Shields-Ethridge House
Circa 1866

Agriculture and rural communities are an important part of the culture and rich history of Georgia.

The Shields-Ethridge farm is a living history lesson of the farming community in Jackson County at the turn of the century.

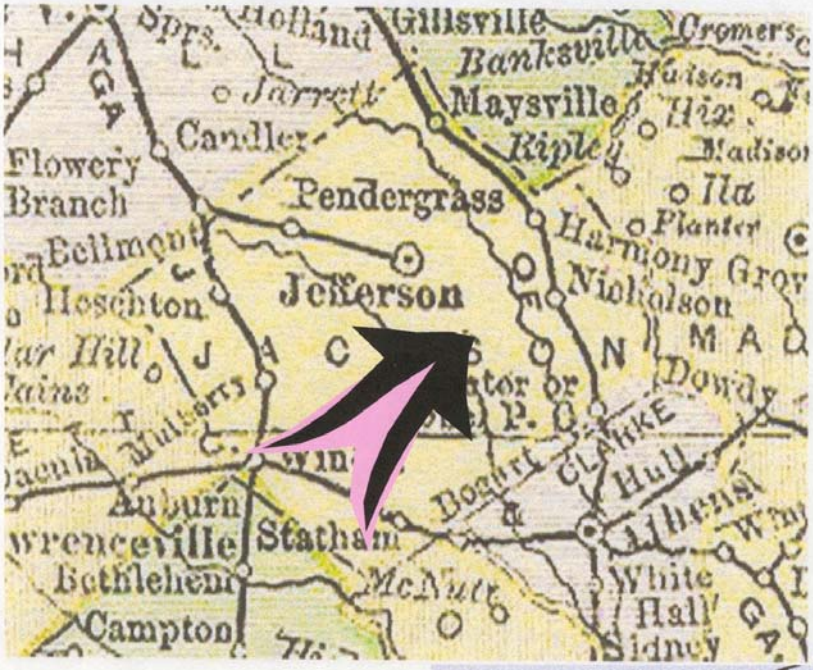
The Shields plantation was established in 1803 by brothers Joseph Patrick and Samuel Shields. Before the Civil War, the farm covered 850 acres and was worked by 25 slaves.

The main house was built in 1866 by Joseph Robert Shields, the grandson of Joseph Patrick.

Mrs. Joyce Ethridge , the matriarch of the Shields-Ethridge Farm, married Lanis Ethridge in 1944. She started managing the farm in 1970 when Lanis died. She worked successfully to have the farm listed on the National Register as a historic district. Mrs. Ethridge's grandchildren are the seventh generation to live on and work the farm.

With the help of Mrs. Ethridge's oral history, we will take a walking tour of some of the farm's buildings.

The Shields-Ethridge Farm, located on 600 acres off U.S. Highway 129, is south of Jefferson in Jackson County.

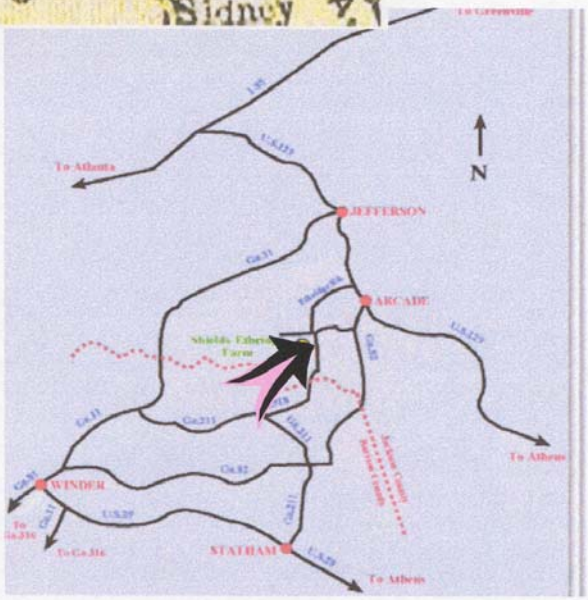


Jackson County, Georgia 1895

approximate location of the farm

Jackson County, Georgia 2000

Location of the farm



MAIN COMPLEX

The main complex includes over twenty agricultural buildings dating from c. 1900-1920's in their original location.The buildings served the agriculutural needs of the family and surrounding farms, functioning as a small industry in the cultivation of cotton, corn, wheat & other crops. Today, they all remain with very few changes and visitors can view the buildings as well as see the farm's original equipment and machines.

