Welcome

to the Tobacco Farm Life Museum

We welcome you to explore the exhibit gallery and engage in the history of the eastern North Carolina farming community.

As I-95 grew in the early 1980s, the Kenly community sought innovative ways to encourage tourism off the busy interstate by leading tours of tobacco farms—one of North Carolina's first examples of agritourism. What began as a passionate, community-led effort to share the history of the tobacco industry expanded to a 6,000 square foot museum in 1986. The museum was brought into the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources under the Division of History Museums in 2024. This acquisition marks the beginning of an exciting new chapter as we continue to explore and share eastern North Carolina's rich agricultural history.

Early advertizing motifs for the museum included tobacco leaves, barns, and bright yellow "gold leaf" colors. This sign caught the eye of travelers driving on Highway 301.

With the support of the Friends of the Tobacco Farm Life Museum, the museum preserves and presents the history of rural farming communities. Your donations go toward maintaining historic structures, supporting educational programming, implementing community events, and continuing care of collections.

As faithful stewards of North Carolina's cultural resources, the outbuildings are temporarily closed for evaluation and restoration. While the structures are closed, we encourage you to explore the exhibit spaces and interpretive panels outside to reflect on the long-lasting impact of agriculture in North Carolina.

We invite you to follow along with us on this exciting journey!

NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL & CULTURAL RESOURCES

TOBACCO FARM LIFE MUSEUM

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Barnes Crossroads Schoolhouse

The interior of this schoolhouse is typical of many rural community schools from the turn of the 20th century – wooden floors, wooden benches, and a stove for warmth. While White schools underwent numerous structural improvements, Black schools often remained single-room structures.

In 1910, North Carolina's population was 2,206,287 people. Of those ten years of age or older, 291,497 people, or 18.5% of the state's population, were deemed illiterate—unable to write, regardless of their ability to read. Education inequality persisted across racial and urban lines. Schools were systematically segregated, as were resources and funding. Charles B. Aycock, governor of North Carolina from 1901 to 1905 and a known White supremacist, campaigned for educational access throughout the state. In his 1901 inaugural address, Aycock stated that, "The problems before us are of the gravest nature, but among them all there is none that can approach in importance the necessity for making ample provision for the education of the whole people."

Under his tenure, public schools in the state received better support through higher budgets and increased teachers' salaries, but they were unequally funded between White and non-White schools. Public schools for Black children often remained in one-room classrooms and faced limited supplies and resources, while White institutions continued to expand across the state.

When this schoolhouse was originally used from 1890 to 1920, it was located near present-day Clayton, North Carolina, and served a population of White students in grades 1 through 8. The schoolhouse is currently closed to the public.

To remain faithful stewards of North Carolina's cultural resources, this building is temporarily closed as we assess and update the museum's supporting structures. Follow along with us on this historic preservation journey!

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Growing Tobacco

A sharecropper and wage laborer crop tobacco and put the leaves into a tobacco sled in Shoofly, Granville County, North Carolina. A mule drags the sled full of tobacco leaves to the cure barn.

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives. LC-USF34-019998-E.

A tenant farmer in Person County tops tobacco, removing the flowers to encourage stronger leaves. Removing the sticky flowers encourages the plant to focus energy into leaf production, rather than seed production, creating a higher yielding plant.

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives. LC-USF34-020223-E.

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The eastern region of North Carolina grows mostly "brightleaf" or "flue-cured" tobacco, which thrives in the sandy, loamy soil of the region. Preparing, growing, and harvesting tobacco took massive efforts. Labor was usually supported by all members of the family. A farmer's to-do list included plowing the fields, seeding planting beds, tending the new seedlings, transplanting seedlings into the field, watering, fertilizing, topping (removing the flowers), suckering (removing new growth between the leaves to promote strong main leaves), and controlling pests.

By late July and early August, these plants grow to be over five feet tall. The bottom leaves turn a yellow green, signaling that those leaves are ready to be harvested. Tobacco is then "cropped," or harvested, from the fields and brought in a narrow sled pulled by a mule or tractor up to the barn to be cured. Several rounds of cropping occur through the season—three to five times in July and August—because the leaves ripen gradually from the bottom of the stalk upwards.

