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NEGRO FARM OWNERSHIP IN THE SOUTH

JAMES S. FISHER

ABSTRACT. Rural Negroes achieved farm ownership in the southern United States after the Civil War. The number of Negro farm owners has declined substantially from a peak of more than 200,000 around World War I, yet they remain significant in some areas. The small size of Negro farms, and the limited capital of their owners, will make their survival difficult. Many of these landholdings now have greater social value than economic significance. **KEY WORDS:** *Agriculture, Negroes, Ownership of land, Southern United States.*

THE Negro has participated in American agriculture as slave, as tenant, and more recently, as cash wage hand. He has contributed a wealth of labor, most often as a landless peasant, but as farm owner he has also been a part of the rural South for many decades. Nearly twenty-five percent (218,467) of all nonwhite farm operators were classified as owners in 1910 by the Bureau of Census. The number of nonwhite owners has decreased greatly since that peak year, but not nearly as rapidly as the number of tenants, and in 1969 more than eighty percent of all nonwhite farm operators were classed as owners (Table 1).

Negro farm land ownership has been confined mainly to the South, and within the South, to those areas where Negroes have accounted for a large proportion of the total rural population. Negroes began acquiring land almost immediately after the Civil War. The number of owners and their acreage increased until 1910 or 1920, and subsequently declined. The development of a black landowning class was originally restrained by economic and social forces, and later disrupted by new forces which have encouraged change in the South. The likelihood of a large black landowning class in the rural South was never great, and its very existence is becoming even more unlikely. Despite that fact, those rural black landowners who do remain deserve consideration.

Beale predicted that the rural Negro population will not drop below 4,500,000, and may begin to increase by 1975.¹ The socioeconomic

gap between rural whites and nonwhites is widening.² The persistence of a large rural black population, and the failure to improve its socioeconomic condition during the past two decades, suggest a high probability of increasing severity of problems for many rural areas. These areas, if hopeless for the Negro, will only continue functioning as "seedbeds" for the cities. Serious attention to opportunities for blacks in rural areas is essential.

A residual rural black population with low education levels and limited skills will inherit the low paying and low status farm labor jobs, or those which are agriculturally related. In our society these jobs have not meant stability or security. Meaningful opportunities for rural blacks can only exist for those with some direct control of the basic rural resource—land. In the South traditional tenancy is dead, or little more than a relic institution in a few places, and it never meant control of land for the tenant. Meaningful participation in agriculture in the South will only be for landowners and/or those with capital and organizational ability. Few Negroes have these advantages. Nevertheless, those Negroes who do own land should be studied to determine the social and economic significances of such land, and whether or not that land may provide some hope of satisfaction and stability for the owners. The fact that Negro landowners have resisted migration more than tenants and cash wage hands does not ensure their survival. Will the Negro farm owner be able to participate in American agriculture in a meaningful way?

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¹ C. L. Beale, "The Negro in American Agriculture," in J. P. Davis, ed., *The American Negro Reference*

Book (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), pp. 203-04.

² J. D. Cowhig and C. L. Beale, "Socioeconomic Differences Between White and Nonwhite Farm Populations in the South," *Social Forces*, Vol. 42 (1964), pp. 354-62.

Isolating the Negro landowner for study may seem illogical. His problems and the economic forces to which he must react are essentially the same as for any other farmer. Collectively he contributes little to the national economy. Nevertheless, because he has been located almost totally in the South, he is not just a farmer, but a "Negro farmer." Becoming a farmer in the South has meant distinctive characteristics for him as a farm operator and for the landholding as a farm. These characteristics will have major influences on attempts by the Negro farmer to adapt to contemporary conditions.

DATA

Studies which deal with Negro farm owners are limited.³ Tenancy was so extensive that discussions of Southern agriculture rarely included more than passing observation on ownership. The United States *Census of Agriculture* was the source for most data used in this study, because reasonably uniform coverage was available for large areas and over an extended period. "Non-white" data were most commonly used. Restriction to the South ensured that nonwhite data primarily represented Negroes, because other nonwhites were less than three percent of the total. Oklahoma and North Carolina were the only states in which nonwhite farm operators

other than Negroes were of some importance.⁴

Census reports include data for units classified as farms. Rural land which is owned by nonwhites, but does not meet the Bureau of Census definition of farm, is excluded, as is the landowner. Most such holdings are small, but are an omission which results from dependence upon Census data. The Census data have utility for identifying gross distribution patterns and for assessing the social and economic significance of land in the farm category. County tax digests in Georgia are an excellent data source on Negro landownership.⁵ All rural land privately owned is included, but with information only on the number of owners and their acreage. A comparison of data from both sources indicates that Negro landowners are far more numerous than Census data suggest. Although the digests are excellent for local studies, data for large areas such as the South are neither uniformly available nor easily retrievable. Tax digest data on Georgia counties however, have allowed comparisons and checking of the quality of Census data.

DISTRIBUTION OF NONWHITE OWNERSHIP

The most significant areas of nonwhite ownership in 1969 had values between twenty and thirty-five percent (Fig. 1). Some areas with relatively high percentages of nonwhite ownership had small absolute numbers, because these areas had few farmers (Fig. 2).⁶ Tidewater Virginia, coastal Georgia, and southwest Georgia are among such areas. Areas with relatively

³ Sources which provide some focus on this topic are: W. E. Du Bois, *The Negro Landholder in Georgia*, Bulletin of the Department of Labor, No. 35 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901); E. M. Banks, *The Economics of Land Tenure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1905); R. P. Brooks, "The Agrarian Revolution in Georgia, 1865-1912," *Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin*, No. 639, History Series, Vol. III, No. 3 (1914); L. P. Jackson, "The Virginia Free Negro Farmer, 1830-1860," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 24 (1939), pp. 390-439; C. S. Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), pp. 103-19; H. Powdermaker, *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South* (New York: The Viking Press, 1939), pp. 94-110; A. F. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936), pp. 110-42; W. E. Garnett and J. M. Ellison, *Negro Life in Rural Virginia, 1865-1934*, Bulletin 295 (Blacksburg: Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, 1935); L. D. Rice, "The Negro in Texas, 1874-1900," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Texas Technological College, 1960; *A Study of Negro Farmers in South Carolina* (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, 1962), pp. 1-20; and J. O. Wheeler and S. D. Brunn, "Negro Migration into Rural Southwestern Michigan," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 58 (1968), pp. 214-30.

