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A Vanishing Breed: Black Farm Owners in the South, 1651–1982

LOREN SCHWENINGER

"I'm getting too old to battle it," sixty-nine-year-old farmer Matthew Grant lamented in an 1987 interview. He had purchased his first sixty acres in 1947 for $3500 and eventually expanded his holdings to 190 acres, but increasing costs, low returns, and old age made him question whether or not he should keep up the struggle to retain his farm enterprise. Indeed, he was among the last black farm owners in a large section of North Carolina. "We don't have any black farmers left in Tillery," his son said, nodding toward his father, "This is it." Only a generation before nearly 100 Negro families had been involved in the Tillery Farm Project of Halifax County as part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal "forty acres and a mule" program to establish America's poor on land of their own.[1]

The situation in Halifax County, and the experiences of Matthew Grant, are by no means unique. During the past several decades the number of black farm owners in the South has precipitously declined. To understand the reasons for the recent trend we must place black farm ownership in historical perspective, examining changes from one generation to the

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1. Greensboro [North Carolina] *Daily News,* August 24, 1987; Lester M. Salamon, "The Time Dimension on Policy Evaluation: The Case of the New Deal Land-Reform Experiments," *Public Policy* 27 (Spring 1979): 161.

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next, as well as the sub-regional differences within the South. This essay also compares black with white farm ownership, probes the meaning of landholding among blacks and the problems rural black proprietors have found so burdensome in recent years. Historians, economists, and public policy experts have examined farm ownership during various periods in different locales, but there is no systematic treatment of the subject.[2] As with any historical phenomenon—the frontier experience, immigration, rural dominance—the best perspective perhaps derives as an era comes to an end. Most indications show that the end is nearly at hand for the South's black farm owners.

The origins of black proprietorship in the region reach back to the settlement in colonial Virginia. As early as 1651, only 32 years after the arrival of the first "Negars" at Jamestown, a few Negroes had not only received their freedom papers but had begun to acquire land and other farm holdings. By the 1660s, Sebastian Cain, Manuel Rodriggus [Emanuel Driggus], Philip Mongum, Anthony Johnson, and Anthony Longo were constructing houses, building up herds of cattle and hogs, and planting crops of tobacco. Black freeholders spent most of their time planting, transplanting, weeding, topping, and curing tobacco, but they also raised corn, wheat, and vegetables, constructed out buildings, and cleared new land. Several among them produced as much as 1500 pounds of tobacco each year. Selling their crop for ten shillings per hundred weight, they could earn up to ten pounds sterling—this at a time when a few pounds could be traded for 100 acres of uncleared land. In a few rural areas, including Northampton County, free black farmers comprised a relatively large proportion of the total black population. As early as the 1670s, at least one free Negro family in the South boasted three generations of landownership.[3]

2. T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes, *"Myne Own Ground": Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640–1676* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 6, 11; Lawanda Cox, "Promise of Land for the Freedmen," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 45 (December 1958): 413–40; Paul W. Gates, *Agriculture After the Civil War* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1965); Robert Higgs, *Competition and Coercion: Blacks in the American Economy, 1865–1914* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and "Accumulation of Property by Southern Blacks Before World War I," *American Economic Review* 72 (September 1982): 735; W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Negro Farmer," in U.S., Department of Commerce and Labor, *Special Reports: Supplementary Analysis and Derivatives Tables [of the] Twelfth Census of the United States* (Washington: GPO, 1906), 511–40; Carl Kelsey, *The Negro Farmer* (Chicago: Jennings and Pye, 1903); Leo McGee and Robert Boone, eds., *The Black Rural Landowner—Endangered Species: Social, Political, and Economic Implications* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979); U. S., Civil Rights Commission, *The Decline of Black Farming in America,* Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights (Washington: GPO, 1982); U. S., Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, *Black Farmers and Their Farms,* by Vera J. Banks, Rural Development Research Report No. 59 (Washington: GPO, 1986).

3. Records of the County Probate Court, Northampton Co., Vir., Deeds (July 13, 1640), in *County Court Records of Accomack-Northampton, Virginia, 1640–1645,* ed. by Susie Ames

With the hugh influx of African slaves during the eighteenth century, merely acquiring the status of freeman became extremely rare. But a few blacks in Maryland, Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia worked their own land in much the same manner as the early blacks in Northampton County. One 1705 land deed in Charleston District, South Carolina, noted that Nathaniel Williams, "Commonly known by the Name of black Natt," a carpenter and planter, sold a 100-acre "plantation" near the Cooper river to the widow of a white South Carolina settler, while continuing to farm an adjacent piece of land acquired some years before. With the wave of emancipations following the American Revolution, a few more landholders emerged in various areas. Their holdings were usually very small, and their farming mostly at subsistence levels, but by the first census in 1790 there had been continuity in black proprietorship for nearly a century and a half. The tiny size of their holdings, and their difficulties in sustaining themselves could be seen in the first land assessment records of Maryland (the state with the second largest number of free blacks). Surveys of seven counties in 1783 and 1793 revealed 45 property-owning rural free blacks with holdings assessed at $4500. A 1798 survey of Frederick and Somerset counties showed 16 farm owners with average holdings worth $86. In all, in scattered assessments between 1783 and 1818, 145 rural blacks in Maryland owned land assessed at a total of $14,130, or nearly $100 per owner. While they represented only a tiny fraction of the rural free black population, these former slaves struggled to acquire an economic stake.[4]

(Charlottesville, Vir.: University of Virginia Press, 1973), 32; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1975), 141–42, 154–47; Breen and Innes, *'Myne Own Ground',* p. 69; James H. Brewer, "Negro Property Owners in Seventeenth Century Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 3rd ser., 12 (October 1955): 576–78; n.a., "Documents: Anthony Johnson, Free Negro, 1622," *Journal of Negro History* 56 (January 1971): 71–72.

4. Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 74, 125; Robert S. Cope, *Carry Me Back: Slavery and Servitude in Seventeenth Century Virginia* (Pikeville, Kentucky: Pikeville College Press, 1973), 37; John H. Russell, *The Free Negro in Virginia, 1619–1865* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1913), 51, 89; James Wright, *The Free Negro in Maryland, 1634–1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1921; reprint ed., New York: Octagon Books, 1971), 94; *The Gentlemen's Magazine* 34 (June 1764), 261; St. George Tucker, *A Dissertation on Slavery: With a Proposal for the Gradual Abolition of it in the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1796; reprint ed., New York: n.p., 1861), 70; Sylvia Frey, "Between Slavery and Freedom: Virginia Blacks in the American Revolution," *Journal of Southern History* 59 (August 1983): 387; Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), chap. 3; Richard S. Dunn, "Black Society in the Chesapeake, 1776–1810," in *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution,* ed. by Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1983), 49–52; Philip D. Morgan, "Black Society in the Lowcountry, 1760–1810," in ibid., 109–16; Records of the County Probate Court, Charleston District, S. C., Miscellaneous Land Records, bks. E–F, pt. 13 (March 1, 1705–6), pp. 335–7, in Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

During the early decades of the nineteenth century, two groups of farm owners emerged in the region. In the Upper-South, stretching from Delaware and Maryland, westward to Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri, only a few blacks became proprietors. In this area, those who gained their freedom had been part of a large scale, indiscriminate emancipation process following the American Revolution. They possessed few skills and comprised nearly 11 percent of the total Negro population. While precise statistics on rural black land ownership are sketchy, one observer estimated that in the entire state of Virginia in 1820 there were only a few hundred Negro farm holders. Only a slightly greater number possessed farms in Maryland. Together the two states had a predominately rural free black population in excess of 76,000. In the Lower-South, stretching from South Carolina and Georgia across the Gulf Region to Louisiana, the situation was quite different. Those who acquired their freedom in these states had been part of a highly selective manumission process and represented less than 4 percent of the black population. Often directly related to whites they were sometimes bequeathed large tracts of land. As a result, enclaves of farm owners, including a number of black slaveholders, emerged in Charleston and Barnwell counties South Carolina, Mobile County, Alabama, Jefferson County, Mississippi, and several Louisiana parishes. Free persons of color who owned farms in the Lower-South, often of mixed French, or Spanish, and African ancestry, were sometimes as prosperous as their white neighbors.[5]

In the Upper-South the first generations of free blacks slowly increased their rural landholdings, but between 1830 and 1860 they rapidly accumulated farmland. At the beginning of the period approximately 678 rural free Negroes in Virginia owned 31,721 acres of land appraised at $184,184; by the end of the period, 1316 farmers and rural landholders owned 60,045 acres appraised at $369,647. An even greater expansion occurred in Mary-

5. Memorial of the Richmond and Manchester Colonization Society, Presented January 1825, in *Annual Reports of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States,* 91 vols. (Washington, D. C.: [American Colonization Society], 1818–1910; reprint ed., New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 8:55; Legislative Records, Petition of Richard Furman, Joseph B. Cook, et al., to the South Carolina General Assembly, 1802, #182, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, South Carolina; Jack D. L. Holmes, "The Role of Blacks in Spanish Alabama: The Mobile District, 1780–1913," *Alabama Historical Quarterly* 37 (Spring 1975): 10–11; Legislative Records, Petition of Andrew Barland to the House of Representatives of Mississippi, ca. 1824, Record Group 47, boxes 16–17, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi; James Robertson, ed., *Louisiana Under the Rule of Spain, France, and the United States, 1785–1807; Social, Economic, and Political Conditions of the Territory represented in the Louisiana Purchase,* 2 vols. (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1910–11; reprint ed., Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 1:218–19; Herbert Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Ante-bellum Louisiana* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1972), 91–92; Donald Everett, "Free Persons of Color in Colonial Lousiana," *Louisiana History* 7 (Winter 1966): 38, 45, 48–49.

land, where the number of black farm owners rose from 519 to 2124 and the value of their holdings jumped from $172,848 (assessed value of real and personal property) to $1,270,000 in real estate and $618,700 in personal property during the 30 years. Taking into account a probable assessment ratio of less than 50 percent of the actual value, this represented a 450 percent rise in a single generation. This was substantially more than the slow growth (less than 10 percent per decade) in the rural free Negro population of these states, or the gradual appreciation in the value of farm land. There was also an expansion, though not as great, in other Upper-South states. By 1860, one of six rural free Negro family heads owned an average of $612 worth of real estate. This had occurred despite a severe depression during 1837–1843, a recession in the late 1850s, as well as increasingly restrictive laws against free blacks, and mounting political tensions.[6]

The growth in farm ownership in the Lower-South leveled off during the pre-Civil War generation. During the 1840s and 1850s, some Negro farmers, like their white neighbors, suffered from drought, floods, fluctuating cotton prices, depreciated paper currency, and agricultural depressions. The Cane River creoles of color in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana, for example, began a slow period of decline, experiencing a loss in their farm land (from 15,000 to 7736 acres) and in the number of their slaves (from 436 to 379). But rural free persons of color in the region remained among the most prosperous free blacks in antebellum America. By midcentury, one out of three rural free Negro landowners in Louisiana (181 of 543) owned at least $2000 worth of real estate. Typically they cultivated a few hundred acres, owned several slaves, and tended small herds of livestock. The widow P. Olivier of Plaquemines Parish, for example, owned 280 acres of land, worth $4000, and several head of cattle and horses. She worked a small gang of slaves. A few owned much larger holdings. South Carolina's William Ellison, Alabama's Zeno Chastang, Mississippi's John Barland, Louisiana's Andrew Durnford were among the most affluent planters in their communities. By 1860, one out of three rural free black family heads in the Lower-South owned a total of $3,166,000 worth of real estate, or nearly $3000 per realty owner [see Appendix A]; in both proportion and mean holdings they were not much below whites in the region.[7]

6. Luther Porter Jackson, "The Virginia Free Negro Farmer and Property Owner, 1830–1860," *Journal of Negro History* 24 (October 1939): 408; Wright, *The Free Negro in Maryland*, 184; *Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington: GPO, 1864), 214.

