Western Kentucky University

From the SelectedWorks of Ann K. Ferrell

2013

Burley: Kentucky Tobacco in a New Century

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/ann-ferrell/1/
“Would you rather have present day or olden days?”

*Tradition and Transition in Kentucky Burley Tobacco Production*

Frequently over the past decade, I have heard Kentucky natives comment with sadness on the changing landscape of their home state: the countryside of childhood will soon be gone. The links between land and culture, sense of place, history, and identity have been widely acknowledged.¹ According to Lucy Lippard, “The intersections of nature, culture, history, and ideology form the ground on which we stand—our land, our place, the local.”² Such intersections, of course, are neither inherent in the land itself nor static. We form the ground on which we stand through our use of it and as we come to view it not just as land but as landscape. Gregory Clark argues, “*Land* becomes *landscape* when it is assigned the role of symbol, and as symbol it functions rhetorically.”³ It is precisely because landscapes symbolize something about who we are that shifting landscapes often result in feelings of loss. The source of the sense of loss expressed by so many Kentuckians is not the expected—the loss of land to the proliferation of subdivisions and “big-box” retail stores, although certainly many bemoan such development. This sense of loss follows observations that the tobacco fields are disappearing.

It is difficult for many to understand the loss of tobacco—a crop that has come to symbolize addiction, disease, and a deceptive industry—as lamentable. However, this loss has vast economic and cultural consequences for farming communities, as well as for
the state as a whole. Tobacco was once Kentucky’s largest cash crop, and although other types of tobacco are grown in the state, historically over 90 percent of the tobacco grown in Kentucky has been burley tobacco. The crop has been an important symbol of regional identity, and the changing landscape symbolizes a shift to a “brave new world” in which King Burley no longer reigns and the future is uncertain—both economically and symbolically. I came to this project thinking that it would somehow be possible to conduct research with tobacco farmers disconnected from tobacco products. I found that not only is that not possible but that the interconnections are central to the story. This book is premised on the idea that the stories of tobacco farmers and of burley tobacco in Kentucky must be understood not separate from but within the context of the changing meanings of the crop.

In the interwoven process of collecting and interpreting the material that forms the basis of this book, I bring together my training as a folklorist with the theory and methods of the field of rhetoric, particularly the work of Kenneth Burke. In bringing the two together, not only do I view the performance of traditional cultural practices as persuasive and attempt to understand the rhetorical force of the usage of terms such as tradition and heritage, but I also investigate the interactions between the performance of cultural practices and public discourses about such practices. “Public discourses” have been examined in a range of fields, often involving questions of what constitutes public and how various media produce, sustain, change, or limit understanding of an issue. In his rhetorical reading of American tourist landscapes, Gregory Clark defines “public discourse” as “the ongoing process of inquiry and exchange that is sustained by people who constitute... community.” Clark understands public discourses not only as “taking the form of print and speech” but also as “experiences not immediately discursive at all.” My interest is in the emerging and evolving discourses surrounding tobacco farming in the context of other public discourses on tobacco, such as those related to smoking, health, and disease, as well as those related to farming more generally, such as increasing calls in recent years for the procurement and consumption of foods grown by local farmers. This requires an understanding of the historical conditions in which these multiple discourses have emerged and the ways in which they compete.
It also requires an understanding of the discourses of tobacco farmers.

This book is the result of the collection of two kinds of data, broadly speaking. First, I rely on data that I gathered through ethnographic fieldwork primarily in central and northern Kentucky, the center of burley tobacco production. Research began on this project in 2005, with intensive fieldwork during the 2007 crop year—January 2007 through February 2008. During this period, I spent time on farms, observing and at times participating in tobacco production. I conducted one or more recorded interviews with over sixty farmers, warehousemen, and agricultural professionals, and I visited the farms of and had conversations with many others. In addition to my own interviews, with the support of a grant from the Kentucky Oral History Commission (KOHC), I fully transcribed thirty-three recorded interviews conducted by John Klee and Lynne David for the KOHC between May 2000 and February 2002 with farmers, agriculture professionals, and policy makers. I attended agricultural events such as trainings, meetings, and field days, and I visited public and private sites related to tobacco once it leaves the farm, such as one of the last remaining burley tobacco warehouses, tobacco receiving stations (where farmers now sell their crop), and a redrying facility (where tobacco is processed before it is shipped to manufacturing facilities). I also worked in the tobacco exhibit area of the Kentucky Folklife Festival in 2005 and 2007, interpreting tobacco traditions for visitors alongside farmers, interacting with and observing visitors to the tobacco tent, and conducting interviews both on and off stage.

Second, throughout the period of my research I have observed and collected (both systematically and serendipitously) public discourses from a wide range of oral, print, and electronic sources. I spent many days in the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, reading the newsletters of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, and I collected published materials—books, pamphlets, brochures, booklets, fliers, posters, and policy and statistical documents—about tobacco history and production from a range of sources, including tobacco industry lobbying and marketing organizations, tobacco companies, the state and federal government, research institutions, and farm organizations. During my time in the field, I read the major Kentucky newspapers on a daily basis, I utilized online databases to locate media coverage in past
Map of 120 Kentucky counties with the Bluegrass Region noted. Fieldwork was conducted in highlighted counties. (Map drawn by Richard A. Gilbreath)
periods, and I regularly visited and studied a number of websites, particularly those of state-sponsored agriculture agencies and farm organizations.

In a caveat meant to explain how his book *The Written Suburb: An American Site, An Ethnographic Dilemma* departs from “conventions of ‘traditional’ ethnographic documentation,” John Dorst describes such documentation as “an attempt to ‘get close to,’ to understand and to describe the culture, values or world view of a certain set of people.” This was the task of my ethnographic fieldwork with tobacco farmers; I set out not with a hypothesis to prove, but with a wish to understand not only tobacco farming practices but the meanings of these practices to farmers during the current period of transition. In part, I have gathered a retrospective history, an accounting of how people today view the past and their connections to it. I quickly understood that these meanings can only be understood within a context of the public discourses that surround these farmers and their ongoing processes of the generation of meaning(s). As they talked to me, they were also talking back to those who argue that tobacco is being replaced by diversified farming, to the perception of tobacco as a thing of the past (as “heritage”), and of course to those who argue that the crop that they depend upon is lethal. These and other discourses surrounding tobacco serve as screens through which tobacco is differently understood. Kenneth Burke writes: “When I speak of ‘terministic screens,’ I have particularly in mind some photographs I once saw. They were different photographs of the same objects, the difference being that they were made with different color filters. Here something so ‘factual’ as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending on which color filter was used for the documentary description of the event being recorded.” Tobacco farming (and more important, tobacco farmers) takes on differing, often competing, textures and meanings dependent on the discursive screen through which it is considered. My folklore training helps me to understand how people communicate (with each other, with me) on the ground; rhetoric helps me to understand the persuasive work of discourses (both on the ground and seemingly all around, in more public discourses) and what is included and left out in order for persuasion to take place. Together, they help me to understand interactions between multiple domains—rather than attempting to
separate public from private or cultural practices from how they are represented in multiple sites.

Of course, my endeavor to understand tobacco farmers within the context of such public discourses and the changing symbolism of the crop is just that: my endeavor. In recent decades, ethnographers in the fields of folklore, anthropology, and others have problematized prior assumptions of the writing of ethnography as an objective enterprise. Rather, as ethnographers, we offer interpretations that are filtered through many screens of our own, both scholarly and personal. I also came to my fieldwork as an outsider, and I write as an outsider; this both limits my ability to understand tobacco culture from an insider perspective and affords me the opportunity to offer an interpretation from the outside looking in. My assemblage and use of sources from multiple domains—ethnographic, historical, archival—engenders a dialogic account rather than one that relies on any one voice.

