

Jackson County, North Carolina

70+ years of Agricultural Change: 1950 to 2022

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Introduction

Jackson County has always been a mountain county defined by its relationship with the land. In 1951, as the county celebrated its centennial, it described itself proudly as a scenic mountain county of diversified farming. Seven decades later, the 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture tells a different story, one of profound contraction in land, livestock, crop diversity, and the number of families whose lives were rooted in farming. Understanding this transformation is essential for shaping the county's future agricultural policy, its land use decisions, and its long-term food security.

This narrative draws on three primary sources: the Jackson County Centennial Panorama of Progress document from 1951, which captured a snapshot of county agriculture in 1950; the USDA Census of Agriculture County Tables for North Carolina from the 1954 and 1950 censuses, which provide corroborating and supplementary data across land, livestock, and crops; and the 2022 USDA Agricultural Census county profile for Jackson County, North Carolina. Together they form a 72-year arc that every commissioner, planner, and agricultural stakeholder in the county should understand.

The Land: An 83 Percent Collapse in Total Farmland

In 1950, Jackson County's farmers maintained 52,352 acres of pasture and a total of 128,018 acres in farms of all types. By 2022, total land in farms had fallen to just 22,208 acres, a decline of 82.6 percent. Pastureland specifically had contracted to 2,354 acres, a 95.5 percent collapse. The number of farms fell from 2,260 in 1950 to 236 in 2022.

Land Category	1950	1954	2022	Change
Pasture (acres)	52,352	56,869	2,354	Down 95.5%
Total land in farms (acres)	128,018	148,505 [↑]	22,208	N/A
Cropland (acres)	27,651	32,216	4,812	N/A
Woodland in farms (acres)	74,196	92,606	12,198	N/A
Number of farms	2,260	1,813	236	N/A

The loss of 50,000 acres of pasture is not simply a statistical change. It represents an almost complete dismantling of the county's livestock-based agricultural infrastructure. Fences came down. Barns were abandoned or converted. Farm families moved off the land. What was once a working pastoral landscape became either forested, developed, or simply unmanaged. While some reforestation is environmentally valuable, the scale of this transition reflects a loss of agricultural capacity that cannot be easily or quickly rebuilt. The 1954 figures illuminate how this collapse unfolded. Between 1950 and 1954, the number of farms fell sharply, from 2,260 to 1,813, a loss of 447 farm families in just four years. Yet total land in farms actually increased, from 128,018 acres to 148,505 acres, and both cropland and woodland expanded. This is the signature of consolidation rather than abandonment: as smaller farms failed or were sold, their land was absorbed into surviving operations, which grew larger even as the number of families working the land declined rapidly. The

mid-1950s represent a brief interval when the agricultural land base held, and even grew, before the sustained, irreversible contraction set in. By 2022, that consolidation-era land base had largely dissolved, leaving just 22,208 total acres in farms and 4,812 acres of cropland across the entire county.

Livestock: From Thousands to Twenty

Perhaps no set of numbers captures the depth of change as starkly as the livestock figures. The 1951 centennial document recorded 8,307 cattle and 3,617 hogs across the county. By December 31, 2022, the USDA census counted 2,035 cattle and just 20 hogs.

Animal	1950	1954	2022	Percent Change
Cattle and calves	8,307	8,323	2,035	Down 75.5%
Hogs and pigs	3,617	3,820	20	Down 99.4%
Sheep and lambs	506	373	253	N/A
Horses and ponies	1,750	1,399	180	N/A
Goats	Not recorded	N/A	145	N/A

The near-total disappearance of hog production is emblematic of what happened across Appalachia as industrial hog operations consolidated in eastern North Carolina and the Midwest. The 1950 and 1954 USDA Censuses of Agriculture document this contraction: in 1950, 1,369 Jackson County farms reported hogs, more than six in ten of the county’s 2,260 farms. By 1954 that had declined to 1,268 farms. What followed was far more severe: from 3,617 hogs county-wide in 1950 to just 20 in 2022, a decline of 99.4 percent. Small farms that once raised a few dozen hogs as part of a diversified operation could not compete on price, and the local infrastructure, including feed mills, processing facilities, and cooperative structures, gradually disappeared, making small scale production economically unviable even when farmers wanted to continue.

