

4-1-1995

# Dark Fired Tobacco: The Origin, Migration and Survival of a Colonial Era Agrarian Tradition

John Morgan

*Western Kentucky University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses>



Part of the [Folklore Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Morgan, John, "Dark Fired Tobacco: The Origin, Migration and Survival of a Colonial Era Agrarian Tradition" (1995). *Masters Theses & Specialist Projects*. Paper 916.

<http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/916>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses & Specialist Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact [topscholar@wku.edu](mailto:topscholar@wku.edu).

DARK FIRED TOBACCO:  
THE ORIGIN, MIGRATION AND SURVIVAL OF  
A COLONIAL ERA AGRARIAN TRADITION

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of  
Modern Languages and Intercultural Studies  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

By

John Morgan

April 1995



DARK FIRED TOBACCO:  
THE ORIGIN, MIGRATION AND SURVIVAL OF  
A COLONIAL ERA AGRARIAN TRADITION

Date Recommended 4-18-95

Michael M. Williams  
Director of Thesis

John B. [unclear]  
[unclear]

Date Approved 4-18-95

John B. Gray  
Dean of the Graduate College

In the fall of 1825 Jessie Paschall and his wife Mary, of Caswell County, North Carolina, loaded their fourteen children and all their belongings into wagons and prepared to depart for the West. Somewhere underneath the Paschall's handmade furniture and few store-bought items was a wooden box. Inside that box was a small cloth bag, and inside that bag were a few ounces of the tiniest seeds one could imagine. They were the dark tobacco seeds Jessie Paschall had collected from his fields earlier that summer. His family aside, these seeds were his most precious cargo.

In the fall of 1992 Tommy Paschall, the great-great-great-great-great grandson of Jessie Paschall, tends the curing fires of one of his tobacco barns in Calloway County, Kentucky. One hundred and sixty seven years of Paschall family life and tradition had passed by. As I watched Tommy lay down large scrap planks of hickory wood in three rows on the floor of his barn, I wondered where this unique tobacco curing process might have originated. And as Tommy placed smaller pieces of scrap wood on top of his three "firing runs," I knew that he was practicing a tradition learned from his father, but I knew also that the tradition went much deeper. When I asked Tommy where he thought the fire-curing method came from, he answered, "I don't know. But I do know its been here as long as anyone can remember."

The "here" Tommy was speaking of is an area known as the "black patch," so called for the dark green tobacco grown in a region that once included twenty-eight Kentucky counties and eight counties in Tennessee. Over the years the area has diminished with a changing tobacco market. Though you will still find

## Map of Kentucky Counties

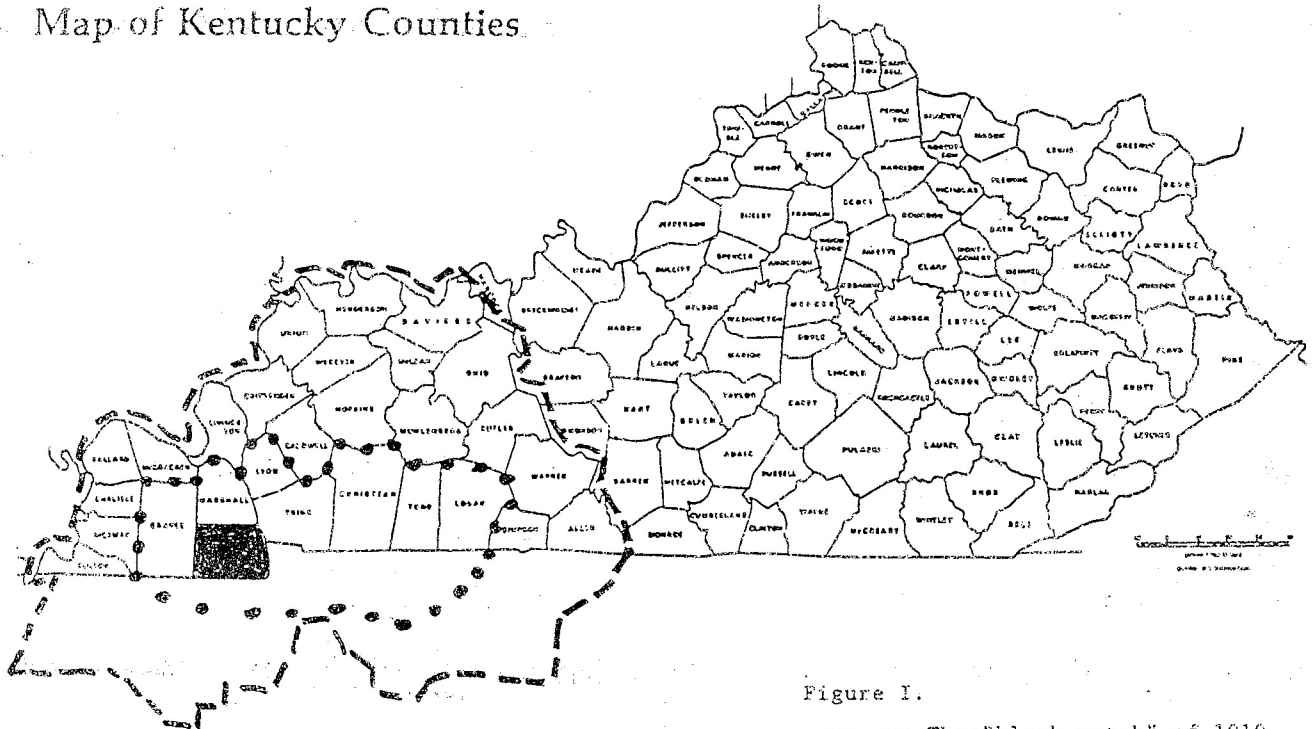


Figure I.

— — — — — The "black patch" of 1919.

• • • • • The "black patch" of 1922.

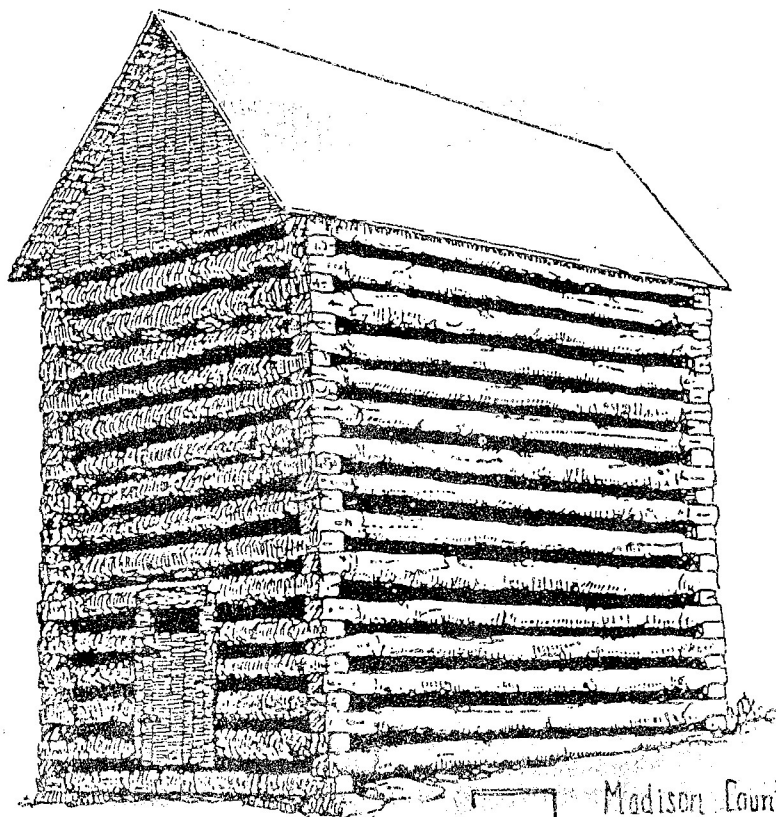
The "black patch" once included twenty-eight Kentucky counties and eight counties in Tennessee.

Calloway County, Kentucky is represented by the darkened area.

occurrences of fire-curing throughout the old boundaries, the majority of all fire-cured dark tobacco is currently produced in an area encompassing parts of four Tennessee counties and eight Kentucky counties, including Calloway County, where the tradition of fire-curing remains strong (personal correspondence 1992).

The main questions I wish to answer in this paper are how and when did this tradition arrive in Kentucky and Tennessee, and where did it originate? Nearly everyone I talked with in Calloway County about the origin of fire-curing dark tobacco responded with variations of Tommy Paschall's answer. It had just been there for as long as they could remember. They were exemplifying what Michael Ann Williams called "the limited reach of oral history" (Williams 1991:4). Folk memory is short, generally only reaching back two or three generations. This fact is problematic because a basic working premise of any folklife study is that everything has a history. Nothing develops in isolation, though many people in Calloway County seem to believe that the process of fire-curing tobacco is completely unique to their region.

Recognizing the limitations of oral history, how then do we get at the origins of certain traditions? My response to was to take a comprehensive approach to my research, including the use of secondary document history, observation, and interviews with primary sources. The primary informants, though limited in historical reach, were most valuable in understanding the contemporary status of this agricultural tradition. Observation was also useful. Careful observations of people acting out their traditions, and observation of their material environment always



Madison County  
North Carolina

This drawing of a tobacco barn by Henry Glassie was the second piece of evidence linking the barn forms found in western Kentucky to those found in North Carolina and Virginia.

provided valuable pieces of evidence for this study. In all, this research is supported by dozens of informal interviews, two telephone interviews, eight audio taped interviews, twelve hours of video tape, and over four hundred still photographs.

As a third source of information, I had to rely a good deal on secondary history for my research. Though the historical document often has a tendency to be biased, when used wisely as corroborating evidence it can prove invaluable, particularly in a study of a historical nature, such as this one. Finally, I would be less than honest if I did not give due credit to serendipity. For example, when a fellow student's parents visited from North Dakota they brought along a place mat illustrated with American barns. They had found the place mat in a restaurant in North Dakota many years earlier. Knowing their daughter, Claudia Pratt, was researching barns they thought she would appreciate the illustrations. Claudia excitedly brought the place mat to my attention because there amongst the eighteen illustrated barns was a type very similar to the dark tobacco barns Pratt and I had co-researched in western Kentucky. This barn, though, was identified as a "North Carolina log tobacco barn." It was the barns that first got me interested in dark tobacco, and it was this illustrated barn, on of all things a place mat, that provided the first clue in my search for the origin of the fire curing process. Many other such chance happenings and meetings have blessed this study.

This paper is an historiographical account of the origin of a traditional agrarian process that reaches far back into the

Colonial era in the Americas. Though I will describe the contemporary process of fire-curing tobacco, I do so for the purpose of placing it in an historical context. A complete analytical study of the "dark fired" process as it exists today needs to be done. But that is another task for another time. The main task of this study is to indicate the origin, migration, and survival of the dark tobacco fire-curing tradition still practiced in western Kentucky and Tennessee.

My first contact with dark tobacco farmers came in September of 1992 when a research team, of which I was a part, went to investigate an old dark tobacco barn in Calloway County, Kentucky. The team soon discovered that the subject was much more complex; the barn documentation opened many doors on the region's tobacco producing culture. We quickly learned that we were not dealing with barns as relics, but rather were investigating artifacts of a living tradition - the process of using fire to cure tobacco. Like all living traditions, this one, too, has seen many changes, but the basic elements are intact. Perhaps the oldest element of this tradition is the tobacco itself.

Europe's "discovery" of the Americas brought about its discovery of the tobacco plant. Long before the arrival of European explorers, Native Americans had used the plant in their medicine, ceremonies, and for personal enjoyment. "It is believed that tobacco is almost certainly a native American plant, but not native to Canada or to the eastern two-thirds of the [continental] Americas, including Kentucky" (Axton 1975:5). Though it was used throughout the North and South American continents, the exact

origin of tobacco is unknown. Not long after Europeans arrived in the Americas, tobacco became one of the first trade products to be shipped from the New World to the Old World. The tobacco plant reached Spain and Portugal in 1558, and England by 1565. The smoking of dried tobacco leaf quickly became very fashionable in Europe. Thus, by the time Jamestown was settled, the demand for tobacco was enormous. Jamestown settlers immediately set about cultivating the native tobacco (ibid).

John Rolfe, an English planter, was dissatisfied with the native plant found along the James River. This *Nicotiana rustica* was much harsher than the variety being imported by the Spanish. "Apparently John Rolfe, or one of his compatriots, initiated a change to the '*West-Indie Trinidado*' type about 1612 by importing [smuggling] seed of the milder *Nicotiana tabacum* from Trinidad or the Orinoco River Valley. Presumably Rolfe cultivated his first crop of the new variety in 1612" (Tilley 1948:5). This small amount of tobacco seed smuggled out of the Caribbean or South America proved to be the most valuable treasure ever taken from the Spanish by Englishmen. "By 1616 dark tobacco of the *Nicotiana tabacum* species was considered the chief commodity of Virginia; and by 1628 the annual export to England amounted to five hundred thousand pounds" (ibid). The dark tobacco grown today in western Kentucky and Tennessee is "closer than any other modern tobacco to the original type which was planted at Jamestown in 1612" (Hart 1961:279).

Historical records indicate that from the beginning English colonial planters sought to improve their "chief commodity" by



experimenting with different curing methods. Initially, the colonial planters likely followed the example of the indigenous people who laid their tobacco leaf out on the ground to dry. But Jamestown planter Thomas Lambert soon found unsatisfactory the procedure of piling tobacco in heaps like hay. "On March 10, 1618, Governor Samuel Argall wrote to officials of the Virginia Company as follows: 'Mr. Lambert has found out that tobacco cures better on lines than in heaps and desires lines be sent'" (Tilley 1948:5). Lambert's suggestion of raising the harvested tobacco off the ground by stringing it on lines possibly marked the beginning of what is called air-curing. There aren't any known records to show how this curing method was accepted, but it seems reasonable to say that it must have gained wide favor. The move from stretched lines, to wooden scaffold, to a shelter over the scaffold is also not traceable. However, the fact that air-curing remains today the most widely used method for curing tobacco attests to its efficiency.

With innovative cultivation and curing practices the colonial planter increased both the quality and quantity of his product, and the need for new land was great. A planter often raised three or four crops on a patch of land, then abandoned it for virgin soil. Such land exploitive tactics led to the expansion of plantations and the opening of new lands. The tobacco culture began to spread west and south of the James River colonies. Indeed, tobacco seems to have been a prime impetus for colonial expansion. As the eighteenth century arrived, European demands for tobacco increased and colonial planters strove to meet those

demands. A century and a half of tobacco consumption in Europe had resulted in refined tastes, and planters struggled to produce a product that would match whatever tobacco was currently in favor. The rewards were high and competing colonial governments regularly lobbied the English crown for favor, hoping to gain royal patronage and legal advantage over their neighboring colonists. Intense competition marked the development of an increasingly powerful tobacco culture in the southern colonies (Robert 1938).

