

# Past, Present, & Future: Heritage in the Black Belt

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**A**s you turn a curve on Highway 14, just seven miles west of Marion in Perry County, it is like stepping back in time. The community is Folsom. There you will find the Holmestead Company's Moore-Webb-Holmes Plantation, one of the oldest continuous working family farms in the state of Alabama, actively managed by Charles A. Holmes, the fifth-generation descendant of the original owner. This TREASURE Forest is certified as a "Century and Heritage Farm" by the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries, the plantation is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1819 shortly before Alabama attained statehood, Charles' great-great-grandfather, William "the wagon maker" Moore, journeyed here from South Carolina. The 80 acres he homesteaded has grown over the years to several thousand acres. Strolling the quiet peaceful grounds today, one can only imagine the hustle and bustle of this busy plantation during a bygone era. Although the original house was lost in a fire in 1927, you can still tour the family home site. Several authentic structures remain intact and preserved, many of them dating back to the 1800s and the handiwork of Moore "the wagon maker." There are more than 28 agricultural buildings which include a carriage house; a smoke house; a chicken coop; a potato house with a pit for storing vegetables, lard, and sausage; a blacksmith shop; and barns housing farm equipment such as wagons, plows, hay rakes, and other antique tools. In addition to the new gin and seed house, there's the original log seed house that was used with the first cotton gin. One of the main attractions is the plantation's 1875 "Country Store" with its pot-bellied stove, which features a deed signed by Andrew Jackson, as well as other historic papers and items of interest.

Extremely proud of his inheritance, Charles Holmes works hard not only to preserve it, but also improve it and share it with others. I first met him during a Soil and Water Conservation District meeting just after being assigned to Perry County, and I knew immediately I would see a lot of him. After working as a forester in a few counties, you quickly learn the characteristics of

a very active landowner. For one, they ask lots of questions, and right away they invite you out to see their property!

A graduate of Marion Military Institute, Charles studied agricultural economics at Auburn University. He also completed a summer exchange at Christ Church College in Oxford, England, studying British-American history, religion, and British architecture. He will tell you, however, that his real education came during the 20 years he served an agricultural apprenticeship on the plantation under his two uncles, J. C. and Charlie Webb. After they passed on, Charles and his family took the lead in operating the farm. He and his wife, Jenny Cooper Holmes, raised their three sons to actively participate in the family enterprise. All three and their families live within a 10-mile radius of the farm! The two youngest, Webb and Cooper, have followed in their father's footsteps and are now the sixth-generation farmers living on and working the same land that has been passed down to them.

The Moore-Webb-Holmes Plantation consists of 6,000 acres, of which 4,000 acres are forest land. With timber management being the primary objective of this TREASURE Forest, the Holmes family manages the forested acreage as a sustainable forest. Much of the forest in the last few generations had been predominantly planted in loblolly pine with a component of hardwood. These stands have either been thinned or converted to longleaf pine. There are approximately 700 acres of longleaf with additional acres planned for the future. Charles tries to burn a portion of the property every year, usually operating on a three-year burn cycle. He employs the services of a registered forester consultant. However, oldest son, William, is a certified pre-



scribed burn manager and together they conduct much of the prescribed burning themselves.

As with all forest landowners in Alabama, there are challenges for the Holmes family. They battle privet and kudzu. They have also identified and chemical-sprayed several cogon-grass spots. In the ongoing war with feral hogs, Charles installed seven hog traps across the property with Environmental Qualities Incentives Program (EQIP) assistance through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

In addition to timber, the Holmestead Company also operates a cattle business where they raise purebred horned Hereford and Brahman cross cow calf stock. Grazing pastureland comprises the remaining 2,000 acres of the property. The all-natural beef they sell is grass-fed and “Holmesgrown” deep in the rich soil of Alabama’s Black Belt.

Wildlife is the secondary TREASURE Forest objective of the farm, both for watching and harvesting. Charles’s sons started hunting with their dad at a young age, and now the five grandchildren are being raised to appreciate wildlife as well. Additionally, the plantation now offers hunting and fishing packages, along with a relaxing stay at the “Folsom Inn” Bed & Breakfast. Deer and turkey abound, along with rabbits, squirrels, quail, doves, ducks, and don’t forget the wild pigs! Wildlife openings and food plots are maintained, plus several areas of native warm season grasses such as Alamo switchgrass and Eastern gamagrass. Habitat for the diverse wildlife is also supported by two creeks, as well as a 107-acre watershed lake where 21 bald eagles are nesting.