This book must also be read as specific to the people with whom I interacted and the region in which they live and work. Geography and climate led to the establishment of distinct tobacco regions based on the type of tobacco grown. Cultivation methods, labor, marketing practices, and farm size all vary by region. The historical context of tobacco production is unique to each tobacco region as well, because tobacco type, farm size, and landscape determined, for instance, the degree of dependence on slave labor and, later, the mechanization of tobacco work. Central Kentucky has historically been the center of burley tobacco production, the center of what is referred to as the Burley Belt; nearly half of Kentucky's burley tobacco production has been based in the Bluegrass Region, which lies at the heart of central Kentucky. I began my first interview with Martin Henson, whom we will meet in chapter 1, with my standard interview opening. I noted that I was “talking with Martin Henson . . . in Franklin County, Kentucky, about tobacco.” Martin corrected me: “Burley tobacco.” Although other types of tobacco are grown in Kentucky—particularly dark air- and fire-cured tobaccos—burley has long been both economically and culturally dominant. Central Kentucky farmers are not just tobacco growers. They are burley tobacco growers. This book is therefore specifically about the changed meanings of burley tobacco in central Kentucky as I came to understand and interpret it based on a combination of ethnographic fieldwork and rhetorical analysis.
A Narrative of Change

I am indebted to the first tobacco farmer I interviewed as I began this research in 2005, the late Robert Taylor of Bracken County, in part because he provided me with the knowledge I needed in order to ask my future interviewees much more informed questions than those that I asked him. But he also asked me an important question. Following a driving tour of the Taylor farm that included his cattle and pastures, his tobacco barns, his garden, and of course his tobacco crop, we sat down in the living room for an interview and began with this exchange:

Author: And one of the things that, that you talked about [during our farm tour] is the different parts of the process? And I wondered if you could walk me through like a whole year, you know, what the different . . .
Robert Taylor: Okay, I’ll do my best. Would you rather have present day or olden days? There’s a whole lot of difference.

I replied that I wanted him to tell it in the way that he thought it should be told and that perhaps he might tell me about both.

Mr. Taylor’s question stayed with me, but it was a while before I realized that he had given me the narrative structure of the story of tobacco in the early twenty-first century: a narrative woven together out of threads of change. While most farmers didn’t ask me if I wanted to hear about “present day or olden days” as Bob Taylor did, most offered me a comparative narrative that included how things are done today and how they were done during other periods. Many also shared both questions and predictions about tobacco’s future. The tobacco buyout of 2004, which—as I will discuss—ended the federal tobacco price support program that had been in place since the New Deal era, is widely understood as a dramatic moment of change and transition for Kentucky agriculture. Although transition in its current usage most often refers explicitly to the aftermath of the buyout, tobacco production can more generally be understood as tradition-in-process, ever changing, continually transitioning. This book unravels multiple threads of change within the lifetimes of present-day tobacco farmers in order to understand how those threads have been woven together into a complex whole.
For Kentucky burley tobacco growers, tobacco farming is a livelihood that involves a mastery of traditional skills passed through generations and adapted to changing circumstances—technological, economic, social, and political. Over the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, there have been rapid technological changes on the farm, local labor has largely disappeared, women and men have increasingly found jobs off the farm, the federal tobacco program has ended, acreages have grown—substantially in some cases—and the buying habits of the tobacco companies have increasingly moved offshore. During this same period, public awareness of the dangers of smoking has skyrocketed, smoking rates have plummeted, and smoking in public places has become socially unacceptable and in some places illegal. All of this has led to dramatic changes in the political, economic, social, community, and even personal meanings of tobacco. According to D. Wynne Wright, “For public health advocates and social advocates, tobacco is a menace to public health and welfare—a commodity to be stamped out. For farmers, tobacco is a health hazard but, at the same time, an economic and social opportunity wrought by a rich historical legacy.”

The confluence of the changing symbolic and economic valuing of tobacco must be understood in order to understand the past and present situation on Kentucky farms and to ensure a healthy farm economy in Kentucky’s future.

I did not fully understand this for some time. I initially assumed that the narrative of change suggested by Bob Taylor’s question was about nostalgia for the loss of the old ways of tobacco production. This in turn reinforced my focus on the cultural and symbolic valuing of tobacco. Farmers set me straight. For instance, Roger Quarles explained in an interview that tobacco was only one part of his farm operation. I asked, “But did it—was it important to you to continue growing some amount of tobacco, despite other opportunities that you had?” He responded, “Well . . . You gotta understand I never did particularly love growing tobacco, I did it because it was a business opportunity.” I realized that perhaps I wanted to be told about an emotional attachment to the crop, not just an economic one. While many other farmers told me that they do enjoy raising tobacco for a number of reasons, I was told many times that no matter how much anybody might enjoy it, no one enjoyed it enough (or was stupid enough) to keep doing it if it didn’t pay. Farmers taught me over and over that they continue this tradition because it provides an income.
Farmers emphasized the economic role of tobacco because as the crop has become stigmatized, widespread awareness of the present-day economic importance of tobacco to families, communities, and the Commonwealth of Kentucky is largely gone. I was in the offices of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture (KDA) one day in the summer of 2007 for a meeting in preparation for the Kentucky Folklife Festival, and in a hallway I noticed a display of large, colorful photographs of Kentucky agricultural products. As I scanned the images, I realized there were no photographs of tobacco. Later I visited the KDA website; there were no images of tobacco there either. How had tobacco, once so important to the Kentucky agricultural economy, lauded as central to Kentucky heritage, come to disappear? I wondered. And when had it disappeared? These questions became a central thread that I sought to unravel.

Today tobacco is widely understood as part of Kentucky’s heritage—the state’s past, not its present. When farmers and I discussed the importance of documenting this tradition for the historical record through oral history interviews, they wanted me to know that tobacco continues to be of economic importance in the present. This connects back to the narrative of change and my assumptions about nostalgia. Farmers cannot simply lament changes within the tradition of tobacco farming, because such changes have helped them to raise the crop more efficiently, and they are therefore necessary to their very survival. However, by asserting that tobacco is of great economic importance, I do not argue that tobacco is not also of great symbolic importance. Rather, the two are intricately entwined. There is nostalgia around tobacco production, but it does not necessarily follow the single path that I initially assumed, for, as Ray Cashman argues, “not all nostalgias are the same.”

Nostalgia takes multiple forms depending on the position of the person expressing it, as I will discuss.

This book is structured in three parts in order to provide a holistic interpretation of the multiple, changing contexts of tobacco production—changes that are often alluded to but that have not previously been elucidated and interpreted. In part 1 of the book, I trace the “thirteen-month” tobacco production cycle based on my fieldwork with tobacco farmers during the 2007 crop year. The three chapters in this section provide a first-person account of my interactions in the field, combined with quotations and paraphrases from recorded interviews and fieldnotes. I include descriptions of changing cultural
practices and circumstances at each stage of tobacco production, as they were described to me. Martin Henson, my most important teacher through the tobacco year, serves as the major guide throughout these chapters, and what I learned from many other participants in my fieldwork is included in order to demonstrate the diversity of perspectives and farming operations. This section is not meant to serve as a comprehensive history of changing farm technologies but rather to provide farmers’ perspectives on and experiences with the changes they have seen in their lifetimes. Despite stereotypes of farmers as resistant to change, tobacco farmers have long been accepting of change—when changes prove to be in their economic interest. Rather than merely mourning the loss of “the olden days,” farmers understand change and transition as part of the tradition of raising burley tobacco that includes gains and losses.

