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Refusing to be Dispossessed: African American Land Retention in the US South from Reconstruction to World War II

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Refusing to be Dispossessed:
African American Land Retention in the U.S. South from Reconstruction to World War II

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History

by

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Abstract

African Americans in the South were tied to the land during slavery and after emancipation. Many felt that land ownership was the key to freedom. For decades, black farmers strove for land ownership, in many cases falling prey to sharecropping and tenancy agreements in the meantime. Despite this drive toward independent farming, however, since 1920, there has been a steady decline in the number of black farm owners. This trend is especially prevalent in the Southern United States. The black farm owners who persevered through periods of economic, social, and political turmoil were able to, for varying reasons, navigate those systems more successfully than their counterparts. This thesis paints a portrait of the agricultural landscape from Reconstruction, when emancipated slaves made clear their desire to own land, to the beginning of World War II when the effects of the New Deal and the Great Migration solidified a black exodus from the land. This study looks at the causes and effect behind land retention in multigenerational black farm families, rather than land loss, which sets it apart from the existing historiography.

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I would also like to thank the members of the National Black Growers Council who allowed me to interview them and tell their stories. Mr. Haynie, Mr. Bridgeforth, Mr. Armstrong, and Mr. Morris, thank you for your help.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family and friends, and to Miles Davis, who helped me pull many an all-nighter.

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Introduction

The socio-economic implications of land ownership in a capitalist society cannot be overstated. Land holdings of any size (or the lack thereof) have historically cemented entire families' standing in their communities and determined the life chances accessible to owners, their children, and generations to follow. In an agrarian, capitalist society, the emphasis on control over land is even more exaggerated, to the point where land ownership becomes a lifelong goal. To people who can potentially support themselves on the profit of nature's products, land ownership represents the opportunity to be one's own boss, control one's own fate, and to quite literally reap what is sown. For a major portion of modern history, property holdings determined whether or not a citizen could participate in the political system governing his life. The state-by-state abandonment of property-holding requirements for white male voters was still in process as late as 1860.¹ In short, land ownership has become a snapshot of the American Dream. As Gerald O'Hara of Margaret Mitchell's classic *Gone with the Wind* so eloquently worded the sentiment behind land ownership, "Why, land is the only thing in the world worth workin' for, worth fightin' for, worth dyin' for, because it's the only thing that lasts."²

After having lived, toiled, and been systematically denied economic and political freedom, respect, and stability, newly freed African-Americans in the South³ were well aware of

¹ Donald Ratcliffe, "The Right to Vote and the Rise of Democracy, 1787-1828," *Journal of the Early Republic* 33, No. 2 (Summer 2013), 249-254; Steven Mintz, "Winning the Vote: A History of Voting Rights," *History Now* 1, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed March 31, 2017, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/government-and-civics/essays/winning-vote-history-voting-rights>.

² Margaret Mitchell. *Gone with the Wind*. (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1936), 49.

³ For the purpose of this study, the term "South" will apply to the states of Arkansas, Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina,

the positive implications of owning their own land. As some of the nation's most experienced agricultural workers and Southerners, it was only natural that freedmen gravitated toward land possession with the intent to use it for agrarian purposes. E.Y. Beauford writes, "The idea that a family can independently own and operate a farm has always been an important part of American tradition and ideology."⁴ In the period pre-dating the introduction of any viable industrial economy in the American South, this concept held especially true. The phrase "own and operate a farm," within that quote is especially telling. Agricultural censuses, backed by personal property and income tax records have shown that owning land that does not produce anything of value is essentially useless as a source of income and offer little benefit to a family's future generations.

Since 1920, there has been a steady decline in the number of African Americans who operate farms in the United States. The term "dispossessed" has been coined to describe the phenomenon of losing land assets. Both white and black "small farmers," defined by the United States Department of Agriculture as any person operating on less than 1,000 acres⁵, dealt with dispossession. Land loss amongst small farmers was a widespread by-product of the changes that took place in agriculture from the Great Depression throughout the late 20th century. African American farmers, however, were disproportionately affected. Historian Pete Daniel stated it best, writing, "...if African-American farmers had left agriculture at the same rate as white farmers since 1920...there would still be 300,000 left. By 1982, the U.S. Commission on Civil

Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia, in following with the geographical designations of the United States Census Schedule of Agriculture.

⁴ E.Y. Beauford, et al, "Effects of the Changing Structure of Agriculture on Nonwhite Farming in the U.S., the South, and Georgia: 1954-1978," *Sociological Spectrum* 4, Issue 4, (1984): 405.

⁵ United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural and Rural Economics Division, *Black Farmers, Their Farms*, by Vera Banks (Washington, DC, 1986), <https://naldc.nal.usda.gov/naldc/download.xhtml?id=AGE86929124&content=PDF>.

Rights reported that only 33,000 black farmers remained.⁶

The broader historiography of black farmers tends to focus on African-Americans involved in agriculture primarily as sharecroppers. While such a history is important, the history of sharecroppers comes to a somewhat natural conclusion that can be attributed to two major events. One was the onset of the Great Depression and subsequent New Deal programs, during which time scores of small farmers, both black and white, were pushed off of the land they cultivated as mechanization and modernization significantly reduced large planters' need for hands-on labor and the costs associated with it. A second blow to the existence of sharecroppers in the South was the Great Migration, the large-scale movement of African-Americans from the South to Northern, Midwestern, and Western states from the start of World War I in 1914 until 1970. During this time, the black populations in cities like Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York grew exponentially, as that in the rural South decreased. Isabel Wilkerson, author of *The Warmth of Other Suns*, contributes to the study of this movement by chronicling the stories of three southern blacks with ties to agriculture, either sharecroppers or workers in the agricultural industry and their migration to California, New York, and Illinois. It is estimated that the African-American population of Detroit alone increased by 2,000 percent in just the twenty-year period between 1910 and 1930.⁷ The movement happened continuously during this period, but most dramatically at the start of World War I and again during World War II when the demand for war-related goods was heightened and white labor scarce. Even the South experienced a sort of internal migration, as blacks increasingly left the fields in favor of wage

⁶ Pete Daniel, *Dispossession: Discrimination Against African-American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 6.

⁷ U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Historian, "World War I And The Great Migration," <http://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-Essays/Temporary-Farewell/World-War-I-And-Great-Migration/> (accessed February 26, 2017).

work in Southern industries. *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* by Pete Daniel concerns the exodus of rural African-Americans into city centers as industry grew, counting the movement away from agriculture, especially sharecropping and tenancy, as a facet of the rural Civil Rights Movement. Though a necessary study, *Lost Revolutions* does not give much attention to the people who decided to stay and the statement that they made by doing so, especially those who owned land.

The historiography of black farm owners tends to contribute to a narrative that is extremely limited in scope. The focus lies on an image of farm owners who fell prey to dispossession. The problem with that narrative, as well as with the one of sharecroppers, is that both imply a failure of African Americans to participate successfully in agricultural pursuits. A recent collection of photos and short essays has garnered popularity by publicizing how black farmers faced “the onslaught of globalization, changing agricultural technology, and discriminatory lending practices by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.”⁸ The photos in the book point to the epidemic of black farmers losing land that they previously owned. The book provides information on when and where the farms closed, the effect on the farmers’ families, and what those who were heavily involved in agriculture did once they were pushed out of the industry. The photos are sad. Black farmers with leathery skin in worn out overalls stand near fields that they used to cultivate. That does not tell the total story of present-day black farm owners in America, however. While there are obstacles to overcome and the decline in black farmers was sharp, swift, and unfair, black farmers who persist today are making strides toward growing their operations through continued land retention, addition, and technological advancements.

⁸ “American Black Farmers Project,” *American Black Farmers Project*, accessed January 30, 2017, <http://www.americanblackfarmersproject.com>.

Granted, there is good reason that the historiographical narrative of black farmers, especially in the South, focuses primarily on land loss. Referring back to Pete Daniel's statistic, as well as census data collected over the years, black farmers lost more land than any other demographic. It borders on repetitive to emphasize this effect on Southern, black farmers because the vast majority of black farmers nationwide have always been consistently located in Southern states.⁹ In 1997, two lawsuits were brought against the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that cited discrimination against African American farmers when it came to loan distribution and assistance. *Pigford v. Glickman* and *Brewington v. Glickman* were consolidated into one class action suit, with participating farmers complaining that they had been discriminated against by the Farm Service Agency when applying for operating loans and disaster and crop payments with their local county commissions. Participants in the lawsuit also asserted that that national office of the USDA was unresponsive to official complaints, which is easy to believe given that the Civil Rights Office of the USDA was closed in 1983. Prior to the class action suit, a study commissioned by the USDA in 1994 revealed that a mishandling of documentation on the local level left no explanation for why the largest USDA loans went to either corporations or white males, why the loans granted to black males were on average 25% less than those allowed similarly situated white males, and why 97% of disaster relief funds were awarded to white farmers, while black farmers received under 1% between 1990 and 1995.¹⁰

The settlement of the Pigford cases in 1999 resulted in a victory for the plaintiffs, at least

⁹ United States Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service, "2007 Census of Agriculture: Black Farmers," https://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Online_Highlights/Fact_Sheets/Demographics/black.pdf. (accessed March 31, 2017).

¹⁰ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *The Pigford Cases: USDA Settlement of Discrimination Suits by Black Farmers*, by Tadlock Cowan and Jody Feder, RS20430 (2013).

on paper. The verdict called for the establishment of two settlement options for claimants. “Track A” called for \$50,000 to be awarded to approved claimants, as well as debt and tax relief as long as between 1983 and 1997:

“1) The claimant owned or leased, or attempted to own or lease farm land, 2) the claimant applied for a specific credit transaction at a USDA county office during the applicable period, 3) the loan was denied, provided late, approved for a lesser amount than requested, encumbered by restrictive conditions, or USDA failed to provide appropriate loan service, and such treatment was less favorable than that accorded specifically identified, similarly situated white farmers, and 4) the USDA’s treatment of the loan led to economic damage to the class member.”

“Track B” claimants were able to claim larger amounts depending upon the damages they experienced if they could prove actual, greater damages. The added burden of proof for Track B claims pushed more farmers toward Track A, even though \$50,000 was not enough to save or reclaim a farm operation. Furthermore, only 69% of Track A and 62% of Track B claimants were approved for settlement. Many more potential claimants were initially unable to have their cases heard because they filed after the September 15, 2000 deadline. In order to address the number of potential claimants excluded from the initial *Pigford* settlements because of late claims, Congress opened another opportunity for those claimants to settle in 2010 nicknamed *Pigford II*. Funds have still gone largely unclaimed.¹¹

Complaints filed by minority farmers against the USDA reached back much further than the 1990s, however. Complaints had been filed with the USDA’s civil rights office since its official inception in 1965 with the installment of William Seabron, an African American Chicago

¹¹ Ibid.

native who was unprepared to deal with Southern whites in extension positions. Prior to the formation of a civil rights office, complaints against extension agents and credit agencies are hard to find. After the formation of the civil rights office, complaints filed against agents and agencies were subject to the full bureaucracy of the USDA. Written complaints sent to the USDA by black farmers were largely forwarded back to local agencies for further investigation, negating the efficacy of complaining in the first place and inviting further retribution.¹² The legacy of minority conflict with the United States Department of Agriculture is undoubtedly important. However, a closer examination of the *Pigford* cases than the one offered here will not take place in this study. For one, the temporal analysis of this thesis ends with World War II, a full 50 years before *Pigford*. Furthermore, because of the failure of the *Pigford* cases to help African American farmers keep or regain landowning status, it fails to contribute significantly to a study of African American land ownership and retention such as this one, except to create a contrast.

Those black farm owners who remained in the fields during the periods between Reconstruction and the ups and downs of the Great Depression and New Deal maintained much more than land. Black farm owners held on a realized sense of independence and stability through ownership. A new documentary, "Dirt and Deeds in Mississippi" is an important contribution to the discourse of how black landownership fit (or refuted, rather) the social and political climate of the South. "Dirt and Deeds in Mississippi," through a series of interviews with black landowners and their descendants, reveals ways in which landowners used their agency to further the Long Civil Rights Movement and challenge the status quo in the state. Far more independent than sharecroppers or domestic workers, which constituted the majority of

¹² Pete Daniel, "African American Farmers and Civil Rights," *The Journal of Southern History* 73, no. 1 (Feb. 2007), 3-38.

black occupations in the rural south, black, landowning farmers were able to provide housing for visiting civil rights workers – at times even resorting to taking up arms for protection when necessary, as well as put up the collateral for jail bonds. Though landowning farmers still faced the retribution of local racists when it came to securing loans or getting fair prices for commodities, “Dirt and Deeds” in Mississippi points to the ways in which landowning status meant more than economic security and how black farm owners helped entire communities progress. Even before the Civil Rights Movement, black farm owners demonstrated an ability to avoid some levels of racial violence by exercising personal freedoms and to some degree, avoiding situations in which those freedoms were most likely to be threatened. This theory will be explored more fully in the coming chapters.

Historians have approached the problem of identifying the factors behind the decline in African-American participation in agriculture in several ways. One tactic is to stray from dividing the issue of disproportionate representation in agriculture by race, opting instead to look at “small farmers” collectively. The classification of “small farmers” has not been defined by any authoritative agency, but typically refers to farmers who operate a total acreage that is significantly less than the national average in any given time period. Consistently, African-Americans have maintained the strongest presence in this category, rarely ascending to the level of production necessary to finance larger operations. Those who conduct studies through the lens of size have determined that classism and economic struggle outweighed racism in the decline of the small farms that granted so many families independence. Adrienne Petty, for example, asserts in her book, *Standing Their Ground*, that “the historiography of southern agriculture has too often analyzed black farm owners on a segregated basis, lumped all white farmers together without an appreciation for class differences among them, and ignored Indian farmers in the

South altogether.”¹³

Petty makes a strong point by arguing that class is an important variable within the narrative of agriculture’s history in America. However, it is difficult to discredit the study of black farmers that analyzes their narrative primarily by looking at race. Based on the size of the average farm in the South at the time and even presently, black-owned farms constitute the bulk of what are considered “small farms” in the region. In 1991, nearly half of all farms operated by African-Americans were tracts of land under 50 acres.¹⁴ Statistics such as these prompt a discussion into how race is inextricably tied into class when minority farmers are so obviously tied into a lower socioeconomic standing.

Furthermore, the historiography of American farmers, especially that which has emerged over approximately the last thirty years, does indeed address differences in class. American agricultural historian Theodore Saloutos’ *The American Farmer and the New Deal* analyzes the polarized effects of New Deal programs, contrasting the highly varied perception of the Agricultural Adjustment Act amongst landowners, politicians, and sharecroppers/tenants. Moreover, Saloutos’ exploration of the 1934 clash between “urban liberals” and “agrarians” points to a deeply rooted division amongst whites in the United States Department of Agriculture and AAA. Urban liberals maintained that landowners – by entering into reduced acreage contracts with the AAA- were required to use at least a portion of that profit to ensure stability in employment for their sharecroppers and tenants, while agrarians favored viewing these payments as a private contract between the landlord and government with no necessitated responsibility for

¹³ Adrienne Petty, *Standing Their Ground: Small Farmers in North Carolina Since the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.

¹⁴ United States Commission on Civil Rights, “Decline of Black Farming in America” <https://www.law.umaryland.edu/marshall/usccr/documents/cr11b562z.pdf> (accessed Oct. 29, 2015).

sharecroppers and tenants. These same elements of expectations for social welfare were reflected in class conflicts on the ground level amongst large Southern planters, small landowners, sharecroppers, and tenants, both black and white.¹⁵

There exists a general consensus amongst historians that the Great Depression and New Deal agricultural programs meant to combat its effects had an adverse effect on Southern, small farmers. *New Deal and the South*, a collection of essays from Southern historians Alan Brinkley, Pete Daniel, Frank Friedel, J. Wayne Flynt, Harvard Sitkoff, and Numan V. Bartley, identifies the acreage reduction program initiated by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration as the first spark that led the transformation of Southern agriculture away from yeomanry and toward a more streamlined form of “agribusiness.” Agribusiness refers to large-scale agriculture that relies increasingly upon what are referred to as scientific agriculture methods, including mechanization, such the purchase of farm equipment like tractors and cotton pickers that are extremely expensive and make hand to crop labor obsolete, as well as fertilizers and pesticides that do the same. Many scholars of agriculture, race, Southern history, or any combination of the three argue a step further that New Deal programs not only negatively affected small and yeoman farmers, but also that the New Deal wreaked irreversible havoc on black farmers, especially. Agricultural census records definitively demonstrate that trend as the number of black farm operators, a class inclusive of sharecroppers, tenants, managers, and owners alike decreased from 882,830 in 1930¹⁶ to approximately 681,790 in 1940¹⁷, a statistic expressed dramatically in

¹⁵ Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1982), 103.

