LOCATING THE AGRARIAN IMAGINARY IN TILLERY, NORTH CAROLINA

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Abstract
ELIJAH GADDIS: Locating the agrarian imaginary in Tillery, North Carolina.
(Under the direction of Katherine Roberts)

This thesis examines the role of an agrarian imaginary in the history of Tillery, North Carolina. Located just south of the Roanoke River in the northeastern reaches of the state, this place is home to long, complex, and interwoven histories of agricultural labor, landownership, and the struggle for racial equality. Using archival and ethnographic research, this thesis examines the role of the agrarian imaginary in the many histories of this one place. It argues that an agrarian ideal, established early in America’s history, has been the basis for a social imaginary employed to various ends by people in the community of Tillery.
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Introduction

On one of those sweltering days in June, when the still-green fields and temperatures in the high 80s only hint at the peak of summer heat, Gary Grant and I were driving through Tillery, North Carolina, with the windows down in his old Lincoln. Mr. Grant is an activist and advocate, a towering figure in the environmental justice movement who has devoted much of his life to protecting the rights of African Americans to farm and to own farmland. And Tillery is his community—the place around which he has constructed his expansive worldview and in which he continues to experience the injustices of unequal access to landownership and resources. On that day, I asked Mr. Grant about Tillery’s long history of agriculture and the way that history informed his own activism. Without pausing or diverting his eyes from the familiar road, he spoke about his understanding of the processes of history and the way those processes have come to define the Black agricultural experience.

Well you know, my thing has been, and my sister’s thing, is that white folk have been defining history for however long. And they then define it how it is that suits them. So, that means they can leave out whatever it is that they want. I mean, we’re talking about Black people owning approximately 17 million acres of land at the turn of the nineteen… in 1920. That nobody talks about. If you talk to folk that were part of the Great Migration—and there was the Great Migration—they’ll tell you that the only thing there was, was to farm. And they’ll say, “I was not going to farm.” That’s what you need to be talking about. What happened to the group that stayed?" ¹

¹ Gary Grant interviewed by Elijah Gaddis, 20 June 2012, Tillery, North Carolina.
This quote summarizes both Mr. Grant’s understanding of the ways and means by which history is produced, and the absence of African Americans in that process. He understands the history of his community as part of a much larger history of agriculture, a history that has segregated African Americans from the mainstream of agricultural history when it has mentioned them at all. That absence speaks to a dominant American social and cultural understanding of farming. The history that Mr. Grant relays is an insistence that Tillery’s story, and others like it, also belong in the American agrarian imagination.

**Overview: the American agrarian imaginary**

In this thesis, I will explore the history of Tillery and the competing claims to a social and cultural understanding of agriculture that I call the agrarian imaginary. I define the agrarian imaginary as the cultural structure underlying the practice of farming; a shared vision of what agriculture is and does. The individual stories and individuals that make up this history all inform each other both because they exist close together spatially if not temporally, and also because they each bear an intimate relationship to broader ideas of agrarianism which transcend boundaries. Beginning in the late 17th century, when the area that would become Tillery was first settled, the historical narrative of this thesis continues through the present-day, when residents of Tillery are seeking to define and disseminate information about their shared history as a means of fighting against the inequalities wrought by a history of agriculture defined in large part by its erasures. This thesis seeks to explore the history, in one place, of those erasures and absences, the presences and emphases that took their place, and the contemporary attempts to forge a new history from countervailing
claims to the agrarian imaginary. Combining archival and ethnographic study, I seek to first define the broader epistemological history of American agrarianism, and then chart its employment and development in three hundred years of history at Tillery. I have borrowed the concept of the agrarian imaginary, though not the brief definition I include above or the lengthier one here, from the geographer, Julie Guthman. Guthman defines the agrarian imaginary as the “presumption of a universal desire to tend the land.” She points out that this is a structure particularly “insensitive to a racialized history of agrarian land and labor relationships in the [United States].”

The concept necessarily borrows from the two intellectual traditions that comprise its name. The imaginary, or the “social imaginary” as Charles Taylor has termed it, is a relatively recent philosophical and intellectual construct that can be usefully applied to the longer history of American agrarianism. Taylor defines the social imaginary most simply as “the way people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings,” and suggests that these imaginings are most often “carried in images, stories, and legends” rather than in the theoretical language of the academy. This is the difference between the social imaginary and social theory; Taylor’s concept is one deeply rooted in “common understanding[s] that make possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.” In a deeply reciprocal relationship, vernacular practice comes to inform elite social and intellectual theory, which in turn allows for a re-articulation of the meaning behind practice. Taylor writes that” the new understanding comes to be accessible to the participants in a way that it wasn’t before. . . [i]t

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4 Ibid, 23
begins to define the contours of their world and can eventually come to count as the taken-for-granted shape of things, too obvious to mention.”⁵ In other words, the everyday actions of people, whether it be their work, their songs, or the dreams and aspirations that they share through carefully crafted narratives, are all part of a shared set of understandings that together form a social imaginary.

Taylor’s model fits neatly with the idea of agrarianism, its articulation in an American context, and its subsequent adoption into the consciousness of “large groups of people, if not the whole society.”⁶ Probably as long as there has been agriculture, there has been agrarianism, the “belief that ‘agriculture and those whose occupation involves agriculture are especially important and valuable elements of society.’”⁷ Classical Greco-Roman society in particular began a formal articulation of agrarianism, one that certainly stemmed from a long prior history of venerating agricultural output. Those classical ideals re-emerged in the minds of early American intellectuals, and coalesced into a uniquely American vision of agrarianism. Intellectuals like Thomas Jefferson viewed themselves as agriculturalists and advocated at length for the new country to follow a rural agrarian ideal. In a famous passage from his Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson draws an explicit parallel between the success of the new nation and the agricultural production on its land. He argues that America must . . . define itself in opposition to the rapid industrialization of Europe and instead integrate its (agricultural) labor more fully into its culture. Jefferson writes: “In Europe the lands are either cultivated, or locked up against the cultivator. … but we have an immensity

⁵ Ibid, 29.

⁶ Ibid, 23.

of land courting the industry of the husbandman. It is best all our citizens should be employed in its improvement.”8 He goes on in even more florid language, suggesting that “those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God… [in] whose breasts he has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.”9 Lisi Krall, writing about the scholarly consensus around this enunciation of the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal, summarizes his words as “offer[ing] a vision of a nation of independent farmers who could provide the bedrock on which to build our republic.”10

Jefferson was certainly not alone in envisioning a republic based on agrarian ideals. His contemporary, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, was even more explicit in advocating a specifically American agrarianism, though he was less influenced by the literary pastoral mode into which Jefferson was wont to fall. Leo Marx observes that Crèvecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer evoked the agrarian ideal not through literary-pastoral convention, but through “new forms supplied by the American experience.”11 The poetic shepherd was replaced by the taciturn farmer, and the open fields replaced by the well-tamed cultivation of the “middle landscape.”12 By the beginning of the early Republic, then, there was an established American intellectual tradition of agrarianism. These ideas would periodically be revived in the hands of a temporally, politically, and geographically diverse set of thinkers that ranged from the 19th century liberal romanticism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry


9 Ibid, 280.


12 Leo Marx, 114.
David Thoreau, to the 20th century regressive stance of the Twelve Southerners. The philosophical school called Agrarianism sprung from this tradition, and indeed, a fairly robust form of the genre survives today with thinkers like Wendell Berry and his “limited agriculture” stance.\(^\text{13}\)

The survival of that emergent school of thought represents, in part, the utility of Taylor’s model applied here: the social imaginary is a model by which broadly configured ideals can be spread and adopted across an equally broad range of people. Following that model, those early ideas were quickly adopted and expanded by people other than the elites who re-articulated thousands of years of practice into a powerful foundational mythos. From diverse sources – vernacular and intellectual, literary and mythic – early Americans forged a philosophical and intellectual tradition that concretized ideals of land, labor and farming in a far-reaching social structure. These ideas formed the basis of the agrarian imaginary on which this paper focuses, a wide-ranging structure broadly concerned with the cultural basis for farming. And while the individualized claims to this agrarian imaginary are by no means universal or uniform, there are a few commonalities that undergird the structure. While many romantic layers comprise this imaginary, leftovers mostly from a pastoral mode which valorized rurality, at its core is a concern with landownership and labor. Those twin concepts, often idealized, are the core around which other elements of the agrarian imaginary revolve.