⁴ In the 1964 Census of Agriculture nonwhite other than Negro (Indian) accounted for thirty-six percent of the nonwhite farm operators in Oklahoma. In North Carolina eight percent of the nonwhite farm operators were other than Negro. Most notable were the Lumbees of Robeson County.

⁵ The practice of distinguishing in county tax digests between "white" and "colored" owners of property was begun shortly after the Civil War. Concern over civil rights led to the abandonment of this practice in the mid-1960s. In coastal Georgia and the Georgia Piedmont, where the farm function of rural landholdings has greatly diminished, the number of farms reported in the Census of Agriculture are often one third or less of all holdings actually owned by Negroes.

⁶ As an example, Liberty County in coastal Georgia had few farmers in 1964, but twenty-seven percent were Negro owners. Most of the 1,700 rural Negro holdings were less than fifty acres, and functioned mainly as residential property and garden plots. The owners had nonfarm jobs.

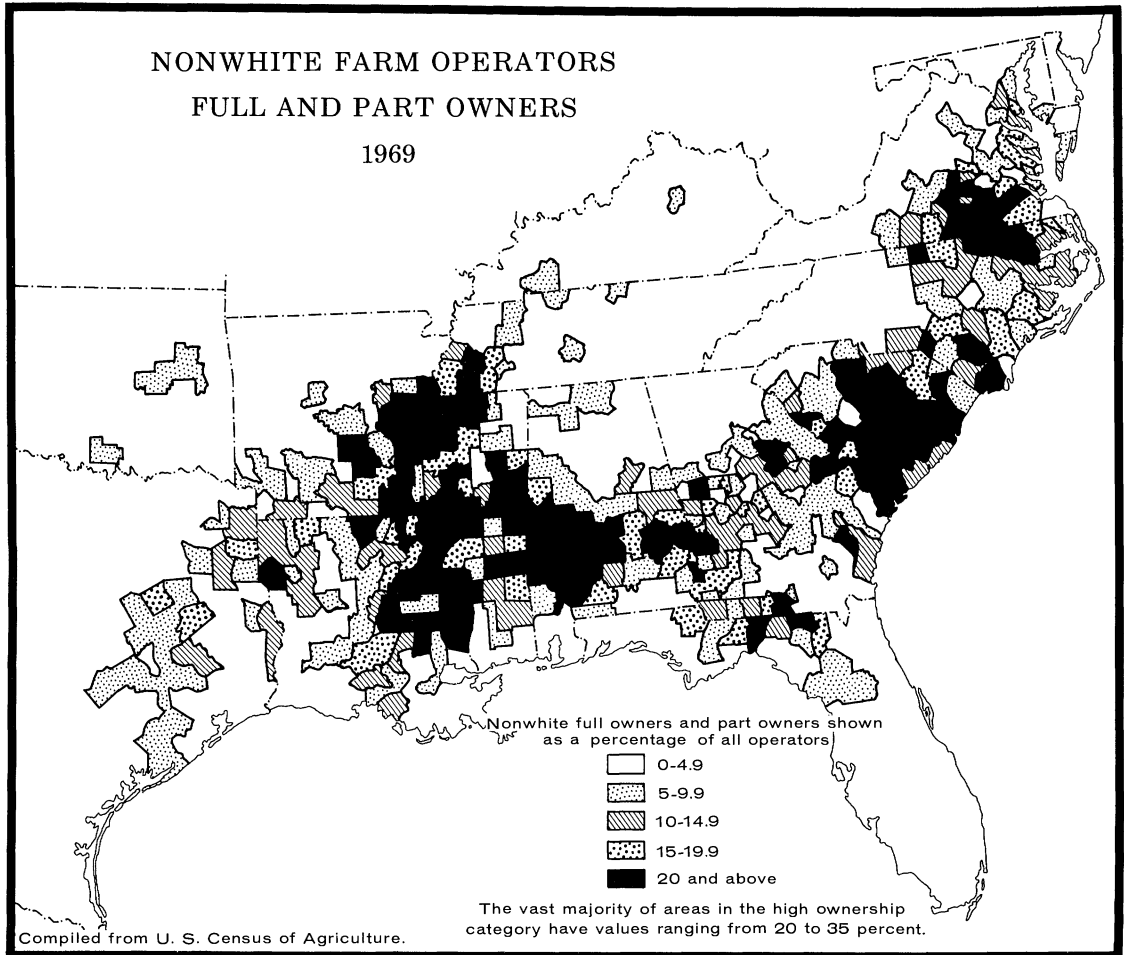


FIG. 1.

high percentages of nonwhite ownership and significant absolute values were:

- 1) the Coastal Plain and Piedmont of Virginia and North Carolina;
- 2) the Coastal Plain of South Carolina and southeastern North Carolina;
- 3) the Red Hills south of the Alabama Black Belt and their counterpart in eastern Mississippi;
- 4) the Pine Hills of southern Mississippi and adjacent Louisiana;
- 5) the area extending northward from the Pine Hills of Mississippi through the Bluff Hills into southwestern Tennessee; and
- 6) the hill lands of northern Louisiana and northeastern Texas.