¹⁶ U.S., “Farms Operated by Negroes – Number, 1930 and 1920; Farm Acreage, and Value of Specified Classes of Farm Property, 1930; By Tenure; For the United States,” 1930 Census of Agriculture Table 3.
<http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1930/04/01/1837/03337983v4ch05.pdf>, (accessed March 31, 2017).

the south, where 98.7%¹⁸ of the nation's black farmers were concentrated at the time.¹⁹

Roger Biles confront the ways in which the division amongst New Deal agricultural program leadership trickled down and was reflected on the ground amongst Southerners, black and white, wealthy and poor. *The South and the New Deal* tackles not only the agricultural element of the New Deal, but the urban, artistic, and industrial advancements that were associated with agencies such as the Works Progress Administration, Tennessee Valley Authority, and relief organizations like the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Biles' study complements Saloutos' by dealing less thoroughly with the penetration of existing elements into large-arena politics and more heavily with the opposite: The ways in which local, state, and federal governments permeated everyday life in the South. Both Biles' and Saloutos' studies, however, contribute to the study of black farmers by presenting a succinct picture of the distinct challenges and opportunities created by the New Deal for those farmers to either leave or stay in farming. New Deal studies also contribute to the humanistic approach to the query of how African Americans either stayed or strayed from agriculture because in the short amount of time that New Deal programs were active in the South, they either magnified or created social orders that sparked a fight or flight response from small farmers, who have already been established as

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, "Farms of Nonwhite Operators by Race and Tenure – Number, Acreage, and Specified Values, For the United States: Census of 1940," 1940 Census of Agriculture Table 13, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1940/03/03/1282/Table-13.pdf>, (accessed March 31, 2017).

¹⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, "Chapter IV – Statistics by Race of Farm Operator: Introduction," 1930 Census of Agriculture. <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1930/04/01/1837/03337983v4ch05.pdf>, (accessed March 31, 2017).

¹⁹ Daniel, Friedel, Flynt, Bartley, and Sitkoff's essays on these topics can be found in: *The New Deal and the South* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1984).

overwhelmingly black.²⁰

The intent of this study is to address the opposite side of the prevailing narratives by recognizing the existence of multigenerational black farmers in the southern United States who have retained land ownership at least since the period during which it became most difficult to do so. The essential argument is that in order to retain land throughout periods of social, political, and economic tumult from Reconstruction to World War II, black farm owners adeptly navigated such systems, which were at most points, turned against them. The varying conditions created by these systems are explored in chapters organized chronologically, covering the farm booms and busts of the 1920s, the onset of the Great Depression in the South, the effects of the New Deal on black farmers, and culminating with the effects of World War II and the Great Migration on African-American participation in agriculture. Chapter One deals with the emergence of sharecropping as the primary tenure level of black farmers during Reconstruction, as it is vital to provide a background that will put into perspective the importance African Americans placed on land ownership. Subsequent chapters consider the effects of social, political, and economic change on sharecroppers, but such consideration does not equate a contribution to the historiography of sharecropping. Rather, surveying the conditions of sharecropping, as well as agricultural laborers, will provide a comparative, contextual element. This structure is meant to underscore the importance of land ownership.

In order to add a humanistic element to what would otherwise be a compilation of census data, I conducted interviews with four black farmers who are presently active in row crop agriculture in the states of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Virginia. To the best of their abilities, these farmers provided their families' histories in agriculture, with special attention

²⁰ Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 1-15; 58-82; 103-124; Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 179-191.

devoted to the pursuit and retention of land ownership. At the risk of being presented as an afterthought, which is not the least bit true, the families with whom interviews were conducted will not appear until the totality of the historical landscape of agriculture and race in the South has been fully demonstrated. The rationale behind this approach is to 1) Avoid an attempt to chop the multigenerational history of these families into the neatly divided periods of time chronicled in each chapter, an attempt which would significantly reduce the impressive effect of their persistence and 2) Present these families in sharp relief to the realities of the general class of black farm operators in the South. The final chapter contains the content and an analysis of these interviews.

Chapter One: Reconstruction to World War I: 1865-1914

“I may state to all our friends, and to all our enemies, that we has a right to the land where we are located. For why? I tell you. Our wives, our children, our husbands, as been sold over and over again to purchase the lands we now locate upon; for that reason we have a divine right to the land.” – Bayley Wyatt, 1866

For freed slaves, emancipation after the Civil War represented a variety of opportunities. For most of those ex-slaves, with the exception of a small class of skilled workers, agricultural work represented the totality of their marketable skills. From day one of emancipation and in some cases, years before, African Americans put an earnest effort toward becoming landowners. Former slaves were cognizant that landownership represented the only sure path toward stability, freedom, and full citizenship. Overwhelmingly, however, newly emancipated slaves were funneled into wage labor, then into sharecropping and tenancy agreements instead of independent operations. This progression into a system that ensured perpetual debt and the longevity of social control directly conflicted with the desires expressed by freedmen, but at the time, sharecropping was the closest step toward landownership many African Americans could take.²¹

The phrase “40 acres and a mule” is commonly used to describe the reparations that blacks expected post-Emancipation. The phrase is derived from Union General William Tecumseh Sherman’s Special Field Order Number 15, issued in January 1865. On Sherman’s famed “March to the Sea,” Sherman confiscated a 400,000-acre tract of land spanning the southeastern coastline from Charleston, South Carolina to Florida, composed mainly of rice plantations. The Georgia Sea Islands were also included in Sherman’s claim. Prior to the issuance of the order, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton met with Sherman in Savannah, Georgia

²¹ Edward Magdol, *A Right to the Land* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 19.

to discuss plans for the land of Southern planters who had been forced to evacuate. After Sherman and Stanton's private meeting, they both met with twenty black Baptist and Methodist preachers and discussed plans for successful emancipation. Four days later, President Lincoln approved Field Order No. 15 on the basis that the Union army could not afford to continue harboring, sheltering, and feeding the black refugees that had followed them through Georgia. Field Order No. 15 called for confiscated lands to be distributed in forty-acre plots to the black families following him, who had been technically freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, but offered little help past that. Later, Sherman would also direct his troops to distribute mules to families on the confiscated lands, but not out of pure concern for those families' ability to work. The mules that Sherman had his troops distribute were near death and would probably not make the march back northward. Shortly after the issuance of Special Field Order Number 15, President Lincoln created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) and gave the Bureau the authority to distribute forty-acre plots of land to both freed blacks and Southern Unionists.²²

The expectation for "40 acres and a mule" is largely traced back only as far as Special Field Order No. 15, but nearly four years prior to Sherman's March to the Sea and well before the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau, the failings of Reconstruction were foreshadowed by the Port Royal Experiment in the South Carolina Sea Islands. On November 7th, 1861, the Union Army opened fire on Fort Beauregard and Fort Walker in Port Royal Sound. Outmanned, the Confederate soldiers at these forts retreated, taking with them white planters from the Sea Islands to the mainland. Some 8,000 slaves were left behind, free of their masters, in the middle of

²² Barton Myers, "Sherman's Field Order No. 15," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/shermans-field-order-no-15>; Howard C. Westwood, "Sherman Marched: And Proclaimed Land for the Landless," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 85, no.1 (Jan. 1984), 35-44.

cotton harvesting season. The bounty that was a mature cotton crop piqued the interest of the Union Treasury Department, which was fully aware of the domestic and international demand for cotton since the Civil War had ravaged cotton plantations across the South. The Department, however, lacked the manpower to travel to South Carolina and oversee the harvest and sale of the cotton crop. Simultaneously, Northern abolitionists jumped at the chance to prove that freed African Americans could exist as productive, self-sustaining citizens. The circumstances overlapped to create a perfect storm in which the United States government actively recruited “Gideonites,” as they would soon be called, to educate the freed slaves on community building, healthcare, and how to become economically independent. The “Gideonites” who went to Port Royal in March 1862 was a group of 53 New England teachers, ministers, and doctors, backed financially by abolitionist interest groups in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.²³

When the Gideonites stepped onto the Sea Islands, they were equipped with pre-conceived, distinctively Northern, capitalist notions of success. To Northerners, who had long moved from agrarianism and yeomanry, free labor and the ability to earn wages was deemed an orderly first step in the path toward black citizenship. Especially in the first days of the experiment, though, African Americans at Port Royal did not feel the same. Tasked with harvesting the cotton crop for that year, newly freed slaves were treated as field hands, just as they had been before their owners fled. Moreover, offenses committed against the freed blacks in the Sea Islands closely mirrored some of those experienced in slavery. Underpayment or late payment for work done, as well as abuse at the hands of soldiers in the area, and for some men, being forced to work the cotton plantations took the freedom out of “free labor.” The Northern Gideonite volunteers wholeheartedly believed that if freedmen were provided a formal

²³ Akiko Ochiai, “The Port Royal Experiment Revisited: Northern Visions of Reconstruction and the Land Question,” *The New England Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (March 2001), 95.

education, they could continue to work on commercial plantations and by those means, would ascertain full citizenship and prove to the rest of the country that they were deserving of such.²⁴

Still, African Americans in Port Royal clung to the hope that they would become independent farmers and nearly a year later, it appeared that the stars would align to make those dreams a reality. In March 1863, the federal government set aside 59,000 acres for “military and charitable uses.” The remaining 21,000 acres were auctioned off at a dollar an acre and African Americans were able to claim 2,000 of those acres. In an exercise of pure Northern patriarchy, however, Gideonite Edward Philbrick bought eleven full plantations and leased 7,000 additional acres with the intent of supporting African American families. Philbrick ended up hiring 950 freedmen for cotton cultivation on his property. Philbrick’s favor of free labor put him in direct conflict with the class of Gideonites and freedmen who believed that landownership was still the best way to secure citizenship.²⁵

When additional acreage became available in the Sea Islands later in 1863, Lincoln issued a directive that 16,000 acres were to be divided into 20-acre plots and sold exclusively to African Americans at a special rate of \$1.25 an acre. That same land would cost up to eleven dollars an acre if purchased by white speculators. This practice was called “preemption” and was the same privilege that catalyzed westward expansion in the 1840s. Preemption dictated that certain groups of people get first rights of purchase on land that they settled and improved. However, given that the African Americans at Port Royal had severely limited access to capital, even preemption did not guarantee ownership. Many freedmen engaged in a sort of layaway program, placing deposits on plots of land that they wanted to own, therefore literally buying

²⁴ Ibid, 94-96

²⁵ Elizabeth Brabec and Sharon Richardson, “A Clash of Cultures: The Landscape of the Sea Island Gullah,” *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (2007), 155.

time to earn more wages before the land actually went on sale. In just five months, African Americans had already claimed 6,000 acres using this method, which is a true testament to the extent of landholding desires amongst freedmen. Unfortunately, although there was much more acreage to be claimed, a lack of information about the proper steps to take toward preemption paired with an unwillingness on the part of tax commissioners to exercise any leniency on African Americans applying for preemption blocked freedmen from claiming a greater percentage of available land.²⁶

By the time Reconstruction started in the rest of the Southern states, it was painfully clear that the Port Royal experiment had failed to live up to anyone's expectations. The Gideonites and federal officials who ended up in the Sea Islands were divided into two ideological camps: preemptors and anti-preemptors. Anti-preemptors claimed that free labor was the only way to "teach" African Americans how to be full citizens, that if land were just "given" to ex-slaves, they would never know the value of hard work, and that preemption was a program logically and pragmatically destined to fail in most cases. Moreover, many African Americans were stuck in a hopeless cycle, as the main requirement for preemption of federal land was the claimants must have settled and improved the land themselves. This was not considered to be the case on already improved plantations, which most freedmen had been coerced into working after their owners abandoned the land. Most freedmen remained landless as Northern speculators continued to pour onto the Sea Islands looking for cheap land and a cheap labor source to work it. Unfortunately, the miscarriage of the Port Royal experiment did not inform the processes of Reconstruction, which would reflect similar clashes in ideologies and failure to understand the polarities of

²⁶ Ochiai, "The Port Royal Experiment Revisited: Northern Visions of Reconstruction and the Land Question," 103-107.

Southern and Northern economic and cultural principles.²⁷

On the mainland, the U.S. Senate proposed an act during the Second Session of Congress in 1864 “to establish a Bureau for the relief of Freedmen and Refugees.”²⁸ The Freedmen’s Bureau, created in 1865, took on responsibility for “social reconstruction” in nearly every facet of newly emancipated slaves’ lives. The Bureau essentially served as a conduit connecting African Americans to their new constitutional rights, instituting welfare programs for food, clothing, and healthcare, and mediating between blacks and whites when necessary.²⁹ Arguably nothing came close to testing the mediating powers of the Freedmen’s Bureau in the way that the evolution of agriculture did. As in Port Royal, African American freedmen all throughout the South held landownership tantamount to citizenship. Also similar to the situation in Port Royal, the Freedmen’s Bureau was composed overwhelmingly of white, Northern men.

During Reconstruction, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands widely encouraged freedmen to enter into wage labor contracts with large landowners. The culture of the agents informed them that the ability to work for wages was the pinnacle of freedom.³⁰ However, for many newly deemed citizens, the wage labor scene looked eerily

²⁷ Ibid, 99-106; Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1964). 209-272.

²⁸ *Freedmen’s Bureau Acts of 1865 and 1866*, HR 51, 38th Cong., 2nd Session, *Congressional Record* 68, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/Freedmens_Bureau_Act_3-3-1865.pdf (accessed March 31, 2017).

²⁹ “African American Records: Freedmen’s Bureau,” *Archives.gov*, accessed February 10, 2017, <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau>.

³⁰ Ralph Schlomowitz, “Origins of Southern Sharecropping,” *Agricultural History* 53, no. 3 (Jul., 1979), 557-575; Donald G. Nieman, *African-American Life in the Post-Emancipation South, 1861-1900: From Slavery to Sharecropping* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1994), 199; Carl Moneyhon, *The Impact of Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2002), 207-215; Ronald L.F. Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor: From Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District, 1860-1890* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 95.

familiar. Most, if not all of the large planters looking to remedy their labor shortage were wealthy, white, former slaveholders. Freedmen were commonly approached by former masters with offers of paid employment on the same plantation they had just left, usually complete with housing in the same quarters they had been confined to not even a year before. Adding further insult to injury, wage laborers were subjected to work conditions that almost exactly mirrored those of slavery. Planters hired “supervisors” to perform the job of overseers before them and demanded the labor of entire families, even women and children.³¹ Gang labor, also a remnant of slavery, was also common and entirely too recognizable. However, some opportunities existed. For the first time in history, black men were able to act as heads of their own households, allow their wives to dedicate themselves to creating a domestic sphere, and send their children to receive formal educations. Moreover, planters who felt threatened by the possibility of freedmen voting for the Republican Party and furthering Radical Reconstruction discouraged wage laborers from exercising their 15th Amendment right by threatening to terminate contracts. Intrusive wage labor contracts underneath former slave owners who undermined those rights were not a part of the freedmen’s vision of emancipation.³²

The emergence of sharecropping was largely an unnatural progression from slavery. After experimenting with wage labor contracts, however, both planters and freedmen were left wanting. Planters were angered whenever oppressive work conditions motivated ex-slaves to leave their plantations, while laborers were disgruntled with planters who sought to control them and who could arbitrarily cancel contracts for any perceived social offense. The Freedmen’s Bureau was called innumerable times to mediate contract disputes between planters and wage

³¹ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003), 20-49.

³² Steven E. Nash, *Reconstruction’s Ragged Edge* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 99-101; Schlomowitz, “Origins of Southern Sharecropping,” 559.

workers, but still pushed wage work over any other economic system. This devotion to one system made the Bureau ill equipped to knowledgeably mediate any other agreement, which would become a major factor in the proliferation of sharecropping. Historians have discussed at length the emergence of sharecropping and its initial appeal, especially to those who would inevitably fall into a trap of debt peonage because of it. *The Impact of Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas* by Carl Moneyhon highlights the problems that drove freedmen to sharecropping and the role that the Freedmen's Bureau played. Moneyhon argues that Freedmen's Bureau agents did all that they could to help African Americans find consistent labor in a way that they found worked in the North, but points to evidence that in cases of disputes, "bureau agents often favored planters and farmers over laborers."³³ Planters voiced the same concerns, however, claiming that the Freedmen's Bureau was essentially too soft on their black workers, accusing those workers of using their newfound freedom as an excuse to escape work. Either way, a couple years after its inception, the Freedmen's Bureau lost or voluntarily loosed its control over agricultural work.³⁴

After 1867, the number of potential wage labor contracts presented to the Freedmen's Bureau declined as sharecropping agreements, many not negotiated by the Bureau, increased. In 1865, as freedmen anticipated the federal government's intervention in land ownership, the Bureau actively dispelled rumors that land would be distributed to ex-slaves. Simultaneously, Freedmen's Bureau agents followed instructions coming from their national office to help

³³ Moneyhon, *The Impact of Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 215.

