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Origins and Endings: Share Labor and the Economic Effects of Emancipation on the Ames Plantation in Fayette County, Tennessee

Jason Jordan

Introduction

In the days immediately following the end of the Civil War in 1865, Southern farmers faced a challenge unlike any they had previously met. It was a time of great change and uncertainty for the Southern economy. The North had won the war, and in the process thousands of black slaves had been granted emancipation. To many Southern farmers who had relied chiefly upon the forced labor of African-Americans for decades in order to drive the Southern economy, this was nothing short of a disastrous occurrence. The principle labor force for a critical mass of the South's farming communities had been granted freedom and had now set out to discover for themselves what their newfound freedom meant. Some trekked off to attempt to reunite with lost family members. Some moved north in search of better social treatment and jobs. And others simply began trying to find a piece of land that they could call their own. In many cases the lands where African-Americans and their former owners lived, and that blacks were now beginning to leave behind, had been ravaged by the war, rendering it all but useless. In a letter from a Tennessee Confederate soldier, William Milliken, returning home to Fayette County after the war, he recalls the atmosphere of the time. He writes,

A few days after the surrender, we were given our paroles and started out to walk home . . . I left the boys at Grand Junction and walked out to my Father's plantation some 8 miles. It was a star-light night but everything was so altered since my last ride over, four years before, that I had difficulty in following the road . . . Following the driveway up the hill, I came to where the front gate stood, but there were only the two Gate-pillars standing with no fences. This did not surprise me as along our entire journey we had passed through smoldering ruin, met mourning widows and fatherless children, destitute of proper clothing or food

but uncomplaining and bravely facing the clouded future.¹

As is shown in Milliken's letter, for a vast number of Southern land holders, there was a both a sense of loss and trepidation about where all of these changes would lead. If planters were to go on with their lives and face that "clouded future" which Milliken and others saw on the horizon, then many changes would have to be made.

And perhaps the most salient of these changes and sacrifices that Southern land owners needed to put into action was in regards to relations with the newly freed African-Americans. Much help would be needed in order to restore the damaged infrastructure of the Southern economy. The land that had either been ruined by or abandoned because of the Civil War would need many strong hands to help rebuild it. And more often than not, those hands belonged to the same individuals who helped to make the Southern economy what it was prior to the Civil War - former blacks persuaded back to work through such arrangements as sharecropping, tenant farming and other wage-based provisions.

This paper explores these issues of loss, change and adaptation within the context of the land base in West Tennessee, now known as the Ames Plantation. For much of the 19th century, the Ames Plantation area, located primarily in Fayette County, Tennessee was a bustling site which exemplified the Antebellum Southern economic dynamic. Made up of several large and small farms all in close proximity to one another, the Ames land area was first settled in the 1820's. Shortly afterwards, it experienced a rapid growth in its population, as more and more farmers sought out fertile land with which to turn a profit. This act of making a profit was principally accomplished through the production of large quantities of cotton, in which the region was particularly suited for growth. As the area's population grew, so did its dependence

¹ William A. Milliken, *Letters from Judge William A. Milliken, 1922 and 1924* (C.F. Stoddard, 1979).

on cotton to bring in revenue. In turn, as its reliance on cotton increased, so did its reliance on slave labor to sustain the income that was being generated from that cotton production. With 90% of land owners in the Fayette County/Ames Plantation area producing cotton as their main commodity, the Ames land base saw its rate of slave ownership by white farmers skyrocket from just 1 in 4 to 8 out of 10 by 1850.²

It was not until after Emancipation and the end of the Civil War in 1865 that the Fayette County/Ames area saw both its high rate of slave ownership and its burgeoning production of cotton come to an abrupt halt. With the loss of not only their primary labor force but also one of their primary means of bringing in revenue, land holders on the Ames land base were forced to make what at the time must have seemed like drastic changes in order to achieve the two goals of staying afloat economically and getting production going again. At times mutually exclusive and at times not, these goals were often met by two main strategies which presented themselves to land owners. The first of those strategies was the offering of economic incentives to the newly freed blacks for the purposes of enticing them to remain on the plantations and continue to work. The second strategy, involved the redistribution of property ownership across the plantation, shifting away from a small number of land owners controlling large areas of land to many more land owners taking control of fewer acres property. Given the relative prosperity that many farmers enjoyed prior to the war, where many had both large land holdings and a black labor force working those land holdings for free, neither of these options could have seemed entirely desirable. The latter method, in fact, more often than not came about as the end result of the first method going awry.

² Dan Sumner Allen IV, *1999 Historical and Archaeological Investigations of the Postbellum Tenant Plantation as Expressed on the Ames Plantation, Fayette and Hardeman Counties, Tennessee*, November 1999, Duvall and

The purpose of this paper is to explore exactly how farmers at Ames used both of these strategies and the economic benefits and/or consequences of doing so. What will be shown is that, naturally, one of the first impulses for white land holders in the Fayette County/Ames Plantation area after the Civil War was to try and get production going again in much the same way as before the war. Only now, being unable to legally coerce or compel the labor of African-Americans, land holders in the Fayette County/Ames area entered into share arrangements with newly freed blacks in an attempt to try and restore that lost Antebellum economic dynamic. However, at best such share labor arrangements were in a sense fundamentally flawed in that competing interests between white planters and African-Americans continually threatened to break them apart. While many land holders wanted a cheap but efficient labor force to work for them, a large amount of African-Americans, in fact, wanted to own farms of their own and not to till the land of their former masters.³ Drawing on, yet at the same time expanding upon existing scholarship about the nature of share labor arrangements, this paper argues that, by examining labor and agricultural production records from farms in the Ames plantation area before and after the Civil War, one is able to get a sense of how ineffective share labor was as a tool for restoring a broken economy. It is proposed, then, that ultimately it was these conflicting interests between the two groups which eventually led to the dissolution of the old plantation system in the Fayette/County Ames Plantation area, represented by the entire area being purchased by one man in the early 20th century, Hobart Ames, a wealthy Northerner.

The Rise and Fall of a Slave Based Economy in the Fayette County

Prior to the Civil War there were mainly two non-mutually exclusive dynamics which played a significant part in defining the Tennessee economy. Those dynamics were slavery and

the production of cotton. They relied on each other in an almost symbiotic relationship with one continually fueling the need for the other. The production of cotton was what brought the largest amount of capital into Tennessee. To harvest that cotton, something that was a particularly labor intensive process, a workforce was needed by the mostly white planters who grew and profited from it on plantations across much of the state. This labor force was found in African-American slaves, whom in the eyes of planters must have seemed to be almost the ideal workers, subservient and, perhaps above all else, free.⁴ In 1820, there were around 80,107 slaves in Tennessee. 40 years later that number had more than tripled to 275, 719, making slaves account for nearly a quarter of Tennessee's total population.⁵

This dramatic rise in Tennessee's total number of slaves can be seen as being directly correlated to the rise of cotton to a prominent position in the various goods that farmers in Tennessee produced. In 1801, Tennessee produced merely 2,500 bales of cotton. As more and more people began to settle and to farm in West Tennessee, however, that number, just like the number of slaves that were owned, also began to skyrocket with approximately 50,000 bales of cotton being produced statewide by 1820. By 1840, Tennessee ranked 7th in the nation as a cotton producer. In 1850, it came in 5th as a cotton producer, with the total amount of cotton bales being produced numbering at about 194,532. This left the state of Tennessee behind only South Carolina, Mississippi, Georgia and Alabama in terms of the amount of cotton grown per year.⁶ And while it is true that the majority of farmers in Tennessee only owned somewhere in the area of around 10 slaves at any given time, this was especially true in areas of East

³ Edward Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 9.

