

THE MYTH OF A NATURAL PRAIRIE BELT IN ALABAMA: AN INTERPRETATION OF HISTORICAL RECORDS

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THE crescent-shaped region commonly called the Alabama Black Belt (see Fig. 1) is conspicuous on vegetation maps of North America. It appears in many recent textbooks and atlases and is usually represented as a natural grassland or prairie. Fenneman, for example, says that this region "has always been prairie," and Schmieder calls it a "long and open prairie country which originally extended through the forest."¹ In the *Atlas of American Agriculture*, Shantz and Zon show the crescent as "tallgrass prairie," making use of the same symbol and legend that they employ for the prairies of the Middle West. There can hardly be any doubt about the great and widespread influence of this atlas, for the particular shape and position given the Black Belt in it can be recognized in many other atlases and books published both in this country and abroad and used by several generations of students.² It is therefore not strange if many people have been led to believe that an open grassland, 20 to 30 miles wide and some 300 miles in length, once existed in central Alabama and northeastern Mississippi, and doubtless many think that this was a unique vegetation zone in the Southeast, for most of the maps show no other prairie belts in that region. This mistaken

belief is so widely held that it may well be called a myth. It behooves geographers and makers of vegetation maps to try to correct the error, for it is mainly they who have perpetuated the misconception, even though they may not have originated it.

It is not entirely clear how the misconception came about, but it probably began in a confusion of terms. A crescent-shaped belt in Alabama and Mississippi is found on the maps of the first state geological surveys, and the term "prairie region" is used in the reports, but with reference to soil, not to vegetation; and the boundaries on these early maps are in reality geological, not vegetational, delimitations (Fig. 2). Indeed, Tuomey's central belt in Alabama is labeled the Cretaceous.³ Charles Mohr, in his description of the Alabama Black Belt, says, "The term prairie region refers less to the timberless tracts, which originally formed a small fraction of its area, than to the black, calcareous soil. Before settlement by whites this region was largely covered by forests." Very similar comments referring respectively to the prairie regions in northeastern Mississippi and Alabama are made by E. W. Hilgard and Eugene A. Smith.⁴ These statements seem to imply that the risk of confusing prairie soil with prairie vegetation already existed a century ago. The confusion has persisted and, if anything, worsened, as is suggested by the fact that the shape and position of the tallgrass region in Alabama and Mississippi, as mapped by Shantz and Zon, is virtually identical with the area of prairie soil in those states, as shown

¹ N. M. Fenneman, *Physiography of the Eastern United States* (New York, 1938), p. 70; Oscar Schmieder, *Länderkunde Nordamerikas* (Leipzig, 1933), p. 202.

² H. L. Shantz and Raphael Zon, "Natural Vegetation," *Atlas of American Agriculture* (Washington, D. C., 1924), p. 5. The same prairie belt appears in many other widely used publications, for example: *Bartholomew's Advanced Atlas* (London, 1950), p. 20; *The American Oxford Atlas* (New York, 1951), Plate VIII; *Goode's World Atlas* (New York, 1953), p. 53; *Great Soviet Atlas* (Moscow, 1937), Vol. 1, Plate 43; V. C. Finch, G. T. Trewartha, A. H. Robinson, and E. H. Hammond, *Physical Elements of Geography* (New York, 1957), Plate 5; Arthur N. Strahler, *Physical Geography* (New York, 1951), p. 404; W. A. Albrecht, "Soil Fertility and Biotic Geography," *The Geographical Review*, Vol. XLVII (1957), p. 94. The only recent map, to my knowledge, that shows other prairies in the Southeast, such as the Jackson prairie belt in central Mississippi and other grasslands, is that of A. W. Küchler in *Goode's World Atlas* (1953), p. 53.

³ Michael Tuomey, *First Biennial Report on the Geology of Alabama* (Tuscaloosa, 1850), Map.

⁴ Charles Mohr, "Plant Life of Alabama," *Geological Survey of Alabama*, Monograph No. 5 (Alabama Edition, Montgomery, 1901), pp. 99-100, and Plate I, reprint of *Contributions from the United States National Herbarium*, Vol. VI (Washington, D. C., 1901); Eugene W. Hilgard, *Report on the Geology and Agriculture of the State of Mississippi* (Jackson, 1860), p. 254, and Map; Eugene Allen Smith, "Report on the Cotton Production of the State of Alabama," *Tenth Census of the United States* (Washington, D. C., 1884), Vol. VI, p. 55, and Map opposite p. 19, which is generally similar to the maps of Tuomey and Mohr.

by Marbut.⁵ That is, the crescent of alleged grassland in fact represents not a type of vegetation but a group of soils, mostly of the Houston, Oktibbeha, and Susquehanna series. Forests grew on those soils in ancient time, and they do so now.

Roland M. Harper and H. F. Cleland estimate that not more than 10 percent of the Black Belt area was treeless when the American pioneers settled the land in the early part of the nineteenth century.⁶ Even smaller proportions of open prairie are indicated by the only two early maps I have found on which actual prairie is distinguished from forest cover, one of northeastern Mississippi in 1857 by L. Harper (Fig. 3), and the other of Sumter

County, Alabama, in 1881 by R. D. Webb (Fig. 4). These maps, supplemented by data in the Cotton Report of 1880 by Eugene A. Smith, show that open prairies occupied not more than 6 or 7 percent of the prairie belts in Sumter and Greene counties, Alabama, and about the same proportion of the prairie region in Mississippi as delimited by Hilgard; and the total amount of open prairie in each of the other Black Belt counties of Alabama is given in the Cotton Report as "a few square miles."⁷ The myth of a large, continuously open grassland is thus not supported by the best authorities of the last century. The question whether the prairies perhaps were significantly larger in earlier centuries can only

⁵ C. F. Marbut, "Soils of the United States," *Atlas of American Agriculture* (Washington, D. C., 1935), Plates 2 and 5.

⁶ Roland M. Harper, "Forests of Alabama," *Geological Survey of Alabama*, Monograph 10 (University, Alabama, 1943 [revision of Monograph 8, 1913]), p.160; H. F. Cleland, "The Black Belt of Alabama," *The Geographical Review*, Vol. X (1920), p. 382.

⁷ L. Harper, *Preliminary Report on the Geology and Agriculture of the State of Mississippi* (Jackson, 1857), Map, and Plates V and VI; R. D. Webb, "The Relation of Geological Formations and of Soils to Malarial Fevers, as Exemplified in Sumter County, Alabama," *Transactions of the Medical Association of the State of Alabama*, Vol. 34 (1881), Map 1, facing p. 287; Eugene A. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-29.

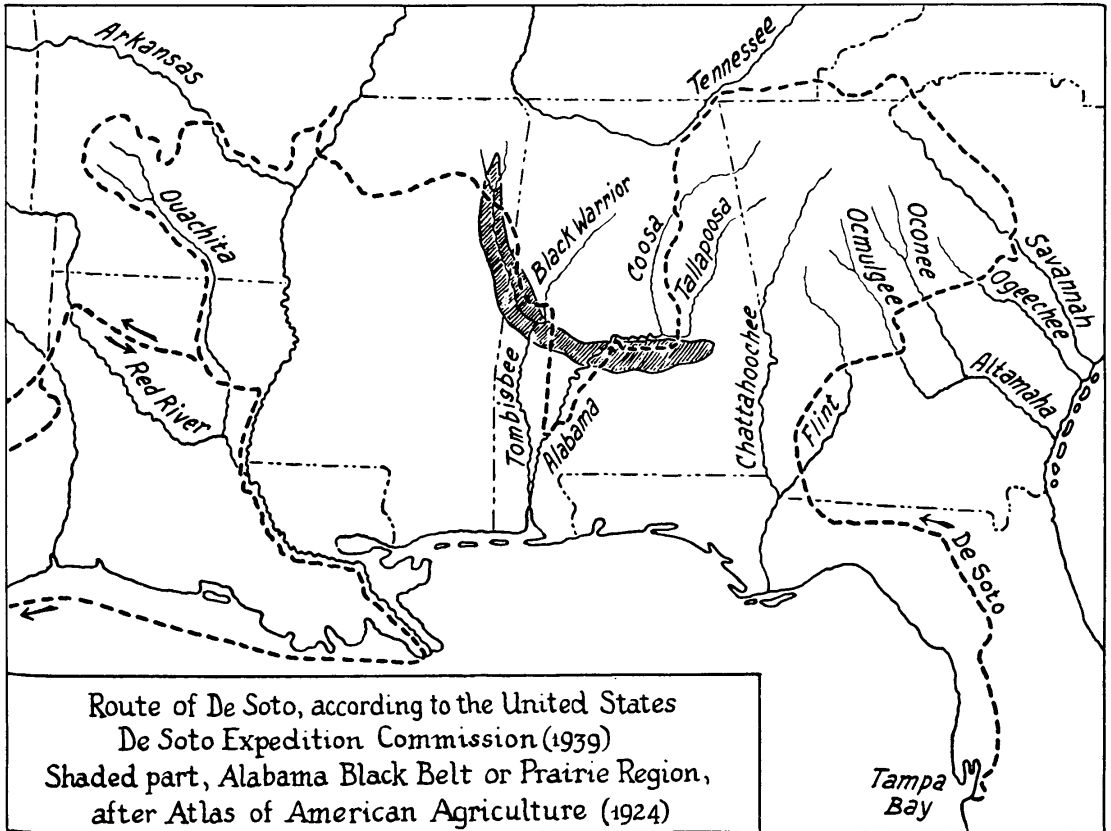


FIGURE 1

be answered by a search for evidence in the older historical records.

I wish to make it clear at the outset that the purpose of this study is not a botanical reconstruction of the vegetation of the past. The aim is to follow the explorers and early settlers, to envisage the land they saw, and to hear their descriptions and explanations, with the attention not so much upon species of plants as upon the general type of vegetation cover, forest and open country. The Black Belt is not "an island entire of itself," as the myth has made it; the Black Belt is part of the Southeast and must be viewed against the background of the Southeast in order to see if there was anything markedly different or even unique in it, and for that reason it is necessary to include descriptions of areas outside the prairie region in Alabama and Mississippi.