Many farmers and sharecroppers would exchange work with their neighbors to bring the tobacco in. All of this work in the tobacco field is done in addition to the tending of other crops grown by farmers, tenant farms, and sharecroppers!

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Curing Tobacco

Preparing the tobacco crop is community affair that all members of the family help with. A child hands tobacco leaves to a group of women tying tobacco while men separate the leaves in the tobacco sled. Once the sticks are tied off, they are set aside, ready to be loaded into the curing barn.

Curing tobacco. 1952. Daily Reflector Negative Collection. 0741-b1-fe-v1.e.8. East Carolina University Digital Collections.

The son of a sharecropper in Shoofly, North Carolina hangs tied tobacco in a curing barn. Workers hand up tobacco sticks to a person straddling the posts going through the barn, starting at the ceiling and working their day down to the bottom row of posts.

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives. LC-USF34-019928-E.

After tobacco is cropped, farmers must act quickly to preserve their crop before it molds. Once brought to the barn, tobacco leaves are tied in bundles of three to four leaves onto a stick using thin cotton twine, usually by women and children.

Tobacco sticks are then hung across the wooden beams that run through the cure barn. A fire is lit inside the stone furnace. Metal flues, or pipes, attached to the furnace circulate the heat of the fire around the inside of the cure barn.

Farmers carefully monitor the heat over a period of six to seven days, where the internal temperature can reach upwards of 160 degrees Fahrenheit. This constant heat removes the moisture from the leaves and turns them from a bright green color to a golden yellow.

With no water in them, these leaves are brittle and crumble easily! The furnace was doused with water and the doors to the barn opened, allowing the leaves to soak in the natural humidity and making them pliable enough to move to the packhouse.

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Well

This well and shelter are reproductions of those dug by hand in 1909 in the front yard of the original Brown homestead. For most farms, wells served as the main source of water for both people and the livestock they cared for. Farmers utilized the water in wells for drinking, cooking, washing clothes, taking baths, and other critical tasks for a homestead. The large pot adjacent to the shelter would have had a fire underneath, constantly heating up water for cooking and cleaning.

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Iredell Brown House

Ovealur Brown and her young son Clarence used this front room as a bedroom until Clarence was old enough to sleep in the adjoining shed room. Ovealur then shared the room with her sister Lucy.

The Brown family used this space as a bedroom and a parlor when needed. As electric service spread through the state, farmers were able to install newly accessible technology like the telephone on the table.

When the Iredell Brown house was built in 1910, farmers in North Carolina were producing 138,813,000 pounds of tobacco a year. Some farmers were able to expand on their existing farmsteads and build new structures to better suit their growing families and lifestyles, and to accommodate a quickly industrialized world.

This hall-and-parlor style house is typical for eastern North Carolina. The two front main rooms were used as bedrooms. The "shed rooms" off the back porch served many uses, including as washrooms, closets, and additional bedrooms. Beyond electrifying the house in 1936, this structure has remained relatively unchanged from the 1910 designs.

To remain faithful stewards of North Carolina's cultural resources, buildings are temporarily closed to the public as we evaluate and update the museum's supporting structures. Follow along with us on this historic preservation journey!

