# FROM SLAVE TO LANDOWNER: HOW BLACK FARMERS USED TENANT FARMING AS A STEPPING STONE NELSON COUNTY, VIRGINIA 1865-1910

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Pleasant Wood worked as a slave on a farm in Nelson County, Virginia until he was twenty-eight years old. The end of the Civil War and the enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments abruptly altered his life. Formerly a person with no legal identity, trapped in a system of enforced economic dependence, Wood legally became a full citizen. The new laws established Wood's right to opportunities denied his family for generations: the freedom to move at will, earn a living, and own property. With these rights, Wood could claim responsibility for his own welfare and that of his family.

Wood's transition from slavery to independence included daunting obstacles. With no financial resources, economic independence was an immediate challenge. Wood turned to farming, a familiar occupation close at hand in an agricultural community like Nelson County. As a former slave, Wood lacked the money, tools, and livestock necessary to begin farming independently. Tenant farming, employment offered by the former slave owners, allowed Wood to farm with no capital. In 1880, Wood sharecropped on seventy-six acres, growing wheat, Indian corn, oats, and a little tobacco. He

raised a few pigs and chickens.<sup>1</sup> By 1910, Wood was an independent land owner. He farmed fifty-three acres in Nelson County worth two dollars an acre. The tax collectors assessed the value of his farm at \$304. In 1910, he paid \$3.30 in taxes.<sup>2</sup>

Wood's transition from slave to independent farmer between 1865 and 1910 was not unique. Black ownership of farms peaked in 1910.<sup>3</sup> Only forty-five years after emancipation, 26 percent of all black farmers owned their own farms. Percentages of black farm owners rose even higher in certain areas of the nation. In the Southern Region, 24 percent of black farmers farmed independently, and in some southern states, black farm owners outnumbered black tenants by 60 and 70 percent.<sup>4</sup>

These figures seem to contradict the usual bleak view of the freedmen's opportunities, particularly in regard to the

The Southern Region in the 1910 Agricultural Census includes Delaware, Maryland, Washington D.C., Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Original Returns of the Agricultural Census, 1880, Nelson County, Virginia, The Virginia State Library, microfilm.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>Land Tax Records 1910, Nelson County, Virginia, Archives, The Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>Manning Marable, "The Politics of Black Land Tenure 1877-1915", <u>Agricultural\_History</u> 53 (January 1979): p. 147.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup><u>Agricultural Census 1910</u>, Vol. V.(Washington D.C., The Government Printing Office, 1914), 169. This paper uses "black farmer" where the 1910 Agricultural Census uses "colored farmer." "Colored farmer" included black, Indian, Chinese, and Japanese farmers, so national figures taken from the census are not exact for black farmers. Statistics for "colored farmers" in the South are accurate for black farmers because so few Indians, Chinese, and Japanese farmers lived in the South.

system of tenant farming.<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, tenant farming trapped blacks in areas of the country in an unending cycle of dependence. While rightly maligned in these cases, ideas about tenant farming may need to be reexamined in light of the relatively optimistic figures for black ownership of farms in other localities in 1910.

Mention tenant farming, particularly sharecropping, and one thinks of a manipulative system limited to the southern states used by former slave owners to control the freedmen. The common identification of tenant farming with the South fails to acknowledge the role tenant farming played in agriculture nationally. Tenant farming was a thriving system that met a vital need in the national farming community. (See page 4.)<sup>6</sup> One quarter of all farmers outside the Southern Region in 1910 were tenant farmers. Share tenants and cash tenants worked farms in all forty-eight states. Nationally between 1880 and 1910 the number of tenant farmers increased more rapidly than the number of farm owners; 74 percent of all farmers owned their farms in 1880 compared with 63

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>The 1910 Agricultural Census divides farmers into three categories: farm owners, managers, and tenants. Farm owners include "(1) farmers operating their land only, and (2) those operating both their own land and some land hired from others." Tenant farmers, share tenants, cash tenants, or share-cash tenants, do not work their own land. Share tenants pay "a certain share of the products as one-half, one-third, or one quarter. Cash tenants pay "cash rental or a stated amount of labor or products, such as \$7, 10 bushels of wheat, or 100 pounds of cotton per acre." Share-cash tenants pay "a share of the products for part of the land rented by them and cash for part." <sup>6</sup>Agricultural Census 1910, Vol. V, 98.



percent in 1910. The 1910 Agricultural Census attributes the declining percentage of farm owners to the closing of the frontier; free land was not as readily available in 1910 as in 1880, so more young farmers worked as tenants to save money to buy a farm. Nationally, tenant farming served as a stepping stone for young farmers working their way up to independent farming.<sup>7</sup>

Although tenant farming occurred nationally it was hardly uniform in practice. Varying circumstances altered the purpose tenant farming served in specific communities as well as the position of tenant farmers in those communities. The organization of typical farm communities in the West, North, and South differed according to the tenant farmers' race, the percentage of tenant farmers in the farm population, and the type of tenant farming used. All three of these factors contributed to making the southern system of tenant farming unique.