Krall writes that the agrarian ethos in America arose in large part as market-driven concept meant to counteract the industrialism of Europe.\(^\text{14}\) This meant that the rather


\(^{14}\) Krall, 4.
romantic literary-pastoral definition of agrarianism was balanced by a very real emphasis on labor and land as valuable commodities. These two motivations led to a complex imaginary that in turn legitimated any number of injustices and indignities at the institutional and individual level. The institution of slavery arose in its most basic sense as a response to this ideal, and the latter day struggles of the community of Tillery are legitimated as an attempt to hold onto agricultural land. But agricultural land has always maintained a value that far outstrips its function as a market commodity, a point James Montmarquet makes explicitly in his history of American agrarianism “[F]armland, owing in part to the very same noneconomic values which underlie the agrarian tradition we are talking about, often does not function … entirely like other economic assets.”¹⁵ Instead, Montmarquet would suggest, it possesses a very real symbolic value in addition to its economic value. We see this manifestation of the agrarian imaginary today in the charged rhetoric about the family farm, which tends to idealize farmland as something worth preserving, even as it masks the fact that the small plots of our collective imagination have largely become outmoded in the face of industrial agriculture. But careful attention to abstract notions about farm life or farming reveal that these are concepts that, at the core, still revolve around land and labor. The various permutations of the word “farm” effectively serve as an easier, if abstracted, way of talking about those inextricable relationships between landscape and work.

Of course, that same rhetoric of agrarianism tends to privilege whiteness in subtle ways, and consequently erases the existence of other laborers. Mr. Grant of Tillery made this point in one of my interviews with him. “We are Black farmers, but y’all are family farmers. . . I thought a family famer was a farmer that was trying to make their living off of

¹⁵ Montmarquet, 74.
it. It didn’t matter whether you were Black, red, white, brown.”16 Yet, in the popular imagination, it has generally been the case that the labor of the Black farmer in particular has been overlooked, if not erased. One group of scholars has arrived at a similar conclusion, suggesting that “from their beginning days in the United States, Black farmers were defined institutionally as being less worthy than white farmers.”17 They recognize too that the institutions with which Black farmers were associated—slavery, sharecropping, and tenancy—served only to heighten this unworthiness.18 In sum, they find that a novice “doing a cursory reading of the mainstream literature . . . may arrive at the faulty conclusion that there are no Black farmers left in the United States.”19 This, of course, does not conform to historical reality: the Black majority of agriculturalists in the antebellum South established an agrarian tradition that yet survives. Despite a history with agricultural labor that is among the most exploitative of any people in the world, farming has always held at least some promise for groups of African Americans. Kimberly Smith claims that “agrarianism could serve to undermine …forms of racial oppression,” even as it was employed concurrently in the subjugation of African Americans.20 The agrarian imaginary, then, is complex and holds multiple meanings for people of diverse races and classes. Accordingly, this paper will view the agrarian imaginary as a structure that in and of itself contains no binaries of race or class. The narratives that follow show the competing and often simultaneous employments of this

16 Grant, 20 June 2012 interview.

17 John Green, Eleanor Green, and Anna Kleiner, “From the past to the present: Agricultural development and Black farmers in the American south, in Cultivating food justice: Race, class and sustainability, Alison Hope Aiken and Julian Agyeman, eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 50.

18 Green, Green and Kleiner, 50.

19 Green, Green and Kleiner, 48.

imaginary; as a tool of hegemony, as a counter to institutional power, and occasionally, as both.

**Methodology: constructing ethnographic history**

This thesis explores that agrarian imaginary through a place history of Tillery, North Carolina. My focus is on the land of Tillery, its transfer, cultivation, and above all, its meaning to the people that have lived and worked there. In exploring the agrarian imaginary through a place history of Tillery, I have attempted to employ the skills of both the archival researcher and the ethnographer. In the archives, I confronted the “sedimented detritus of a history [that] seemed both endless and banal.”\(^{21}\) I have attempted to read from a set of often unrelated documents a history that resembles a cohesive narrative, ever mindful that in animating data mined from the records of long dead individuals, I am creating meaning that was certainly unintended and perhaps antithetical to its originators. As the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot suggested in his treatise on the production of historical narrative “the past—or more accurately pastness—is a position.”\(^{22}\)

The same is, of course, true with the practice of ethnography. Out of necessity, I will set aside any debate over the reproduction of words or actions from any ethnographic observation. I do feel it necessary, though, to defend the ethnographic methodology that I employ here. In formulating this project, I spoke with many different people and engaged with them on various levels. My most sustained, and I will admit, useful contact was with Gary Grant of Tillery. Almost without exception, it is his words that you will read in the

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\(^{22}\) Michel-Rolph Trouillot. *Silencing the past: power and the production of history*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 15
ethnographic portion of this paper. In choosing to give such weight to his words, I am relying on my own experience and attempting to follow the precedent of the folklorist Henry Glassie. Glassie, in a work that is in many ways about the process of ethnography, writes about the individuals he singled out for inclusion in his book. He calls these people “stars.” “The star” Glassie suggests “is the one who shines in the social scene, speaking smoothly and brightly, glittering against the engulfing darkness as the stars above interrupt the night sky with pricks of brilliance.”

I am hesitant to apply such poetical language to my own consultant, but Glassie nonetheless identifies in this passage an almost stock character in the ethnographic endeavor: a person whose eloquence, forcefulness, and willingness, along with the community’s support, push them to become leaders of a sort, and in turn, to emerge as the people to whom outside ethnographers turn. Gary Grant serves as that person for the community of Tillery.

A further word on the production of history is, I think, warranted here. This thesis attempts to be sensitive to the unfolding of history both as a series of facts verifiable by written words, and as a cultural production. I am complicit in the creation of each of the narratives here, though I take my charge largely from the opening epigraph of this work and its condemnation of a history constructed on omission. Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small have drawn attention to the fact that “while often seen by the public as a power-neutral site, [cultural production] is always about the embodiment and construction of meaning and power.”

Trouillot is even more explicit, stating that “power does not enter the story once and for all, but at different times and from different angles… it precedes the narrative

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Those remain among the core truths of this paper, that beyond even my own interventions and interpretations, the historical narratives in this thesis always already bear a relationship to power that is individual, institutional, and perhaps most unfortunately, cultural. Part of the charge of these next pages is to reveal the “fundamentally processual character of historical production, to insist that what history is matters less than how history works.”

**History: beginnings**

A brief outline of the history of the place now called Tillery begins in the late 17th century when the first settlers from Europe, or Europe by way of Virginia, began surveying, claiming, and settling the fertile land south of the Morratuck (now Roanoke) River in present-day Halifax County. The first such survey that survives, from 1694, refers only to the red oak, white oak, and ash trees that stood as the markers on land yet unimproved. This was land that even today, bearing the marks of 300 years of cultivation, still looks productive. The soil is a rich, dark loam, what one early 20th century observer described as “made up of rich vegetable deposits and …very fertile.” That rich soil, and the proximity to a large river, undoubtedly attracted these early settlers. They came to this area with varying degrees of wealth but with the aspirations that belong to all would-be landowners. It is no surprise, then, that their fixation turned to that fertile delta drained by the Roanoke as a means of fulfilling those dreams. As these claimants cleared or had cleared these rough

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25 Trouillot 28-29.

26 Trouillot 28.

27 Land survey for George Piercy, 1 January 1694, Folder 1 in the Hayes Collection #324, in the Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

patches of earth, they attached names to them. Evocative of their homeland and the unanswered promises that brought them to this new place, one name, Caledonia, came to signify their collective aspirations.

That name, a nostalgic and long-cherished name for the wild moors of Scotland, undoubtedly came to the area with the huge preponderance of Scottish settlers to the area. 29 Caledonia first appears in 1712 when William Brown is deeded “six hundred and forty acres on the South side of Moratock River near to Calladonia.” 30 It was as a general name for much of the area in the early 18th century, during which time it was designated as the property of multiple men, often concurrently. Those men who did not own land called Caledonia still had their property lines defined by it, so that even small shareholders had some relationship to the agricultural ideal that it represented. But as the century wore on, the claims of the small shareholders were increasingly bought out, and the land south of the Roanoke came to be the property of a few wealthy men. Men named Brown, Maule, Cathcart, and Johnston all acquired and transferred vast tracts of land through sale, purchase, and marriage. The Johnston family would prove to be the ones who owned the land for the longest. Samuel Johnston acquired 3,000 acres of land through marriage, and steadily added to that number throughout his lifetime. 31 Nearly a century later, as the Civil War loomed, the land was still in the hands of his family. His son, James Cathcart (J. C.) Johnston had increased the acreage to nearly 8,000, and perhaps even more crucially, had steadily acquired

29 Ibid, 8.

30 Land grant from Duke of Beaufort to William Brown, 1712, in the Hayes Collection #324, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

31 Deed of land from William Cathcart to Samuel Johnston, 4 August 1770, in the Hayes Collection #324, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
slaves. On the eve of the Civil War, their number at Caledonia stood at 271, a sure sign that
the romance and nostalgia of the name had become wedded to a system where forced
agricultural labor represented the sole manifestation of the agrarian imaginary at the land
south of the Roanoke.

