

Building a Black Belt Empire: Charles H. Miller in Marengo County, Alabama, 1870-1917

by

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Abstract

The life of planter, merchant, and politician Charles Houston Miller of Miller, Marengo County, Alabama exemplified the powerful elites who ruled the Black Belt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through kinship ties that provided him access to networks of financial and political power, he controlled land and credit, created a community, and reshaped the landscape of southern Marengo County. As a merchant, Miller operated within the crop lien and credit system that drove the region's cotton-dependent economy. Using general store ledgers, this thesis reconstructs the lives of his customers, including African American tenant farmers, landowning African Americans, and poor whites through their experiences in the Miller Store. Miller's financial power provided a base on which to build his political career. Throughout the turmoil of Marengo's Populist Revolt, the 1901 Constitutional Convention, and his tenure in the Alabama Senate, Miller fought to maintain white supremacy and the power of the Black Belt. He faithfully guarded the interests of the Democratic Party, Marengo County, and his white constituents. Examination of Miller's small empire allows for understanding of the economic and political systems at work in the Alabama Black Belt as well as inclusion of the stories of local people and places.

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List of Abbreviations

CDEC County Democratic Executive Committee

L&N Louisville & Nashville Railroad

MTU Marengo Temperance Union

SDEC State Democratic Executive Committee

Introduction

An old schoolhouse stands in the pines on the side of US Highway 43 about ten miles south of Linden, the seat of Marengo County, Alabama. Once a vital part of the community of Miller, the school is locked and empty, and the village is no longer the center of life in this isolated area of South Marengo. Founded in the late 1890s, Miller grew around the family home and general store of Charles Houston Miller, a prosperous white planter, politician, and merchant who controlled land and credit in his village. Charles H. Miller owned thousands of acres of land where tenant farmers lived and farmed cotton. People from all over South Marengo came to the store to buy goods, pay rent, use the telephone, and mail letters at the post office. Through his control of land, wealth, and political power in Marengo County, Charles H. Miller was the center of a small empire. He exemplified the elite planter class of the Alabama Black Belt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Using Miller as a case study of power in the Black Belt allows for examination not only of the whites who controlled the region, but also of the lives of the landless and less powerful people who lived there. Because so many different lives and stories converged in Miller, Alabama, examination of this community as one man's empire demonstrates the importance of the local story in Alabama economics and politics.

Charles H. Miller was the son of George Oliver Miller, a merchant, former slaveholder, and veteran of the Civil War who migrated from the Carolinas to Alabama with his family as a young man in the 1830s. Charles' mother was Susan Catherine "Cathy" Trussell, a daughter of

Black Belt farmers; after her 1849 marriage to George O. Miller, she had nine children. The Millers resided in Allenton, Wilcox County until 1870, when they migrated northwest to the southern region of Marengo County. Their son Charles was educated in the local schools of Marengo and Wilcox Counties and spent his early adulthood as a farmer.¹ By the 1890s, Charles began accumulating political and financial influence that eventually spread far beyond the Miller community. Charles H. Miller's involvement in business occurred through his father's general store, of which he assumed ownership in 1893. Through the store, he amassed land and operated a cotton gin and gristmill. In 1904, he founded First National Bank of Linden and served as its president for thirteen years. His political career began in 1884 with his involvement in the Marengo Temperance Union and his appointment to the County Democratic Executive Committee. He took elected office as a County Commissioner from 1892 to 1904. At the state level, he was a representative of Marengo County at the 1901 Alabama Constitutional Convention, a member of the State Democratic Executive Committee, and a state senator from 1911 until his death in 1917.

In order to understand Charles H. Miller's role in Marengo County and Alabama as a merchant, planter, and politician, establishing his background is essential. Chapter One addresses the influence of place and the story of the Miller family on Charles' rise to prominence. The chapter defines the Alabama Black Belt and identifies Marengo County's place within it, as Marengo was a typical county of the Black Belt due to its high population of poor African Americans and its white-dominated political and economic climate based in the rich soil that was conducive the plantation system and cotton cultivation. This chapter also tracks the movement of the Miller family from the Carolinas to Alabama in the early nineteenth century. As a

¹ Thomas McAdory Owen, "Miller, Charles Houston," in *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography* vol. 4 (Chicago: S.J. Clarke, 1921), 1199. See Appendix 2 for Miller family trees.

slaveholding merchant family in Wilcox County before the Civil War, the Millers were reasonably prosperous. After the Civil War, the family's fortunes took a downward turn when they moved to southern Marengo County and lost the land they had bought, forcing them into deep debt, a common experience among former antebellum planters after the war. The Millers became tenant farmers who constantly moved to different plantations but were tethered to the area.

To escape the spiral of debt and landlessness, Charles H. Miller used kinship ties to gradually acquire land and gain access to business and politics.² Through his family connections, he became a prominent landowner and merchant in South Marengo, establishing his own small empire with a general store and plantation in the community of Miller. Charles H. Miller became one of what Gavin Wright identified as the new landlords of the post-Civil War South, who constituted a "great landowning class" that controlled land but not labor.³ Ed Ayers meanwhile describes the new men of the New South as those as who began their careers in their rural homes, but wanting to make something of themselves, they left for Southern cities to find "better chances."⁴ This chapter argues that Miller was something of a hybrid between the New South man and the landlord. Miller sought opportunity for himself, but he also possessed strong loyalties to the rural area in which he had grown up. Instead of leaving, he remained in South Marengo long enough to make something of himself through land purchases and business opportunities that arose from the support of his strong network of kin.

² Carolyn Earle Billingsley, *Communities of Kinship: Antebellum Families and the Settlement of the Cotton Frontier* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 6.

³ Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 49.

⁴ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 64.

Chapter Two examines the economics of Miller's power through his general store and bank, his use of the crop lien and credit system, and its effects on his community. This chapter identifies the origins of the Miller Store and its place in the business network of Marengo County from 1882 to 1920. Arguing that many of Miller's customers depended on the store for their basic survival, chapter two examines the economic statuses of African American and white customers and their experiences at the store. Charles H. Miller used his land and his position as a merchant to build a base of wealth and power that extended to the rest of the county through his presidency of First National Bank of Linden and fueled his political career.

Thomas D. Clark identified the general store as the center of life in Southern communities, though he focused on the experiences of the merchant and ignored the customers, particularly African Americans. Ted Ownby broadened the literature to include a full picture of customer experiences and considered the impact of race and gender. He also argued that because general stores were such white-dominated spaces, African Americans tended to avoid the stores and incur lower debts. This chapter finds that in the case of the Miller Store, landless African Americans in fact depended the most heavily on the store for their survival. Landowning African Americans experienced slightly elevated levels of economic independence, but both groups endured racism that made their positions in the world more precarious than their white counterparts. This chapter also highlights the lives of poor whites, a group largely disregarded by historians of the Black Belt, who focus on white landowners and African Americans. Landless whites also lived in extreme poverty but escaped the racial discrimination that plagued African Americans. Landowning whites possessed the most privilege as the ruling elites of the county and escaped the cycle of debt, as they had the greatest access to cash, purchasing power, and available resources.

Chapter Three examines Miller's political career at the local, county, and state levels, following him through the Populist Revolt of the 1890s, the disfranchising 1901 Constitutional Convention, and Progressivism in the Alabama Senate. Tracing the development of his political career from his initial involvement in the Marengo Temperance Union in 1884 to his tenure in the Alabama Senate, this chapter identifies Charles H. Miller as a staunch Conservative. Miller maintained his support of the Conservative Democrats throughout the turbulence of Marengo's Populist Revolt despite living in an area where Populism took root and claimed his friends, neighbors, and family members. Miller sought instead to preserve the power of the Marengo County Democratic machine, uphold white supremacy and the Black Belt's domination of Alabama at the Constitutional Convention, and protect the interests of his white constituents through social legislation as a Progressive state senator.

Miller's experience is historiographically important. Historians focus exclusively on the hill counties and the Wiregrass when discussing Alabama Populism, as these areas were the epicenter of the state's Populist movement. Sheldon Hackney, Malcolm C. McMillan, and other historians have dismissed the Alabama Black Belt as predominately conservative during the 1890s, instead focusing on the region's rivalry with the Populists of North Alabama. While William Warren Rogers recognized Marengo as a hotbed of Populism in the Black Belt in the 1890s, he offered no further analysis of the county's political climate.⁵ By ignoring the Populist activity of the Black Belt, historians miss a significant part of the motivation for Black Belt politicians' desire to rewrite Alabama's constitution in 1901. Chapter Three identifies a major Populist movement in Marengo County that posed a real threat to the county Conservative machine. This chapter argues that control of local politics that provided a foundation for their

⁵ William Warren Rogers, *The One-Gallused Rebellion: Agrarianism in Alabama, 1865-1896* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 316.

control of the state legislature and executive offices was essential to the Black Belt's control of Alabama; if Conservative Democrats could not control their counties, then their control of the state would be lost. The threat of local Populist movements provided the impetus for Black Belt conservatives' actions at the 1901 Constitutional Convention and during the Progressive Era.

This thesis relies on data from multiple censuses in order to track the Miller family as well as their neighbors in Wilcox and Marengo Counties. Federal census records from 1830 through 1940 were used to trace the movements of the Miller family and establish their economic status and background. Because the 1830 and 1840 Federal Censuses do not list household dependents, and because James Miller was a common name, identification of the Millers is approximate for these years. I chose the James Miller family that appeared most likely to fit the Millers based on location, the age of the head of household, the number of dependents, and the age range and gender of the dependents. The 1850 and 1860 Federal Slave Schedules established George O. Miller's status as a slave owner, the Alabama State Censuses of 1850, 1860, and 1866 provided the means to track the Millers before their move to Marengo County.

The 1900 Census and the C.H. Miller Store Records, a collection of thirteen general store ledgers and two letters located in the University of Alabama Special Collections, were crucial sources in recreating the store and the Miller community around 1900. I analyzed the 1901-1902 ledger due to its occurrence in the same year as the 1901 Alabama Constitutional Convention. 1901 was a year of significant political and social change because of the new constitution; it was also an important year in the life of Charles H. Miller because of his participation in the convention. Each ledger provides a list of prices, goods, and payments for each customer of the Miller Store. Information from the 1900 Census allowed for customer identification. Cross-referencing the census with the 1901-1902 ledger provided further means to reconstruct the lives

of the customers, taking note of each person's race, gender, age, place of residence, marital status, and housing situation. Customers fell into four categories, with one to two case studies for each designation: African American tenant farmers, poor white tenant farmers, African American landowners, and white landowners.

The 1900 Census provided identifying information for 90 percent of the customers of the Miller Store. However, the remaining 10 percent of customers were untraceable due to illegible or absent census data recording. It is possible that some of these customers lived elsewhere in 1900 and moved into the Miller area later. Many of the identified customers also shared names with other people who lived in Marengo County at the time. In these cases, I chose the person who lived in the area, or beat, closest to the store, if none of them lived in the beat in which the store was located. Analysis of the record of items purchased and the frequency of purchases determined which person best fit the account. If identification of a customer proved impossible using these methods, then the person was not included in calculating data, unless the multiple possible customers fit the same general profile. For example, Carrie Hosea appears in the store data, despite the fact that two different people with this name lived in Shiloh in 1900, because both of the possible matches were African American renters. A similar process identified customers of the First National Bank of Linden using the 1910 Census; if the customer was absent from the 1910 records, the 1900 or 1920 Census acted as a substitute.

Public records located at the Marengo and Wilcox County courthouses allowed tracking of the economic activity of George O. Miller, Charles H. Miller, and their family members, neighbors, and customers. Wilcox County land deeds were instrumental in establishing the existence of George O. Miller's general store in Allenton before the Civil War. In both Wilcox and Marengo, direct and indirect indexes provided all possible deeds and mortgages that

involved these two Millers from 1849 to 1869 in Wilcox County and from 1870 to 1918 in Marengo. Analysis of the mortgages and deeds included noting the names and races of each party and possible connections to the two Millers' general stores. A count of the number of mortgages executed to Charles H. Miller in each year allowed for comparison of the mortgages to the growth of his landholdings. Marengo County tax books from 1911 and 1916 were particularly useful in tracking the growth of Charles H. Miller's wealth and estate. These tax records supplied exact figures concerning acreage and property values, which allowed for comparison of Miller's personal numbers to those of the rest of Shiloh and the rest of the county. The Marengo County poll tax register dated 1901 to 1914 was also useful in determining the extent to which the 1901 Constitution's suffrage restrictions affected the voting base in the county, as it lists the name, race, and year associated with each poll tax payment.

Because Charles H. Miller left behind no accessible personal papers other than the store ledgers, newspapers became another indispensable tool in accessing his world. Marengo County newspapers dating from 1870 to 1917, including the *Linden Reporter*, the *Reform Democrat*, the *Marengo Democrat* and the *Democrat-Reporter*, were instrumental in tracking the political rhythms of South Marengo, including local opinions, elections, meetings of the County Democratic Executive Committee, and the regional rivalry within the county. These four newspapers also illuminated Marengo's vitriolic political climate of the 1890s. In conjunction with James M. Anders' 1940 thesis on the political history of Marengo in the 1890s, these newspapers served as further documentation of Populism in the Black Belt. The *Montgomery Advertiser* meanwhile provided statewide coverage of the 1901 Constitutional Convention and the actions of the 1911 and 1915 Alabama Senate sessions. Because Miller himself never wrote to local or state papers expressing his political opinions or announcing his candidacy for office,

this thesis necessarily relies on newspaper commentary on his actions and character, including editorials, social columns, and obituaries.

This thesis also uses state political records in order to establish Charles H. Miller's political activities and beliefs. Collections located at the Alabama Department of Archives and History, including Alabama Senate journals from 1911 and 1915 and records of the State Democratic Executive Committee from 1906 to 1910, were used to track Miller's political career at the state level. Detailed proceedings of the 1901 Constitutional Convention were instrumental in identifying Miller's role. A search of each day's proceedings for Miller's name emphasized items relating to suffrage issues and the Committee on Education and the Committee on State and County Boundaries, on which he served. Because Miller remained silent during the convention, committee reports and voting records established his political beliefs.

Through the creation of his own small domain, Charles H. Miller changed the landscape of his community and of Marengo County. At the heart of his territory was the village of Miller, and Charles H. Miller was its founder and central figure, playing the role of the classic Black Belt planter, merchant, and politician. As a merchant, Miller took full advantage of lackluster state laws regulating the crop lien and credit system through his general store; hundreds of customers depended on him for their livelihoods. As a landlord, he controlled vast acres of land that tenants farmed to supply him with cotton. As a politician, he acted as a consummate representative of Black Belt planters' interests as a steadfast Conservative during the Populist crisis and at the 1901 Constitutional Convention. Through fighting against new county movements, he protected the interests of South Marengo citizens. However, before he became powerful, Miller possessed access to a network of kinship ties that connected him with the land and credit that allowed him to build his empire.

Chapter One

Roots of the Empire

When George O. and Cathy Miller first moved their family of ten from Wilcox County to southern Marengo County, Alabama, in 1870, disaster struck. George O. Miller was a merchant, a somewhat prosperous farmer, and a slaveholder before the Civil War. Even after the war the family lived reasonably well until the move to Marengo, where the Millers failed to pay the mortgage on an 856-acre plot of land that they had purchased in 1870. Forced to abandon their land and become tenant farmers, the family lived under a cloud of debt for the rest of the decade. George O. Miller executed increasingly large mortgages that he could not pay in order to continue farming cotton and feed his family. The economic transition brought on by emancipation and into the new system that came to dominate the postwar South trapped the Millers in debt and poverty. That system was the crop lien system, which perpetuated atrocious living conditions and gave farmers few options except to continue operating in its thrall.¹ In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the system dictated the rhythms of life in the Alabama Black Belt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including in Marengo County, where a small class of wealthy white landowners dominated the political and economic landscape. Although debt plagued George O. Miller after the Civil War, his children had the

¹ Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 20.

opportunity to use the crop lien system to their advantage, as his son Charles H. Miller did. Through kinship ties that allowed gradual and judicious acquisition of land, involved him in the mercantile business, and connected him with powerful Marengo citizens, Charles H. Miller transcended the limitations of his parents' deep debt and financial tailspin to become one of the archetypal wealthy planters of the Black Belt.

Traditional Counties of the Alabama Black Belt



Figure 1. Traditional Counties of the Alabama Black Belt. The Center for Business and Economic Research, University of Alabama.

The Alabama Black Belt geographic region spans Alabama from west to east. The origins and precise meaning of region's name are confusing, as it has been used in reference to the region's dark, rich soil that was conducive to growing cotton, to the heavily African American population of the area, and finally to the combination of the distinctive soil, culture, and

population of the region.² Colyer Meriwether's 1897 article "Social Changes in the Black Belt," was the first published instance of defining the Black Belt by its racial makeup and applied the concept to locations beyond Alabama.³ Ulrich B. Phillips' description followed suit; his 1906 article "The Origins and Growth of the Southern Black Belts" mapped out the Black Belts as regions where African Americans constituted more than 50 percent of the population.⁴ Alabama Black Belt historian Glenn N. Sisk refuted the legitimacy of the term's association with race and instead asserted that the name originated from geography.⁵ J. Sullivan Gibson also argued for a geographic interpretation and advocated narrowing the term's usage, as he asserted that the "Black Belt" was most widely associated with "dark prairie soil of south central Alabama." He described it as a "strikingly rural" area built on top of a dark, crescent-shaped strip of rich, black soil.⁶

The Alabama Black Belt can further be described through a discussion of regionalism, in which geography creates the base of a region's cultural identity. Rupert B. Vance argued that "factors of physiography and natural resources" define regions.⁷ Similarly, Howard Odum maintained that geography conditioned the culture of Southern regions.⁸ Vance identified a

² Scott Samson and Gerald R. Webster, "On Defining the Alabama Black Belt: Historical Changes and Variations," *Southeastern Geographer* 32, no. 2 (November 1992): 164.

³ Colyer Meriwether, "Social Changes in the Black Belt," *The Sewanee Review* 5, no. 2 (April 1897): 203.

⁴ Ulrich B. Phillips, "The Origins and Growth of Southern Black Belts," *The American Historical Review* 11 no. 4 (July 1906): 806.

⁵ Glenn N. Sisk, "Rural Merchandising in the Alabama Black Belt, 1875-1917," *Journal of Farm Economics* 37, no. 4 (November 1955): 153.

⁶ J. Sullivan Gibson, "The Alabama Black Belt: Its Geographic Status," *Economic Geography* 17, no. 1 (January 1941): 1, 12.

⁷ Rupert B. Vance, *Human Geography of the South: A Study in Regional Resources and Human Adequacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 16.

⁸ Howard Odum, *Southern Regions of the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 11.

1,600-mile long Cotton Belt stretching across the South, defining it as a region of cotton culture based in “geography, the seasonal cycle of plants, the economics of production and marketing, [and its] social organization.” He argued that cotton created regional cultural patterns that defined the rhythms of life, including unstable standards of living and the crop lien and credit system.⁹ Odum framed regional distinctiveness as features that developed in response to various “crises.” He concluded that an evolving crisis of cotton and its economy defined much of the South, as seen in the low standards of living, the boll weevil, monocrop agriculture, and the crop lien and credit system.¹⁰ In the case of the Alabama Black Belt, its cotton culture originated in the natural and physiographical factors of the area, including the rich soil.

Gibson specifically identified the Black Belt’s regional identity as that of a plantation culture that originated in the richness of the soil, building on regionalism as well as Herdman Cleland and Renwick C. Kennedy’s arguments for a cultural interpretation of the Alabama Black Belt’s name.¹¹ During the 1930s, Kennedy identified the region as “the section of the State that is still the Old South.”¹² Veronica L. Womack argued that the region’s plantation culture has shaped “Southern mythology,” and that this mythology has cultivated the Black Belt’s unique culture in turn.¹³ In this thesis, the Black Belt name encompasses not only racial makeup and soil, but it also captures the culture and society that pervaded that region of Alabama. In the

⁹ Vance, *Human Geography*, 193, 203.

¹⁰ Odum, *Southern Regions*, 11, 13.

¹¹ Herdman F. Cleland, “The Black Belt of Alabama,” *Geographical Review* 10, no. 6 (December 1920): 375.

¹² Renwick C. Kennedy, “Black Belt Aristocrats: The Old South Lives on in Alabama’s Black Belt,” *Social Forces* 13, no. 1 (October 1934-May 1935): 80.

¹³ Veronica L. Womack, *Abandonment in Dixie: Underdevelopment in the Black Belt* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2013), 1.

nineteenth century, the Black Belt was distinctive in Alabama for its plantation life that hinged on the cultivation of cotton and sustained harsh levels of poverty for both African Americans and whites. In keeping with this culture, a minority of white planters and merchants dominated the poor, African American majority, a system that flourished from the antebellum period well into the twentieth century. Race divided the Black Belt, and whiteness often signified political solidarity.¹⁴ The region's elite whites not only dominated their own localities, but they also dominated Alabama through perpetuating economic practices that exploited the impoverished majority.

Because of its dominant cotton culture based in the soil, elite white economic and political control, and poor majority, Marengo County is representative of the typical Alabama Black Belt county. To be sure, historians and geographers have disagreed as to which counties should be included in the region, from Sisk's ten counties to Odum's more than two dozen counties. Sisk included Sumter, Greene, Hale, Perry, Marengo, Dallas, Wilcox, Lowndes, Montgomery, and Bullock Counties; among these, Gibson identified Sumter, Greene, Hale, and Marengo as a model cross-section of the Black Belt.¹⁵ The extent of the Black Belt matters less than the fact that when historians and geographers have identified Alabama's Black Belt counties and described their distinctive plantation culture, they have traditionally included Marengo. It was representative of the Black Belt model, as cotton plantations dominated the county's economy and little industry existed. White planters dominated Marengo politically and economically in the antebellum period and continued to do so after the Civil War. Although slavery had been eradicated, the plantation system continued to exploit the labor of poor African

¹⁴ Womack, *Abandonment in Dixie*, 2.

¹⁵ Samson and Webster, "Defining the Alabama Black Belt," 164.

Americans, who constituted the majority of the county's population and farmed most of the cotton that Marengo produced. From 1880 to 1910, Marengo's African Americans made up 76 to 77 percent of the county's population, and the number decreased only to 72 percent in 1920.¹⁶ Even at the height of the Great Migration, Marengo's racial demographics remained unchanged.

