VENTERS FARM HISTORIC DISTRICT (Venters Farms)
Both Sides of US 258, Southeast of Junction SR 1229
Richland Vicinity
Onslow County
North Carolina

HABS No. NC-370

HABS
NC-370

WRITTEN HISTORIC AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Building Survey
National Park Service
Southeast Region
Department of the Interior
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

VENTERS FARM HISTORIC DISTRICT (VENTERS FARM) HABS No. NC-370

Location: Both sides of US 258, Southeast of Junction with SR 1229, in the vicinity of Richlands, North Carolina

U.S.G.S. Catherine Lake Quadrangle (F.5)
Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:
18.26F155.3860620

Present Owners: Elmer Jerome Venters, Sr.
Dr. Wayne V. Venters
Dr. George C. Venters
Mrs. Mary Lou Venters Paschall
Mr. E. Jerome Venters, Jr.

Present Occupant: Multiple Occupants

Present Use: Residential

Significance: The Venters Farm Historic District, located in Onslow County near the New River and the community of Richlands, was put together in the mid-1890s when newlyweds Wayne Brinson Venters (1873-1948) and Julia Stephens Venters (1875-1946) joined tracts of land from their parents' adjacent farms. Wayne Venters became, perhaps the largest landowner in Onslow County and a prominent businessman, while the Venters children included longtime Onslow County state legislator Carl Venters (1906-1977). The Venters farm district consists of 37 buildings, most prominently an 1896 family house and nine tenant house four of which date from around 1896. A large and varied assortment of agricultural buildings comprises much of the remainder of the structures. From its inception, the Venters farm has been remarkably representative of North Carolina's tenant system which arose after the Civil War and the breakup of the plantation system. Venters farm was and is larger than most North Carolina farms. With this exception, it is characteristic of much of the state's tenant farms. This aspect of the farm, combined with the large and historically varied number of associated buildings on the property, makes the Venters farm an unusually effective and representative example of the important tenant system in North Carolina. In comparison to the typical tenant farm, Venters Farm is of particular significance because of the survival of so many of its tenant houses and because of the unusual visual impact created by their location facing each other along both sides of US 258.

PART I: PHYSICAL SETTING OF VENTERS FARM

The 37 mostly frame buildings of the Venters Farm complex are situated either on both sides of US 258 which bisects the farm district on a north/south axis or on farm lanes which cross at the center of the farm district on an east/west axis. The farm district is bounded as follows: on the northwest by a row of trees and shrubs (on the property boundary) and SR 1229, on the northeast by a row of trees and shrubs (on the property boundary), on the east by the New River, on the southeast by a row of trees and shrubs (also on the property line), on the southwest by an access road which runs (on the property line) from US 258 to SR 1221, and on the west by SR 1221. The farm district consists of approximately 530 acres of open land and approximately 30 acres of woodlands located in the easternmost part of the property and adjacent to the New River. Situated in the center of the district on the west side of US 258 is the main house and its immediate outbuildings just west of the main house and along a farm lane. On the west side of US 258, at the northern and southernmost ends of the district and farm complex, are two 1950s tenant houses. Along the east side of US 258 and at the west edge of the eastern fields, from the northern to the southernmost ends of the district, are a row of tenant houses dating from 1896 to the 1940s. The tenant houses and their outbuildings are set in evolving groves of oak, pecan, chinaberry, and mulberry trees.

PART II: HISTORICAL CONTEXT - FARM TENANCY IN NORTH CAROLINA

Venters built at least four tenant houses on his property about the same time he built his family house. These tenants supplied the labor while Venters supplied the land and supplies. The tenant system developed in North Carolina and the rest of the south after the Civil War "as the natural readjustment in a region inhabited by landed proprietors who lacked capital and labor and by...(workers) who were experienced in farm labor but lacking in land and capital."[1] Despite complaints that the system was inefficient, promoted soil depletion, discouraged the growth of scientific farming, and led to a variety of social, intellectual, and moral ills, the tenant system thrived in the state until the middle of the twentieth century. The number of farms in the state more than doubled from 1860 to 1880 and tripled from 1860 to 1900. The tenant system evolved as the best way to respond to this breakup of large antebellum plantations. By 1900 over forty percent of the state's farms were operated by tenants. This figure increased to almost fifty percent by 1930 before beginning a gradual decline.[2]

Farm tenancy flourished in regions where the soil was unusually rich, thereby making the use of unskilled labor profitable. Tenancy also flourished in regions where tobacco and, to a lesser extent, cotton were primary crops. Tobacco is essentially non perishable, yields a small bulk relative to its value, can be sold shortly after harvesting, and can not be easily destroyed or eaten. Soil quality varies in Onslow County but is particularly high in the appropriately named Richlands area, near the New River. Cotton and corn were the primary crops in Onslow County in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lumber was also a prominent source of farm income in the county. However, land was invariably logged by its owners, taking lumber outside the tenant system.