⁴ Chase Curran Mooney, *Slavery in Tennessee*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), p. 127.

⁵ Mooney, *Slavery*, p. 102.

⁶ Mooney, *Slavery*, p. 128.

Tennessee, the elevated numbers still point to this near critical mass of cotton production as being primarily driven by slave labor, with the highest output of cotton consistently coming from areas of Tennessee that had the highest rate of slave ownership.⁷ One such area was Fayette County in the southern part of West Tennessee and in the particular the land base now known as the Ames Plantation.

Established in 1824, Fayette County during the Antebellum Period has been traditionally referred to as a “real plantation county,” a reputation to which the facts appear to bear witness.⁸ While West Tennessee in general had both high rates of slave ownership and cotton production, it was in the Ames area of Fayette County where the two truly took off. In 1850 and 1860, the total amount of citizens in Fayette County who operated farms numbered around the 1,000 mark. Of those farm operators, approximately 80% were slaveholders. This served to make Fayette County, of all the major counties in Tennessee, the one with the highest rate of slave ownership among farmers, far outpacing the slave ownership rate in most other counties by as much as 2:1.⁹ Because of this fact, Fayette County also had the distinction of being one of the few places in Tennessee where the slave population outnumbered that of the free white population.¹⁰ These extreme numbers become slightly easier to put into a context in comparison with the rest of Tennessee when it is considered that Fayette County and West Tennessee in general were areas of Tennessee where cotton could more easily grow.¹¹ “Attracted by the extremely fertile

⁷ Mooney, *Slavery*, pgs. 115, 120-121.

⁸ Mooney, *Slavery*, 115.;

Goodspeed Publishing Co., *History of Tennessee from the earliest time to the present; together with an historical and a biographical sketch of the counties of Fayette and Hardeman, besides a valuable fund of notes, original observations, reminiscences, etc.*, (The Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1887) ,p. 252.

⁹ Mooney, *Slavery*, p. 103-105.

¹⁰ Mooney, *Slavery*, p. 102.

¹¹ Mooney, *Slavery*, p. 6.

landscape and thick virgin forests,” the area was first settled in the 1820’s.¹² After the initial settlement, the area’s population began to grow very rapidly, from about 800 citizens in 1825, to boasting more than 8,000 in 1830, and then to 21,501 by 1840.¹³

Once this explosion of its population had taken place, West Tennessee soon became the leading producer of cotton for the entire state.¹⁴ Fayette County in specific became a major center of cotton production. In 1850, it was cultivating over 28,000 bales of cotton (400 lbs each). The majority of those bales of cotton, 26,775, came from farms in Fayette County where slaves were kept. In 1860, 35,281 bales were produced.¹⁵ The numbers for the year 1866 were much the same with more than 34,000 bales produced, 32,016 of which came from slave owning farms, a ratio of almost 9 to 10.¹⁶ With this said, however, it must also be understood that cotton was by far not the only crop being produced in Fayette County. A large number of land holders relied instead upon subsistence farming methods in order to get by.¹⁷ Still, there can be little doubt as to the importance of cotton and also slavery in terms of the revenue that they worked to bring into the Fayette County area. The numbers lead one to suspect that they were two of the most lucrative and vital aspects of the Fayette County economy.

The Ames area in particular relied upon both of them. Made up of around 18,000 acres of land in Fayette County and another 6,000 to 7,000 acres in neighboring Hardeman County, the Ames Plantation acquired its name when the entire land base was purchased by wealthy Boston

¹² Allen, *Historical*, p. 7.

¹³ Allen, *Historical*, p. 10.

¹⁴ Mooney, *Slavery*, p. 128.

¹⁵ Allen, *Historical*, p. 12.

¹⁶ Mooney, *Slavery*, pgs. 128-129, 131.

¹⁷ Allen, *Historical*, p. 12.

industrialist Hobart Ames in the early 20th century.¹⁸ Up until that point, from its settlement in the early to mid-19th century, the Ames Plantation area was made up primarily of a number of different land owners. Some of these lived in residence and others were speculators who owned land in Fayette County, but did not actually reside in the area. Their common desire, however, was to take full advantage of the fertile West Tennessee soil in an attempt to turn a profit. And as was shown above, they did this primarily through the production of cotton and the use of slave labor. 90% of farmers on the Ames land base grew cotton. And approximately 80% of all farmers on Ames were also slave owners.¹⁹ By and large, then, one is forced into assuming that they were the ones who were chiefly responsible for both the high output of cotton in Fayette County and in turn the high revenue that came from that cotton for much of the mid-19th century.

However, with the onset of the Civil War, and more specifically emancipation, slave-based economies such as found on Ames, and indeed all around the South, were completely overturned. As the newly freed African-American population set out to find for themselves what the meaning of their freedom was, the white planters whose farms and plantations they were leaving struggled to find out what African-American freedom meant as well. Now without the option of legally being able to force others into their service as had been done in the Antebellum Period, a great deal of planters now faced the dilemma of figuring out how to continue to operate their farms and how to bring in enough revenue to even survive on after having been so dependent upon the forced labor of blacks.

In West Tennessee and Fayette County, which more so than almost all other places in Tennessee had been extremely dependent upon coerced black labor to produce cotton, the end of

¹⁸ Fayette County Sesquicentennial, Inc. (Tenn.), *150 years in Fayette County, Tennessee, 1824-1974*, ed. Roy Coleson, (Somerville, Tennessee: Fayette County Sesquicentennial, Inc, 1974).

¹⁹ Allen, *Historical*, pgs. 12-13.

slavery had effectively “crippled the productive capacity of the region.”²⁰ 2/3's of the area's planters were owners of slaves prior to the Civil War, and now they found themselves with vast quantities of land (if it had not been damaged during the war) and no workforce to attend to it.²¹

Given this dichotomy of having a sizeable land base but no workers, there were two solutions which planters tended to enact in order to get production going again. The first and perhaps most widely adopted in the Fayette County/Ames area was to reduce one's farm size, and shift away from the production of cotton to a crop that was less labor intensive to grow. The thought pattern was that large farms that produced vast quantities of cotton necessarily required large work staffs, which in the Postbellum Period was now widely unavailable. Therefore, in order to cut back on overall expenditure, many farms began relying more upon subsistence farming than had been done in the past. And in fact, the average farm size in the Fayette/Ames area dropped considerably in the years after the Civil War from 1860 to 1880 while the total number of farms subsequently rose.²²

The second solution that many planters went with was to try to entice former slaves to come back and once again work their land. Since the methods of violence and intimidation that often compelled African-Americans to work during the Antebellum Period were no longer sanctioned by law, planters sought to accomplish this goal by entering into various wage-based systems with former slaves. As Royce refers to these methods, they were a “substitution of cash for the lash.”²³ This trend could be seen in the advent of practices such as cash renting, tenant farming and sharecropping. Under practices such as these, planters would enter into contracts

²⁰ Allen, *Historical*, p. 14.

²¹ Allen, *Historical*, p. 13.

²² Allen, *Historical*, p. 15.

