



DRAWING OF FIRST FERGUSON PEANUT PICKER. DONE BY INVENTOR'S GRANDDAUGHTER, NANCY FERGUSON

Ferguson, Benthall Were Inventors:

Peanut Picker Is Hertford First

MURFREESBORO — It was a case of minds running in the same channel which produced an improvement of the age-old system of picking peanuts by hand.

Two men with similar ideas worked to adapt the simple principle into a machine, but one got the jump on the other.

It is coincidental that J. T. Benthall and Fenton Finley Ferguson, who invented the first peanut pickers, should both have been residents of Hertford.

It was Benthall, who farmed near Mapleton, who first perfected his machine in 1904.

He was followed closely in 1905 by Ferguson, who had been born in Maney's Neck township and was living in Murfreesboro at the time.

Benthall's idea, it appears, was not original, but his adaptation of it to a machine was resourceful.

The tale goes that Benthall had watched a Negro named Ben Hicks, who could outpick fellow workers any day.

Hicks stretched a piece of chicken wire across a box, took

a handful of peanut vines and placed them on the wire so the peanuts fell through the mesh. A jerk diagonally upward parted vines from nuts, which were caught in the box.

Benthall designed a horse-driven machine in 1904 which would do this same work—run the vines over a conveyor, shaking them so that peanuts would drop down to be caught.

The first Benthall pickers were fashioned at Mapleton, probably in a blacksmith shop.

Later parts were manufactured and assembled in Norfolk and Richmond.

In 1906, however, Benthall established his own company, the Benthall Machine Company, in Suffolk, center of the peanut world, and moved his home to Norfolk.

Several Changes

The firm has passed through a number of changes of ownership and management since then, and Benthall himself died in 1937. But Benthall peanut pickers rank today as one of the most-used ma-

chines on the market. A new idea, the peanut combine, was started experimentally in 1950 and grew to be 60 per cent of the company's output last year.

Fenton Ferguson was a farmer with a mechanical bent, who loved to invent things.

Raised on the family farm in Hertford County a few miles from the Virginia line, Ferguson was 12 years old when the Civil War began. After marriage to Callie Worrell in 1869, they moved to her home near Newsoms, Va., where they became the parents of eight children.

Ferguson spent spare hours on the farm working on a guano sower, which he completed in 1875, and a few years later invented a peanut planter.

In 1887 when he was 38, Ferguson opened a little machine shop on William Street in Murfreesboro. It was there that he invented the combination fertilizer sower and cultivator, the first machine to cultivate both sides of a row at once.

This invention was patented

and put into production in Murfreesboro about 1892, and has made the Ferguson name famous.

An outstanding farmer, Ferguson was often asked for advice by farmers in the county.

His interest in improved agricultural methods led to the invention of his one-cylinder type peanut picker in 1905.

In 1910, the Ferguson Manufacturing Company was established in Suffolk by Ferguson, his sons W. C. and E. C., and his son-in-law, T. H. Debnam. The Ferguson picker was manufactured there from 1912 until 1927.

Many Inventions

Small, household inventions were made by Fenton Ferguson in his own machine shop, but were never put into production.

For his big family, he designed one of the earliest round "lazy susan" tables, with a stationary top and revolving top tier so each person could serve himself.

Butter churns, a washing machine, a posthole digger and overhead table fly fan (operated

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