

Pre-Modern Georgia



Late Reconstruction
To the turn
Of the 20th Century

Effects of Reconstruction

- ▶ **Sharecropping** was an agricultural labor system that developed all over the South following Reconstruction and lasted until the mid 20th century.
- ▶ Laborers with no land worked on farms owned by others, and at the end of the season landowners paid workers a share of the crop.
- ▶ Sharecropping started due to the failure of both the contract labor system and land reform after the War.
- ▶ The contract labor system, administered by the Freedmen's Bureau, was designed to negotiate labor deals between white landowners and former slaves, many of whom resented the system and refused to participate.

- ▶ Also, despite some talk during the war of land reform, in which the federal government would divide Confederate-owned plantations into smaller farms to be distributed to former slaves, most land was returned to its original owners.
- ▶ Instead of enjoying the often quoted "40 acres and a mule" that the government might have provided, freed slaves in Georgia were left with few options as free laborers.
- ▶ After the War, plantation owners, without slaves or the money to pay a free labor force, were often unable to farm their land.
- ▶ Sharecropping originally developed as a system that theoretically benefited both parties.

- ▶ Landowners could have access to the large labor force needed to grow cotton, but they did not need to pay these laborers money, a major benefit in a post-bellum Georgia that was cash poor but land rich.
- ▶ The workers were free to negotiate a place to work, had the possibility of making enough profit at the end of the year to buy farm equipment or even land, even negotiate a place to stay if needed.
- ▶ By 1880, 32% of the state's farms were operated by sharecroppers; this would increase in the 50 years following.
- ▶ By 1910 sharecroppers operated 37% of the state's 291,027 farms.
- ▶ Tenancy rates in general and sharecropping rates in particular were highest in those portions of the state that grew mostly cotton.

- ▶ In 1910, Burke, Dooly & Houston counties led the state's cotton production, and each had higher than average rates of tenant farms & sharecroppers.
- ▶ For most sharecroppers, making money and paying off debts were not the only factors that mattered when it came to deciding whether or not to stay on a certain farm from one year to the next.
- ▶ In many cases the deciding factor was the extent to which the landowner attempted to control the sharecropper's life.

- ▶ Though the owners instructed the sharecroppers on how much acreage was to be planted in each crop, when the crops were to be planted and harvested, most of the actual farming and how the farm was to be run was left up the sharecroppers.
- ▶ More often than not, this system became another form of slavery, reminiscent of Indentured Servitude.
- ▶ The plight of Georgia sharecroppers received national attention with the publication of Erskine Caldwell's best-selling novel *Tobacco Road* in 1932.

- ▶ Sharecropping in Georgia ended in the mid-20th century, for the most part.
- ▶ Some areas it continued until the 1970's.
- ▶ Many sharecropper's, both black & white, left the fields for jobs in the cities.
- ▶ Black Georgians left the state for a variety of reasons, and landowners sought new technologies to make cotton growing possible (and less expensive) with fewer people in the fields.
- ▶ Poor whites moved away from agricultural labor for industrial jobs in the state's growing cities.
- ▶ Tractors, cotton pickers, and other technological advances also allowed landowners to increase their yields with fewer workers.

- ▶ In 1997 the U.S. census reported just 2,607 tenant farmers in Georgia, with no special classification for sharecropping. Only 119 of these tenants were African American.
- ▶ From the 1870's to the 1940's, sharecropping was a labor system that kept poor black and white Georgians working in agriculture.
- ▶ For black Georgians in particular, this labor system was a major obstacle to being fully able to realize and enjoy the social and political rights granted to them at the end of the War.

- ▶ **The Naval Stores Industry**, in the late 19th & early 20th centuries, had Georgia being the world's leading producer of turpentine.
- ▶ Naval Stores are materials extracted from southern pine forests and then used in the construction and repair of sailing vessels.
- ▶ Typical naval stores include lumber, railroad ties, rosin, and turpentine.
- ▶ The naval stores industry in North America originated in the mid-18th century in North Carolina.
- ▶ Before 1800 the major products of the trade were raw gum, pitch, and tar.

- ▶ After the American Revolution (1775-83), processes were developed for distilling spirits of turpentine from gum.
- ▶ By 1850, 96% of U.S. naval stores came from North Carolina.
- ▶ In the early 1870's North Carolina naval stores producers began migrating to southeast Georgia's sandy coastal plain to take advantage of the untapped virgin pine forests in that region.
- ▶ They brought their equipment and black laborers and established residential villages on large turpentine farms.
- ▶ By the mid-1880s about 7 in 10 turpentine workers in southeast Georgia had been born in North Carolina.

- ▶ The industry grew so rapidly that by 1890 Georgia was the national leader in naval stores production, a ranking that lasted until 1905.
- ▶ Florida was the leader from 1905 to 1923, after which Georgia regained its predominance and maintained it until the 1960's.
- ▶ Reliable labor was important to any successful naval stores operation.
- ▶ At the top of the turpentine farm hierarchy were a superintendent and a woods rider, who coordinated the work of the laborers who boxed pine trees and chipped and dipped the pine gum.

- ▶ Other workers operated the turpentine distilleries, while coopers made the barrels to transport rosin and turpentine, and teamsters transported the products to the markets.
- ▶ The superintendent and woods rider were usually white men, while the majority of the laborers, called woodsmen, were African American.
- ▶ After 2 or 3 yrs., naval stores crews dismantled their stills, commissaries, and other facilities and moved their laborers and equipment to areas where virgin dip was more plentiful.
- ▶ The growth of the industry attracted increasing numbers of migrants to the Georgia Wiregrass & pine barrens.