Tobacco gradually became the dominant crop in the county during the early decades of the twentieth century. Thus it is no surprise to see tenancy rates increase in the 1900-1930 period as tobacco becomes increasingly prominent.[3]

Farm tenancy rates in Onslow County were usually roughly comparable to those of the state as a whole. In 1900, the first available census after the establishment of the Venters farm, 32.7 percent of Onslow's farms were operated by tenants, as compared to the statewide average of 41.4 percent. The relationship of tobacco to farm tenancy can be seen by the fact that, as early as 1900, counties such as Edgecombe, Lenoir, Greene, and Wilson, that were heavily dependant on tobacco, had tenancy rates in excess of 60 percent. Onslow was typical of the state in two other respects. Almost all of the tenants were share tenants, as opposed to cash tenants. A majority of tenants were white, although a disproportionately large number of tenants were black.[4]

The cultivation of long leaf tobacco began in the county around 1900. Richlands resident Dr. J. L. Nicholson is believed to have been among the first in the county to plant the crop.[5] By 1910 the county had over 1,000 acres of tobacco under cultivation. Cotton and corn remained the main crops. The tenancy rate in the county had increased only slightly, up to 34.1 percent from the previous census, leaving the county still below the state average.[6] The amount of land devoted to cotton in Onslow County increased by about 50 percent from 1910 to 1920, while that devoted to corn decreased slightly in that period. The acreage used for tobacco almost tripled in that period, from 1.229 in 1910 to 3,164 acres in 1920. Tobacco production in the latter year was about 2.3 million pounds. This likely accounts for the increase in tenancy to 40.6 percent in 1920, almost equal to the state average of 43 percent.[7] The tenancy rate in the state peaked in 1930 at 49 percent. Onslow's rate in that year was 47.5 percent. The amount of land in cotton and corn decreased during this decade, while the tobacco acreage continued its increase. Onslow's farmers planted 8,075 acres of tobacco in 1930, growing 5.5 million pounds.[8] Onslow's tenancy rate declined to 46.3 percent in 1940, slightly above the state average of 44 percent. Cotton production continued to decline while tobacco production increased to 10,103 acres and 9.3 million pounds.[9] During this period, share tenants continued to greatly outnumber cash tenants and white tenants continued to outnumber black tenants in the county at an approximate ratio of 3:2.

In most respects, the Venters farm was typical of the county. Cotton and corn were heavily grown in the early part of the century. Cotton was the cash crop with most of the corn used to feed livestock. Generally, in North Carolina, the landowner received from one fourth to one half of the crop, with the laborer receiving the rest. The arrangement that has existed on the Venters farm almost from its development was a common arrangement. The owner received one half the crop. In exchange, he furnished housing, barns, mules (usually 15-20 to each tenant), fertilizer, seeds, and other supplies. The tenant received half the crop in exchange for his labor. (Arrangements in which the tenant received more than one half the crop required him to furnish some supplies and equipment. This arrangement has apparently not been used on the Venters farm to any extent.) The Venters farm gradually made the switch from cotton to tobacco and by 1940 had largely dispensed with the former crop.[10]

At least four tenant houses were built in the latter 1890s by Venters. Others date throughout the early to middle twentieth century and a number of houses are no longer standing. It is not possible to ascertain through census information exactly who the Venters tenants were. It is clear from the 1900 and 1910 population schedules that Wayne Venters and his family were enumerated near a large number of farm tenants. Several of these tenants, including Thomas Stephens in 1900 and Hugh Humphrey and Lewis Humphrey in 1910, have family names that have long tenant associations with the Venters family. Other families with unusually long tenure on the Venters land include the Whaley, Brinson, Findeisen, Chase and Bynum families. Most of the tenants in the early part of the century were white, although some were black. In recent years, virtually all of the tenants have been white. The tenant farmers tended to be family men, with wives and children. A number of these families have farmed on the Venters land into the third generation.[11]

The Venters agricultural district contains outbuildings from a number of different years. Four of the remaining nine tenant houses date from the late 1920s, about the time tenant farming peaked in North Carolina. The other three date from the 1940s and 1950s. Family sources indicate that at least three, and possibly more, earlier tenant houses are no longer standing.[12] Several agricultural buildings date from the late 1890s, including a smokehouse and a corn barn. Also dating from the 1890s are a detached kitchen and a carriage house. Most of the tobacco facilities are post World War II: however, the existence of an early twentieth century tobacco barn indicates that the venters complex had some early involvement in tobacco. Also of importance to the district is a grocery store built on the edge of the farm around 1950 by Bill Carroway on land purchased from Elmer Venters. The store was one of only a few grocery stores in the Richlands area.

