

Farmville's modern take on "Honoring Our Past, Shaping Our Future"  
through agribusiness transformation  
by Macy Robinson

Growing up in Farmville, I thought it was a rite of passage to work in the tobacco fields during the summer. My mom, aunt, and grandparents had all spent time driving tractors or working in the barns; I assumed that I would eventually do my time as well. As I grew older, I began to realize that the fields surrounding our town were no longer teeming with tobacco, but rather a mix of corn, cotton, and soybeans. Farmville was changing, the tobacco industry slowly departing, only leaving the roadside barns and a historic legacy behind.

While the tobacco barns are symbolic of what was, they also represent the tangible past of Farmville. You can hardly drive a mile down the road without witnessing one. Farmville has a long history of leadership in tobacco, cotton, and sweet potato production. Our agricultural heritage paved the way for innovative agribusiness practices that not only provide great potential for Farmville, but also uphold our traditional agricultural backbone.

The first settlers in Farmville were almost exclusively farmers by trade. This pattern continued as cultivated tobacco and the implementation of the East Carolina Railroad in 1900 created an economic boom. A.C. Monk & Company, founded in 1907, became one of the largest independent flue-cured tobacco distributors in the world. Due to the success of Monk & Co., employment peaked, trading accelerated, and while farming became more diversified, tobacco remained the largest cash crop in the area for decades.

As the tobacco industry began to stall in the 1970s, Farmville became less reliant on agribusiness and started to diversify its economy. Today, Alliance One, a product of A.C. Monk's several acquisitions and mergers, still stands off of West Wilson Street. Much of our prized tobacco land is being used to farm other commodities as countries like Brazil are growing more of the world's tobacco; however, we are currently in the midst of our own agricultural resurgence. Nearly fifty years after the beginning of a prolonged decline in Farmville's tobacco industry, we host a berry tissue culture company, a renewable energy group that utilizes poultry litter as fuel, and a revitalized community garden.

I first learned about the vibrant, yet overlooked aspects of our new food economy when I interned one summer at PhyllaTech LLC. A startup tissue culture company founded by Worthington Farms, PhyllaTech has been cultivating disease-free berry plants since January of 2019 on East Wilson Street. The company offers a wide variety of blackberries, raspberries, and blueberries to growers nationwide. They ensure a clean, field-ready transplant in a state that suffers from rampant berry diseases.

East Energy Renewables (EER), formerly known as Power Resource Group, is another innovative startup located downtown Farmville. Rich Deming founded EER in 2019 with the goal of integrating clean power production, waste diversion, and community involvement. EER has one functioning biomass power plant in Farmville, with two more being built in Eastern

North Carolina. Through relationships with local poultry farmers, EER collects their litter, turning it into clean energy that is sent to Pitt and Greene EMC. By doing so, EER redirects an immense amount of waste that would otherwise go to the landfill, creates local jobs, and decreases local dependence on fossil fuels.

EER is also working in partnership with Ham's Farms, Wilson Wastewater Treatment Facility, and Alliance One to create a sustainable poultry operation. Black soldier fly larvae are super-composters and hold a near 40% protein content. EER is feeding larvae sweet potato scraps from Ham's Farms, treated biosolids from Wilson, and tobacco dust from Alliance One to divert waste from all three facilities while also raising protein-rich livestock feed. The birds' litter will, of course, be used to create energy at one of their biomass power plants.

Finally, another hidden gem is Farmville's Community Garden, which is promoting regenerative gardening practices through community involvement, knowledge sharing, and collective growth. The Garden first broke ground in 2016 and now hosts routine work days, workshops, and lectures from local gardeners. You can adopt your own plot, partner with other gardeners, or just volunteer at whim.

Committed to respecting Farmville's community, many employees at PhyllaTech and East Energy Renewables expressed their joy to be in our small town. Caroline McMillan, ESG Specialist at EER, said:

*"It is really important for us to bring opportunity and prosperity as much as possible to Farmville, whether it be through supporting local farmers, developing relationships with local businesses, or ensuring fair and equitable wages for all positions at EER. We are trying to do well by the planet, while making sure that the projects we bring to the table are respected by and add to Farmville in social, environmental, and economic ways. Our hope is that even if you don't care about clean energy, you see that we want to support the people we call our neighbors."*

Agribusiness in Farmville is still represented by the crops you see on an Alt-264 drive, but it also resides in formerly vacant buildings and lots across town. As our local economy and food system evolve, it is important to recognize the path that led us here, while embracing our new legacy. These organizations are bringing people, jobs, and innovation to Farmville - and indeed the state and nation - while staying true to our agricultural roots.

Agribusiness has been something we have embraced throughout all of Farmville's history as a key tenant to who we are as a community. While our next generation may not get to share the sentiment of spending summers in the tobacco fields, they may get the incredible opportunity to adopt a plot at our local community garden or raise turkeys with East Energy Renewables. As our world continues to change, it is imperative that we welcome the rapid transformations to our local food system. I am thankful to have grown up in a town that is a consistent leader in agribusiness innovation, and I can't wait to someday tell my kids about my summer spent at PhyllaTech.

Links to Organizations:

<https://phyllatech.com/>

<https://eastenergyrenewables.squarespace.com/>

<https://www.farmvillecommunitygarden.org/>