Disaster at Snow Hill
1845–1846

by Timothy D. Hudson

The mid-1840s brought an environmental and economic catastrophe to south-central Alabama, where two consecutive years of drought, crop failure, and financial collapse struck at the very foundations of rural life. These devastating events directly impacted many local communities, including the small village of Snow Hill in the northeastern corner of Wilcox County. Like most families in Alabama's Black Belt, their livelihoods relied on a fragile interplay of cotton credit, subsistence corn, and kin-based labor. As harvests failed and debts mounted, the crisis exposed the limits of local resilience and forced even long-established households to confront the impossibility of recovery.

In early 1845, cool late winter weather delayed farmers from planting their crops until two weeks later than usual. April rains initially made crop prospects positive. Trouble began in early May, when the rain simply stopped. Although rain clouds gave *"frequent signs and promises of rain,"* dry weather and intense heat prevailed throughout May and June.

These conditions caused the smaller streams to dry up, leaving the Alabama River *"exceedingly low."* Farmers were forced to haul water four or five miles for their families' use and struggled to find water for their livestock [1]. Because the dry weather had stretched far beyond an ordinary *"dry spell,"* one farmer lamented that *"the land is literally parched with heat and thirst"* [2].

Writing on July 2nd from Perry County, just north of Snow Hill, a correspondent exclaimed: *"We have had no rain for weeks!"* Residents in the interior counties of Wilcox, Dallas, Lowndes, Autauga, and Perry bemoaned the *"injurious effects of the drought,"* saying that *"crops in this section are sustaining serious injury from the great drought."* A newspaper editor in Cahaba, located a few miles north of Snow Hill, wrote on July 2nd:

> *A general drouth seems to pervade the whole country; in every direction from which we hear, the crops are suffering for rain. The corn crop is a total loss in many places – rain cannot save it.*

Eyewitness reports across the region became increasingly desperate. One Autauga County resident described the corn crops as *"entirely ruined,"* while one in Pickens County warned, *"…we shall have to take a steady gaze at starvation."* A report from nearby Marion added that vegetation was *"withered–dried, literally dried like hay,"* with fields that looked *"as if it had been overrun by fire"*—a sight he found *"painful to look upon"* [3].

Although the corn crops on farms in the vicinity of Snow Hill were a total loss, as of early July, the drought had only injured the cotton crop. Farmers reported that, *"unlike corn,"* the cotton could *"in a measure be reclaimed by future showers"* [4]. That hope proved short-lived. Unfortunately, the showers did not materialize, and hot and dry weather continued to prevail throughout July and August. Residents of Haynesville, a short distance northeast of Snow Hill, reported that, *"vegetation seems to be entirely stopped,"* with the cotton crop *"extensively injured by the dry weather."*

Cotton plants in fields near Snow Hill that would normally have reached 4'–6' by that time were a mere 3' tall, with some fields only knee high. Moreover, the cotton plants began to show signs of decay while still in bloom, preventing the bolls from maturing and opening [5]. The drought halted the cotton's development at its most basic level, freezing the plants in place. One editor wrote [6]:

> *The effect of the dry weather we understand, has been to stop the growth of the plant, to wither it and cause it to shed its fruit. Instead of increasing the quantity of fruit, as it should do at this* [time of the] *season, and putting out new bolls on the top branches of the weed, the entire process of production is suspended.*

The drought and its effects triggered the complete failure of the 1845 cotton crop across wide swaths of Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina, especially in the Black Belt of south-central Alabama. In summing up the disastrous 1845 growing season, one newspaper editor wrote [7]:

> *We have never known a more unfavorable season, or heard more general and well founded complaints, and really fear that there will be much distress before another crop can be planted and gathered.*

By the fall of 1845, the near total failure of that year's corn crop caused food shortages across the region, putting the poorer classes of people, those *"who are least able to bear it,"* right in the crosshairs of hunger and the risk of starvation. In late October 1845, on the Alabama state line at Columbus, Georgia, the demand for corn caused prices to skyrocket from the typical 20¢–25¢ to $1.00 per bushel, while sweet potatoes sold for $1.25 per bushel. This scarcity caused those few families with sufficient quantities of corn to refuse to sell it *"at any price"* [8].

