed to these inflated prices out of the fear that one of their fellow neighbors would procure the land if they refused –thus increasing the possibility of being “shown” in town by a rival aristocrat. However, even if the small landowners were the ones raising land prices instead of the planters, the result was the same. The status of planters rose nonetheless due to their ability to buy the overpriced land. Thus, land value still became a tool through which planters demonstrated their economic stability and high standing.

However, one seemingly coincidental occurrence suggests that the price manipulation lay with the planter class, not the small landholders. The inflated prices offered by LaGrange’s old blood, those aristocratic families from the East, coincided with the buying practices of a few important new arrivals to the small town. Beginning in 1836, a handful of “unsavory” characters began buying land for fair market value or less; these were the bourgeoisie planters, small landowners who, through pure tenacity managed to procure a large number of slaves and a large plantation on which to work. While they did possess cash, they often had no family or social connections. Even worse, not only did they hold a more capitalistic understanding of slavery and agriculture, these newly rich slaveholders did not share the aristocratic planters’ views of honor, reputation, or social perceptions of image and appearance. They did not follow the rules of social image or gifting.

There could be few other threats so great to the planter’s public image. The bourgeoisie were a class of man capable of gaining the financial level of the aristocratic without the financial burdens that accompanied appearance. These planters were not concerned with paying above market value for the property they obtained. They were not

concerned with aiding the “suffering small landowner.” Bourgeoisie planters knew the true value of land during the agricultural depression, and they knew that they could get away with paying actual market value.

Bourgeoisie planters in LaGrange are difficult to categorize due to the lack of information that remains behind them. Specifically, bourgeoisie planters were those who came to LaGrange in the latter half of its settlement. Little or no records remain of their genealogy, suggesting a more humble upbringing than their aristocratic, Virginia-born counterparts. They were absent from the political scene and were not involved in helping build the town. Through the land deeds and boundary maps, it is evident that most came to LaGrange as small landholders and, over the decades, slowly accumulated enough land and slaves to tentatively be called planters. They are further categorized by the few who actually succeeded in acquiring the land quantities necessary to meet planter landholding status.

With a few exceptions, bourgeoisie planters accumulated their land by paying the fair market value and not the inflated price. For instance, in his seven land transactions between 1836 and 1856, Alexander McNeil paid above \$6.00 for land only once – in 1851, when he purchased 180 acres for \$7.78 an acre. The remaining five transactions show him paying under \$6.00 an acre; \$5.88 in 1836 (850 acres), \$3.90 in 1847 (712 acres), \$4.74 for 316 acres and \$292 for 512 acres in 1853, and in 1856, 250 acres for \$2.20.¹⁰⁴ But by 1860, McNeil could claim 62 slaves on the slave census, a number that very obviously placed him among the richest in LaGrange.¹⁰⁵ Yet, despite his high number of slaves and acreage, Alexander McNeal never once became involved in local political affairs, never led a bridge or road inspection, and he never sign an on record

trust deed. His lack of action sets him apart from LaGrange's aristocratic planters. He had no need to play their games of public displays. The aristocratic planters, however, had a vested interest in purposefully defining themselves a part from him. The fact that the aristocratic and bourgeoisie landholdings and slaveholding bore similarities in size to the public world was something that the planter class could not ignore.

Planters manipulated the land's cultural meaning in other ways. They also participated in a complex system of gift giving, designed again to show their honor and position, by giving away land and slaves to family members and friends. By showing that material objects were worthless to them, they in fact greatly increased its social worth. And a common example of gifting involves the cosigning of loans and the creation of trust deeds between planters of different classes. The act of cosigning loans and signing trust deeds was a practice intended to increase their own and each other's reputations through association.

Cosigning loans occurred when a bank was dissatisfied with a planter's ability to make good on the loan he intended to take out. In such cases, the planter in question had another co-sign the loan. Thus, the responsibility for repaying the loan was shared between the two planters. Cosigning loans therefore added to a planter's word of honor since, if a planter defaulted on their payments, the cosigner would be held financially responsible for the entirety of the payment.

In contrast, a deed of trust occurred when a previously financially stable planter found himself unable to pay back his debts. As an alternative to defaulting and losing his plantation, planters would often secure the financial help of a fellow planter. This second planter agreed to pay off the outstanding debts. In return, the indebted planter would pay

him back over an indeterminate amount of time. If, however, his financial conditions failed to improve, the indebted planter's property would be signed over to the second planter as compensation.