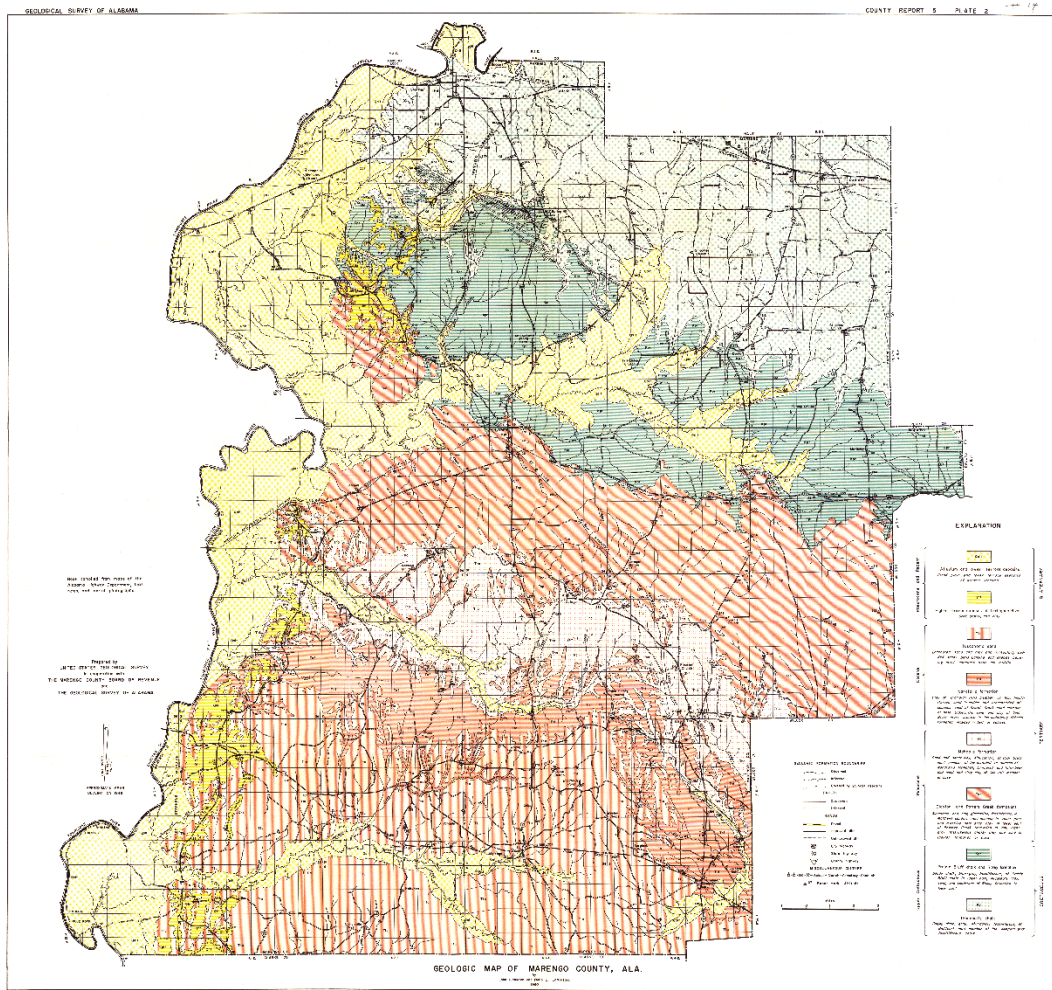


Figure 2. Geologic Map of Marengo County, Alabama. The pink areas in the south indicate various types of sand and sandy soil, while the green indicates Prairie Bluff chalk, and the cream color in the northeastern corner indicates Demopolis chalk. John G. Newton and P.E. LaMoreaux. Geologic Survey of Alabama, County Report 5, Plate 2, 1960. University of Alabama Historical Maps of Alabama.

¹⁶ Gibson, "Alabama Black Belt," 14.

Not all of Marengo County fell within the strip of rich soil that Gibson identified as so integral to the Black Belt's plantation culture, however. The prairie soil of Black Belt cut Marengo in half. Sandy, poor soil characterized the region of Marengo located south of Linden, where Miller was located. As a result, more small farmers and whites and fewer traditional plantations populated South Marengo in comparison to North Marengo, where large planters dominated the landscape and the soil was rich.¹⁷ This regional division within the county contributed to political rivalry in the 1890s, when Populism attracted the white farmers of South Marengo, who believed that the large planters of North Marengo held undue amounts of power and wealth. Yet even though he lived in South Marengo, Charles H. Miller was nonetheless a traditional Black Belt and North Marengo planter, even throughout the Populist crisis, when frustrated white farmers of South Marengo organized against the county Democratic machine. He fit into the Black Belt planter-politician model, defined as white landowners who possessed substantial financial power and used it to influence politics at the county and state level. These men often occupied prominent political positions for years and owned general stores and ginneries. In Marengo County, such men included Charles H. Miller as well as contemporaries John H. Minge of Faunsdale, Daniel J. Meador of Myrtlewood, and John J. King of McKinley. The latter two also controlled large plantations in South Marengo.

Cotton farming drove the Black Belt's economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The region was home to the highest numbers of farms in the state, with Marengo, Dallas, Wilcox, Lowndes, and Montgomery constituting the top five farming counties of Alabama in 1900. Even as Marengo industrialized in the late nineteenth century, cotton

¹⁷ James M. Anders, "The History of Marengo County, Alabama, 1890-1900" (master's thesis, University of Alabama, 1940), 53-54.

production expanded, as it did across the South. In 1890, only seven manufacturers existed within Marengo's borders. By 1900, the county was home to eighty, and the variety of industries expanded from solely cotton and lumber to include manufacturers of cement, carriages, and barrel staves and headings. Despite the growth of industry, acreage devoted to cotton in Marengo continued to increase and the number of bales produced per year ballooned.¹⁸ Cotton production relied on the labor of African Americans. The vast majority of Alabama's African Americans lived in the Black Belt, where most of them worked as tenant farmers who raised cotton at the insistence of their landlords. In Marengo County in 1900, African American tenant farms made up 64 percent of total farms, while white tenant farms accounted for only 8.5 percent. In total, tenant farms made up 72.5 percent of farms in Marengo County.¹⁹ Tenant farming took various forms. The 1900 Census differentiated between share tenants, who paid rent to a landlord in the form of a share of the crops they grew in a given year, and cash tenants, who paid a fixed amount of cash rent. In the cotton-growing South, cash tenants paid "at the end of the season a specified quantity of cotton."²⁰ Tenant farmers who lived in the Black Belt were cash tenants in overwhelming numbers. Of African American tenant farms in Marengo County in 1900, 2,693 were cash tenants, while only 900 were share tenants, or sharecroppers.

Across the South, landlords and merchants used the crop lien and credit system to control the livelihoods of the poor white and African American tenant farmers. This system was integral to the Black Belt's agriculture and economy, and it operated fully in Marengo County. Landlords

¹⁸ Anders, "History of Marengo," 77.

¹⁹ Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, accessed December 6, 2014, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php> (hereafter cited as Historical Census Browser).

²⁰ Benjamin H. Hibbard, "Tenancy in the Southern States," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 27, no. 3 (May 1913): 485.

divided plantations into plots of land on which tenants and their families cultivated cotton. Local merchants furnished tenants with the necessary equipment to make a crop each year and allowed them purchase goods on credit at his store. Customers usually attempted to pay the debts they amassed with the crops they grew; if they were consistently unable to pay their debts, they signed a crop lien with the merchant. Crop liens "allowed the tenant to offer as security on loans a claim against his forthcoming crops."²¹ The people who signed crop liens promised to pay the merchant a certain amount of money in rent by the end of the year and secured the debt with the entirety of all crops grown in the county for the current year. Many people also offered land and livestock as security. If the tenant farmer could not pay the agreed-upon amount, the merchant could take the crops, land, and other items named in the lien as payment. In some cases, farmers who owned their land lost it because they repeatedly could not settle their debts with the local merchant. Often in those cases, the merchant took the land as payment, forcing the farmer into a life of landless tenancy.²² The crop lien and credit system thus perpetuated the high levels of poverty across the Alabama Black Belt.

Cotton cultivation itself was a dangerous trap for landless Southern farmers. Landlords required their tenants to grow cotton, as it brought the most profits and required cheap labor, but it "fastened a yoke of permanent and oppressive debt" around the necks of the South's poor farmers.²³ Exclusively cultivating cotton prevented farmers from growing subsistence crops with

²¹ Sisk, "Rural Merchandising," 705-06.

²² Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 23.

²³ Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 27; W.W. Alexander, et al, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy: Summary of Field Studies and Statistical Surveys, 1933-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 13.

which to feed their families and ensured that farmers had little, if any, supplementary income.²⁴ Average farm size in Alabama shrank from 346 acres in 1860 to 93 in 1900, mainly due to emancipation, and land exhausted from decades of constant growing led to low production per acre. Additionally, declining cotton prices per pound meant that customers found paying off store debt through cotton proceeds increasingly difficult.²⁵ Due to these problems, the vicious circle of cotton and tenure claimed more and more farmers across the South; accordingly, the proportion of tenant-operated farms in Alabama increased from 46.8 percent of all farms in 1880 to 57.7 percent in 1900, and the numbers only continued to rise.²⁶ Tenant farming, coupled with dependence on the cotton crop, sustained the tenant farmer's nearly "bare animal existence" and maintained the postwar South's chronically low-performing economy.²⁷

Cotton defined Marengo County, whose cotton economy originated as a part of the antebellum plantation system. Affluent white slaveholders settled Marengo County in 1818, when Alabama was still a territory. These slaveholders migrated to the region searching for farmland on which to establish vast plantations. Plantations and villages characterized Marengo County save for the towns of Demopolis and Linden. Expatriates from France and Saint-Domingue, known as the Vine and Olive Colony, founded Demopolis in 1817.²⁸ Located in the northern part of the county, Demopolis occupied the land where the Tombigbee and Black

²⁴ Rupert B. Vance, "Cotton and Tenancy: Discussion," in *Problems of the Cotton Economy: Proceedings of the Southern Social Science Research Conference, New Orleans, March 8 and 9, 1935* (Dallas: The Arnold Foundation of Southern Methodist University, 1936), 19.

²⁵ Fite, *Cotton Fields*, 15, 28.

²⁶ Hibbard, "Tenancy," 486.

²⁷ W.W. Alexander, et al, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy: Summary of Field Studies and Statistical Surveys 1933-35* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 13; 14.

²⁸ Rafe Blaufarb, *Bonapartists in the Borderlands: French Exiles and Refugees on the Gulf Coast, 1815-1835* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 118.

Warrior Rivers met.²⁹ It developed as a regional center of commerce, as its location on two navigable rivers and on an east to west railroad line beginning in the 1850s made it a magnet for business. In an 1887 pamphlet, town councilmen proclaimed that for more than fifty years, Demopolis had been “the commercial centre” of the Black Belt and “command[ed] trade from [...] the counties of Marengo, Hale, Greene, and Sumter.”³⁰ Yet despite Demopolis’ economic importance, the town failed to secure the county seat. That distinction belonged to Linden, originally known as Marengo and Screamersville before the settlers dubbed the town “Hohenlinden,” almost certainly in honor of France’s victory over Austrian and Bavarian forces there in 1800. Residents later shortened the name to Linden.³¹ As the political center of Marengo County, Linden became home to the county and circuit courts and a number of attorneys who worked in the town, although it was significantly smaller than Demopolis, Marengo’s only city in 1900. This thesis defines cities as places containing 2,000 or more inhabitants, while towns contain fewer than 2,000.³² This study identifies places like Miller as villages, a term that applies to places of 50 inhabitants or fewer whose names often originated from the local post office. Outside of Demopolis and Linden, Marengo County remained largely rural, with only villages dotting the landscape. A series of districts, or beats, divided Marengo County, and the beats’ names and boundaries frequently changed. The most significant place within a beat’s bounds

²⁹ Winston Smith, *The People’s City: The Glory and Grief of an Alabama Town, 1850-1874* (Demopolis, Alabama: Marengo County Historical Society, 2003), 5.

³⁰ Demopolis City Council, “Demopolis, Alabama: A Pamphlet Descriptive of Its Location, Together with an Accurate Description of Its Surroundings” (Selma, Alabama: Selma Printing Co., 1887), 4.

³¹ James P. Kaetz, “Linden,” in *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, March 15, 2010; <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-2558>.

³² Code of Alabama 1975, Section 11-40-6. Demopolis was first designated a city in 1900, when the population reached 2,606 residents. See Appendix 1 for a contemporary map of Marengo County.

provided its name. The Millers for example lived in Shiloh, a beat south of Linden, for most of their residence in Marengo County.

The Miller family migrated to the Alabama Black Belt in the 1830s as one of the many white families moving west, whether to join kin in the area or in hopes of finding rich new land and economic opportunity.³³ George O. Miller was born on January 13, 1821 in South Carolina. His parents were James and Mary Miller, who were born in the Carolinas in the 1790s. George was the eldest of their four children. The Millers gradually moved farther south, first to Newton County, Georgia, and then to Alabama in the 1830s.³⁴ By 1840, the Millers lived in Wilcox County, a county of the Alabama Black Belt, and had taken up farming in the area.³⁵ Cathy Trussell Miller was the daughter of Matthew and Mary Ann (Sanders) Trussell. She was a native of the Alabama Black Belt. Born in 1831 in Greene County, she and her siblings were orphaned in the mid-1840s. She married George O. Miller on January 18, 1849, and they had nine children, eight of whom survived to adulthood, including four sons and four daughters. Born on February 22, 1857, Charles Houston Miller was their fourth child and second son.

The Millers resided in the town of Allenton in eastern Wilcox County. There George O. Miller entered the mercantile business in the 1840s. On December 31, 1849 he purchased a half-

³³ Frank J. Byrne, *Becoming Bourgeois: Merchant Culture in the South, 1820-1865* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 23; Billingsley, *Communities of Kinship*, 6.

³⁴ 1830 U.S. census, Newton County, Georgia, population schedule, p. 18, James Miller and dependents; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed February 5, 2015, <http://ancestry.com>.

³⁵ 1840 U.S. census, Wilcox County, Alabama, population schedule, p. 334; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed February 5, 2015, <http://ancestry.com>. Even though the Millers only had four children, three boys and a girl, the 1830 and 1840 censuses indicate the presence of a second daughter. She was probably Rebecca Stokes Chambers, whom the Millers appear to have taken in as a ward. George, Cathy, their infant son Julius, George's brother Alfred, and Cathy's sisters Elizabeth and Victoria lived in the Chambers household in 1850. Rebecca and her husband and children moved to South Marengo around the same time that the Millers did. The Chamberses may have moved with the Millers, or if they moved earlier, they may have provided part of the reason why the Millers left Wilcox.

acre lot in Allenton that included a “House [...] Now Occupied as a Store by George O. Miller.” The store occupied a half-acre lot bordering the south side of Canton Street; fellow merchant James Robinson inhabited the lot next door.³⁶ George’s younger brother Alfred worked as the store clerk.³⁷ By 1854, George O. Miller was one of seven general merchants in Allenton, which was then the second-largest business center in Wilcox after Camden, the county’s political center.³⁸

Many antebellum merchants owned slaves, and the Miller family was no exception. The 1850 Alabama State Census listed George O. Miller as the owner of eight slaves, who probably worked in the store and around his home.³⁹ Miller earned his living solely as a merchant by then, rather than as a farmer as his father and brother James. George did purchase 160 acres of farmland in 1849, but he sold the land the next year.⁴⁰ Miller also bought three lots in Allenton bordering the north and south sides of Canton Street, staking a claim for himself as an important merchant in the town. As an antebellum merchant, Miller acted as an economic middleman.⁴¹ He

³⁶ William E. Tanner to George O. Miller, December 31, 1849, Wilcox County Land Deeds, Wilcox County Probate Recording Office, Camden, AL.

³⁷ 1850 U.S. census, Wilcox County, Alabama, population schedule, p. 399, dwelling 817, family 817, Alfred T. Miller; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://ancestry.com>. Alfred T. Miller died on May 19, 1854.

³⁸ John P. Campbell, *The Southern Business Directory and General Commercial Advertiser*, vol. 1 (Charleston, SC: Walker and James, 1854), 25. Camden was home to ten general stores; every other community in Wilcox, except for Allenton, had only one or two general stores in 1854.

³⁹ 1850 Alabama census, Wilcox County, p. 8, George O. Miller; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://ancestry.com>.

⁴⁰ Hugh L. Rower and Beatrice C. Rower to George O. Miller, August 30, 1849, Wilcox County Land Deeds, Wilcox County Probate Recording Office, Camden, AL; George O. Miller and Susan C. Miller to Andrew J. Lewis, October 10, 1850, Wilcox County Land Deeds, Wilcox County Probate Recording Office, Camden, AL. Miller purchased the land from Hugh L. and Beatrice C. Rower on August 30, 1849 for \$800; he and Cathy sold it for a loss of \$100 on October 10, 1850.

⁴¹ Byrne, *Becoming Bourgeois*, 14.

extended credit to the residents of Allenton in exchange for goods, and in some cases he acted as security for residents who had executed mortgage notes to area planters, a prelude to the crop lien system that characterized the Black Belt's cotton economy after the Civil War. On July 8, 1853, for example, David A. Martin conveyed to Miller the interest in a mule, 25 acres of corn, and 25 acres of cotton and executed a mortgage for \$336.33 for value received in goods, wares, merchandise, and cash advances from Miller's store. If Martin failed to pay the value of the mortgage, Miller was authorized to seize the mule and crops and sell them.⁴² Miller provided security on a total of four of these mortgage notes from March 1850 to March 1854. Other local men who came to Miller for this service mortgaged their landholdings and livestock.

By 1860, however, Miller was no longer in the mercantile business and had gone into farming.⁴³ The reasons are murky. He seems to have shuttered his store around 1855, when Miller stopped acting as security on mortgage notes. Instead, he began executing notes himself to local merchant James A. Crook and planter Elbert H.J. Mobley. Of the four men who used Miller as security, David A. Martin executed the note of the largest sum; Miller's two notes dwarfed that of Martin. These mortgages began a pattern of debt that would define George O. Miller's credit into the 1870s after the family's move to Marengo County. In 1855, Miller used two of his Allenton town lots, including the half-acre parcel with the store and the six-acre parcel where he and his family lived, as security with Crook and Mobley on a mortgage for the sum of \$2,700.⁴⁴ Miller retained the six-acre parcel, as he sold it to Martha Benson for \$2,730 on July 4, 1860. He

⁴² David A. Martin to George O. Miller, July 8, 1853, Wilcox County Land Deeds, Wilcox County Probate Recording Office, Camden, AL.

⁴³ 1860 U.S. census, Wilcox County, Alabama, population schedule, Eastern Division, p. 1052, dwelling 257, family 288, George O. Miller; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://ancestry.com>.

⁴⁴ George O. Miller to James A. Crook and Elbert H. J. Mobley, December 20, 1855, Wilcox County Land Deeds, Wilcox County Probate Recording Office, Camden, AL.

may have lost the half-acre parcel.⁴⁵ Three years later, Miller mortgaged three slaves – Anthony, age 20; Abe, age 16; and Sarah, age 14 – to Crook and Mobley as security for a note amounting to \$2,169.⁴⁶ The land sale to Martha Benson may have allowed the Millers to pay off this lingering debt, and despite their debt and changing status the family remained reasonably well off by 1860. They still owned five slaves: three female slaves ages 16, 17, and 18, and two male slaves ages 25 and 26. Miller also owned real estate worth \$2,500, and his personal estate was worth \$4,000.⁴⁷

The Millers' fortunes continued to shift in 1861, when George O. Miller enlisted in the 1st Alabama Infantry at the age of 40. An early volunteer, he joined Company K (later Company B), known as the "Wilcox True Blues," as a private on February 9, 1861.⁴⁸ He saw action at Fort Barancas in Pensacola, Florida, but was discharged a year later when his enlistment expired, two months before Union forces captured his old company at Island Ten on the Mississippi River.⁴⁹ Despite pressure from the army, Miller apparently chose not to reenlist and simply returned home after his year of service. His health also might have been a factor. Family lore states that his war service damaged him both mentally and physically, and that he most likely became an

⁴⁵ George O. Miller to Martha Benson, July 4, 1860, Wilcox County Land Deeds, Wilcox County Probate Recording Office, Camden, AL.

⁴⁶ George O. Miller to Crook & Mobley, March 23, 1858, Wilcox County Land Deeds, Wilcox County Probate Recording Office, Camden, AL.

⁴⁷ 1860 U.S. census, Wilcox County, Alabama, slave schedule, Eastern Division, p. 40, George O. Miller; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://ancestry.com>.

⁴⁸ Alabama Civil War Service Database, Alabama Department of Archives and History, <http://www.archives.alabama.gov/civilwar/soldier.cfm?id=201147> (accessed February 1, 2016). The flag of the Wilcox True Blues is part of the Alabama Department of Archives and History's Civil War period flags collection.

⁴⁹ Willis Brewer, "First Alabama Infantry Regiment," in *Alabama: Her History, Resources, War Record, and Public Men From 1540 to 1872, Brief Historical Sketches of Military Organizations Raised In Alabama During the Civil War* (Montgomery, AL: Barrett & Brown, 1872), 589.

alcoholic as a result of his experiences in the Confederate Army. A year and a half after the war ended, he pledged in a family Bible never to “drink ardent spirits as long as I live with God as my helper.”⁵⁰ Whether he kept his pledge is unknown, but in 1869, George O. Miller sold the family’s remaining landholdings in the Allenton area, which amounted to 193 acres.⁵¹ Soon thereafter, the family moved to southern Marengo County, when Charles was about thirteen years old. The reason for the Millers’ move is unknown, but kinship ties to the area possibly played a role.

Charles H. Miller thus came of age in a family forced to navigate the crop lien and credit system in the aftermath of the Civil War. When the Millers moved to Marengo County, they were among the ten wealthiest in Nanafalia, the beat where they first settled. George O. Miller’s real estate holdings were valued at \$5,000 and his personal estate was valued at \$1,000.⁵² This apparent prosperity did not last. Throughout the 1870s, the Millers lived under a cloud of financial troubles and debt, and the family lost their land. When the Millers bought 856 acres of land from Maria L. Wood in the early 1870s, they executed a mortgage in order to secure payment for it. They failed to pay, and Wood sold the parcels. In response, the Millers sued her in Marengo County Chancery Court and later appealed to the Supreme Court of Alabama, which ruled that they had to abandon the suit, pay all taxes due on the land, and reconvey the property

⁵⁰ Becky Miller Wilson, “Miller Descendants” (Linden, AL: n.p., 1986), 28, 32. Wilson’s sources state that Miller enlisted in the 54th Alabama Infantry, but no record exists of his enlistment in a regiment other than the 1st Alabama in 1861. A record does exist for a Geo. Miller in the Alabama Defenders, a Home Guard located in neighboring Lowndes County; if this record is in fact George O. Miller, it may explain why he was able to avoid conscription after his discharge in 1862. Wilson, “Miller Descendants,” 32.

⁵¹ George O. Miller and Susan C. Miller to James W. Woodson, August 31, 1869, Wilcox County Land Deeds, Wilcox County Probate Recording Office, Camden, AL; George O. Miller and Susan C. Miller to William J. Sessions, August 31, 1869, Wilcox County Land Deeds, Wilcox County Probate Recording Office, Camden, AL..

⁵² 1870 U.S. census, Marengo County, Alabama, population schedule, Nanafalia, p. 490, dwelling 423, family 438, George O. Miller; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://ancestry.com>.

to Wood, which they did on November 5, 1872.⁵³ As a result, the once-prosperous Millers became landless tenant farmers.