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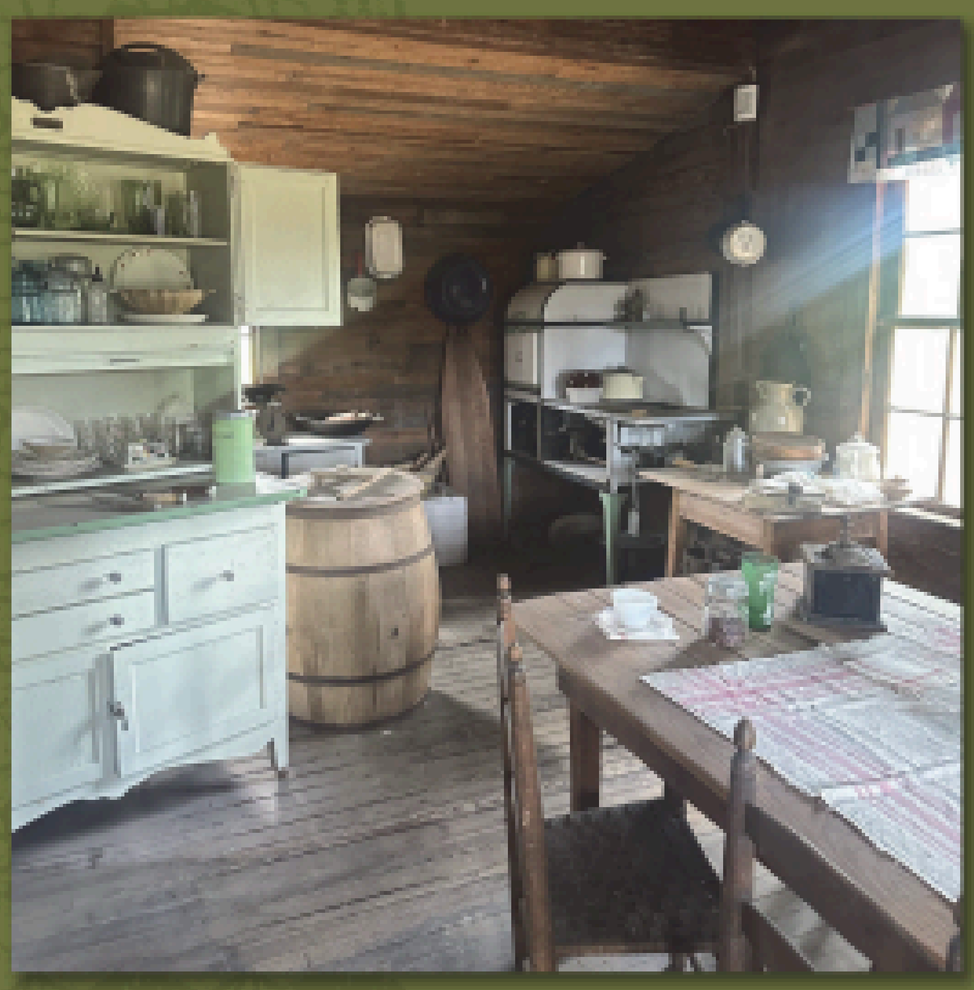
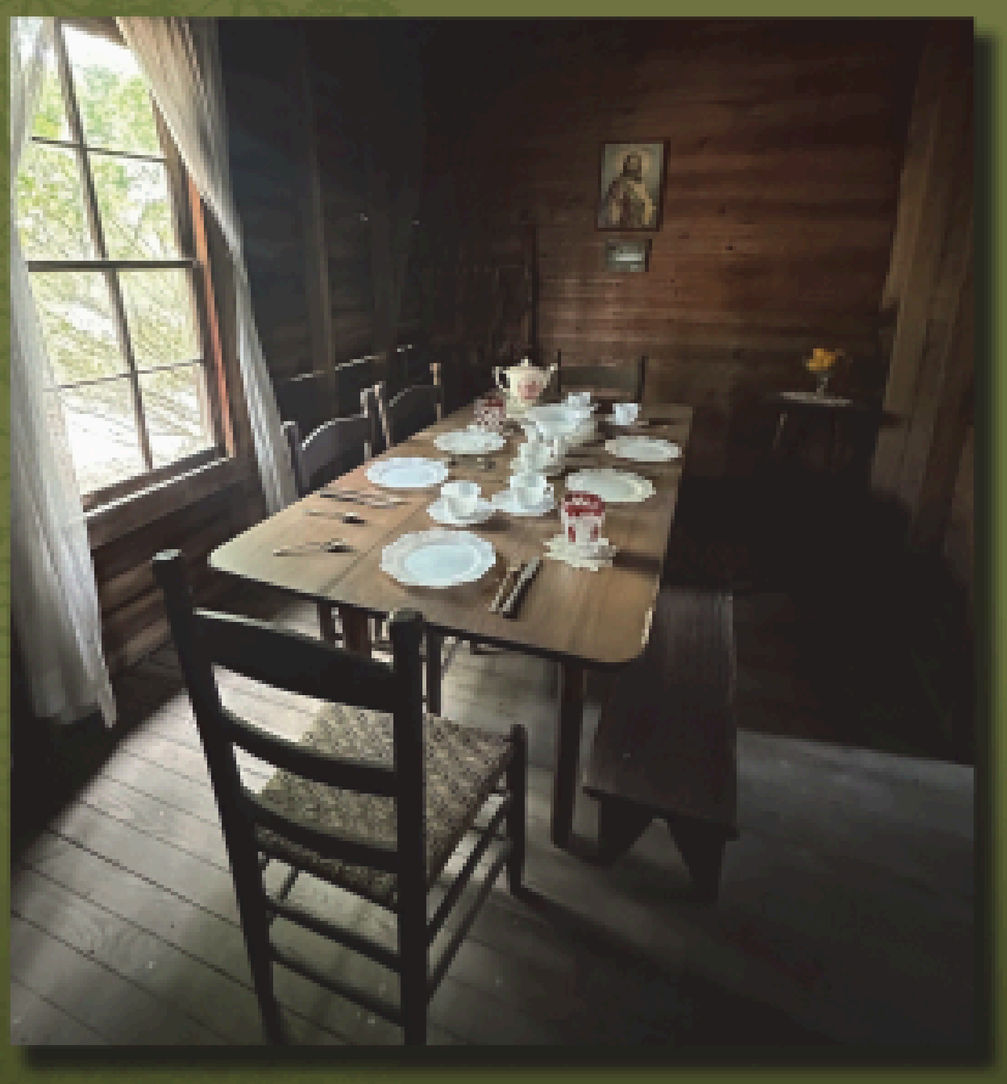
The Kitchen and Dining Room