SIXTEENTH CENTURY

The most important evidence from the sixteenth century is contained in the four narratives of the De Soto expedition, written by Ranjel, Biedma, the Gentleman of Elvas, and Garcilaso de la Vega, *El Inca*.⁸ Not counting all the rivers of which mention is made, there are about 60 references to landscape features in Garcilaso, 40 in Elvas, 35 in Ranjel, and 10 in the relation of Biedma, which is very short. The most probable route of De

Soto is undoubtedly the one that has been traced by the United States De Soto Expedition Commission, with John R. Swanton as Chairman (Fig. 1). It is the route accepted here, and all identifications of places are according to the De Soto Commission.⁹

Florida. Ranjel makes three brief references to more or less open plains in Florida, in each instance using the term *savana*.¹⁰ Elvas offers only a general comment on this state: "The land is low and very level, the greater part is in pines, and in some places there are high and dense forests [*alto e espeso arvoredo*]."¹¹ According to Garcilaso, a short distance northeast of Tampa Bay the expedition came to "a great plain [*llano*] fringed by a dense forest [*monte cerrado de matas espesas*]," and for the next 60 or 70 miles along the route (25 leagues) the country consisted "as much of woods as of fields [*tanto de tierra de monte como de campiña*]." In Citrus County they camped on "a good plain," and farther north, between Ocala and Gainesville, the route led through a great forest in which the trees looked "as if they had been planted [*puestos á mano*], being so far apart that horses could safely run between them." In Alachua County they found land that was "clear of underbrush as well as tall trees [*limpia de monte bajo y alto*]." In describing the march through northern Florida from the vicinity of Lake City to the site of Tallahassee, Garcilaso makes several references to dense forest (*monte alto y espeso*), open forest (*monte claro y abierto*), treeless land (*tierra sin monte*), cleared land (*campo limpia de monte*), and plains (*llanos*); and he speaks of cultivated fields (*sementeras*) "extending over the plain as far as the eye could see." North of Tallahassee the scouting parties found many towns in a fertile land clear of forests, but to the south there was "poor country, almost impassable because of undergrowth and swamps [*malezas de montes y ciénagas*]."¹²

Georgia. From Ranjel we learn that between the Ogeechee and the Savannah "there was no end of berries in the plains [*savanas*],"

⁸ Rodrigo de Ranjel, "Diario" (1545), in Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdés, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias* (reprint, Asunción del Paraguay, 1944), Vol. 4, pp. 15-71, translation in Edward Gaylord Bourne, *Narratives of the Career of Hernando de Soto* (New York, 1904), Vol. 2, pp. 41-150; Luis Hernandez de Biedma, "Relación de la jornada que hizo Hernando de Soto" (1544), in Buckingham Smith, editor, *Colección de varios documentos para la historia de la Florida y tierras adyacentes* (London, 1857), Vol. 1, pp. 47-64, translation in Bourne, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 1-40; The Gentleman of Elvas, *Relação verdadeira dos trabalhos que o Governador D. Fernando de Souto e certos fidalgos portugueses passaram no descobrimento da Provincia da Florida* (1557), facsimile reproduction, edited by F. Gavazzo Perry Vidal (Lisbon, 1940), translation in Bourne, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 1-223; Garcilaso de la Vega, *El Inca*, "La Florida del Inca, Historia del Adelantado Hernando de Soto" (1605), in *Historia de Méjico, de Los Incas, y de la Florida* (Madrid, 1829), Vols. 6 and 7, translation in J. G. Varner and J. J. Varner, *The Florida of the Inca* (Austin, 1951).

Quoted passages are from the English translations; Spanish and Portuguese terms, occasionally inserted in the text for the sake of accuracy, are from the cited editions in the original language.

⁹ John R. Swanton, chairman, *Final Report of the United States De Soto Expedition Commission*, H. Doc. 71, 76th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D. C., 1939).

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 64, 74.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 59, 220.

¹² *Op. cit.*, pp. 78-260 *passim*.

and that at Cofitachequi, an Indian town on the Savannah River just below the site of Augusta, there were "many fine fields [*buenas savanas*]." ¹³ The land along the Ocmulgee, says Elvas, had "heavier soil, and was more fertile than Florida, the forest was more open [*arvoredo mais ralo*], and there were very good fields along the streams [*mui boas várzeas de rios*]." Cofitachequi had "good fields and an open forest," and a league and a half off there were "large depopulated towns grown up in grass." ¹⁴ Garcilaso describes how they crossed the Flint River in southwestern Georgia and came to "clear land [*tierra limpia*] with many cornfields." Farther north but still west of the Flint, probably in Lee County, "they doubled their marches and could easily do so, for the land was level without woods, mountains, or rivers." Like Elvas, Garcilaso says that the land along the Ocmulgee was "fertile and abundant, with fine forests and clearings [*rasos*]." Marching for six days between the Ocmulgee and Oconee, they found the terrain gentle and the forest easy to pass through, for it was not dense; but on the seventh day they got lost in a wilderness where the ground was craggy and full of brambles (*breñales*), the forest different, higher, denser, and more difficult for travel. Between the Ogeechee and the Savannah they camped in "a very beautiful place," and at Cofitachequi they traveled "a full league through a garden-like land of fruit-bearing trees, among which a horse could be ridden without any trouble, for they were as far apart as if they had been planted." ¹⁵

South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee. De Soto marched up the Piedmont between the Savannah and the Saluda rivers to the northwestern corner of South Carolina, and then over the mountains to the town of Chiaha in the Tennessee River valley. Ranjel speaks of three or four plains along the route, using both the term *savana* and the word *llano*. ¹⁶ Elvas reports that there were rich lands at Chiaha with many corn fields along the streams (*muitas sementeiras de mais*), and that they rested for thirty days at that place, during which time "the horses fattened on the good pasture." ¹⁷ According to Garcilaso, the

Piedmont was easy to traverse "either afoot or on horseback, and there was plenty of grass for the livestock." In northwestern South Carolina "they passed many fine fields of tilled lands [*tierras de labor y semeteras*]," and while crossing the mountains during the next five days they saw "a great quantity of oaks and extensive grazing lands [*mucho pasto para ganado*]." ¹⁸

Alabama. In Ranjel's narrative of the march through Alabama, mention is made now and then of grapes, plums, oaks, pines, rivers, and of villages in which food was obtained—from which cultivated fields can be inferred—but otherwise nothing is said that can be construed as a clear reference to plains, prairies, savannas, or other types of open country. Elvas and Garcilaso do not have much more to say about the landscape, and like Ranjel they are mostly concerned with the settled and cultivated regions. The province of Coza or the land of the Upper Creeks, according to Swanton, extended from about Etowah and Calhoun counties in the Coosa River valley to the town of Talisi (Talise), which was situated on the left bank of the Alabama at Durand's Bend in Dallas County, about 10 miles east of Selma (Fig. 2, No. 5); and southwest of Talisi was the territory of the Mobile Indians, with their principal settlement at Mabila (Mauvila) somewhere in Clarke County. The land of Coza, Elvas reports, was "thickly settled in numerous towns with fields extending from one to the other, a pleasant place with fertile soil and good meadows along the rivers. Talisi was a large town, and on both sides of the river there were other towns, many corn fields, and an abundance of grain." The land of the Mobile Indians, Elvas continues, was also "fertile and well inhabited, with large towns surrounded by walls, but people were numerous everywhere [*espalhada por todo o campo*], the dwellings standing a cross-bow shot or two apart." ¹⁹ Garcilaso says that the province of Coza was "so fertile and thickly populated that on some days the Spaniards passed 10 or 12 towns, not counting those that lay on one side or the other of the road," and Mabila he describes as situated on "a beautiful plain and surrounded by a wall as high as three men." ²⁰ We also learn from

¹³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 96, 102.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 66, 220.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 264-314 *passim*.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 103, 104.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 329, 331, 334.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 82, 86, 98.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 342, 353.

Biedma that Mabila was on a plain (*llano*).²¹ From Mabila, De Soto went almost due north to the Black Warrior River, passing through regions that Garcilaso calls "peaceful although unpopulated," but no mention is made by any of the chroniclers of plains, savannas, or other types of open land. The Choctaw Indians had settlements on the Black Warrior in later years, but if there was any open country in this part of Alabama in 1540 no record of it is found in the De Soto narratives. After crossing the Black Warrior, the expedition proceeded northwest through Greene and Pickens counties, marching for four days, as Garcilaso states, through level country (*tierra llana*) that had only a few scattered villages.²² Ranjel and Biedma make no comments on this part of the route, and Elvas only says that the land was unpopulated.

Mississippi. The exact route through the Chickasaw country in northeastern Mississippi is not known, and the De Soto Commission indicates several alternates, the most probable of which is shown on the map (Fig. 2). Ranjel has three references to plains (*savanas*) in this region.²³ Elvas says that the land of the "Chicaza" was "thickly inhabited, the people distributed over it as at Mabila, and, since the land was fertile and the greater part of it cultivated, there was plenty of maize." The open nature of the land can be inferred from Elvas' comment on a Chickasaw chief "who was half a league away in an open country [*terra de campina*]."²⁴ Garcilaso tells us that the principal town was situated on "a flat hill [*loma llana*] between two arroyos, in which there was very little water (even though this was the month of December, 1540) but many groves of walnuts, oaks, and live-oaks," and he further says that after departing from the Chickasaw country they traveled four leagues over "level land, where there were many small settlements."²⁵ The next open land referred to in the narratives was west of the Mississippi River, but it is unnecessary to follow the expedition that far, and will suffice to say that each of the longer relations contains half a dozen references to open country in Arkansas and Louisiana.

Summing up. The most notable impression

gained from reading the De Soto chronicles with the eye open for signs of the Black Belt prairie is that there are no such signs. Savannas, plains, and fields were encountered all along the route from Florida to Louisiana, and the Black Belt region does not at all stand out in the record as having had any more open country than other areas. What we do learn from the narratives is that De Soto found much cleared and cultivated land in Alabama and northeastern Mississippi, some of it within the Black Belt but probably as much outside its limits, but there is nothing in the record indicating that an open grassland, 20 to 30 miles broad, was crossed several times. In short, the De Soto narratives, the oldest eyewitness accounts we have, provide no evidence from which the Black Belt prairie, as represented on modern maps, might be reconstructed.

There are not many other sixteenth-century reports to add. The published documents of the Spanish expedition to central Alabama in 1559 under the command of Tristan De Luna give no useful information on the vegetation cover. In Vandra's *Memoria* of Juan Pardo's exploring journey from the coast of South Carolina in 1566 mention is made three or four times of "very large and good plains [*mui grandes vegas i mui buenas*], clear land [*tierra rasa*], and beautiful plains [*lindas vegas*]," but as far as geographical location is concerned, all we can say is that these lands were probably situated somewhere on the Carolina Piedmont.²⁶ The records of the attempted French settlements on the coast of Florida and South Carolina in the 1560's do not throw much light on the vegetation in the interior. Laudonnière makes several references to "great plains" and "fair meadows" in Florida, but just how far inland they lay is not clear.²⁷

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The seventeenth-century reports are few, and only one pertains to central Alabama. In September, 1686, the expedition led by Marcos Delgado journeyed from Florida to the

²⁶ Joan de la Vandra, "Memoria," in Buckingham Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-8.