The most evident contrast between farming communities in the South and the rest of the country was the number of blacks in the farming population. In 1910, 97 percent of all black farmers lived in the Southern Region, not having moved from the area since the end of the Civil War. Blacks made up

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup><u>Agricultural Census 1910</u>, Vol. V, 169, 102.

a negligible percentage of the farm population in the West and North.<sup>8</sup>

The percentage of tenant farmers in the farming community also distinguished agriculture in the South. In typical western communities, one in ten farmers worked as tenants; in the North, the number rose to a quarter of the farming population; in the South, almost half of all farmers were tenants. The South was distinct because half of its large tenant community was black. In the Southern Region, black tenant farmers alone made up a quarter of the farming community.<sup>9</sup>

Regional differences also appeared in the proportion of share tenants and cash tenants in a farm community. Despite the usual association of sharecropping with the South, the distribution of sharecroppers was fairly uniform in the eastern half of the country. (See page 7.)<sup>10</sup> The percentage of farms run by sharecroppers in Illinois, 26 percent, equaled the percentage of farms run by sharecroppers in Alabama. High concentrations of sharecroppers appeared in areas as varied as northeastern Texas, Maryland, northern Georgia, western Ohio, western South Carolina, and Kentucky.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup>Agricultural Census 1910, Vol.V, 169.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>Agricultural Census 1910, Vol. V, 169.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>Agricultural Census 1910, Vol. V, 100.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup>Agricultural Census 1910, Vol. V, 19, 100, 413.



Cash tenant farming was more of a southern phenomenon. While cash tenant farmers could be found across the nation, concentrated numbers of cash tenant farmers appeared only in central Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and along the Mississippi River in Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi.<sup>12</sup>(See page 9.)

The southern system of tenant farming, with its high percentage of black, cash tenant farmers, operated quite differently than the small, white, sharecropping tenant systems in the West and North. It was within the southern states that most black farmers succeeded or failed between 1865 and 1910.<sup>13</sup>

Four years of war with the resulting loss of property and disorganization contributed to a weakening of agriculture in the South for the next thirty or forty years. The number of acres of improved land remained below 1860 levels until 1880, the number of acres under cultivation in 1860 were not recovered until 1890, and the value of land and buildings did not surpass 1860 levels until 1900.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Agricultural Census 1910, Vol. V, 879.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup>Agricultural Census 1910, Vol. V, 99-100.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup>Several of the states included in the "Southern Region" as used in the 1910 Agricultural Census had a low percentages of black farmers. Black farmers operated less than 10 percent of the farms in Delaware, West Virginia, and Kentucky. These states will not be included in statistics for "the Southern States". Oklahoma will be excluded because a high percentage of its "colored" population was Indian, not black. "The Southern States" then include Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas.



The relationships between the freedmen and their former owners were also thrown into a state of flux. The antebellum agricultural system based on slavery ended suddenly, forcing whites and blacks to establish new working relationships. Land owners needed workers, and freedmen and poor whites needed work. Tenant farming in some respects met the immediate needs of both groups, although admittedly they met on unequal ground. The development of large-scale tenant farming was a response to the sudden reordering of southern agriculture.

By 1910, tenant farming was a secure fixture in southern agriculture, both for whites and blacks. In South Carolina, Alabama, and Texas between 40 and 50 percent of white farmers worked as tenants. The percentages fell only slightly, between 30 and 40 percent, in North Carolina, Tennessee, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Even with the dramatic number of white tenant farmers, white farm owners continued to manage most farms in the South. White farm owners outnumbered white tenants in all southern states except Georgia.<sup>15</sup>

The pattern of black ownership of farms in 1910 was almost a reverse image of the pattern for white ownership of farms; black farm owners outnumbered black tenants only in Maryland and Virginia. While close to half of white farmers

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup>Agricultural Census 1910, Vol. V, p. 192.

owned land in each southern state, black ownership of farms varied widely from state to state. A majority of black farmers owned land in Maryland and Virginia, less than 20 percent owned farms in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Generally, the proportion of black farm owners per state decreased moving north to south. (See page 12.)<sup>16</sup>

Within Virginia itself, patterns of black farm tenure in 1910 varied slightly. Sixty-six percent of black farmers owned land in Virginia in 1910. Black farm owners were not concentrated in any one part of the state. Farmers owned farms in equal proportions in the eastern Tidewater section of the state with its flat, sandy soil, in the central Piedmont area with its hills and rivers, and in the rugged Blue Ridge Mountains in the west. Proximity to towns and markets made little difference, nor did the percentage of blacks in the farming population. (See pages 13 and 14.)<sup>17</sup>

Black farmers in the Upper South seemingly made remarkable progress by 1910. The position of farmers like Pleasant Wood dramatically contrasted with the position of the recently freed slaves just fifty years before, as well as with the position of blacks locked into tenant farming in the Deep South. This increase in black ownership of farms went against the national trend of increasing percentages of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup>Agricultural Census 1910, Vol. V, p. 190.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup>Agricultural Census 1910, Vol. VII, pp. 800-809.





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# Percentage of Owners Among Black Farmers

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tenant farmers. What circumstances allowed black farmers in the Upper South, particularly in Virginia, to buy their own farms fifty years after Emancipation?

Answering this guestion is a little like putting together a jigsaw puzzle where all the pieces are blank; the picture or the obvious answer is not there. Resources on black farmers prior to 1910 are limited. Black farmers for the most part were illiterate and left no personal records. National resources, including the Agricultural Census, tell little. The first census information broken down according to tenure and race appeared in 1900, only ten years before the peak in black ownership of farms.<sup>18</sup> Original Returns of the Agricultural Census prior to that date list one hundred facts on each farmer in a specific county including the farmer's tenure, the size and value of the farm, the amount spent on fencing, hired labor, and fertilizers, as well as the acreage devoted to certain crops, the number of livestock, and the amount and value of all farm produce, but do not indicate the farmer's race. Matching information from individual returns of the Agricultural Census with names of black farmers taken from the Manuscript Census provides some clues as to how black farmers were faring in a particular county at a particular time. Combining information from the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup>In 1880, census takers first collected information on tenure. In 1890 they started gathering information on tenure and race, but never tabulated their data.

