Land Value Patterns in Ames Plantation, Fayette County, Tennessee: 1825-1860

Cailin E. Meyer

2009 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies

In 1818, future president Andrew Jackson negotiated a treaty with the Chickasaw Indian tribe for land situated along the lower 'Chickasaw Bluffs' on the Mississippi River. With the Chickasaw's claim to its remaining lands in Kentucky and western Tennessee gone, the door to expansionism was opened to prospectors, merchants, riverboats and, most importantly, land hungry cotton farmers. Arguably, Jackson was serving his own purposes more than his country's, as he had already acquired 5,000 acres through speculation in 1790.[1] Nonetheless, without his self-serving ways, the city of Memphis may never have been born, as in 1819, Andrew Jackson, John Overton and James Winchester laid the city's foundation.

The growth of Memphis as a town was agonizingly slow. Historian Gerald Mortimer Capers describes the town's first twenty years of life as "a tough and uninviting hole overrun by the scum of the river."[2] In 1819, the settlement contained only six white men, most of whom traded with the Indians still inhabiting the area.[3] The nearest proper settlement was seventy five miles away and little if any steamboat traffic actually stopped at the bluffs. However, over the next ten years, flatboat men carting cotton down the Mississippi to New Orleans would slowly invite life into the area.

Despite the lack of a city settlement until well into the 1830s, the regions surrounding Memphis flourished as planters moved into the area and established somewhat remote farming communities – such as the still existing town of La Grange. Laying inside Fayette County and officially founded in 1828, La Grange's population would grow to 3,000 citizens by the 1850s.

Long before then, however, La Grange boasted a reputation of rich culture, society and education. In an 1832 advertisement in the *Nashville Republic and State Gazette*, La Grange is described as being "a very flourishing village, where there are two good schools, male and female, and in a very wealthy and respectable neighborhood…"[4] The key to La Grange's wealth and culture – like most of Western Tennessee and Memphis – was due to the way short-growth cotton took to its nutrient rich soil. Fayette County's soil held more in common with the plantation regions of Louisiana and Mississippi. From its very beginning, Fayette became marked by land speculators and planters as an area destined to cultivating America's then number one cash crop.[5] White settlers "poured into the region, [and]…within one generation, the county emerged as part of a thriving cotton culture."[6] This fast paced growth is aptly summed up by Lawrence G. Gundersen, Jr. in his essay "West Tennessee and the Cotton Frontier, 1818-1840":

> …The third wave would come in. These people were "the men of capital and enterprise." They would buy up the settler's properties, and the settler would, "sell out and take advantage of the rise of property, push further into the interior and become himself a man of enterprise in turn."[7]

The tendency of plantation owners to habitually move from their established farmland into frontier areas, followed by the continual creation of larger plantations as time progresses, marks a cultural trend that impacts the physical environment humans inhabit. However, this cultural trend is influenced by several external forces. While it is true that the vast majority of slave holding and non-slave holding farmers alike could never afford to stay at one plantation for any length of time, their decisions to move were motivated more by personal decisions, societal trends and national catastrophes – not just the search for the new frontier.

Logically, plantation land purchases should be motivated by the quality of land available. Acreage with a higher growing potential holds a superior value than sub-par or lowland parcels. This relation theoretically ensures that such land would stay among the upper plantation class, while yeoman and middle-class farmers would subsist on lower quality of land and, as the largest southern class, create the pattern of moving from plantation to plantation. Land prices based on growing potential thus restrict what class purchases what land, which in turn restricts the growth of the upper class. However, while growth potential does remain a prominent theme in land value, its influence is limited in a planter's purchasing decision and in the overall land price.

As this paper will demonstrate, several various patterns influenced the buying and selling habits of planters and the value of the land they controlled. One of the most significant patterns involved the location of additional land to original parcels, as planters often spent extra money for convenience. Another prominent pattern is the impact of national phenomenon on local conditions and resulting changes in market values. Specific to this time period is the occurrence of the Panic of 1837, which drove planters into purchasing frenzies in order to amass physical wealth. The Panic also allowed a select number of planters to pursue the planter ideal – entry into the select Gentry class – which in turn influenced a planter's expenditure for new property. Finally, the occurrence of personal business decisions and situations, inter-plantation relations and individual disasters and fortunes all directed the value of land and decided a plantation owner's chance of success.

Secondary Research and Study Synopsis

Previous study with Fayette County has been limited, but thorough. For instance, in "West Tennessee and the Cotton Frontier" Gundersen traces the development of Tennessee land from a 'survivalist state,' in which yeoman and gentry planters coexisted within a realm of relative self-sustainability, to a fully functioning money-driven, bank oriented capitalist market. Gundersen rightly attributes this transition to the growing prevalence of cotton in the area, aided by cheap land prices and easy access to shipping through the Tennessee and Mississippi rivers and tributaries.[8] However, his more relevant research deals with comparing cotton prices in New Orleans to those in Memphis, and recording the fluctuating cotton prices throughout the antebellum period.[9]

Gary T. Edwards also focuses on the relationship between Western Tennessee and cotton growing in his study of yeoman planters. In his short essay, "Venerate the Plow: Agricultural Life in Antebellum Fayette County, Tennessee," Edwards hypothesizes that yeoman farmers were unable to grow large amounts of cotton due to the inherent risk in raising non-edible crops. Simply put, if a yeoman planter devoted too much of their limited acreage to growing cotton when the market price plummeted, he would be left with an useless surplus that could neither sell for enough to cover costs, nor serve as sustenance for him, his livestock, his slaves or his family.[10] Edwards further delved into the structure of a classic yeoman-owned farm versus Gentry plantations by defining family-oriented chores rather than slave labor, and this relation to the yeoman class' constant uphill struggle for economic success.[11]

The relationship between humans and their shared environment plays a critical role in understanding the connections between cotton, land prices and human involvement. Jamie P. Evans has partially addressed this relationship in his thesis, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee." Using the Ames Plantation as his base of study (see below), Evans found that between 1830 and 1850 the average parcel size decreased as the number of land owners increased, creating an inverse relation. This relation later reversed and continued during the next decade as parcel sizes increased while land owners decreased.[12] Evans hypothesized that this relation was due to the sudden, massive influx of immigration later being dismantled by the growing number of larger cotton plantations.[13]

Picking up where Evans left off, this study consists of land deeds pulled from Fayette County, TN archives relating to the modern day Ames Plantation property.[14] In the early twentieth century, successful entrepreneur Hobart Ames obtained over 20,000 acres from remaining and absentee heirs of antebellum plantation owners; his purchases included the plantations of several of La Grange's most prosperous planters. The Ames Plantation exists today as a research and education center to the University of Tennessee, and actively seeks to keep its history of plantation farming alive by documenting the lives of its past owners. Since the Ames Plantation area is relatively small in comparison, the inter-human relationships driving landscape changes become even more pivotal to understanding land transaction patterns.

Of the 323 deeds collected on the Ames area, the study used 309 deeds dated between 1820 and 1860.[15] These fall into four categories: traditional or standard deeds, defined as land transactions lacking a significant external influence mentioned within the deed; deeds of trust, consisting of forced sales due to debt or lawsuit; wills or gifted deeds, documenting the transfer of land mostly within family relations; and non-land transactions, ranging from the sale of livestock and slaves to farm equipment and household furniture. Standard deeds were further split into the decades, and then the year, of their occurrence in order to better track the evolution of land prices.[16]

Land Values: 1825-1836

Traditional land transactions make up the largest category of the Ames deeds, consisting of 262 transfers out of the total 309. As each land deed records the acreage and the sale price, the average total sale value and cost-per-acre sorted by decades can be compared:

Decade	Total Sale Value	Cost Per Acre	Number of Sales
1820	$1,106.45	$5.35	29
1830	$1,659.53	$6.17	110
1840	$1,420.95	$6.55	47
1850	$1,796.32	$6.55	73

On a superficial scale, land value increased dramatically between its first and second decade of settlement before leveling out to a stable multi-decade average. However, this assumption changes upon comparing acre prices between separate years, or even separate land deeds themselves. For instance, during 1825 – its first year of real occupancy – land sold for an average $10.69 per acre before dropping down to $3.69 the following year. It rises again briefly in 1828 to $4.16 before dropping down $3.09 in 1829.[17] It is possible that a sudden rush of immigration created the land price inflation during 1825. This fact is corroborated by Judge Murphey in a letter to John Carter of North Carolina:

> "First Rate Lands on the Hatchie, Looshatchie and Wolf Rivers, are worth $6 per acre on the Market, second Rate $4, third Rate $2.50. They are believed to be more suitable for Cotton than any other lands in the Purchase…Land of good quality average in products from & to 10 Blls of Corn per Acre, and from 1000 to 1500 lbs of Cotton."[18]

The lack of a sedentary population explains the lack of land transactions in the 1820s. During this decade, most of said property belonged to absentee owners, such as North Carolina citizens rewarded for their war efforts, or the University of North Carolina. A digital representation of the area in 1823 notes only 31 settled farmers, some of whom held land as absentee owners.[19] As Evans notes, the original deed owners almost never physically saw their land, and land deeds often crossed palms several times before the frontier opened.[20] Furthermore, the lack of internal infrastructure made reaching any frontier difficult, if not dangerous; and at this time, Memphis held the notorious reputation as a rogue river town, not fit for proper citizens.

