

The Shade Laborers:
Tobacco Worker Recruitment Through the 1940s
By
Dawn Byron Hutchins
© 2011

Each summer fewer and fewer acres of gauzy tents cover shade tobacco in the Connecticut River Valley due to the lessened demand for cigars and the increased demand for speculative real estate. At the height of shade tobacco popularity in the first half of the 20th century, over ten thousand acres of this premium cigar wrapper tobacco were under cultivation in Connecticut alone. The introduction of this labor-intensive crop to Connecticut's economy drew blacks from southern states and the Caribbean and brought racial changes to a city steeped in Puritan traditionalism – Hartford.

In a city more closely associated with the staid mores of the 18th century than the Jazz Age came a population that strained the propriety of even those who shared their skin color. Shade tobacco laborers were just part of a prequel to the historic first wave of the Great Migration of blacks to northern industrial cities during World War I and the 1920s. Driven by poor agricultural conditions, low wages, escalating racial violence and the lack of opportunity in the south, blacks flooded into Detroit, Chicago, Pittsburgh and New York where they were relegated to ghetto neighborhoods and worked in low paying menial jobs. The unskilled southern farm workers who came north to work tobacco in the Hartford region mirrored this larger movement. They were an unwelcomed necessity to growers who became dependent on their labor to grow shade tobacco.

The growing season for shade tobacco begins in May with weeding and transplanting seedlings in long rows. As the plants grow they are fastened to guide wires then cloth tents are spread over them. The tents increase humidity while protecting the tender plants from direct sunlight creating an artificial climate to maximize the short New England growing season. The tents also hide from view what those who worked under them called the dirtiest and most labor-intensive crop.

The remainder of cultivation takes place by hand in high humidity and excessive heat. Field workers spend weeks moving among the rows pulling off shoots and tobacco worms before returning seated on the ground to pick the initial harvest. The leaves are brought to sheds where female workers predominately sew the leaves together so they can be strung on laths that are hung up to cure in the rafters of the slat-sided tobacco barns or sheds. Then the tobacco is moved to sorting sheds and warehouses where processing continues throughout the rest of the year.

Connecticut farmers, according to probate records, grew tobacco as far back as the 1600s. Originally brewed as a beverage or smoked in pipes, by the late 18th century tobacco was being hand rolled into cigars in family workshops. After the Civil War, farmers faced competition from foreign grown tobacco yet increasing tariffs did little to protect them.

When a thinner and superior cigar wrapper was imported from western Indonesia, the challenge to the domestic cigar tobacco market could not be ignored.

The US Department of Agriculture (founded in 1862) began experimenting in Florida with various tropical tobacco varieties in an attempt to provide farmers with a competitive product. By 1899, a botanist in Connecticut was successful in growing the Florida Sumatra tobacco seed and reproducing the thinner leaf. Marcus Floyd, the USDA's leading tobacco expert at the time and a Florida native, came to Connecticut to oversee the first crop of this experimental tobacco. The product proved equal to the imported leaf.

Growers were advised to wait for further testing before committing to the new product but the tobacco rush could not be held back. Fifty acres was put into the production of shade tobacco in 1901. Following the first flush of success, several wet growing seasons dashed the hopes and finances of many farmers who had been willing to experiment and replant their acreage with shade. Smaller farmers ended up selling out to larger growers who consolidated tobacco growing and moved it from family farms to large corporate plantations. In 1910 shade tobacco was well established in Connecticut, as was the growing realization of the need for more labor than was available domestically.

Hartford area whites and new immigrants filled most positions in shade tobacco until the advent of World War I in Europe. Then munitions plants drew off unskilled workers with higher wages. Many immigrants returned home to serve in their own military while new ones were impacted by the restrictive immigration laws. One tobacco company took matters into its own hands with alarming results when they placed the following ad in the New York World for sorters in December 1915.

Girls (500) experience not necessary, to work in modern
warehouses to sort and size tobacco, warehouses 80 miles
from New York; we pay transportation up and back; no strike
or war orders but guaranteed steady work until May 1, 1916...
Apply all week Connecticut Tobacco Company 135 Front Street,
Or cigar store, 1468 2nd Avenue.