²⁷ René Laudonnière, "History of the First Attempt of the French to Colonize the Newly Discovered Country of Florida" (Paris, 1586), in B. F. French, *Historical Collections of Louisiana and Florida* (New York, 1869), pp. 182, 236.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 18.

²² *Op. cit.*, pp. 393, 397.

²³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 134, 136.

²⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 100, 102.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 397, 415.

Creek Indian settlements on the Coosa and Tallapoosa rivers (Fig. 2). Delgado's journal records different types of land and vegetation in southeastern Alabama: "a plain of open pine woods," "a thick wood," "3 leagues of difficult wood," "a thick swamp of large trees," and the like. (In Dale County they saw many bears and buffaloes—*cibolas*. The expedition was approaching the region described a hundred years later by Hawkins as the "beloved bear ground" of the Creek Indians.) The crossing of the Black Belt in Bullock and Montgomery counties is described as follows:

We traveled 2 leagues through pine woods; then for 3 leagues over rough, hilly ground; and then for 7 leagues north over rough ground without having encountered a drop of water in three days, until we came to a spring. On leaving the spring, we went north 2 leagues and crossed two small thick swamps, and then 1½ leagues over good and level ground to a stream (the Oakfuskee), and later arrived at a river (the Tallapoosa).²⁸

A few seventeenth-century reports come from Georgia, Carolina, and Virginia. William Hilton and his boat crew went up the Cape Fear River in 1663, and when they were "near fifty leagues from the river's mouth" they found "good tracts with great burthens of grass." They explored one of these open tracts for several miles, and found that it was "thin of timber, except here and there a great oak, and full of grass," and they "saw no end of the plain."²⁹ Letters describing Henry Woodward's journeys in 1670 and 1674 from newly-founded Charleston to the site of Augusta, and to other parts of the interior, relate that he discovered "a pleasant and fruitful country, the woods being so clear of coppice and underbrush that a man could ride his horse a hunting." Woodward also observed "many spacious and large savannas."³⁰ John Lederer, who in 1669 was the first white man to make his way from the Virginia tidewater to the Blue Ridge Mountains, reports having passed several *savannae*, and says that much of the

Virginia and North Carolina Piedmont "by the industry of the Indians was very open and clear of wood." Although he found forests on the land, "yet where it was inhabited by Indians, it lay open in spacious plains."³¹

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

In the journal of his trip in the winter of 1701 from Charleston to Pamlico Sound by way of the Piedmont, John Lawson makes many comments on the landscape. One day his party traveled "about 20 miles near a savanna, the woods being newly burnt and on fire in many places." This is one of several references to the Indian custom of annually burning the woods. Not far from the site of Charlotte, North Carolina, Lawson observed some abandoned Indian croplands that had become "spread with grass and strawberry vines." After crossing the Yadkin River, probably just east of Salisbury, North Carolina, they journeyed "about 25 miles over pleasant savanna ground, high and dry, having very few trees upon it, and those standing at a great distance apart." The journal contains a dozen descriptions of what Lawson calls "large savannas."³² Mark Catesby, the naturalist, while exploring the interior of the Carolinas in the 1720's observed many Indian-set fires, as did Lawson, and found numerous "spacious tracts of meadow-land with grass six feet high. The buffaloes ranged in droves, feeding upon the open savannas morning and night, and in the sultry time of day retiring to the thickets of tall cane along the rivers."³³ On a campaign with General Oglethorpe through southern Georgia and northern Florida in 1742, Edward Kimber saw tracts of land so open, "diversified only here and there with rising hummocks of trees," that he began to fancy himself in the well-remembered pasture and meadows of his native Britain.³⁴

³¹ *The Discoveries of John Lederer in three several marches from Virginia to the west of Carolina and other parts of the continent*, collected and translated by Sir William Talbot (London, 1672; reprint, Rochester, New York, 1902), pp. 16-24.

³² *Lawson's History of North Carolina* (London, 1714; reprint, Richmond, Virginia, 1937), pp. 5-52 *passim*, 80, 219.

³³ *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and Bahama Islands* (London, 1731-1743), Vol. 2, pp. IV, XXVII.

³⁴ *A Relation or Journal of A Late Expedition to the Gates of St. Augustine in Florida* (London, 1744; reprint, Boston, 1935), p. 21.

²⁸ Marcos Delgado, "The Expedition of Marcos Delgado from Apalache to the Upper Creek Country in 1686," translated by Mark F. Boyd, in *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 16 (1937), pp. 2-32.

²⁹ William Hilton, "A Relation of a Discovery Lately Made on the Coast of Florida" (London, 1664), in Peter Force, *Tracts and Other Papers* (New York, 1947), pp. 10-11.

³⁰ Henry Woodward, "Letters," in "The Shaftesbury Papers," *Collections of the South Carolina Historical Society*, Vol. 5 (1897), pp. 186, 308-9, 457-8.

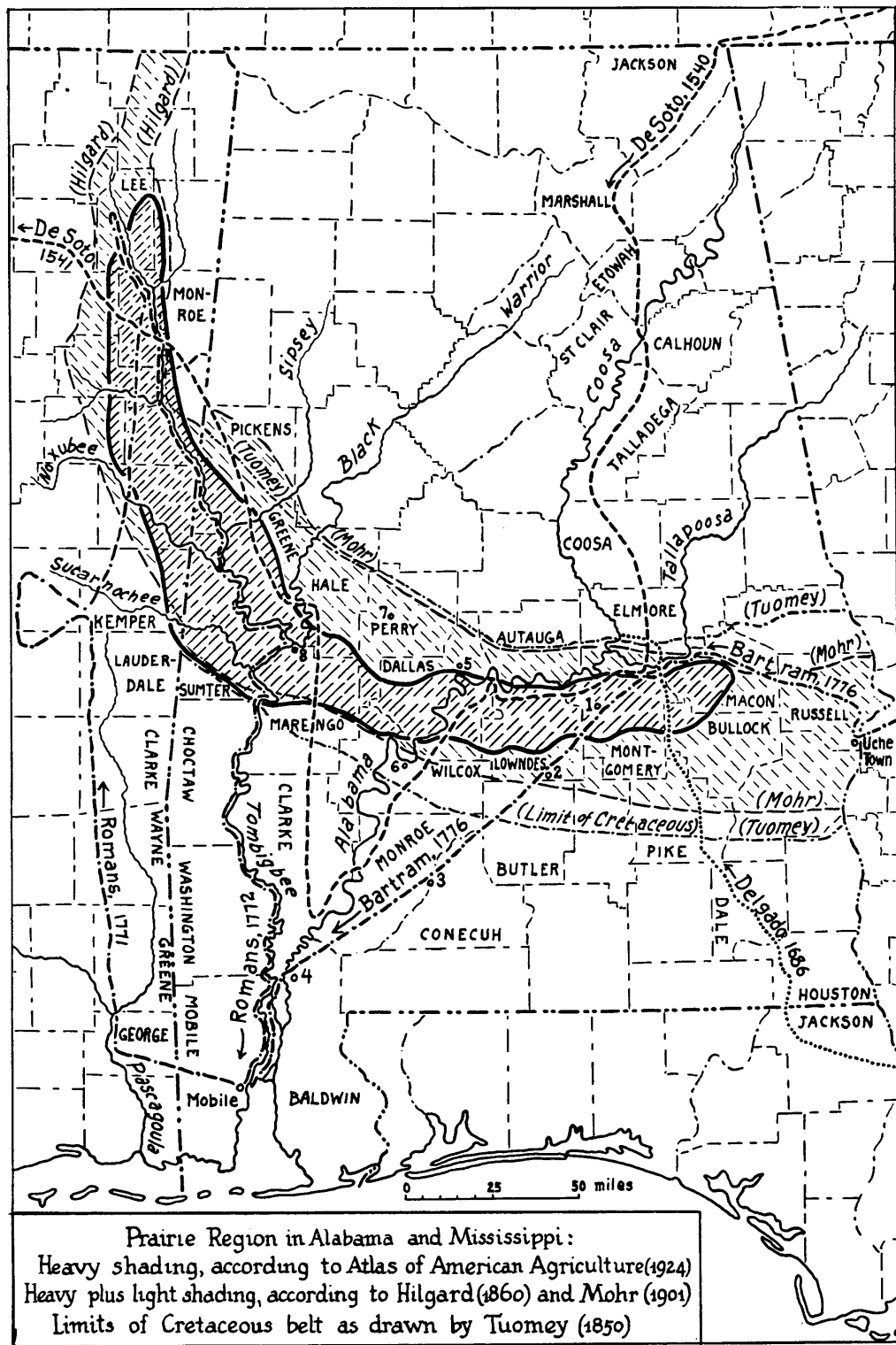


FIGURE 2

James Adair, who traded among the southern Indians in the 1730's and 1740's, writes that in the northern part of what now is the state of Mississippi there were "a number of extensive and fertile savannas, or naturally clear land, interspersed with woods to a great distance, probably 300 miles, the soil of the clear land generally consisting of rich mould to a considerable depth, with a kind of chalk or marl underneath."³⁵ This remark is of interest for several reasons. Adair is speaking of the Cretaceous belt in northeastern Mississippi and central Alabama, the region of "rotten limestone" in nineteenth-century terminology, and his comment is probably the earliest expression in the literature of the concept of an extensive region characterized by numerous grasslands which are regarded as *naturally clear* lands, a forerunner, that is, of the idea of the crescent-shaped belt of natural prairie represented in modern atlases. But it may be doubted that any historical connection exists between Adair's concept and the modern idea. The "rich mould to a considerable depth" makes it clear that Adair is not referring to the bald prairies with soil so thin that "the plow scrapes the bedrock," as the saying goes, but to the level or gently rolling lands with deep prairie soil. And this was fertile soil, in Adair's opinion. There is no hint that he considered the absence of trees a sign of low soil fertility; and neither is there any such suggestion in the writings of other eighteenth-century travelers in this region.³⁶

Bernard Romans, a civil engineer and nat-

uralist who traveled widely in the Gulf region during the 1770's, made a journey in the fall and winter of 1771-72 from Mobile through eastern Mississippi to the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations, and back to Mobile by way of the Tombigbee (Fig 2). The daily entries in the log he kept show that in southeastern Mississippi he traveled through "pine lands," "oak land," "pretty mixed land," "savannas," and many "deserted fields." Circling west from Kemper County, he made a tour of the Choctaw country and found "many old as well as cultivated fields interspersed in the forest," and traveled through "various kinds of woods and savannas." He returned to Kemper County and departed for the Chickasaw country, crossing "many savannas" in northeastern Mississippi, and arrived at the Chickasaw town, which was situated "nearly in the center of a very large and somewhat uneven savanna of a diameter above 3 miles" (presumably Chickasaw Old Fields, Fig. 3). The return trip down the Tombigbee was begun on December 13, 1771, and from that time until he passed the mouth of the Sucarnocnee in Sumter County, Alabama, Romans traveled entirely within the Black Belt, but the journal shows that he observed forests as often as open prairie, if not oftener. A few examples from the journal follow. On December 14, presumably in northern Monroe County, Mississippi, he "passed some pine lands." On December 15, a mile or so below the mouth of the Oktibbeha in Lowndes County, "a remarkable bluff came into view, 50 feet high, a mile and a half long, covered with juniper and cedar." Two days later he saw "one of the high savannas with a delightful grassy bluff," and the next day, probably in the southern part of Lowndes County, camp was made on a high bank "timbered chiefly with shagbark hickory, iron wood, and Spanish oak." On January 4, 1772, in Pickens County, Alabama, Romans passed "one of the savannas on the west side," and then voyaged 22 miles through a region where "the canes and the timber were exceeding large." The journal continues in this fashion with comments on both savannas and forests until he was well below Sumter County. Romans also noted open country south of the Black Belt. On January 13 he observed "an old field on the east side," and on the 16th he

³⁵ *The History of the American Indians* (London, 1775), p. 461.

