Rutherford County’s mild climate, proximity to Nashville, and access to river and rail transportation fostered a profitable agricultural economy. Much of this depended upon slavery, and by 1860, enslaved people constituted almost half the county’s population.

The onset of the Civil War transformed the county. Occupation and violence ravaged the once-peaceful countryside, as both Union and Confederate soldiers foraged and plundered local farms.

As thousands of men left to fight, most women remained behind to cope as best they could. Many men returned too ill or injured to farm, leaving women to shoulder much of the responsibility on their own.

For formerly enslaved men and women, the war’s end brought freedom to work and farm for themselves. Starting with almost nothing, they relied on their labor and determination, working as sharecroppers or hired hands. Despite discrimination and often unfair labor contracts, by 1910 land ownership among African Americans peaked at roughly 16 million to 19 million acres.
Farm women handled many responsibilities—cooking, cleaning, childcare, tending livestock, operating dairies, and helping in the fields. Yet despite the workload, financial instability, and times of racial strife, they navigated the 20th century’s changes through hard work and creativity.

Most Americans at that time still farmed for a living. World War I brought high demand for crops, but the Great Depression soon dealt a heavy blow to farmers. Farm women used whatever resources were available, from selling eggs and milk to planting gardens, to help provide for their families.

World War II, industrial jobs, and educational opportunities drew some farmers, including women, in new directions. Rural electrification also simplified many strenuous household chores. But although roles and responsibilities changed, the legacies of farm women live on through their descendants, their stories, and the land itself.

Farm women dipping water.
Photo courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Junior Champion Jersey cow at the 1941 Juvenile Dairy Show in Murfreesboro.
Photo courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Tenant farmers on the Smiths Farm, a Tennessee Century Farm in Rutherford County.
Photo courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.

Displaying wares at the Home Food Supply for Victory exhibit at the Tennessee State Fair.
Photo courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.
B utter—thoroughly enjoyed, yet often taken for granted. In reality, producing this kitchen staple requires a lot of hard work.

To simplify a fairly complicated task: Farmers poured fresh milk into temperature-controlled containers. Heavy milk sank, allowing lighter cream to rise. Cream was churned into butter, ready to be refined, salted, and sometimes pressed with designs.

Farm women often made money selling butter, using special molds for a distinctive look. However, the Industrial Revolution introduced new technologies, including cream separators and refrigeration, allowing mechanized dairies to produce larger quantities. Many women lost opportunities to sell their products and began making them primarily for home use.

Rutherford County dairy farming flourished during the early 20th century. In 1913, 85 dairy farms formed the Rutherford County Creamery Association (eventually becoming the nation’s second largest cooperative creamery). Together they sold products under the whimsical name “Magnolia Butter.” Many middle Tennessee farm women began selling to these large operations, helping generate much-needed additional income.

World War II brought significant changes to the dairy industry, including shortages and rationing. Replacing butter with margarine (made with vegetable oils) became a readily available, less expensive option. Despite these changes and the effort required to make it, butter remained an essential ingredient in refrigerators across the county.

Today, the MTSU Creamery and Farm Laboratories carry on Rutherford County’s legacy by training students at a state-of-the-art milk processing plant. Their products are sold in stores and markets across the county.

Mildred McIntosh, queen of the 1941 Juvenile Dairy Show, with Grand Champion cow and its owner, Louis Robinson.

Photo courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Lillian Lowe of Eagleville participates in a milking competition at the University of Tennessee.

Photo courtesy of the Rutherford Courier.

Canceled airmail stamp noting Murfreesboro as the “Dairy Center of the South.”

Photo courtesy of Bill Jakes.

MTSU animal science major Erin Coleman of Readyville goes through all the processes of preparing the School of Agriculture dairy cows for milking at the MTSU Farm Laboratory in Lascassas.

MTSU photo by Cat Curtis Murphy.

Magrillia Creamery building.

Photo courtesy of the Rutherford County Archives.
In 1917, Milton and Mary Blackwell purchased 231 acres near Eagleville. Granddaughter Marianne, a Rutherford County Conservation Farmer and Master Beef Producer, now runs the farm. She recently protected the farm through a conservation easement with the Land Trust for Tennessee.

Residents and visitors enjoy the downtown farmers market. Photo courtesy of the Main Street Murfreesboro Saturday Market.

Century Farm families are protecting their legacy by finding innovative ways to hold on to their homesteads. Farmers markets, field trips, pumpkin patches, pick-your-own opportunities, and event venues are just a few ways they have adapted. Despite hardships and back-breaking work, Rutherford County’s industrious Century Farm owners continue to endure and thrive.

Many places remain where residents and visitors can support local agriculture and experience life on the farm. Take time to drive through the county, visit a farmer’s market or two, and keep your eyes open for the bright yellow signs that proudly proclaim, “This is a Century Farm.”

Batey Farms proudly displays its Century Farm sign. Photo courtesy of Batey Farms.

An eighth-generation hog and row-crop farm dating to 1807, Batey Farms prides itself on being a good steward of the land and advocating for agriculture. It remains a popular pick-your-own farm and event venue.

Photos courtesy of Batey Farms.

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Photos courtesy of Batey Farms.

TONY ANGUS FARM

Founded by African American blacksmith Jesse Landrum and wife Cora in 1891, this farm raises Angus cattle today. Second-generation owner Beulah married Negro League baseball player Charles Lanier; they operated a baseball diamond and community park on the farm.

Photos courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.

Tony Angus Farm

In 1917, Milton and Mary Blackwell purchased 231 acres near Eagleville. Granddaughters Marianne, a Rutherford County Conservation Farmer and Master Beef Producer, now runs the farm. She recently protected the farm through a conservation easement with the Land Trust for Tennessee.

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BLACKWELL FARM

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BLACKWELL FARM

The nation’s fastest-growing cities. But even as once-rural communities become more urban, our history remains rooted in the farms that remain.

Administered by the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation and the Tennessee Department of Agriculture, the Tennessee Century Farms program honors families that have owned and farmed the same land for 100+ years. Over 30 Century Farms are certified in Rutherford County, and that number continues to grow.

Downtown Murfreesboro then and now, at the corner of Maple and College Streets. Photo courtesy of the Heritage Center of Murfreesboro and Rutherford County.
This exhibit was made possible through a generous donation by Lloyd Lewis, who donated the butter-making tools and implements to the Heritage Center in memory of his wife, Bonnie Lewis. Bonnie, an avid local collector and antique dealer, created this wonderful collection that you see today. The Lewises’ gift has made it possible to better understand and appreciate the hard work that farm women and families accomplished and continue to accomplish today.

Lloyd Lewis with Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area graduate research assistants Sherry Teal, Lane Tillner, and Ethan Holden.

Exhibit developed by Laura S. Holder.