In 1830, Memphis' official population sat at a measly 663 – a number probably padded by remaining Chicksaw Indians.[21] Furthermore, up until 1836, the town of Randolph further north and also along the river continuously stole the best of business from the fledgling city. Scholar Gerald Mortimer Capers contributes most of Randolph's prosperity to the various epidemics of cholera (1826 and 1832), dengue (1827) and yellow fever (1828).[22] This bad luck gave Memphis an unhealthy reputation that scared away the steamboats and flatboat men vital to shipping and settling alike.

As news of the miraculous soil spread, and with the gradual emergence of Memphis as a proper town, many of those deed owners – original or not – must have realized that their scrap of paper symbolized a valuable commodity. This theory became reality when the frontier farmers confirmed suspicions that the area grew high quality cotton – at an average of 1050 pounds of cotton per acre.[23] Easy shipping means through the various rivers combined with cotton selling at an average of ten cents per pound in New Orleans, farmers flocked to the newfound fertile ground, and by 1833, the number of farmers grew to seventy-eight.[24]

Here, the importance of actual land value based on location comes into question. With the Wolf River running directly through the plantation, the Ames area is split between highland and lowland regions. Lowland regions are located closer to the west side of the river, and are affected by flooding [Fig. 1]. Evans explains that land situated inside the flood plain and the adjacent upland north-western highland areas were "considered inferior to that south of the river and remained largely unclaimed prior to the initiation of settlement."[25] Due to this lower value and affected production, this area was settled last, and sports characteristically small land parcels. Theoretically, the sale value for lowlands should accordingly be lower, while upland prices should grow farther to the east.

Accordingly, all of the transactions in this decade consist of land in the eastern highlands. Joseph Cotton, Nathanial Ragland and James Kimbrough's separate lands rest parallel to the river, but consists of high-quality upland acreage. However, despite this fact, Joseph Cotton (of presumably no relation to the Robert Cotten addressed below) paid more for the relative same quality land than Ragland and Kimbrough.

Land prices during the 1830s rose marginally to a $4.75 average, but steadily increased up until 1836 as seen below:

Year	Total Sale	Total Av. Sale	Av. Cost Per Acre	Number of Sales
1830	$17,370	$1,930	$5.22	9
1831	$12,377.34	$2,062.89	$3.55	5
1832	$20,957.53	2328.61	$4.97	9
1833	$17,023	$1,215.93	$4.91	14
1834	$15,723.87	1209.53	$4.36	13
1835	$4,408	$881.60	$5.12	5
1836	$31,353.43	$1,959.59	$9.27	15
1837	$2,650	$869.30	$6.92	18
1838	$38,640	$3,220.00	$8.26	12
1839	$12,366	$1,236.60	$5.49	10

Table 2 – Demonstrating parcel sales and acreage cost by year

As the area east of Memphis developed, so did Memphis – albeit slowly. During this decade, Memphis was still more a river town than a proper city, and would not emerge as an evident metropolitan force until after the chaos of the 1837 depression. For the first time since its settlement, Memphis shipped more cotton than its rival Randolph in 1836. Prior to this point, most cotton came only from the surrounding immediate area – Shelby and Fayette county, and possibly Hardeman and southern Tipton – in the back of wagons.[26] Proof of such population stagnation is evident in the slight rise, subsequent drop and general steady pace of land prices through the early part of this decade. However, growth remains evident in cotton sales and production – in 1826, a measly 300 bales of cotton are attributed to Memphis. Nine years later, however, that number climbed to 50,000 - proof enough that avid interest in Memphis land stayed alive.[27]

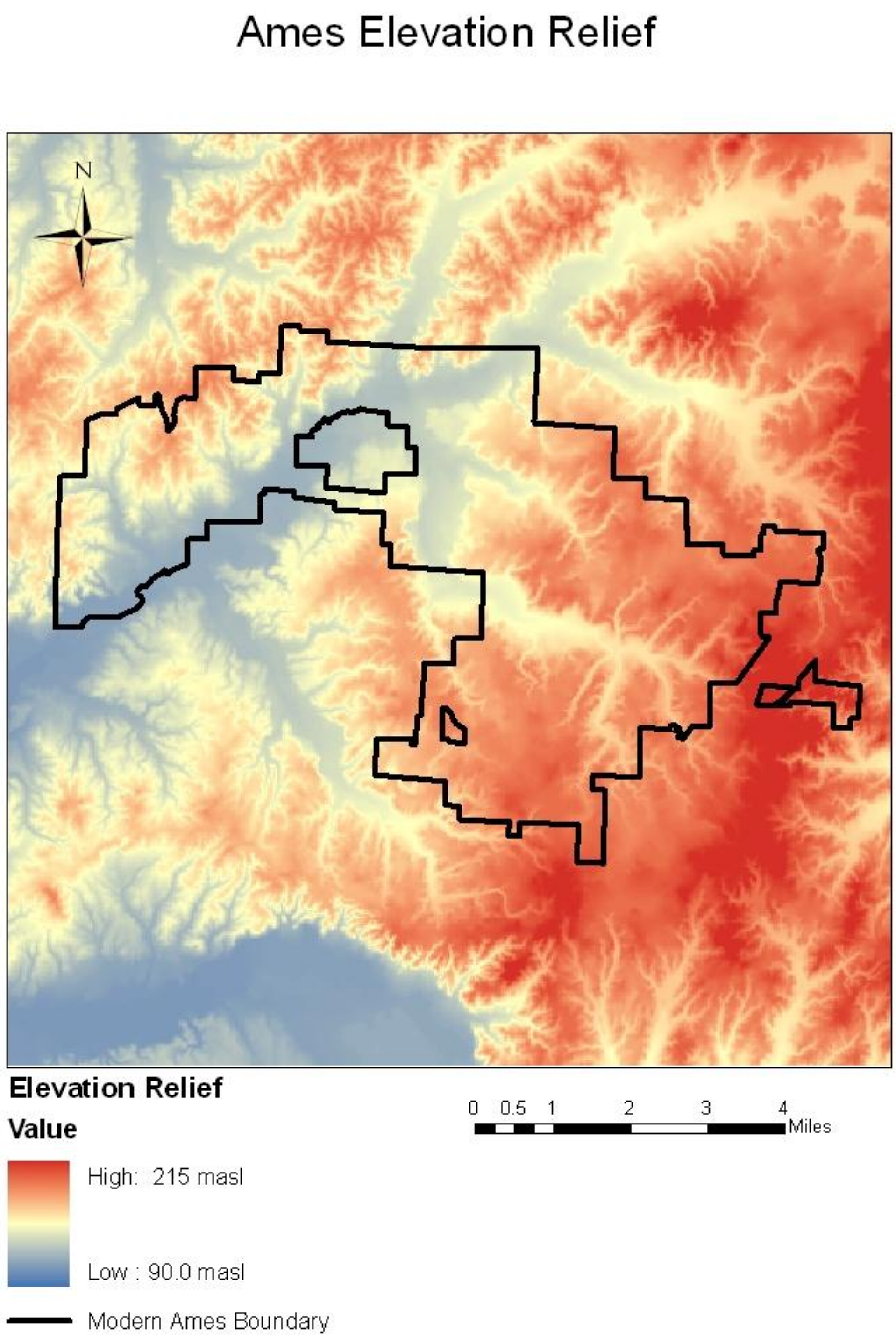

Figure 1 - Map showing the impact of the Wolf River on the Ames Plantation acreage, and subsequent lowland flooding areas. Ames' modern day boundaries are outlined. Map design by Dusty Long and Anna Lunn.

