

HOW FARM TENANTS LIVED IN CHATHAM COUNTY, NC IN 1922

Jim and Beverly Wiggins, Chatham County, June 2010¹

In John Cooper's chapter on Chatham County Agriculture in the county's history book, *Chatham County 1771-1971*, are a few sentences about farm tenants and an associated reference to a 1922 paper on the topic. Curiosity piqued, we went to the Internet, and after some searching, found the full text of the paper, *How Farm Tenants Live: A Social-Economic Survey in Chatham County*.² (Dickey 1922) Who knows what treasures lurk in cyberspace!

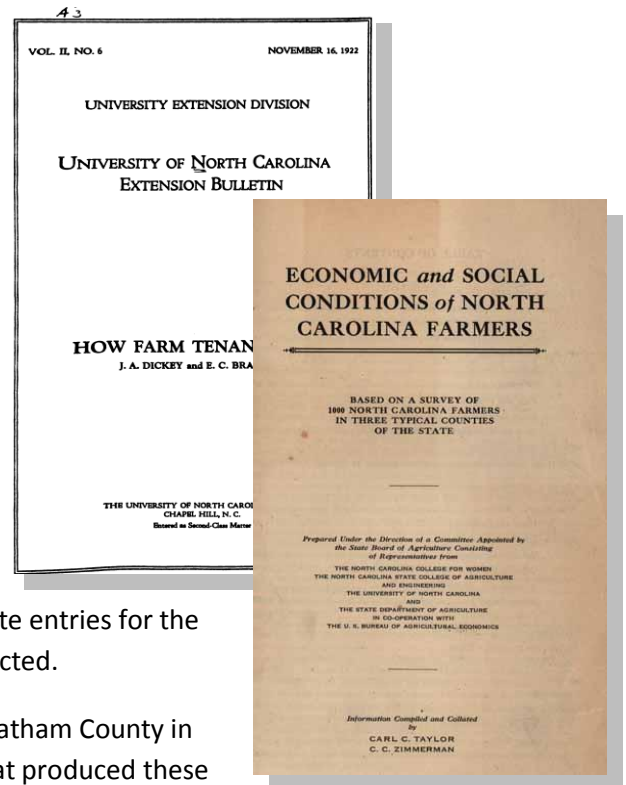
Furthermore, *How Farm Tenants Live* indicated that a larger and more detailed report was being produced that would contain the data for all three regions of the state and cover more topics than did the Chatham County summary. This revelation sent us back to the Internet where, sure enough, we found the full text of a report edited by C. C. Taylor and C. C. Zimmerman, *Economic and Social Conditions of North Carolina Farmers: Based on a Survey of 1000 North Carolina Farmers in Three Typical Counties of the State*.³ Most of the information in that report—the official report of the North Carolina Tenancy Commission (NCTC)—is presented in tables that show separate entries for the three regions, allowing the Chatham County data to be extracted.

Intrigued by the wealth of data on the topic of tenancy in Chatham County in 1922, we researched the origin and methods of the study that produced these two reports.

Background of the Study

During the study year, 1922, which followed World War I but preceded the Great Depression, North Carolina's economy was based largely on agriculture. Farms in Chatham County—indeed, in North Carolina in general—produced mostly cash crops to sell—the soil-exhausting crops of cotton, tobacco and corn—and devoted little acreage to food for home consumption—potatoes, poultry, pork.⁴ Long-term soil erosion and depletion and the newly arrived boll weevil were decreasing productivity, and the demand for and price of cotton were low.

State leaders at the time were concerned about the low productivity of the state's farms and believed that the system of tenancy that was prevalent in North Carolina—as in the South as a whole—contributed to the state's falling behind other states in agricultural development. The prevailing ideology was that farming one's own land was best for both the farmer and the state. In the farming areas of the North and West, tenancy farming was, they argued, a capitalistic enterprise. In the South,



...power in a state must and will reside with those who own the soil. If the land belongs to a king, the government is a despotism, though every man in it vote; if the land belongs to a select few, it is an aristocracy; but if it belongs to the many, it is a democracy, for here is the division of power.

*NC Governor (1862-1865)
Zebulon B. Vance*

The small farm, owned by the man who tills it, is the best plant-bed in the world in which to grow a patriot.

Every consideration of progress and safety urges us to employ all wise and just measures to get our lands into the hands of the many and forestall that most destructive of all monopolies—the monopoly of the soil.

*NC Governor (1917-1921)
Thomas W. Bickett*

Quotes from: Report of the State Land Commission, pp. 6-7.

however, they argued that tenancy was an “evil” that trapped and exploited “moneyless men”—both black and white. (Branson 1923, p.213) They also believed that the high and growing proportion of landless families in the state was a social problem in that it led to a lack of interest in and commitment to civic values.

