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Source: *Agricultural History*, Spring, 1998, Vol. 72, No. 2, African Americans in Southern Agriculture: 1877-1945 (Spring, 1998), pp. 399-416

Published by: Agricultural History Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3744389>

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# African American Landlords in the Rural South, 1870–1950:

A Profile

VALERIE GRIM

The experiences and contributions of African American landlords in the South have been largely overlooked in research and scholarship. Discussions concerning the rural black population have focused primarily on African Americans as landowners, producers, sharecroppers, tenants, renters, and day laborers. While scholars have provided invaluable insight into the roles blacks played in American agriculture, they have not helped us understand this experience much beyond victimization—the oppression of the African American rural and farm population by large-scale, white planters. Although economic, political, and social exploitation is an aspect of the rural and agricultural past of blacks, it is not the only experience; there was a significant number of African American landowners and owner-operator landlords who minimized exploitation by whites by establishing black independence through the purchase of land and the creation of all-black towns and villages.<sup>1</sup>

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1. This research is part of a larger study on African American rural life and culture in the rural South, 1870–1970. For this article, more than fifty persons, ranging in age from fifty-eight to one hundred, were interviewed. The interviewees reside in Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, Arkansas, Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia. As a group, these persons represent every class of African American farmer: landowner, landlord, tenant, renter, sharecropper, and day laborer. Their experiences date back to the late 1890s. Descriptions of African American landlords' work and roles have been recorded in the narrative reports of the Work Progress Administration, historical novels, the records of the Cooperative Extension Service, the Agricultural Experiment Stations, state and federal censuses, community institutional records, tax documents, newspapers, and anthropological and sociological studies. Much of this

By offering a profile of southern African American landlords, this discussion seeks to add to our knowledge of rural blacks in the period following emancipation and to our understanding of the roles African American landlords played in the economic, political, social, and cultural development of the rural black community. African American landlords were individuals who owned land, farmed parts of their land, and, in doing so, provided a livelihood for families who worked for them as sharecroppers, tenants, renters, and day laborers. Individual African American landlords in the nine southern states owned land ranging from thirty-five to more than two thousand acres. The number of families employed varied from two to fifty-five per farm.<sup>2</sup>

The transition from slave to landlord was not easy for African Americans. It began with the acquisition of land, a concept that African Americans understood quite well. "We are at the mercy of those who combined to prevent us from getting land enough to lay our fathers upon . . . Our wives, our children, our husbands has been sold over and over again to purchase the lands we now locates upon; for that reason we have a divine right to the land."<sup>3</sup>

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discussion relies on interviews I have conducted. For the purpose of this study, an "African American landlord" is defined as any black person who owned land and used it to employ other persons or families either in a hired or shared economic arrangement. The phrase African American landlord is at times used interchangeably with "African American owner-operator landlord" to indicate that most black landlords were also owner-operators.

2. Robert Boone and Leo McGee, *Black Landowners: An Endangered Species* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979); Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom* (New York: Atheneum, 1968); John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New York: Doubleday, 1937); Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner, *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988); Elizabeth R. Bethel, *Promiseland* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981); Benjamin C. Wilson, *The Rural Black Heritage Between Chicago and Detroit* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Press, 1985); Kenneth M. Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profits* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction* (1935; reprint, New York: Atheneum, 1971); Nell I. Painter, *Exodusters* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976).

3. Jay R. Mandle, *Not Slave, Not Free: The African American Economic Experience Since the Civil War* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992); Janet S. Hermann, *The Pursuit of a Dream* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981); Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975). The statement comes from "a freedman of Virginia" quoted in Jacqueline Jones, *Dispossessed* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 13–14.

A divine right to the land was a belief held primarily by ex-slaves. However, former masters did not share their sentiment. The majority of ex-slave holders refused to divide their lands as blacks demanded, and other whites refused to sell land to blacks, leaving African Americans to rely on the government to make land acquisition or homesteading possible. The majority of former masters, instead, supported intimidation tactics designed to dissuade blacks from pursuing ownership. In spite of being beaten, cheated out of their wages, and disenfranchised, the African American community endured rape, lynching, and the destruction of their property to obtain and keep land. Thus, by the first two decades of the twentieth century, the African American community in the rural South was comprised of more than nine hundred thousand farm producers who owned more than fifteen million acres of land.<sup>4</sup>

