THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF FAMILY AND FARM FORESTRY IN ALABAMA

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ABSTRACT

Social research on, and programs for, forest landowners in the United States has tended to view them as individuals, and to be oriented toward transferring new knowledge, technical assistance, financial assistance, and even cultural content to autonomous forest landowners. However, social scientists have long recognized that a great deal of human experience is relational, not individual, and that it is important to study the patterns of relationships among individuals. Social relationships are structured according to history, proximity, interests, class, race, and ethnicity, gender, and power; and the structure of forest values and knowledge is strongly influenced by these social relationships. Forestry in Alabama takes place primarily on private lands, mostly family owned. While past research has given us good descriptions of the characteristics and values of nonindustrial private forest (NIPF) landowners, including family and farm forest landowners, we know very little about their social relationships. This paper reports ongoing research in two Alabama counties on the household and family structure of forest ownership, historical patterns of land ownership and use, social networks, forest values and knowledge, economic and institutional relationships, and forest practices of NIPF landowners. The two counties, Macon and Escambia, have different historical race and class relationships that have given the private forestry sector of each a unique social structure.

INTRODUCTION

Family and farm forests, and the broader group of nonindustrial forest (NIPF) landowners under which they are generally discussed, are of public concern for diverse and important reasons. In spite of the fact that they are private property and that the decisions about what happens in them are largely made by the individuals who own them, the status of the aggregate of individual forest landholdings ultimately has important implications for timber supplies, forest health, watershed benefits, biodiversity, and global climate change. They have long been an important subject of study and target of public policy for these reasons (see Best and Wayburn 2001 for a summary). Studies of nonindustrial private forest landowners have typically described their social and economic characteristics (Birch 1996, Hartsell and Brown 2002, Somberg 1971), attitudes and values (Bliss and others 1994, Bourke and Luloff 1994, Erickson and De Young 1994, Johnson and others 1997), forest management practices (Brockett and Gebhard 1999, Zobrist and Lippke 2003), or use of assistance (Zhang and others 1998). As a result of these studies, we know that private forest landowners are diverse in characteristics, ownership objectives, and amount and type of forest owned (Best and Wayburn 2001, Jones and others 1995). We also know that they apply professional forest management techniques to varying degrees, that only a small percentage makes use of forestry assistance and have management plans, that most have limited knowledge of professional forestry, and that many forest landholdings receive little systematic management (Birch 1996, Bliss 1993, Jones et al. 1995). The percentage of forest owners who are farmers is low nationwide, and only a somewhat higher 22% in Alabama, although woodlands occupy a significant percent of lands owned by farmers (as well as those owned by agricultural landowners who are not considered farmers by government definitions)(Bliss 1993, Gilbert and others 2002, Jones and others 1995). If the public, as well as the private, benefits of private forests are to be maintained, effective ways must be found for public agencies to work with private forest landowners and to encourage them to work with each other. This could be termed a social approach to forestry outreach and assistance.

Yet, reviewing the literature, one of the things that stands out is that social and economic research on non-industrial forest landowners in the United States has nearly always focused on forest landowners as individuals. Programs for forest landowners tend to do the same by focusing on transferring new knowledge, technical assistance, financial assistance, and even cultural content to autonomous forest landowners (see, for example, Best and Wayburn 2001, Sampson and DeCoster 1997). Research and extension focusing on individual landowners is obviously of fundamental importance, but it is not sufficient to provide us with a useful understanding of family and farm forestry unless complemented with research on social groups, institutions, processes and the relationships among them–for which we will use the shorthand term social structure in this paper. There has been very little research on social structure and NIPF landowners in the U.S., with the notable exception of Bliss and others' (1998a, 1998b) papers on forest land ownership in Alabama. While one might expect this to be different in the emerging field of community forestry, this literature tends to either assume the presence of certain social institutions or to propose methods for building new institutions with little attention to understanding existing patterns (Gray and others 2001, Ascher 1994). We are addressing this general lack of information on the social and cultural aspects of NIPF landowners through several of our current research projects. In this paper, we outline relevant aspects of social structure and their importance to understanding and working with nonindustrial private forest landowners in general, and family and farm forest in particular; and report some of our preliminary results from work in two Alabama counties.

