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African Americans and the Enduring Quest for Land

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The newly freed slaves deemed control of land to be integral to their lives as emancipated people and to their children's future. This widespread view was unambiguous, spelled out by a group of freed people in Virginia: "We feel it to be very important that we obtain Homes--owning our shelters, *and the ground*, that we may raise fruit trees, concerning which our children can say 'These are ours.'" Their goal: that their children "be an established and growing people, and be respected, and recognized by all loyal people, as welcome and efficient citizens of these United States-which is now *our* Country."¹ While they clashed with former slaveholders to try to secure property, the federal government balked at subdividing and distributing confiscated land once owned by former southern slaveholders, then the world's richest, most powerful landed gentry.²

¹ "Northern Teacher to the Freedmen's Bureau Commissioner, Virginia, August 1865," in Hahn et. al., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Series 3: Volume 1, Land and Labor, 1865*, 699-700.

² See, for example, Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and More recently, see Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O'Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland, *Freedom: A*

Until recently, this federal betrayal marked the end of the story of freedpeople's quest for land for most scholars. With a few notable exceptions, historians focused primarily on the fact that freedpeople's aspiration for land withered in the face of leniency toward the former slaveholders, violence, and transformations in the South's political economy.³ The coming of capitalist relations of production to the southern countryside transformed former slaves into sharecroppers and abruptly ended any possibility of landed independence for the freedpeople.⁴

Over the past few years, historians have finally started coming to terms with a part of the African American past that many of you have known all along—that landownership among African American workers was far more widespread than we have understood, and that the aspiration for land among the descendants of slaves in the United States has been far more enduring than historians have imagined. A significant reason for renewed interest in the question of land is the landmark *Pigford v. Glickman* class action settlement in 1999, which found the United States Department of Agriculture guilty of discriminating against black farmers in the administration of federal farm programs. The decision inspired historians to take notice of African

Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Series 3: Volume 1, Land and Labor, 1865 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

³ As with most areas of African American history and life, Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. DuBois were trailblazers in the study of African American farmers. See Lorenzo J. Greene and Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro Wage Earner* (Washington: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1930); W.E. Burghardt DuBois, *The Negroes of Farmville, Virginia: A Social Study*, U.S. Department of Labor, Bulletin 3, no. 14 (Washington: Government Printing Office, January 1898); DuBois, *The Negro Landowner in Georgia*, U.S. Department of Labor, Bulletin 6, no. 25 (Washington: Government Printing Office, July 1901). A notable, groundbreaking work since the proliferation of social history in the post Civil Rights era is Marsha Jean Darling, "The Growth and Decline of the Afro-American Family Farm in Warren County, North Carolina, 1910-1960," Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1982.

⁴ Barbara Jeanne Fields, "The Advent of Capitalist Agriculture: The New South in a Bourgeois World," in Thavolia Glymph and John J. Kushma, ed., *Essays on the Postbellum Southern Economy* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), 73-94; Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Barbara Jeanne Fields, "The Nineteenth Century American South: History and Theory," *Plantation Society* 2 (April 1983): 7-27; Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Joseph Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995). For an excellent historiographical essay on the economy and Reconstruction, see Stephen A. West, "A General Remodeling of Every Thing: Economy and Race in the Post-Emancipation South," in Thomas J. Brown, *Reconstructions: New Perspectives on Postbellum United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Americans who had remained in farming throughout the twentieth century and emboldened historians who already were interested in the land question. The most notable recent book is Pete Daniel's *Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights*. Journalists and filmmakers also have turned increased attention to black farm owners. In 2001, the Associated Press published an award-winning series on the theft of land owned by African Americans. Ta-Nehisi Coates recently featured the story of land loss prominently in his influential essay "The Case for Reparations."⁵

It is an important story because the struggle for land among African Americans was primarily one of working people resisting a capitalist labor system that weakened their autonomy and left them incapable of securing a livelihood without resorting to the market. It is the story of newly freed slaves and their descendants, who defined freedom in terms of independent proprietorship of agricultural land, not wage labor on someone else's behalf. Moving into the twentieth century, it is the story of African Americans who sought landownership not as a replacement for sharecropping and other work but more often as a precautionary supplement to them. Having land represented insurance for family members who left the

⁵ Pete Daniel, *Dispossession: Discrimination against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>, accessed March 20, 2016; *Homecoming*; Charlene Gilbert and Quinn Eli, *Homecoming: The Story of African American Farmers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002). See also Debra A. Reid and Evan Bennett, *Beyond Forty Acres and a Mule: African American Landowning Farmers Since Reconstruction* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2012); Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religions in the New Cotton South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Adrienne Monteith Petty, *Standing Their Ground: Small Farmers in North Carolina Since the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Thomas W. Mitchell, "From Reconstruction to Deconstruction: Undermining Black Ownership, Political Independence, and Community Through Partition Sales of Tenancy in Common Property," Univ. of Wisconsin Legal Studies Research Paper No. 1106; Mark Roman Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); John Francis Ficara, *Black Farmers in America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006); Spencer D. Wood and Jess Gilbert, "Returning African-American Landowners to the Land: Recent Trends and a Policy Rationale," *The Review of Black Political Economy* 27:4 (Spring 2000): 43-64; Sharon Ann Holt, *Making Freedom Pay: North Carolina Freedpeople Working For Themselves, 1865-1900* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000); Valerie Grim, "African American Landlords, 1865-1950: A Profile." *Journal of Agricultural History* 72 (2): 399-416.

