

John Morgan. THE ROLE AND STATUS OF THE TOBACCO ORDERING PIT
IN THE EASTERN FLUE-CURED BELT OF NORTH CAROLINA. (Under the
direction of Douglas C. Wilms) Department of Geography.

In the Eastern Flue-cured Belt of North Carolina the tobacco ordering pit is a relict feature, having been rendered obsolete during the last decade. The ordering pit was a specialized structure used to bring dry, cured tobacco into a state of "order" or pliability, usually during late fall and winter. The purpose of this study is to portray the role of the ordering pit in the Eastern Belt where it has been a component of the landscape for over three-quarters of a century.

An in-depth study of the ordering pit was carried out in Pitt County. It is believed that findings from the work in Pitt County will shed light on the past role of the pit in the Eastern Belt.

For at least the first three decades of this century the ordering pit was a very significant feature of tobacco farms in Pitt County. Few pits have been constructed in the county since the middle 1930's, and the use of these structures in ordering tobacco began to decline during that decade. This decline was apparently related to a shortening in the tobacco marketing season.

The ordering pit remained a viable component of some tobacco farms in Pitt County until the 1960's. Since the late 1960's, pits have seldom been used for ordering tobacco; they have been abandoned extensively and destroyed in significant numbers. The demise of the

ordering pit is directly related to the change from marketing tobacco in tied bundles to a system of loose-leaf sales.

It is believed that the past role of the ordering pit in other counties of the Eastern Belt has been quite similar to its past in Pitt County.

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THE ROLE AND STATUS OF THE TOBACCO ORDERING PIT
IN THE EASTERN FLUE-CURED BELT OF NORTH CAROLINA

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Geography

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Geography

by

John Morgan

September 1976

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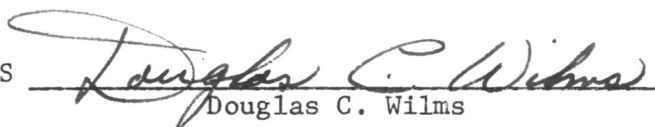
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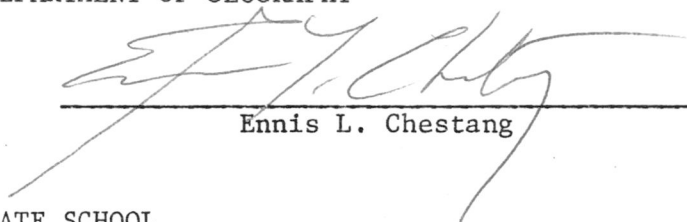
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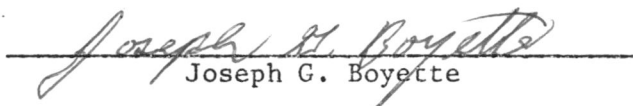
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INTRODUCTION

Recent economic and technological innovations have produced significant changes on the landscape associated with the cultivation of tobacco in the Eastern Flue-cured or New Bright Belt of North Carolina (Fig. 1).¹ These changes are continuing at a rapid rate, and perhaps within a relatively short period of time few vestiges of the traditional landscape will remain.² Many of the outbuildings traditionally associated with flue-cured bright leaf tobacco production have been destroyed, abandoned or subjected to functional changes.³ One such structure which faces certain extinction is the tobacco "ordering pit," which was rendered obsolete during the last decade. This specialized pit was utilized to artificially bring cured tobacco into a state of "order" or pliability in preparation for processing for market. To be in proper order, "...tobacco must contain enough moisture so it can be handled without shattering the leaves while preparing it for market, but it

¹The Eastern Flue-cured or New Bright Belt lies on the North Carolina Coastal Plain, extending southward from Virginia to the South River. This district, once referred to as the New Bright Belt, is now known as the Eastern Flue-cured Belt. The United States Department of Agriculture designates six major classes of tobaccos based on variations in soils and climate, varieties of seed, cultural practices and curing methods. Flue-cured tobacco is designated Class 1; within this class the tobacco grown in the Eastern Belt is referred to as Type 12.

²Although little research on landscape changes in the Eastern Belt has been carried out to date, this subject was the theme of a paper presented by Ennis L. Chestang at the 72nd Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers in New York, April 11-14, 1976. The paper was titled "Technological Innovations and Landscape Changes in the Eastern Flue-cured Tobacco Area of North Carolina."

³Henceforth flue-cured bright leaf tobacco will be referred to as flue-cured tobacco.

FLUE-CURED TOBACCO BELTS of NORTH CAROLINA

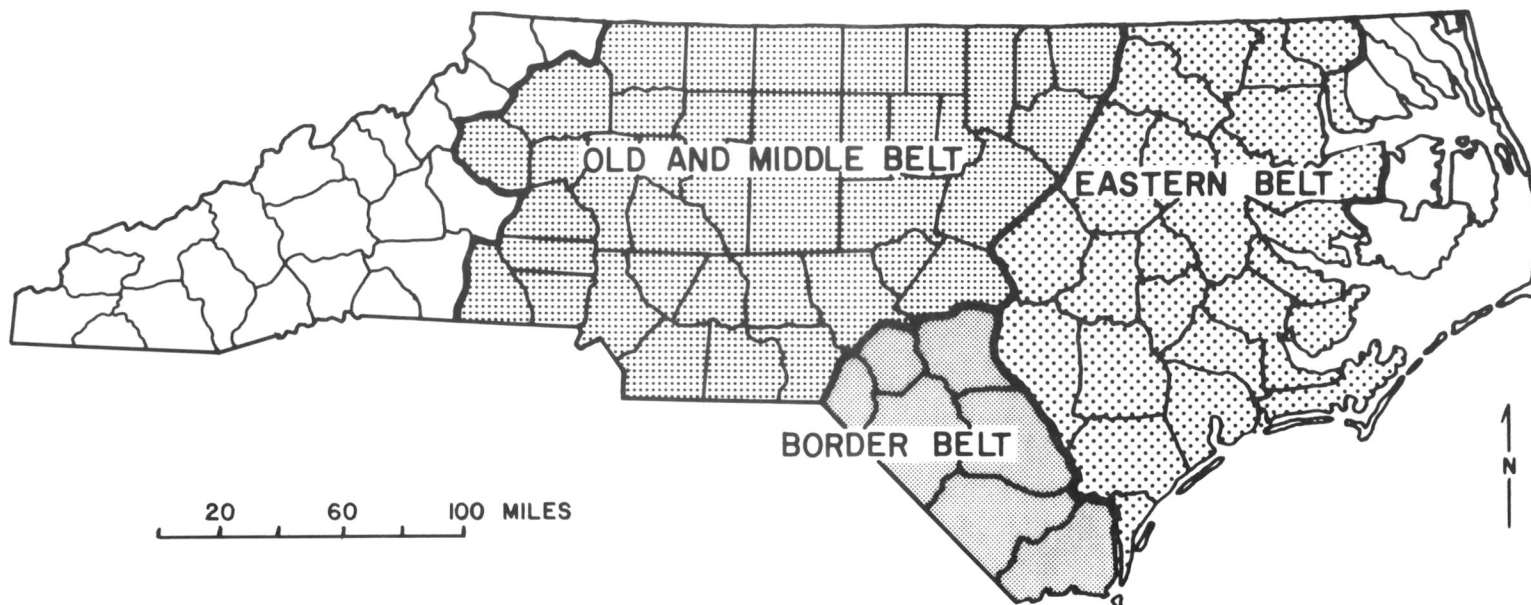


FIGURE 1

also must be dry enough so it will not mold or become otherwise damaged."⁴ Since tobacco comes into order naturally under moist conditions, the use of the ordering pit was restricted to periods of low humidity, which usually occurred during cool or cold weather.

The ordering pit, a feature of the tobacco landscape of the Eastern Belt for more than three-quarters of a century, is usually constructed as a dirt-floored cellar under packhouses or grading rooms.⁵ Many ordering pits, however, are also built as self-contained units immediately adjacent to packhouses or grading rooms.

Although use of the ordering pit has been in a state of decline in the Eastern Belt of North Carolina for several decades, its functional demise is due primarily to the recent change from marketing tobacco in tied bundles to loose-leaf or untied sales. The purpose of this thesis is to trace the role of the ordering pit as a landscape element from its inception to its present relict status in the Eastern Belt.

The late geographer Carl O. Sauer, in a discussion of cultural relicts, stated that they "...should be recorded while they still exist."⁶ Peter O. Wacker additionally points out that "the survival of lesser relict

⁴R. R. Bennett, S. N. Hawks, Jr., and Astor Perry, Handling and Preparing Flue-Cured Tobacco for Market (Raleigh: North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service, Extension Circular No. 410, 1957), p. 5.

⁵A structure constructed for storing flue-cured tobacco prior to marketing is referred to as a packhouse; a grading room is a well-lighted facility where tobacco is sorted into various quality groupings for marketing. The grading room is often constructed as a shed attached to a side of a packhouse while in other instances it may be a self-contained unit.

⁶Carl O. Sauer, "Foreward to Historical Geography," Annals, Association of American Geographers, Vol. 31 (1941), p. 368.

features is rare even in rural areas."⁷ Perhaps the best statement expressing a need for geographic study of relict features is provided by Hugh C. Prince:

"Relict features, however defined, may be studied for the contribution they make to the present landscape; as such, they are the concern of all geographers... In the study of the geography of the present time relict features have a special significance because they indicate the nature, extent, and rate of changes currently taking place."⁸

Thus the need for studying the tobacco ordering pit as an agricultural relict is clearly established. By examining the development and decline of the ordering pit, much can be learned of the nature of changes taking place on the rural landscape in the Eastern Flue-cured Tobacco Belt of North Carolina.

Geographers have devoted relatively little attention to research on structures associated with different kinds of agriculture. This paucity of research has been lamented by John Fraser Hart and Eugene Cotton Mather, who stated:

"Little attention has been given to the character and distribution of barns and other distinctive structures associated with different kinds of agriculture, despite the fact that in many areas such structures are important components of the landscape."⁹

⁷Peter O. Wacker, "Historical Geographers, Newspaper Advertisements and the Bicentennial Celebration," Professional Geographer, Vol. 26 (1974), p. 13.

⁸Hugh C. Prince, "Report on Historical Geography," in, J. Wreford Watson, editor, Congress Proceedings, 20th International Geographical Congress, pp. 164-168.

⁹John Fraser Hart and Eugene Cotton Mather, "The Character of Tobacco Barns and Their Role in the Tobacco Economy of the United States," Annals, Association of American Geographers, Vol. 51 (1961), p. 293.

Although the above statement was made in 1961, the situation regarding research on agricultural structures has not changed significantly.

Little research has been carried out by geographers on structures associated with the growing and processing of tobacco. There are notable exceptions, the most significant being the work by Hart and Mather on tobacco barns in the United States,¹⁰ and that of Karl B. Raitz on the Wisconsin tobacco shed.¹¹ No work in any discipline is known to have been solely directed to the study of the tobacco ordering pit. The completion of this study should aid significantly in closing the gap in geographic knowledge of structures associated with tobacco.

The primary objective of this thesis is to portray the role of the ordering pit as an element of the landscape in the Eastern Tobacco Belt. An historical approach will be utilized to achieve this objective. A brief examination of tobacco cellars in the United States will also be carried out to provide background regarding the nature and geographic distribution of such structures.

An understanding of the significance of the ordering pit in the Eastern Belt can be best accomplished through an intensive study of one county. Hart and Mather, in stressing the need for investigations of "distinctive structures associated with different kinds of agriculture," stated:

"Our appreciation of the character of areas would be further

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 274-293.

¹¹Karl B. Raitz, "The Wisconsin Tobacco Shed: A Key to Ethnic Settlement and Diffusion," Landscape, Vol. 20 (1975), pp. 32-37.

enhanced by more intensive studies at the local level."¹²

By knowing in detail the role of the ordering pit in a particular county, much can be inferred about the role of the pit in neighboring counties.

The general area of study for this research consists of the tobacco-producing counties of the Eastern Flue-cured Belt of North Carolina where the ordering pit is now a relict feature (Fig. 2). Pitt County, the leading tobacco producer in the belt, has been selected for in-depth study (Fig. 2). *Justified or of study Area* It was chosen because of its central location as well as its history of production. Pitt County has been an important area of tobacco production since the crop was introduced into the Coastal Plain during the late nineteenth century. For a study which involves the examination of past tobacco production techniques it is advantageous to select an area well-served by a local market. Both Greenville and Farmville have had viable markets for almost as long as tobacco has been produced in the county. A map of Pitt County showing principal localities and roads is provided in Figure 3.

Background information on the historic role of the ordering pit was obtained through library investigations and correspondence with persons having knowledge of the subject. In addition, general field investigations and interviews were carried out in various parts of the flue-cured tobacco belts of North Carolina and Virginia. *methodology*

Intensive field work was conducted in Pitt County, North Carolina in an effort to determine the significance of the ordering pit in that county. Using a random numbers table, 32 maps of the Soil Survey of Pitt County have been selected for use as sample areas. The sample areas comprise about

¹²Hart and Mather, p. 293.