The Depression Era: 1837-1844

This 'flourishing period' would soon be tempered by national economic concerns, however. A mish-mash of unfortunate circumstances quickly led the United States into tumbling economic difficulties coined the Panic of 1837. A key component to the Panic was President Andrew Jackson's distrust of the financial institutions and his corresponding introduction of the Specie Cirrcular and refusal to renew the Second Bank of the United States' charter. However, others find cause in: faulty legal tender laws; fractional reserve banking; simultaneous state government deficit spending, decreased interest rates and expanded credit supply; and individual, erroneous investment decisions by all.[28] In short, a wide range of national and Wall Street economic mistakes cascaded together until they affected banks – national, state and private – nation wide. In turn, the bank failures dramatically impacted daily industrial decisions – especially in the under developed South that depended on industrial buyers to sell their cotton. By 1837, the nation plummeted into its greatest depression yet as the economy ground to a halt.

River counties felt the pinch of the depression as interest in commerce plummeted. Without the driving demand, steamboats and flatboat men had little to no cargo to ship on the waterways. Cotton trade was especially affected by this change of events. Gundersen notes that, "in march of 1837, the price paid for cotton in New Orleans was between 11 to 17 cents per pound, but within two months the price had fallen to 8 to 8.5 centers per pound and some cotton went for 'as low as 5.'"[29] With the market saturated with America's number one cash crop, cotton began sitting on the banks of the wharf and loading docks of New Orleans, then the nation's number one price setter.[30] Prices recovered slightly in 1839 as the economic situation improved somewhat, but fell again to 4 to 6.5 cents in Memphis, and 6 to 8 cents in New Orleans, as Dutch and English banks raised interest rates.[31]

Memphis, despite previously being in a tedious position, would come out of the Panic stronger than when it went in. Growth in Memphis was previously inhibited by rival town Randolph, upriver. Randolph, however, accustomed to living off commerce brought by traders and steamboats, suffered greatly due to the drop in business.[32] Randolph failed to recover when, in 1838, "extremely low water diverted steamboats and the cotton trade to Memphis."[33] In the end, Memphis benefitted greatly, as the 1840s-1860s became booming decades and the town's population surged to 22,623, while it processed over 398,000 bales of cotton.[34] However, before this could occur, several changes would be wrought on the cotton-producing landscape.

Land transactions at Ames show interesting developments during these early depression years as several distinct patterns emerge. Despite the faltering prices of cotton, eighteen land transactions took place in 1837- the largest number since the Memphis' founding. Furthermore, the land prices actually hovered above the previous low averages by two dollars. Half of those transactions sold for above seven dollars an acre, and twelve for above six dollars – conditions that would suggest a continuation of the cotton land boom rather than a saturated market. However, upon studying the details of the actual transactions, it becomes obvious that large amounts of social and class politics are at play in Fayette County. By all appearances, well-established plantation owners took advantage of the financial crisis and cotton freeze to further root themselves within the county.

The surprising rise in 1837 land prices to $6.92 is due not to a stable market, but to risky and wealthy plantation owners artificially stimulating land worth. Without these transactions buoying the market, land prices fell back to $4.50 values averaged from nine transactions.
Of the nine land transactions selling for above $7.00/acre, all of them involve an upper-class planter either as the buyer or seller. Nearly all of said planters first appeared earlier in the 1830s,

though some date back to the 1820s. Furthermore, a notable number seemed interested in buying small sections of land for extravagant prices: Willis Person bought twenty-five acres for $10; Mary G. Wilkes, six measly acres for $12.5; B.F. Whitmore purchased 90 acres for nearly $10; and Joel Baugh paid $7.69 for thirteen acres.[35] And in all but one case (Joel Baugh), the acreage purchased was located immediately adjacent to the buyers current property. In fact, of the eleven transactions that could be accurately geographically placed, seven were adjacent to or close by previous land, two were of relative distance, and two involved new blood owners.[36]

It makes sense that plantation owners would rather amass land close to their previous purchases, rather than deal with the hassle and risk of maintaining slave populations further from the 'home base.' What this demonstrates, however, is not only a willingness to buy land close to home, but that many would pay extravagant amounts for the privilege – and that the amount of land involved had little influence.

There are also several cases of newly arrived and previously established owners using these years specifically as a means of starting fresh. Several would-be plantations owners came into the area at this point in time, took advantage of the financial situation, and established themselves on respectively sized plantations.

Edward Pegram, for instance, made his appearance in 1833 when he bought 112 acres for $1.34 each, as well as a later 50 acres for $5.72. In 1837 he made a profit from his land by selling 25 acres for $10/acres, and 144 for $7.29. It is impossible to tell whether Pegram sold his land due to debts, or whether he willingly decided to make a profit; perhaps Willis Person and James Pugh were willing to pay inflated prices for his parcels in particular, or perhaps Pegram simply desired a change of scenery. Either way, Pegram stayed in the area for the next several years, buying a new 107 acres for ~$6.00 two days after selling his old farm.

Another example is Martha Winfield, who in 1837 bought out E.J. Rawlings final tract of 160 acres for $1600. The following year, she purchased 429 acres for $8580 ($20 per acre) from Lewis Connor.[37] These purchases are unprecedented for a depression era, making one wonder what Winfield's situation was – possibly aided by the purchase of land containing a sawmill in 1839 for $5 – but they allowed her to become a staple in the area until 1853, when most of the land passed to her son, William.[38]

It is obvious that these risky business moves did not always work out, however. Of all the purchasers in this area, at least three would sell the entirety of their land before the depression's end, and several went into large debt. Martha in particular would pay for her extravagant purchases. During the 1840s , Martha opened a trust deed in which she lists ~$1,340 worth of debt to at least three separate persons, as well as owing a large inheritance to her grown son and daughter.[39] Under the conditions of the deed, if Martha failed to pay off her collective debts within an undisclosed amount of time (a year for her children), any or all of her debtors could sell a value-equitable portion of her land through public auction. Martha also signed over ownership of eleven slaves, "five horses and one mule, two yoke of oxen and twelve head of cattle, one waggon [sic], five featherbeds and their furniture, all the farming utensils and household and kitchen furniture…"[40] It would appear that the majority of those owed became impatient with Martha, taking her to court for their settlement. As the property stays within the family unchanged past 1860, it can be assumed that Martha somehow paid her debts.

The nation felt a small recovery from the turmoil in 1838. While the number of land transfers dropped – and would continue to drop until the late 1840s – price value rose to $8.26. This was due, again, to several transactions inflating the acreage value to above $7/acre.[41] However, when the English and Dutch banks raised interest rates in 1839, the land value plummeted to $5.49/acre.[42] Only three of ten transactions sold for above $7/acre; four between $5 and $6.99; and three below $4. This trend continued until 1850, showing only slight signs of recovery in the immediately preceding years. Artificially high purchases between larger plantation owners made up the majority of land transactions until 1842, when on a national scale the depression 'officially' ended. At that point, land sales fell off almost entirely until 1850.

Further evidence for a continuing depression exists in the sudden high spike of trust deeds and title bonds during the later depression years. Of the twenty-eight such land transfers, sixteen occurred between the years of 1838 and 1843 alone.[43] Trust deeds exist when one person, taking the traditional 'seller' position, has accumulated too much debt to one or more persons, and prematurely signs his property over to said person or a third party. If he fails to pay the entirety of his debt within a certain time frame – usually specified in the deed – then he forfeits his ownership of the property. The 'buyer' then has the right to sell all or a portion of the property as a means of procuring the missing debt.