In part 2, I examine the changing political context of tobacco in Kentucky through an analysis of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture newsletter in order to understand the rhetorical decisions made by the state in response to the changing political status of the tobacco industry and therefore of tobacco production. What began as a search for evidence of the inclusion of images of tobacco production in previous periods in order to find out if the absence I noted in the KDA offices and on the website was indeed a documentable change led to days and days in the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives reading every issue of the KDA newsletter, from when it began in the 1940s through the period of my research. I chose to focus on the newsletter because it represents a purposeful public articulation of the priorities and perspectives of the state agency most responsible for shaping the image of Kentucky agriculture. As I took careful notes about what was reported in the newsletters and how this news was framed, the pattern of the shifting politics of tobacco in different periods emerged. It is for this reason that, while I set out to write an ethnography, I have ended up with a book that devotes nearly a third of its pages to the rhetorical analysis of a single printed source.

As the state’s official agriculture agency, the KDA generates and promotes the agricultural face of the Commonwealth, and the newsletter has served as the agency’s primary means of intentional communication with the public. Along with news, the publication provides the agency’s—and therefore the state’s—shifting arguments about what Kentucky agriculture is and should be. Over the second
half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the KDA’s representation of tobacco evolved from an economically vital crop to a celebrated symbol of the state’s heritage to a crop replaced by diversified agriculture. By the turn of the new century, tobacco had become a stigmatized crop, and it was no longer politically expedient to claim it as important to the economy. Tobacco is now viewed as heritage, a terministic screen that suggests its economic value is in the past.

Taken together, parts 1 and 2 of this book demonstrate diverging realities: although tobacco production continues in Kentucky, tobacco has become a stigmatized crop, and its existence in the present has largely been erased from public awareness. The occupational and identity category tobacco farmer has become, for many, a stigmatized category—what Erving Goffman described as a “spoiled identity.” In part 3, I examine aspects of what this means to tobacco farmers. The combined impact of the technological changes and the changing status of the crop and those who grow it has affected the traditional “pride” farmers take in their crop. This is evident in particular expressions of tobacco nostalgia that communicate feelings of loss for a better time of tobacco production, next to the idea that, for some, “now is the good old days” because of technological innovations and improved efficiency. Not only was there more pride in tobacco in farmers’ fathers’ and grandfathers’ days, but there was also more respect for the occupation. Tobacco farmers long not for a return to earlier times and technologies—which would be economically unfeasible—but for the pride and respect once associated with a “tobacco-man” identity.

In the final chapter, I examine competing perspectives on the “transition” in which Kentucky burley farmers find themselves. The dominant perspective on the future of Kentucky agriculture is that tobacco production is in its last days and that the “transition” currently taking place is one in which tobacco farmers have replaced, will replace, or should be replacing tobacco production in favor of “diversified” agriculture. This rhetoric suggests that simply planting another crop or raising alternative livestock will lead to the replacement—economically as well as symbolically—of tobacco. This chapter complicates these assumptions, as well as assumptions about the concept of “tradition,” through a discussion of tangible and intangible challenges to “replacing” tobacco.

In order to establish a historical context for tobacco production today, it is necessary to provide a brief metahistory of the development of
the tobacco industry in the United States and Kentucky as it has been told by past chroniclers. A number of volumes address the history of tobacco in the United States, at least through the mid-twentieth century. In providing an overview of this history from commonly cited works, I am as interested in how the historical narrative has been told as I am in the history itself. Hayden White has argued that the historian “emplots” a particular story of history by pulling from a “chronicle of events” in the historical record. These tobacco histories are all similarly emplotted; they hinge on the same historical events and analogous descriptive passages and end up telling similar uncritical stories about the role of the crop, those who grow it, and those who manufacture products with it. Following this metahistory, I describe recent events that affect tobacco farmers (essentially emplotting my own narrative), informed by media accounts, interviews, Extension Service materials, and recent publications.

**Burley Tobacco Production: A Metahistory**

There are particular events and details that historians of tobacco repeatedly use to demonstrate the importance of tobacco in the establishment of the American colonies. Tobacco has been called “America’s oldest industry” because of its economic role in America before and since the European discovery of the plant upon first contact with Native Americans, at which time it had long been a major item of trade between Native American peoples. As early as 3000 B.C.E., Native Americans “were smoking tobacco for a variety of ritual, social, and diplomatic purposes as well as for personal pleasure” and were also using the plant for a number of medicinal purposes throughout the Americas. Christopher Columbus first mentioned “dry leaves” that appeared to be of great importance to the Indians in a diary entry written in 1492, although the first gift of tobacco he received was said to have been thrown overboard since he and his crew did not know what it was or what to do with it.

Over the course of the sixteenth century tobacco spread across Europe, Asia, and Africa “largely through the agency of traders and sailors who carried the weed and the habit of using it in various ways throughout the world,” and by 1607 the Spanish had a “virtual monopoly” on the crop. By this time, the English had developed a “ravenous appetite” for tobacco, despite the admonitions of King James I, making the cultivation of tobacco under English control
particularly desirable in order to avoid importation costs. The survival of Jamestown, after two failed attempts, is attributed to John Rolfe’s successful development of the crop, opening the way for further “settlement” of the continent. Rolfe made his first attempt to grow a crop of tobacco in 1612, and in the year 1618 Virginians raised twenty thousand pounds. By 1664, twenty-four million pounds of tobacco were being exported from the colonies to England.

Tobacco warehouses were “one of the first businesses to be regulated” in colonial North America. Not only did tobacco help to fund the American Revolution, but some “argue that the unfavorable terms of trade and heavy debt burden that colonial tobacco planters had with English merchants and tobacco consignees were important factors in establishing colonial rebelliousness toward Britain.” George Washington raised tobacco, and in 1791, during his first presidential term, tobacco exports totaled $4,359,567, “making it the nation’s principal export crop.” “The tobacco leaf was woven so deeply into the fabric of American life,” writes historian Susan Wagner, “that it was used as a motif in the decoration of columns in the Capitol.”

In the earliest days of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, receipts given as proof of stored tobacco “could serve as currency in payment of fees, fines, forfeitures, and debts both public and private.” According to John van Willigen and Susan C. Eastwood, “Tobacco is American. Some farmers see it as a link they have with Native Americans. In some regions of America, tobacco is a historic icon. The seal of the city of Lexington, Kentucky, has a tobacco leaf on it,” as does the seal of the city of Owensboro and others.

**The Development of Kentucky’s Number-One Cash Crop**

Europeans learned the basic method of raising a crop of tobacco from Native Americans, “including the details of proper spacing in the field, topping and suckering the plants, and the distinctive drying processes now known as air-curing, sun-curing, and fire-curing.” Detailed descriptions of the practices involved in raising a crop of tobacco have, since the eighteenth century, been central to telling the story of tobacco. In 1784, British traveler John Ferdinand Smyth published a two-volume account of his adventures in America that includes a lengthy description of the process of raising a tobacco crop in Virginia. This description is in many ways consistent with
methods of tobacco production either as they exist today or at least as they existed within the lifetimes of current tobacco farmers. This includes vernacular language that remains in use today and that will be defined in part 1, such as preparing plant beds, topping and suckering, the use of tobacco sticks in the curing of tobacco, tying cured tobacco into hands, and storing it in bulks. Curing practices vary much more widely from then to now, as multiple classes and types have since been developed, each with its own unique curing method and structure. However, the basic idea of curing tobacco using heat and/or air has long been an important step in tobacco production.