ELEMENTS OF A STRUCTURAL APPROACH

Research that focuses on individuals and their behaviors, generally characterized by the term methodological individualism, can be contrasted to research on social structure, which focuses instead on the patterned relationships and institutions that manifest themselves at societal levels (Halperin 1994). Social scientists have long recognized that a great deal of human experience is relational, not individual, and that it is important to study institutions and processes as well as the attributes and behaviors of individual actors (Halperin 1994). Social relationships are structured according to history, proximity, interests, class, race and ethnicity, gender, and power; and these structures, in turn,

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influence the material conditions and opportunities and the forest values and knowledge of current landowners. While structures and the systems in which they are found are formed by the actions of many individuals over time, a structural approach recognizes emergent properties of systems that are not discernable from studies of their individual components. Structures and culture are institutions that become deeply embedded in a society over time and are often overlooked or considered "normal" by individuals living in that society. However, particular structures are not inevitable, but rather historically contingent, and cross cultural studies and systematic analysis can reveal them and important role they play in what happens in the world.

Household Ownership and Livelihood Strategies

Halperin (1994) shows that families and communities can be oriented more toward maintenance of relationships than profit or upward mobility, and highlights the importance of the life course in determining the kinds of work and expectations that may be placed on an individual within their family or community. We hypothesize that forest ownership is often viewed through a family-centered cultural lens, rather than being viewed strictly as an economic enterprise. This has several important implications. First, regarding current management, we know that farm families use many strategies to maintain family farms in the face of macro-level changes, including acquiring more land, part time employment, and spouse employment, and that these strategies may differ with race and ethnicity (Beauford and others 1984, Zabawa 1987, 1991). It is likely that forest landowners do similar things, yet we know little or nothing about the strategies used by NIPF and family forest landowners and how they influence forest management.

Second, studies have consistently found that NIPF landowners are advanced in age (Gan and others 2003, Wood and Gilbert 2000). This advanced age is a cause for concern among foresters, who fear that increasingly small forest landownership will limit the efficiency of forestry and threaten future wood supplies (Decoster and Sampson 2000). There is, of course, a legitimate cause for this concern since heirs may indeed end up with forested parcels of land too small to economically manage, at least with standard forest management practices (DeCoster and Sampson 2000). Forest landowners themselves often have related concerns, which include concerns that heirs will lack interest in the land or be unable to use it due to small parcel size, perhaps leading to the sale or neglect of a treasured family resource. This problem is of particular importance to African Americans, who already own a small percentage of farm and forest lands, have suffered dramatic rates of land loss, and for whom landowner age may be particularly advanced. Yet at gatherings of forest land owners we encounter heirs who have supplemented inherited lands with the purchase of additional lands while engaging in off-farm careers, who have often returned to the land in retirement, and who have a strong interest in forestry.

Although there are many social, cultural, economic, and policy pressures in the United States for landowners to think of themselves as individuals, there is also ample evidence that landowners–along with their decisions and values–are situated in complex household and familial contexts (Halperin 1994, Netting and others 1984, Rogoff 2003, Wilk 1989). While we do not yet know what different patterns predominate among forest landowners in the two counties we are studying, we recognize the importance of viewing forest land ownership in the larger contexts of family history, family culture and values, household and family economic patterns, and patterns of life course. The implications of this include the importance of looking at both the material and social contexts of decision making, including the ways that production and consumption are organized at the family and household levels (Netting and others 1984), and the construction of cultural practices and traditions at family and community levels across generations (Rogoff 2003). In one very practical response to this, we have begun to develop estate planning tools for landowners that, through the creating business entities such as limited liability corporations (LLCs), that treat the land as a family resource and remove some of the disadvantages and obstacles to forest management that arise when land is treated as an individual enterprise to be divided by the next generation (see, for example, Tufts et al. 2000, Tufts et al. n.d).