Loss of this land also meant that the Millers had to execute more mortgages with local businesses and landowners in order to feed the family and continue producing cotton. In the 1870s, George O. Miller executed \$11,040.63 in mortgages with R.H. Hudson & Co. of Hoboken, Marengo County; Mobile firm Malone & Foote; and Shiloh merchant Thomas I. Hosea.⁵⁴ A \$3,000 mortgage with Malone & Foote furnished provisions and equipment to make a crop, but it claimed a lien on four mules, a horse, 25 head of cattle, two yoke of oxen, and his entire crop of cotton and corn.⁵⁵ The 1872 Malone & Foote lien specifically required Miller to deliver his crops to Gays Landing, a settlement on the Tombigbee River, the primary means of shipping cotton from Marengo plantations to market in Mobile. Marengo farmers were responsible for transporting cotton that they had raised to landings on the Tombigbee River to get their crops to market in Mobile each year. Scarcity of public and easily navigable roads in the county would have made this task even more difficult for Miller and would have increased his expenses and added to his debt.⁵⁶ Having repaid none of the debt to Malone & Foote in 1872,

⁵³ George O. Miller and Susan C. Miller to Maria L. Wood, November 5, 1872, Marengo County Land Deeds, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

⁵⁴ George O. Miller to T.I. Hosea, February 11, 1876, Marengo County Mortgages, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL; George O. Miller to Thomas I. Hosea, July 18, 1878, Marengo County Mortgages, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL. In 1872, Miller executed a mortgage with R.H. Hudson amounting to \$300, which was given to Miller to make a crop, with a lien on the first four bales of cotton and on the bay horse that he purchased for his farm. In 1876, Miller executed a mortgage with Shiloh merchant Thomas I. Hosea. Miller promised Hosea \$640.23 and a lien on three mules, twenty head of cattle, one yoke of oxen, and the entirety of his crops raised, which endured until paid in full. In 1878, Miller executed a second mortgage with Hosea. This was given to purchase food and clothing needed to make a crop and included a lien on one bay mare mule named Rhody, fifteen head of cattle, and his entire crop.

⁵⁵ George O. Miller to Malone & Foote, June 3, 1872, Marengo County Mortgages, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

⁵⁶ Anders, "History of Marengo," 94-95.

Miller renewed this mortgage again in 1873 with the stipulation that the “lien [would] continue until the debt [was] paid.”⁵⁷ Because the Millers no longer owned any land and depended on renting property from large landowners, they also moved frequently within a small area in the 1870s. The 1872 Malone & Foote mortgage placed the Miller residence at Horse Creek, while the 1873 mortgage listed it at the Jackson Plantation on Beaver Creek.⁵⁸ By 1876, the Millers had moved again, this time to the Witherspoon Place.⁵⁹ While the family moved to different plots of land every few years, however, they never left the area around Sweet Water, Shiloh, and Dixons Mills. Debt tethered the Millers to South Marengo.

As an enterprising, single young farmer, Charles H. Miller sought his place as one of the “new men” of the South in the 1880s and 1890s.⁶⁰ In order to make a place for himself, he first had to escape the cycle of debt and impoverishment that had ensnared his parents through gradual acquisition of small pieces of land in the 1880s. He executed only one mortgage during his earliest years as a farmer. In 1879, he promised \$100 to Thomas I. Hosea for advances to make a crop and secured the agreement with the entirety of the crops that he grew.⁶¹ As he was still part of his parents’ household in 1880, he well may have executed this mortgage to

⁵⁷ George O. Miller to Malone & Foote, January 18, 1873, Marengo County Mortgages, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

⁵⁸ George O. Miller to Malone & Foote, June 3, 1872, Marengo County Mortgages, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.; George O. Miller to Malone & Foote, January 18, 1873, Marengo County Land Deeds, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

⁵⁹ George O. Miller to T.I. Hosea, February 11, 1876, Marengo County Mortgages, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

⁶⁰ Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 64.

⁶¹ C.H. Miller to Thomas I. Hosea, January 28, 1879, Marengo County Mortgages, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

contribute to the family's cotton crop.⁶² In addition, support from his network of kin likely provided him with sufficient resources so that he did not have to execute numerous mortgages with local merchants to make a crop.⁶³

Kinship ties and a lack of substantial debt allowed Charles to accumulate cash with which to purchase land. Acquisition of land often came with family connections for Charles, as his siblings also had managed to escape the debt and poverty of their parents and had begun acquiring land of their own through marriages and business ventures. Family possession of land provided Charles with easier access to it. In fact, his younger brother William brought him into the world of landowners. William sold Charles his first 140 acres of land in Township 14, Range 3 East on June 12, 1884.⁶⁴ William had bought 335¾ acres of land in South Marengo from 1880 to 1883; three of the sales were from their eldest brother Julius and their eldest sister Mary and her husband, G.A. Watts. In June 1883, William bought a 140-acre parcel of land from the Wattses, which he sold to Charles the next year for \$800.⁶⁵ In 1889, Charles made a second land purchase, this time from Mike S. Thomas, for \$1,000. He executed a mortgage promising \$500 to Thomas in order to pay for the land, consisting of 220 acres north of Beaver Creek, as well as

⁶² 1880 U.S. census, Marengo County, Alabama, population schedule, Shiloh, p. 701, dwelling 105, family 105, Charles H. Miller; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://ancestry.com>.

⁶³ Billingsley, *Communities of Kinship*, 7.

⁶⁴ W.L. Miller to C.H. Miller, June 12, 1884, Marengo County Land Deeds, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

⁶⁵ G.A. Watts and M.E. Watts to W.L. Miller, June 1883, Marengo County Land Deeds, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

the Forniss Place and Gum Corner south of Beaver Creek.⁶⁶ A later, undated note from Thomas established that Charles satisfied the agreement in full.⁶⁷

Charles H. Miller thus initially built his wealth and power on a network of kin that allowed him limited use of credit, access to land, and involvement in the mercantile business in the 1890s. His father resumed his career as a merchant sometime in the 1880s or early 1890s with the establishment of George O. Miller & Son; his business may have originated from a general store that William owned in Shiloh.⁶⁸ Charles' father and brother provided a model for his own career as a merchant. Charles became involved in the operation of the store as early as 1891, when his name appears on the first page of the store's account book. On January 1, 1893, he assumed full ownership.⁶⁹ In May of the same year, he purchased land at a county sale, and in February 1895, he paid \$333 to E.R. Bradford and Mary and G.A. Watts, his sister and brother-in-law, for a one-third share of 760 acres, allowing him approximately 253 acres.⁷⁰ In November 1896, Miller bought a parcel of land of unknown acreage from Mary Tucker for \$100. Located at the southwest quarter of the northeast quarter of Section 28, Township 14, Range 3 East, this

⁶⁶ C.H. Miller to M.S. Thomas, January 14, 1889, Marengo County Mortgages, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ R.G. Dun & Company, *The Mercantile Agency Reference Book (And Key,) For The Within States, with Banking Towns, Banks, Bankers, Etc.; State Collection and Assignment Laws; Dates of Sittings of Courts, Etc., Etc., Corrected up to January 1882* (New York: R.G. Dun & Co., 1882), 106 (hereafter cited as R.G. Dun 1882).

⁶⁹ C.H. Miller, general store ledger 1891, C.H. Miller store records, W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama; *Reform Democrat*, "Dissolution Notice," February 16, 1893.

⁷⁰ E.R. Bradford, G.A. Watts, and M.E. Watts to C.H. Miller, February 9, 1895, Marengo County Land Deeds, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

land became the center of the village of Miller, Alabama, where Charles H. Miller built his family home and relocated his store in the late 1890s.⁷¹

Miller gained access to another network of power with his marriage into the Thomas family. Miller married Mary Caroline “Carrie” Thomas in Atlanta on December 4, 1895.⁷² Carrie was also from southern Marengo County and grew up in Shiloh and Sweet Water beats. Her parents were George Washington Thomas, a farmer who had fought for the Confederacy, and Placidia Peter June (Wright) Thomas, a teacher.⁷³ Carrie received a college education at the State Normal School in Florence, Alabama in 1888 and worked as a teacher before she married Miller, who was twelve years her senior. Carrie had family connections to a number of powerful Marengo citizens, including her uncle Mike S. Thomas, who had sold Miller his second parcel of land in 1889. Another uncle, Dr. Charles Brooks (C.B.) Thomas, was the founder, promoter, and namesake of the town of Thomaston, a new and thriving railroad town in Marengo County in the early 1900s. Uncle Alexander C. Thomas was a merchant in the community of Rembert in the 1890s and 1900s; in 1905, R.G. Dun agents gave his business a rating of E 2½, signifying pecuniary strength of 20,000 to 35,000 and good credit. His business ranked at the top of general stores located in Marengo’s villages; only three other general stores in the entirety of Marengo

⁷¹ Mary Tucker to C.H. Miller, November 34, 1896, Marengo County Land Deeds, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

⁷² *Linden Reporter*, “Town and County,” December 13, 1895.

⁷³ 1880 U.S. census, Marengo County, Alabama, population schedule, Sweet Water, p. 521, dwelling 151, family 151, Carry Thomas; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://ancestry.com>. Carrie Thomas was Miller’s second wife; he married Maggie Elan Watts of Wilcox County in 1886, but she died childless on October 3, 1887. She is buried in Bear Creek Cemetery near Pine Apple in Wilcox County. Carrie Thomas’s father fought in the 4th Alabama Infantry, Company D, and enlisted as a private on April 25, 1861. He was promoted to 5th sergeant and saw action at the battles of First Manassas, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Chickamauga, and the Wilderness, among others. Alabama Civil War Service Database, Alabama Department of Archives and History, <http://www.archives.alabama.gov/civilwar/soldier.cfm?id=201147> (accessed February 1, 2016).

possessed higher ratings.⁷⁴ A fourth uncle, William K. Thomas, was the Marengo County Superintendent of Education from 1897 to 1905.⁷⁵ In addition to his father and brother, the Thomases may have served as models for Miller's mercantile business and his political involvement in Marengo County. Through his marriage to Carrie Thomas, Miller became part of her family and part of the powerful political and economic networks in which her uncles did business.

Miller's establishment of a new community around himself and his family changed the landscape of South Marengo. The general store drove the growth of Miller, which was one of many developing villages in southern Marengo County in the 1890s. Between 1890 and 1900, Marengo County experienced a 15.8 percent jump in population from 33,095 to 38,315 inhabitants, an increase of 5,220.⁷⁶ Population increases in Linden and Demopolis accounted for fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, while Dayton and Faunsdale, the two other larger towns in Marengo at the time, experienced increases of only 15 and 122 residents, respectively.⁷⁷ Accordingly, most of Marengo's new residents were moving to rural areas, driving the growth of villages in the 1890s. Some of these villages were new, while others that may have already existed developed in ways that connected residents to the outside world in the 1890s. R.G. Dun

⁷⁴ R.G. Dun & Company, *Reference Book (and Key) Containing Ratings of Merchants, Manufacturers and Traders Generally, Alabama* (New York: R.G. Dun & Co., 1905), 23 (hereafter cited as R.G. Dun 1905). The three stores with higher credit ratings were Robert W. Price Co. of Dayton, rated at C 2; Mayer Bros. of Demopolis, rated B 1; and E.C. Dozier & Co. of Nanafalia, rated at D 2. All three of these businesses were located in much more highly populated areas than Rembert, which was a village of 25 people in 1905.

⁷⁵ W.K. Thomas, letter to John G. Harris, 1897; Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL.

⁷⁶ Gibson, "Alabama Black Belt," 14-15. Between 1890 and 1900, Alabama experienced a population growth rate of 20.8 percent, increasing from 1,513,401 to 1,828,697 residents.

⁷⁷ Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910: Abstract of the Census with Supplement for Alabama* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), 581.

credit records from 1894 and 1905 included eighteen places with general stores that had not existed in the previous records, including Miller and thirteen others located in South Marengo. The village of Miller first appeared in county mortgage records on May 14, 1898, in a crop lien executed to Charles H. Miller.⁷⁸ His establishment of Miller provided residents of the area with new connections to the rest of Marengo County and the rest of the world. Not only did the Miller general store provide people with goods from far off places, but it also opened channels of communication. In spring of 1897, the *Linden Reporter* noted that Miller had a new telephone line that connected the store to Linden.⁷⁹ In 1898, Rural Free Delivery brought mail to Miller for the first time; Charles H. Miller became the first postmaster and operated the post office out of the general store.⁸⁰ The federal government compensated him \$49.79 annually for providing this service to his community.⁸¹ Named for its postmaster and central figure, the Miller post office lent the village its name.

Railroads also brought change to South Marengo in the form of a new mode of shipment and transportation in the early 1900s. Since the 1850s, Demopolis had received rail service, but the line's location at the northernmost part of the county limited South Marengo residents' access to it.⁸² By 1902, the Louisville and Nashville (L&N) Railroad extended a line from Selma through Thomaston and Linden. The new line transported both passengers and produce from

⁷⁸ J.B. Kirkham to C.H. Miller, May 14, 1898, Marengo County Land Deeds, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

⁷⁹ Anders, "History of Marengo," 90.

⁸⁰ Virginia O. Foscue, *Place Names in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 93.

⁸¹ *Official Register of the United States, Containing a List of the Officers of Employees in the Civil, Military, and Naval Service, Together with a List of Vessels Belonging to the United States, July 1, 1901*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901), 23.

⁸² Thomas, Cowperthwaite, & Co., "A New Map of Alabama," 1853, University of Alabama Historical Map Archive.

Marengo to points outside the county. For example, Linden farmers grew cantaloupes and used the L&N line to ship them east to markets in the North.⁸³ In 1903, the line reached Myrtlewood, where it stopped just short of the Tombigbee River. While the river served as a mode of shipping and transportation, it was also a boundary. The Tombigbee limited rail access to Mississippi and the westernmost counties of Alabama, as the L&N did not cross the river until the 1940s.⁸⁴ South Marengo received another railroad between in 1903 or 1904, when the Marengo Choctaw & Meridian Railway extended sixteen miles from the Southern line in Pine Hill, Wilcox County, to Vangale, running through Dixons Mills and Sweet Water, a few miles south of Miller.⁸⁵ The line provided transportation for South Marengo timber. By 1906, the line measured twenty-five miles and reached the village of Coxheath, though it never stretched any further.⁸⁶

Not only did the railroads provide new shipping and passenger connections to South Marengo residents, but they also changed the county's landscape. New settlements appeared along the L&N in the first decade of the twentieth century. In the case of Linden, the railroad altered the shape and activity of the town. In 1900, the "old town" and the "new town" divided Linden. The old town was located on the northernmost side of Linden, while new town was situated on the south side, one mile away.⁸⁷ When the railroad reached Linden in 1902, it ran

⁸³ "'Heart of Alabama: Some Facts and Figures about the Country South of Selma,'" *North & South*, June 1904, 12.

⁸⁴ United States Geologic Survey, "Alabama Transportation Map," sheet 6, 1948, University of Alabama Historical Map Archive. State maps show the line stopping at Myrtlewood in 1935; the next available railroad transportation map shows the line crossing the Tombigbee to Choctaw County in 1948.

⁸⁵ Interstate Commerce Commission, *Seventeenth Annual Report on the Statistics of Railways in the United States for the Year Ending June 30, 1904* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1905), 224. The Marengo, Choctaw, & Meridian line became the Alabama & Northwestern Railroad in 1912 and was abandoned in 1934.

⁸⁶ Interstate Commerce Commission, *Nineteenth Annual Report on the Statistics of Railways in the United States for the Year Ending June 30, 1906* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1907), 228.

⁸⁷ Betty Jane Gardner, "Linden: The Past 100 Years" (Linden, AL: n.p., 1973), 30.

through the southern part of town, moving commerce away from the old town and toward the new. The railroad also pulled the center of county government away from the old town with the relocation of the courthouse in 1903. The old courthouse, located in the old town on the northwest corner of Cahaba Avenue and Mobile Street, had become too small, and so in 1902 the county commissioners, including Charles H. Miller, sought a site for a new courthouse. The commissioners proposed two locations, one on the corner of East Street and Center Avenue, near the old town, and the other on the corner of East Street and Coats Avenue, further south nearer the new town and the railroad. Miller voted for the Center Avenue lot, but the commission chose the Coats Avenue lot, where the new courthouse opened on October 1, 1903.⁸⁸ Because the new courthouse was more than half a mile away from the old, the old town declined while the new town flourished around Linden's rail depot.

With his personal and political connections, his land, and his store, Charles H. Miller had the makings of the typical, prosperous planter and merchant of the Black Belt. Miller became one of the major planters who dominated Marengo and the Black Belt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After experiencing a financially volatile upbringing, Miller achieved this status through the privilege of kinship ties that provided him with access to networks of power, credit, and land. Miller's financial influence helped shape the landscape of South Marengo and provided new connections to the world to his neighbors in the Miller area. Miller's power and wealth rested on cotton cultivation, and he functioned as an important part of the economy in Marengo County, which depended on the cotton plantations. To be sure, the cotton plantation system that fueled Marengo's economy and benefited the planters operated at the

⁸⁸ Gardner, "Linden," 31; Joel D. Jones, "Old Times" (Linden, AL: n.p., n.d.), 88.

expense of poor whites and African Americans. In both his business dealings and his political career, Charles H. Miller would protect the interests of the white planter class of Marengo County and the Black Belt without fail, often at the expense of his poor white and African American neighbors.

Chapter Two

The Economics of Power

The general store was the heart of the village of Miller. In 1901 and 1902 the store served 152 individuals in the Miller area, including African-American farmer Tony Rogers. Rogers shopped at the Miller Store on a near-daily basis in order to buy necessities for himself, his wife Emma, and his two daughters, Sallie and Lillie.¹ Among his purchases were tobacco, snuff, coffee, molasses, soap, 51½ total yards of four different kinds of fabrics, eight different kinds of medicines, and 143¾ pounds of meat.² On February 1, 1901, Rogers signed a mortgage with Charles H. Miller. In a typical exchange for the food, implements, and other supplies he needed to make a crop, Rogers promised to pay Charles H. Miller \$200 and give him all of his crops grown in the year 1901. He then secured this agreement with his own livestock and a parcel of land located in the Miller area.³ After he defaulted on the mortgage payment, Miller bought the

¹ C.H. Miller, general store ledger, C.H. Miller store records, 1901-1902; W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama (hereafter cited as Ledger 1901-02).

² Ledger 1901-1902, 15; 54; 110; 144; 196. Rogers's fabric purchases included calico, Osnaburg, domestic, and dress goods; his medicine purchases included asafoetida, antiseptic, paregoric, viburnal wine, laudanum, calomel, liniment, and castor oil. See Appendix 4 for a sample inventory of items from the Miller Store in 1901 and 1902.

³ Tony and Emma Rogers to C.H. Miller, February 1, 1901, Marengo County Mortgages, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, Alabama. The land parcel: S ½ of SE ¼ except 10 acres in NE ¼ of Section 7, Township 14, Range 3 E, 65 ¾ acres. It is unknown whether this land is the land for which Miller charged Rogers rent beginning in 1902. Miller did not include a description of the land in the ledger.

parcel for \$130 on February 11, 1902, and Rogers lost his land.⁴ Sixteen days later, Miller charged him twenty dollars in rent and recorded the charge in his store account.⁵ Rogers' experience was typical of that of the Southern tenant farmer who lacked the economic means to control his own livelihood.

Reconstruction of the identities and experiences of the Miller Store customers from ledger accounts, census data, mortgages, and land deeds allows for examination of the role of the cotton economy, sharecropping, and crop lien and credit system as they affected the residents of the village of Miller. As the central institution of Miller, Alabama, the Miller Store provides a window into life in Miller and life in the Black Belt region. At the center of the Miller Store was its owner, operator, and postmaster, Charles H. Miller. He built his political power, which will be discussed in the next chapter, on his extensive land holdings and influence through his general store and First National Bank of Linden. Through taking advantage of the crop lien and credit system as a landowner, merchant, and banker, Miller built a base of significant economic power that shaped his community and county.

Kinship ties introduced Miller to the mercantile business. His general store may have originated with his brother William, who operated a general store in Shiloh in the 1880s. The store appeared in the 1882 R.G. Dun & Company's *Mercantile Reference Book for Alabama*.⁶ R.G. Dun's agents canvassed each state in order to evaluate the "pecuniary strength" and credit of businesses using a code of letters and numbers. Pecuniary strength, noted in a letter ranging from A through M, ranged from under 500 to above one million dollars, and credit rating

⁴ Tony and Emma Rogers to C.H. Miller, February 11, 1902, Marengo County Land Deeds, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, Alabama.

⁵ Ledger 1901-02, 196.

⁶ R.G. Dun 1882, 106.

categories included “limited,” “fair,” “good,” or “high,” using numbers 1 through 4. These books can be used to trace the growth of businesses and business networks over time. In this case, books from 1882, 1894, 1905, and 1920 were used to track the growth of the Miller Store and the network of general stores in Marengo County.

R.G. Dun agents gave William Miller no credit rating at all in 1882, indicating that the store’s pecuniary strength was low and its credit was poor. His store was one of nine general stores in South Marengo whose credit was insufficient enough to receive this rating. In 1894, when Charles again appeared in R.G. Dun’s records, the business continued to struggle. The agency assigned Charles’ store a rating of L 4, indicating “less than 1,000 est. pecuniary strength” and “limited credit.” Charles H. Miller’s store, listed as “C. H. Miller, G.S.,” was one of six general merchants listed in the Shiloh area. His store had the second weakest pecuniary strength in Shiloh, and it was tied with W.W. Bennett & Bro. for the worst credit of the six businesses.⁷ In 1905, R.G. Dun agents listed the store’s location as Miller, a community of 35 residents.⁸ Charles H. Miller had moved the store from Shiloh to Miller sometime after 1896, when he bought the land and built his home there. By 1905, the business showed significant growth, probably due to the lack of competition in the Miller area, as Charles H. Miller was the area’s sole merchant. Among general stores in Marengo villages, Miller’s store had the third highest pecuniary strength, listed at G 3½, signifying pecuniary strength of 5,000 to 10,000 with fair credit. Charles H. Miller was listed only behind A.C. Thomas of Rembert at E 2½ and T.H. Bradford of Moss at F 3.⁹ In 1920, three years after Miller’s death, his store continued to serve

⁷ R.G. Dun & Company, *The Mercantile Agency Reference Book (And Key,) for Alabama, January 1894* (New York: R.G. Dun & Co., 1894), 164 (hereafter cited as R.G. Dun 1894).

⁸ R.G. Dun 1905, 18.

⁹ R.G. Dun 1905, 18, 20, 13.

the Miller area under the operation of his wife and his eldest son, Charles Augustus Miller. R.G. Dun agents at that time assigned the business a rating of 3, indicating good credit without specifying its pecuniary strength.¹⁰

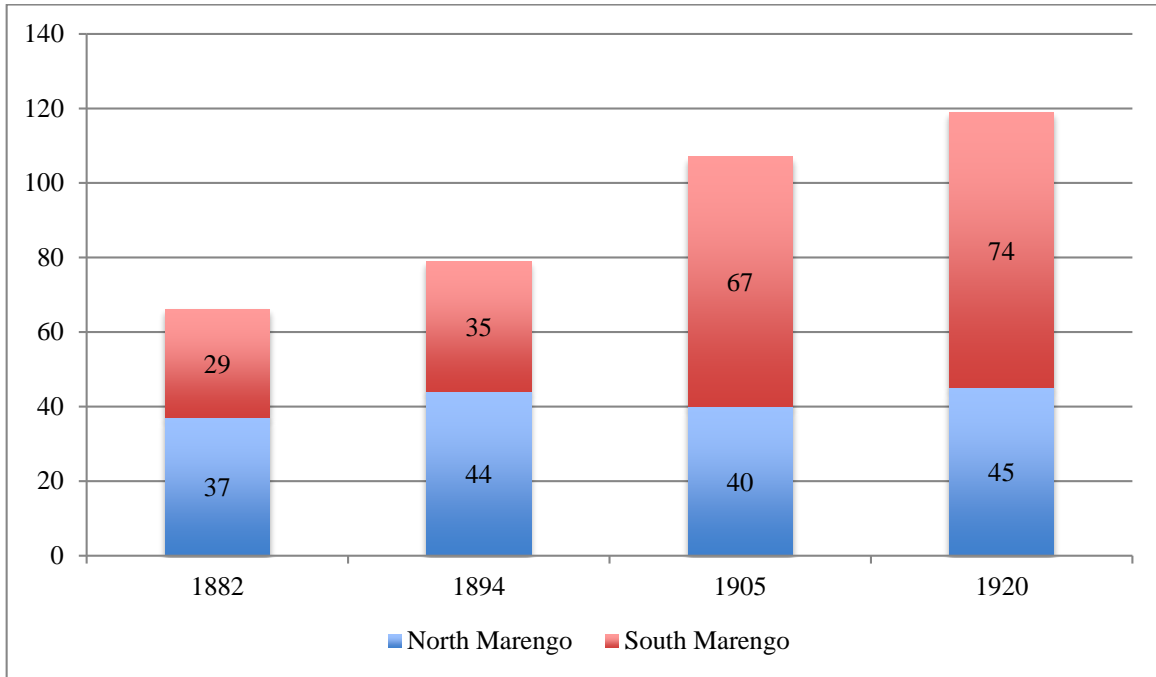


Figure 3. General stores in Marengo County, 1882-1920.