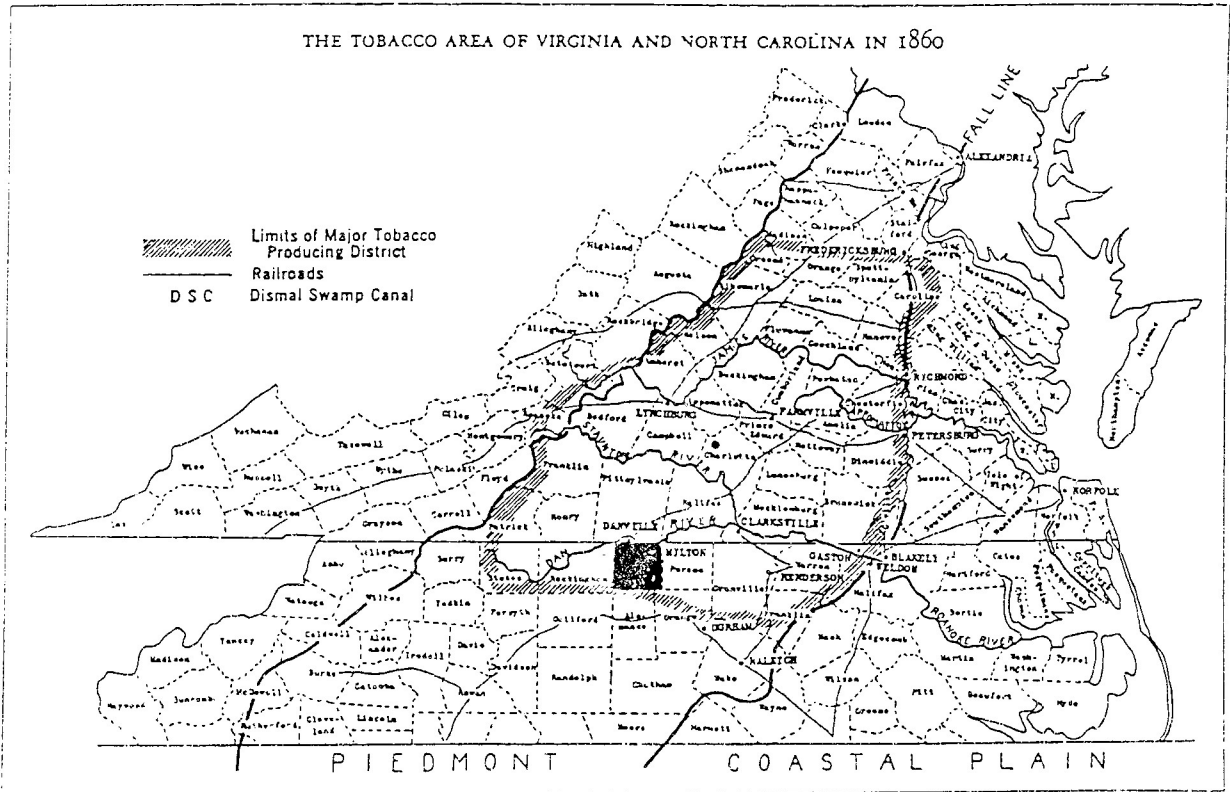
Powered by slave labor, tobacco production increased dramatically. As the American Revolution neared, Virginia typically was exporting 55,000,000 pounds of tobacco per year, and Maryland 30,000,000 pounds. Parts of the Carolinas were also emerging as a region of significant tobacco production. The Carolina region lay just south of the present-day Virginia/North Carolina border. Colonial planters were flexing their muscles and, indeed, played major roles in the declaration of independence from the Mother Country. "In the immediate post-Revolutionary years there was a notable extension of tobacco culture in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. Exports of the leaf from the United States in Washington's first administration approximated the highest Colonial levels" (Robert 1938:10). By the turn of the nineteenth century the region responsible for the most tobacco production was well defined. Called the Virginia District, it began in the north at Fredericksburg, Virginia and spread out south and westward, bounded on the east by the falls line of the eastern Virginia rivers, on the west by the Blue Ridge

Mountains, and to the south across the North Carolina border to encompass six of that state's counties. This region is also known as the "Old Tobacco Belt" (ibid). Geographically, the area is referred to as the Piedmont, and it proved particularly suitable for the cultivation of tobacco. Caswell County, North Carolina sits right on the lower end of the "Old Belt," and, significantly, the nearby Virginia/North Carolina border lies between the thirty-sixth and thirty-seventh latitudes, exactly as does the Kentucky/Tennessee border on which rests Calloway County, Kentucky, 600 miles to the west.

By 1800 the cultivation of tobacco was a highly developed agricultural artform. But it remained the most labor intensive crop a planter could choose to cultivate. The rewards, however, were equal to the effort. Both proportionately high profits and intensive labor remain factors of tobacco production even today. Tobacco is still called the "13 month crop" because in November as a farmer prepares this year's crop for the market he is also preparing his tobacco fields for the next crop.

One of the most valuable descriptions of the cycle of work involved in tobacco cultivation in the early nineteenth century, valuable mainly because the description was drawn from ante-bellum publications, comes from Joseph Clark Robert in his book, *The Tobacco Kingdom*:

As is the practice today, the tobacco plants were started in plant beds, and then transplanted to the fields. The place chosen for the plant bed was usually virgin soil on a sunny slope, often in the woods, and preferably by a small stream so that in dry weather watering would be less difficult. The soil desired was fresh loam with a slight



Map showing "old tobacco belt" of Virginia and North Carolina. Caswell County, North Carolina is represented by the darkened area.

- Location of Redhouse, Virginia.

mixture of sand. Several beds distributed over various locations were preferred in order to avoid the hazard of staking all on the chances of one plot. Some planters recommended manuring the plant bed the fall before the actual seed sowing, though customarily preparation commenced with the burning of the ground in January, February, or the first part of March. In the earliest years the ground was sometimes burned by heaping cornstalks and other rubbish on the desired place and setting fire to the mass, but the more usual procedure was to put skids about two feet apart, pile wood on top, set fire to the logs, and, after a good blaze for an hour or so, pull the fire to newer parts of the plant bed by means of long poles, equipped with hooks. The specific purpose of burning was to kill the grass and weed seeds, although a planter here and there had the idea that the fire itself was a good fertilizer.

Hoes and sometimes plows pulverized the soil for receipt of the seed. The tobacco seeds, carefully preserved from plants of the year before, were mixed with sand, ashes, plaster of Paris, or some other substance so that the distribution of the tiny seeds - one of the smallest of the whole vegetable kingdom - would be effected evenly. Four tablespoons were sufficient to plant a hundred square yards of plant bed. After the seeds were sown, they were lightly covered with finely prepared dirt. Then came the application of strong fertilizer, and, as a protection against frost, row after row of bushes... When frost time had passed and the plants were up, the bushes were removed.

If new land was planted, a practice that became less and less frequent with the progress of the century, it had to be cleared of timber and brush, raked, plowed, and perhaps grubbed by hand. Usually a hill was raised for the reception of each plant. Hills averaged from four thousand to five thousand per acre. Planters commonly spoke in terms of their tobacco crop as so many thousand plants, rather than in terms of acres.

In May or June the crop was "pitched," that is, the plants were drawn from the beds and put in the hills which had been prepared for them. The time was appropriate when sufficient rain had fallen for the transplanting to take place without danger to the plant. A favorite period was the so-called "long season in May," which, as one narrator apologetically explained, often came in June. Even in the best of weather not all plants lived and vacant spaces were filled by replanting.

When the roots became firmly attached to the ground, the tobacco received its first working, sometimes called a "weeding out" or "trimming down." Hoes were used almost continuously from this time until the crop was "laid by."

The process of "topping," which took place about six weeks after transplanting, consisted of extracting from the top of the plant the small bud together with as much of the

stem and as many leaves as the condition of the soil and type of tobacco warranted. Topping kept the plant from running up to seed and allowed fuller development of the remaining leaves.

Two tasks of frequent repetition were suckering and worming. After topping, superfluous sprouts called suckers appeared between leaves and stalk and were pulled off before they sapped the nutriment from the leaves. The greatest insect pest met in tobacco raising was the green horn-worm, called "the worm that *never dies*." The only effective defense known at that time was a careful examination of each plant and the killing of each worm as discovered. Guinea-fowls and turkeys were often drafted to aid in the attack on the worms.

The growing plants were subject to damage or destruction, not only from insects, but from disease, flood, drought, hail, and wind. If an early frost threatened, it forced cutting before the leaf was thoroughly ripe; if it unexpectedly arrived, it occasioned the ruin of entire crops.

Only the experienced planter could tell when tobacco was ripe; there was grave danger from cutting either too early or too late. Usually several cuttings for each field were required, though in case of emergency, a frost threat for example, the whole lot was cut at one time. A practice which was adopted by an increasingly large number of planters was, before cutting, to split the stalk down almost to the point [near the ground] where it was to be cut. By the 1830's stalk splitting was accepted as the usual procedure, as it not only facilitated curing but allowed the plants to straddle the tobacco sticks, or laths, on which they rested while being cured.

The cut plants were left in the field until the sun "killed" them, that is, until they had wilted and become pliable enough to be moved without breaking. Before they were placed in tobacco houses for the actual curing, sometimes they were left on scaffolds exposed to sun and air for several days. This yellowed the tobacco and initiated the curing process (1938: 34-39).

Although modern tobacco planters have many advantages over their nineteenth century counterparts, such as mechanization and pesticides, the cultivation cycle, remarkably, is the same today as it was 200 years ago.

Robert's description of this cycle leads us to the critical focus of this study, that of the curing process used on dark tobacco. He was describing the planting season of dark tobacco

grown in nineteenth century Virginia and North Carolina , but even as other strains of tobacco were introduced, the planting cycle remained essentially the same, much as it does today for burley tobacco. It is, however, both the species and the curing process that make dark tobacco distinctive in the late twentieth century. Fire-curing, as it is practiced in Calloway County, varies from family to family, but the basic process is consistent. After the farmer has housed his tobacco in the barn, he will let it air-cure for three to five days, maybe even a week. When the farmer deems the tobacco ready he will prepare his first fire. The actual method used to prepare the fire has usually been passed down within the family. In general, the farmer will lay out three rows, or "runs" of scrap timber on the floor of the barn. These rows of timber run parallel to the ridge line of the barn roof. The three row pattern is most commonly used in the average size barns, which range in dimensions of sixteen feet by sixteen feet in the oldest log barns, to twenty feet by twenty-four feet in later barns. The barns that have shed additions usually require two additional firing runs per shed. The newer, larger barns sometimes take six or more firing runs, but such barns are atypical in Calloway County. The examples I give are more common. For instance, brothers Glen and Johnny Cossey still fire in two ninety-plus year old log barns measuring twenty feet by twenty four feet at the floor. The method they use was learned directly from their father, who learned it from his father, and so on. In watching these two men at work, it was not difficult to envision the performance of a contemporary dance, made all the more

dramatic amidst the blowing smoke and floating ash. Every move seemed to be choreographed.

To begin the process each brother carried in long, thin strips of scrap wood from a pile located just outside the barn. These strips were placed in three shallow trenches in the barn floor. The trenches had been formed over decades of use. Once sufficient amounts of small scrap wood was laid out, Glen and Johnny began to carry in large scrap slabs of timber, measuring on the average about eight feet in length and eight to twelve inches in width. These planks, about one inch thick, had been purchased from a nearby lumber mill. The planks were placed over the smaller scrap in a tent-like fashion. When the planks were in position, one of the brothers began hauling in wheelbarrow loads of sawdust which he piled over the firing runs. At the same time the other brother was starting fires at the ends and middle of each firing run. Once these fires were burning they, too, were covered with sawdust. The three long mounds of sawdust were packed down carefully. Satisfied that the fires were still burning, the Cossey brothers closed the barn doors to allow the fires to smolder and the heat and smoke to build up in the barn. This process would be repeated, with varying degrees of fire and heat intensity, over a six to eight week period. The season I witnessed the Cossey brothers at work, they were firing six barns of tobacco.

Each farmer I observed in Calloway County fired his tobacco differently than his neighbor. But no matter who performs the fire building it is essentially the same process, as is the



expected result: the production of a uniquely cured tobacco which is favored for use in snuff, and favored by many European smokers. Exactly how one creates perfect fire-cured tobacco leaf remains a mystery to me. I do know it involves a codified folk knowledge which I was not able to fully understand. Each family seems to produce a cured leaf with different qualities. The Cossey brothers, for example, are known for a dark, heavy leaf, while Tommy Paschall is known for producing a leaf lighter in weight and color, exactly as his father produced. When I interviewed Tommy about the firing process, I detected a modest sense of pride in the fact that he produced tobacco just like his father had. Examples of Tommy's coded traditional knowledge can be seen in his descriptions of various phases of the curing process. When he was talking about the need to avoid discoloring the freshly housed leaf, he said, "the first two fires you're trying to bring the colors through. That's the most important part. If it's too hot it will green it." Tommy continued by explaining that the ultimate goal in the firing process is to get the leaf to look "shiny like varnish" once the leaf has been "brought back to order." As best I could determine, Tommy was striving to get his tobacco leaf to look and feel like thin, finely tanned leather. All of the farmers I talked with used similar terms, and each felt a little frustrated when they tried to explain the process to me. The fire-curing of dark tobacco is one of those intangible occupational practices you can only learn through experience; it cannot be described verbally either to an outsider. Only years of observation and practice can instruct one in the craft.

A more tangible element, however, are the barns used in the fire-curing process. Their form is distinctive and likely evolved from their intended use. Their unusual shape makes them appear to be tall and slender, and proportionately they are taller than their base measurements would normally dictate. Since this paper focuses on the history of the fire-curing process, the description of barns I include will be of the oldest examples documented. These examples are presented because the barns are important links toward understanding the origins of the fire-curing tradition.

The oldest extant log tobacco barns found in Calloway County, Kentucky measure sixteen feet by sixteen feet at the inside floor. In the Upland South, a sixteen feet square single pen structure is very common (Glassie 1965). The older dark tobacco barns of Kentucky differ from the common single pen barns in that they are taller; often they are twice as tall as they are wide, averaging twenty-eight to thirty feet in height from ground to roof ridge. The oldest extant barns are typically constructed of hewn logs joined with a half dovetail technique. Oral testimony indicates that the logs are most likely to be post oak, a native wood in western Kentucky and Tennessee. The hewn logs average from eight inches to eleven inches tall and six inches thick. The base logs are set on four corner stones that are on average twenty inches in diameter. These stones are called "iron concrete," which is a natural rock formation found one foot below the aggregate in Calloway County (Pratt, et al 1992). Having this barn type firmly in my mind helped me recognize the next clue that would lead me to North Carolina. The barn type I saw illustrated on the place mat

was similar to the Calloway County barns, but it sat on top of a tall stone foundation which, with its arched opening, appeared to be an oven-like structure. Later in my research I did come across an illustration of a barn type that nearly exactly matched the Calloway County type. The illustration was by Henry Glassie and was part of his study of Appalachian barn types. Glassie identified the structure as a North Carolina tobacco barn (1965). Although Glassie's illustrated tobacco barn had unchinked logs, indicating it was used for air-curing, it was without a doubt the same basic building form used for fire-curing in Kentucky and Tennessee. Finding this illustration reinforced my belief that the barn form found in western Kentucky originated in the old tobacco district, and that a trip to North Carolina would be a worthwhile pursuit for my research. I needed to measure some eastern tobacco barns and see what they looked like inside.

