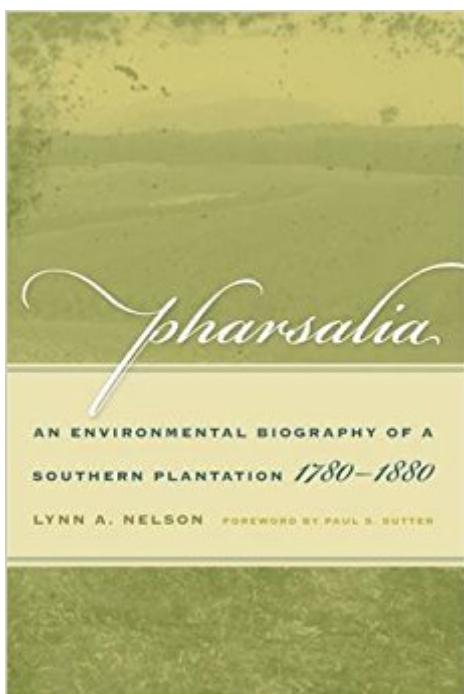


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# Pharsalia: An Environmental Biography Of A Southern Plantation, 1780-1880 (Environmental History And The American South Ser.)



## Synopsis

Pharsalia, a plantation located in piedmont Virginia at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, is one of the best-documented sites of its kind. Drawing on the exceptionally rich trove of papers left behind by the Massie family, Pharsalia's owners, this case study demonstrates how white southern planters paradoxically relied on capitalistic methods even as they pursued an ideal of agrarian independence. Lynn A. Nelson also shows how the contradictions between these ends and means would later manifest themselves in the southern conservation movement. Nelson follows the fortunes of Pharsalia's owners, telling how Virginia's traditional extensive agriculture contributed to the soil's erosion and exhaustion. Subsequent attempts to balance independence and sustainability through a complex system of crop rotation and resource recycling ultimately gave way to an intensive, slave-based form of agricultural capitalism. Pharsalia could not support the Massies' aristocratic ambitions, and it was eventually parceled up and sold off by family members. The farm's story embodies several fundamentals of modern U.S. environmental thought. Southerners' nineteenth-century quest for financial and ecological independence provided the background for conservationists' attempts to save family farming. At the same time, farmers' failure to achieve independence while maximizing profits and crop yields drove them to seek government aid and regulation. These became some of the hallmarks of conservation efforts in the New Deal and beyond.

## Book Information

Series: Environmental History and the American South Ser.

Hardcover: 320 pages

Publisher: University of Georgia Press; annotated edition edition (February 25, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0820326275

ISBN-13: 978-0820326276

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.1 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 4 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #696,108 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #335 in Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Historical Geography #1650 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Civil & Environmental > Environmental #1979 in Books > Science & Math > Earth Sciences > Geography

## Customer Reviews

Lynn Nelson has given us a wonderful case study of southern agricultural practices during the nineteenth century. His 'biography' of Pharsalia, a plantation in upland Virginia, is in every sense a life story not only of planters and slaves but also of the crops, weeds, livestock, and other organisms that inhabited the land for nearly a hundred years. Exhaustively researched and quietly provocative, this important book should find a wide audience among scholars interested in the South, the environment, agriculture, or antebellum slavery. (Timothy Silver author of *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests, 1500-1900*) Lynn Nelson gets beneath the literature of nineteenth-century 'agricultural improvement' to the hard realities encountered by a Virginia planter who tried it. William Massie plowed deep, sowed clover, improved his seeds and breeds, and achieved some success by dogged good management. But in the end, Pharsalia foundered on the contradictions between high farming and ecological pushback from pests and weeds, crop markets glutted by cheap frontier production, resistance from black slaves and white neighbors, and the luxurious lifestyle expectations of Massie's children. Variations of this same dilemma haunt the dreams of soil conservation and sustainable farming in America to this day. Agricultural history needs more ecologically grounded studies like this one. (Brian Donahue author of *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord*) Innovative . . . Nelson has effectively utilized the family papers and consulted an extensive array of secondary sources to produce a solid study . . . Rich and informative . . . Pharsalia is a rich addition to the exciting and rapidly growing field of southern environmental history. (Robert B. Outland III North Carolina Historical Review) There are many things to admire in Nelson's writing: excellent description, imaginative 'sight seeing,' vivid characterizations, and a flowing story. (Terri Sharrer American Historical Review) Key to understanding the southern conservation movement as it follows its owners' agricultural pursuits and environmental assessments. (Library Bookwatch) Sets a high bar for future publications [in its series] . . . Meticulously researched and persuasively argued. (Connie L. Lester Journal of Southern History) Nelson's effort is more than the 'environmental biography' its subtitle suggests. It is a model for the integration of environmental considerations into historical analysis. In the best tradition of inductive reasoning, he draws out the implications of the experience of one particular family in one particular place to develop a broader consideration of the tensions and conflicts of southern agriculture. (John P. McCarthy Journal of the Early Republic) [A] brilliantly successful environmental biography . . . Historians have tended to blame the farmers themselves for the soil depletion that contributed so heavily to the poverty of the rural South, but Nelson's study offers a convincing analysis of the overwhelming difficulties facing those who attempted soil

conservation. (Randolph B. Campbell Journal of American History)

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Good overview of farming in Virginia before the Civil War and afterwards in detail.

Very interesting book!

Pharsalia is a plantation located in piedmont Virginia - one of the best-documented sites of its kind thanks to papers and records left by the Massie family owners. These enable PHARSALIA to be presented here as a case study of how white southern plantation owners employed capitalistic methods to cement their ideas of independence. Any college-level holding strong in Southern history or regional environmental history will find PHARSALIA key to understanding the southern conservation movement as it follows its owners' agricultural pursuits and environmental assessments.

Although the topic seems narrow, the subject actually affects the whole scope of US history from the

era. Absolutely fascinating to see the efforts of elites to hold on to ties to a specific place when their economic interests were really in relocating.

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