COUNTIES IN THE EASTERN BELT



FIGURE 2

PITT COUNTY: PRINCIPAL ROADS, CITIES and TOWNS

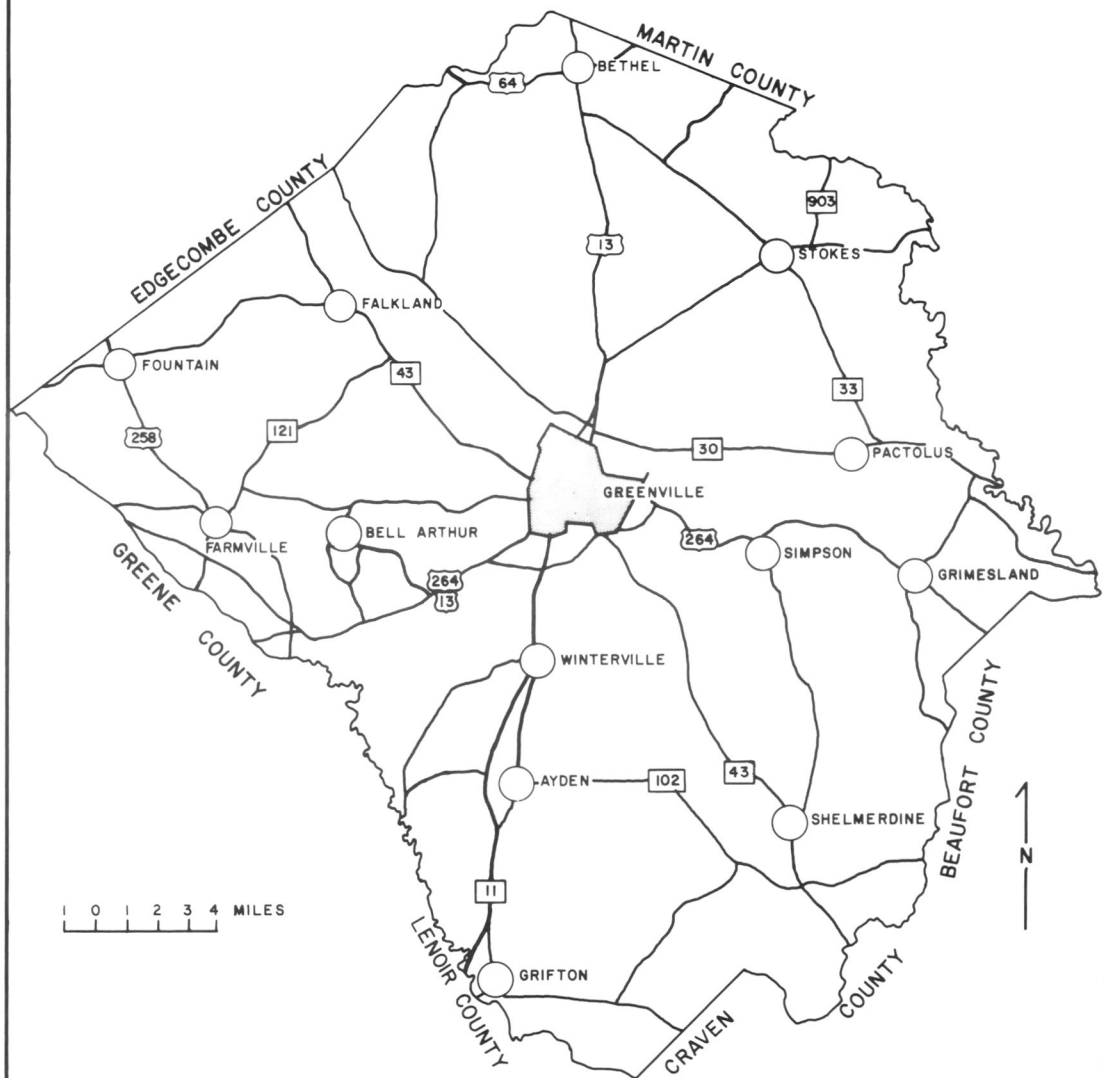


FIGURE 3

forty per cent of the total area of the county (Fig. 4). The individual maps of the Soil Survey are actually aerial photographs (scale of 1:15,840) with the boundaries of soil types superimposed on them. These photographs also show features of the physical and cultural landscape such as woodlands, fields, buildings and roads. Thus these maps are excellent *soil maps* aids in conducting various types of field research in the county.

Each farmstead within the sample areas was examined to determine if pits were present or had existed in the past. When possible, interviews were conducted to learn about the history of individual pits, and the distribution of the pits within the sample areas was mapped. Additional interviews were carried out throughout the county, primarily with elderly residents who had knowledge of ordering pits.

Since no written references to ordering pits in the Eastern Belt have been discovered, findings in this work are primarily the product of field investigations.

SAMPLE AREAS in PITT COUNTY

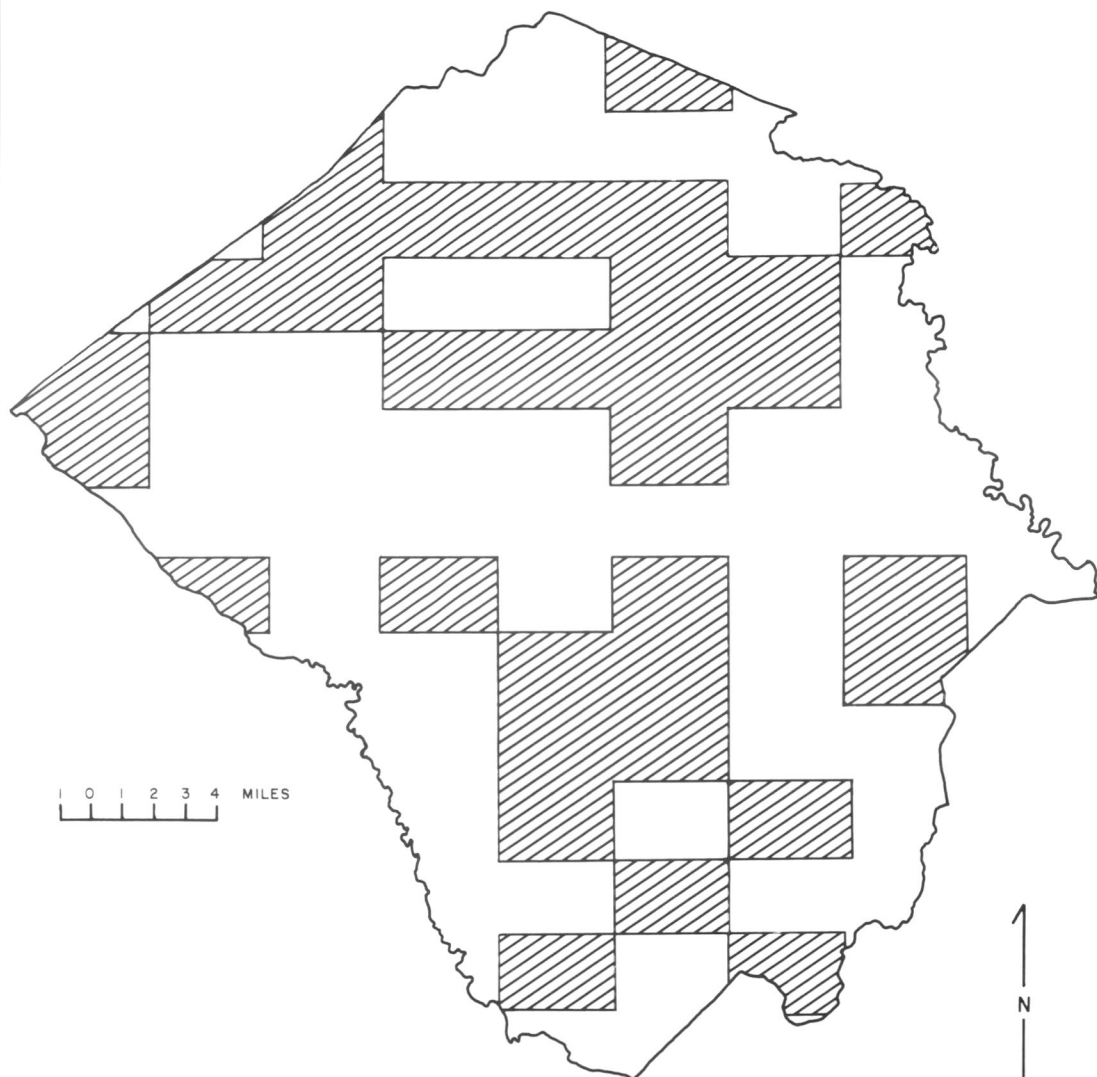


FIGURE 4

Chapter I

TOBACCO CELLARS IN THE UNITED STATES

Tobacco cellars are found in several areas of the United States, but are noticeably absent from others. These specialized facilities presently exist or have existed in the past in the southern flue-cured belts, the cigar tobacco districts of Pennsylvania, New England, and Maryland, the Burley Tobacco District of western North Carolina, and the Dark Fire-cured and Sun-cured districts of Virginia. This chapter will briefly examine the distribution and character of the various tobacco cellars of the United States. In addition, comments on the possible origin and diffusion of the tobacco cellar will be put forth.

The Flue-cured Belts

For over three-quarters of a century tobacco cellars have been a significant feature on the landscape in several of the flue-cured belts, where they were utilized as ordering facilities.

The distribution of tobacco ordering cellars in the Old Flue-cured Belt of Virginia and North Carolina is almost ubiquitous.¹ Ordering cellars also pervade most of the Middle Belt of North Carolina and are also found in many parts of the Eastern Belt of North Carolina.² A scattering

¹The Old Belt, located in the Piedmont, is comprised of the flue-cured tobacco-producing counties of Virginia and the western section of the counties growing flue-cured tobacco in North Carolina. Type 11a tobacco is grown in the Old Belt.

²The Middle Belt, formerly a part of the Old Belt, is comprised of the counties in the eastern Piedmont of North Carolina and produces Type 11b tobacco.

of tobacco cellars is also found in the Border Belt of North Carolina and South Carolina.³ There is no evidence that tobacco cellars exist or have existed in the past in the Georgia-Florida Belt.⁴

The most widely accepted term for ordering cellars in the flue-cured belts is "ordering pit." The term "basement" is sometimes used in the Old Belt while "ordering room," "ordering house," and "ordering cellar" are occasionally used in both the Old and Middle belts. In the Eastern and Border belts tobacco ordering cellars are almost always referred to as "ordering pits."⁵ These structures are usually constructed under storage or grading facilities.

Little is known of the early history of ordering pits in the flue-cured belts. Historian Nannie May Tilley, in her monumental work, The Bright-Tobacco Industry, 1860-1929, stated that ordering pits were used "soon after the turn of the century."⁶ However, tobacco experts J. B. Killebrew and Herbert Myrick, writing in 1897, noted the presence of ordering pits several years prior to the time mentioned by Tilley:

"The best planters now have under their assorting and stripping rooms, a cellar six or eight feet deep, with tier poles put in, upon which the tobacco may be hung to bring it into any order that may be required. Such a cellar makes one independent of the weather, and permits the work to go on

³The Border Belt is composed of the tobacco-growing counties of South Carolina and several counties of southeastern North Carolina. Type 13 tobacco is produced in this belt.

⁴The Georgia-Florida Belt is made up of all the counties growing flue-cured tobacco in those states, and produces Type 14 tobacco.

⁵Ordering cellars in the flue-cured belts will henceforth be referred to as ordering pits.

⁶Nannie May Tilley, The Bright-Tobacco Industry, 1860-1929 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), p. 84.

at all times."⁷

Elderly informants in Pitt County, North Carolina attest to the presence of pits in that Eastern Belt county during the middle 1890's, which was about the same time that tobacco production became significant on the Coastal Plain.

Ordering pits apparently either did not exist or were not widespread in the flue-cured region in 1880. The Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, contains a detailed report by Killebrew entitled, "Report on the Culture and Curing of Tobacco in the United States," which devoted considerable attention to production processes in the various tobacco-producing states.⁸ Killebrew does not mention the existence of tobacco cellars in any of the states which produce flue-cured tobacco. Further investigations are needed to accurately determine the history of the ordering pit in the flue-cured belts.

From the late nineteenth century until very recently, the ordering pit remained a viable component of the landscape associated with flue-cured tobacco production. However, during the last decade the popularity of the ordering pit as an aid in preparing tobacco for market has dwindled drastically due to the aforementioned change in the marketing system of flue-cured tobacco. The decline of the pit has been such that presently it is definitely a relict in the Eastern and Border belts as well as in some,

⁷J. B. Killebrew and Herbert Myrick, Tobacco Leaf: Its Culture and Cure, Marketing and Manufacture (New York: Orange Judd Publishing Company, 1897), p. 367.

⁸J. B. Killebrew, "Report on the Culture and Curing of Tobacco in the United States," Tenth Census of the United States, 1880: Agriculture (Washington: U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1883), Vol. 3, 583-880.

if not all, parts of the Middle and Old belts.

Western North Carolina Burley District

Tobacco cellars are prevalent in the small Burley District of mountainous western North Carolina.⁹ Burley tobacco is normally stalk-cut and air-cured, with harvesting in western North Carolina usually taking place during middle September and curing generally being completed by the middle of November. The cellars of this district are usually referred to as either "basements" or "casing houses." They are apparently used not only to bring tobacco in order or case and to maintain that condition, but also function as a "stripping" facility where tobacco is removed from the stalks and prepared for market.

According to Yancey County Agricultural Extension Chairman William C. Bledsoe, these basements or casing houses vary considerably from farm to farm with "no clearly delineated pattern or blueprint," the only requirement being that they maintain "a situation of high relative humidity for a sustained period of time."¹⁰ The following comments on ordering tobacco in the Burley District were offered by Madison County Agricultural Extension Agent Wiley DuVall:

"There are many types of ordering systems in use throughout the burley area. Many of our farmers depend on the weather to bring their tobacco into case...Quite often farmers with

⁹Air-cured tobacco is designated Class 3 by the U. S. Department of Agriculture; burley tobacco is classified as Type 31. Most of the North Carolina burley tobacco is grown in the counties of Madison, Buncombe, Yancey, Ashe, Haywood, Watauga, Mitchell, Graham, Alleghany, and Avery.