**Agricultural labor and inherited mastery**

At the start of the Civil War, J.C. Johnston was already an old man, with a half-
century’s experience as an owner of land and slaves. He had rejected the political lineage of
his family and instead devoted himself to life as a self-styled agrarian, a “planter” in the
parlance of his time. The war seemed to aggravate existing tensions between Johnston and
his family, and by 1863, he had decided to exclude them from the final version of his will. At
the time, he wrote to a friend that “the Johnston family I have no respect for whatever.”
Perhaps even more damning was his charge that the family would cause his land to be
“entirely destroyed and suffered to go to ruin by bad management.” Consequently, when
J.C. Johnston died in 1865, Caledonia went not to the family he had grown to loathe but to an
overseer, Henry Futrell, his “friend and faithful agent” as a reward “for his fidelity and good
management.” It was a gesture befitting the times that were to come, and a powerful final
expression of J.C. Johnston’s understanding of agrarianism. Agricultural land, in his
formulation, was a commodity that required careful and judicious management of both
landscape and the human workforce that was a seeming inevitable and inseparable part of it.

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32 James Cathcart Johnston to Edward Wood, 13 June 1863, in the Hayes Collection #324, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

33 Ibid.

34 Will of James Cathcart Johnston, 10 April 1863, in the Hayes Collection #324, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
His life served to concretize a model of agrarianism that inextricably linked land and forced labor. The will he left behind, and the subsequent court battle brought by his spurned family, illustrates best the complex understanding of agrarianism he had constructed for himself and that he intended to leave intact for his heirs.

Enclosed in James Cathcart Johnston’s will is a letter to Henry Futrell, which details at considerable length the plans Johnston had for both is “lands in Halifax” and for Futrell. He left provisions for a couple of his favorite enslaved people and instructed that Futrell give “all the other Negroes their trade, according to their behavior and good conduct, and the crop they raise.” Otherwise, the letter serves as a manifesto meant to initiate Futrell into an agrarian vision of ownership and mastery. Johnston wishes for Futrell to “so manage and take care of the property I have entrusted to you . . . as to make you wealthy and comfortable in your old age and your family after your death.” There are no mentions of the specific ways that Futrell is to run the plantation, especially given that he had already been doing so. Rather, Johnston clues him in on the provisions of slave ownership, instructing him in the ways of outward liberalism that marked the ideal of the kind master. Futrell’s inauguration into this club was one meant to convey a kind of linked responsibility to the land and to the people that worked it. Those who owned land could afford to be magnanimous enough to give their slaves “trade” from the gardens and livestock they raised on their own time. As much as the land itself, what Johnston was passing to Futrell was the idea of ownership, one that made Futrell the heir not only to Johnston’s property, but to his mastery both of human life and an agrarian ideal.

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
This played out explicitly in the court case the Johnston family brought against Futrell and the other executors to challenge the legitimacy of their relative and benefactor’s will. The estate’s attorney in the year-long case cast J. C. Johnston as a “tiller of the soil,” a man who chose to work and improve his own land rather than use his money and influence to gain public office or fame. This certainly has much to do with the 19th century distaste for the eager politician, but it also speaks to public perception of the agriculturalist. Anyone hearing the address knew that Johnston was a wealthy man, but the lawyer was reminding them of the source of that wealth: the fundamental relationship between man and land that formed a mutually shared vision of agrarianism. Interestingly, the lawyer also mentioned Johnston’s slaves and their relationship to the land. They are mentioned only briefly and are collectively referred to as “architects of his fortune.” In a trial conducted in the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation and a Confederate loss, and with the passage of the 13th amendment looming, the lawyer acknowledged that it was on the backs of those slaves that the agrarian vision of Caledonia was realized. He may also have been cognizant of the fact that it was against the freed slaves’ claims to that ideal that the postbellum institution of Caledonia would stand. Either way, he was surely evoking ideals held by all of the people in the courtroom, and indeed it was on that portrayal of agrarian promise that the case was won. The family of J. C. Johnston was portrayed as little more than a collection of helpless wastrels who lived off the good graces of a benefactor. Futrell, though, could be seen as the rightful, indeed as the moral, heir to the property given the deftly crafted portrayal of him as a man who understood the proper function of agricultural land.

37 “Suggestions [Defense’s Final Statement to Jury]”, 1866, in the Hayes Collection #324, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

38 Ibid.
History: postbellum changes

Around the same time that Henry Futrell was beginning his brief tenure at the helm of Caledonia, John Richard (J. R.) Tillery was similarly dealing with the problem of bending the newly freed workers in the area to his will. J. R. Tillery was a neighbor and fellow landowner, a man who had gotten his start cultivating land in the years immediately preceding the Civil War. He was undoubtedly no novice in dealing with slaves any more than Futrell or any other white man above a certain station. He was almost certainly the son of a slaveholder, and may well have owned slaves himself before the war (though he was just 25 at the outset). But neither he nor Futrell were heir to the class privileges of a man like J. C. Johnston. Instead, they both set out to be agriculturalists and masters in a radically changed South. Men of a different class than planters like Johnston, they were indebted to a new social order, yet still invested in older ideals of agrarianism. Their mutual dealings with the local branch of the Freedman’s Bureau in their postbellum community represent the best example of the new claims to the agrarian imaginary in the period. Those claims increasingly eliminated the class divides that the Johnston family and others had worked so hard to maintain, in favor of a unified white vision of agrarianism.

Postbellum Tillery and the construction of a unified white agrarianism

Henry Futrell finally took official control of Caledonia in 1866 after the prolonged court battle, and immediately turned to the Freedman’s Bureau for help negotiating a contract with his newly freed workers. In a contract signed on 6 January, 1866, Futrell and the “Freedmen on [his] plantation” signed an agreement for the next year’s work.39 The document is interesting for several reasons, offering as it does a recorded example of the

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struggle to define the situation of agricultural land and labor in a changed social world. Much of the contract contains the kind of unremarkable details about pay and housing that one expects from a tenancy agreement of the period. But there are also multiple passages that refer to the freedmen (never any women) as part of a collective. “Each and every one of them for themselves individually and severally agree” . . . “each of them severally covenant and agree.” In these instances, the word “severally” is key, and its meaning stems from the longstanding legal definition of the word where it is employed as “opposed to jointly.” In effect, then, these parts of the contract are used to subordinate the newfound individualism of each of these persons within the collective body they had just ceased to be. It reinforces their servitude, and suggests that the 84 individuals signing the contract possessed little agency and no rights outside of their identification as members of a collective body. The contract continued to reinforce the relationships between master and newly freed workers, promising to “allow…the usual holidays” and “not to inflict corporal punishment.” Though that last provision was no doubt hard-won, it nonetheless hearkens back to the days of slavery. It suggests a relationship between employer and worker that would hardly need clarification if it were between two white men. The “usual holidays” provision functions similarly; it is undoubtedly a carryover from the days of slavery and seeks to frame this relationship as one between benevolent master and grateful servants, rather than that of relative equals. Most damning of all though are the moral and behavioral directives: the contract specifies that fulfillment of the agreement requires the freedman “to conduct themselves in a decorous

40 Cooke 27, 28

41 *Oxford English Dictionary*, online, s.v. “severally.”

42 Cooke 28.
manner [and] to do their work cheerfully… with faithfulness and alacrity.”

At this point the contract becomes less about developing a mutually beneficial relationship between worker and employees, and instead falls back on pernicious stereotypes of African Americans and qualities long-supposed to be “natural” to them. In demanding cheerfulness, faithfulness, and alacrity, Futrell is admitting that the racial stereotypes long held as truisms in the antebellum South have no basis in reality. At the same time, though, he demands that his workers continue to conform to them, rendering them not simply subservient, but conforming to longstanding and mythic ideals.

More than forty years later, at the time that myth was becoming further concretized through portrayals in Southern literature, film, and art, the eminent historian Joseph Grégoire de Rouhac Hamilton wrote what is still one of the only accounts of the Freedman’s Bureau in North Carolina. Though mostly an overview, it is a telling document both for its depiction of the Bureau and for its conception in the South two generations later. Hamilton writes that “employers were forced by the bureau to fulfill the terms of the contract, regardless of the failure of the other parties.”

His sympathetic portrayal continues: “[i]t was hard for the planters to accustom themselves to a condition of affairs where a negro could refuse to work, often in a defiant and insolent way, and not be punished for it, and so it is not a remarkable fact that they at times took matters in their own hands.”

John Richard Tillery appears to have done just that. In a letter dated April 23, 1868, the local commander of the “bureau of R.F. and A Lds” (apparently ubiquitous enough in the area by this point to go by a nearly

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43 Ibid.