African American landlords came from this large number of producers and owners. While it is not clear how many black landowners became landlords, it is apparent that many classified themselves in this way. Calling themselves the “leaders, examples, and providers,” hundreds of African American landlords resided in such places as Mound Bayou, Renova, and Davis Bend, Mississippi; Eatonville, Florida; Promiseland, South Carolina; Burroughs, Harrisburg, and Gullinsville, Georgia; Kowaliga and Klondike, Alabama; and Thomasville, Arkansas. The vast majority of rural black landholders, including landlords, lived in areas near neighboring white farmers. Blacks typically bought farms that existed on the outskirts of towns so their farm operations would not conflict with white producers; white farmers did not want African American landowners living next door. Because of racist attitudes and segregation, black landowners purchased land in the back woods of the towns or counties. Though their numbers increased during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African American landlords never represented more than a small percentage of the rural black population.<sup>5</sup>

4. Henderson H. Donaldson, *The Negro Freedmen: The Life Conditions of the American Negro in the Early Years after Emancipation* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1952); Charles F. Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Landownership* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Pete Daniel, “The Metamorphosis of Slavery,” *Journal of American History* 66 (June 1979): 88–99.

5. Loren Schwening, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790–1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 161–66; James A. Padgett, “From Slavery to Prominence in North Car-

Farm tenure in Promiseland, South Carolina, a black rural town, provides an example of the kind of economic arrangements that existed within black rural communities and among those who worked the land. In this community, landlordism was diverse. Men and women were motivated by a desire to retain ownership of their land, even after they were too old to farm. Through rental and sharecropping arrangements, according to sociologist Elizabeth R. Bethel, black landlords remained economically independent and enjoyed the highest status their ownership afforded long after they lost the physical ability to farm. At the same time, this group provided an entryway into community life for the younger generation, those who were babies or small children at emancipation. The tenancies created at Promiseland helped young blacks establish an economic independence and community status that would have been impossible under white landlords. African American landlords thus played a vital role at Promiseland.<sup>6</sup>

Sharecropping in Promiseland resembled the share system that evolved throughout the reconstructed South. The life of sharecropper Cyrus Lites serves as an illustration. Sharecropping was not a cash system, so men like Cyrus Lites scratched a meager existence from the land. With his two children, Lites worked fifteen acres of land and maintained a two-acre pasture. From their six-acre cotton patch, the Lites harvested one bale—eighty pounds of lint cotton—to the acre. This small cash crop did not alleviate the family's poverty. Half of the cotton paid the landlord, while the other half paid the lien man for seed, fertilizer, and other supplies.<sup>7</sup>

The Lites family farmed with limited resources. Using a two-dollar plow and a mule, they planted cotton, corn, and oats, but no wheat or sorghum cane for food. Flour, molasses, meat, and fresh fruits and vegetables were rare luxuries at the Lites table. At sixty dollars, the family's income for the year 1879 was below average even for the poverty-bound yeoman at Promiseland; therefore, they could afford only to eat cornbread,

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olina," *Journal of Negro History* 22 (October 1937): 433–87; Thomas J. Edwards, "Classes of Negro Farmers in Macon County, Alabama," *Southern Workman* 40 (August–December 1911): 459, 672–76.

6. Bethel, *Promiseland*, 57–60.

7. *Ibid.*; Mason Crum, *Gullah: Negro Life in the Carolina Sea Islands* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1940).

greens, fatback, and molasses, food high in calories but poor in nutrition. The Lites, like 25 percent of the other families at Promiseland, lived a precarious existence, their survival largely dependent on the fairness of their landlord and a good cotton crop.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to point out, however, that most African American laborers and sharecroppers understood that black landlords' resources were less than those of whites. "Workin' for a Black landlord meant some struggle," Willie Mae Curry explained, "but we also knowed that we was not gon' really eat or live no better workin' for the white man even though they was suppose to have more. It was the respect and peace of mind that we got workin' for a black landlord that reduce the pain we felt 'cause we was poor."<sup>9</sup>

In rural black communities, landlords usually enjoyed the most comfortable lifestyle. Primus Letman, however, was an exception. As an owner-operator landlord in 1880, he headed a family which included his wife and thirteen children ranging in age from eight months to sixteen years. Sharecropping fifteen of their fifty acres, the Letmans worked as a unit, together cultivating thirty-five acres of land, eighteen acres in cotton, and the remainder in corn, oats, wheat, and sorghum cane. These food crops were supplemented with fruit from thirty peach and two apple trees.<sup>10</sup>

The Letmans farmed and produced their foods with limited resources and equipment, consisting mainly of an old, four-dollar plow and an ox. Though they were owner-operator landlords, the Letmans, unlike the majority of black farmers with a labor force, were too poor to purchase a mule. Valued at forty dollars, the Letmans' livestock included an ox, two milk cows, a calf, and ten chickens. The farm yielded \$395 worth of commodities during the 1879 growing season and was the single source of in-

8. Bethel, *Promiseland*, 57–60. See also John M. Gandy, "The Needs of Negro Rural Life in Virginia," *Southern Workman* 41 (November 1912): 223–28.