The general distribution of farms owned by nonwhites had been established by 1910. Negro ownership is associated with areas in which Negroes had lived before becoming freedmen (Figs. 1 and 2). Small numbers of nonwhite landholdings had been created in areas where large landholdings (plantations) had been most important.

INITIAL ACQUISITION

The most important phase of acquisition began shortly after the Civil War, and for most areas ended between 1910 and 1920. Negroes owned a rural acreage in antebellum times which is little more than a historical curiosity. The most notable exception was Virginia, where the number of free Negro farm owners doubled

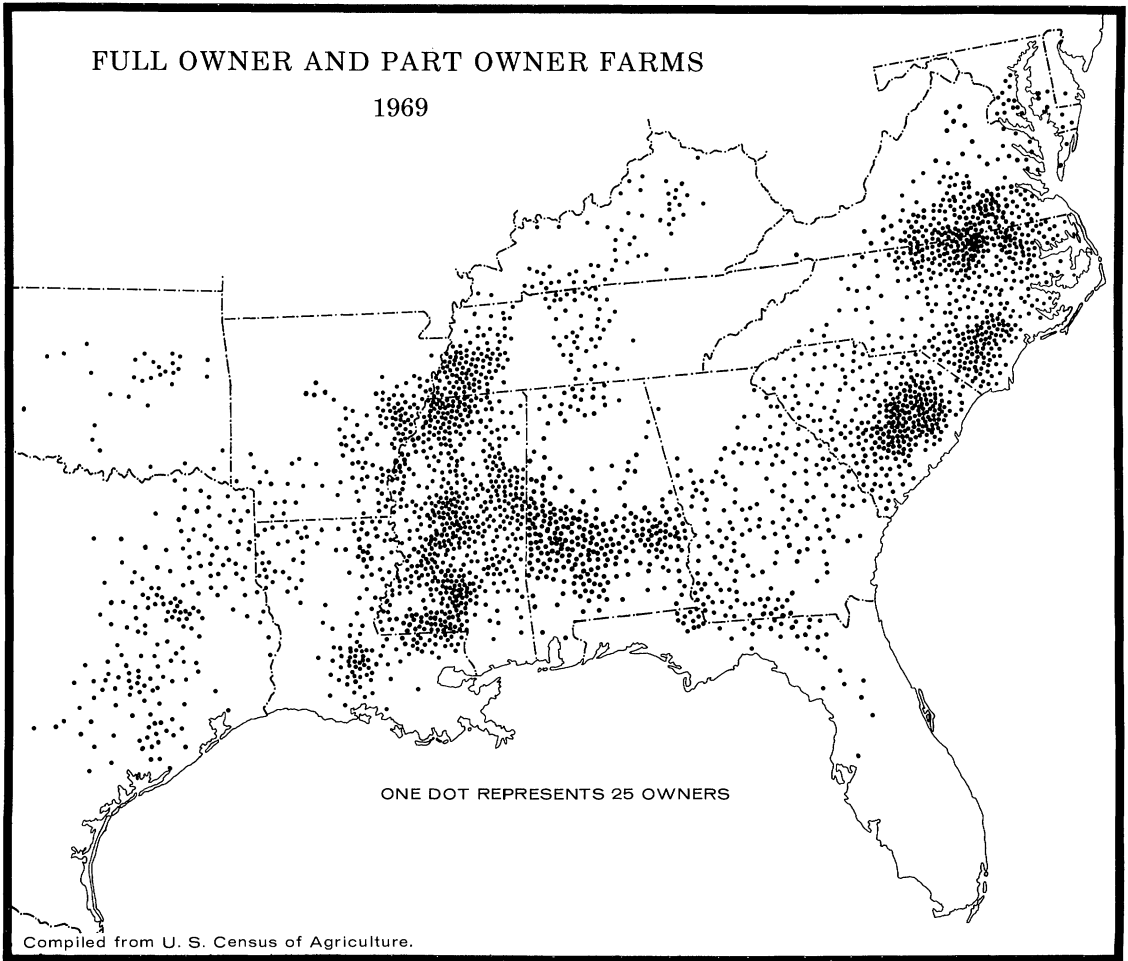


FIG. 2.

between 1830 and 1860.⁷ During the postbellum period the majority of the freedmen remained landless laborers, and the Negro farm

⁷ Jackson, *op. cit.*, footnote 3, pp. 406-14. Negroes owned more than 1,300 tracts of land in Virginia in 1860, mainly in Tidewater counties. L. C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States*, Vol. 1 (New York: Peter Smith, 1949), p. 528, referred to legislative attempts to prohibit landownership by Negroes as early as 1818. One might infer that some viewed Negro landownership as a potential problem, but this does not seem to have been widespread. F. L. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Travellers' Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), p. 262, noted plantations and slaves owned by Negroes along the lower Mississippi River in Louisiana. "Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830," published by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in the *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 9 (1924), noted that most Negro slave owners

owner remained clearly in the minority, but by 1900 slightly more than twenty-five percent of all Negro farm operators were either full or part owners.⁸ This group represented seven percent of all Southern farm operators (Table 1).⁹ The process by which these owners acquired land limited the number of Negroes who would become landowners and the acreage acquired. The

were urban; as with the acquisition of property, social and economic barriers were much greater in rural areas. An exception may have been Louisiana, where rural slave ownership by free Negroes was apparently more common.

⁸ Part owners are farm operators who own a farm and rent or lease additional land.

⁹ Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, Historical Statistics, Series E 43-60. Classifications of farm operator by tenure and color were first presented in the Census of 1900.