²³ Royce, *Origins*, p. 1.

with freed African-Americans, stipulating that in exchange for working the planter's land, the former slaves would be compensated either with a fixed wage, free residence on the land, a share in the goods that were produced or some combination of these amends. Often, farmers would include other incentives such as medical care for the tenant's family members in the event of an emergency in exchange for ensuring that the tenants would be "good, faithful and obedient servants."²⁴ These contracts were sometimes made verbally or officiated under the auspices of the local Freedman's Bureau.²⁵

It must be understood that neither of these options, either reducing farm size and production or offering financial incentives to African-Americans, were greeted by Southern planters with much enthusiasm. More often than not, they were only begrudgingly accepted as a way of solving a problem. As will be explored in more detail later, for years, many Southern farmers had grown accustomed to the comforts that slave labor provided them. As was shown in the example of West Tennessee and Fayette County, it was in fact a highly profitable endeavor, and to be forced to let it go was nothing if not quite a rude awakening. However, the planters that were able to adapt to this new way of doing business were invariably the ones that found the most success in keeping control over their land holdings, while those that were not often struggled financially.²⁶ The next section focuses exclusively on a select number of individual planters in the Ames/Fayette County area during the Postbellum Period, examining their various agricultural outputs before and after the Civil War and examining in depth the assorted ways in which they attempted to adapt to the new economic status quo.

Before and After the War - The Economic Effects of Emancipation on Fayette County

²⁴ *Major Problems in African-American History, Vol. 2: From Freedom to "Freedom Now," 1865-1990's*, ed. Thomas C. Holt, Elsa Barkley Brown, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), p. 43.

²⁵ Allen, *Historical*, pgs. 20-21.

Planters

- Capt. John Walker Jones was by far the most prominent and well-to-do farmer on the Ames Plantation land base. He is also the one whom the most information is known about. Of the many farms on the near 20,000 acres Ames land base, it was Jones' land holdings that consistently produced the most goods and consequently brought in the most revenue. Having been able to maintain this economic dynamic both before and after the Civil War, Jones can be seen as something of an anomaly as far as planters at Ames go. He was one of the few Fayette County planters to come out of the Civil War economically intact. The name of Jones' plantation was Cedar Grove and it had the distinction being both the largest single plantation in the Ames area and also boasting the largest amount African-American slaves under one owner in Fayette County. Residing in Alabama before moving to Tennessee in the 1820's, Jones first began acquiring land in Fayette County after an amount was granted to him by his father as a wedding gift.²⁷ In 1836, he owned 1,850 acres of farmland and 25 slaves. In 1847, he had his manor constructed on the property. And by the year 1850, Jones was the wealthiest planter in the Fayette County/Ames Plantation area.²⁸ Over the years, then, through a steady number of transactions with fellow Fayette County land holders, Jones managed to substantially increase the amount of farm land that he owned in the area.²⁹ Because of his aggressiveness in acquiring property, Jones eventually took on a reputation as almost a type of land baron, a domineering figure whom for better or worse, a large number of other Ames area residents had financial

²⁶ Allen, *Historical*, Introduction.

²⁷ Bernice Taylor Cargill, interview by Jason Jordan, Somerville, TN., 18 July 2006

²⁸ *Settlers of Shelby County, Tennessee and Adjoining Counties*, ed. Bernice Taylor Cargill, Brenda Bertha Connelly, (Memphis, Tennessee: The Descendants of Early Settlers of Shelby County, Tennessee, 1989), p. 88.

²⁹ Allen, *Historical*, pgs. 56.

transactions with at one point or another.³⁰

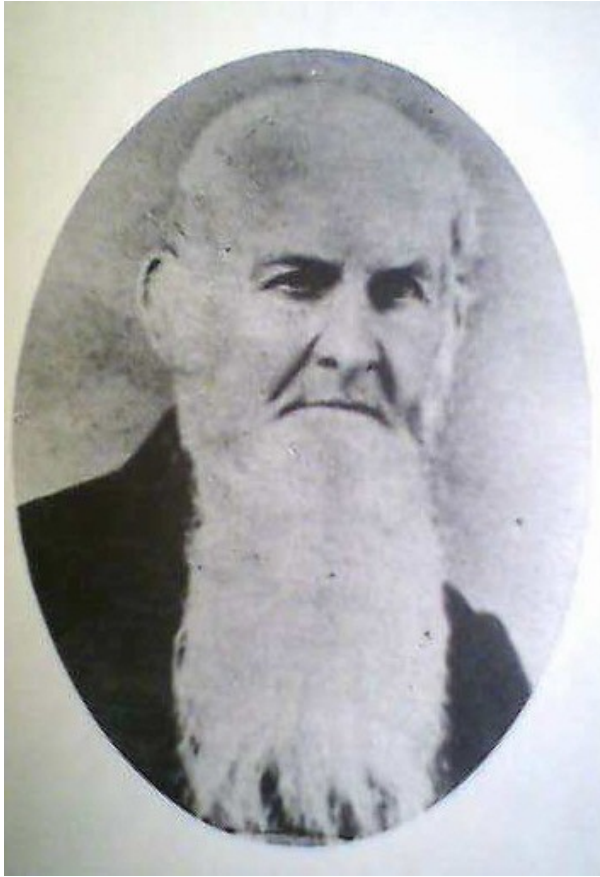


Figure 1- Capt. John Walker Jones

At its height, Jones' Cedar Grove plantation counted more than 2,000 acres of farmland and around 240 slaves as property of Jones. While Jones produced a number of different goods on Cedar Grove, including standards such as corn, oats, butter, milk and potatoes, cotton was still very much one of the primary sources of capital for the Jones plantation.³¹ This fact cast Jones almost as a kind of archetype for the aforementioned dynamic that existed on many plantations in Antebellum West Tennessee wherein a high rate of slave ownership was with only a few

exceptions directly correlated with a high output of cotton. After the Civil War and Emancipation, agricultural production records show that the Cedar Grove plantation continued to run largely as it did during the Antebellum Period and indeed even increased in its size afterwards as well.³² While few records exist today to use a point of reference, this continuation of relative economic prosperity on Jones Cedar Grove plantation has been attributed by previous historians to Jones reliance on tenant farming arrangements with former slaves and other freed African-Americans in the area. Of the available records, they show that for the year 1866, Jones

³⁰ Cargill, interview, 18 July 2006.

³¹ Allen, *Historical*, p. 54.

³² Allen, *Historical*, pgs. 54, 59.

entered into a labor contract with Robert Miller, a former slave, wherein it was stated that:

J.W. Jones agrees to furnish the said Robert Miller (freeman) with as much as fifty [50] acres of land one mule and horse and furnish feed for said horse and mule and quarters for Robert Miller to live in. Robert Miller of the Second part agrees to furnish one horse & feed to feed the same and repair the fencing around said land and is to furnish five hands with himself to cultivate said land and the said J.W. Jones agrees to give Robert Miller one half of all the crop raised by himself.³³

Additional contracts of this type have not been recovered for a number of reasons which will be covered in more detail further on. In addition, archaeological surveys that have been done on the Jones land base in recent years have uncovered a number of sites in the area where Cedar Grove used to be where tenant farmers and other share workers are presumed to have lived after the Civil War.³⁴ What these findings suggest, then, is that, undeniably, one of the factors that helped to keep Jones' plantation running, and indeed profitable, in the years after the Civil War until Jones' death was Jones' continual reliance upon the labor of African-Americans. Only now, that labor was being bought through cash and other incentives instead of being coerced. After Jones' death in 1879, the Cedar Grove plantation was then divided up between Jones' heirs who were less successful at running the plantation than Jones was, a fact which eventually led to the entire Cedar Grove area being purchased by Hobart Ames in 1901.³⁵ Today, many consider Jones' Cedar Grove plantation to be "the forerunner of the Ames Plantation," an observation whose importance will become more clear in the next section.³⁶

Tables 1a, 1b, and 1c show the agricultural production figures for Cedar Grove prior to and after the Civil War.

