The postwar agricultural depression continued after the end of Reconstruction and the Conservative government did nothing to help small farmers. Small farms, worked by sharecroppers or tenant farmers, had replaced the large plantations of the antebellum period. Cotton continued to dominate the South Carolina economy, but it did not bring prosperity. Instead of helping the destitute farmers, the Conservatives passed a crop lien law that allowed creditors to have first claim on a farmer’s crop. The crop lien system held farmers in continual debt.

South Carolina farmers did not experience the mechanization of farming (cotton was picked by hand well into the 20th century) that raised supply in other regions of the country. However, they did have fertilizers that increased the cotton yield. They were also competing with foreign suppliers. Worldwide supply exceeded demand and the price that farmers were able to get for their crops fell throughout the period.

Farmers throughout the Midwest and the South were unable to make payments on the loans that they had taken out to purchase land and equipment. In South Carolina, the problem of debt was exacerbated by the sharecropping and tenant farming system and the crop lien laws. Farmers first responded to this problem as individuals by planting more so that they could make more profit. However, the more farmers planted, the more prices fell. In South Carolina, farmers also felt the impact of bank foreclosures, forfeiture of their land for non-payment of taxes, as well as drought and pests such as the army worm and the boll weevil that led to periodic crop failures.

The political roots of the Populist movement were established in South Carolina, as in other parts of the South and in the Midwest, as a result of these worsening economic conditions. Farmers organized first as the Grange, a social organization designed to alleviate the isolation of farm life. In the Midwest, the Grange evolved into a political organization. However, in South Carolina the farmers did not have political power, which remained in the hands of the elite Conservatives. Farmers organized in regional Farmers’ Alliances in the 1880s that advocated an increase in the monetary supply, especially the coinage of silver.

In South Carolina, where society was segregated by both law and practice, there was a white Farmers’ Alliance and a Colored Farmers’ Alliance. In the 1890s, alliances around the country united to form the Populist Party, which supported the regulation of railroads and banking, the free and unlimited coinage of silver, and a system of federal farm loans. The party also advocated democratic reforms such as the popular election of Senators, the secret ballot, and a graduated income tax. The farmers attempted to ally with industrial workers by advocating an eight-hour day and restrictions on immigration.

The Populist Party was successful in electing senators, governors and state legislators in the South and West. In South Carolina, farmers did not form a separate party but worked to control the Democratic Party. South Carolina farmers accepted the leadership of Ben Tillman because of his extraordinary oratorical and political skills. He could be considered a Populist because he appealed to the values and needs of the common people against the Conservative elite. However, Tillman was not a true advocate for the ideals of the Populist Party and he strove instead to gain control of the Democratic Party in South Carolina.

Tillman’s demagoguery and political maneuvering were more in keeping with the political machines of the late 19th century than they were with the idealistic farmers’ reform movement, which advocated more
popular control of the government. Unlike other Southern Populists, Tillman never supported the Populists’ appeal for the vote of the African-American farmers, who suffered as much or more from economic conditions as the white farmer. Instead Tillman’s white supremacy message and racist rhetoric led to an increase of violence and lynching against African-Americans and to efforts to disenfranchise the African-American voter.

The fight between the Tillmanites and the Conservative establishment first got statewide attention with Tillman’s support for the establishment of Clemson as an agricultural college and his opposition to the elitism of the University of South Carolina. Tillman advocated the establishment of educational facilities for farmers to teach them better crop management and to develop new crops to increase their economic prosperity. The property at Clemson was a bequest by Thomas Green Clemson [son-in-law of John C. Calhoun], who supported Tillman’s promotion of an agricultural college. However Clemson was also a land grant college in that its operation was supported by the system of land grants established by the national government [Morrill Act] by which the sale of a portion of western lands was reserved to support agricultural improvements in each of the established states.

In order to comply with the ‘separate but equal” doctrine South Carolina and other southern states established separate land grant colleges for African America farmers. South Carolina State was authorized by the land grant system but received limited financial support from the state. Clemson and South Carolina State encouraged diversification of crops, but changes in crop production in various regions of South Carolina occurred as a result of natural disaster and entrepreneurship.

Although its epicenter was nearer to Summerville, the effects of the 1886 intraplate earthquake were more graphic in the city of Charleston rather than the agricultural countryside. As the largest, most destructive (thus costly) and most lethal earthquake ever to strike east of the Mississippi, the catastrophe and the city’s response to it revolutionized and modernized practices in construction, disaster preparedness/response and scientific study that continue to this day. The hurricane that struck Charleston in 1893 and others that followed wiped out the rice fields and competition from the Far East brought an end to the production of ‘Carolina Gold.’

Lowcountry farmers turned to truck gardening to supply local markets. Tobacco was introduced as a cash crop to the Pee Dee but could not be grown in other parts of the Lowcountry. Some upstate farmers started planting peach trees; however cotton continued to dominate South Carolina agriculture into the 20th century.

Questions:
1. How did Conservative Democrats respond to struggles of small farmers during the agricultural depression?

2. Why was cotton not as successful as a cash crop anymore?

3. What was the Grange? How was it different in the South than in the Midwest?

4. What political party developed from the Farmers’ Alliances?
5. What policies did the Populist Party support?

6. Which party did Populists in South Carolina try to control?

7. Why did poor white farmers support Ben Tillman?

8. What were Ben Tillman’s beliefs on African American farmers? Why was this dangerous?

9. Why was the Constitution of 1868 replaced? What changed?

10. How was Clemson University established? How did this also lead to SC State University?

11. Describe the earthquake of 1886.

12. What other natural disasters occurred after the earthquake? How did this affect South Carolina agriculture?

13. What did farmers turn to after the natural disasters of the late 19th century?