Historical Patterns of Land Ownership and Use

The South is in the midst of a long process of historical change, with those changes linked to social and economic changes that mean different things to different people. Both Macon and Escambia Counties, Alabama were gradually taken over from the Creek Indians in the 18th and 19th Centuries (Waters 1983, Yamaguchi 1981). In Macon County, the Creeks were completely driven out and replaced by an agricultural economy rooted in the antebellum system plantation and slavery, which then gave way to the post Civil War system of share cropping (Yamaguchi 1981). Subsequently, agriculture declined and many fields were planted in or reverted to forest. Tuskegee National Forest was created out of submarginal agricultural lands as a part of the Tuskegee Land Use Demonstration Project, of the New Deal-era Resettlement Administration (Warren and Zabawa 1998). Macon County currently is a forested, rural landscape with a majority African American population and high poverty that stands out as an anomaly in near the southwestern end of a rapidly developing and urbanizing swath of the South (Gan and Kolison 1999, Wear and Greis 2002).

Table 1.—Population by Race and Ethnicity, Macon and Escambia County 1990 & 2000

Population by Race and Ethnicity, Macon and Escambia County 1990 & 2000

	Macon		Escambia	
	1990	2000	1990	2000
Race				
One race	--	99.3%	--	98.9%
White	13.8%	14.0%	68.5%	64.4%
Black	85.6%	84.6%	28.3%	30.8%
American Indian	0.1%	0.2%	2.9%	3.0%
Asian	0.4%	0.4%	0.2%	0.2%
Other	0.1%	0.4%	0.1%	0.1%
Two or more races	--	0.7%	--	1.1%
Ethnicity				
Hispanic	0.4%	0.7%	0.5%	1.0%

Escambia County, in contrast, has had a long and continuous reliance on the timber industry, including logging of native and planted forests and the wood products industry (Waters 1983). There were only a few agricultural plantations in the county before the Civil War, and today's black residents descend from slaves on those plantations and from blacks who migrated into the county to work in the forest products industry (Waters 1983). Cut-over forest lands were historically not considered valuable, and several timber companies accumulated large landholdings because landowners preferred to sell them land along with timber rather than only timber. In the 20th century, agriculture emerged as the important land use in the delta area of western Escambia county (Waters 1983). The county is home to the Poarch Band of Creek Indians, the only Federally-recognized Native American Tribe in Alabama, and retains a significant Native American population, particularly in the western part of the county. Members of the Poarch Creek

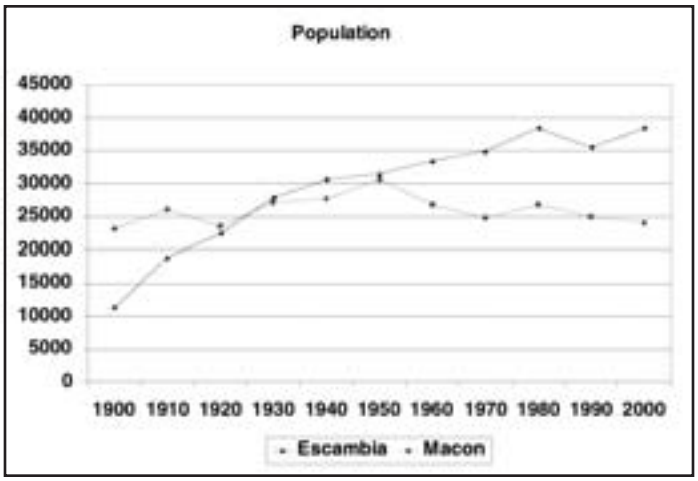

Figure 1.–Population of Macon & Escambia Counties 1900-2000 (Source: Census of Population)

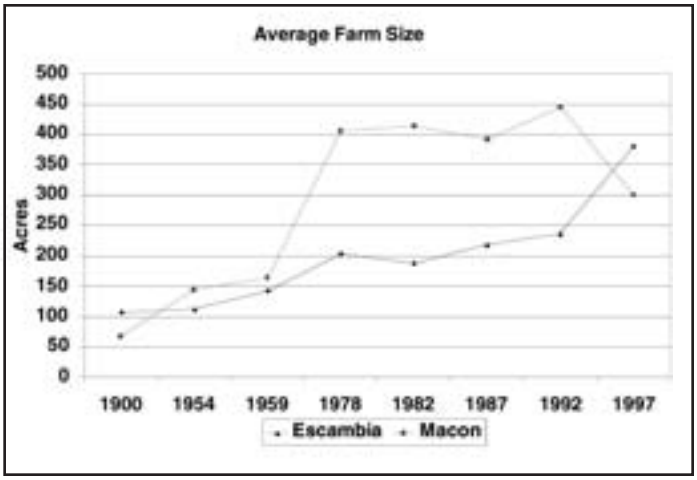

Figure 2.–Average farm size–Macon & Escambia Counties, 1900-1997 (Source: Census of Agriculture)

