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978-1-107-05411-0 - Cultivating Success in the South: Farm Households in the Postbellum Era

Louis A. Ferleger And John D. Metz

Excerpt

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Introduction

Contesting the Myth of the Backward Southern Farmer

Like any good son, D. W. Hancock, an African-American farmer in Franklin County, Georgia, took care of his father's estate following his death in 1896.¹ Doc, as he was often called, had always worked closely with his father and his brothers on the family farm.² Barney Hancock had died in June, but Doc and his brothers were anxious about settling the estate so early in the growing season, when it was difficult to predict how well the cotton crop would fare. After all, Georgia law gave them up to twelve months to settle affairs. The past few years had been rough; the economy was depressed, and it was simply not safe to bet on the weather or the market. Moreover, the Hancocks knew that any essentials the family needed in the coming months would be purchased on credit and paid off once the cotton had been sold. So they decided it was best to wait to begin the probate process until fall, when the crops would be in and they would have a better idea of what the profits and the debts would be.

Barney Hancock's estate entered probate on October 2, 1896, when Doc traveled to the county seat in Carnesville to appear before the Clerk of the Court of Ordinary for Franklin County and submitted a petition asking to be appointed administrator of the estate, because his father had died without leaving a will. Despite Doc's effort, the court appointed A. W. McConnell, a white man from Carnesville, to be responsible for "collecting and paying the debts because of and owing by the estate and for the purpose of making distributions thereof among the heirs."³ While discrimination against African

¹ Barney Hancock was one of fifteen African-American decedents identified in Crawford, Franklin, and Jasper counties for the period between 1880 and 1910, representing 6 percent of the 228 estates used in this study.

² U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880: Population*. Gunnels District, Franklin, Georgia, Roll 147, Page 527B. Enumeration District 28, Image 0338.

³ "Application of D. W. Hancock for Letters of Administration on the Estate of Barney Hancock, dec'd," 7 October 1896 (Atlanta: Georgia Department of Archives and History, hereafter, GDA).

Americans in the South was pervasive during this era, race may not have been a major factor in the case of the Hancocks, as many white estates were treated similarly. In any event, Doc and his family were keen to ensure careful oversight of the estate, since they estimated the land and personal possessions to be worth \$2,000 – roughly three times the value of the average white farmer’s estate in Franklin County, and over fifteen times the value of the average black estate.⁴ While Barney Hancock’s success is impressive by any contemporary standard, it is exceptional given that he was African American.

Barney was born into slavery, probably in Franklin County or its environs, while his wife, Harriett, was born across the border in South Carolina. Barney and Harriett appear to have been together as early as the mid-1850s, since their two oldest daughters, Lucy and Ann, were born in 1856 and 1857, according to the enumerator’s notes in the 1870 Federal Census.⁵ By the end of the 1860s, the family lived in the Bold Spring district of Franklin County, located approximately ten miles southwest of Carnesville. Barney initially worked as a hired farm laborer to support his wife and their six children (Lucy, Ann, Nancy, James Neal, Doctor, and George) while Harriett kept house. By the time of the 1880 census, however, Barney’s family consisted of five girls and six boys, ranging in age from three months to twenty-five years.⁶ Although Ann had left the household, the family now included Henrietta, Harriet, Columbus, Charles, and three-month-old John. At the time of his death 16 years later, Barney owned 210 acres of land in 2 tracts, as well as 4 mules, 8 hogs, and a 2-horse sulky plow. The land, the livestock, and the ability to acquire the latest farming implements were clear indicators of hard-earned success.⁷

The Hancock family returned to court on November 2, 1896, to make certain that Harriett and her three minor children received the household possessions and twelve months of financial support from the estate guaranteed

It is unclear why the court appointed McConnell as administrator of the estate in spite of the application of D. W. Hancock. It is possible that the court was acting out of racial prejudice or felt that there was some benefit to an alternative appointment (e.g., McConnell was literate and Doc Hancock was not). There may have even been dissension among family members over which of them should serve as administrator. Unfortunately, court appointments rarely if ever include such details.

⁴ William A. Wright, *Report of the Comptroller General for the State of Georgia (hereafter, RCG) for the Year Ending September 30, 1895* (Atlanta, GA: Franklin Publishing House, 1895), 132, 137, 147, and 152.

