



THE LONGLEAF LEADER

**RARE SPECIES
RECOVERY**
in the
Longleaf Ecosystem

Heartpine

By Rob Shapard

Heart pine lends both strength and beauty to the home that my parents built in Griffin, Georgia in the 1960s.

Indeed, the house is loaded with heart pine boards and timbers, rescued and reused from older structures around the state. In the kitchen, thick pine boards line the walls. The boards are unpainted so that the pine grain shows and the wood has taken on an amber hue that gives the room a warm character—along with the warmth generated by countless family meals, celebrations, squabbles, and mishaps. For many decades, these heart pine boards had “lifted up,” if you will, the parishioners of St. George’s Episcopal Church in Griffin, as they were made from the seats of the old wooden pews there. My parents, Bobby and Ginger, salvaged the pews when the church installed new ones in the ‘60s, and they trimmed and sanded the seats to make the kitchen wall boards. I am still researching the microhistory of these pews, installed sometime after the church was completed in 1871, to confirm they were made from longleaf pine. But the fact that they have always been described as “heart pine” is strong evidence.

My parents also salvaged the heart pine used in the columns of the Griffin Female College, built in 1855 when the city was new, and demolished in 1967, and they used that wood for the floor boards in the main hallway. They hauled away heart pine timbers from Old Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia just a day or two before that structure burned as it was being torn down in 1963, and heart pine timbers from the old *Constitution* building in downtown Atlanta, constructed in 1884 and demolished in 1967. These dense, sturdy timbers comprised the very bones of our house, as did similar longleaf timbers for structures across the South, the American West, and elsewhere in our country and overseas.

Griffin and Spalding County are a few counties north of the native range of longleaf, even though longleaf surely has grown in spots within Spalding over the centuries. A family friend, who tends to think against the grain, has even planted longleaf

in his yard—within the city limits—and he dutifully burns his small stand. I say, Godspeed, and more power to him. It might turn out that this longleaf-ophile, a local attorney, has anticipated a shift in longleaf’s range that climate change might provoke. But loblolly has long been the most prevalent pine in the natural landscapes there, in which I immersed myself since childhood, while longleaf was a mystery.

It was about an hour’s drive south from home to the coastal plain, along routes to the Georgia coast and Florida Panhandle that crossed waterways and passed rural communities, rich wetlands, and vast expanses of flat pastures and crop fields. Even where the pine trees and other vegetation were plentiful, by the time I started passing through in the 1970s, these landscapes were virtually devoid of the old-growth longleaf that once was so abundant. Like many Americans today, I never experienced a thriving forest of old longleaf.

I feel a deep regret that earlier generations destroyed so much of the longleaf ecosystem, even as I appreciate longleaf’s historical importance as a building material, the key naval-stores tree, and a critical economic driver for the Longleaf South into the early 1900s. I think about longleaf as a historian with roots in journalism, a southerner, and someone who recognizes healthy and beautiful ecosystems as the *sine qua non* for all life, rather than a landowner in the longleaf region, botanist, forester, conservation biologist, ecologist, wildlife manager, or active longleaf advocate. Approaching the topic as a historian means exploring human ideas, desires, and actions that help to explain the drastic changes in this ecosystem over time, especially since the American colonial era. It means “unpacking” the views of people like Robert Jehu Massey, a physician who regularly traveled through the longleaf region in his native state of Georgia before and after the American Civil War.

To find Massey, I followed an intriguing clue that Janisse Ray left in *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*. Ray briefly cited a dispatch in the Brunswick newspaper from September of 1885, in which the author “R.J.M.” expressed his amazement at how drastically the timber crews and saw-millers had cleared the pine forests from the area that became the Georgia counties of Eastman and Dodge since he had last passed that way in 1858. “An invasion of a terrible army of axemen, like so many huge locusts, has swept over the whole face of the land, leaving naught of former native grandeur but treeless stumps to mark the track of their tramp,” wrote R.J.M. OK, very interesting, but exactly who was R.J.M. and what did this person make of the changes?

Further digging in the historical record convinces me that R.J.M. was physician Robert J. Massey, born near Madison in 1828, and a well-known Georgian by his death in Atlanta in 1915. While Ray noted Massey’s shock at the deforestation, my take is that, even though Massey

at first appeared to be upset by this “invasion” of axemen, he was in fact pleased with the timbering and development he observed in the Georgia longleaf region. His remarks about the forest destruction around Eastman essentially were a set-up for his larger point—that the costs were greatly outweighed by the benefits from developing a forlorn antebellum landscape of

“pine trees, wire-grass, rude tents, cow paths and deer-trails” into a small but thriving piece of the New South, with “fields, farms, cottages, refinement, civilization, plenty, thrift, [and] commerce.” Massey liked what he saw in 1885, even if the destruction of the pine forest truly was striking to him.

But he had some critical blind spots in his viewpoint, such as his failure to note that many people did not have an equal shot at sharing in this economic progress. Nor did Massey give a full accounting of the costs of the deforestation, such as the negative impacts on the larger longleaf ecosystem and its biodiversity. Massey was a fairly representative figure, as a white, middle-class man in the New South who embraced the economic development enabled in part by longleaf. He shared this sensibility with people like the directors of a lumber company in Louisiana, which I researched for my dissertation, who dealt with longleaf through a “lumber lexicon” of acres, board feet, and train-loads of logs and lumber, with

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no meaningful room for recognizing the forests as a living ecosystem with diverse and valuable life. These directors focused relentlessly on assessing and quantifying the forests, on the way to commodifying them. At that point in the early 1900s, most such companies continued to treat longleaf solely as an economic resource to be exploited to the fullest extent.

Heartpine

But there were alternatives to exploiting the longleaf forests in such destructive and short-sighted ways, and we can see now that earlier generations made choices. We know as well that the conceptions of longleaf have changed over time to include the view that, like other timber trees, longleaf is a crop to be renewed via agricultural and scientific principles. Also, many of us understand now that longleaf is part of an ecosystem, and it forms a realm of diverse, interconnected life. The range of ideas that we have about longleaf has expanded to include notions like sustainable use, and ecological, cultural, and aesthetic values, rather than solely economic values.

Still, it seems to me that the debate among these various conceptions of longleaf is ongoing, and the outcome is uncertain. The most holistic, ecologically oriented views have by no means gained an unquestioned dominance.

Longleaf advocates today clearly are committed to promoting the understanding of longleaf as part of an ecosystem, with a wide range of values that include but go beyond economic value. I see that commitment in studying longleaf history and advocacy, and I have gained a better sense

of how challenging it is to convincingly explain the value of biodiversity, to a broad range of people when working for longleaf restoration and conservation—as compared to talking about potential economic values. Nevertheless, we still need more compelling ways of communicating this value of biodiversity, as supported by fire-maintained longleaf forests, in spite of any fears that many people will not be able to grasp this notion. Advocates must make the related point even more strongly and clearly that, while millions of acres of pines are growing in the South, a plantation of loblolly or slash is not at all the same as a longleaf forest managed under ecological principles. Longleaf enthusiasts know this very well. But many more people, within and beyond the Longleaf South, need to see the light on this point.

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