³³ Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Tennessee, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1867, Reel 22, Contracts, Jan. 1, 1865 – Jan. 1, 1867, Hardeman – Madison Counties.

³⁴ Allen, *Historical*, p. 60.

³⁵ Allen, *Historical*, p. 54.

Table 1a.

1850:

Improved Acres of Land: 2,200	Horses: 13
Unimproved Acres of Land: 1,820	Asses and Mules: 56
Cash Value of farm: \$30,000	Milk Cows: 25
Value of Farming Implements: \$2,000	Working Oxen: 16
Other Cattle: 68	Sheep:100
Swine: 500	Value of Livestock: \$6,700
Wheat Bushels: 100	Indian Corn Bushels: 12,500
Oat Bushels: 1,000	Cotton Bales (400 lbs. each): 875
Wool (in lbs.): 200	Peas and Bean Bushels: 200
Irish Potato Bushels: 50	Sweet Potato Bushels: 400
Butter (in lbs.): 600	Value of Slaughter Livestock: \$1,800

³⁷**Table 1b.**

1860:

Improved Acres of Land: 2,000	Horses: 16
Unimproved Acres of Land: 1,500	Asses and Mules: 56
Cash Value of farm: \$52,000	Milk Cows: 30
Value of Farming Implements: \$1,000	Working Oxen: 12
Other Cattle: 100	Sheep:120

³⁶ Cargill, *Settlers*, p. 88.³⁷ United States Government, U.S Bureau of the Census. Seventh Census of the United States, 1850.

Swine: 600	Value of Livestock: \$12,000
Wheat Bushels: 32	Indian Corn Bushels: 12,000
Oat Bushels: n/a	Cotton Bales (400 lbs. each): 800
Wool (in lbs.): 250	Peas and Bean Bushels: 200
Irish Potato Bushels: 50	Sweet Potato Bushels: approx. 500
Butter (in lbs.):150	Value of Slaughter Livestock: \$4,000

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Table 1c.

1870:

Improved Acres of Land: 3,000	Horses: 30
Unimproved Acres of Land: 9,000	Asses and Mules: 80
Cash Value of farm: \$180,000	Milk Cows: 30
Value of Farming Implements: \$695	Working Oxen: 26
Other Cattle: 100	Sheep:30
Swine: 100	Value of Livestock: \$13,650
Wheat Bushels: 32	Indian Corn Bushels: 11,500
Oat Bushels: 400	Cotton Bales (450 lbs. each): 400
Wool (in lbs.): 70	Peas and Bean Bushels: 200
Irish Potato Bushels: 100	Sweet Potato Bushels: 500
Butter (in lbs.):150	Value of Slaughter Livestock: \$1,500

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³⁸ United States Government, U.S Bureau of the Census. Eighth Census of the United States, 1860.

³⁹ United States Government, U.S Bureau of the Census. Ninth Census of the United States, 1870.

• Another prominent planter in the Ames/Fayette County area during the 19th century was Wiley B. Jones, the brother of John Jones, whom his plantation neighbored. Born, in 1813 and the youngest child in the family, Wiley married Mary O. Bass in 1832 and subsequently moved the family from Madison County, Alabama to Fayette County, Tennessee, where he first purchased land in 1836.⁴⁰ Like his brother's Cedar Grove plantation, Wiley Jones' land holdings numbered over 2,000 acres. However, Wiley Jones at his most prosperous only owned slightly over 60 slaves, less than half of what his brother John did. Like John, though, cotton was still one of the principle crops produced on Wiley's plantation.⁴¹ At the time of his arrival in Fayette County in the 1830's, records show him as owning only 8 slaves. That number would increase, however to 63 by the year 1850.⁴² After the Civil War, it is believed that, like his older brother John, Wiley relied upon sharecropping and other wage-based arrangements in order to continue to run his plantation. In 1866, he entered into a contract with Ben Moore, a freed African-American, which provided that Moore would "receive two-thirds of all crops he raised with the other third retained by Jones." In addition to this, surveys of his land base have revealed 13 probable sites where tenant farmers could have resided after during the Postbellum Period.⁴³ Despite relying on similar methods as his brother, however, Wiley Jones did not see the same kinds of post-Civil War economic returns that his brother John did or indeed his nephew, Caleb, who was another prominent land holder in the Fayette County/Ames area.⁴⁴

Table 2a shows the agricultural production for Wiley B. Jones' plantation in 1870.

Table 2a.

⁴⁰ *Goodspeed*, pgs. 863-864.

⁴¹ Allen, *Historical*, p. 89.

⁴² Allen, *Historical*, pgs. 90-91.

⁴³ Allen, *Historical*, pgs. 92, 96.

⁴⁴ Allen, *Historical*, p. 92.

1870:

Improved Acres of Land: 100	Horses: 3
Unimproved Acres of Land: (unknown value)	Asses and Mules: 2
Cash Value of farm: \$1,000	Milk Cows: 2
Value of Farming Implements: \$180	Working Oxen: 3
Other Cattle: n/a	Sheep: n/a
Swine: 25	Value of Livestock: \$700
Wheat Bushels: n/a	Indian Corn Bushels: 500
Oat Bushels: n/a	Cotton Bales (450 lbs. each): 14
Wool (in lbs.): n/a	Peas and Bean Bushels: n/a
Irish Potato Bushels: n/a	Sweet Potato Bushels: n/a
Butter (in lbs.): n/a	Value of Slaughter Livestock: \$125

⁴⁵

• Caleb Baker Jones was the son of John Walker Jones and his first wife Martha Williams Moorman. In comparison to his father and uncle, little is known about Caleb's personal life. However, it is known that he was born before his parents moved from Alabama to Fayette County in the 1820's.⁴⁶ He eventually was married to Mariah Tom Bass, the two of which had 8 children, only 4 of whom survived childhood. Records show that the first land he owned was given to him by his father, John Walker Jones. In 1850, Caleb Jones owned 33 slaves a number which increased to 46 by the year 1860. Also in that year, he is listed as owning a little over

⁴⁵ U.S. Census, 1870.

⁴⁶ Allen, *Historical*, p. 75.

1,600 acres of farmland. While these numbers were very large in and of themselves, however, they were still less than the amount owned by Caleb's father John Jones and uncle Wiley Jones.⁴⁷

It is known that Caleb Jones fought in the Civil War on the confederate side, but was injured and subsequently went back to his home in Fayette County and continued to operate his plantation.

No records are available showing any labor arrangements with freed African-Americans after the end of the Civil War, yet like his uncle and father, it is assumed that Caleb also relied upon tenant farming and sharecropping arrangements due to a large number of suspected tenant dwellings located on his property.⁴⁸

Table 3a provides the agricultural production records for Caleb Jones for the year 1870.

Table 3a.

1870:

Improved Acres of Land: 600	Horses: 10
Unimproved Acres of Land: 800	Asses and Mules: 20
Cash Value of farm: \$12,000	Milk Cows: 20
Value of Farming Implements: \$300	Working Oxen: 2
Other Cattle: 20	Sheep: n/a
Swine: 100	Value of Livestock: \$3,800
Wheat Bushels: n/a	Indian Corn Bushels: 2,000
Oat Bushels: n/a	Cotton Bales (450 lbs. each): 50
Wool (in lbs.): 70	Peas and Bean Bushels: n/a
Irish Potato Bushels: 100	Sweet Potato Bushels: n/a

⁴⁷ Allen, *Historical*, 77.

⁴⁸ Allen, *Historical*, pgs. 77, 80-81.