Trust deeds show us three things. First, they demonstrate the number of people who could not pay back even small loans; second, they suggest social ties and relations between plantation owners by signaling who is willing to co-sign for whom; and finally, they also hint at exactly how much time 'buyers' could afford to give the seller to payback the loan. Thus, the impact of the Panic can be measured in more than the number of planters bartering away their debt through material objects. Trust deeds demonstrate the class structure and class divisions evident in the Ames area by highlighting which planters were able to lend money at all during this period. That class structure can further be analyzed by judging the amount of time given to repay the loan.[44] Unfortunately, it is difficult to analyze the effects of trust deeds on the surrounding area without first discussing each one in depth. For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to note that the lower-middle class used trust deeds more often than the upper-middle or gentry classes; that trust deeds were often used as means of settling debts between heirs and collectors; and that the collectors often benefitted from such deeds, as this seems to have been the manner in which a good portion of land was accumulated during this time.[45]

The 1840s averaged a total of five land sales a year, displaying a downward trend of seven in 1840 and 1841 to two in 1848 and four in 1849. They regained a bit of their bluster in the 1850s, averaging eight or nine transactions a year with a peak of fourteen in 1853 before falling off again in the later half of the decade. Land value, however, did retain its previous depression highs of +$7/acre. Half the decade boasted of value prices hovering around $9/acre, a value again being kept artificially high by a few key plantation owners.[46] A partial explanation to this selling pattern may lie in the fact that, as a whole, the more successful planters were the only ones able to afford purchasing any land at this time. However, this remains an unsatisfactory explanation when one considers that, as the major area growers of cotton, the depression should affect these planters more. This fact, in turn, brings into question large plantations allocation of land resources. It also suggests that planters used a variety of methods to continue obtaining key land tracts – such as social conditions and business strategies.

Case Study: Alexander McNeal

One planter who took advantage of the continuing murky land prices was Alexander McNeal, whose business style of taking on partners to buy large land parcels no doubt influenced his quick rise wealth. McNeal appeared right on the edge of the depression, weathered the turmoil well and then made several smart purchases in the latter half of the 1840s. Unfortunately, not much is known about his hometown, business ventures, or previous plantations before his arrival in1836. Furthermore, little is known about his social agendas or connections while in Fayette. According to the 1840 census, he had two small boys and a daughter under the age of five, as well as two other male family members between the ages of twenty to forty and thirty to fifty.[47] It is possible one of these older males was McNeal's father or father-in-law. It is clear from land deeds and census records that, for the two decades of activity in Ames, he was well acquainted with the life of plantation owning, came from a relatively wealthy background, and seemed to associate with upper-level plantation owners.

McNeal paid large money for his first tract in 1836 with a business partner, Hamilton Thornton. Located along the southern portion of the highlands, said 850 acres previously belonged to Lewis Trezevant, who knew their quality and charged the two entrepreneurs $10,000 ($11.76/acre), one of the most expensive purchases in forty years.[48] Sometime in the next few years, McNeal became the sole owner of the tract, leaving the details of the arrangement a mystery. McNeal did not purchase another plantation until 1847. He may have worked on improving the acreage he already owned, as did John W. Jones, another prominent Fayette County planter (see below). It is also possible that the national depression and plummeting cotton prices discouraged McNeal from obtaining further land at this time.

McNeal's second purchase took place after a land auction on November 15, 1847. Amos David won the auction for 200 acres from an unspecified previous owner. McNeal purchased the bid from him by matching David's payment plus an extra $100 dollars (the original count remains unknown.).[49] On December 15, that same year, McNeal appears to have purchased David's entire 512 acre plantation from him with Jesse Stafford, a 'middle class' plantation owner in the area. The two split the $2,000 cost ($3.9/acre) and operated the land as partners until 1853, when McNeal purchased Stafford's half.[50] Despite his slow start, by the 1850 slave census, McNeal owned fifty-eight slaves, most within prime age.[51]

In October of 1851, McNeal purchased 180 acres from J.M. Wright and William Smith – the two husbands of well-to-do Robert Cotten's surviving daughters discussed below - $1,400 ($7.78/acre).[52] This purchase was the second most expensive purchase McNeal made, and the most expensive he made alone. Apparently now well along enough that he did not need business partners to buy land with, McNeal bought Jessee Stafford's half on February 14, 1853, after buying John Stafford's 250-acre plantation a month earlier for only $550 ($2.2/acre). McNeal apparently died in January of 1857, based on the appearance of his will. On March 25, 1857, his widow Martha sold an insignificant amount of land (~11 acres) to Benjamin Moody for $172 dollars ($15.64/acre).[53] She remained active in the area at least until 1860, when the second slave census mentions her as owning sixty-three slaves.[54]

Alexander McNeal demonstrates the importance of using specific business strategies to create a large plantation. By partnering with other landless planters, McNeal managed to split the cost of prime cotton land. This method was not without its own risks, however. Had any of McNeal's partners fallen into bankruptcy themselves, McNeal would have been held accountable for their portion of the debt as well. The use of business strategies in obtaining land acts as a two-edge sword in this manner, as not all planters who engaged in this strategy picked business-savvy and debt- free partners.

Post-Depression: Sedimentation, the Planter Ideal and Wills in 1845-1859

On a whole, land sales would never again regain their pre-depression numbers, though controversially they might have regained their value. This may be due to either the depression, or to the sedimentation of the area as a whole. After all, 1840 to 1850 were considered boom eras for the Memphis metropolis; stabilization of the area as a proper town may account for the lack of transactions as available land grew more sparse. The Panic of 1837 acted as a catalyst point for large plantation owners by giving them the perfect opportunity to amass large amounts of land otherwise not available to them. After this point, these same plantation owners did not desire to sell their land, thus allowing sedimentation to occur within the area.

What motivated these large plantation owners to initiate this land-grabbing practice cannot rest fully on logical, sound business sense – as previously mentioned, these larger landowners had even more cotton stacked along the dock banks than their smaller counterparts. However, it is possible that these larger land owners had the money on hand – or, at the very least, the presumed equity of their land and slaveholdings – to stave off concerns of debt and bankruptcy. It may simply be that some planters saw an advantage of accumulating physical equity during the depression as a means of surviving it; with the excess land, they then had the means by which to subsidize their falling cotton prices. The issue thus becomes one of class differences and privileges. Simply put, smaller plantation owners could not afford such risky ventures for the exact same reasons they often could not climb out of their poverty, subsistence-living lifestyle. They lacked the economic stability necessary to do so.

However, another explanation may lie in the socio-economic differences between the two classes. Smaller plantation owners possibly found themselves frantically buying land in order to obtain further social mobility. In the South, the more land and property one owned, the richer one appeared. The richer one seemed the more one also amassed social admiration and increased social relations and credibility. And these were abstract ideas tied up in the even more abstract ideal of the plantation life, paternalism, and what it meant to be a large plantation owner.

Due to the lack of qualitative data, it is difficult to say to what degree the paternalism ideal drove Ames plantation owners to amass land. However, these land transfers were not drawn simply through logical means – emotional responses and desires drove a specific portion.

It cannot be a coincidence that it is during this time period that Ames shifts from subsistence farming to large cotton plantations owned by an elite, small number. When one looks in detail at those farmers who thrived during the depression, certain paternalistic traits and class-driven ideals appear in the most successful case studies. Mannerisms inherent in the purchasing of land vary according to this class status. Often these success cases find themselves in such promising positions due to an upbringing in the upper class, and benefitting from a significant inheritance, such as wills.

Wills make up a small, though still significant, portion of the Ames land deeds. As transfers often occurred from fathers to sons-in-law, it can be difficult to separate regular, undocumented land transfers from wills without the actual will in hand. As such, at least ten transfers can accurately be named as wills or inter-family gifts, split evenly between pre-depression and post-depression categories.

Wills impact the shaping of the area in two distinctive, opposite manners. First, they often give a young planter the means by which to rise to wealth easily, provided that he is the sole or one of the sole inheritors. If he is not, however, the deed can have the opposite effect by splitting a significant amount of land into several smaller portions, many of which end up being sold to different parties over a range of years for a myriad of reasons. For instance, a son or daughter may have married and/or moved elsewhere – sometimes a significant distance – seeking their own fortune. These heirs thus become absentee planters, and often end up selling the land instead of moving back home or managing two separate plantations.

Case Study: The Jones Family

An example of the first manner lies with John W. Jones, whose success story actually begins with his father-in-law, Micajah Moorman. Following the pattern of searching for fresh, healthy soil, in the early 1800's Moorman moved from his estate in Campbell County, Virginia, to Alabama.[55] There he established a profitable farmstead, but he and his family remained dissatisfied with his location and soon sought to move again. Coincidentally, the Western District had just opened for settlement, complete with those salivating tales of fertile soil growing premium cotton. Moorman, in 1824, purchased 1971.5 prime acres for $5,000 ($2.54/acre.) from prominent land speculator Samuel Polk.[56] It was one of the first purchases in the Ames area.