⁵ 1870 *Federal Census*, District 210, Franklin, Georgia, Roll M593-150, Page 15B; Image: 247. The 1870 census listed Barney as “Barnet.”

⁶ 10th *US Census*, 1880, *Franklin, Georgia*. Roll 147, Page 527B, Enumeration District 28, *Gunnels*, Image 0338.

⁷ The average white farmer in Franklin County had an average of \$78.13 in livestock, while Barney Hancock’s four mules alone were appraised for a total of \$202.00. Likewise, Hancock’s sulky plow was valued at \$10.00, representing a little more than half the \$19.13 average for tools that white farmers in the county possessed; Wright, RCG (1895), 132, 137, 147, and 152.

for widows under Georgia law. The court appointed five “discrete and proper persons” to appraise the estate and return a “true and perfect” inventory of Barney Hancock’s personal possessions.⁸ The appointees, all white men, were neighbors of the Hancock family who acted quickly and returned the appraisal within eight days of being selected.⁹ The Warrant of Appraisement lists the items selected by the widow, amounting to one-third of her husband’s personal estate, which included 250 pounds of corn, 8 hogs, 6 bushels of wheat, 25 gallons of sorghum syrup, feed and fodder for livestock, and the sulky plow, in addition to nearly all of the household goods. Besides the beds, chairs, and cooking stove that Harriet chose from the household goods to sustain her family in the coming year were a desk and a “lot of books,” which suggests, contrary to the enumerator’s notes for the 1870 and 1880 censuses, that at least some in the Hancock family could read and write.¹⁰

Once the widow received her distribution from the estate, Georgia law dictated that the remainder be sold at auction to provide the cash needed to pay creditors, with any surplus cash being divided equally among Barney’s adult children.¹¹ A small group of family and neighbors gathered at the courthouse in Carnesville on December 3, 1896, to witness the sale of what remained of Barney’s personal estate. While cash was always helpful, the opportunity to buy healthy livestock and good tools cheaply may have been more important to farmers like the Hancock boys. In the end, Doc and two of his brothers purchased twenty-one of the twenty-six lots auctioned off that day. Doc got his father’s two best mules, the red heifer, and the two-horse wagon. George was able to buy the sand-colored yearling cow, a mule, and farm tools, while Charles purchased a drawknife, the cultivator, a turning plow, and a set of harness. Two of the appraisers, Jessee T. Holbrook and William Y. Holbrook, also participated. William was the successful bidder for the saddle, while Jessee won the lot of boards. William’s son, W. N. Holbrook, got the best deal of the day with the double buggy he acquired for \$18 less than the appraised value. In fact, nearly all of the prices realized at auction that day were bargains, ranging from 10 to 90 percent lower than the appraised values.¹² Six months later, A. W. McConnell concluded the administration of Barney Hancock’s estate when he appeared at the July session of the Court of Ordinary to certify the

⁸ “Petition of Harriett Hancock, widow of Barney Hancock, dec’d. for twelve months support out of estate of said dec’d and order appointing appraisers for selling a part of same,” 2 November 1896 (GDA).
⁹ “Warrant of Appraisement, with Oath, for the Estate of Barney Hancock, dec’d.,” 10 November 1896 (GDA). While the documents associated with Barney Hancock’s estate reflect the typical range of estate issues faced by executors, heirs, and survivors in Crawford, Franklin, and Jasper counties at the turn of the century, it should be stressed that the Hancock family’s level of success was a rarity among African-Americans in Franklin County for the period under study.
¹⁰ 1870 *Federal Census*, Roll M593–150, Page 15B; 1880 *Federal Census*, Roll 147, Page: 527B.
¹¹ “Sale Bill of Barney Hancock’s Personal Property,” 24 July 1897 (GDA).
¹² Ibid.

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bill of sale for the auction, listing the items sold, the names of the buyers, and the prices paid.