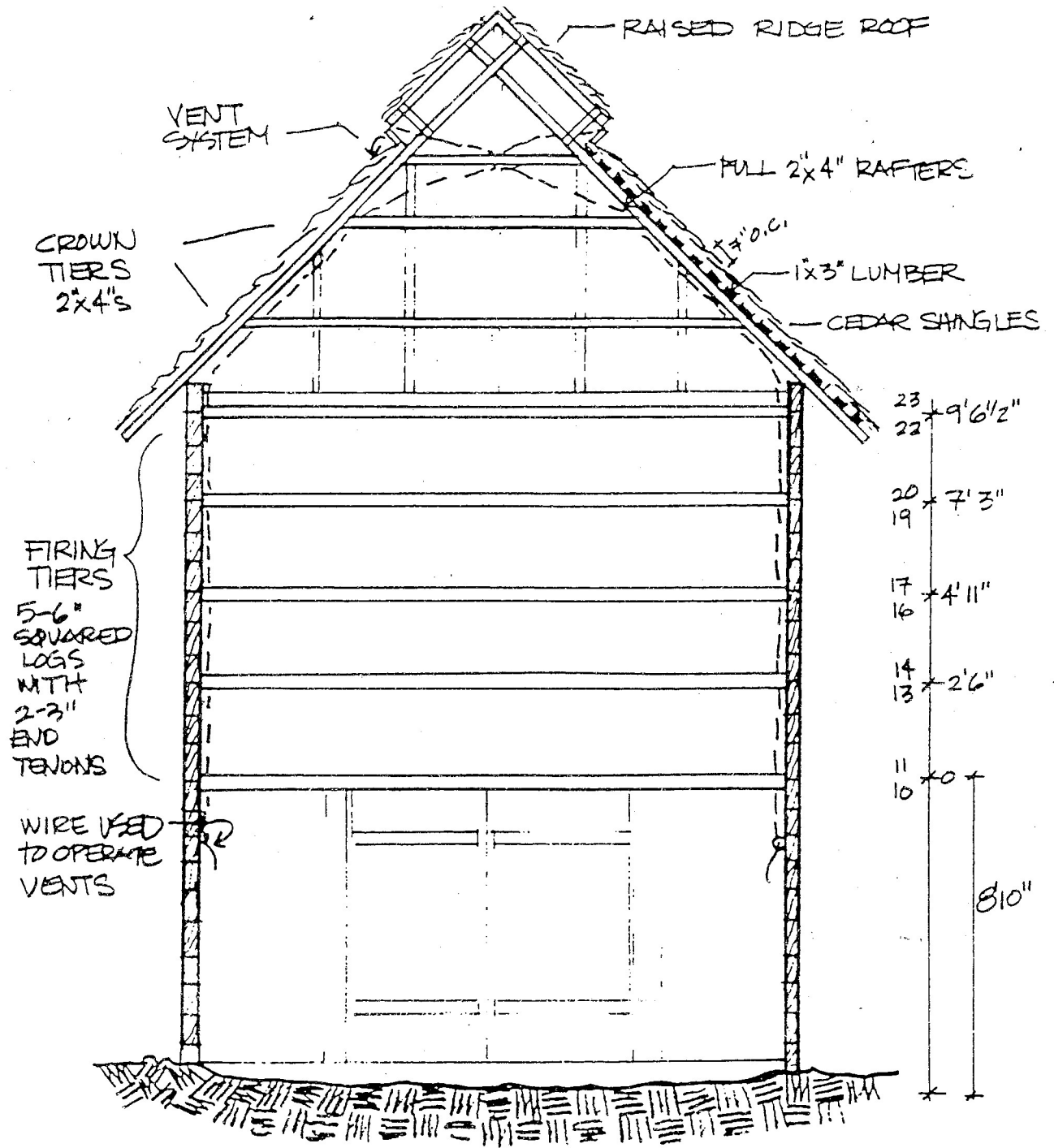
The main, pertinent feature of the interior of a fire-curing tobacco barn, or any tobacco barn, are the tier poles. These are the poles from which the sticks of harvested tobacco are hung to cure. For the best description of the tier pole arrangement in an older log barn I again turn to Pratt:

Three sets of log tiers run perpendicular to the ridge of the structure. The "firing tiers" or bottom five tiers begin between logs ten and eleven and continue up [five levels to the top of the log walls]. The lower five tier poles have full width, flat, two to three inch thick tenons which are pinned between the wall logs. The top three "crown tiers" are constructed of thinner poles or milled lumber. In each interior gable end of the structure, there are one by three inch planks attached two inches off the wall to match the height of each of the tiers. This enabled the barn to hold tobacco sticks four bays or "rooms" wide (1992: III/5).

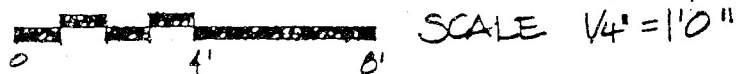
To better understand what the interior of a typical fire-curing barn looks like, I have included two of Pratt's scale drawings of the structure described above.

Another piece of evidence that pointed back east was found in a 1961 article by cultural geographers John Fraser Hart and Eugene Cotton Mather. This was their study of the disbursement of various tobacco barn types across the eastern United States. In this article was a flue-curing barn of Virginia. In exterior appearance, it was very similar to the fire-curing barns of western Kentucky. I knew that flue-curing was significantly different from fire-curing, in that heat from external fires was distributed through the barn by large flue pipes laid on the barn floor along the interior walls. But the fact that fire was used in both processes was a feature that could not be ignored.

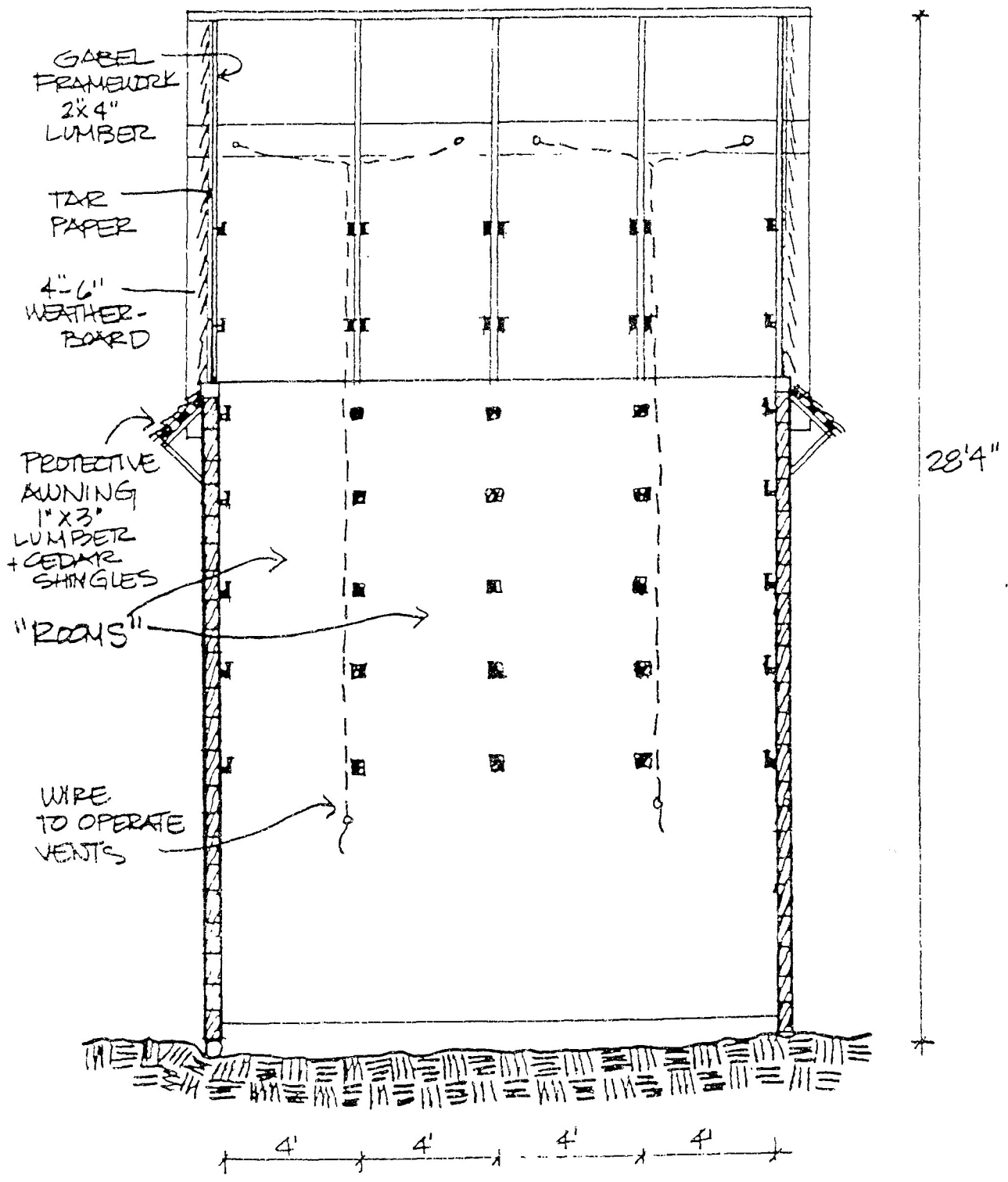
After noting the similarity of barn types of North Carolina and Virginia, I began to inquire about the earliest settlers of Calloway County, Kentucky. As expected, most of the county's early nineteenth century families had come from North Carolina and Virginia, many of them after having first settled in neighboring counties in Tennessee (Jennings 1978). The Jackson Purchase area of Kentucky, in which Calloway County is located, was not officially a part of the commonwealth until it was bought from the Chickasaws in 1818. The lands purchased make up all of present-day Kentucky and Tennessee west of the Tennessee River (Hancock 1992). In anticipation of the purchase, many settlers had moved into areas east of the river, awaiting a chance to settle new land. Many of these pioneer farmers were tobacco planters.



SECTION AA (EAST/WEST)



Typical dimensions and construction of older dark tobacco barns found in Calloway County, Kentucky. (Drawing by Claudia Pratt)



SECTION BB (NORTH-SOUTH)

SCALE 1/4" = 1'0"



Side view elevation of a typical dark tobacco barn found in Calloway County Kentucky. (Drawing by Claudia Pratt)

When I began to ask questions about family origins in Calloway County, the answers I received confirmed my hypothesis. In fact, the very families I had been working with proudly claimed roots in the old tobacco belt. Many of the families offered me copies of family genealogies. One of these genealogies showed Tommy Paschall's ancestry reaching right back to Caswell County, North Carolina. His mother, Imogene Paschall, also knew that her family, the Erwins, came from Rowan County, North Carolina. Another informant, Paul A. Lassiter, traced his family roots back to Nansemond County, Virginia, and his niece, Donna Lassiter Jackson, supplied me with a detailed genealogy of her Calloway County branch of the family. Dr. Charles A. Lassiter researched his branch of the clan back to Northampton County, North Carolina. It is common knowledge that the tobacco culture of Virginia and North Carolina migrated with settlers to Kentucky and Tennessee. But here, finally, was the direct connection I had been searching for. With the information I now had in hand, I went to North Carolina to see first-hand what evidence of the fire-curing process might still exist in the old Colonial tobacco producing region.

My first stop was in Northampton County, North Carolina, where I met with Dr. Charles A. Lassiter. Dr. Lassiter is a retired professor of agricultural studies. He was born and raised in Calloway County, Kentucky, but ended his teaching career at North Carolina State University and retired to a lakefront home near Cary, North Carolina. He graciously took me to the Lassiter family homestead in Northampton County, where we did discover a

few examples of flue-curing barns. Later research revealed that this part of North Carolina was, in Colonial days, involved in tobacco production, but by the time the tobacco industry gained momentum, in the post-Civil War era, the region had converted mostly to cotton production. The fields in front of the Lassiter homestead were, indeed, planted with cotton when I visited in May of 1993. The area was marginally engaged in flue-curing tobacco production in the first half of the twentieth century.

The following day I visited the North Carolina Division of Archives and History, where I was greeted by Michael Southern of that office. Southern spent most of that day touring me around the primary tobacco producing counties of Person, Caswell, Rockingham, and Stokes. All four of these counties lie along the Virginia/North Carolina border. On this tour I saw the first tangible evidence that suggested to me the fire-curing process originated in this general region. The older log flue-cure barns we viewed were basically the formal equivalents of the fire-curing barns of western Kentucky. The main difference was that the flue-cure barns were built upon stone foundations, which included two built-in stone furnaces on either side of a single door. The elevated log structure, however, was nearly identical to the Kentucky examples I had seen, even down to the rived shingle pents, or awnings, attached to the gable ends at the eaves. The single entrance, usually in the side, was likewise similar to the older Calloway County barns. Inside the barns, the similarities continued. Each of the older flue-cure barns I was able to view inside exactly reflected the spacial divisions of the Kentucky



barns. There were invariably four rows of tier poles, installed perpendicular to the roof ridge, stacked five poles up, with two to three crown tiers creating, as in the Kentucky barns, four rooms or bays in which to hang tobacco.

One intriguing barn I viewed and photographed shared this same interior spacial division and construction, but it was not built on a stone foundation and there was no evidence of flue vents, as are found on all flue-cure barns. This barn measured exactly sixteen feet square and had chinking between its logs. It appeared to be approximately twice as tall as it was wide. Could this barn be a relic of the fire-curing process in North Carolina?

The following day was spent in Raleigh, at the state's Iconographic Archive, going over secondary sources and looking over old photographs. Both of these efforts proved fruitful, and much of the material gathered there is included in this study. One excellent piece of information that came from that research was a description and photo of a barn owned by the Page family. It was a particularly fine example of an older log flue-cure barn and I decided to visit the site before returning to Kentucky.

The Page barn is located about one mile outside of Yanceyville in Caswell County. It is constructed of hewn logs, of unknown species, and rests on a two and one half feet high stone foundation. Built into the foundation are two externally fed woodburning furnaces. The barn measures twenty-two feet by eighteen feet at its base, and is approximately thirty feet high from the ground to the roof ridge. This is an unusually large barn, with an extra interior bay made possible by adding four more

feet to its length. The typical early flue-cure barn measures eighteen feet by eighteen feet. A large lean-to shed roof was built onto the west side of the barn, covering the two furnaces and the single step-through door. This roof provides cover during inclement weather for the tenders of the fires. Despite its larger size, the Page barn shares the same construction techniques and form as other flue-cure barns of its era.

While viewing the barn I was fortunate to meet Wilbur A. Page, the current owner. Page said that his father, Ludolphus Page, built the barn around 1910, give or take five years. Page remembers curing tobacco in the barn when he was a boy, right up until he was a young man and left the farm for school. After leaving school, he pursued a career as a civil engineer. He recalls that his father continued to cure in the barn until he was no longer able to work tobacco. When Ludolphus Page died, his son Wilbur inherited the family homeplace and the section of the farm where the barn sits. Wilbur Page has maintained the barn ever since then, and has now retired from "public work" to live at the old homeplace. Although Page spent most of his adult life working off the farm, he was well informed on the flue-curing process and supplied valuable information for my research.

During my interview with Wilbur Page, I learned that he and an acquaintance, Jerome Long, planned to cure some tobacco in the old barn later that year. Page invited me to come back and observe the process. I accepted, and made tentative plans for my return to North Carolina.

The 1993 tobacco growing season was dry in North Carolina. Extreme heat and near drought had stalled the maturing process. The tobacco leaf was "burning" in the field, wilting and turning brown on the edges. Jerome Long had waited as long as he could, hoping for a little rain to rejuvenate his tobacco and build up its weight in moisture content. But by the last week in August he could wait no longer. On August 29th, I received a call from Page saying that Long would harvest his crop beginning September 2nd.

At 9 a.m. of September 2nd, Page and I arrived at Long's tobacco field. I wanted to observe the flue-cure harvest process. Even though the flue-cure tobacco is a different strain than that of dark tobacco, its cultivation process is essentially the same. Flue-cure tobacco was derived from the original *Nicotiana tabacum* species, but was intentionally planted in marginal soil over the years to create a lighter, brighter leaf tobacco. In fact, it is often referred to as bright-leaf tobacco. Apparently, soil quality was a controlling factor in the development of the many different varieties of tobacco that exist today (Tilley 1948).

The harvest of bright-leaf tobacco, as it is practiced today, is significantly different from the way dark tobacco is harvested. Bright-leaf tobacco is harvested by "priming" the plant. Ripe leaves are plucked from the plant and taken to the barn for curing. In the past, harvested leaves were loaded into wooden sleds which were pulled between the rows of tobacco by a mule or horse. Today, the draft animal has been replaced by a tractor and the wooden sled by a flatbed trailer with rubber tires.

Priming tobacco as a harvest method likely evolved from a cultivation practice that included the plucking of the tobacco plant's lower leaves to induce growth of the upper leaves. The method of priming the entire plant over the course of the harvest season was not widely practiced in North Carolina or Virginia until the 1930s, when tobacco buyers influenced the growers to make the change. Buyers were convinced the priming method produced a better quality leaf (ibid). Jerome Long confirmed the fact that when he first started working tobacco, the whole stalk was harvested. He described how the stalk was first split from its top to its base near the ground, and then the stalk was cut away below the split. The split stalk was then hung over a wooden stick and transported to the barn where it was cured intact. Long's description was exactly like those I received from Paul A. Lassiter and Tommy Paschall when they described how dark tobacco used to be harvested. The entire dark tobacco plant is still harvested today, but instead of splitting the stalk, it is spiked onto a tobacco stake with the aid of a sharp pointed metal cone placed on the end of the stake.