1880 Agricultural and Manuscript Censuses for Nelson County, Virginia with local resources such as whites' diaries, account books, newspaper articles, and advertisements can fill in pieces of the puzzle, creating a picture of black farmers' lives in Central Virginia in 1880.

Traveling by train through Nelson County, Virginia, in 1880 Orra Langhorne looked out at a "poor and rugged" land with "rough craggy hills and bare fields."<sup>19</sup> Straddling the Piedmont and Blue Ridge sections of the state, Nelson County offered few resources other than its soil and timber. Its landscape varied from the flat river bottoms along the James River in the east, to the rugged mountains of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the west. Creeks and streams washed down the mountains into narrow valleys, feeding the Tye, Piney, and Rockfish Rivers.

Nelson County initially attracted settlers seeking land suitable for the cultivation of tobacco. With its rich, gray, sandy loam and red clay, numerous rivers, and proximity to the James River, Nelson County proved suitable for tobacco production. While tobacco provided the prime reason for settlement, Nelson County farmers never depended on tobacco

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup>Orra Langhorne, <u>Southern Sketches From Virginia 1881-1901</u>, ed. Charles E. Wynes (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1964), 4. Orra Langhorne, a native Virginian, wrote a monthly column for Hampton Institute's "Southern Workman and Hampton School Record" between 1880 and 1901. She was an abolitionist and a Republican.





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as their single cash crop. Indian corn, wheat, and oats occupied more acreage than tobacco in 1880. Farmers in the county also raised significant amounts of beans, straw, rye, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, and apples.<sup>20</sup>

The development of diversified agriculture and the mountains in the western half of the county did not stop the development of a plantation economy in Nelson County. Fortyfour percent of Nelson County's population were slaves, and 58 percent of those slaves lived in groups of twenty or more. Most slave owners, sixty-six percent, owned fewer than ten slaves. The county had a small antebellum free black population of 128 people.<sup>21</sup>

Little occupied people in Nelson County outside of agriculture. Nelson County lacked industry and had no commercial centers. Residents conducted most of their trade at the county stores or made a trip outside the county to the neighboring cities of Lynchburg and Charlottesville. These cities supported active agricultural markets. The Lynchburg Daily Virginian advertised weekly wholesale price currencies, listing the produce in demand that week. In 1879 merchants needed dressed hogs, green apples, Irish potatoes, cabbage,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup>The 10th Census of the United States, Vol. V, Agriculture, (Washington D.C.: The Government Printing Office, 1884), p. 209, 883.
<sup>21</sup>Herbert G. Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), p. 38; The Eighth Agricultural
<u>Census</u>, 1860, (Washington D.C.: The Government Printing Office, 1864)
244: The 9th Census of the United States, Statistics of Population (Washington D.C.: The Government Printing Office, 1874), 68.

beans, peas, dressed fowl, wheat, butter, and eggs, all agricultural products that Nelson County farmers could supply. Lynchburg merchants mailed Nelson County farmers current prices for produce. The city's merchants must have had some success attracting the county's trade; L.M. Adler, proprietor of a general store in Lovingston, advertised special prices to "divert the trade in the County from the Cities."<sup>22</sup>

Lovingston, the largest community in the county, never supported a business or industry not tied to the needs of the farmers. Merchants, inn keepers, undertakers, shoemakers, tanners, and blacksmiths offered essential services. Attorneys worked at the county court house built in 1810, three years after the founding of the county.<sup>23</sup>

The county's dependence on agriculture shaped the paths open to the recently freed blacks in 1865. Agricultural work was almost their only option if they stayed in Nelson County. In 1880, half of the black heads of households in Nelson County were agricultural workers. The rest of the heads of households worked as day laborers, blacksmiths, ministers, shoemakers, carpenters, tanners, gardeners, boatmen, coopers, stonemasons, railroad workers, miners, and millers. Female

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup><u>The Lynchburg Daily Virginian</u>, January-August, 1879; The Gordon Family Papers, Archives, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia; <u>The Nelson County Examiner</u>, May 12, 1876.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup>"Nelson County, 150th Anniversary, 17th Nelson County Day", Nelson County Courthouse, 1957, 44; <u>The Nelson County Examiner</u>, 12 May 1876.

heads of households worked as housekeepers, laundry-women, cooks, and milk maids.  $^{\rm 24}$ 

Agricultural workers included farm laborers, sharecroppers, cash tenants, and farm owners. Distinctions in the degree of supervision and the length of contract distinguished one job from another. Farm laborers worked sporadically for daily or monthly wages. Sharecroppers farmed for a set period of time for a landlord, paying the landlord one-quarter to one-half of their crop. Cash tenants paid a landlord a set sum in cash to rent a farm. Farm owners cultivated their own land unhindered. A black agricultural worker's profit and his control over his earnings increased with his degree of independence.<sup>25</sup>

Farm laborers had the least control over their work. The regularity of their employment, the chores they performed, and the wages they received depended on the demand for farm labor and the generosity of their employer. In 1879, Dennis, Basil, Schroeder, Molly, Becky, and Philli worked six days a week for Samuel Gordon during peak planting and harvesting seasons. The men plowed fields, harvested crops, tended the vineyard, chopped wood, drove to the mill, and ran errands. The women tended the garden, shucked corn,