9. Florence Murray, *The Negro Handbook, 1942–1949* (New York: Wendell Malliet, 1942–1949); Berlin B. Chapman, "Freedmen and the Oklahoma Lands," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 29 (September 1948): 150–59; Willie Mae Curry, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 3 January 1987.

10. Bethel, *Promiseland*, 57–60; Steven J. Ross, "Freed Soil, Freed Labor, Freed Men: John Eaton and the Davis Bend Experiment," *Journal of Southern History* 44 (May 1978): 213–32.

come for the fifteen-person household, an amount indicating prosperity by community standards but minimized by the number of children who shared the resources.<sup>11</sup>

Not all African American landlords' resources were as limited as the Letmans. Although their experiences revealed that they appeared to understand the value of diversified farming and self sufficiency, the Letmans could not afford to purchase advanced technology. When the profitability of black farming improved around the turn of the twentieth century, however, some African American landlords were able to purchase commercial fertilizers, improved plows, and other farm equipment.<sup>12</sup>

The lives of Cyrus Lites and Primus Letman, nevertheless, illustrate the diversity of African American landlordism in the rural South. Their experiences show that some landlords' lifestyles, despite ownership, were quite similar to those of their laborers, while others lived much more prosperously than the families they employed.

Deal Jackson was one of dozens of African American landlords whose lifestyle reflected the increase in earning and purchasing power of black landholders from the 1890s through the first three decades of the twentieth century. Residing in Albany, Georgia, Jackson, a former slave, managed to acquire more than two thousand acres of rich farmland and employed forty black families as tenants and croppers on his plantation.<sup>13</sup>

In the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta between 1910 and 1950, at least fifty black landlords operated farms, not as large as Jackson's, but much more productive and profitable than those farmed by the Letmans and Lites in Promiseland, South Carolina. Early twentieth century African American landlords such as Steve and Jodie Hearon, Edward Scott Sr., Edward Scott

11. Willie Mae Curry, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 20 August 1988.

12. Steve Hearon, interview by author, Ruleville, Mississippi, 16 June 1989; Jodie Hearon, interview by author, Memphis, Tennessee, 3 July 1989; C. B. Myes, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 16 June 1989; Edward Scott, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 7 July 1989; Neil McMillen, *Dark Journey* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 1990); Victor Perlo, *The Negro in Southern Agriculture* (New York: International Publishers, 1953).

13. Monroe Work, *Negro Year Book and Annual Encyclopedia of the Negro* (Tuskegee Institute, Ala.: Tuskegee Institute Press, 1912), 163–67, 180; Arthur F. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry* (New York: Atheneum, 1968); Richard T. Ely and George S. Wehrwein, *Land Economics* (New York: Macmillan, 1910).

Jr., and Alexander Scott Sr. kept more than fifty sharecropping families on less than one thousand acres, while others such as Leroy Vassel, Ben Collins, Tyson Williams, James Walter, John Morris, Johnnie Walker, Stanfield Jackson, Dick Ball, and Earnest McWilliams continued the pattern of hiring two to seven sharecropping families to work their 50- to 150-acre farms.<sup>14</sup>

The more prosperous African American landlords shaped the identity of the black rural community by developing the material culture, one which resembled landlords in the majority society. Black landlords, such as the Ellingtons, Watts, Murdens, Rowlands, Fambroughs, Harrises, Lewises, Tookes, Turners, McDonalds, and Jordans, lived in the largest houses, purchased the best horses, buggies, and automobiles, purchased rather than made their furniture, ate the best foods, and had access to better health and medical care. They lived on the best roads and their children were likely to receive educational training.<sup>15</sup>

Because they possessed more resources, black landlords considered themselves the communities' parents. They functioned as mediators between blacks and whites, and they acted as spokespersons for the local school trustees when they went to the county superintendent for assistance. African American landlords interceded with court officials on behalf of rural blacks, pleading for understanding and good will because their continued land ownership depended to some degree upon their acceptability to white planters, while their community leadership depended on

