

Chapter 7

The African-American as Sharecropper

In 1865 and 1866, some northern friends of the freedmen urged that they be given farms of their own. President Andrew Johnson did not simply ignore this suggestion, he went much further and turned the land back that had been already given to former slaves under the Confiscation Act of 1862 to its original owners. The emphasis during Congressional Reconstruction was on protecting the freedmen's right to vote. With the collapse of Congressional Reconstruction, the former slaves were once again denied the right to vote, equal protection under the law, and land to own and farm. Forced to find employment where they could, the vast majority had no choice but to work on their former owner's plantation at his terms. Thus, freedom for African-Americans meant exchanging the condition of the slave for the life of the sharecropper or tenant farmer. The poverty of these former slaves would be visited upon the families of their sons and their grandsons. This chapter examines the economic legacy of black Americans and raises the question whether they should have been given land as well as freedom.*

Luther Mills Becomes a Sharecropper

On January 1, 1866, nine months after the Civil War ceased, two Mississippians came before an officer of the Union army. One was a planter named L. P. Thomson who wanted to be sure that the cotton in his field would be harvested. Accompanying Thomson was Luther R. Mills, a Negro "which he lately owned." No longer a slave, Mills had to provide for his wife Martha and their three young children. Thomson and Mills had come to write a contract on a form provided by the Freedman's Bureau. Thomson agreed to provide the Mills family, "free of charge," with "clothing and food of good quality and sufficient quarters and medical attention when necessary, and kind and humane treatment," and "a 'patch' for garden purposes." In exchange for this, Mills agreed to work for Thomson during the following year. Mills signed the contract with an X, for he could neither read nor write.

Why did Luther Mills agree to work for his former master under conditions so similar to his servitude? The main reason is that he could not find work anywhere else, and he could not buy a farm for himself. Fifty years later, neither Luther Mills and nor his descendants were able to own their own farms, and for that matter, neither were 90 per cent of all African-Americans who were either sharecroppers or tenant farmers.

Sharecroppers and Tenants

A sharecropper did not own his own farm; nor did he own house, mule, or tools. Instead, he rented these from his landlord. The landlord allowed 'croppers' to farm his land, usually about 10 acres, in exchange for 1/3 of the crop. For use of a mule, the seeds, and the tools, the cropper frequently paid another third. Since he owned the land, the landlord could order the planting of a money crop, usually cotton or tobacco, and could prevent "croppers" from planting vegetables, which they might eat or sell on the sly. Croppers seldom made improvements on the farms, which they did not own, and landlords frequently let the farms, which they didn't live on, fall into disrepair. With from 1/3 to 2/3rds of the crop going to the landlord, there was little incentive to work as hard as the business of farming required.

* A preliminary discussion on this issue can be found in Chapter 2., Land and the Freedman.

©Dorothea Lange, FSA, Library of Congress



Poverty and sharecropping went hand in-

merchant advanced supplies such as food, clothes, or tools, (never cash) in return for a mortgage or lien on the farmer's crop. In the most typical cases, the farmer pledged his unplanted crop at the county store each spring. The merchant kept the books and charged a rate of interest per year (usually about 37%). The African-American farmer seldom asked to see his account, even if he could understand the credit system or add the numbers. Challenging either the skills or the integrity of the white man was not tolerated in the South.

Sharecroppers and crop-lien farmers usually had to confine their business to the local store until their loans were paid. They were allowed to plant only those crops that did not compete with the provisions they were supplied. Since farmers always sold their crops in the fall when prices were low, bought at the high price of the local merchant, paid a 37% rate of interest, and never got to inspect the books, they usually ended the year owing money. To use the local language, they failed to 'pay out' and began the next planting even deeper in debt.

Under slavery in 1860 almost all African-Americans worked either as farm laborers or as house servants. Thirty years later, in 1890, 21% were servants and 56% were farmers. By 1930, only one in ten remaining in the South owned the land they worked. Emancipation did mean freedom, but freedom for African-Americans often meant continuing to work the white man's land or to work in his house.

Seventy Years Later: The Slave's Grandson

The real meaning of the sharecropping and crop lien system some seventy years after slavery is described in the following passage. Tom, the young man depicted here, was 12 years old in 1932 and would have been 80 in 2000. His son or grandson would probably have left the cotton fields of Alabama and moved to some city in the North:

Tom is a black sharecropper's child in Alabama. His family (father, mother, and four children) all work for the landowner. They are all in debt to him (they get \$75 worth of supplies for the growing season, but he keeps the books), and they all live in a two-room cabin supplied by the landowner.

Like the sharecropper, a tenant farmer did not own the land he worked. Instead, he paid a yearly cash rental. He had more incentive to improve his condition because he could keep his earnings after paying the rent. Like the cropper, however, he frequently had to borrow money and often had to put a 'lien' on his crop.