In response to concerns such as these, the North Carolina State Board of Agriculture appointed a Tenancy Commission⁵ in 1921 and charged it with conducting field studies of farm tenancy in North Carolina.⁶ The proposed study of tenant farmers, then, grew out of the perception that farm tenancy was a major and growing problem. The resolution setting the study in motion put it this way:

Whereas, the alarming increase in tenancy presents one of the most serious problems now confronting the farmers of our State and other States. In 1880 only one American farmer in four was a tenant, whereas now practically two out of five are tenants, and the percentage is higher in North Carolina than in the country as a whole. Our public men as well as our agricultural leaders are now becoming aroused to the seriousness of this evil, with a view to discovering precise facts and suggesting definite remedies...

(NCTC 1922, p. 3)

To “discover precise facts,” the Tenancy Commission decided to sample farmers in the three regions of the state—mountains, piedmont, and coast. The surveys were conducted in the summer of 1921 in selected areas of Madison County, a mountain county on the edge of the cotton-tobacco belt; Chatham County, described as a “diversified farm county in the mid-state;” and Edgecombe, a cotton county in eastern North Carolina.

The Chatham County sample, which is of primary interest to us here, was assigned to the State University (now UNC-CH), represented on the Tenancy Commission by E. C. Branson, Kenan Professor of Rural Social Science. Branson was also chairman of the steering committee of The University of North Carolina Club, a volunteer organization consisting of faculty members and students. Each year the Club chose an issue to study among the “economic, social, and civic problems of the home state.” The focus of the Club in 1921-1922 was Home and Farm Ownership, so a former member of the Club, J.A. Dickey, was chosen to carry out the Chatham County part of the Tenancy Commission study.

Dickey and Branson's paper, *How Farm Tenants Live*, summarizes the Chatham County study, focusing particularly on the white tenant farmers of the area.⁷ The paper is a 47-page volume of the *University of North Carolina Extension Bulletin*, and was published in 1922, before the Tenancy Commission produced its official report on the larger study.

The Tenancy Commission's own report, *Economic and Social Conditions of North Carolina Farmers: Based on a Survey of 1000 North Carolina Farmers in Three Typical Counties of the State*, was published later in 1922. That 87-page document was edited by C. C. Taylor, Head of the Division of Rural Economics at the State College of Agriculture and Engineering (now NCSU) and C. C. Zimmerman, one of Taylor's graduate students, and consists mostly of data in tabular form.

Our purpose here is to use the treasure-trove of data produced by the Tenancy Commission survey of Chatham County to give a brief summary of the lives of farm tenants in Chatham County in 1922. To do this we draw primarily on the data from *Economic and Social Conditions of North Carolina Farmers*, which contained more detailed data, and supplement it with information from the Dickey and Branson report.

The Chatham County Sample

The Chatham surveys were the responsibility of the State University (UNC-CH) team. Mr. J. A. Dickey conducted the Chatham County surveys in the summer of 1922. He went from home to home in Baldwin and Williams townships—two townships in the northeastern part of Chatham County. According to *How Farm Tenants Live*, Dickey interviewed almost every farm family in these two townships—owners and tenants, white and black—a total of 335⁸ farms. Each family was asked more than 700 questions about farm production, farm ownership, and farm life.



Wolcott, Marion Post, photographer. General store. Bynum, North Carolina. Highway 15. Sept 1939.^a

Baldwin and Williams townships consist of 95.1 square miles, or 60,864 acres. Much of the farmland in the county was lying idle, because farm laborers had taken jobs in the cotton mills in Carrboro, Bynum, and elsewhere, or were getting better wages at other odd jobs such as working on roads, bridges, and buildings, driving or hauling. (Dickey 1922, p.13)

Agriculturally, the area studied lies between the cotton-tobacco counties in the eastern part of the state, and the grain-forage counties of the north and west. The farms represented by the Baldwin and Williams township sample were small, averaging only 18 cultivated acres for farm owners and 14 cultivated acres for tenants. (NCTC 1922, p.11) Interviews were conducted with 181 landlords—137 white and 44 black. (NCTC 1922, p. 9) Twenty were absentee owners who let out their land to renters and sharecroppers. Most of the owners were active farmers, living on and cultivating part of their land while letting out parcels to renters and sharecroppers. Thirteen of the owners ran small roadside stores. There were in

the two townships ten schools and twelve churches. Bynum was the only village in the area. (Dickey 1922, p.10)

While the survey included 181 landowners, who accounted for 54% of the farmers in the two Chatham townships studied, our focus here will be in their 154 tenants—the landless farmers of the area who accounted for the other 46% of farmers in the area and who farmed 39% of the tilled land. (NCTC 1922, pp.9-10)

Who Were the Tenants?