³⁴ Schlomowitz, "Origins of Southern Sharecropping," 560; Bobby L. Lovett, "African Americans, Civil War, and Aftermath in Arkansas," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (Autumn, 1995): 317; Eric Foner, "Reconstruction Revisited," *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (Dec. 1982): 93, doi:10.2307/2701820; William L. Richter, *Overreached on All Sides: The Freedmen's Bureau Administrators in Texas, 1865-1868* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 84.

freedmen find work as free laborers. All in all, both planters and freedmen were displeased with free labor arrangements and as it were, the sharecropping contracts that emerged in the years right after emancipation were incredibly predatory and there was no one to stop that. To freedmen who did not fully understand the role that violence and deceit would play in the enforcement of sharecropping contracts, the possibility of operating a semi-independent farm opened the doorway to full ownership in just a few years. Having been burned by interfering in free labor contract disputes before and significantly understaffed, the Freedmen's Bureau did not review sharecropping contracts for possible potholes and variable stipulations that could be devastating to ex-slaves. Sharecroppers fell into debt, both actual and constructed. When the Bureau was dissolved, the agreements became even more restrictive, as white planters and politicians knew they had unbridled power to force blacks into such contracts. The establishment of "Black Codes," a priority as soon as state legislations resumed session in 1865 and 1866, cemented the social status of freedmen even before the Freedmen's Bureau was abolished and Reconstruction ended. Vagrancy laws and debt peonage ensured that non-landholding freedmen did not ascend socially or economically.³⁵

After Reconstruction ended in 1877 and federal troops gave up their occupancy of the South, the prospects for independent black farm ownership were bleak. As a matter of fact, the possibilities for black advancement in any form took a turn for the worse. Before Rutherford B. Hayes took presidential office in 1876, the United States had experienced an impressive period of black political involvement, relatively high rates of public school attendance, and community building, reflected in the formation of churches and benevolent societies. This intersection of

³⁵ Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 405; Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 73.

literacy and community involvement can be best demonstrated by looking into the black church. Ministers in Reconstruction-era black churches constantly preached the importance of land ownership to their congregants and headed mutual aid societies for that purpose.³⁶ Education and leadership point to an increased likelihood of land ownership for black farmers, a trend that will be demonstrated in the interviews conducted for this study. A report on black farm cooperatives issued by the Rural Business Cooperative Service of the United States Department of Agriculture asserts that educational programs remaining in the South for blacks post-Reconstruction moved away from an interest in social advancement toward means of education for social control.³⁷ This could be attributed to the exeunt of Northern philanthropists interested in educating freedmen classically and the shift toward education being controlled by Southern politicians and planters who sought to provide just enough of an education to blacks to keep them satisfied and train them vocationally.³⁸ Many of the gains made during Reconstruction were reversed in the days after President Hayes vowed to end Radical Reconstruction in the Compromise of 1877. The Civil Rights Act of 1875, which granted African Americans equal access to public accommodations was declared unconstitutional in 1883 and by 1890, restrictive Jim Crow laws based on the precedents set by black codes permeated every aspect of black life and spread throughout the southern states like wildfire.³⁹

One positive result of the post-Reconstruction era, especially for black farmers, was the

³⁶ Susan Eve O'Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 142-143.

³⁷ United States Department of Agriculture, "Black Farmers in America, 1865-2000: The Pursuit of Independent Farming and the Role of Cooperatives," by Bruce Reynolds (Washington, D.C.: Government Publishing Office, 2002), 3.

³⁸ Catherine Lewis and Jim Lewis, *Jim Crow America* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2009), 82; Minion K.C. Morrison, *Aaron Henry of Mississippi: Inside Agitator* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2015), 10.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 36-76

creation of “1890 institutions” or land-grant institutions specifically for African Americans. 16 schools were created from the Second Morrill Act, which outlawed racial discrimination in the creation of schools funded by the provisions of the original Morrill Act.⁴⁰ The Morrill Act of 1862 gave states public lands to either sell or use for profit in order to fund “agricultural, mechanical, and normal” institutions. The only way to get around the provision of racial equality in the “1862s” was for states to fund separate agricultural, mechanical, and normal universities for African American students. These schools were equipped to formally educate African Americans on agricultural practices from raising livestock to managing farm accounts and everything in between.⁴¹

Two acts in the period between Reconstruction and World War I affected land grant universities and the ways in which schools created by the Morrill Act were able to educate black farmers. In 1887, the Hatch-George Act established experiment stations at agricultural colleges so that professors could perform research to further the field. The language of the act, however, dictated that in states where two or more land-grant institution existed, the appropriated funds should be divided evenly. Unless, that is, the state legislature decided otherwise. This “unless” clause meant that most black land-grant institutions saw no real benefit from the Hatch-George Act. Nearly two decades later in 1914, the Smith-Lever Act formalized cooperative extension programs resulting from a partnership between the USDA and the Morrill Act. County extension programs were founded as partnerships between the USDA and land grant schools. These cooperatives provided education and resources pertaining to a range of topics from farming to

⁴⁰ Tuskegee University is considered an 1890 school, but was founded in 1881 as a private institution by Booker T. Washington.

⁴¹ National Research Council, “History and Overview of the Land Grant Colleges,” *Colleges of Agriculture at the Land Grant Universities: A Profile*, (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 1995), <https://www.nap.edu/read/4980/chapter/2> (accessed March 31, 2017).

health and home maintenance.. Debates on the Smith-Lever Act revealed the era's Southern demagogues, particularly Senator Hoke Smith of Georgia, who claimed that providing Smith-Lever funds to black colleges would be a waste of money and that even if funds were appropriated, finding black extension agents would be impossible because of a lack of competency. Smith-Lever passed in 1914 with the same clause found in the Hatch-George Act allowing states to appropriate funds unequally between white and black universities.⁴²

Until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, there existed separate and unequal Negro Extension Agents who served more farmers on much smaller budgets than their white counterparts. Black extension agents were strongly urged, sometimes with threats on their lives, not to disrupt the Southern status quo, especially when it came to black sharecroppers and tenants on white-owned land. A circular issued by the USDA in 1920 discouraged black agents from participating in "loosely organized associations of doubtful principles," most likely referring to agencies pushing for race equality.⁴³ Planters did not enjoy black county agents teaching their sharecroppers to grow and preserve more food and cutting into their commissary profits. Furthermore, teaching sharecroppers to improve their overall quality of life and become more independent cut into the psychological stronghold of dependence that had been drilled into Southern blacks for centuries. Earl Crosby argues that black tenants themselves were hostile toward extension agents because any permanent improvements to the land or housing could make landlords want to raise their rent. With these limitations, Adrienne Petty argues, black county agents were unable to help black farmers reach landowner status, but they did potentially

⁴² R. Grant Seals, "The Formation of Agricultural and Rural Development Policy with Emphasis on African-Americans: II. The Hatch-George and Smith-Lever Acts," *Agricultural History* 65, No. 2 (Spring, 1991): 12-34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3743705>.

⁴³ United States Department of Agriculture, "Extension Work Among Negroes 1920," 11. University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service Records, Series 7, box 8, folder 4. Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

slow their decline after 1920.⁴⁴

Despite the destitute circumstances they faced post-Reconstruction, African American farmers continued to make strides toward independent farming. In 1900, the first year that the agricultural census recorded race and tenure, 25% of black farm operators in the South at least partially owned their operations, which is nothing short of amazing considering the farmers polled for the census were only one generation removed from slavery, at most.⁴⁵ Throughout the first two decades of the 20th century, Southern black farm ownership would continue to rise, reaching its peak in 1920.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Sarah T. Phillips, Dale Potts, Adrienne Petty, and Mark Schultz, "Reflections on One Hundred and Fifty Years of the United States Department of Agriculture," *Agricultural History* 87, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 332-349, doi:10.3098/ah.2013.87.3.314; Earl W. Crosby, "Limited Success Against Long Odds: The Black County Agent," *Agricultural History* 57, no. 3 (July, 1983): 277-288, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3742454>; Daniel, "African American Farmers and Civil Rights," 3-38.

⁴⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, "Farms, June 1, 1900, of White and Colored Farmers, and of Specified Area, Principal by States and Source of Income and Value of Products of 1899 Not Fed to Livestock, Classified by Tenure, Territories," 1900 Census of Agriculture Table 2. <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1900/05/01/1835/33398096v5ch3.pdf> (Accessed March 31, 2017).

⁴⁶ Jess Gilbert, Gwen Sharp, and M. Sindy Felin, "The Decline (and Revival?) Of Black Farmers and Rural Landowners: A Review of the Research Literature," Working Paper 12810 (2001), *University of Wisconsin-Madison, Land Tenure Center*: 2, <http://purl.umn.edu/12810>.

**Chapter Two:
Agriculture Policies and the Realities of Farm Ownership for Black Farmers in the
Southern United States in the Post World War I Period**

“Leven cent cotton, forty cent meat, How in the world can a poor man eat?”
-“Eleven Cent Cotton”

The economic environment associated with agriculture in the postwar period made farming economically uncertain for many. Even though the agricultural economy bounced back from its immediate post-World War I slump brought on by overproduction, black farmers were still largely an exit from sharecropping into ownership during the decade. Much of that denial was caused by the relationship between race and society in the South, which in the 1920s was particularly volatile. In 1915, the South experienced a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, proliferated largely by the propaganda film “Birth of a Nation,” which was heralded by then-president Woodrow Wilson as “terribly true.” The end of World War I and the ensuing influx of African Americans back into the South from military service only added fuel to the fire.⁴⁷

African American soldiers returned home from serving their country with expectations of being treated with the respect typically earned by veterans of war. Especially those veterans who spent time in Europe understood that racial prejudice was a distinctly American ideal and hoped that after proving their worth in combat or support roles, they could dismantle the belief that African Americans were inherently inferior to whites. Black ministers and community leaders throughout the South encouraged the men of their congregations to serve their country honorably and with patriotism, despite the offenses that had been visited upon them for the color of their skin. Moreover, the nature of African American soldiers’ experiences as soldiers instilled in them a notion of pride and self-worth from which they had been systemically discouraged. Black

⁴⁷ Robert Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), 36-45.

soldiers were able to send home parts of their salary to support their families, a first-time experience for many who had hardly seen cash at home. Some black soldiers even advanced upward through military ranks, evidence of the respect they commanded with their performances as soldiers.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, respect was the last sentiment black soldiers received when they came home. Isolated incidents of violence occurred all throughout the South almost as soon as troops filtered back into their hometowns. African American soldiers who walked around in their uniforms were labeled “uppity.” In the summer of 1919, tensions resulting from pure racism to frustration over an increase in competition for declining jobs resulted in race “riots” all over the country. The word “riot” here necessitates clarification as the bloodbaths in Arkansas, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. can better be described as massacres, as black casualties heavily outnumbered white ones. In rural areas, the added stress of profiting from crop production in a surplus period exacerbated tensions, as well. The worst of the 1919 riots, the Elaine Race Riot, began late on September 30, 1919 in Phillips County, Arkansas and lasted for four days.⁴⁹

There are plenty of versions of what sparked the violence in Elaine. Newspaper articles published during the riots and after clung to a story of black bloodlust and murder conspiracies. The narrative that proliferated the violence and prompted whites from neighboring areas of the Arkansas Delta, Mississippi, and Tennessee held that African American sharecroppers, outraged at not seeing a profit from the 1918 cotton season until July of the next year, were organizing an armed insurrection against white planters. In actuality, sharecroppers were planning to take legal action and to organize, but allegations of a planned massacre have since been widely disproven.

⁴⁸ Randy Finley, “Black Arkansans and World War One,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (Autumn 1990): 249-274.

⁴⁹ O.A. Rogers, “The Elaine Race Riots of 1919,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1960), 142.

Instead, a more practical takeaway is that the assumed threat to an established social order of black sharecroppers not questioning their white landlords, or any other whites for that matter, resulted in a level of outrage that prompted swift and extreme retribution.⁵⁰

The nature of black sharecropper/white planter agreements required that sharecroppers relinquish almost total control to their landlords. Sharecroppers planted and harvested their product, and then landlords took the “share” to market, secured payment for it, and issued sharecroppers their just payment. There was no system of checks and balances in place to ensure that sharecroppers were paid fairly, as black croppers did not accompany white planters to sell their product, which was cotton in this case. Certainly, there was no motivation for landowners to miss out on the largest profit possible. Robert Whitaker asserts that landowners dictated that sharecroppers maintain small gardens in order to limit their food production and force them to depend on credit for food instead. With sharecroppers totally dependent upon landowners for household supplies, shoes, clothing, and food, landowners were able to charge inflated commissary prices for items issued on credit. The combination of what sharecroppers owed at the end of the year and what planters arbitrarily skimmed from the sale of the final product left croppers deeper in debt each year and if they saw any profit at all, it was minimal and could not aid them in securing upward mobility toward ownership status. In 1919, sharecroppers decided they would not accept short, late settlements. The reasons why 1919 was the year for action when previous attempts at similar measures had ended in disaster cannot be affirmatively established, but scholars have pointed to the post-war attitude of self-determination and assertiveness amongst blacks as a contributing factor. What can be proven, however, is the influence of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America. Between April and

⁵⁰ Kieran Taylor, ““We Have Just Begun”: Black Organizing and White Response in the Arkansas Delta, 1919,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (Autumn 1999), 265.

August, black farm laborers and sharecroppers organized branches of the Union in Elaine and nearby communities of Hoop Spur, Ratio, Old Town, Ferguson, Countiss, and Melwood. The Union had also sought counsel from the law firm Bratton, Bratton, and Casey, who agreed to help members charge their landlords with peonage.⁵¹

The reported start of the riot on September 30th has been attributed to an “accidental” discovery of a meeting held by the Hoop Spur branch of the Union in a church roughly three miles away from Elaine. The most popularly circulated account of that night claims that Missouri Pacific Railroad Special Agent W.A. Adkins, Deputy Charles Pratt, and a black prisoner, possibly an informant, were on their way to investigate a potential bootlegger when their car stopped near the church. For reasons that can only be explained by claiming black bloodlust, the narrative claims that the members of the Union fired at Adkins and Pratt, killing the former and injuring the latter. In testimonies given by black witnesses, including the black trustee, the total opposite was true. An entire party of white men had fired upon the church, prompting the Union members to fire back in self-defense. Either way, by morning, whites had taken up arms in search of revenge, arresting both men and women indiscriminately, only releasing those for whom whites personally vouched. Although blacks outnumbered whites in the areas of violence 1,003 to 123, the influx of whites from Tennessee and Mississippi disabled the blacks unable to escape on October 1st from defending themselves against mob violence. The number of casualties has never been determined absolutely, but most reports listed 5 whites killed and upward of 200 blacks. The disproportionate death toll seriously calls into question the use of the

⁵¹ Rogers, “The Elaine Race Riots of 1919,” 144; Grif Stockley, *Blood in their Eyes: The Elaine Race Massacres of 1919* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001), 31; Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods*, 7.

word “riot.”⁵²

Racially motivated violence continued to permeate the nation throughout the 1920s. In 1917, 38 African Americans were killed in a race riot sparked in an East St. Louis neighborhood. In Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921, the prosperous “Black Wall Street” region of the city lay in ruins after an alleged incident of “insolence.” Still, nowhere in the nation came close to the violence exacted in the South. Georgia and Mississippi alone were responsible for 40% of all lynchings that took place between 1901 and 1929.⁵³ Roger Biles, author of *The South and the New Deal* asserts that in the 1920s, lynchings became even more “sadistic than ever before.”⁵⁴ Although lynching was clearly a problem, attempts to pass anti-lynching legislation were wildly unsuccessful. The December 2, 1922 issue of the New York Times reported: “The Dyer Anti-Lynching bill is dead.” The bill, introduced by Republican Representative Leonidas C. Dyer of Missouri, was met with a filibuster from southern Democrats, who argued that a federal law against lynching would encourage Southern blacks to disregard the law. Senator Lee Slater Overman, a Democrat from North Carolina issued a statement on the bill claiming that “decent hard working Negroes of the South” did not need the extra protection of an anti-lynching law. Overman, in a statement that only reinforced the importance of ownership to the hope of any semblance of citizenship went on to argue that these “decent Negroes” “own property, their children go to public schools, and for such as they this proposed legislation is absolutely uncalled

⁵² Jeannie Whayne, “Low Villains and Wickedness in High Places: Race and Class in the Elaine Riots,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* Vol. 58, no. 3 (Autumn 1999), 303.

⁵³ United States House of Representatives, “Anti-Lynching Legislation Renewed,” <http://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-Essays/Temporary-Farewell/Anti-Lynching-Legislation/>.

⁵⁴ Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 8.

for.”⁵⁵

The purpose of pointing to instances such as the Elaine Race Riot and others like it is to point to the conditions to which black farm laborers and sharecroppers were subjected and to identify the ways in which farm ownership granted African Americans the right to exact more control over their own affairs. Farm owners took their own products to market, determined for themselves which crops to grow in which quantities, and had the freedom to decide with whom to do business for their everyday household needs. These freedoms could only be somewhat guaranteed to farm owners and African Americans farmers were painfully aware of that. However, this chapter will demonstrate that despite the agricultural reform efforts of the federal government during the postwar/pre-Depression era, African American landownership was not bolstered or arguably even considered.

Before the emergence of the New Deal and the resulting relatively new heavy-handedness of the federal government, the nation’s attempts at state building and modernization had resulted in two distinct approaches, both of which were reflected in the period’s agricultural policies. The combination of these two approaches resulted in what Barry Karl coined the “uneasy state.”⁵⁶ The uneasy state refers to the identity crisis America went through while attempting to reconcile the pre-industrial, laissez-faire values of individualism and an emphasis on local control over a largely centralized state with a system of regulatory programs, spearheaded by a strong federal government. The former depended upon partnerships between corporations, individuals, and the federal government, with the government acting more as a

⁵⁵ Unknown Author, “Filibuster Kills Anti-Lynching Bill,” *New York Times* (New York City, NY), Dec. 2, 1922, <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=950CE1D7153AEF33A25750C0A9649D946395D6CF>.

⁵⁶ Barry Karl, Introduction to *The Uneasy State: The United States from 1915 to 1945* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

moderating force than a deciding one. The latter necessitated ways of expanding the administrative functions of government, including the aggressive formation of new agencies, a legacy that persisted until the end of World War II. It is in this “uneasy state” which the United States’ agricultural industry existed in the decade predating the Great Depression Complicating the state’s relationship with industry and agriculture even further was the renewed uneasiness of race relations throughout the South as blacks, fresh from service overseas or still riding high from the promise of industrial work in urban centers, continued to question the status quo of their second-class status. Black farmers continually sought to either keep or ascertain a status of independent farm ownership in the interwar period prior to the Great Depression. 1920 marked the record high of black farm ownership, with the 1920 agricultural census showing that African Americans held 925,710 units across the country,⁵⁷ the vast majority of which were located in the South. The policies of the 1920s and the ways in which the events of that decade manifested in social relationships explored in this chapter will reveal both why that status was so important and at the same time, grew increasingly more difficult to reach.