As the shortage of food intensified during the winter of 1845–1846, the price of corn rose even higher. On 15 February 1846, Mrs. Penelope Yelvington, an elderly resident of Columbus, wrote to her kinfolk in Louisiana:

> *We have the hardest times in this country that we ever have had since we have lived here. Corn cannot be bought for a dollar a bushel. The folks are going from here to Arkansas a good many of them. Several of our neighbors have gone there…*

On May 24th, Mrs. Yelvington's son wrote his own letter to their Louisiana relatives, and he echoed his mother's earlier description of that region's suffering [9]:

We have the hardest times now that I ever have seen in my life. There is no corn in Georgia nor much of anything else to eat or feed with.

To ward off the starvation of livestock, officials urged farmers to plant winter fields of rye for livestock and turnips and rutabagas for both their families and cattle. The scarcity of corn prompted some planters to make plans to move their slaves, white laborers, and livestock westward for a year where food was cheaper [10].

The food crisis was only one dimension of the disaster; the collapse of the cotton economy posed an even greater and more enduring threat. Throughout the nineteenth century, credit formed the foundation of the Southern economic system. Each spring, farmers and planters received advances of supplies from merchants to enable them to cultivate that year's crops. They typically signed promissory notes, promising to repay the merchants after the fall harvest [11].

Because cotton served almost exclusively as the South's cash crop, the failure of the 1845 crop put farmers across the region in severe financial distress. The collapse of the cotton crop left farmers unable to repay their promissory notes for the previous spring's advances. Those with independent resources could survive until the next season, but families without cash reserves faced financial ruin by defaulting on their notes. The threat of default pushed many toward land sales and the prospect of leaving the region. As the crisis deepened across Alabama's Black Belt, its pressures landed heavily on many of Snow Hill's longtime families.

The aftermath of the 1845 crop failure forced some Snow Hill families, especially young couples, to confront the prospect of losing their farms to foreclosure. Martin Batte Lee and his wife, Levincy Albritton, and their extended families had settled in Wilcox County, Alabama by September 1824, possibly arriving several years earlier. They lived on the outskirts of what coalesced into the Snow Hill community in the latter 1820s.

In the wake of the 1845 crop failure, the husbands of all three of Levincy and Martin's married daughters sold their Snow Hill farms. On 1 September 1845, their second daughter, Penny Jane Hayes, and her husband, James Hayes, sold their 90-acre farm located about one mile southwest of the village of Snow Hill [12].

Two months later, on November 4th, the Lees' third daughter, Nancy Lee Parrott, and her husband, William Parrott, sold their 147.76-acre tract of land near Snow Hill to Ira Skinner for $400 [13]. A few weeks after that, on November 28th, William Haywood Gulley, the husband of the eldest Lee daughter, Lavincy, disposed of his Snow Hill property. He sold Martin B. Lee an 80-acre tract of government land he had purchased the previous August [14]. On the same day, for $870, Gulley sold Ira Skinner a 190-acre tract of his land near Snow Hill [15].

The timing of these land sales by the husbands of Lavincy Gulley, Penny J. Hayes, and Nancy Parrott—immediately after the disastrous crop failures of 1845—is revealing. Mounting debts likely compelled them to sell their land to pay their notes, since they did not immediately leave Snow Hill. Evidence implies that they all remained until early 1847, undoubtedly hoping that 1846 would yield a bountiful harvest [16].

The winter of 1845–1846 proved *"unusually cold and unpleasant"* across south-central Alabama, and by late winter, many roads were almost impassable across the Black Belt due to the copious rainfall. The weather became *"mild and balmy"* during the first week of March 1846, prompting farmers to plant fields of corn in hopes of an early crop [17]. The cool weather soon returned and delayed the planting of cotton and some corn fields.

Once planted, the continued cool and wet weather forced farmers to replant their fields multiple times. This was followed by *"scarce any sunshine from the middle of March to the 1st of June."* These conditions yielded an *"indifferent stand"* of crops that then had to endure overflows, a renewed drought, and unusually heavy late-summer rains [18].

Despite the atypical cool weather, by July, farmers had generally managed to harvest an *"unusually good"* corn crop across central Black Belt. A Greensboro editor observed that *"A more abundant crop has not been made in this section for years past."* While this helped to alleviate the immediate food shortage, prospects did not seem promising for the cotton crop, which was fifteen to twenty days behind normal due to the cold and wet spring.

Mid-July brought yet another setback: frequent heavy rainfall, a weather pattern that continued throughout August. This drove the cotton plants to grow too fast, preventing the bolls from forming and maturing [19]. The incessant rains continued so that by early September, one resident reported it had rained every day for twenty days and the sun had appeared only half a dozen times in the past month.