We can tell the story of Barney Hancock because of the information carefully recorded in a series of seemingly mundane probate documents: an application for the administration of an estate, the petition for twelve months of support for a widow and her dependents, an inventory of the personal possessions owned at the time of death, and a bill of sale for the items auctioned off at the end of the process. This complex method of dispersing an estate at death, as demonstrated by the example of Barney Hancock, was standardized and well-established in Georgia law by the end of the nineteenth century in order to ensure the proper distribution of land, possessions, and capital from one generation to the next.

While this story from Middle Georgia may seem insignificant at first, closer scrutiny of probate inventories reveals critical details about the type of “ordinary” Georgia farmer who is frequently silent in the historical record. From the inventories we learn that Barney Hancock was typical of most Georgia planters in the 1890s in that he worked hard to be self-sufficient – producing enough corn, hogs, and cane syrup to sustain his family – while pinning his fortunes on the prospects of the cotton he grew for market. While he spent conservatively, he saw the potential in new technology and invested hard-earned cash in a sulky plow that would allow him to put more land into cultivation. Likewise, his household possessions were mostly utilitarian (including an out-moded spinning wheel), but he also owned books, a desk, and a fairly expensive cookstove. Perhaps most significantly, we learn from the probate documents that this African American achieved an impressive level of economic success at a time when racial and economic circumstances prevented most farmers of color from escaping tenancy and achieving any economic freedom whatsoever.

Most Southern yeomen, whether white or black, owned little. However, the items listed in the probate inventories of Barney Hancock and his contemporaries suggest that Georgians were shrewd consumers who focused on acquiring those things that would give them a productive edge. Likewise, the persistence of seemingly antiquated items like spinning wheels and looms, despite the availability of cheap cloth on the market, suggests a lingering perception among farming families that self-reliance remained the surest way to hedge one’s bets against poor harvests and unpredictable downturns in the cotton market. The Hancock story, along with the stories of many other black and white Georgians to be discussed in subsequent chapters, calls into question the long-standing notion of an impoverished postbellum South characterized by a stagnating economy, political turmoil, and racial tension. Barney Hancock achieved a considerable degree of success in spite of the racist society in which he lived, and clearly his family was eager to achieve that same level of success for themselves, as indicated by the fact that the bulk of his estate was purchased at auction by kin. In this way, the Hancocks were similar to many

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white farmers who purchased their relatives' belongings at estate auctions. Indeed, auctions were a very common part of the estate-settlement process. Their prevalence suggests the development of a vigorous secondary market in used goods – hardly surprising in a region where cash was tight and farmers were constantly striving to increase their production.

Because such people left behind few written records, the stories of the Hancock family and other Southern yeomen like them are often lost to history. But they were the backbone of the South's agricultural economy, and their stories are crucial to understanding the development of the region and nation. Using probate records, census returns, and county-wide tax data allows us to explore the world of goods yeoman farmers inhabited in Middle Georgia between 1880 and 1910. The information contained in these records may appear mundane – inventories of farm tools, kitchen utensils, livestock, and the like – but it can reveal valuable insights into people's economic strategies and motivations, as well as their aspirations and values.

How did Georgia's yeomen respond to the challenging circumstances of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? How did they adapt their traditional means of agriculture and system of labor to become more fully engaged in the market economy by the early twentieth century? What did it mean to farmers to be successful in the postbellum South? Our answers to these and other questions challenge the notion of the New South as a culturally stunted and economically stagnant society. Identifying patterns in the way that goods were acquired, used, and disposed of, we find that Southerners employed rational, sophisticated strategies to minimize economic and social risks and to maximize their chances of success and prosperity. The yeoman farmers of Middle Georgia were, more often than not, forward-thinking and hopeful actors. Like their urban counterparts, they were active and eager consumers, but they consumed in very different ways and for very different reasons.

Poverty and economic complacency came to be considered hallmarks of the South soon after the Civil War. Northern writers frequently viewed Southern economic hardship through the lens of social and cultural differences, leading them to depict the region as both peculiar and pathetic.¹³ Southern writers like Thomas Nelson Page, on the other hand, lost no time in recasting adversity as genteel decay, which helped to create the image of crippled nobility associated with the "Lost Cause" interpretation of the Civil War.¹⁴ Joel Chandler Harris's observations fell somewhere in between.

Born and raised in the Middle Georgia town of Eatonton, Harris came of age during the closing years of the Old South, the tumult of the Civil War, and the dawn of the New South. While he is best known as the popularizer

¹³ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 25.