When Jerome Long's flue-cure tobacco arrived at the barn, it went through one more step before being housed. The harvested leaves were gathered in bundles and sewn together at the stem ends with heavy white thread. A quick, experienced hand was needed to keep this process moving along, and the sewers required assistance from sorters who would pass them bundles of leaves. As the sewer - typically a woman - completed a bundle she would hang it across a tobacco stick. Other workers would remove loaded sticks and

quickly replace them on the wooden stands so the sewer would not have to slow down. The loaded tobacco sticks were carefully stacked in front of the barn door, ready for the next step.

Eventually, the hand-sewing process was replaced by machines designed to do the same job. With the new bulk curing method, now widely employed, the sewing step has been eliminated. The tobacco leaves are stuffed into wire cages which are placed in large metal containers, where the tobacco cures in forced hot air heated from propane burners. Fortunately, I was given the opportunity to witness the traditional flue-curing process.

Once Jerome Long's tobacco crop was sewn and loaded onto sticks, it was ready to be housed in the barn. The process of housing tobacco is virtually the same wherever it occurs, regardless of the type. Workers on the ground pass loaded sticks up to workers who are precariously situated on the various levels of tier poles. Workers perched on the top tiers are often working more than twenty-five feet off the barn floor. At the Page barn, additional workers stood outside and passed sticks of tobacco through the single door, the bottom of which was two and a half feet off the ground. Newer flue-cure barns eliminated this awkward architectural feature when they did away with the stone foundation, after converting to liquid fuels. Still, a single walk-through door was maintained, and flue-cure barns never were renovated with drive-through doors like one finds on the newer barns used to house other types of tobacco.

The process I observed at the Page barn took the better part of one day to house one acre of tobacco.

Once flue-cure tobacco is housed, it hangs in the barn for about twenty-four hours before the main curing process begins. Long's crop, for example, was housed by the evening of the day it was harvested, but the first curing fire was not started until the evening of the following day. Fires were built in both of the externally-accessed furnaces which are connected to large flue pipes approximately twelve inches in diameter. The two flue pipes in the Page barn ran along the floor straight back to the wall opposite the furnaces. At this wall, the pipes turned at right angles toward the center of the barn, where they made another right angle to join with vent pipes of equal size. These vent pipes angled upward away from the floor and reached through openings in the wall where the furnaces and door are located. The vent pipes came through this wall just above the stone foundation and angled straight up, venting heat and smoke away from the people tending the fires.

Jerome Long built up his first fire slowly, gently increasing the temperature in the barn. Long says that the various firings of the flue-cure process create interior temperatures ranging from 90 to 140 degrees Fahrenheit. Precise temperature seems to be a concern of flue-cure farmers, and they almost always use a thermometer to control the process. Under ideal conditions, a typical older barn loaded with an acre of bright-leaf tobacco can be successfully cured in five days. As with dark tobacco, though, damp weather may extend the curing period. Throughout the curing, the fires must be tended to maintain the optimum temperature for the various phases. Both Long and Page fondly recalled nights

spent sleeping under the shed roof, preceded by hours of tale-swapping, and cooking meals on or in the open-ended furnaces. It was just such remembrances that had prompted them to organize this old-fashioned curing. They both wanted to do it the old way just one more time.

Before leaving the old tobacco district I had the opportunity to visit an area near Redhouse, Virginia. I was told that dark fire-cured tobacco was still produced there, but on a smaller scale than in Kentucky and Tennessee. During this visit I was fortunate to meet Andy Clowdis, a young farmer who was working about fifteen acres of dark tobacco. His family had been raising this type of tobacco for as long as anyone could remember. When I was there, Clowdis was in the process of "firing" several barns and volunteered to show me how he cured dark tobacco. As we arrived at the first barn, I was again struck by the similarity of its form to those in Kentucky. The first barn was a frame structure covered with clapboards, measuring twenty feet by twenty-four feet at its base and approximately thirty feet in height. It had double drive-in doors wide enough to accommodate a tractor and wagon. There was no stone foundation or large lean-to shed like one finds on the old flue-cure barns. This barn could easily be mistaken for a tobacco barn in Calloway County, Kentucky. The second barn we visited was even more striking in its similarities to western Kentucky dark tobacco barns. It was constructed of hewn logs and measured eighteen feet square at the floor. The barn was about thirty feet high from the ground to the ridge line, and it had a single walk-through door on one side. Without close

observation this barn was indistinguishable from the older dark tobacco barns found in Kentucky. When Clowdis allowed me to look inside the barns, I noted the same amount of tier poles and spacing found in the Kentucky and Tennessee barns. But I also noticed that the arrangement of the curing fires was much different than those I had seen in Kentucky. What appeared to be nine small campfires were evenly spaced about four feet apart on the barn floor. Each fire had three hardwood logs measuring about four inches in diameter and fifteen inches in length. The fires were not connected, nor was there any sawdust covering the flames. Each fire burned slowly, emitting only a small amount of smoke, but producing an even heat which could be felt when entering the barn. Clowdis said that on the average he maintained these fires for six to eight weeks before the tobacco was completely cured. The similarities of this Virginia fire-curing method to those of the Kentucky fire-curing method outweighed any dissimilarities I witnessed, convincing me that I was observing a direct antecedent of the fire-curing tradition practiced in western Kentucky. It was certainly a more apparent antecedent than the flue-curing process.

If one were able to observe, side by side, the flue-curing process of North Carolina with the fire-curing process of Kentucky one would see similarities. But there are also enough significant differences between the two processes to weaken the argument for linking these two agricultural traditions. The most significant difference, of course, is that the two tobaccos are different varieties, though flue-cure tobacco is derived from the same basic



type of plant as dark tobacco. The two types are currently harvested differently, though oral testimony indicates they were once harvested exactly the same way. The older extant barns are similar in form, but even where artifactual evidence, such as form and dimension, indicates a linkage, there are enough construction differences, such as stone foundations and log notching techniques, that determination of linkages between the two traditions remain inconclusive. So while the tangible evidence was compelling, it was, on its own, insufficient for my purposes.

The best evidence linking the fire-cure and flue-cure processes was found in less tangible form - language. By the time I reached North Carolina to conduct research, I had interviewed and observed at work more than a dozen western Kentucky dark tobacco farmers. Thus, I felt very familiar with most of their unique terms. As I began to interview North Carolina flue-cure tobacco farmers, I found that they shared with the Kentucky farmers many of the same terms. For example, in both processes there is a phase where intense heat is built up in the barn. This heat is intended to sap the moisture out of the stem of the tobacco leaf. All of the fire- and flue-cure farmers I interviewed called this the "killing out fire." Likewise, after both types of tobacco leaf have been cured they are allowed to hang in the barn for a variable amount of time to re-absorb moisture in the leaf. The farmers in both states call this phase bringing the tobacco "back in order." This term is unique to the flue-cure and fire-cure producers. Burley tobacco farmers, for example, call this same phase getting the tobacco "in case."

Interestingly, another term not directly related to tobacco is shared by western Kentucky and North Carolina farmers. The term is "public work," which refers to any job off the farm. I have never heard it used as frequently as I did in upper North Carolina and western Kentucky. Its usage seems to be fairly uncommon in areas between these two regions.

Another term shared by both groups of farmers is the name given to the tier poles from which the tobacco is hung in the barn. In both the old tobacco belt and the black patch these poles are called "firing tiers." Why would a flue-cure farmer use this term? Neither Wilbur Page nor Jerome Long could explain why he uses that term. They just knew that that was what the tier poles had always been called. The fact that both groups shared this term strongly indicates to me that the flue-curing process had evolved from the fire-curing method. It also indicates, along with the other evidence, that the fire-curing farmers of western Kentucky are practicing a tradition their ancestors had once practiced in North Carolina and Virginia. Here were terms that had survived a six hundred mile migration and one hundred and seventy years of time.

Upon further questioning, Long and Page both recalled their fathers mentioning the use of open fires to cure tobacco. It apparently was a rare method in their fathers' time and place, and was used only as a way to cure tobacco in especially wet and cold curing seasons. Neither Long nor Page had practiced the method. Both, however, had seen old-timers heap hot coals on the barn floor during the killing out fire. These coals would quickly heat

the interior of the barn by twenty or more degrees. Historical documents as well as oral tradition make reference to this practice. Most notable is the traditional narrative that local people tell of how flue-curing was discovered. This story, in fact, doesn't tell of the discovery of flue-curing, but rather of the discovery of how the application of intense heat will change the color of curing tobacco. The tale involves a slave named Stephen, who belonged to Abisha Slade, a successful tobacco planter of Caswell County, North Carolina. Stephen was eighteen years old at the time of the discovery. Nannie May Tilley recounts the story in her book, *The Bright-Tobacco Industry: 1860-1929*:

Among his other duties Stephen served as blacksmith on Abisha Slade's farm with his shop near the tobacco barns. Here Stephen had a pit where he prepared charcoal for the forge, usually keeping a large supply on hand. While Stephen was watching a barn of curing tobacco on a rainy night in 1839, he fell asleep and allowed the wood fires to become almost extinguished. On awakening, rather than use wet wood, he rushed to the charcoal pit, seized several charred butts of logs, and placed them on the dying embers in the barn of curing tobacco. Application of the sudden drying heat, derived from the charred logs, produced startling effects and the accidental result of Stephen's drowsiness was six hundred pounds of the brightest yellow tobacco ever seen. Stephen described the accomplishment in 1886: "... to tell the truth about it, 'twas a accident. I commenced to cure it and it commenced to get yallow. It kep' on yallowin' and kep' on yallowin' and kep' on yallowin' twell it got clar up...it looked so purty. I kept making it yallow and when it was cured it was 'musement for folks to come and see it." At the same time, Stephen stated emphatically that charcoal was used but no flues. Furthermore, he said that the yellow tobacco, which he first cured accidentally, was sold to a Danville [Virginia] manufacturer at forty dollars per hundredweight when the average price was only ten dollars (1948: 24-25).

The part of this story significant to the present research is the reference to the use of open wood fires placed on the floor of the tobacco barns. Tilley goes on to explain that the accidentally-discovered curing method was widely accepted and that by 1858 the *Southern Planter*, a publication catering to tobacco growers of the Virginia/Carolina area, was printing meticulous directions for the production of yellow tobacco. Tilley's research indicates that as the yellow tobacco gained favor, charcoal fires increasingly replaced wood fires. But still, this process did not include flue pipes. Tilley says that even though growers had experimented with external fires and flue pipes during the first half of the nineteenth century, such a system was not perfected or widely employed until after the Civil War. She states that, "After the temporary use and partial abandonment of flues [during the early nineteenth century], experiments for improving curing techniques in general centered on the revived use of open fires with wood or charcoal for fuel" (1948:22).

There seems little doubt that the use of fire to cure tobacco originated in the earliest years of Colonial America. Joseph Clarke Robert writes, "The transition from air-curing to fire-curing was not difficult, for even in so-called air-curing, fires were built when they were warranted by the humidity" (1938:40) and he continued by saying, "According to William Tatham [an early historian of tobacco], the typical method by 1800 was to cure by air; but if the atmosphere contained too much moisture, small smothered fires might be built under the leaves" (ibid). During the first two decades of the nineteenth century there was a

significant increase in the use of artificial heat. Speaking of both the old and new tobacco producing regions, Robert says, "The rage for the intensive use of open fires in curing tobacco extends from 1815 to 1840. In its Colonial origin, fire-curing was probably a development of its use as a temporary expedient in sun- and air-curing. Fire-curing not only gave a taste favored by some consumers, but decidedly improved the keeping qualities of the leaf. After the War of 1812, the foreign trade put a new premium on highly colored tobacco, and apparently favored a smokey smell" (ibid).

We are thus presented with conclusive evidence that open fires, whether wood or charcoal, were extensively used to cure tobacco throughout Virginia and North Carolina beginning in the Colonial era, and continuing through the first six decades of the nineteenth century. A fact important to my thesis is that the major, early migration of Virginians and Carolinians to the lands of western Tennessee and Kentucky occurred during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, prior to Stephen's accidental discovery of yellow tobacco, and long before any flue-curing system was perfected. The tobacco curing technology carried in the minds of these early westward bound immigrants was most certainly that of the open wood-fire method.

During the years following the War of 1812, Virginian and North Carolinian immigrants flowed into western Kentucky and Tennessee by the thousands. The Jackson Purchase agreement of 1818 opened up vast new lands, approximately 8,000 square miles, of which, 6,000 square miles were in Tennessee and 2,000 square

miles in Kentucky (Hancock 1992). Many of these immigrants came from Caswell County, North Carolina. By early nineteenth century standards, Caswell County had become overcrowded, and close living conditions spawned disease. On March 29, 1816 the *Raleigh Register* reported, "Died, in Caswell Co., of the prevailing Epidemic, Mr. John Kerr, about 60 years of age, and a few days afterwards of the same complaint, his son Alexander, age 27. This disease has proved very fatal in the above neighborhood. Within a circle of five miles, it is supposed more than a hundred persons have died since Christmas" (Powell 1977:162). The reader was not told what type of disease swept through Caswell County in 1816. But such epidemics were common for the time, and were probably not the sole reason for the mass out-migration affecting the county and the state.

Between 1815 and 1835 people left North Carolina in great numbers. Speaking of Caswell County in particular, William S. Powell writes, "In most communities there were few opportunities for improvement. Educational resources were poor, roads were bad, markets were few and far between, and those that did exist didn't amount to much" (1977:169). But would conditions be any better in the West, on the frontier?

Perhaps a better explanation for the great out-migration was the low fertility of the soil which had not been well maintained. Crop rotation and soil conservation practices were virtually unknown at the time, and the fertilizers used in the early nineteenth century were inefficient. The area now known as Caswell County had been settled as early as 1728, and much of the

surrounding land had been farmed for a hundred years using soil exhausting techniques. A grower would clear-cut a piece of land, plant it until it would no longer produce, and then move on to clear a new tract.

The earliest slave owning settlers of upper North Carolina had claimed large tracts of land, forming impressive tobacco plantations. Others, "were in a middle group, farmers substantial but with limited acres and a moderate number of slaves. These made up the backbone of Southern society, though they have found small place in the tradition of ante-bellum life" (Robert 1938:19). As the nineteenth century began, fewer and fewer acres were available to late arrivals. Also, families tended to grow, leaving little land for a father to give his sons. And a farmer using family labor could hardly compete with the slave owning plantation growers. The thought of new lands in the West must have been appealing.

So many Caswell Countians were interested in moving that in 1824 a local newspaper, the *Milton Intelligencer*, published an "Emigrants Guide, being a history of soil, climate, and productions of the Western Country" (Powell 1977:169). Perhaps Jessie Paschall bought a copy of that guide in 1824 as he prepared to leave for the West the following year.

The story of the Paschall family migration must have been similar to the stories of hundreds of other families immigrating to the West. While we don't know the exact route the migrants took, we are familiar with their motive - opportunity. The situation in their native states back east had become untenable,

or at the very least, stagnant. For the Paschalls, there must have seemed little opportunity to raise a family of fourteen children in Caswell County. They weren't alone. In 1819 five Lassiter brothers immigrated to Kentucky, leaving behind their homes in Northampton County, North Carolina. These brothers were the ancestors of Paul A. Lassiter, Charles A. Lassiter, and Donna Lassiter Jackson, all of Calloway County, Kentucky and informants in this research. Twenty years after the Lassiter brothers left for the West, John Johnston Erwin, of Rowan County, North Carolina, settled in Crossland, Kentucky. John was the great-great grandfather of Imogene Erwin Paschall, Tommy Paschall's mother. These families, and many more like them, came to the West for a new beginning. For most of those families, a new beginning meant an opportunity to grow tobacco on new land. Many accounts of Kentucky settlement history speak of early settlers bringing with them tobacco producing skills, but few of these accounts recognize tobacco as the prime motivation for immigration. Considering the place of origin of many Calloway County families, and their likely participation in the tobacco culture of the old Colonial regions, it seems reasonable to conclude that these immigrants came to the new lands of Kentucky and Tennessee with the intent of producing tobacco. The tobacco skills and traditions they brought with them were more than a mere aside to their way of life; they were the means for creating and sustaining a livelihood. Upon arriving in the new land, these settlers immediately began the process of growing dark tobacco. What they accomplished was remarkable.