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup><u>The Manuscript Census, 1880</u>, Nelson County, Virginia, Archives of Alderman Library, Charlottesville, Virginia, microfilm.
 <sup>25</sup><u>The Manuscript Census, 1880</u>, Nelson County, Virginia; Marable, "The Politics of Black Land Tenure", 143.

cleaned the yard, and assisted with housework. Gordon hired farm laborers only periodically the rest of the year.<sup>26</sup>

When they were working, farm laborers had little independence. Gordon supervised his farm hands daily, keeping strict account of the chores finished and the number of days worked. The one freedom farm laborers had was to choose not to work. Nothing tied Gordon's workers to his farm on more than a daily or weekly basis. In his journal, Gordon frequently complained about one or more of the laborers leaving without notice when he needed them.<sup>27</sup>

Nineteen farm hands, ten males and nine females, worked Robert Thurston Hubbard's Tye River farm helping him with planting, harvesting, and odd jobs. Hubbard's records give some idea of what farm laborers earned; he recorded the number of days worked on a job and the wages for that particular job. A survey of the collection of receipts for the freedmen's wages found in the Hubbert family papers shows that wages varied widely.

Tieing bundles of tobacco .05 per 100Tieing wheat and oats.50 a dayShucking corn3.00 a monthSplitting rails.50 per 100Digging an old ditch.03 per yard

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup>Jane Townes in her study of Nelson County in 1860 found that 67 percent of owners of 500 acres or more held onto at least 500 acres ten years later. In 1870, the 106 large land owners would have needed laborers and tenants.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup>Letterbook of Samuel Gordon, 1879, Gordon Family Papers, Archives, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.

Digging a new ditch	.04 per yard
Crophand	2.69 per month
Fixing three fireplaces	2.50
Blacksmithing	1.00 a day

Skilled jobs like blacksmithing or masonry earned higher wages, but were far less regular. Even long-term, lower paying jobs were seasonal. Few of Hubbard's laborers worked regularly. Eliza worked 183 days, more than any of the other women. Sterling Murray, one of the male laborers worked a full year. The rest of the males worked a day here and there, or a month or two at most. With low pay and sporadic work, farm laborers' annual wages were low.

Women's Annual Wages(\$) Cornelia 9.61 Sally Turner 1.00 Daphny 8.40 Eliza 24.45 Shelia 1.13 Pocahantas 11.54Caddy 13.25 Delia 1.20 Frank's wife 4.50

Men's Annual Wages(\$) Walter 8.41 Peyton Lewis 2.25 10.00 Issac Tom Cary 9.64 John Seay 31.00 Sam William 25.00 Sterling Smith 6.00 Sterling Murray32.28 Tobias Brown 18.79 Berry Watkins 1.62 Henry Oliver 2.50

Because wages varied widely and farm laborers worked irregularly, it is difficult to determine an average annual income for farm laborers. Comparing farm laborers' annual wages with the value of the average agricultural production for black tenants and black farm owners, it is clear that farm laborers' earnings fell significantly short of black farmers' earnings.<sup>28</sup>

Black farmers, tenants and owners, had more in common with each other than with farm laborers. Because black farmers managed a particular piece of land for a specific amount of time, they had common concerns and responsibilities. Farmers were tied to one place and could not leave on a whim.

Black farmers tended to be an an older population than black farm laborers. In Nelson County, black farmers were middle-aged, married, illiterate males. The average black farmer was forty-nine years old. Only 3 percent of black farmers were single, only 13 percent could read, only 6 percent could write, and only 2 percent were female. An average black farmer's household included 5.8 people. Black farmers were family men with family responsibilities.<sup>29</sup>

Responsibilities connected with their farms and families provided a structure for black farmers that farm laborers lacked. The stability imposed on black farmers may have

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup>The Robert Thurston Hubbard Papers, Box 8, Archives, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> All figures for farmers in Nelson County in 1880 were calculated from a sample of farmers identified on both the Manuscript Census of 1880 and the Original Returns of the Agricultural Census. The Manuscript Census listed names for 319 black farmers, 224 of whom appeared on the Original Returns of the Agricultural Census, a correspondance of 71 percent. The missing 29 percent may have been farm laborers who might show up on the Manuscript Census, but not the Original Returns of the Agricultural Census.

given them an added incentive to accumulate land, livestock, and machinery. Farmers needed to acquire or gain access to land, livestock, and machinery because these factors determined the value of their agricultural products, their annual income.

In 1880, clear distinctions occured in the average annual incomes of black owners, cash tenants, and sharecroppers. The value of a sharecropper's produce was actually worth more than an owner's or cash tenant's produce, but between a quarter and half of a sharecropper's profit went to pay his landlord. Cash tenants had to pay rent.

# Average Income for Black Farmers Calculated From the Individual Agricultural Census Returns

	<u>Owner</u>	<u>Cash Tenant</u>	Sharecropper
Value of Farm			
Products(\$)	169	95	195
Value of Orchard(\$	) 3.70	2.46	2.20
Value of Forest(\$)	6.80	6.97	9.60
Total income(\$)	179.50	104.43	206.80
Money due landlord	(\$) <u>0</u>	?	-97(1/2)-48(1/4)
Actual income(\$)	179.50	?	109.80- 158.80
In terms of actual	annual i	ncome, owners	earned more than

sharecroppers, and sharecroppers earned more than cash tenants.

Farm owners worked the most valuable farms with the most acreage, livestock and machinery. Sharecroppers managed

somewhat smaller farms, but oversaw almost as much improved acreage, only two acres less than farm owners.