44 Joseph Grégoire de Rouhac Hamilton. Freedmen’s bureau in North Carolina,1909 [manuscript], in the North Carolina Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

45 Ibid.
inscrutable abbreviation), addresses J. R. Tillery pointedly and succinctly. The letter reads, in full: “complaint is made by Samuel Daniels, Edmond Skinner, and Tho[m]as Deveraux, [illegible], that you refuse to settle with them you are requested to settle with these men and should you fail to make a settlement you can appoint a time to meet with my Office for settlement.” It seems evident from Hamilton’s account and the brusque nature of the letter that J. R. Tillery’s failure to settle with his workers was a commonplace occurrence in the region. While this brief letter is perhaps not as immediately revelatory as the lengthier contract between Futrell and his newly freed workers, it nonetheless illustrates the nature of the relationship between the freed slaves of the Johnston and other nearby plantations, their former owners and current masters, and the newly developing governmental power in the South. The unnamed agent of the government was forced to advocate for these workers only to the extent promised in the hard fought and unequal contracts like the one initiated by Henry Futrell. The language of settlement used in the letter to Tillery is far more ambiguous and less directive and forceful than words like “pay” or “compensate.” Instead it implies a simple fulfillment of the undemanding terms of the unequal compromises forged with the help of the Freedman’s Bureau. Already the promises of Reconstruction and the 13th amendment were seemingly fading and being replaced by a maintenance of something like the old status quo, albeit one reframed slightly for an era that banned outright slavery.

These documents represent a subtle but markable shift from the days of the antebellum plantations of Caledonia and Tillery. The many thousands of documents that

46 This is shorthand for the “Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands” the official name of the organization generally known as the Freedman’s Bureau.

47 Illegible [Freedman’s Bureau representative] to Richard Tillery, esq, April 23, 1868, John Richard Tillery papers, East Carolina Manuscript Collection, Special Collections Department, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.
survive from the Johnston plantation generally refer to the slaves in the abstract, as a collective body with only occasional mentions of individuals. Undoubtedly it would be the same with any slaves that Tillery had owned. More importantly, the slaves’ lack of agency and control over their own lives is assumed in those antebellum documents. What this postbellum contract does is require the newly freed workers to give up their newly-promised agency in subservience to an old institution. Effectively, it concretizes the often unspoken code of the plantation, taking the implied contract and making it real. No longer were the workers slaves toiling under the broad paternalism of a master content mostly to view himself as their protector and champion from a distance and in the abstract. Instead, they now had their behavior codified in a series of agreements and their wages doled out at the whims of fickle and bitter employers, still invested in posturing as slave masters.

That is not to say that Samuel Daniels, Edmond Skinner, Thomas Deveraux, and the dozens of other men who remain nameless were better off before their freedom. Instead, they were the recipients of what one postbellum white observer characterized as “nothing but freedom.” Further, it is important to recognize that these documents, and in particular the work contract, reframe the fundamental relationships necessary to perform agricultural labor in the community. This contract was not one between owner and worker, but between owner, worker, and institution. Despite the defeat of a Confederate government founded on the ideals of slavery and elite white control, the prevailing order was in many senses maintained. We certainly see this with J. R. Tillery and his refusal to settle with what he undoubtedly felt were his workers. It is also manifested in more subtle ways in his correspondence, where his farm land maintained the label of “plantation” for years after the fundamental relationships

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that defined that institution were outlawed. There may have been some new faces that owned the plantations (men like Futrell, who were part of an ascendant class of formerly middling whites), and the government was different, but it still protected largely the same interests. In a Freedmen’s Convention held in Raleigh during 1866, representatives from across the state singled out Halifax as one of six counties with a particularly dire situation for freed people.49 One representative, Charles Carter, made a statement about “injustice towards the (colored) laborer, and the binding out of children without the consent of their parents,” all the while insisting that “these matters are known to agents of the Freedmen’s Bureau, but they take no steps to arrest the evil in its onward march.”50 The very right to have an assembly such as the Freedmen’s Convention was a huge step, but it made little difference to the working and living conditions of the majority of African American agriculturalists. Though they could perhaps count on a few more protections than previously, the workers in Tillery were still subject to control, both by their former masters and by new institutions, each operating under an agrarian imaginary that represented the unified interests of whiteness.

**History: Tillery the town**

The next few years in the community were not particularly eventful, if archival records are any indication. Futrell’s tenure at Caledonia was cut short when he died prematurely not long after assuming control of Caledonia.51 His family evidently maintained the land for the next generation or so, all the while allowing it to go into increasing disrepair. Meanwhile, J. R. Tillery was actively struggling to evolve and understand the role of the

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49.“Minutes of the Freedmen’s Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh, on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th of October, 1866.”Documenting the American South. University Library, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001. [http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/freedmen/freedmen.html](http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/freedmen/freedmen.html)

50 Ibid.

51 Cooke, 29.
landowning planter in the postbellum South. His struggle was a microcosm of the South’s, a constant negotiation between long-held agrarian ideals, new sources of labor, and the influx of a worldview that saw the practice of agriculture quickly becoming outmoded. John Richard Tillery thus entered into the buying and selling of farmland zealously, no doubt intending to make his mark and his riches off of the land, albeit in a different way from previous generations. If J. R. Tillery could be said to have bought land with ambition equal to that of the earlier inhabitants of the place, the results were not quite as successful in a fundamentally transformed economy. His buying and selling of land represented a balance between old and new: he stubbornly maintained his belief in the value of his land, even as market taught him that he had to modify his staunchly agrarian vision to current economic realities. By the 1880s, J. R. Tillery seemed to have decided that his land was worth very little as an agricultural commodity. In 1888, he was corresponding regularly with his friend Walter Clark about his plans for converting what they both still called a “plantation” into the meeting point of two railroads (the Chowan Southern and one referred to only as S.N.R.R., in all probability the Southern Norfolk).\footnote{Walter Clark to John Richard Tillery, October 4, 1888, John Richard Tillery papers, East Carolina Manuscript Collection, Special Collections Department, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.; Walter Clark to John Richard Tillery, October 29, 1888 John Richard Tillery papers, East Carolina Manuscript Collection, Special Collections Department, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.} Apparently Tillery was well-along in his plans by this point, because Clark’s next letter admonishes his friend not to “forget to let me know when sale of your lots at the Station below is to take place.”\footnote{Walter Clark to John Richard Tillery, November 14, 1888, John Richard Tillery papers, East Carolina Manuscript Collection, Special Collections Department, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.} The railroad station was established, as evidenced by the fact that early in the next year, J. R. Tillery was receiving his
mail for the first time at a town, one newly christened in honor of its founder and most prominent citizen: Tillery.

**Naming and power**

At the same time that J. R. Tillery was establishing the town of Tillery, Caledonia re-emerged from years of dormancy. In 1891, all of the surviving Futrell children committed to lease their land to the state of North Carolina starting the next year. The state of North Carolina turned the land into a prison farm, clearing massive amounts of acreage that had returned to forest, and turning them over again to agricultural cultivation. The process proved successful enough that the state purchased the land outright in 1900, making Caledonia the center of an agricultural endeavor that quickly became the “main reliance for support” of the penal system. The state, like previous owners of Caledonia, acquired and cultivated more and more land. By 1919, the state owned right around 7,000 acres of Caledonia. This was hardly the end of Caledonia though. Even now, three hundred years after this land was first cultivated under the name Caledonia, the prison farm is still operational. Prisoners observe the usual cycle of the seasons, planting crops of soybeans and corn in the spring, and harvesting them in the fall. And they do all of this at a place, now with an official green sign, still called Caledonia.

The persistence of the Caledonia name through all of these layers and years of history sheds further light on the dominant imaginary. Its use on this new prison farm, an institution that both then and now bears some uncomfortable commonalities with the plantation, acted as a kind of reification of all the name had stood for in its years of existence. In some ways the name is an innocuous and sentimental survival of a time remembered with fondness in

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54 “Biennial report of the State’s prison for the year 1919.”
http://archive.org/details/biennialreportof191920nort
the early 20th century white imagination. But it bears a very real parallel to the contemporaneous monuments then being erected throughout North Carolina and the South. Right around the same time, in 1895, the State erected a monument to the Confederate dead in the plaza outside the Capital. This helped inaugurate a state and region wide movement that would see Civil War monuments erected in 70 of North Carolina’s 100 counties. In the same way that those monuments sought to reify the nobility of a white-controlled past, the continued re-adoption of the Caledonia name made real the racial order that underlay even its most minute functions. Hortense Spillers has written about the power of naming in social constructions of racialized gender norms. The central question of her “Mama’s baby, papa’s maybe” belongs here in a slightly less specific context. “We might well ask,” Spillers writes, “if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually ‘transfers’ from one generation to another, finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments?” Those initiating moments, the ones where the land was first claimed, when it first accommodated a system that yoked together land and labor force, and when it found manifested in it the various configurations of power, were all preserved in the seemingly innocuous name. The same is true of the town established in this same place. Tillery, a name less abstract than Caledonia yet every bit as reflective of hegemonic power, quickly came to be the default name for land not named anything else. It became the name under which both sharecroppers with recent memories of slavery and African Americans

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with new deeds to old land, lived. Together with Caledonia, this name lives in both the past and the present. In each sign that bears these names, and in every utterance of it, there exists some small remembrance of the hegemonic agrarian imaginary that ruled the bodies, if not the minds, of the community for so long.