TABLE 1.—SOUTHERN NONWHITE FARM OWNERSHIP^a

Census year	Total nonwhite farm owners ^b	Nonwhite owners as a percentage of all operators	Nonwhite operators ^c	Nonwhite owners as a percentage of all nonwhite operators	Nonwhite part owners as a percentage of all nonwhite owners
1900	186,676	7.1	740,670	25.2	15.1
1910	218,467	7.1	890,141	24.5	19.8
1920	217,589	6.8	922,914	23.6	17.9
1925	194,540	6.2	831,455	23.4	17.9
1930	182,019	5.7	881,687	20.6	22.8
1935	186,065	5.4	815,747	22.8	19.1
1940	173,263	5.8	680,266	25.5	18.1
1945	189,232	6.7	665,413	28.4	14.9
1950	193,346	7.3	559,090	34.6	26.7
1954	180,590	7.8	463,476	39.0	28.1
1959	127,283	7.7	265,621	47.9	29.5
1964	102,062	7.4	184,578	55.3	30.6
1969	67,922	5.8	84,397	80.5	22.6

Source: *U. S. Census of Agriculture*.

^a All data are for the South as delimited by the Bureau of Census.

^b Includes "full" and "part" owners.

^c Includes owners, part owners, managers, and tenants.

conditions thereby established are significant to the adjustments which Negro landowners have had to make during this century. The postbellum nonwhite ownership of land began almost immediately after emancipation. Initial acquisitions occurred through confiscation and redistribution, inheritance, or direct purchase.

During the Civil War significant acreages of plantation lands were confiscated along the coast of the Carolinas and Georgia and the Mississippi River in Louisiana. The administration of these lands was placed under the Freedmen's Bureau (1865).¹⁰ Initial efforts by the Bureau involved leasing of land; there were later attempts to provide titles to freedmen, but little land was ever placed permanently under their control. Nearly all of the acreage was eventually restored to former owners. Though some contemporary Negro-owned farms in coastal South Carolina originated in redistribution projects of the federal government after the Civil War, the Bureau's long term impact was extremely limited.¹¹

¹⁰ Paul S. Pierce, *The Freedmen's Bureau*, Bulletin No. 74, New Series (Iowa City: State University of Iowa, 1904).

¹¹ Pierce, *op. cit.*, footnote 10; Du Bois, *op. cit.*, footnote 3, p. 648; M. Abbott, "Free Land, Free Labor, and the Freedmen's Bureau," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 30 (1956), pp. 150-56; and H. A. White, "The Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Tulane University, 1956, pp. 63-64. White discussed cooperative efforts by Negroes interested in land settlement on former plantations; their applications for land appear to have been denied.

Attempts to use the provisions of the Homestead Act of 1862 and the Land Act of 1866 to encourage settlement of public lands in the Gulf states (in particular, in Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama) by both black and white settlers failed because of lack of capital, social attitudes, and a limited knowledge of procedure and availability of land. No more than 4,000 Negroes participated in such settlement programs. Most claim entries were in Florida.¹² Neither the public land programs, the Freedmen's Bureau, nor the few cooperative and communal attempts by Negroes themselves at occupying and settling land were very successful.¹³ Most Negroes came to control land as individuals, occasionally by inheritance, but

S. Gottschalk in *South Today*, Vol. 3 (September, 1971), p. 8, noted problems of contemporary owners in maintaining ownership of the small farms which evolved from that era.

¹² Du Bois, *op. cit.*, footnote 3, p. 648; C. F. Pope, "Southern Homesteads for Negroes," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 44 (1970), pp. 201-13; and White, *op. cit.*, footnote 11, pp. 65-71. White discusses the attempt (and failure) of the Freedmen's Bureau to settle Negroes on public land in Louisiana.

¹³ Jackson, *op. cit.*, footnote 3, p. 422, mentions slaveowners who manumitted slaves and settled them on land in Ohio, Illinois, and Michigan. See Du Bois, *op. cit.*, footnote 3, p. 666; White, *op. cit.*, footnote 11, p. 63; Rice, *op. cit.*, footnote 3, pp. 291-97; Powdermaker, *op. cit.*, footnote 3, pp. 95-99; and W. H. Pease and J. H. Pease, *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1963), for comments on attempts at land acquisition by Negroes.

TABLE 2.—NONWHITE FARM OWNERS IN
SELECTED SOUTHERN STATES

	All owners as a percentage of all nonwhite operators 1910	All owners in 1969 as a percentage of 1910
Maryland	61.9	14.4
Virginia	66.9	14.4
North Carolina	32.6	45.2
South Carolina	21.0	36.9
Georgia	12.7	28.4
Florida	49.5	17.0
Kentucky	50.5	26.7
Tennessee	27.9	36.4
Alabama	15.4	42.3
Mississippi	15.1	58.1
Arkansas	23.0	20.6
Louisiana	19.5	36.2
Oklahoma	53.9	8.0
Texas	30.3	22.4

Computed from: *U. S. Census of Agriculture.*

more commonly through direct purchase, over a half century following emancipation.¹⁴ Inheritance from former owners or employers probably occurred during several decades after emancipation, but the results are difficult to ascertain. Direct purchase has been by far the most important means of obtaining land.

The proportion of nonwhite operators who were owners in 1910 ranged from sixty-six percent in Virginia to thirteen percent in Georgia (Table 2). Where the plantation system and Negro labor had been significant, Negro acquisition was easier where land of lower value was available, or where the production system showed signs of deterioration. Such land had less significance for whites, and less resistance was raised to nonwhite ownership. Du Bois termed some of these "waste lands or bankrupt plantations."¹⁵ Land which had value for whites was not readily available for blacks, whether locally numerous or not. Tax data and early work in Georgia allowed a more thorough study of the process.