Education is another guiding principle at the Moore-Webb-Holmes Plantation, as Charles is always excited to introduce youth to the benefits of forestry and agriculture, as well as the importance of the environment and water quality. The property provides numerous conservation and preservation teaching opportunities, and is open by appointment to school groups, organizations, and individuals. Over the past few years, the Holmes TREASURE Forest has hosted several educational programs, including an annual “Classroom in the Forest” field day for all the fifth graders in Perry County (approximately 160 students). With the assistance of several different partnering natural resource agencies, they usually set up seven stations. Topics include: Flag a Tree, Oh Deer, Soil Profile, Soil Runoff, Skins and Skulls, Wildfire Protection, and the Cahaba River.

Perhaps the most successful event occurs almost every year on the first Saturday in October when the plantation comes alive . . . there is music in the air, hay rides, a corn maze, and pumpkins to pick from the field. “Fall in Folsom” provides a day of history, entertainment, and excitement for the whole family in a hands-on, demonstration-type teaching environment. This event is open to the public and promotes involvement of children and adults alike. All the original historical buildings are accessible in a museum atmosphere. Once again, all the partnering agencies (including the Alabama Forestry Commission, the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, the Alabama Wildlife Federation, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service) set up educational booths that provide an array of FUN teaching programs.

In 2008, the National Wild Turkey Federation’s “In the Game” show was video-taped on the Holmes property, where Charles emphasized Conservation Districts working with partners. Then in 2010, he invited representatives from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to tour the property to observe various conservation practices being implemented. These practices included: understory thinning, longleaf restoration, prescribed burns, stream crossings, as well as wildlife habitat in longleaf pine and native grasses.

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## A Heritage in the Blackbelt

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Past and present, Charles has served on so many forestry-related committees – county, state, and national levels – there’s not enough room here to name them all! He has spoken numerous times on various forestry-related topics, including a talk on the Longleaf Pine Restoration Initiative to a group in South Carolina in 2010. At the request of the Chief of the Forest Service, Holmes represented private land ownership in the United States at the World Forestry Conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 2009.

For all of his endeavors, Charles was recognized as “Conservationist of the Year” by the Alabama Wildlife Federation, their highest honor. In 2011, he was named the Alabama Association of Conservation Districts “Supervisor of the Year,” and was an inductee into the Conservation Hall of Fame, Southeast Region. He has also been awarded a “Special Service Award” By the National Association of Conservation Districts and he received an “Environmental Stewardship Award” presented by the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association which recognizes cattlemen whose natural resource stewardship practices contribute to the environment while enhancing productivity and profitability. Other honors include the USDA’s national winner of the “Earth Team Award” for dedication to conservation and outstanding efforts in the recruitment, training, and management of a superior volunteer program for the Perry County Soil and Water Conservation District.

Most recently, in 2013 the NRCS named Charles a “champion” of soils health. He encourages the use of all-natural fertilizers, and promotes “no till” practices, emphasizing that soil enrichment should apply not only to row crops but to timber as well.

With his dedication to stewardship, water quality, and soil improvement, it’s no surprise that the plantation was named a Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest Award winner in 2013. Charles noted that many of the components of the TREASURE Forest creed had been implemented by his family for years before he took over. (To watch the full presentation video, visit [www.youtube.com/user/ALForestryCommission](http://www.youtube.com/user/ALForestryCommission). To learn more about the Moore-Webb-Holmes Plantation, visit [www.holmesteadcompany.com/](http://www.holmesteadcompany.com/).)

The successful operation of the Holmestead Company and the Moore-Webb-Holmes Plantation takes the whole family – everyone pitches in and each one plays a vital role. The days are often long and the work is hard. Charles noted, “People sometimes ask, ‘why do you do this?’ I suppose it can be attributed to my Scotch-Irish upbringing . . . this inherent love of the land that was instilled in me. Farming and an agrarian lifestyle has been in my family for generations, down to my father and uncles. It’s in my blood. All I’ve ever wanted to do was farm, and I’ve never regretted coming back to the family farm.”

As for the future, Charles and Jenny both acknowledge that their main goal is to make sure the plantation is passed on to children and grandchildren that will continue to foster a love of the land. “The Holmes family has worked this beautiful farm and forestland for almost 200 years . . . we hope this next generation will take what we’ve been given and make it even better.”