7. Gary Mills, *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 218; United States Manuscript Agricultural Census, Natchitoches Parish, La., 1850, p. 425; ibid., Plaquemines Parish, La., 1850, pp. 485, 549; ibid., Pointe Coupee Parish, La., 1850, p. 569; ibid., St. John the Baptist Parish, La., 1850, p. 661; ibid., St. Landry Parish, La., 1850 p. 695; ibid., St. Mary Parish, La., 1850, pp. 727–9; Lewis Gray, *History of*

The Civil War and its aftermath brought substantial changes to the antebellum profile of black farm ownership. Not only were nearly 4 million slaves released from bondage (compared with 262,000 former free Negroes), but those who had acquired rural holdings before the war experienced difficulties during the postwar era. In the northeastern sections of the Upper-South (Delaware, Maryland, Virginia) the earlier expansion in farm ownership slowed considerably. This was due in large measure to violence, intimidation, and the failure of sympathetic whites to promote the idea of black proprietorship. At the same time, some free Negro farmers, like whites, witnessed the destruction of their property by Union or Confederate troops. In Amelia County, Virginia, Alfred and Francis Anderson, slaveholding brothers who managed thriving farms, watched helplessly as their livestock and crops were carried off by Union soldiers. Over a period of three days they lost everything—horses, mules, sheep, 1500 pounds of bacon, 1200 pounds of fodder, wheat, corn, and twenty hogs. In the Lower-South, the war spelled disaster for the mulatto planter class. "When [the] war commence it purty hard on folks," one free Negro recalled. First came the Confederates who swept up the slaves, including those owned by blacks, and took them away to build fortifications. Then came the Yankee raiding parties, who rode through portions of South Carolina, Alabama, and Louisiana, burning, pillaging, and looting. "The road all the way to Natchitoches," one observer said, describing the region where some of the wealthiest free persons of color in America owned their plantations, "was a solid flame." His heart was "filled with sadness" at the sight of those lovely plantations being burned to the ground. During the 1860s the mean value of real estate held by black planters in the Lower-South dropped from nearly $10,000 to less than $200, significantly more than the depreication in land values following the war.[8]

Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860, 2 vols. (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1933; reprint ed., New York: Peter Smith, 1941) 1:509; Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1984), 37–38, 62, 121–23, 132; David O. Whitten, *Andrew Durnford: A Black Sugar Planter in Antebellum Louisiana* (Natchitoches: Northwestern Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 85, 88; United States Manuscript Population Census, Plaquemines Parish, La., 1850, p. 278; Records of the Parish Probate Court, Plaquemines Parish, La., Inventories, vol. 1846–1858 (March 6, 1857): 404–12; United States Manuscript Population Census, Mobile Co., Ala., 1850, pp. 464, 481; ibid., Southern District, 1860, p. 27; ibid., Northern District, 1860, pp. 136–7, 140; ibid., Adams Co., Miss., Natchez, p. 14; ibid., 1860, pp. 44, 120.

8. Claim #16,011, Alfred Anderson, Amelia Co., Vir., ca. 1877, Records of the Treasury Department, Records of the Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 56, reel 9, National Archives; Claim #16, 012, Francis Anderson, Amelia Co., Vir., ca. 1877, in ibid.; George Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography,* 19 vols. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Pres, 1972–), vol. 5, p. 4, p. 158; quoted in Gary B. Mills, *The Forgotten People,* 237; Records of the Parish Probate Court, St. Landry Parish La., Successions, #5040, October 14, 1890; ibid., Iberville Parish, La., Deeds, bk. 9 (July 15, 1868): 221–3.

But the decline of former free Negro farmers, which was greater in the Lower- than the Upper-South, coincided with the beginning of an expansion of landholding among former slaves in the rural areas of the South. Perhaps no Americans better understood the meaning of property ownership than those who had been considered "a species of property" themselves. "What's the use of being free," an elderly man told journalist Whitelaw Reid in 1865, "if you don't own land enough to be buried in? Might just as well stay [a] slave all yo' days." But the path to farm ownership was a long and difficult one. The legacy of bondage, the failure of government agencies to assist blacks, the lack of available funds, and the difficulties of simply maintaining one's family kept the vast majority of blacks landless. In the Lower-South, whites mounted a determined campaign to keep freedmen in an economically subordinate and dependent position. In 1865, Mississippi prohibited "any freedman, free negro or mulatto" from renting or leasing "any land or tenements" except within the limits of "incorporated titles or towns" where local authorities could control and oversee such rental and lease agreements. While this law was overturned in 1867, whites in various other parts of the lower region signed employers' agreements concerning hiring black workers, demanded that freedmen labor in much the same way as they had in slavery, and refused to sell or lease them land. Every effort was made, one observer said, "to prevent negroes from acquiring lands," even small tracts in remote, unproductive regions. One native of Alabama asserted: "The nigger is going to be made a serf, sure as you live."[9]

Despite such conditions, some former slaves began acquiring small farms in various sections of the South. In the western states of the Upper-South, with smaller rural populations, the support of some whites, and the greater demand for wage laborers, some freedmen moved with little difficulty from bondage to farm ownership. In Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri, the number of rural landholders nearly kept pace with the increase in the number of free rural Negro families following emancipation. The number of realty owners outside of towns and cities rose from 775 in 1860 to 6538 in 1870, or 744 percent. Some of them were only part-time farmers who worked as harvest hands, wood cutters, rail splitters, and day laborers. Charles Christopher, James Warren, Harrington Bruce, and Jesse Jones, of Boyle County, Kentucky, for example, were listed in the census as common