Several hundred women made the trip by boat to Hartford - many to find it and the work on Silver Lane in East Hartford not to their liking. The unhappy ones, according to Charles Spurgeon Johnson's seminal work *The Negro Population of Hartford, Connecticut* (The League, 1921), "... straightway proceeded to demoralize the town and make themselves obnoxiously conspicuous in the city of Hartford." It seems that many of the young ladies took advantage of the offer of free transportation to check out the town and take other jobs or failing that went public with their conflicting stories. Several underage girls took the opportunity to runaway from home and follow boyfriends. The episode got so out of hand that according to the *Hartford Daily Courant* of December 4, 1915,

The presence of the young women in Hartford and conflicting stories about their arrival here gave rise last night to rumors that this was a

“white slave” case but investigations of the police showed there was no foundation for that report.

A trickle of southern blacks also began responding to advertisements in black newspapers like the Chicago Defender and moved north with their families.

Ten families and 50 men wanted at once for permanent work in the Connecticut Tobacco fields. Good wages. Inquire National League on Urban Conditions among Negroes, 2303 Seventh Avenue, New York City, New York.

By 1920 seven black families from Georgia and Alabama were renting tobacco company housing in Granby Connecticut alongside Polish and Lithuanian immigrants.

Marcus Floyd, the former USDA agent and by 1911 President of the Connecticut Tobacco Company, was leading the search for additional sources of shade tobacco workers. Being from the South he was more comfortable with black farm workers than his Connecticut counterparts and also familiar with a source of labor that might suit northern growers – the black college student. The National Urban League, already serving as a clearinghouse for jobs, provided Floyd with introductions to influential Southern educators like Dr. John Hope, first black President of Morehouse College.

Students from all black colleges, accompanied by their teachers, came north seasonally to work in service jobs at New England summer resorts. The transition to working shade tobacco allowed more students to have summer jobs that would provide them with tuition and remove them from the escalating racial tensions at home. The students provided Connecticut growers with a pliable and educated work force that spoke English and was motivated to work. Aware of the repercussions in the South to blacks, they were not likely to agitate for better working conditions. As temporary seasonal workers they would also not racially impact the communities in which they worked.

Floyd initiated the use of Morehouse students during the 1916 growing season at his Hazelwood plantation on the Windsor/East Granby border. According to the August 13, 1916 The Hartford Daily Courant the students were paid \$2.00 per day and they in turn paid \$4.50 per week for their room and board at the fields. “Working from June 1 to September 1 this gives a frugal [student] a chance to clear nearly \$100 in a season” (about \$2000 in 2009 dollars). The same article reported, “The Connecticut Leaf Tobacco Association considers the importation of Southern help to have passed the experimental stage.” But not all growers were sold on black labor. Two years later in August 1918 the Hartford Daily Courant reported, “Tobacco Farmers Prefer White to Colored Labor.” Employers’ preference aside, the reality was that Southern blacks would need to be welcomed in the Greater Hartford area - at least in the fields.

The recruitment methods employed by Floyd and other large growers often left something to be desired. Terms of employment changed and promises of housing and reimbursement of transportation costs were often broken once workers arrived in Connecticut.

According to Dr. Stacey Close, Professor of History at Eastern Connecticut State University,

Labor recruiters used the persistence of lynching and police violence to encourage African American workers to take the chance and leave the South. Recruiters argued that the North paid wages that were two and three times the wages paid in the South...some recruiters, acting almost like slick used car salesmen, aggressively scoured the South searching for workers. Such agents offered incentives like pre-paid passage and guaranteed jobs. People hungry to leave the South became easy prey for unscrupulous recruiters.

World War II again diminished the local agricultural labor pool as men entered military service and women took over their factory jobs. Small growers were hard pressed to find enough help. Large corporate growers minimized their labor problems by creating residential camps on their plantations. By building their own dorms and tenements or using abandoned depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps camps, the growers were able to have a residential labor supply wholly dependent upon them.