The Crop 'Lien' System

A lien is a loan with goods or produce as the security. Cash was scarce after the Civil War, and few banks were open (those that were seldom did business with poor farmers), so most croppers and tenants obtained credit from the local merchant or storekeeper. The



Everyone in the family was expected to contribute

The cabin sits close to the ground, with a single layer of boards for a floor. One window, or window hole, lights each room (no glass, a wooden shutter instead). The roof leaks so badly that when the last baby was born, the mother had to move her bed three times. It has bare walls, without paper or plaster, and you can see daylight between the cracks. There is no stove, only an open fireplace. Outside there is no fence or garden (the landlord says that the cotton must be grown “up to the doorstep”), no well, because “the creek is so near” and an outhouse. Here Tom lives and works. At the age of twelve, he has been picking cotton for half of his life.

Tom is awakened or pulled out of bed at 4 o'clock in the summer by his older brother. Work for the family work force is “from can see to can't see,” — that is from daylight to dark, and the old plantation bell

tolls out the hours. The “riding boss,” as the foreman is called, sees that everyone is out on time. Because of the heat, little Jenny, aged 5, is being left at home today to care for the baby. On cooler days the baby is carried along to the field and laid on a pallet under a tree. (There are plantations where mothers of young infants are given two fifteen-minute nursing periods — once in the morning and again in the afternoon. Then they must take the baby along because there is not enough time to go home).

Tom is a good, steady chopper and can do over half a man's work. At picking time he can do two-thirds. Peter, aged nine, does a lot less than that. In fact, when Tom's father asked to stay on at the beginning to the growing season, the landlord told him he didn't see how he could keep him on for another year raising a crop on so many acres and living in such a good house, with his family so “no-account.” Tom has been to school for part of three grades. The Negro school in his district “normally” runs four months (the white schools runs six), but in the year 1932-33 it closed altogether. Since then, it has been averaging less than three months. In any case, cotton-picking season in Alabama runs well into November, and after that it is often too cold to go to school without shoes. From January on, Tom and Peter have been taking turns wearing one pair of shoes. Tom's older brother did a little better. He was a “prosperity” child, and during several of the 1925-29 seasons he got the full four-month school terms. By the time he was 13, however, he had stopped going altogether, having finished the fifth grade (20 months of education for a lifetime of work). The riding boss thought him “plenty big for a man's work and likely to get uppity soon if he don't quit school.”

At the age of 12, Tom can pick cotton for a twelve-hour day with the thermometer close to 100 degrees. All the children pick with both hands. Tom is taller now than when he started picking at age 6, and now he has to stoop much of the time or move along on his knees.

Cropping cotton is much more difficult and is done under greater time pressure, for the growing season will not wait. At age twelve, Tom has had years of experience and can keep the heavy hoe moving around the tender plants from sunup till dark. What are Tom and all of the hundreds of thousands like him in the South's cotton belt getting for giving up their childhood? Money? Education? Job skills? The hope for a bright future? On the contrary, Tom is not only burying his childhood in this cotton patch, he is not even getting a dollar of pay for working from year to year. The landlord simply adds up the number of acres Tom and his brothers did not work, his father

Digital History

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

would not get the farm for the coming year. The reward for Tom is that he can continue to be shoeless and badly fed, that he can continue to be put down and uneducated until he dies.²²

Persistence of Poverty

Through the 1990's, poverty has continued to be the plight of many African-Americans. The following statistics show that, relative to whites, African-Americans have not made as much progress as one might have hoped.

Year	Unemployment rates		
	White	Black	Multiple
1960	4.9	10.2	2.08
1970	4.4	8.2	1.86
1980	6.3	14.3	2.27
1990	4.1	11.3	2.76

Number & Percent of White and Black in Poverty

Year	# White	% White	# Black	% Black
1970	17.5 million	8.9	7.5 million	33.5
1980	19.7	10.2	8.6	32.5
1990	22.3	10.7	9.3	30.7

Income Distribution in year 2000 Dollars

Income Category	African-American	White American
Over \$50,000	14.5%	32.5%
\$35,000 - \$50,000	15.0 %	20.8%
\$25,000 - \$35,000	14.0 %	16.5%
\$15,000 - \$25,000	19.5%	16.0%
Under \$15,000	37.0%	14.2%
Medium Income	\$21,243	\$36,195²³

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Describe the agreements between Luther Mills and L. E. Thomson.
2. Describe the conditions under which, Tom, the sharecropper's son lived. Would you say that his life was significantly better than that of his grandfather?
3. Do you see a causal connection between the poverty of African-Americans in the 1870's, 1930's, and 1990's? Explain

²² Adopted from, Katherine DuPre Lumpkin, et. al., *Child Workers in America*, (International Publishers, Co.) pp. 406-10.

²³ Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Ballantine Books), pp. 103, 100, and 98.