Trust deeds and cosigning loans often merged together in the same documents, making inter-plantation relationships even more difficult to untangle. What is easily identifiable, however, is that planters entered into trust deeds not only with each other, as we will see later, but also with small slaveholders and non-slaveholders. Undoubtedly the planter's role in these deeds involved vital aspects of neighborly paternalism as well as demonstrations of wealth and reputation. The planter did not simply lend money, but rather seemed to follow the progress of those to whom he lent. In these interactions, the planter served not only as an initial lender for the debtor, but he continued on in the role of financial security past his personal interactions with the debtor. Thus, the process of lending becomes a very personal and social interaction – one that profited the planter in social standing, if not in turnover.

Take, for instance, the relationship between planter William Bau(gh) and small landowner Alfred Whitten. On 24 January 1840, Whitten named Bau as the Trustee of his debts and property in exchange for 70 acres and \$5.¹⁰⁶ Should Whitten fail to “settle his estates” and repay a debt of \$194.00 to a relative, Bau was authorized to secure the sale of Whitten's remaining property – including two young slave girls, three horses, five cows, and two bulls, and an odd assortment of other belongings – through a public auction. What makes this trust significantly more interesting is not only Bau's role as possible auctioneer, but Whitten's naming of John Graham and David Jernigan – the same Jernigan mentioned earlier as a prominent LaGrange citizen – as having acted as

previous securities of his estate. The auction sales, should they take place, would first repay Bau's expenses, then "secondly to the satisfaction of securities" names within, and third toward repaying his relative. Records do not indicate whether or not Whitten was able to make due, or if Bau had to arrange for the sale of his property.

A similar case involved plantation owner Ira Green and small landowner Eldred J. H. White. White borrowed \$704.65 from Green on 1 January 1838, a time when, on a national level at least, cotton prices were supposedly recovering.¹⁰⁷ When, by November of the same year, however, it became evident that White would be unable to repay Green's loan, he and Green signed a new trust deed. Green agreed to resume responsibility for White's property – including his land, slaves, and various belongings listed – as well as his remaining debts. What these debts might have entailed is not mentioned in the trust deed, but the phrase's inclusion is significant. Similar phrases are mentioned in other trust deeds, though this deed states its role most blatantly.

The phrase signifies a continuing responsibility by the loaning party in the event of misfortune. When entering into loans, planters did not simply give the money away, but rather remained involved in the entire process of repaying whoever was owed. If the money borrowed was not enough, was poorly invested, or if it was evident that the borrower was simply a terrible businessman, planters acted as a gap-stop measure. They allowed borrowers to repay them in property – which may or may not fully cover the amount owed, though it often did. But in return, they also had to assume responsibility for any further outstanding debts outside of their agreement with the borrower.

Cosigning loans and trust deeds also occurred between planter families, with similar results. Consider the story of Martha Winfield. When Winfield moved to

LaGrange, she was a planter-status widow with two children just under age; her grandfather was apparently affluent enough that, in his will, he made significant securities for his grandchildren. She originally purchased 429 acres from a Lewis Connor – of unknown status – in 1838 for the price of \$20 an acre.¹⁰⁸ Her purchase signifies one of the highest prices per acre paid in any decade. The poor timing of her purchases in connection to the national financial insecurities may explain her constant financial woes. It appears that, in order to buy her land, Winfield used money intended as her children's inheritance. Two separate securities are named in her deed. Winfield was also being sued by her son-in-law, Rawlings, for a portion of her daughter Margaret's inheritance.

In her trust deed, Winfield promises to “discharge the said Henry G. Smith... and Johnson” for the securities they had previously offered for covering the money owed to her children. If she failed to do so within a year, Martha agreed to forfeit her 200 acres – property that included Jernigan's old grist mill – and at least eleven of her slaves. Martha's continued ownership of the land until she willingly transferred it into her son's care – an action that occurred in 1853, well after her deadline – suggests that all debts were paid in a timely manner. Winfield's case demonstrates the complexity of inter-plantation relations. She initially cosigned loans with two separate gentlemen for two separate loans – one to a bank in New Orleans, and another to a John G. McMahon of Somerville. However, upon failing to procure new funds for her children's inheritance, Winfield had no choice but to enter into another trust deed to ensure the financial protection of her cosigners. In Martha's case, signing over her property to her cosigners was not an option; it no doubt was meant to symbolize the inheritance her son and daughter were meant to receive.