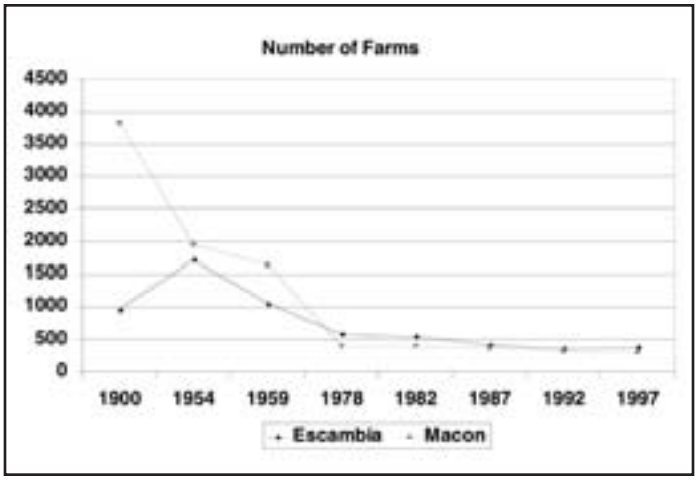

Figure 3.–Number of farms Macon and Escambia Counties, 1900-1997 (Source: Census of Agriculture)

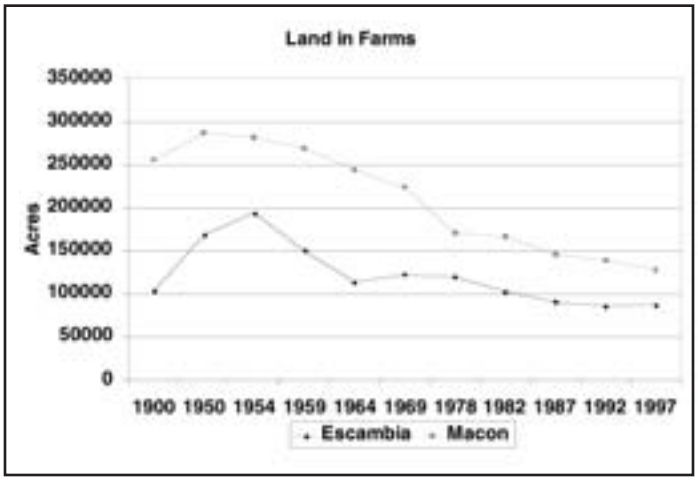

Figure 4.–Land in farms, Macon and Escambia Counties, 1990-1997 (Source: Census of Agriculture)

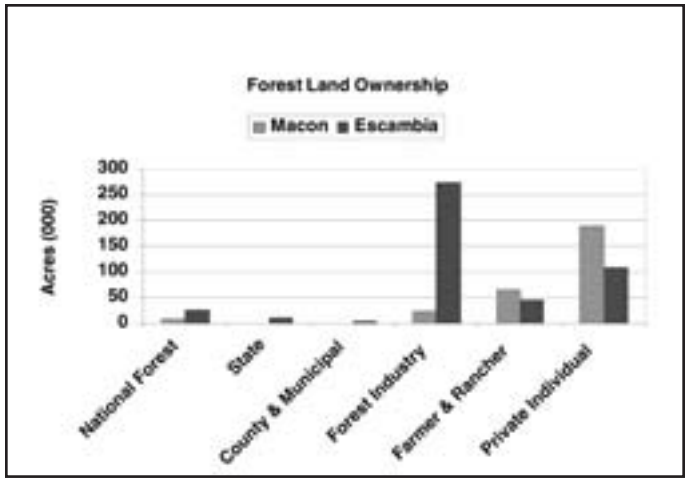

Figure 5.–Forest land ownership, Macon & Escambia Counties, 2000. (McWilliams 1990a, b)