9. Whitelaw Reid, *After the War: A Tour of the Southern States, 1865–66,* ed. C. Vann Woodward (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1953), 261–62; Vernon Lane Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865–1890* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1947), p. 87; Rawick, ed., *The American Slave,* vol. 4, pt. 2, pp. 251–52; Roger L. Ransom aand Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 81–87; Mobile [Alabama] *Nationalist,* January 11, 1866; Loren Schweninger, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 84.

laborers, but they each owned small acreages for farming. Although the holdings of these rural blacks remained small—worth between $580 in Kentucky and $709 in Tennessee—by 1870 freedmen in this section were accumulating farm land twice as fast as rural blacks in other areas. In the Lower-South, only in locales where military authorities or Northern missionaries assisted freedmen (St. Helena, Our Ladies, and Port Royal islands in South Carolina) or in remote and infertile back country regions (Duval and Marion counties in Florida, and Desha and Union counties, in Arkansas) were significant numbers of former slaves able to acquire small tracts of land. By 1870, only one family in thirty-one had acquired rural land in the lower states, compared to one in twenty-one for the Upper-South. Slightly more than half of these landholders were listed in the census as farmers or planters.[10]

Even so, there had been nearly a three-fold growth in the number of black farm owners during the 1860s. During the next two decades this expansion continued at an even more rapid rate. It varied in different sections of the South, and blacks continued to confront many obstacles in their quest for economic self-sufficiency. Even after an especially good harvest, rising prices for their crops, and other favorable economic conditions, freedmen in the Lower-South sometimes lost most of their profits to landlords who charged as much of 100 percent interest for goods and supplies, and took most of the crop for the use of the land. Fifteen years after the Civil War, only 9.8 percent of the acreage under cultivation in the most densely populated counties of the "Cotton South" (an agricultural region stretching mainly from South Carolina to Texas) was owned and operated by blacks, although they comprised more than half of the agricultural population. At the same time they comprised only 7.3 percent of the farm owners.[11] But in the Upper-South, whites gradually became less resis-

10. United States Manuscript Population Census, Boyle Co., Ken, 1870, p. 220; Certificates of Land Sold to Heads of Families, South Carolina, 1862–1869, Records of the Internal Revenue Service, Record Group 58, National Archives.

11. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Negro Farmer," in U.S., Department of Commerce and Labor, *Special Reports: Supplementary Analysis and Derivative Tables [of the] Twelfth Census of the United States* (Washington: GPO, 1906), p. 523; Gerald Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862–1882* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 173; Contracts of Edgar Dawson to Freedmen, 1870, 1873, Black History Collection, Baker Texas History Center, Austin, Texas; William Parker, "The South in the National Economy, 1865–1970," *Southern Economic Journal* 46 (April 1980): 1024–28; Schweninger, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction,* 164; Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom,* 83–85; Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 108–10; Thomas F. Armstrong, "From Task Labor to Free Labor: The Transition Along Georgia's Rice Coast, 1820–1880," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 64 (Winter 1980): 443; W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Negro Landholder in Georgia," in *Bulletin of the Department of Labor, #*35 (Washington: GPO, 1901), 648–49; Tax Rolls, Louisiana, 1893–1916, Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge, La.

tant to the idea of selling land to Negroes. "The whites own a great deal of land and they want money," Thomas C. Walker, a graduate of Hampton Institute, noted. "If a colored man has got money and wants land he can get it." As a result, by 1890, the proportion of black farm owners in states like Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, and Virginia, had risen above 40 percent, and in the Upper-South as a whole the number of owners increased from 6859 to 39,859, or 481 percent between 1870 and 1890. By the latter year one out of three black farmers in the region owned his or her own farm.[12]

Farm ownership did not always bring prosperity. In some areas, owners broke up their holdings, worked long hours in the fields, and often went into debt to white merchants. The average value of owner-cultivated farms in Charles, Frederick, and Kent counties, Maryland, in 1880, for example, was $979, while the average value for black share tenancies in Frederick and Kent was $3511. By then, the average black landholder in Kent County controlled only 16 acres. In various sections of the Lower- and Upper-South, farm owners suffered from low prices for tobacco and cotton, small acreages under cultivation, and exorbitant costs to distribute or gin their crops. After white merchants took their "cut," some farmers were scarcely left with enough income to sustain their families during the winter. Although, as historian Barbara Fields suggests, land ownership enhanced an individual's sense of freedom, independence, and accomplishment, for a number of blacks it meant living at a barely subsistence level.[13]

Despite these difficulties, between 1890 and 1920 blacks continued to purchase farms. In the Lower-South, the process was very slow, and although in some states they were acquiring land more rapidly than whites, in other states, including Louisiana, they did not regain their antebellum landholding position until the early twentieth century. In Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana, the proportion of farmers who claimed proprietorship never rose above 15 percent, and in the Lower-South as a whole it remained under 20 percent in 1920. But in the Upper-South, farm ownership became widespread during these decades. The movement of whites off the land to take jobs in industry, jobs which were not available to blacks, readiness of white bankers to extend farm loans to rural blacks,