The best examples of cosigning loans and trust deeds lie with “Captain John” W. Jones.¹⁰⁹ Jones was the son-in-law who married Micajah Clark Moorman’s second daughter, Martha, in the early 1820s, and moved the entire Moorman family north after Moorman’s untimely death. Once settled, he superseded his fellow brother-in-law, Elisha Harris, to control the majority of Moorman’s estate and provided for Martha’s mother and several young siblings. Despite being delinquent for taxes in 1826, the 1836 tax census lists him claiming between 1,290 and 1,480 acres valued at \$11,120.00 and owning twenty-five slaves worth \$16,250.00.¹¹⁰

Jones seemed to hold an “open door” policy for his neighbors, as many smaller landowners borrowed or were gifted various sums over this period. His primary means of acquiring new land seemed to be through taking care of other’s financial troubles. In 1840, Jones obtained roughly 70 acres from a P.T. Scruggs through a lawsuit. Scruggs, a well-off small slaveholder, had previously entered into a trust deed with James Hunter and Lawrence McGinnis in which the two, “among other conveyences[sic] convey ... a certain tract or parcel of land known as the Mount Comfort Store...” to Scruggs.¹¹¹ It appears that Hunter and McGinnis were in debt to Jones for \$2,912.83. Scruggs acted as an intermediary, giving Jones the land in exchange for forgiving the bad loan.

This transaction between Jones, Scruggs, Hunter and McGinnis demonstrates the complexity of gift and exchange in southern society. While the tract might have held more value thanks to the store’s location, it is not clear from the deed whether the general store closed upon passing into Jones’ hands, or if it remained in operation; there is no indication, however, that the store remained open, and no indication that Jones received any share of its profits. Thus, the value of the store cannot be indicated. As such, the

exchange of 70 acres for three thousand dollars – a rate of \$42.61 per acre – can either appear as incredibly generous or somewhat vindictive on Jones' part.

When considering this exchange in light of gifting, honor and reputation, Jones' actions make more sense. The practice of cosigning on loans involved a planter literally putting his reputation, as well as his money, at risk in the form of his signature. If the planter's ability to repay the loan was questionable, the lender often required him to secure the signatures of those who would cover his debts, should he default. Any friend or relative who cosigned a loan gained nothing material from the exchange, but risked public embarrassment and financial setbacks if the planter failed to repay the debt.¹¹² By endorsing the name of a fellow planter through loans or cosigns, one's own reputation and sense of judgment was put to question.

Jones assumed this risk every time he cosigned the debt of another planter. This time, Jones' judgment had been called into question when, even after requiring Hunter and McGinnis to find a cosigner, he still permitted the store owners a year long extension – after which they still failed to repay their large loan. By not paying back their debt a second time, Hunter and McGinnis insulted Jones' honor by disappointing his judgment. Jones had little choice but to procure legal ramification.

Scruggs, as the cosigner, became liable for the partner's debts, and thus it was Scruggs who suffered the larger blow to his reputation. Furthermore, while Scruggs owned a profitable plantation, he was a much smaller planter than Jones; the \$3,000 debt would have put him in his own financial woes. Despite this, Scruggs negotiated a tenuous treaty with Jones; by forgiving Hunter and McGinnis in exchange for their

property, Scruggs provided Jones an honorable way out the situation. In return, Scruggs own reputation as a man of his word remained intact without endangering his livelihood.

The elaborate transaction between Scruggs, Hunter and McGinnis with Jones demonstrates just how entwined the business world and the social world could become in the antebellum South. In order to participate in either field, a planter inevitably and constantly risked his reputation and his pocket book on the words of others. This created a complex network of relationships in which each planter simultaneously increased the reputation of himself and others when cosigning or paying others' loans. To understand better the complex relationships and the acts of gifting between planter families, one only has to consider the exchanges between Beverly Holcombe, Ephraim Rawlings and John W. Jones.

Beverly Holcombe's circumstances were similar to Jones', but fraught with more financial difficulties. He, too, hailed from a prominent Virginian planter family whose ancestors had emigrated from England in the 1600s; it is believed that the family plantation, known as The Oakes, held over 3,000 acres and was given as a regal grant.¹¹³ Despite the family's good social standing, however, severe financial difficulties due to the "inroads of liberal living and the waning prosperity of the farming operation due to unscientific crop management" forced patriarch Philemon Holcombe to sell the family estate.¹¹⁴ Holcombe Sr. then moved with his daughters and youngest son, Beverly, to LaGrange in 1829; their slaves and heirlooms followed them. There, within the first year at LaGrange, Beverly Holcombe courted and married Eugenia Hunt, the daughter of prominent planter John Hunt.¹¹⁵

In 1834, Holcombe had enough financial security to continue his family's plantation tradition. He purchased 640 acres of prime upland stock from Samuel Dickens, one of LaGrange's few remaining land prospectors, for \$5,888.66 (\$8.01/acre – an obviously inflated value). Naming his new plantation Woodstock, Holcombe experienced enough financial stability to purchase an additional 167 acres from an Ephraim Jackson in 1838, for which he paid \$9.58 an acre for the privilege.¹¹⁶ In 1839, a trust deed notes that he owned forty-six slaves, twenty head of horses, and fifty head of cattle and sheep, each, and by 1842, his landholdings would grow to 900 acres.¹¹⁷ At this same time, he commenced to have a proper manor house built for him and his growing family of six children.