Following the Civil War, the shift from slave to tenant labor required a change in the rules of the landowner-laborer relationship. The 1877 Landlord and Tenant Act institutionalized this relationship in the “crop-lien” system. This legislation required that in any tenant agreement the landlords retain possession of all crops until their tenants had paid due rents in full and carried out “all other stipulations.”⁹ By the 1920s many had come to view this system as shifting much of the risk of farming from employer to employee,” or, in this case, from landowner to tenant. (Foner ,1988, p.594)

One-year, informal and unwritten contracts governed the farming of all of the tenants. The survey distinguished two kinds of landless farmers: renters and sharecroppers.

Renters owned their own farm implements and livestock, paid for three-fourths of the fertilizer bill, and received two-thirds of the corn crop and three-fourths of the cash crop money. Apart from the cotton seed, other goods produced by the renter belonged to him.



Lange, Dorothea photographer. U.S. Farm Security Administration: 1 July 1939, Chatham County, N.C.

A **sharecropper**, (usually referred to as a “cropper”¹⁰ in the reports) on the other hand, owned little or nothing. Everything he used was furnished by the landlord—land, livestock, dwelling, farm implements, and sometimes advances of cash or supplies. Croppers paid one-half of the fertilizer bills and got half of the corn and cash crop that they produced. Against the cropper’s half of the crop money, however, the landlord charged the cropper’s debts for advances and his portion of the fertilizer bill.

The study authors make clear that “Croppers are distinctly the under-crust of the farmers in the South—the bottom-rail, the underdog,” and note that this type of farmer is almost unknown in other areas of the U.S. (Dickey 1922, p. 14) In the South, in the state of North Carolina, in Chatham County, and in Baldwin and Williams townships, white croppers accounted for one-fourth of all white tenant farmers.

In the Chatham County study, 153 tenants were interviewed—106 renters (40 white and 66 black) and 48 croppers (13 white and 35 black). (NCTC 1922, p.9)

What Was the Economic Situation of Tenants?

The study found that almost a third of the tenants’ annual incomes came from intermittent non-farm jobs—such as work on construction of buildings at the university in Chapel Hill. Sixty-nine percent of their income was derived from farming. (Dickey 1922, p. 14) Because the lump sum payment for crop sales was received in the fall, most of the tenants’ money was not available to them during the year, and they had to depend upon credit from landlords and supply stores. In good years, these debts were repaid by the fall crop sales. In bad years, debt was carried over to the next year with the interest rate determined by the creditor. This crop-lien system made tenants overly dependent on landlords and merchants, who often insisted that they produce cash crops like cotton, for which the market price varied significantly from year to year. Dickey and Branson suggest that this system hampered the development of diversified farming in the South.

Table 1: Average Annual Cash Income

	Per Family	Per Individual
Renters		
White	\$336	\$74
Black	374	64
Croppers		
White	365	65
Black	209	37
Owners		
White	770	179
Black	515	91

Table 1 shows the average cash income per family and per individual in 1921, for the farmers in the two Chatham townships. (NCTC 1922, p.27) The discrepancy in income between owner and tenant families was striking. White farm owners in the area earned more than twice as much as white tenants. Black farm owners earned 38% more than black renters and 146% more than black croppers.

The average tenant farmer used credit for farm and home operating funds. The average credit debt per family in Baldwin and Williams townships for tenants was \$117. While white owners used considerably less credit (\$45) than did tenants, black owners benefitted less from their landholding status by using slightly more credit than

tenants (\$131) (NCTC 1922, p.28) Most of the tenants’ credit came from merchants, with the exception of black croppers who obtained two-thirds of their credit from their landlords. Only six of the tenant farmers in the two townships had received credit from banks. (NCTC 1922, p. 29)

The reports’ authors described the crop-lien credit from merchants and landlords as “restrictive credit” because the creditor could exercise “restrictive” powers over the sale of the farm product and could dictate the rate of interest charged. For example, a study of farm credit conducted by the State in 1920 found that interest charged by banks for short-term credit amounted to a little more than 6 percent, compared to as high as 34% for crop-lien credit for black croppers. (NCTC 1922, p.32) Of course, this should not be taken as a blanket indictment of all creditors. Some merchants and owners provided goods or loans to tenants at low or no interest and took losses when tenants’ crops did poorly. However, this did not lessen the tenants’ continued dependency on the creditor.

Average wealth (personal property such as farm implements, work stock, household goods, guns, and dogs) per family ranged from \$108 for black croppers to \$521 for white renters. Ownership of these goods is, by definition, the distinction between renters and croppers, and appears also to be an important ingredient in the move up the agricultural ladder to ownership.

Table 2 shows the wealth per family for tenants in the two townships of Chatham County. (NCTC 1922, p.32) It should be noted that this accounting of wealth does not take into account the family's debt. One out of five croppers was described by the researchers as insolvent.