A much longer account was provided by William Tatham in his Essay on the Culture and Commerce of Tobacco, published in 1800 based on his two decades of observation, beginning in 1769 at the age of seventeen. His account is relevant not only as the most extensive account from the period but because the production and marketing methods that he observed were those that were practiced as tobacco farmers were beginning to settle in what, in 1792, became the Commonwealth of Kentucky. As planters moved west to what is now Kentucky, “the broad outline of the cultural technology of Burley leaf had already become established in Virginia and was carried whole into Kentucky.”42 In addition to farm practices, the complex system of state control of the sale of the crop was “carried whole” into the territory.

The system of slavery was also carried into the territory. As early as 1751, as the territory was being explored, “blacks and whites entered Kentucky together,”43 and Daniel Boone brought slaves along on his explorations of the territory in the 1770s.44 The labor of slaves on colonial plantations is central to the story of tobacco in American history. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, a number of factors led to a shift from white immigrant servants to African slaves in the major tobacco-producing region surrounding the Chesapeake Bay. By 1700, farmers in the Chesapeake region were wholly dependent on the labor of slaves in the production of tobacco.45 According to Joseph C. Robert, a mid-twentieth-century tobacco historian, tobacco “created the plantation pattern. Its labor requirements soon meant hordes of African slaves. Present-day rural and racial problems below the Mason and Dixon Line are rooted in that first Southern staple, tobacco.”46

With this in mind, the dependence on slave labor seems oddly missing from Kentucky history as it has been written. This is in part
due to the fact that “after the Revolution, when nearly all the good land in piedmont had been taken up . . . dissatisfied poor farmers had to leave for Kentucky to find greater opportunities.” Many of the farmers who moved to Kentucky and came to depend on tobacco income were small, poor farmers who did not own slaves; Kentucky’s was not on the whole a plantation culture. However, as Ann E. King-solver notes, the Kentucky historical narrative often ignores Kentucky’s slaveholding past, focusing instead on Kentucky’s status as a border state during the Civil War, and tobacco “has been glossed as a family-based cash crop.” According to Steven A. Channing in Kentucky: A Bicentennial History, although “it would be misleading to overlook the feature that most distinguished Kentucky from the lower South, namely the absence of a substantial number of very large plantations,” “it is possible to exaggerate the importance of that comparative difference. Apologists developed a powerful mystique around it, using that to argue that slavery was relatively inconsequential.” While slavery was a much larger part of the history of the western portion of the state—where the land is flatter and farms larger, and the culture is often described by Kentuckians as more “southern”—there were slaves on farms across the state, including the Bluegrass Region, which became the center of burley production.

The importance of burley tobacco, which had become dominant in Kentucky as it spread to the central region, grew as chewing tobacco became the most widespread method of consumption in the United States because burley was a primary ingredient. At this time, new strains of red burley were being developed, and leaf quality was improving. The move to “chaw” during the first half of the nineteenth century was fostered in large part by the desire on the part of Americans to separate themselves from what were seen as elite and effeminate European ways. As the masculine hero became the frontiersman, a “man of manly independence,” and the “common man” “reigned supreme,” chewing spread up the class ladder. Chewing tobacco was the “only one of our tobacco customs which did not originate in the conscious imitation of European manners.” Although tobacco was grown in Kentucky in the early nineteenth century, it was not until the 1830s, when a canal was built in order to provide a consistent and safe route around the Falls of the Ohio at Louisville, that Kentucky began to take its place as a major producer of tobacco as well as hemp. Even then, however, tobacco
production continued to center around the rivers, and very little was produced in the Bluegrass Region.

By the mid- to late nineteenth century, distinct types of tobacco with different production practices and uses had settled into particular regions based on climate and soil conditions. Cigar tobaccos (binders, wrappers, and fillers) remained concentrated in the North (the Connecticut Valley, small portions of New York and Pennsylvania), as well as small parts of Georgia and Florida. Flue-cured or bright tobacco became concentrated in the Carolinas and Georgia. Dark fire-cured and dark air-cured tobaccos—used primarily in chewing tobacco and snuff, as well as pipe tobacco—settled in far western Kentucky and northwestern Tennessee. According to John Morgan, the practices that are still used in the production of dark fire-cured tobacco remain the most consistent with tobacco production of colonial times.54 Burley settled in Kentucky and parts of Tennessee, and Maryland retained its own air-cured type. Today, the overwhelming majority of burley, Maryland, and flue-cured tobaccos is used in cigarettes. A small region of Louisiana, centered in St. James Parish, became the home of a particularly specialized type of pipe tobacco, Perique tobacco.55

According to numerous versions of the tobacco history narrative, “warfare has been the single most significant influence on the worldwide propagation of a taste” for tobacco.56 The Civil War had both direct and indirect effects on Kentucky’s move to the top of tobacco production. In stories told about Union and Confederate soldiers meeting in the darkness between battles to exchange news and provisions, it is said that Confederate soldiers traded their chewing tobacco for Union coffee because of the shortages of each in their respective regions.57 As a result, the northern appetite for chewing tobacco grew.

The Civil War also shifted the important tobacco regions. Because Kentucky was a border state, it was largely spared the structural devastation of states that had joined the Confederacy. This meant that during and after the war, Kentucky tobacco farmers had a distinct advantage over their counterparts in states such as Virginia and North Carolina, where farms and warehouses had largely been destroyed, as had centers of marketing and manufacturing.58 Louisville, the center of the market of the West at the time, also came through the war relatively unscathed, unlike potential competitors such as Nashville, Atlanta, and Birmingham.59 Meanwhile, New
Tobacco growing regions, historically, by class and type (USDA). (Map drawn by Richard A. Gilbreath)
York became a marketing center for the sale of tobacco produced in Union states. Although Virginia never recovered its former share of tobacco marketing and manufacturing, North Carolina eventually did recover and became the nation’s largest tobacco-producing state.

Another development just before the war ended was instrumental in establishing Kentucky’s place in the tobacco industry ever more firmly—the discovery of white burley. The burley tobacco leaf that was being grown at the time was a harsh red variety. The story of white burley—Kentucky burley’s origin narrative—is recounted in nearly all published histories of tobacco, with an accompanying explanation that it was one of the rarest of moments in the natural world, called a “sport” or “a sudden deviation from a standard type.”

The story goes that the tenants of a Brown County, Ohio, tobacco producer named Fred Kantz ran out of seed and bought some from a Bracken County, Kentucky, farmer named George Barkley. The tenants planted the seeds in their seedbeds, and when it came time to transplant the plants into the field, they didn’t look right—they were “dirty yellow in color,” although “sturdy enough”—so they were destroyed. The next year, one of the tenants, George Webb, planted leftover seeds that grew to become leaf that “cured out to a handsome, almost golden, light tan or cream leaf.” The following year, he raised twenty thousand pounds; the tobacco was praised by buyers, and it took off and “positively thrived” in the Bluegrass Region beginning in the 1870s.