Holcombe also experienced a close friendship with another local planter family – the Rawlings. In 1838, following the death of John Rawlings, Holcombe acted as the Executor of Rawlings' will and covered half of a missing payment, up to \$800, on a large parcel of land on behalf of Rawlings' widow – which he then seems to have continued to own jointly with John Rawling's descendants.¹¹⁸ At the same time, he also agreed to cover other extensive debts procured by John Rawlings during the latter's lifetime. Both John Rawlings and his son, Ephraim, became indebted to John Wilkins of Brunswick County, Virginia. The Rawlings had purchased a number of slaves from Wilkins and, with the death of patriarch John, lacked the means to fill their three \$4,000.00 payments over the next three years.¹¹⁹ Holcombe agreed to cover their costs in a deed of trust in exchange for 160 acres of Rawlings' land and five slaves.

The final nail in Holcombe's financial coffin, however, was his decision to put up Woodstock in order to cover another deed of trust in 1839 – this one for a \$27,000 debt

owed to The Merchants Bank of Memphis.¹²⁰ Unfortunately for Holcombe, this was one financial decision that nearly ruined him; fortunately for Jones, Holcombe was about to secure the Jones family's position as LaGrange's most prosperous land owners for the next sixty years. Holcombe's friend – whose identity, unfortunately, is not known, but is assumed to be Ephraim Rawlings – was unable to pay back his debts and defaulted in 1842. In addition to his troubles with the Rawlings, Holcomb also owed the bank an excess \$5,530.00 made “jointly and severally with George H. Wyatt and John W. Jones...”¹²¹ Stuck with the fallout – a portion of which was no doubt caused by the continued recessed cotton prices – Holcombe had no choice but to sell his plantation in order to cover the loan. Jones, ever the gentleman, approached Holcombe and, by buying Holcombe's 900 acres for a total \$10,595.82 (\$11.74 per acre), helped cover Holcombe's remaining debt.¹²²

Considering the economic situation in 1842 – the year that finally marked the end of the depression – there is little doubt that Jones' buying price was intended to secure Holcombe's financial future in a very public, but honorable manner. Only two other land transactions took place in 1842, the highest of them selling for \$6 an acre.¹²³ Furthermore, since the distance between plantations was too great for his brother-in-law, John Hunt, to purchase, and with the death of Robert Cotten in 1836 (whose plantation bordered Holcombe's entire west and south property line), Jones signified the only planter in LaGrange with both the geographic opportunity and the financial means to buy all of Holcombe's land. Holcombe had little choice but to deal with his fellow Virginian. His only other options were to sell his plantation piecemeal to the smaller

landowners to the north – a process requiring time he no doubt did not have – or, even worse, bear the further embarrassment of a public auction.

With time and opportunity on his side, Jones could have easily made a more fiscally sound decision to buy Holcombe's property at a lower value. Instead, Jones made the public decision to bail a fellow planter out of an unfortunate situation. The mysterious friend eventually recovered his fortunes and repaid Holcombe, who removed to Marshall, Texas, and purchased 100 acres of new land. Jones gained 900 acres, and solidified his immeasurable social image and reputation as not only LaGrange's wealthiest planter, but a remarkably generous one as well. By covering the social embarrassment of Holcombe's bankruptcy, Jones demonstrated exactly how little importance money held for him.

As small land owners could not be so free with monetary funds, their perception of Jones – and, accordingly, of others who followed him – was altered by his actions. The lower classes had a different concept of money; they literally lacked the resources to cosign loans or trust deeds, because they themselves would be unable to afford it should their partner default. Thus, when a planter went through the action of not only offering financial assistance but acting upon it, it demonstrated to the lower classes his superior hierarchial position. Since maintaining Southern honor required public displays of power, and since power was dictated by social perception – the acknowledgment of an action – a planter's status grew in proportion to his philanthropic generosity.

Social perception could be influenced in much more physical means, as well. Planters purposefully altered the landscape, and thus influenced land's value, through the public display of their manor houses. All plantation owners desired to leave a lasting

impression on the landscape. They acquired land, marked their boundaries in a public deed book, cleared their fields, impacted the local flora and fauna with devastating effects, handpicked their employers and oversaw construction themselves. They named their homesteads after scenes of nature and elegance – Cedar Grove, Woodstock, Willow Glenn, for example – names that evoked a feeling of superiority and better living. The plantation landscape expressed its owner's aesthetics, principles and ethics.