Tobacco growing did not begin in the Jackson Purchase area until 1818, but a mere twenty years later, the Kentucky and Tennessee planters were in direct competition with Virginia and Carolina growers. Another twenty years later, in 1859, the Western growers were equalling the production of Virginia and North Carolina planters. "In the eyes of the Virginia [District] tobacco planters the most ominous development in the first three decades of the nineteenth century was the opening in the Western states of new tobacco districts, which rivalled and eventually eclipsed the old centers" (Robert 1938:142). A partial explanation for this rapid increase in Western tobacco production was the growers' ability to ship and market their product via the many river routes that flow through and around the region. During the early decades of the nineteenth century countless hogsheads (large barrels) of tobacco were sent by flatboat down the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers to the Ohio River and thence down the Mississippi River to the French controlled port of New Orleans (Ibid).

Credit for this unparalleled pattern of agricultural growth must be given to the thousands of pioneer farmers who moved west to produce tobacco. They came with the knowledge and skills necessary to produce a crop their ancestors had produced since the earliest Colonial settlements. By the time these farmers reached Calloway County, Kentucky, they were the bearers of more than two hundred years of experience and tradition in the cultivation of tobacco. And more than one hundred and seventy years later, their descendants carry on the same tradition.

Each dot represents 1,000,000 pounds

TOBACCO PRODUCTION, 1839

State	Pounds
Virginia	75,347,106
Kentucky	53,436,909
Tennessee	29,550,432
Maryland	24,816,012
North Carolina	16,772,359
Missouri	9,067,913
Ohio	5,942,275
Indiana	1,820,306
Illinois	564,326
Connecticut	471,657
Other	1,374,024
United States	219,163,319



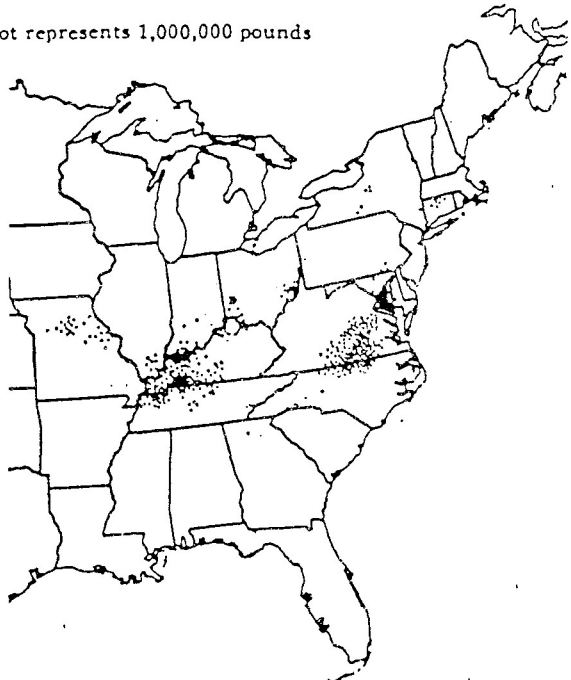
Map of U.S. Production through courtesy of U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics

TOBACCO PRODUCTION IN THE UNITED STATES, 1859

Each dot represents 1,000,000 pounds

TOBACCO PRODUCTION, 1859

State	Pounds
Virginia	123,968,312
Kentucky	108,126,840
Tennessee	43,448,097
Maryland	38,410,965
North Carolina	32,853,250
Ohio	25,092,581
Missouri	25,086,196
Indiana	7,993,378
Illinois	6,885,262
Connecticut	6,000,133
Other	16,344,447
United States	434,209,461



Map of U.S. Production through courtesy of U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics

By the middle of the nineteenth century the tobacco producers of the West were in direct competition with farmers in the "old belt."

At the end of the Civil War, the old tobacco districts of Virginia and North Carolina underwent many changes, not the least of which was the pivotal change in the way bright-tobacco was cured. Tobacco was being consumed differently, too. Cigarettes became the favored medium of consumption and large cigarette factories developed in the tobacco districts, notably the Duke Tobacco Company of Durham, North Carolina, which ultimately became the giant American Tobacco Company. Smokers began to demand a lighter, more mellow tobacco. Tobacco growers responded by reviving and refining the flue-curing method, which soon reigned supreme in the old tobacco districts, gradually replacing the open curing fires of the past. Burley tobacco also was developed about the same time in response to the needs of cigarette manufacturers. Eventually, dark tobacco all but disappeared from the old tobacco belt, except for the small area around Redhouse, Virginia where it is still produced in limited quantities.

In western Kentucky and Tennessee, however, dark tobacco thrived, in part because of the region's historical connections with the European market. While Virginia and North Carolina planters were converting to a product more suitable to domestic tastes, the Western growers were maintaining their business relations with English, Dutch, and French buyers. This relationship continues today, with half of all Kentucky and Tennessee fire-cured tobacco sold in foreign markets. The other half finds its way into domestic smokeless tobacco products, such as the popular moist snuffs. Currently, dark tobacco producers enjoy a fairly stable market, showing no immediate signs of

## Recorded Interviews

- Ayres, Sharilyn. September 25, 1992. Murray, Kentucky.
- Lassiter, Paul A. January 9, 1993. Calloway County, Kentucky.
- Long, Jerome. September 4, 1993. Caswell County, North Carolina.
- Page, Wilbur A. May 27, 1993. Caswell County, North Carolina.
- Paschall, Imogene. January 25, 1993. Calloway County, Kentucky.
- Paschall, Billy and Mark Paschall. September 26, 1992. Calloway County, Kentucky.
- Paschall, Tommy and Barry Paschall. September 25, 1992. Calloway County, Kentucky.
- Tidwell, Bertha and H.L. Tidwell. September 26, 1992. Calloway County, Kentucky.

## Telephone Interviews

- Gay, Bert of the Kentucky Agriculture Stabilization and Conservation Service. November 24, 1992.
- Tidwell, Bobby of the Tennessee Agriculture Stabilization and Conservation Service. November 24, 1992.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Axton, W.F. 1975. *Tobacco and Kentucky*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Cunningham, Bill. 1983. *On Bended Knees*. Nashville: McClanahan Press.
- Glassie, Henry. 1965. The Old Barns of Appalachia. *Mountain Life and Work*. 40:21-30.
- Handcock, Hunter M. 1992. The Jackson Purchase. In *The Kentucky Encyclopedia*, ed. John E. Kleber, 460-62. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Hart, John Fraser and Eugene Cotton Mather. 1961. The Character of Tobacco Barns and Their Role in the Tobacco Economy of the United States. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 51:288-93.
- Jennings, Dorothy and Kerby Jennings. 1980. *The Story of Calloway County 1822-1976*. Murray: Murray Democratic Publishing Co.
- Johnson, Paul R. 1984. *The Economics of the Tobacco Industry*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Powell, William S. 1977. *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County, North Carolina 1777-1977*. Durham: Moore Publishing Company.
- Pratt, Claudia, et al. 1992. "Your Barn's On Fire:" An Investigation of Dark-Fire Tobacco Barns in Calloway County, Kentucky. Unpublished study.
- Robert, Joseph Clarke. 1938. *The Tobacco Kingdom*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Tilley, Nannie May. 1948. *The Bright-Tobacco Industry 1860-1929*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Williams, Michael Ann. 1991. *Homeplace*. Athens: The University Press of Georgia.

**PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION**

The Process and Experience  
of  
Fire-Cured Tobacco Production  
in  
Calloway County, Kentucky



Many families still sow their tobacco seeds in plant beds. When the plants have matured, around late May or early June, they are pulled up and transplanted to larger fields. Here, a younger generation learns the process of pulling young seedling plants.





Many Calloway County tobacco farmers have adapted the hydroponics method of raising plants to maturity. The seedlings are place in styrofoam containers and floated in tanks of water. The seedling are often bought from producers who start the plants in greenhouses.



Once the seedling tobacco plants have matured they are ready for transplanting in the growing fields. This operation has been mechanized since the 1940s. Tommy Paschall still uses a planter his father bought nearly forty years ago.



Although the transplanting operation has been mechanized, the human hand must still feed plants into the machine.



Someone still has to follow the tractor to hand-plant those plants dropped by the mechanized planter. Every tobacco plant was transplanted by hand prior to mechanization.

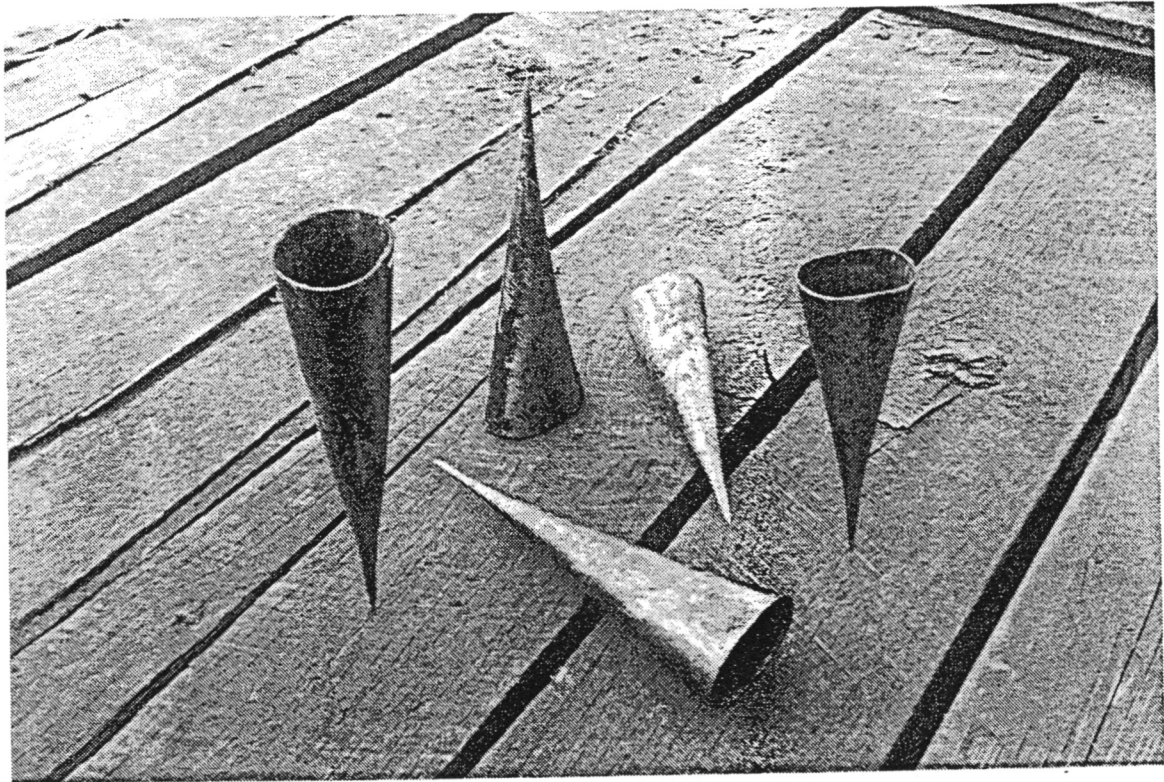


After a successful and labor intensive growing season the tobacco is ready for harvest. This is an exhausting job, particularly in the late August and early September days when dark tobacco is typically harvested.

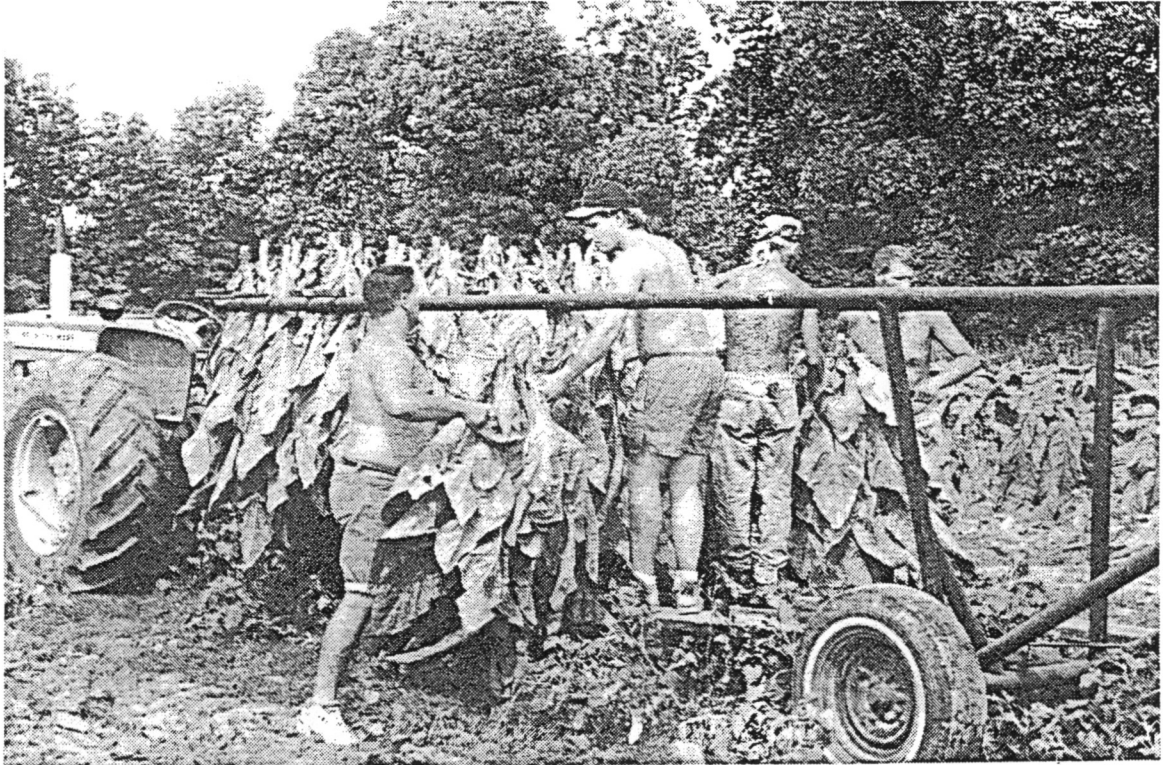




After the fully grown tobacco plant has been cut at the base of the stalk it is then "spiked" onto a wooden stake with the aid of a sharp metal cone. In times past the stalk was split first and draped across the stake. Tommy Paschall remembers this latter method was used when he first began working in tobacco as a boy.