Farm tenancy in North Carolina in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continues to be a subject of some controversy. Most historians agree with Hugh Lefler's assessment that tenancy was "one of the greatest social and economic problems of North Carolina and the rest of the South."[13] Lefler asserts that tenancy decreased farm size and efficiency, decreased soil fertility, discouraged the use of machinery and scientific farming, hindered the growth of rural organization, intellectual and moral development, good citizenship, a healthy political life, and social mobility.[14] Another historian acknowledges that "all the evils of the tobacco economy came to be heaped at the door of the tenant farmer."[15] On the credit side, the tenant system enabled the system to function during a period when North Carolina's chronic lack of capital was critical and when farm size was dramatically decreasing. Farm tenancy was rarely a going concern in the mountainous, western third of the state. In the remaining two thirds of the state, however, at least half of the farms in operation during the first four decades of the twentieth century were tenant operated. Whatever its deficiencies, the tenant system was an integral part of the agricultural landscape during most of the post Civil War period.

PART III: HISTORY OF VENTERS FARM

The Venters Farm Historic District occupied by three generations of the Venters family during the past 90 years, includes some 37 buildings situated on approximately 536 acres of mostly open fertile land west of the New River and on both sides of US 258 in the vicinity of Richlands in Onslow County. The family house, ca. 1896, and its contemporary and later outbuildings, clustered in a grove of trees on the west side of US 258, and the nine tenant houses dating from 1896 to the 1950's, each situated in a grove of trees and located on both sides of US 258, are surrounded by open fields given mostly to plantings of tobacco and corn. They have survived as a unique example of the large landowner/tenant type of farming prevalent from the late 19th century through the first half of the 20th century. Soon after Wayne Brinson Venters (1873-1948) and Julia Stephens (1875-1946) married in 1894, each inherited a couple of hundred acres of land. The land on the west side of US 258 was inherited by Wayne Venters from his father, Brinson Venters, in 1986, and that on the east side was inherited by Julia (Stephens) Venters from her father, Christopher Stephens, also in 1896. The original buildings built by Wayne and Julia Venters, ca. 1896, include a well-crafted, well-maintained, two-story frame, late Victorian farm house with a detached kitchen in the house yard; a corn barn, a carriage house, and a smoke house in the farm yard just west of the farm seat. They also built four of the original eight one-and-a-half story frame tenant houses on the east side of US 258. Wayne Venters later built the two-story frame mule/hay barn and the one-and-a-half story frame cow/pig barn in the farm yard in the late 1920s, a couple of the remaining tobacco curing barns situated east and west of the farm seat and along the farm lanes in the 1930s, two tenant houses in the late 1920s, and one tenant house in the 1940s. Wayne Venters' son and one of the present owners of the farm, Elmer Jerome Venters Sr., built the pump house, located in the house yard, in the 1950s; the oil house, located in the farm yard, in the 1960s; several remaining tobacco curing barns and tobacco pack houses at various sites in the 1930s and 1940s; and two one-and a-half story cinderblock tenant houses on the west side of US 258 in the 1950s. Twenty-three of the buildings in the district are contributing; fourteen are non-contributing because they were constructed in the 1950s and 1960s after the period of significance. In scale, materials and form, however, most of the non-contributing structures blend in the district.

The Venters farm was considerably larger than the average North Carolina farm, tenant or otherwise, during the early part of the century. With this exception, the Venters operation was highly representative of the state's tenant operations. The type of rental plan employed, the relaive reliance on cotton and then tobacco as money crops, and the use of both white and black tenants were all typical elements of tenant farming in North Carolina The large number of buildings in the district, most notably the tenant houses dating from all periods of the farm's developent, greatly adds to the importance of the district. The Venters farm was and continues to be an unusually effective and representative example of an important aspect of the state's agricultural history.