South to always have someplace to return. It represented the promise if not always the substance of sanctuary from the dependence and violence of the Jim Crow. Most of all, landownership exemplified one of many strategies that African American workers used to simultaneously resist, engage, and confront the advance of American capitalism. I will provide an overview of what recent scholarship has revealed about African Americans' struggles over land and labor, and suggest lines of investigation that will further enhance our understanding of this crucial aspect of African Americans' engagement with capitalism.

In 1865, the number of black farm owners in the southern states was negligible. By 1920, a quarter of African American farmers in the South, or about 220,000 families, owned their own land.⁶ Some of the most exciting recent work has taken a more expansive look at how we evaluate the meaning of landownership. This new body of work has made clear that very few African Americans relied on farming their own land alone. They patched together a living from a variety of sources, including subsistence farming, farm labor or off-farm work for others, the sale of farm products, and the sale of their children's labor. It has taken our understanding of the importance of land for African Americans well into the twentieth century, in all of the former Confederate states, in the bootheel of Missouri, and even Illinois.⁷ New work on the Populist movement at the end of the nineteenth century shows that control over land and land use rights were at the heart of agrarian activism among black and white farmers that capped off what historian Steven Hahn has characterized as the most impressive and far-reaching rural protest movement in American History.⁸ Other recent studies are turning attention to African Americans' quest for land in the context of Native American displacement in Oklahoma.⁹ Still others, including my own work on North

⁶ *Fourteenth Census of the United States, taken in the year 1920*, Volume V, Agriculture (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1922).

⁷ Reid and Bennett, *Beyond Forty Acres and a Mule*; Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*; Petty, *Standing Their Ground*; Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy*.

⁸ Steven Hahn, "What Sort of World Did the Civil War Make?" in Gregory P. Downs and Kate Masur, eds., *The World the Civil War Made* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 345.

⁹ Kendra T. Field, "'Grandpa Brown didn't have no land': Race, Gender, and An Intruder of Color in Indian Territory," in *Gender and Race in American History*, ed. Carol Faulkner and Alison Parker (Rochester:

Carolina, conceptualize African American farm owners as part of a larger class of small farm owners that struggled to retain hold of their land throughout the twentieth century.¹⁰

How did African Americans manage to accumulate farmland during Reconstruction and the Jim Crow period? It is well known that many white landowners refused to sell land to African Americans. An 1873 editorial from the *Southern Cultivator* entitled “Our Old Farms: What Shall We Do With Them?” argued against the “suicidal policy” of the “ruling race” selling land “to the blacks,” arguing that only “thoughtless persons, and some pressed for means,” would do so.¹¹ Yet the latest scholarship shows that African Americans gained land in the face of such rural redlining and other enormous economic, political and social constraints by pouncing on slim opportunities. Changes in landownership patterns among white planters, such as the migration of turpentine production from North Carolina to Georgia during the late nineteenth century, cleared the way for many sharecroppers, both black and white, to buy land for the first time. Sharecroppers also relied on kinship ties and close connections with well-heeled white landowners, who advanced funds or ran interference for black farmers when they were bidding on land. Another strategy families used was to accumulate cash for a down payment through seasonal paid farm work, construction work or occasional labor on the railroads. Such strategies show their attempts to simultaneously accumulate capital and resist capitalism.¹²

Women were central to land acquisition. Their household production and sale of surplus farm products played a crucial role in making landownership possible. One practice that bears more study involves women and children running the farm while men held jobs on other farms, in construction or on the railroad. In addition to playing a managerial role, many black women took the lead in purchasing farms. We need much more work on women’s aspiration for land and how it changed over time.

University of Rochester, 2012); Kendra T. Field, “No Such Thing as Stand Still: Migration and Geopolitics in African-American History,” *Journal of American History* (December 2015).

¹⁰ See Petty, *Standing Their Ground* and Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*.

¹¹ “Our Old Farms: What Shall We Do With Them?” *Southern Cultivator*, Sept. 1873, 9.

¹² Petty, 41-44; Reid and Bennett, 26.

Women also were key to the success of double farming, or dual tenure, the most significant conceptual contribution about landownership to emerge in the last 15 years.¹³ Under dual tenure, freedpeople and their descendants worked as sharecroppers and slowly accumulated their own property at the same time. Speaking before the house Industrial Commission at the turn of the twentieth century, F. M. Norfleet, a banker in Memphis, described how black farmers in the Mississippi Delta bought 40- to 80-acre farms while working on shares for other farmers. They were doing this right at the moment when urban segregation, disfranchisement, and violence were hardening throughout the South. According to Norfleet, many of them bought wooded land and cleared it over time, and began raising food crops while continuing to farm on someone else's land.¹⁴ This practice extended far into the twentieth century, and, with the changing structure of southern agriculture, became even more important as a path to landownership even as the overall number of black farm owners was declining.