¹⁰William C. Bledsoe, Yancey County Agricultural Extension Chairman, Burnsville, North Carolina, private correspondence, October 15, 1975.

modern homes will leave an earthen floor in the basement of the house, Tobacco is then hung in the basement to come in case. Sometimes tobacco when in case is removed from the sticks, bundled, and stacked in the basement for stripping. Some farmers will build casing houses. These may be partially underground or back into a slope - always with an earthen floor."¹¹

Several publications of the North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service have alluded to and recommended the use of basements or casing houses for ordering burley tobacco and in processing it for market.¹² However, descriptions of these structures are not provided. Apparently casing or ordering facilities in the Burley District of North Carolina have not been constructed under curing barns. With the exception of basements under dwellings, these structures are built as individual, self-contained units. Basements and casing houses in western North Carolina apparently continue to function today in the same way they have for many years in the past.

Virginia Dark Fire-cured and Sun-cured Districts

Tobacco cellars are known to exist in at least some parts of the Dark Fire-cured and the Sun-cured districts of Virginia.¹³ However, they are not believed to play a significant role in the processing of cured tobacco

¹¹Wiley DuVall, Madison County Agricultural Extension Agent, Marshall, North Carolina, private correspondence, October 24, 1975.

¹²See, for example, R. R. Bennett and Astor Perry, Preparing Burley Tobacco for Market (Raleigh: North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service, Extension Circular No. 412, 1957).

¹³Virginia dark fire-cured tobacco is produced in Amelia, Amherst, Appomattox, Bedford, Buckingham, Campbell, Dinwiddie, Lunenburg, Nelson, Nottoway, Powhatan, Prince Edward, Brunswick, and Charlotte counties. This district produces Type 21 tobacco. The so-called sun-cured tobacco is a dark air-cured type and is grown mainly in Carolina, Louisa, Hanover, and Goochland counties.

for market. These cellars are referred to as "basements" or "ordering pits" and apparently function solely as an aid in bringing cured tobacco into the desired state of pliability. Little is known of the past history of tobacco cellars in these districts.

New England

Apparently few if any tobacco cellars presently exist in either the cigar-binder or cigar-wrapper districts of New England.¹⁴ However, cellars were present under some curing sheds of the binder district during the late nineteenth century. Killebrew, in 1880, alluded to cellars:

"The character of sheds or barns has been very greatly improved within the last decade...Cellars to the best sheds are now prepared to be used as stripping rooms and for bringing and retaining the tobacco in proper condition."¹⁵

Further evidence of the existence of tobacco cellars in New England is found in C. G. Warnford Lock's handbook on tobacco production (1886), in which numerous planters offered advice on various aspects of tobacco culture. Among these were two Connecticut growers: Perry Hull, of Litchfield County and a farmer identified only as, "White, a Connecticut

¹⁴In private correspondence, Goodson S. Taylor, Assistant to the Director, Valley Laboratory, Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, Windsor, apprised that cellars are not a part of tobacco processing in either of the cigar-tobacco districts of Connecticut. In addition, John C. Howell, Jr., Regional Vegetable and Tobacco Specialist, Hampshire County Agricultural Extension Office, Northampton, Massachusetts, reports that tobacco cellars do not presently exist in that state.

¹⁵Killebrew, p. 841; on p. 835 Killebrew identified the New England Tobacco-Growing District: "The production of tobacco in the Connecticut valley is confined for the most part to the following counties: Middlesex, Hartford, and Tolland, in...Connecticut; Hampden, Hampshire, and Franklin, in...Massachusetts; Windham...of Vermont; and Cheshire and Sullivan, in...New Hampshire. In the Housatonic valley tobacco is cultivated in Fairfield and Litchfield counties, (Connecticut) and...Duchess and Putnam...in

grower."¹⁶

White's proposal for the proper construction of a curing shed included a recommendation for a cellar beneath it:

"For such a building, I would have a tight floor to the whole, and underneath a good walled cellar lighted with suitable windows and chimney in one corner, with a stove, to keep fire in very cold weather, to work by when stripping the tobacco."¹⁷

In a discussion of the process of stripping tobacco, Perry Hull also refers to cellars:

"By far the preferable way is, especially if there is a very large crop to pick, to take off the leaves during damp or wet weather, tie them into bundles of 15-20 lb., with twine, and pack it away into cellars, or wherever it can be kept without drying up. It can then be assorted in any kind of weather..."¹⁸

The comments of Killebrew and the aforementioned farmers substantiate the existence of tobacco cellars in Connecticut during the latter part of the nineteenth century. However, their popularity was apparently short-lived. Further investigations are necessary to determine more about the role of cellars in the history of tobacco production in New England.

Pennsylvania

Tobacco cellars are found throughout the Cigar-Filler District of

eastern New York. New Haven county belongs in part to the Connecticut valley and in part to the Housatonic valley."

¹⁶C. G. Warnford Lock, Tobacco: Growing, Curing, and Manufacturing (London: E. & F. N. Spon, 1886), pp. 35, 44.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 108-109; "stripping" is the process of pulling the cured leaves off the stalks, but the term through time has evolved to refer to the entire process of preparing tobacco for market.

southeastern Pennsylvania where nearly all of the state's tobacco is produced. Small acreages of cigar-binder tobacco are also produced in a few Pennsylvania counties.¹⁹ In two of these counties, Clinton and Lycoming, cellars are found on virtually all the tobacco farms, but are noticeably absent from farms in other counties producing binder type tobacco.²⁰ Cellars in Clinton and Lycoming counties exhibit characteristics similar to those in the filler district.

A great percentage of the filler type tobacco of Pennsylvania is grown in Lancaster County with small acreages being cultivated in the neighboring counties of York, Berks, Dauphin, Lebanon and Chester.

In the cigar-binder and filler districts harvesting is accomplished by the "stalk-cutting" method, and air-curing is utilized. Once the plants are mature the stalks are cut off near the ground and "speared" on laths or sticks. This process is usually carried out in late August or in September. The sticks of tobacco are taken from the fields and hung in curing barns or sheds where they remain until the curing process is

¹⁹Pennsylvania cigar-filler tobacco is also known as Pennsylvania Broadleaf or Seedleaf while the cigar-binder tobacco is also called Pennsylvania Havana Seed. Cigar-filler tobacco has been designated as Class 4 tobacco while cigar-binder belongs to Class 5. The Pennsylvania filler type tobacco is classified as Type 41 and the binder type is referred to as Type 53.

²⁰William Frear and E. K. Hibshman, The Production of Cigar-Leaf Tobacco in Pennsylvania (Washington: U. S. Department of Agriculture, Farmers' Bulletin No. 416, 1910), p. 20; Otto Olson, Cigar-Tobacco Production in Pennsylvania (Washington: U. S. Department of Agriculture, Farmers' Bulletin No. 1580, 1929), p. II; binder-leaf tobacco is grown mainly in Clinton, Lycoming, Tioga, and Bradford counties.

completed, usually late November or December.²¹

The average size of the curing sheds in southeastern Pennsylvania is 32 by 54 feet,²² but some of the larger ones are as much as forty feet wide and one hundred and fifty feet long.²³ Beneath most of the tobacco sheds are dampening cellars and adjoining stripping cellars (often called stripping rooms). The dampening cellars are usually at least half the size of the shed floors while the adjacent stripping cellars are much smaller.²⁴ In Tobacco Lore of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Arthur L. Reist, the author and a tobacco farmer, describes the role of the dampening cellar and the stripping cellar:

"In the latter part of fall, taking down tobacco and putting it in the dampening cellar to prepare it for processing begins. When tobacco becomes dry in the sheds and the wind blows through it, the leaves rattle. A completely cured leaf, when crushed in the palm, resembles corn flakes that have been gone over by a rolling pin. Only when the cured leaf is damp and pliable can it be handled. Soon after Thanksgiving when there is a rainy or foggy day, "taking down" begins. Ventilators and doors are opened wide to allow moisture to penetrate the cured crop. Now the reverse of what was done sixty days earlier is begun. Naturally, the first tobacco that was harvested is in

²¹Both of the terms, "tobacco barn" and "tobacco shed" appear in the literature on tobacco production in Pennsylvania. However, the term "tobacco shed" apparently is used more by Pennsylvania tobacco farmers.

²²Hart and Mather, p. 284.

²³Franklin Ellis and Samuel Evans, History of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1883), p. 357; for a detailed description of the structure and function of the tobacco shed in Pennsylvania, see Amos Long, Jr., The Pennsylvania German Family Farm (Breinigsville, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania German Society, 1972), pp. 495-507.

²⁴Newton J. Blair, Lebanon County Agricultural Extension Agent, Lebanon, Pennsylvania, private correspondence, December 30, 1975.

the top of the buildings; but that cannot be removed until that beneath it has been passed, two laths at a time, through open trap doors in the shed floor to the dampening cellar below. Now the entire crop has to be rehung in the earthen floored cellar to acquire the proper condition of moisture. A few days later each lath must again be carried to the stripping room where each leaf is "stripped" or pulled downward from the stalk for removal and processing. Conditioning of the cured leaf is extremely touchy. If the leaf is too dry, the farmer loses considerable weight, and this means money. If he allows the tobacco to become too damp, it may possibly spoil in the package (bale)."²⁵

It is not known exactly when the earliest tobacco cellars were constructed in Pennsylvania. Tobacco apparently was first produced commercially in that state in the 1830's or shortly before. However, historian Horace R. Barnes asserts that "...tobacco production in Lancaster County did not become really significant until after the Civil War."²⁶ Barnes also states that the tobacco shed did not come until the crop grew in importance:

"During the early decades of tobacco raising in this County very little attention was paid to its storage. The garret, unused rooms in the farmhouse, the barn, or any other building on the farm was used as a place in which to hang the crop. When the size of the yield increased ordinary wooden sheds were built to serve as storage houses for the tobacco crop."²⁷

Of particular significance is the fact that, according to Barnes, no cellars were constructed under these early sheds. It can therefore be assumed that tobacco cellars were not constructed under sheds in Lancaster County until after the Civil War. However, it is known that cellars were

²⁵Arthur L. Reist, Tobacco Lore of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania (Ephrata, Pennsylvania: Science Press, 1974), not paged.

²⁶Horace R. Barnes, "Early History of Tobacco," Papers of the Lancaster County Historical Society, Vol. 45 (1941), p. 5.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 17-18.

being constructed under sheds in Lancaster County by the middle 1870's.²⁸ By 1880, both the dampening cellar and the stripping cellar were essential parts of the tobacco shed in Lancaster County.²⁹

It is quite possible that cellars first appeared in Pennsylvania in some county other than Lancaster. However, if that is the case, one would suppose that they were introduced into Lancaster County shortly thereafter.

The work of Lock in 1886 contains statements of a Pennsylvania farmer identified as Libhart, who recommended the use of a tobacco cellar to keep tobacco damp prior to stripping.³⁰

Tobacco specialists William Frear and E. K. Hibshman apprised in 1910 that "a portion of the barn basement walled off from the stables," was sometimes used as a dampening cellar.³¹ Thus one might be tempted to assert that dampening cellars constructed under sheds evolved from make-shift dampening cellars in livestock barns.³² However, much work remains to be done before conclusive statements can be made regarding the origin of the Pennsylvania tobacco cellars.

²⁸Arthur L. Reist, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, private correspondence, May 22, 1976; Reist states that a shed constructed by his grandfather in 1875 has both a dampening cellar and a stripping cellar.

²⁹Killebrew, p. 750.

³⁰Lock, pp. 36, 106.

³¹Frear and Hibshman, p. 20.

³²Even if the use of cellars as an aid in conditioning cured tobacco was first discovered in Pennsylvania, it would be difficult to determine the role played by the cellars of other buildings because of the tradition of having them under so many different structures. Reist, May 22, 1976, points out that "nearly every house, barn, church, school, and many other types of

The processes associated with tobacco production in Pennsylvania have remained relatively unchanged for decades, and as Reist has stated, "much of the work is carried on as it was a century ago."³³ Thus both the dampening cellar and the stripping cellar continue to be vital components of the Pennsylvania tobacco farm, and there is little prospect for their roles to change in the near future.

Maryland

Maryland air-cured tobacco is produced in five counties of the southern part of the state: Prince Georges, Anne Arundel, Charles, Calvert, and St. Marys. On many of the Maryland tobacco farms excavated stripping rooms or stripping cellars are found. These structures are used "more to hold tobacco in order than to bring tobacco in order."³⁴ These specialized facilities are usually constructed within the curing barn or attached to it, but in some instances are built as self-contained units near the curing barn.

George B. Spence, Extension Agent, Prince Frederick, Maryland, states that "up until about 1920 there were practically no stripping rooms or holding facilities in southern Maryland."³⁵ Spence provides additional background information relative to the stripping rooms of that state:

buildings here have cellars."

³³Reist, not paged.

³⁴Claude G. McKee, Extension Tobacco Specialist, Upper Marlboro, Maryland, private correspondence, October 30, 1975.

³⁵George B. Spence, Agricultural Extension Agent, Prince Frederick, Maryland, private correspondence, October 23, 1975.