Being able to provide housing also allowed recruitment of another segment of workers – Southern black high school students. One legendary recruiter was black school principal Henry Lawrence Summerrall who modeled his rural youth program based in Central Virginia on the one Morehouse College (which he briefly attended) established in 1916. From 1941 to 1976, 12,000 high school students from the ages of 13 and up recruited by Summerrall and his sub-agents made the trip north to work at Camp Buckland for boys in Manchester and after 1949 the Camp Stewart for girls in Windsor.

With tobacco declared a necessity during World War II the growers appealed to state and federal labor agencies for assistance. A scheme was proposed to import men from Jamaica to provide much needed farm labor in the States. Over two thousand workers were recruited for Connecticut. In 1943 the first wave of workers were transported from Kingston Jamaica to the US on ships that recalled the infamous slave ships of the middle passage. Reginald Leslie's experience on the SS Shank was recorded in Faye Clarke Johnson's book on Jamaican tobacco workers in the Hartford area, *Soldiers of the Soil*.

There were 5,200 people on that ship, and if anybody told you they had three meals a day on that ship, then they are the biggest liars that God ever made. There was one guy who was so disappointed, he jumped overboard and killed himself...It got worse as the food ran out...

While all labor was problematic to growers that of children carried a public distaste unassociated with adult labor. On family farms children could work as soon as they were old enough to handle tasks yet nine year olds and younger were now working for non-family members.

While there was strong supply of underage workers, there was also a growing sense by the 1940s that children younger than teenagers did not belong in shade tobacco. Each season an accident or catastrophic event would trigger an investigation into child labor practices but no reform.

Then in July 1945, a group of black girls ages 13 to 17 were recruited from Bellevue Square in Hartford to work in the tobacco sheds of Consolidated Cigar Corporation. They were bussed to fields in South Windsor on a rainy day where the girls were dropped. The girls complained to their driver that they were to work inside and when told they would be in the field demanded to be taken back home. After their driver refused they walked over eleven miles to arrive wet and with injured feet in the Square at 7:30 PM. Parents brought the matter to Hartford Mayor William Mortensen's attention who said, "...I will not knowingly tolerate the irresponsible recruitment of children on the streets of Hartford for such exploitation. It is abominable that there is no law to protect our children from such exploitation." The "Nine Little Girls" incident drew media attention as accusations flew back and forth on the failure of previous legislative action.

House Bill 834 was introduced several months earlier in March 1945. The legislation attempted to limit the age of children employed in tobacco to 14 unless working for parents or guardians and the time worked to six days per week and no more than eight hours per day. On March 23, 1945 the Hartford Daily Courant editorialized,

It is anomalous, therefore, to say that the war emergency justifies the use of ten - and eleven-year old children from sunup to sundown in the tobacco fields. The War Emergency has been used as a cloak to conceal many things but this threadbare device is not strong enough to hide the exploitation of children.

In May 1945 the bill failed by a vote of 146 to 85 supposedly because of its narrow application to just tobacco. The year 1946 saw another bill fail. The argument over child labor appeared to just a matter of enforcing voluntary child labor agreements between growers and the Department of Labor. Then in May 1947 House Bill 919 passed over strong opposition and minimum age for children in agriculture was set at fourteen

Shade tobacco labor had ramifications for Connecticut and Hartford beyond that of labor practices. The population shift of Southern black laborers to the Hartford vicinity put strains on the existing community. According to the National Urban League,

Those newcomers to the North soon discovered they had not escaped racial discrimination. Excluded from all but menial jobs in the larger society, victimized by poor housing and education, and inexperienced in the ways of urban living, many lived in terrible social and economic conditions.

No job would have been considered more menial than shade tobacco.

Hartford blacks whose social status in their community was traditionally tied to the status of their white employers strove to distance themselves from the influx of unskilled black labor coming from the rural south. "It must be remembered that the movement to Hartford was not merely a movement northward; it was a movement of rural Negroes to the city – a prim and sedate New England city," wrote Charles Johnson. "They were crude and ungainly, many of them boisterous, with strange habits of dress and manners altogether repellant to the older Negro residents inured to the refinements of the city," he continued. Whites supported this distinction as they came to blame southern blacks for social ills like crime.