Because R.G. Dun agents evaluated the credit of businesses in even the most remote villages, these books are also useful in tracking where goods were available to people in Marengo County, where most of the general stores were located in rural areas. In 1882 and 1894, sparsely populated South Marengo hosted fewer general stores than the northern part of the county. North Marengo, with a larger population, had more general stores as well as a more diverse pool of stores and businesses concentrated in towns. Dayton, Demopolis, and Faunsdale

¹⁰ R.G. Dun & Company, *The Mercantile Agency Reference Book (And Key,) for Alabama, 1920* (New York: R.G. Dun & Co., 1920), 159 (hereafter cited as R.G. Dun 1920).

alone had 31 general stores in 1894, but only thirteen stores existed outside these towns, for a total of 44 stores in North Marengo. In South Marengo, a number of isolated villages like Shiloh populated the area in the 1890s. Thirty-five general stores were distributed evenly between each of these small communities. The distribution of highly rated general stores throughout the county highlights the lack of centralization of South Marengo in the 1890s. 26 general stores in Marengo County held good or high credit in 1894, and only nine of those stores were located in South Marengo. While fifteen of the seventeen North Marengo stores possessing good or high credit were concentrated in the towns of Demopolis, Dayton, and Faunsdale, the nine successful South Marengo stores were located in nine different small, isolated villages, which was typical of the rural South.¹¹ In these villages, the only businesses were usually general stores that linked local residents with goods from Linden, Demopolis, Selma, and beyond. Additionally, stores often contained a post office, as the Miller Store did. As a result, the Miller Store played an important role in the community as the residents' closest connection to the rest of the world.

In order to provide his customers access to goods, the merchant relied on an extensive business network, as his store was one of many “small cogs in a large and complex machinery of trade.”¹² While Miller personally escaped the impoverishment and debt cycle of the crop lien and credit system, he remained an integral part of the system as a merchant. In order to extend credit to his customers, Miller relied on suppliers and wholesalers to extend credit to him, and he had to find the means to pay them for their goods. As a local merchant, Miller held little power in his relationships with suppliers and middlemen. Faunsdale merchant John H. Minge maintained business with over 100 firms in fifteen states, including John Deere Plow Company, the New

¹¹ R.G. Dun 1894.

¹² Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 83.

Home Sewing Machine Company, and Gulf Refining Company of Louisiana, all of which supplied him goods for his store in 1906. These firms were located as close as the Southern Grocery Company in Demopolis and Tissier Hardware in Selma, and as far away as the Great Eastern Whip Company in Westfield, Massachusetts. Minge maintained contact with businesses in a number of major cities, including New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Chicago, Atlanta, Nashville, and New Orleans.¹³ A letter to Charles H. Miller from salesman Frank A. Ross of the Hamilton Brown Shoe Company of St. Louis indicates that Miller probably had contact with suppliers in many of the same locations that Minge did.¹⁴ Miller's business connections may not have been as extensive, as Minge's store was larger and located in a more prosperous, more populated area, but Minge's accounts provide an example of the network in which Miller participated as the operator of a general store in Marengo County.

The R.G. Dun reference books also reveal an uptick in business activity across the entirety of South Marengo at the beginning of the twentieth century, while business in North Marengo declined outside of Demopolis. By 1905, the number of general stores in South Marengo increased to 67, outnumbering those in North Marengo by 27.¹⁵ The network of general stores in South Marengo grew as the number of villages increased, with new villages popping up in the 1890s, including Miller. South Marengo also experienced significant town growth from 1894 to 1905. Linden and Nanafalia expanded in population and in diversity and number of

¹³ John H. Minge, business records, 1892-1907; Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL. Minge had contact with 25 local businesses in Selma and Demopolis, 12 other in-state businesses in Birmingham, Mobile, and Montgomery, 37 in the Southeast, and 29 outside the South. See Appendix 3 for the complete list of Minge's business connections.

¹⁴ Frank A. Ross, letter to C.H. Miller, C.H. Miller store records, November 14, 1900; W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL.

¹⁵ R.G. Dun 1905.

businesses, and Thomaston thrived as a new railroad town. By 1920, South Marengo's general store network grew to include 74 merchants, while North Marengo had only 45 general stores. South Marengo continued to experience business growth throughout the area, while development in North Marengo remained concentrated in Demopolis, which accounted for 19 general stores, while other towns declined, including Dayton and Faunsdale. In 1920, the general store remained at the center of commerce in South Marengo.

Historians have acknowledged general stores such as these as the hub of all aspects of rural life in the post-Reconstruction South.¹⁶ Thomas D. Clark argued in 1944 that the general store was the institutional center of the destructive crop lien and credit system that was integral to the Southern agricultural economy.¹⁷ This system trapped farmers in debt, because it allowed them to buy goods on store credit, which they attempted and often failed to repay with proceeds from crops, perpetuating their debt.¹⁸ Clark gave only cursory consideration to the lives of the African Americans who were caught in this system, a deficiency of the literature that endured for decades afterward. In the 1970s, economists Ransom and Sutch attempted to fill this gap with a study of the economic impact of general stores on African-American life throughout the South.¹⁹ They argued that rural merchants were "territorial monopolists" who used economic dominance of their localities to trap African-American sharecroppers and tenant farmers in poverty and rob

¹⁶ Thomas D. Clark, *Pills, Petticoats, and Plows: The Southern Country Store* (1944; repr., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 15; Ayers, 13.

¹⁷ Clark, *Pills, Petticoats, and Plows*, 273.

¹⁸ "Crop Lien System of Credit," University of Kentucky Agripedia, accessed December 6, 2014, <http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agripedia/glossary/croplien.htm>.

¹⁹ Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xiii.

them of agency.²⁰ Ransom and Sutch's approach, however, ignored the stories of the poor white farmers caught in the crop lien and credit cycle. Edward Ayers also analyzed the conflict between merchants and farmers through the crop lien system, although his analysis painted a broad picture that encompassed general stores throughout the South.²¹ Glenn N. Sisk examined rural stores in the Alabama Black Belt specifically and explored the workings of the crop lien system in the region. The study unfortunately only skimmed the surface of customer experiences and lacked in-depth analysis of individual customer accounts.²² Most recently, Linda English examined case studies of thirty general stores during the late nineteenth century. While her study linked stores with race, cotton growing, and sharecropping, her research covered only communities in Texas and Indian Territory.²³

Ted Ownby also considered the influence of stores on rural life through a series of specific case studies, in which he reconstructed communities in Mississippi through store records. Ownby focused on the lives of the general store customers and argued that consumer identity influenced customers' purchases and experiences.²⁴ He found that rural general stores in

²⁰ Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 127.

²¹ Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 83.

²² Sisk, "Rural Merchandising," 705-15. Other case studies of general stores in specific Southern localities: William Hampton Adams and Steven D. Smith, "Historical Perspectives on Black Tenant Farmer Material Culture: The Henry C. Long General Store Ledger at Waverly Plantation, Mississippi," in *The Archaeology of Slavery and Plantation Life*, ed. Theresa A. Singleton (Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1985), 309-334; Margaret Pace Farmer, "Furnishing Merchants and Sharecroppers in Pike County, Alabama," *Alabama Review* 23, no. 2 (April 1970), 143-51.

²³ Linda English, *By All Accounts: General Stores and Community Life in Texas and Indian Territory* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013).

²⁴ Ted Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, and Culture 1830-1998* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). Other historians have focused exclusively on the merchants' experiences in the rural general store: Jacqueline P. Bull, "The General Merchant in the Economic History of the New South," *Journal of Southern History* 28, no. 1 (February 1952): 37-59; Jonathan M. Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama 1860-1885* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

this period were overwhelmingly white, male environments. African Americans avoided these stores because of the tensions of shopping in a white-dominated setting fraught with white supremacy.²⁵ He asserted that African Americans also made fewer purchases because of marginalization and discomfort with spending money due to the white assumption that African Americans would “spend themselves into starvation” if given the chance.²⁶ Additionally, Ownby focused solely on goods that customers purchased and did not explore the issue of merchants as landlords, bankers, and middlemen and the ties between store debt and rent.

This pattern does not hold true for the Miller Store. The marginalization of Charles H. Miller’s tenant-customers increased their dependence on the store for their livelihoods, thereby causing increased frequency and number of purchases and accrual of debt in the store. Many customers regularly visited the store, some on a near-daily basis, to buy goods that they needed to live. For many Miller Store customers, rents and mortgages charged to their accounts tethered their survival to the store beyond just their purchases of subsistence goods. These people were economically and politically powerless, as high levels of debt tied people to the land they rented from or mortgaged to Miller.

Through the store, Charles H. Miller became the central figure of his village. Owning hundreds of acres of land in the 1890s gave him a base of power. Acting as community creditor and landlord through his store increased that power in the 1890s and into the twentieth century. By 1902, he owned over one thousand acres in the Miller area and continued to buy more land at frequent intervals in subsequent years. By the time of his death in 1917, he owned over three

²⁵ Ownby, *American Dreams*, 73.

²⁶ Ownby, *American Dreams*, 62.

thousand acres of land that were scattered throughout central Marengo County.²⁷ As Miller expanded his landholdings, he acquired more tenant farmers to work his new land. Through the general store, Miller also benefited from African Americans' and poor whites' lack of economic and political power to increase his own power and wealth. These people were often trapped in the cycle of indebtedness that the crop lien and credit system created, leading them to execute mortgage after mortgage with Miller in order to attempt to pay their debts, which included store purchases and land rent. Of a total of 135 mortgages executed to Charles H. Miller from 1899 to 1902, customers of the Miller Store executed 92 of them (68 percent). Almost every year, the number of mortgages that farmers executed with Miller increased. The regular increase in mortgages can be attributed to an increase in number of tenants as well as an increase in customers who could not pay their store debts. From 1889 to 1900, mortgage executions increased from one to 40. By 1914, the number of mortgages executed rose to a high of 76, by which time Miller owned more than two thousand acres of land.

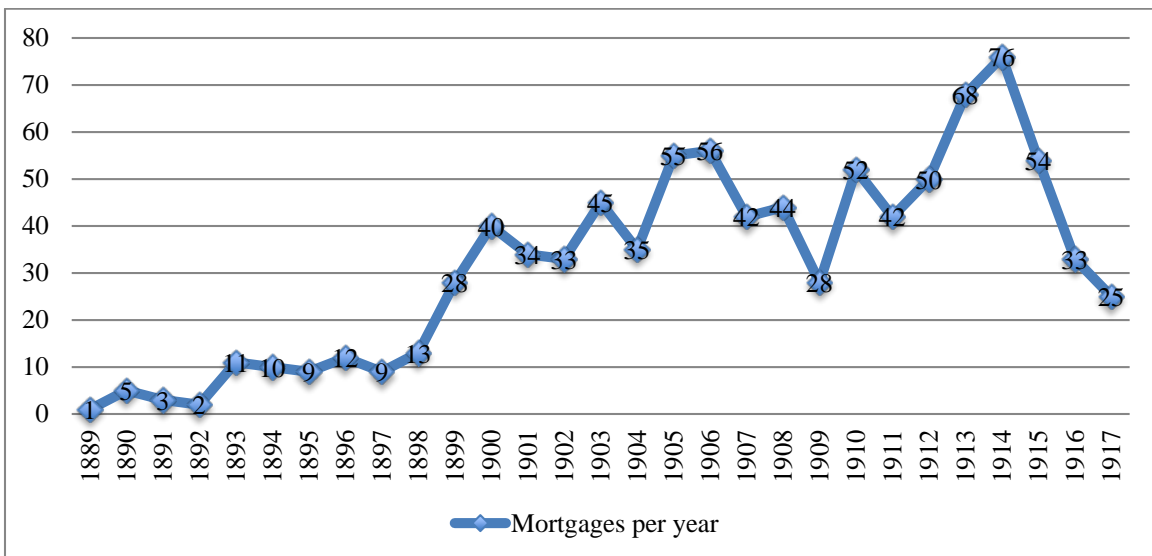


Figure 4. Mortgages executed to Charles H. Miller, 1889-1917.

²⁷ C.H. Miller, 1916, Marengo County Tax Assessments, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

Miller thus held extensive “control of land and the agricultural infrastructure” in the Miller area, which indicated his family’s importance as one of the planter class of the Black Belt.²⁸ Miller continually acquired land and rarely sold what he bought. Land deeds located in the Marengo County Courthouse account for only 1,716 acres and 29 parcels of his landholdings, and only eighteen of the deeds list acreage amounts for the parcels he bought. However, tax records illustrate that Miller was even wealthier and his estate even more extensive than the deeds indicate. In 1911, tax records note that he owned 25 parcels of land totaling 2,358 acres and valued at \$8,180.²⁹ 1916 tax records demonstrate that within over the previous five years, he had increased his estate to include 46 parcels of land, totaling 3,412 acres and valued at \$11,930. The value of Miller’s estate was valued at \$11,670 in 1911, and by 1916, it had increased to \$16,370. In fact, Miller owned 11.28 percent of the land and 11.68 percent of the wealth in Shiloh in 1916, making him the wealthiest man in the beat.³⁰

While Miller was the foremost citizen of Shiloh in the 1910s, the wealth and resources of his planter-politician counterparts elsewhere in the county dwarfed his. Daniel J. Meador of Myrtlewood owned over 5,000 acres of land valued at nearly \$20,000, as well as a mercantile business with merchandise valued at \$5,000; in comparison, Miller’s store held merchandise valued at only \$1,000.³¹ While Meador lived in a rural beat similar to Shiloh, the wealthiest men

²⁸ Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South since the Civil War*, Creating the North American Landscape (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 39.

²⁹ C.H. Miller, 1911, Marengo County Tax Assessments, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

³⁰ C.H. Miller, 1916, Marengo County Tax Assessments, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

³¹ D.J. Meador, 1911, Marengo County Tax Assessments, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

of Marengo often had connections with larger places that Charles Miller lacked. John C. Webb possessed land and Demopolis city lots with a combined value of \$105,430.³² John J. King of McKinley owned nearly three thousand acres of land valued at \$23,680, 690 acres of town lots in the thriving town of Thomaston, a mercantile business, and 2,700 shares in the King Lumber Company.³³ In addition to his general store, John H. Minge owned a ginnery in Faunsdale and a cotton oil mill, together valued at \$21,000.³⁴ The wealthiest men in Marengo commanded not only land and credit through general stores, but they also controlled city and town real estate as well enterprises such as lumber companies and mills. While Miller's wealth far exceeded that of his neighbors in Shiloh, he did not command the extensive resources or possess the urban connections that some of his peers did.

Still, Charles H. Miller's business constituted a central part of his domain. The store served over one hundred customers, including other white landowners and tenant farmers and African American farm owners and tenant farmers.³⁵ Through the store, Miller served as the village's banker, middleman, and landlord. Customers used him as their local banker and frequently came to the store to withdraw small amounts of cash. As the community middleman, he also handled the bills that his customers owed at other area businesses, such as Mayer Brothers Grocery in Demopolis.³⁶ He also acted as a landlord for many of his customers, as he

³² J.C. Webb, 1916, Marengo County Tax Assessments, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

³³ J.J. King, 1911, Marengo County Tax Assessments, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

³⁴ J.H. Minge, 1911, Marengo County Tax Assessments, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

³⁵ C.H. Miller, general store ledger, 1891-1893; C.H. Miller store records; W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama, accessed December 3, 2014, http://acumen.lib.ua.edu/#!/u0003_0000987_0000001.

³⁶ Ledger 1901-1902.

controlled their rents and mortgages through the store. He used the store as a means to acquire more land, which he then rented out to the tenant farmers who shopped there. Miller also made arrangements with local tenant farmers before he became involved with the store; he required them to begin buying supplies on credit from him. He also made arrangements to furnish other local landlords' tenants, as not all tenant farmers who shopped at the store appeared to have rented from Miller.

Analysis of Miller Store ledgers from the years 1901 and 1902 illustrated that many customers depended on the store for their survival. People not only purchased necessary goods, but they also managed rents and mortgages through the store. African Americans constituted 53 percent of the 138 customers identified; many of the rest were poor white farmers. Sixty-five of the identified customers, or 47 percent, lived on rented property and paid rent to Miller or other local landlords who may have sent their tenants to the store. Customers paid in cotton or occasionally corn, cash made from selling crops, or odd jobs, such as hauling cotton or working a certain number of days for store credit. Other customers earned credit toward their accounts by collecting rent from other customers on Miller's behalf. For example, Mrs. M.J. Barkley, a white property owner, collected land rent from tenant Bryant Huckabee on February 14, 1902 and earned ten dollars of credit through this transaction.³⁷ Eighteen customers, or 13 percent, lived on mortgaged property and paid mortgages to Miller; in all, 60 percent of customers owed their livelihoods to him through the store.

The exploitative cycle of the tenure system trapped Miller's tenant-customers, both white and African-American, in crippling poverty. Through the general store, Miller played the role of

³⁷ Ledger 1901-02, 217.

the benevolent, paternalistic planter. After the Civil War and the reorganization of the labor system, whites redefined their paternalistic attitudes to maintain African Americans' subservience to white planters. Planters took care of their tenants and believed that limiting African Americans' opportunities was good for them.³⁸ Miller furnished his tenants with goods from his store, provided them with medical care, and allowed them to use his farm equipment and livestock, but those commodities came at a high price that tenants often could not surmount, subsequently chaining them to the land they worked and leaving them without any opportunity for social or economic advancement.

Many of the customers, especially African Americans who rented property, sustained consistent levels of debt throughout the year. Customers constantly amassed debt, sometimes in the hundreds of dollars, as twenty-six customers charged one hundred dollars or more to their accounts, which they paid off in small amounts of credit when they were able. Twenty of these customers were African Americans. The account of African American tenant farmer Sam McIntosh, Jr. demonstrates the most egregious example of this cycle. He began his 1901 account on April 6 with \$628.62 in debt, a sum that had only decreased to \$508.29 by May 31, 1902. Over these thirteen months, he bought subsistence items such as shoes, meat, flour, tobacco, and various fabrics to support his family of six, but a payment of \$432.44 in proceeds from twelve bales of cotton at the end of 1901 was insufficient to erase his debt. Tony Rogers had the same problem; while his debt was not as high as that of McIntosh, he still owed the store \$283.13 at the conclusion of his account on February 27, 1902, despite having paid Charles H. Miller

³⁸ Aiken, *Cotton Plantation South*, 27.

\$89.46 in cotton on December 13, 1901.³⁹ As tenant farmers operating within the confines of the crop lien and credit system, these men and others could not escape the constant cycle of purchasing goods to survive.

A type of county convict leasing further perpetuated the debt cycle for a few customers. Alabama's peonage system convicted African American men on "baseless" criminal charges and required them pay fines that were beyond their means. After conviction, planters would offer to sign labor contracts with the men in order to pay off their fines. The agreement became a form of involuntary servitude in which the convicted men worked for planters under oppressive conditions.⁴⁰ This system operated in Marengo County and benefited Charles H. Miller. In 1899 and 1900, he employed three African American men who had been convicted in the Marengo County courts under the peonage system. On November 16, 1900, for example, Sam McIntosh was convicted of carrying a concealed weapon and was fined \$100. As he was unable to access cash to pay these debts, the county leased him to work for Charles H. Miller as a farm laborer until he paid his fines. Miller paid him \$5 per month and furnished him with food, clothing, and other provisions from the store free of cost.⁴¹ The agreement certainly benefited Miller, as he

³⁹ Ledger 1901-02, 20, 79, 144, 167, 248. McIntosh made two payments from his cotton crop. He made the first payment on November 7, 1901, which amounted to \$144.21 from four bales of cotton, and he made the second on December 19, 1901, which amounted to \$288.21 from eight bales of cotton.

⁴⁰ Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 45-47. The alternative was working in the mines as a convict-lease prisoner.

⁴¹ Sam McIntosh to C.H. Miller, November 16, 1900, Marengo County Mortgages, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL. There is no way to know the severity of the conditions under which McIntosh worked during his contract and whether Miller actually supplied McIntosh with sufficient provisions. Daniel's study examines peonage cases in which the planters and their overseers essentially starved convicted men while they worked under labor contracts. Convicts worked under constant guard and slept in locked cells, and planters allowed them no outside contact. Daniel also observes that the peonage cycle repeated itself in many cases. As the laborer's term neared its end, he might be arrested on another trumped up charge so that he could continue working for the planter. In the case of Sam McIntosh, I have found no evidence that this cycle continued after Miller paid his fine almost two years later.

received extra labor at a low cost, but it cost McIntosh his freedom for almost two years. Unfortunately, this arrangement also meant that McIntosh was unable to generate income to support his family for twenty months and pay his store debts, perpetuating the cycle of debt peonage and McIntosh's reliance on the store.

As the Miller Store performed a variety of functions in the community, customers' debt often included more than just purchases of goods. Miller regularly charged rent to his tenant-customers through their store accounts. In McIntosh's case, Miller charged him \$92 in land rent on March 15, 1902. For the entire thirteen-month period, rent was the largest single charge on his account; his next largest single charge amounted to \$13.05 for 104 pounds of meat. Rogers' charge of twenty dollars in land rent was the second largest charge to his 1901-1902 account, after forty dollars for forty-three bushels of corn and meal, purchased on September 4, 1901.⁴² Owing such large amounts of money in land rent intensified customers' poverty, forcing their continued existence at the mercy of the tenant farming system. Tenant farmers remained "tethered" to the general area where they were known.⁴³ McIntosh and Rogers both maintained accounts at the store for years afterward, and they or their families, considering that Rogers died between 1908 and 1910, continued to live in the Miller area until at least 1910. Tied together, rent and the constant necessity of purchasing goods to survive bound impoverished customers like Sam McIntosh, Jr. and Tony Rogers to the Miller area.

The crop lien and credit system did not marginalize only African American tenants. Whites lost their land in increasing numbers after the Civil War, and they were subsequently

⁴² Ledger 1901-02, 248, 20, 110.

⁴³ Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 197.

pulled into sharecropping and tenant farming as well, as it was often their only alternative.⁴⁴ Twenty-three of Charles H. Miller's customers belonged to the ranks of Marengo's poor white tenant farmers. White tenant farms constituted only 8 percent of farms in Marengo County. One of them, Columbus J. "Dock" Hall, head of a family of six, rented farmland in the Miller area, although he may have rented from a landlord other than Charles H. Miller. His account listed no rent payments, nor was he among the farmers who signed crop liens with Charles H. Miller from the years 1899 to 1902. Much like the impoverished African American tenant farmers, Hall accrued a substantial amount of store debt by purchasing subsistence goods such as molasses, meat, and flour, as well as tobacco, coffee, and snuff. Over the course of seven months in 1901, he accumulated \$309.54 in debt, after beginning the account with \$161.27 charged to him. At the end of 1901, he paid Charles H. Miller with \$22.52 in meal, \$138.55 in four bales of cotton, and fifteen dollars' worth of work, though all of these payments only reduced his debt to \$133.45. While this was less extreme than the amounts that Tony Rogers and Sam McIntosh owed the store, it was still an unwieldy amount for a farmer who depended on cotton cultivation for his livelihood. As with African-American tenants, the constant need to purchase goods to survive perpetuated the cycle of indebtedness and only exacerbated white tenants' poverty.