These manor houses, immortalized by Hollywood in *Gone with the Wind*, served to separate the upper class from the lower in the most blatant, physical and material manner possible. The proper planter's home must, in every acre and every floorboard, reject completely the image of the colonist farmer's first house, built "almost all of wood, covered with the same; the roof with shingles, the sides and ends with thin boards, and not always lathed and plastered within...the windows of the best sort have glass in them the rest have none, and only wooden shutters."¹²⁴ Manor houses acted as a tangible enforcement of the planter ideal, the symbol of ultimate southern power. The effect was doubled when the house was accompanied by thousands of acres of cotton crops. It ensured that every visitor, no matter their class status or background, was painfully aware of the social standing of the one they were calling upon. And it ensured that every human being who even only ever saw the outside façade dreamed of obtaining the ever elusive plantation ideal themselves. The manor house's function was purely culture driven. It acted as a prominent physical reminder of the planter's well being, a semi-permanent mark on the landscape that signified his superiority.

Multiple examples of the manor house existed in LaGrange in antiquity, but few have been so lucky to survive in contemporary times. Holcombe, for instance, is

believed to have had a manor house built in the late 1830s, but it has since either been purposefully destroyed or lost to neglect, leaving behind only vague references to the “Holcombe manor house” in records. Likewise, the manor house of planter Robert Cotten, who was deeply involved in the development of LaGrange in its earliest years, is often noted in antiquity, but no visible traces of it exist today on the landscape. However, a few antebellum manors have survived to modernity – such as that belonging to John W. Jones who, in 1845, began constructing the crown jewel of his planter landscape.

Jones’s manor house, reputedly finished in 1847, spared no expenses in displaying this iconic image. The nearest lumber mill was “Davis’ Mill” (present day Michigan City) in Mississippi; this required Jones to use his own labor to cut and prepare material on site, meaning that slave labor had to be diverted from the fields for an extended amount of time.¹²⁵ The structure featured an L-shape configuration, and consisted of two stories and at least eight rooms, a veranda-style porch and an upstairs sunroom over the main entryway. An impressive brick path led from a purposefully constructed gateway, designed to force visitors to dismount, to the double doors and into the lavish foyer and two-flight staircase. Two brick kitchens hide behind the house’s front exterior. Oak trees and cedars planted by Jones’ workers still surround the building today. Christened “Cedar Grove” by Jones, the house helped instill the feeling of his Virginia heritage.

John Hunt, the prominent LaGrange planter whose daughter, Eugene, married Beverly Holcombe, provides another manor house example that has survived to this day. His manor, known as “Huntland,” was described in 1938 as a, “large house, having eight rooms and three baths...”¹²⁶ Hunt built the entire house from bricks made through tedious

slave labor, grouped the windows by threes, installed pinewood floors, and had the six columns along the main entryway made octagonal in shape, instead of the far easier to construct square columns.¹²⁷ His manor house, just like Jones' Cedar Grove, was meant to stand as a visible material testament to his status.

Architectural historian Dell Upton suggests that the layout of the "Big House" was designed to simultaneously enforce the central focus of the planter in society while using physical barriers, pieces of material culture, to keep the public as far away as possible.¹²⁸ The sumptuous architectural designs forced outsiders to pay attention to the planter's status at the same time that the attention-grabbing layout presented limited access to the plantation. A pre-determined pathway accompanied by walls, gates, flora and thresholds meant that the planter decided where and where to accept and entertain. In the ever more crowded frontier that was LaGrange, Jones and Hunt took numerous steps to adopt and adjust the meanings of land into a more socially understood form. Land gained more than just the value imparted on it by cotton prices in New Orleans; it became a bold, daring statement of the planter's positions as the top planter in LaGrange.

Jones' position, apparently, was one of never ending generosity, especially among friends and family. Mary Cornelia Jarrott, a close friend of Jones' two daughters, Ann Eliza and Mary Arthur, recalled Jones' generosity through a relative's visit that lasted six years, and remembered the, "wonderful entertainments at Cedar Grove... it was always 'open house.'"¹²⁹ By opening his house to friends and family – sometimes for years – Jones demonstrated the lengths of his hospitality – and his ability to pay for it. He controlled who entered his home, and thus his image as not only a master but as a

southern gentleman, by allowing free access to anyone who called. Their reason for visiting did not matter, as he could afford it anyway.

In a system where individual worth was determined by social perception, planters looked for a variety of ways in which to publically display their power. Capitalizing on the financial distresses of the late 1830s and early 1840s, planters altered the social meaning of the landscape into a tool for their public demonstrations. Land purchases became a way to display social status and financial well-being, as planters assumed a social responsibility of ‘taking care’ of the unfortunate who were forced to sell. They signed deed trusts to show their communal status and trust – that *this* planter can cover *that* planter, but he won’t have to because *that* planter will pay his debts. And physical markers on the landscape served to enforce the status quo by visibly reminding the public of a planter’s wealth and prestige, and thus his power.