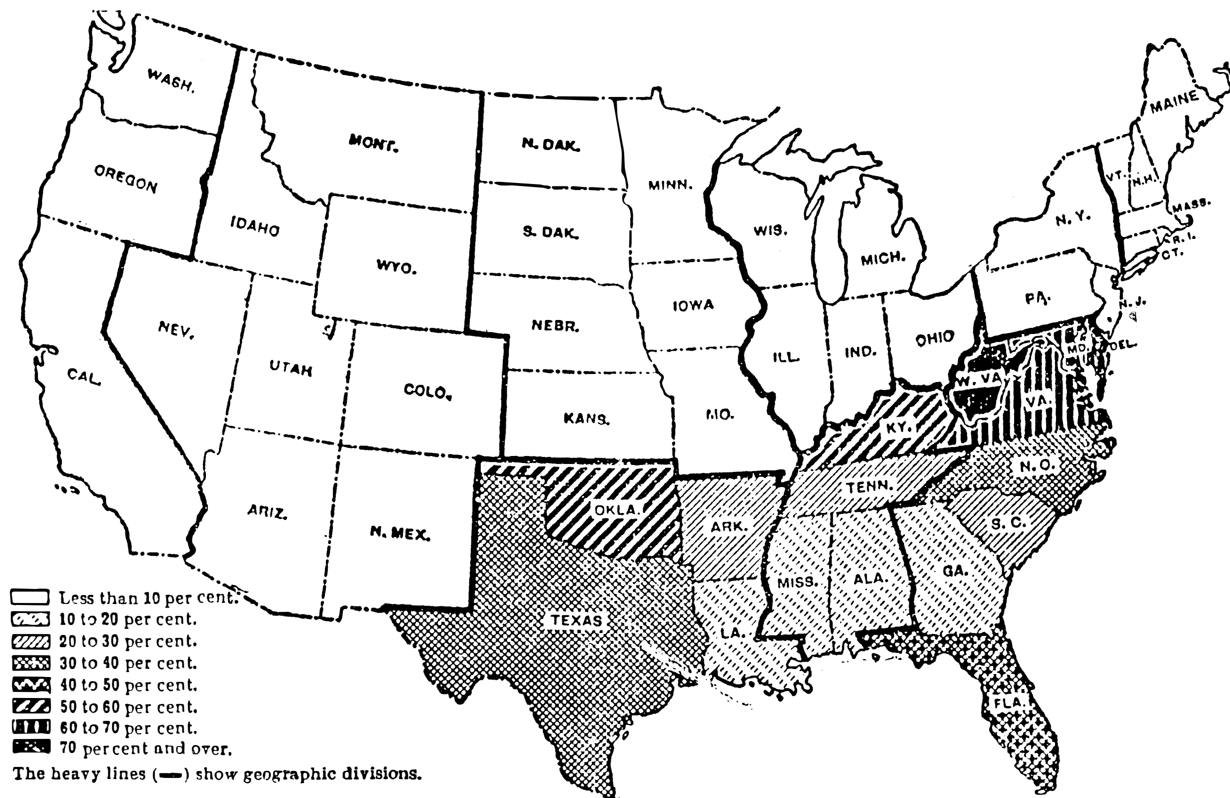
12. "Proceedings of the Second Hampton Negro Conference," May 25, 1894, in *The Booker T. Washington Papers,* ed. Louis R. Harlan, 11 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972–) 3:428–30; William Edward Spriggs, "Afro-American Wealth Accumulation, Virginia, 1900–1914" (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Wisconsin, 1984), 130, 156; Richard R. Wright, "The Colored Man and the Small Farm," *Southern Workman* 29 (November 1900): 483.

13. Barbara Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 144–45; Lester C. Lamon, *Black Tennesseans, 1900–1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 111–12; Kelsey, *The Negro Farmer,* 36.

and the stability of the rural Negro population were conditions which led to this expansion. Also there were a number of able blacks leaders who pressed their brethren to acquire their own land. In 1891, Virginia blacks owned 698,074 acres of improved and unimproved land; by 1910, this had risen to 1,551,153 acres. Between 1900 and 1910, black farm owners in the state increased their acreage by one-third (compared to 7 percent for whites) and by the latter year more than one half of the total farm acreage tilled by blacks was on black owned farms. One observer said that Negro farm owners in various parts of the state were "more independent and prosperous" than in any section of the South. Although Virginia led all states in the proportion of blacks who owned their own land—two out of three—by the end of the period the proportion of owners in the Upper-South had reached 44 percent of the black farmers.[14]

Beginning in World War I, with its subsequent restrictions on immigration, and continuing, with slight interruptions, until well after the mid-twentieth century, blacks left the rural areas of the South in search of better jobs and opportunities. Some moved to southern towns and cities, but the vast majority left the South entirely, migrating to the urban West and North. The drain of the population was one of the most dramatic internal migrations in American history. During this period the South's proportion of the nation's black population dropped from nearly 90 percent to 50 percent. This occurred during a long agricultural recession and depression, marked by disastrously low prices for farm products, and included bank failures, foreclosures, and rural deprivation during the Great Depression. While various programs were tried to assist small farmers during the New Deal era, most subsidies went to the larger farmers; in any case, few blacks benefited from the federal programs. To a remarkable degree, however, black farm owners clung to their holdings. Most of those who emigrated from the South were sharecroppers and tenant farmers, as indicated by the rising proportion of black farmers who owned their own land during the decades after 1930. A majority of blacks who owned their own land had paid for it before the Depression struck, and despite the hard times they did not have to make mortgage payments. A few large farmers actually benefited from the assistance of the government and managed to mechanize their farms and expand their holdings. Despite some fluctuations, the total number of black farm owners in the South declined only

14. Robert Park, "Negro Home Life and Standards of Living," in *The Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science* 49 (September 1913): 149; W. H. Brown, *The Education and Economic Development of the Negro in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1923), 89; Samuel T. Bitting, *Rural Land Ownership Among the Negroes of Virginia With Special Reference to Albemarle County* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1915); Spriggs, "Afro-American Wealth Accumulation," 130, 156.