Around the same time as Moorman's Alabama relocation, John W. and Wiley B. Jones' father, Arthur Jones, sold his own plantation in Buckingham County, Virginia, and moved to North Alabama.[57] Presumably this is where John Jones met Micajah Moorman's daughter, Martha, and married her prior to the 1824 land purchase.[58] Micajah died before the move to Fayette could be completed, leaving Jones as the de facto head of household. Records indicate that Jones moved to the new plantation in 1826 – along with his wife, one-year old son Collattinus Jones, and his extended family, including several of his wife's younger siblings and her mother, Ester.[59] Also accompanying them was another of Micajah's son-in-laws, Elisha W. Harris, who married Martha's elder sister Ann. Thanks to their association with the Moorman family, John, his brother Wiley and Elisha would quickly grow into the areas richest and most prominent planters.

Records indicate that Moorman's estate was not officially distributed until 1831. By that time, both Jones and Harris had laid claim to 740 and 511 acres, respectively – 1,251 acres not included in said distribution.[60] The remaining recorded 720 acres was split among Esther Moorman and her several younger children. One has to wonder at the family dynamics that led Jones and Harris to leave their mother-in-law – and their wife's younger siblings – with only a fourth of her husband's original stake. Perhaps the widow planned to remarry, and they feared for their inheritance, or perhaps they considered the parcels as their wives' fair share. Either way, court records indicate that Widow Moorman refused to part from the land without a fight. Unfortunately, she legally lost both parcels to her sons-in-law in 1832 and 1833 – a court move that quite possibly demonstrates the dichotomy of male privilege and the perceived socially appropriate role of women in the rural south at this time.[61] In the end, Jones obtained the entirety of the Moorman tract, sans Harris' stake, bringing his total acreage to 1,480. Records do not indicate how he gained the additional 720 acres, thus leaving the fate of Ester Moorman and the younger Moorman siblings unknown.[62]

Jones spent the next few years growing his wealth and tending to his family. It is unclear whether Jones brought the family slaves from Alabama to Tennessee; tax records in 1826 mark him as 'delinquent,' with no goods or chattel.[63] If this is true, part of these early years would no doubt be spent collecting new help along with establishing his 1,460 acre plantation. Young Collattinus had died in January of 1827, though it's unclear what role their new abode played in his demise. Later that same year, however, Caleb Baker Jones would be born – the first of only half of Jones' children to survive childhood.[64] In an 1830 census, he is noted as the head of household, with two young children; Ann Eliza joined the family that same year. In 1836, and following the births of two more children – Arthur Jones in 1833, and Martha Walker in 1836 – Jones' land was valued at $11,120, and he owned twenty-five slaves valued at $16,250.[65] By the start of the depression, Jones was one of the richest plantation owners in Fayette County, and in a very select percentile to own more than ten slaves for such a length of time.

This situation set Jones up well to weather the depression, and to further cement himself as a major social icon in southeast Fayette County. The next ten years would be spent establishing his plantation in society's upper echelon – a feat accomplished primarily through lavish land purchases, savvy loans and taking advantage of unfortunate circumstances. At the same time, he would also appear as a generous gentleman, willing to take on his share of community chores and helping those in less fortunate circumstances than his own. They would also be wrought with personal sorrow, as four more of his children would die before the age of ten – young Arthur in 1838, Martha Walker in 1845, and Micajah Clark would live for only a few hours, the weaker of twins born in 1844. His brother, James K. Polk Jones, would die three years later.[66]

Jones' land purchases follow the upper plantation pattern of purchasing land close to home regardless of the price. Only once does he seem to break this rule when, in 1840, he obtained roughly 70 acres from a P.T. Scruggs through a lawsuit. Scruggs had previously entered into a trust deed with James Hunter and Lawrence McGinnis in which they, "among other conveyences convey … a certain tract or parcel of land known as the Mount Comfort Store…" It appears that Hunter and McGinnis were in debt to Jones for $2,912.83.[67] Scruggs intervened on their behalf, giving Jones the land in exchange for forgiving the bad loan. Jones would later sell this land to his brother, Wiley, for $2,500 ($36 per acre) – a fitting act, as Wiley's land intersects John's property from the store tract.[68] It is not clear from the deed whether the general store closed upon passing into Jones' hands.

Jones' next purchase occurred in 1841, when he bought two separate parcels containing 360 acres for $3960 ($11/acre) from a William C. Harris – presumably of no relation to his brother-in-law Elijah Harris. [69] Presumably, this Harris was not interested in actively farming the parcel at this time.[70] The land in question was located in the middle of Jones' other holdings; purchasing the property allowed Jones to connect his three major parcels without interruption.[71]

In the same year, Jones was appointed in court as commissioner to examine bridges, and he was named as executive administrator in the estate of Thomas J. Vaughn (ironically, he seems to have acquired this land for himself, adding another 240 acres to his growing empire.)[72] Jones would later use his own field hands to help construct an area bridge in 1842.[73] That same year he also bought out the majority of a rival plantation owned by Beverly Holcomb.

Mr. Beverly Holcomb's family left their established plantation in Amelia County, Virginia, due to financial difficulties in early 1828.[74] Upon reaching La Grange, the family set up a new plantation within the town and made a living producing wheat and cotton.[75] Within their first year there, Beverly met his future wife, Eugenia Hunt, the daughter of another well established planter in Fayette County.[76] Holcomb appears to have purchased his own 735 to 900 acres in 1834 from Samuel Dickens, an old land prospector, for $5,888.66 ($8.01/acre), suggesting that up until then he had worked either as a tenant farmer or on his father's separate plantation.

Holcomb's luck changed for the worse when he entered into an unsavory partnership prior to 1839 that involved using his plantation's equity as insurance. His partner defaulted on the loan, leaving Holcomb responsible for over $27,068.10 of debt towards Bankers and Merchants of Memphis.[77] Holcomb also owed the bank an excess $5,530.00 made "jointly and severally with George H. Wyatt and John W. Jones…"[78] Holcomb failed to pay the entirety of his bank debts in time, requiring the holders of his trust deed to sell his entire plantation. Jones stepped in and procured Holcomb's 900 acres for a total $10,595.82 ($11.74 per acre). This deed gave Jones a huge advantage in owning a majority of prime agricultural land in Fayette County.

In 1845, Jones obtained a further 69 acres from Pinkney Reed for an undisclosed amount – though it may be assumed that Reed was in debt to Jones, possibly through his half of the previous Mt. Comfort trust deed catastrophe. By this point, Jones had obviously come through the depression not only unscathed, but as a far richer man – despite spending an average $13 dollars an acre for the privilege. His landholdings doubled as a result of his efforts, and by 1845 Jones clearly thought that the landowner of a wealthy plantation deserved a proper antebellum mansion. Construction of his manor house finished in 1847. The house – known today as the Ames Manor House – was two stories and featured an L-shape configuration, a cistern and two removed brick kitchens. The lavish style of the house stands in stark contrast to the often dirt floored, log constructed two-room dogtrots that nearly all plantation owners lived in. Jones' house clearly stood as an embodiment of the Gentry class, separating him from his fellow neighborhood planters in every means possible. Ironically, however, the cistern accompanying the house probably contributed to the illnesses that claimed his three youngest children.

According to the Agricultural Census of 1850, Jones was possibly one of the wealthiest plantation owners in Tennessee. He owned 2,200 improved acres, and an additional 1,820 unimproved. The value of his plantation had risen to $30,000, and produced 874, 400 lbs. cotton bales. At this point, he owned a total 244 slaves, placing him in the top 2% or less of plantation owners.[79] His son Caleb – no doubt still being subsidized by his father at twenty-three years of age – owned 33 slaves. This relationship helps demonstrate Jones' peculiar economic standing; Jones could afford to give Caleb an extensive plantation of his own and place him within the top 30% of slave owners without detracting from his own wealth or plantation in any way.[80]

Jones would buy at least three more parcels in 1850: one consisting of 720 acres from an unknown planter; 777 acres from Benbury Walton, an adjoining plantation owner currently not cultivating his property, for $5,827 ($7.49/acre); and a third from Charles and Edwin Harris, absentee land owners who became heirs of the recently deceased Robert Harris' property.[81] This

Harris tract consisted of 600 acres, bought for $6,000. In 1855, Jones made what seems to be his final purchase for this decade from Alexander Goode (and his wife, Minerva) and John Blackwell, who acted as their trustee in marriage.[82] This transaction appears to be for the lowest amount Jones ever paid for land – 232.5 acres for $1,464.75 ($6.3acre). It also brought his landholdings to a total minimum of 3,852 acres by 1860 – not counting an additional 1,377 acres "purchased and given to family members," including a 777 acre tract gifted to his eldest son, Caleb.[83] By the time the 1860 census occurred, Jones' assets were in excess of $600,000.[84] He, his eldest son and his brother would own a significant portion of South Eastern Fayette County by the start of the Civil War.