Table 2: Wealth per Family

Renters	
White	\$521
Black	406
Croppers	
White	251
Black	108

Not surprisingly, the comparisons of tenants to land owners are striking, since the owners' wealth includes land values. The wealth per white owner family in the study was \$6234. For black owner families it was \$2230. That they had less wealth and higher debt suggests that these families probably had a more tenuous hold on farm ownership. Dickey and Branson lamented the lack of cash money available for Chatham farmers in general, saying that families with so little cash income had to focus on "keeping soul and body together," and could not be expected to support "progressive civilization" such as investments in schools and local roads. Such farmers, they said, had a poor chance to keep up with the rest of North Carolina. (Dickey 1922, p.12)

How Much of Their Own Food Did They Produce?

Most of the Chatham farm tenants—at least 90% in all four categories—raised garden and orchard products. And 90% or more of each of the four categories raised chickens. Almost 40% of black renters produced sorghum molasses. But not all were equally productive when it came to production for home consumption. Black croppers consistently raised a smaller percentage of their own family food supply than did other tenant farmers —fewer gallons of milk, pounds of butter, pounds of pork, bushels of potatoes, pounds of lard, and dozens of eggs. The percent of food for home consumption raised by tenant families ranged from a high of 84% for white renters to a low of 60% for black croppers. (NCTC 1922, p. 19, 23-26)

How Much Education Did They Have?

More than 88% of the white male tenants could read and write, and averaged 3 to 5 years of schooling. About 45% of the black male tenants could read and write, and the average years of schooling completed by this group was one to two years. (NCTC 1922, p. 65)

Of the tenant children ages six to fifteen, about half of whites could read and write. Among black tenant children, education depended greatly on farm status. Among black renters, about 70 % of the children could read and write, but of black cropper children only 26% could. (NCTC 1922, p. 66) At the time of the study, North Carolina law required that children between the ages of 8 and 14 be in school for at least four months of the year. (Bradley 1969, p.43)

For the white children in the two townships there were seven public schools. Six were one-teacher schools of elementary grade, open for only half of the year when the demand for work in the fields was less. Bynum had a five-teacher school. Three schools served the black inhabitants of the two townships, but additional information on schools for black children in the townships was not provided in the report. (Dickey 1922, p.26)

What Were Their Homes Like?

The average age of housing units among the tenant farmers studied was thirty years. The housing of renters and croppers differed little. More than half of the units had holes in the roof and/or floor. Lack of electricity and indoor plumbing was the norm. (Dickey 1922, p.23) None of the tenant homes in the townships studied had bathtubs or indoor toilets. In this respect, farm owners fared not much better—fewer than 2% of the homes of farm owners had bathtubs and fewer than 1% had an indoor toilet—indicating that rural living in Chatham in 1922 was still a rustic business. (NCTC 1922, p.43)



Lange, Dorothea, photographer. House of Negro tenant family. Pittsboro, North Carolina. July 1939. Library of Congress.

Only 15 of the 153 tenant homes had access to an “outdoor closet” —an enclosed privy. Heat was typically provided by fireplace; washing was done in tubs with washboards. Few of the houses had screens and a majority had broken window panes. The most common convenience was the sewing machine, which was found in more than half of all homes—owner and renter. About a third of white owner families had telephones, and one white tenant family did. None of the black families—owner or renter—had telephones. There were

no electric lights, washing machines or vacuum cleaners in any of the Chatham homes, probably

due to the lack of access to electric power. Although tenant houses were smaller than owners’ houses, extreme overcrowding was not a common problem. (NCTC 1922, p.45-47)

Means of transportation were very limited. Sixty-nine percent of renters had buggies and four had automobiles. None of the croppers had either form of transportation. (NCTC 1922, p.83)

What Was Their Health Status?

Doctors called on tenant families at home, on average, two to three times per year. Visits to the doctor’s office were infrequent. This is probably due to the distance to the doctor—averaging more than 8 miles—and the lack of means of transportation available to many tenant families. Vaccinations were available but not common, with only about 4% of tenants having been vaccinated for smallpox and less than one percent for typhoid. (NCTC 1922, p.58-59)

Tenant family births were attended by a doctor for about 80% of the white tenants, but only about 42% of black families, who were more likely to be attended by midwives. More than ten percent of the black tenant families had had stillbirths, as had 18% of white tenants. (NCTC 1922, p.55)

Privies and barns often drained toward the tenants' water supply. A majority of wells were open and often located too near houses or livestock. That 90% of tenant dwellings lacked an outhouse meant that the surrounding yard was often contaminated with human waste. (NCTC 1922, p.60-63)

What Were Their Religious Practices?