Farms of Black Owners—Percentage of Black Owned Farms by States in the South: 1910. [Source: *Negro Population 1790–1915* (Washington: GPO, 1918), p. 573.]

slightly during the three decades prior to 1950, from 208,647 to 186,540 or less than 11 percent.[15]

During the post-1950 era, however, the situation changed dramatically. The increasing mechanization of farm operations, the high cost of fertilizers and machinery, and greater crop diversification made southern farming more capital-intensive. This drove many small black farmers out of business. Others suffered from the relatively small size of their landholdings; they found it difficult to experiment with truck crops, soybeans, and peanuts, remaining instead vulnerable to the uneven profits from the two traditional crops of tobacco and cotton. In some respects they were under the same pressures as other small farmers, but black farmers still found it more difficult than whites to secure mortgage loans, obtain government assistance, and reap the benefits of federal price support programs. Only 15 percent of black landowners who responded to one survey during the 1970s had ever applied for agricultural loans through the Farmers Home Administration, the institution with loan programs best designed to meet the needs of small farmers. Not only did few blacks proprietors have knowledge of these assistance programs, but many lacked knowledge of various legal matters pertaining to their estates—writing wills, mortgages, foreclosures, heir property, property appraisal, partition sales, tax sales, and eminent domain. In addition, those who owned land near urban areas were sometimes cheated out of their holdings when the value of their land rose precipitiously. One survey of black landholders in Tennessee revealed that the decline in that state, at least in the perceptions of blacks, was due to "persons in official capacities working together to gain possession of black-owned land."[16]

The results have been devastating for black farm owners in the South. During the twenty-four years between 1950 and 1974, the number of black owners in the region dropped 80 percent, from 186,540 to 38,182. In the single decade of the 1960s, according to the United States Census Bureau, the number of commercial black cotton farmers (those with at least $2500 worth of sales) fell from 87,074 tgo 3191; tobacco farmers in the same category declined from 40,670 to 9083. The losses occurred in every south-

15. Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 177–78; Salamon, "The Time Dimension in Policy Evaluation," pp. 160–61; Raymond Wolters, *Negroes and The Great Depression: The Problem of Economic Recovery* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970), 12–13.

16. U. S., Civil Rights Commission, *The Decline of Black Farming in America,* 50–51, 64–5; Leo McGee and Robert Boone, "A Study of Rural Landownership, Control Problems, and Attitudes of Blacks Toward Rural Land," in Leo McGee and Robert Boone, eds., *The Black Rural Landowner,* 60–65; C. S. Graber, "Cloud on the Title: A Blight Hits Black Farmers," *Nation* 49 (March 11, 1978): 269–72.

ern state, among farmers large and small, and have been so substantial that by 1982 the number of black farm owners in the region was only slightly greater than it had been during the early post-Civil War period when most of the new owners had only recently emerged from slavery.

The recent decline is all the more catastrophic when we compare black and white farm ownership over a period of four or five generations. Comparisons can only be rough due to the lack of precise statistical data for the nineteenth century, but several trends are clear. First, when opportunities were available blacks quickly took advantage of them and narrowed the gap between themselves and white farm owners. During the 1820s, probably not one in thirty rural free Negro family heads was a landholder, compared to a majority for white farmers. By the eve of the Civil War, nearly 20 percent of southern rural free black households possessed real estate, compared to nearly 60 percent among whites. With the emancipation of millions of slaves, this dropped to 3.8 percent in 1870, with 2.2 percent owning their own farms, while the proportion of whites remained about the same. By 1890, 21 percent of the black farmers owned their own farms, by 1900–1910, 24 percent. This ratio dipped slightly during the 1920s, but even after the Great Depression it stood at 25 percent, rising to 34 percent by 1950. At the same time, the proportion of white farmers in the southern states who owned their own land, except for a small rise during the 1910s, dropped from 65 percent in 1890 to 53 percent in 1930, rising again to 74 percent by 1950. Thus, in the proportion of farm owners, blacks steadily improved their relative position from one generation to the next, and even after 1930, despite a one to two ratio, maintained it down to the mid-twentieth century.[17]

Second, blacks increased their average land holdings significantly during the late 1800s in comparison with whites. In 1860, the mean realty holdings for rural free Negro heads of family, including the propertyless, was approximately $200, compared with $1492 for white farmers. In 1870 this dropped to $22, between 1 and 2 percent of the average white's holdings. By 1900, the mean holdings for black farm owners in land, buildings, machinery, and livestock was $779, compared with $2140 for whites, in 1910, $1588 compared with $3911. During the next two decades, despite severe rural economic problems, black proprietors owned between 42 percent and 35 percent of the average real estate of whites. This proportion held during the 1930s and 1940s. In short, despite a significant gap,

17. Lee Soltow, *Men and Wealth in the United States, 1850–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 44, 76. The percent of white farm owners in 1950 was derived from the summary census tabulations for "The South" rather than a state by state break down as was the case for blacks. U. S., Dept. of Commerce, *United States Census of Agriculture: 1950,* vol. 2, *General Report,* p. 956. See notes in Appendix B for other sources.

black farm owners greatly improved their relative position during the late nineteenth century and maintained it during the first half of the twentieth century.[18]

As had their predecessors in the seventeenth century, black farm owners took great pride in possessing their own land. Ownership gave them a sense of self-worth, accomplishment, independence, and self-fulfillment. The attitude of Anthony Johnson, one of the first black farmer owners in the South, who said "[N]ow I know myne owne ground and I will worke when I please and play when I please," continued down through the generations to the mid-twentieth century. Opportunities for self-employment, managerial experience, and discretion over their own lives made black farm owners "more self-reliant, better off nutritionally, more secure psychologically, more confident," said one recent observer, than most other blacks. Even those who eschewed the free enterprise system and gained small subsistence plots, planting vegetables, fishing, and hunting to sustain their families, discovered that ownership allowed them a large measure of autonomy and self realization.[19]