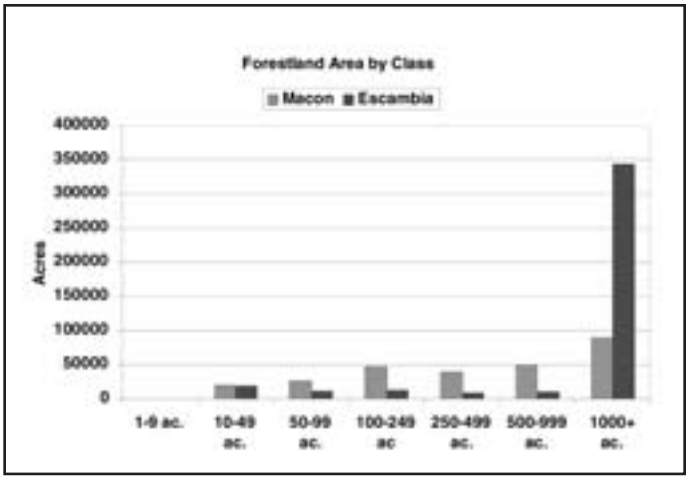

Figure 6.–Forest acreage by landholding size, Macon and Escambia Counties, 2000 (County tax records)

Band have private landholdings in Escambia County, but also acquired tribal lands through the transfer of state school lands to the tribe in 1974 (Waters 1983).

The two counties are very different demographically. Since 1900, the population of Macon County has remained relatively stable, while that of Escambia county has nearly tripled (Fig. 1). The populations of the two counties also have very different racial and ethnic make-up, with Macon County 85% Black, and Escambia county 30% Black and 3% Native American (Table 1). Farm characteristics and forest ownership in the two counties also is very different. Beginning at similar points in 1900, average farm size in Escambia County has steadily increased while Macon county farm size increased dramatically in the 1960s but has recently decreased (Fig. 2). While Macon County had many more farms in 1900, the number of farms has declined in both counties, reflecting the declining importance of agriculture (Fig. 3). Macon County still has more land in farms than Escambia County (Fig. 4). In terms of forest landownership, the two counties have many similarities and several significant differences. Escambia County has a significant amount of land owned by forest industry and a much greater amount of land in large landholdings, while Macon County has more land in mid-sized NIPF holdings. (Fig. 5 & 6).

Social Embeddedness

The tendency for social and economic research on NIPF landowners to focus on individuals removed from their social relationships reflects what Ortner (1991:171) has identified as the deeply individualistic grounding of American social thought, where "society is conceived as the sum of empirical skin-bound individuals, and social institutions are conceived as the products of individual notions, desires, and wills. "There are, however, important potential contributions to the understanding of family and farm forestry from academic traditions that focus on the emergent properties of systems and the relationships between individuals and these larger structures, for example Halperin's (1994) focus on the cultural and institutional constructions of economies, Tindall and Wellman's (2001) use of social network analysis, Ortner's (1991) analysis of the simultaneous material and cultural formation of class, and Salamon (1985) and Bliss (1992) work on ethnic farm and forest management styles.

There is a significant body of research on the values and attitudes of rural people and NIPF landowners that engages in debate as to whether NIPF landowners are a distinct and separate community, with values reflecting those of professional foresters, or whether they share the values of the larger general public (e.g. Bliss and others 1994, Bourke and Luloff 1994, Jones and others 1999). This research, generally focusing on the attitudes and values as individual attribute, has made an important contribution by identifying the diversity of values held by NIPF landowners and showing that their values are similar to those of the general public. We can make more of this insight if we recognize that individuals participate in multiple cultural communities (Rogoff 2003) and then focus future research on the formation of values, attitudes, and norms in these contexts and as emerging from locations in structural systems of social relationships. It is through the interplay of social structure and culture that people construct and maintain relationships and structures that sustain them and create new opportunities (Tindall and Wellman 2001), and these processes are fundamental to the spread of forestry knowledge and the adoption of forestry techniques. For example, we expect to find that there are multiple, cross-cutting cultural communities that relate to occupation, landholding size, race and ethnicity, and other social factors.