14. *Land Records, 1940–1970*, Leflore County Courthouse, Greenwood, Mississippi; *Land Records, 1940–1970*, Sunflower County Courthouse, Indianola, Mississippi; *Land Records, 1940–1970*, Bolivar County Courthouse, Cleveland, Mississippi; Steve Hearon, interview by author, Ruleville, Mississippi, 11 June 1989; Jodie Hearon interview, 3 July 1989; Edward Scott Jr., interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 7 July 1989; Alexander Scott Jr., interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 9 July 1989; Leroy Vassel, interview by author, Minter City, Mississippi, 28 April 1989; Ben Collins, interview by author, Ucahoma, Mississippi, 15 June 1989; Margaret McLemore, interview by author, Osceola, Arkansas, 23 May 1989; Mae Liza Williams, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 29 April 1989; Samuel Walters, interview by author, St. Louis, Missouri, 22 March 1992; John Morris, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 13 June 1989; Francis Walker Morris, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 27 April 1988; Earnest McWilliams, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 10 June 1989.

15. Edward Scott interview, 7 July 1989; Arthur F. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 111–44.



their popularity among members of the African American community.<sup>16</sup>

A difference in the availability of capital and credit created a quality of life difference between African American landlords and their workers. Prior to the New Deal capital and credit in the rural South were often unavailable to black landowners. Large white planters had a monopoly on both, and through agricultural statutes and crop liens, they decided to whom credit would be extended. To prevent black landlords from advancing socially and economically, some white planters conspired not only to inhibit the sale or rent of additional lands to blacks, but they also threatened merchants, bankers, and business persons who sympathized with ambitious African American landowners and landlords. Members of the all-powerful planter class encouraged vigilante groups to burn African American's crops and to kill their community leaders and property holders so that blacks would be dependent on whites for survival.<sup>17</sup>

As a result, African American landlords relied on family members to help finance farm operations. Sisters and brothers of African American landlords working in urban areas sent money for supplies, equipment, repairs, and property taxes.<sup>18</sup>

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, capital for black farm production was derived not only from the generous support of family members, but also from the sale of crops, vegetable produce, livestock, fruit, lumber, and fees received for the use of gins, mills, and boarding houses owned by African Americans. In addition, interest was earned from items charged at the commissary that served the landlord's share-

16. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 111–44.

17. W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, *The Negro in the South* (New York: Citadel Press, 1970); Robert Brandfon, *Cotton Kingdom of the New South: A History of the Yazoo Mississippi Delta From Reconstruction to the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967); Philip A. Bruce, *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman: Observations on His Character, Condition, Prospects in Virginia* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1889); Herman C. Nixon, *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1938); Federal Writers Project, *These Are Our Lives* (New York: Norton, 1975).

18. Willie McWilliams, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 10 June 1989; John Dancy, "The Negro People in Michigan," *Michigan History Magazine* 24 (Spring 1940): 221–40; Martin Dann, "From Sodom to the Promiseland: E. P. McCabe and the Movement for Oklahoma Colonization," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 40 (Autumn 1974): 370–78; W. E. B. DuBois, "Negro in the Black Belt: Some Social Sketches," *Department of Labor Bulletin*, no. 22, vol. 4, May 1899.

croppers. To some extent this form of economic independence helped black landlords minimize dependence on white bankers and merchants who extended credit at usurious rates.<sup>19</sup>

The presence of African American landlords had at least two effects on agricultural developments in the rural South. First, it created competition for black labor. There was a number of African American landlords. Ord Hunt Hill in Georgia, for example, provided employment for blacks, laborers, sharecroppers, and tenants. African American landlords, in addition, understood the impact of fair treatment, honesty, and respect on productive farming. They knew these were qualities black laboring families valued. Therefore, they appealed to workers' emotions to gain a valuable, loyal work force. White planters, on the other hand, knew that black laborers desired respect but often refused to extend it because they did not value equal and fair treatment. Consequently, as Eva Glenn, a retired domestic worker and farm woman in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, explained, "there was many of us who accept a few pennies less just so we could work for our own people, 'cause relationship of this sort just made you feel better 'bout life."<sup>20</sup>

"Those Blacks," Steve Hearon, a retired farmer, former landlord, and former trustee of the black rural schools in Leflore County, Mississippi, argued, "who could not get work with a Black landlord, was in a good position to bargain with white planters for higher wages, 'cause those white boss men knowed that as soon as the Black landlord got more land, he was gon' encourage Black laborers to work for him. . . . This kind of situation . . . force the white planter, in a very small way, to make a commitment to wage improvement, while at the same time, force them to work to gain the respect and loyalty of Black laborers and croppers."<sup>21</sup>

19. Mason Cooper, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 3 June 1989; Edward Magdol, *A Right to Land: Essays on the Freedmen's Community* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977); Christie Farnham Pope, "Southern Homesteads for Negroes," *Agricultural History* 44 (April 1970): 201–12; Frederick Bruce Rosen, "A Plan to Homestead Freedmen in Florida in 1866," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 43 (April 1965): 379–84.