Between 1865 and 1929, Kentucky produced more tobacco, by pound, than any other state. White burley required a shorter growing season, the entire stalk could be harvested at once (stalk-cut) rather than requiring multiple passes through the field harvesting the leaves as they matured (primed), and it could be air cured rather than fire cured. It was appealing to manufacturers because it had characteristics that made it ideal for chewing and pipe tobaccos: there was less sugar in the leaf, so it absorbed sweeteners that were added to it for flavoring and that helped it to blend well with other tobaccos. These characteristics would later make it an essential part of the American-blend cigarette.

Changes in tobacco marketing took place from the 1830s through the 1890s, as auctions became “institutionalized,” and farmers began to move away from packing their tobacco in hogsheads. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was growing distrust of
the “tobacco note” that had long served as the representation of a hogshead of tobacco as it was bought and sold, and by the 1830s the auction system was developing as buyers began purchasing directly from farmers immediately following the inspection of their tobacco.68 Looseleaf sales were introduced in Kentucky and Tennessee in 1901, replacing sale in hogsheads.69 The practice of packing hands of tobacco onto baskets at the warehouse, rather than in piles on the floor, was established in Lexington in 190470 and would remain the standard marketing practice until the early 1980s; even today, this practice remains the iconic image of the tobacco sale. The last hogsheads sales in the burley region took place during the 1929–1930 marketing season in Louisville.71

**The Tobacco Trust, Trouble in the Black Patch, and the Tobacco Program**

Tobacco overproduction was identified as a problem immediately following John Rolfe’s first planting of the crop in Jamestown in 1612, and with the concept of overproduction came governmental monitoring and intervention. As early as 1613—just the second year of cultivation at Jamestown—Deputy Governor Thomas Dale feared yet another failed colony and “ordered that no man could raise tobacco unless he also each season manured and maintained two acres of corn.”72 According to William Tatham, as early as 1620 King James I ordered colonists to limit tobacco production and instead to plant corn and potatoes and raise livestock,73 and the first legislation ever passed regarding tobacco commerce, in 1639, addressed the need to limit tobacco production.74 Overproduction was at the heart of the 1670s event known as Bacon’s Rebellion, and in 1682 there were “plant-cutting riots” in which planters cut their own and their neighbors’ tobacco when the Virginia Assembly refused to impose production limits.75

While the relationship between farmers and the tobacco industry had been a tumultuous one since the strife between planters and British merchants, the conflict intensified beginning in the 1870s as manufacturing became consolidated. Until the late nineteenth century, tobacco products were largely produced by “country factories”—everyone from merchants to planters produced chew for sale locally.76 Gradually, cities such as St. Louis and New York, as well as towns in North Carolina, became centers of manufacturing.
The American Tobacco Company was established in 1890 “under the guiding hand of J. B. Duke,”77 the son of a poor planter made rich through home manufacture and traveling sales of tobacco products beginning just after the Civil War.78 “The Trust,” as it came to be called, was made up of the largest tobacco manufacturing companies, and it rapidly achieved a monopoly in the industry through rampant price wars that drove their competitors “not out of business, but into joining the Trust,” which ultimately subsumed over 250 manufacturers.79

The formation of the Trust, along with other factors, resulted in severe price reductions, and farmers attempted to overcome shrinking farm incomes through increased production. Increased production led to overproduction, which served to drop the prices further. One result was the “Black Patch Wars,” which most famously took place in the dark tobacco region of far western Kentucky and Tennessee.80 Dark-tobacco growers experienced the most drastic price reductions as the demand for their product dropped when domestic tobacco consumption began to move away from chewing tobaccos to smoking tobaccos at the end of the nineteenth century. The first attempt to build a cooperative association to fight the growing power of the Trust took place in this region in 1904, with what became the Dark-Fired Tobacco District Planters’ Protective Association of Kentucky and Tennessee. Alongside this organization, a secret association was formed that became known as the Night Riders. Beginning in 1906, the Night Riders organized themselves “with robes and masks, and [with an] elaborate paramilitary hierarchy operating as an outlaw underground army” that “coerced reluctant leaf planters to join . . . flogged still others, dragged plant beds, burned barns and houses, killed some.”81 They also burned warehouses and manufacturing facilities in the towns of Princeton and Hopkinsville, Kentucky.

Although the activities of the Night Riders in the dark-fired region have been most widely documented, there were similar movements in central and northern Kentucky as well. The tactics of the Night Riders in other regions were reportedly “more successful and somewhat less violent,”82 but oral accounts of violence and murder have been passed through families. The activities of the Night Riders ended around 1908 in large part because of legal action taken against them by their victims, but also because by this time public sentiment had turned against them. In 1911, the Trust was dissolved
by the US Supreme Court as a violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890. However, out of the Trust came the “Big Four” companies—American Tobacco Company, Liggett and Myers, Lorillard, and R. J. Reynolds—and the turbulent times were far from over.

Early twentieth-century cigarettes—a form of tobacco use that was not yet widespread—were primarily “Turkish-blend” cigarettes. This blend comprised about 60 percent domestic tobaccos—but not burley—and 40 percent Turkish tobacco, a type not raised in the United States. R. J. Reynolds introduced its Camel brand of cigarettes in 1913, and with it and the competing brands that followed came a cigarette blend that “revolutionize[d] the cigarette field.”83 Though particular blends have been trade secrets over the years, this “American-blend” cigarette generally included—and still includes—about 50 to 60 percent flue-cured or bright tobacco, 30 to 35 percent burley, 10 percent Turkish, and about 2 percent Maryland leaf.84 Camels were followed by the American Tobacco Company’s Lucky Strikes in 1918 and by Liggett and Myers’s Chesterfields in 1919, all American blends. With these brands, the companies ushered in the era of “concentrated one-brand advertising.”85 This new blend also increased the demand for burley tobacco.

The First World War helped to spread these new cigarettes, and tobacco prices soared to all-time highs, ranging from twenty-five to thirty cents a pound.86 This height, however, was followed by a bad crop year in 1920, and prices plummeted to an average of thirteen cents a pound in the Lexington burley market. Once again, farmers were angered and determined to band together in hopes of pressuring the companies for higher poundage prices, and during this period cooperative associations were formed for each of the tobacco classes. The Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association was formed in 1921 with a membership goal of 75 percent of all burley growers. These efforts were successful for a few years, with prices reaching over twenty-eight cents a pound in 1922,87 but by 1926 the efforts were failing, the crop was not cooperatively managed, and the price dropped back to twelve and a half cents.88 As the Great Depression hit, not only were prices low, but demand for cigarettes fell, and by 1931 burley brought about eight and a half cents a pound and dark-fired three cents.89 Attempts to revive cooperative associations during this period failed.90

With “Franklin D. Roosevelt’s eventful first hundred days of New Deal legislation” came the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933
Burley (known as the AAA), which “focused on wheat, cotton, field corn, hogs, rice, milk, and tobacco and provided for restricted production and benefit payments to the farmer.” This act was struck down in 1937, and a new version was passed in 1938; various amendments were added over the years. With the passage of the Agriculture Adjustment Act of 1938, all tobacco growers were “permitted to vote through referendum [every three years] to impose production quotas in return for a supported price.” The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) was also charged with creating a system of inspection and outlining a structure for the uniform grading of tobacco by government graders through the Tobacco Inspection Act of 1935, which in essence strengthened 1916 and 1929 legislation by making uniform grading and inspection mandatory at no cost to the farmer. The tobacco program generally stabilized tobacco production for decades, even through times such as the Second World War, when war once again led to a boom time for tobacco. American cigarette consumption rose 75 percent between 1939 and 1945, and the Second World War spread the American cigarette around the globe.