Prefacing FDR and the New Deal was Herbert Hoover and the “New Day.” In his inaugural address of 1929, Hoover highlighted the merits of “government by the people,” going on to say that since the Great War, Americans had moved away from poverty and toward a “higher degree of individual freedom.” It is safe to assume that Hoover was not considering all Americans when he made that claim. In 1929, the average income of Southerners was only half of what it was nationally. Though great strides were made in industry building, even in the South, the agricultural industry remained volatile throughout the roaring twenties. Amongst farm

⁵⁷ Robert Zabawa, “The Black Farmer and Land in South-Central Alabama: Strategies to Preserve a Scarce Resource,” *Human Ecology* Vol. 19, no. 1 (1991): 61, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4602999>.

laborers, the average monthly earnings of those in the South Atlantic, East South Central, and West South Central regions was consistently below that of the U.S. average. In 1929, the national monthly average for farm workers, all races considered, was \$40.40. Every geographical region with the exception of those in Southern states were higher than that average, while the three aforementioned regions came in at \$25.23, \$23.28, and \$27.67, respectively.⁵⁸

Furthermore, Hoover promoted the federal government playing a cooperative role with a “multitude of agencies, State, municipal and private” with a definitive avoidance of governmental restraints.⁵⁹ He also favored this approach to government and business relations, and in the speech, indicated that his victory over New York Governor Alfred “Al” Smith proved that the American people agreed with him and prized government regulation of private enterprise, but not outright governmental ownership of industry. Smith had run on a platform government involvement in matters such as housing, public works, and most pertinently, a more hands-on approach to agriculture. In his acceptance of the Democratic Party Presidential Nomination, Smith pointed to agriculture as the bread and butter of not just farmers, but manufacturers, financiers, merchants, and any other participant in the free market. In reality, though, Smith and Hoover agreed the cooperativeness in agriculture was essential, even if some government intervention was the tool to facilitate that. Smith proposed coordinating the agricultural market with other “phases of our business institutions” in an attempt to deal with crop surpluses and distribute the costs associated with such, as well as bolstering cooperative

⁵⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, “Farm Laborers-Average Monthly Earnings with Board, by Geographic Divisions: 1818 to 1948,” *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112104053548;view=1up;seq=181> (accessed March 31, 2017).

⁵⁹ Herbert Hoover, “March 4, 1929: Inaugural Address,” *Miller Center*, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/march-4-1929-inaugural-address> (accessed March 3, 2017).

marketing on the ground level, not a vastly different plan for agriculture than the one Hoover outlined on Inauguration Day 1929.⁶⁰ Despite the similarities in their proposed agricultural programs, it is true that Hoover indeed rolled over Smith, raking in 444 electoral votes to Smith's 87. The reason behind Smith's defeat probably had less to do with his economic policies than his religion and views on Prohibition, though. Smith was the recipient of vehement anti-Catholic rhetoric, including literature distributed by the Ku Klux Klan. Furthermore, having spoken out for a repeal of Prohibition, Smith was despised by those interested in preserving morality by way of outlawing alcohol. As Hoover rode the coattails of the two Republican administrations before him, the expectation was that he would continue the legacy of economic advancement established by Presidents Coolidge and Harding.⁶¹

Even before Hoover's "New Day," at the start of the decade, Secretary of Agriculture Henry C. Wallace pushed for administrative involvement in the economic side of agriculture. Wallace, a member of a lineage of farmers and producers of *Wallaces' Farmer*, a family newspaper, was raised in Iowa and was the father of "Harry" Wallace, who devoted his life to studying the economic aspects of farming and would later serve as Secretary of Agriculture under Franklin D. Roosevelt.⁶² Under the Harding administration, Wallace pushed for the inaugural National Agricultural Outlook Conference, which took place on April 20th and 21st, 1923.⁶³ As head of the Department of Agriculture, Henry C. Wallace also helped establish the

⁶⁰ Al Smith, "Address of Acceptance at the State Capitol, Albany, New York," *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=75571> (accessed March 3, 2017).

⁶¹ "Herbert Hoover: Campaigns and Elections," *The Miller Center*, <https://millercenter.org/president/hover/campaigns-and-elections> (accessed March 3, 2017).

⁶² Lauren Soth, "Henry Wallace and the Farm Crisis of the 1920s and 1930s," *The Annals of Iowa* 47, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 195-214.

⁶³ John Farris, "The USDA/Land Grant Extension Outlook Program – A History and Assessment," <http://ageconsearch.umn.edu/bitstream/101723/2/USDALandGrantOutlookProgram.pdf>. (accessed March 2, 2017.)

Bureau of Agriculture Economics (BAE) in 1922, a combination of the Bureau of Markets and Crop Estimates and the Office of Farm Management and Farm Economics. The BAE dedicated its resources to researching scientific ways in which to reduce wastefulness and inefficiency, thereby driving commodity prices upward and eliminating pesky surpluses. The agency's ultimate goal was to bolster the results of the annual Outlook with an analysis of the international agricultural market in order to make American farmers more competitive in the world market. Unfortunately, the Bureau fell short in its execution of these goals, leaving the 1920s with yet another bleak sign for the agricultural economy.⁶⁴

The same conflict demonstrated in the process of determining whether business would have a home in government or vice versa existed in the agricultural reform efforts of the late 1920s and pre-Depression 1930s. What Hamilton terms "counterorganization" and "associationalism" in agrarian policymaking align with the trends of "uneasy" state building. Counterorganization promoted the formation of agrarian interest groups on the ground level and the organization of individuals in order to manipulate the market for higher commodity prices. The disappointing commodity prices of the 1920s proliferated the growth of such organizations, known as cooperative marketing associations. Ideally, cooperatives operated as the unions of agriculture, seeking to increase the quality of their products, expand their markets outside of their immediate locality by advertising, and coordinate sales in order to stabilize prices. In reality, though cooperatives did succeed in occasionally driving prices up, the number of separate cooperatives, as well as the tendency of individual farmers to undermine a cooperative's agreed production one organization's ability to make a marked difference in the market. Furthermore,

⁶⁴ "Administrative History," Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/083.html> (Accessed March 31, 2017); "Journal of a Tamed Bureaucrat: Nils A. Olsen and the BAE, 1925-1935," *The Annals of Iowa* 46 (1981): 154-156.

although cooperatives existed all over the agricultural landscape, black farmers were almost universally excluded from participation. For one, farm cooperatives in the South abided by the social order, which deemed blacks and whites interacting as equals a capital offense. Moreover, farm cooperatives relied upon power in numbers, specifically numbers of owners. Though black farmers made a considerable showing in ownership percentages in the 1920s, the overwhelming majority of black farm operators in most Southern areas were either agricultural laborers or tenants who did not participate directly in the marketing process. Not until the late 1960s and 1970s would African American farm cooperatives demonstrate real influence.⁶⁵

The Agriculture Marketing Act of 1929, also known as the Farm Relief Bill, established the Federal Farm Board and provided that the national government would consider agriculture ...”on a basis of economic equality with other industries.” The Farm Board was granted special power to “encourage the organization, improvement in methods, and development of effective cooperative associations” as well as to “promote education in the principles and practices of cooperative marketing of agricultural commodities and food products thereof.” The Farm Board, which would later be replaced by the Farm Credit Administration, was also appropriated \$500,000,000 to make loans to cooperatives for the purposes of improving and acquiring physical facilities, to form stabilization corporations, and make higher advances to its members. Essentially, the Agricultural Marketing Act gave the Farm Board the power to help cooperatives transition from entities separate from the national government to participants within it, thereby creating a larger cooperative relationship and bringing to life Hoover’s commitment to a

⁶⁵ David E. Hamilton, *From New Day to New Deal: American Farm Policy from Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928-1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 14; Harold D. Woodman, “Postbellum Social Change and Its Effects on Marketing the South’s Cotton Crop,” *Agricultural History* 56, no. 1 (Jan. 1982): 216; Greta de Jong, *You Can’t Eat Freedom: Southerners and Social Justice after the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 149.

business-like form of self-government. Organizations that combined individual commodity cooperatives into larger associations, such as the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives founded in 1929 and the American Cotton Cooperative Association founded in 1931 were results of the Farm Board.⁶⁶ Prior to the creation of the Farm Board, the Cooperative Marketing Act of 1926 created a division within the USDA to help back cooperatives with research and educational resources during the Coolidge administration. Still, the federal government, by failing to address societal resistance to black cooperatives, as well as the limitations facing those that did exist, failed to consider the exclusion of black farmers in the cooperatives they were helping to empower.⁶⁷

The last agricultural census taken before the fall of the Great Depression and subsequent changes brought on by the New Deal revealed that throughout the South⁶⁸, there was a total of 3,131,418 farmers, divided into three classes of tenure: “full owner,” “part owner,” “manager,” and “cropper” and two categories of race: “White” and “Colored.” Of the roughly three million total farmers, 2,299,963 of them were white and 831,455 “colored.” 42% of white farmers that year fell into either the full or partial ownership category, compared to just 6% of black

⁶⁶ “Agricultural Marketing Act,” accessed March 5, 2017, <http://www.agriculture.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/AMA.pdf>; Elizabeth Hoffman and Gary D. Libecap, “Institutional Choice and the Development of U.S. Agricultural Policies in the 1920s,” *The Journal of Economic History* 51, No.2 (Jun., 1991), 404.

⁶⁷ Joseph G. Knapp, “The Scope of Farmer Cooperatives: Present and Future,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 44, No. 2 (May, 1962): 477, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1235849>; Reynolds, “Black Farmers in America, 1865-2000: The Pursuit of Independent Farming and the Role of Cooperatives,” 7.

⁶⁸ The geographic division of the “South” consisted of Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, Delaware, Maryland, District of Columbia, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas.

farmers.⁶⁹ That census year was 1925. In the prior census year, 1920, those numbers had been higher with 23% of all black farmers in the South were owners, compared to 60% of white farmers. By 1930, “colored” farm ownership in the South was at 20%, while white farm ownership was at 52%.⁷⁰ The relatively even fluctuations amongst both racial groups in farm ownership are reflective of the changes in the farm economy as a whole, especially those post-1917. During the war, like most other industries, agriculture experienced an economic boom, but agricultural commodity prices steadily declined thereafter, rising intermittently in the mid-1920s, but culminating in Depression. Regardless of the numerous ups and downs of farm ownership in the South, the trend pointed to black farm ownership being much less common than white farm ownership, with over half of all black farmers consistently tied into tenancy or sharecropping instead.⁷¹

⁶⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, “State Table I. – Supplemental – Farmers by Color and Tenure, 1925,” <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1925/01/49/1559/Table-01a.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2017).

⁷⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, “Number of Farms and Farm Acreage, with Averages and Percentages, 1930, 1925, and 1920; And Crop Land Harvested, 1929 and 1924; By Color and Tenure of Operator; For the South,” 1930 Census of Agriculture Table 7. <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1930/04/01/1837/03337983v4ch04.pdf> (Accessed March 31, 2017).

⁷¹ J.M. Tinley, “Behavior of Prices of Farm Products during World Wars I and II,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 24, no. 1 (Feb., 1942): 157-167, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1232301>; Carl Moneyhon, *Arkansas and the New South, 1874-1929* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), 135.

Chapter Three: The Great Depression Strikes the South: 1929-1933

“We will not have any more crashes in our time.”
–John Maynard Keynes to
Swiss Banker Felix Somary at their 1926 meeting

This chapter deals with the social and economic conditions that African Americans encountered in the South in the early 1930s and the ways in which a persistent absence of opportunities for advancement motivated desires for land ownership. For the purpose of this chapter, the term “early 1930s” will refer to the portion of the decade predating the initiation of New Deal programs. The chapter is organized this way in order to establish the ways in which the South changed between the nation’s period of increased economic prosperity in the late 1920s and the onset of the Depression before New Deal programs affected the social, political, and economic climate in a very distinctive way. In order to fully contextualize the atmosphere of the early 1930s and the importance of black landownership, some events of the late 1920s will be revisited and may overlap temporally with the previous chapter.

The agricultural environment in the South in the 1930s was as unfriendly as every other industry of the time. Farmers, black and white, owners and otherwise, endured permanent changes to the agricultural market that pushed many off the land. The post-war period of the early 1920s wrought booms and busts in the agricultural market, but the remainder of the decade saw relative stability. The demand for exports of food commodities plummeted once the dietary needs of soldiers overseas were no longer a concern, resulting in a 40% decrease in commodity prices between 1919 and 1921. By the end of the decade, though still lower than their war time highs, during which time the profit farmers saw for crops and livestock doubled, those prices were beginning to stabilize. However, after Black Tuesday, October 29, 1929, a weak market for

agricultural exports nearly immediately resulted and would not be fully turned until the beginning of the Second World War.⁷² In the meantime, a slew of New Deal agricultural policies, most of which were largely experimental, were enacted in order to combat the effects of the Great Depression, which ranged from hunger to social upheaval as farmers became greatly displaced.

As has been established, at the start of the Great Depression and for centuries before, the economy of the Southern United States rested primarily upon agriculture. Even industry in the South held a close relationship with land and nature, as the primary non-producing industries were timber extraction, mining, and lumber mills. The South was ill equipped to withstand the economic downturn of the Great Depression. At the top of the decade, Southerners' average per capita wealth was only roughly 57% of that of the nation.⁷³

Following the typical pattern, education and healthcare were equally as poor, with literacy rates well below the national average. Especially amongst African Americans, illiteracy was a persistent problem, though literacy was consistently on the rise. In 1930, 16.6% of black males in the South between ages 15-24 were illiterate, compared with 21.7% in 1920. In black males between the ages of 10 to 14, literacy rates were even higher, with only 7.4% considered illiterate.⁷⁴ This trend toward increased literacy amongst the younger black demographic points

⁷² Jason Henderson, Brent Gloy, and Michael Boehlje, "Agriculture's Boom-Bust Cycles: Is This Time Different?" *Economic Review (Kansas City)* 96, no. 4 (2011): 83-85; Hoffman and Libecap, "Institutional Choice and the Development of U.S. Agricultural Policies in the 1920s," 397.

⁷³ U.S. Census Bureau, "Personal Income – Percent Distribution and Per Capita Income as Percent of U.S. Total, by Regions: 1840-1970," *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112104053548;view=1up;seq=260>, (Accessed March 31, 2017).

⁷⁴ Note: The statistics for illiteracy in black females ages 10-14 are not available for 1930, but in 1920, 10.4% of black females in this age range were illiterate. Literacy rates in black women in

to a growing emphasis on school building in the rural South. From the period of the Freedmen's Bureau occupation in the South throughout the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, black communities pushed for the opportunity to secure a formal education. With these efforts, in 1932, 230 Southern counties still did not show a single high school that blacks could attend.⁷⁵ In many cases, smaller, rural communities pieced money together to help fund schools, while many a sharecropper or farm owner housed and fed a visiting teacher when local instructors were unavailable. Still, however, a perfect storm of a lack of opportunity to attend decent schools paired with an inability to attend regularly even when schools were available to make obtaining a high school diploma an insurmountable challenge. The agricultural cycle of the crops most commonly grown in the South created a direct conflict with the school cycle.⁷⁶

Cotton, the most popularly grown crop in the South by black farmers, followed closely only by corn, demanded hands-on labor for the larger part of a calendar year.⁷⁷ A journal article written in 1950 cites that in the period between 1925 and 1929, "268 hours of man labor were

both the 10-14 and 15-24 age range prior to 1930 maintained a consistent differentiation between that of black men. This statistical difference hovered around -3% each decade, making it realistic to assume that the 1930 rates would follow the same pattern.

⁷⁵ National Bureau of Economic Research, *Race and Schooling in the South: A Review of the Evidence*, by Robert A. Margo, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c8792.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2017).

⁷⁶ United States Department of Agriculture, "Field Crops Usual Planting Dates," <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/current/planting/planting-10-29-2010.pdf> (Accessed March 31, 2017).

⁷⁷ Cotton production began to slowly decline after 1929. A special section within the Agricultural Census conducted in 1934 reveals a 35% decline in cotton production nationwide. However, in 1964, it was reported that over half of all black farmers who did not live in tobacco-producing regions still produced cotton. U.S. Census Bureau, "Changes in Production of Crops," 1935 Census of Agriculture Chapter IV, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1935/03/06/1935-03-06.pdf> (Accessed March 31, 2017).

required to produce one bale of cotton.”⁷⁸ The year 1929 saw the production of 13,853,599 bales of cotton in the East South Central, West South Central, and South Atlantic regions.⁷⁹ The “Southern Rural Almanac, and Plantation and Garden Calendar, for 1851-1853, 1856” recommended preparing the ground for cotton planting immediately after the winter holidays.⁸⁰ Planting in the Southern states (with the exception of Texas, where a lower risk of frost allowed for earlier planting) typically began in April and the work of cultivating a productive crop was hands-on from there. As the cotton plants grew, they had to be periodically “chopped,” mostly in the early summer, which refers to the process by which laborers used a hoe to thin weeds from the fields. Chopping cotton allowed the strongest plants to grow without interference from weeds or plants growing outside the row. The cotton harvest took place in the fall, typically between September and October. Before the expansion of mechanization, every stage of the process was performed by hand. For small farmers and sharecroppers, both black and white, managing day-to-day farm operations while simultaneously producing a cash crop was a family affair, meaning that many children across the South missed the opportunity to attend school, especially when they reached working age.⁸¹

“Working age” in the United States was mostly subjective until the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) was passed in 1938. This act marked the first federal regulation of child labor in the

⁷⁸ Frank J. Welch and D. Gray Miley, “Cotton Labor Requirements,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 32, no. 4, Part 2 (1950): 753, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1233825>.