Eight churches of three denominations (not specified) served the white inhabitants of Baldwin and Williams townships in 1922. Seven of the churches had once-a-month preaching, mostly by non-resident preachers. Preaching was often done "in rotation" so that, most Sundays, preaching would be occurring somewhere. Dickey and Branson describe the country church buildings of the townships as "evidence of pride and care" in contrast to the dilapidated appearance of the residences. Four churches served the black inhabitants of the townships, but additional information on black churches was not provided. (Dickey 1922, p.31-32)

The survey asked tenants about church attendance. Most families in these two townships did go to church on Sunday—to their own church one Sunday a month and to other churches within reach on other Sundays. Renter families attended church no less often than did landowners. Although the churches were strictly segregated by race, Dickey and Branson note that farm owners, renters and croppers mingled at church services. (Dickey 1922, p.32)

White croppers were the only tenants to fall below 80% in church membership (with 54% membership) and also to fall below 90% in church attendance (with 69% attendance). (NCTC 1922, p.74) Lack of transportation and appropriate clothing were some of the reasons given for this by the respondents. Dickey and Branson suggest that high illiteracy rates making these croppers unable to read hymns and sing with the congregation or that their inability to give when the collection plate was passed might also contribute to their reluctance. (Dickey 1922, p.33)

What Were the Tenants' Opinions About Public and Community Improvements?

Each farmer was asked what he thought of six topics regarding public and community improvement—consolidated schools, road bonds, higher education, strict enforcement of the laws, scientific farming, and cooperative buying and selling.

The surveyors recorded each answer as favorable, opposed to, or indifferent. The number of favorable, opposed, and indifferent answers were totaled across the six topics for each of the six farmer groups—white owners, renters, and croppers and black owners, renters, and croppers. Table 3 shows the results in percentages. (NCTC 1922, p. 86) For example, among white renters, 78% of their responses were favorable.

Within both the renter and cropper groups, whites gave a higher percentage of favorable responses than did blacks (78% vs. 21% among renters and 48% vs. 9% among croppers). When tenants (renters and croppers combined) are compared by race, seventy percent of all white tenant responses were favorable, compared to only 17% of all black tenant responses.

It is worth noting that “opposed” responses were few among all of the groups compared. Among blacks—owners, renters, and croppers—“indifferent” responses were very high—ranging from 76% to 90%. Although the report gives little information about what was coded as an indifferent response, it seems reasonable to assume that many of these responses meant that the respondent “didn’t know” or “wasn’t informed” about the topic, rather than that they “didn’t care.”

Table 3: Opinions on Six Public and Community Improvement Topics

	Percent Favorable	Percent Indifferent	Percent Opposed
Renters			
White	78	16	6
Black	21	76	3
Croppers			
White	48	45	8
Black	9	90	1
Owners			
White	83	10	7
Black	17	82	1

Were owners more supportive of public and community improvements than were tenants (as the reports’ authors appear to have expected)? When the responses of owners are compared to those of tenants, we find that white owners and white renters had very similar responses (83% and 78% favorable, respectively), with the few white croppers in the sample being less supportive (48%). The favorable responses of black owners and black renters were also similar—17% and 21% respectively—with black croppers showing only 9% favorable responses. So, in Chatham County, owners and renters of the same race showed similar opinions, with whites being much more favorable than blacks. The researchers’ expectation that owners would be much more supportive of community improvements than were tenants was not supported by the data.

Were Tenants Stuck at the Bottom of the Agricultural Ladder?

One of the main questions addressed by the 1922 reports was whether tenancy was a stepping-stone to ownership, or a permanent underclass status. The answer was mixed. Clearly, movement up the agricultural ladder was possible. Some 48% of white renters had at one time been croppers, as had 73% of black renters. (NCTC 1922, p.37)

Among white renters, nearly three-fourths were the sons of farm owners (the remainder had renter fathers) and half lived on family land. (NCTC 1922, p.35) These renters had accumulated more wealth and enjoyed favorable rents and other benefits not shared by renters unrelated to their landlords. The finding that many white renters lived on family land is significant in that renters living on family land were the only tenants who did not depend on the regular field labor of their wives and young children. Children of tenant farmers often began working in the fields at the age of seven or eight. (Dickey 1922, p.21)

Other studies also found that the participation of wives and children in the farming aspects of tenant farming was common. A 1918 study of rural families in an eastern piedmont county of North Carolina found that, "In addition to the cooking, cleaning, scrubbing, washing, ironing, sewing, milking, churning, care of chickens and garden, and canning and preserving the average woman also works side-by-side with her husband in the field helping to plant, cultivate, and harvest the crop." (Bradley 1969, p. 35) That study also found that "two-thirds of the white children and three-fourths of the Negro children from 5 to 15 years old, in addition to chores and odd jobs, helped in the fields cultivating and harvesting the crops." (Bradley 1969, p. 49) A later, 1939, study also stressed that tenant wives' contributions to field work were significant. (Hagood, p. 87)



Wolcott, Marion Post, photographer. Negro tenants picking cotton on Highway 15 about seven miles south of Chapel Hill. Chatham County, North Carolina. Sept 1940.^d

The Tenancy Commission report concluded that land ownership was not solely the result of hard work or wise management. More than 30% of white landowners received their land by gift, inheritance, or marriage, and about half of the white renters were expected to move into ownership through inheritance or marriage. (NCTC 1922, p.38) Dickey and Branson noted that "kith and kin" relationships had long provided stability in Southern agriculture. They warned, however, that if farm ownership became less attractive due to lower crop prices, soil depletion, and the boll weevil, the young people most likely to move into farm ownership through inheritance or marriage were also those who could most easily move away from farming as a livelihood.