Butter (in lbs.): n/a	Value of Slaughter Livestock: \$600
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49

To provide a comparison of numbers from a non-prominent farm during the same time period, Table 4a. provides the 1870 agricultural production schedule of John W. Davis, whose farm neighbored that of the Jones' and was also substantially smaller.

Table 4a.

1870:

Improved Acres of Land: 200	Horses: 5
Unimproved Acres of Land: 440	Asses and Mules: 3
Cash Value of farm: 45,000	Milk Cows: 3
Value of Farming Implements: 250	Working Oxen: n/a
Other Cattle: 13	Sheep: n/a
Swine: 60	Value of Livestock: \$1,960
Wheat Bushels: n/a	Indian Corn Bushels: 1,000
Oat Bushels: n/a	Cotton Bales (450 lbs. each):27
Wool (in lbs.): n/a	Peas and Bean Bushels: n/a
Irish Potato Bushels: n/a	Sweet Potato Bushels: n/a
Butter (in lbs.):n/a	Value of Slaughter Livestock: 400

50

While specific documentation such as share labor contracts have not been recovered from the farms surrounding the Jones family plantations have not been recovered, it can be safely assumed that to various extents they also relied on share labor arrangements during the

⁴⁹ U.S. Census, 1870.

Postbellum Period. This assumption appears to be born out from census records taken during the 1870 – 1880 time period which show an extremely high rate of African-Americans residing in Fayette County's District 15 area which was made up primarily of white land holders on the Ames Plantation land base. In addition, the absence of labor contracts between land holders in the Fayette County/Ames area and freed African-Americans is not necessarily indicative that those labor contracts did not exist. Given that the local Freedman's Bureau often brokered such contracts and had the authority to charge land holders for doing so, a likely assumption is that land holders and freed African-Americans often bypassed the Freedman's Bureau and made agreements with one another verbally.⁵¹ Nevertheless, as the next section addresses, despite such methods being taken by land holders in order to ensure the profitability of these arrangements, they still proved largely unprofitable in the long run due to reasons which may have not been foreseen at the time.

Share Labor and Economic Loss in the Fayette County/Ames Plantation Area

If one looks at the agricultural production numbers of some of the various farms on the Fayette County/Ames Plantation land base that relied on tenant labor and other share-based arrangements after the Civil War, then a steady decline becomes noticeable with regards to both the economic output and intake of these farms. Perhaps, one of the most salient signs of this fact is that the production of cotton, which in pre-Civil War years had been a hallmark of the agricultural vitality of the region, began to rapidly decrease throughout the region. Going along with this decrease in cotton, crop production on the whole largely began to fall as well. In addition, the size of the average farm in the area was also cut by as much as 2/3's.⁵² This last

⁵⁰ U.S. Census, 1870.

⁵¹ Allen, *Historical*, pgs. 20-21.

⁵² Allen, *Historical*, p. 15 .

fact is emphasized in Figures 2-5 which show the steadily increasing breakup and redistribution of land holdings in the Fayette County/Ames area during the years that followed the end of the Civil War. Over the course of this time, then, it appears that farming in the area in general became largely unprofitable for a large amount of white land holders.

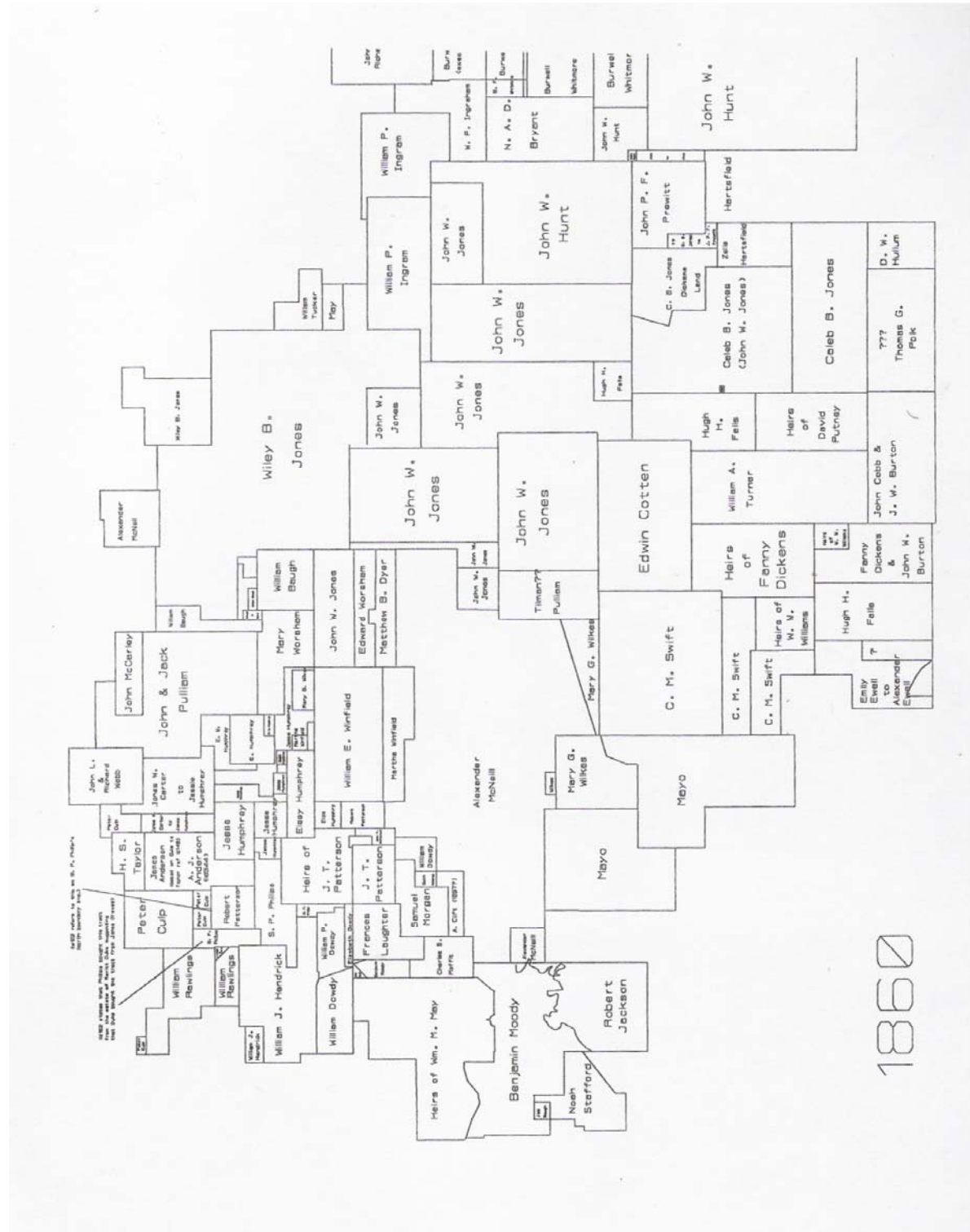


Figure 2 - Fayette County/Ames Plantation Property Ownership Map for 1860⁵³

⁵³ All maps courtesy of Jamie Evans and the Ames Plantation archives.