The plight of the poor tenant farmer became inextricably tied to Alabama politics. During Reconstruction, African-American and poor white farmers had been "sucked into the whirlpool of tenant farming" in the aftermath of emancipation.⁴⁵ With the failure of Reconstruction in 1874, Black Belt planter-politicians seized control of state government. The cycle of tenant

⁴⁴ Wayne Flynt, *Poor But Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 62.

⁴⁵ William Warren Rogers and Robert David Ward, "Part Two, From 1865 through 1920," in *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 237.

farming allowed white politicians and landowners, such as Charles H. Miller, to reassert power over African Americans. The 1901 Alabama Constitution only intensified tenant farmers' poverty. This document, which went into effect on November 28, 1901, marked the culmination of white Black Belt planters' dominance of the Alabama economy and politics, to the detriment of all other groups. These planters, allied with prominent businessmen, used the new constitution to write white supremacy into law.⁴⁶ Its writers, to whose ranks Charles H. Miller belonged, designed the document to formally strip African Americans of their voting rights through implementing voting requirements, including the poll tax, literacy tests, and the grandfather clause, thereby stamping out what delegates called "the menace of negro domination."⁴⁷ The new constitution required men ages 21 to 45 to pay a poll tax of \$1.50 each year. In Shiloh from 1901 to 1914, only 21 of 57 male customers within this age bracket appeared on the Marengo County Poll Tax Register; sixteen of the voters were white, and five were African American.⁴⁸ None of the African American voters paid their poll tax after 1901, while fourteen of the sixteen white voters paid their poll tax for two or more years.⁴⁹ Because white men could more easily access cash, the new voting system tipped in their favor and successfully disfranchised African Americans, though it also disfranchised poor white men as well. By requiring men to pay cash to exercise their right to vote, the writers of the 1901 Constitution institutionalized white supremacy

⁴⁶ Alabama Legislature, *Official Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Alabama, May 21st, 1901 to September 3, 1901* (Montgomery, AL: Brown Printing Company, 1901), 9 (hereafter cited as *Proceedings*).

⁴⁷ Rogers and Ward, "Part Two," 347; *Proceedings*, 10.

⁴⁸ Shiloh, 1901-1914, Marengo County Poll Tax Register, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL. Only 21 African American men appeared on the poll tax register, and in each case, the voter only paid his poll tax in 1901. See more about this in Chapter 3.

⁴⁹ The two white voters who only appeared once on the poll tax register included L.B. Huckabee, who appeared in 1905, and Charles H. Miller himself. Miller paid his poll tax in 1901; the next year, he met the age requirement for poll tax exemption.

and perpetuated the harmful cycle of tenant farming by forcing poor whites and most African Americans to remain poor, place-bound, and dependent on white elites to sustain themselves and their families.

Although white supremacist politics abandoned African Americans to second-class citizenship and deprived them of social and political agency in their communities, not all lived entirely at the mercy of their landlords. A small number of Charles H. Miller's African American customers found the means to purchase land, although their plots were usually small.⁵⁰ Marengo County had the fourth highest number of African American farm owners in Alabama, after Clarke, Conecuh, and Monroe counties. Even so, only 381 black families in the county owned their farms, in comparison to 793 white families.⁵¹ African Americans found purchasing land in the South in the period after the Civil War extremely difficult. Most white landowners refused to sell property to them, as allowing African Americans to become landowners themselves might have encouraged social and economic equality and allowed for an unacceptable degree of independence.⁵² Buying land also required accumulating substantial amounts of cash, which was a scarce resource. African Americans could only attempt to become landowners through a combination of luck, persistence, hard work, and thrift, though many still failed to "overcome the ironlike grip of whites on the land."⁵³ In 1901 and 1902, fifteen African American customers at the Miller Store either owned property themselves or lived on a farm or in a house owned by a member of their family.

⁵⁰ Loren Schweningen, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 162.

⁵¹ Historical Census Browser.

⁵² Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 86.

⁵³ Schweningen, *Black Property Owners*, 163.

Silla Glass surmounted the obstacles to farm ownership. One of two female African American landowners who shopped at the Miller Store, she was the head of her family and had six children, one of whom worked for Charles H. Miller as his farm overseer.⁵⁴ At the store, Glass bought plenty of daily necessities, such as soap, sugar, molasses, medicines, fabrics, and sewing supplies, though her balance usually amounted to less than ten dollars. Unlike most of the other customers, she made no purchases of snuff or tobacco of any form. She bought writing paper and envelopes, a rare purchase at the Miller Store, and while she could not read or write, three of her children could. Glass paid her store debt through working for Charles H. Miller. On the first day of the month, he added five dollars in credit to her account for each full month's work. Regularly generating credit allowed her to frequently pay her bill in full. In two instances, she paid enough that Charles H. Miller owed her \$0.95 and \$1.29 in credit.⁵⁵ Because she owned her land and thereby did not rely on the vicious tenure and crop lien systems for survival, Silla Glass maintained a slightly elevated level of economic independence that most other African Americans could not achieve. Yet she could not escape the social otherness that plagued African Americans in their daily life. Miller did not list her with a deferential "Miss" or "Mrs." in front of her name, as she did not "merit the distinction" as a woman of color.⁵⁶ Glass's account at the Miller Store exemplified how an African American landowner maintained her property in a region in which high levels of debt and extreme poverty were commonplace for African American farmers.

⁵⁴ Wilson, "Miller Descendants."

⁵⁵ Ledger 1901-1902, 89, 128.

⁵⁶ English, *By All Accounts*, 6.

As the minority ruling class of the Black Belt, white landowners constituted only a small portion of Marengo County's population, but they enjoyed the most privilege. White-owned farms made up fourteen percent of total farms in the county.⁵⁷ Twenty-five white customers of the Charles H. Miller Store, or 18 percent, lived on property that they or a family member owned. Among their number was Calvin L. Tucker, a landowner who lived in Shiloh Beat and was married with three children, including two grown daughters, Belle and Gertrude. His account in the ledger began on June 28, 1901 and noted a manageable \$33.15 in debt carried from the previous book. While Tucker bought a variety of necessities, such as shoes, meat, and flour, he did not have to purchase the large quantities of subsistence goods that the tenant-customers needed to survive. Instead, he bought "luxury" household items such as a set of plates, a set of cups and saucers, and two coffee pots. He even purchased a bottle of cologne, another rarity that few customers of the Miller Store could afford.⁵⁸ Tucker ended his account in the 1901-1902 ledger on December 12, 1902 with \$105.35 in debt; however, the account was carried to another book before Charles H. Miller recorded Tucker's payment at the end of 1902, which would have significantly reduced his debt going into 1903.⁵⁹

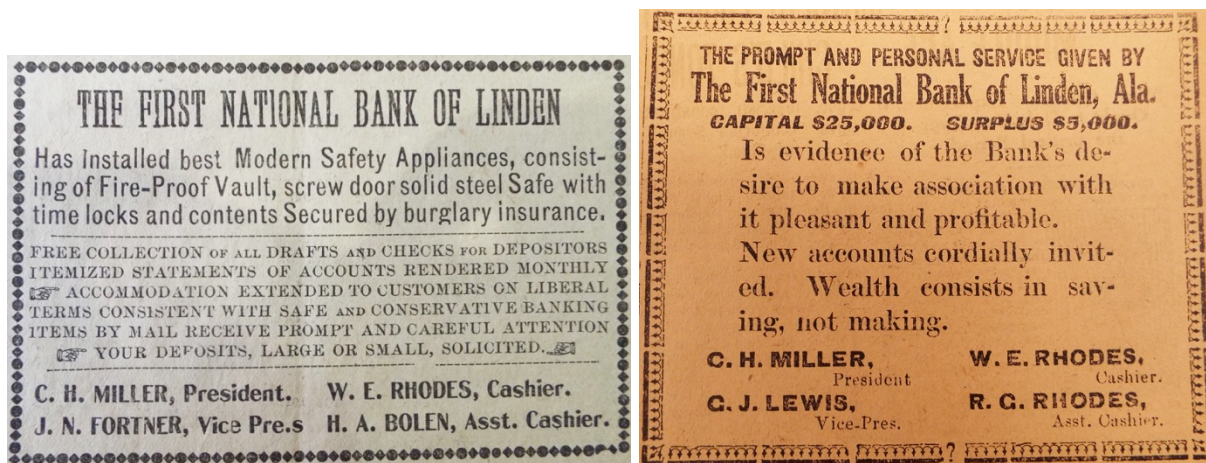
As members of a stable and prosperous family, the two Tucker daughters opened store accounts for their personal use. Noted in the ledger as "Miss Belle" and "Miss Gertrude," the women frequently bought fabrics and supplies for sewing projects. Between the two, they made nineteen purchases of ten different fabrics and maintained low account balances over the course

⁵⁷ Historical Census Browser.

⁵⁸ Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 123. A customer would have purchased such household items during a prosperous year.

⁵⁹ Ledger 1901-1902, 256.

of 1902.⁶⁰ Belle concluded her account in March and paid the \$4.93 balance in cash. Gertrude accumulated \$16.15 in debt by the end of the year, though she regularly made payments on the account by selling a total of six dozen eggs to Miller. She also made two cash payments that amounted to \$4.40. In this way, white landowners and their families enjoyed access to cash that their African American and poorer white counterparts did not. Not only did possession of cash make purchasing land easier, it also enabled white landowners to avoid the downward spiral of constant debt that doomed the landless. Because they did not rely on the store for daily survival, possessed more resources, and more easily paid off their accounts than poor tenant farmers, landowners could maintain low balances at the store.



Figures 5 and 6. Advertisements for First National Bank of Linden. Above left: From the *Linden Reporter*, March 22, 1907. Above right: From the *Democrat-Reporter*, March 29, 1917.

Charles H. Miller's financial influence eventually reached beyond the Miller community through his involvement in the First National Bank of Linden, one of a network of new local

⁶⁰ Ledger 1901-1902, 204 and 205. The Tucker women bought stripes, domestic, plaids, bleaching, gingham, calico, percale, Flanelaine, dress goods, and outing flannel.

banks that constituted much of the South's banking system after the Civil War.⁶¹ First National was the first bank to serve residents of South Marengo; banking in Marengo County was restricted to Demopolis and Faunsdale before the organization of First National Bank of Linden in 1904.⁶² John H. Wood was the first president, Charles H. Miller served as vice president, and his brother-in-law William E. Rhodes was the cashier.⁶³ All three men were prominent South Marengo citizens. Wood was a physician from Sweet Water while Rhodes was an Iowa transplant who settled in Sweet Water, where he taught school and operated a general store. By 1905, Wood had left the bank and Miller was president with Rhodes still working as cashier. Miller served as the bank's president for the rest of his life. First National Bank of Linden possessed capital of \$25,000, the minimum capital for a national bank in a town of fewer than 3,000 residents, and surplus of \$5,000 between 1904 and 1917.⁶⁴ First National was the first in a wave of seven new banks formed in Marengo during the first two decades of the twentieth century as the county continued to industrialize and expand its business and transportation networks. By 1908, Linden had two banks, as a group of prominent Linden men had founded Marengo County Bank, which possessed levels of capital and surplus similar to that of First National. Capital of \$25,000 was a small sum compared to that of the banks that operated in Demopolis, where Commercial National Bank and the Robertson Banking Company possessed

⁶¹ John A. James, "Financial Underdevelopment in the Postbellum South," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 11, no. 3 (Winter 1981): 454.

⁶² *The Bankers' Magazine* 65 (July to December 1902): 100.

⁶³ *The Commercial and Financial Chronicle* 78, no. 2010 (January 1904): 1091.

⁶⁴ Ivan Wright, *Bank Credit and Agriculture under the National and Federal Reserve Banking Systems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1922), 78.

combined capital of \$225,000 in 1917.⁶⁵ In 1917, First National Bank of Linden's capitalization consistently ranked in the middle of the eight banks operating in Marengo. The larger banks in Demopolis and Faunsdale, both centers of trade, ranked at the top and commanded capital of at least \$50,000, while new, relatively weak banks in small towns such as Thomaston and Sweet Water ranked at the bottom of the list with capital of around \$15,000.⁶⁶

The establishment of First National Bank of Linden marked an important step toward connecting residents of South Marengo to networks of credit that extended beyond the local merchant. As bank president, Miller acted as a creditor to people across Marengo County. The bank acted much in the same manner that landlords and merchants did and executed crop liens with farmers for "short-time agricultural credit" in Marengo, a practice common across the South.⁶⁷ In a sample of eleven bank mortgages from 1905 to 1914, seven African Americans and six whites executed mortgages to the bank. These thirteen customers represented five different beats, including Linden, Shiloh, Jackson's Store, Hills, and Myrtlewood. All but two of the mortgages pertained to individuals who owned their house or farm and usually secured the agreement with livestock, land, wagons, and buggies. In addition to a cart, a buggy and harness, a cow, a heifer, and a steer, African American brick mason John Moses of Jackson's Store used a ten-piece set of furniture as security on his \$80.36 mortgage to the bank.⁶⁸ Customers executed mortgages of totals as low as \$28.70 and as high as \$575, in the case of white farmer W.H. Dunn

⁶⁵ *The American Bank Reporter and Attorney List* 96 (March-April 1917): 4, 7, 988; *The Bankers' Magazine* 72 (January-June 1906): 4.

⁶⁶ *The American Bank Reporter*, 4-5; 10-11.

⁶⁷ E.W. Kemmerer, "Agricultural Credit in the United States," *The American Economic Review* 2, no. 4 (December 1912): 856.

⁶⁸ John Moses to First National Bank of Linden, February 24, 1911, Marengo County Mortgages, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

and his wife Nettie, who lived in Shiloh. The Dunns executed the mortgage on January 21, 1910, but only eight years later did they satisfy the terms of the note, and including interest, they paid First National a total of \$882.72 on February 18, 1918.⁶⁹ First National Bank of Linden offered farmers and other residents of Marengo County access to cash and credit without incurring debt with their local merchant, but the bank often used similar tactics when extending credit to customers, due to its heavy reliance on crop liens.

By 1917, Charles H. Miller had taken “command of a small domain” through his control of land, cotton, and finance in South Marengo.⁷⁰ His secure financial base allowed the Miller family to live comfortably; in 1916, he owned 200 head of cattle, ten horses, twelve mules, and nine hogs, and the family also enjoyed the luxury of owning a car, a Hupmobile.⁷¹ Miller’s prosperity came at the expense of many of the people in his village, however, due to his manipulation of the crop lien and credit system. Through both the Miller Store and First National Bank of Linden, Miller controlled the extension of credit to many Marengo residents. The economic experiences of poor whites and African-American tenant farmers converged in the Miller Store. Dependent on cultivation of cotton and the merchant’s extension of credit for survival, these two groups of tenant-customers remained trapped in the oppressive tenure system. Members of both races found themselves struggling to pay debts that rooted them to the Miller area. Though the handful of landowning African-Americans suffered the same social and political disadvantages that their landless counterparts did, they experienced a slightly increased

⁶⁹ W.H. & Nettie Davis to First National Bank of Linden, January 21, 1910, Marengo County Mortgages, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

⁷⁰ Aiken, *Cotton Plantation South*, 41.

⁷¹ C.H. Miller, 1916, Marengo County Tax Assessments, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL; C.H. Miller, June 17, 1916, Marengo County Licenses Record for Automobiles, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

level of economic independence. As the Black Belt's ruling minority, landowning whites enjoyed the most privileges. They possessed the most resources, the greatest purchasing power, and the easiest access to cash in comparison to the less powerful members of the Miller community. The hierarchy that the crop lien and credit system created directly benefited Charles H. Miller and allowed him to build a base of wealth that drove his political career at the local, county, and state levels.

Chapter Three

Fighting for Marengo Democracy

Historians have combined analysis of Populism, the South's disfranchising constitutions, and Progressivism into generalized studies of the region or individual states, but rarely examine them from the local perspective. Wayne Flynt takes an Alabama-specific approach to the period in *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* and begins with the 1901 Constitution. He analyzes the Populist Revolt as a basis for the new constitution, and later traces Alabama's transition from 1901 into the development of Progressivism.¹ Edward Ayers also presents a few case studies of Alabama's political atmosphere in the context of the South as a whole. Both studies dismiss the Black Belt as a homogenous region of Conservatism, however, ending their commentary of the region's political climate after identifying it as a hotbed of election fraud and voter intimidation.² In fact the political climate of the Black Belt was more complicated than existing studies suggest. Further analysis shows evidence of electoral dissent and competing ideas at work. Through his political connections, personal characteristics, and powerful role in Marengo County politics, the career of Charles H. Miller demonstrated the importance of local politics to understanding Alabama in the 1890s and into the twentieth century.

¹ Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004).

² Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 269.

This chapter will analyze the connections between Populism, the 1901 Constitution, and Progressivism on a local level that reflects and enhances the complexity of Alabama politics. In order to understand Marengo County and Black Belt politics between 1884 and 1917, one must study the motivations and actions of individuals like Charles H. Miller. Miller fit the archetype of the financially and politically powerful Black Belt planters who ruled the region, one of the “gentlemen who ran plantations [and] cotton gins” and controlled state politics.³ Miller’s personal quirks and political connections offer a view into Alabama politics during this time period through the lens of Marengo County. Understanding more about Marengo politics and Miller in particular reveals the powerful effects that local politics had on state politics. The Black Belt’s political environment was particularly complex because politicians not only struggled to combat dissenting political ideas elsewhere in the state, but they also dealt with these ideas at home and had to fight to maintain control at the local level. Particularly during the Populist Revolt, if Black Belt planters could not control their communities, they had little chance of maintaining power in state politics. Local and county politics mattered because they drove the Black Belt’s control of Alabama. The local threat to their power in the 1890s motivated Black Belt politicians, including Miller, to fight to mold the state’s political and social climates through the 1901 Constitution and Progressive policies.

A local temperance movement introduced Miller to politics. “Intemperance is the enemy of the home, the church, and the State,” asserted the fledgling Marengo Temperance Union (MTU) in May 1884.⁴ Ultimately a failure, this movement nonetheless gave voice to proto-

³ Samuel L. Webb, *Two-Party Politics in the One-Party South: Alabama’s Hill Country, 1874-1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 2.

⁴ *Linden Reporter*, “The Temperance Meeting,” May 23, 1884.

Progressive ideals of Marengo citizens, including Miller, for whom temperance carried personal and political importance throughout the rest of his career. He was at the time a small farmer living in his home beat of Shiloh. A strict Southern Baptist, Miller was Shiloh's representative to the MTU, giving him the opportunity to debate county-wide prohibition with some of Marengo's most prominent politicians at the time.⁵ Miller used the MTU as a stepping-stone into Marengo County politics. His involvement in the MTU marked the beginning of his accumulation of local power as a conservative and loyal Democrat, which later developed into significant influence at the county and state level. Miller's strong Baptist roots, coupled with a desire to build power and financial stability, steered his political career, ultimately manifesting themselves in his work as a Progressive in the 1910s. Maintaining his personal power, defending Conservative Democracy, and fighting for the best interests of Marengo County whites motivated Miller throughout his career.

When Miller entered Marengo politics in 1884, county whites were politically harmonious. Having only rid themselves of Republican control in 1876, counties of the Alabama Black Belt focused on building up Democratic power in the 1880s. The *Linden Reporter* celebrated the successful and smooth 1888 election: "Marengo turns up with her usual Democratic majority. Everything passed off quietly. [...] Three cheers and a tiger for Marengo Democracy!"⁶ Political unity was not only expressed in party terms, but also in racial terms, as Democratic control signified white elite control. Extolling the unity of white voters, an 1880 letter to the *Reporter* claimed, "In Marengo we have the best population in Alabama. There is no antagonism between the whites. [...] There is as much homogeneity in the white people of

⁵ *Linden Reporter*, "The Temperance Boom," May 2, 1884; "The Temperance Meeting," May 23, 1884.

⁶ *Linden Reporter*, "The Election," August 10, 1888.

Marengo as there is in any county in the state.”⁷ White harmony was a key issue, especially in the Black Belt, where a large population of African Americans and an extreme minority of whites resided. White fear of African American domination certainly loomed large in Marengo, where African Americans constituted 76 percent of the population in 1880 and 1890.⁸ Whites’ consensus in Marengo County kept them in control in the 1880s; however, the harmony of whites in Marengo politics would not last into the 1890s with the development of the Populist Revolt.

The context of Marengo’s Populist crisis and identification of Miller’s role in it are essential to understanding his actions and those of men like him later at the 1901 Constitutional Convention and in the Alabama Senate. As white farmers in Alabama’s hill counties and Wiregrass began mobilizing against Conservative Democrats out of economic and social discontent, Marengo descended into political chaos despite the strength of the Conservative county machine. Marengo’s contentious and fractured political climate in the 1890s directly contradicts the idea that the Black Belt was a bastion of “unity and conservatism” while other regions of the state were mired in political conflict.⁹ In reality, Marengo County became a hotbed of Populist dissent. White political discord threatened the power of the county’s Conservative machine and tore apart Marengo’s earlier Democratic unity. The disunion of local whites in the 1890s motivated Black Belt Conservatives to use election fraud to maintain their power and eventually call the disfranchising 1901 Constitutional Convention. While white disunion elsewhere in Alabama threatened Conservatives’ power at the state level, the presence

⁷ *Linden Reporter*, letter to the editor, June 18, 1880.

⁸ Gibson, “Alabama Black Belt,” 14.

⁹ Webb, *Two Party Politics*, 2.

of Populism in Marengo Conservatives' own towns and villages threatened Democratic power in their county and communities, providing politicians with even more powerful motivation to secure white unity and their own power.

The Populist Revolt in Marengo divided the county both politically and geographically. The movement developed out of local Farmers' Alliance chapters. The Alliance, formed in 1889, was initially popular across the entirety of Marengo County, but once the organization began politicizing its messages in 1890, many people withdrew their support, leaving only the white small farmers. The resulting Populist ideas took root in the southern part of Marengo and concentrated in Linden, which became the epicenter of the county's Populist movement. Populism fed into an extant feud between the northern and southern regions of the county. Wealthy planters dominated the north, where the rich soil was conducive to large plantations, while the south was home to more white small farmers, who farmed poor, sandy soil on smaller plots of land.¹⁰ South Marengo farmers, who were poorer than their North Marengo counterparts, believed that they were the victims of "unfair representation," as real political and economic power rested in the hands of the planters.¹¹ Marengo's north and south divide echoed the geographical split in the rest of the state, where the hill counties of the north bolted and became Populists, and much of the south remained Conservative. White farmers of South Marengo initially wanted to remain part of the Democratic Party and therefore maintain white unity.¹² The county machine refused to address their concerns and compromise its ideals, however, which drove the dissenters to organize their own party.

¹⁰ Anders, "History of Marengo," 1, 6, 13, 57.

¹¹ *Linden Reporter*, "Have We Harmonized?" May 13, 1892.

¹² *Linden Reporter*, "Linden Meeting," September 11, 1891.