The period of significance of the Venters Farm Historic District extends from the formation of the farm in 1896 by Wayne Brinson Venters until his death in 1948. His death roughly coincides with the end of the traditional tobacco tenant farm in North Carolina. In a recent study of the cotton, tobacco, and rice cultures of the South since 1880, Pete Daniel, an agricultural historian, documents the unchanging persistence of the traditional tobacco farm in North Carolina up to the recent past, long after the cotton and rice cultures had died out. He writes that the tobacco culture "remained relatively stable until the mid-1950s and largely unmechanized through the 1960s." In these decades, mechanization began to cause consolidation of farm acreage, and tobacco tenant farmers lost their land. Venters Farm, then, is a microcosm of the North Caroina farm in the twentieth century. The buildings clearly demonstrate the practical and social aspects of the farm tenancy system and the gradual evolution of that system. The buildings also demonstrate the subtle transitions in agricultural production from hand work to mechanization and the gradual shifts in the planting and harvesting of cash crops from corn and cotton in the early years of the twentieth century to mainly tobacco and corn in the interwar years. The tenant houses and tobacco barns built during the ascendancy of tobacco, from the late 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and even a few in the 1950s, illustrate the final chapter in the history of the tenant farm in North Carolina. The continued operation and management of the farm by Wayne Venter's son, Elmer Jerome Venters, Sr., (1912-), reinforces the significance of this farm in the history of the county.

PART IV: PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION OF VENTERS FARM COMPLEX

The house yard, containing less than an acre of land, surrounds the main house, a detached kitchen just northwest of the main house, a pump house just southwest of the main house, and a cinderblock garage south of the main house and on the south side of a house driveway. A picket fence and shrubs along the fence separate the house yard from the farm yard which is west of the main house. There are a number of large oak and pecan trees throughout the house yard and along the house driveway. These trees were planted at the time the main house was built. In the front yard of the main house there are oak trees and a large magnolia tree, also contemporary with the main house. Along the northern edge of the house yard are a number of dogwood trees and azalea bushes.

Outbuildings in the farm yard include the carriage house, the smoke house, both ca. 1896, on the south side of the farm lane; a mule/hay barn in the northwest corner of the farm yard; a corn barn just south of the mule/hay barn; and a cow/pig barn just west of the corn barn. Between the smoke house and the carriage house is a small fenced in vegetable garden. On the west side of the carriage house are grapevines planted by Elmer Venters in the 1950s. Farther west of the farm yard and along the farm drive are four tobacco curing barns built in the 1950s and the 1960s.

Directly east of the farm seat and on the east side of US 258, a long farm lane runs from the highway through the fields and forest to the New River. There is an older tobacco curing barn, built in the early 20th century, on the south side of the lane and just off the highway, and two later tobacco curing barns farther east along the drive. Large oaks and pecan trees in a row along this drive were planted at the time the main house was built.

FOOTNOTES

[1]High Talmage Lefler and Albert Ray Newsome, North Carolina: The History of a Southern State (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, third edition, 1973), 522, hereinafter cited as Lefler and Newsome, North Carolina.

[2]Lefler and Newsome, North Carolina, 522, 577.

[3]Nannie May Tilley, The Bright-Tobacco Industry, 1860-1929 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), 93, hereinafter cited as Tilley, The Bright-Tobacco Industry; Joseph Parsons Brown, The Commonwealth of Onslow (New Bern: The Owen G. Dunn Company, 1960), 211, hereinafter cited as Brown, The Commonwealth of Onslow.

[4]Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Agriculture; Tilley, The Bright-Tobacco Industry, 95.

[5]Brown, The Commonwealth of Onslow, 211-212.

[6]Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Agriculture.

[7]Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Agriculture.

[8]Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Agriculture.

[9]Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940, Agriculture.

[10]Tilley, The Bright-Tobacco Industry, 102-103; information supplied by the Venters family.

[11]Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Onslow County, North Carolina, Population Schedule; Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Onslow County, North Carolina, Population Schedule; information supplied by the Venters family.

[12]Elmer Jerome Venters, Sr. remembers at least three tenant houses standing in the 1950s that no longer remain.

[13]Lefler and Newsome, North Carolina, 648.

[14]Lefler and Newsome, North Carolina, 522-523.

[15]Tilley, The Bright-Tobacco Industry, 103.

