

Growing Tobacco ^[1]



^[2] [This short documentary](#) ^[2] shows the process of harvesting, curing, and selling tobacco, from farm to auction. It was filmed at Duke Homestead State Historic Site in Durham, North Carolina, during the 2009 Tobacco Harvest Festival.

The reenactors represent various time periods, from the late 19th century to the late 20th century. By the postwar era, for example, mules were being replaced by tractors. But the work shown changed little in this period.

North Carolina Tobacco and Black Labor

By Kyle Porter, NC Government and Heritage Library, 2018; Jordan Scott, 2018

Before the Piedmont Leaf Tobacco Plant Strike of 1946, the relationship between North Carolina tobacco and black labor goes back centuries to when North Carolina was a colony of the British Empire. Free enslaved African labor cultivated tobacco as a cash crop for North Carolina. There is a story known to historians about an enslaved man name Stephen who created what is known as bright leaf tobacco today.

In the late nineteenth century after slavery ended, a significant population of freedmen began to settle in what is now Durham, North Carolina. In respect of its natural position in the northeastern part of the state, Durham was a shipping town where goods passed through to be distributed to various regions and other states. The city's location, natural shipping routes, and a city politic that developed to foster black and white business leaders ties was ideal for the building of a tobacco empire.

By the late nineteenth century big tobacco corporations built factories in Durham as the base of their business operations. R.J. Reynolds, American Tobacco, Lorillard, Liggett and Myers and the British-American Tobacco Company all hired cheap African American labor to maximize their profits. African American laborers worked under some of the worst conditions, and did the most grueling and menial work. White workers did not want to work next to African Americans, in response companies built separate facilities to separate the races.

Tobacco factories was some of the only work available to African Americans during this time period. Even though African Americans engaged in most of the hard labor, their pay was not equal to their white counterparts. A significant number of African American women were hired to separate tobacco seeds from the leaves. This was tedious work that black women were not getting a just pay for. From unsafe working conditions to discrimination, segregation in the workplace and unfair pay, the seeds of dissatisfaction were planted decades before the culmination of the Piedmont Leaf Tobacco Plant Strike of 1946.

APWU. "Black Women Raise Their Voices in the Tobacco Industry." Accessed October 29, 2021.
<https://www.apwu.org/news/black-women-raise-their-voices-tobacco-industry> ^[3]

North Carolina State University. "Tobacco History." Accessed July 24, 2018.
<https://www.lib.ncsu.edu/archivedexhibits/tobacco/thistory.html> ^[4]

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