The story of John Jones illustrates the role that economic and social class may have played in setting land values. There is no question that accumulation of land and slaves equaled power in the South, politically, socially and economically. The more value a planter's property held, the more his fellow planters revered and admired him. Jones' average payment per acre equaled $13.06 – exactly twice the $6.55 rate set in 1840 and 1850.[85] Despite the increased amount Jones paid, however, the growing potential of his land compared to his neighbors remained the same. Much like how his lavish manor house served as a visible, material status symbol, the amount paid for the property in question may also have acted in this portrayal of class structure – especially when coupled with his public status as a Gentry planter and political figure.

Less is known about Wiley Baker Jones, John Jones' younger brother. He amassed a landholding nearly equal to John's Cedar Grove Plantation – without the aid of a father-in-law's purchase, but most likely with financial help from his brother. Whereas John moved to Tennessee in 1826, Wylie stayed in Alabama until 1835.[86] He married Mary Ohio Bass in the summer of 1832, and their first child, Arthur Baker Jones, was born a year later.[87] Their second child, Sarah Elizabeth Jones, would be born in Fayette in 1836, six months after Wiley purchased his first land tract. Originally belonging to the Morgan brothers Hiram and John – a name in the area since 1828 – Wiley bought the relatively small, 228 acre plot for $1,824 ($8/acre).[88] The plot in question was immediately north of John Jones' much larger holding, a factor that probably contributed to his purchasing decision.

Unlike many newly-arrived plantation owners who must wait quite a few years to establish their plantation, Wylie made his next purchase only two years later. Henry Jackson sold his entire 1,086 acre plantation to both Wiley B. Jones and Elisha Harris – John W. Jones' fellow brother- in- law.[89] Jones and Harris presumably split the cost of the $6,300 venture ($5.80/acre.), though it remains uncertain how the land was allocated between them. It is worth noting at this point that the land sales Wiley pursued are consistently marginally less than those of his brother. For instance, the largest amount John paid for an acre was $12 (not counting P.T. Scruggs title bond), while the smallest was $6.3. In contrast, Wiley's largest amount was $8.36; his smallest, $1.52. It is uncertain whether Wiley cared less for impressions, if he was less interested in what particular land he bought, or if he simply could not afford to appear overly generous like his brother.

Coinciding with the birth of his third child, Martha Hibernia Jones, Wiley purchased an additional 168 acres only a year later for $1,092 ($6.5). This land consisted of 168 acres from Alexander and James Reed, and was directly adjacent to Wiley's previous solo tract.[90] This total 396 legally solo-owned land was not enough for him, however; he bought another tract in 1841 from William A. Mask. Wiley shows savvy business sense in this land deal as he obviously takes advantage of Mask's financial difficulties; Mask sells his entire 1,970-acre prime land plantation in the middle of the depression for a petty sum of $3,000 ($1.52/acre).[91] The land was, again, located right next to Wiley's previous purchases.

Despite his seemingly cold business exterior, Wiley was still a citizen in a democratic county; he pulled jury duty on the first of November, 1841.[92] Eleven days earlier, Wiley co-signed a trust deed with his brother for William S. Paine, a fellow planter, for his slaves. Wiley now owned at least 2,366 acres, enough to rival his brother's plantation. However, if Wiley ever built his own manor house to celebrate his success, its only remains are the family graveyard. Two of children died before the age of seven during this period as well, and he would lose a third before 1860.[93] Throughout his personal trials, however, he never seemed to lose sight of his business aspirations. Wiley would continue to purchase three more separate land tracts between 1845 and 1852, bringing his total acreage to 3,798 by 1860.[94]

In all, Wiley's pre-Civil War plantation was nearly the size of his elder brother's, but the 1850 slave census shows only 63 slaves under his name.[95] While this still puts him in the top 25% percentile of rich planters, it seems like a comparatively low number, especially when contrasted to John's 244 slaves. This suggests that Wiley was more concerned about amassing land value than slave value. It is also possible that John lent his younger brother the use of his own slaves, suggesting an interesting family-business dynamic between the two brothers and John's eldest son.[96]

In comparing John Jones and Wiley Jones' purchasing habits, two parallel patterns appear. First, the elder Jones habitually paid more for acreage than Wiley. Second, John Jones also appears to be a much larger political and social figure than his younger brother, whom John may have financially supported for some time. Like McNeal, Wiley paid less per acre for his prime acreage – and, like McNeal, he also played a smaller roll in area politics. This relation between the two brothers and their purchasing habits further supports a relation between planter class and amount paid per acre.

Case Study: The Cotten Family

The unfortunate story of the Cotten family in Ames provides an example of the second impact wills have on geography. Robert Cotten, like Jones and Moorman, moved into Ames in the early 1820s and also came from the aristocratic planter tradition. He originated from Halifax County, North Carolina, where his father Jobe Cotten had inherited the family plantation as the eldest child. Robert Cotten himself would come to own property in the same area, but in 1823 he sold his land and moved his family – then consisting of a wife and three small children – to LaGrange, Tennessee and the Ames Plantation region.[97] Once there, Cotten quickly became active in local politics and concerned with improving the town's infrastructure.[98] Clearly, Cotten carried with him a certain ideal of a planter class from the old South to the new.

Cotten bought his first land tract in April of 1826 from Dimpsy Bryan and Louis D. Wilson, located roughly four miles from La Grange.[99] The 640 acre parcel, located in prime highland territory, sold for a trifling $1,920 ($3/acre). Two years later, Cotten purchased an additional 180 acres from John Jarman, Jr, for $1,598 ($8.88/acre). Interestingly, this second tract is not located directly adjacent to Cotten's Willow Glen plantation, but rather is a significant distance away with at least three other plantations in between. Evans also notes that, "although no verifying deed has been found, up to 640 additional acres were purchased… bringing Willow Glen's acreage to 1460 acres."[100] Thus, within a few short years, Cotten had firmly planted himself within La Grange, both as a prominent planter and as a visible community leader.

A most peculiar event occurs in 1832, however, when Cotten runs an advertisement in the June 8th edition of the *Nashville Republican and State Gazette*. In the ad, Cotten clearly describes three separate tracts of land that roughly accounts for all of his acreage, and his desire to sell them. He also describes a "good Dwelling House, three rooms below and the same above, 20 feet square, which will be completed by the fall."[101] The state and size of this house clearly demonstrates the wealth of the Cotten family, and speaks highly of Cotten's financial state only eight years after moving into La Grange, and six after buying his property. Cotten goes on to describe other improvements to his land, such as "cabins for thirty Negroes… a gin house, horse mill, corn houses, stables and work houses… forty acres enclosed for pasture…with fine springs of water on various parts of the plantation."

No indication is made as to why Cotten desired to sell his plantation, except that, "any or all will be sold low for cash or negroes from the age of twelve to twenty years old… My only object is to exchange land for Negroes."[102] This last line is an intriguing phenomenon that will probably never be solved. Perhaps, with the rising price of slaves during this time period, Cotten sought to create a new source of equity or income. Whatever the cause, there is no indication if Cotten ever received any serious enquiries, as he legally retained ownership of his entire acreage, and as his family remained in the area for several years.