"The early stripping rooms were built about half underground and half exposed. This seemed to give about the desired humidity to hold tobacco in order. The tobacco is taken out of the barns while in order and placed in the stripping room to keep it from drying. The workers do the stripping and tying in this room and the tied bundles are usually taken out and placed on baskets in the curing barn ready for market."³⁶

A rationale for the construction of stripping cellars is provided by tobacco specialist W. B. Posey who reports that "excavating the soil 3 to 4 feet and constructing a semi-basement type of room affords more moisture and a higher temperature than rooms constructed on the surface of the soil."³⁷

During recent years, however, the tendency has been to build stripping facilities completely on the surface "with better materials for sealing in moisture."³⁸ In addition, windows are now often omitted and only electric lights used, and in some stripping rooms heating furnaces and automatic humidity controls are utilized.³⁹

After curing, a farmer has to wait until there is sufficient humidity to bring dry tobacco into a pliable condition before handling. In the past the farmer was "limited to the quantity he could remove from the barn by

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷W. B. Posey, Tobacco Culture in Maryland (College Park: Maryland Agriculture Extension Service, Extension Bulletin No. 65, 1945), p. 33.

³⁸Spence, private correspondence, October 23, 1975.

³⁹Ibid.

the capacity of his stripping room."⁴⁰ The situation has recently changed, according to McKee:

"The advent of polyethylene plastic covers change all this. Now a grower can take down as much tobacco as he wants, leave it in the barn, and cover it tightly with a plastic cover and it will stay in order until he is ready to strip it."⁴¹

In spite of these technological advances, Spence reports that most of the semi-basement type stripping rooms are still in use.⁴² It seems highly unlikely, however, that stripping cellars will be constructed in the future. Thus, one can only speculate as to how long they will remain as functional components of the rural landscape of southern Maryland.

Origin and Diffusion

There is a possibility that the idea of using cellars to condition tobacco emanated independently from two or more sources. However, the writer suspects that such an idea originated at one point and diffused or spread to other areas. Before any conclusions can be put forth regarding the possible origin and diffusion of tobacco cellars, investigations must be carried out in each of the areas where these structures exist or have existed. Such investigations should attempt to accurately determine the history of tobacco cellars in the respective areas, and to compile in detail their structural characteristics for use in comparative analysis. Evidence un-

⁴⁰McKee, private correspondence, October 30, 1975.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Spence, private correspondence, October 23, 1975.

covered to date, however, does allow one to put forth certain hypotheses with respect to the past development of tobacco cellars.

The areas in which tobacco cellars exist in the South essentially form a continuous zone of tobacco production. This region is composed of the Virginia Sun-cured and Dark Fire-cured districts, the flue-cured belts of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, and the Burley District of western North Carolina. It is hypothesized that tobacco cellars in this region are somewhat similar in nature and developed from a single regional source. More than any other reason, this hypothesis is based on the fact that terms used to refer to tobacco cellars transcend district or belt boundaries in this zone.

The tobacco cellars of the northern cigar-tobacco districts are also believed to be regionally associated. The cellars in the binder and filler districts of Pennsylvania are virtually identical in nature and the cellars which existed in New England were apparently quite similar to those of Pennsylvania. It is believed that these tobacco cellars spread from one cigar district to the others. They probably diffused from one of the Pennsylvania districts to the other in that state as well as to New England where their popularity was shortlived.

If the stripping rooms in Maryland did not develop until the present century as suggested by Spence, it seems certain that the idea of constructing such facilities resulted from a knowledge of tobacco cellars in other areas.

It has been hypothesized that perhaps two regional associations of tobacco cellars exist. Moreover, the cellars in the northern cigar-tobacco districts may have existed for as long as two decades prior to their appearance in the South. This leads to the hypothesis that such structures

in the South developed due to a knowledge of the existence of tobacco cellars in the northern cigar-tobacco districts. However, additional research may suggest or reveal a completely different pattern of development with respect to tobacco cellars.

Summary

Tobacco cellars are known to exist in the southern flue-cured belts, the western North Carolina Burley District, the Virginia Dark Fire-cured and Sun-cured districts, southern Maryland, and the cigar-tobacco districts of Pennsylvania. There is some question about the existence of cellars in New England at present, but some are known to have existed in Connecticut during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The present status of tobacco cellars varies from area to area. They are essential components of Pennsylvania tobacco farms and are viable features of the western North Carolina Burley District. The cellars of Maryland appear to be entering a stage of decline while they are relatively insignificant in the Dark Fire-cured and Sun-cured districts of Virginia. The tobacco cellars in most parts of the flue-cured belts are in a state of functional demise, and they apparently have disappeared from the landscape in New England.

It is hypothesized that tobacco cellars can be divided into two regional associations, the northern cigar-tobacco districts and the tobacco-producing areas of the South. Available evidence suggests that tobacco cellars developed somewhat earlier in the northern districts than in the

South. It is therefore hypothesized that their development in the South resulted from knowledge of tobacco cellars in the northern districts.

Chapter II

THE TOBACCO ORDERING PIT IN THE EASTERN BELT OF NORTH CAROLINA

The distribution, description, and function of the ordering pit in the Eastern Belt of North Carolina will be discussed in this chapter. In addition; brief sections dealing with some of the traditional processes of tobacco production will be presented in an effort to facilitate an understanding of the role of the ordering pit.

Distribution

While not being a ubiquitous feature in any individual county of the Eastern Belt, the ordering pit is a relatively common landscape feature in a contiguous zone of counties comprised of Johnston, Nash, Edgecombe, Wilson, Wayne, Greene, and Pitt. Ordering pits are also known to exist in the following counties which border on the aforementioned zone: Sampson, Lenoir, Craven, Beaufort, Martin, and Halifax. No pits have been found in Duplin, Pender, New Hanover, Onslow, Jones, Carteret, Pamlico, Washington, Bertie, Chowan, Hertford, Gates, or Northampton counties. However, this does not preclude the existence of these structures in those counties. It should also be noted that several of the counties in which pits have not been found produce very small amounts of tobacco.

The present distribution of ordering pits in any area of the Eastern Belt may not be an accurate indication of their past distributions. The rate of destruction of pits in this belt has been quite rapid, and such destruction may have been occurring at varying degrees within the belt for the past several decades. Of considerable historical significance is

the past existence of a great number of self-contained log pits in this region. Most of them were destroyed several decades ago, and at present they are virtually extinct. Much remains to be learned of the distribution of these log pits. Further investigations are necessary before meaningful conclusions can be drawn regarding the distribution of ordering pits in the Eastern Belt.

Description of Pits

All tobacco ordering pits in the Eastern Belt were utilized for the same function, and the interior working components of pits are virtually the same. However, the pits of the Eastern Belt vary with regard to exterior characteristics. A classification and description of the ordering pits in the Eastern Belt will be presented in this section.

Types

The ordering pits of the Eastern Belt may be classified into three principal types: (1) those built as substructures under other facilities, (2) self-contained pits, and (3) pits attached to sides of buildings.¹ The majority of pits in the Eastern Belt at present are constructed under packhouses or grading rooms, but self-contained pits are believed to have predominated early in this century. Relatively few pits have been constructed to the sides of storage buildings.

¹Hereinafter, ordering pits built under other facilities will often be referred to simply as "substructures" and those constructed to the sides of buildings may be denoted as "attached pits."

(1) Pits Constructed Under Storage or Grading Facilities (Substructures)

These pits are constructed as cellars under a portion of a packhouse or grading room, or under the whole of a grading room. Seldom is a pit excavated under the whole of a packhouse. When built under a packhouse the pit is often below a compartment designated as the grading room.

Most substructures are from six to eight feet deep with from three to five feet being below ground level and the remainder above the surface. A few pits are constructed almost completely below ground level, but these structures are rarely excavated totally below the surface.

The most common building material is brick (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6), but many are constructed of concrete (Fig. 7) or concrete block (Fig. 8). A few log grading rooms with ordering pits beneath them still exist in the Eastern Belt (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10).

The wooden floors of the buildings above usually serve as the ceilings of these ordering pits. Nearly all of these structures may be entered from the building above through a trap-door (Fig. 11). Quite often an outside door is also present and many pits have windows for light since most do not have electric lights.

(2) Self-Contained Pits

Although not attached physically, these pits are always built adjacent to a packhouse or grading room. The depth characteristics of self-contained pits are about the same as those of pits constructed under other facilities.



Figure 5

Brick ordering pits. Upper photo: large pit under a two-story packhouse in Lenoir County. Lower photo: pit beneath grading room section of a packhouse in Pitt County.



Figure 6

Ordering pits constructed of brick beneath grading rooms in Wilson (upper) and Greene (lower) counties.



Figure 7

Concrete ordering pits in Edgecombe County. The pit in the upper photo is beneath the grading room of a packhouse while the pit in the lower photo is under a small self-contained grading room.



Figure 8

Pits constructed of concrete block. Upper photo: pit under tin grading room is presently used as a dog house (Wilson County). Lower photo: pit under grading room of wooden packhouse. Note the presence of both a door and window in the front wall of the pit (Johnston County).



Figure 9

Dilapidated log grading room with ordering pit below it. Note the small exterior door to pit in lower photo (Johnston County).



Figure 10

Abandoned log grading room with ordering pit under it. The unusual feature of this structure is that the pit is entirely below ground level with the only entrance being through a trap-door (Pitt County).



Figure 11

Trap-door entrance to ordering pit (Pitt County).

These pits are constructed primarily of brick (Fig. 12 and Fig. 13), concrete, and concrete block (Fig. 14). A great number of self-contained log pits once existed in the Eastern Belt, but very few still remain on the landscape (Fig. 15). A few pits constructed of wooden boards have also been located.

Most of these pits have low-angle gable roofs (Fig. 12, Fig. 14, and Fig. 15), but some roofs are slightly angled rearward while others are angled toward a side (Fig. 13). The roofs are almost exclusively of tin construction. In the past some log pits were covered with overlapped wooden planks, and sometimes the structure was then overlaid with earth. However, none of these pits is known to exist at present. The pits with gable roofs usually have a flat ceiling below the roof; the partition between the roof and ceiling is often not enclosed.

Unless of log construction, the walls of these pits below the surface are usually of the same material as they are above ground level (Fig. 16). However, log walls often extended only to ground level or slightly below, with the walls below the surface being of earth.

A door is located at one end of a self-contained pit and occasionally a rear window is provided.

(3) Pits Attached To Sides Of Buildings

This pit type is very similar to the other two with regard to depth characteristics and building materials utilized in its construction (Fig. 17). The distinguishing features of this pit are its attachment to the side of a packhouse or grading room, a tin roof angled away from the adjacent building, and sometimes the presence of a side door connecting the two structures. A door opening to the outside of the pit is also usually present.



Figure 12

Self-contained brick pits with low-angle gable roofs (upper: Wayne County; lower: Johnston County).



Figure 13

Self-contained brick pits with roofs angled to a side (upper: Pitt County; lower: dilapidated pit in Martin County).



Figure 14

Self-contained concrete-block pit with low-angle gable roof (Edgecombe County).



Figure 15

Self-contained log ordering pit with low-angle gable roof (Pitt County).
This structure was constructed circa 1915.



Figure 16

Abandoned, dilapidated ordering pit (Halifax County). Note that the subsurface concrete walls extend down to the earthen floor of the pit.



Figure 17

Pits attached to sides of packhouses (Wilson County). Both of these pits are of concrete-block construction.

Interior Characteristics

All pits have similar interior features. In addition to an earthen floor, a lattice of racks similar to those under or near curing barn shelters is present in each pit. The racks are composed of a series of horizontal and vertical planks or poles. The vertical poles are attached to the ceiling and extend to the earthen floor of the pit. They support the attached horizontal planks or poles which are commonly called "tier poles." The vertical distance between tier poles is between 18 and 24 inches, and pits in the Eastern Belt usually have three or four layers or tiers of horizontal poles.

The open space between groups of tier poles is called a "room;" each room is four feet in width. The rooms and tier poles usually run parallel with the length of the pit, but many pits are square or nearly so. When sticks of tobacco are placed in ordering pits they are hung on the horizontal tier poles, thus occupying the room spaces. Interior characteristics of pits are shown in Figures 18 and 19.

Size of Pits

Most ordering pits are two to four rooms in width and from 15 to 25 feet in length, though some are considerably larger (Fig. 20). No one-room pits are known to exist in the Eastern Belt at present, but in the past log pits were often only one-room wide.

Traditional Processes

To facilitate a better understanding of the role of the ordering pit a brief discussion of the traditional methods of harvesting, curing, storing,



Figure 18

Interior characteristics of ordering pits. Each photo shows a room bounded on each side by a lattice of vertical and horizontal planks or poles. Sticks of cured tobacco are hung on the horizontal tier poles. The earthen floor of the pit is discernible in the lower photo.



Figure 19

Interior characteristics of ordering pits. The ceilings of these sub-structures are the floors of the superstructures above them. Note that the vertical poles of the pits are attached to the sleepers of the superstructures. The presence of electric lights in pits, as shown in the lower photo, is quite rare in the Eastern Belt.



Figure 20

A brick ordering pit is present under the whole of this large tin packhouse whose dimensions are 20 by 54 feet (Edgecombe County). Most pits are much smaller than the one above.

and sorting tobacco in the Eastern Belt will be presented.

Flue-cured tobacco has traditionally been harvested by the "priming" method. When the tobacco crop is mature individual leaves are picked or primed from the stalks as they ripen or turn yellow. Tobacco is usually primed weekly with two to four leaves being pulled from each plant. In the Eastern Belt priming usually begins in early July and extends to the middle or latter part of August. Six to eight primings are usually required to harvest a single crop.