The acquisition of land in coastal Georgia and South Carolina was more rapid than elsewhere, and ownership attained high levels. At the close of the antebellum period the coastal

region contrasted distinctly with land immediately inland. The ten to twenty mile wide coastal zone consisting of Sea Islands, the banks of major rivers, and adjacent tidal swamps was useful for cotton and rice production. It was the domain of the large planter and slaveowner. Rice planters faced ruin after the Civil War. The adaptation to a new labor system was one of several problems. The intense and arduous labor requirements could not easily be satisfied with free labor. What was sometimes viewed as a lack of reliability on the part of freedmen was partially encouraged by the availability and low cost of land—both in the coastal zone and in the adjacent sparsely settled Pine Barrens.¹⁶ The freedman was able to move into the Barrens, or purchase small plots on declining plantations, and practice a quasi-subsistence agriculture supplemented by irregular labor elsewhere. The beginnings of this minute landed element were favored by the sale of land at low cost and the availability of undeveloped land. The limited capital of freedmen ensured that their holdings would be small even if land was inexpensive.

Southwest Georgia was another area of early growth in Negro land ownership. Banks attributed this early growth to the availability of unused land.¹⁷ The plantation system was less well established, and the Negro population was actually smaller than the white, but the low demand for land favored Negro ownership. Less desirable land, or that which was declining in utility, was more readily available for purchase by blacks. Areas adjacent to major plantation regions became significant for nonwhite ownership. The Pine Hills of Mississippi and the Red

¹⁶ Earnings accumulated over a year, when paid, allowed Negroes to buy cheap land, adding to the labor problems of planters attempting to reestablish plantations after the Civil War; F. B. Leigh, *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation Since the War* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1883), pp. 79 and 156. A similar account of Negroes who "bought land at a very small price in the adjoining pine woods and drifted into settlements there," is in "Inquiries I, 1912," a collection of letters written by former planters to R. P. Brooks and placed in the University of Georgia Library.

¹⁷ Banks, op. cit., footnote 3, pp. 62–68; Raper, op. cit., footnote 3, pp. 111–42, observed that quality and value of land, location relative to prominent white owners, and distance from towns had significant effects on the distribution of Negro owners within communities.

¹⁴ G. B. Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes, 1877–1900* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1952), p. 103, pointed out that even in Beaufort County, South Carolina, when federal attempts to provide land for Negroes were intense, most who had achieved owner status by 1876 had done so through their own efforts.

¹⁵ Du Bois, op. cit., footnote 3, p. 665.

Hills of Alabama and Mississippi were adjacent to classic plantation areas.

The significance of more generous attitudes toward nonwhite ownership for the rapid development of Negro ownership in Virginia is difficult to evaluate. Probably more important, eastern Virginia and Maryland had experienced significant agricultural changes by the time of the Civil War.¹⁸ The productivity of land had fluctuated, land values had varied, and the basic production systems had been modified. The change involved less dependence upon row crops, especially tobacco, and an increase in the use of systems considered less exploitive, such as general farming.

Whether valid or not, some of the problems of agriculture in the region were attributed to the plantation system, slave labor, and tobacco. Negative attitudes were evident before the Civil War, and contributed to easier acceptance of nonwhite ownership of land.¹⁹ This area was more completely ravaged by the War, and there was less return to traditional systems of agriculture in Virginia than in other parts of the South. An outmigration of whites from some rural areas actually took place. All of these factors, although difficult to measure, contributed toward easing the barriers to Negro ownership by reducing the importance of land. Though nonwhite acquisition of farms occurred more often and more frequently in Virginia and southern Maryland than elsewhere, the decrease also came earlier and has been almost continuous since 1920.

The notion that land of decreasing value to whites favored Negro ownership does not imply that acquisition of land by blacks was impossible in areas where the planter was more successful after the Civil War. The lower Piedmont of Georgia also experienced growth in Negro ownership after the Civil War, but at a slower rate. Many planters returned to their traditional production systems with relative ease. Initial labor problems were overcome as the area adapted the tenancy system commonly associated with

the South. Land maintained a higher value for whites and was less readily available to blacks. The total number of owners remained lower, particularly during the later decades of the nineteenth century. The plantation system began to deteriorate in parts of the Southern Piedmont after the turn of the century, and rates of nonwhite acquisition increased.

A more involved process determined land purchases in areas where land retained its value and traditional systems were stable. Land acquisition in areas such as the southern Piedmont was as much the function of a social equation as a business transaction. The personal relationship between the owner, the prospective owner, and local society was very important, whether ownership was achieved by inheritance or direct purchase. The initial step often began with the original owner. In seventy-five percent of the Georgia case studies where more than twenty-five acres was involved, the white man, or original owner, had taken the initiative by suggesting a transfer of ownership.²⁰ More than sixty percent of the purchases were from former landlords, and more than half of the remainder were from merchants with whom the new owners had had business dealings. Tenancy commonly preceded ownership, as did a number of years during which the black tenant exhibited qualities such as "keeping his place," thrift, honesty, and hard work which might ultimately qualify him as a landowner.²¹ Acceptance of the Negro as landowner, whether mere tolerance or warm welcome, came only by a highly selective process.

The benevolent intent of original white owners was that a really good man should own his land and work it for himself to assure him a means of supporting his family, but it did not mean that he was being given the opportunity to change his economic and social position within the larger society. A parcel of a larger landholding was used to establish a farm of

¹⁸ A. O. Craven, "Soil Exhaustion As a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606-1860," *University of Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences*, Vol. 13 (1925), pp. 122-79.

¹⁹ W. H. Yarbrough, *Economic Aspects of Slavery in Relation to Southern and Southeastern Migration* (Nashville: George Peabody College for Teachers, 1932), pp. 14-16; and J. Gottman, *Virginia in Our Century* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1969), pp. 99-141 and 144-87.

²⁰ Raper, op. cit., footnote 3, pp. 121-25; Powdermaker, op. cit., footnote 3, pp. 94-110; Rice, op. cit., footnote 3, pp. 287-89; A. A. Taylor, "The Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 11 (1926), pp. 372-76; and J. Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction, 1861-1877* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), pp. 155-56.