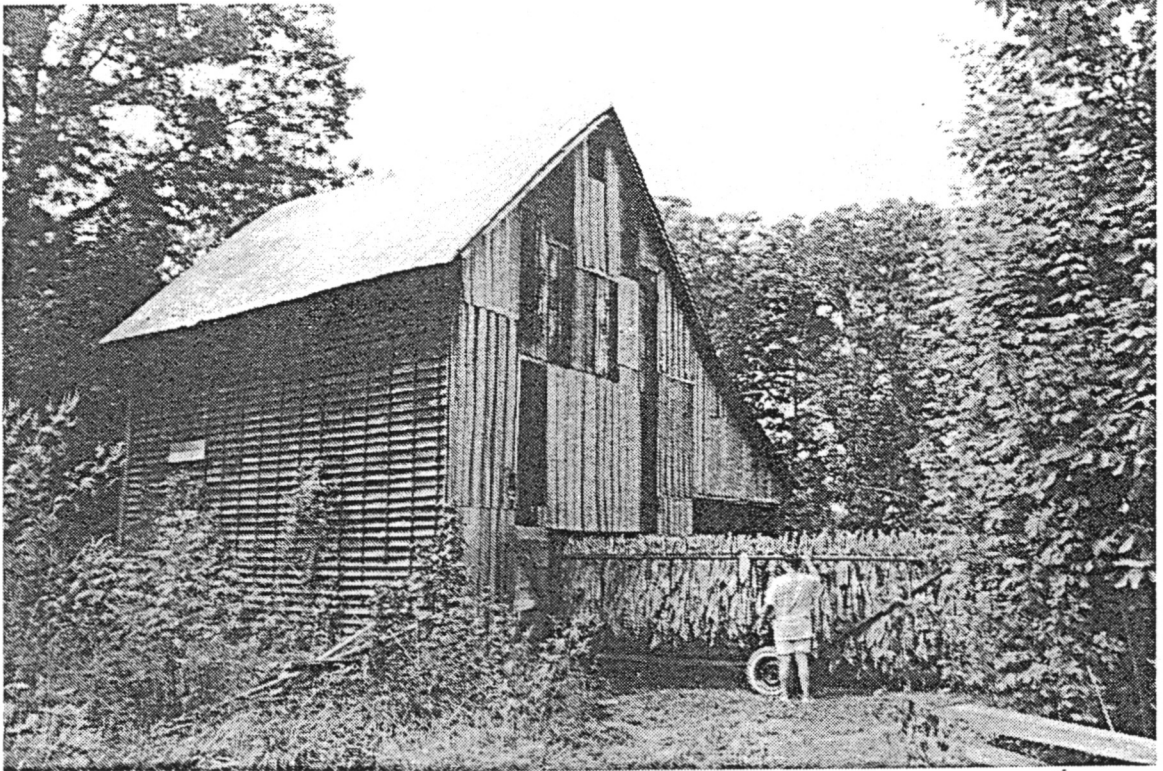


Sharp metal cones are placed on the end of wooden stakes so the tobacco stalk can be "spiked" on the tobacco stick.



The staked tobacco is loaded onto a scaffold trailer where it will be left in the open air for a few days to begin the curing process. These scaffold trailers have only been in use for about fifteen years. Before that, the tobacco was hung on wooden scaffolds set in the field, and later loaded onto flatbed wagons for transport to the barns.

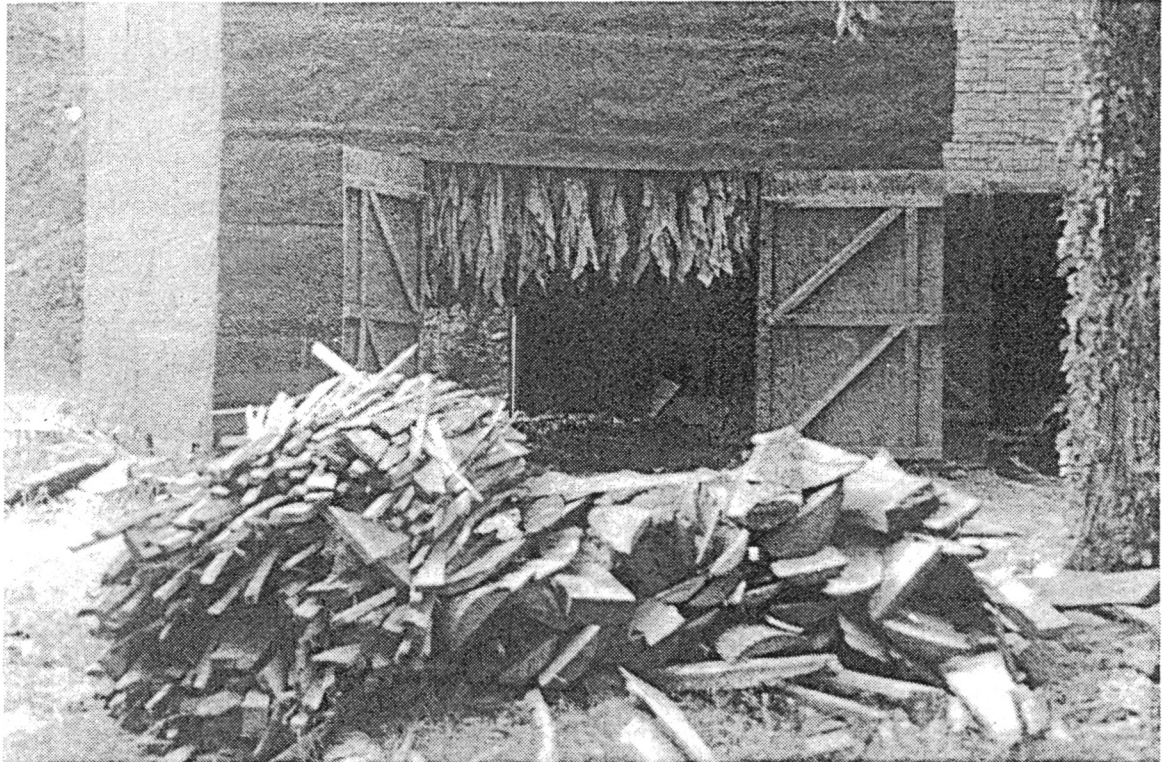




The new scaffold trailers are designed to be driven into the barn for unloading. Drive-in doors are features of the newer barns and older barns that have been renovated with wider doors.



Loading the staked tobacco on the firing tiers is one of the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs in the entire production process. Workers on the ground pass up stakes of tobacco to other workers precariously balanced on the various levels of tiers. The top tiers are thirty feet off the floor of the barn.



Piles of scrap lumber are placed outside of the dark tobacco barns during the usual curing season in September and October. If the weather is wet, however, the tobacco may be cured up through Christmas time.



The typical curing arrangement for Calloway County dark tobacco farmers includes three "firing runs" of scrap lumber laid out parallel to the ridge line of the barn roof. These runs are covered with sawdust to keep the fires smoldering and producing smoke. This arrangement, however, is not exact and varies from family to family. Here, Glen Cossey begins to pile on the sawdust.

(Photograph by Claudia Pratt)



Most dark tobacco farmers start their curing fires with a flammable liquid. Tommy Paschall prefers kerosene.





Once the tobacco has been cured it must be stripped from the stalk. The stripped leaves are "classed" by quality, then tied into "hands." A hand is about six leaves of tobacco tied together at the stem end by a seventh leaf. This is a scene of Tommy Paschall's stripping room in December of 1992.



Imogene Paschall, matriarch of the family, enjoys a central role in the stripping room because of her experience and skill in classing the tobacco as "leaf," "seconds," or "lugs."



Tommy Paschall gathers the tied hands of tobacco to be "boxed" for shipment to the sales floor.

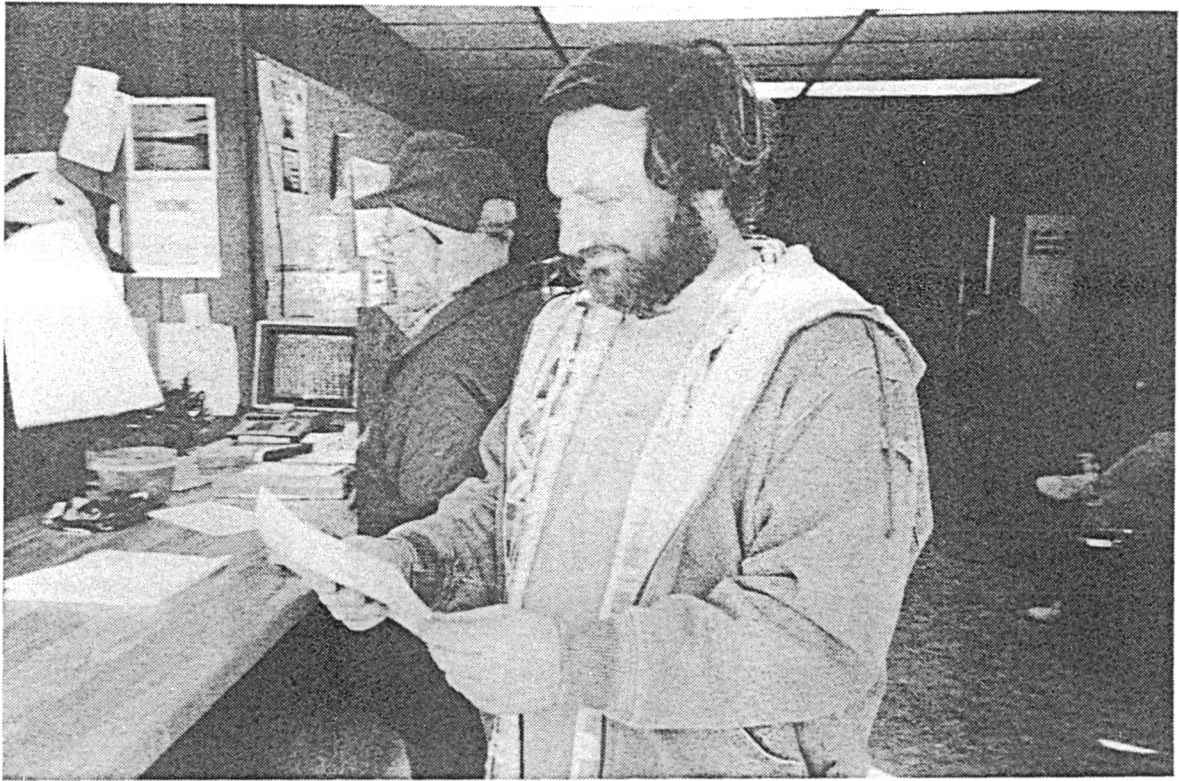




The hands of tobacco are "boxed" or bundled together in strong paper wrapping and bound with twine for shipment to the sales floor. The wooden box used by Tommy Paschall to shape these bundles was built by his late father.



Tommy Paschall and his wife, Elaine, have both worked in dark tobacco since they were children. They, like their parents before them, have raised a family on an income derived from dark tobacco.

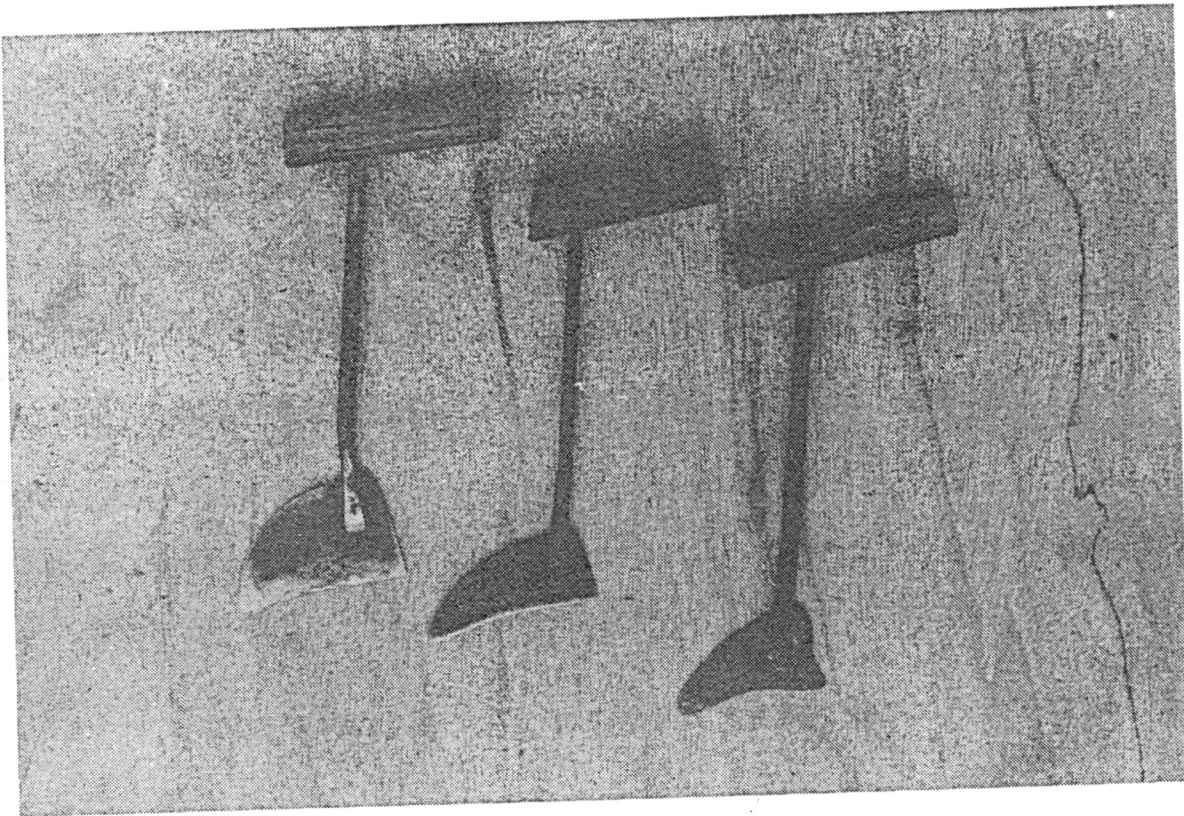


An important day for the tobacco farmer is when he receives a check for the first sale of his product. On this day he can pay off bills, pay the taxes, and, if he's lucky enough, put a little money in the bank. Fire-cured dark tobacco sales begin in late January.



Paul A. Lassiter demonstrates how he used a "one horse plow" to till his first tobacco fields. Lassiter has kept most of his old tools long after they became obsolete. He says the tools help him fondly remember the "old days" when he and his father worked tobacco together.





Three dark tobacco knives representing the three latest generations of dark tobacco farmers in Paul A. Lassiter's family.



To many of the Calloway County farmers, the old decaying barns have taken on symbolic meaning, reminding them of their long careers in the "black patch."

The Process and Experience  
of  
Flue-Cured Tobacco Production  
in  
North Carolina



Flue-cure tobacco is harvested by "priming" the plant. Individual ripened leaves are plucked from the plant and taken to the barn for curing. In the past, the harvested leaves were loaded into wooden sleds which were pulled between the rows of tobacco by a mule or horse. (Photograph from the North Carolina Division of Archives and History)

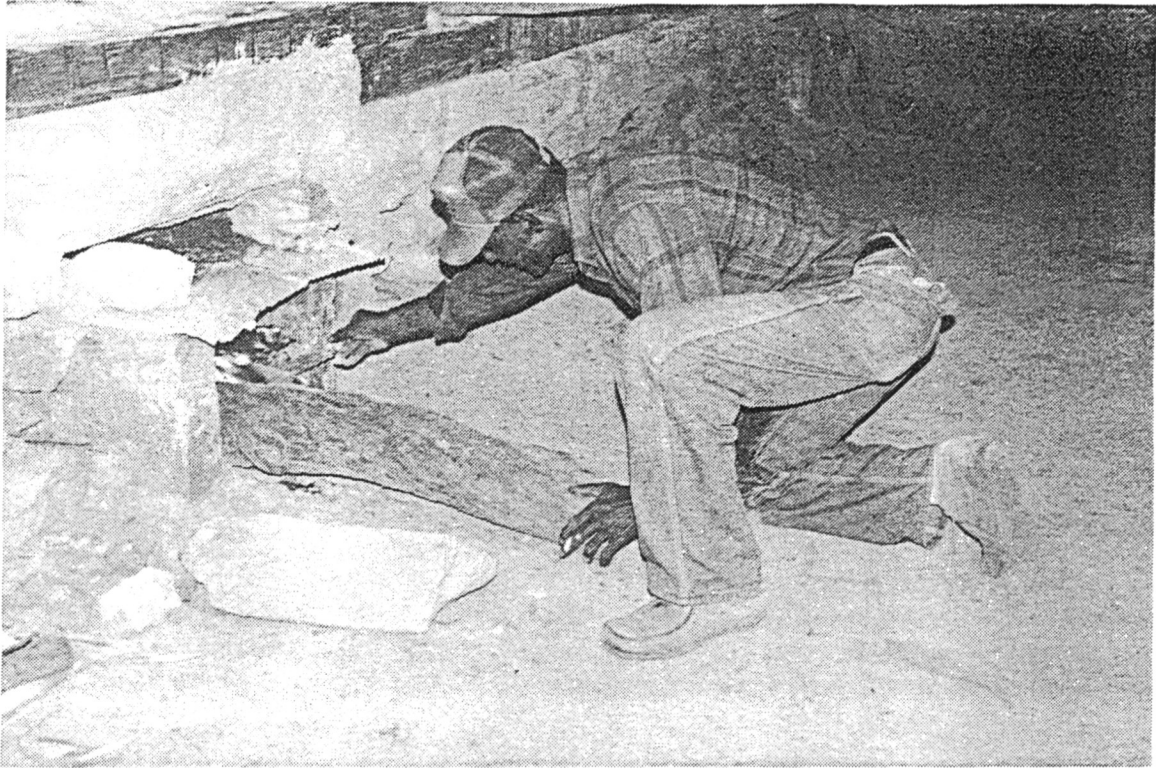




In past times, flue-cure tobacco was processed for curing just outside the barn in which it was to be loaded. The large shed additions to the flue-cure barns are for the protection from rain for those tending the fires. The sewing and staking of the tobacco could also take place under the shed in the event of inclement weather. This is the Page barn situated just south of Yanceyville, North Carolina.