Three major newspapers, all located in Linden, fueled the political conflict in South Marengo. Founded in 1892 as the county's official Farmers' Alliance paper, the *Reform Democrat* embraced the ideas of Reuben F. Kolb and Populism. While usually courteous, the editors were critical of Conservative Democrats and they frequently clashed with Linden's first newspaper, the *Reporter*, a staunch Conservative organ. The editors of the *Reporter* in contrast were openly hostile to the *Reform Democrat*, often publishing columns decrying the Populist movement and its adherents. In 1895, the *Reform Democrat* changed ownership and became the *Marengo Democrat*. The new *Democrat* sought to support the ideals of Populism from within the Democratic Party, appease Conservatives, and reestablish white political unity. The editors accepted the losses of Populist candidates and occupied a weaker position in comparison to the earlier *Reform Democrat*, which reflected the flagging of the Populist movement within Marengo County in the late 1890s.

In the midst of increasing turmoil, Charles H. Miller remained part of the county Democratic machine in the early 1890s. Silence characterized Miller's political activity during this decade and defined the rest of his career, as he did not write letters to local newspapers or make lengthy speeches that were on record. Yet while he acted in the political background, he was one of the men who formed the backbone of Marengo Democracy during the Populist Revolt. Although a Conservative Democrat throughout the 1890s, Miller lived in a heavily Populist area and many of his neighbors and family members joined the movement. Miller had built his political power on his wealth, and Populism posed a direct threat to him and the wealth that he was accumulating in the 1890s. His home beat was typical of the rest of South Marengo, as it was constituted primarily of small farms, but Miller more closely resembled the planters of North Marengo. He owned hundreds of acres of land that he rented to tenant farmers, both white

and African American, who grew cotton for him. He also owned a general store through which his tenants paid their rent and sold their cotton. Populists' dislike of the plantation and crop lien system meant a possible attempt to rid Marengo of it if they seized power. Miller operated in a system that benefited him, and dismantling that system would strip Miller of his source of wealth, and ultimately, his power.

By the 1890s, Miller had used this wealth and local influence to build his power at the county level. He was elected one of four County Commissioners in 1892, which position he held until 1904. As a Commissioner, Miller shared the responsibility of controlling Marengo's finances. The County Democratic Executive Committee (CDEC) also appointed him as a member in 1891, in which capacity he represented Shiloh.¹³ Members of the CDEC decided the county platform and held the power to control elections, including who was allowed to vote and when and how the county held its primaries and elections. In the 1890s, the organization directed Marengo's Conservative response to the Populist Revolt. Along with nine established Conservative CDEC members, Miller signed a July 1893 resolution that expressed a desire for "harmony and unity in the party" in order to maintain white supremacy but refused to sacrifice Conservative principles to address Populist concerns.¹⁴ The county machine, with Miller as a supporting member, rebuffed all efforts to negotiate, denying the legitimacy of Populist demands and asserting its own supremacy.

Politics eventually divided Miller's own family. As one of the foremost Populists in the county, Miller's youngest brother James provides a case study of Populist dissenters of Marengo

¹³ *Linden Reporter*, "Meeting of Executive Committee," October 23, 1891. Miller served on beat delegations to the CDEC and to his congressional district's conventions as early as 1884.

¹⁴ *Linden Reporter*, "The 'Conservative' Meeting," July 7, 1893.

in the 1890s. James Miller was a college-educated Linden attorney who maintained his connections with rural Shiloh. Unlike his brother, James Miller was a vocal and colorful supporter of his political faction. He frequently contributed opinion pieces and letters to the *Reform Democrat*. As the “Alliance lawyer of Marengo,” he also gave colorful, rousing speeches at county picnics and barbecues, expressing passionate support of Populist gubernatorial candidate Reuben F. Kolb and the Populist platform, including public ownership of transportation and free silver. Arguing for fair elections in early 1894, Miller declared that he “would rather be shot down in the streets of Linden and let the Earth drink [his] blood” than have his “ballot counted out.”¹⁵ A Conservative North Marengo planter alleged that James Miller’s dissent was the result of a “desire for office and the cohesive power of public plunder.”¹⁶ James Miller stood to gain much from the Populist movement if it succeeded, including winning office, since he did not already have a place in the Conservative machine as his brother did. But he risked social and political alienation. Reprinted in the *Reporter*, a column in the *Uniontown Herald* denounced men of independent action as “[enemies] of the South” and “[traitors] to [their] people.”¹⁷ As a vocal Populist, James Miller appreciated the plight of the white small farmer. Populist leaders were deeply “rooted in their communities,” and as Miller had strong kinship ties to South Marengo, he may have relished the opportunity to defend the region’s white small farmers because of his personal relationships with them, though he was not a farmer himself.

¹⁵ *Reform Democrat*, “Mr. Miller’s Explanation,” January 18, 1894.

¹⁶ *Linden Reporter*, “The Sweet Water Picnic,” July 24, 1891.

¹⁷ *Linden Reporter*, “A Traitor to His People,” September 2, 1892.

As the election of 1892 approached, white farmers across Marengo became increasingly agitated. In response, the Conservative establishment organized picnics and barbecues in an attempt to foster harmony.¹⁸ The county machine feared that white supremacy would falter and that the specter of African American political rule would reappear if the white men of the county split in the upcoming election. Conservatives acknowledged the geographical aspect of the conflict and attempted to unify the two factions before lasting damage could be done: “Let there be no more North and South Marengo [...] let every man put his heart and his head and his hands together for a united Democracy and a united Marengo.”¹⁹ A united Marengo meant rejection of dissenting white farmers’ demands, as ruling Conservatives still refused to make concessions. For example, Populists wanted to implement an educational test as a voting requirement, and Conservatives denied them. Such a measure would have disfranchised the masses of African American voters on whose manipulated votes the county machine’s power rested.²⁰ As a result, the white voting base split. Populists bolted the Democratic Party and ran their own candidates in direct competition with Conservatives for local offices. The election of 1892 became a season of fear, with citizens anticipating violence in the streets if the Populists won office. One Populist Marengo farmer declared that “blood will flow like water” if Conservatives attempted to use election fraud to beat Kolb.²¹ Populists were afraid that Democrats would abuse African American votes by counting more votes for Democratic candidates than were cast, an election fraud tactic called ballot stuffing.

¹⁸ Anders, “History of Marengo,” 23.

¹⁹ *Linden Reporter*, “Have We Harmonized?” May 13, 1892.

²⁰ Anders, “History of Marengo,” 30.

²¹ Rogers, *One-Gallused Rebellion*, 218.

Predictions of violence went unfulfilled, as Populist candidates were unsuccessful, but it was significant that they had a large enough support base to break from the party at all. The white split posed a significant threat to the rule of white elites, which frightened and angered the Democrats who were part of the county machine. In 1892, Populism held widespread appeal and even resonated for voters in beats north of Linden, particularly in Jackson's Store, a beat with a large population of poor, white farmers.²² Predictably, South Marengo voted en masse in favor of Populist candidates. Despite fear and the threat of violence, the conflict took a lighthearted turn in one example of the Populists' "colorful press," in which James Miller made a bet with politician C.K. Abrahams on the outcome of the congressional race.²³ Miller bet on Populist candidate William J. Mason, while Abrahams supported steadfast Conservative Richard Henry Clarke, who won the race. Miller rolled Abrahams through the main street of Linden in a wheelbarrow while Abrahams sang a victorious song.²⁴ In the race for County Commissioner, Charles H. Miller received a comfortable 5,110 votes, the most of all five candidates, while the lone Populist Lewis L. Simmons received only 903 votes.²⁵

The 1892 gubernatorial race between Populist Reuben F. Kolb and Conservative Thomas Goode Jones was particularly contentious, setting the tone for a series of controversial elections in the rest of the decade. A vote for Kolb meant a vote for change and frustration with poverty, while a vote for Jones signified support of "law and order, the status quo, and white

²² *Linden Reporter*, "The Vote for Governor," August 5, 1892.

²³ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (1951; repr., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 247.

²⁴ *Reform Democrat*, "Local Items," December 1, 1892.

²⁵ Anders, "History of Marengo," 29.

supremacy.”²⁶ In Marengo, Kolb received 2,152 votes to Jones’ 3,196.²⁷ Every single beat south of Linden, except for Hills and Nixon’s Store, voted in favor of Kolb. In Miller’s beat, Shiloh voters overwhelmingly supported Kolb 212 votes to 18, with similar numbers in the other South Marengo beats. Nonetheless, Jones won the county and then the state, even though Kolb carried thirty-seven counties to Jones’ twenty-nine. Newspaper editors and historians alike raised the question of widespread voter fraud in the Black Belt. The *Reform Democrat* hinted at the possibility of fraud in a poem accompanying the tale of James Miller’s lost bet: “For all [Miller] knew it might prove true/Somebody had been cheated.”²⁸



Figure 7. James Miller during his 1898-99 term in the Alabama House of Representatives. Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

South Marengo remained a stronghold of opposition during the 1894 election season, although Populism’s appeal to farmers of the northern half of the county dissipated. Both

²⁶ Rogers, *One-Gallused Rebellion*, 221.

²⁷ Anders, “History of Marengo,” 27.

²⁸ *Reform Democrat*, “Local Items,” December 1, 1892. I cannot substantiate rumors of election fraud in Marengo in 1892, as newspapers did not include registration numbers to compare to the election returns in that year.

Populists and Conservatives made failed attempts to reunify Marengo whites, with James Miller pleading, “Now let us as neighbors and friends, both Organized and Jeffersonian, work together for a common cause; the cause of a ‘free ballot and a fair count.’”²⁹ Creating white harmony would not be so simple, however. The CDEC, backed by Conservatives that included Charles H. Miller, continued to express similar desires but nonetheless refused to compromise with Populists. Maintaining the Conservative machine’s power was still more important than bringing dissenting whites back into the party. Populism remained a significant source of fear, even though local Populists failed to win office. After another round of decisive Conservative victories in 1894, the *Linden Reporter* praised the intelligence of Marengo voters, who “realized that if Kolbism triumphed in this State lawlessness, anarchy and bloodshed would follow.”³⁰

As in 1892, the gubernatorial vote was the ultimate measure of Populism’s strength in Marengo. Despite more accusations of election fraud at the state level, Marengo’s 1894 gubernatorial vote did not indicate ballot stuffing. Barring any doctoring of the newspapers’ election results, numbers of registered voters were sufficiently higher than the number of votes cast. In Shiloh, 158 whites and 128 African Americans were registered in 1894, for a total of 286 voters, but only 164 votes were cast, with 133 in favor of Kolb.³¹ Since the 1892 race, support for Kolb had dwindled. The *Reporter* took great pleasure in calling out the county Populists: “A great many people in South Marengo are under a false impression as to Kolb’s strength. He beat Oates only three votes South of the Bogue.”³² Tallying up South Marengo numbers gave Kolb

²⁹ *Reform Democrat*, “Mr. Miller’s Explanation,” January 18, 1894.

³⁰ *Linden Reporter*, “Marengo’s Victory,” August 10, 1894.

³¹ *Reform Democrat*, “Registered Voters,” June 7, 1894; *Linden Reporter*, “The Cold Facts,” August 17, 1894.

³² Anders, “History of Marengo,” 35.

816 votes, while Oates received 813. Marengo Populism was on the decline, while the Conservative Democrats maintained power. Regular defeat at the hands of Conservatives, fraudulent or otherwise, was demoralizing and propelled Marengo Populists back to the Democratic Party.

The election of 1896 was the last gasp of Populists in Marengo County. By this time, the CDEC had made concerted efforts to bring dissatisfied white farmers back into the party fold. Conservatives encouraged Populists to rejoin the party and put their differences behind them. As a result, though the Populists were still active, they received even lower polling numbers. The remaining “insurgents” lost badly to the Conservatives.³³ After the 1896 disaster, Marengo Populism all but disappeared. Few voters mounted opposition to Conservative Democrats in 1898; by this time, most of the Populists had rejoined the Democratic Party with little difficulty. Additionally, an increase in the population of African Americans between 1890 and 1900 influenced white men to remain loyal to the Conservatives to maintain white supremacy.³⁴ Marengo Populists ultimately decided that the restoration of white political unity was more important than toppling the Conservative machine.

Marengo Populism’s resemblance to the Wiregrass form of Populism rather than that of the hill counties also contributed to the movement’s failure. Concentrated in the southeastern Alabama counties, Wiregrass Populists had been loyal to the Democratic Party but had no history of “anti-Democratic dissent.” As a result, they had no way to form alliances with independents, as Populists in the hill counties did, and had little hope of beating the

³³ Anders, “History of Marengo,” 53.

³⁴ Webb, *Two-Party Politics*, 29.

Conservatives.³⁵ In Marengo County, as in the Wiregrass, there was no tradition of dissent to sustain the Populists. A few dissenters remained, such as Populist county chairman Foscue, but they were an extreme and powerless minority. The *Birmingham Age-Herald* proclaimed the “End of Populism in Marengo” when Foscue refused to take part in the 1898 Democratic primaries but instead resigned when the rest of the organization, led by James Miller, overruled him.³⁶ The end of Populism signaled the return of white unity and harmony in Marengo. Even though he had been a well known and vocal Populist, James Miller won a seat in the state legislature as a Democrat in 1898 without issue, while brother Charles continued to win elections as County Commissioner. With the reunification of Marengo whites, Charles H. Miller’s power as an elite remained secure, and the county again became a typical Black Belt “stronghold of conservatism” and white unity leading into the new century.³⁷

The Democratic Party’s resurgence in Marengo thus signaled an increase in Charles Miller’s personal power. As a loyal Democrat throughout the Populist crisis, he had become influential enough to receive a nomination for chairman of the CDEC in 1898, although he lost the election.³⁸ Instead, he served as the elections return official for Shiloh and formed the CDEC’s Campaign Committee, allowing him control of local elections and campaigns. The 1890s were also a time of personal change for Miller. He assumed sole ownership of his father’s general store in 1893, whose customer base grew steadily with each year.³⁹ Two years later, he

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Birmingham Age-Herald*, “End of Populism in Marengo,” February 10, 1898.

³⁷ Malcolm C. McMillan, *Constitutional Development in Alabama, 1798-1901: A Study in Politics, the Negro, and Sectionalism* (1955; repr., Spartanburg, SC: Reprint Company, 1978), 217.

³⁸ *Marengo Democrat*, “County Executive Committee,” June 23, 1898.

³⁹ *Reform Democrat*, “Dissolution Notice,” February 16, 1893.

married Carrie Thomas, and the couple had two children by 1900.⁴⁰ With a strong, growing political, economic, and family base, Miller appeared positioned to become more successful into the new century. However, in order to secure the power of the Democrats, work remained for the white elites of Marengo County and the rest of the Black Belt.

The Populist Revolt pushed Miller and other Black Belt Conservatives to agitate for a new Constitution in order to secure white, Democratic political domination for good. White disunion at the state and local levels had produced fears of the failure of white rule in the Conservative establishment. Two major issues of the 1890s defined the 1901 Constitution: the elimination of election fraud and legal establishment of white supremacy. The bitter fighting over alleged Black Belt ballot stuffing in the 1890s moved Democrats to reconsider election tactics. Realizing they could not continue fraudulently winning elections, Democrats proposed disfranchisement as the solution.⁴¹ As delegate Lee McMillan of Wilcox put it, “the primary object for which the Convention was called was to restrict the suffrage, and as far as possible to eliminate the negro from politics.”⁴² Disfranchising African Americans would prevent the Black Belt from abusing their votes, but it would also secure white supremacy, as Alabama whites feared the recurrence of the “wrongs and humiliations” of Reconstruction.⁴³ Reunification in Marengo meant that Miller and other whites could focus on shoring up their power and solidify it at the Constitutional Convention.

⁴⁰ *Marengo Democrat*, “Local,” December 12, 1895.

⁴¹ McMillan, *Constitutional Development*, 229.

⁴² Proceedings, 2096.

⁴³ McMillan, *Constitutional Development*, 226.

Ruling elites of the Black Belt had an additional goal for the new constitution: disfranchise the poor whites, particularly in the northern hill counties. Doing so would ensure dominance of the Black Belt in state politics without the vast numbers of African American votes on which they had relied. After a vicious statewide fight, the Black Belt voted en masse in favor of the convention, with Marengo voting 2,197 to 241 to hold the convention.⁴⁴ Black Belt counties reported such large numbers of votes in favor of the convention that politicians and election officials probably manipulated the vote to suit their liking, as it appeared that African Americans voted to hold a constitutional convention that they knew would disfranchise them.⁴⁵ As a result, the white counties, which voted against holding the convention, leveled yet more accusations of election fraud against the Black Belt.

Charles H. Miller's power grew as the power of the Conservative establishment returned. With the official endorsement of the Marengo County Democratic Convention, Miller was elected to represent the 20th Senatorial District at the 1901 Constitutional Convention, where he served as a delegate along with county representatives Gesner Williams of Demopolis and John J. King of McKinley.⁴⁶ Like other delegates from the Black Belt, Miller sought to secure racial and regional supremacy. Miller was one of many "extreme conservatives" who controlled the course of the convention.⁴⁷ Of the 155 delegates, he was one of 141 Democrats, with Populists, Republicans, and a lone independent filling out the remainder of the delegation. The members of the convention formed four groups: a weak faction of "Populist remnants," urban Progressives,

⁴⁴ Alabama Constitution of 1901 Records, election returns, SG005602, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

⁴⁵ McMillan, *Constitutional Development*, 261.

⁴⁶ *Marengo Democrat*, "The Marengo Convention," March 22, 1901. The 20th Senatorial District consisted of Marengo County. John J. King disappeared from the convention proceedings after the first day.

⁴⁷ Webb, *Two-Party Politics*, 172.

and the planters and “Big Mules,” who formed a powerful coalition that dominated the convention. Miller belonged to the ranks of the planters, the large landowners who controlled the Black Belt, while the Big Mules consisted of urban businessmen.⁴⁸ As a planter, Miller was interested in his own provincial matters and sought to protect the interests of Marengo County and of South Marengo at the convention, and he had been involved in Marengo’s Democratic political machine since 1884. Miller was also heavily invested in maintaining the power of the Marengo Democratic Party, as its interests aligned with his own.⁴⁹

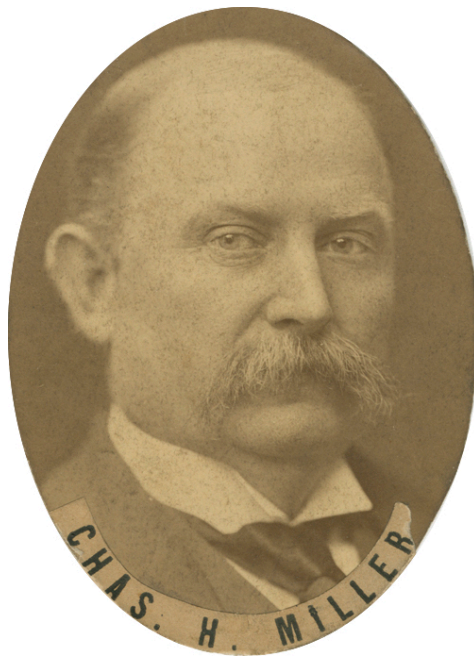


Figure 8. Charles H. Miller at the 1901 Constitutional Convention. Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

⁴⁸ Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, 7, 8.

⁴⁹ Sheldon Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 353. Hackney also identifies Miller as a planter, though he breaks down the convention differently from Flynt. Hackney classifies the delegates into bosses, planters, agrarians, and progressives, categorizing bosses and planters as two separate groups with completely different interests. Both factions contained planter-politicians from the Black Belt. Hackney argues that planters were fundamentally different from bosses, as they were provincial, opposed to organized power, and uninvolved in county political machines.

Miller's activity at the 1901 Constitutional Convention was that of a junior statesman, and he remained characteristically silent, only offering a few ordinances and making no grand speeches. He sought to guard the interests of his home county, however, with particular emphasis on South Marengo. After being appointed to the Committee on State and County Boundaries, Miller continually disputed the square mileage criteria for new counties. While the rest of the committee favored a 500 square mileage limit, Miller, in collaboration with Milo Moody of Jackson County, fought for no new counties of fewer than 600 square miles and for no current county to be reduced to fewer than 600 square miles.⁵⁰ Miller's action was directly tied to Marengo County, which had a history of new county movements fueled by its north-south divide. In these new county fights, Demopolis usually tried to break off and form a new county in the north, while Linden opposed the movement. Through his action as part of the Committee on State and County Boundaries, Miller was trying to thwart the new county advocates. Without Demopolis, Marengo County would suffer; even though Linden was the county seat, Demopolis was larger and economically more important because of its strategic location where the Tombigbee and Black Warrior Rivers met. Miller also opposed new county movements originating outside Marengo, such as when a Perry County delegate introduced an ordinance to form a new county from pieces of Hale, Perry, Marengo, and Dallas. The *Marengo Democrat* reported that Miller was "outspoken in [his] opposition" to the new county and had "kept faith with the people."⁵¹ Fighting for Marengo Democracy at the Constitutional Convention meant

⁵⁰ Proceedings, 1055, 2137.

⁵¹ *Marengo Democrat*, "Union, Now and Forever; One and Inseparable," August 16, 1901.

fighting for the physical unification of Marengo County to preserve its balance of political and economic power.

Concerning the major issues of African American disfranchisement and white supremacy, Miller was a typical Black Belt planter. Miller was absent on account of a family illness during the entire period of debate over African American suffrage.⁵² As a result, there was no record of his opinion on the grandfather clause and the poll tax, both harsh measures that Alabama's convention delegates borrowed from other Southern states that had disfranchised African Americans in the 1890s. Despite his absence, Miller most likely shared his planter colleagues' views of white supremacy and would have voted in favor of both suffrage restriction measures. His absence was an endorsement; he was assured that disfranchisement would prevail and that his vote was not essential.

Miller broke from the planter-Big Mule coalition, however, on a different suffrage issue. On Day 66, the Convention heard debate over a limited form of woman suffrage, in which women who owned more than \$500 worth of property would be given the right to vote. The measure passed with much debate; Miller was one of 65 ayes, while Williams, the other Marengo delegate, voted against the measure.⁵³ The next day, the Convention reconsidered the vote and withdrew the brief and limited enfranchisement of women. Miller was a member of the minority of 22 delegates that voted against overturning. He voted with men such as W.T.L. Cofer of Cullman, an agrarian who declared himself one of the "cranks among the men" who advocated for woman suffrage.⁵⁴

⁵² Proceedings, 2412.

⁵³ Proceedings, 3823.

⁵⁴ Proceedings, 3873.

Voting rights for women who owned more than a certain amount of property was a potential solution to the issue of maintaining Black Belt supremacy without African American votes. Suffragists throughout the South saw white male politicians' desire for the disfranchisement of African Americans as a key to white women's enfranchisement. White women believed themselves to be a superior voting base to African American men and hoped that politicians might resort to female enfranchisement to fix "the South's 'negro problem.'"⁵⁵ Carrie Miller's political opinions may have influenced her husband to vote in favor of limited woman suffrage. Carrie was well-educated, politically active, and a member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union; if she was an advocate of woman suffrage, she most likely supported white female suffrage as a solution to legally disfranchising African Americans.⁵⁶ Enabling women like Carrie Miller to vote had the added advantage of further enhancing the power of their husbands, the men who controlled Alabama's political and economic systems.

On September 3, 1901, the convention adjourned, and the battle for ratification began. The planter-Big Mule coalition fought for votes to ratify the constitution against former Populists in the northern counties and African Americans throughout the state, led by Booker T. Washington.⁵⁷ Democrats campaigned for ratification under the banner of "White Supremacy, Honest Elections, and the New Constitution One and Inseparable."⁵⁸ The *Marengo Democrat* celebrated the new voting restrictions, proclaiming, "THE WHITE MAN WILL RULE FOR ALL TIME IN ALABAMA."⁵⁹ However, ratification was not without opponents in Marengo,

⁵⁵ Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 101.