The primed leaves are taken from the field to the curing barn where cotton twine is utilized to string bundles or "hands" (composed of three to four leaves) of tobacco onto wooden tobacco sticks, which are four and a half feet long. The sticks of tobacco are hung in racks until enough has been strung to fill a barn. Then the sticks of tobacco are hung in the curing barn on tier poles. Most curing barns have five rooms and an average capacity of from six hundred to seven hundred sticks of tobacco.

The curing process is accomplished with artificial heat, and it usually takes from one hundred to one hundred twenty-five hours to cure a barn of tobacco. After the curing process has been completed, the barn doors are opened so that the tobacco will absorb enough moisture to be handled without breaking. Once the tobacco is in adequate order it is removed from the curing barn and piled down in a packhouse where it usually remains until most or all of the crop has been harvested and cured.

*Flue-cure
Process*

Once harvesting and curing were completed, the tobacco in packhouses would be sorted or graded into various quality groupings, tied into bundles, hung on sticks, and packed down in the storage facility where it remained until it was taken to market. However, before these processes could be carried out, the tobacco had to be in sufficient order to prevent the leaves from breaking and crumbling when they were handled. If the tobacco did not contain enough moisture, some artificial means of ordering was necessary.

Ordering Techniques

In late summer and early fall ordering was not much of a problem for farmers. Often tobacco remained in enough order to be sorted or graded from the pile or bulk in the packhouse during the early part of the grading season. After several weeks in the packhouse tobacco would begin to dry out and the moisture content would often have to be increased. The desired order was often achieved by hanging tobacco around the eaves of packhouses with the doors being left open during the night, or by laying it on the grass at night outside packhouses. During the early grading season ordering may also be accomplished by hanging the tobacco in the racks of barn shelters or on temporary ordering racks placed near packhouses or grading rooms (Fig. 21). Another favorite ordering technique involved the use of "dog fennel" weeds. After a dew dog fennels were broken and placed in alternate layers with tobacco in a packhouse. After a few hours the tobacco would usually be in proper order to prepare for market.

Later during the fall and winter (if tobacco was still on hand) the relative humidity was often quite low and ordering tobacco became much more

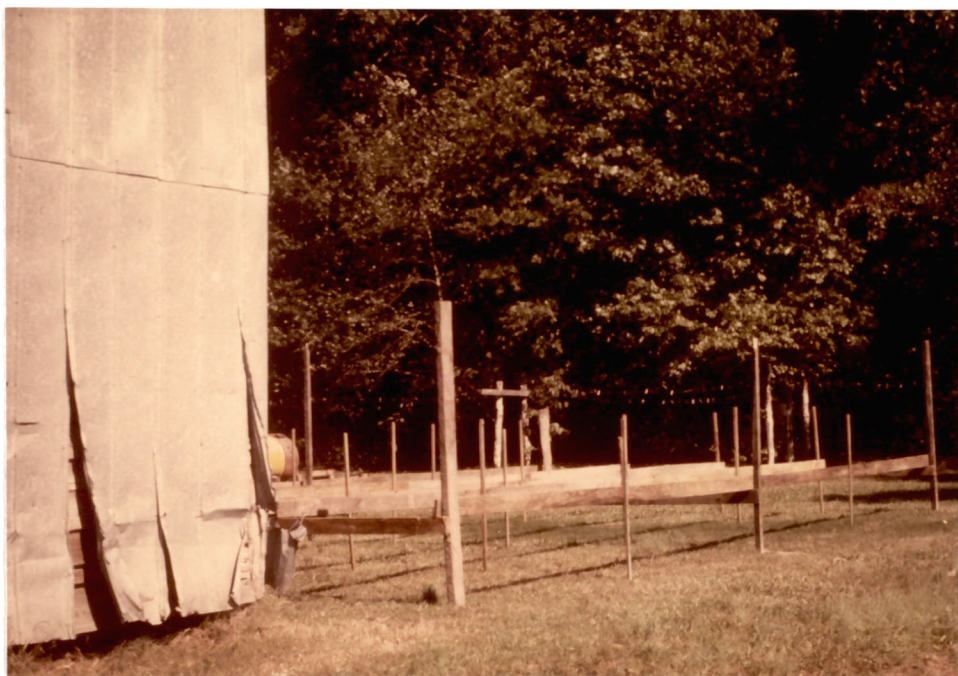


Figure 21

Temporary ordering racks located near packhouses. A compressed-air sprayer is also shown in the lower photo.

difficult. Some farmers ordered their tobacco by applying water directly to it. Water was often sprinkled on tobacco from a bucket or basin with a broom, twigs, or other things. The use of compressed air sprayers in applying water to tobacco became popular after World War II (Fig. 21). Many tobacco experts and farmers criticized these methods of ordering tobacco by citing the potential danger of molding or rotting. Many farmers utilized dirt-floored pits to order tobacco during periods of low humidity. The ordering pit was generally considered to be the safest and most natural means of artificially ordering tobacco.

Function of the Ordering Pit

The earthen floor of ordering pits was excavated several feet below the surface of the ground, and thus provided a warmer temperature and considerably more moisture within these tightly enclosed structures than existed in the atmosphere outside. Dry tobacco was hung in these pits to absorb enough moisture to be handled without difficulty during the processes of sorting and tying. If hung in a pit during the afternoon, dry tobacco would usually be sufficiently pliable for processing the next morning. During extremely dry conditions, water was often poured on the floor of the pit to increase the amount of available moisture.

Sometimes steam was forced into pits to reduce the time required for ordering tobacco. A small brick furnace was constructed outside a pit, an enclosed steel drum placed on top of it, and a small metal pipe extended from the drum into the pit via a hole in the wall of the structure (Fig. 22). Water poured into the drum was subsequently heated forcing steam to escape into the pit. As a result the dry tobacco in the pit absorbed considerable moisture in a very short period of time. It often required less than one



Figure 22

Small holes in the walls of pits usually indicate that steam was once utilized to order tobacco in them.

hour to order dry tobacco with steam. However, when utilizing steam great care had to be taken to avoid bringing tobacco into extremely high order and thus increasing the chances of it molding or rotting.

History

Flue-cured tobacco production became significant in what is now known as the Eastern Belt of North Carolina during the last decade of the nineteenth century. The ordering pit is believed to have been introduced into the region during that period. However, the history of the ordering pit has not been documented and no references to its past in the Eastern Belt have been discovered. Fortunately, some of the elderly residents of the belt are able to provide valuable information on the historical role of the pit in the Eastern Belt.

The ensuing chapters form a case study of the ordering pit in Pitt County. It is believed that findings in this county will shed light on the past role of the ordering pit in the Eastern Belt.

Chapter III

THE ORDERING PIT IN PITT COUNTY

The next three chapters will focus upon the ordering pit in Pitt County. The present distribution and characteristics of pits in the county will be examined in this chapter. In addition, comments regarding past distributions of ordering pits will be put forth.

Present Distribution

Although all of the ordering pits in the county probably have not been located, it can be stated without reservations that over half the total number of pits are found in the west-central part of the county. The area in which pits are relatively densely distributed extends westward from near Greenville and lies primarily between highways N. C. 43 and U. S. 13. It probably represents no more than one-fifth of the actual area of the county. At present ordering pits are sparsely distributed about the remainder of the county with little tendency toward clustering.

Sample Areas

Thirty-two randomly selected areas representing approximately forty per cent of the area of Pitt County were intensively surveyed in an effort to establish the physical and spatial characteristics of ordering pits within the sample areas (Fig. 23). Sixty-two pits were located in the sample areas and plotted on a map (Fig. 24). Thirty-six of the 62 pits or 58 per cent were found in two sample areas in the west-central part of the county. Nineteen pits presently exist in Sample Area 17 located just northwest of Farmville and bordering on Greene County. Seventeen pits were found in