Averages for Black Farmers Nelson County, 1880

(		<u>Owner</u>	<u>Cash tenant</u>	Sharecropper
Value of	farm(\$)	467	277	410
Value of	livestock(\$)	95	68	90
Value of	<pre>machinery(\$)</pre>	15	11	11
Acres of	land	82	57	64
Acres of	improved land	28	17	26
Acres of	unimproved lan	d 53	49	36

Cash tenants worked the least valuable farms. Their farms were worth only 59 and 67 percent of that of owners' and sharecroppers' farms. Cash tenants cultivated the least acreage and had less livestock and machinery.

More valuable farms did not necessarily have better soil. Blacks' farms were equally fertile. Average yields per acre were consistent for owners, cash tenants, and sharecroppers.

Average Yield per Acre

	<u>Indian corn</u>	<u>Oats</u>	<u>Wheat</u>	Tobacco
	(bushels)	(bushels)	(bushels)	(pounds)
Owners	17.0	8.3	7.2	653
Cash tenants	16.6	8.8	8.4	204
Sharecroppers	17.4	8.2	8.8	536

Owners and sharecroppers had higher yields in tobacco because they used commercial fertilizers.

If differences in soil fertility did not affect black farmers' annual income, the amount of acreage planted did. Sharecroppers received the most money for their produce because they planted the most acreage.

> Average Number of Acres of Indian Corn, Oats, Wheat, and Tobacco

	Owners	<u>Cash Tenants</u>	<u>Sharecroppers</u>
Indian corn	5.4	4.8	10.0
Oats	1.8	.98	2.7
Wheat	1.8	1.3	4.2
Tobacco	.66	.73	1.8
Total acreage	9.66	7.81	18.7

Sharecroppers planted twice as much Indian corn, wheat, and tobacco as farm owners. They cultivated more than twice as much acreage as cash tenants. Sharecroppers also planted twice as much tobacco, a valuable cash crop.

The amount of acreage under cultivation was the key to a black farmer's prosperity in 1880. The quantity of land planted, not the quality, determined a black farmer's annual income in Nelson County. Black owners had the largest, most valuable farms, but they planted less of their improved acreage than sharecroppers, so they had less produce to sell. Even so, owners ended up with the largest annual income because they controlled all their profit. Sharecroppers took in the most money, but ended up with a medium income after giving their landlord a portion of their produce. Cash tenants planted the least number of acres and paid rent, leaving them the lowest annual income.

Even the \$180 dollars an average black farm owner earned in 1880 was a meager income compared with the \$376 dollars the average Nelson County farmer earned.<sup>30</sup> Blacks farmers were poor. The average black farm was half the size and had half as much livestock and machinery as the average Nelson County farm. The average black farm was worth only a third of the average farm. The one equality between the average farm and a black farmer's farm was the fertility of the soil; black farmers harvested as many bushels of oats, wheat, and corn per acre as other Nelson County farmers.<sup>31</sup> Farm sizes were most equitable among sharecroppers, less among cash

 $^{30}{\rm The}$  "average farmer" discussed here is the average Nelson County farmer, including whites and blacks. Unfortunately, statistics for white farmers are not available.

21	<u>The</u>	<u> 10th</u>	Census	of	the	United	States,	Vol.	V	Agriculture,	p.	138,
		20-321								-	-	

A	Comparison of Wealth	
	Average Black Farmer	Average Farmer
Value of Farm Products	160	337
Value of Orchard	2.50	12.80
Value of Forest Products	8.42	26.50
Total income	170.92	376.30
Value of farm	375	1,441
Value of Machinery	11	35
Value of Livestock	84	175
Size in acres	64	180
Yield of Oats in bushels	8.1	8.9
Yield of Corn in bushels	17	19
Yield of Wheat in bushels	8.6	8.0
Yield of Tobacco in pounds	484	760

tenants, and least among farm owners. Judged according to farm size, black sharecroppers were in the lower 60 percent of all sharecroppers, black cash tenants were in the lower half of all cash tenants, and black farm owners were in the lower third of all owners.  $^{32}$ 

How did a black sharecropper like Ben Wright survive on the \$75 to \$112 dollars he made farming fifty acres, much less save the money necessary to be a land owner by 1910? It is impossible to reconstruct a black farmer's finances in complete detail, but existing information does point to trends that improved black farmers' financial welfare. Black farmers like Wright lived frugally. They were as selfsufficient as possible and they limited their expenses. The way black farmers controlled common expenses for food, items at the store, fertilizer, labor, and taxes helped them progress from tenant farming to independent farming.

When Ben Wright looked across his fields he saw Indian corn, wheat, and oats, not acres of cash crops. Black farmers such as Wright concentrated on growing these food crops which occupied twelve times as much acreage as tobacco. Black farmers also raised beans, straw, rye, Irish potatoes,

<sup>32</sup> The 10th Census	of the United States, Vol.	V Agriculture, p. 96-97.
	Percent of all Farmers	Average size of
	with 99 acres or less	black farm
Owner	33%	82
Cash tenant	55%	57
Sharecropper	60%	64

apples, and sweet potatoes. Black farmers grew crops that could feed their families and their livestock. A black farmer's barnyard and pastures held livestock that contributed to the family's table. The average black farmer's 1.4 cows produced 51 pounds of butter, his 8.9 fowls laid 44 dozen eggs, and his 4.3 swine could be turned into bacon, sausages, and hams.<sup>33</sup>