The memory work of Resettlement Tillery

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past.”\(^{59}\)

The remainder of this thesis is somewhat different from the preceding sections, at least in part because its main sources are ethnographic interviews that I conducted in the spring and summer of 2012.\(^{60}\) Like the archival sources that informed the first part of this paper, these interviews have their own silences and omissions that I attempt to draw out. In addition to continuing the narrative of Tillery, albeit with a new type of source material, this portion of the paper also further addresses the way that the current historical narrative of Tillery stems from and sometimes rails against the history that has gone before it. This narrative is part of a continual process of historical definition intimately linked to memory. W. Fitzhugh Brundage has suggested that the process of historicizing is continual, and perhaps reciprocal. A group’s very identity “goes hand in hand with the continuous creation of its sense of the past.”\(^{61}\) Edward Said is even more direct about this kind of memory work, insisting that “collective memory is not an inert and passive thing, but a field of activity in which past events are selected, reconstructed, modified, and endowed with political


\(^{60}\) I also make use of an oral history conducted by Kieran Taylor of the Southern Oral History Project about a decade prior to my own research.

\(^{61}\) Brundage, 7.
meaning.”62 Indeed, memory in this sense is used as a narrative of meaning for a community, and is “frequently, if not always, manipulated and intervened in for sometimes urgent purposes in the present.”63 This begs for a distinction between the related but separate cultural constructions of history and memory. I will refer again here to Trouillot, who suggests that “remembering is not always a process of summoning representations of what happened.”64 In other words, while both history and memory are constructions, history is an intentional assemblage of memories designed with the purpose of telling some story, of provoking some response. History is, in effect, a narrative of memories which are themselves “intentional creations.”65

As evidenced by the opening quotation of this thesis, Gary Grant clearly understands the constructed nature of history, and wants the people of Tillery to be able to intervene and tell the story he regards as their own. He elaborated that point further during a presentation he gave to the North Carolina Folklore Society that centered on Tillery’s history. “You are the only ones who have been able to define history. You defined it in all the text books—nobody in there that looked like me. Nobody in there that looked like us. Nobody in there that our children could recognize themselves with.”66 The history drawn from the archives and constructed in the first part of this paper is not necessarily one that that Gary Grant or the other people in Tillery know. It is, however, history that they have felt. If I was able to give

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63 Said, 245.

64 Trouillot, 14.

65 Brundage, 4.

66 Gary Grant, presentation at the North Carolina Folklore Society Annual meeting, Greenville, NC, 31 March, 2012.
Mr. Grant or others small facts about the origins of their community, they were able to impress on me some small inkling of what living in a place burdened by that history was like. The remainder of this thesis is reflective of those conversations, and in particular my conversations with Gary Grant. His voice is one that stands in for his community; not because he is formally elected for such a position, but because he speaks from a place of deep engagement with the issues of social justice and civil rights that defines and unites the community. The focus of that engagement and the definition of the community itself revolves around an attempt to re-frame the agrarian imaginary, to make loud the long-silenced voices of African American farmers.

**History: transition**

Over the next few years, Caledonia underwent some significant changes. Starting in 1923, the prison was segregated by race, leading one administrator to opine that it “requires more men to man the farm than if it were manned by actual farmers or Negroes.”\(^67\) Far from being a negative reflection on the fitness of white males for farming, this statement instead grants to them some kind of innate quality that sets them apart from their Black counterparts. White men, it suggests, can become farmers should they so choose; Black men, on the other hand, are born to a kind of subservience that admits a certain level of skill, though not the title of “actual farmer.” Clearly, this was yet another expression of the views of agrarianism that had dominated life for the 200 hundred years of prior history in this place. That history, as I have shown, was one dominated by white elites, who controlled land, labor, and the imaginative conception of agrarianism itself. It was their vision that prevailed, their vision

that undergirded the dominant imaginary, and their vision which demanded a subservient African American population.

Indeed, throughout the early part of the 20th century on the land around Caledonia, sharecropping remained the norm. On land owned by J. R. Tillery, and other whites, the predominately African American population of Tillery continued to toil under contracts not dissimilar to those signed in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. The poverty that had been institutionalized in the system of sharecropping came to the rest of the country with the stock market crash of 1929. Ironically, the very institutionalization of white agrarian power led to a system that finally allowed African Americans to control their own agricultural land and labor. The recovery efforts following the market crash of 1929 included the founding of the Resettlement Administration, an agency dedicated to giving landless people a home to live in and fields to cultivate. It came to Tillery in 1935, when the government planned to establish there a large community called Roanoke Farms. The vast majority of land in this new community was to come from land formerly owned by John Richard Tillery. Like other Resettlement communities established throughout the country, Roanoke Farms was set up to supply homesteads to deserving applicants. The project came in the midst of the New Deal, and was imbued with the politics of the era, which regarded hard work as a kind of cure-all. And Roanoke Farms, at least in its initial stage, represented the kind of shock to the system of agrarianism that governmental agencies had only been an unwitting part of in the past

Tillery divided

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Initially, Roanoke Farms was meant as “a real experiment in socialization. [They were] going to have white folk on one side and Black folk on the other side.”\(^{69}\) In effect, it was meant to be an integrated farming community, subject still to the laws of segregation, but with a shared and relatively equal investment in communal agricultural output. That decision was reversed when white resettlers discovered that Tillery’s location on the Roanoke River would undoubtedly lead to flooding. As Mr. Grant tells it “we actually found a letter where someone said ‘yeah, and you know, we are in the wetlands, the flood plains and if this place floods… mosquitoes and malaria. And Black folk can deal with malaria better.’”\(^{70}\) The government, either persuaded by this evidence or leery of housing whites and Blacks so close together, purchased land on the other end of the county and moved the white resettlers there.\(^{71}\) Roanoke Farms failed in its original purpose of promoting racial harmony and instead established two communities in Halifax County. The one that stayed in Tillery was comprised solely of African Americans, and quickly came to be known, simply, as Tillery.\(^{72}\)

This meant that there was a new community of African Americans all of a sudden put into the middle of an existing community. On and next to land where slaves and their descendants had lived for years, there were now neat homesteads that belonged to newly arrived African Americans. Some of these new people, the resettlers, came from as far away

\(^{69}\) Gary Grant presentation at North Carolina Folklore Society Annual Meetings, March 31, 2012. Greenville, NC.

\(^{70}\) Ibid.


\(^{72}\) Chris Potter and Charles Thompson, We shall not be moved: A history of the Tillery resettlement community, (Tillery, NC: Concerned Citizens of Tillery, 2007), DVD.
as Florida and Alabama.73 Others came from communities in nearby Northampton or Edgecombe counties. In total, around 150 families came to Tillery and established homesteads through the Resettlement Act and the various agencies that continued the Administration’s mission after its official dissolution in 193674. These homesteaders, whether from near or far, entered into the midst of a community already called Tillery, and made up primarily of slave descendants who had lived on the land for generations. As Mr. Grant suggested, “The descendants of the slaves had become the sharecroppers. And they were denied access to education, you know all that stuff.”75 Though the Resettlement Administration sought to establish a community at Tillery, its presence in many ways continued to reinforce entrenched hegemony. Just as the Freedman’s Bureau had done three quarters of a century earlier, the Resettlement Administration (RA) effectively served the interests of white farmers. Both these agencies were progressive in their stated purposes, but they each failed to confront ideas entrenched through hundreds of years of history. If the RA represented an initiation into the agrarian ideal for white farmers in other places, it carried far different meanings for the African Americans who participated in the program at Tillery. It was, at once, a promise for liberation from the burden of a difficult history, and an imposition on an already existent community.

In the time since the official founding of Tillery as a town in the late 19th century, and the establishment of Resettlement Tillery in the 1930s, the African American community had undoubtedly developed its own traditions and sense of self. So when this new Tillery

73 “Remembering Tillery…” A New Deal Resettlement. Historic Community Guide.”

74 Ibid.

75 Gary Grant interviewed by Elijah Gaddis, Tillery, NC, 8 August 2012.
came in, it was “basically having to establish a community within a community. Actually within two communities. You had the descendants of the slaveowners, and you had the descendants of the slaves. And so the descendants of the slaves had become the sharecroppers.”  

Far from producing a unified community, this new Tillery predicated a further split. Resettlement Tillery became a place that defined itself as the heir to the promises of the agrarian imaginary that had been denied the African Americans in that community for so long. Rather than expressing the kind of unified racial vision of agriculture that we saw in white postbellum Tillery, the two communities, united only by name, became one divided along class lines. Larger social structures and the prevailing racial prejudice that defined much of the world outside of Tillery was certainly part of this split. “The local whites saw the Blacks who came here as smart aleck quote niggers and taught the sharecroppers that ‘you don’t want to get involved with them because it only leads to trouble.’”  