¹⁴ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001), 222.

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of “Uncle Remus” folktales, he was also a journalist and short-story writer. In his fictionalized versions of the South, Harris eschews any pretense of nobility, instead offering vignettes that portray Southern society in all its threadbare richness, featuring characters (both white and black) who are wry, shrewd, and self-effacing, and who struggle to do their best with what little they have. In the short story *Free Joe*, Chandler offers a succinct view of the economic challenges facing the New South. Describing the fictional Middle Georgia town of Azalia, he explains, “There was room for improvement, but no room for progress, because there was no necessity for progress. . . . They were satisfied with things as they existed, though they had an honest, provincial faith in the good old times that were gone.”¹⁵ While neither the Northern writers, nor Page, nor Harris quite captured the full complexity of economic life in the New South, Harris came closest.

In our effort to understand the lives of common people in postbellum Georgia, we use a wide range of primary documents, but we rely most heavily on probate inventories. Probate inventories are lists of a person’s material possessions owned at the time of his or her death. Inventories from Georgia, like those from many other states, list only moveable objects, not land or buildings. Under state law, an estate was subject to probate in the absence of a will, in situations where inheritance was in dispute, or in cases of insolvency. Typically, the district court appointed two or three appraisers familiar with the occupation of the deceased to compile an inventory of the decedent’s possessions and to assign a fair market value to the personal estate.¹⁶

Historians have long been aware of the importance of probate documents to understanding the material lives of a broad spectrum of society. They provide a snapshot of a moment in time, a peek inside the barns and cupboards of people who lived in previous centuries. Moreover, information from probate inventories can be quantified and measured in a number of ways. Scholars have become quite adept at teasing out data about economic and social development from these documents by focusing on the presence or absence of certain items, their quantity, the frequency with which they are mentioned, when they appear in or disappear from the historical record, their location in the home, and the ways in which they are described.¹⁷ It is also possible to quantify change over

¹⁵ Joel Chandler Harris, *Free Joe and Other Georgian Sketches* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), 165, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/harrisj/harris.html>.

¹⁶ Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, “Inventories and the Analysis of Wealth and Consumption Patterns St. Mary’s County Maryland, 1658–1777.” *HM*, 13(2) 1980: 81–104.

¹⁷ Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, “Changing Lifestyles and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake,” *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, edited by Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert, 59–166 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994); Gloria L. Main, “Probate Records as a Source for Early American History,” *WMQ* (33) 3, 1975:88–99; Lorena S. Walsh, “Urban Amenities and Rural Sufficiency: Living Standards and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake, 1643–1777,” *JEH* 43(1), 1983:109–117; Paul A. Shackel, *Personal Discipline and Material Culture: An Archaeology of*

space and time by comparing patterns of probate data from different regions and years. While this finer level of analysis is common for earlier periods of American history, probate-based studies of individuals and discrete groups are virtually nonexistent for the postbellum South.

The material possessions listed in inventories also reflect a person's consumer choices, values, and world view. Changing ways of thinking become evident when individual inventories are compared to those from a different area, socioeconomic class, ethnic group, gender, or time period. The patterns of material culture that these records reflect provide important clues about how consumption differed between groups in a given era, as well as how consumption habits shifted over time in response to altered social and economic conditions.¹⁸

To be sure, inventories have their drawbacks as primary sources. First of all, how the information is presented can vary greatly from one appraiser to another. This makes it difficult to judge both the quantity and quality of goods in some inventories. For example, appraisers rarely listed every single item, often referring to groups of objects instead, such as "one lot of earthenware." And "one plow" could refer to any number of varieties used by Georgia farmers in the late-nineteenth century. Second, probate inventories do not reflect a reliable cross section of society. The poorest and richest segments of society are barely represented, because estates worth less than \$500 were not subject to probate, and the very wealthy usually left a will. Those who disposed of their property prior to death are also missing from or misrepresented in probate records.¹⁹ Third, inventories may be deficient in many types of data. For example, details concerning clothing, food, debts owed by the deceased, and everyday objects of little value often do not appear in the inventories. Appraisers also may have omitted heirlooms, possessions bequeathed in a will, goods given prior to death, and objects belonging to others in a household.²⁰ As we will show in Chapter 2, however, there are ways of accounting for and overcoming these gaps and biases in probate records.