⁷⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, “1930 Census Publications: Table 62: Cotton – Farms Reporting, Acreage, and Production, By Divisions and States: 1929, 1924, and 1919,” 817 <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1930/04/01/1837/03337983v4ch12.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2017).

⁸⁰ Thomas Affleck, “Southern Rural Almanac, and Plantation and Garden Calendar, for 1851-1853, 1856,” (Washington, MS: Unknown Publisher, 1854), PDF eBook.

⁸¹ Walter C. Reusser, “The Secondary School,” *Review of Educational Research* 13, no. 4 (Oct. 1943): 353, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1168583>. (Note: The terminology used in this article is reflective of the period in which it was published, but the numerical data is solid.)

country, though efforts had been made since the early 19th century to establish a minimum age for employment, as well as specify appropriate working conditions and restrictions for minors. However, the FLSA established that any child, regardless of age, is permitted to work in any farm occupation “on a farm owned or operated by that parent or person standing in place of that parent.”⁸² Therefore, when six-year old Fannie Lou Townsend was “tricked” into picking sixty pounds of cotton a week, she certainly was not alone. Townsend, who would grow up to be civil rights and agricultural reform leader Fannie Lou Hamer, was approached by the plantation owner whose fields her parents sharecropped one day while they were in the fields. The owner bribed her with “sardines, some Cracker Jack, and a gingerbread cookie” from his store if she could pick thirty pounds of cotton that week. As could be expected of any small child, Townsend was excited about the promise of treats, which, given her place in a poor family of 20 children, were a rarity. She eagerly picked her thirty pounds that week and collected her spoils, but then the owner expected her to pick sixty the next week with no treats in return. In 1923, when Hamer would have been six, the nation was in the throes of a discussion about regulating child labor. In 1924, Congress passed the Child Labor Amendment, giving the federal government power to regulate child labor, but lacked the necessary state ratification. Much of the opposition to the 1924 amendment was that it regulated farm labor. An editorial published in the *Sunflower Tocsin*, a conservative newspaper in Fannie Lou’s home county, stated that it could not consciously endorse a measure cutting farm labor. Moreover, the editorial expounded “It is a far different proposition from the white factory hands of the north and east to the colored farm

⁸² U.S. Department of Labor, “Child Labor Requirements in Agricultural Occupations Under the Fair Labor Standards (Child Labor Bulletin 102),” <https://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/childlabor102.pdf> (Accessed March 31, 2017).

children of the south.”⁸³

The photos below are examples of the nature of child labor in southern agriculture. The children in Figure 1 are picking cotton, which would normally take place in September or October. They appear to be elementary age, meaning they probably missed a crucial element of their primary education if a school was available. The children in Figure 2 were photographed in June when school was out of session. Still, their ages range from eight to thirteen, hardly ages at which children should be expected to perform physical labor.



Figure 1: Lee, Russell, photographer. *[Untitled photo, possibly related to: Picking cotton near Lehi, Arkansas]*. Arkansas Lehi, 1938. [Sept] Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/fsa1997023475/PP/>. (accessed March 25, 2017.)

⁸³ Chris Myers Asch, *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: The New Press, 2008), 53-54.



Figure 2: Mydans, Carl, photographer. *Children chopping cotton. Near Marked Tree, Arkansas. Ages, left to right: ten years, thirteen years, eight years.* Arkansas Marked Tree Poinsett County, 1936. June. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/fsa1998020201/PP/>. (accessed March 26, 2017.)

Access to education and the freedom to exempt children from the dead-end nature of agricultural work in favor of formal schooling was not only a perk of farm ownership. It was a motivating factor. From the initial engagement of freedmen in agriculture, the ability to access education pushed black farmers toward independent operations. Ronald L.F. Davies conducted a project tracing the evolution of the sharecropping system in the Natchez District of Concordia Parish, Louisiana and Adams County, Mississippi. In his study, Davies argues that newly emancipated slaves were disenchanted with the wage labor contracts that the Freedmen's Bureau consistently pushed them toward because said contracts severely limited the ability of freedmen

to obtain an education, participate in the political process, or in many cases, recuse members of a black family from working in the fields. Contracts written during the first years of Reconstruction typically called for “good and faithful labor,” leaving room for plantation owners to arbitrarily terminate their black wageworkers for undesirable behavior. Many contracts had clauses expressly forbidding their workers to leave the plantation for the purpose of limiting social advancement. From Reconstruction forward, ideas of freedom were tied to land ownership.⁸⁴

The Great Depression in the South exacerbated existing social issues, some of which had actually begun to wane at the end of the 1920s. Civil Rights historian Harvard Sitkoff argues that the Great Depression increased competition for rare employment opportunities and economic advancement, thus “intensifying racial animosity.” Citing the increase in lynchings in the South, Sitkoff points to clashes between railroad workers and organizations such as the Black Shirts and other extralegal, white supremacist organizations that threatened black workers away from potential jobs.⁸⁵ In Atlanta, Georgia, Black Shirts members touted signs that read “No jobs for niggers until every white man has a job.” Positions in railroad work were especially sought-after. In the lower Mississippi Valley, unemployed whites attacked black firemen in mobs, even going so far as to commit murder. Firemen positions were typically relegated to blacks because of the dangerous, uncomfortable nature of the work. Railroad firemen were responsible for shoveling coal into the furnace and making sure that the boiler did not explode. Furthermore, depending on the destination of the trains they worked, firemen’s schedules were varied and unpredictable, making the job low-class work. Even so, the economic pressures of the Depression made even

⁸⁴ Davis, introduction to *Good and Faithful Labor*.

⁸⁵ Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 202.

the work of a fireman seem desirable.⁸⁶

The crimes committed against the firemen in Mississippi were part of a larger trend of violence across lines of race and class. In a project conducted using the Archives at Tuskegee University, it was revealed that in 1929, there were ten total recorded lynching victims in the country, with seven of the victims black. In 1930, after having steadily declined for four years, the number of recorded victims shot back up to 21, all but one of whom were black.⁸⁷ While lynchings that were not racially motivated did occur in areas of the country outside of the South, namely in Western states, the vast majority of lynchings occurred in Southern states and were obviously associated with an attempt to protect an established social order. Social economist Gunnar Myrdal reported in 1944, “The southern states account for nine-tenths of the lynchings. More than two-thirds of the remaining one-tenth of lynchings occurred in the six states which immediately border the South.”⁸⁸ The number of lynchings recorded certainly does not represent the total number of victims. Innumerable instances went unreported by families who were intimidated into silence or were covered by authorities who were often either directly involved or complicit in the lynchings. Despite the rampant nature of mob violence, however, in 1930, the social realities of blacks in the South had still failed to manifest in political progress. After the failure of the Dyer Bill in 1922, no other significant progress was made toward anti-lynching legislation until almost the end of the New Deal.

Land ownership greatly reduced the amount and type of interactions that black farmers had to have with local whites and thusly, the risk of those interactions turning sour. Being a

⁸⁶ Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, 109.

⁸⁷ “Lynchings by Year and Race, 1882-1968,” *The Charles Chesnutt Digital Archive*, http://www.chesnuttarchive.org/classroom/lynching_table_year.html. (Accessed March 31, 2017).

⁸⁸ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 560-561.

sharecropper required almost total dependency upon a white planter. Planters extended credit at the beginning of the planting season, charging supplies such as seed and tools to a sharecropper's account. Personal supplies were also often issued on credit. Many planters had a store on their property from which sharecroppers could purchase items, charging them to an account that would be due after the harvest. By managing accounts in this manner, planters could ensure that sharecroppers stayed in perpetual debt to them. Jim Crow laws in most states prohibited a black man from leaving any county in which he owed a white man money, which meant that the greater the dependency a black sharecropper had on a white planter, the longer that planter could guarantee that his land would be worked. Furthermore, a self-sustaining farm operation meant that a black farm owner could avoid some of the day-to-day run-ins with whites that could often turn dark. Still, it is important to note that black farm owners were not exempt from the realities of racism. African Americans who ascended to landowner status were often resented by poor, non-landholding whites, similar to the situation employed blacks faced during the depression. Black landowners, by ascertaining economic independence, threatened the social order that rested precariously upon superiority afforded by skin color. Fannie Lou Hamer asserted many times that once her family's farm grew to the point of renting land and producing their own food, jealous whites poisoned their livestock.⁸⁹ A study conducted in 2015 on Southern lynchings concluded that counties reliant upon cotton production, as well as counties in which less whites were planters or yeoman farmers than renters experienced more lynchings than others.⁹⁰ For farmers who managed to hold on to their land during the Depression, the issue of competing for jobs with unemployed whites was null and void. While many black farmers did off-farm work to

⁸⁹ Asch, *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: The New Press, 2008), 55.

⁹⁰ Amy Kate Bailey and Stewart E. Tolnay, *Lynched: The Victims of Southern Mob Violence* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 1-31.

supplement their incomes, land ownership guaranteed at least some degree of security that wage labor and sharecropping could not.⁹¹

Work conditions in the early 1930s for southern African-Americans who were not totally self-employed were abhorrent. Besides jobs on rapidly expanding railroads throughout the southern states, one way that black southerners, particularly men brought in an income was on the Mississippi Flood Control Project. The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 wreaked havoc on the Mississippi Valley. The Flood affected every facet of life in the Delta, including race relations, labor, and politics, both locally and on a national level. The greatest damages that the flood inflicted were wrought upon Mound Landing, Mississippi and nearby Greenville, where on April 21st of 1927, the levees on the banks of the river broke and some 13,000 African-Americans were left in refugee camps in ghastly conditions. The refugee camps reinforced the social strata of the South, as only those African-Americans identified as farm laborers or sharecroppers for white planters were assured even basic rations. Farmers who owed any debt, either to a planter, which was the entire basis of the institution, were not allowed to leave the camps, despite the fact that cholera and typhoid ran rampant and food and medical care were scarce. Mississippi National Guardsmen stood guard on the refugee camps, which could more aptly be termed concentration camps and did double duty keeping black sharecroppers in and the public eye away. Sharecroppers in the camps were “tagged” with the name of their landlords to avoid losses in the labor force. When the water receded, blacks forced to stay were conscripted into labor rebuilding the levees on the river, many at gunpoint. The prevailing argument as to how the Flood overwhelmingly and disproportionately blacks is that a purposeful lack of information about the impending flood and a decision officiated by father-son team LeRoy and

⁹¹ Sarah A. Soule, “Populism and Black Lynching in Georgia, 1890-1900,” *Social Forces* 71, no. 2 (Dec. 1992): 432-449, doi:10.2307/2580018.

Will Percy to coerce blacks into fortifying the levees before the flood simply ran down the clock for black evacuation.⁹²

As soon as they could, many African-Americans who had lost family and property left Greenville. However, over half remained, tied into the debt peonage system and conscripted into work rebuilding the levees on the banks of the Mississippi. For the most part, this work was performed by sharecroppers looking to bring in some cash wages and depending upon labor demands, could detract from work that needed to be performed during the height of the cotton cycle. Levee work was initially attractive to black sharecroppers because it required adept mule-driving in order to add dirt to the levees, a skill they nearly monopolized. Unfortunately for white planters, and resultantly, black sharecroppers looking for mobility, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Great Migration was in full swing. Migration to Northern centers was especially attractive in the face of natural disaster and destruction in the South and white planters were fully aware of that. Planters feared that if their tenants earned cash wages, they would be relinquished from their dependence upon the plantation and join the millions of black southerners who had already left the region. To prevent this exodus, planters worked with levee officials, including contractors and foremen at the levee sites to ensure that wages never totaled the amount necessary for upward mobility. Much like sharecroppers on plantations, workers in levee camps worked on credit for most of the year, had their paychecks arbitrarily delayed, and were forced to buy overpriced supplies from commissaries unaffectionately nicknamed “robissaries.” Moreover, as one historian put it, the treatment of black workers in the camps “carefully reproduced many

⁹²William Howard, “Richard Wright’s Flood Stories and the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927: Social and Historical Backgrounds,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 16, no. 2 (Spring, 1984): 46; Pete Daniel, *Deep’n As It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1977), 120-177; John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

of the racialized economic controls that characterized black agricultural labor throughout the Jim Crow South.”⁹³

In 1931, the American Federation of Labor launched an investigation into the working conditions of Delta levee camps. In 1932, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) launched its own investigation into the camps, sending journalist George Schuyler and assistant NAACP secretary Roy Wilkins to Greenville, MS to conduct an undercover investigation of the levee camps. Talking to black levee workers, Schuyler and Wilkins discovered that physical violence was a daily reality and that many of the workers had been forced into work. Vagrancy laws and a “work demand” issued by Will Percy after the flood gave local whites the authority to press African-Americans into any line of work they felt appropriate. These sorts of laws meant that landless blacks, especially, fell prey to debt peonage in the Mississippi Delta. The greatest offense, Wilkins and Schuyler found though, was that workers were seldom paid even the meager wages they were promised after having to pay commissary fees for water, tools, and basic necessities.⁹⁴

By owning even a small piece of land, black farm owners were granted more options for both advancement and financial independence. Even though they owned only bits of land at a time and mixed tenure (a status occupied by roughly 20% of all black farm owners in 1930), they were in a much stronger position than landless black farmers. As the Depression progressed, land ownership decreased across all races and tenure classes, but especially for small farmers, who were overwhelmingly black. In 1930, 431,121 out of 916,070 total black farmers operated

⁹³ Michael McCoyer, “Rough Mens” in “the Toughest Places I Ever Seen”: The Construction and Ramifications of Black Masculine Identity in the Mississippi Delta’s Levee Camps, 1900-1935, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 69 (Spring, 2006): 60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27673022>.

⁹⁴ Richard Mizelle, “Black Levee Camp Workers, the NAACP, and the Mississippi Flood Control Project,” *The Journal of African American History* 98, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 515.

between only 20 to 49 acres, whereas the majority of white farmers had holdings in the 100 to 174 acre range.⁹⁵ Many black farmers were unable to retain operator status at all, let alone maintain ownership of their land throughout the earliest days of the Great Depression. Those who did rarely made gains in the size of their operation, combating a lack of available credit as local banks collapsed and New Deal programs failed to fairly distribute resources. These themes of political and social discrimination within agricultural policy will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, “Number of Farms, By Size and Tenure of Operator, 1930 and 1925; And by Size, and Color and Tenure of Operator, 1930; With Percent Distribution; For the United States,” 1930 Census of Agriculture Table 3, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1930/04/01/1837/03337983v4ch04.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2017).

Chapter Four: The New Deal Seals the Deal: 1933-1941

“Unless something is done for the American farmer we will have a revolution in the countryside within less than 12 months.”
-Ed O’Neal

In 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt outlined his New Deal program in just the second installment of his famed “Fireside Chats.” The speech, delivered on Sunday, May 7, 1933 only two months after his inauguration, discussed in some detail the ways in which the President was working in concert with Congress to remedy the economic despair that had befallen the country. President Roosevelt outlined, without yet naming all of the agencies that would enforce the measures, many of the initiatives that would have heavy effects on the South, both positive and negative. Roosevelt touted that the government was “killing two birds with one stone” by creating the Civilian Conservation Corps and hiring young men to “enhance natural resources” through forestry and flood prevention work. The levee building work described in the previous chapter fell under the supervision of the Civilian Conservation Corps, a factor to which the NAACP took offense given that the abuses visited upon black workers were done so in the name of the federal government. Five days after Fireside Chat number two, FDR signed the Farm Relief Bill and urged mortgage creditors to “abstain from bringing foreclosure proceedings and making any effort to dispossess farmers who are in debt to them” as mortgage creditors were encouraged to trade their holdings for Federal Land Bank bonds.⁹⁶ The statement issued after the signing of the bill appealed mainly to mortgage holders, but in his Fireside Chat, President Roosevelt informed America that the proposed purpose of the Farm Relief Bill was to bolster the returns farmers saw on major commodities, while also preventing the over-production that had

⁹⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Statement on Signing the Farm Relief Bill - May 12, 1933," *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=14641> (accessed March 31, 2017).

lowered prices before. Roosevelt made it clear that the Farm Relief Bill provided for a wide range of government powers, the extent of which would be explored on an “as needed” basis. In an obvious attempt to appease those who opposed a centralized administration, FDR assured his listeners that it would be “wholly wrong” to refer to New Deal measures as “government control of farming, government control of industry, and government control of transportation.” Instead, he promised a cooperative effort between government and those industries that would funnel profits not to the state, but to individual citizens.⁹⁷

The beginning of the New Deal in the South was met with relatively open arms, considering Southerners had harbored a negative attitude toward the intrusion of government agencies since Reconstruction until about the 1920s. Historian Frank Freidel argues that the steady winds of change predating the New Deal primed the South for acceptance of measures that a little over a decade before would have previously been considered “meddling” on the part of the federal government. Freidel presents his case for a number of factors, including a changing ideology more inclusive of minorities and a general admiration for the President amongst Southern democrats, but his most compelling argument relies on economics. New Deal programs bolstering agriculture and railroad building in the South were particularly attractive to Southern politicians. For years, Southerners had lobbied for railroads to come through their states and towns. Railroads offered steady employment for both blacks and whites, as well as guaranteed streams of income from both passengers and workers passing through.⁹⁸

In 1880, Henry Grady actively promoted the idea of the “New South” through a number of editorials in the *Atlanta Constitution*. The “New South” revolved around three main concepts:

⁹⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Fireside Chat #2 – “Outlining the New Deal Program”,” http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/_resources/images/msf/msf00646 (accessed March 31, 2017).