The local power structure, one that had grown out of control over land and labor, was certainly invested in maintaining their control over the agricultural production of Tillery. “The local white merchants and larger landowners … further oppress[ed] the sharecroppers … to increase the division between the communities. There has been a real struggle in this community over the years to unite those two Black communities together.”  

Yet those divisions have not come entirely from without. Even the use of the word “community” is one filled with tension, given that the origins of one part of this community lie with a governmental agency. On my very first visit to Tillery, before I knew anyone in the  

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76 Ibid.  
77 Interview with Gary Grant by Kieran Taylor, 6 August, 2003 (U-D466), in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.  
78 Ibid.
community, I asked the first person I had a conversation with how big Tillery was. “The
boundaries of Tillery,” she replied “are five miles in every direction.”79 This is the way that
the inhabitants of Resettlement Tillery view their community. Its imagined borders stretch
well beyond the confines the individual homesteads that each family was granted. Instead,
these borders are a claim to the entirety of Tillery, and a claim to the entirety of its history.
Resettlement Tillery sees itself as the only Tillery, as a fulfillment of the promises inherent in
the agrarian imaginary. Consequently, its narrative of historical self-definition deals
forthrightly with the idea of the plantation. While people in Tillery only rarely talked about
the specific history of the plantations there, the symbol of the plantation emerges as a locus
of their attempts to refashion the agrarian imaginary. Because it is perhaps the most potent
symbol of agriculture in the South, the plantation as a figured entity is one that Resettlement
Tillery defines itself in opposition to.

**Resettlement Tillery and the symbolic plantation**

In the communal narrative relayed by Mr. Grant, Tillery, the Resettlement
community, was formed when the government “bought up several plantations and broke the
land up into forty to sixty or eighty acre tracts.”80 In this way then, the plantation is the
literal antecedent of Resettlement Tillery. At the material level, the plantation could hardly
be broken up since its character was derived from the very land itself. In that way it was
preserved as a figure on the landscape, “the plantation system was over, but the large land
mass was still owned.”81 But the specter of Tillery’s plantation past, what Mr. Grant calls the

79 Personal communication with Doris Davis, 7 March 2012.
80 Interview with Gary Grant by Kieran Taylor.
81 Ibid.
“plantation-minded” social interactions persisted as well. The process of resettlement made land owners rich again by buying up their land and then carving it up into homesteads. More even than that though, in the view of Gary Grant, it institutionalized sharecropping even further, so that the government no longer simply protected sharecropping, it engaged in it. Buying a Resettlement homestead and agreeing to the terms laid out meant that “you actually became a sharecropper for the government.” Tillery’s community guide, a small book meant to tell the story of Resettlement Tillery, is equally direct about the stringent terms required for landownership:

Settlers on Tillery farms project were initially loaned land, a home, tools and livestock for three years. In this time, they were expected to learn the basics of farming, home management, and community cooperation. They were expected to follow strict home and farm guidelines, keep a record of expenses, and pay monthly installments toward purchasing their farm. If, after 3 to 5 years, they had demonstrated adequate ‘interest and potential,’ settlers gained title to their land, paying the remainder of their loan over a forty year period.

Though they did not necessarily think so at the time, the resettlers in Tillery now look back at their agreements with the government as being akin to another form of bondage. In talking about this history, Mr. Grant and the others in the community evoke the plantation in a very specific way. They are not necessarily thinking of the actual, physical conditions of bonded servitude which still existed among the sharecroppers in other parts of Tillery. Instead, they are evoking the plantation as a symbolic entity, as one whose existence and persistence represents the antithesis of all that Resettlement Tillery stands for. As a symbol, the

82 Ibid.
83 Gary Grant, presentation at North Carolina Folklore Society Annual Meeting.
84 Interview with Gary Grant by Kieran Taylor.
plantation dominants Tillery’s imagination, acting as a reminder of the past which is not yet forgotten and not yet conquered.

In effect, the plantation in Tillery is what Edward Said has called an overdetermined historical landscape. These are particular landscapes whose “power and resonance. . . [rest] over and above a particularly specifiable moment in history or a geographical locale.”86 The plantation landscape in general and at Tillery specifically, is the very definition of this concept, with its diverse meanings persistently being employed for different purposes. Jessica Adams has reflected, almost needlessly given that persistent fascination with the plantation, on the way “the rhetoric of economies linked to slavery has been reiterated,” repeatedly and unabashedly.87 The plantation has, Adams writes, “an uncanny ability…to maintain its original shape even over the course of centuries.”88 It is almost certainly the most visible sign of Black agriculture in the South and, at the same time, the region’s most enduring symbol of racial inequality. Though it is hard to argue with that reality, those meanings have often been subsumed to a series of understandings that, while no less complex, do not treat the plantation primarily as a landscape of forced agriculture. The plantation has become, as Adams puts it, “more idea than place.”89 Building on that idea, Elizabeth Russ has called the plantation “not primarily a physical location but rather an insidious ideological and psychological trope.”90 The plantation, then, has persisted mostly as

86 Said, 246.


88 Adams, 20.

89 Adams, 56.

a figured or symbolic entity, one whose currency in the public context relies largely on received notions about plantations and the lifestyles we have come to associate with them.

The narrative of Tillery capitalizes on those understandings. As evidenced above, the Resettlement community has begun to rethink its own history as one defined in part by the persistence of the plantation in memory and action. In the history of the sharecroppers and slaves of Tillery, the resettler’s narrative finds an appropriately unjust precedent to its own founding. The plantation is that most visible of symbols, one that embodies the indignities of a white dominated version of the agrarian imaginary. But if the plantation is a useful symbol from which to derive, it is equally useful as a symbol to reject. Mr. Grant states it rather simply: “everybody had plantations… The slave stories are the same. You come here and you have a place that changed.” The plantation’s generalizable nature which makes it such a potent symbol also covers up definitional nuances and elides the distinction between past and present. Mr. Grant insists that Tillery be recognized as unique, as a place that be understood through its relationship to the systematic inequalities that still survive from the plantation, but that also seeks to transcend them. The narrative of this new Tillery is a complex one that assembles from the past, by bits and pieces, an identity for itself. But it is never a wholesale appropriation; Resettlement Tillery is defined both by the things that it rejects and accepts.

**History: community**

After the founding of Resettlement Tillery in the mid-1930s, other waves of resettlement occurred in 1942 and 1947-1948. Though these were undertaken under the auspices of different governmental agencies, they effectively made the same promise of a

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91 Grant, 8 August 2012 interview.

92 “‘Remembering Tillery…’ A New Deal Resettlement. Historic Community Guide.”
homestead equipped with “a barn, a chicken coop, a smoke house, and privy.” Most of these new families acquired their homestead through loans from the Farmer’s Home Administration (FHA). Though the promise of a fully-constructed homestead replete with all the necessary buildings was not always fulfilled, the families that came to Tillery were all motivated by the potential to farm. For them, the word and the title “farmer” held meaning far beyond its nominal definition. To be a farmer meant that one was not a sharecropper or a slave, but someone who owned his own land and controlled his own labor. It was the promise of that fulfillment of the agrarian imaginary that ultimately brought these people to Tillery.

Resettlement Tillery and the historical Black farmer

The chief commonality in the history of this place up to the founding of Tillery is that the Black farmer as both an historical actor and a symbolic figure had been systematically and intentionally erased. Active erasure began at least as early as the postbellum days of Caledonia and Tillery when the planters forged a new imaginary that saw land, even without labor, as the basis of agricultural wealth. Before then, the tallies of profits and losses on the plantation, mentions of land cleared and tilled, and the absence of mentions of labor effectively erased the Black farmer from the landscape. No rational person would argue with the fact that the historic-institutional basis of Black agriculture in the United States was exploitative and sought to reduce Black subjects to something less than human. But scholars have been more reticent to recognize that those historical erasures persist. By not labeling Black farmers—both contemporary ones and those from the past—as farmers, we erase the Black body from the fields of agriculture. “Slave” or “sharecropper” signify something very different than farmer because they have a subordinate relationship to the market. The slave

93 “Remembering Tillery…’ A New Deal Resettlement. Historic Community Guide.”
represents a body to be possessed and sold; the sharecropper is merely an imperfect facsimile of the slave. He or she remains little more than a vessel through which work is completed and profits are made. Both persist as a kind of void onto which meanings can be read. “Farmer” on the other hand represents a right to name, and a right to self-definition.