The events of 1837-1842 allowed the planter class to regain a foothold into the model of the world they preferred. The small landholders, suffering from the same financial insecurities they always faced, moved away one by one to greener pastures, but were never replaced by fellow small landholders. From 1842 to the start of the Civil War, every piece of land offered for sale would be snatched up by a large plantation owner; Ben Moody, John Hunt, John W. Jones - even Alexander McNeal, for all of his bourgeoisie attitudes. By 1850, LaGrange’s cotton landscape would consist of almost exclusively large plantations on the east bank, and by 1860, the same process would almost be completed in the flood plains to the west. The planters of LaGrange would enjoy their monopoly only until the start of the Civil War. Then their worlds would once again be torn asunder as reality forced them to adapt to yet another social-economic shift.

- ⁸¹ Jamie P. Evans, "Map of Ames Plantation, 1836," provided by Jamie P. Evans.
- ⁸² Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: Knopf, 1948), 63.
- ⁸³ Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960), 114.
- ⁸⁴ Walter Buckingham Smith and Arthur Harrison Cole, *Fluctuations in American Business, 1790-1860* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 185 and 192; Bray Hammond, *Banks and Politics in America, from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 467-90, 502-18; Douglass North, *Growth and Welfare in the American Past* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1966), 32.
- ⁸⁵ Peter Temin, *The Jacksonian Economy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969), 26.
- ⁸⁶ Peter Temin, *The Jacksonian Economy*, 36.
- ⁸⁷ Bell Irving Wiley, *Cotton and Slavery in the History of West Tennessee* (Thesis, University of Kentucky, 1929). 14-22.
- ⁸⁸ Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States: 1790 to 1860* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1961), 197.
- ⁸⁹ Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States*, 200.
- ⁹⁰ Lawrence G. Gundersen, Jr. "West Tennessee and the Cotton Frontier, 1818 – 1840," *The West Tennessee Historical Society Paper*, Vol. LII, (Memphis: The West Tennessee Historical Society, 1998), 30.
- ⁹¹ For more information on the Bank of Pennsylvania, please see Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States*, 201.
- ⁹² The assertion that the drop in cotton prices is due to a rise in production (due in turn by the continuing advancement of the frontier) is false. As shown in Table I, cotton prices fluctuated wildly throughout these depression years while the production of cotton remained arguably stable. Clearly a market for cotton never mysteriously evaporated. The only implication that cotton production oversaturated the market comes in 1848, but even this claim dissipates as, over the next ten years, cotton production continued to rise with an equally growing purchasing price. For more information, please see Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States*, 202.
- ⁹³ Lawrence G. Gundersen, Jr. "West Tennessee and the Cotton Frontier, 1818 – 1840," 30.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ⁹⁵ Claude A. Campbell, "The Development of Banking in Tennessee" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Tennessee, 1932), 73.
- ⁹⁶ Thomas P. Abernathy, "The Early Development Banking in Tennessee," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 14 (1927-28): 315. As quoted in Lawrence G. Gundersen, Jr, "West Tennessee and the Cotton Frontier, 1818-1840," 31.
- ⁹⁷ James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders*, (New York: Knopf, 1982), 72- 79.
- ⁹⁸ James Oakes, *The Ruling Race*, 31-47.
- ⁹⁹ Lawrence G. Gundersen, Jr, "West Tennessee and the Cotton Frontier, 1818-1840," 31.
- ¹⁰⁰ Twelve land transactions took place during this year; two were omitted for fear of skewing the data.
- ¹⁰¹ Some scholars attribute the sudden fall in cotton prices to overproduction and remaining surplus from the 1839 season. This surplus was created in part to the inexplicable lukewarm market in 1839.
- ¹⁰² Jamie P. Evans, "Map of Ames Plantation, 1837," provided by Jamie P. Evans.
- ¹⁰³ In 1838, half of the twelve transactions involved new landowners – most of whom eventually sold their land before 1842 was over. Of the remaining six, all but one involved property directly bordering previous property lines. The one exception was a purchase by Mary Wilkes, who bought an apparently very important 40 acres for \$8.13 an acre – forty acres that was nowhere near her original property lines. 1839 saw four of ten transactions involving shared property lines, one within a few hundred acres, three new landowners (two of whom of known planter status) and two properties that could not be geographically placed. 1840 breaks this pattern, with four of seven of the sales taking place among new landowners , and the remaining three, considered large slaveholders but not of planter status, buying land close to but not adjacent to original property. In 1841, all seven transactions involved land sharing boundaries, as in 1842.
- ¹⁰⁴ Fayette County Deed Book N, 214; Fayette County Deed Book I, 159; Fayette County Deed Book R, 122; Fayette County Deed Book U, 303.
- ¹⁰⁵ U.S. Census Manuscripts, Slave Population (1850). Seventh Census, Vol. 2, Fayette and Hardeman Co., TN. Microfilm, State Archive, Nashville TN.
- ¹⁰⁶ Fayette County Court House Book I, 281.

