Chapter 14

Imagining the Forest: Longleaf Pine Ecosystems in Spanish and English Writings of the Southeast, 1542–1709

E. Thomson Shields, Jr.

When I drive past large, dense stands of tall trees where I live in eastern North Carolina, as often as not they are pines. When large stands of these pines line both sides of the road, they make me feel as if I am driving through a primeval forest—that is, until I notice that the trees have been planted in neat rows. What grows along the rural roadways of my region are mostly plantation loblolly pines, not the naturally growing longleaf pines that dominated from before the time of the first European explorers until the nineteenth century. The longleaf forests that flourished before European American settlement of what is now the southeastern United States were not like the dense stands of trees that most of us associate with the primeval. Longleaf forests or savannas feel open, with a widespread canopy and low growing understory kept open through fire. These fires, set by lightning or by humans, suppress non-fire-resistant trees that might compete with the longleaf and allow grasses and shrubs to grow as groundcover. Loblolly ecosystems, whether plantations or naturally occurring, are very different from the longleaf ecosystems that once predominated the Coastal Plain of the southeastern United States and well into the region’s Piedmont areas (figures 14.1 and 14.2).1

Yet, North Carolina has continued to call itself “the land of the longleaf pine,” most prominently in the opening to its state toast, not “the land of the loblolly pine,” let alone just “the land of the pine.”2 Even the highest civilian award that the governor of North Carolina can bestow is the Order of the Longleaf Pine. In its nostalgia, the State of North Carolina highlights the loss of a major ecosystem that once defined much of the coastal southeast, from Tidewater Virginia to east Texas. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the timber and the naval stores industries—deriving such things as turpentine and tar from the trees—along with the seemingly well-intended forestry policy of fire suppression effectively wiped out the southeast’s longleaf ecosystems. What
Figure 14.1  A longleaf pine savanna being restored by the Nature Conservancy at the Green Swamp Preserve in Brunswick County, North Carolina (photo courtesy of the author)

Figure 14.2  A loblolly plantation forest near the Green Swamp Preserve in Brunswick County, North Carolina (photo courtesy of the author)