MAP KEY

1. Main House, 1866
2. Commissary, c. 1900
3. Blacksmith Shop, c. 1900
4. Carpenter's Shop, 1925
5. Gin Office, 1930
6. Cotton Seed House, c. 1904
7. Cotton Gin, 1910
8. Teacher's Residence, c. 1912
9. Log Corn Crib
10. Warehouse, c. 1900
11. Water Tower, 1920's
12. Grist Mill, c. 1900
13. Garage, c. 1920
14. Wheat House, c. 1910
15. School House (inset upper right
16. Tenant House c. 1915
17. Demonstration Field

The Wheat House Circa 1910

Wheat was put in sacks from the porch and hoisted up to the crib.

The grist mill was used to grind meal for the family, tenants, and neighbors.

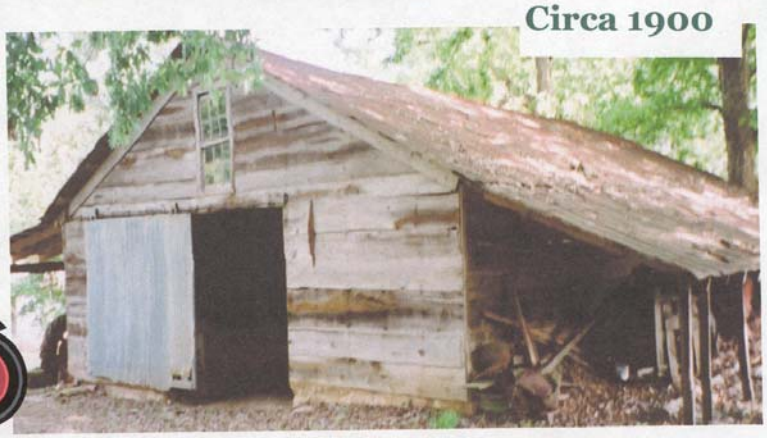
There is also a hammer mill used for grinding corn cobs for the pigs to eat. Mrs. Ethridge stated, "We used to kill 5 or 6 hogs every month."

This building also houses a pipe cutting room, and a planing mill used to dress lumber sawed on the farm.

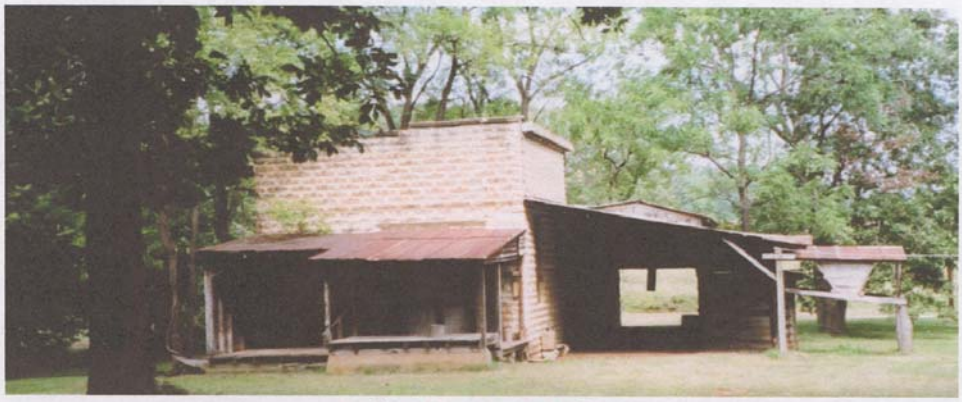
The Grist Mill Circa 1900

Log Corn Crib

Warehouse
Circa 1900



Cow Barn



The Cotton Gin

The original gin burned in 1910 and was rebuilt in 1918. Mrs. Ethridge commented, "The original gin, which was a clapboard gin burned. After the cow got out, well then, they built the water tower for protection. Just before ginning season started, they would always pump water from the creek."