Those who had grown tobacco in the years leading up to the passage of the AAA were given a “base” or “allotment”: a precise number of acres or part of an acre of tobacco that could be grown and sold on each farm without penalty, based on how much had been raised on that farm in the years prior to the program. This base was then adjusted annually dependent on the projected demand of the tobacco companies (both domestic and exports) and the amount of tobacco in the pool stocks held by the cooperatives, and support prices were set for each grade. Because tobacco is aged approximately three years before it is used, company estimates were based on their projected needs three or more years in the future. When it came time for farmers to sell their tobacco at auctions that took place at tobacco warehouses, if buyers—either representing specific tobacco companies or “leaf buyers” who bought tobacco for multiple manufacturers worldwide—were not willing to bid at least a penny above the support price, then that tobacco went to a “pool” managed by a grower cooperative. The Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association was revived in 1941 to manage the burley pool stocks, paying farmers for tobacco that was not bought at auction with money borrowed from the Commodity Credit Corporation of the USDA and later paid back with interest when the tobacco
was sold. Farmers and others on the production end are quick to point out that unlike other commodity programs, the tobacco program was not a subsidy program, and although there were administrative costs associated with it, the government more than gained these costs back through interest gained on loans to the pool, a topic to which I will return.

It has been argued that tobacco production techniques and marketing procedures, unlike those of commodities such as cotton, changed little as a result of the AAA. However, acreage allotments meant that farmers could sell every leaf of tobacco that they raised on their allotment, and they therefore resulted in ever-growing average yields through not only the careful collection of each leaf but also the development of new production techniques and varieties and the application of new synthetic fertilizers. Average yields tripled between 1939 and 1971. The research that led to the sharp increases in yields was described by one longtime Burley Co-op president, John Berry Sr., as “cruel economics and blind scientific endeavor”

![Average yield per acre (in pounds), Kentucky tobacco, all types. Data provided by decade through 1990 and annually beginning in 1995. (USDA, Economic Research Service)](image-url)
because higher yields led to more tobacco at lower prices, ultimately leading to more work for the farmer at lower wages. The industry continued to be plagued by overproduction, and quotas rose and fell over the years.

In 1971, when there was once again too much burley being raised and an abundance of tobacco in the pool stocks, growers passed a referendum that changed the acreage quota system to a poundage system; at the same time they agreed to a quota reduction. This meant that farmers could plant an unlimited number of acres in order to raise their poundage quota of cured leaf. This is understood by many as one link in a chain of events that decreased the care with which each individual leaf was treated and therefore changed traditional practices designed to preserve the full value of each leaf. Yet during the push for a move from acreage to poundage the Kentucky Department of Agriculture argued that this shift would result in better-quality tobacco because farmers were overusing fertilizers in order to get the most out of their allotted acreage. However the shift is interpreted, yields gradually dropped to an average of 2,100 pounds, although 3,500 pounds to the acre is not unheard of today.

For most of the years of the program, a tobacco marketing quota could almost exclusively be obtained through the purchase of land that came with a quota, which meant that land values were heavily influenced by the amount of tobacco base that came with a piece of land. There had long been a sharecropping and tenant system in which growers engaged in various arrangements, such as on shares (a relationship in which one farmer raised another’s tobacco for a share of the crop that varied depending on who supplied the inputs such as seed, fertilizers, equipment and barns, labor, etc.) or on halves (a sharing relationship in which the landowner and tenant split the inputs and profits evenly). Beginning in 1971, farmers could lease quota owned by others; these arrangements also varied, but by 2004 some paid as much as eighty or ninety cents a pound to grow someone else’s allotment. Lease costs varied significantly by county, according to demand, and were highest in central and western Kentucky. This also meant that a class of nonproducing quota owners was born, so that retired farmers, widows, nonfarmers who bought a farm that had some quota, and even businesses and institutions such as schools and churches came to depend on leasing their tobacco allotments as a source of income. Beginning in 1991, it was possible to buy quota separate from a parcel of land within
the county in which you lived. The ability to lease or buy quota in other counties, known as cross-county leasing, was a subject of contentious debate right up to the end of the program in 2004; it was voted on numerous times by growers and never passed in Kentucky. The primary argument against cross-county leasing was that it would benefit only the largest farmers.

**Tobacco Threatened**

Tobacco use was criticized beginning with first European contact. King James I published *A Counterblaste to Tobacco* in 1604, and when that did not stop the spread of its use throughout England, he imposed heavy taxes. Movements against tobacco use rose and fell in the centuries following King James, and the first “significant” anti-tobacco tract in the United States was published in 1798. Well-known Americans such as Horace Mann, Henry Ward Beecher, Horace Greeley, Thomas Edison, and Henry Ford were anti-tobacco proponents, as were the official organizations of Methodists and Quakers. In 1902, the Quakers condemned “the grant of public money for use in research concerning growing and curing tobacco,” and despite what had been an ongoing split between northern and southern Methodists on the issue, in 1914 the Methodist Conference forbade “candidates for the ministry from smoking.” Joseph C. Robert quotes a southern Methodist’s comments in the Reconstruction period: “Those Northern Methodists . . . are engaged in a general crusade against tobacco. That is our Southern staple, and our churches are largely supported by it.” The movement against tobacco use in the United States gained momentum in the early 1900s alongside the Prohibition movement. Several states banned the sale and public use of tobacco, and the anti-tobacco movement even served as the platform of the 1920 presidential campaign of Lucy Page Gaston, a former member of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and a leader in the anti-tobacco movement.

Widespread public acceptance of the negative health effects of tobacco finally began to take hold in the 1950s and ’60s. In 1954, “the first cigarette cancer scare coincided with the introduction of the modern filtered cigarette,” which was actually an improvement on existing filters. This scare came in the form of a report released by the American Cancer Society to the American Medical Association, which was taken quite seriously by the public, resulting in a dip
in sales and in tobacco allotments. But the major blow to tobacco came with the 1964 Surgeon General’s Report on Smoking and Health. The report, issued on a Saturday to avoid immediate repercussions on the stock market, made a connection between tobacco use and lung cancer that was taken more seriously by American consumers than any previous expression of belief about the ill effects of tobacco use. It included the statement that “cigarette smoking is a health hazard of sufficient importance in the United States to warrant appropriate remedial action.” This was followed, in 1965, by a required warning label on cigarette packages that stated—as a result of concessions to the tobacco companies—simply that “cigarette smoking may be hazardous to your health” and a ban on cigarette advertising on broadcast television in 1971.

Tobacco companies rushed to buy other manufacturing concerns in order to protect both their image and their finances. Philip Morris led the way, buying up subsidiaries that made everything “from chewing gum and razor blades to beer.” Pro-tobacco associations had begun to organize in the late 1910s and early 1920s, and the Tobacco Institute—which would become the major lobbying arm of the tobacco industry—was established in 1958. The Council for Burley Tobacco formed in 1971, because “the challenge of mounting defenses against anti-tobacco attacks promised to be a full-time job.” Taxes were viewed as a threat to the industry perhaps equal to the growing awareness of health effects, and increased excise taxes were often successfully fought off. Manufacturers successfully mobilized growers to fight such fights for them, through active campaigns to tie the interests of farmers with their own interests and put a sympathetic face on the industry.