- ▶ Cutover pine lands available for purchase or lease also attracted new settlers, particularly African Americans, who farmed the lands as tenants or owners.
- ▶ Much of the acreage that had been tapped for turpentine was subsequently cut for timber and then turned over for a third commercial use, agriculture.
- ▶ By 1900 the Georgia turpentine industry began to decline as the primitive harvesting methods continued to damage and destroy pine trees.
- ▶ University of Georgia chemist Charles Herty revolutionized turpentine production by designing a clay pot known as the Herty cup, which could be suspended from a nail in the tree.

- ▶ This allowed shallower tree cuts to be made above the cup.
- ▶ Gum dripped into metal gutters tacked to the tree, and then flowed into the cup.
- ▶ The Herty cup-and-gutter system was patented in 1902 and quickly replaced the more primitive box method of resin collection.
- ▶ The turpentine industry saw renewed productivity, and Georgia regained its leading position in the world naval stores market in 1923.
- ▶ From the 1890s through WWII (1941-45), Savannah & Brunswick were the world's leading ports for the shipment of naval stores.

- ▶ Small-scale production of naval stores declined after 1940 due to rising competition from large chemical companies and the lack of innovation by small producers.
- ▶ New methods introduced in the 1930's modernized turpentine production, primarily through large-scale steam distillation processes and the vapor-condensation process, which produced sulfate turpentine.
- ▶ By the 1960's the small-scale production of naval stores in Georgia was very limited.

- ▶ **The Convict Lease System** was another solution after the War, for landowners having a difficult time finding, and controlling, a labor force.
- ▶ Some Georgians saw the prisoners at the state's prison in Milledgeville as the answer to their problems—a workforce that could be firmly controlled.
- ▶ Georgia leaders were also concerned about the costs associated with operating a penitentiary, as the prison population increased and included many more African Americans.
- ▶ In an effort to resolve these issues, officials during Reconstruction approved the leasing of prisoners to private citizens.

- ▶ Provisional governor Thomas Ruger awarded the 1st convict lease to William A. Fort of the Georgia and Alabama Railroad on May 11, 1868.
- ▶ Fort was given 100 African American prison laborers for a year at the price of \$2,500.
- ▶ Fort was responsible for taking care of the prisoners' basic needs during that year.
- ▶ Sixteen prisoners died during that first year while working for private entities, but from the government's point of view, the program was successful.
- ▶ In 1869 the state decided to lease out all of the 393 prisoners in the penitentiary for no fee to the contracting firm Grant, Alexander, and Company to work on the Macon and Brunswick Railroad.

- ▶ Although it was agreed that the convicts would be treated humanely, reports to then-Governor Rufus Bullock indicated that leased convicts were being overworked, brutally whipped, and killed while under the care of Grant, Alexander, and Company.
- ▶ Within 5 yrs., convict leasing was a major source of revenue for the state.
- ▶ Over a span of 18 months in 1872 and 1873, the hiring out of prison labor brought Georgia more than \$35,000.
- ▶ With this success, the state legislature passed a law in 1876 that endorsed the leasing of the state's prisoners to one or more companies for at least 20 yrs.
- ▶ Three companies took on these convicts at the price of \$500,000 to be paid at intervals over the 20 year span of the lease.

- ▶ During this period, there were attempts to reform the system of convict labor in Georgia, although such efforts were never successful, in part because of the sheer profitability of the convict lease system.
- ▶ In 1881, expressing intentions to improve the prisoners' quality of life, the state legislature passed a law requiring that only one person in each work camp be authorized to administer punishment.
- ▶ Rather than ease the difficulties of leased convicts, however, this legislation enabled the harsh treatment of prisoners by men known as "whipping bosses."
- ▶ In an 1894 report for the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture's Office of Road Inquiry, O. H. Sheffield, a civil engineer from UGA, endorsed the utilization of convict labor on state roads.

- ▶ Because almost all of the state's 2,000 felons were leased to private companies, only misdemeanants could be used in road construction.
- ▶ In 1903 the state legislature gave counties the opportunity to use felons who were serving less than 5 year sentences for roadwork projects.
- ▶ Convict leasing became less profitable during the first decade of the 20th century as a rising tide of progressivism, culminating with the election of Governor Hoke Smith, swept across the state.
- ▶ Progressives, influenced by the media exposure of convict leasing's inhumane conditions, pushed through legislation in 1908 outlawing the convict lease system.

- ▶ This wave of anti-convict leasing was coupled with a depression in 1907, which made enlisting prisoner labor less economically feasible for companies.
- ▶ When convict leasing was abolished, the use of roadside chain gangs took its place.
- ▶ The chain gang system relied upon the idea that prisoners were repaying their debts to society through labor on public projects, which the state government supported because it could be done "on the cheap."
- ▶ By 1911 the Georgia Prison Commission reported that 135 of the state's 146 counties utilized convict labor on road projects.
- ▶ The chain gang system lasted for several decades.

- ▶ The media, investigators, and prisoners complained of harsh treatment during the course of its implementation.
- ▶ Robert E. Burns's book *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang*, adapted as a film in 1932, brought nationwide attention to the treatment suffered by these prison laborers.
- ▶ In the mid-1940s the national media focused again on the harsh conditions of Georgia's chain gangs, which led to a movement to abolish them.
- ▶ Gov. Ellis Arnall's investigation of the prison system ultimately resulted in a prison reform act, which modernized the Georgia prison system & sent chain gangs the way of convict leasing.
- ▶ Convict labor in Georgia no longer endangers the health of prisoners, however, Georgia's convicts are still expected to work on various projects, including roadside beautification.