The woods and streams in Nelson County supported animals and fish that black farmers used to augment the food they raised on their farms. The forests hid wild ducks, wild geese, quail, doves, pheasant, grouse, frogs, squirrels, rabbits, and deer. The streams held trout, bass, bream, catfish, and eel. People in Nelson County hunted and fished. Evidence of the popularity of such activities appears in a notice in the Nelson County Examiner in 1879; P.O. Brittle of Lovingston forbid all "trespassing on [his] lands for the purpose of hunting, gathering nuts etc.", promising that trespassers would "be punished to the full extent of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup>Other studies by James T. Lemon and Fred Shannon suggest that between 9.5 and 12.5 acres were needed to support one person. Using the higher figure, the average black farmer's 67 acres would have been just enough to feed the 5.8 people in his household. Higher figures may be attributed to larger amounts of grain needed to feed livestock. In Lemon's study of the acreage needed to feed five people in Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century, fifteen of twenty-one acres planted in wheat, corn, and oats supported the farmer's livestock. Black farmers had far less livestock and so could have used their 10.9 acres planted in wheat, corn, and oats more efficiently.

law." With their fields and the land around them, black farmers could feed themselves.<sup>34</sup>

Black farmers were not completely self-sufficient. There were items that they wanted and needed that they could not produce themselves, items carried by general stores like J.P. Lea's General Store in Massie's Mill. Nine of the black farmers in this study traded at Lea's General Store between 1883 and 1885. They bought shoes, whiskey, medicines, coffee, cloth, nails, molasses, dried fish, crackers, peanuts, and dried apples.

Pleasant Wood and Boyd Loving were two of the sharecroppers that shopped at Lea's General Store. Like half of the black farmers listed in Lea's account book they made infrequent purchases, buying one or two essential items a year.

#### Pleasant Wood

March 6	peanuts	.05	
November 23	2 pair of boots	5.75	
November 24	Paid in full.		5.80

1883

1004

#### Boyd Loving

1004			
March	3	Medicine for wife .55	
April :	9	Paid off.	.55

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup>David Drumheller, "Wild Game and Its Use as Food in Nelson County," Folklore Museum, University of Virginia, April 19, 1977, p. 5.; <u>The</u> <u>Nelson County Examiner</u>, 12 May 1879.

They paid their bills in cash, even if they did not clear their accounts right away. Lea does not seem to have charged them interest on late payments.

Other black farmers shopped at Lea's General Store regularly. Bart Meade, owner of 88 acres in 1880, made ten purchases and borrowed money once in a five-month period in 1884.

#### Bart Meade

1884			
January 3	1 Coffee	.07	
February	2 Paid off.		.07
March 5	1 pair of shoes	2.00	
March 12	Paid off.		2.00
March 22	?	.10	
March 25	Paid this amount.		.10
March 25	1 pair of shoes	1.00	
March 25	?	.25	
March 25	7 yards of calico	.42	
April 18	1 1/2 gal molasses	.50	
		2.17	
	Credit for this amt.		. 50
	Credit by 5 logs		2.50
	Credit by planks		1.21
			4.21
	14 1/2 lbs dried apple	es .70	
	Money lent him.	.30	
May 2	Money paid.	1.00	
May 13	1 lb coffee	.15	
May 17	? this amount		.15

May 17 3 1/2 lbs of meat .44 June 26 Paid off. .44

Meade cleared his bill each time within a month, paying part of what he owed in lumber. $^{35}$ 

Black farmers near Lovingston may have traded with L.M. Adler. Like Lea, Adler sold "groceries and bacon for Cash or Produce in hand."<sup>36</sup> Unlike Lea, Adler charged an unknown amount of interest on credit accounts and he did not make cash loans.

Local merchants' willingness to accept produce as payment, charge little or no interest for credit, and make cash loans freed the black farmers in Nelson County from entangling credit obligations. Such debts could quickly consume a farmer's small cash reserves, tying him in a cycle of dependency and poverty. In Nelson County, black farmers did not buy staples at the general stores, and they paid their debts with cash and produce. These circumstances helped black farmers build and maintain their independence.

Black farmers also had to manage expenses related to running their farms as progress in farming techniques began to make farming more expensive. Prior to the 1870's, farmers relied on home-produced fertilizers: barnyard manure, wood

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup>The J.P. Lea Ledgers, Archives, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup>Nelson County Examiner, May 10, 1876.

ashes, bones, and marl.<sup>37</sup> Farming experts began to discourage the continuation of this practice, recommending new commercial fertilizers coming on the market. An early commercial fertilizer called quano was a rich mixture of bat and bird droppings imported from Peru. Advertisements for Excelsior No. 1 Peruvian Guano in the Nelson County Examiner described quano as the "most concentrated, universal, and durable fertilizer ever offered to the farmer." Guano contained high concentrations of nitrogen and phosphates, nutrients necessary for the cultivation of tobacco.<sup>38</sup> The 1880 Agricultural Census recommended that tobacco farmers combine the "bulky but valuable accumulations of the farmyard and stables" with guano to improve their yields. Commercial fertilizers combined with barnyard manure increased tobacco yields in the Piedmont counties north of the James River from 25 to 80 percent, and increased yields from 20 to 50 percent when used alone. $^{39}$ 

The census's claim that commercial fertilizers "return a fair profit upon the amount invested in their purchase" may have been true, but the cost of the commercial fertilizers, \$3 to \$9 dollars an acre, was prohibitive for the average

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup>The 10th Census of the United States, Vol. V, p. 795.
 <sup>38</sup>Richard C. Sheridan, "Chemical Fertilizers in Southern Agriculture", Agricultural History, Vol. 53 (January, 1979): 308.
 <sup>39</sup>The 10th Census of the United States, Vol. V, Tobacco Production in the United States, p. 202.

black farmer.<sup>40</sup> The average black farmer would have used between 2 and 7 percent of the value of his agricultural products just to fertilize his three acres of tobacco. Farmers like Nelson Flemming, a cash tenant making \$150 dollars farming 40 acres, must have carefully considered spending between \$3 and \$9 dollars an acre on commercial fertilizers. Black farmers spent an average \$.64 on fertilizer, far below the \$3.20 the average Nelson County farmer spent on fertilizer. Among black farmers, farm owners spent the most money on fertilizer, \$2.66, and they also had the highest tobacco yields, 647 lbs. per acre.