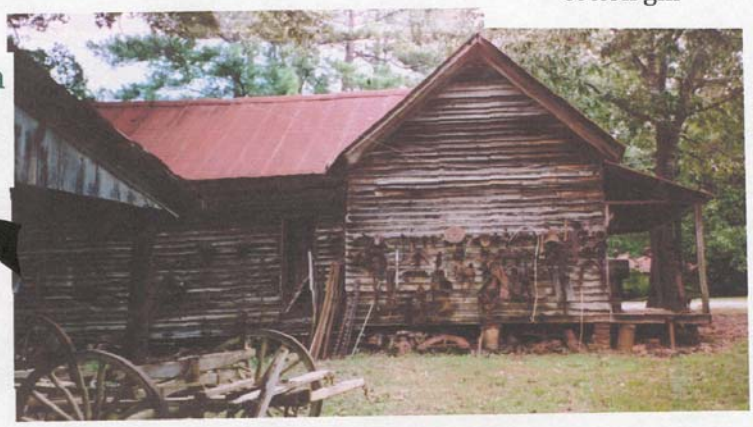
The bricks are hand made "granitoid" blocks made to look like granite, and were patented in 1908. The patent number is carved on the bricks inside the building.

Looking at the rear of the gin from the seed house. It takes 18 minutes to gin a bale of cotton. Cotton was ginned here until the 1950s. Mrs. Ethridge gave us a full demonstration of ginning cotton.