"Before the middle of the summer of 1917, there were three thousand migrant Negroes in Hartford, and those were not students," Johnson also reported. By 1921 he found that southern blacks lived in the worst areas of Hartford tucked into inferior housing amid brothels, speakeasies and slums near the Connecticut River. With few housing choices and primed to be taken advantage of by landlords and merchants, families often were forced to give up privacy to take in unrelated lodgers who further strained the existing unit. Like immigrants, southern tobacco workers also encouraged family and friends to join them and provided entry for them when they arrived.

It is only in the past few decades that prominent and successful blacks from southern schools have been identified as working tobacco in Connecticut. The Luddy/Taylor Tobacco Museum in Windsor, Connecticut holds hundreds of Morehouse student employment cards from the Cullman Brothers in the 1930s. A brief search yields a cross-section of future teachers, doctors, lawyers, religious leaders and other professionals. The difference between the imported students and Hartford workers shows in the responses to the "Nationality" line on the card. Hartford residents responded "Negro" while the southern college students all responded "American."

The fact that Jamaicans were not American citizens made them vulnerable to the worst labor practices. Jamaicans did not have a docile history of ignoring such violations in their own country and brought a more strident response to unfair labor practices. They were unafraid to challenge white authority. According to Soldiers of the Soil, one Jamaican worker went so far as to send a telegram to President Franklin Roosevelt in 1944.

Jamaicans dissatisfied of conditions on General Cigar Farm,
driven as dumb cattle, work under intimidation. United Nations
fight for freedom, justice and fair play. We should have same.
Please investigate.

Many of the Jamaican laborers who came during World War II did so on the promise that after seven years in the States they would be eligible for citizenship. When Connecticut growers realized the Jamaicans were planning to apply for citizenship they dismissed them summarily replacing them with displaced immigrants. Some workers fled Hartford while others sought legal help to remain in the States. Those who remained in Hartford began businesses and clubs to provide support for their countrymen. These workers founded the West Indian Social Club in 1950.

Jamaicans were not the only Caribbean workers to come to the Hartford vicinity. Laborers from Barbados, St. Kitts, and other countries were recruited in lesser numbers. They also came with the hope of establishing for themselves a better standard of living. The influx of the foreign-born Jamaicans and West Indians in 1940s into the black community of Hartford brought a cultural divide within the black community based on geography and custom that still exists. A distinction, too subtle, for those who categorize all blacks as a homogeneous group to notice.

The importation of labor for shade tobacco changed those who worked it and the city of Hartford that eventually housed them. While the immigration pattern followed that of earlier the generations, because of their skin color, black shade tobacco workers' incorporation was more problematic than it had been for European whites. For thousands of workers, Connecticut shade tobacco work provided an opportunity at a time when staying where they were offered them little hope.

Now billowing tents and long barns are an evocative reminder of Connecticut's agriculture past. In those rural fields, it is not difficult to imagine the voices of those who spent their summers and even their lifetimes in the heat and dust cultivating and harvesting a crop that is no longer popular. Many of the workers who prospered and stayed in Connecticut preferred to put the experience behind them once they gained economic traction. So it comes as a surprise to their children and grandchildren when they learn that their ancestor toiled in the fields of Enfield, Manchester, Simsbury, Suffield, Granby, East Granby, Windsor and other places where shade was produced.

For over two thousand former high school students still living in the south who made the trip north under Summerrall's program, several recent annual reunions in Virginia have allowed them to give voice to their experiences. They are quick to identify others who are better known than they and who spent summers working in Connecticut. Mahalia Jackson, Arthur Ashe, Martin Luther King, Jr., Hattie McDaniel, and Thurgood Marshall are among the thousands of color who labored in the shade.

**Some material on southern students previously appeared as "Laboring in the Shade" in the Summer 2011 issue of CT Explored*

Who was Rushia West?

In the height of summer a dusty dead end road, in the midst of what was once Connecticut Tobacco Company's Floydville Plantation in East Granby Connecticut, echos the rural south of Rushia West. Here amidst a small community of homes sits the remains of a church built by this former tobacco worker to honor her mother Mary James and husband Theodore West and end their commute to Hartford to worship.