More than 86% of black renters were the sons of cropper fathers, and did not enjoy the benefits of renting family land. More than 87% of the land wealth of black owners had been acquired through purchase.

However, as land values increased, fewer landless farmers—black or white--could be expected to move up the agricultural ladder to become owners. The authors feared that this tendency was moving the South steadily toward a "peasant type" of agriculture—with the number of landless tenant farmers increasing every year and a larger percentage of farmed land being farmed by landless men. (Dickey 1922, p.21; NCTC 1922, p.39)

The study also revealed some downward mobility. Two of the white renter farmers had at one time been owners. None of the 13 white croppers had ever been a renter or owner, although nine had renter fathers. Among black croppers, none had been owners, but 9% previously had been renters, and 70% had renter or owner fathers. (NCTC 1922, p.35&37)

Which Tenant Farmers Could Be Helped?

The rationale for the tenancy study was the notion that farm tenancy in the State was problematic, in both practical and ideological terms. Practically, most tenants were poor and had an increasingly small chance of obtaining farm ownership. Their economic status made them resistant to and for practical purposes incapable of paying taxes needed to fund roads, bridges, schools, jails and public officials. Ideologically, the Commission agreed with former governor Bickett, that "...every honest, industrious, and frugal man who tills the soil [should have] a chance to own it." (NCTC 1922, p.39) "Civilization," they noted, "is rooted and grounded in the home-owning, home-loving, home-defending instincts....All these landless men need help..." (Dickey 1922, p. 37)

"Ain't no trouble fer me to move. I ain't got nothing much but er soap gourd and er string er red-peppers. All I got to do is ter call up Tige, spit in the fireplace, and start down the road."

*Chatham County sharecropper
From Branson, 1923, p. 219.*

While the Tenancy Commission report failed to directly address the question of which farmers might be helped, Dickey and Branson concluded that some were more worthy of help or more profitably helped than others. Renters living on family farms, they reasoned, don't need help because they are likely to inherit part of the farm or be helped to ownership. It was the renter who did not live on family land that could use public assistance to move into land ownership. These renters had acquired personal property, including farm implements and livestock, thereby demonstrating self-effort.

White croppers, Dickey and Branson suggested, would in all probability not benefit from public assistance because "...they are handicapped by a lack of the homeowning virtues, namely (1) steady-gaited industry, (2) thrift which is the combined result of prudential foresight and hardy self-denial, (3) sagacity or the ability to think things through to wise conclusions, (4) sobriety or freedom from the use of intoxicating liquors, and (5) integrity—reliability, a sense of moral obligations, trustworthiness, and the like essential qualities of character." (Dickey 1922, p.38)

The authors' low opinion of white croppers stems from their assessment of the 13 white cropper families in the two townships studied.¹¹ In *How Tenant Farmers Live*, the authors often noted the "smell of whisky" on the breath of the cropper, or the "lack of aspiration" these farmers displayed. These farmers moved often and so lacked identity with the community and interest in such things as churches and schools. The croppers, the researchers said, were "tempted into the business of making and selling liquor," and made up a disproportionate percent of criminal court cases, according to the report, which concluded that "As a class they are a doubtful economic asset and a distinct social menace." (Dickey 1922, p.23)

Because many former black croppers had become renters and a substantial number had attained farm ownership without the benefit of having owner parents, the authors concluded that, as a group, the black croppers showed more initiative. Consequently, the report suggests that it was the renters—white and black—who did not rent from related landlords, and perhaps the more industrious croppers—mostly black—who could profit from assistance toward farm ownership.

How Can the State Help Tenant Farmers Become Farm Owners?

Surprisingly, although the Tenancy Commission was expressly charged with “discovering precise facts and suggesting definite remedies,” the report offers no suggestions as to how to move farmers from tenancy to farm ownership. (NCTC 1922, p.3)

The Dickey and Branson paper did discuss a number of ideas for increasing farm ownership in the State, including:

- using 30-year mortgages to finance the sale of uncultivated lands to men who would farm them.¹²
- creating farm communities or colonies where farmers could cooperate in their planting, marketing and purchasing.¹³
- educating new landowners to make better farming decisions.
- increasing the number and lending of county banks and the formation of farm credit unions.
- changing tax laws to favor cultivated land and be progressive—with larger cultivated parcels being taxed at a higher rate than smaller ones. (Dickey 1922, pp. 39-47)