20. W. E. B. DuBois, "The Negro Landholder of Georgia," *Department of Labor Bulletin*, no. 35, July 1901; Eva Glenn, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 30 April 1988.

21. Steve Hearon interview, 11 June 1989. For supporting documentation, see also W. E. B. DuBois, "Negroes of Farmville," *Department of Labor Bulletin*, no. 14, 1898; William H. Pease and H. H. Pease, *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America* (Madison, Wisc.: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1963).

The presence of African American landlords also meant that black workers and sharecroppers would have the opportunity to obtain higher wages from white planters. According to scholar James Cobb, wage battles were one of white planters' greatest fears because they had to compete not only with each other, but with African American landlords who offered black workers more than money. Black landlords provided their workers with a sense of community that white planters did not understand. Because of the competition for labor, white planters adopted a number of exploitative means, such as the crop lien, to prevent black laborers from seeking better opportunities for themselves and their children.<sup>22</sup>

The migration of black laborers from one farm to another is the second effect of African American landlords on southern agricultural production. At the end of every harvest, many black families left their white employers to search for higher wages, at times leaving planters without a sufficient labor force to work their land. Many black sharecropping families sought out African American landlords because they neither wanted to work for whites nor move to the city to find employment.

In this process, African American landlords helped slow the tide of migration from the delta areas of Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas and Tennessee by acting as a way station for black agricultural hands. "I am one of hundreds of black sharecroppin' and day laborin' families," Willie Ivory, a retired sharecropper who worked for such African American landlords as the Scotts and Hearons in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, recalled, "who move from one white man plantation to another, 'til I could find work on a Black man's land, and when I did, me and my family and many others move no matter what the white man said we owe him or what he was gon' do to us."<sup>23</sup>

"Me and my family," Minnie Brown, a retired sharecropper in Drew, Mississippi, remembered, "and at least three hundred other families between Belzoni, Clarkesdale, Drew, Ruleville, Cleveland, Greenwood, and Minter City, Mississippi, are still here, 'cause we was able, at some point

22. James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Jeannie M. Whyne, *A New Plantation South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996).

23. Willie Ivory, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 12 July 1989.

in time, to move onto Black farmers' land and work 'til they started using chemicals and equipment to farm durin' the 1960s and 1970s."<sup>24</sup>

Black landlords supported migration within the delta areas because additional population into black rural communities meant that more resources would be available to support schools, churches, and black businesses. To block the flow of population onto black landlords' farms, white planters instituted laws that made "labor stealing" illegal and punishable by imprisonment and fines. But these actions did not seem to deter black farmers from inviting African American laborers to work for them and neither did they diminish black laborers' interest in obtaining better social and economic opportunities.

While conflict occurred between white planters and black landlords over labor and migration, it was the poor white sharecroppers and laborers who felt most disillusioned by the presence of black landlords and agricultural laborers. White field workers believed that all employers placed too much importance on the value of black labor. They disliked the fact that employers preferred black laborers, and they blamed their own low pay on the presence of black workers. As a result, poor white sharecroppers and field hands engaged in intimidation tactics with white planters not only to incur favor from them, but also to make life difficult for the African Americans.<sup>25</sup>

Concerned more about community survival than personal fortunes, African American landlords helped to erect a number of institutions and organizations to encourage continuous economic, political, social, and cultural growth within the black rural community. In the economic sphere, black landlords helped to create alternative employment by establishing mills, lodging houses, cafes, juke joints, grocery and drug stores, funeral homes, hairdressers, tailors, insurance agencies, and banks. In the all-black rural town of Mound Bayou, Mississippi, for example, with the help of black landlords, leading citizen Charles Bank established a cottonseed oil mill, a loan and investment company, and a bank. Many rural black land-

24. Carter G. Woodson, *The Rural Negro* (Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, 1930); Carter G. Woodson, *A Century of Negro Migration* (New York: Associated Publishers, 1918); Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992); Willie Ivory, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 8 July 1989; Minnie Brown, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 3 June 1989.