NUMBERED SAMPLE AREAS in PITT COUNTY

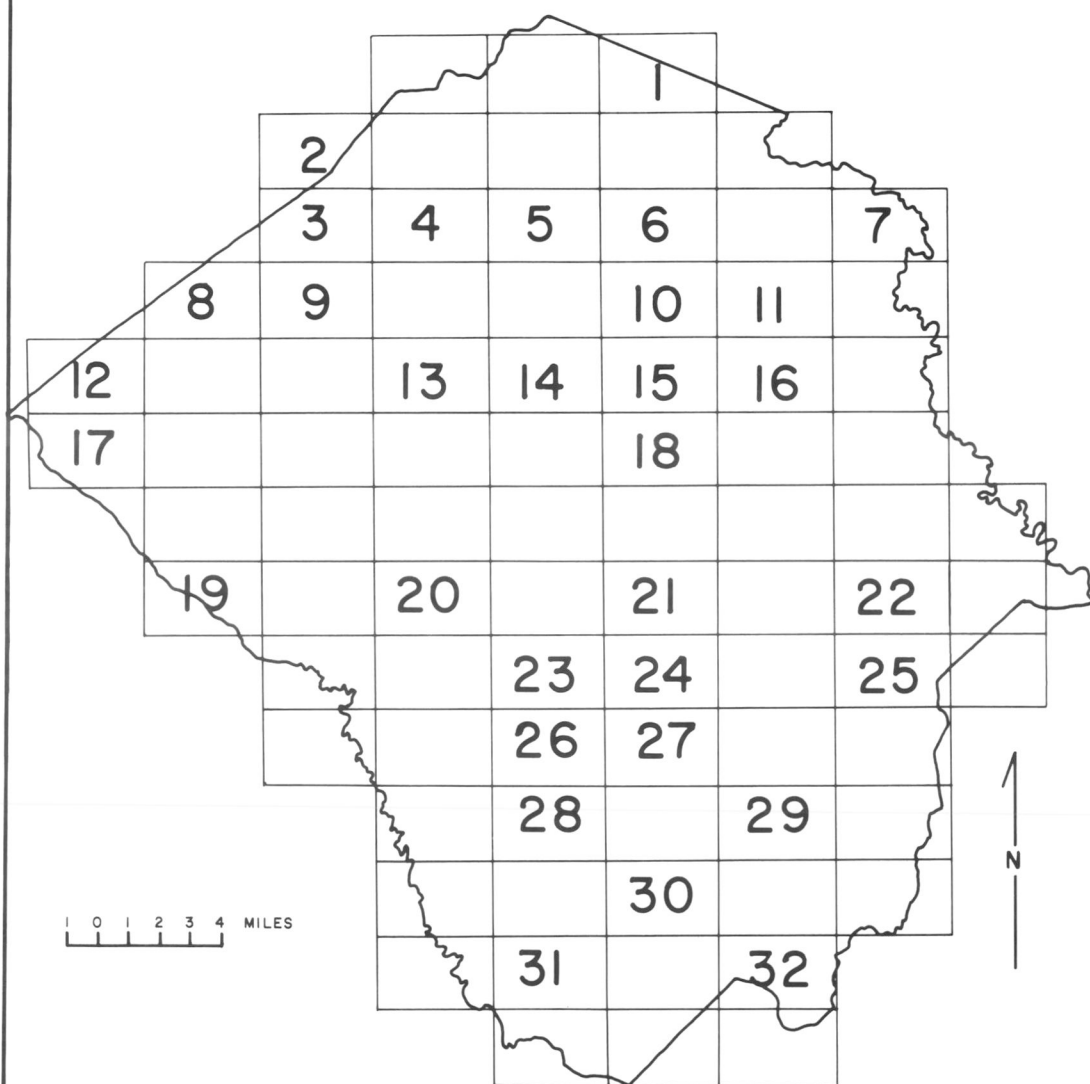


FIGURE 23

ORDERING PITS in AREAS SAMPLED

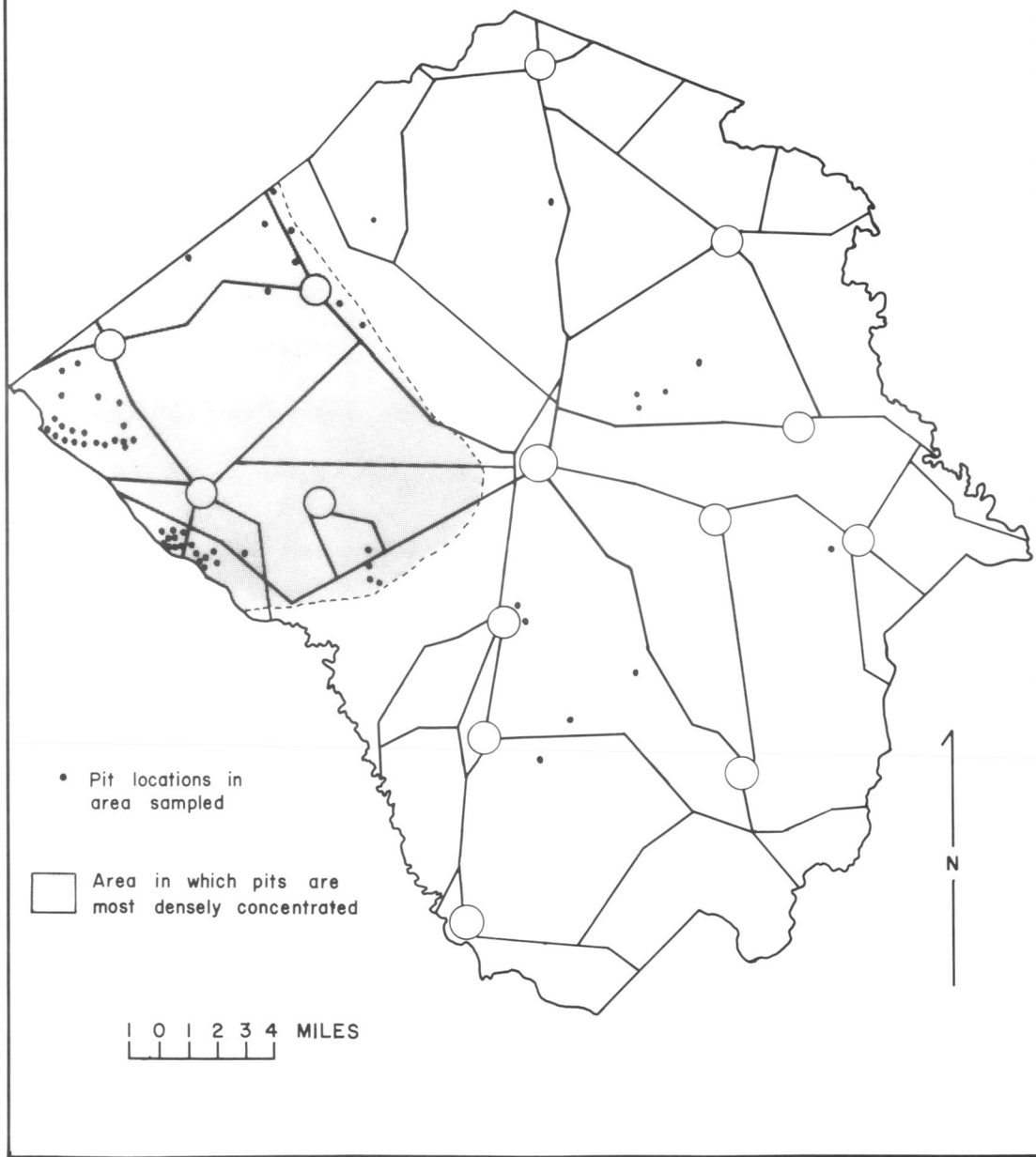


FIGURE 24

Sample Area 19 just south of Farmville and also bordering on Greene County. No other area surveyed contained more than four pits and in 15 of the 32 sample areas no pits were located. The number of pits located in the respective sample areas are listed in Table 1.

Other Parts of the County

In addition to those pits located in the sample areas, 53 pits have observed in the county in non-sample areas. More than half of the 53 pits located outside sample areas are on farms in the west-central section of the county (Fig. 24). Ordering pits are very densely concentrated in the section around the town of Farmville in the extreme west-central part of Pitt County.

Characteristics of Pits in Sample Areas

Sixty of the 62 (97 per cent) pits located in the sample areas are substructures. Of the other two pits, one is attached to the side of a pack-house and one is a self-contained unit. Although statistics are not available, it appears that some of the other counties of the Eastern Belt have higher percentages of self-contained and attached pits than are found in Pitt County.¹

Of the 60 pits constructed under other buildings, 46 (77 per cent)

¹This statement is based on personal observations of ordering pits in the counties of the Eastern Belt.

Table 1

Ordering Pits in Sample Areas of Pitt County

<u>Sample Area</u>	<u>Number of Pits</u>
1	0
2	0
3	3
4	1
5	1
6	0
7	0
8	1
9	3
10	0
11	0
12	2
13	1
14	0
15	0
16	1
17	19
18	3
19	17
20	4
21	0
22	1
23	2
24	0
25	0
26	1
27	1
28	1
29	0
30	0
31	0
32	0
	62

were under packhouses and 14 (23 per cent) were under grading rooms. However, most of the structures beneath packhouses are actually below the grading room compartment of the packhouse complex.

Forty-four of the 62 pits in the sample areas (71 per cent) are of brick construction. Thirteen per cent of the pits were constructed of concrete while six per cent are of concrete block and ten per cent are built from other materials including logs.

Structures below packhouses tend to be slightly larger than those beneath grading rooms. The mean dimensions for pits under packhouses are 17 feet in width and 23 feet in length while the average size for those below grading rooms is 16 feet by 18 feet.

Nearly all pits are three tiers in height or between six and seven feet, and are usually about half above ground level and half below the surface. All those pits beneath other facilities have trap-doors and most have a window or exterior door, and sometimes a combination of two or more windows and doors. Several of the ordering pits of Pitt County are shown in Figures 25-27.

Past Distributions

The number of extant pits in the county probably represents a relatively small percentage of the total number of pits which existed in the past. There is no way of determining the total number of pits that once existed, but it is probable that the majority of tobacco farms in the county had a pit at some time in the past. Residents of areas where there are few or no pits on the landscape today often have knowledge of the past existence of many ordering pits.



Figure 25

Brick substructures. The pit in the upper photo is beneath a dilapidated grading room while the one in the lower photo is under a packhouse. Both structures are located near Ballard's Crossroads in Pitt County.



Figure 26

Concrete and concrete-block substructures. Upper photo: pit beneath grading room on Buck Moore farm near Falkland. Lower photo: pit under grading room section of packhouse near Farmville.



Figure 27

Log grading room with pit beneath it near Farmville.

The greatest overall number of pits probably existed during the 1920's when pits were probably distributed throughout most of the county. Most of these structures were self-contained log pits but in the west-central part of the county many substructures were built.

It has not been determined why substructures were so popular in a relatively small area of the county while apparently occurring only occasionally in the rest of the county.² Apparently nearly all of these substructures were built by relatively prosperous farmers. Seth Paramore, a farmer in the Boyd's Crossroads section of the eastern part of Pitt County, states:

"Forty-five or fifty years ago almost everyone that farmed tobacco had an ordering pit...most were built of logs...a few built under packhouses but only 'big shot' farmers had these pits...they had to put money into the construction of their pits while log pits only required labor really...any tenant could dig a hole and build a log pit."³

Outside the west-central part of the county, substructures were apparently constructed only on the main farmstead, if at all. However, in some sections of the west-central part of the county, substructures were present on almost every farm, including those considered to be tenant farms. For unknown reasons, many large landowners perceived a need for constructing permanent type pits on each of their farms. Perhaps this trend was started by one or more influential farmers and followed by others.

²It is believed that the present distribution of substructures represents a much smaller number than existed in the 1920's, even in areas where little evidence of their existence is exhibited today. In almost every community, informants can tell of pits under packhouses which have been destroyed.

³Seth Paramore, Route One, Grimesland, North Carolina, interview, November 25, 1975.

Alex Allen, a 70 year old Farmville businessman and farmer, recalls that there were once 22 tenant farmsteads on his holdings and that one or more ordering pits existed at each of them.⁴ Ten of these pits still remain on one conterminous section owned by Allen. Similar patterns with regard to the presence of substructures existed on the Tom Lewis and L. B. Johnson farms, all located near Farmville. No such occurrences have been noted outside the west-central part of the county.

The past distribution and use of ordering pits, especially log pits, will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Chapter IV
THE DEVELOPMENT AND DECLINE OF THE TOBACCO ORDERING PIT
IN PITT COUNTY

The tobacco ordering pit is believed to have been a common landscape feature in Pitt County by around 1900. From that time until the middle 1930's many ordering pits were constructed on farms in the county. During the middle 1930's the ordering pit entered a period of decline. This chapter will attempt to account for the development and decline of the ordering pit in Pitt County.

Early Pits

The exact time of the introduction of the ordering pit into Pitt County is unknown. However, it is believed that the earliest pits were built in the county shortly after flue-cured tobacco production was initiated in 1886.¹ In 1898, O. L. Joyner, one of the pioneers of the tobacco industry in Pitt County, gave the following account of the early years of tobacco cultivation in the county:

"Prior to 1886 cotton and corn formed the chief agricultural crops of the county, but that year a few of our farmers clubbed together and secured the services of an expert tobacconist to come down here and see if our land would grow tobacco. From that year our tobacco began to increase in acreage, and in 1890 there was quite a large acreage in the county."²

¹Several references to the introduction of flue-cured tobacco into Pitt County are available. Note especially the account given in Tilley, pp. 143-144; also see Eastern Reflector (Greenville, North Carolina), September 1, 1886 and September 15, 1886.

²O. L. Joyner, Eastern North Carolina as a Tobacco Producing Section, Its Culture and Management (Greenville, North Carolina, 1898), p. 28.

For many years numerous farmers from the Old Belt came into Pitt County to instruct farmers in the art of growing tobacco, to hire out as tobacco curers, and often to purchase land and farm their own crops.³ It is believed that with the migration of Old Belt farmers came the introduction of ordering pits into Pitt County.

Several elderly informants of the county offer proof that ordering pits existed in Pitt County as early as the middle 1890's. Lewis Speight, 92 year old retired farmer, remembers ordering pits existing in the Winterville area from the time he was about ten years old (1895).⁴ This testimony is supported by Luther Barrett, 92 years old, who recalls the existence of pits during his youth in the nearby Willow Green community, located along the border of Pitt and Greene counties.⁵

Evidence that early distribution of the pit was not limited to the abovementioned areas is offered by Minnie Whitford, 97 year old resident of the Clayroot community, which is located along the Pitt and Craven County border. Mrs. Whitford states that her father, John Quincy Adams, grew his first crop of tobacco in 1895 or 1896. She adds that he built an ordering pit that same year. Her husband, Lawrence K. Whitford, constructed the first of several pits in 1900, the first year that he grew tobacco.⁶

³Evidence of such migrations may be found in newspaper accounts of that period. See, for example, Eastern Reflector, January 31, 1894, July 10, 1895, and July 24, 1895; Daily Reflector (Greenville, North Carolina), August 15, 1895.

⁴Lewis Speight, Winterville, North Carolina, interview, August 4, 1975.

⁵Luther Barrett, Route Two, Farmville, North Carolina, interview, October 15, 1975.

⁶Minnie Whitford, Route One, Vanceboro, North Carolina, interview, October 25, 1975.

All of the pits described by the aforementioned informants were small, self-contained units constructed of log and located adjacent to packhouses. Cooper Williams, 96 years old, states that when he moved to the Farmville area in 1903 there were many self-contained log pits in existence and a few brick pits built under packhouses. Prior to moving to Pitt County, Williams lived in the Macclesfield area of neighboring Edgecombe County on the Van Webb farm. He recalls that two log pits were constructed on that farm a few years before he moved to Pitt County.⁷

The log pits in the county were usually small one or two-room structures about 15 to 20 feet in length, although some were considerably larger. They generally had three tiers or a depth of about six feet with half or slightly more than half of the structure being below ground level and the rest above the surface. The walls above ground were constructed of logs but the dirt walls below the surface were not lined unless there was a tendency for the soil to cave-in. Low-angle gable roofs were attached to most of the pits but some roofs were nearly flat with a slight angle to the rear of the buildings. Many of the roofs were of tin while others were of overlapped boards. Many of the latter type were covered with dirt except in front where a wooden door was provided. If the pits were not covered with dirt, the interstices between the logs were often chinked with small planks and/or daubed with cement. Sometimes, however, the interstices were covered on the outside with small planks rather than being daubed. Log pits, especially those covered with dirt, tended to rot after a few years, and thus had to be repaired or replaced quite often.

⁷Cooper Williams, Route Two, Farmville, North Carolina, Interview, January 8, 1976.

During the 1890's tobacco sometimes was still in the hands of the farmer as late as the month of May. Unless he had an ordering pit, the farmer was unable to prepare his tobacco for market during the cold, dry periods of late fall, winter, and early spring. He was forced to wait for a rainy spell or natural "damp" when the relative humidity was high enough to get his tobacco in proper order for grading and tying. The ordering pit allowed the farmer to prepare his tobacco for market whenever he desired rather than when the weather was favorable.

There are two main reasons why tobacco was on hand for such a long period of time during the early days of production in Pitt County. First, once tobacco had been harvested, cured, and safely packed away in storage facilities, the farmer had to spend much time harvesting other crops and performing additional required tasks. Cotton had to be picked and peanuts stacked during late summer and fall and corn had to be pulled during the fall and winter. In addition many other tasks such as cutting wood for winter and preparing tobacco plant beds during the winter required considerable time and effort on the part of the farmer. Tobacco was thus usually prepared for market when no other work was pressing or weather conditions prevented the performance of other chores.

The second factor contributing to the long marketing season was the meticulous manner in which tobacco was sorted or graded. Every leaf was closely examined to determine its proper grade, and eight or more grades per curing were not uncommon in those days. Therefore, besides being delayed while other tasks were done, preparing tobacco for market was a very slow, tedious process.

Subsequent Development

Numerous informants support the contention that ordering pits existed throughout most of Pitt County by around the turn of the century. Statements similar to those of W. H. Wooten, 84 year old retired farmer who resides near Falkland, are voiced by many elderly farmers when queried about the existence of ordering pits during their youth:

"Most all farmers had a log pit or a pit of some kind when I was young. If not they had to wait till a rainy spell came to get their tobacco in order."

Wooten clearly recalls his father constructing a pit under his packhouse "a couple of years before 1905" near Sharp Point on the Edgecombe County line.⁸

Although the early existence of pits under packhouses in the county has been established, the great majority of pits built during the first two decades of this century were self-contained units constructed of log. By the 1920's or shortly before pits built under packhouses increased in popularity. Many of these substructures were built during the 1920's and early 1930's especially in the west-central part of the county.