The cattle decline, while less dramatic in percentage terms, represents a loss of nearly three-quarters of the county’s herd over seven decades. Jackson County had 2,035 cattle in 2022 spread across a county of over 300,000 total acres. This is a thin presence for a landscape that was once defined by grazing. The 1954 census also documents livestock categories that tell additional parts of this story. Sheep and lambs numbered 506 in 1950 and have declined to 253 by 2022. Horses and mules, which numbered 1,750 in 1950 and were essential to the working farm economy of that era, have declined to 180 by 2022. The disappearance of draft animals tracks directly with the broader dismantling of small-scale mixed farming across the county.

Crops: From Diversified Food Production to Christmas Trees

In 1950, Jackson County’s farmers were growing food. The centennial document records 8,948 acres of corn, 1,037 acres of Irish potatoes, 575 acres of cabbage, and 91.6 acres of burley tobacco. This was a genuinely diversified food-producing landscape, feeding both local families and regional markets. The 1954 USDA Census of Agriculture shows the decline was already underway: corn acreage had fallen to 6,438 acres on 1,473 farms within four years of the centennial, a drop of roughly 28 percent from the 1950 figure in less than a decade. The same census records 27,651 acres of cropland in the county in 1949 and 74,196 acres of woodland in farms. By 2022, total cropland had fallen to 4,812 acres, a decline of 83 percent, and woodland in farms to 12,198 acres, a decline of 84 percent. The county did not simply stop growing certain crops. It dismantled the land base that made crop production possible.

By 2022, the picture had changed fundamentally. The top crops in acreage were cultivated Christmas trees at 1,871 acres and forage and hay at 1,868 acres. Tobacco is now zero. Corn, potatoes, and cabbage do not appear as standalone line items in the census data.

Crop	1950 (Acres)	2022 (Acres)	Notes
Corn	8,948	Not reported	No longer a significant crop
Irish potatoes	1,037	Withheld (D)	Present but small/undisclosed
Cabbage	575	Not reported	No longer a significant crop
Burley tobacco	91.6	Zero	Complete elimination
Christmas trees	Not present	1,871	Now the dominant crop
Forage and hay	Not separately reported	1,868	Second largest acreage

Christmas trees are Jackson County’s most economically significant agricultural product, generating \$7,152,000 in sales in 2022 and ranking the county 5th in North Carolina and 13th in the entire United States. This is a genuine and hard-won agricultural success story rooted in a specific variety, the Fraser Fir, that thrives in the high elevation climate of the southern Appalachians. What makes the shift from 1950 to 2022 especially striking is that this industry did not exist when the centennial document was printed. The 1954 USDA Census of Agriculture confirms this directly: only 15 Jackson County farms reported any nursery products at all in 1954, generating a combined \$2,031 in sales, a figure that captures ornamentals, shrubs, and trees of all kinds. The Christmas tree industry as it exists today was not yet measurable. North Carolina did not begin growing Fraser Fir seedlings specifically for harvest until 1955, and the North Carolina Christmas Tree Association was not formed until 1959. The crop that now defines Jackson County agriculture was not yet a crop at all when county farmers were raising 8,307 cattle, 3,617 hogs, and nearly 9,000 acres of corn. However, Christmas trees are not food. A county whose agricultural base has shifted almost entirely to a decorative seasonal product is a county whose farmland is no longer producing calories for its residents.

Jackson County produced \$701,972 in total farm income in 1950. Adjusted for inflation, that is roughly \$8.5 to \$9 million in 2024 dollars. The 2022 census shows \$24,895,000 in total market value of products sold, a real increase of approximately 2.5 to 3 times. But strip out the \$7,152,000 in Christmas tree sales and the food-producing economy of the county looks far more fragile. The remaining \$17.7 million in non-tree agricultural sales has grown modestly in real terms since 1950, but has not kept pace with population growth, and nearly all of the county’s agricultural income gains are concentrated in a single non-food crop. A county that has nearly doubled its population since 1950 while its food-producing cropland fell by 83 percent is not a county whose agricultural capacity has kept pace with its people.

Who Is Farming: A Consolidating and Aging Economy

In 1950, 2,260 people lived on farms in a county of 19,261 residents, roughly 11.7 percent of the population. Today Jackson County's population is approximately 43,000. The 2022 census reports 395 producers across 236 farms. While population has more than doubled, the number of people directly tied to farming has contracted to a small fraction of what it was.