Buying land in groups was another way that freedpeople overcame their limited economic base. Historians have long known about freedpeople's churches that pooled resources to buy land during Reconstruction, and about black Union soldiers who organized to buy large tracts of land, especially in the upper South states of Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina. Lodges and voluntary land-buying organizations also provided collective avenues for individual families to settle on their own land. Cooperative purchase persisted into the twentieth century, at least among families. It was not uncommon for freedpeople and later generations to create what amounted to a family compound. For example, a couple in Virginia bought 12 acres in Virginia. Over the course of 25 years, their 11 children joined them in working together to pay for the land. In 1900, they bought about 62 acres. Three of their sons owned 96 acres together. The couple

¹³ Sharon Ann Holt first discovered and named this phenomenon in Sharon Ann Holt, *Making Freedom Pay: North Carolina Freedpeople Working For Themselves, 1865-1900* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000). I traced dual tenure into the twentieth century in Petty, *Standing Their Ground: Small Farmers in North Carolina Since the Civil War*.

¹⁴ United States. Industrial Commission, *Report of the Industrial Commission on Agriculture and Agricultural Labor: Including Testimony, with Review and Topical Digest Thereof*, Volume 2; Volume 10 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901), 486.

eventually ended up owning another plot with one of their grandsons. In Arkansas, a mother and her four grown children used both strategies, dual tenure and cooperative ownership, to buy land during World War II.¹⁵

Dual tenure and cooperative ownership were forms of land tenure that defy census enumeration. One of the reasons that historians have undercounted the extent of farmland ownership among African Americans is that they rely on the federal census of agriculture, which only counts farms considered viable for commercial agriculture. Interviews, tax lists and county records provide fertile ground for piecing together a more complete picture of landownership. Historian Mark Schultz and I have made significant strides in this direction with our Breaking New Ground oral history project. Relying on the talents and connections of students at historically black colleges and southern universities, we directed the collection of more than 300 interviews with black farm owners and their descendants. These interviews reveal the complex ways that farmers came to acquire land and the equally complex ways they fought to hold onto it.¹⁶

What Schultz and I seek to know—and what I encourage other historians to pursue as well—is why farmers continued aspiring to landed independence on the farm in the midst of well-documented discrimination against black and other small farmers on the one hand and preferential treatment toward wealthier farmers and agribusinesses on the other hand. And why, despite migration and forces drawing people from farming, did any African Americans persist in pursuing lives on the farm even as large-scale changes in the structure of United States agriculture were making farming and landownership untenable? Always among the farmers

¹⁵ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 106, 109, and 116; Interview with Samuel Lee by Hudson Vaughan, 31 May 2012 U-0986, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁶ The interviews in the Breaking New Ground collection can be found in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. We are currently at work on a book based on the interviews and archival research. Another work in progress on black farm owners is Evan Bennett's *Finding Cedar Grove: Searching for Black Community in the Rural South* about the Corbett family, featured in Marion Post's depression era photographs.

with the smallest farms and lowest earnings, African Americans bore the brunt of competition from larger farmers as agriculture became more mechanized and landholdings grew larger and larger. Yet there continued to be waves of people becoming landowning farmers for the first time even as the number of farmers overall declined in number during the era of agricultural transformation.

Of course, this transformation of farming was a worldwide phenomenon. Fewer and fewer people were growing more and more on larger, more mechanized farms. The experience of black farm owners who confronted this massive shift in agriculture shares much in common with the experience of people throughout the world, perhaps especially those in places with a history of New World slavery. Studies of comparative emancipation have drawn parallels and distinctions during the immediate period of freedom but it might be useful for historians to extend the comparison of post-emancipation societies into the twentieth century.

In the American South, struggles over land and economic justice played a prominent role in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements that historians have not fully investigated. Fannie Lou Hamer established a cooperative farm in Mississippi. Shirley and Charles Sherrod set up New Communities in Georgia. Other separate black communities—well known and lesser known—come to mind, such as Floyd McKissick's Soul City in the North Carolina Piedmont and Alex Brown's Greenevers in eastern North Carolina. Land and farming figured in reprisals against Civil Rights activists. Local officials withheld operating loans and took retaliatory measures that Pete Daniel details in *Dispossession*.¹⁷

Ultimately, African American farmers never achieved the freedpeople's vision and expectation of widespread control of southern land. Nevertheless, their aspirations endured through the generations in ways that scholars should continue to investigate. Their struggle for land marks a significant aspect of the story of African Americans' engagement with labor and capitalism. Their efforts to acquire land, whether

¹⁷ Pete Daniel, *Dispossession: Discrimination against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

the most modest snippets of land or thousands of acres—constituted a form of resistance to a capitalist system that relegated African Americans to the most precarious and exploitative roles. With every acre they bought, they were lodging a protest against efforts to extract their labor for someone else’s benefit. As African American workers bear the brunt of changes in our current economy, the story of black farm owners is relevant now more than ever.