	<u>Tobacco yield</u>	Money spent
	per acre in pounds	<u>on fertilizer(\$)</u>
Owner	647	2.66
Cash tenant	204	.27
Sharecropper	512	. 42
Black farmer	468	. 64
Average farmer <sup>41</sup>	760	3.20

No matter how beneficial, commercial fertilizers cost more than black farmers were capable of or willing to pay. Black farmers continued using traditional fertilizers, saving their limited cash for other expenses.

On occasion, black farmers needed to hire farm laborers. In 1880, black farmers spent \$923 on labor, roughly 2 percent

 $^{40}$ <u>The 10th Census of the United States</u>, Vol. V, Agriculture, p. 795.  $^{41}$ <u>The 10th Census of the United States</u>, Vol. V, Agriculture, p. 138, 320.

of their total income. The average sharecropper spent far more on labor, \$4.94, than owners, \$.50, and cash tenants, \$.09. Sharecroppers like Abraham Williams needed extra hands because they planted far more acreage. Williams sharecropped sixty acres, cultivating eight acres of Indian corn, twelve acres of oats, and forty acres of wheat. For those who needed extra help, especially sharecroppers, money spent on farm labor paid off in the long run because it allowed them to increase their agricultural produce with a manageable investment. Other farmers limited the money they spent hiring farm laborers.

Black farmers faced one additional expense, taxes. All black farmers owed a capitation tax and farm owners owed real estate taxes. The capitation tax required that every male over twenty-one years of age pay \$1.50 to support the public schools. In 1880, land owners owed the state government \$.50 per 100 acres for real estate taxes. These taxes should not have been a crushing burden on black farmers. The \$1.50 capitation tax plus the \$.27 real estate tax charge on sixtynine acres, the average size of a black farmer's property, equals \$1.77, about 1 percent of the average value of a black farmer's products.

Most black farmers avoided paying even the \$1.77. Virginians resisted paying the capitation tax, forcing the General Assembly to pass an act forbidding a negligent

taxpayer access to the polls. Seventeen percent of whites and 43 percent of blacks failed to pay the capitation tax in 1880. The earliest delinquency rates on real estate taxes for blacks appeared in 1893, when 16 percent of black land owners in the state did not pay the tax on their land.

Refusing to pay taxes seems to have been a common event, especially on the county level. Collection of taxes in the counties presented special problems. Tax collectors frequently refused to assess taxes in rural areas. They complained that the paltry sums collected did not make it worth their while to travel from one farm to another. Rural counties had the highest delinquency rates in the state. It seems likely that a large percentage of black farmers in Nelson County avoided paying any tax at all.<sup>42</sup>

Black farmers like Boyd Loving were poor, but they managed to survive by controlling their expenses and living as self-sufficiently as possible. Sharecroppers were better off than cash tenants. They worked larger, more valuable farms, had more livestock and machinery, and earned more money. All tenant farmers were better off than farm laborers; the average income for black farmers, \$160, exceeded the highest wages paid any farm laborer. Active agricultural markets, crop diversification, an emphasis on

<sup>42</sup>Tipton Ray Snavely, <u>The Taxation of Negroes in Virginia</u>, (Charlottesville: Phelp-Stokes Fellowship Papers, 1916): 1-97.

food production, frugal dealings with local merchants, limited spending on fertilizer and labor, and low taxes all contributed toward making black farms solvent, if not profitable. If the Nelson County Examiner's claim that a farmer could prosper if he would just be "industrious, attentive to his business, and practice a rigid ecomonomy" presented a somewhat rosy picture for black farmers in 1880, it was not completely false.<sup>43</sup> For black farmers in Nelson County in 1880, tenant farming was a tenuous means of making progress toward independent farming.

By 1910, Boyd Loving, Pleasant Wood, Ben Wright, Abraham Williams, and Nelson Flemming all owned farms in Nelson County.<sup>44</sup> These men were only a few of many Nelson County blacks who successfully made the transition from slavery to tenant farming to land ownership. In 1910, 61 percent of all black farmers in the county cultivated land that they owned; only 38 percent worked as tenants. Black farmers across Virginia enjoyed successes like Nelson County farmers. Black farmers in the Deep South, in contrast, remained mired in a tenant system they could not escape. In Georgia in 1910, only 18 percent of black farmers owned land. The observation that

<sup>43</sup>The Nelson County Examiner, 12 May 1876.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup>These farmers all appeared on the 1880 Manuscript Census, the 1880 Agricultural Census, and the tax records for 1910.