25. Davis et al., *Deep South*, 454–83

lords became entrepreneurs, sharing Booker T. Washington's philosophy of racial pride with their workers. Like Washington, some black landlords remained convinced that a rural petty bourgeoisie of African American farmers, small bankers, and merchants could form the basis of a black economy inside American capitalism.<sup>26</sup>

In the economic arena, African American landlords not only provided employment for landless blacks, but also encouraged sharecroppers, laborers, and tenants to seek employment in white-owned cotton, saw, lumber, and molasses mills. Information concerning the availability of jobs in the coal mines and domestic industries was given to laborers interested in off-farm employment. In keeping with this philosophy, African American landlords, such as W. H. Holtzclaw, established companies to purchase plantations to divide and resell to landless blacks for the production of surplus vegetables, fruits, livestock, poultry, and lumber to supplement family incomes.<sup>27</sup>

Prior to the integration movement of the early 1950s, black landlords, along with black landowners, assumed the political leadership of rural black people. African American landlords' political participation began with their involvement in the Republican Party during the 1860s and continued through the 1930s when they began to align with the Democrats. Along the way, many black landlords supported populism, progressivism, communism, and socialism and joined integrated political groups such as the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union to keep abreast of political affairs and issues that related to agricultural production. African American landlords helped establish black political organizations, such as the Colored Farmers Alliance, the Progressive Colored Farmers, and the Black Labor Movement, to exercise political leadership and to help their workers understand the power of politics and the role it played in bringing about change.<sup>28</sup>

The height of political activism among African American landlords can

26. Carrie Gordon, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 28 May 1987; August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 139–48.

27. Work, *Negro Year Book*, 17, 110–18; Richard A. Straw, "The Collapse of Biracial Unionism: The Alabama Coal Strike of 1908," *Alabama Historical Quarterly* 37 (Summer 1975): 53.

28. Leroy Vassel, interview by author, Minter City, Mississippi, 30 May 1989; Robin Kelly, *Hammer and Hoe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Hanes Walton Jr., *Black Republicans: The Politics of the Black and Tan* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1975).

be seen in their efforts to combat racism in New Deal programs. During the 1930s, black landlords sent letters of protest to Congress and encouraged black laborers to migrate from abusive landlords' plantations. Due to discrimination and a lack of knowledge of farm programs, only a small percentage of black landowners benefited from the programs of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service and the Farmers Home Administration (FHA). "I tried in the 1940s to get crop insurance," Steve Hearon remembered, "but I was turned down and was told that I would suffer the consequences if I raised questions about my treatment." "In the 1940s, I attempted to borrow money to expand my farm operations," Jodie Hearon recalled, "but I was turned down 'cause them agents believe I neither deserve the money or wasn't intelligent enough to produce a crop good enough to repay it." "I wanted the FHA to only loan me enough money to buy land and a piece of farm equipment," Leroy Vassel explained, "but they said no even though I had almost saved enough money to pay for them." "I wanted to borrow just enough money to buy seeds and fertilizers," Alexander Scott Sr. recalled, "but was turned away." Because some farm programs continued to be dominated by segregationist ideology during the 1940s, African American landlords decided to pool their resources and help each other in time of need. At times, they loaned each other money to prevent the loss of land and property.<sup>29</sup>

Early histories of rural black communities in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia reveal the significance of African American landlords' emphasis on cooperative living and communal farming. Due to discrimination and denied participation in farm programs, black landlords had to support each other. They borrowed, bartered, and farmed communally. Their croppers and laborers were expected not only to farm together, but

29. Steve Hearon interview, 11 June 1989; Jodie Hearon interview, 3 July 1989; Leroy Vassel, interview by author, Minter City, Mississippi, 30 May 1989; Alexander Scott Sr., interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 12 and 30 February 1987; George Turner, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 10 June 1989. For a discussion, see Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997); Valerie Grim, "Black Participation in the Farmers Home Administration and Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, 1964–1990," *Agricultural History* 70 (Spring 1996): 321–37; Robert Browne, "Black Land Loss: The Plight of Black Ownership," *Southern Exposure* 4 (Autumn 1974): 11–15.

to hunt, fish, make cloth, sew, quilt, and develop patent medicines for their communal needs. Ultimate self-sufficiency, as black landlords advised, could only result “when families put their money together to buy land, even if more than one family had to own it,” former laborer Ocean Myes remembered.<sup>30</sup>