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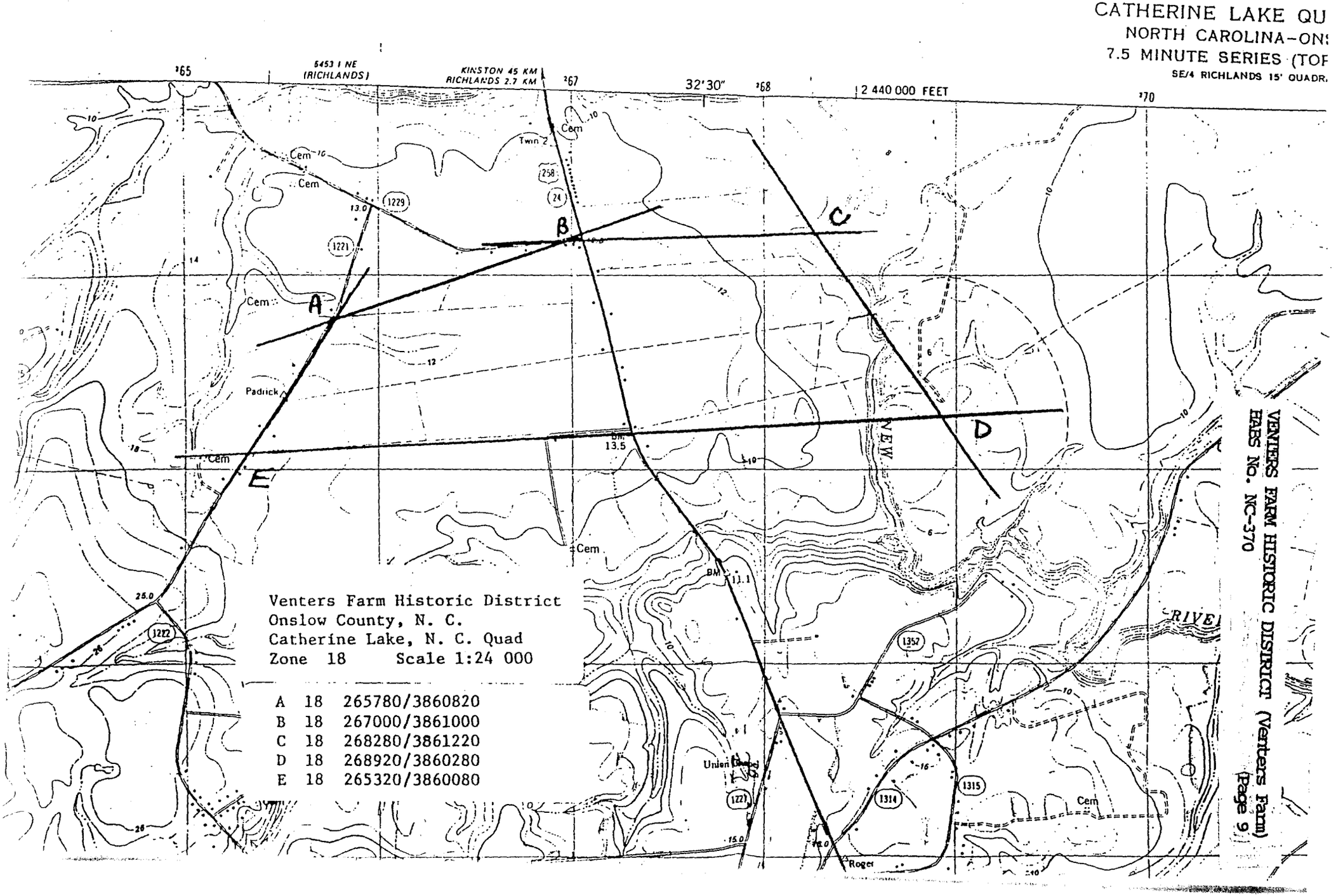
Lefler, Hugh Talmage and Newsome, Albert Ray. North Carolina: The History of a Southern State. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, Third Edition, 1973.

United States Census Office. Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Agriculture: Onslow County, North Carolina, Population Schedule; Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Agriculture: Onslow County, North Carolina, Population Schedule.


CATHERINE LAKE QU
NORTH CAROLINA-ON
7.5 MINUTE SERIES (TOP
SE/4 RICHLANDS 15' QUADR.
5453 I NE (RICHLANDS)
KINSTON 45 KM
RICHLANDS 2.7 KM
32'30"
2 440 000 FEET
Cem
Twin 2
Padrick
BM 13.5
BM 11.1
Union
Roger
NEW
RIVE
A
B
C
D
E
Venters Farm Historic District
Onslow County, N. C.
Catherine Lake, N. C. Quad
Zone 18 Scale 1:24 000
A 18 265780/3860820
B 18 267000/3861000
C 18 268280/3861220
D 18 268920/3860280
E 18 265320/3860080