In 1923 the NC General Assembly appointed a State Land Commission to investigate, among other things, ways the State might help landless tenants become farm owners. The commission conducted an investigation of other states’ efforts as well as the findings of the State Tenancy Commission. Unlike the Tenancy Commission, the State Land Commission did make recommendations regarding the problem of land tenancy in North Carolina. In particular, the State Land Commission recommended that (1) a revolving loan fund be created by the General Assembly to assist landless men to become farmer owners, and (2) two community settlements be established in North Carolina to serve as public demonstrations of “agricultural efficiency and social betterment.” (State Land Commission 1923, p. 58)

Farm owner cooperatives were a popular proposed remedy to the “evils” of tenancy throughout the South following Reconstruction and through the 1920s. The thinking was that cooperating farmers could agree to keep their produce out of the market until prices were sufficiently high. Such efforts were supported by state legislatures (Bleser, 1969) and grass-roots farmer movements (Saloutos, 1964). However, the resistance of both buyers and creditors contributed to a low level of cooperation among farmers, and the scheme was largely unsuccessful. As far as we can determine, nothing much came of the study’s proposals. Tenancy continued to increase through the mid-1930s and increasingly came to be seen as a problem.

What Solved the Problem of Tenancy?

Few people would have guessed in 1940 that within thirty years the problems of southern agriculture would be transformed—not, for the most part, by the solutions proposed by the Tenancy Commission or State Land Commission. Rather, the agricultural reforms of the New Deal, mechanization, the introduction of new crops, and the stimulus of WWII all played important roles.

The Great Depression was the beginning of the end of tenant farming in the South. As the price of cotton and tobacco fell, farmers tried to increase production in order to eke out a living. This only

exacerbated the price decline. Farmers cooperatives tried to get farmers to reduce production to help prices recover, but these efforts failed. Eventually, the Federal Government intervened.

The Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) program was one of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal measures designed to end the Great Depression. This 1933 program was designed to reduce farm output in order to raise farm prices. An unintended consequence of the program, however, was the displacement of tenant farmers and sharecroppers.

Federal programs aimed at regulating cotton and tobacco production were handled differently. Farm owners were given cash payments for reducing their production of cotton. Not surprisingly, these payments were not passed along to or shared with the tenant farmers who had previously raised the cotton crops. Rather, these tenants were let go because their labor was no longer needed. At the same time, mechanization of cotton production was also reducing landowners' reliance on tenant labor and shifting it to seasonal wage laborers. Fewer workers could use tractors to break the land, newly developed cotton harvesters to pick crops, and pesticides to rid fields of weeds previously "chopped out" by tenants and sharecroppers. Cotton tenancy was on the decline in the late 1930s and this trend continued over the next three decades as cotton production east of the Mississippi declined steeply. These displaced workers faced continued hardships as alternative employment in the rural South was all but impossible to find. Many of these workers migrated to other locations. (Daniel, p. 241-242)

The Governments' efforts to raise tobacco prices took the form of an acreage allotment program which determined the acres a farmer could devote to tobacco production. Allotments were based on recent past production and special taxes were placed on tobacco sold by farmers who did not cooperate.

Initially, allotments were given to land owners who often profited by laying off tenants. Large numbers of tenants were displaced. However, this unintended effect was recognized early in the program and changes were made to protect tenants. (Daniel, p. 119-120) Importantly, payments were made to tenant growers, rather than to their landlords, and special consideration was given to farmers with small allotments. Although when the program was introduced in 1933, farmers had angrily denounced it and predicted ruin, by the following year tobacco prices had more than doubled in most areas and the program was embraced.

This program helped to sustain tobacco tenancy to some degree until the 1970s, when two factors led to a decrease in tenancy and the number of tobacco farmers: laws permitting a grower to lease acres from another farmer—allowing a farmer to collect rent on his allotment rather than farm it—and increased mechanization—making tobacco farming a more capital-intensive operation that was cost-effective only on larger farms. Displaced tobacco tenants were also being drawn to increasingly available factory jobs. (Daniel, p. 266-267)

A growing national problem in the 1930s, southern farm tenancy declined during and after World War II. Tenant farmers, their wives, and children found jobs in war-related industries. After the war, mechanization continued to replace farm workers at the same time that jobs and the promise of a better way of life lured them to towns and urban areas. By the late 1970s farm tenancy had all but disappeared.

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Photo credits

Note: Photos used to illustrate this paper are from 1939 and 1940--seventeen to eighteen years after the 1922 study was undertaken. All of the photographs are from the study area.

Images of the two study documents are from the on-line links in endnotes 2 and 3 above.

^a Wolcott, Marion Post, photographer. [Post office in general store and filling station. Bynum, Wake [sic: should be Chatham] County, North Carolina. Highway 15. Sept 1939.] [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsa+8c10596\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8c10596))) (accessed 3 March 2010).