Flue-cure tobacco is sewn together in bundles of leaves which are then hung across a wooden stick. The loaded sticks are hung in the barn on "firing tiers" just as they are in western Kentucky. Wilbur Page, on the left, along with Jerome Long, organized this old-time curing for their own enjoyment. They wanted to do it the old way just one more time.



Jerome Long, of Caswell County, North Carolina, stokes the fire in one of two externally fed furnaces built in the foundation of the Page flue-cure barn. Long has been producing flue-cure tobacco for more than sixty years.



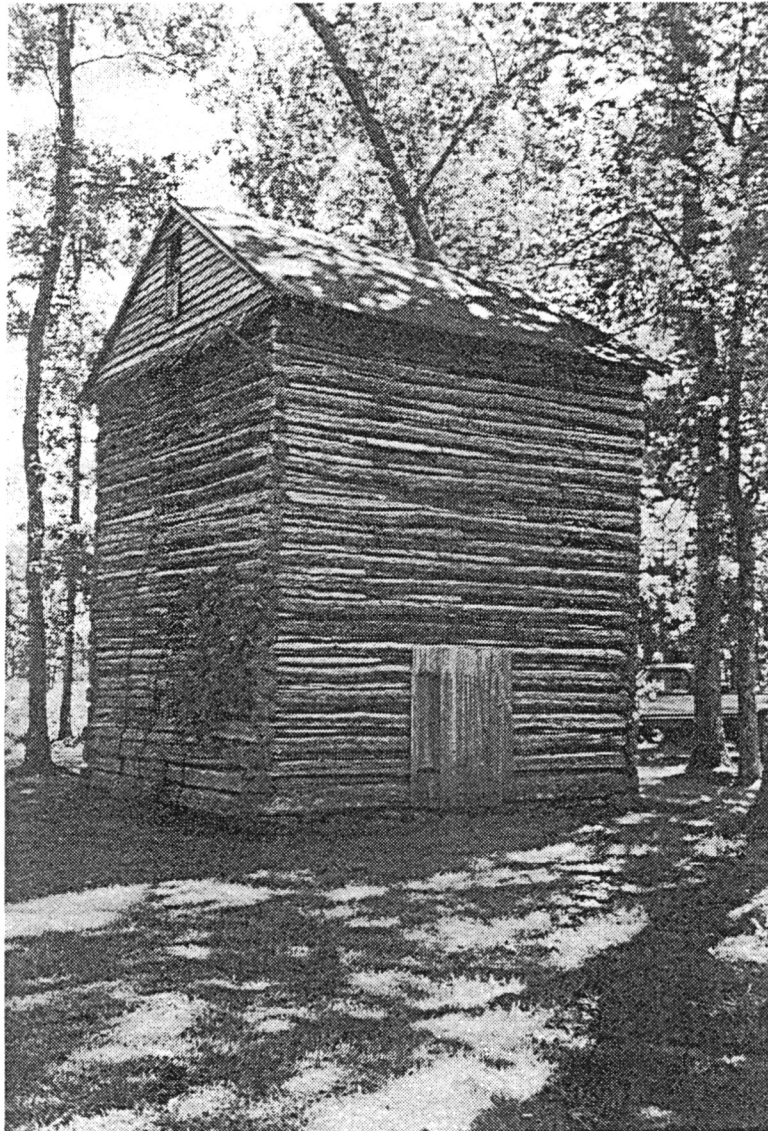
Jerome Long checks the temperature inside the Page flue-cure barn.  
Precise temperature control is important to the flue-curing process.



A North Carolina tobacco knife and a cedar planting peg belonging to Wilbur Page of Caswell County. The curved knife blade is sharpened on both edges; one for splitting the stalk and the other for cutting the stalk at its base. The peg was used to poke a hole in the soil to accept the seedling tobacco plant.

The Fire-Curing Barns  
of  
Calloway County, Kentucky



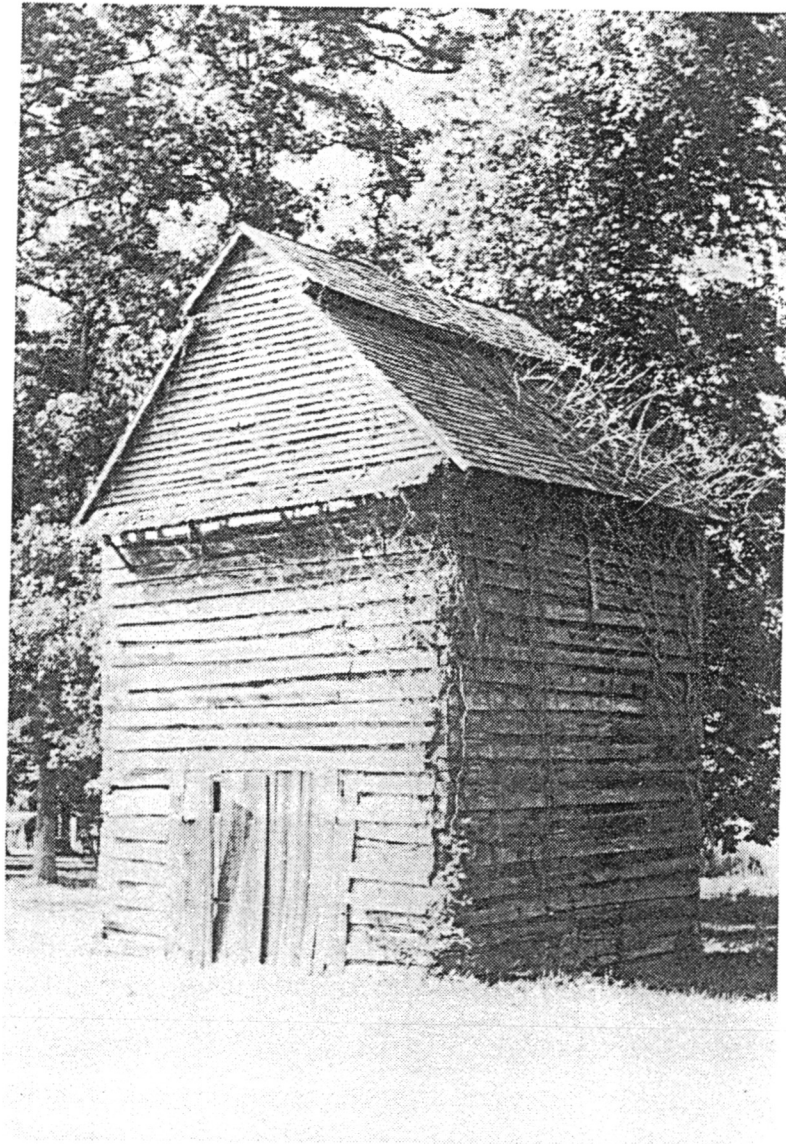


This old log dark tobacco barn is located on Tidwell Road in the northeast quadrant of Calloway County, Kentucky on what is called the Tidwell site. The form and dimensions of this structure represent the oldest extant tobacco barns found in the county. It measures sixteen feet by sixteen feet by twenty-eight feet high. The barn has had no renovation except for a new tin roof. Note the single walk-through door on the side.

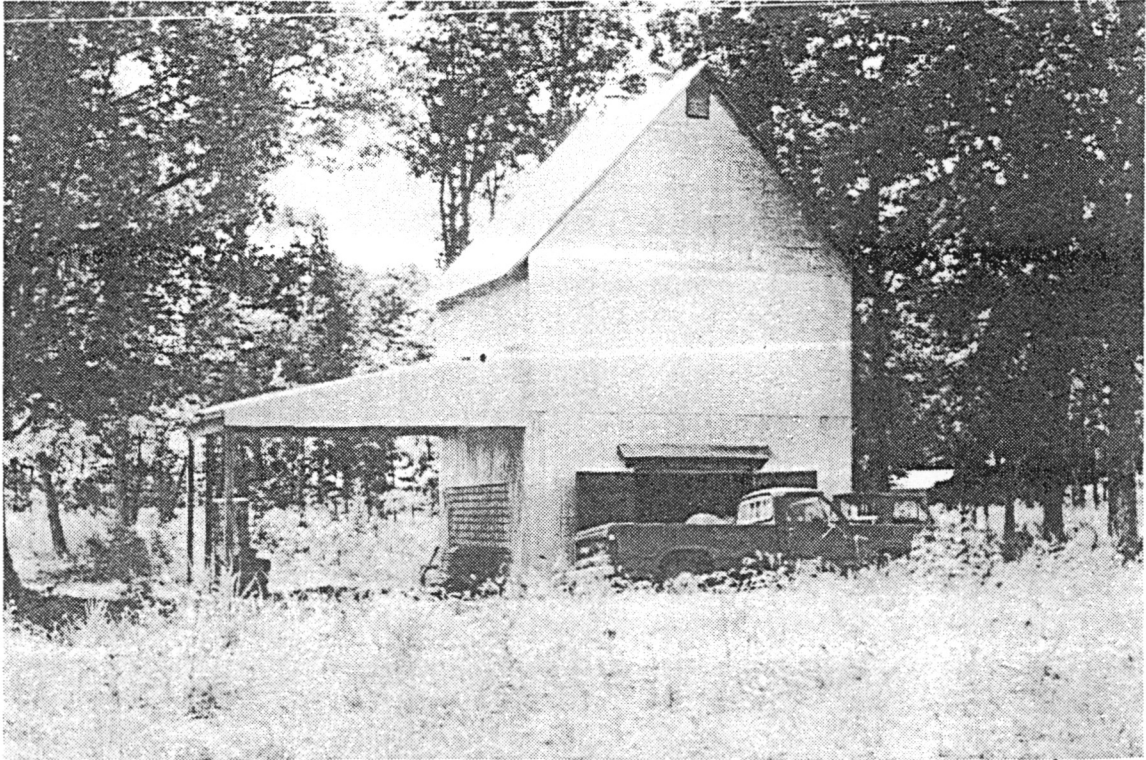


This barn, also at the Tidwell site, is identical to the previously described structure. It is believed to be in excess of ninety years old.





This log barn shows the notable renovations of a raised ridge roof and widened drive-through doors on the gable ends. The basic form of the barn, however, can still be recognized. It measures sixteen feet by sixteen feet by twenty-eight feet high, and is located on Billy Paschall Road in Calloway County, Kentucky.



This fire-curing barn, located at the Tidwell site, is a log structure covered with corrugated tin. It measures twenty-four feet by twenty feet at its base. The barn once sat four hundred feet to the north of its present location. It was moved to its current site more than fifty years ago by jacking up the barn, placing it on log rollers, and pulling it the four hundred feet with a team of mules. The barn was still in use during the fall of 1992.



This fire-curing barn, located at the junction of Kentucky Highway 94 and Tidwell Road in Calloway County, measures twenty-four feet by twenty feet by thirty feet high. It is constructed of hewn logs and covered with corrugated tin. Note the original walk-through entrance on the side of the barn. The gable end double doors are a later renovation designed to accommodate tractor pulled wagons. This barn, too, was in use in the fall of 1992.

The Flue-Curing Barns  
of  
North Carolina and Virginia



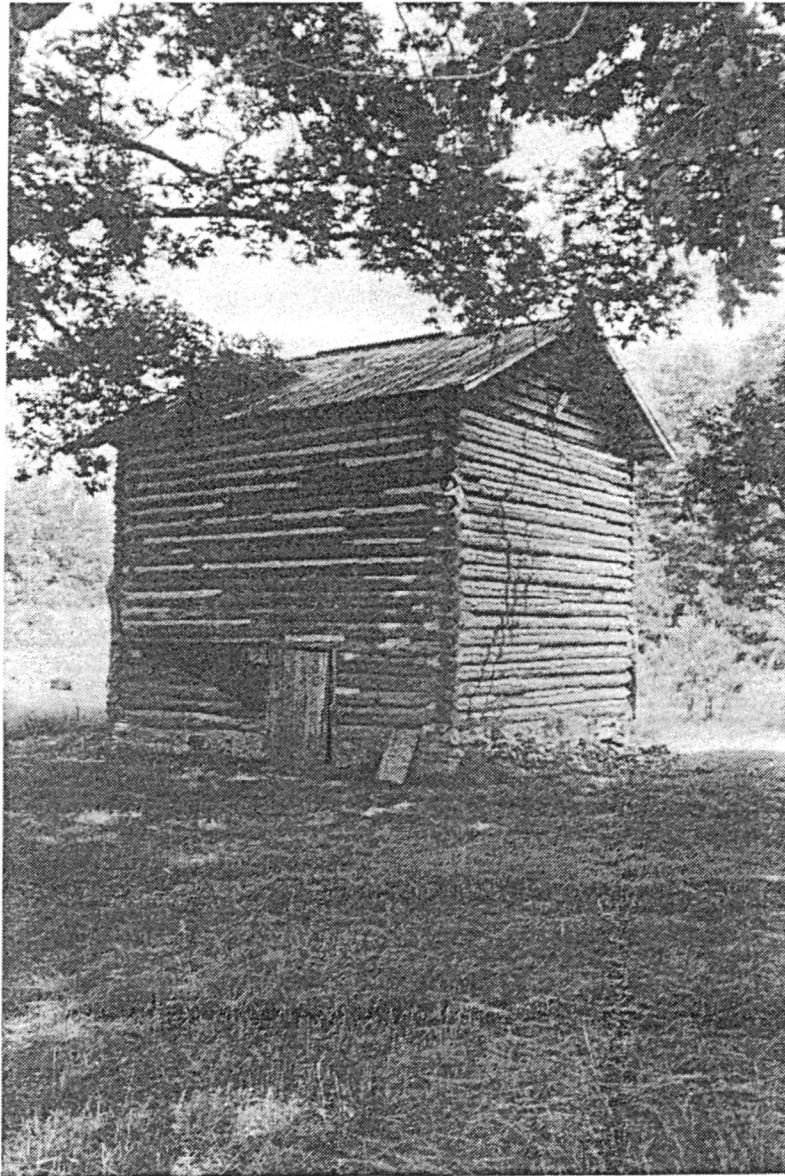
Note the rived board shingles on this North Carolina flue-cure barn. This old barn appears to have the exact same form as the oldest extant fire-cure barns found in Calloway County, Kentucky. Judging by the humans depicted in this photograph, the barn also appears to have similar dimensions to the Kentucky barns.

(Photograph from the North Carolina Division of Archives and History)



Many relics, such as this barn, dot the cultural landscape of the "old tobacco belt" of Virginia and North Carolina. These artifacts are tangible evidence of the link between the tobacco farmers of those states and the dark tobacco producers of western Kentucky and Tennessee.