⁹⁸ Frank Freidel, “The South and the New Deal,” In *The New Deal and the South*, ed. James C. Cobb and Michael V. Namorato, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 17-36.

industrialization, improved race relations, and the growth and improvement of agriculture. In Grady's view, all three of these factors would ideally come together to change the reputation the South gained as a violent, impoverished region. Grady took a hands-on approach to promoting agricultural practices that would result in higher yields and profits, urging farmers to decrease their reliance on cotton by growing another cash crop and food products in case the market failed. Community building was another facet of the "New South" that did not escape Grady's eye. Having perfected a method of reproducing handwritten letters, Grady sent requests to community leaders in every county of Georgia, asking them to recognize farmers they found successful and the reasons why.⁹⁹ Communal recognition of individual leadership and agricultural success was the precursor to cooperative boards, which in the 1920s and 1930s elected members from within individual communities to do anything from organizing to educating local farmers. In essence, Grady's "New South" began to set the stage for Southern acceptance of the New Deal.

The failings of the American cotton industry in the 1920s nearly wiped the South out of competition with the rest of the world. Cotton production in India, Brazil, and Egypt was steadily on the rise while sharecroppers, tenants, and even landowners failed to turn any respectable profit. The post-World War I farm bust and the rampant spread of the boll weevil ate away any economic gains that Southerners hoped to gain. Their hopes lay with diversifying crops, increasing mechanization and other means of scientific agriculture, and switching from scattered yeomanry and plantations to a more streamlined system of "agribusiness." Agribusiness refers not only to farmers staying abreast of new operational methods like chemical use and mechanics,

⁹⁹ Harry E. Davis, "Henry Grady, the Atlanta Constitution, and the Politics of Farming in the 1880s," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (Winter, 1987): 571-573, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40581737>.

but also to applying the concepts of traditional business to agriculture. Teaching farmers who were not formally educated at land grant universities or schools of business how to secure credit, keep expansion front of mind, use provided resources, and streamline costs was a stated goal of New Deal programs. This approach initially appealed to both small and large farmers alike because it promoted advancement and because it was similar to Grady's "New South." Unfortunately, it would become clear soon after the implementation of some New Deal initiatives that it takes money to make money and that those small farmers who had somehow survived without hard cash would no longer remain afloat.¹⁰⁰

Roosevelt's New Deal plan was extremely appropriate in that nearly a third of the initial plan was dedicated to the improvement of agriculture. Farmers composed 30% of all employed Americans in 1933 and their careers were severely at risk, especially in the South. With a high percentage of sharecropping, a category of tenure that agricultural census takers reserved only for the Southern states, the Great Depression was especially rough on farmers in those states. The 1930 census revealed that 1,782,283 Southern farmers out of 3,215,307 total farmers (55%) were either sharecroppers or tenants, with still others classified as "standing renters."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Mary Summers, "The New Deal Farm Programs: Looking for Reconstruction in American Agriculture," *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2 (Spring, 2000): 241-257; Delmar Hayter, "Expanding the Cotton Kingdom," *Agricultural History* 62, no. 2, (Spring, 1988): 229-230, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3743295>.

¹⁰¹ U.S. Census Bureau, "Number of Farms and Farm Acreage, 1930, 1925, and 1920 and Specified Classes of Land According to Use in 1929 and 1924; By Color and Tenure of Operator; By Divisions and States," 1930 Census of Agriculture Table 20, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1930/04/01/1837/03337983v4ch04.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2017).

Tenure of Farmers in Southern States, 1930 Across Racial Categories with Percentage of Total Tenure Category			
	Black	White	Total
Owners (Full or Partial)	182,010 (12.8%)	1,233,656 (87.3%)	1,415,600 (100%)
Cash Tenants	89,420 (38.9%)	140,112 (61.1%)	229,532 (100%)
Croppers	600,919 (38.7%)	951,832 (61.3%)	1,552,751 (100%)
Managers	829 (4.7%)	16,529 (95.3%)	17,358 (100%)
Total	873,178 (27.1%)	2,342,129 (72.9%)	3,215,307 (100%)

Table 1: Tenure of Farmers in Southern States, 1930 w/ Percentage of Total Tenure Category by Race

Tenure of Farmers by Race within Racial Categories, 1930		
	Black	White
Owners (Full or Partial)	20.8% (182,010)	52.7% (1,233,656)
Cash Tenants	10.2% (89,420)	6.0% (140,112)
Croppers	68.8% (600,919)	40.6% (951,832)
Managers	1.2% (829)	.7% (16,529)

Table 2: Tenure of Farmers by Race within Racial Categories, 1930

On March 16, 1933, President Roosevelt sent his Agricultural Adjustment Act to Congress. The bill was signed into law on May 12, 1933 and created the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). Unlike the other agencies created during the New Deal, the AAA did not report directly to the President. Rather, it fell under the control of the United States Department of Agriculture and Henry A. Wallace. The Agricultural Adjustment Act gave the AAA the power to issue “parity” payments for voluntary acreage reduction. Under acreage reduction, landholders were rewarded for taking a percentage of their acreage out of production for a season. A surplus of cotton after World War I had aided in driving cotton prices down from their high of 35 cents per pound during the war, to only 4.6 cents per pound at selling time in June 1932. That surplus kept cotton prices low, as planters sought to overcome the low selling prices by producing more bales to sell, exacerbating the problem. Taking into account the historical average of production per acre, the AAA would distribute payments ranging from \$7 to \$20 an acre in the form of what

would be termed “parity payments.” A second component of the strategy allowed farmers to purchase surplus cotton from the Farm Board and Stabilization Corporation (FBSC), a commodity controlling body organized in 1929 at the request of President Herbert Hoover. The purchase program gave farmers the option of paying 6 cents per pound for cotton, purchasing up to the amount equal to what was taken out of their crop production and then reselling it at market price.¹⁰²

Since the AAA reported to the USDA and not to the President, the program interacted heavily with cooperative extension programs in rural areas. Plow-up programs were enforced through local extension programs, which caused conflicts with nearly every class of farm operator besides white planters. Positions within local enforcement agencies were elected in an attempt to be inclusive of the varied interests of entire communities, but as would be the case in the execution of most New Deal programs, local autonomy meant that the interests of black and poor white farmers would not receive full consideration. Within the AAA, interests were split, as well, on nearly identical fronts, but with different labels. The leadership of the AAA was penetrated by liberals who saw the Agricultural Adjustment Act as a way to level the economic playing field. This battle played out first in tobacco fields in September of 1933, but foreshadowed the conflicts that would plague the Cotton Belt not even a full year later. Liberals within the legal division of the AAA thought it fair to examine the financial records of tobacco producers in order to set fair commodity prices. The conflict grew so out of hand that although Roosevelt technically did not have authority over the AAA, he had to intercede in the disagreement. Roosevelt sided with George Peek, who took a minimalist view, stating that the purpose of the agency was only to raise commodity prices, not to interfere in the everyday affairs

¹⁰² Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 73-105.

of planters.¹⁰³

The AAA was successful in its first year at raising tobacco prices. Historian Anthony Badger asserted that the New Deal was more successful at obtaining its desired results in the tobacco industry than it was with any other crop. The hope was that the same would happen with cotton, but the reality of the number of small farmers and sharecroppers growing cotton in the South made that a hard check to cash. The plow-up program of the Triple A overwhelmingly favored large planters, even though the Cotton Belt was heavily populated with sharecroppers, tenants, and small farmers. Large planters and landowners had room to take land out of cultivation. Sharecroppers, tenants, and small farm owners simply did not. Moreover, when large planters took land out of cultivation, they simultaneously reduced their labor needs. For the needs that remained, parity payments made it possible to increase mechanization, the final nail in the coffin of many of the South's farm laborers, sharecroppers, and tenants.¹⁰⁴ For large landowners, parity payments were large enough to help purchase tractors. This move toward mechanization in large part catalyzed the move from small yeomanry and sharecropping to commercial farming and agribusiness, which was unforgiving of those without capital.

The unionization efforts that occurred in the South in the early days of the New Deal are indicative of the biases within those programs. For the first time, poor whites and black farmers facing displacement and eviction from their land came together to form the Southern Tenant and Sharecroppers' Union (STFU). Founded in 1934 in Tyronza, Arkansas by black and white tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and members of the Socialist Party, the STFU's membership rolls reportedly swelled to 30,000 across Arkansas, Missouri, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Oklahoma.

¹⁰³ Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, 39-42; Jeannie Whayne, *A New Plantation South* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 218.

¹⁰⁴ Anthony J. Badger, *Prosperity Road: The New Deal, Tobacco, and North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 63.

The STFU came on the tails of failed attempts to integrate longer-standing farmers' unions in the South, including the Farmers Alliance, which had a totally separate branch for black farmers called the Colored Farmers Alliance. Unlike those organizations, the STFU required total integration amongst members, who were forced to take pledges to the organization's success. The growth of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union upset white planters and law enforcement by upsetting the social order and threatening the availability of a cheap, vulnerable work force.¹⁰⁵

The first successful strike organized by the STFU was responsible for what would be the largest membership jump in the organization's history. A strike organized for cotton pickers in Arkansas secured wages for some at the rate of \$1 a day, up from \$.75. The September strike took planters off-guard and desperate to get the crop out of the ground, they agreed to the higher wages. The success of the strike and subsequent 25,000 member increase inspired founder H.L. Mitchell to organize another strike the following year. Unfortunately, the second strike would not only enjoy the same success, and would actually turn dangerous. In 1936, Mitchell attempted to organize a strike that would be wider in scope. Mitchell turned to the Alabama Sharecropper's Union and the Committee of Industrial Organizations for unionized support, giving STFU members the impression that they would have sufficient support. A vote taken on the matter of the strike resulted in a 5,734 to 384-vote victory for pro-strikers. The strike date was set for May 18, 1936. However, perhaps because of Mitchell's efforts to include outside organizations or because of the larger number of STFU members involved in strike plans, the second movement for higher wages was no surprise to large planters and local law enforcement. Planters, sheriffs, and deputized local whites took up arms against the strikers that morning. In a cruel twist of

¹⁰⁵ Wayne, *A New Plantation South*, 208; Jason Manthorne, "The View from the Cotton: Reconsidering the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union," *Agricultural History* 84, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 23; Lowell K. Dyson, "The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and Depression Politics," *Political Science Quarterly* 88, No. 2 (Jun., 1973): 230, doi:10.2307/2149109.

events, laborers already employed by the government relief programs created by the New Deal tended and harvested the cotton crop that year. After 1936, the STFU slowly faded from existence.¹⁰⁶

The start of World War II provided the only means by which black farmers who had been displaced could find other viable options for employment. For rural agricultural workers, there was a proliferation of unionization spurred by increased production demands that helped them negotiate higher wages and better conditions. In addition, the resurgence of the Great Migration scared planters into thinking that their monopoly on their African American work force would be loosed. For the first time, planters had to compete for their work force, both with Northern industrial hubs, as well as the industries that were growing in Southern cities like Atlanta, Birmingham, and Jackson, MS. Still, although jobs off the field became more common, racial discrimination was prevalent in war-industry positions, both in the North and South. The willingness of sharecroppers and tenants to trade agriculture for industry despite having to still face racial barriers indicates the hopelessness they felt as landless farmers in the South.¹⁰⁷

New Deal programs are largely regarded as having been detrimental to all black farmers, principally because of the fact that the classifications of “black farmers” and “small farmers” so often overlapped and the New Deal was rough on “small farmers.” However, the decrease in

¹⁰⁶ Michael K. Honey, *Sharecropper's Troubadour*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 55-87; Dyson, “The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and Depression Politics,” 231-236; H.L. Mitchell, “The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (Winter, 1973): 344-369, doi:10.2307/40027642.

¹⁰⁷ Alexa B. Henderson, “FEPC and the Southern Railway Case: An Investigation into the Discriminatory Practices of Railroads During World War II,” *The Journal of Negro History* 61, No. 2 (Apr., 1976): 175, doi:10.2307/2717269; Bruce Nelson, “Organized Labor and the Struggle for Black Equality in Mobile during World War II,” *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 3 (Dec., 1993): 953-966; Craig Heinicke and Wayne A. Grove, “Labor Markets, Regional Diversity, and Cotton Harvest Mechanization in the Post World War II United States,” *Social Science History* 29, no. 2 (Summer, 2005): 269-274.

black farm owners did not even rival the losses felt by black sharecroppers. Between 1930 and 1940, 201,421 black, Southern farmers left agriculture altogether. The percentage of black farm owners who were pushed out of agriculture in that decade was 4.8%, compared to 27.5% of black sharecroppers in the region.¹⁰⁸ That decrease in sharecropping was the first decrease in tenancy since 1880.¹⁰⁹ Compared to the number of black sharecroppers pushed off the land, 4.8% of black landowners seems but a small portion of all black farmers who suffered from the Great Depression and New Deal programs. However, the national statistic for the decrease in black farm owners was only 0.8%¹¹⁰, meaning that nearly every black landowning farmer who lost land in the 1930s lost it in the South. This pattern would continue to play out in decades to come. A sample taken from Alabama shows that between 1910 and 1987 in Alabama, there was a -98.3 percent change in farms operated by blacks as compared to a -72.8 percent change in farms operated by whites.¹¹¹ Consistently, however, at least some degree of ownership helped black farmers weather the storms. Newly freed slaves could not have known what would happen decades ahead socially, economically, or politically. Still, somehow they were spot on in perceiving that land ownership could at least soften the blows.

¹⁰⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, "Number of Farms, with Increases and Decreases, and Percent Distribution, by Color and Tenure of Operator for the South: 1880 to 1940," 1940 Census of Agriculture Table 9, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1940/03/03/1282/Table-09.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2017).

¹⁰⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, "General Report on Agriculture by Subjects," 1940 Census of Agriculture Introduction, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1940/03/00/1940-03-00.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2017).

¹¹⁰ United States Census Bureau, "Number of Farms, With Increases and Decreases, and Percent Distribution, by Color and Tenure of Operator, by Divisions and States," 1940 Census of Agriculture Table 9, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1940/03/03/1282/Table-09.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2017).

¹¹¹ Zabawa, "The Black Farmer and Land in South-Central Alabama: Strategies to Preserve a Scarce Resource," 63.

Chapter Five: “If you don’t own land, you don’t have freedom.”
Interviews with Multigenerational Black Farmers

The information in this final chapter is gleaned from interviews conducted with Mr. Bill Bridgeforth of Tanner, Alabama; Mr. Rogers Morris of Mound Bayou, Mississippi, Mr. P.J. Haynie of Reedville, Virginia, and Mr. Harper Armstrong of Bastrop, Louisiana. This information will be presented here as a supplement to the time periods explored in this thesis. Each of these men is a currently active, black, landowning farmer and agreed to answer questions concerning their family’s involvement in agriculture and specifically land ownership. Although the entirety of this thesis paints a picture of the general agricultural landscape in the South, in order to fully contextualize the specific conditions these black farm families have faced, the information presented from each interview will be prefaced by a short profile of the agricultural and social histories of the regions where these families are located.

The Haynie Family: Reedville, Virginia



The Haynie family in Reedville, Virginia has a history in agriculture traceable to the first days of emancipation. Born a slave around 1823, Robert Haynie managed to secure a 60-acre homestead in Northumberland County. On the sheet of the 1870 United States Federal Census that Robert Haynie shares with 6 other black heads-of-households, Haynie is the only who does not have a notch in the “cannot read” and “cannot write” columns. More tellingly, though his occupation reads “farmer,” much like the other 6 names on the census, Haynie is the only person on the roll with an amount written in the “Value of Real Estate” and “Value of Personal Estates”

columns, which show \$600 and \$100, respectively.¹¹² I interviewed Robert Haynie's great great grandson, P.J. Haynie, who was extremely well versed in his family's history.

The Northern Neck region of Virginia is the five-county region bordering the Chesapeake Bay. This region of Virginia, consisting of Richmond, Lancaster, Westmoreland, King George, and Northumberland Counties, is the birthplace of George Washington and Robert E. Lee and originally home to some of Virginia's most elite families. In the early days of the Northern Neck's history, the region was dominated by a slave-owning gentry composed of tobacco planters. The majority of wealth was estimated to rest with a concentrated, small percentage of the greater population and political power followed the same pattern. Sixty-two of the ninety-nine men elected to represent the Northern Neck in the Virginia Assembly held an average of 704.4 acres between 1787 and 1810, when the county average was 153 acres.¹¹³ Slavery in the Northern Neck began as it did in most of the original colonies. While colonial economies existed in geographic isolation, limited to the production of one main crop, African slaves typically had the autonomy to diversify their skill sets off of the plantation. However, with the expansion of the colony of Virginia, as well as the growth of the slave trade, the violence of slavery increased, along with the threat of family separation and sales. Furthermore, Northern Neck slaves on tobacco plantations worked under the stringent gang system, rather than the task system, which meant that unlike African slaves who cultivated rice in the South Carolina Lowcountry, slaves worked in supervised groups, closely supervised, for predetermined amounts of time, typically all day. However, by the onset of the American Revolution, tobacco cultivation in the Northern Neck had become much less lucrative, due in part to soil exhaustion. Large slave owners

¹¹² U.S. Census Bureau, "Schedule 1 – Inhabitants in Heathsville Township in the County of Northumberland, State of Virginia, enumerated by me on the 29 day of July, 1870," *Ancestry.com*. (accessed March 31, 2017).