Whatever the benefits, however, in a single generation black farm owners have nearly disappeared from the southern landscape, bringing to a virtual end more than three centuries of black proprietorship. Ironically, this rapid decline coincided with remarkable advancement in the political, social, and economic sphere for a number of blacks in the region. Those who have examined this recent trend have usually emphasized discrimination, racial exploitation, racial violence and intimidation, economic problems, and government insensitivity as causes for the problems facing black farmers. Besides the difficulties of securing loans, purchasing land from whites, and maintaining a competitive edge with small holdings, the United States Civil Rights Commission concluded in its 1982 report on *The Decline of Black Farming in America,* blacks have not received the same tax benefits, government price and income supports as larger white farmers. Moreover, the heirs of black landholders are more likely to fall prey to unscrupulous practices of whites who through various means, both legal and illegal, gain control of black owned land after the death of the owner. "Historically, racial

18. Soltow, *Men and Wealth,* 76. The averages for post-1900 are taken from U. S., Dept. of Commerce, *Negro Population 1790–1915* (Washington: GPO, 1918), 580; U. S., Dept. of Commerce, *Negroes in the United States 1920–1932* (Washington: GPO, 1935), 578–79; and compilations from various sources listed in Appendix B. There are slight definitional changes which occur in these various sources. While these effect the mean holdings only slightly, for 1920 and 1930 there are a few Indian, Japanese, Chinese, and members of other non-white racial groups included in averages for "colored farm owners" and I have excluded Missouri, West Virginia, and Oklahoma as part of the South in calculating white average holdings.

19. Philip D. Morgan, "The Ownership of Property by Slaves in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Low Country," *Journal of Southern History* 49 (August 1983): 399–420; U. S., Civil Rights Commission, *The Decline of Black Farming in America,* 5.

discrimination in credit and in the selling of land has resulted in smaller and less productive landholdings for blacks," the Commission concluded. "These disadvantages have been compounded by current lending practices, research, technology, commodity price and income supports, and tax structures which are geared to benefit large farm operations."[20]

While these reasons have some validity, they hardly explained the precipitous drop in farm ownership during the last few decades. Indeed, these same factors have been prevalent for generations, and discrimination and racial exploitation were surely far more overt and violent during the early twentieth century than in the last quarter century. During what some scholars consider a "nadir" in the black experience—1890 to 1920—there was substantial expansion in the Negro farm owning class. One must look deeper to explain the recent phenomenon. Perhaps the most revealing evidence on the subject concerns age differentials between white and black farmers. In the 1980s black farmers are twice as likely as other farmers to be 65 years old or older; their average age is 57 years, six years more than the national average. With the broadening of economic opportunities in various other sectors of the economy, with the rapidly increasing urbanization in the South, and with the improving educational levels, young blacks have moved away from the farm to seek more remunerative livelihoods. Economic opportunity, more than racial discrimination, has been primarily responsible for the recent decline in farm ownership.[21] Ironically, it was precipitated by the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. In this sense, then, the drop in farm ownership reflects a movement away from the past, a movement of better educated, better trained, and more mobile younger blacks seeking to improve themselves by escaping from the grueling toil on the land.

As with the end of any era there is a certain tragedy in the declining fortunes of Negro proprietors in the South, especially considering their remarkable efforts to acquire farm land from the earliest years of American colonial history. Yet, the recent decline, despite its signalling the end of a phenomenon, symbolizes a new beginning for younger blacks who are entering a wide variety of professions and business fields or securing more highly paying jobs in towns and cities. While the results of this trend will be more apparent in the future than they are at present, there is little doubt that the self-made landowning yeoman farmer, however much he has been romanticized by some contemporary observers, belongs more to the nineteenth than the twenty-first century.

Such arguments, however, mean little to the older generation who, like

20. *The Decline of Black Farming in America,* 69.

21. U. S., Dept. of Agriculture, *Black Farmers and Their Farms,* p. v.

Black Farm Owners in the South, 1850–1982 (in thousands)

their forebears, believe that the only real material value is in the land. They have not been helpful to the commercial farmers who, unable to secure loans or purchase additional acreage from whites, lost their farms. Matthew Grant, heavily in debt and in jeopardy of losing his land, now farms only a portion of his 190 acres, renting soybean, corn, and peanut acreage to a neighbor. Grant is one of only about 20 black farm owners left in Halifax County, North Carolina. Perhaps he and his wife Florenza's only consolation is they have sent nine of their ten children (including four foster children) to college. Without loans, grants, or public assistance, during one span of six years, they paid for board, room, tuition, and fees for three college-age children. Recently, their oldest grandchild, Crystal Redding, a graduate in international studies from the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill, received scholarship offers from four prestigious law schools, including Columbia University.[22] For the elder Grants, who cling tenaciously to the land they have owned for more than forty years, however, farm ownership remains intimately connected with family, kinship, community, self-worth, and a continuing struggle for black autonomy and freedom.

22. Telephone interviews with Gary Grant (Matthew's son), May 11, August 1, 1988. See *The Charlotte Observer,* August 23, 1987; *The Raleigh News and Observer,* July 27, 1986. The author wishes to express his appreciation to Mr. Grant for his willingness to share his family history, despite his disagreement with some of the arguments presented in this essay.

Appendix A Rural Black Land Owners in the Upper-South, 1860

State	*Owners*	*Real Estate Total Value*	*Real Estate Mean Value*
Delaware	522	$318,500	$610
District of Columbia	34	24,400	718
Kentucky	464	348,600	751
Maryland	2124	1,270,000	598
Missouri	98	66,800	682
North Carolina	844	452,200	536
Tennessee	213	225,800	1060
Virginia	1316	732,700	557
total	5615	$3,439,000	$612

Rural Black Land Owners in the Lower-South, 1860

State	*Owners*	*Real Estate Total Value*	*Real Estate Mean Value*
Alabama	89	$112,800	$1267
Arkansas	2	1,200	600
Florida	23	24,900	1083
Georgia	47	29,000	617
Louisiana	567	2,669,800	4709
Mississippi	17	45,100	2653
South Carolina	304	251,400	827
Texas	17	31,800	1871
total	1066	$3,166,000	$2970
total in South	6641	$6,605,000	$989

Source: Computed from United States Manuscript Population Census, 1860. Those listed as "farmers" but residing in towns and cities have been excluded from this analysis. Data on 44 property owners were taken from several secondary sources, including, among others, John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1943); Luther Porter Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia, 1830–1860* (Washington: The American Historical Association, 1942); Andrew Muir, "The Free Negro in Jefferson and Orange Counties, Texas," *Journal of Negro History* 35 (April 1950): 183–206; David Rankin, "The Origins of Black Leadership in New Orleans During Reconstruction," *Journal of Southern History* 40 (August 1974): 417–40.