Our work is concerned with production and consumption among yeoman farmers in the Georgia Piedmont during a period of tremendous change, as they

Annapolis, Maryland, 1695–1870 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993); Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

¹⁸ In a landmark study of the standard of living, self-sufficiency, and the increasing importance of consumer culture in colonial Maryland, Lorena Walsh observes that, "One does not learn of these changes much from letters, diaries, or other personal records . . . One finds most of the answers to such questions in probate records." See "Urban Amenities and Rural Sufficiency," 109.

¹⁹ Mark Overton, Jane Whittle, Darron Dean, and Andrew Hahn, *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600–1750* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 27–28.

²⁰ As Mark Overton argues, "the omission of some goods from an inventory has no effect on the accuracy of unit valuations (prices) for example, but would lead to an undervaluing of the moveable goods of the deceased." *Ibid.*, 32.

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made the transition from self-sufficiency to market dependence. We dispute the timeworn assertion that Southern yeomen were desperately poor and did little to improve their condition. Examining shifts in the pattern of goods ownership, we can see the resourceful ways in which farmers adapted to profound economic and social changes. These same patterns allow us to understand the factors that prompted farmers to assume greater risk in order to improve their lot in life, as well as those factors that stood in the way of progress. Additionally, we look for evidence to determine when, how, and to what degree Georgia farmers engaged in the “consumer revolution.” Focusing on the household as the primary unit of analysis, we test what seems to be a reasonable hypothesis: farmers who were risk-averse diversified their productive capabilities in order to guard against economic disaster, while those who focused intensively on a single crop (cotton) were confident enough in the stability of the market to put all their efforts into a single pursuit.

While many studies of the postbellum South focus on county-aggregate data to reveal the evolving patterns of land tenure, agricultural production, and reliance on store credit, the wealth of data from the three rural counties we examine makes it possible to reveal specific trends in household assets over time, by linking sales and tax data with probate inventories.²¹ Specifically, our investigation draws from a sample of 228 estates from the counties of Crawford, Franklin, and Jasper between 1880 and 1910. Each decedent was verified independently and cross-verified through census data (the household had to have been recorded in the 1880 census as living in the same location as at the time of death), annual state tax records (the individual had to have been recorded as paying Georgia taxes for at least five years prior to his or her death), and other primary sources. Although 90 percent of the probated estates used for this study belonged to white males, African Americans accounted for 6 percent of the decedents, and women for 7 percent. Given this, we consider both race and gender at length.

The Middle Georgia counties of Crawford, Franklin, and Jasper are especially fitting for an investigation through probate records of the material world of yeoman farmers engaged in cotton production. Each county has a rich body of historical documents to work from, and all three have always been on the periphery in Georgia, geographically, economically, and socially.²² Crawford

²¹ See, for example, Louis Ferleger, “Capital Goods and Southern Economic Development,” *JEH*, XLV (June 1985): 411–417; –, “Self-Sufficiency and Rural Life on Southern Farms,” *AH*, 58, (July 1984): 314–329; Jay Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy After the Civil War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978); William N. Parker, “The South in the National Economy, 1865–1970,” *SEJ* 46 (April 1980): 1019–48; Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978); and Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

²² Franklin County, named for Benjamin Franklin, was settled in 1784. Jasper County, located southwest of Franklin, was established in 1807 as Randolph County and renamed in 1812 for

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and Jasper counties are situated in the Lower Piedmont, while Franklin County is in the northeast corner of the state, in an area of the Upper Piedmont known as the Uplands (Figure 1.1). Crawford County was among the first Piedmont counties to be drawn into the cotton economy when planters from the older cotton-producing region known as the Black Belt moved northward in the 1830s and 1840s, in search of fresh farmland. Jasper County also became integrated into the cotton economy well before the Civil War, yet it retained economic similarities to the more remote Upland counties because of its location on the northern margin of the Lower Piedmont region. Franklin, on the other hand, was located squarely in the Uplands, where conditions were more conducive to smaller farms practicing mixed agriculture. Landowners there were typically smallholders or middling farmers who produced corn for the local market and wheat, small grains, peas, beans, and potatoes for home use. While cotton had been grown for home and local consumption in the Upper Piedmont ever since whites settled in the area, it was not commercially viable until the widespread adoption of fertilizers and the arrival of railway service following the Civil War.²³