At the core of African American landlords’ philosophy of communalism and self-help was the idea that families had to work together to have adequate health, proper diet, and decent housing. Some black landlords provided families with fresh lumber to repair their houses. Communities organized to repair leaky roofs and provide good drinking water and plenty of firewood to stay clean and warm during winter. Only during times of economic hardship was it difficult for African American landlords to continue providing improved health care, nutrition, and housing for their tenants, laborers, and croppers.<sup>31</sup>

African American landlords worked, moreover, to ensure access to good nutrition as well as decent housing. Throughout the year, landlords encouraged cooperative food production and supported good eating habits to help workers avoid common colds, tuberculosis, rickets, dysentery, and other sicknesses caused by poor diet and inadequate housing. During verbal contractual negotiations, African American landlords explained to their workers what management expected in terms of food production. The majority of African American landlords provided small plots of land so their tenants could raise food and livestock for healthy and nutritious diets. Even though sharecropping and day laboring families understood the value of healthy eating, there were some who refused to give the kind of attention to food production that African American landlords demanded. However, a lack of food production by some families was the result of many being accustomed to white landlords providing provisions as well as the lack of interest white landlords showed in black laborers providing anything except cotton. For many families the habit of waiting on furnishings and food was difficult to break.<sup>32</sup>

30. Fon Louise Gordon, *Caste and Class: The Black Experience in Arkansas, 1880–1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); Jeffrey Crow et al., *A History of African Americans in North Carolina* (Raleigh, N.C.: Department of Cultural Resources, 1944); Ocean Myes, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 16 June 1989.

31. Fannie Turner, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 12 July 1989.

32. Beatrice Collins, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 30 April 1988.

Between 1870 and 1950, the majority of rural black children received some form of elementary and secondary education at the hands of African American landlords who donated money for building materials and worked closely with philanthropic organizations, such as the Peabody, Jeanes, Rosenwald, and Slater Funds, to finance black rural education.<sup>33</sup>

Advocating industrial training as the dominant aspect of children's education, African American landlords believed that there was a relationship between improved living, quality health, good housing, and education. Therefore, they insisted that if children were taught how to produce foods and goods and maintain facilities, good health and nutrition would ultimately prevail. Thus, black teachers, some of whom were graduates of Tuskegee and Hampton Institutes, were recruited to teach boys mechanical repair, brick masonry, carpentry, farming, road and bridge building, and landscaping. Girls received instructions in food preservation, child-rearing, cooking, cleaning, quilting, sewing, health care, and home management.<sup>34</sup>

Believing, as did Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois, that the black community needed trained teachers and other professionals to serve its needs, black landlords were instrumental in the struggle to establish dozens of African American agricultural and teachers' training colleges. Included in these were such institutions as Georgia State Industrial College, Knox Academy, Tuskegee Institute, Haines Normal and Industrial Institute, Utica Normal and Industrial School, and the state Normal School in Montgomery, Alabama. Serving the needs of the black rural and farm population, schools of this sort organized yearly farmers' conferences and small agricultural fairs where black farm families exhibited and sold swine, cows, sheep, and vegetables. Improvement in agricultural education for blacks resulted in an improvement in their economic climate, which enabled young African American graduates of small historical black agricultural and mechanical schools to compete more competitively with white owner-operators.<sup>35</sup>

Because some African American landlords emphasized education as a

33. James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Edward Scott interview, 7 July 1989.

34. Howard Williams, interview by author, Minter City, Mississippi, 15 August 1989.

35. Work, *Negro Year Book*, 17, 110–14; Jack T. Kirby, *Darkness at the Dawning: Race and Reform in the Progressive South* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Lippincott, 1972).



social and cultural necessity, some black colleges and newspapers began publishing reading materials to further literacy among the populace. African American newspapers in Alabama provided the best example. Between 1890 and 1950, Alabama witnessed the introduction of more than twenty newspapers to serve black landlords, owner-operators, and those generally involved in farming, most significantly the *Messenger* and the *Negro Farmer*. Established by Booker T. Washington in 1905 and 1914 respectively, the general purpose of each was to provide African American landlords and black farmers with information concerning the economic and political problems of black agriculturalists. Devoted to the elevation of the African American race, these newspapers published farm news concerning scientific agriculture, livestock, and domestic science so that women could improve their household management and family living skills. Black rural newspapers were circulated widely to schools, churches, farmers' institutes, and local black conferences. The newspapers told of black landlords' economic successes and failures, their school and church activities, and important visitors to their community. They were used in black schools to teach children to read. Every week, the papers printed suggestions written by George Washington Carver, who gave advice on the potential uses of peanuts and sweet potatoes. He also offered suggestions concerning plowing and cultivating the soil.<sup>36</sup>