Rushia James came north from Americus Georgia in 1917 with her parents and at least four siblings to find better opportunities in Hartford. The granddaughter of slaves and already a teacher in her native Georgia, she found the only employment in the north for blacks was menial. Responding to the call from tobacco growers, Rushia's family moved to Granby around 1918 where her family lived in close proximity to a follower of Marcus Garvey -Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson and his family migrated from the South to Granby to work tobacco. He became a follower of Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and advocate of a return to Africa movement.

By 1920 Rushia was married to another Georgia native Theodore West and she worked as a tobacco sorter. In 1921 Theodore was able to purchase about five acres of property along side the railroad tracks in East Granby off Floydville Road. Over the years she and her family made the trek each week to Hartford so they could worship at a Seventh Day Adventist church. The local Congregational churches lacked the welcome and the Pentecostal spirit she and other tobacco workers of color desired.

By the 1950s with her mother's health failing, Rushia began planning the dream church she and her mother envisioned. In 1955 Rushia spent fifty dollars to have the foundation of a single room church poured. For almost 15 years the church building grew slowly as Mrs. West funded the project herself. When in 1971 the church building stalled at 90 % completion due to building permit issues and town officials began paying attention to a church rising up in a corner of town where few ventured. With the help of a local contractor, who stepped in when he realized that Rushia, who was approaching 80, might need help, the obstacles were overcome. In 1976 the West Community Church a short walk from her family home along Railroad Street was dedicated.

Her dream church caught the attention of the local and national press who ran articles on it and chronicled its on-going difficulties – monetary support, its founder's age, physical access and competing congregational interpretations of the Bible – until 1985 when all mention of it stopped. By 1990 Rushia West had passed and along with her the memories of the community she built.



1942 Camp Buckland

Author's Collection

Official summer photo of Camp Buckland student workers, 1942



1949 Camp Buckland

Author's Collection

Official summer photo of Camp Buckland student workers, 1949



1950 Girls Camp

Author's Collection

Official summer photo of Camp Buckland student workers, 1950



Tobacco Needles

Luddy/Taylor Tobacco Museum

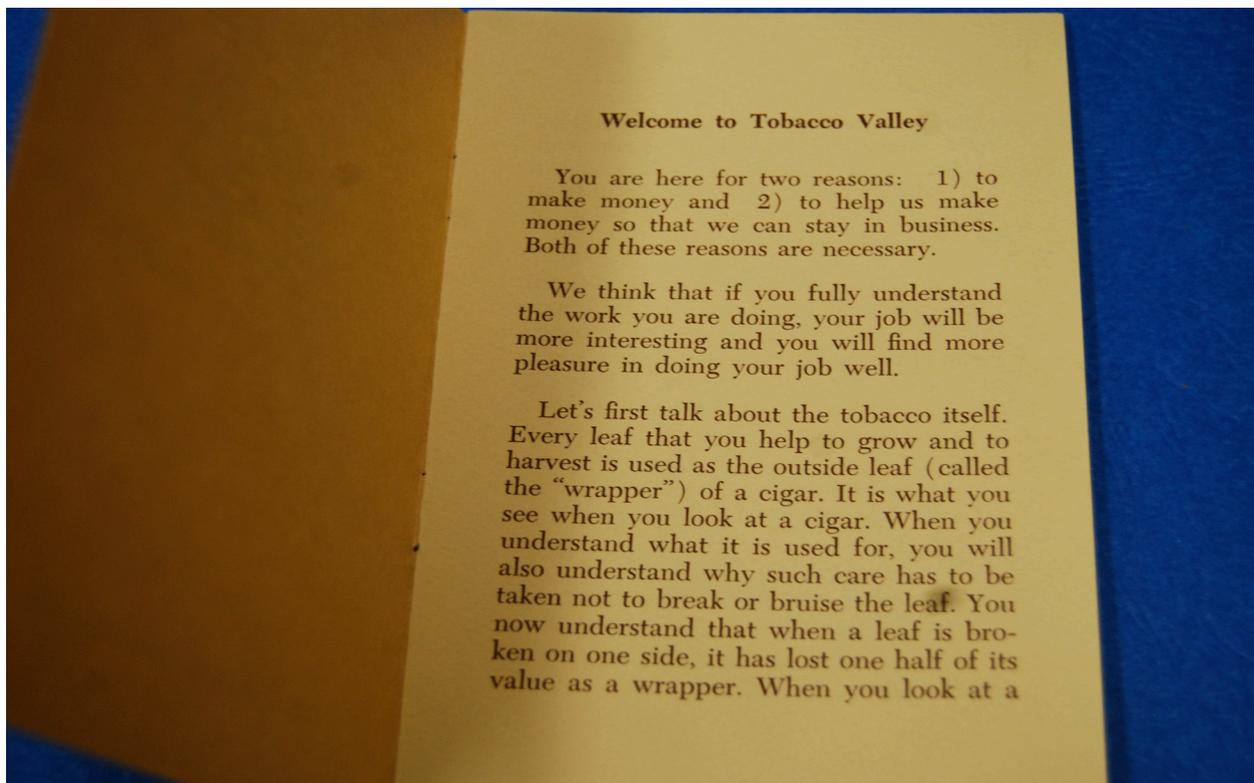
Needles used to sew tobacco leaves together