Recent Events: The Master Settlement Agreement, the Tobacco Buyout, and Government Regulation of Tobacco

President Bill Clinton was perceived by many to be “the most anti-tobacco president in history.” He paid a visit to Kentucky in 1998 to meet with farmers, assuring them that “we don’t have to wreck the fabric of life in your community. We don’t have to rob honest people of their way of life.” In September 2000, the Clinton administration created the President’s Commission on Improving Economic Opportunity in Communities Dependent on Tobacco Production while Protecting Public Health. The lengthy name reflects the
complexity of the issues with which it grappled. The commission's report, released in May 2001, made a range of recommendations focused on revamping but not eliminating the tobacco program, providing financial compensation and technical assistance to encourage growers to diversify their farm operations, and supporting tobacco cessation programs. This commission represented one aspect of a movement in the 1980s and '90s to bring public health advocates and tobacco communities together on those issues that they could agree upon, such as the economic consequences of a decline of tobacco markets and working to end youth tobacco use.

The $206 billion Master Settlement Agreement (MSA), reached in 1998 between the four largest American tobacco companies and forty-six state attorneys general, both symbolized and fortified the change in public attitudes regarding tobacco, as tobacco manufacturers settled with states that sought to recover medical costs associated with smoking-related illnesses. The MSA was the largest settlement of a civil suit in American history. Florida, Minnesota, Mississippi, and Texas had made prior, separate settlements totaling $40 billion. The companies originally sued were Philip Morris, R. J. Reynolds, Brown & Williamson, and Lorillard; additional companies signed on subsequent to the original settlement. Kentucky's participation in this lawsuit itself posed questions. Scott White, a member of the Kentucky attorney general's staff, said in an interview for the Kentucky Oral History Commission in 2000, "But of course tobacco affects so many different parts of Kentucky's economy and is grown in 119 out of our 120 counties. We've got a manufacturing plant in Jefferson County, there's tobacco warehouses strewn across the state, I mean, it truly is . . . you know, just part and parcel of who we are as Kentuckians. And, so we were, we kind of felt like if we were to sue the cigarette companies, it'd be kind of like Kentucky suing itself." Nevertheless, Kentucky participated in the lawsuit.

In addition to the monetary settlement, the industry agreed to create a fund for the promotion of tobacco prevention and cessation, the American Legacy Foundation, and to "modest restrictions on advertising and promotion," including a ban on the use of cartoon characters such as Joe Camel and of billboard advertising and promotional merchandise. In addition, the industry agreed to the closure of lobbying organizations, including the Tobacco Institute, and released what amounted to millions of pages of internal industry documents. Public health advocates had hoped for many additional
outcomes, including legislative changes such as Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulation of tobacco, stronger warnings on packaging, and tougher restrictions on the promotion of tobacco products. According to Allan Brandt, in his critique of the MSA, it “proved to be one of the industry’s most surprising victories in its long history of combat with the public health forces.”

The Master Settlement Agreement resulted in two phases of monetary awards. Phase I monies are being paid out to states over twenty-five years, and Phase II monies provided annual payments to growers in order to compensate them for the expected decline in demand for tobacco. The payments to farmers ended with the tobacco buyout, discussed below. Kentucky allocated 50 percent of the state’s Phase I monies to the support of agricultural diversification through the newly created Kentucky Agricultural Development Board, discussed in chapter 7. The use of Phase I monies by states has generated widespread criticism in the ensuing years, primarily because so little of the money went to antismoking programs, as public health advocates had hoped. Many states simply used the funds to plug holes in their budgets. “The costs of the settlement, as predicted, were passed on to consumers,” as the major companies raised their prices in order to cover the costs. Some argue that states are even more dependent on the tobacco industry for revenue than they were prior to the settlement.

Meanwhile, farmers were experiencing a tobacco program that had become a rollercoaster ride. Throughout the late 1990s, quotas rose and fell dramatically. In 1991, quotas were raised over 20 percent, followed by cuts at or below 10 percent until 1995, when they began to climb again. In 1999, farmers saw a 29 percent cut, followed by a 45 percent cut in 2000. Average quota lease prices increased from under thirty cents in 1997 to nearly seventy cents in 2002, as quota owners attempted to maintain their incomes. In the year 2000, Philip Morris established what it called the Tobacco Farmer Partnering Program, through which it began encouraging growers to bypass the auction system and contract directly with them, and in the following years other companies followed their lead. The controversy and uncertainty that came with contracting, combined with the dramatic quota cuts, served to increase feelings of inevitability surrounding the demise of the tobacco program. The end of the program came in October 2004.

For over sixty years, the pool stocks maintained by the Burley
Co-op ensured that growers had a market for their tobacco, and the guaranteed minimum price ensured, with a few exceptions, that the price did not drop significantly from one year to the next. However, support prices also ensured that American tobacco was increasingly more expensive than tobacco grown in other parts of the world, such as parts of Africa, South America, and Asia. Between 1970 and 2002, the portion of burley tobacco imported into the United States for domestic use grew from 0.6 percent to 48.1 percent. While American burley growers were being paid about two dollars a pound prior to the buyout, producers elsewhere were raising burley for fifty to seventy-five cents a pound, "maybe up to $1.00/lb in some years depending on the country as well as the year." The program also never fully controlled the problem of overproduction, particularly in bad crop years when unwanted leaf went into the pool in large quantities. This meant that when pool stocks grew excessively large, deals were struck in which tobacco manufacturers bought out the pool stocks in exchange for lowered prices and quotas for farmers. The largest of such buyouts took place in 1985, when farmers accepted a thirty-cent cut in poundage prices in exchange for an agreement in which the companies bought the pool stocks over a period of several years.

During the 1980s and 1990s there were multiple attempts to dismantle the tobacco program, such as an amendment to the 1981 farm bill that came one vote shy of passage. In 1982, "no-net-cost"
legislation instituted a system of fees, shared between producers and buyers, to cover the administrative costs of the program in order to ensure that taxpayers were not supporting tobacco production.\textsuperscript{132} By the late 1990s, the congressional delegations of Kentucky and other tobacco-producing states were proposing their own legislative solutions to the problems plaguing tobacco farmers and the tobacco industry. By this time, it was clear to all involved that major changes to the system were needed, although there was little agreement on what those changes should be, and Congress was working to please the opposing constituencies of growers, quota owners, manufacturers, and public health advocates. Many proposals were made, some of which became legislation, some of which did not; in 2002 alone, nine tobacco buyout bills were introduced in Congress.\textsuperscript{133}

In October 2004, Congress ended the federal tobacco program with the passage of the Fair and Equitable Tobacco Reform Act (within the American Jobs Creation Act of 2004), resulting in “one of the most dramatic changes in any U.S. agricultural policy over the last half century, as tobacco now ha[d] the distinction of being the only government-supported commodity to move abruptly to an entirely free-market policy.”\textsuperscript{134} The primary argument for the buyout was that once there was no longer a support price, the market would readjust, and manufacturers would buy more American-grown tobacco. It was also argued that the complicated system of nonproducing quota owners and growers to whom they leased their allotments would be simplified, and growers could accept lower prices since they would not have to lease in poundage.