¹¹³ Albert H. Tillson, Jr. *Accommodating Revolutions*, (University of Virginia Press, 2010), 14.

increasingly moved and sold slaves into the Piedmont and Valley regions of Virginia, leaving a smaller black population in the Northern Neck.¹¹⁴

Though the slave industry steadily declined in Virginia's Northern Neck, the laws of race in the state did not allow for a great degree of freedom for the small percentage of freedmen in the area. Rather, a law passed in January 1806 required that any freed slave either leave the state of Virginia after twelve months of gaining free status or "forfeit all such right."¹¹⁵ The law greatly discouraged manumission in the state, as slave owners suspected that any slave they freed would ultimately be conscripted into work for another master and were not willing to risk giving that slave's labor to another plantation owner. Furthermore, the concentration of wealth amongst a small class of whites ensured that poorer whites remained offended by any additional barriers to their own advancement. Poor whites' shared social, political, and in some cases, economic status with slaves certainly reinforced resentment against blacks, especially freedmen. It is this resentment that influenced the stringent nature of black codes in the state.

Northumberland County, Virginia, where the Haynies have lived since emancipation, was founded in 1648 and is the mother county from which the remaining four counties of the Northern Neck region were carved. Like the rest of Virginia and the South, for that matter, the county's history reflects racial divide and a stubborn resistance to the progression of the black race. Only in 1919 was the first high school in Northumberland constructed, with the financial assistance of Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Co. from 1908 to 1924, as well as self-proclaimed benefactor of "Negro Education." Rosenwald, primarily through the Negro Rural School Program of the Julius Rosenwald Fund, but also directly out of pocket, made

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 136

¹¹⁵ "1806 Manumission Law," <http://www.stratalum.org/july22/slavelaw.html> (Accessed March 13, 2017).

sizeable donations to the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute for the Training of Young Men and Women, presently known as Tuskegee University.¹¹⁶ Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee University, partnered with Rosenwald to design the rural school program in 1912. Rosenwald's philosophy was that to encourage black education was to further the cause of productive American citizenship in totality. Rosenwald's first contribution in Northumberland County helped bring to fruition the Northumberland County Training School in 1916. As a testament to the determined (and resilient) nature of the black community of the county, the local community raised \$8,943 to go toward the construction of the school, a sum equal to \$199,239.37 today. Julius Rosenwald, who stipulated that local communities and governments contribute to their own projects more so than lean on his contributions, donated \$1,500 and the Northumberland County Board of Education contributed \$700. Still, even until 1955, the school did not provide students with a traditional twelve-year education and after a battle with desegregation after *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka* struck down "separate-but-equal," in 1954 the Julius Rosenwald High School was closed in 1961.¹¹⁷

Interviewer: I read the article that the Washington Post did.¹¹⁸ So your family's involvement goes back 5 generations?

Haynie: My great great grandfather was the first to purchase land, but the real increase in acreage was more attributed to my father I guess. My great great grandfather may have had an initial 70-acre homestead and by the time it got to my grandfather, it was probably less than 500 and when dad got it, he expanded and started leasing land got the operation up to 4,000 acres of land. He kind of maxed that acreage out in the early 90s and we haven't been able to pick up significant acreage since then.

Ricky Haynie, great-grandson of Robert Haynie, was born in 1954. Determined to grow

¹¹⁶ J. Scott McCormick, "The Julius Rosenwald Fund," *The Journal of Negro Education* 3, no. 4 (1934): 605-26, doi:10.2307/2292184.

¹¹⁷ "Rosenwald Schools in the Northern Neck," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 113, no. 2 (2005): 116, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4250250>.

¹¹⁸ For more information, see: "The Promised Land," an special piece written for the Washington Post on the Haynie family's experience with discrimination. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A58673-2004Sep29.html>

his family's operation, Haynie bought and added 180 acres to his family's 70-acre pig farm in 1979. Ricky Haynie's passion for adding land to his family's operation speaks to the importance of land ownership and retention amongst farmers. The fact that before Ricky Haynie, the family's farm only experienced 10 acres of growth speaks to the difficulties that black farmers in particular encountered in their quest for land ownership and growth, even once ownership was ascertained. Understanding this makes the legacy of land retention in the Haynie family even more amazing.

Interviewer: That leads me to another question. If your family did not have that legacy of ownership, would you have had any desire to farm on your own?

Haynie: Probably not. If I didn't have the exposure at a young age of being out in the field – If I didn't have that I probably wouldn't have a desire or passion to farm. But growing up with 4 younger sisters, I didn't want to stay in the house much. By the time I started shaving the Barbie's heads, my mom made me get out and go to work so that worked out.

Interviewer: Yea, sounds like you had to go. You mentioned that your dad grew his operation through a combination of renting and buying land. Agricultural census data shows that mixed tenure is a common occurrence amongst black farmers, especially. Why do you think that is?

Haynie: Black landowners don't have the wealth of white farmers. Let me give you an example. My 40-year old white counterpart that I went to high school with farms down here in Virginia. His granddaddy or great granddaddy even, had my great granddaddy sharecropping on his farm. So the plantation was good if you owned the plantation. So five generations ago when land was \$100-\$500 an acre...that same land is now valued at \$5,000 an acre...by owning that land, their great-granddaddy put money in their pockets that mine didn't have the money to do. So now, when they want to buy land, they have collateral for loans. But me - not having the same history of having land - I can't get the same loan. It's like if you have a house that's paid for already. It makes it easier to go get another house and another house and so on.

The Bridgeforth Family: Tanner, Alabama

The Bridgeforth family's story addresses many of the facets of black farm history that are addressed in this thesis. Bill Bridgeforth runs the farm operation with his brother, and was fortunately accustomed to talking about his family's history. At the end of our interview, I asked

Mr. Bridgeforth if he had an opinion on how to change the narrative of black farmers from one of loss and despair to one that does not sugarcoat historical disparities and challenges, but that also recognizes the important role that land retention has played and can continue to play in the future of black agriculture.

Tanner, Alabama is a small, unincorporated community in Northern Alabama roughly 30 miles away from Huntsville. At the peak of black farm ownership in 1920, the tenure divisions of Alabama's black farm operators was somewhat peculiar. Out of a total of 95,203 total black operators, 77,874 were tenants, but of that total, over half were cash renters and not sharecroppers or share tenants. As a matter of fact, only 38% of black farmers in the state were sharecroppers or tenants.¹¹⁹ In nearby Georgia and Mississippi, out of all black farm operators, the number of sharecroppers and share tenants made up over 65% and cash renting was much less common. This distribution of tenants was more in line with regional averages.¹²⁰

In the 1860s, Alabama was known as "The Cotton State." Today, cotton accounts for just 4% of all agricultural products grown in the state. The clay-like soils of the Tennessee Valley and Northern Alabama valleys attracted the earliest settlers and cotton was continually grown in the area. The internal slave trade continuously funneled slave labor into Alabama until the state had one of the highest black populations in the South. After the Civil War, blacks remained in the state growing cotton as sharecroppers on former plantations and as previously stated, renters and eventually owners. Cotton was grown until largely without interruption or crop

¹¹⁹ Sharecroppers are share tenants for whom all supplies are provided on credit by the landowner. Share tenants pay a certain share (no more than one-half) for the use of the land and provide their own animals.

¹²⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, "Number of Farms, by Color and Tenure, by Divisions and States: 1900 to 1930," 1930 Census of Agriculture Table 12, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1930/04/01/1837/03337983v4ch04.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2017).

diversification, with the exception of corn for livestock and food, until the 1930s. One event that did curb the production of cotton in Alabama was the infestation of the boll weevil, which began ravishing crops in 1910. The boll weevil initiated a move toward crop diversification, which resulted in increased cultivation of peanuts, citrus, peaches, and pecans.¹²¹

African American farmers in Alabama probably had a better chance of success than they would have in any other state, simply because of the availability of agricultural education. Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute was founded in south Alabama 1881 and produced the first African American extension agent, Thomas Monroe Campbell, whose ran the "Movable School" to educate rural blacks on agricultural methods and technology. The Movable School was the brainchild of George Washington Carver and packed with tools and information, it was the original "Negro Extension Service." The State Agricultural and Mechanical College for Negroes (now Alabama A&M) in Northern Alabama near Huntsville was another institution at which African Americans could obtain an education. Both Tuskegee and Alabama A&M received 1890 land-grant funds expressly for agricultural education.¹²² The Bridgeforths who originally settled in Alabama attended Tuskegee University.

¹²¹ Charles Mitchell, "Agriculture in Alabama," (accessed March 31, 2017) <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1396>.

¹²² Robert Zabawa, "Tuskegee Institute Movable School," (accessed March 31, 2017), <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1870>.



Figure 3: Tuskegee Institute "Movable School" Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

Interviewer: Hi Mr. Bridgeforth. Thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me. I just have a few questions and they shouldn't take long at all.

Bridgeforth: Ok, I'm ready.

Interviewer: First question: How long has your family been engaged in farming?

Bridgeforth: My great-grandfather was a freed slave in Tennessee. He got his official start in 1865. We've been farming in present location since the turn of the century. I don't know exactly when, but no later than 1900.

Interviewer: What brought your family to Alabama?

Bridgeforth: My grandfather and his brother attended Tuskegee Institute.

Interviewer: What were their names?

Bridgeforth: George Ruffin Bridgeforth and Isaac Bridgeforth. The train from Tennessee to Tuskegee stopped in North Alabama near Athens. They got off the train and one thing led to another and they got to look at some beautiful land, found out it was for sale, wrote home and told their daddy about it. He came and looked at it and he negotiated a deal for the 320 acres he had in Tennessee for 600 in Alabama. The white Bridgeforths had given him 320 acres in Tennessee and was helping educate his family at Tuskegee, so I'm guessing he sold them that land and they gave him enough to buy the land in Alabama.

Interviewer: How would you describe your tenure?

Bridgeforth: Well...we own about 30% of the land we farm and rent the other 70%. I believe a lot of black farmers are like that because it takes that when you're

sharecropping...that's about as much money as we can apply toward purchasing land – that's about all the budget can stand maybe. There are some wonderful examples of how folks who were sharecropping have gone on to own 100% of the land they farm. I believe that example is in the business model. If the Bridgeforths had set their mind and had as their goal to own more land, then back in the 80s when we were buying equipment, we would have found a way to own more land when it was cheaper. Even though my daddy owned land, when my grandfather died, they owned 230 acres in 1968. In 1996 when daddy died, we owned 1,190 acres. We didn't start buying it until late in the late 80s and early 90s when our business model changed and we started buying land instead of equipment. Thank God, today Greg and I own almost 3,000 acres.

Interviewer: And that's your brother?

Bridgeforth: Yes, and that's from 2006 to the present.

Interviewer: Has your family ever engaged with agricultural agencies, assistance, and regulatory programs such as the USDA, cooperative extension programs, FmHA [Farmer's Home Administration], Farm Credit Services, and so on?

Bridgeforth: As I talk to other black farmers, a lot of times, it's what you don't do – is just as important as what you do do. The Bridgeforths have never turned to the FmHA or US government for operating loans. We did have an emergency disaster loan, but that was not an operating loan. I think that has been one key – the fact that we did not have to deal with the FmHA has been a key to our success. Because we didn't use their money for operating, they never really got a chance to put their foot on our neck. I know of several other black farmers who tried to use the USDA and FmHA for operating loans and were never able to accomplish anything – never were able to buy any land, never able to give their children anything to help them succeed. Best I've ever seen is when farmers completely got out of the business before they got into dire straits with the FmHA, they decided they would stop farming and rent us their land. Because of that one decision, they were able to hold on to the land.

Interviewer: Being black Southerners and landowners, has the status of race relations influenced you or your family's career?

Bridgeforth: The Lord blessed my dad to be a phenomenal leader and even the folks who didn't like him had enough sense to not fool with him because of the number of folks that did like him. The only thing that was given to daddy that other white folks or other black folks didn't get was an opportunity. Daddy often – he never took credit for it – he often told us he said “fellas there are other farmers who work a lot harder than we do and there are a lot of folks a lot smarter than we are who just haven't been blessed to have what we have.” It's not because we worked so hard or had such a good business model. It's because the Lord blessed us and we don't always know exactly why but we think it's because we've always been there to help other people. And so a lot of times, we didn't always – we never chose to work folks land looking to see how much we're gonna get out of it. Even today, our smallest landlord is 1.8 acres and our largest landlord is 3,461 acres and we treat them all the same. We pay the land rent – I'm not saying we pay them all the same amount - but we treat them all the same.

Interviewer: Land ownership has for a long time been a huge part of the American dream for people across all races and backgrounds. Is land ownership important to you? Is it more of an economic advantage or an emotional advantage as well?

Bridgeforth: All of that. Business wise – owning land is the sign of a successful farmer.

Owning land certainly has emotion involved because that's what we're working for. If a farmer – all he wanted to do was work – he'd be better off as a farm manager than he would a farm owner. And then – farm ownership – you can weather the storm a lot better than the guys out there paying rent on land instead of paying themselves some rent. And then when they talk about your piece of the American pie, stocks and bonds are terrific, but when you own real estate, you really do own a piece of the pie.

Interviewer: Do you have anything that you'd like to see considered in the narrative of black farmers?

Bridgeforth: I believe that black farmers are very important to the black community. Nationwide, we're important to the black community. And since we're so important to the black community, we can't depend on the government to help black farmers. We've got to have some help from within. Black folks have got to invest in black agriculture themselves. Let me put it to you this way. If some of our black billionaires and millionaires, some of our black businesspeople – if they help the black farmer, we would be the most successful segment in the agricultural industry. And I can't think of any segment that needs more help than the black farmer. I don't care who you are. It all starts with agriculture. Well that's how we got to be #1. We're kind of using bullets and rockets to stay up there. And we're blessed to use our agriculture to feed people all around the world.

I want to point to the Bridgeforths for a second. The Lord has been awfully good to us and my favorite Psalm is Psalm 25 and it says "Lord don't reward me according to my own goodness, reward me according to your goodness and mercy and kindness." I don't know why – I've got some ideas – but he has blessed us and you know, he's keeping us around for some reason, but you know there are other black farmers that probably smarter, worked harder than we have that lost the business because there are just so many obstacles.

Rogers Morris: Mound Bayou, MS

Rogers Morris runs a farm operation in Mound Bayou, MS. My interview with him underscores the image of Mound Bayou presented here. Before he became a full time farmer, Mr. Morris worked with the rural health center created under the Johnson administration. Moreover, Mr. Morris's description of Mound Bayou as an "experiment in self-government" certainly speaks to the history of the town.

Mound Bayou, Mississippi is a small, Southern town with a big history. One of four all-black incorporated towns established after the Civil War, Mound Bayou was founded in 1887 by Isaiah T. Montgomery, former slave of Jefferson Davis, and a relative, Benjamin Green, who

together purchased 840 acres in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta and cleared it with other freedmen. Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute, was also heavily involved in the advancement of Mound Bayou. Charles Banks, another leading figure in the beginning operations of the city was a member of Washington's National Negro Business League. Washington established the league in 1900 "to promote the commercial and financial development of the Negro." Banks, along with Montgomery, founded Mound Bayou's first bank. Washington's business influence resulted in the attraction of Northern capital for the town's cotton oil mill, backed by Julius Rosenwald, whose fund also donated a thousand dollars toward the creation of a school in 1909. Washington also convinced Andrew Carnegie to donate four thousand dollars for the creation of a library.¹²³

Mound Bayou is located in Bolivar County, Mississippi. The contrast between Mound Bayou and Bolivar County in terms of race relations is amazing. Between Reconstruction and 1945 alone, there were a reported 13 lynchings of black citizens. One gained especial notoriety, as it was the result of a conflict between a white tenant farmer, Clayton Funderburg, and a black tenant farmer and moonshiner, David Harris. The black account is that Funderburg and a couple of friends went to Harris demanding moonshine, but Harris refused him due to outstanding debts. The white account says that Harris stole Funderburg's groceries and grew angry when Funderburg confronted him, and shot him. Either way, on April 23, 1930, Funderburg was killed and a white mob pursued Harris unencumbered by the deputy sheriff who the mob first asked for Harris's whereabouts. The mob lynched Harris and in frenzy, also shot and killed the African American man who gave them Harris's hideout location, accusing him of conspiring with Harris

¹²³ August Meier, "Booker T. Washington and the Town of Mound Bayou," *Phylon* (1940-1956) 15, no. 4 (4th Qtr., 1954): 396-399, doi:10.2307/272852; Harold M. Rose, "The All-Negro Town: Its Evolution and Function," *Geographical Review* 55, no. 3 (Jul., 1965): 362-375, doi:10.2307/213134.

to kill Funderburg.¹²⁴ However, despite the threat of racial violence looming right outside the town, when asked whether he was afraid of violent whites infiltrating Mound Bayou, Isaiah Montgomery answered “The Negroes who have shaped and controlled the destiny of Mound Bayou understand conditions too well to allow any radical or indiscreet policy to prevail here. On the other hand, there are too many white men around us or in any reach who are our friends and willing to see that no impediment is thrown in our way...”¹²⁵

Under the Johnson administration, the federal government placed a renewed emphasis on public health, along with combating poverty. The Office of Economic Opportunity granted \$30 million to comprehensive health project, a portion of which went to Mound Bayou for the creation of a rural health center in 1965, the first of its kind. The Delta Health Center, staffed primarily by members of the Mound Bayou community, spoke to the sort of community building that black activists would promote heavily in the 1970s.¹²⁶ Prior to the creation of the Delta Health Center, Mound Bayou had already established a legacy of community-based healthcare. In 1934, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, the nation’s first black sorority, founded at Howard University, established the Mississippi Health Clinic, a mobile health clinic staffed entirely by volunteers. Eight years later, the Mississippi Jurisdiction of the International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor opened the Taborian Hospital, a hospital blacks could legally attend and be treated as patients instead of pariahs. Before the Taborian hospital was opened, the

¹²⁴ William Fitzhugh Brundage, *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press Books, 1997), 32.