Lewis Speight, who constructed a concrete pit under his packhouse about 1915, offered the following rationale for building pits under packhouses:

"They are much more convenient than log pits, especially if the grading room is part of the packhouse, because you never have to transfer the tobacco outside the confines of the building...you never run into problems with the weather with this type pit...and of course it is a much

⁸W. H. Wooten, Route Four, Greenville, North Carolina, interview, October 28, 1975.

more permanent structure."⁹

During the first decade of the present century the Pitt County tobacco markets began sales on or about the first day of August and remained open until about the first of April.¹⁰ During the second decade there was a trend toward a somewhat shorter selling season, but the markets still remained open until about February 1, and sometimes later. There was also a shift to a later opening date during this decade, and by 1919 the sales season began the first week in September.¹¹ The same pattern of marketing prevailed in Pitt County until the middle 1930's when the tobacco markets closed before Christmas for the first time (Table 2).

Until the middle 1930's considerable amounts of tobacco were sold during the late fall and winter months. It was difficult for the farmer to order his tobacco during the dry periods of these months. Many farmers thus utilized pits to order tobacco during the periods of low humidity.

Decline

Very few ordering pits have been constructed in Pitt County since the middle 1930's and none is known to have been built after 1953.

⁹Lewis Speight, interview, August 4, 1975.

¹⁰Many of the opening and closing dates or approximate dates for those years are available in issues of the Eastern Reflector. The Greenville Tobacco Market was established in 1891 and the Farmville Market opened in 1904. Both markets opened and closed the sales season at about the same times.

¹¹Farmville Enterprise (Farmville, North Carolina), August 22, 1919.

Table 2

Available Opening and Closing Dates for the Farmville, North Carolina
Tobacco Market, 1915-1935

<u>Marketing Year</u>	<u>Opening Date</u>	<u>Closing Date</u>
1915-1916	August 17	February 5
1916-1917	August 15	January 31
1917-1918	August 21	-----
1918-1919	-----	February 21
1919-1920	September 2	January 30
1920-1921	September 7	March 11
1921-1922	September 6	February 10
1922-1923	August 15	-----
1923-1924	August 28	About March 1
1924-1925	September 2	-----
1925-1926	September 1	-----
1926-1927	September 7	About February 1
1927-1928	September 6	About February 1
1930-1931	September 2	February 6
1931-1932	September 1	About February 1
1933-1934	August 29	January 26
1934	August 23	December 7
1935	August 26	December 13

Source: Farmville Enterprise.

Most of the self-contained log pits had probably disappeared from the landscape by the early 1940's. Those pits constructed of such materials as brick or concrete naturally survived much longer than did those of log.

Many farmers who had pits continued to utilize them, but by the early 1950's the number of ordering pits in use had dwindled considerably. The destruction rate of all pit types is believed to have been quite rapid during the last three decades. However, some farmers continued to use the pits until a change in the marketing system of flue-cured tobacco rendered them obsolete during the 1960's.

There is a relationship between the decline in pit construction and use during the 1930's and the shortening of the tobacco marketing season. In 1933 the Farmville Tobacco Market opened on August 29 and closed for the season on January 26, 1934.¹² Prior to that year the Pitt County markets had not closed before January, and as late as the early 1930's remained open during part of the month of February (Table 2). However, in 1934 the Farmville Market opened on August 23 and closed on December 7, 1934 (Table 2). Tobacco sales in the county since that time have usually been completed during the month of November (Table 3).

The ordering pit traditionally has been used primarily during the late fall and winter months. However, during the middle 1930's the period in which ordering pits were used during each marketing season became considerably shorter, and as a result most farmers no longer perceived a need for constructing pits.

The initial shortening of the marketing season during the 1930's was

¹²The Greenville Market opened and closed on about the same days as the Farmville Market.

Table 3

Eastern Belt Opening and Closing Dates, with Three-year Intervals,
1938-1974

<u>Year</u>	<u>Opened</u>	<u>Closed</u>
1938	August 25	November 22
1941	August 26	November 14
1944	August 28	December 20
1947	August 25	December 5
1950	August 21	November 17
1953	August 20	November 20
1956	August 23	November 20
1959	August 18	November 5
1962	August 21	November 9
1965	August 25	November 5
1968	August 26	November 7
1971	August 30	November 16
1974	July 22	November 7

Source: United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service.

related at least in part to government sponsored reductions in tobacco acreage.¹³ Since that time, however, production figures have increased greatly while the marketing season has not been extended.¹⁴ The overriding motivation for early marketing in the Eastern Belt has been the tendency for prices to be higher during the months of September and October.¹⁵

Several factors contributed to the farmer being able to sell his crop during the early marketing season in spite of increased production. These included a considerable increase in the number of sales warehouses, improved modes of transportation and better roads, and improved redrying facilities.¹⁶ Several informants state that many tobacco farmers in Pitt

¹³ Under provisions of the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 many farmers reduced their acreage by 30 per cent during the 1934 growing season. For provisions of the Agricultural Adjustment Act and subsequent legislation relating to tobacco production controls, see R. Charles Brooks and J. C. Williamson, Jr., Flue-Cured Tobacco Programs, 1933-1958 (Raleigh: North Carolina State University, Department of Agricultural Economics, A. E. Information Series No. 66, 1958). The impact of the acreage reduction in Pitt County can be noted by comparing the sales statistics of the Farmville Market for the 1933-1934 and 1934 sales seasons. In 1933-1934, 22, 587,047 pounds were marketed while in 1934 about nineteen million pounds were sold. Sales figures were obtained from the Farmville Enterprise, February 2, 1934 and December 7, 1934.

¹⁴ While there have been some acreage increases over the years, there has been a tremendous increase in productivity per acre. For the twenty-five year period, 1930-1954, "yields per acre increased from 600 or 700 pounds to around 1250 or 1300 pounds..." in the flue-cured belts. Source: Roy R. Bennett, et al., Factors Pertaining to Opening Dates of Flue-Cured Tobacco Markets (Raleigh: North Carolina State University, Agricultural Experiment Station, 1955), p. 11.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 5-10.

County had discontinued growing cotton by the 1930's thus allowing more time for preparing tobacco for market during the late summer and early fall.¹⁷ Each of these factors may have contributed to the decline of the ordering pit by aiding the farmer in marketing his crop during the early months of the sales season.

The single most important factor contributing to the accelerated decline of the ordering pit during the 1950's was a general breakdown of the traditional methods of preparing tobacco for market. The slow, meticulous system of sorting the individual leaves into numerous grades gave way to a much faster system in which a minimum amount of sorting was done. This relaxed method of processing tobacco for market came about as farmers sought to sell their tobacco during the early part of the sales season and, perhaps to a lesser degree, to reduce the amount of labor required.

Most informants state that the trend toward less sorting began during the 1930's, and gradually increased thereafter. In 1941, tobacco specialists E. Y. Floyd and L. T. Weeks recommended that each barn of tobacco be sorted into five or six grades.¹⁸ In 1955, Bennett et al. reported that the trend toward less sorting had reached the point of no sorting in some cases.¹⁹ Retired Pitt County farmer Sam Hodges asserts that "the premium

¹⁷Other possible factors include the development of mechanized equipment such as the cotton picker and the corn picker.

¹⁸E. Y. Floyd and L. T. Weeks, Factors Affecting the Quality of Flue-cured Tobacco (Raleigh: North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service, Extension Circular No. 212 (Revised), 1941), p. 8.

¹⁹Bennett, et al., p. 21.

placed on proper preparation of tobacco went out...with about the same price being paid for all tobacco, so it wasn't worth the trouble to grade it so closely."²⁰

With the increased emphasis on early marketing, many farmers who had ordering pits found little opportunity to use them by the early 1950's. Much tobacco was sold before ordering was necessary and when ordering difficulties did arise the farmers often preferred a new means of ordering -- the compressed-air sprayer. When using a pit, the amount of tobacco that could be ordered was limited to the capacity of the pit. Most of the pits in the county had been constructed during times when only small amounts of tobacco were processed daily due to the methods employed. When using a compressed-air sprayer, there were no limits to the amount that could be ordered. Moreover, less handling of the tobacco was usually required when using the compressed-air sprayer. Thus some farmers who owned pits preferred to use sprayers for ordering their tobacco.

By the 1920's or earlier some farmers had begun to use brooms and other items to sprinkle water on their tobacco to achieve the desired condition. It is known that a few compressed-air sprayers were used to sprinkle tobacco during the 1930's. However, most farmers were very wary of such ordering methods fearing that they would cause the tobacco to mold or rot. Gradually these sprayers became popular and by the late 1940's or early 1950's they were likely to be found on most tobacco

²⁰Sam Hodges, Grimesland, North Carolina, interview, July 24, 1975.

farms.²¹ Farmer Seth Paramore of the Boyds Crossroads section in eastern Pitt County, offered the following comments on the historical role of the compressed-air sprayer in that area:

"The selling season had much to do with the decline of ordering pits but the use of sprayers was very important too. At first few farmers would use them but once they did they hardly ever used anything else. A lot of farmers were afraid of damaging the tobacco but after one farmer had success with sprayers he would convince others of their safety. For at least twenty years before sheet tobacco came in sprayers were used almost exclusively."²²

With the trend toward early marketing continuing and compressed-air sprayers being utilized extensively, the use of ordering pits continued to decline during the 1950's and early 1960's. However, some farmers used these structures for ordering tobacco until the system of marketing in bundles was replaced by a system of loose-leaf sales during the last decade.

²¹In an interview of January 8, 1976, R. R. Chapin of R. E. Chapin Manufacturing Works, Batavia, New York, stated that the company became aware that the Chapin compressed-air sprayer was being used for conditioning tobacco shortly after World War II. On the same day, Clara Spain, an employee of the A. W. Ange Company, Winterville, North Carolina, apprised that the Ange Company had sold compressed-air sprayers to tobacco farmers since as early as 1945, with steadily increasing sales.

²²Seth Paramore, November 25, 1975. "Sheet tobacco" refers to the current practice of selling tobacco in loose-leaf or untied form. Whereas in the past bundled or tied tobacco was marketed in specially-designed wooden baskets, untied tobacco is sold in eight-foot-square burlap sheets. Thus from the use of sheets the term "sheet tobacco" is derived.

Chapter V
THE DEMISE OF THE TOBACCO ORDERING PIT
IN PITT COUNTY

The nature of the demise of the ordering pit will be examined in this chapter and the possibility of converting such pits to alternative functions will be explored.

Functional Demise

In the early 1960's, some farmers in Pitt County were still using pits to order their tobacco in preparation for market. However, a major change in the system of marketing flue-cured tobacco had rendered the ordering pit completely obsolete before the end of the last decade.

Traditionally flue-cured tobacco has been sold in tied bundles or "hands" in areas outside the Georgia-Florida Belt. In the Georgia-Florida Belt tobacco has always been marketed in loose-leaf or untied form. For many years farmers from North Carolina and South Carolina had sold considerable amounts of untied tobacco at markets in Georgia and Florida. As a result, they were able to sell some of their tobacco before local markets opened while at the same time avoiding the labor expenses of tying the tobacco.

During the late 1950's flue-cured tobacco farmers began to express an interest in establishing loose-leaf or untied sales in areas outside the Georgia-Florida Belt. Increased pressure from producers "led to the adoption in 1962 of a program change which permitted price-support on limited marketings of tobacco in untied form within the traditional tied

tobacco marketing area."¹

From 1962 through 1965, sales of untied tobacco were permitted for the first five days of the marketing season. However, the marketing of untied tobacco during this period was restricted to certain down-stalk tobacco. During the 1966 season twelve days of loose-leaf sales were permitted with price support being extended to all stalk positions. Untied sales were increased to the first 95 hours of the 1967 selling season.²

During the 1968 marketing season untied sales were permitted throughout the entire season. Thus the transition to loose-leaf sales had essentially ended and a new system of marketing flue-cured tobacco had been fully established.³

The shift from the traditional method of marketing flue-cured tobacco to the present loose-leaf or untied system is primarily related to a reduction in farm labor. Robert H. Nicholson and Garnett L. Bradford

¹William O. Shofner, "Market Behavior, 1964-1967," in Tobacco Mechanization and Marketing (Raleigh: North Carolina State University, The Agricultural Policy Institute, School of Agriculture and Life Sciences, 1968), p. 68. "Government price support is offered for all types of tobacco sold at auction where growers have approved marketing quotas. Under the program a price support level is established for each grade of tobacco. If the buyer's bid price on any basket of tobacco is not more than the Government loan rate for the grade, the grower may accept the loan rate." -- Albert Doub, Jr., and Larry Crabtree, Tobacco in the United States (Washington: United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service, Revised 1973), p. 35.

²Shofner, p. 70.

³Fred G. Bond, General Manager, Flue-cured Tobacco Cooperative Stabilization Corporation, Raleigh, North Carolina, private correspondence, February 10, 1976.

stated in 1968 that:

"...untied market preparation offers substantial labor savings because the tying process is eliminated as is a substantial proportion of the sorting labor. This reduction in labor is especially valuable during the early sale days of each season when farmers need a large amount of labor for harvesting."⁴

The period of transition (1962-1968) from the traditional system of marketing tobacco to the existing loose-leaf system also represents the period of demise for the ordering pit in Pitt County. The overwhelming majority of those producers utilizing pits immediately prior to the advent of loose-leaf marketing abandoned them as soon as they discontinued the practice of tying tobacco. Typical of the comments of producers regarding the discontinuance of the use of pits are those of Mrs. Frank Coburn of Route Five, Greenville, who states:

"We last used our ordering pit in 1966 or 1967 when we tied some of our tobacco. Once we went entirely to sheet tobacco there was no need for the pit. We haven't used it since then, but we would still be using it today if we were tying tobacco."⁵

The ultimate demise of the ordering pit is directly related to the reduced moisture requirement for tobacco marketed in loose-leaf or untied form. It was necessary that tobacco be in good order to carry out the processes of sorting and tying required under the traditional system of marketing. In Pitt County ordering pits were often used to attain the desired degree of order or pliability. Preparation of untied tobacco

⁴Robert H. Nicholson and Garnett L. Bradford, "Measuring Seasonal Trends in 1967: A Controlled Experiment," in Tobacco Mechanization and Marketing, p. 97.