The older log flue-cure barns of North Carolina closely resemble the fire-cure barns of Kentucky and Tennessee. In North Carolina, log technology was used to construct tobacco barns throughout the first half of the twentieth century. This barn is located in Person County, North Carolina.



This log flue-cure barn is built up on a stone foundation which includes two externally fed furnaces. Note the pents or "bonnets" added to the gable ends to protect the logs from rain. This barn is located in Rockingham County, North Carolina.



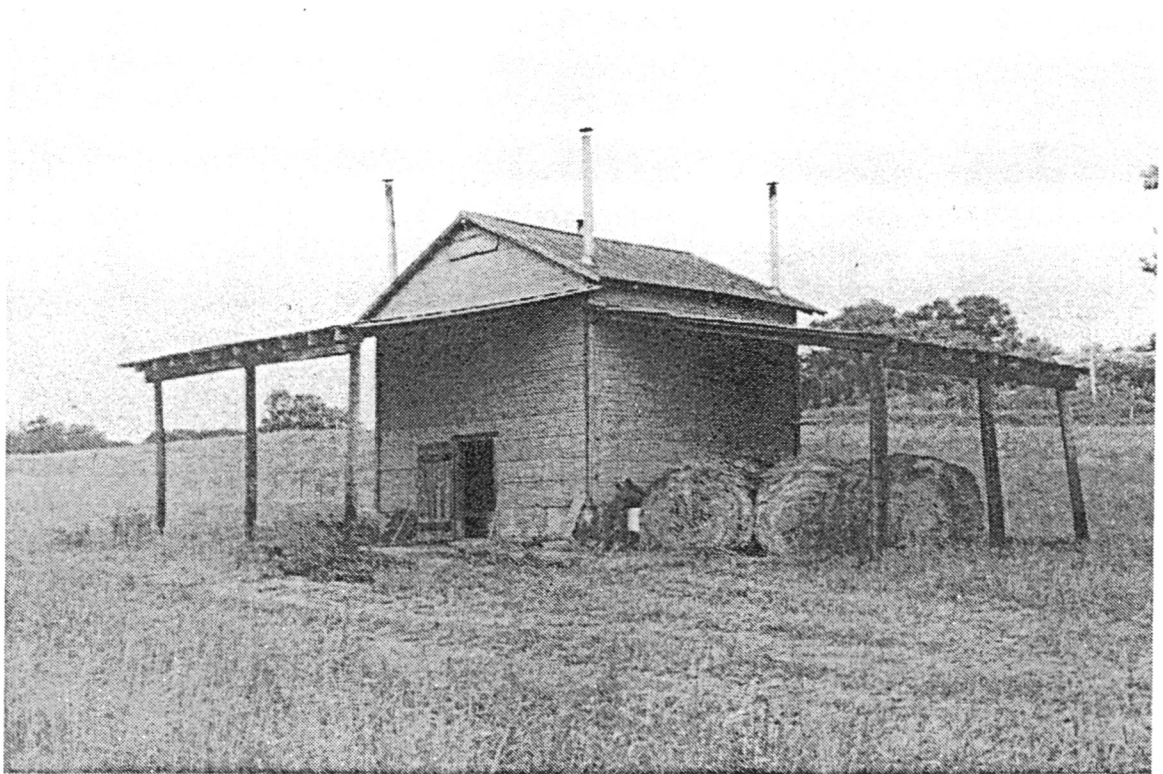


The Page barn, located in Caswell County, North Carolina, was built by Ludolphus Page, circa 1910. Although somewhat larger than the typical flue-cure barn, it, nevertheless, exhibits the exact same form of the oldest log structures of this type.

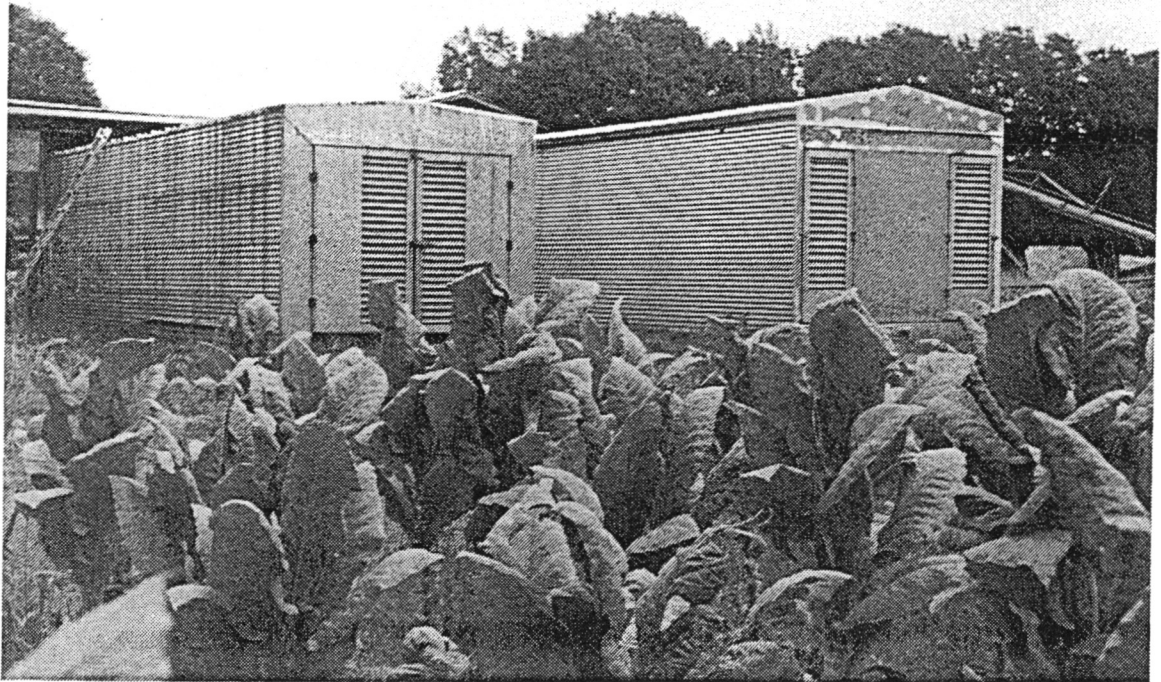
(Photograph from the North Carolina Division of Archives and History)



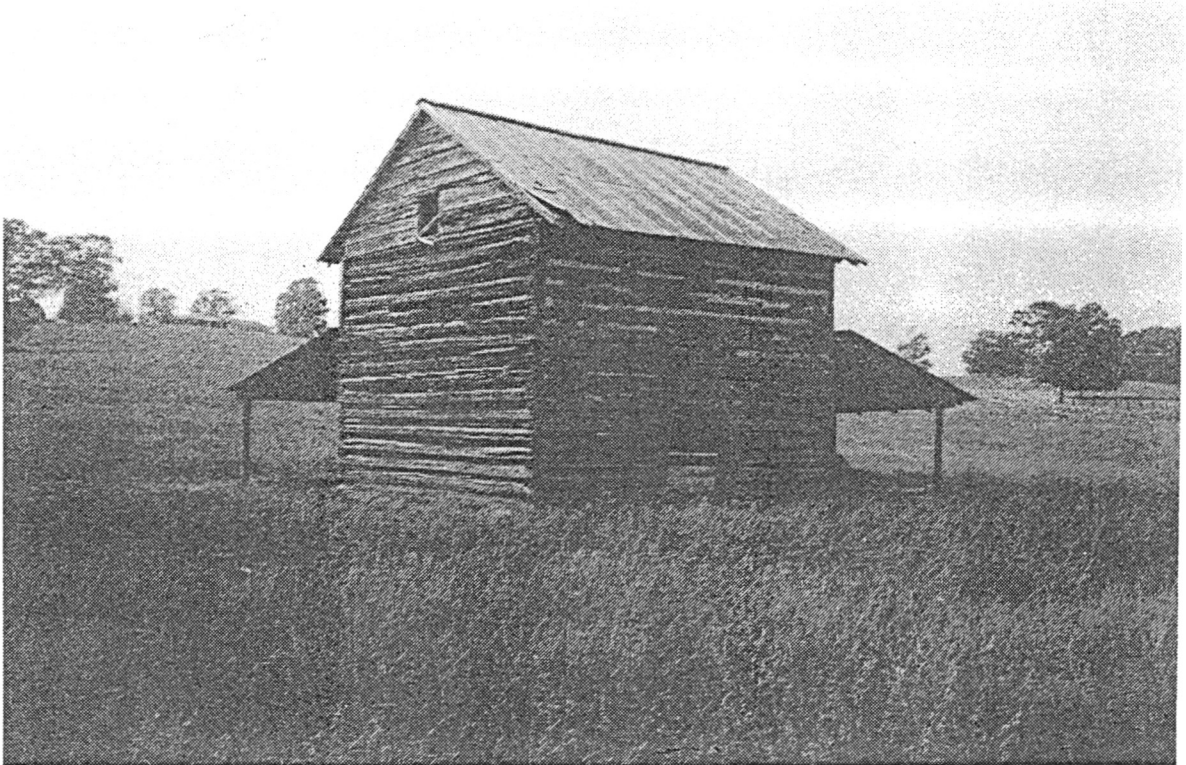
Many of the older flue-cure barns were converted from wood burners to kerosene, then to propane gas.



This is a typical modern flue-cure barn, probably built after 1950. Note the four small vent stacks protruding from the roof. This barn is located in Pittsylvania County, Virginia.



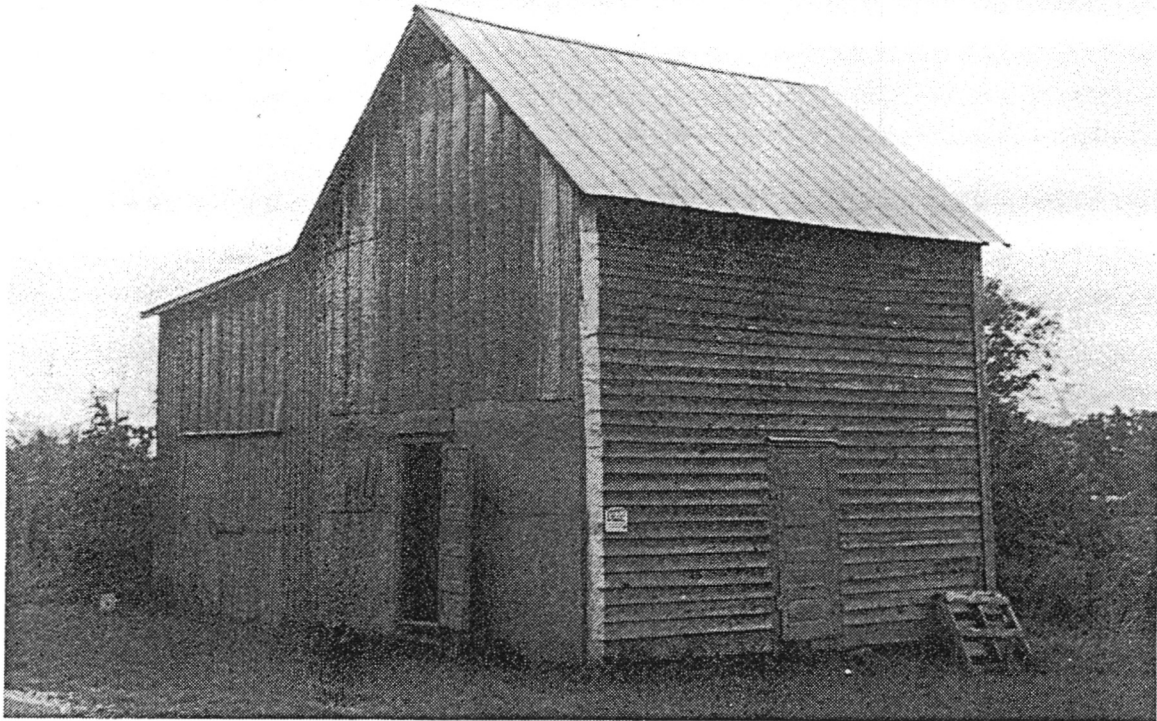
Flue-curing barns are quickly becoming relics of the past as bulk-curing containers take their place. Tobacco is packed in these metal containers and fast cured by forced hot air heated by propane burners.



This intriguing barn is located in Stokes County, North Carolina. Its basic form and the presence of interior tier poles identify it as a tobacco barn, but it shows no evidence of ever having been a flue-cure barn. It does not have a stone foundation, nor furnaces. There are no signs of openings to accommodate vent pipes. Could it be an old barn once used for fire-curing tobacco?

**The Fire-Curing Barns  
of  
Virginia**



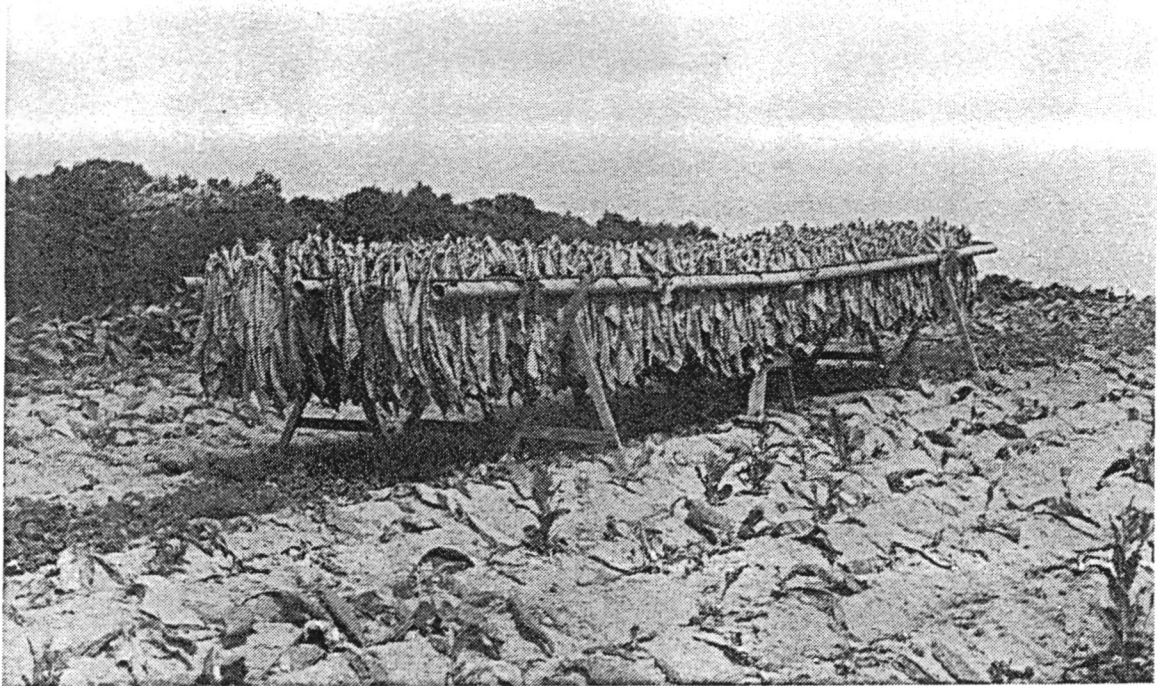


This barn could easily be mistaken for a fire-curing barn of western Kentucky. It is, however, a dark tobacco fire-curing barn located in Appomattox County, Virginia.



This older log dark tobacco barn, located near Redhouse, Virginia, is still used for the fire-curing process. Its form and dimensions are identical to many of the older log tobacco barns found in Calloway County, Kentucky.





Fire-cured dark tobacco harvested around Redhouse, Virginia is first placed on wooden scaffolds and left in the field for a few days to begin the curing process.



Andy Clowdis checks one of the dark tobacco barns he uses for fire-curing. The barn is located near Redhouse, Virginia. It is identical in form to the dark tobacco barns of western Kentucky.