³⁶ It seems to be commonly believed, and in some quarters even regarded as an established fact, that the pioneer settlers from the East were at first skeptical about the fertility of the western grasslands because of the absence of trees. However, Ralph H. Brown says that he found nothing in the old sources indicating doubt in the minds of the first settlers concerning the fertility of the prairies in the Middle West, but also points out that other scholars have reached different conclusions: *Historical Geography of the United States* (New York, 1948), pp. 208, 553. Whatever the pioneers in other regions may have thought of grassland soils, it can be said for the record that the prairie soils in Alabama and Mississippi were regarded as very fertile, not only by James Adair, but by Bernard Romans, William Bartram, Benjamin Hawkins, Caleb Swan, all of them competent eighteenth-century observers, and similar opinions are expressed in a number of reports from the early nineteenth century.

passed "a spacious old field." Both fields were probably in Clarke County.³⁷

In 1730, about 40 years before Romans made his journey to the Choctaw towns in east-central Mississippi, Régis du Roulet visited the same region. According to his journal, the village of Castacha (in Neshoba County, just west of Kemper County) was "situated on a large plain [*grande plaine*] with a small hill in the center." The nearby town of Jachou (Yazoo) was also on "a great plain," and the Indians had "their fields on this plain [*ont leur désert dans cette plain*] and their cabins all around it." This plain was not so large as that of Castacha, but "it probably was at least 2 leagues (ca. 5 miles) in circumference." Two villages in Kemper County were on "small plains," and yet another, the position of which is uncertain, was likewise on a "small plain."³⁸ Captain Lusser, another traveler in the Choctaw country in 1730, describes one village in Neshoba County as situated on "a hill in the form of a prairie, where water was very scarce," and a neighboring settlement he found "very agreeable and surrounded by prairies of rather great extent."³⁹ In an account by an unknown writer, sometimes called the "Relat de Kened," which according to Swanton probably dates from about 1755, the territory of the Choctaw Indians is depicted as beautiful and as having "very large plains cut up by little streams, the grass in these plains growing to the height of a man." The land of the Chickasaw was even "better provided with these plains than the Choctaw country, the landscape more beautiful, and the soil better."⁴⁰

Another glimpse of the land held by the Chickasaw in northeastern Mississippi is given

³⁷ A *Concise Natural History of East and West Florida* (New York, 1775), pp. 62, 305–33 *passim*.

³⁸ Le Baron Marc de Villiers, "Notes sur les Chactas, d'après les journaux de voyage de Régis du Roulet, 1729–1732," *Journal de la Société des Américanistes de Paris*, N. S., Vol. 15 (1923), pp. 240–41. The Choctaw towns named by du Roulet are identified and located by John R. Swanton, "Source Material for the Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians," *Bureau of American Ethnology*, Bulletin 103 (1931), pp. 61–3, 71.

³⁹ Captain Lusser, "Journal," in *Mississippi Provincial Archives, French Dominion*, collected and translated by Dunbar Rowland and A. G. Sanders, Vol. 1 (Jackson, 1927), p. 96.

⁴⁰ John R. Swanton, "An Early Account of the Choctaw Indians," *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association*, Vol. 5 (1918), pp. 69–70.

in De Montigny's narrative of Bienville's campaign against that nation in 1736. The troops ascended the Tombigbee and disembarked a few miles below the mouth of Old Town Creek (Fig. 3).⁴¹ From this point, which is right in the prairie belt, the army "proceeded in two columns through the woods [*au travers des bois*]," and in the evening "halted in a plain surrounded by woods." Next morning the troops crossed a ravine and a wood and entered a beautiful plain. Then the battle began: "Forming a square battalion, our soldiers advanced in good order, like Gideon's of old, gathering bunches of strawberries as they crossed the prairie."⁴² In Bienville's own journal we also find several references to prairies in this region.⁴³

There is a wealth of other French reports on eighteenth-century Louisiana and neighboring states, many of which are of great historic and ethnographic significance, but they have little or nothing to say about the landscape of interior Alabama and Mississippi. Most of them tell us even less than does Captain Bossu, who in 1759 went upriver from Mobile to Fort Tombigbee (Tombeckbee) in central Sumter County, and all that we can glean from him about the vegetation cover is that his party ascended the Tombigbee "a hundred leagues between forests, camping each night in the woods upon the banks of the river."⁴⁴

The narratives of Swan, Taitt, Hawkins, and Bartram, all of the late eighteenth century, are of particular interest for their descriptions of timberland and open country in the eastern end of the Black Belt. Major Swan of the United States Army, who spent two months in the fall of 1790 among the Creeks and made a brief report of their country, says that the land near the Alabama River in Montgomery and Lowndes counties was "very beautiful with high clear fields along the banks, the soil being of a dark brown color, producing most abundantly, and well tim-

⁴¹ This was Bienville's point of embarkation according to J. F. H. Claiborne, *Mississippi as a Province, Territory, and State* (Jackson, 1880), p. 59.

⁴² Dumont de Montigny, *Mémoires historiques sur la Louisiane* (Paris, 1753), Vol. 2, pp. 215–19.

⁴³ Bienville, "Journal," in Rowland and Sanders, *op. cit.*, pp. 303–5.

⁴⁴ Jean Bernard Bossu, *Travels Through That Part of North America Formerly Called Louisiana* (Paris, 1768), translated by J. R. Forster (London, 1771), Vol. 1, pp. 282, 285.

bered with oak, hickory, mulberry, poplar, wild cherry, wild locust, laurel, cypress, bay, gum, cedar, iron, and white cork woods."⁴⁵ David Taitt came through Montgomery County in 1772 on a journey from Pensacola and probably passed over the site of Snowdown or not far from it (Fig. 2, No. 1). In this section, he writes, his party "passed through several little savannas entirely clear of trees or underwood in the middle, and surrounded with rows of trees between each savanna, making a very pleasant prospect for a considerable distance and appearing more like the works of Art than of Nature."⁴⁶

In his short but thorough "Sketch of the Creek Country," Benjamin Hawkins names over fifty Indian towns and in more or less detail describes their lands. Most of them were situated along the Coosa, Tallapoosa, and Chattahoochee rivers outside the Black Belt proper, but some of them were within it. Only a few excerpts from these descriptions can be given here. The part of the Black Belt that lies along the border of Montgomery and Macon counties and extends into Bullock County is drained by the Oakfuskee and its numerous tributaries, and, says Hawkins, "there was good land on all of the eight or nine forks, with growth of oak, hickory, poplar, cherry, persimmons, and cane brakes, a delightful range for stock." He adds the interesting comment that this region was "preserved by the Indians for bear, and was called the beloved bear ground," and explains that each town used to have its own exclusive reserve, but since cattle had increased and bears decreased, the grounds were hunted in common. Along the Tallapoosa from its falls to the confluence with the Coosa there was "good land spreading out on its left," that is, in the northern parts of Macon and Montgomery counties, "and there were several pine creeks on that side, the land bordering them rich, the timber large, and cane abundant." The "good land" continued to the Alabama River and "down it for 30 miles, including the plains," and these plains were "17 miles through, going parallel to the Alabama south

20 degrees west." William Bartram (see below) describes the plains as lying parallel to the river and about 10 miles distant from it. According to Hawkins and Bartram, then, the plains—in later times more commonly known as prairies—began 5 or 10 miles south or southeast of the site of Montgomery and extended in a south-southwesterly direction well into Lowndes County. These plains were the "savannas" of Taitt, the much-quoted "illuminated grassy plains" of Bartram, and the section of the Black Belt that has been described more frequently than any other part, for all of the travelers from the Montgomery region destined for Mobile or Pensacola crossed these plains, at first on the old Creek Southwest Trail and in later time on the Federal Road. It may well be that these numerous descriptions, many of them written by passers-by who saw little else of the Black Belt, have helped to create the erroneous impression that prairie vegetation was typical of all of central Alabama. Hawkins describes the plains as follows:

They are waving, hill and dale, and appear divided into fields. In the fields the grass is short, no brush; the soil in places is a lead color, yellow underneath, and very stiff. [The reader can scarcely avoid the thought that Hawkins may in fact have been describing what once *were* fields, cleared, farmed, worn out, and abandoned.] In the wooded parts the growth is generally post oak, and very large, without any underbrush, beautifully set in clumps. Here the soil is dark clay, covered with long grass and weeds, which indicates a rich soil. . . . Four large creeks meander through the level, rich land, well wooded and abounding with cane. There is, notwithstanding these creeks, a scarcity of water in the dry season, and all the creeks were dry in 1799, and not a spring of water was to be found.⁴⁷

The most valuable eighteenth-century report on vegetation in the Southeast is undoubtedly William Bartram's journal, in which there are upwards of fifty separate descriptions of "extensive savannas," "vast meadows,"

⁴⁵ Caleb Swan, "Position and State of Manners and Arts in the Creek, or Muscogee Nation in 1791," in Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Archives of Aboriginal Knowledge* (Philadelphia, 1864), Vol. 5, p. 257.

⁴⁶ David Taitt, "Journal," in Newton D. Mereness, ed., *Travels in the American Colonies* (New York, 1916), p. 500.

⁴⁷ Benjamin Hawkins, "A Sketch of the Creek Country in the Years 1798 and 1799," *Georgia Historical Society, Collections*, Vol. 3 (1848, reprint, Americus, Georgia, 1938), pp. 22-5, 32. The Indian towns named by Hawkins, Bartram, and other early travelers in the Creek country are identified and located by Albert S. Gatschet, "Towns and Villages of the Creek Confederacy, in the XVIII and XIX Centuries," *Publications of the Alabama Historical Society, Miscellaneous Collections*, Vol. 1 (1901), pp. 386-415, and also by John R. Swanton, "The Indians of the Southeastern United States," *Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin* 137 (1946).