Appendix B Black Farm Owners in the South, 1850–1982
Total Number and Percentage Owners

state	1850	1860	1870	percent rural families	1890		1870–1890	1900		1890–1900	1910		1900–1910
							/percentage increase						
Alabama	58	89	1152	1.3	8847	13	668	14,110	15	59	17,047	15	21
Arkansas	38	2	1203	5.2	8004	24	565	11,941	25	49	14,660	23	23
Delaware	290	522	154	4.0	288	35	87	331	41	15	406	44	23
District of Columbia	6	34	1	*	16	31	*	5	29	*	8	67	*
Florida	7	23	596	3.5	4940	38	729	6551	48	33	7286	50	11
Georgia	50	47	1367	1.4	8131	13	495	11,375	14	40	15,698	13	38
Kentucky	501	464	1336	3.5	4110	40	208	5391	48	31	5916	51	10
Louisiana	543	567	1107	1.8	6685	18	504	9378	16	40	10,681	19	14
Maryland	1035	2124	884	3.4	2150	43	143	3262	56	52	3949	62	21
Mississippi	28	17	1600	1.9	11,526	13	620	20,973	16	82	24,949	15	19
Missouri	66	98	695	4.1	2745	50	295	2657	54	−3	2104	58	−21
North Carolina	502	844	1628	2.2	10,494	26	545	16,834	31	60	20,707	32	23
South Carolina	182	304	3062	4.0	13,075	21	327	18,970	22	45	20,356	21	7
Tennessee	169	213	1301	2.2	6378	23	390	9414	28	48	10,698	28	14
Texas	10	17	839	1.8	12,513	26	1391	20,139	31	61	21,182	30	5
Virginia	762	1316	860	1.0	13,678	43	1490	26,527	59	94	32,168	67	21
total	4247	6681	17,785	2.2	113,580	21	539	177,858	24	57	207,815	24	17

state	1920		1930		1940		1950		1974		1982	
Alabama	17,201	18	15,920	17	15,686	21	19,173	34	3344	85	2459	89
Arkansas	15,369	21	11,452	14	10,550	19	11,831	29	1504	85	1032	83
Delaware	355	41	373	46	345	55	263	82	42	88	29	91
District of Columbia	9	45	8	73	1	33	none		none		none	
Florida	6320	49	5560	51	5491	56	5490	74	792	88	743	89
Georgia	16,040	12	11,080	13	10,017	17	12,344	25	2526	86	1809	88
Kentucky	5318	42	4175	46	3163	57	2745	56	917	93	833	89
Louisiana	10,975	18	10,488	14	11,171	19	12,928	32	2223	85	1623	86
Maryland	3548	57	2938	56	2269	56	2170	60	444	90	483	88
Mississippi	23,130	14	22,552	13	23,253	15	28,789	24	7442	92	4470	93
Missouri	1643	58	1163	20	1149	32	1057	33	219	87	196	82
North Carolina	21,714	29	18,978	25	17,235	30	22,462	33	6145	82	3745	85
South Carolina	22,759	21	15,975	21	17,053	28	20,975	34	4041	88	2782	88
Tennessee	9839	26	7828	22	6884	25	6980	29	2018	86	1450	91
Texas	23,519	30	20,578	24	20,046	38	20,376	59	3043	91	2955	90
Virginia	30,908	65	24,399	62	22,238	63	18,957	67	3482	89	2459	90
total	208,647	23	173,467	20	166,551	25	186,540	34	38,182	88	27,068	90

Source: Computed from United States Manuscript Population Census, 1850, 1860, 1870; Tabulated from U. S., Dept. of Interior, *Report on Farms and Homes: Proprietorship and Indebtedness in the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896), pp. 566–70; *Negro Population 1790–1915* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1918), p. 607; U. S., Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Negroes in the United States, 1920–32* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1935), pp. 580, 626–675; U. S., Dept. of Commerce, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, vol. 5, *Agriculture: General Report and Analytical Tables*, pp. 300–1; U. S., Dept. of Commerce, *United States Census of Agriculture: 1950*, vol. 2, *General Report*, pp. 956, 970–86, 1025; U. S., Dept. of Commerce, *1974 Census of Agriculture*, vol. 11, pt. 3, *Statistics by Subject*, pp. 1–88; U. S., Dept. of Commerce, *1982 Census of Agriculture*, vol. 1, pts. 1–48, *Geographic Area Series*, passim. Note: In 1850 and 1860 census takers listed occupations for 74 percent and 84 percent of rural black landholders. I have therefore decided to include all rural land owners. In 1870, census takers listed occupations for 98 percent of black real estate owners. Consequently, I have included only those rural Negroes listed as farmers or planters. To obtain data in 1870 on those with estates valued at from $100 to $999, a sample of 7855 propertied blacks (from every twentieth printed page of the manuscript census) was used. This is subject to a small margin of error. Tabulations between 1890 and 1982 include "owners," "part owners," "owners, mortgaged," but not managers. While often included in general statistics published by the Department of Commerce, other non-white farmers, including Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander (usually listed under the rubric "colored farmers") have been excluded from the above table.]