Gary Grant is explicit about making this point. To him, these people represent the antecedents of his community, the African Americans farmers who first cultivated the land of Tillery and in some ways made it possible for him to do so as well. Even if they are not his own literal genealogical ancestors, the narrative he presents sees them as worthy of recognition as agrarians themselves, rather than as simple laborers. If hegemony is intent on erasing their presence and denying their agency, the countervailing claims that Tillery makes to the agrarian imaginary insist on a re-evaluation. Mr. Grant maintains that slaves and sharecroppers be called farmers, because that word inscribes a very particular meaning which carries far different connotations than the usual words used to classify African American agrarians. To call slaves ‘farmers’ would “equate [them] with the Midwest guy and puts [them] on an equal footing.” Mr. Grant argues that this labeling is intentional, that “‘farmer’ wouldn’t be degrading . . . [while the term] ‘slave’ is degrading.” Both the historical and current usage of the word ‘slave’ or ‘sharecropper’ is meant, in Gary Grant’s vision, to degrade and indeed to present a vision of history that excludes Blacks as anything other than anonymous and interchangeable workers. “And the slaves worked the land. Hear the phrasing. The slaves worked the land. Not farmed it. They worked the land.”

94 Grant, 20 June 2012 interview.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
slaves farmers, Mr. Grant suggests, would be to “admit that there is equality.” Such an admission can certainly not be found in antebellum or postbellum Tillery, where there arose an agrarian imaginary that was constant only in the certainty that whites alone had a claim to landownership and it was only their labor that constituted “farming.”

But, there is an even more complicated side to this idea of farming. Underlying even this specific ambition is a promise of more. The earliest settlers at Caledonia undoubtedly saw the unclaimed land as part of a larger series of ambitions. It was the same with the resettlers in Tillery. As Mr. Grant suggests, there was a subtle cultural bias against farm work within the African American community. “When we look at those time periods, who do they talk about? They talk about the undertaker, the preacher, every now and then a black doctor, teachers. There’s never conversation or stories about farmers.” This place within the imaginary of the Black community, coupled with the hard work it entailed, led many people to give up on farming, even as they were working toward owning their own land. “Farming was a dirty job. Everybody wanted to leave farming and become something else. That made it . . . even to be a chauffeur, working in somebody’s kitchen, anything other than being out in that hot sun.” So there was, and is, a fundamental ambivalence among the people of Tillery about their livelihood as farmers. But even with these negative perceptions, the agrarian imaginary contains within it the promise of more resources. Mr. Grant, looking back now, states it simply: “we’re very clear about what got us to where we are and that it was the farm. The land ownership and farming. So that’s the story.”

97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
History: outmigration, remigration and civil rights

The story of Tillery is, of course, far from idyllic. Looking back now, Mr. Grant and the other children of those first Resettlement families can remember the problems that existed from the very first. There was always a climate of fear and distrust of the resettlement and its aims from the communities surrounding Tillery. But starting in the early 1950s that opposition began to meld with a larger regional and national movement of racial intimidation. Citizen’s Councils were formed in Halifax County, and in response the people of Tillery founded the first chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in the county.101 It was also two families from Tillery that attempted to enroll their daughters in the local white school in the wake of the 1954 decision in Brown versus Board of Education. The relative level of economic independence afforded by landownership allowed the people of Tillery to outwardly and prominently oppose the lingering system of economic and social oppression. As the Civil Rights movement in America grew, the first generation of Resettlement children were going off to college with a self-confidence and independence that allowed them to participate in the larger struggle for rights. Some of those who left never returned, part of a continual wave of outmigrating residents who would no longer deal with the uncertainty and hardship of agrarian life. The people who did return came back to those same struggles, and to the same FHA loans that their parents had been paying off for years. But, those who did return also brought with them a new commitment to improving the place they were from. These children of the first settlers had grown up in the early days of Civil Rights activism, and experienced it first hand in the world outside Tillery. Together,

101 Grant, 8 August 2012 interview.
these two generations formed their own brand of activism responsive to the challenges of agrarianism in Tillery.

Resettlement Tillery and environmental activism

Mr. Grant suggests that activism was engrained in daily life at Tillery. “I grew up in Tillery in an activist community. Never understanding it because it was just the way that things were.” True to the designed communal nature of the resettlement, though no doubt contrary to the government’s intentions, individual actions eventually became part of larger institutional efforts organized within the community. Chief among these groups was the Concerned Citizens of Tillery (CCT).

The Concerned Citizens of Tillery, we were born in 1978 when the local white, predominately white, school board decided to close the Tillery elementary school—where I graduated from and where I came back and taught for years. Suddenly it’s going to close and we’re going to bus students fifteen miles away to a crossroads community.

The formation of CCT can clearly be seen as an outgrowth of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and ‘60s. Mr. Grant relates further “So you’ve had this going on all of this time, and then there was probably some lax between the late 50s through the mid-60s.” This small gap of activism came as the first generation of children went off to college and got involved in the larger causes consuming the country at the time. Mr. Grant’s experience with this larger movement is typical of many of the people in Tillery. “So, I go off to college and get involved in the Civil Rights movement there in Durham… I had 15 or 17 arrests in the

102 Gary Grant presentation at North Carolina Folklore Society Annual Meeting.
103 Ibid.
104 Grant, 8 August 2012, interview.
Durham area.”

Others in the community similarly left: “[in] just about every home at least one child went off to college.” Some people were part of the long and sustained exodus of African Americans from the rural South to the industrial North. But many in the community came back and stayed in place with a kind of rootedness that belied the lack of opportunity and seeming lack of change in Tillery. The challenge for those who came back was to bridge the intergenerational “gap of activism,” to take the lessons learned from a childhood spent in an activist community and combine them with the emergent lessons of Civil Rights. The people of Tillery gradually came to realize that their struggle was tied up not only with the national movement and its somewhat vague promises, but also with their problems at home. And their problems at home were the same ones that African Americans in Tillery had been experiencing for hundreds of years: control over their own land and labor. In short, they were problems tied to agrarianism.

The story of this newly emergent activism, as Mr. Grant tells it, begins not long after the founding of CCT. There were continual attempts by outsiders to take advantage of the cheap infrastructure and labor costs in Tillery. Once the community’s school, which CCT had formed to protect, closed, various outside investors sought to take advantage of the vacant building and job scarcity in the surrounding community. “The one descendant of the Tillery family that was still here was talking about ‘oh they’re going to bring us some economic development. And we’re going ‘what kind of economic development?’”

Interestingly, in this narrative, the messenger who brings news of economic development is

105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
someone from “Old Tillery.” The resettlers (“we” in this instance) are painted as the skeptics, those who could see the long pattern of economic discrimination unfolding again. Mr. Grant goes on: so everybody was benefitting except the people at the factory . . . the process was to make white folk rich.”

This pattern of economic development, and resettlement Tillery’s opposition to it, continued for years. The resettlers were still mostly farming, able to criticize the process of exploitation from the comparatively protected position of landowning.

Eventually though, economic development began to exhaust the potential of labor in the community, and sought instead to capitalize on the other, most resource in Tillery: land.

It was seemingly inevitable that people coming into Tillery seeking economic benefit would adhere to the tried and true model of capitalization. Even if agriculture no longer held the same promise of vast riches that it had for so long in this place, it was nonetheless the most obvious arena of development. Despite the prevalence and persistence of agriculture in Tillery, throughout the early part of the 1980s at least, the community still clung to the model of agrarianism outlined and romanticized by early American thinkers. This agricultural community was still primarily one of smallholders, of the now-mythical family farm. But industrial farming was beginning to dominate the agrarian imaginary:

Then the next economic development phase for us was the industrial hog raising facilities. Which initially we paid no attention to because we had all raised pigs as farmers. It was the one left descendant of the Tillery family who came and got me and took me to the site where the facility was being built. And they were not putting up fence posts, they were digging holes with earth moving machines like I had never seen before. So that is how we got involved in the environmental piece.  

108 Ibid.  
109 Ibid.
These circumstances ultimately altered the course of Tillery. The well-established
tradition of activism in Tillery and the lessons learned from the bigger struggle for Civil
Rights, now came squarely in contact with the agrarian imaginary that had quietly
informed every action in Tillery for hundreds of years. If the emerging struggle against
industrial farming was rooted in community activism, its deeper roots were in the history
of African American claims to an agrarian imaginary.