¹²⁵ Booker T. Washington, “A Town Owned by Negroes,” (Accessed March 31, 2017), https://www.press.jhu.edu/books/supplemental/booker_t/ch07_02_booker_t_washington_rediscovered.pdf.

¹²⁶ Jennifer Nelson, “Hold Your Head Up and Stick out Your Chin: Community Health and Women’s Health in Mound Bayou, Mississippi,” *NWSA Journal* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 101, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4317104>; Luther J. Carter, “Rural Health: OEO Launches Bold Mississippi Project,” *Science* 156, no. 3781 (Jun., 1967): 1466-1468, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1722316>.

closest black-owned health facility was ninety miles away. Of the six charity hospitals in Mississippi at that time, none were in the Delta area or catered to African American patients like the Taborian hospital.¹²⁷

Tuskegee's "Movable School" caught the attention of the USDA. In 1908, Thomas Campbell, the agency's first black extension agent, was promoted to a District Agent and given an agent to operate a new Movable School wagon in Mound Bayou. Thus, Mound Bayou, MS became one of the South's first areas to benefit from having black extension agents before the widespread growth of county extension programs resulting from the Smith-Hawley Act.¹²⁸

Interviewer: Good evening! Thank you for agreeing to talk to me. My first question: How long has your family been engaged in farming?

Morris: My grandfather from Louisiana [Dan Morris] lived around St. Joe [St. Joseph Parish], he left well before the flood of 1927. He moved with his brothers and some cousins who were involved in a very hot altercation in Louisiana and it was of course race-based and they were the type of people who did not take kindly to abuses. They later moved to the Delta area around Lamont, MS north of Greenville. He started farming – bought some property – on the Bolivar/Washington County line.

Interviewer: So they would have been close to the Mississippi River then. How did they deal with the flood in 1927?

Morris: You know most folks – black folks – ended up on the levee of the river and it was a very trying time for them, but they were able to survive until the water receded. My grandfather was born in 1906 and they were very young men at that time so they worked the land and they acquired additional land – 104 acres. A lot of the land was woodland, so they worked clearing land, clearing stumps and stuff like that.

My grandmother's father at that time did not own his own land when he first started, but he served as sort of the horseman and the driver for one of the plantation owners there and after working for a particular period, they asked him what he wanted and as he was getting older, he told them he wanted a piece of land. That land was a four-acre tract where he raised his daughters and of course my grandfather married one of his daughters.

Interviewer: And you're still in Mound Bayou today, right?

Morris: Uh huh. I moved to Mound Bayou when I got out of college to work in environmental health and to work in one of the first health centers in the Delta.

¹²⁷ Bessie E. Cobbs, "Health on Wheels in Mississippi: The Mississippi Rural Health Project of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority," *The American Journal of Nursing* 41, no. 5 (May 1941): 551-54, doi:10.2307/3415336; David T. Beito, "Black Fraternal Hospitals in the Mississippi Delta, 1942-1967," *The Journal of Southern History* 65, no. 1 (Feb., 1999), 109-140.

¹²⁸ Allen W. Jones, "The South's First Black Farm Agents," *Agricultural History* 50, no. 4 (Oct., 1976): 636-644.

Interviewer: So when did you start farming, then?

Morris: I always sort of came back and helped my father even when I was in school you know doing some cotton farming, selling produce and stuff like that but after I graduated and started working at the health center.

Interviewer: Being black Southerners, how has the status of race relations influenced your/your family's career?

Morris: Well Mound Bayou is all black – it's a union town and you had black farmers and it was a self-governing town of black farmers. You had black cotton buyers, you had oil mills and gins operated by blacks, stores (commissary stores so to speak) so it was an experiment in self- government. And we had one of the few high schools. You either came to Mound Bayou for high school or went down to Alcorn, there was no in between. Now a lot of land has been lost in this area as well as older farmers died out, a lot of their land was sold and some lost a lot of land that had been acquired, so it's got its history of land loss too but there was a large holding in this area too.

Interviewer: With people dying out and losing their land, how important do you think it is to get younger generations involved in agriculture?

Morris: I think it's very important if we're going to be able to hold on to the land and you've got some young blacks who are interested, but it's difficult to acquire land. There are some programs –as you're aware, like the Farm Services Agency [FSA] and some programs at HBCUs [Historically Black Colleges and Universities] that promote interest in agriculture. But it's gonna take some significant investment both in bringing our students along in understanding farming and what the possibilities are. Most of the students I've seen either were with FSA or government agencies and they started with the parents being involved and they started sort of on the side and as they got older...in their late 40s and 50s... started wanting to be farmers. But they have already pretty much kind of secured their survival if farming does or does not work and you're getting some young folks who may have just gotten out of high school or college – high school primarily – and they have a burning interest, but they have not gained a full understanding of what college is all about and its ins and outs. And the whole thing is about acquisition of land and financing. That's been an issue with black farmers from the very beginning. My father started and he was using Production Credit Association [PCA] and it was always a grind when it came to financing blacks and black operations. They did it as a choice, not as they treated many of the large white farmers and it's been a tough go. Most black farmers will tell you that. In the early times of farming, they were one of the few banks that were a primary farmer-lending agency. They kind of come under Farm Credit now. The land banks were the lenders who bought the land and the PCA financed the operations.

Interviewer: Is your personal opinion of the types of agencies you just described generally positive?

Morris: Well – a lot of things came to the forefront with the guys at the FSA and with the black farmer lawsuit association when we learned that preference was given to the white farmer as opposed to what should have been given to all farmers. And it is constantly a problem, but managing debt is one of the most problematic situations among farmers – managing debt and receiving timely financing for your operation. That can really make you or break you. Of course one of the really serious problems back in those times was getting irrigation and how to make a crop without it. Now there's a great environmental

focus on saving water and how to make it through those dry periods and there's a focus on making irrigation available to all farmers, but also on conservation. It's late coming, but if you can utilize it and you have to opportunity to put some wells in and get some land leveling and get some of those benefits, you'll have a sustainable operation. It's been tough – It's always been tough, though and that's saying the least. I remember a lot of times when my father would request his money, it was always cut. And that was a method of keeping you at a bare minimum level. Despite it, many farmers have survived, but many have lost out. If you lived next door to someone who wanted your land, especially if you had rich land, it could be a problem.

Armstrong Family: Bastrop, Louisiana

Though it would not happen for him in the 1920s or even 1930s, in 1918, Andrew Armstrong was sowing the seeds of ownership for his family. In 1918, Andrew and his wife Anne moved their family from Canton, Mississippi to Mer Rouge, Morehouse Parish, Louisiana in search of better prospects for land ownership. Harper Armstrong is a descendant of the Armstrongs and current operator of Armstrong Farms, a 2,500-acre row crop farm operation in Bastrop, Louisiana. In 1949 when Harper Armstrong's father, Joe Armstrong, bought 120 acres of land in the parish, the average acreage farmed by black farm owners fell into the 1 to 99 acres range. Only 655 "nonwhite" farmers in the entire South in 1945 could claim full ownership of over 100 acres.¹²⁹ In the state of Louisiana, the average farm size across all races and tenure classes was only 74 acres.¹³⁰ The transcripts from my interview with Mr. Armstrong reveal exactly how the Armstrongs' legacy of farming in the South began near the 1920s and has

¹²⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, "Number of Farms, Farm Land Classified by Principal Uses, Value of Farms and of Farm Implements and Machinery, and Farms Reporting Cropland Harvested by Acres Harvested; By Tenure of Operator (By Color and Tenure in the South), By States: 1945 Census of Agriculture," 1945 Census of Agriculture Table 1, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1945/03/07/1248/Table-04.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2017).

¹³⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, "Average Acreage Per Farm of All Land in Farms, and of Improved Land in Farms, by Divisions and States: 1850 to 1920," 1920 Census of Agriculture Table 11, http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1920//Farms_and_Property.pdf (accessed March 31, 2017).

continued since.

In 1918 when the Armstrongs first settled in Louisiana, the state was almost solely responsible for the nation's sugar production. The agricultural census published in 1920 reports that 4.2 percent of improved lands in the state were used for sugarcane production, compared to 0.9% in Florida, the state's closest competition. That year alone, Louisiana produced 2,435,683 tons of sugar cane out of a national total of 3,544,679.¹³¹ At that time, Louisiana also dominated rice production, putting out 16,011,687 bushels out of a total 35.3 million nationwide, followed by Arkansas and Texas who produced 6.7 million and 5.3 million bushels, respectively.¹³² Cotton also made a respectable showing on the state's agricultural scene, but fell short of other states in the Cotton Belt. 23.9% of all improved land was used to grow cotton, compared to 31.6% in Mississippi, 36.9% in Texas, 27.7% in Arkansas, and 26.6% in Alabama.¹³³ In Morehouse Parish specifically, cotton was the predominantly grown crop.¹³⁴

Socially, Morehouse Parish was a tough place for blacks to make it. One study on lynching claims that at a point between 1882 and 1936, the four counties in America guilty of the most lynchings of African Americans were all in Louisiana, Morehouse Parish included. In 1922,

¹³¹ U.S. Census Bureau, "Sugar Cane – Acreage 1879 to 1919, and Production, 1899 to 1919, by States," 1920 Census of Agriculture Table 111, http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1920/Individual_Crops.pdf (accessed March 31, 2017).

¹³² U.S. Census Bureau, "Rice – Farms Reporting, Acreage, Production and, Value by Divisions and States: 1919 and 1909," 1920 Census of Agriculture Table 50, http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1920/Individual_Crops.pdf (accessed March 31, 2017).

¹³³ U.S. Census Bureau, "Cotton – Percentages and Averages, by Divisions and States 1879 to 1919," 1920 Census of Agriculture Table 108, http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1920/Individual_Crops.pdf (Accessed March 31, 2017).

¹³⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, "Value of Crops and Acreage and Production of Principal Crops: 1924," 1924 Census of Agriculture Parish Table IV, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1925/01/35/1556/Table-04.pdf> (accessed 31, 2017).

only four years after Andrew Armstrong moved his family to Mer Rouge, in a show of their recently regained power, the Ku Klux Klan brutally murdered two white men from Mer Rouge, Thomas Richards and F. Watt Daniel who had criticized the terror group. In the 1920s, a rivalry between the cities of Mer Rouge and Bastrop was exacerbated by the Klan's move into Morehouse Parish. Recruitment drives in Bastrop resulted in widespread success, while in Mer Rouge, the Klan was met with contempt. When in August of 1922, one of the KKK's enforcers, Dr. B.M. McKoin was driving from making a house call when he said that he was ambushed with gunfire. The Klan suspected that Daniel, the son of a wealthy planter, and his friend Richards, a mechanic were responsible. On August 24th, the Klan set up a roadblock backing traffic up for a mile and a half until they found the car holding Daniel and his father, along with Richards and two other men. They kidnapped all five men, released one, then whipped released the elder Daniel and another acquaintance, who wandered back into town later that night. F. Watt Daniel and Thomas Richards were not immediately found. Efforts on the part of Governor John M. Parker to eliminate the KKK's hold in the state were met by the Klan placing wooden headstones in his yard and tying his dog to a tree in direct defiance. Finally, in December, a dynamite explosion in Lake Lafourche brought two badly mutilated bodies to the surface: Daniel and Richards. Despite efforts on the part of the state to convict, no one was held responsible and the murders of Daniel and Richards are still considered "unsolved."¹³⁵

A sociological study on racial violence concluded that in the Deep South, instances of violence fluctuated with the cotton market between 1882 and 1930. When the price of cotton

¹³⁵ Yvonne Brown, "Tolerance and Bigotry in Southwest Louisiana: The Ku Klux Klan, 1921-23," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 47, no. 2 (Spring, 2006): 156; Keith Finley, "Lynching," *knowlouisiana.org Encyclopedia of Louisiana*, Accessed March 31, 2017, <http://www.knowlouisiana.org/entry/lynching>; Charles C. Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2015), 68.

decreased, the number of lynchings in the South increased. The study indicates that violence perpetrated by poor whites was due to increased competition with blacks, while elite violence was borne of a desire to control black workers and sharecroppers and to discourage coalition.¹³⁶ Given Northern Louisiana's legacy, as well as the depressed state of the cotton economy when the Armstrongs moved to Morehouse Parish, this would have been especially true there. In this environment, however, Joe Armstrong led his family into land ownership and that has persisted into the present-day.

Interviewer: What is the earliest recollection you have of your family being involved in farming, ownership or otherwise?

Armstrong: Ok...well. My great grandparents were farmers...

Interviewer: In Louisiana, as well?

Armstrong: No, my grandparents moved from Canton, Mississippi in...wait I have that jotted down somewhere. We just did a family history of my family. My grandfather moved here [Morehouse Parish, Louisiana] in 1918.

Interviewer: And your family has been in Morehouse Parish ever since?

Armstrong: Yea they've been here ever since. In 1918 when my grandparents moved to Mer Rouge [Louisiana], they were sharecroppers. My granddad was a preacher and they had three children: my aunt, my father, and another uncle. My dad was three years old at the time. My dad and his dad farmed as sharecroppers. My daddy bought the farm that we lived on in 1949.

Interviewer: How many acres was the farm that he bought?

Armstrong: He bought 120 acres in 1949. My family has lived on that farm and farmed that farm ever since. He farmed, his daddy farmed, and I farm, and I have siblings that farm as well.

Interviewer: So it's safe to say that farming is definitely a family business. Of those 120 acres, how much of that land is still in your family and have you added to that?

Armstrong: We still have all 120 and I've bought additional acres since...since I've been running the farms I've bought roughly 300 acres.

Interviewer: How do you think inheritance and heir property influenced your ability and desire to farm? Do you think you would've wanted to farm if you hadn't inherited land?

Armstrong: Since I was raised on a farm...I probably was able to farm along with my father and I guess I would have always tried to continue to farm. Out of my siblings, there were 10 of us. I was next to the youngest. All of the boys helped on the farm all the time so I guess that indoctrinated me to want to become a farmer myself.

Interviewer: Do you have positive memories of that?

¹³⁶ E.M. Beck and Stewart E. Tolnay, "The Killing Fields of the Deep South: The Market for Cotton and the Lynching of Blacks, 1882-1930," *American Sociological Review* 55, no. 4 (Aug., 1990): 526-528.

Armstrong: Yes, it was a very good life for us. We enjoyed the farm. We raised everything we needed to and it was a good life. I know compared to a lot of my friends who just worked on someone else's land, we were blessed to have our own.

Interviewer: Would you say those positive feelings were heightened by being a landowner in a time where many black farmers were not?

Armstrong: I would definitely say that being a landowner creates pride and maintains a reason for staying in agriculture.

Interviewer: Being black landowners in the South, have you ever felt like you were a target of resentment or racism because of that status?

Armstrong: Well yes. Being black and in the South, we always felt like we were being discriminated against when it came to getting a fair price for commodities, it was always less than what counterparts got even though your crop was just as good...Until things changed in the later years [1980s and 90s] when information became more out in the open, blacks had unfair access to information. Even now, it's covered, but it's still a good ol' boy situation but if you apply yourself, you can find out almost anything you want to. But most of the time, we're the last to find out if a new program is coming out and when we figure out how to work it, it changes. I always say Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves in the 1860s, but black people didn't really taste freedom until the late 60s or 70s when things changed in the South.

Interviewer: Would you say landownership is a component of freedom?

Armstrong: Oh yes. Landownership is one of the biggest parts of freedom. Look at the wars we have. A lot of them are about land. If you don't own land, you don't have freedom.

Taken together, these interviews reveal important trends that are also reflected in the events of the history of black farmers. For one, all four interviews reveal an attachment to the land and to agriculture that go past economic gain. Each of the farmers that I interviewed was able to provide an accurate history of his family's involvement in agriculture from past to present, demonstrating both pride and recognition of the difficulties faced by their predecessors to obtain land ownership. Moreover, all four of these farmers had the opportunity to seek employment in other industries, but returned to their family's farm to continue the work started by their parents and grandparents. On a more technical note, for the purpose of this study, it is important to note that each farmer indicated a healthy skepticism of agricultural assistance programs, which, given the history of African American engagement with such programs, is understandable. Of the areas in which these farmers run their operations, not one was exempt

from the social, economic, or political realities of African American life in the rural South during the periods explored in this study. To the contrary, it is clear that persistence, intelligence, and an eye for rare opportunities helped these farm families become landowners despite a lack of support from outside sources. I would like to thank Mr. Haynie, Mr. Armstrong, Mr. Morris, and Mr. Bridgeforth for agreeing to lend their family histories to this study. Hopefully, the personal element they lent this thesis will help contribute to the narrative of black farmers as proud, persistent, successful contributors to their communities.

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