The persistent rains triggered a new kind of danger: an explosion of the dreaded caterpillars and bore worms. These insects quickly wreaked havoc on cotton fields in both the rich Black Belt and the surrounding sandy soils, and soon, *"acres upon acres are to be found…where scarcely a Boll…can be seen."* The widespread destruction left planters and farmers alike *"brooding in melancholy gloom over the path of this almost Egyptian plague"* [20].

Reports from surrounding communities echoed the devastation. In early October 1846, a newspaper editor from Greenville, located just east of Snow Hill in Butler County, surveyed fields across Wilcox, Dallas, Lowndes, and Butler Counties and concluded that farmers expected to make less than one-fourth of a normal crop.

The relentless rain and worms destroyed the cotton crops across south-central Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. After surveying fields across Perry County, located just north of Snow Hill, a resident wrote that *"the crop is past redemption. The destruction by the worm is unparrallelled* [sic] *in the history of cotton growing."*

A similar excursion by Haynesville officials in Lowndes County which adjoins Wilcox to the east revealed similar devastation. They reported that they *"were pained to witness the dreadful ravages of the worm"* on the cotton fields, many of which *"...are quite, if not entirely destroyed by the depredations of these vermin"* [21].

These dire conditions guaranteed a second consecutive failure of the cotton crop. For many Snow Hill farmers, these back-to-back ruins erased any remaining prospect of financial recovery.

Meanwhile, settlers from nearby communities who had migrated to Louisiana and Arkansas in the 1830s and early 1840s had prospered on the plentiful lands there unaffected by the drought. This forced many Snow Hill farmers to reckon with fateful, irreversible decisions as they sought a way back to stability. Although many had built their lives in eastern Wilcox County for a generation, greener lands in the west beckoned—lands the drought had spared.