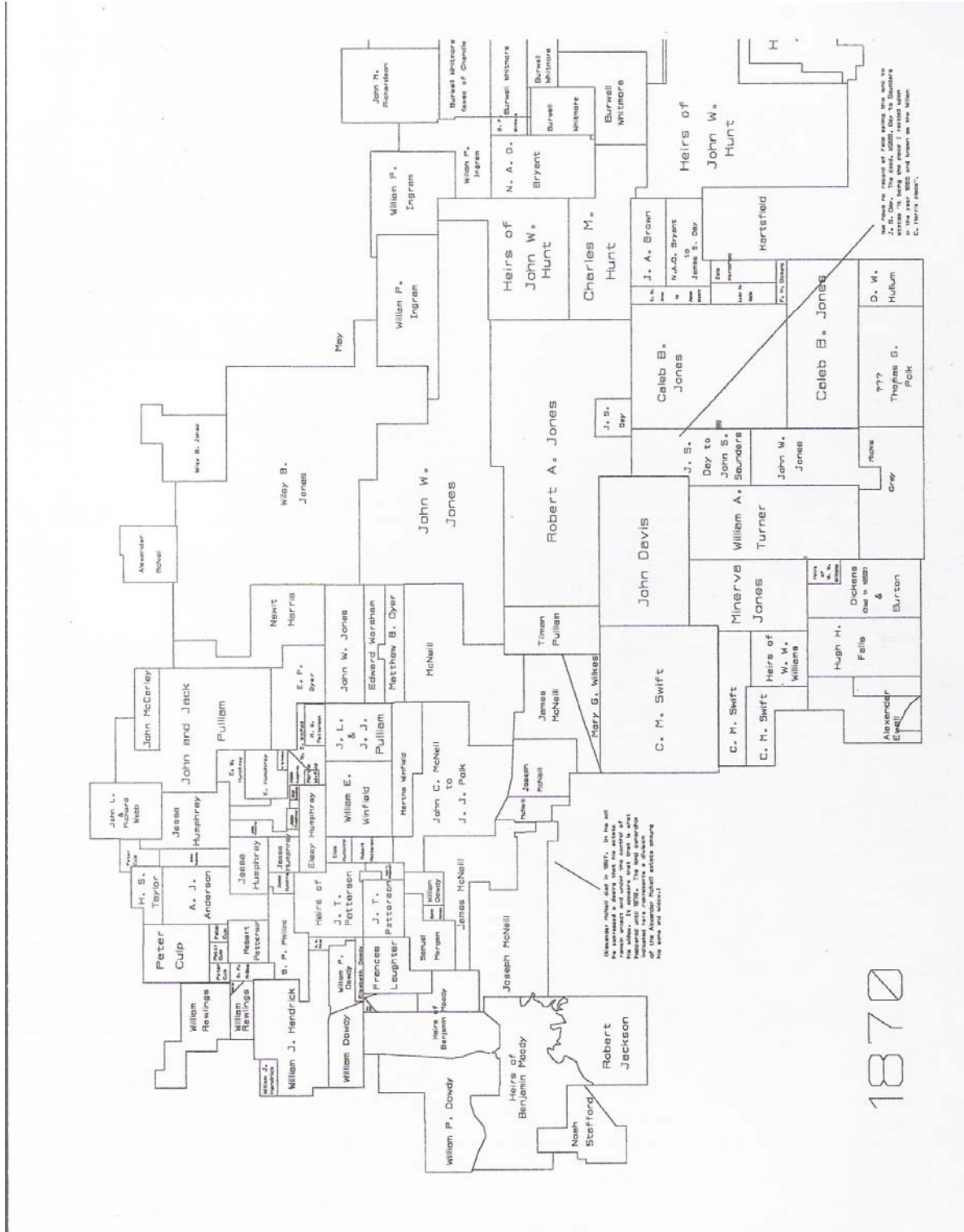


Figure 3 - Fayette County/Ames Plantation Property Ownership Map for 1870

1870

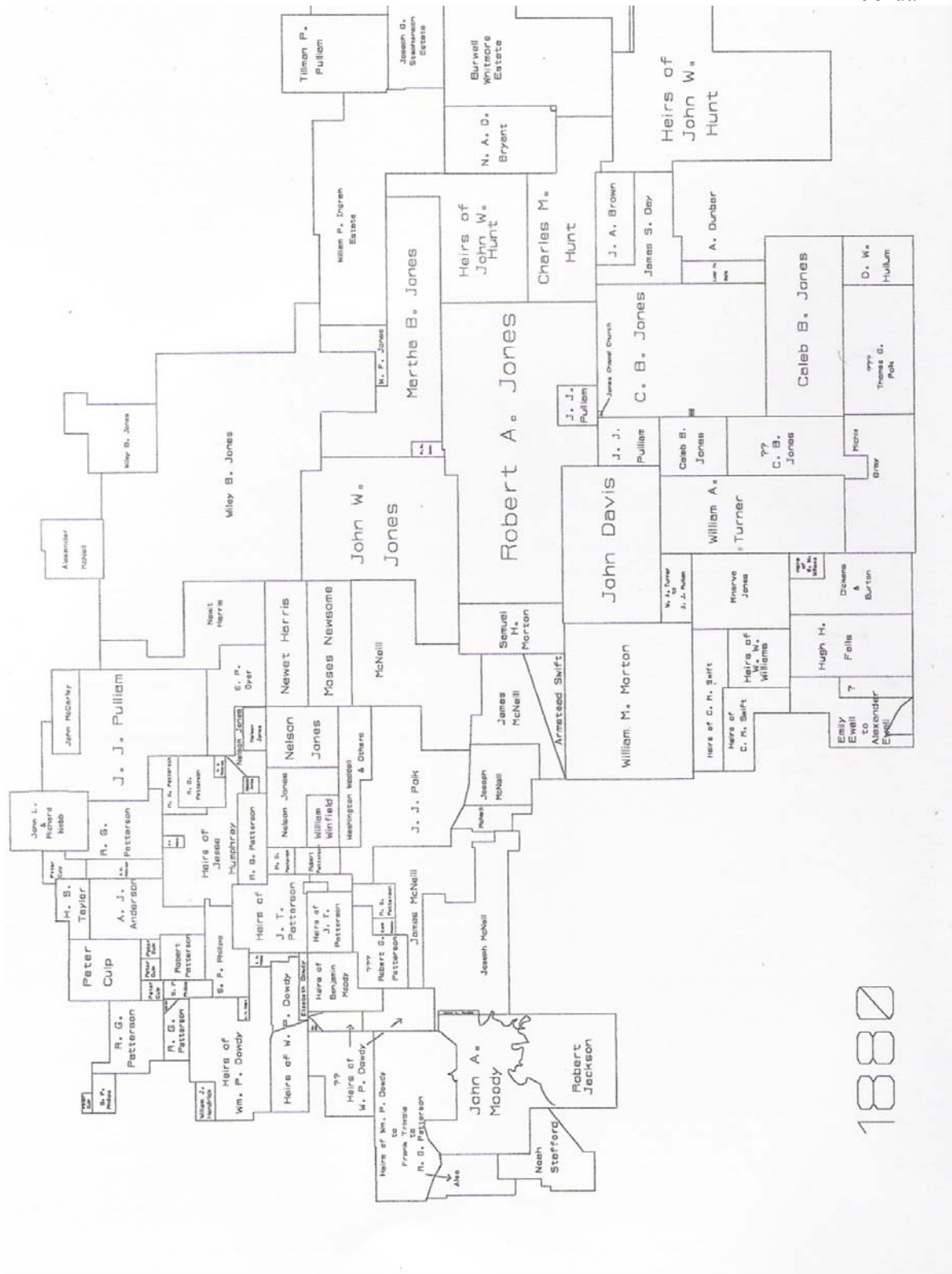


Figure 4 -Fayette County/Ames Plantation Property Ownership Map for 1880

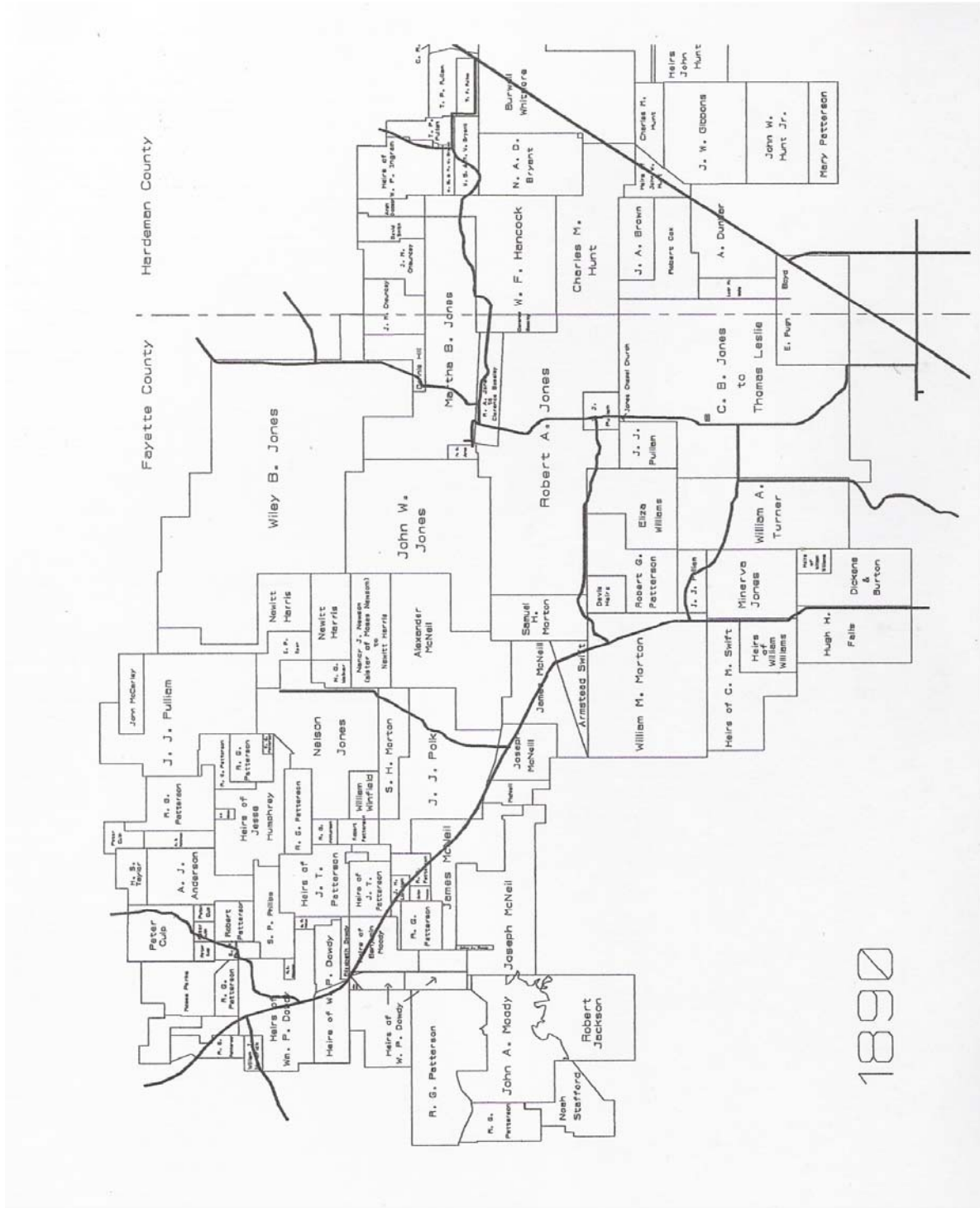


Figure 5 -Fayette County/Ames Plantation Property Ownership Map for 1890

It is worth noting, however, that one of the few exceptions to this trend was Capt. John

W. Jones' Cedar Grove plantation. As briefly mentioned earlier, in the years after the Civil War, Jones' Cedar Grove plantation, appears to have actually thrived much as it did throughout the Antebellum Period. Not only did it continue turning a substantial profit, Jones also managed to increase the size of Cedar Grove by taking control over other neighboring plantations that were struggling from the aforementioned economic downturn, a fact which is especially reflected in Figures 3 and 4.⁵⁴ Cedar Grove continued to prove to be a largely profitable venture for Jones up until the time of his death in 1879. This seemingly anomalous occurrence cannot be easily accounted for outside of the observation that Jones had lived in the region for longer than most other planters and his years of experience working in the area together with his wealth may have in some way been a factor in his Postbellum economic success. Regardless of this, however, the fact remain that for most planters in the region, the postwar years brought little else but economic hardship. As the years progressed, land owners all over the area had little choice but to decrease the size of their land holdings by selling portions of them to other farmers. Even John W. Jones' Cedar Grove plantation, which for years had been the principle buyer of other struggling plantations, was not entirely unaffected by this trend. After his death in 1879, Cedar Grove was divided amongst Jones' various descendants whom he had charged with continuing to operate the farm. However, generally speaking Jones' heirs found little of the same success that he did in controlling the area.⁵⁵ Eventually, in the early part of the 20th century, they sold the entire farm to Hobart Ames, who was a wealthy businessman from the North with little interest in continuing the farming traditions of the region.⁵⁶ After this act, other area land holders soon followed suit and also began selling their land to Ames as well. This pattern continued until

⁵⁴ Allen, *Historical*, p. 54.

⁵⁵ Allen, *Historical*, p. 54.

⁵⁶ Coleson, *150 Years*.

Ames eventually came to possess the more than 20,000 acre area lying in both Fayette and Hardeman Counties which now bears his name. For all intents and purposes, then, this purchasing of what had once been one of the most economically powerful areas in West Tennessee effectively signaled the death knell for the old plantation system in the area.