"large grassy plains," and the like, by far most of which were situated outside the Black Belt region. Bartram made several journeys in the South, including one to Mobile by way of the Creek country in the eastern end of the Black Belt (Fig. 2). In late June of 1777 or 1776 (perhaps even earlier; the year is uncertain) he joined a company of traders at Augusta, Georgia, followed the old Indian trail near the fall line, crossing the Ocmulgee below the site of Macon, and reached the Alabama border at Yuchi (Uche) Town, which was situated some 20 miles south of Columbus. The first evening after leaving Augusta they came to camp near the Ogeechee on "a pleasant grassy open plain." At the Oconee River they stopped for the night in "a delightful grove of oak, ash, mulberry, hickory, black walnut, elm, sassafras, locust, etc. This grove extended into an extensive, green, open, level plain, consisting of old Indian fields and plantations, stretching to a very great distance." After leaving the Oconee, they traveled "over a pleasant territory affording sublime forests contrasted by expansive illumined green fields, native meadows and cane brakes." At the Ocmulgee, Bartram observed the "famous old fields," and west of the Flint River they halted for the night "on the acclivity of a swelling ridge with open airy groves of superb pines, glittering rills playing beneath, and pellucid brooks meandering through an expansive savanna." Then they passed through "almost endless grassy fields, detached groves, and green lawns extending for the distance of nine or ten miles." In his journal of the trip from Augusta to Uche Town, Bartram describes at least ten large open plains or savannas.

From Uche Town, Bartram proceeded north on the Alabama side of the Chattahoochee, "riding over a level plain consisting of ancient Indian plantations," and arrived at the Indian settlement of Apalachicola (Apalachucla) a few miles up the river. He then traveled west through Russell and Macon counties, probably passing near the site of Tuskegee, and came to the bend of the Tallapoosa after a journey of three days "over a vast level plain country of expansive savannas, groves, cane swamps, and open pine forests." Descending along the left bank of the Tallapoosa "continuously in sight of Indian plantations," Bartram reached Old Coolome, where he found "very extensive old fields, the abandoned

plantations and commons of the old town, the settlement having been removed to the opposite (northern) shore." Coolome (Kulumi or Kolomi, Coo-loo-me in Hawkins), according to Gatschet, was situated on the Tallapoosa about 13 miles above its junction with the Coosa, that is, in the northeastern corner of Montgomery County. It was from Coolome that Bartram took his departure for Mobile.

The exact route to Mobile cannot be identified from Bartram's writing, but, as Roland M. Harper suggests, it probably ran in a general southwesterly direction, passing near the sites of Snowdown, Fort Deposit, Burnt Corn, and Tensaw (Taensa; Fig. 2, Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 4).⁴⁸ These sites just about mark the route of the old Federal Road, which was built in the early nineteenth century along the ancient Creek Southwest Trail, according to Peter Hamilton.⁴⁹ And this trail may well have been the "trading path for West Florida" that Bartram says he set out on.

The route on the first day after leaving Coolome presents no problem. "Early in the morning we set off for Mobile. Our progress for about 18 miles was through a magnificent forest, frequently having in view the distant towns over plains or old fields, and at evening we came to camp in a grove of venerable oaks on the verge of the great plains." The magnificent forest was in the northeastern part of Montgomery County, and, having come 18 miles on a course that could only have been in the southwesterly quadrant, the position of their camp—at the verge of the plains—must have been 5 or 10 miles south of Montgomery, very likely near the site of Snowdown (Fig. 2, No. 1).

The next day's entry in the journal contains Bartram's description of the plains.

We continued over these expansive illumined grassy plains, or native fields, about 20 miles in length, and in width 8 or 9, lying parallel to the river, which was about 10 miles distant. They are invested by high forests, extensive points or promontories, which project into the plains on each side, dividing them into many vast fields opening on either hand as we passed along. The surface of the plains or fields is clad with tall grass, intermingled with a variety of herbage. The upper structure or vegetable mould of these plains is perfectly black, soapy, and rich, especially after

⁴⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Peter J. Hamilton, "Indian Trails and Early Roads," *Publications of the Alabama Historical Society, Miscellaneous Collections*, Vol. 1 (1901), pp. 423, 426.

rains, and renders the road very slippery; it lies on a bed of white limestone rocks, which in places resemble chalk, and in other places there are strata of various kinds of sea shells, these dissolving near the surface and mixing with the superficial mould renders it extremely productive.

The journal continues, "Immediately after leaving the plains we entered the grand high forest. There were stately trees of *Robinia pseudoacacia*, *Tilia*, *Morus*, *Ulmus*, *Juglans exaltata*, *Juglans nigra*, *Pyrus coronaria*, *Cornus florida*, *Cercis* etc." The first impression is that Bartram is here speaking of the timberland south of the Black Belt, and perhaps he is, but there is a possibility that this forest was within the prairie region, for in the same paragraph Bartram says, "Our road now for several miles led us near the Alabama, within two or three miles of its banks." The journal is not clear at this point; but Bartram certainly could not have come within a couple of miles of the Alabama had he continued on a southwesterly course after leaving the plains. He may have shaped a more westerly course at some time during this day, which apparently was the second day out from Coolome, perhaps along the old Alabama-Choctaw Trail,⁵⁰ and in that event he would have approached the river, possibly near Benton in Lowndes County, where the Alabama meanders southward for 6 or 7 miles. The suggestion that this was the route seems to be supported by Bartram's next entry in the journal, in which he says that they now left the river at a good distance, bore away southerly, and entered "a vast open forest which continued above 70 miles."

While the position of the "grand high forest" may be uncertain, it seems clear that when Bartram entered the vast and open seventy-mile forest he was south of the Black Belt. Two points stand out in his description of this forest: it was no monotonous pinery, and there was plenty of open country in it. "This forest," he writes, "consists chiefly of oak, hickory, ash, sour gum, sweet gum, beech, mulberry, scarlet maple, black walnut, dogwood, *Cornus florida*, *Aesculus pavia*, *Prunus Indica*, *Ptelea*, and an abundance of chestnut on the hills, with *Pinus taeda* and *Pinus lutea*." (Botanists will recognize that some of

the specific names used by Bartram have been changed since his time.) The open character of the forest is clearly indicated: "During our progress over this vast forest we crossed extensive open plains, the soil gravelly, producing few trees and shrubs or undergrowth." And again Bartram says, "We traveled about 20 miles through a landscape of expansive plains of cane meadows, and detached groves." In Monroe County, having crossed one of the branches of the Escambia River, Bartram observed that the country was gently but perceptibly dropping toward the Gulf, and here he noted a landscape that was "very different from what had been observed since leaving the Creek nation, and not unlike the low countries of Carolina, being in fact one vast flat grassy savanna and cane meadow, intersected and variously scrolled over with narrow forests and groves." Shortly thereafter Bartram reached Taensa, "embarked in a boat and proceeded for Mobile."⁵¹

⁵¹ William Bartram, *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee country, the extensive territories of the Muscogulges, or Creek Confederacy, and the country of the Chactaws* (London, 1794), pp. 374-401 *passim*.

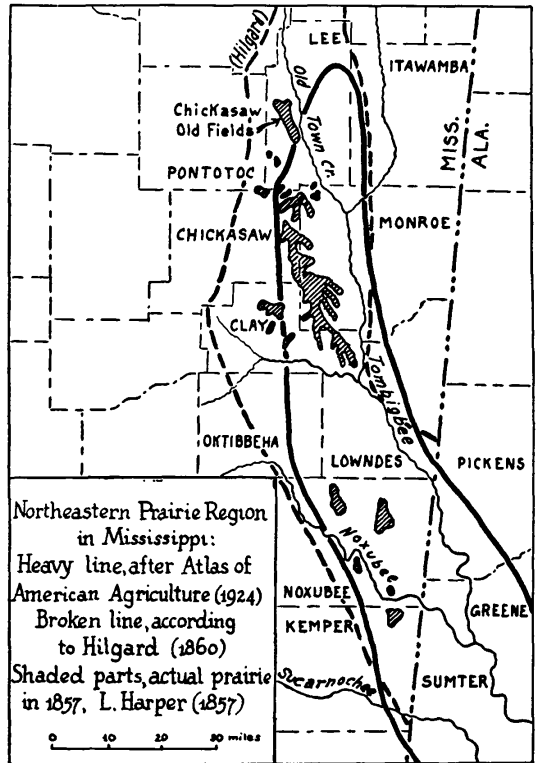


FIGURE 3

⁵⁰ For the route of the old Alabama-Choctaw Trail, see William E. Myer, "Indian Trails of the Southeast," *Bureau of American Ethnology, Annual Report, Vol. 42* (1924-25), p. 748.

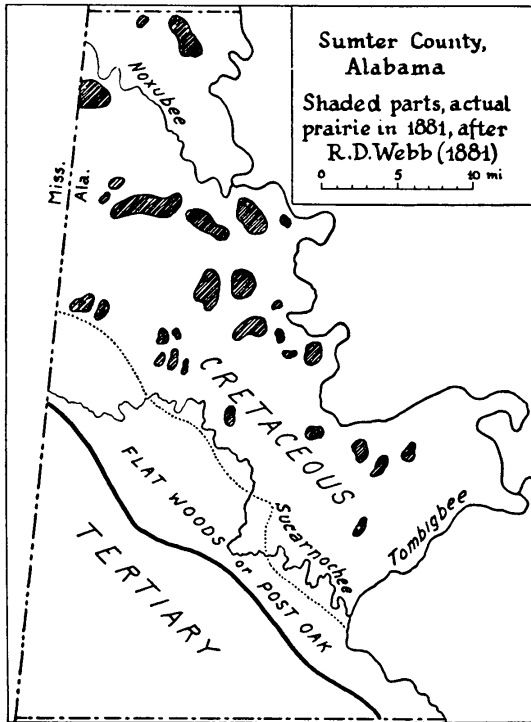


FIGURE 4

NINETEENTH CENTURY

Nineteenth-century reports on the Southeast are very numerous; so only those that describe the Black Belt region are considered. These descriptions bring out especially two things: the appearance of the prairie sections and the prevalence of timber in the Black Belt.