Front of the commissary from across the street

Side of the commissary from the cotton gin

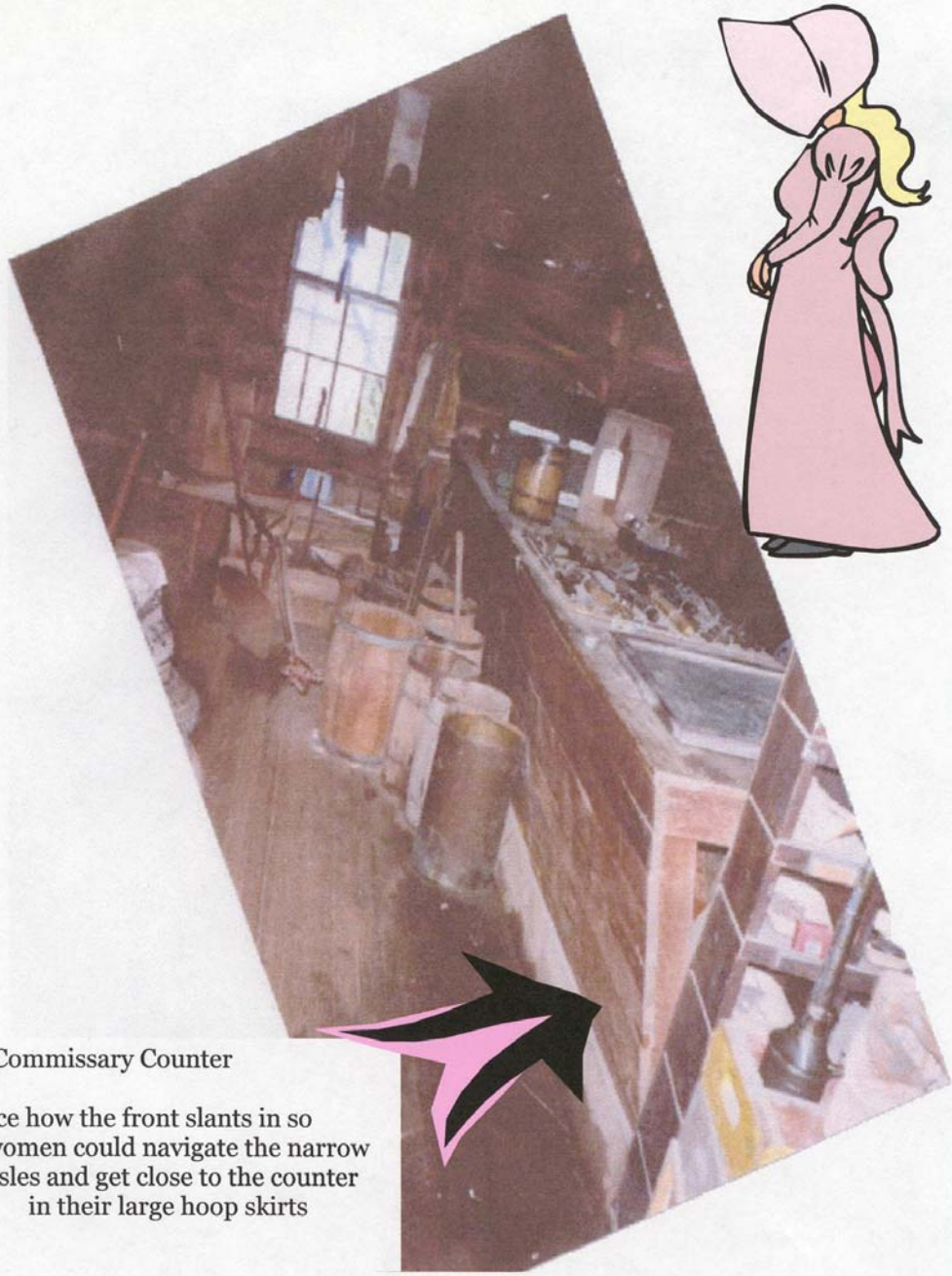
The Blacksmith Shop Circa 1900



The Commissary Circa 1900

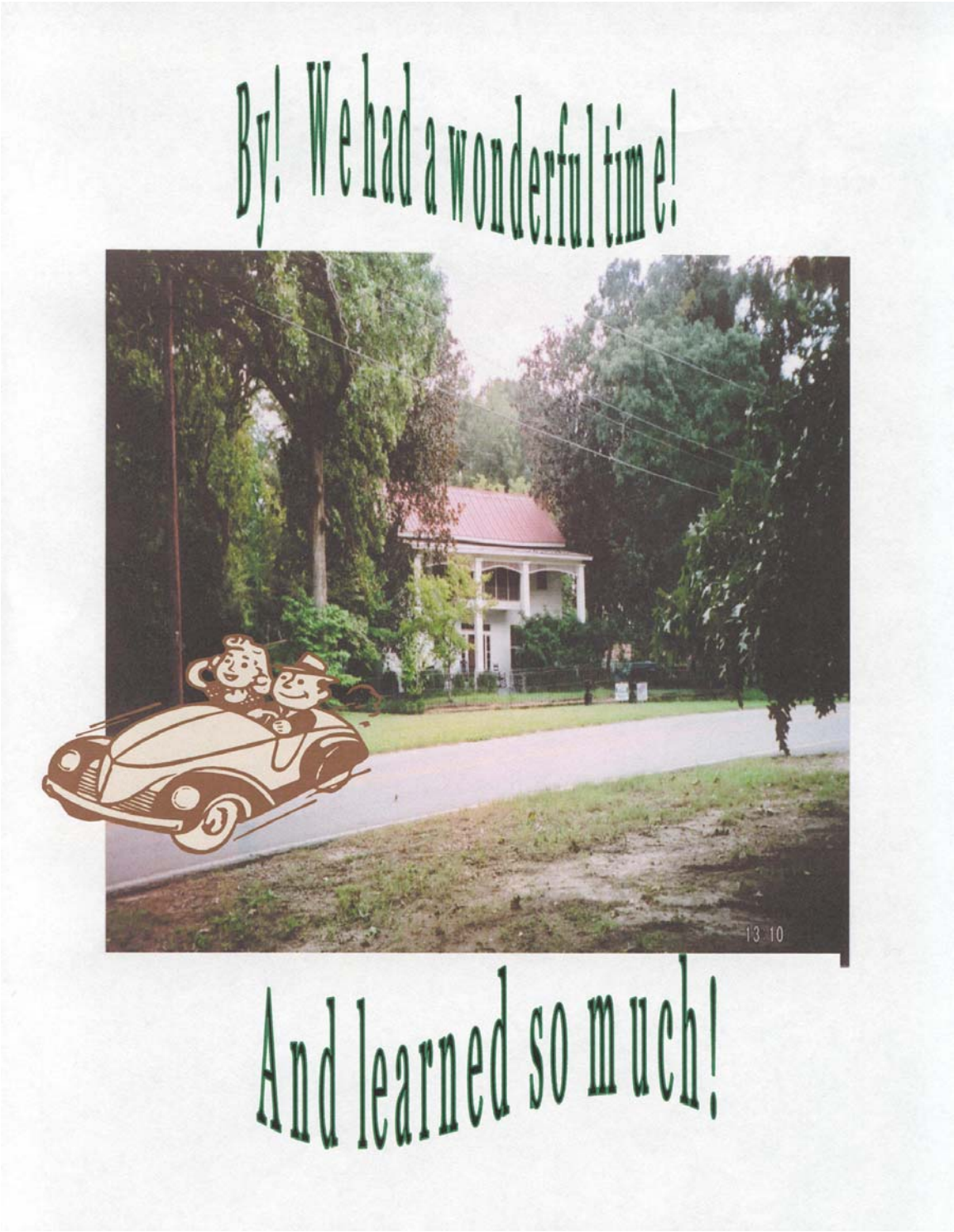
The fully stocked commissary was a convenience for the sharecroppers and others that worked the farm.