Chapter 1 establishes the broader historical context necessary for understanding our analysis of production and consumption in Crawford, Franklin, and Jasper counties. We begin by describing the conditions on the eve of the Civil War and go on to discuss economic change from the Reconstruction period through the first decade of the twentieth century. Here we show how the Southern yeomanry transitioned from subsistence-level conditions to more intensive involvement in commercial agriculture and fuller engagement with a national economy. The impact of this transition was greatest in regions such as Franklin County, which had existed on the margins of the cotton economy prior to the Civil War.

Chapter 2 delves into our methodology, stressing the importance of probate files as the most representative documentation available to permit a comprehensive analysis of yeoman households in the postbellum period. The detailed inventories created as part of the probate process, listing the possessions of individuals at various wealth levels, make it possible to explore farm families' domestic organization, their degree of self-sufficiency, and the ways in which they defined success. The household was the locus of most production-related activities throughout Georgia in the late-nineteenth century, and virtually every family member was involved in agriculture in some way. Similarly, most craftwork and manufacturing took place in the home or in dependencies located

William Jasper, a Revolutionary War soldier killed in Savannah in 1779. Crawford County was formed in 1822 and named for William Harris Crawford, President of the United States Senate, minister to France, and Secretary of War and the Treasury; Marion B. Holmes, ed. *Georgia Official and Statistical Register* (Atlanta: Perry Communications, 1978), 1117, 1122 & 1112.

²³ Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 79.

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on the home property. Therefore, the household was the most important economic unit in Middle Georgia. We examine how changes in household organization and family composition relate to the transition of the regional economy toward more intensive levels of cotton cultivation, arguing that the scale and scope of production were typically limited by family size or by the ability of kin groups to work together.

Chapter 3 considers the full range of productive activities carried out on yeoman farms, including production for home use, production for market, and by-employment, in order to provide a more holistic view of production and self-sufficiency in the three counties. We contend that farmers in Middle Georgia balanced the high-risk strategy of cotton monoculture by engaging in other productive activities whenever possible – not only farming but also trades and crafts. These additional sources of income allowed farmers to diversify their earnings and remain as self-reliant as possible, thereby limiting risk.

In Chapter 4, we focus on the role of the household as part of a farm operation, and on how household possessions reflect consumption practices. Our analysis of probate inventories and estate sales (auctions) suggests that Middle Georgia farmers at all wealth levels were eager and active consumers. They made farming and productive by-employment priorities over consumption and the purchase of domestic amenities, but they also followed the latest product and fashion trends as they took hold in urban centers. Likewise, Southern farmers understood the ways in which material goods and the act of consumption communicated one's station in life and position in the community. Unlike in urban areas, agricultural implements, production-related items, and laborsaving devices appear to have been linked more strongly to affluence than were domestic refinements. While the goods listed in the inventories imply something about purchasing decisions and patterns of acquisition, the records of estate sales conducted as part of the probate process provide perhaps the broadest and best insight into the buying habits of Georgia yeoman farmers. We conclude Chapter 4 with a discussion of how estate auctions created a robust secondary market in used goods, providing Georgians with an alternate source for acquiring the things they wanted or needed. While many aspects of the Georgia estate-sale system are enigmatic, the auction process served a clear purpose: it offered quick access to cash and the equitable division of assets without contention. Many heirs likely preferred this arrangement to spending the considerable time and energy required to attempt to divide possessions equally among survivors. A sale held "at public outcry," after all, offered the beneficiaries of the estate the potential of exceeding the value assigned to goods in the inventory, while those attending the auction had the opportunity to acquire a cultivator, a stove, or a mule at a discount.

Chapter 5 explores questions of wealth and status as they are represented through land tenure and goods ownership. We find that the rural, agriculture-based economy of postbellum Middle Georgia was every bit as complex, dynamic, and viable as the contemporaneous urban model characterized by