The journal of Major Howell Tatum's survey of the Alabama River in 1814 is mostly a record of courses and distances but also includes brief remarks on the land. Tatum, like Romans in his descent of the Tombigbee, found timbered bluffs and banks alternating with open country, and generally his comments on the former outnumber his remarks on the latter, whatever that may mean. His notes of August 14 and 15, when he crossed the Black Belt from Durand's Bend east of Selma (Fig. 2, No. 5) to Canton Bend in Wilcox County (Fig. 2, No. 6), contain about a dozen references to "pine lands," "timbered bluffs," "pine, oak, and hickory growth," or other forest terms.⁵²

⁵² Major Howell Tatum, "Topographical Notes and Observations on the Alabama River, August 1814," in Peter J. Hamilton and Thomas M. Owen, eds., *Transactions of the Alabama Historical Society*, Vol. 2 (1898), pp. 135-50.

A description by W. Roberts, another surveyor, of the part of the Black Belt that lies east and south of the Alabama River in Dallas, Lowndes, and Montgomery counties was published in 1818 and reads as follows:

Next to the river swamp, and elevated above it by a bluff, we enter upon an extensive body of level, rich land, of fine black, or chocolate-colored soil. The principal growth is hickory, black oak, post oak, dogwood, and poplar are also common, but pine is rather scarce. . . After this comes in the prairies. These are wide-spreading plains, of a level or gently waving land, without timber, clothed in grass, herbage, and flowers, insulated by narrow skirts of rich interval woodland. The soil is generally of a fine black rich cast and has the appearance of great fertility. . . The only objection to this part of the country seems to be the want of water.⁵³

The prairies near Cahaba, Dallas County, in 1821 are described in these words by J. W. Heustis, an early settler:

Before you is a wide and extended meadow; to the right and left intervening strips of oak and pines; proceeding onwards, the prospect seems terminated by the surrounding woods; anon, you catch a glimpse of the opening vista; and again the prospect expands into the widespreading horizon of an extensive prairie. These prairies are generally rolling; the quality of the soil is admitted to be the best the country affords; and the only objection is the scarcity of good water.⁵⁴

Another description of the same region is given by Philip Henry Gosse, who taught school in Dallas County during the 1830's:

There are in this neighborhood many prairies, not the boundless prairies of the West, but little ones, varying in extent from an acre to a square mile. They are generally so well defined, that the woods environ them on all sides like an abrupt wall, and one can hardly be persuaded that these prairies are not clearings made with the axe of the settler. . . The residents on the prairies suffer greatly in the dry season from the scarcity of water.⁵⁵

James Stuart, speaking in 1830 of the plains southwest of Montgomery, says, "In many of the prairies are what are called islands of wooded land. They generally have the appearance of such beauty, and are so well placed, that a stranger is with difficulty con-

⁵³ Quoted in William Darby, *The Emigrant's Guide to the Western and Southwestern States and Territories* (New York, 1818), pp. 132-3.

⁵⁴ "Letter," in Thomas Perkins Abernethy, *The Formative Period in Alabama, 1815-1828* (Montgomery, 1922), p. 22.

⁵⁵ *Letters from Alabama* (London, 1859), pp. 75, 80-1.

vinced that they are not planted."⁵⁶ Commenting on the prairie region in northeastern Mississippi in 1827, Thomas McKenney remarks, "There are prairies in that district, large and level. Pretty groves occasionally rise out of them, whilst a fringe of woodland belts them around. But there is no water."⁵⁷

Many of the early accounts clearly reveal the prevalence of timbered land in the Black Belt. In 1817, according to S. A. Townes, the site of Marion in Perry County (Fig. 2, No. 7) "was covered with a dense forest."⁵⁸ Another Marion settler reports, "I came to Perry County in 1832. Passing through the Creek country, we camped at Mt. Meigs near Montgomery, where farmers were picking cotton and clearing land—the axes were cutting until midnight, and an hour before day next morning. [This was Bartram's "magnificent forest" in northeastern Montgomery County that was being cleared.] We camped near Marion Saturday night, and here Negroes were cutting timber all night until sunrise Sunday."⁵⁹ The region granted by Congress in 1817 to a group of French émigrés, who founded Demopolis in Marengo County (Fig. 2, No. 8), is described by Pickett as "an immense forest, interspersed with prairies."⁶⁰ Levasseur, accompanying Lafayette on a steamer down river from Montgomery in 1825, was impressed by the "always wooded banks of the Alabama."⁶¹ Stephen Elliott does not give a detailed description of the Black Belt in his Southern botany of 1824, but says that the district with the finest forests in the United States is "the country which encloses the Alabama and its tributaries."⁶² In 1836 Tuskegee, Macon County, appeared to an Army surgeon as "a spot in the primeval forest laid out in town lots on which a few buildings

had arisen among stumps and burnt trees."⁶³ A traveler approaching Montgomery by river in 1834 was impressed by "the green forest crowning the bluff on which the city was built,"⁶⁴ and twenty years later Frederick Law Olmsted observed that "from the state house of the fine and promising town of Montgomery the eye falls in every direction upon a dense forest, boundless as the sea."⁶⁵ The following description of the Alabama prairies dates from 1830:

There are open prairies of every size from 100 to 1200 acres, mixed and interspersed in every form and mode with timbered lands of all kinds; some producing only black-jack and post-oak; others again covered with most majestic oak, poplar, elm, hickory, walnut, pecan, hackberry, grapevine, and cane.⁶⁶

A trace of former forests is seen in M. C. Boyd's note of the "ever-present stumps" encountered by the plowman in Greene County during the 1850's.⁶⁷ Much of the timber was cleared away during the nineteenth century, when the prairie belt became one of the leading cotton producers of the South, but despite this clearance it was estimated in 1878 that about 45 percent of the area of the Black Belt counties in Alabama remained in forest.⁶⁸

The crescent-shaped prairie belt shown in many modern atlases cannot be recognized in, or reconstructed from, the great nineteenth-century works on botany, or from the magnificent silvas of North America by André Michaux, Thomas Nuttall, or Charles Sprague Sargent; nor can it be found on the maps accompanying Sargent's comprehensive forest report for the *Tenth Census of the United States* in 1880. Map No. 1 of that report shows the "Forest, Prairie, and Treeless Regions of North America," Map No. 16 the "Relative Density of Existing Forests," and on neither

⁵⁶ *Three Years in North America* (Edinburgh, 1833), Vol. 2, p. 175.

⁵⁷ *Memoirs, Official and Personal, with Sketches of Travels among the Northern and Southern Indians* (New York, 1846), p. 163.

⁵⁸ "The History of Marion, Sketches of Life in Perry County" (1844), *The Alabama Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 14 (1952), p. 179.

⁵⁹ W. T. Jordan, "Early Ante-Bellum Marion, Alabama," *ibid.*, Vol. 5 (1943), p. 27.

⁶⁰ Albert James Pickett, *History of Alabama* (1851; reprint, Sheffield, Alabama, 1896), p. 625.

⁶¹ August Levasseur, *Lafayette en Amérique* (Paris, 1829), Vol. 2, p. 187.

⁶² *A Sketch of the Botany of South Carolina and Georgia* (Charleston, 1816–24), Vol. 2, p. 608.

⁶³ Jacob Rhett Motte, *Journey Into Wilderness, An Army Surgeon's Account of Life in Camp and Fields during the Creek and Seminole Wars of 1836–1838*, James F. Sunderman, ed. (Gainesville, Florida, 1953), p. 22.

⁶⁴ Charles U. Shepard, "Geological Observations upon Alabama, Georgia, and Florida," *The American Journal of Science and Arts*, Vol. 25 (1834), p. 163.

⁶⁵ *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (New York, 1861), p. 574.

⁶⁶ W. W. McGuire, "On the Prairies of Alabama," *The American Journal of Science and Arts*, Vol. 26 (1834), p. 96.

⁶⁷ *Alabama in the Fifties* (New York, 1931), p. 37.

⁶⁸ Saffold Bernay, *Handbook of Alabama* (Mobile, 1878), p. 221. The forest data in this handbook were contributed by Charles Mohr.

map is there any sign of open, treeless land in the region of the Black Belt.⁶⁹ The absence of the Alabama prairies from these and other maps of the nineteenth century does not mean that there were no prairies, nor that the makers of the maps were ignorant of them, but it must mean that in their opinion the vegetation cover of the Black Belt region was not sufficiently different from that of surrounding areas to warrant a different map symbol.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

The two most recent developments relevant to this study are: the first appearance on a vegetation map of the crescent-shaped prairie region, and the marked actual increase during the last few decades of the forested area in the Black Belt counties.

So far as I know, the Black Belt region in its present familiar shape and position first appeared on a forest map of the United States that was published in 1923 as part of a work which was described by Zon and Sparhawk, the authors, as a semi-official publication of the Forest Service.⁷⁰ The maps in this work are said by the authors to be original and never published before, and no further documentation or source of the maps is given. On this forest map, however, the crescent-shaped region is not labeled as prairie; it is merely a blank space on the area represented as forest.

⁶⁹ Charles Sprague Sargent, "Report on the Forests of North America," *Tenth Census of the United States* (Washington, D. C., 1884), Vol. 9, Map Nos. 1 and 16 in portfolio accompanying the volume.

⁷⁰ Raphael Zon and William N. Sparhawk, *Forest Resources of the World* (New York, 1923), Vol. 2, Plate XI facing p. 522. There are several early twentieth-century vegetation maps on which the Alabama prairie belt does not appear, for example: John W. Harshberger, "Phytogeographic Survey of North America," in A. Engler and O. Drude, *Die Vegetation der Erde* (Leipzig and New York, 1811), Vol. 13; Forrest Shreve, "A map of the Vegetation of the United States," *The Geographical Review*, Vol. III (1917), pp. 119-25; V. E. Shelford, *Naturalist's Guide to the Americas* (Baltimore, 1926), figs. 3, 4, and 5. A large reproduction from the original full-size blueprints of Shelford's maps is found in A. L. Kroeber, *Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America* (Berkeley, 1939), Map 3. Other maps appear in Cleland and Roland M. Harper, *op. cit.*, but their regions, labeled Black Belt, Blue Marl, Eutaw Belt, and so on, are not truly vegetation zones so much as they are geological or soil differentiations, resembling the maps of Tuomey, Hilgard, Mohr, and E. A. Smith.