"It was a total community here," Mrs. Ethridge told us. "In its heyday, we had at least 75 people on this farm."



Commissary Counter

Notice how the front slants in so the women could navigate the narrow aisles and get close to the counter in their large hoop skirts



Rural Recovery Project

This project started out as part of the rural recovery project. Our instructions were to find a website that demonstrated some aspect of rural life or culture in Georgia.

My search led me to www.shieldsethridgefarm.org. This is a very comprehensive web site about the Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm. The website outlines a brief history of the farm, which has been in existence for over 200 years, site plans, and some pictures of the buildings. It also said tours were available on request.

I was so intrigued by the possibilities of this find as a larger project, and just the history in general, that I e-mailed, and then called for an appointment. I was able to talk to Mrs. Joyce Ethridge, the matriarch of the family, and we set a date for a meeting. Mrs. Ethridge was very protective of her farm, and had to have my reassurance that I was a student, and not someone out to exploit the farm in the media. So on September 30, my husband and I started out on an adventure that would affect us both deeply.

The journey to Jefferson, Georgia, was longer than we expected, but once we got there (after a couple wrong turns), we found Mrs. Ethridge to be a most gracious hostess in the style of the old South. Her knowledge of the history and workings of the farm is immeasurable.

We started our walking tour at the house built in 1866. She let us go inside and showed us where the original house was and where the additions had been built through the years. Mrs. Ethridge is very proud of her family that still lives and works on the farm. Her grandson is the seventh generation, direct descendent of the Shields-Ethridge founders. She told us about a box that was found in the attic of the house in 1985 that contained all the records: birth and death certificates, deeds, wills, and bills of sale (even for slaves) that dated back to 1794. She is in the process of preserving these invaluable links to her past. I would like to try and go back there at a later date and interview Mrs. Ethridge at length about these incredible records. I would love to be able to see and photograph them for posterity.

We continued our tour across the street where twenty buildings remain standing in their original locations. As we walked, Mrs. Ethridge gave us a detailed oral history of what farm life was like at the turn of the century. Many of the machines still work, and she demonstrated them for us. I was totally enthralled by the cotton gin. I never realized all the work involved in ginning a bale of cotton. Their gin was in operation until the 1950s and Mrs. Ethridge told us they still grow a half-acre of cotton every year to demonstrate the gin to visiting schoolchildren. This project has given me much better insight on the day-to-day workings of a large farm at the turn of the century. It was a hard, but rewarding life with a real sense of community. Everyone depended on each other for cooperation and the success of the farm. The Shields-Ethridge Farm was the largest in the area, and supplied work and services for many other people in Jackson County.

I took two rolls of pictures and used two tapes to record Mrs. Ethridge, along with three pages of written notes. I have so much information that I decided to focus on just the work buildings for my final project. This project has been a labor of love for me since the first day I found the website. I knew instantly that if I could visit the farm, I would use it for my final project. It can even be expanded for future projects. Mrs. Ethridge is a wonderful lady and I learned so much from her. The history of the farm and this family is incredible. I hope to be able to visit her again. In the meantime, I would like to start writing her, and I promised to send this project when completed.

I have so much more to learn.