Of course, it is difficult if not impossible to relay the agricultural
experience, let alone its symbolic function, of African Americans throughout Tillery’s
long history. But its more recent iterations stem from a long, if rarely discussed, history
of Black agrarian imagination and environmental consciousness. Frederick Knight, in his
recent history of African labor in the Anglo-American world, points to the centrality of the
natural world in early expressions of African American identity. “Since slaves spent the
bulk of their time working in the natural world,” Knight suggests, “nature and its
metaphors were prominent in their vision of power dynamics and human relationships.”
He further claims that diverse groups of 19th century African Americans “saw the natural
world as a metaphor for their own experience as subjects, a domain that offered escape
from the confines of slavery, and an object of veneration.” 110 Knight’s argument is
convincing, though it does bear mentioning that the emic perception of these slaves and
freed people was much in contrast to the general perception of the slave’s relationship to
land. Cassandra Johnson and J. M. Bowker contrast the general white view of America’s
seemingly endless frontier with the Black slave who “stood as antonym to the American

110 Frederick C. Knight. Working the diaspora: the impact of African labor on the Anglo-American world, 1650-
myth of unrestricted wilderness exploration.”¹¹¹ Johnson and Bowker further argue that African Americans do not view “wildlands” (places agriculturally uncultivated and generally called “wilderness”) as possessing the same potential or innate grandeur that arises from the elite subject position of whites.¹¹² They are correct in pointing this out, though I think they do not go far enough; indeed, I would suggest that for many Blacks, both during and after slavery, land by default, and particularly land seemingly too wild for whites to make agriculturally productive, possessed in it the seeds of liberation and autonomy. Kimberly Smith suggests as much in her epistemological history of Black environmental consciousness. In close readings of prominent African American writers from the end of slavery into the 20th century, she finds a strain of environmental thought that is radically different from the whites in the emerging environmental and conservation movements. First, there is the fact that these Black writers were unabashedly concerned with agrarianism, as opposed to the more general call for conservation or preservation among their white counterparts. In addition, these “Black agrarians focused on property rights, the status of labor and the exploitation of workers, issues seldom explored in the canonical environmental literature.”¹¹³ These works gave voice to a strain of thought that was forcibly silenced by the power structure during times of slavery and sharecropping, and often sublimated in the years afterward out of well-founded fears of reprisal. Smith rereads canonical works of African American culture, among them works by Frederick Douglass, Solomon Northrup, and Booker T. Washington, and finds in them a well-


¹¹² Ibid, 67

articulated tradition of environmental consciousness: “The Black tradition, in contrast, focuses on the legal, political, and economic conditions necessary to develop an enduring connection to the land.”\textsuperscript{114} The very materiality of land granted the kind of security that allowed Black farmers to speak out against injustice. If, for a time, that security of landownership gave way to the security in mass numbers, as Jarod Roll suggests, it was seemingly an aberration that can be attributed to its particular historical context. Tillery is proof that there exists a persistent strain of the Black cultural imagination that foregrounds land, and sees its possession as a way to establish at least some kind of power.

\textbf{History: environment and litigation}

This early opposition to industrial farming too eventually became part of a larger national movement. The environmental justice movement, now a cause for people of color internationally, was initially rooted in the grassroots efforts of communities like Tillery.\textsuperscript{115} As the long histories of activism and agrarianism were increasingly being combined in Tillery, the resettlers started to confront the injustices inherent to the system that had brought them to Tillery in the first place. Many, if not most, of the resettlers still living in Tillery had loans with the FHA. While title to the land these people worked was in their own hands, the federal government still controlled the land through the various loan programs applied to Tillery over the years. With high interest rates and unequal access to loans, many people in Tillery lost their land, either through repossession or other financial impossibilities that left outmigration as the only viable option. Many of those who stayed in the community had

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid, 280.

\textsuperscript{115} www.ejrc.cau.edu/princej.html.
vastly reduced amounts of land and found farming impossible. Faced with the seeming fact that the land they had worked for for years would no longer be there to fall back on, Tillery elected to force the federal government to rectify its discrimination and live up to its promises. Pigford versus Glickman started by Timothy Pigford in neighboring Warren County, sued the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) on the grounds “that the agency had discriminated against black farmers on the basis of race,” and ignored the complaints of these same African American farmers for decades. Mr. Grant and others in Tillery quickly entered into the case and formed an organization within CCT to help other plaintiffs enter the lawsuit as well. The suit was brought in 1997, and decided by the Supreme Court in 1999. It quickly became the largest civil rights settlement in United States history.

Resettlement Tillery and the end of the family farm?

When the case was decided, the government emphasized that the settlement would only be for recent injustices and that they in no way constituted a longer historical reckoning. “And they wanted to make sure, [with] the Pigford class action law suit, this was not reparations. As if we would think $50,000 was reparation. ‘This is not reparations and don’t you dare refer to it as reparations.’” Those and other indignities endured over the long duration of the Pigford lawsuit were in some ways the death knell to the practice of

116 Chris Potter and Charles Thompson, We shall not be moved.


118 Grant, 20 June 2012, interview.

119 Ibid

120 Ibid.
agriculture in much of Tillery. Mr. Grant tells the story of his extended family, and many others in the community:

Well, we got locked up in the [lawsuit]. Our last farm year was ’92 or ’93. And there was one brother who actually farmed, because he and my dad were all in that together and that was his last year as well. And he makes the statement that he would kill his children before he would let them farm. And then again when kids have seen folks struggle and heard these conversations...  

For all of the emphasis placed in Tillery on education and establishing a path for youth to follow, I only rarely heard Mr. Grant or others talk about a future return to farming.

With all the debt and all of that, if you had sold everything you still wouldn’t have had anything. My thing is, we are not going to be family farmers anymore. So you keep an acre out for your own garden and you lease hunting rights. Or in our case, we’ve got 88 acres of riverfront. I don’t even have to stop farming. I just need to take out maybe ten acres and start selling lots. Or doing long term leases. But the only people who really want that land are white. And then you start thinking about the S.O.B’s that did this to you and it makes it [laughs]. But the next generation is not going to have that outlook. Which is probably good.  

The battle for the Pigford decision took 20 years. And in the end, despite a national payout that exceeded $1,000,000,000, Mr. Grant was left unsatisfied. Not only did Pigford do little to rectify the struggles of the past, it failed to pave a way forward for the future. But the community is still a farming one, even if it is no longer home to a majority of farmers. If the subject of this thesis at its simplest has been the divergent and sometimes unfulfilled claims to the agrarian imaginary, then Tillery’s present situation is the perfect one on which to end. It shows the pervasiveness of this structure and the way it becomes essential to the existence of a people, not because it provides sustenance or even solace, but because it informs and is

121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
informed by their actions. Agrarianism may have increasingly less promise as a symbol, and even less as a quantifiably beneficial economic system for small farmers. But it persists in Tillery because it is real. Tillery residents live on a daily basis with both the failings of farming and its very real successes. Farming has allowed the people of Tillery the means not necessarily to escape the realities of their lives, but to act with certitude knowing that they can change that reality.

Conclusion

The first time I visited Tillery, in the late winter of 2012, I ended up staying there for five hours. Mr. Grant and the other community leaders I had arranged to talk to that day had promised me, a curious outsider, one hour of their time. That hour turned into several more, and as the sun began to set, I found myself walking with Gary Grant through his plowed-under fields. We were approaching the Roanoke, the river whose presence here informed so much of the community’s history. We talked as we made our way through the fields. About the lack of economic opportunities in Tillery and Halifax County. About the disregard or outright antipathy expressed by governmental representatives and agencies. About the past and the future of farming in Tillery. As we reached the edge of the river, Mr. Grant looked at me and asked “Would you live here?” I did not say a word, but only nodded my head silently to signal that I knew what he meant: this was not a place with opportunities for young people, and the tight-knit community life could be suffocating even if you were part of the accepted group. But this was not a rhetorical question. “No really, I’m asking, why would you live here?” This time I had no answer. With so little opportunity, a dark past, and a future that promises little improvement, it is hard to imagine anyone choosing to live in Tillery. And it is hard to express the profound ambivalence with which the people in this
community regard their land. In contemporary academic and public discourse, there is a pervasive idea that land possesses almost mythic properties, that place is both the root of everything and the solution to most problems; this is the essence of a still-maintained white agrarian imaginary. Like many concepts, place and landscape often get defined by their extremes, as either a positive public good or a site of great personal and communal grief. In addition, there is an unresolved tension between the idea of place and landscape, and its materiality. The narrative of Tillery is one that seeks to balance these poles, to recognize that land has both symbolic and material (if not necessarily economic) value. And perhaps more to the point, both of those values matter to the people of Tillery. The land, for most people in town, has long since outlived its economic value. Some people moved away, part of a continued outmigration, and some people have begun moving back as part of a process of remigration, bound by inextricable ties to the South of their ancestors. But the people in Tillery, those who stayed, view things in a very different way. The land is not some far off place that calls out with an indefinable allure. Instead it is a resource, one that has supplied economic livelihood at some points, and that has always served as a repository for hopes, dreams and aspirations. From the very beginning, before this place was called Tillery and probably even before it was named Caledonia, people saw themselves as linked to the land in a mutually beneficial relationship. They made the land better by cultivating it, and in turn the land would make them better: richer, happier, and more in control of their world. If crops failed, isolated rural life got depressing, or events conspired to challenge that control, there was always at least the promise the land and renewed labor on it would eventually make things better. In that way the agrarian imaginary in Tillery has always been a real presence. Farm land meant at least as much symbolically as it did economically. Today, much of
Tillery’s land sits fallow and those underlying ideas are often all that is left. The people of Tillery cling to this imaginary not because they are delusional, but because past experience has told them that given even the slightest of resources, a person can make his own history.
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