But on the map of Shantz and Zon, which came out the following year, the blank space has been filled with the symbol for tallgrass prairie, and it is clearly this map that has become the prototype for many others in recent years.⁷¹ The present shape and position of the crescent thus appears to have originated with Zon and Sparhawk, and it became a natural grassland with Shantz and Zon. Distinction must be made between the map of Shantz and Zon and their description of prairie vegetation, for it is the map that has been widely copied, not the description; indeed, a description of the prairies in Alabama and Mississippi could not have been copied from them, for they give none. The excellent discussion and all of the photographs in Shantz's section on grassland vegetation pertain to the Midwestern and far Western prairie and deserts, and it is not clear just how the Alabama Black Belt came to be mapped as a natural prairie. It may well be that there was no intention of representing it as a region that *always* had been a grassland. Shantz writes in a personal communication, "I do not regard our prairie as a thoroughly natural climax since it is continually thrown back by fire."⁷²

Much of the land that was cleared for cotton during the nineteenth century has been abandoned as cropland in the twentieth, and is being reforested by a natural encroachment of trees.⁷³ The forest surveys have revealed that approximately 47 percent of the area of the 12 Alabama counties through which the main part of the prairie belt runs (Autauga, Bullock, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Macon, Marengo, Montgomery, Perry, Pickens, and Sumter) was forested in 1935, whereas about 56 percent of the area of the same counties was forested in 1952, showing an increase of 19 percent in 17 years. The corresponding increase in 8 Mississippi counties (Chickasaw, Clay, Kemper, Lee, Lowndes, Monroe, Noxubee, and Oktibbeha) was a little over 12 percent in the 14 years from 1933

⁷¹ Shantz and Zon, *loc. cit.*

⁷² Letter from H. L. Shantz, April 1956.

⁷³ "That this second growth was not purposely grown by man, but happened to develop through natural means, is indeed worthy of note." A. R. Spillers, *Forest Resources of Southeast Alabama*, Forest Survey Release No. 47 (December 1939), p. 8.

to 1947.⁷⁴ P. R. Wheeler, Chief of Forest Economics at the Southern Forest Experiment Station, informs me that it has not been determined exactly how much of the increase was contributed by the part occupied by the Black Belt itself, but observations suggest that it was not an unusually large share. I take this to mean that neither was the share unusually small but about average. It is not known, of course, how far this encroachment by the forest would go if it were allowed to take its natural course, but, in reply to my question, Wheeler expressed the belief that if there were no interference by man the Black Belt would probably in time become a predominantly forested region.⁷⁵ I suspect that many foresters share that opinion. It may be noted that the latest maps of the Forest Service do not show the crescent-shaped region, whether as prairie or blank space. Central Alabama and northeastern Mississippi are now represented as forest land, as they were on Sargent's maps in 1880. In the combined light of the historical record and these latest developments, it is becoming increasingly hard to believe that the Black Belt was ever a *natural* grassland.

MEANING OF THE HISTORICAL RECORD

The substance of the old reports is that the early observers (1) found two kinds of forest, (2) discovered several types of open, treeless land, and (3) encountered these open lands not only in the Alabama Black Belt but throughout the Southeast.

1. One kind of forest was "high and dense," the *monte alto y espeso* of the Spanish explorers, obviously a forest dominated by stands of mature timber and difficult to pass through because of heavy undergrowth. These dense

woods were undoubtedly virgin forests undisturbed by man, or at least relatively unaffected by human action for a long time prior to observation. How widespread they were in aboriginal time is hard to say, but it can be said that there are not very many references in the early historic record to forests of this type. It is almost certain that the "forest primeval" was not nearly so universal in pre-colonial time as seems to have been commonly believed a generation or two ago.⁷⁶

The second type of forest was a sunlit wood, *claro y abierto*, the "open airy grove" of Bartram, with trees so far apart and so clear of underbrush that horses could freely gallop from glade to glade. Captain John Smith tells us that in Virginia "all the woods for many an hundred miles grew slight, like unto a high grove, not thicke together, and much good ground between them without any shrubs."⁷⁷ On the Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee, according to Featherstonhaugh, "the openness of the woods gave a parklike appearance to the country, and enabled you to see through the forest for a great distance."⁷⁸ Adam Hodgson rode from Natchez to the Choctaw country in central Mississippi and found that the forest was "delightful, open and interspersed with occasional small prairies, and had the appearance of an English park."⁷⁹ Comments in this vein are found in so many of the old narratives, and in reports from so many different parts of the Southeast, that one can hardly avoid drawing the conclusion that open woodland with little or no underbrush must have been the most common type of forest. Some of the early observers speculated upon the reason for the open character of the forest, and suggested that the cause was the Indian

⁷⁴ The comparisons are based on information in: A. Duerr, *Basic Data on Forest Area and Timber Volumes from the Southern Forest Survey, 1932-1936*, Forest Survey Release No. 54 (February, 1946), pp. 7-8, 21-2; L. M. James, *Mississippi's Forest Resources and Industries*, Forest Resource Report No. 4 (1951), p. 64; and P. R. Wheeler, *Forest Statistics for Alabama*, Forest Survey Release No. 73 (December, 1953), p. 17.

⁷⁵ Letter from P. R. Wheeler, July 1954. I am also indebted to Mr. Wheeler for calling my attention to the studies of George D. Scarseth, who says that the Oktibbeha clay was heavily timbered in the virgin state. *Morphological, Greenhouse, and Chemical Studies of the Black Belt Soils of Alabama*, Agricultural Experiment Station of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute, Bulletin 237 (Auburn, 1932) p. 11.

⁷⁶ The older opinion is exemplified in this statement, "From Maine to Alabama the woods were unbroken and impassable. The great Appalachian forest was in primitive days an exceedingly dense tangle." Nathaniel S. Shaler, *Nature and Man in America* (New York, 1891), p. 195. A very different idea is expressed in Professor Carl Sauer's comment, "Our eastern woodlands, at the time of white settlement, seem largely to have been in process of change to park lands," in *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth* (Chicago, 1956), p. 55.

⁷⁷ *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith*, Edward Arber, ed. (Edinburgh, 1910), p. 950.

⁷⁸ G. W. Featherstonhaugh, *Excursion through the Slave States* (London, 1844), Vol. 1, p. 185.

⁷⁹ *Remarks During a Journey Through North America in 1819, 1820, and 1821* (New York, 1823), p. 273.

practice of burning the woods at frequent intervals. That opinion is shared by some of the forest authorities of today.⁸⁰ Indian burning has sometimes been both misunderstood and misrepresented; it was not wantonly destructive but was rather, as Gordon M. Day puts it, a method of maintaining a balance in the forest favorable to their economy.⁸¹ The woods were burned for several reasons, but one of the most common was the belief that occasional light fires helped to increase the food supply for game, and improved conditions for hunting by keeping down the underbrush. That is, burning was primitive management of a food resource. The hunting territory of the Creeks, their "beloved bear ground" in Bullock County, Alabama, was in fact a sort of managed game preserve, and there must have been hundreds of others in the Southeast. In short, the open, parklike appearance of the woodlands, undoubtedly the most common type of forest in the ancient Southeast, was mostly the work of man.

2. There were several types of open, treeless land: cultivated fields, which generally had been cleared of forest; abandoned croplands and uncultivated lands variously described as prairies, savannas, meadows, plains, fields, glades, and the like.

Most of the prairies, to use a single term for the last group, were small, only a few acres to a square mile in extent, but some of them were much larger. Bartram says that the Alachua savanna in northern Florida was "a level green plain, above 15 miles over, 50 miles in circumference, with scarcely a tree to

be seen."⁸² The plain southwest of Montgomery extended 18 miles, according to Hawkins; Lawson rode 25 miles over a stretch of open country in North Carolina; and the largest savanna known to Bernard Romans (probably the prairie in western Monroe County, Mississippi, Fig. 3) "was nearly 40 miles over from north to south."⁸³ McKenney crossed part of a prairie in northeastern Mississippi that was said by his guide to be over 100 miles in length, but this hearsay can hardly be taken as valid evidence of a single, continuous prairie that long. However, open sections of such dimensions may have existed here and there, as is suggested by reports from other regions. William Henry Foote refers to the existence in the 1750's of "vast prairies" and "extensive tracts covered only with grass" on the North Carolina and Virginia Piedmont and along the Holston and Clinch rivers in the folded Appalachians.⁸⁴ In these descriptions Foote gives no dimensions expressed in miles, but Hu Maxwell, basing his statement on other data of Foote (not available to me), says that the prairies in the Shenandoah Valley, with only scattered trees along the water courses, extended over a distance of 150 miles and covered an area of 1,000 square miles in one body.⁸⁵

The old narratives do not give us much exact information on the dimensions of the cultivated fields, which in some regions seem to have been very large, "extending over the plains as far as the eye could see," as De Soto's men observed in Florida. Bartram describes the abandoned croplands along the Ocmulgee below the site of Macon as 20 miles in length, and ancient Apalachucla in Russell County, Alabama, he judged to have been "a very populous settlement from its expansive old fields stretching beyond the scope of sight."⁸⁶ The Virginia Indians, according to Maxwell, by means of their clearings and burnings had deforested from 30 to 40 acres for each individual in the tribes.⁸⁷ The significant point about the areal extent of the cultivated fields and abandoned croplands, whatever it may

⁸⁰ Roland M. Harper estimates that in prehistoric time the mixed shortleaf pine and oak forests of the Southeast were burned over, from all causes, about once every 10 years, and that the longleaf pine forests must have been burned at least 5 years out of 10, but probably not at regular intervals. *Op. cit.*, pp. 33-4. The idea that Indian burning helped to create the nearly pure stands in the longleaf pine forest was expressed as early as the 1840's by Sir Charles Lyell, but probably did not originate with him, for he prefaces his comment with the phrase, "It is said that . . ." *A Second Visit to North America* (3rd ed.; London, 1855), p. 80.

⁸¹ "The Indian as an Ecological Factor in the Northeastern Forest," *Ecology*, Vol. 3, (1953), p. 339. On reasons for burning, see also Omer C. Stewart, "Burning and Natural Vegetation in the United States," *The Geographical Review*, Vol. XLI (1951), pp. 317-20, and "Fire as the First Great Force Employed by Man," in *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth* (Chicago, 1956), pp. 115-33.

⁸² *Op. cit.*, p. 185.

⁸³ *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁸⁴ *Sketches of North Carolina* (New York, 1845), pp. 79, 187, 308.

⁸⁵ "The Use and Abuse of Forests by the Virginia Indians," *William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine*, Vol. 19 (1910), pp. 95-6.

⁸⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 53, 387.

