

# Early Tobacco Culture In This State

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## First Yellow Flue-Cured Tobacco Raised In Caswell County In 1852

Picked up from the agriculture census of 1880, the story below offers the first authentic and interesting sketch of the development in North Carolina of what is now known as bright flue-cured tobacco. The Slades mentioned in the story may have been related to the Slades in this county, but the relationship was not close. While tracing the development of the "fine tobacco," the story was written as of 1880, and the current reader can readily recognize the developments as they have followed during the intervening years. The story:

The development of the fine tobacco interest in North Carolina exhibits one of the most remarkable transitions in the annals of agriculture. Its growth was first begun in this State by two brothers, Eli and Elisha Slade, of Caswell County, upon a ridge between two small tributaries of the Dan river. The soil was thin and sandy, and in comparison to the river bottoms, was of little value. About 1852 or 1853 the Slades grew, by chance, as they supposed, a small crop of yellow tobacco. As it grew year after year its peculiarities were attributed to special methods of culture and curing. They communicated their methods to all inquirers, and it was soon found that soil was the chief element, although care in the modes of cultivation and curing was also found to be necessary to the production of the best qualities.

From the plantation of the Slades its growth extended over Caswell County, and along the same ridge into Pittsylvania County, Virginia. This covered almost the entire area of yellow tobacco culture before the civil war, when the production of tobacco was almost entirely suspended. The war increased the manufacture of tobacco in the North, where no tobacco suitable for plug or wrappers was grown, and at its close attention was called to the fitness of the North Carolina yellow leaf for this purpose. The price rose with the demand, and the production extended to other counties, especially to Person, Granville, and Rockingham. Granville outstrips all competitors, although many other counties have entered the lists, from Buncombe and Madison, in the west, where it is grown on the slope of the Alleghanies, 3,000 feet above sea-level, to the coast belt about Goldsboro, 200 feet above the sea—a vertical range of 2,800 feet, and a climatic range equivalent to about eight and a half degrees of latitude. While yellow leaf may have been raised in Virginia in small quantities, this may be taken as an accurate sketch of the origin and spread of the new product in North Carolina and the contiguous counties of Virginia.

Alongside the decline in wealth in old areas of prosperity there are other instances in the South of the growth of thrift and wealth

in communities which were poor before the war, but no other section presents such wonderful changes. Comfortable farmhouses have taken the place of rude log cabins, excellent and convenient barns and outhouses exhibit the new thrift, and new life has been infused into all classes and into both races. The distinctive feature of this phenomenon is that it has brought into requisition, as most profitable, the poorest soils in the state, and wrought its improvements on the poorest farming classes. It has also enhanced the value of such lands until they actually sell for more than the most fertile bottom lands, and the spectacle has actually been witnessed of a contention between counties as to which could show the most poor land. The effect of this is practically to increase largely the wealth-producing power of the state, breaking down the ordinary economic distinctions between sterile and fertile lands. The amount of this enhancement cannot be given with even approximate accuracy, because nothing definite can yet be known as to the area of fine tobacco lands, the continued value of poor lands depending also on the stability of the demand for such tobacco.

The population of Winston, Forsyth County, in 1870, was 443. The leaf market opened in 1872, and one small factory was built, making 40,000 pounds. There are now fourteen plug factories in operation, and one smoking tobacco

factory not in operation. The plug factories make 3,880,000 pounds. Population in 1880, 2,854.

Reidsville, Rockingham County, had, in 1870, no corporate existence. In 1880 it had 1,316 inhabitants and nine plug and two smoking tobacco factories, with a capacity of 3,000,000 pounds of plug and twist.

Lands worth from \$1 to \$3 per acre in 1860 now bring from \$20 to \$100, and old fields, worn out 50 years ago and grown up in pines—fields which would scarcely produce a bushel of corn to the acre—are now often sold for \$50 per acre.

### Progress of the Tobacco Industry

The area of tobacco has been enlarged in most of the counties reporting, showing a gradual growth from 1876 to 1879, Clay, Guilford, and Warren alone reporting a decreased area.

As to quality, the crop of 1879 is generally reported better than that of the three years preceding, only two counties reporting deterioration in quality by comparison with 1876-'77-'78, and the care directed to the production of quality rather than quantity renders the exhibit as to the yield per acre apparently more unfavorable, nearly half the schedules reporting a decreased yield per acre, two counties about the same, and one-half an increased yield for 1879, as compared with 1876-'77-'78. Of the comparison were with the years when shipping leaf was raised, the diminution would

be general; but this comparison is only in fine-tobacco culture. It is worthy of notice here that the counties where the industry is older show increased yield. The most experienced planters have learned to combine body and weight with quality, and the production of different grades in the crop, in comparison between 1879 and 1869, shows the rapid change in the character of the product. In 1869 the shipping leaf averaged 36 per cent; in 1879 15 per cent; while the proportion of fine tobacco, wrappers, fillers and smokers, was enormously increased in all the counties. In many localities fine tobacco has only been grown since 1869.

The chief reason given for the great change in the character of the tobacco grown is the decline in price for shipping leaf, coinciding with the demand for fancy leaf at high prices.

The deterioration of quality in certain localities is attributed to the following causes: High prices have led many to undertake the culture of fine tobacco without experience and on unsuitable lands; others have been induced to plant more than could be perfectly cultivated; and hasty and careless handling and curing have been the faults of still others; all these resulting in the production of much light, chaffy tobacco. This deterioration is reported at from 1 to 5 per cent in Granville, which is the best fine-tobacco county.

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