⁵Mrs. Frank Coburn, Route Five, Greenville, North Carolina, interview, July 22, 1975.

for market requires considerably less handling than tied tobacco, and only a very minimal degree of order is necessary for marketing loose-leaf tobacco. Little or no sorting is done in preparing untied tobacco for market.

Much of the tobacco grown in Pitt County today is cured in bulk barns. The bulk barn does not require that tobacco be strung on sticks, but rather accomodates it in loose-leaf form. As a result, almost all bulk-cured tobacco is placed in sheets ready for market as soon as the curing process is completed (Fig. 28 and Fig. 29).

In many cases tobacco cured in conventional barns is taken from the sticks and placed in sheets at the barn as soon as curing has been completed. Some tobacco cured in conventional barns is still piled down in packhouses for storage prior to sheeting for market. However, in only rare cases is it necessary to order this tobacco. In such instances the farmers often perceive a need which does not exist.

As a result of the rapid techniques of preparing tobacco for market today, farmers are allocated certain days to sell specified amounts at the warehouse they designate. This system helps prevent the overloaded market conditions which were prevalent during the early years of untied marketings. Consequently much tobacco is now stored on the farm in sheets awaiting the day of marketing. Since the sheets of tobacco may remain in storage for considerable periods of time prior to sale, most farmers prefer that the tobacco be in relatively low order to avoid any possibilities of damage. Therefore the degree of order traditionally required for sorting and tying tobacco is no longer necessary, but, moreover, that degree of order is not desired today by producers.



Figure 28

Tobacco being placed in sheets as it is taken from bulk curing barns. Most farmers use the circular cardboard "packing guides" to aid in carrying out this process.



Figure 29

Tobacco being "sheeted" from bulk barns.



Figure 30

Sheets of loose-leaf tobacco ready for market.

Much of the tobacco sold loose-leaf in Pitt County in late summer and early fall would likely contain enough moisture to be tied in the traditional manner, but by late October hardly any tobacco on the markets could be tied due to its dry condition.⁶

While the traditional method of marketing flue-cured tobacco has been replaced by a more efficient system, a very few, mostly elderly, Pitt County farmers continue to prepare tobacco for market as they have for decades. For that reason there are probably a few farmers who still use the ordering pit.⁷ However, the likelihood that even one pit in the county will be in use a decade from now is very remote.

In summary, the change in the marketing system of flue-cured tobacco during the 1960's has rendered the ordering pit completely obsolete, a relict feature on the landscape in Pitt County.

Functional Conversions

Howard F. Gregor, an agricultural geographer, has stated that "as economic requirements change and specialized buildings lose their value, farmers commonly attempt to salvage their investment by continuing to use the structures, even though they may not be as well designed for their new function."⁸ While ordering pits may not represent significant farm

⁶This statement is based on the personal examination of tobacco on the Greenville and Farmville markets, and an interview with John I. Oakley, Manager, Pierce's Warehouse, Farmville, North Carolina, February 12, 1976.

⁷Only one Pitt County farmer, Mark Hart, Farmville, North Carolina is known to have used an ordering pit during the past marketing season.

⁸Howard F. Gregor, Geography of Agriculture: Themes in Research (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), pp. 105-106.

investments, their owners have no doubt considered functional conversions once their use in ordering tobacco has been discontinued. However, in the great majority of instances, farmers in Pitt County have been unsuccessful in finding alternative uses for pits. These highly specialized structures are apparently not readily adaptable to any significant substitute function, and are, in general, presently going through a stage of abandonment and destruction rather than one of functional conversion.

Most farmers interviewed are very skeptical about finding other uses for ordering pits. Pitt County farmer R. T. Manning, Route One, Fountain, states:

"I have studied and pondered for a long time trying to figure out something to do with my ordering pit. I haven't been able to find any use for it, to amount to anything. I do know that it's causing my packhouse to gradually collapse. I've had to add supports to it twice already. As soon as I don't need the packhouse anymore I'm going to tear it down and fill in that pit. I'd like to get rid of the pit and save the packhouse, but I'm not sure the packhouse is worth the trouble since I'll probably have to tear it down in a few years anyway."⁹

Ordering pits excavated under grading rooms or packhouses tend to remain on the landscape longer than self-contained pits because they are afforded some protection from destruction by the building above. Therefore these pits have a better chance for functional conversion. Self-contained pits are often destroyed shortly after their normal function has been discontinued.

A few Pitt County farmers have managed to convert their pits to uses other than ordering tobacco, though none could be considered economically

⁹R. T. Manning, Route One, Fountain, North Carolina, interview, September 23, 1975.

significant. Some pits are used as storage facilities for tools, small implements, etc. which are seldom used. Others have been converted into livestock houses or shelters as well as houses for pets (Fig. 31).

Occasionally a pit may be found with baskets of potatoes inside. Most farmers, however, disapprove of using pits as root cellars because of the damp conditions inside them. Some pits are known to have been used as flower cellars, and apparently they function quite well in this capacity. Perhaps the most common use of ordering pits in the county is that of a "garbage dump." Often garbage is placed in abandoned or isolated pits without the knowledge of the owner. Conversely, some farmers openly admit they contribute to such blight, the reason most often being that they are just "filling up that old pit."

There have undoubtedly been other functional conversions of ordering pits in the county. Such conversions, however, are usually ephemeral and only a prelude to the imminent abandonment and destruction of those ordering pits which remain on the landscape in Pitt County.



Figure 31

The ordering pit above, located near Winterville, has been converted into a storage shelter and livestock pen.

Chapter VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Tobacco cellars are common landscape features in some areas of the United States which grow the crop, but are noticeably absent in others. In several of the flue-cured belts, tobacco cellars, referred to as "ordering pits," have been components of the landscape for over three-quarters of a century. In the Eastern Flue-cured Belt of North Carolina the ordering pit is a relict feature, having been rendered obsolete during the last decade. This thesis has attempted to portray the historical role of the ordering pit in one county of the Eastern Belt. It is believed that inferences about the significance of the pit in the Eastern Belt can be put forth based on the county study.

The ordering pit is a relatively common feature in a contiguous zone of Eastern Belt counties comprised of Johnston, Nash, Edgecombe, Wilson, Wayne, Greene, and Pitt. These specialized structures are observed less frequently in several other counties while no occurrences have been noted in some counties. However, the present distribution of ordering pits may not reflect past distributions in the Eastern Belt since the rate of destruction of pits has been quite rapid.

All ordering pits in the Eastern Belt were used to bring dry, cured tobacco into a state of pliability, usually during late fall and winter. The interior components of ordering pits are virtually the same, but the pits vary with regard to exterior characteristics. The ordering pits in the Eastern Belt may be classified into three principal types: (1) sub-structures, (2) self-contained pits, and (3) attached pits. Most of the

pits in the Eastern Belt at present are constructed under other structures, but self-contained pits are believed to have predominated in the belt early in this century. The majority of the ordering pits are built of brick but some are constructed of concrete or concrete block. In the past, many self-contained log pits were present in the Eastern Belt.

Ordering pits were excavated several feet below the surface of the ground, and thus during cold, dry periods a warmer temperature and considerably more moisture were present within them than existed in the atmosphere outside. Tobacco placed in pits in the afternoon usually absorbed enough moisture overnight to be processed without difficulty. Under extremely dry conditions, water was often poured on the earthen floor of pits to increase the amount of available moisture. In addition, steam was sometimes forced into these structures to reduce the time required for ordering tobacco. Within each pit is a lattice of wooden racks composed of a series of horizontal "tier poles" where the tobacco absorbed moisture available in the pit.

Ordering pits are believed to have been introduced into what is now the Eastern Belt during the last decade of the past century when tobacco production became significant on the Coastal Plain. In a case study in Pitt County, the ordering pit was traced from its inception as a landscape element to its present status as a relict. It is believed that findings from the work in Pitt County will shed light on the past role of the ordering pit in the Eastern Belt.

Approximately forty per cent of Pitt County was intensively surveyed in an attempt to locate ordering pits. Sixty-two pits were located in the sample areas; in addition, 53 pits have been observed in other parts of the county.

Over half of the pits located are concentrated in the west-central part of the county. The remaining pits are sparsely scattered about the county with little tendency toward clustering.

Nearly all of the pits in the county at present are located under other facilities, and are constructed mainly of brick, with some being built from concrete, concrete block, and other materials. The average size of substructures under packhouses is 17 by 23 feet while those under grading rooms average 16 by 18 feet. Nearly all of the pits are between six and seven feet in depth, and are usually about half above and half below ground level. All pits below other facilities have trap-door entrances and usually one or more windows and/or outside doors are present.

The number of pits in the county at present is believed to represent a relatively small percentage of the total number of pits which have existed previously. A majority of the farms in the county are believed to have had an ordering pit at some time in the past. Ordering pits are known to have existed in Pitt County by the middle 1890's and probably were common landscape features by about 1900. From that time until the middle 1930's, many pits were constructed on farms in the county. Few pits, however, have been built since the middle 1930's. The great majority of pits constructed during the first three decades of the present century were small, self-contained log pits. During the 1920's and early 1930's the popularity of substructures increased, especially in the west-central part of the county. Most of the extant pits of the county were built during the 1920's and early 1930's.

Ordering pits were needed during the early part of this century because the marketing season was very long, often extending into the spring. The long marketing season for tobacco was due mainly to two reasons: (1) other

crops had to be harvested in late summer, fall and winter, and other farm tasks had to be carried out, and (2) preparing tobacco for market was a very slow, meticulous process. Thus, preparation of tobacco for market was usually done when no other work was pressing. Moreover, processing the cured tobacco was a very time-consuming operation. During dry periods of late fall and winter pits were often used to bring tobacco into the desired order.

The decline in the construction and use of pits during the 1930's was related to a shortening of the tobacco selling season. The Pitt County tobacco markets did not close before January prior to 1934. Since the 1930's the markets in the county have usually completed sales during the month of November in spite of increases in production. With the shorter marketing season the period in which ordering pits were used each season became considerably shorter. As a result most farmers no longer perceived a need for constructing pits.

The principal motivation for early marketing was the tendency for prices to be higher on the Eastern Belt markets during the months of September and October. In order to sell their tobacco early during the marketing season, many farmers relaxed the practice of meticulously sorting the tobacco into numerous grades.

By the early 1950's, this breakdown in the traditional method of preparing tobacco for market had accelerated to the point that some farmers were doing little or no sorting. With the increased emphasis on early marketing, many farmers found little opportunity to use ordering pits. Much tobacco was sold before ordering was necessary and when tobacco had to be artificially ordered many farmers preferred to use

compressed-air sprayers. With the trend toward early marketing continuing and compressed-air sprayers being utilized extensively, the use of ordering pits continued to decline during the 1950's and early 1960's.

In the early 1960's some ordering pits were still being used in Pitt County. However, a change in the marketing system had rendered this structure completely obsolete before the end of the last decade. The period from 1962 to 1968 was one of transition from marketing flue-cured tobacco in tied bundles to a system of untied or loose-leaf sales. This period also represents the era of demise for the ordering pit in Pitt County. The demise of the ordering pit is directly related to the reduced moisture requirement for tobacco marketed in loose-leaf or untied form. It was necessary that tobacco be in good order to carry out the processes of sorting and tying required under the conventional system of marketing. Preparation of untied tobacco requires considerably less handling than did tied tobacco, and only a very minimal degree of order is necessary for marketing loose-leaf tobacco. Little or no sorting is done in preparing untied tobacco for market.

Although pits are no longer used for ordering tobacco, they are apparently not readily adaptable to any significant substitute functions. They are presently going through a stage of abandonment and destruction in Pitt County rather than one of functional conversion.

The ordering pit has gone through several distinct phases as a landscape element in Pitt County. For at least the first three decades of this century the ordering pit was a very significant component of the landscape in the county, having been utilized extensively by farmers in ordering tobacco. Although in a state of decline since the middle 1930's,

the ordering pit remained a viable feature of many tobacco farms in the county until the 1960's, a decade in which the pit was rendered obsolete. Since the late 1960's, pits have seldom been used for ordering tobacco; they have been abandoned extensively and destroyed in significant numbers.

The ordering pit is not believed to have been a significant element of the landscape throughout the Eastern Belt, but additional work is needed to determine exactly where it was distributed in the past. It is hypothesized that this specialized structure was a very significant component of tobacco farms in the counties where pits are relatively common today. It is believed that the past role of the ordering pit in these counties is quite similar to its past in Pitt County. The decline in construction and use of pits in Pitt County is closely related to the shortening of the tobacco marketing season. Since all markets in the belt have traditionally opened and closed on or about the same dates, it is assumed that ordering pits outside of Pitt County entered a stage of decline at about the same time as those within the county.

There is no doubt that the ordering pit is a relict feature in the Eastern Belt, and its functional demise is related to a change in the system of marketing flue-cured tobacco. It is hypothesized that the change from selling tobacco in tied bundles to a system of loose-leaf sales has also rendered the ordering pit obsolete in the Old and Middle belts.

Ordering pits are rapidly disappearing from the landscape in the Eastern Belt and one can only speculate as to how long they will remain on the landscape in any of the flue-cured belts. Additional research is needed on these structures while they still exist, and while it is still possible for elderly persons to provide first-hand knowledge of the history of ordering pits.

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