⁸⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

have been, is that the total amount must have been constantly increasing, not merely because of population growth but because of the agricultural system. If one thing is certain about aboriginal farming in the Southeast, it is that the Indians, lacking manure and other fertilizers, were continually clearing new land and abandoning old fields. Most of this land, if left undisturbed for a generation or two, would no doubt have reverted to forest—just as part of the Alabama Black Belt has become reforested in the twentieth century—but the land was *not* left undisturbed. The Indians customarily burned over not only the woodlands but the open tracts as well, which also became favorite hunting grounds; and this burning, to judge from the old reports, was so common and widespread that it is highly improbable that any large part of the cleared and abandoned land had a chance of reverting to forest. On the contrary, it is far more likely that the area of this type of open country was steadily increasing, and since this aboriginal deforestation had been in progress for a long time, for millenia rather than centuries, the upshot is that the open country made by men must have constituted a very considerable part of the old Southeast.⁸⁸

The maximum of cleared land was probably reached at some time before contact was made between the Indians and the Europeans, and thereafter, because the Indians were displaced from many regions and their frequent burning of the vegetation ceased, the area of cleared land diminished and the forested part increased. Maxwell and William Henry Foote both point out that the large open sections in the Shenandoah Valley and on the Piedmont, which were treeless in the 1750's, later became largely covered with forests, so that many of the settlers had to clear away timber from land that formerly had been prairie. Similar increases of forest area have been re-

ported from many other regions. The cessation of Indian burning also meant that the underbrush in the forest had a chance to grow and become dense. The pathless and difficult forest with its tangle of brush that gave its name to the Wilderness Campaign of 1864 in Virginia occupied the same land as did Captain John Smith's "open groves with much good ground betweene without any shrubs." Paradoxical as it may seem, there was undoubtedly much more "forest primeval" in 1850 than in 1650.

The explanations of the origin of the open lands suggested in the historical record can be grouped into two general types. Many of the early writers speak of some of these lands as man-made, while others, like James Adair, refer to the treeless tracts as "natural prairies" or "naturally open lands," their meaning obviously being that the cause was not human activity but some other factor in nature.

Bernard Romans distinguishes between two types of savannas. One type was exemplified by the prairies in northeastern Mississippi, but he expresses no opinion concerning their origin. The other type, which he found mostly in Florida, he describes as "a kind of sink or drain to the higher lands, and their low situation alone prevents the growth of trees in them." I dare say that his explanation is still acceptable. The wet savannas or meadows, covered with standing fresh water for months at a time, perhaps the most common and widespread type of "naturally" open land in the Southeast, are commented upon in a number of the old accounts besides that of Romans, notably by Lederer, Lawson, and Hugh Young.⁸⁹

The "bald prairies" on tops of low knolls and swells in the Alabama Black Belt are explained by Tuomey, Hilgard, Mohr, and Heustis as areas with soil too shallow for tree growth.⁹⁰ The question is whether these soils always were shallow, or are "naturally" shallow. Tuomey points out how the soil is "washed away by every shower or rain" from these heights; and it is conceivable that the bald prairies may be the product of acceler-

⁸⁸ The plant cover of the Southeast, say in the year 1500 A. D., cannot in its entirety be called a "natural vegetation," because that term, as I think it is most commonly understood, means a vegetation unaffected by man, and man obviously includes not only the white man but the aboriginal Indian. It may be suggested that a critical examination of the meaning and use of the term "natural vegetation" is needed, for as employed on most of the vegetation maps of North America the term is not precise: what these maps represent as "natural" is a vegetation that has been under the influence of human activity for many centuries.

⁸⁹ Romans, *op. cit.*, p. 22; Lederer, *op. cit.*, p. 24; Lawson, *op. cit.*, p. 20; Hugh Young, "A Topographical Memoir on East and West Florida," annotated by M. F. Boyd and G. M. Pontan, *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 13 (1934), p. 28.

⁹⁰ Tuomey, *op. cit.*, p. 136; Hilgard, *op. cit.*, pp. 77, 261; Mohr, *op. cit.*, pp. 48, 104; Heustis, *loc. cit.*

ated sheet erosion set off by deforestation at the hand of man in the distant past.

In 1833 Rush Nutt proposed the theory that the prairies of Alabama, or some of them at any rate, have their origin in blow-downs caused by hurricanes and tornadoes. His argument is that violent winds make openings in the forest canopy, and then grass, sometimes aided by fire, becomes dominant in the open spaces. Whether any prairies actually originated in this fashion cannot be proved by the old narratives, but it can at least be said that the early travelers did observe large openings in the forest made by windfalls, resembling "the swath cut by a reaper through a field of wheat," as C. F. Volney depicts them. Taitt in 1772 and Hodgson in 1820 saw big blow-downs in southern Alabama; Catesby found a number of "glades or openings caused by violent winds" in the Carolinas; and Lusser describes a hurricane path through central Mississippi that was more than two miles wide and extended over so great a distance that "its length was not known."⁹¹

An old and debated question is whether grasslands are natural products of seasonally dry climates. There is no real dry climate in the Southeast, but there is a real summer drought in some parts, including the Alabama Black Belt.⁹² One of the recurring remarks in the narratives from the time of De Soto to the recent period concerns the scarcity of water in the prairies during summer. But it is a scarcity of running streams and springs, and it

⁹¹ Rush Nutt, "On the Origin, Extension, and Continuance of Prairies," *The American Journal of Science and Arts*, Vol. 23 (1833), pp. 40-5; C. F. Volney, *A View of the Soil and Climate of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1804), p. 140; Taitt, *op. cit.*, p. 499; Hodgson, *op. cit.*, p. 151; Catesby, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. II; Lusser, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

⁹² One can hardly fail to notice the approximate coincidence in shape and position of the Alabama-Mississippi prairie belt, as shown on recent vegetation maps, and similar crescents, representing regions of summer minimum of precipitation, on the maps of E. N. Transeau, "Climatic Centers and Centers of Plant Distribution," *Seventh Report of the Michigan Academy of Science*, Vol. 7 (1905), p. 74, and C. Warren Thornthwaite, "An Approach toward a Rational Classification of Climate," *The Geographical Review*, Vol. XXXVIII (1948), pp. 55-94. The apparent coincidence of the crescents naturally suggests the idea that the summer drought may be the cause of the prairies—although I do not believe these articles actually make that claim. But such an explanation would fail to account for the forested tracts within the crescents and the open prairies outside their limits.

was understood and explained long ago that the scarcity is caused by a soil or drainage condition rather than by the climate. Hilgard points out: "It is mostly stiff clay which underlies the prairies; hence, a great dearth of water during the dry season." And Gosse says, "The rain-water, owing to the tenacity of the soil, does not sink into the ground but accumulates in the hollows until evaporated by the sun." None of the early writers, to my knowledge, expressed the belief that the summer drought was the *cause* of the Alabama prairies; and it may also be said for the record that neither did any of them suggest that the cause was the heavy clay or the high lime content of the prairie soils.⁹³

The cultivated fields and abandoned croplands were man-made, of course, but, to judge from the old reports, it is very probable that many of the open lands described as prairies and savannas were also caused by human activity. It is notable that Bartram, in his descriptions of open country, frequently adds what seems to be an explanatory phrase to his main term for the open land, so that he will say, for example, "level plains, *or old fields*," or "illuminated grassy plains, *or native fields*." These phrases can only mean, I think, that in Bartram's opinion the plains or savannas he was talking about were in fact old abandoned croplands. Sometimes, leaving no possible doubt as to his meaning, he says, "An extensive plain *consisting* of old Indian fields." (My italics.) Lederer says that it was "by the industry of the Indians" that much of the Piedmont was "very open and clear of wood." David Taitt and other early observers were struck by the artificial appearance of the Alabama prairies, and found it hard to believe that they were not clearings made by man, for

⁹³ Hilgard, *op. cit.*, p. 76; Gosse, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-1. The early narratives naturally give no accurate information on the calcium content of the prairie soils. Marbut, with reference to the Houston clay in the Black Belt, says, "Because of the high percentage of calcium carbonate in the parent material and its disintegration to clay before the leaching out of the excessive calcium, these soils have not been good forest soils. The natural vegetation on this part of the clay belt, therefore, was grass with scattered trees." *Op. cit.*, p. 42. Whether or not Marbut's explanation is acceptable to foresters and soil scientists of today is for them to say; but it will be noted that Marbut is speaking only of Houston clay, which in 1930, according to Scarseth, represented not more than some 5 percent of the area of the Black Belt soils. *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

they looked "more like the work of Art than of Nature." According to Hilgard, the prairies on the hummocks in the Yazoo basin probably began as Indian clearings.⁹⁴ Tuomey unhesitatingly attributes the prairies on the deep soils of the Alabama Black Belt to annual burnings by the Indians, and says that he has observed woods in the way of becoming prairies because of the same practice followed by the white settlers.⁹⁵ We learn from Romans that as early as the 1770's the stockmen in the wiregrass country of southern Alabama, Georgia, and Florida were in the habit of frequently firing the woods in order to procure young grass, for the cattle did not like the native wiregrass when it became old and harsh.⁹⁶ These fires encouraged not only the growth of the young grass but likewise the growth of the open tracts at the expense of the forest. We can only assume that this process of turning forest into pasture land was begun by the Indians before the coming of the white graziers, but we cannot say so with assurance, for the early stages of the introduction of domesticated animals to the Southeast are still in need of clarification. The eighteenth-century travelers, Lawson, Bartram, and others, make a few comments on Indian horses; Hawkins refers to the dogs, horses, and cattle of the Creek tribes in 1798; and Timberlake, who spent some time among the Cherokees in the 1750's, reports that they had "a numerous breed of horses, also hogs, but neither cows nor sheep."⁹⁷ It is not clear, how-

ever, how large these herds of Indian livestock actually were, and whether or not they had any appreciable effect on the vegetation cover is difficult to say. Another question to which the historical record does not give a clear answer is how much the grazing and browsing wild animals contributed to the creation and maintenance of the open lands. That they did contribute seems certain.

3. The open lands were distributed throughout the Southeast. Cultivated fields, abandoned croplands, prairies, savannas, and open country under various other labels have been reported not only from the northeastern prairie belt in Mississippi, but from the Yazoo basin and the central and southern parts of that state; not only from the Black Belt in Alabama, but from the Coosa, Tallapoosa, and Chattahoochee river valleys, and from the Alabama counties south of the Black Belt; from the valleys of the folded Appalachians and the Appalachian plateau lands; from both the coastal plains and Piedmont sections of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia; and from Florida.

On a vegetation map of the ancient Southeast, if such a map could be constructed from the early records, there would be some areas in dark green color to show the dense and mature forests, other areas in light green to represent the open woodlands, and the map would be liberally flecked with yellow to indicate the scattered tracts of open country. There would be some yellow flecks in the region of the Alabama Black Belt, but no conspicuous concentration of them, and certainly no crescent-shaped area in solid yellow. The Alabama Black Belt, as a distinct and unique vegetation zone, would disappear from this map, not because there was no open country in that region but because open country was common almost everywhere in the Southeast.

⁹⁴ "Report on the Cotton Production in the United States," *Tenth Census of the United States* (Washington, D. C., 1884), Vol. V, p. 40.

⁹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 137.

⁹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁹⁷ Henry Timberlake, *Lieutenant Henry Timberlake's Memoirs 1756-1765*, annotated by Samuel Cole Williams (Johnson City, Tennessee, 1927), p. 72.

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