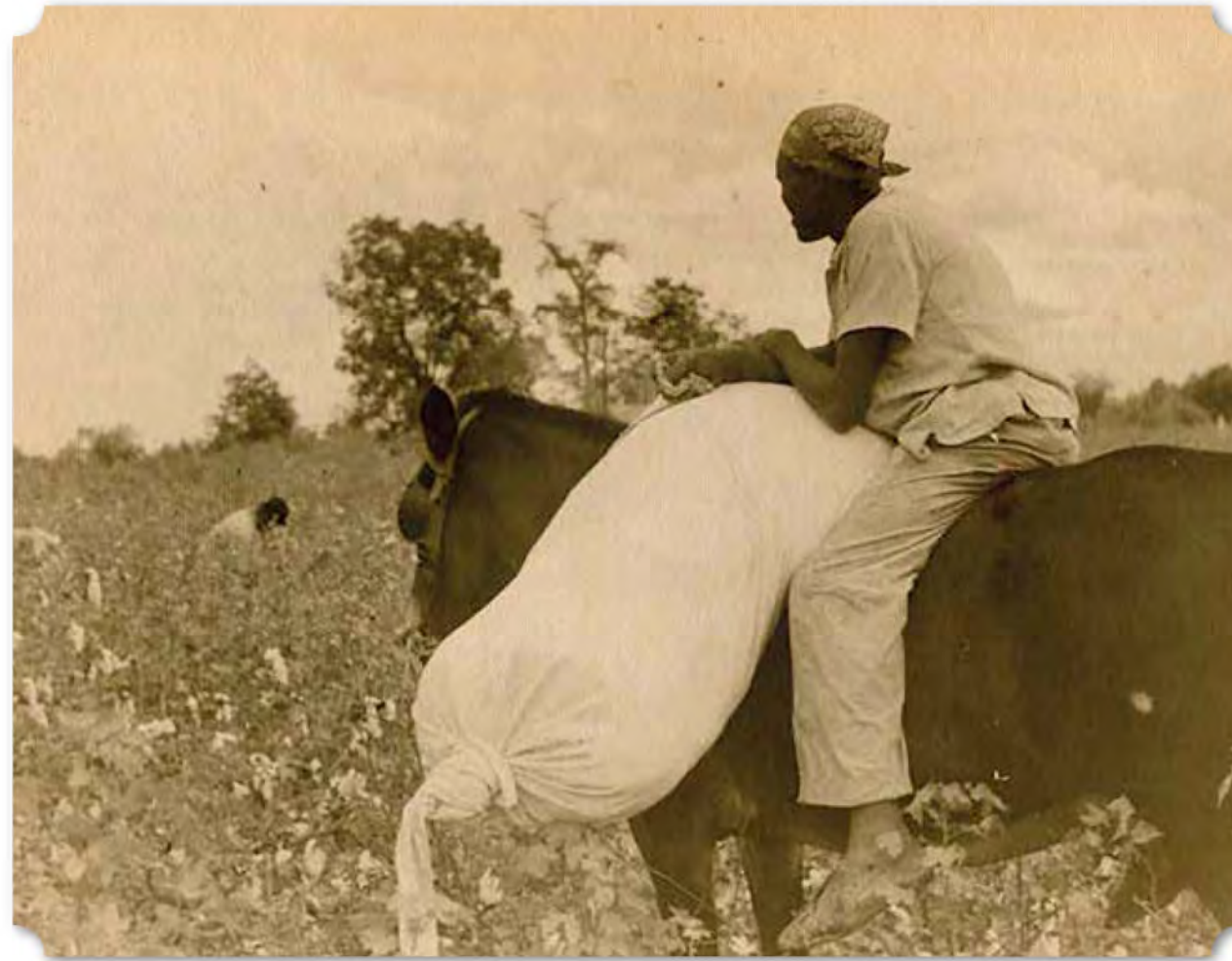


12.8 million acres were owned by non-white farmers in the South – 175,290 acres fully owned and 43,177 partly owned (mortgaged).

The success of early 20th century African American farmers can be partly attributed to institutions of higher learning for people of color, such as the Tuskegee Institute and Alabama A&M University, which came to the aid of rural farmers. This aid was in the form of educational programs, such as the Movable School and the demonstration farms program. The Movable School was a mobile exhibit that conveyed education on agriculture and mechanics to rural farmers. It was established by famed professor George Washington Carver and later headed by Thomas Monroe Campbell, a graduate of Tuskegee and the first African American extension agent. In one incarnation or another, the mobile school continued to educate rural African American farmers until 1944. The demonstration farms promoted by A&M were usually located nearby the school in North Huntsville, such as the David and Lucy Crutcher's farm. These farms were owned and operated by people of color and were used to instruct students and other local farmers in the most productive methods of agriculture.

During the Great Depression, African American landownership in Alabama increased due to diminished land value and the return of some migrants to the South, however, the farms tended to be smaller than the typical white-owned farms. From 1920 to 1930, the overall average acres fell slightly from 75 to 68 acres and tenancy increased from 58%

to 65%. The Depression prompted many rural farmers to leave the country for the urban areas, like Huntsville and the Quad-



(Above) "African American Cotton Plantation Worker, Hired as a Day Laborer, Riding a Mule and Holding Down a Sack of Cotton in the Cotton Field at Nugent Plantation, Benoit, Mississippi Delta, Mississippi, October 1939." (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Digital Collections)

cities. By the late 1930s, the effects of the economy reached the urban centers and people fled back to the depleted and eroded soils in hopes of growing a cash crop.

Agriculture in North Alabama

Cotton: the crop that fueled the South and the early American economy – and the institution of slavery. For most of America's history, cotton was the most profitable crop. It grows well in the limestone-rich soils of the Tennessee River Valley in the state's most condensed area for row crops. From the time of Alabama's settlement in the 1810s, through to the mid-20th century, cotton was king. Despite soil depletion and erosion and the boll weevil, all nine counties of North Alabama counted cotton

as their number one crop through to 1950. But times changed and a post-WWII economy was forcing Alabama and the South to diversify.

Between 1949 and 2010, the top agricultural products of North Alabama changed dramatically. Alabama no longer has the large agricultural industry that it once did. Where cotton once reigned, now poultry farms are the top producers and new products like soybeans and grains join cattle. The amount of land devoted to crops has drastically decreased and farmers do not rely solely on the agricultural products of the past couple of centuries. The latter half of the 20th century saw a turn from agriculture toward industry across the country, this was true for Alabama as well. By the 1960s, most of Alabama's farms were relying more heavily on mechanical harvesters and feeders than on human labor. Farm labor was siphoned from agriculture to more concentrated industry – displacing many rural African American workers at a time of great social tension.

In 2015, there were about 42,700 farms in the state, taking up 8.8 million acres – a little over 200 acres a farm on average. Most of the \$5.5 billion industry is from poultry (65%), another 11% is cattle, followed by 8% for greenhouse or nursery crops, and only 4% is cotton. This is a severe decline as fifty years ago, cotton accounted for 45% of Alabama's agricultural output. In North Alabama, soybean, corn, wheat, and cattle have been added to the repertoire in the past decades, however, Lawrence, Limestone, and Madison counties still retain numerous acres of cotton. Farmland adjacent to urban areas such as Huntsville, Athens, Decatur, and Florence have decreased due to urban expansion. What farms are left are frequently over 2,000 acres of crops tended to by only three or four workers – highly trained and highly paid.