Incomplete historical records from the Antebellum time period make it impossible to say with complete certainty why all of this occurred and, more specifically, why so many farmers were not able to hold on to their land after the war. However, an educated guess based on general knowledge of the time period as well as data gained from studying other Southern plantations similar to those in the Fayette County/Ames Plantation area seems to hold share labor arrangements contracted between white plantation owners and free African-Americans as being largely responsible. These arrangements included things such as sharecropping, tenant farming, wage for hire work and the like. And over the years, historians have often debated over the exact nature of these share arrangements during the Postbellum Period with three general arguments coming to the forefront.

On one hand, the rise of such share labor arrangements between the two groups has often been seen from purely economic motives and laid out in simple terms of supply and demand. A somewhat simplified account of this position holds that white land owners who had relied chiefly upon slave labor during the Antebellum Period needed a labor force to work their land holdings due to a sudden shortage of workers in the wake of the Emancipation. In turn, Southern Africans-Americans, now charged with having to live alone and fend for themselves, needed jobs in order to provide for themselves and their families. And it was due to this respective need for workers and work on both sides that share labor arrangements were first born, with black

laborers flocking to a reserve of jobs that they were particularly suited for.⁵⁷ A somewhat related view argues that shares labor agreements between planters and free blacks were mutually beneficial in that they gave freed African-Americans and white land holders a common goal to work towards. In short account, this particular view posits that share labor arrangements were a comparatively risk-free venture for newly freed African-Americans. It follows that they were largely unprepared for the rigors of maintaining a farm of their own, having been abruptly thrust into freedom. However, by entering into share labor contracts with white planters, blacks, in effect, were being given a safety net where the land holder shouldered much of the burden and also where blacks could depend upon the land holder to provide a certain measure of assistance in times of hardship. Likewise, land owners had in the African-Americans that they contracted with a dependable workforce that was wholly eager to prove themselves and their capabilities. Because of the eagerness of African-Americans to gain experience in caring for land that they had a personal stake in, then, white land holders could rest assured that their land was being cared for by people who would put the necessary time and energy into making it flourish.⁵⁸

And indeed while both of these positions showcase valid points about the nature of share labor arrangements, a third argument takes the position that both of these traditional views tend to overlook the personal agency that African-Americans and whites had in entering into these agreements with one another.⁵⁹ In this view, the one which seems most plausible in light empirical evidence found in studying the Fayette County/Ames Plantation area, economic experiential incentives most certainly played a part in how share labor arrangements were put together, however they were also not the sole defining factor in the brokering of these

⁵⁷ Daniel Chirot, "The Growth of the Market and Servile Labor Systems in Agriculture," *Journal of Social History*, 8 (Winter 1975), pgs. 67-80.