Disaster stuck Willow Glen when Robert Cotten died in November, 1836.[103] The tax census for 1836 indicates that, at the time of his death, Cotten owned forty-one working age slaves valued at $27,800.[104] According to his will, Willow Glen would legally remain in control of his widow, Mary Norfleet, and eldest son Leonidas until his minor children came of age.[105] With Robert Cotten gone, however, his plantation empire slowly began to crumble. The family suffered two more deaths before the end of 1840, and Leonidas himself would die in 1847.[106]

Evans notes that, in 1850, the lack of the Cotten name in the Fayette County Agricultural Census suggests that the entire farm was lying fallow.[107] At this time, Cotten's widow Mary Norfleet lived with her daughter Sally and son-in-law William Smith in Haywood County, while Edwin, Norfleet, daughter Mary and her husband, John Wright were living together in La Grange.[108]

Willow Glen was finally sectioned off in 1849 through court decree. Daughters Mary and Sally obtained 415 acres of the Cotten tract, while the original 640 acres remaining in the control of Widow Mary and her sons Edwin and Norfleet. It is interesting to note that, prior to Leonidas' death, he and his mother had become indebted to John Jones for $4,353 and had yet to pay said debt prior to 1850. At that point, Mary Norfleet signed a trust deed with Jones, in which she agreed to sell him her one-third portion of Willow Glen if she failed to pay off the loan within the next ten years.[109] As Jones failed to obtain this land, it can be assumed that Mary Norfleet met her deadline. The occasion, however, serves as an intriguing window into the world of inter-plantation relationships. Furthermore, it is not clear whether any of the families started cultivating the farm at any point. Edwin Hamilton Cotten became the operator of Willow Glen in 1855 when Mary and her son Norfleet each sold their portions to him for $1,706. Only five years later, Edwin would sell all 640 acres to a John Davis in lieu of becoming an absentee planter, as he and his wife had recently moved to Monroe County Arkansas.[110]

The Cotten family dilemma illustrates several effects that a head of household death may cause. For instance, the results of dismantling willed property become inherently obvious. Robert Cotten willed each of his surviving children and his wife equal portions of his large estate. However, while they remained successful when operating the land together, none of the farms survived after the death of Leonidas when the land was finally divided into separate parcels. This leads to the changes of ineffective family leadership on both the family status and the geography. While Robert Cotten held respect and prestige as a large plantation owner, these attributes failed to transfer to his children. Little is known about the spouse's of Sally and Mary except that they appeared to be landless farmers living in town who failed to exploit the prospective wealth of their inherited land. His son Leonidas died very early in life – only in his thirties – and Edwin joined the ranks of planters migrating west for better land. As a result, the Cotten plantation found itself ripped apart by inner family feuding, then later being sold off to fellow planters as Cotten's heirs lacked the skills to properly run a plantation. As other planters assimilated Cotten's old parcels, the landscape changed to reflect the new ownership.

Concluding Remarks

Land value and sale patterns in Southeast Fayette County were affected by far more than just growing potential. In fact, while growing potential remained a prominent theme, it often appeared like a secondary concern to plantation owners. Instead, planters – especially prominent planters – had a voracious appetite for any value land adjacent or close to their original parcels. These planters set prices not according to growing potential so much as for the convenience of a close location – a convenience most were more than willing to purchase.

It is also possible that land value was controlled by a social institution that involved the planter ideal. Larger plantation owners who employed the Gentry-class characteristics in their daily lives seemed to pay far more for their land purchases than their less fortunate neighbors. This price control may have been initiated on the Gentry class' part, as a means of displaying their wealth through material objects. It also may have been instigated by smaller land owners who knew they could charge the Gentry class more for their land.

While the buyer's economic and social class did impact the amount he paid for land, many less fortunate plantation owners employed various business strategies to afford significant sized parcels. Such strategies include those employed by Alexander McNeal, who entered into partnerships and split the cost of large land tracts. Others include the tendency to create long-term contracts that allowed a planter to pay off the price over a decade or more. However, all strategies contain high value risks as well as rewards. Beverly Holcomb, for instance, failed to choose his business partners wisely and was forced to sell everything to his largest rival. Martha Winfield decided to spend ten years paying off her land purchase, but almost lost everything when she failed to meet her due dates.

Likewise, family relations and friendships often impacted land transactions as well. Planters tended to sell land to friends for under market value, for a myriad of different reasons. And family relations greatly impacted the spacial arrangement of boundary lines and ownership patterns. For instance, wills broke up large parcels into even portions belong to surviving heirs. Those heirs, however, had frequently already moved away from the area, and thus became absentee land owners. In turn, these absentee planters often wished to sell their inheritance quickly to whomever wanted the land. This allowed other planters to snatch up parcels as they desired. Even when still present, the smaller acreage impacted an heir’s ability to continuously succeed in that area. Without the means of purchasing more land, most heirs seemed to sell out or became absentee planters.

Finally, national occurrences could directly impact the daily lives of those living in relatively remote areas. For instance, the Panic of 1837 drastically changed land transaction patterns, though not in a logical manner. A select number of planters reacted to the depression by amassing as much land as possible during the seven year span. Land prices selectively sank with the falling cotton prices among middle class and yeoman farmers, but continued to rise among more prominent planters. Many planters took advantage of the Panic of 1837 to enter the upper-middle class while a significant few used it to advance to the Gentry class.

The Gentry planter status so desired would only last until the eve of the Civil War. John Jones would lose one son, John Walker Jones, at the Battle of Murfreesboro.[111] His eldest, Caleb, would fight as well and survive, returning home to turn his plantation into sharecropping – as nearly all the plantations in the area did. John Jones would die in 1879, leaving his estate to children who could no longer afford to live there; his descendants would eventually sell what remained of the plantation, including their two story white manor house, to Hobart Ames. Wiley would sell his in 1869, moving to and living in La Grange with his wife until his death in 1893.[112] La Grange itself would never recover its antebellum period glory in any capacity. Its planters diverted their lands to sharecropping, and one by one were slowly dismantled for other uses. La Grange thrived on the prominence of cotton as a cash crop, but with its best growing institutions gone, the town quickly sank into an oblivious existence from which it has yet to leave.

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[1] Gerald Mortimer Capers. *Biography of a River Tow; Memphis: Its Heroic Age,* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1939), 23
[2] Gerald Mortimer Capers. *Biography of a River Tow; Memphis: Its Heroic Age,* 44
[3] Ibid., 48
[4] "Western District Land for sale." *Nashville Republic and State Gazette.* Friday, 8 June 1832. Provided courtesy of Jamie Evans.
[5] Gary T. Edwards, "Venerate the Plow: Agricultural Life in Antebellum Fayette County, Tennessee," *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers,* Vol. LI, (Memphis: The West Tennessee Historical Society, 1997), 88
[6] Gary T. Edwards, "Venerate the Plow: Agricultural Life in Antebellum Fayette County, Tennessee," 88
[7] Lawrence G. Gundersen, Jr. "West Tennessee and the Cotton Frontier, 1818 – 1840," *The West Tennessee Historical Society Paper,* Vol. LII, (Memphis: The West Tennessee Historical Society, 1998), 36
[8] Lawrence G. Gundersen, Jr. "West Tennessee and the Cotton Frontier, 1818 – 1840," 35
[9] Ibid., 27-30
[10] Gary T. Edwards, "Venerate the Plow: Agricultural Life in Antebellum Fayette County, Tennessee," 89
[11] Ibid., 91
[12] Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," (M.S. thesis, University of Memphis 2000), Chapter 6
[13] Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," iv

[14]Admittedly, focusing on the Ames Plantation alone limits the applicability of this study. Land transaction numbers often occurred in too small a number to accurately portray an average land value for the greater Fayette County area, much less Western Tennessee. For instance, some years record only a single deed, and many less than five, making it difficult to gauge an accurate representation of actual land value. In short, this study's results may change radically using a much larger data pool. Future work might consider creating a much larger database covering the entire Fayette County. Using such a database as a means of comparison would allow historians to pinpoint relations specific to the Ames Plantation, or to other landmass groups.
Land deeds traditionally record a standard amount of information – the two parties involved in the transaction, the date, the amount of land involved and its total price, and a description of the land's geographic placement. This makes them ideal for studying the effects of land on inter-plantation relations.
[15] Fourteen deeds were discarded due to relevant data not being recorded within the original deed, or due to external damage to the original document or to the microfilm that made accurate readings of necessary data illegible.
[16] A notable amount of cross-over exists between these subcategories. Non-land transactions, for instance, often appeared within deeds of trust as a means of paying off excess debt. Such transactions also appear among wills and deeds of gift as well as parts of the standard transactions. However, non-land transactions were also recorded as separate entities, in which no land exchange took place. Likewise, wills often settled debts through de facto deeds of trust, frequently naming a trustee or executive to handle the actual transaction before divvying the remaining property to his surviving heirs. This cross-over serves to prove the intricate relations and external forces driving some of these transactions.
[17] See Tabled Data
[18] Lawrence G. Gundersen, Jr. "West Tennessee and the Cotton Frontier, 1818 – 1840," 31
[19] "Map of Ames Plantation, 1823" made by Jamie P. Evans
[20] Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee,"44
[21] Gerald Mortimer Capers. *Biography of a River Tow; Memphis: Its Heroic Age,* 48
[22] Ibid., 57
[23] Lawrence G. Gundersen, Jr. "West Tennessee and the Cotton Frontier, 1818 – 1840,"31
[24] "Map of Ames Plantation, 1833" made by Jamie P. Evans
[25] Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," 94
[26] Rivertown 57
[27] Mortimer Capers. *Biography of a River Tow; Memphis: Its Heroic Age,* Chapter 3
[28]Murray N. Rothbard, *History of Money and Banking,(*Auburn, Ludwig von Mises Instittute, 2002), 102
[29] Lawrence G. Gundersen, Jr. "West Tennessee and the Cotton Frontier, 1818 – 1840,"30
[30] Ibid., 30
[31] Figures taken from Lawrence G. Gundersen, Jr. "West Tennessee and the Cotton Frontier, 1818 – 1840"
[32] Mortimer Capers. *Biography of a River Tow; Memphis: Its Heroic Age,* 56
[33] Ibid., 58
[34] Ibid., 77
[35] See Tabled Data
[36] "Map of Ames Plantation, 1837-1842" by Jamie Evans
[37] In this deal, Connor agreed to give Martha Winfield four years (until 1842) to complete the payment. See Fayette County, TN Deed Book J, p 524
[38] "Map of Ames Plantation, 1853" by Jamie Evans
[39] Debts owed to her son amount to ~$1,792; debts to her daught, ~$1,737; to the Union Bank for $1,000; amd a John G. MaMahon for ~$250. See Fayette County, TN Deed Book J, p. 524, microfilm #40
[40] Fayette County, TN Deed Book J, p. 524, microfilm #40
[41] See Tabled Data
[42] See Tabled Data
[43] See Tabled Data
[44] Differences will of course occur between each separate case, based on the character of both buyer and seller, and previous, undocumented exchanges between the two. However, it can be assumed that one would not lend, not ask for, money from someone they despised or had previous altercations with.