- ^b Photograph by Dorothea Lange, U.S. Farm Security Administration: 1 July 1939, Chatham County, N.C. From Arthur Franklin Raper Papers (#3966), Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/southernhistoricalcollection/2932627813/> (accessed 3 Mar 2010).
- ^c Lange, Dorothea, photographer. [House of Negro tenant family. This is a larger house than usual box type. Has several rooms, unscreened, but well kept. Part of the family is sitting on the porch resting--Saturday afternoon. The oldest son on the mule is on his way to visit a neighbor. Pittsboro, North Carolina. July 1939] From Library of Congress: America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945. [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsa+8b33927\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8b33927))) (accessed 3 March 2010).
- ^d Wolcott, Marion Post, photographer. [Negro tenants picking cotton on Highway 15 about seven miles south of Chapel Hill. Chatham County, North Carolina. Sept 1940.] [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsa+8c13884\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8c13884))) (accessed 3 Mar 2010).

Endnotes

¹ Jim and Beverly Wiggins live happily in Baldwin Township and are active members of CCHA. The authors wish to thank Jean Vollrath, Librarian at the Pittsboro Campus of Central Carolina Community College, for her assistance with obtaining many of the documents consulted in the preparation of this report; Jane Pyle, for her careful reading of the text, substantive suggestions, and editing; and Walter (Corkey) Harris, for telling us about his experiences in Bynum as they relate to this topic.

² The [full text of this article is available on Google Books](#). See pages 56-98. A similar article was published later by Branson. See E. C. Branson, Farm Tenancy in the Cotton Belt: How Farm Tenants Live, *Social Forces*, 1:3 (Mar 1923), 213-221.

³ Economic and Social Conditions of North Carolina Farmers. Based on a Survey of 1000 North Carolina Farmers in Three Typical Counties of the State. [Electronic Edition](#).

⁴ The percent of acreage devoted to cotton, tobacco, and corn in Baldwin and Williams townships—among all of the farmers surveyed—was 81%.

⁵ The Commission consisted of B. F. Brown, Chief of the State Marketing Bureau, Chairman; Clarence Poe, a Chatham County native, member of the State Board of Agriculture and editor of the *Progressive Farmer*; C. C. Taylor, of the State College of Agriculture and Engineering (now NCSU); W. C. Jackson of the State College for Women (now UNC-G); and E. C. Branson of the State University (now UNC-CH).

⁶ To the best of our knowledge, this study was one of the earliest in the state to use newly developed social science methods to survey a large number of individuals to address a policy question.

⁷ The focus on white farmers seems to be in response to the perception that “farm tenancy in the cotton-tobacco belt is a black man’s problem.” Branson argues that “...on the contrary, it is mainly a white man’s problem. White farm tenants in North Carolina outnumber black farm tenants by some ten thousand, and in the South as a whole, by some one hundred and fifty thousand.” (Branson 1923, p.213)

⁸ The sample sizes in the two studies differed slightly, with the Tenancy Commission study including five additional owners and one additional tenant than did the Dickey study. The reason for this discrepancy is not explained, but

it is possible that these interviews were added after the Dickey study was reported. For the purposes of this paper we have used the data from the Tenancy Commission Report unless otherwise noted.

⁹ The Act specified three aspects of the tenant-landlord relationship: 1) The landlord was to have full possession of all of the crops until the rents and all stipulations contained in the lease or agreement were met by the tenant; 2) The tenant was prohibited from removing the crop or portions thereof without a five-day notice to the landlord; and 3) It was unlawful for the tenant to demolish, destroy, deface, injure, or damage an tenant house, uninhabited house, or other outhouse. (Logan 1959)

¹⁰ The reports summarized here use the word “cropper” for “sharecropper” almost exclusively, and we have followed that usage in our summary. However, we should note that, according to Walter Harris, who grew up in Bynum in the 1950s, the term “cropper” was considered to be a derogatory one, at least in that later time period. As we have noted elsewhere in this paper, the researchers appear not to have been without some prejudice about the character of “croppers.” (See page 11, for example.) Whether their use of the term “cropper” reflects a lack of sensitivity to the derogatory implications of the term, or perhaps indicates that the term developed these derogatory connotations at a later time is not clear.

¹¹ It should be noted that the small sample size (n=13) of white croppers makes generalizations like the ones made by Dickey and Branson of questionable value. Perhaps it was relatively easy for white croppers to become renters and therefore only the least industrious or otherwise handicapped among the white croppers failed to progress to renter status.

¹² This idea had earlier been put into practice as part of South Carolina’s reconstruction efforts. A state-funded land commission purchased plantation land and sold it to settlers. The program began in 1869 and was abandoned in 1890. (Bleser 1969)

¹³ Chatham native and editor of *Progressive Farmer* Clarence Poe strongly supported the farm cooperative idea.