When this structure was first built in the mid-1880s, it was initially used by the Brown family as the main living space for Iredell; his wife, Lueazer; and their five children. After building the adjacent house, the Browns repurposed this structure as the dining room and kitchen in 1910.



Farm families readily utilized new technology that became more widely accessible in the mid 1900s. The Brown family purchased the Quick Meal gas stove in the back right from the American Stove Company in 1929.



The Brown family originally used this small dining space as a sleeping space before the adjoining larger house was built in 1910.

Kitchen

Kitchens went through many technological advancements throughout the first half of the 20th century: Electric lights replace oil lamps; gas stoves replace wood-burning stoves; refrigerators slowly replace smokehouses for food storage. This kitchen, typical of an eastern North Carolina farmhouse from 1910 to 1950, showcases some of these changes in technology. What similarities do you see in this kitchen compared to a kitchen you might use today?

Dining Room

The demand for brightleaf tobacco continued to grow in the early 20th century, and some rural farmers benefitted from having more disposable income from the profitable crop. However, much of the money in the tobacco industry went to distributors and processors instead of to the farmers themselves. While some farmers were able to purchase new furnishings, technology, and goods, others treasured heirloom pieces passed through the family and made use of what they already owned.

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The Pack House

Two men grade and strip tobacco in a packhouse in Caswell County, North Carolina. After tying the tobacco into hands, the men place the completed hands behind them against the wall.

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives.
LC-USF34-056239-D

A Granville County father and son grade tobacco and tie leaves into "hands" on a bench moved into the bedroom after the packhouse grows too cold in the fall.

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives.
LC-USF34-052654-D.

After Tobacco is cured in the barn, there is still work to be done before it can be sold at the auction house and farming families can claim the money from the sale. Once the fragile, freshly-cured leaves absorb humidity and are pliable, they are brought from the cure barn to the packhouse for ordering and grading. Sticks of tobacco from the curing barn were brought to the packhouse, untied, and then separated, or "graded," into similar piles according to stalk position, color, and quality.

Families used grading benches like the one in the front of this packhouse to separate the tobacco into piles between the sticks in the bench. A bundle of about ten to fifteen leaves was carefully stacked together; and a leaf was used to tie the tops of the leaves together, creating a "hand" of tobacco. These hands were pressed flat and carefully stored before they were taken to a tobacco warehouse to be sold.

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