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History of land occupancy and use in Alabama

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We should realize that Alabama was fully settled by Native Americans before being settled by other people (Europeans and Africans). The area of Alabama was settled by primarily four Native American groups: Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Cherokee. Each of these groups had a distinctive way of life and economy; some hunted more, others were extensive farmers with large settlements. To some extent, their way of life was conditioned by the soil on which they lived. For example, on poor sandy soil, they tended to hunt more than to grow corn. Their habitations covered the entire area of what is now Alabama.

Native Americans were forced by Europeans to cede more and more land. Until the Native Americans were removed, Europeans rarely settled in their lands. It was only after Andrew Jackson had decisively defeated (and ultimately caused the removal of) Native Americans in the 1820s and 1830s that Europeans were able to settle in the area of Alabama.

Looking only at European and African population in the U.S. in 1790 and 1800, the Atlantic Coast plain is densely settled, and New Orleans is densely settled, but other appears have few or no people at all. Even by 1810, the area of Alabama had perhaps no more than 20,000 Whites and Blacks, mostly concentrated in the French area to the south of the state.

There were really only two main roads in Alabama in the early 19th century. One went from about the place of Columbus, Georgia, by Montgomery, and down to Mobile. The other road went from about the area of Tuscaloosa to the area of Huntsville. Much of Alabama commerce was carried out by canoe, small boat, and barge over the extensive waterways. The Columbus-Montgomery-Mobile road facilitated growing lowland agriculture, but, at that time, grains were at least as important as cotton. The northern road facilitated the small farmers and cattle raisers of the northern part of the state.

By 1820 and 1830, after the defeat of the Native Americans, White and Black population began to grow, at first not rapidly. By 1840, cotton had become a dominant crop in the southern part of the state, and population grew rapidly afterwards. It grew most rapidly on the areas (in the counties) where agriculture was best (please refer to the slide in which the boundaries of major ecological zones are drawn over indicators of the extent of improved farmland).

The total amount of improved cropland and farmland in Alabama grew from about 5 million acres in 1850 during the time of cotton to a peak of about 11 million acres in the 1920s. After the Civil War, small farmers and small farms grew rapidly, culminating in the 1920s. Total improved farmland declined slowly until the 1950s, after which it

declined rapidly. The decline after the 1950s resulted from mechanization and the fact that Alabama small farms could not compete with other agricultural parts of the nation. (Improved “Cropland” and “Farmland” are slightly different categories, but were not kept distinct by the USDA throughout the entire time it collected statistics. However, the slight difference does not change the general picture.)

The rise and decline in the extent of farmland also shows up in the rise and decline in particular kinds of crops. Contrary to popular conceptions, corn (often for animal feed) often was just as important a crop in Alabama as cotton. Production of both peaked in the 1920s, then declined rapidly afterwards. The decline in cotton production was due to market forces, the decline in corn production occurred partly because tractors replaced mules. The same may be said for oats and wheat, although oats was used to feed animals and wheat was grown for local human consumption. As time went by, Alabamans found it cheaper to import wheat from the Midwest than to grow their own. Total grains and cotton show the same trends.

The fate of the “velvet bean” illustrates the dilemma of Alabama agriculture. Once it was extensively grown as food crop here, and for export to other states. Production began to fall off dramatically around World War II, although some production lingered on for quite a while afterwards. Farmers tried to use it as a substitute for declining grain and cotton production, but ultimately failed. Now, young people hardly know what a velvet bean is. To date, Alabama farmers are still hard pressed to find crops that they can grow in successful competition with other areas of the US.