The age profile is striking. Of 395 producers, 183 are 65 or older, while only 37 are under 35. The farm economy is aging faster than it is renewing itself.

Farm Category	Number of Farms	Percent of Total
Sell less than \$2,500/year	123	52%
Sell \$2,500 to \$4,999/year	19	8%
Sell \$5,000 to \$9,999/year	15	6%
Sell \$10,000 to \$24,999/year	45	19%
Sell \$25,000 to \$49,999/year	16	7%
Sell \$50,000 to \$99,999/year	3	1%
Sell \$100,000 or more/year	15	6%

More than half of all Jackson County farms, 52 percent, sell less than \$2,500 in agricultural products per year. That is less than \$210 per month. These are not full-time farming operations by any standard economic measure. They are families and individuals maintaining a farming identity, a land ethic, and often a cultural tradition, but they are doing so without adequate market access, processing infrastructure, or aggregation support to make farming economically viable.

Only 15 farms in Jackson County, just 6 percent, sell \$100,000 or more in agricultural products per year. It is worth noting that WNC From the Ground Up currently works with 15 Jackson County farm partners through its regional food hub model. These are not necessarily the same 15 farms, but the parallel is not coincidental and there are only 34 farms total making over \$25,000/year. Aggregation, refrigerated distribution, direct, wholesale and institutional purchasing relationships, and low-markup market access are precisely the tools that move farms from the bottom of that sales distribution toward the top. Growing both of those numbers, the farms that reach \$100,000 in sales and the farms that have access to food hub infrastructure, is a central goal of the work being done by WNC From the Ground Up right now.

Only 10 percent of farms sell directly to consumers, and only 24 percent hire any farm labor. Ninety-seven percent are family farms. The county's agricultural economy is almost entirely composed of family-scale operations that are largely economically marginal, held together by land tenure, love of place, and persistence.

What This Means for Jackson County's Future

The data assembled here tells a story that should inform every conversation the county has about land use, economic development, food access, and agricultural policy.

Farmland Loss Is Largely Irreversible

Once agricultural land is developed, the probability of returning it to production is extremely low. The 50,000 acres of pasture that disappeared between 1950 and 2022 are not coming back. What remains, 22,208 acres in farms, represents the viable agricultural base the county has left to work with. Protecting it is urgent. The Headwaters Conservation Plan and the county's emerging farmland preservation framework represent exactly the right institutional response.

Small Farms Need Infrastructure, Not Just Land

The 2022 data makes clear that most of the county's farms are not economically self-sustaining at current scale. The problem is not that the farmers lack skill or commitment. The problem is that the cooperative infrastructure, including aggregation, processing, cold storage, refrigerated transport, and direct market access, that once made small farm economics work no longer exists in the county. Rebuilding that infrastructure is essential to making the farms that remain viable over the next generation.

Food Security Is an Agricultural Policy Issue

Jackson County once grew substantial quantities of food within its borders. It no longer does so at meaningful scale. A county with nearly 16 percent of residents experiencing food insecurity and an agricultural sector that is primarily producing Christmas trees is a county whose food system is structurally dependent on long supply chains and external production. Building local food capacity is not a luxury or a niche interest. It is a resilience and public health issue.

The Next Generation of Farmers Is Not Guaranteed

With 183 of 395 producers age 65 or older and only 37 under age 35, the county faces a generational succession challenge. If the farms held by aging operators do not transfer to new farmers, they will most likely be sold for development or simply taken out of production. Farmland preservation tools, beginning farmer programs, and direct investment in young farmer viability are not optional if the county wishes to retain an agricultural identity in the decades ahead.

Removing Legal Barriers to Local Meat Processing

One of the most concrete examples of the policy work needed to rebuild Jackson County's food system is the recent amendment to the Jackson County Unified Development Ordinance to permit small scale animal processing facilities as a conditional use. Prior to this change, meat processing for commercial retail sale was classified under the county's heavy industry ordinance, effectively prohibiting it in Jackson County. Livestock could be raised here but could not legally be processed here for commercial sale. Any farmer who wanted to sell meat had to transport animals to facilities in other counties, adding cost, stress on the animals, and logistical burden that made small scale meat production economically unworkable for most operations.