¹⁰⁷ Fayette County Deed Book H, 141-142.

¹⁰⁸ Fayette County Deed Book J, 540.

¹⁰⁹ Jones should be considered LaGrange's wealthiest planter. He boasted of planter lineage from both parents. His father, Arthur, came from Buckingham Co., Virginia, where Jones' grandfather, John Jones, received five patents, presumably written on sheepskin, for property in Virginia some time before 1740. His mother was born Sarah Baker, and was the granddaughter of Caleb Baker. Baker travelled with his two brothers from England in the early 18th century, holding commissions from the King to manufacture fire arms in the colonies. Caleb eventually moved to Amelia Co., Virginia, where his family became prominent members of Virginia's society, and where Sarah eventually met and married Arthur J. Arthur eventually moved the family, including John W. Jones and his younger brother, Wylie, to Tuscumbia, Alabama. See Ida Lee Hancock Beasley, "Jones Line on Her Mother's Side." Personal geological documentation. Provided by Jamie Evans.

¹¹⁰ Evans, Jamie. "Hanley Manuscript." The Hanley Manuscript recorded interviews with those familiar with John W. Jones, who consistently referred to him as "Captain." There is no record of any military service in Jones' history whatsoever; ostensibly, the nickname is probably yet another indicator of his reputation and status.

¹¹¹ Fayette County Tennessee Deed Book I, 526.

¹¹² A similar concept was put forth by Kenneth Greenberg. He argues that the very act of cosigning a loan was a gift, due to the elaborate system of constantly endorsing one another. See Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), chapter 3.

¹¹³ It seems that magnificence and military service ran in Holcombe's family. His grandfather, Captain Philemon Holcombe Sr, served during the French and Indian War, and in 1776 helped found Hampton Sydney College. His uncle, Colonel John Holcombe, commanded the first regiment of Lawson's Brigade, while his father, Philemon Holcombe, Jr., served as a young major in General Lawson's Brigade during the Revolutionary War. His father was also personally acquainted with the Frenchman LaFayette, for whom Beverly is named after, and was a staunch believer that, "blood was the determining factor in the lines of men as it was in horses." Jack Thorndyke Greer, *Leaves From a Family Album*, (Waco: Texian Press, 1975) XI – 3.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3

¹¹⁵ John Hunt moved into the area during the 1920s. His plantation, known as Hunt Place, had, at one point, over 60 slaves and over two thousand acres.

¹¹⁶ Fayette Co. Tenn. Deed Book H, p 192. It may be that Holcombe did not, in fact, pay the full amount for this property. In the increasingly confusing relationship between him and the Rawlings family, it appears that he intended to enter into a partnership with John P. Rawlings to purchase the land; each person was to pay half of the \$1600. A parcel of the exact same size was later sold in the same year to John W. Jones, by Holcombe, on behalf of John Rawling's widow, M. E. Rawlings. (Hardeman Co. Tenn. Deed Book K, p 437). However, it appears that an extra 167 acres did make its way into Holcombe's property, as is later seen by the amount of land he later sells.

¹¹⁷ Fayette County Deed Book I, 101.

¹¹⁸ Hardeman Co. Tenn. Deed Book K, p. 437.

¹¹⁹ Fayette Co TN Deed Book H, p. 114.

¹²⁰ Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," 57.

¹²¹ "Beverly Holcomb to John W. Jones," Hardeman County, TN, Deed Book K, p 251.

¹²² Hardeman Co TN Deed Book K p 251.

¹²³ *Fayette County Tennessee Deed Books J, M.

¹²⁴ Quoted in John Michael Vlach. *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press), 2.

¹²⁵ Evans, Jamie. "Hanley Manuscript," 4.

¹²⁶ Betty Billingsley, "Huntland: A Southern Plantation Home," *Hard Times*, 24 March 1994, page 1.

¹²⁷ Betty Billingsley, "Huntland: A Southern Plantation Home," *Hard Times*, 24 March 1994, page 1.

¹²⁸ Norman R. Yetman, ed., *Life Under the "Peculiar Institution": Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 61, 144.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

Epilogue

Everything changed on June 8, 1861. This was the day that, by a slim majority, Tennessee voted in favor of joining the Confederacy. Everything changed again on February 25, 1862. This was the day Confederate forces lost control of Nashville, the first state capital to fall to the Union army. Everything ended on the ninth of April, 1865.