²¹ Jackson, op. cit., footnote 3, implied that tenancy was also the common intermediate step among those who achieved ownership during the antebellum period in Virginia.

minimal acreage. When land was acquired by inheritance, a holding might be divided among several tenants, or a portion might be given to one individual. A Negro who acquired land wholly on his own initiative rarely had capital for more than a small farm. The result was, in either situation, a small farm on lower quality land.²² The intentions of the former owner had merit, and the realization of land ownership by the individual must have been gratifying, but the worth of such a small tract of land would not have been great enough to assure economic stability and attachment to the rural South for the new owner or for his descendants.

Available data are inadequate for a review of the growth of nonwhite farm ownership before 1900, but they suggest fluctuations. Economic depression lowered the rate of acquisition, and even decreased ownership, during the early 1880s.²³ Ku Klux Klan activity virtually stopped progress in Georgia in 1876.²⁴ Violent "white-capping" was fomented by small white landowners in Mississippi, and directed at Negro owners as well as those who promoted Negro advancement.²⁵ Despite temporary setbacks, by 1910 more than 218,000 nonwhite farm owners were reported by the Bureau of Census.²⁶ The overwhelming majority (211,087) were Negro owners, who accounted for twenty-four percent of all Negro farm operators (Table 1).

The Negro acquired land during and after Reconstruction, when social and racial attitudes were major factors affecting opportunity for nonwhites. The weaknesses of the agrarian southern economy were frequently evident during this period, yet Negroes clearly wanted land and saw it as the means of providing some economic security and social position. Owning land meant that residential stability and identification with a community was possible. Though the black community had little external influence, it did have internal organization and structure,

and the landowners provided the leadership. They were the black community spokesmen, the mediators between black and white, the church deacons, and the lodge leaders. A certain economic security and independence was also derived from owning land. The farmer, in addition to cash crops, could produce food for his family.

PROSPECTS

Acquisition of land by blacks increased in most southern states until 1910 or 1920, but since then the border states (Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Florida) have experienced almost continuous decline in the number of nonwhite farm owners (Fig. 3). The other southern states have had less decrease, partly because of renewed acquisitions between 1940 and 1950 (Fig. 4). Acquisition was encouraged by the favorable price of cotton between 1910 and 1920, but the boll weevil and low prices of the 1920s brought acquisition to an end even before the national depression of the 1930s. Renewed acquisition in the 1940s corresponded with major black migration from the South; favorable prices allowed the frugal to expand and buy farms while the landless were moving away.²⁷ The number of farms owned by nonwhites has declined sharply since the second ownership peak in 1954.

The acreage controlled by nonwhite owners corresponds closely with variations in the number of owner operators. The same is not true for white operators. Reorganization of Southern agriculture during recent decades extended white control of land even though the number of farmers decreased. Former tenant farms are now included in the acreage of white owner operated farms. Nonwhite farm owners have not fared well. While all land in farms has changed very little, the acreage of nonwhite full owners decreased by 1969 to thirty percent of what it had been in 1910. As the number of black owners decreases, their acreage is not accumulated by other black farmers, and their already limited control of land weakens.

The Negro landowner is not adapting in a manner which will ensure his survival as a farmer. The great majority have been small tobacco or cotton farmers, and have been slow

²² Raper, *op. cit.*, footnote 3, pp. 122-30; Rubin Martin, *Plantation County* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), pp. 61-62; and Rice, *op. cit.*, footnote 3, pp. 289-91.

²³ Banks, *op. cit.*, footnote 3, pp. 69-70.

²⁴ Du Bois, *op. cit.*, footnote 3, p. 669.

²⁵ W. F. Holmes, "Whitecapping: Agrarian Violence in Mississippi, 1902-1906," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 35 (1969), pp. 165-85.

²⁶ Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, *Negro Population in the United States: 1790-1915* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1918), pp. 570-75.

²⁷ W. Range, *A Century of Georgia Agriculture: 1850-1950* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1954), p. 282.