[45] For instance, several smaller but still significant plantations gained large amounts of acreage through such deeds. Some examples include the Ingram, Baugh (Baw, Bau) and the Hunt family, as well as planters Benjamin Moody, Elisha Harris, the Pulliam estate, Benburg Walton and still others.
[46] See Tabled Data
[47] Sistler, Byron and Barbara Sistler. 1840 Census – Tennessee, (Nashville: Byron Sistler & Assoc., 1986)
[48] "Lewis C. Trezevant to A. McNeal and H. Thornton," land deed provided by Jamie Evans
[49] "Amos David to A. McNeal," land deed provided by Jamie Evans
[50] Fayette County, TN, Deed Book R, p. 118, microfilm #44
[51] "U.S. Census Manuscripts, Slave Population 1850," Seventh Census, Vol. 2, Fayette and Hardeman Co. TN
[52] Fayette County TN Deed Book U, pg. 303
[53] Benjamin Moody was another wealthy plantation owner who etched out a living on the highlands on the western side of the Wolf River. The two plantations were not located too far apart from each other.
[54] "U.S. Census Manuscripts, Slave Population 1860," Fayette and Hardeman Co. TN
[55] Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," 96
[56] "Map of Ames Plantation, 1824-1830," by Jamie Evans
[57] Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," 97
[58] Ibid., 97
[59] Micajah and Esther had at least seven children together. Ann and Martha were the eldest. Other children include (Reverend) Robert Austin Alexander, born in 1808; Judith Clark, born 1810; and three other children born between 1815 and 1818. Genealogy records compiled by Jamie Evans.
Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," 97
[60] Ibid., 97
[61] Ibid., 99
[62] It could simply be that, as the de facto head of household, Jones controlled the property in question while "allowing" its proper owners to retain it. Some of Moorman children were very young at this time; either Jones, Harris or their mother had to control the property in their name.
[63] Fayette County Court Case, January 1827. Provided by Jamie Evans
[64] Genealogy records compiled by Jamie Evans
[65]Fayette County, TN, Tax List 1836, Provided by Jamie Evans
[66] Genealogy records compiled by Jamie Evans
[67] Fayette County, TN, Deed Book I, p 529
[68] Fayette County, TN, Deed Book F, p. 407
[69] Fayette County, TN, Deed Book I, p. 650, microfilm #40
[70] Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," 100
[71] "Map of Ames Plantation, 1841" by Jamie Evans
[72] Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee,"; Fayette County Court Case, 1841 Provided by Jamie Evans
[73] Fayette County Court Case, 1841 Provided by Jamie Evans
[74] Lucy Coolidge, "Always One of Us: Lucy Petway Holcomb Pickens," 2008 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies, 2
[75]Lucy Coolidge, "Always One of Us: Lucy Petway Holcomb Pickens," 3
[76] Ibid., 3
[77] "Beverly Holcomb to Seth Wheatly," Fayette County, TN Court House Book I, p. 100; "Beverly Holcomb to C.W. Hunt," Fayette County TN Court House Deed Book P, p 412; "Beverly Holcomb to John W. Jones," Hardeman County, TN, Deed Book K, p 251
[78] "Beverly Holcomb to John W. Jones," Hardeman County, TN, Deed Book K, p 251
[79] James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982)
[80] James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders*
[81] Data concerning unknown land acquisition from Jamie Evans. "Benbury Walton to John W. Jones" Fayette County, TN Deed Book Y, P 484; "C. W. Harris and E. R. Harris to John W. Jones," Fayette County, TN, Court House Deed Book

[82] Alexander Goode seems to have acquired a large amount of debt prior to his marriage to Minerva. Minerva seemed interested in ensuring that her property could not be used as equity for his debt, and thus created a trust deed to ensure its safety. See Fayette County, TN Land Deed Book U, p. 183
[83] Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," 103
[84] Included in this estimate are the accumulated values of his livestock, slaughtered and still living; his
[85] SEE TABLE
[86] Genealogy information provided by Jamie Evans
[87] "'Wilie' B. Jones Family Bible," Memphis, TN Nov. 10 1846, Provided by Jamie Evans
[88] Fayette County, TN Deed Book M, p. 63
[89] "Henry Jackson to W.B. Jones and E.W. Harris, 11 December 1838"
[90]Fayette County, TN Deed Book I, p. 67
[91] Fayette County, TN Deed Book J, p. 122
[92] Fayette County Court Records, 1 Nov 1841
[93] Thomas Bass Jones, born 1843, died 1846; Lucy Fletcher, born 1840, died 1847; and Thomas Emet, born 1849, died 1859. Genealogy compiled by Jamie Evans.
[94] "B.D. and E.J. Finney to W.B. Jones, 21 June 1852" Fayette County, TN Deed Book R, p 212
[95] "U.S. Census Manuscripts, Slave Population 1850," Seventh Census, Vol. 2, Fayette and Hardeman Co. TN
[96] It is also possible that Wiley preferred to use the majority of his land for tenant farming. Tenant farming fulfilled an important role in the antebellum south, as it provided the landless yeoman farmer class access to resources otherwise denied to them. It also provided an easy mean of income for the renting land owner who did not or could not farm the entirety of their land – for instance, elderly farmers, absentee land owners, widows or those who simply had more land than they knew what to do with. Historian Donald L. Winters argues that, in Fayette County, 14.1% of farm operators were tenant farmers. As a holder of several thousand acres not in use, it is quite possible that the younger and elder Jones employed this method of gathering income.
[97]Mrs. Douglas Bertram Wesson, Unnamed Paper Presented to the University of North Carolina, 12 October 1863, P. 19
[98] Jamie Evans, "The Cotten Family," Ames Plantation 1999.
[99] "Western District Land for sale." *Nashville Republic and State Gazette.* Friday, 8 June 1832. Provided courtesy of Jamie Evans
[100] Jamie Evans, "The Cotten Family," Ames Plantation 1999
[101] "Western District Land for sale." *Nashville Republic and State Gazette.* Friday, 8 June 1832
[102] Ibid.
[103] Genealogy information compiled by Jamie Evans
[104] Fayette County Court Tax Records, 1836
[105] Fayette County, TN Will Book A, p 215
[106] Jamie Evans, "The Cotten Family," Ames Plantation 1999
[107] Jamie Evans, "The Cotten Family," Ames Plantation 1999
[108] Evans notes a possible source of income for the family being Robert Cotten's remaining forty-six slaves, mentioned both in his will and in the trust deed with John Jones (suggesting that they remained in the family's possession.) Since the family was not operating the plantation at this time, Evans suggests that all of the slaves were being leased to other area planters.
[109] Fayette County, TN Deed Book O, p 214
[110] Jamie Evans, "The Cotten Family," Ames Plantation 1999
[111] Family Genaelogy and death records provided by Jamie Evans
[112] Fayette County Death Records 1893