⁵⁶ Wilson, "Miller Descendants," 42.

⁵⁷ Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, 11.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, 16.

including African American Republican politician Frank H. Threet.⁶⁰ He wrote to the *Democrat* and pled with readers to reject disfranchisement: “I now appeal to the white people of native County, and ask them is [disfranchisement] right? Is it just?” Unsurprisingly, whites of Marengo County disregarded Threet’s pleas. The *Democrat* dismissed his letter, arguing, “The new Constitution will not disfranchise any good honest and intelligent colored man. It is intended to eliminate the dishonest and ignorant ones.”⁶¹

Marengo whites disregarded fears of African American disfranchisement and focused on benefits for whites. In a letter to Judge William Cuninghame, Democrat R.R. Poole praised the new constitution as a solution to eradicate election fraud, lower taxes, and save taxpayer money.⁶² Despite claims that the new constitution would prevent dishonest elections, when ratification succeeded, the hill counties yet again accused the Black Belt of using voter fraud in order to secure ratification. African Americans in the Black Belt appeared to vote overwhelmingly in favor of the new constitution; everywhere else in Alabama, they opposed ratification.⁶³ In Marengo County, the tally came to 2,268 votes in favor and 804 votes against, numbers similar to those counted for the vote to hold the convention earlier in 1901.⁶⁴ In Marengo County in 1899, African Americans outnumbered whites on the voter rolls by thousands; 5,094 African American and 1,739 white voters were registered.⁶⁵ It is possible that

⁵⁹ *Marengo Democrat*, “16 Reasons Why the New Constitution Should be Ratified,” October 18, 1901.

⁶⁰ Threet also had a strong record of opposing election fraud and contested two Congressional elections (1875 and 1889), in which he ran as the Republican candidate. He lost both contestations.

⁶¹ *Marengo Democrat*, “The New Constitution,” October 11, 1901.

⁶² *Marengo Democrat*, letter from R.R. Poole to Judge William Cuninghame, November 1, 1901.

⁶³ Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, 12-13.

⁶⁴ *Marengo Democrat*, “New Constitution Ratified,” November 15, 1901. Deterioration of the newspaper prevents analysis of the Marengo ratification vote at the beat level.

county Democratic election officials exaggerated the quantity of favorable votes to bolster the statewide total, or they may have intimidated African Americans into voting for their own disfranchisement or into not voting at all. Other Black Belt counties may have reported results in favor of ratification without counting any votes at all.⁶⁶ In either case, constitutional ratification secured the power of the ruling white planters, Charles H. Miller among them.

Marengo County provided a case study of the disfranchising effects of the 1901 Constitution. The actions of convention delegates effectively removed African Americans, honest or otherwise, from politics. In Marengo, many of them were unable to pay the required \$1.50 in poll taxes, as the poll tax preyed on their lack of access to cash; most African Americans were part of the crop lien system and operated on credit that merchants extended to them. In 1915, the *Linden Democrat-Reporter* proudly claimed that not a single African American in Marengo registered to vote between 1901 and 1913, and only two registered in 1914. The *Democrat-Reporter's* numbers demonstrated that among whites, voter registration dramatically decreased, as the poll tax also preyed upon poor white farmers. The newspaper asserted that sixty-four whites registered between 1901 and 1913, amounting to \$96 in poll taxes. Only six whites registered to vote in Miller's home beat, traditionally one of the poorer white beats.⁶⁷

The *Democrat-Reporter's* claims were erroneous, as a small number of African American men were able to surmount the formidable voting requirements of the 1901 Constitution in Marengo County. As Frank H. Threet's letter to the *Linden Reporter* demonstrated, Marengo African Americans were unwilling to step aside and allow the new constitution to strip away

⁶⁵ Harry Smith Thach, "The Alabama Constitutional Convention of 1901" (master's thesis, Auburn University, 1939), 15.

⁶⁶ Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, 12-13.

⁶⁷ *Democrat-Reporter*, "Amount Poll Tax Paid by Both White and Colored for Year 1914 & Back Years," February 18, 1915.

their voting rights. From 1901 to 1914, 300 African American men appeared on the poll tax register in Marengo County. 255 of these men only paid a poll tax in 1901, while 12 only paid in 1902, one in both 1904 and in 1914, and the remaining 31 paid for two or more years. While the poll tax reduced the black voter base from over 5,000 men before 1900 to a mere handful after the Constitution's ratification, a few African Americans were, in fact, registered to vote, refuting the *Democrat-Reporter's* claims. Nathan C. Craig of Magnolia paid a poll tax every year from 1901 to 1911. Most of the other men who registered appeared in scattered years, as Richard Catlin of Linden did in 1901, 1903, 1905, and 1906. However, by 1914, only three African American men, Christopher Ethridge of Dixons Mills and Luther Sharpe and Clarence Armstrong of Demopolis, were registered voters in Marengo County.⁶⁸

21 African American men appeared on the county poll tax register in Shiloh in 1901. Five of these men were patrons of Charles H. Miller's store at the time; four of the five owned a farm and could read and write. Three of the five men had demonstrated access to cash, as Dan McIntosh, Charlie Hildreth, and Jim Smith settled portions of their store debt with payments totaling \$59.55 in cash. As a result, a \$1.50 poll tax payment was more reasonable for them to pay than for the customers who maintained large debts and lived as tenant farmers. However, each of the men disappeared from the poll tax register after 1901. Every single one of Shiloh's 21 African American voters who paid a poll tax in 1901 never paid another.⁶⁹ It is possible that after 1901 white elites pressured these men into failing to pay a poll tax, perhaps the men failed the easily manipulated literacy test, or they may have been unable to pay because their financial situations changed for the worse. Regardless, the 1901 Constitution accomplished the desires of

⁶⁸ Marengo County Poll Tax Register, Marengo County Probate Recording Office, Linden, AL.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Miller and the other delegates, as the electorate shrank to include only white men who had a measure of financial security and power available to them.

After his service at the Constitutional Convention, Miller sought public office at the state level. In 1906, he ran for Alabama Senate against planter John J. King, a fellow delegate to the 1901 Convention.⁷⁰ Although he lost to King in the Democratic primary, Miller was appointed to the State Democratic Executive Committee (SDEC), on which he served from 1906 to 1910.⁷¹ Members of the SDEC were the most powerful Democrats in the state, as the organization controlled primaries and elections and decided the state Democratic platform. Miller was absent from the SDEC's meetings for most of his tenure, and when he attended, he was characteristically silent. For Miller, membership in the SDEC allowed him to maintain the appearance of power while serving the Democratic Party and focusing on affairs at home, including directing First National Bank of Linden, which he founded in 1904. At the end of his tenure on the SDEC, he again set his sights on the Alabama Senate. In 1910, Miller handily defeated two popular and powerful Democrats in the "warmly contested" race, carrying nearly all of South Marengo.⁷²

Charles H. Miller evolved into a Progressive between his service at the 1901 Constitutional Convention and his two terms in the Alabama Senate in 1911 and 1915. Becoming an advocate of reform was a natural progression of his personal politics. Miller's brand of Progressivism developed from his religious faith and personal moral code, due to his

⁷⁰ *Montgomery Advertiser*, "Results in Marengo," April 11, 1906.

⁷¹ Democratic Party State Executive Committee, Democratic Party (Ala.) State Executive Committee Records, 1875-1986; Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL.

⁷² *Linden Reporter*, "It Is Over," May 6, 1910. Miller received 736 votes to D.J. Meador's 525 and J.H. Compton's 487.

heavy involvement in the Baptist church and his local Baptist association. He was a member of the executive committee of the Bethel Baptist Association, served as a deacon in his church, and frequently presented annual reports on missions and social issues. The *Democrat-Reporter* proclaimed Miller to be “a man of the highest standard of morality and honor.”⁷³ His desire to improve society through legislating moral issues manifested itself as early as 1884 with his involvement in the Marengo Temperance Union, the first effort to enact countywide prohibition in Marengo’s history.⁷⁴ By the early 1900s, temperance had become a central issue of Progressivism in Alabama. At the same time, the Baptist Church increasingly focused on “the divine call to reform the social environment” in the early twentieth century, which included enacting prohibition laws and improving public education.⁷⁵ Drawing on this foundation of moral principles and religious faith, Miller was characteristic of Alabama Progressives who felt the need to purify society and democracy.⁷⁶

Progressivism not only fit with Miller’s personal beliefs, but it also gave Miller more power. Once Conservatives secured white supremacy, Miller and other politicians like him could engineer social change as they pleased, and they sought to improve life for white Alabamians. Miller moved from defending the power of white elites to actively molding society as he saw fit, once the 1901 Constitution secured the dominance of white elites. In fact, Miller was one of many “progressive businessmen” who were essentially Conservative Democrats but supported

⁷³ *Democrat-Reporter*, “For the Senate,” June 12, 1913.

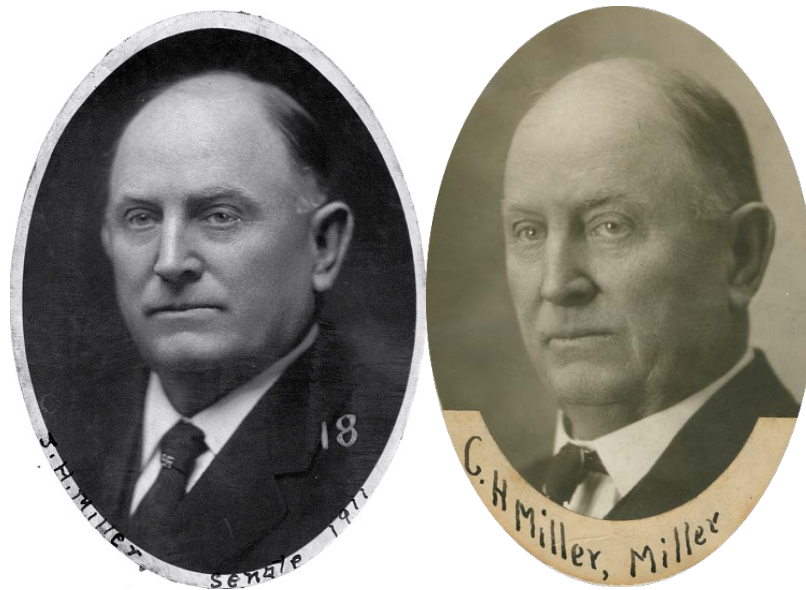
⁷⁴ *Linden Reporter*, “The New Movement,” May 30, 1884.

⁷⁵ Wayne Flynt, “Dissent in Zion: Alabama Baptists and Social Issues, 1900-1914,” *Journal of Southern History* 35, no. 4 (November 1969): 524.

⁷⁶ Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism*, 330.

modernization measures such as improving roads, public education, and public health.⁷⁷

Progressives wanted to create growth, opportunity, and social change in Alabama, but only for whites, which would benefit themselves and the white members of their communities. Any reform measures that Miller and other lawmakers implemented were crafted with disregard for the welfare of African Americans. Progressive reformers were also “true spokesmen for the local community,” in which capacity Miller acted throughout his political career.⁷⁸ With concern for local issues and a desire to improve society through moral legislation, Miller fits into the Progressive frame.



Figures 9 & 10. Charles H. Miller during his terms in the Alabama Senate. Above left, in 1911; above right, in 1915. Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

Miller defended Marengo County well during his two terms in the Senate. He served Marengo so effectively that in comments at the end of the 1911 session, one senator remarked

⁷⁷ Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, 38.

⁷⁸ Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism*, 324-26.

that Miller had “done his duty to Marengo County, if not to the State of Alabama.”⁷⁹ During his first session, he proposed legislation to further develop the county’s Law and Equity Court and created the office of court reporter for Marengo County.⁸⁰ In the 1915 session, he successfully quashed a North and South Marengo new county fight started by Goodman G. Griffin, an outspoken freshman representative from Demopolis. Griffin schemed to break Demopolis off from Marengo and form a new county with pieces of Hale and Greene. Linden’s *Democrat-Reporter* accused Griffin of indifference to representing the interests of the entire county. With Miller in the Senate, the newspaper’s editor argued, “The people of Marengo may rest assured that every interest of the county will be guarded with care, faithfulness, and deliberation.”⁸¹ As the *Democrat-Reporter* predicted, Miller suppressed Griffin’s bill in the Senate, successfully defending the interests of his constituents, particularly those in South Marengo, as they vehemently opposed the new county.

Although Miller remained invested in the welfare of his South Marengo friends and neighbors, he advocated for the interests of his constituents in the rest of the county as well. The county regional rivalry continued with a fight over jury terms of court. As the county seat, Linden was reluctant to allow any functions of the county or circuit court system to go to Demopolis, as it would draw people and revenue away from Linden. The *Democrat-Reporter* optimistically reported that Miller would be “alert to see that no law is made to authorize the holding of jury terms of court any where in the county except at the court house in Linden.”⁸²

⁷⁹ *Montgomery Advertiser*, “1911 Legislature Part of History,” April 15, 1911.

⁸⁰ *Montgomery Advertiser*, “Revenue Bill is Almost Passed,” March 16, 1911; Alabama Legislature, *Journal of the Senate of the State of Alabama, Session of 1911, Held in the City of Montgomery, Commencing Tuesday, January 10, 1911* (Montgomery, Alabama: Brown Printing Company, 1911), 545 (hereafter cited as 1911 Journal).

⁸¹ *Democrat-Reporter*, “Legislative News,” August 19, 1915.

Miller engineered a compromise between the two towns that allowed a portion of the jury terms to meet at Demopolis as well as Linden. The compromise divided Marengo County into a northern district, which included Demopolis, Macon, Old Spring Hill, Dayton, and Faunsdale beats, and a southern district, which encompassed the remainder of the county. The circuit court met four times a year at Demopolis and four times at Linden.⁸³

Miller devoted himself to improving and developing infrastructure for the benefit of Marengo County, but he devoted himself to promoting temperance for the improvement of the state. Perhaps reflecting his childhood and his father's apparent alcoholism, he was a hardline "progressive-prohibitionist" and served as a member of the temperance committee in both the 1911 and 1915 sessions.⁸⁴ His Senate voting record reflects that he favored statewide prohibition rather than local options, which were harder to enforce. In every case, he voted against local dispensaries and legalization of alcohol, no matter how local the bill and regardless of whether the issue was the prerogative of the senator from that district. In a speech in the 1911 session, Senator N.D. Godbold of Wilcox cited an editorial from the *Pine Hill Blade*, which called out Miller for voting against the Parks Bill, which would have allowed each county to vote on prohibition, and supporting statewide prohibition instead.⁸⁵ Godbold denounced the prohibitionist senators as radicals. He noted that Miller had campaigned and voted for a prohibition amendment to the state constitution, a highly unpopular, extreme prohibition measure

⁸² *Democrat-Reporter*, "Legislative News," August 19, 1915.

⁸³ *Demopolis Times*, "Demopolis Will Have Jury Terms of Court," September 23, 1915.

⁸⁴ Inez Norton Edwards, "Emmet O'Neal: Alabama Governor, 1911-1915" (master's thesis, Auburn University, 1957), iv; Alabama Department of Archives and History, *Alabama Official and Statistical Register 1911* (Montgomery, AL: Brown Printing Company, 1912), 67; Alabama Department of Archives and History, *Alabama Official and Statistical Register 1915* (Montgomery, AL: Brown Printing Company, 1915), 69 (hereafter cited as 1915 Journal).

⁸⁵ 1911 Journal, 881.

that Alabama voters rejected.⁸⁶ Again, in 1911, Miller voted against a bill that would allow the people of Alabama to vote on the manufacture, sale, and licensing of alcohol, even though the amendment promised that no local prohibition laws would be affected. Miller remained a member of the radical minority, as the measure passed the Senate.⁸⁷ In the 1915 session, Miller backed another statewide prohibition bill, which prevailed against the protests of Governor Charles Henderson. The strongly prohibitionist Legislature overrode his veto, and Miller helped usher Alabama into a new and lasting era of temperance that began on July 1, 1915.⁸⁸

Miller also believed in improving society through the reform and expansion of Alabama's public school system. He set a precedent for his pro-education Senate record as early as 1900, when he built a schoolhouse for his community and received \$150 from the Marengo County Board of Education to fund the school in 1907.⁸⁹ The school served his children and other white children in the area for the next thirty years.⁹⁰ Once in the Senate, he continued endorsing education policies. In Marengo County, he introduced legislation to expand and provide aid for Demopolis' city school district.⁹¹ He also supported a bill to establish a rural library system and legislation to eradicate illiteracy.⁹² While usually quite frugal and opposed to appropriations

⁸⁶ 1911 Journal, 878.

⁸⁷ 1911 Journal, 645.

⁸⁸ Allen W. Jones, "Political Reforms of the Progressive Era," *Alabama Review* 21 (July 1968): 182; Ed. Ernest Hurst Cherrington, *The Anti-Saloon League Year Book 1921: An Encyclopedia of Facts and Figures Dealing with the Liquor Traffic and Temperance Reform* (Westerville, OH: American Issue Press, 1921), 136.

⁸⁹ *Linden Reporter*, "Rural School Houses," June 7, 1907.

⁹⁰ Wilson, "Miller Descendants," 52.

⁹¹ Alabama Legislature, *Journal of the Senate of the State of Alabama, Session of 1915, Held in the City of Montgomery, Commencing Tuesday, January 12, 1915* (Montgomery, AL: Brown Printing Company, 1915), 2809 (hereafter cited as 1915 Journal).

⁹² 1911 Journal, 1615; 1915 Journal, 590.

from the state budget, Miller favored appropriations that promoted education. He favored paying parents ten cents per child per day for their children's transportation to school if they lived more than two miles from the schoolhouse.⁹³ He also voted in favor of legislation to appropriate \$25,000 to build an agricultural school for whites at Hamilton, Marion County and approved funding for a white industrial school at Camp Hill, Tallapoosa County.⁹⁴

Miller's record on education also highlighted the racial inequity of the Progressive agenda in Alabama. Most of the educational measures he supported benefited whites but neglected the welfare of African Americans. His schoolhouse excluded the African American children of his community, and though his support of public education in the Senate included African Americans, it was limited. In one instance in 1911, he supported a bill to establish an agricultural school for African American students at Corona, Walker County. The contrast between funding for the Hamilton school and the Corona school was stark, as the state allowed Corona only \$1,000 in appropriations.⁹⁵ While Miller's record as a Progressive senator left a legacy of supporting "any form of legislation that meant the suppression of vice or the uplifting of humanity," the benefits of Progressivism were only for whites.⁹⁶

⁹³ 1915 Journal, 616.

⁹⁴ 1911 Journal, 1363; 2197.

⁹⁵ 1911 Journal, 2067.

⁹⁶ *Demopolis Times*, "Senator Miller Dead," September 27, 1917.



Figure 11. Miller schoolhouse in Miller, Alabama, located ten miles south of Linden on US Highway 43. Photograph by Charlie Gibbons.

In 1915, only Miller returned to the State House from the 1911 session, an odd situation for an Alabama senator. It was not strange because all of the other sitting senators lost their reelection campaigns, but because Alabama's Senate so frequently experienced complete turnover between sessions in the early twentieth century. It is odd that Miller returned to the Senate, since most senators served one term and moved on to other offices. Perhaps he was using the position to prepare himself to run for an even higher position, but he died while in office. During his career, Miller sought political power for himself, but he also held the interests of his white constituents at heart. Fighting for Marengo Democracy evolved from supporting the Conservatives during the Populist Revolt, to establishing white supremacy and Black Belt dominance at the 1901 Constitutional Convention, and to advocating for Progressive reforms at the local and state level during his Senate terms. Miller's political career, his own personality,

and his connections demonstrate the importance of securing local power in the Black Belt in order to control state politics during a volatile period in Alabama's history. For Miller and other Black Belt politicians, power began at home. Without considering the local, one misses not only the details of the local story but also the primary motivations for the actions that formed the basis of state power in Alabama in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Conclusion

Charles Houston Miller died in the early hours of September 27, 1917 after a sudden illness. While he had suffered from Bright's disease, his death shocked the citizens of Marengo County. The *Democrat-Reporter* called him a "distinguished and well-beloved citizen" who would be remembered for "his kind and charitable deeds," his long political career, and his involvement in the Marengo Baptist community.¹ The *Demopolis Times* mourned the loss of a man who "identified with Marengo in every way, both politically and materially." His obituary also acknowledged his characteristic silence while in office: "No one had cause to ask promises or pledges of Charlie Miller [...] The people knew where he stood without asking him."² Dr. Paul Bomar, the president of Judson College, preached Miller's funeral at Sweet Water Cemetery on September 28.³ Carrie and five children – three daughters and two sons – survived Miller. At the time of his death, two of his daughters attended Judson College, and his eldest child, Charles A. Miller, was away at Auburn.⁴ Charles returned home and became involved in

¹ *Democrat-Reporter*, "Death of Senator Charles H. Miller," October 4, 1917.

² *Demopolis Times*, "Senator Miller Dead," September 27, 1917.

³ *Democrat-Reporter*, "Death of Senator Charles H. Miller," October 4, 1917.

⁴ *Demopolis Times*, "Senator Miller Dead," September 27, 1917.

First National Bank of Linden and helped run the farm and the general store, which operated until at least 1922.⁵

Despite the fact that Miller had a successor to his empire, it nonetheless faded after his death. The post office closed in 1925, and the schoolhouse closed in 1929 when Marengo County consolidated the public school system. Along with the death of its iconic central figure, agricultural change prompted the decline of the Miller domain. Land ruined from years of monocrop agriculture and the arrival of the boll weevil in Alabama in the 1910s heralded the collapse of cotton throughout the state. While cotton prices rose during World War I and afterward, by the 1920s, the world on which Miller built his life, community, and power was beginning to unravel. Cotton prices dropped during the 1920s and brought about a period of depression and change in the rural South.⁶ At the same time, planters across the South began to mechanize the modes of cotton production, which transformed the region. Sharecropping and tenant farming began to disappear and the rural South was left “depopulated and enclosed” by the mid-twentieth century.⁷ Marengo County and the rest of the Alabama Black Belt felt the effects of the breakdown of the plantation system. In the case of the Millers, they began to distance themselves from agriculture and entered the timber industry; rather than working solely as a farmer, Charles A. Miller became a lumberman and a founder of the Thomas and Miller Lumber Company in 1923.⁸

⁵ 1920 U.S. census, Marengo County, Alabama, population schedule, Shiloh, p. 4A, dwelling 61, family 61, Chas. A. Miller; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://ancestry.com>. Selma Hardware Company, invoices, 1992; privately held by Charlie Gibbons.

⁶ Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), xiv.

⁷ Kirby, *Rural Worlds*, 31, 51.

⁸ C.A. Miller, Jr., “Thomas & Miller Lumber Co.,” in *The Heritage of Marengo County, Alabama* (Clanton, AL: Heritage Publishing Consultants, 2000), 57.

