

Research Report

*Plantation Geographies: Race, Science and Agriculture in the South Carolina Lowcountry*

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With generous funding from the Harvard History Project, the Joint Centre for History and Economics, and the Institute for New Economic Thinking I completed three critical months of archival and interview research in Charleston, South Carolina. I focused my archival research on the voluminous collection of the Agricultural Society of South Carolina held in Charleston by the South Carolina Historical Society. My interviews were conducted with current and retired employees of the USDA coastal experiment station and the regional cooperative extension service. The Agricultural Society of South Carolina, the USDA, and cooperative extension have long been the dominant institutions of agricultural governance in the South Carolina Lowcountry - the coastal region surrounding the port city of Charleston. My dissertation explores the ways that agricultural governance is just as much a racial project as it is a political economic one, and shows that these institutions have been critical to the making of the region's specific iteration of racial capitalism.

The Agricultural Society of South Carolina was founded in Charleston in 1785 as an elite fraternal organization concerned with "the promotion of agriculture and other rural concerns." The twelve founding members were all Lowcountry planters and statesman, several of them educated in Europe. As such, the Society was modeled after elite European agricultural improvement societies and indeed directly connected to this broader network of imperial knowledge production. Their work was not only social and governmental but also embodied the 18th century gentleman science tradition, producing technical knowledge and working to

promote the regional adoption of "scientific" and "improved" agriculture. It was also a clearly elitist institution, promoting specific projects and circulating knowledge in a way that benefitted some at the expense of others - most obviously, the region's black majority population. The Society has a huge collection of archival material that, in my estimation, remains greatly understudied and offers research opportunities for a vast range of themes.

In many ways the Agricultural Society and similar imperial societies prefigured the 20th century role of the US agricultural state, especially the cooperative extension service. They operated an experimental farm, bred new cultivars, encouraged competition through prize contests, and disseminated agricultural knowledge - all towards the goal of promoting more "improved" systems of production. In the Lowcountry, in fact, the relationship goes beyond mere similarities in ideology and practice. The Agricultural Society actively recruited the emerging agricultural state to the Lowcountry in the 1920s to help resolve a crisis in plantation production initiated by the arrival of the boll weevil, plummeting crop prices, and African American resistance to wage labor. The Society provided land and infrastructure for USDA experiment stations that were geared towards breeding cotton varieties that matured before becoming susceptible to the weevil. They also provided support for research that eventually helped the region's planters transition from cotton and rice production to truck farming - the growing of fresh fruits and vegetables for distant urban markets. In this way the Society essentially outsourced its work of agricultural improvement to the growing agricultural state, which reciprocated by helping to reproduce white monopolization of land and black economic dependence.

My project analyzes the shifting racial ideologies and dynamic forms of state power that underpinned transitions in Lowcountry agricultural governance over the course of the long

twentieth century. The archives of the Agricultural Society of South Carolina are crucial to this task. In Charleston, I first focused on early 20th century correspondence between Society leaders, elected officials and USDA or cooperative extension staff - a loose institutional alliance that I think of as the regional plantation bloc. This research reveals that regional elites successfully lobbied the USDA to help reproduce plantation geographies by appealing to their common understandings of "improved" agriculture and "progressive" farmers. It also reveals that, for the plantation bloc, improved agriculture meant not only promoting a suite of modernist production technologies but also maintaining the white monopolization of land.

The second phase of archival research centered on the Society's meeting minutes for the period 1890 - 1935. As some of the most extensive records of Lowcountry planter interests, these minutes provide crucial insight into the ways that elites understood the plantation crisis of the early 20th century and the logic behind their improvement campaigns. The records reveal several important things. The Society initiated prize contests during this period, for instance, in order to encourage crop yield increases and to naturalize competition among farmers, both obvious hallmarks of modern capitalist agriculture. But another equally important assumption was that this increased competition would create "thinking" farmers, ones who would never rest content but unceasingly strive to produce more and more. In effect, prize contests were efforts to create farmers who aligned themselves with the imperatives of capitalist production. Perhaps most importantly, this research shows that the plantation bloc's conception of agricultural improvement was firmly tethered to normative assumptions of whiteness: in other words, the project of promoting the ideal system of modern agriculture was also a project aimed at cultivating a farmer that approached the dominant ideals of whiteness, regardless of that farmer's racial identity.

Finally, I conducted twelve interviews with current and former employees of the USDA and cooperative extension that were aimed at understanding how more recent systems of agricultural improvement challenge and/or reproduce elements from the past. These interviews suggest an important shift in both racial ideologies and forms of state power, changes which ultimately allow for the reproduction of white supremacy in the post-Civil Rights era. Broadly, the overt and intentional discrimination practiced by the various institutions of the plantation bloc in the early 20th century has been replaced by forms of color-blind racism - or, discrimination that is paradoxically facilitated by claims to race-neutrality. In tandem with this shift to purportedly race neutral policy and practice, the USDA has distanced itself from the day-to-day operations and technical requirements of production in the region by funding (through competitive grants) non-profit organizations with improvement missions. These shifts in ideology and governance have the effect of rolling back some of the state protections for racial minorities won during the Civil Rights era.

The support from the Harvard History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking allowed me to uncover key parts of this story. This research will provide the backbone for much of my dissertation and will also be used for a journal article that will construct a conceptual framework for analyzing the racial politics of the US agricultural economy in the 20th century.