WNC From the Ground Up engaged directly with county planners and commissioners to challenge and change this classification. On October 4, 2022, Lisa McBride, now Lisa Kelly and Founder and Executive Director of WNC From the Ground Up, presented to the Jackson County Board of Commissioners and the amendment was approved. The result is Section 6.4(e) of the Jackson County Unified Development Ordinance (Appendix I, Article VI), which establishes a clear and workable regulatory framework for small scale animal processing in the county. Key provisions include a maximum facility size of 10,000 square feet, with any retail sales space exempt from that cap; a requirement that all processing and storage occur within a fully enclosed structure; a 100-foot minimum setback from all property lines; a continuous evergreen vegetative buffer of at least 20 feet wide along all property lines, or alternatively a six-foot opaque fence with a ten-foot buffer; a 30-foot setback from the top of bank of any water body; a mandatory waste management plan that must be followed continuously throughout the life of the operation; and full compliance with all applicable state and federal processing regulations as well as the Jackson County Noise Ordinance.

This is a thoughtfully written ordinance. The standards are real and protective of neighboring properties and natural resources, and they are also achievable for a small farm or cooperative processing operation. This is not a regulatory loophole. It is a legitimate, well-structured pathway for small scale meat processing to exist legally in Jackson County for the first time.

The reach of this ordinance change extends beyond small farms. The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians is developing a meat processing facility in Jackson County on tribal-owned land not currently on the Qualla Boundary. Because that land falls under county zoning jurisdiction rather than tribal sovereignty, the EBCI facility is only possible because of the Section 6.4(e) amendment. A sovereign nation with \$6.5 million in USDA funding secured for meat processing infrastructure chose Jackson County for that investment. That is a direct and measurable consequence of the policy work done in 2022.

The significance of this change cannot be overstated in the context of the livestock data presented in this document. Jackson County currently has 2,035 cattle, 253 sheep and lambs, 145 goats, and 20 hogs within its borders. Without local processing capacity, those animals represent an agricultural resource that cannot be fully captured as local food value. A farmer livestock in Jackson County should be able to have that animal processed, sold, and consumed in Jackson County. That closed loop was illegal until this ordinance change. It is now possible.

Combined with the farmland preservation work, the food hub infrastructure, and the direct market access programs operating through WNC From the Ground Up and other food hubs in the region, this ordinance change opens the door to rebuilding the kind of integrated local food system that characterized this county in 1950.

A Note on the Data

The 1950 data comes from two sources used together. The Jackson County Centennial Panorama of Progress, published for the centennial celebration held in Sylva, North Carolina, September 2 through 8, 1951, reports on agricultural conditions as of approximately 1950 and provides crop, livestock, and farm income figures. The 1954 and 1950 USDA Census of Agriculture County Tables for North Carolina provide corroborating and supplementary data. Specific tables used include: County Table 1 (Farms, Acreage, Value, and Farm Facilities and Equipment), which provides total land in farms, number of farms, and average farm size; County Table 2 (Farms by Color and Tenure of Operator), which provides additional farm counts and land figures by operator type; County Table 7 Parts 1 and 2 (Livestock and Livestock Products), which provides 1954 and 1950 data on cattle, hogs, sheep, horses and mules, and poultry; County Table 8 (Nursery, Greenhouse, and Forest Products), which documents the near-absence of nursery product sales in 1954 and provides forest product data; and County Table 9 Parts 1 through 3 (Specified Crops Harvested), which provides acreage and yield data for corn, small grains, hay, and other crops. Where sources report slightly different figures for the same year (as with cattle, where the centennial document records 8,307 and the census records 7,602 for 1950), the difference reflects distinct enumeration methods and timing rather than error. The 2022 data comes from the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service 2022 Census of Agriculture County Profile for Jackson County, North Carolina, the most recent comprehensive agricultural census available.

Food security figures cited in this report are drawn from the Jackson County 2024 Community Health Assessment, prepared by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Division of Public Health (available at schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/units/ldas/cha2024/JACKSON-2024-CHA.pdf), and from Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap county-level data.

Direct numeric comparison between these sources should be treated as indicative rather than precise. The 1951 document reports pasture acreage as a standalone figure while the 2022 census reports total land in farms across multiple use categories. Nevertheless, the directional story these numbers tell is clear and consistent with what agricultural extension agents, farmers, and community members across the county have observed over generations.

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