"so far as agriculture is concerned there are really several 'Souths'" was true for black tenant farmers.<sup>45</sup>

Tenant farming in the Upper and Lower South emerged out of similar circumstances in 1865 and sought to alleviate similar problems. Conditions for the freedmen in the two regions, however, soon diverged. A larger population of free blacks and the economics of King Cotton shaped tenant farming in the Deep South, making it more restrictive. Landlords in the Deep South placed demands on their tenants that tenants in Virginia seemingly did not face; tenants in the Deep South were pressured to grow cash crops instead of food crops.<sup>46</sup> Cotton, the crop of choice, insured a landlord a fair return. Black farmers planted more of their land in cotton than white farmers.<sup>47</sup>

The onus of King Cotton prevented Georgian tenant farmers from following the strategies Nelson County tenant farmers used to manage expenses. When George Washington Carver saw Georgia "farmers drive to town weekly with their wagon empty and return with them full of various kinds of produce that should have been raised on the farm," he observed a crucial step in a pattern of dependence that black farmers in Virginia managed to escape. Growing more cash

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup>Gilbert C. Fite, "Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: An Overview", <u>Agricultural History</u> 53 (January 1979): p. 3.
<sup>46</sup>Fite, "Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: An Overview", p. 6.
<sup>47</sup>Marable, "The Politics of Black Land Tenure 1877-1915", p. 144.

produce than food, tenant farmers in the Deep South relied on local merchants for staples, and thus were more vulnerable to credit problems. Tenant farmers in the two states made similar incomes, approximately \$100 to \$150 dollars a year, but they spent their money in vastly different ways.<sup>48</sup> Tenant farmers in Georgia were not able to control expenses and live self-sufficiently like tenant farmers in Virginia.

The tenant system in Virginia allowed a majority of farmers to progress to land ownership. In this respect, agriculture in Virginia was more like agriculture nationally. The distinctly southern system of agriculture in Virginia prior to 1865 moderated, finding a middle ground between agriculture in the South and in the rest of the nation. Allowing blacks to advance as it did, the agricultural system in Virginia showed that tenant farming was not intrinsically oppressive. Depending on circumstances within communities, tenant farming could have worked to advance black farmers to positions of land ownership all over the South.

What did land ownership mean for black farmers in the long run? At age 73, how did Nelson Flemming look back on his forty-five year transition from slave to tenant farmer to land owner? The 1900 Agricultural Census describes the increase in black farm owners as "noteworthy", explaining that "the gain in land ownership tends to show, at least,

<sup>48</sup>Fite, "Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: An Overview", p.8.

that the land-lease system in the South, while subject to criticism and open to improvement is far from operating to reenslave the former bondsman and his children."<sup>49</sup> Earlier historians agreed with this evaluation, viewing land ownership as a pivotal step in improving the former slaves' lives. Revisionist historians looking more critically, view land ownership as having limited value as it left blacks living in poverty.<sup>50</sup> With all the progress blacks made, a great disparity continued between white and black farm owners in 1910.

## Farm Values for

White and Black Farm Owners in 1910<sup>51</sup>

	Southern	States Virg		jinia	Georgia	
	White	<u>Black</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Black</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Black</u>
Value of farm(\$)	3,838	1,475	4,354	1,079	3,204	1,635
Value of livesto	ck(\$)636	250	531	167	424	262
Value of machine	ry(\$)252	- 59	128	41	137	64
Acres of land	173	68	131	42	162	85
Acres of improve	d 54	32	67	21	51	41
land						

<sup>49</sup>1900 Aqricultural Census, p. cvii.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Older historians like Samuel Bitting, <u>Rural Land Ownership Among</u> <u>Negroes of Virginia</u>, argue that increases in farm ownership gave blacks an economic advantage. Revisionist historians like Crandall A. Shifflett, <u>Patronage and Poverty in the Tobacco South</u>, maintain that land ownership, while a step in the right direction, fell short of improving their economic welfare. According to his economic analysis, the purchase of a farm exhausted a black farmer's resources, leaving him insufficient income to profitably work his farm. Gavin Wright, <u>Old South, New South</u>, argues that the increase in black ownership of land, even though it was an economic advance, ultimately failed to make a difference because it did not assist blacks in overcoming racism. <sup>51</sup><u>1910 Agricultural Census</u>, V, p. 172,212-213, 220-221.

The economic benefits of farm ownership for blacks were negligible. Blacks continued cultivating smaller, poorer farms with less machinery and livestock. Still, for farmers like Pleasant Wood who did not even own their own bodies in 1865, land ownership must have had some psychological benefit.

Black ownership of farms in Virginia increased until 1910 as the first generation of blacks born into freedom reached middle age. Tenant farming and the prospect of land ownership may have satisfied the generations born into slavery, but it failed to interest younger generations of blacks. Younger blacks set their eyes elsewhere than the farm and the pitiful economic rewards of independent farming. The percentage of black owners and the number of blacks farming declined from 1910 on. By 1970, only 5 percent of southern farmers were black.<sup>52</sup> Farming, even farm ownership, was not the solution for generations of blacks after 1910.

In Virginia, economic independence for blacks was as not as much of "a bitter illusion" as in the Deep South.<sup>53</sup> Black tenant farmers in Virginia did make moderate economic progress up to 1910. Concentrating on growing food crops and controlling their expenses, they were able to live selfsufficently and save money toward purchasing farms of their

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup>Fite, "Southern Agriculture Since the Civil War: An Overview", p. 4. <sup>53</sup>Marable, "The Politics of Black Land Tenure 1877-1915", p. 152.

own. Land ownership became a reality for a majority of Virginia's black farmers by 1910. Yet the remarkable progress made forty-five years after the Civil War must be tempered by the reality of the poverty even black farm owners faced in 1910. The benefits of land ownership were meager. Black farmers' lives were far poorer than other farmers. Ultimately, farming would not hold the interest of generations of blacks born after slavery. Tenant farming may have allowed blacks in Virginia to take a first, uncertain step toward independence, but ultimately it did not provide them a secure future.

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