Your Summer Job Cover

Luddy/Taylor Tobacco Museum

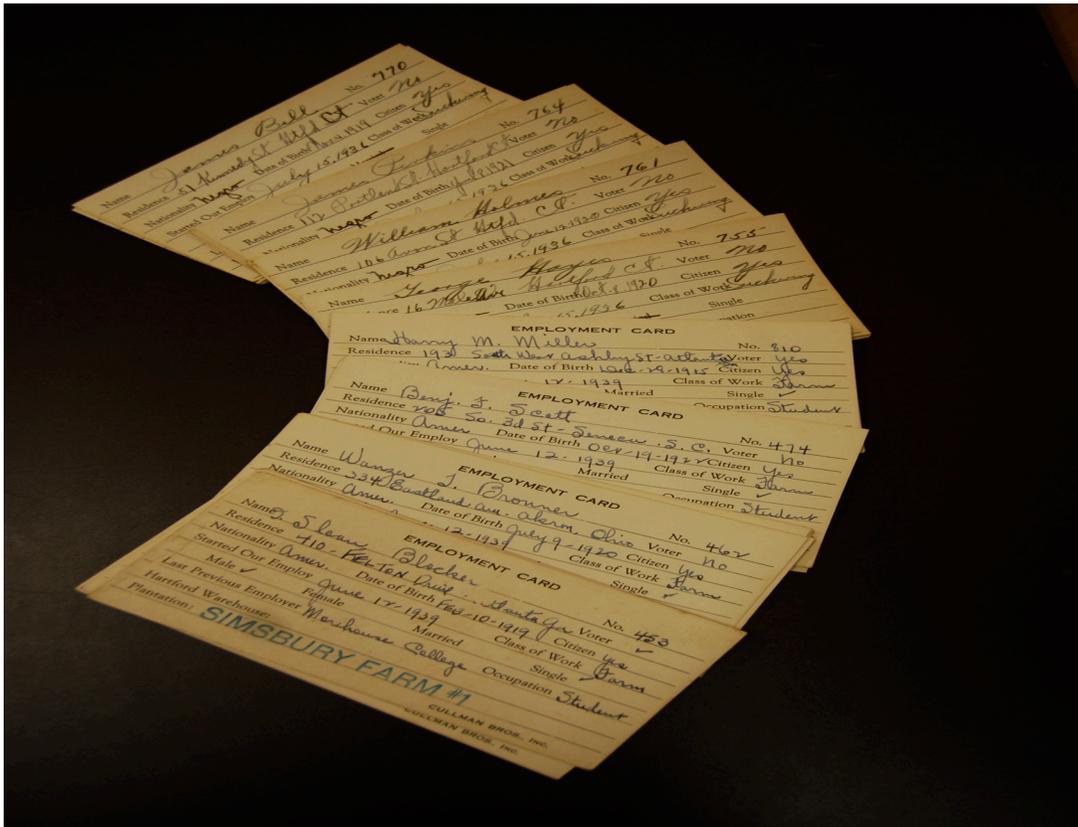
The Hartman Tobacco Company's Summer Worker Handbook