To address the cultural needs of African Americans throughout the rural South, black landlords supported clubs such as the Brothers and Sisters Club in which men learned the latest in agricultural production and women focused on household production and management. Children's organizations, such as the 4-H club, emphasized moral training, strong work ethics, and academic and spiritual training. Clubs organized picnics, dances, and other social activities to create a sense of family and community, especially among the landless poor who often needed assistance with medical, clothing, school, and housing expenses.<sup>37</sup>

Of all the social issues that concerned African American landlords, poverty weighed the heaviest on their minds. "We just couldn't seem to lift

36. *Messenger*, 2 and 16 March, 6 April, and 20 July 1906; *Negro Farmer*, 14 and 28 March, 11 April, 1, 15, and 29 August 1914.

37. Steve Hearon interview, 16 June 1989.

the folk above poverty,” Edward Scott Sr. explained. “I think the farm people struggle so much with poverty,” Jodie Hearon suggested, “ ’cause we came out of slavery with nothin’ and it was a big job for us black landlords to take on, ’cause we couldn’t pay enough money for the majority to have extra funds to invest in property and insurance like they needed to, even though many, with their nickels and dimes, was able to do so.” Many landlords’ goal was to eradicate poverty, believing it could eventually destroy rural black people.<sup>38</sup>

Recognizing their struggle to survive, African American landlords, though having experienced discrimination with farm programs, nevertheless encouraged poor rural blacks to participate in other government programs. “We was told to go down to the Extension Office or one of them farm agency to see what was available, what they could tell us ’bout gettin’ rid of poverty,” Mae Liza Williams recalled, “and how the poor people could do a better job providin’ for themselves, and how they could get electricity, runnin’ water, gas stoves, and screen for their doors and windows,” she continued. Despite the persistent push by African American landlords, many rural blacks did not visit rural development offices, lacking faith that they would be helped.<sup>39</sup>

Caring about the concerns of their labor force did not prevent conflict from occurring between landlords and their workers. Disputes arose when croppers and laborers felt they were treated disrespectfully, “When they start actin’ like they was our mommies and daddies, believin’ they always had to tell us what to do, think, or feel,” Estella Thomas explained.<sup>40</sup>

When it seemed like black landlords were careless with bookkeeping, charging for goods that had not been received, or taking their time to pay wages and settlements, confusion occurred. As one astute African American landlord explained, “You can’t speak a careless word to them or they will quit, while a white boss cuss them all over the place and they will take it meekly. A Black tenant may have taken a beatin’ from a white boss, but if he was struck by a Black landlord, he would hit back; if he thought he

38. Edward Scott interview, 7 July 1989; Jodie Hearon interview, 3 July 1989; Jay R. Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1978).

39. Mae Liza Williams, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 29 April 1988.

40. Estella Thomas, interview by author, Drew, Mississippi, 30 April 1988.

was not gettin' a fair deal from the Black landlord, he would fight and demand more and was not intimidated."<sup>41</sup>

While providing leadership for the black rural community, African American landlords had personal concerns to be contended with. Land foreclosure was a constant threat. Some African American landlords lost their farms due to poor management, indebtedness, and failure to pay taxes. Some black landlords sold their farms after experiencing the difficulties of providing for family and community members.<sup>42</sup>

Overall, the arrangement between African American landlords and their labor force was productive. Black landlords generally had no trouble getting croppers and tenants to work hard and they experienced limited turnover. Both oral and written sources indicate that black landlords had from two to four generations of families working for them. For example, among landlord families such as the Scotts and Hearons in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta could be found households, such as the Currys, Gordons, Allens, Formens, and many others, who had worked more than sixty years combined. Black laborers and croppers argued that African American landlords treated them more humanely than their former white employers because black landlords often allowed them to sell their own crops or at least provided a sales receipt. When croppers were given receipts and were allowed, at times, to sell their crops, they were able to trust their black landlords and believe they wanted them to succeed. Such a relationship appeared to have encouraged laborers and croppers to work even harder to be productive. Many tenants, croppers, and day laborers reported that they made their largest profits while working for African American landlords. Perhaps, this was the greatest accomplishment of black landlords: their ability to make the disinherited feel they were not the dispossessed.<sup>43</sup>

41. Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 75–110.

42. Jodie Hearon interview, 3 July 1989; Steve Hearon interview, 16 June 1989; Edward Scott interview, 7 July 1989; Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 110–20.

43. *Ibid.*