⁵⁸ Joseph D. Reid Jr., "Sharecropping in History and Theory," *Agricultural History*, 49, (April 1975), pgs. 438-439.

agreements among whites and blacks. Rather, there were a host of conflicting feelings between both blacks and whites which went into the genesis of share labor. And instead of holding share labor up as the boon to the Postbellum Southern economy that it has traditionally been seen as, it is these conflicting points that paint a picture of share labor as being a system comprised of more than a few inherent flaws in its origins.

One such flaw was that, going into share labor agreements, a large number of planters initially felt that it was not possible for such arrangements to be of any real value. The gang labor system of farming that so many planters had grown accustomed to was now largely dead, and in its place was a system where African-American laborers were calling for fair and equitable treatment. Many white planters not only saw this as an affront on their sensibilities, but also as a sign that share labor would never work. There was a general feeling that blacks would only squander any measure of freedom that they were given in fits of laziness and irresponsibility, despite any possible incentives for them to gain farming experience by being diligent in their labor. A number of landholders felt that without strict supervision and the driving force of a whip at their backs, an innate deficiency in African-Americans would then take over causing freed blacks never to be truly motivated to accomplish any work, as, on a matter of principle, they were fundamentally incapable of taking care of themselves.⁶⁰ Because of this notion, then, things such as the production of cotton were seen as being all but impossible to rekindle and make profitable to Southern land holders once again. In Royce's words, it was a "disturbing proclivity of freedpeople to act on their own interests" which caused so many planters to experience little more than a feeling of dread when negotiating any share labor

⁵⁹ Royce, *Origins*, p. 9.

contracts. Share labor, more than anything else, represented a loss of authority and control.⁶¹

Going along with this mistrust of share labor by a critical mass of white Southern farmers was the fact that many African-Americans also had misgivings about these arrangements. On the whole, freed African-Americans, in fact, had little desire to return to their former lifestyle working the lands of their former masters as before the war. As one historian writes, “slavery had only suppressed, not destroyed much black ambition and talent,” and because of this idea, going back to work on Southern plantations was one of the last things that many of them wanted to do.⁶² Indeed, the act of their emancipation had “raised among [blacks] an anticipation of freedom impossible to restrain.”⁶³ And because of this joy at the idea of entirely new avenues of possibility to explore, African-Americans in general wanted to set out on their own and experience their newfound freedom for themselves. For some, this meant tracking down family members who had been sold during the Antebellum Period. Others moved to cities in search of a new way of life. And still, others, the ones that still had some desire to have a rural life, had a preference for working their own land as subsistence farmers, not for working for former masters, even if it there were innumerable less risks involved in doing so.⁶⁴ Working as share laborers, then, was often felt by blacks to be a last resort of the desperate, as it meant curtailing that newfound sense of freedom and possibility which had firmly taken root after the Civil War.

Far from being the ideal and mutually beneficial system that it has often been made out to be, then, share arrangements were often marked from their beginnings by feelings of distrust and apprehension on both sides of the contract. More often than not, individuals on both sides were

⁶⁰ Ronald L. F. Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor: From Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 104.

⁶¹ Royce, *Origins*, p. 41.

⁶² Steven V. Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870: War and Peace in the Upper South*, (Louisiana State Press, 1988), p. 140.

in a sense compelled into brokering such agreements because of limited options. Despite their misgivings, white land holders needed workers, and similarly, in spite of wanting to pursue new worlds of possibility, many blacks found that such worlds were often closed off to them at the time. These facts, then, left share labor arrangements as something akin to a fallback plan for blacks and whites.⁶⁵ And also because such contracts were often looked upon with disdain, in many cases they ended up being little more than ephemeral ventures that each side was more than willing to bail out on if they felt the situation warranted such an action.⁶⁶ And indeed, examination of census records from the Fayette County/Ames Plantation show that, for example, many of the black laborers who contracted to live on the plantations of various members of the Jones family often, for whatever reason, moved away to other areas not soon after. Robert Miller, for instance, who agreed to provide labor for John W. Jones in 1866, a deal which would have forced him to reside on Jones' Cedar Grove plantation in district area 15, had moved to district area 3 just four years later when the 1870 census was taken.⁶⁷ Examination of other known share laborers who had contracted with the Jones family revealed a similar tendency. And while it is impossible to say for certain what caused each individual laborer to move away from the Fayette County/Ames Plantation area, this trend does appear to support the position that share labor agreements were, on the whole, temporary arrangements with little stability from year to year. With this inherent instability in mind, then, it becomes easier to see how such agreements, and the old plantation system itself, could become unprofitable. It also becomes easier to explain how an area that was once as economically successful as the Fayette

⁶³ Royce, *Origins*, p. 28.

⁶⁴ Royce, *Origins*, pgs. 50, 21.

⁶⁵ Royce, *Origins*, p. 53.

⁶⁶ Royce, *Origins*, pgs. 53-55.

County/Ames Plantation area was could decline to the point where it could be purchased in its entirety by a single person in the early 20th century.

Conclusion

When William Milliken returned to his home in Fayette County after the Civil War had ended, he noted that he was returning to a place that was nothing like he had left it just a few short years before. And indeed, perhaps those thoughts rang more true than he or anyone else at the time could have possibly foreseen. This is especially so with regards to the Fayette County area. Prior to the war, Fayette County was the quintessence of the old plantation system in Tennessee. The fact that it had few local rivals in terms of its agricultural production and also in terms of its enslavement of African-Americans was a heavy signifier of this. However, these two facts also meant that the Fayette County area stood to lose an incredible amount in the years after the end of the war. This point becomes especially salient when Fayette County and the West Tennessee area in general are held in comparison with Middle and East Tennessee where slavery ownership rates were not nearly as high and, in turn, where such a dramatic economic decline was not felt nearly as much.⁶⁸ With the onset of Emancipation, there was a fundamental shift in the way agricultural production would have to be carried out. It was subtle at the time and would require years to fully take root, but still a seed was planted in the minds of many white planters as well as many African-Americans which, for various reasons, compelled more and more of them to choose to walk away from the same types of farming situations that they were in during the Antebellum Period. To many African-Americans at the time, now yearning to find out what the meaning of freedom was, share labor must have seemed all too constraining a system. Additionally, in the eyes of a number of white land owners, share labor was not

⁶⁷ U.S. Census, 1870.

constraining enough for their desires. This conflict in desire is, in effect, what gave share labor its principle imperfection. And while there is still much room for further research to be done in the area, one interpretation of the facts point to this schism in belief as being primarily responsible for the economic decline of the Ames Plantation area from the late 19th century through the early 20th century.

⁶⁸ Mooney, *Slavery*, p. 146.

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