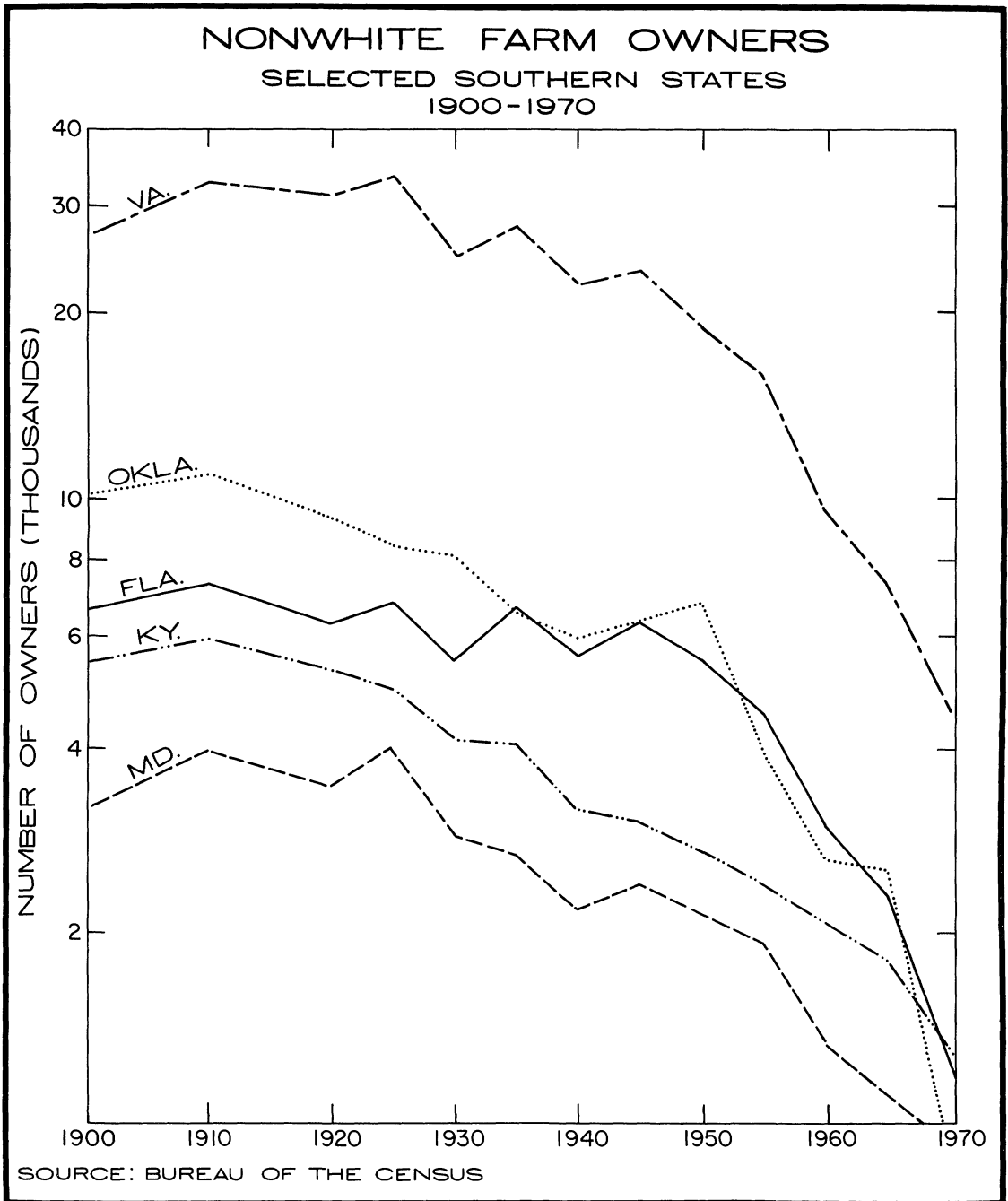


FIG. 3.

to shift from traditional systems. The areas in which these traditional crops have declined have also been the areas in which the number of Negro farm owners decreased early and rapidly. Reluctance to change farming systems, plus proximity to nonfarm employment opportuni-

ties, have contributed to the early decline of the number of Negro owned farms in the border states and the southern Piedmont (Fig. 3). The areas in which cotton and tobacco had declined the least remained the major areas of Negro ownership in 1969 (Fig. 2), but the rate of de-

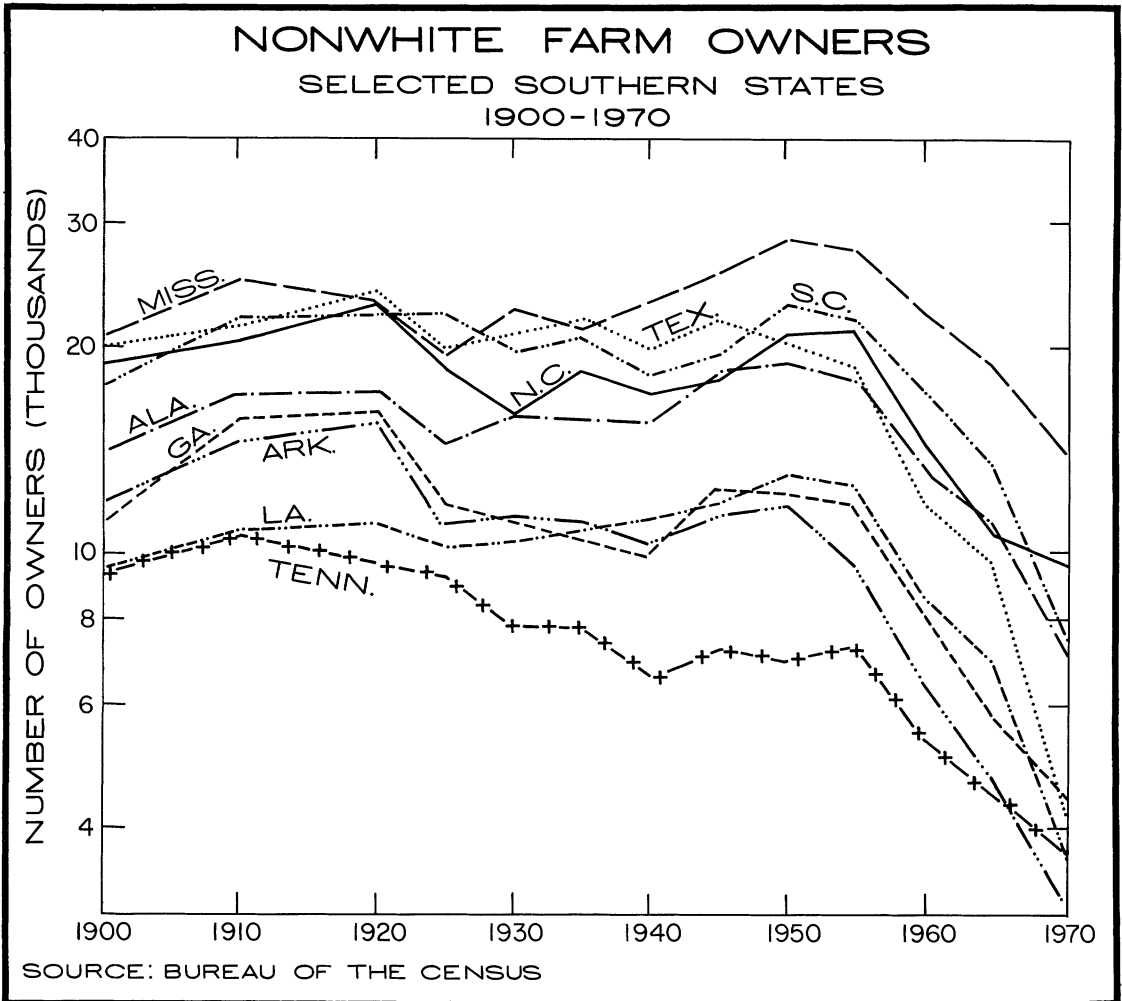


FIG. 4.

cline since 1954 has been high even in these areas (Fig. 4).