For John W. Jones, things changed a little faster. The intrepid planter saw two of his sons off to the Confederacy; Caleb, then thirty-three years of age, entered the service of the 13 Regiments Tennessee Infantry in June of 1861. John Jr., who was twenty-one, joined him in the same Regiment soon after. Caleb made something of a name for himself in the Confederate Army. Assigned a Captain's rank, he was present at the Battle of Richmond, Perryville and Murfreesboro.¹³⁰ His tour ended at Murfreesboro, where he suffered injuries that forced him to resign his commission on April 24 of that year. He returned home to LaGrange to his wife, Mariah Bass, and their five children.¹³¹ John Jr. never returned to Cedars Grove. He died on the battlefield at Murfreesboro in December of 1862.

Some evidence exists to suggest that, after the war's end, Jones turned towards sharecropping to maintain his wealth and status. On 11 December, 1865, Jones signed an agreement with freeman Robert Miller, in which Jones provided "as much as fifty acres of land, one mule and horse and... feed for said horse and mule, and quarters for said Miller...Jones agrees to give Miller one half of all the crop raise[sic] by himself."¹³² While this is the only contract presumably extant between Jones and a freedman, arguably Jones entered into multiple such agreements. Whether or not his sharecropping

experience was lucrative is completely unknown. By the 1860s, West Tennessee's once fertile soil had already begun degrading and adversely affecting crop production.

By 1868, Jones was no doubt feeling his age. He had witnessed the transformation of the Fayette frontier into a crowded suburbia. He took notice, as all planters had, of the developments leading up to 1860. He watched a war tear apart everything his slaveholding culture honored and revered. He lost his wife in May of 1862, and then his son that same year.¹³³ Of his ten children, he survived all but three.¹³⁴

Jones' two surviving male heirs, Caleb and Robert, began slowly taking over the operations of Cedar Grove soon after the war. Jones began making the inheritance official in 1868, when he transferred over 777 acres to Caleb. Another 1500 went to Robert (the youngest child but the de facto legally second eldest) the next year. When Jones died in 1880, Caleb and Robert attempted to continue life as usual on the plantation, but signs of financial stress slowly cracked their visage.

By the late 1890s, the transformation of the landscape that had begun at the end of the Civil War was complete. With the ending of the power of the plantation lifestyle – coupled with the weakening soil – even the largest of plantation owners dismantled their farmsteads, piece by piece, among sharecropping and small landholders. Their status as LaGrange's financial saviors, and thus their power, was gone. Between 1895 and 1910, and continuing into the 1930s, a wealthy entrepreneur from Chicago named Hobart Ames came to LaGrange and purchased over 20,000 acres of farmland – acreage containing what was once the property of Alexander McNeil, William Ingram, Edwin Cotten, Martha Winfield. He bought the plantations of Polk, Bau, Moody and Whitmore. John

Hunt's heirs resisted the lure of Ames' pocket book until 1936. Ames then gutted their magnificent Hunt Place and later loaned it periodically to friends.¹³⁵

Like LaGrange's other prominent plantations, Cedar Grove also failed to stand against the changing landscape. Caleb died in 1895. Records indicate that his surviving heirs made stunted attempts to maintain the Jones legacy for another six years before succumbing to economic pressures. They sold Cedar Grove, including the manor house, to Ames in 1901. Ames renamed the manor after himself and vacationed there in the summer months. He let the old cotton fields lie fallow, using his newfound acreage to test and train his bird dogs. For all rights and purposes, the planter ideal was dead.

¹³⁰ “Confederate Army Record 49896860.” December 9, 1910. Provided by Jamie P. Evans.

¹³¹ Jones Family Genealogical records provided by Jamie P. Evans and Dee Evans.

¹³² “Records of the Assistant Commissioner For the State of Tennessee, Bureau of Refuges, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1867, Reel 22, Contracts, Jan. 1, 1865-Jan 1 1867, Hardeman-Madison Counties,” provided by Jamie P. Evans.

¹³³ Family folklore tells a heart-wrenching tale of Martha’s death. Presumably, Martha fell ill after caring for a slave of a family friend. The slave had been sent by his owner to retrieve his dead son’s body from the field. The slave failed to discover the location of the body, and was returning to his owner when he fell ill at Cedars Grove. Martha apparently insisted on tending to the sick slave herself, which resulted in her contracting the disease. Both she and the slave died soon after.

¹³⁴ Jones family births and deaths recorded from Jones’ cemetery plot.

¹³⁵ Betty Billingsley, “Huntland: A Southern Plantation Home,” *Hard Times*, 24 March 1994, 10.

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