Our effort to apply these ideas to our study of family and farm forestry involves three distinct but related approaches. The first of these is the analysis of the forest values of landowners and professionals, and those found in messages about what are implicitly model landowners in forest landowner publications. We approach this through an analysis of mental and cultural models (based in schemas theory from cognitive anthropology, see for example, Strauss and Quinn 1997) that focuses on the construction of values and their motivational force through participation in cultural communities (Rogoff 2003). The second is analysis of the cultural communities in which forest landowners participate and the related social networks, in order to understand the flows of ideas and resources that relate to forest and land use practices among landowners and forestry organizations. The third component is the study of actual forest and land use practices that are in use by forest landowners, and the differences among them.

Important components of our research are the role of macro-level social, economic, and cultural change, and the role of race and ethnicity in structuring social relationships. In the economic sphere, changes such as the decline of farming, changes in manufacturing, changing forest products industry and markets, urbanization and exurbanization are important (Best and Wayburn 2001). In the social and cultural spheres, race and race relations are obviously major factors in the South. Minority landowners have had unequal access to government assistance programs, private lending institutions, and the legal system, factors that have contributed to high rates of land loss and underdevelopment (Beauford and others 1984, Wood and Gilbert 2000, Zabawa 1991). Minority and majority landowners have correspondingly developed different land and forest related values and used different strategies to acquire, hold, and manage land (Beauford and others 1984, Gan and others 2003).

Undoubtedly, large scale social changes are also important, including the obvious, such as the Great Migration of Blacks from the South to the North in the middle of the 20th Century, and the less obvious, such as patterns of circular migration and the current return of African Americans to the South (Stack 1996). Social change is occurring within the Native American population in Alabama as well. Over the last two census periods, for the general population (1990, 2000) and the agricultural population (1987, 1997), a significant increase is noted. While the general population in Alabama grew at a rate of 10%, the Native American population increased by over 34%. Of significance for rural and natural resource concerns, while farms and land in farms decreased by 4.5% and 4.8%, respectively, Native American farms and land in farms increased by almost 300% and 200%, respectively. Finally, only one tribe in Alabama, the Poarch Band of Creek Indians, has received recognition from the federal government; however, several state recognized tribes, including the Cherokee Tribe of Northeast Alabama and the Echota Cherokees have purchased land to act as tribal lands for the social, cultural, and economic development of the tribe. We hypothesize that white landowners value forests more within the nuclear family, African American landowners in families across generations (intrafamily), and that Native Americans have important communal (interfamily) landownership values. While based in current social theories, we believe that this work has some very practical implications. We know that only a small percentage of forest landowners have formal forest management plans, that there are differences in the values and practices of forest landowners and those of forestry professionals, and that many forest landowners pay little attention to forest lands except when they harvest timber (Birch 1996, Bliss and others 1994, Gan and others 2003, Jones and others 1995). These are clearly obstacles to the effective management of both the public and private values associated with forests, and it seems unlikely that continuing to

focus research and extension on individual landowners will bring about significant changes. We believe that careful mapping of the social networks, values, and practices associated with family and farm forest landowners and forestry institutions will provide important new insights for increasing the effectiveness of forestry management, assistance, and extension.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study is based on the notion that forest values and practices are transferred and constructed over time in patterns that are strongly influenced by social structure. Therefore, understanding the social structure of farm and family forestry is a prerequisite for effective extension, outreach, and assistance programs that will reach significant percentages of forest landowners. The first task of our research, near completion, has involved documenting historical patterns and changes in land use, demographics, and economic activity in two selected counties. This data helps us to understand the historical processes that have formed today's land ownership and use patterns, values and culture, and forestry practices, as well as to locate the present in contexts of ongoing processes and changes. The second phase of our research, now underway, involves interviews with landowners, forestry professionals, and other individuals to document household and family histories and landholding styles; forest-related beliefs, attitudes, and practices; and social networks. We are particularly interested in how these may be influenced by race and ethnicity. We believe that this research will provide important practical insights that can improve the ability of forestry professionals to work with forest landowners to manage the public and private values of family and farm forests.

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