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Notes

1. *"The Mobile Register and Journal"* (Mobile, AL), 5 July 1845, p. 1, column 1: *"The Crops." "The Mobile Daily Advertiser"* (Mobile, AL), July 7 (p. 2, column 6: *"The Crops"*), August 13 (p. 2, column 5: *"The Drouth"*) and September 1 (p. 2, columns 3–4), 1845. *"Daily Chronicle & Sentinel"* (Augusta, GA), 14 August 1845, p. 2, column 6: *"Crops in Alabama." "The Georgia Telegraph"* (Macon, GA), 24 February 1846, p. 2, column 5: *"Georgia Arrow Root."*
2. *"The Georgia Telegraph and Republic"* (Macon, GA), 5 August 1845, p. 3, column 3: *"Crops."*
3. *"The Mobile Register and Journal"* (Mobile, AL), July 5 (p. 2, column 1: *"The Crops"*) and August 9 (p. 2, column 1: *"Review of the Mobile Market"*), 1845. *"The Mobile Daily Advertiser,"* July 4 (p. 2, column 2: *"The Crops"*) and 7 (p. 2, column 6: *"Marion, Ala"* and *"The Crops"*), 1845. *"Daily Chronicle & Sentinel,"* 10 July 1845, p. 2, column 5: *"The Crops."*
4. *"The Mobile Daily Advertiser,"* 7 July 1845, p. 2, column 6: *"The Crops"*
5. *"The Mobile Daily Advertiser,"* August 11, (p. 2, column 2: *"The Cotton Crop"*) and 13 (p. 2, column 5: *"The Drouth"*), 1845. *"The Mobile Register and Journal,"* 9 August 1845, p. 2, column 1: *"Review of the Mobile Market."*
6. *"The Mobile Daily Advertiser,"* 1 September 1845, p. 2, column 3: *"The Cotton Crop."*
7. *"The Mobile Register and Journal,"* 30 August 1845, p. 2, column 1. *"The Mobile Daily Advertiser,"* 1 September 1845, p. 2, column 3: *"The Cotton Crop." "Daily Chronicle & Sentinel,"* July 12 (p. 3, column 1: *"Agricultural Prospects"*), September 11 (p. 2, column 5: *"Crops in Southwestern Georgia"*), November 3 (p. 2, column 3: *"Cotton Crop in East Alabama"*), 1845.
8. *"Telegraph and Texas Register"* (Houston, TX), 29 October 1845, p. 4, column 3: *"Scarcity of Corn in Georgia and South Carolina."*
9. *The Georgia Genealogical Magazine* (Homerville, GA), October 1969, No. 34:
   p. 2343: Penelope Yelvington of Talbot County, Georgia to her son, Robert J. Yelvington of Greenwood, Louisiana, 15 February 1846.
   p. 2345: Moses C. Yelvington to his brother, Robert J. Yelvington of Greenwood, Louisiana, 24 May 1846.
10. *"The Mobile Daily Advertiser,"* 16 July 1845, p. 3, column 1: *"Agricultural: The Turnip Crop." "Daily Chronicle & Sentinel,"* 25 August 1845, p. 2, column 4: *"The Cotton Crop–The Farmers."*
11. Govan, Thomas P. "Banking and the Credit System in Georgia, 1810–1860." *Journal of Southern History,* Vol. 4, 1938, pp. 164–184.
12. Wilcox County AL Deed Book H, pp. 426–427: James and Penny J. Hayes to Sarah McCondichie, 1 September 1845. The Hayes sold the W½ of SE¼ of Section 17, Township 12, Range 11, plus *"Ten Acres being in the South West Corner of the South quarter of the South East quarter of Section Seventeen…"* This is a tract purchased by Silas W. A. Albritton on 3 December 1834 at the Cahaba, Alabama Land Office (see Cash Entry #20284).
13. Wilcox County AL Deed Book I, pp. 230–231: William and Nancy Parrott to Ira Skinner, 4 November 1845. Nancy and William Parrot sold Ira Skinner the NE¼ of SW¼, SW¼ of NE¼, NW¼ of NE¼, SE¼ of SW¼, Section 7, T12N R11E, *"with the exception of ten acres on the east side of"* SE¼ of SW¼, the tract that Martin B. Lee had sold William Parrot a few years earlier.
14. Cahaba Land Office Cash Entry #36690, William H. Gulley, 25 Aug 1845 (E½ of SE¼ of Section 18, T12N R11E, 78.62½ acres). Wilcox County AL Deed Book I, p. 50: William H. Gulley to Martin B. Lee, 28 November 1845.
15. Wilcox County AL Deed Book I, p. 232: William H. Gulley to Ira Skinner, 28 November 1845. Gulley sold Skinner these fractional tracts, all in T12N R11E:
    Section 7: SW¼ of SE¼ (except ten acres exchange between Martin B. Lee and B. B. Patton)
    Section 18: E½ of NW¼, W½ of NE¼
16. Louisiana Confederate Pension Applications, LDS Film #4111881, Images #320–327, #5461: M. B. Hayes, Union Parish, filed August 18, allowed December 14, 1910. Union Parish LA Police Jury Minutes Book 2 (1844–1846). When he applied for a Confederate Pension in 1910, Martin Batte Hayes, son of Penelope Jane Lee Hayes and grandson of Levincy and Martin B. Lee, stated that he was born *"In Willcox* [sic] *Co. Ala"* on 25 March 1846. Furthermore, federal census records suggest that all three families remained in Snow Hill for the 1846 calendar year. It is worth noting that the police jury minutes from Union Parish, Louisiana do not mention William H. Gulley, James A. Hayes, or William Parrott, the husbands of the three Lee daughters, in 1846, nor do land records in Louisiana show them purchasing property there that year.
17. *"Alabama Beacon"* (Greensborough, AL), 7 March 1846, p. 2, column 4: *"The Weather."*
18. *"The Mobile Register and Journal,"* July 17 (p. 2, column 6: *"The Crops"*) and 20 (p. 2, column 5: *"Review of the Mobile Market"*), 1846. *"Merchants and Planters Prices Current"* (Mobile, AL), 1 September 1846, p. 1, column 3: *"The Growing Crops."*
19. *"Alabama Beacon,"* 25 July 1846, p. 2, column 5: *"The Crops." "Merchants and Planters Prices Current"* (Mobile, AL), 1 September 1846, p. 1, column 3: *"The Growing Crops."*
20. *"Jacksonville Republican"* (Jacksonville, AL), 9 September 1846, p. 3, column 2: *"The Cotton Crop in South Alabama."*

21. *"The Democrat"* (Huntsville, AL), September 2 (p. 3, columns 5–6) and 16 (p. 2, column 1: *"The Cotton Crop"*). *"Alabama Beacon,"* 12 September 1846, p. 2, column 1: *"Prospect of the Cotton Crop." "The Eufaula Democrat"* (Eufaula, AL), 14 October 1846, p. 2, column 3: *"The Cotton Crop." "The Mobile Register and Journal,"* 19 December 1846, p. 2, column 3.

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