Your Summer Job (1)

Luddy/Taylor Tobacco Museum

First paragraph is particularly interesting



Fan of Employment Card

Luddy/Taylor Tobacco Museum

Note the different response to “race” by local and migrant workers



Farm (1) Canal 7

Dawn Byron Hutchins

These tobacco sheds in Simsbury, CT are believed to be on the remains of the Farmington Canal



Farm (2) FT 5

Dawn Byron Hutchins

Tobacco fields closest to Morehouse Dormitory in Simsbury, CT



Farm (2) Dorm

Dawn Byron Hutchins

Remains of tobacco worker housing similar to the Morehouse in Simsbury, CT



Farm (3) Office

Dawn Byron Hutchins

Indian Head Farm Office in East Granby, CT



Firetown House (NR Dorm)

Dawn Byron Hutchins

Tobacco housing near Morehouse Dorm at Firetown and Barndoor Hills, Simsbury, CT



Floydville (1)

Dawn Byron Hutchins

Remains of Floydville Plantation, East Granby, CT



Floydville (4)

Dawn Byron Hutchins

Front view of Floydville Plantation Sorting Shed, East Granby, CT



Floydville Shed (2)

Dawn Byron Hutchins

Rear view of Floydville Plantation Sorting Shed, East Granby, CT



West Church

Dawn Byron Hutchins

Church built by Rushia West for Floydville area tobacco workers



Tobacco (1)

Gail Williams

Plainville students c. 1955 process tobacco. Left to right: Anita Johnson, Gail Johnson, & Norene Johnson



Tobacco (2)

Gail Williams

Left to right: Tina Post, Sadie Ruth Robinsn, Norene Johnson, Anita Johnsozn and Judy Ardrey take a break in the shed.



Tobacco (3)
Gail Williams
Gail Johnson, c. 1955



Tobacco (6)
Gail Williams
Left to right: Broom (?), Bobbie (?), Gail Johnson, unknown, Norene Johnson, and Margaret Snelly take a break outside the shed



Tobacco (7)

Gail Williams

Back: Jeff (?), Gail Williams, Vivian Hogans, Norene Johnson, Broom (?)

Front: Margaret Snelly, Sadie Robinson c. 1955



Tobacco 1955 Riverside

Gail Williams

Off to Riverside Park, 1955

Left to right: Norene Johnson, Sadie Robinson and Gail Johnson



Farm (2) Hoskins 3

Dawn Byron Hutchins

Firetown Barn, Simsbury, CT, with original "Farm No. 2" sign

Tobacco Workers Bibliography

- Bennett, Lerone. *What Manner of Man: a biography of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Chicago: Johnson Pub. Co., 1992)
- Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years.* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1988)
- Carson, Clayborne ed. *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Called to Serve January 1929-June 1951.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992)
- The Hartford Daily Courant. January 1899-December 1945
- Johnson, Fay Clarke. *Soldiers of the Soil.* (New York: Vantage Press, 1995)
- Johnson, Charles Spurgeon. *The Negro College Graduate.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina University Press, 1938)
- Johnson, Charles Spurgeon. *The Negro Population of Hartford, Connecticut.* (New York: The National Urban League, 1921)
- Johnson, Charles Spurgeon. *Patterns of Negro Segregation.* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947)
- King, Coretta Scott. *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: H. Holt, 1993)
- Lewis, David L. *King: A Critical Biography* (New York: Praeger, 1970)
- The New York Times. January 1899-December 1945
- Oates, Stephen. *Let the Trumpet Sound: a life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994)
- Range, Willard. *The Rise and Progress of Negro Colleges in Georgia 1865-1949.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, c 1951)
- Scott, Emmett J. *Negro Migration During the War.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1920)
- Weiss, Nancy J. *The National Urban League 1910-1940.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974)