The limited adaptability of the Negro farmer may be the result of his limited land and resources.²⁸ The most notable and persistent trait of the Negro farm has been its small size, which was not a serious handicap initially. Cash cropping of tobacco and cotton was supplemented by production of crops and livestock for home use. This combination of commercial and home use production helped Negro farmers to survive the boll weevil and the low prices of the 1920s and 1930s, and many fared no worse than their

white counterparts.²⁹ Since 1950, however, size has become critical. The average farm size in the United States has increased substantially, but the size of Negro owned farms has changed very little, and most are less than 100 acres. The acreage necessary for viable agricultural production has increased greatly, but acreage allotments and marketing quotas have been used to control production, and so the allotments of many farms have fallen into the "too small"

²⁸ R. D. Bell, *An Economic Study of Farms Operated by Negro Farmers in Claiborne County, Mississippi*, Mimeographed Report 10 (Oxford: Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station, 1952), pp. 48-49.

²⁹ Raper, *op. cit.*, footnote 3, pp. 111-16, documents the impact of high prices for several years followed by boll weevil devastation and lower prices on farmers who had recently become owners. Farmers who had been established longer and practiced cash cropping and home use production appeared more stable than tenants or larger producers dependent upon extensive credit.

category; this has been the fate of most allotments held by Negro farmers. The farmer with a "too small" allotment can expand his operation, continue his traditional method of production, or stop farming. Expansion requires more capital, a larger acreage allotment, and often more land; the other alternatives imply retirement from farming, the necessity of nonfarm employment, or continuation of a production system which does not provide a satisfactory income.

The Negro farmer, like other small farmers, is unable to expand his operation by renting land with crop allotments, or leasing allotments.³⁰ Diversification by the inclusion of a livestock operation, or a complete shift to livestock farming, requires substantial amounts of land for a suitable income level. The Negro farmer has not had, nor will he have, the amount of land necessary for livestock farming.³¹ Many farms on the Piedmont are operated as small livestock farms when nonfarm employment is available, but the Negro, of course, has had less access to nonfarm job opportunities than small white farmers, and in some areas nonfarm jobs simply have not been available.³²

The inability of Negro farm owners to adapt is reflected also in limited commercialism. Only fifty percent of their farms are classed as com-

mmercial (sixty-three percent for whites). Less than six percent of the commercial farms had gross sales greater than \$10,000; these were mainly the more progressive part owners. Most Negro owners produced at a level which could not provide a reasonable income. Many, nevertheless, continue to reside on their land, often older people who produce some garden crops and livestock for home use. Not all of the limited commercialism can be attributed to conditions beyond the immediate control of the farmer. He commonly has a less advanced attitude toward improved methods and commercial production, and therefore does not use his land as effectively as he might.³³ The attitude problem may stem partially from limited education levels and the high age level.

A handicap which sets the Negro farmer distinctively apart from his white counterpart is his limited influence with federal agencies involved in agricultural affairs, especially those whose programs are administered by local committees elected by local farmers; social attitudes and his own hesitance have virtually excluded him from participation in the administration of the programs which vitally affect him.³⁴ Such exclusion means less likelihood of sharing in redistributed allotments, of receiving farm loans which might allow improvements, or participating in conservation programs which aid in developing other farming systems.

SUMMARY

A modest but definite beginning of rural Negro landowning was evident early in this century. Most such holdings functioned as farms producing cash crops and home use commodities. Their drastic decline, particularly since 1954, is indicative of serious problems for those owners who might hope to survive as

³⁰ Renting involves land as well as the needed crop acreage allotment. Leasing an allotment may involve no land directly but rather allows a transfer of the right to produce to another property. Larger operators with the necessary capital and equipment frequently rent or lease several units from smaller operators to form one larger centrally managed farm operation.

³¹ Field studies by P. Ries for a dissertation in progress in the Department of Geography at the University of Georgia found that Negro farmers in Macon County, Georgia, who attempted to include commercial livestock in their farm operations ultimately reverted to cash cropping because extensive land use on small farms simply did not return the necessary income.

³² The lack of alternatives to small scale farming probably has contributed to instances where Negro owners declined less rapidly than white owners. They were encouraged to remain self-employed for a longer time out of necessity, even though their income level remained low. E. S. Bryant and K. M. Leung, *Mississippi Farm Trends, 1950-1964*, Bulletin 754 (State College: Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station, 1967), p. 5, noted that in areas of Mississippi where nonwhite ownership was relatively high, Negro ownership decreased much less rapidly than white ownership from 1950 to 1960. By the early 1960s both were declining at similar rates.

³³ Beale, *op. cit.*, footnote 1, pp. 176-78.

³⁴ See Southern Regional Council, "A Study of the Negro Farmers in South Carolina," No. 23, December, 1962, pp. 1-25, for an analysis of the meaning of federal agricultural programs to Negroes. The study focused on the Farmers Home Administration, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, the Cooperative Farm Credit System, and the Department of Agriculture Extension Service. See also U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Equal Opportunity in Farm Programs, an Appraisal of Services Rendered by Agencies of the United States Department of Agriculture* (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1965), pp. 1-136.

farmers. It is not likely that these farmers, with small holdings, little capital, beyond middle age, without descendants interested in agriculture, and with limited accessibility to institutional resources, will make a significant effort to modernize their farms. A continued decrease in the number of Negro farm owners appears inevitable.