The end of the program is referred to as “the buyout” because quota owners and tobacco growers were entitled to annual payments for ten years, based on the amount of tobacco grown and/or the quota owned under the tobacco program. These payments, totaling $9.6 billion, come from the Tobacco Transition Payment Program, funded by the major cigarette manufacturers, not from tax dollars, as many erroneously believe. The purpose of buyout payments was to compensate growers and quota owners for an anticipated loss of income, as well as the probable decrease in land values once tobacco quotas were no longer attached to farms. Presumably, owners would lose income as they lost the ability to lease their quota, while growers (whether owners or lessees of quota) would lose income because the poundage price would drop once the support price was gone. Those who owned quota at the time of the buyout received payments of $7
per pound of quota owned in 2002. Growers who had leased other people’s tobacco quota received $3 per pound grown, and those who raised tobacco in crop-share arrangements rather than leasing another farm’s quota straight out received a portion of the grower payment based on that arrangement (i.e., those who raised on halves received $1.50 per pound). Many growers were in multiple categories—owning and raising their own quota while also leasing quota in order to supplement what they owned. As the name—Tobacco Transition Payment Program—indicates, in addition to its compensatory purpose, the buyout was intended to help tobacco producers through a “transition,” a term that (as I will discuss in chapter 7) has come to have multiple meanings.

The tobacco buyout is not a true buyout, because tobacco growers did not sell their quota and with it their right to raise tobacco. Although many did get out of tobacco, those who remain now work in a free-market environment with no poundage limits but also no support price. The poundage price dropped from about $2 a pound to around $1.50 the first year after the buyout. For those who were paying seventy to ninety cents a pound to raise tobacco for $2 a pound, $1.50 a pound was clearly a better deal even if they continued to rent land, because without the quota land became considerably cheaper to rent. However, there were also many growers who owned quota—including many who had bought quota after the law changed to allow them to do so in 1991—and these owner-growers lost out (although for ten years their buyout payment serves as at least partial compensation for their losses). The effects of the tobacco buyout are discussed throughout this book.

A number of the buyout proposals of the late 1990s and early 2000s included the granting of regulatory power over tobacco to the FDA—something that health advocates had lobbied heavily for and tobacco companies had long lobbied hard against. Although this power did not make it into the final buyout legislation, it soon followed. FDA regulation of tobacco had long been a topic of great contention. When the FDA was created in 1906, the tobacco industry successfully lobbied for tobacco’s removal from the list of drugs to be regulated. In 1996, the FDA declared that it had the power to “regulate nicotine-containing tobacco products as medical devices,” but in 2000 the Supreme Court ruled that the FDA did not have the jurisdiction to do so without congressional action. FDA regulation of tobacco products finally became a reality with
the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, signed by President Barack Obama on June 22, 2009. Passage was made possible in large part by the support of Philip Morris, which reversed its long-standing opposition. Philip Morris, which claims to be conducting research toward “safer” tobacco products, seems to have decided that FDA involvement will shield it from future litigation. It is the perception of many—particularly other tobacco companies—that the limits on tobacco product marketing included in the legislation will help Philip Morris to protect its control of the cigarette market. In 2008 Philip Morris split into Philip Morris International (PMI) and Philip Morris USA (PMUSA), suggesting a connection with its support of FDA regulation, since presumably PMI, which makes products for sale abroad, would not be under FDA regulation, while PMUSA would.\footnote{138}

Farmers have long feared—with the encouragement of tobacco companies\footnote{139}—that FDA regulation will translate into additional governmental involvement in on-farm practices. Although the legislation bars the FDA from regulating growers, the regulation of the content of tobacco products will certainly lead to more intense regulation—of chemical use and other farming and packaging practices, for instance—of growers by manufacturers. Although growers have long opposed FDA regulation, once it became a reality, some expressed hope that it will result in an increase in the amount of domestic tobacco purchased by manufacturers because “foreign leaf [used in the domestic manufacture of products] will have to meet the same standards for pesticides as domestic leaf.”\footnote{140} Whatever tobacco farmers’ feelings may be, FDA regulation adds another layer of uncertainty about tobacco’s future and the ongoing transition of tobacco production.

**Kentucky Burley Tobacco Production Today**

As I demonstrate throughout this book, tobacco farming as cultural practice has been eulogized in the news and by Kentucky authors, it has been erased from the publications of Kentucky government agencies, it has been removed from local festivals, and it has been put on exhibit as a “way of life” of the past. Informal conversations I have had since I began this research suggest a widespread public perception that there are very few tobacco growers left.

It is indisputable that US tobacco production is in decline, but
the decline is not a new phenomenon. The number of farms growing tobacco of all types and in all regions of the United States fell from 512,000 in 1954 to 56,977 in 2002. Between 2002 and 2007, the number of farms growing tobacco nationwide dropped from 56,977 to 16,234, although the number of pounds that were raised during the same period dropped only from about 873 million to 778 million. There were nearly 60,000 Kentucky farms on which tobacco was grown in 1992 and nearly 30,000 in 2002. Kentucky tobacco production dropped over 30 percent in 2005, the year following the buyout, but the decline in Kentucky burley and dark-fired tobacco
Burley production was smaller than the decline in areas that specialize in flue-cured tobacco, such as North and South Carolina and Virginia.\textsuperscript{144} Kentucky continues to lead in the production of burley and dark tobaccos, and only North Carolina outranks Kentucky in total tobacco production.\textsuperscript{145} However, although Kentucky produced 75 percent of US burley in 2007, this represented just over 15 percent of the world’s burley, down from 40 percent in 1990.\textsuperscript{146}

A full 50 percent of US tobacco farms are in Kentucky, and in 2007 “the number of farms growing tobacco outnumber[ed] all other single ag enterprises in Kentucky with the exception of the number of cattle/hay farms.”\textsuperscript{147} The 2007 Census of Agriculture revealed that there were 8,113 tobacco farms in Kentucky that year.\textsuperscript{148} The census figures, released in February 2009, were somewhat surprising because there were a couple thousand more tobacco farms than had been estimated. The remaining number of small tobacco farms was even more surprising. I was told many times—by former and current tobacco farmers, extension agents, and others—that tobacco farms are all becoming large farms. Tobacco farms are becoming “industrial” farms, I was occasionally told by retired and former tobacco farmers. However, according to the Census of Agriculture, in 2007
the largest group of Kentucky tobacco growers (33 percent) raised between 2.0 and 4.9 acres; only 10 percent raised 25.0 or more.\textsuperscript{149} This is even more startling when compared with North Carolina, which had just over 2,600 tobacco farms in 2007, with the largest category in the over-one-hundred-acre range (583 farms).\textsuperscript{150} A persistent thread throughout this book is an attempt to understand the discrepancies between public perceptions of the number of tobacco farmers and census figures, as well as conflicting perspectives on the future of Kentucky tobacco.

The following exchange took place in early 2008, during an interview with Jonathan Shell and his grandfather, G. B., with whom I had visited many times over the previous year:

**Author:** I was asking your granddad what he thought about me coming down and learning from ya’ll, for really almost a year—

**Jonathan:** Well I like it. I hope you romanticize tobacco in your [book] and you get published; that way people will start loving it.

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<th>Tobacco Acreage per Farm</th>
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<th>North Carolina</th>
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* Totals will not equal 100 percent, due to rounding.*
Author: So you think I should romanticize it?
Jonathan: Yeah.
Author: And what does that mean?
Jonathan: Just make it intimate. To where that they can see
    that you know, there’s hands that touch this stuff, and that
    there’s lives that are dependent on it.

My goal in this book has not been to romanticize tobacco farming,
but I do hope that I have succeeded in demonstrating that “there’s
hands that touch this stuff, and that there’s lives that are dependent
on it.”