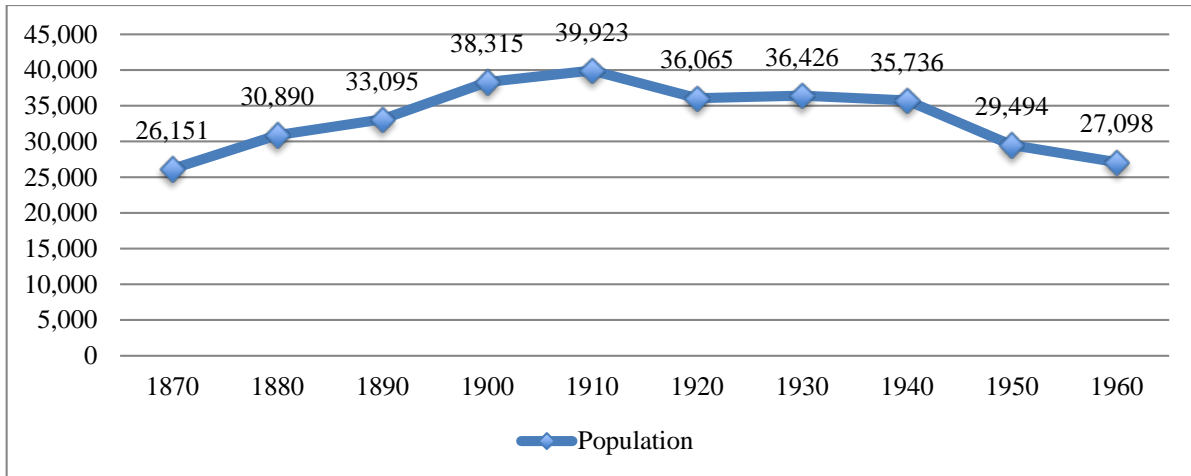


Figure 12. Marengo County population, 1870-1960. Data from the Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia.

The ongoing collapse of agriculture and subsequent lack of economic opportunity propelled population loss in Marengo County. Between 1910 and 1920, the county lost 10 percent of its population; while the number remained stable in 1920 and 1930, the population plummeted between 1940 and 1950 and continued to drop.⁹ Over these decades, more Millers began leaving Marengo County to find opportunities in bigger, more prosperous places, mirroring the general exodus from the Alabama Black Belt. Even during Charles H. Miller’s lifetime, family members left Marengo. His brother William left for Talladega to take advantage of business opportunities in 1888 and then for Birmingham in the 1910s, while brother James moved to Gadsden in the 1910s.¹⁰ The community of Miller gradually declined as Charles and Carrie Miller’s children and grandchildren moved to Linden and Thomaston or left Marengo altogether. Their son George W. Miller moved his family to Thomaston in the 1930s, and their

⁹ Historical Census Browser.

¹⁰ *Linden Reporter*, “Mr. Miller out of the Race,” April 13, 1888; 1920 Federal Census.

daughters had all moved away by 1930. Marguerite moved to Greenville, where she taught public school, and later to Montgomery in the 1940s; Placidia left for Savannah and later Bibb County, Georgia; and the youngest Miller, June, relocated to Grove Hill in Clarke County. They and their husbands sought better opportunities for themselves in places outside Marengo County and the Alabama Black Belt.

As people left the county or moved to Marengo's larger population centers, the communities that sprang up around stores and gins in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries disappeared, Miller among their number. Today, Miller consists of the old schoolhouse on the side of US Highway 43 and a dirt road named for the village. The old Miller place still stands. Family members still use the house as a hunting lodge, but the store has been demolished. Though few of the Millers still live in Marengo County, the family owns a significant proportion of the thousands of acres that Charles H. Miller purchased in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Divided between his descendants, the land is used for hunting or timber harvesting. South Marengo remains rural and remote, holding little economic opportunity for people who live there, as is the case with the rest of the Black Belt. While much of the Miller family left Marengo County and the Black Belt altogether in the twentieth century, many of Charles H. Miller's African American neighbors and customers remained in the Miller area because they simply could not leave due to their economic situation. Families with the names Rembert, Poellnitz, Prince, Worthy, Hildreth, and others lingered on long after many of the Millers had departed.

Charles H. Miller matters because his story gives voice not only to his family, but it also tells the stories of the people who depended on him. Miller built his power in a brief window of time when the South's economy relied on hand cultivation of cotton, fostering the crop lien

system and shoring up the power of landlords and merchants. Had he lived even ten to twenty years later, it is unlikely he would have been able to command such extensive land, resources, and power due to the shifting system of agriculture. Miller provides a classic example of the life of the powerful planter-politician of the Black Belt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, Miller's story is not complete without including the stories of his neighbors, customers, and tenants, all of whom contributed to the spectrum of experiences that converged in the community of Miller, Alabama. The story of Miller – the man and the community – highlights the importance of the local story in Alabama history.

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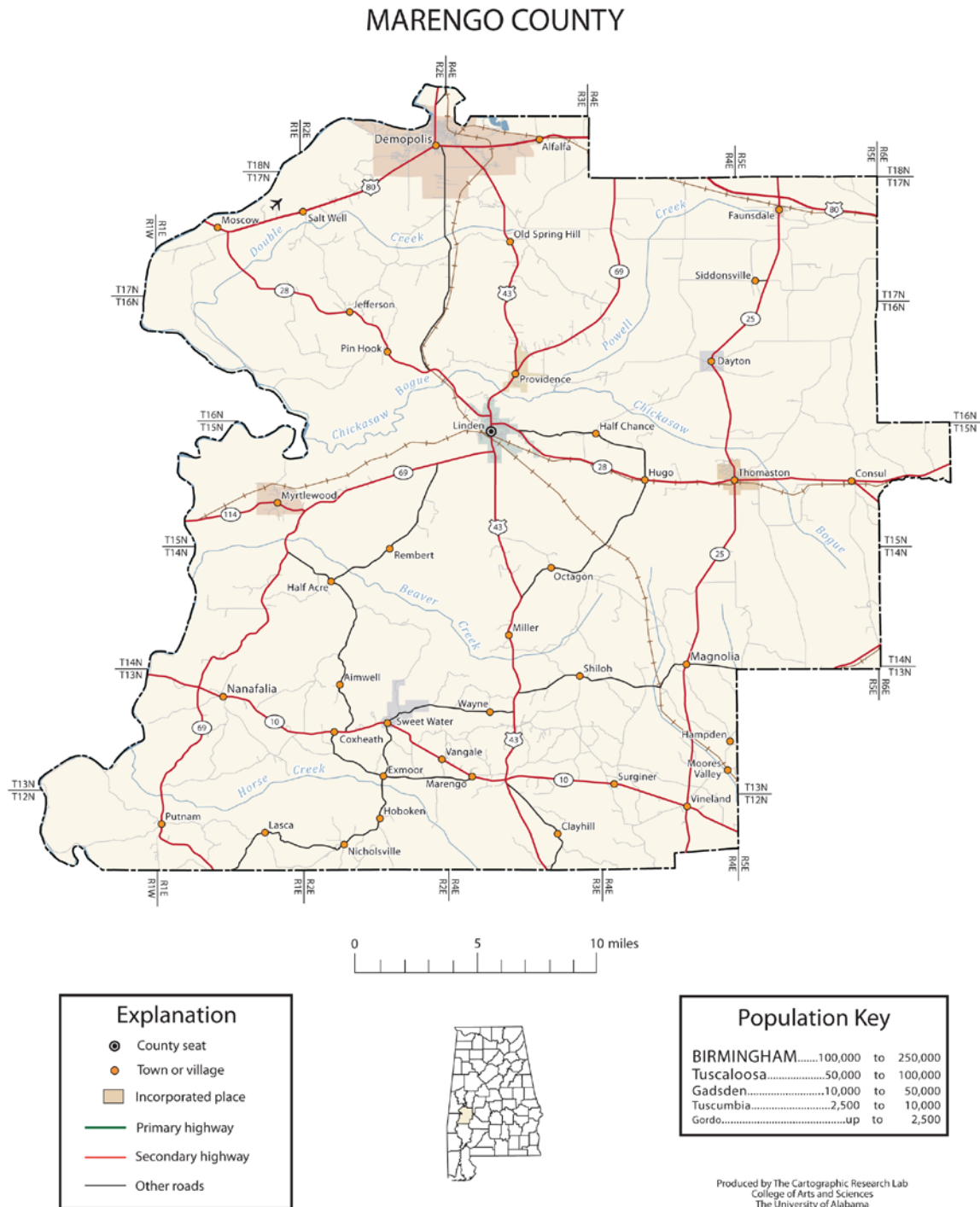
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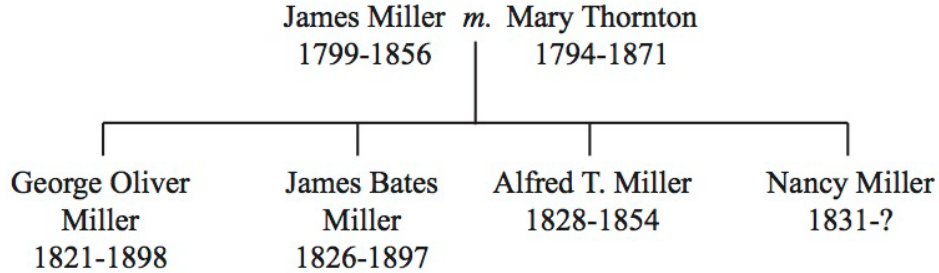
Appendix 1: Marengo County Map



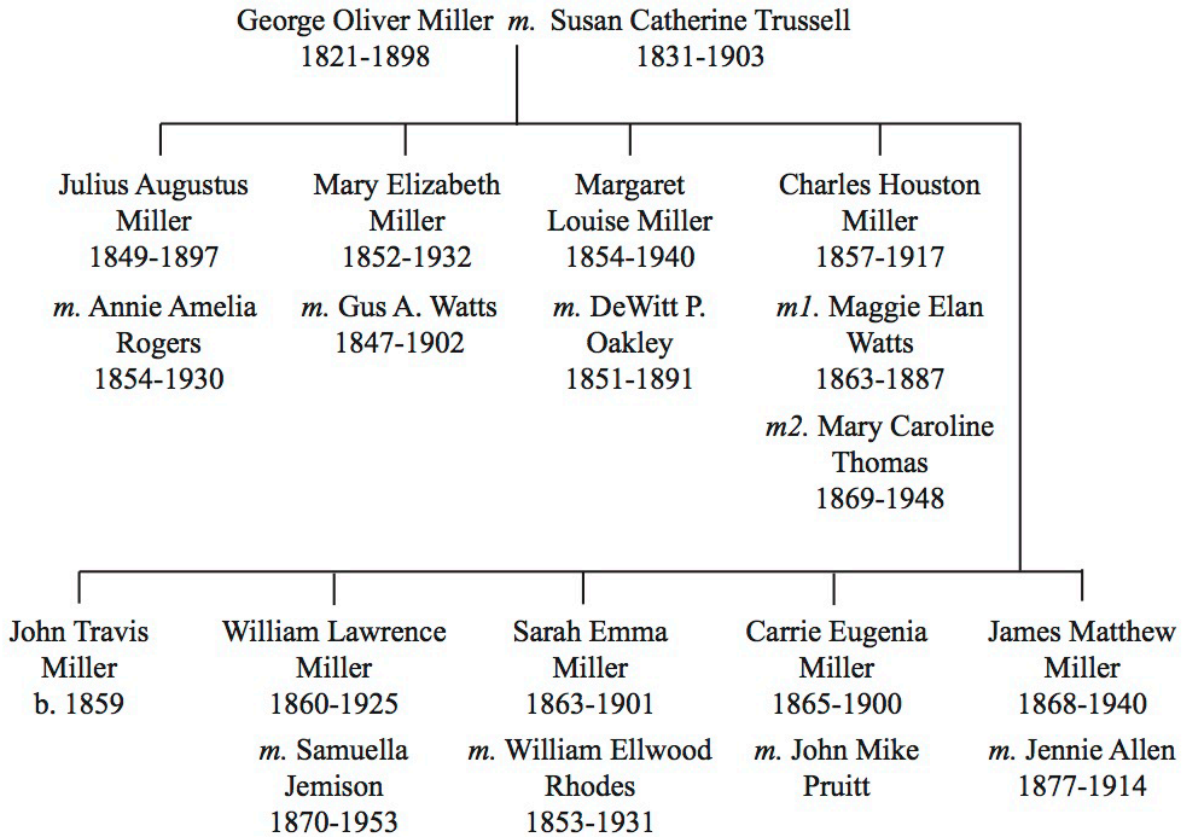
Map courtesy of the University of Alabama Cartographic Research Laboratory.

Appendix 2: Miller Family Trees

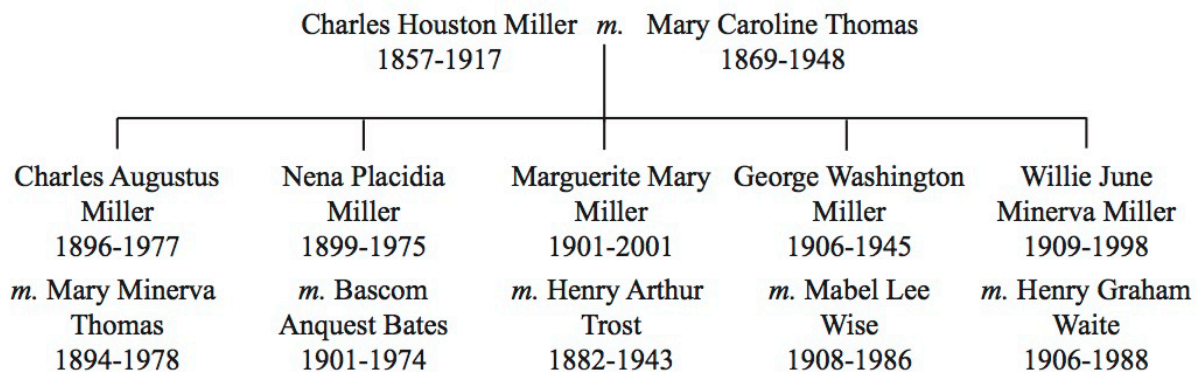
The James and Mary Miller Family



The George and Cathy Miller Family



The Charles and Carrie Miller Family



Appendix 3: John H. Minge Mercantile Network

John H. Minge Mercantile, Faunsdale, Marengo County, Alabama, 1906

Local

Faunsdale

1. Black Belt Trade Company

Demopolis

1. Braswell Hardware Company
2. DeLoach-McMillen Hardware Company
3. H.L. Wood Lumber Company Manufacturers
4. John C. Webb
5. Julius Rosenbush
6. Mayer Brothers Importers and Jobbers
7. Southern Grocery Company
8. Western Wholesale Drug Company

Selma

1. Batterson & Plumlee
2. Ben J. Schuster Hardware
3. Benish & Meyer
4. C.W. Hooper Wholesale Grocers
5. Cawthon-Coleman Company
6. Eliasberg & Brothers
7. J.H. Robbins & Sons Hardware Company
8. Johnson, Coleman, & Graham Hardware Company
9. L. & E. Lamar Wholesale Grocers
10. L.C. Adler & Company
11. Meyer & Elkan
12. R.H. & W.C. Agee
13. Selma Hardware Company
14. Tissier Hardware Company
15. Walter S. Butler Wholesale & Retail
16. William Ullman & Sons

Alabama

Birmingham

1. Amzi Godden Seed Company
2. Birmingham Supply Company
3. Loveman, Joseph, & Loeb Department Store

4. Moore & Handley Hardware Company

5. Roberts & Son

Mobile

1. Alabama Coffee Company
2. Frohlichstein Cigar Manufacturing Company
3. Pollock & Bernheimer

Montgomery

1. A.S. Hertz
2. National Biscuit Company
3. R.L. Seligman
4. Standard Oil Company

Southeast

Atlanta

1. A.M. Robinson Company
2. Frank E. Block Company
3. J.K. Orr Shoe Company
4. Myers Millinery Company
5. Southern Suspender Works
6. Spool Cotton Company
7. T.S. Lewis Wholesale Manufacturer of Crackers
8. The New Home Sewing Machine Company
9. The Rosenfeld Company

Charlotte

1. Charlotte Clothing Manufacturing Company

Chattanooga

1. MacGowan-Cooke Printing Company
2. Mountain City Mill Company

Como, MS

1. E.H. Dunlap Manufacturing Company

Edenton, NC

1. T.H. Shepard

Louisiana

1. Armour Packing Company

Louisville

1. B.F. Avery & Sons
2. Belknap Hardware and Manufacturing Company
3. Federal Chemical Company
4. Harrison & Gathright
5. Myer, Bridges Company Wooden Ware

Macon

1. The Brown Wagon Company

Memphis

1. H. Wetter Manufacturing Company

Meridian

1. Meyer Brothers Wholesale Grocers
2. Swift & Company

Nashville

1. Brandon Printing Company
2. H.J. Heinz Company
3. National Casket Company

New Orleans

1. Burkenroad Goldsmith Company
2. Cluett, Peabody, and Company
3. Gulf Refining Company of Louisiana
4. May & Ellis
5. Schmidt & Zeigler Wholesale Grocers
6. Walker Brothers & Company

Reidsville, NC

1. F.R. Penn Tobacco Company

Richmond

1. T.D. Stokes & Company Hats and Gloves

Savannah

1. Savannah Woodenware Company

Vossburg, MS

1. Stafford Mineral Springs & Hotel Company

National

Baltimore

1. Maass & Kemper

Cairo, IL

1. Cairo Milling Company

Chicago

1. Ed. V. Price & Company Merchant Tailors
2. Moore & Evans Diamonds, Watches, & Jewelry
3. R.D. Swisher Manufacturing Company
4. Robert Johns
5. Standard Talking Machine Company

Cincinnati

1. Anchor Buggy Company
2. Heekin Spice Company

Kansas City

1. Cudahy Packing Company

Lockland, OH

1. Philip Carey Manufacturing Company

New York

1. A.L. Silberstein
2. A.L. Werner & Company
3. D.R. Dunlap Mercantile Company
4. McIlwaine Knight & Company

Philadelphia

1. Pratt Food Company
2. Schuylkill Mills

St. Louis

1. Courtney Shoe Company
2. George D. Barnard and Company
3. Hargadine-McKittrick Dry Goods Company
4. John Deere Plow Company
5. Nelson Morris and Company
6. Red Cross Vinegar Company
7. Simmons Hardware Company
8. The Thread Agency
9. Wohl, South, & Blumberg

Tiffin, OH

1. Seneca Chemical & Stock Food Company

Westfield, MA

1. Great Eastern Whip Company

Unknown: International Harvester Company of America

Appendix 4: Miller Store Sample Inventory, 1901-1902

1 Buck Head	Box salve	Cold tea
1 Chamber	Boy hat	Collar
1 single tree	Boy pants	Collar button
2 pr. Drawers	Boy shoes	Cologne
21# Chops	Braid	Colt
250# Bacon Plates	Brass pan	Colter
3SK A Phosphate	Bridle	Comb
8-inch twister	Bridle bits	Copperas
Alum	Bridle pad and collar	Corn
Antiseptic	Brogan shoes	Cornmeal
Apron goods	Broom	Corset
Arnica salve	Buttons	Cotton flannel
Asafoetida	Cabbage seed	Cotton seed
Axe	Cake soap	Cottonades
Axe handle	Cakes	Cough Cure
Axle grease	Calico	Cough syrup
Baby Hood	Calomel	Crackers
Back board	Calomel pellets	Cravat
Bacon	Calomel tablets	Cream tartar
Ball thread	Camphor	Creole shoes
Bar soap	Camphor gum	Cups
Bed tick	Can corn	Curry comb
Beef	Candy	D.O.D. medicine
Belts	Cap	Dark calico
Bitters	Cape	Diarrhea & dysentery med.
Black calico	Capsules	Dipper
Black pepper	Carbolic acid	Domestics
Blacking	Cartridges	Dress
Bleaching	Castor oil	Dress button
Blue stone	Celluloid starch	Dress goods
Blueing	Chambray	Dress pattern
Book	Cheese	Dress pins
Borax	Cheroots	Drill
Bot. Elixir	Chevroit	Dysentery medicine
Bot. Essence Ginger	Chewing gum	Ear corn
Bot. Lemon	Child's hose	Earrings
Bot. Life Root	Chill tonic	Elastic
Bot. Peppermint	Cigars	Electric Bitters
Bot. Specific	Clock	Embroidery
Bot. Swamp Fox	Coat	Envelopes
Bot. Tr. Iron	Coconuts	Epsom salts
Bot. Wine Cor	Coffee	Eye water
Bot. Worm Syrup	Coffee mill	Fascinator
Bowl	Coffee pots	Featherstitch braid

Female Medicine
Fertilizer
File
Firecrackers
Fishing tackle
Flanelaine
Flannelette
Flannels
Flour
Gal. oil
Garden seed
Ginger
Ginger snaps
Ginghams
Ginning bag and ties
Glasses of jelly
Glover
Gray pony
Hairpins
Half soles
Handkerchiefs
Harness brads
Hat
Hatchet
Headache cure
Headache powders
Heel bolt
Hinges
Hoe
Hook & lines
Insect powders
Insertion
Irish potatoes
Jamaica Ginger
Jeans
Kerosene bbl
Kerosene oil
Kings New Discovery
Knife
Kroker sack
Lace
Lady's hat
Lady's shoes
Lady's shoes
Lady's vests
Lamp Burner

Lamp chimney
Lamp wicks
Lap rings
Lard
Laudanum
Lawn
Lead pencil
Leather chain
Leggings
Lemon extract
License
Lincey
Liniment
Liver medicine
Liver regulator
Loaded shells
Lock
Lumber
Matches
Meal
Meat
Medicines
Melon seed
Merchandise
Milk bucket
Milk cup
Milk pan
Molasses
Molasses sugar
Morphine
Mule
Muslin
Mustard
Muzzle
Nails
Neckties
Nitre
Nutmegs
Nuts
Oats
Onion sets
Onteora
Oranges
Organdie
Organic Restorer
Osnaburg

Outing
Overshirt
Oysters
Padlock
Pan
Pants
Paper beans
Paper needles
Paper pins
Paper tacks
Parasol
Paregoric
Peas
Pellettes
Pen holders
Pencil tablet
Pencils
Percale
Peruna
Pickles
Pills
Pineapple
Pineapple extract
Pipe
Pique
Pitcher
Pk. Potatoes
Plaids
Plow bolts
Plow line
Plow points
Plow stock
Plug tobacco
Pocketbook
Pocketknife
Potash
Potted ham
Powder
Pr. bridle reins
Pr. half soles
Pr. hose
Pr. traces
Prints
Quilt lining
Quinine
Radish seed

Raisins
Ribbon
Rice
Rickrack
Rivets
Rope
Sacks
Saddle blanket
Saddle girth
Sailor hat
Salmons
Salt
Saltpeter
Sardines
Satin
Scissors
Scovil hoes
Seed corn
Set cups and saucers
Set door hinges
Set plates
Sheeting
Shelled corn
Shells
Shirt buttons
Shirting
Shirts
Shoe nails
Shoe tacks
Shoe tap

Shoes
Shot
Shovel plow
Shovels
Silk
Skooter plow
Slippers
Smoking tobacco
Snuff
Socks
Soda
Soothing syrup
Sorrel mare
Spool thread
Sprts. Nitre
St. A. Tea
Stamps
Starch
Steer
Stockings
Strainer
Straw hat
Stripes
Sugar
Suit clothes
Sulphur
Suspenders
Sweep
Talcum powder
Thimbles

Ticking
Tin bucket
Tobacco
Toothbrush
Towel
Trimming
Turning plows
Turnip seed
Turpentine
Umbrella
Undershirts
Vaseline
Velvet
Velvet ribbon
Vermifuge
Vest
Viburnal Wine
Vinegar
Wagon
Waist
Wash dish
Watch
Watermelon seed
White cloth
White goods
Woman's Restorer
Writing paper
Writing tablet

