

# Land Loss and the Renewed Struggle of African American Farmers

African Americans in rural areas of the South have continued their campaigns amid massive removals and impoverishment

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*In the years between 1910 and 2000, African American farmers and agricultural workers lost over 14 million acres of land.*

*One of the major demands of the post-Civil War era was the allocation of land to the formerly enslaved Africans in order to establish a foundation for building a self-sufficient community.*

As the Union army swept across Georgia and other coastal areas of the southeast from Florida to South Carolina, **General William T. Sherman** in January 1865 issued his Special Field Order No. 15 which provided for the confiscation of Confederate controlled land and its redistribution to emancipated Africans. On January 12, Sherman met with leaders within the African community, many of whom were Baptist and Methodist ministers, who urged the Union military forces and **President Abraham Lincoln** to take immediate action.

The policy had the approval of President Lincoln and the agency founded during this period known as the Freedmen's Bureau. The Freedmen's Bureau was designed to assist Africans in their effort to transition from captivity under the Confederacy to being controlled by the Union military into an independent existence after the war.

The Order took control of huge swaths of land and granted each enslaved family 40-acre plots along with mules. The notion of 40 acres and a mule for formerly enslaved Africans grew out of a practical post-Civil War necessity in regard to disempowering the slavocracy and providing the capacity of Blacks to gain self-reliance.

An [entry in the Encyclopedia of Georgia](#) says of this period that:

"The immediate effect of Sherman's order provided for the settlement of roughly 40,000 Black Americans (both refugees and locals who had been under Union army

administration in the Sea Islands since 1861). This lifted the burden of supporting the freedpeople from Sherman's army as it turned north into South Carolina. But the order was a short-lived promise for Blacks. Despite the objections of General Oliver O. Howard, the Freedmen's Bureau chief, U.S. President Andrew Johnson overturned Sherman's directive in the fall of 1865, after the war had ended, and returned most of the land along the South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida coasts to the planters who had originally owned it."

Despite this historic betrayal by Lincoln's successor, President Johnson, African Americans through their own initiatives within a weakened Southern economy and racist political structures, were able to acquire approximately 16 million acres of land from the period of Reconstruction to the eve of World War I. Most of these land holdings were utilized as family farms by the millions of African Americans remaining in the former Confederate states after collapse of Reconstruction and the institutionalization of Jim Crow segregation through legislative and court actions on local, state and federal levels.

Consequently, the call for reparations to be paid to the descendants of formerly enslaved Africans must also extend to the post-Civil War and Reconstruction period. African Americans continue to be impacted by the legacy of Atlantic slave trade and the domestic national oppression experienced in the U.S. some 160 years since the Emancipation Proclamation.

[Even Bloomberg News](#), a publication which reports on and analyzes the dimensions of Wall Street transactions and global commerce noted in an article published in 2022:

"African-American farmers lost about \$326 billion worth of land in the U.S. due to discrimination during the 20th century, a study found. From 1922 to 1997, Black farmers in 17 American states saw a precipitous decline in their acreage caused by state-sanctioned violence and intimidation, according to the paper. The study, which analyzed U.S. Department of Agriculture census data, will be published in the American Economic Association's Papers and Proceedings journal. Reuters reported on the study earlier."

Another source, the [American Bar Association](#), emphasized in an article published on their website in January 2023, said of the historical theft of Black owned land in the U.S.:

"By 1997, Black farmers lost more than 90 percent of the 16 million acres they owned in 1910.

In a recent study, we used county-level Census of Agriculture data to estimate the value of the lost Black agricultural land from 1920 to 1997. For all counties in each of the 17 (mostly southern) states that comprised over 90 percent of all Black-owned farmland, we calculated the yearly acreage loss, multiplied by the county-level estimate of per-acre land values. We then compounded those land-loss values forward to the year 2020 at a rate of return of 6 percent per year for the appreciation of the land and a rate of return of 5 percent per year for the income the land could provide. Our results yield a cumulative value of Black land loss of about \$326 billion. To put this figure in perspective, if this represented the gross domestic product (GDP) of a country, that country would rank 41st out of 213 countries in the world ranking of GDP in 2020. This would be in the top 20 percent of countries, ahead of South Africa, Finland, and New

Zealand.”

## **African American Farmers Intervene**

In 1981 in Southwest Tennessee, where the movement for voting rights in Fayette and Haywood counties took place beginning in 1959, **Thomas Burrell**, a leader of the Concerned Black Farmers of Tennessee (CBFT), held a 23-day direct-action occupation of the Department of Agriculture offices in Tipton County. Burrell and his comrades brought nationwide attention to the plight of African American farmers due to the discriminatory practices of the U.S. Department of Agriculture through its Home Farms Administration (HFA) which allocates loans to agricultural producers.

Burrell pointed out during the 1980s through the early 2000s, that at his peak he had farmed 3500 acres in adjacent Haywood, Fayette and Madison counties. The demonstration by the CBFT sparked Black farmers in North Carolina, Georgia and other states to take decisive action. They organized into several organizations, hired lawyers and took their complaints to the federal courts.

These efforts led to a renewed Black farmers movement in the U.S. The farmers gained the support and sympathy of a wide spectrum of African Americans including the Congressional Black Caucus and several publications. Progressive and Left-wing organizations as well viewed the struggle against the Agriculture Department and FHA as a continuation of the disenfranchisement and disempowerment of the African American people.

[In an article by Gary Gant](#), the President of the Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association (BFAA), he reflects on the legal decisions which resulted from the class action lawsuit:

“On March 2, 1999, Judge Paul Friedman (U. S. District Judge for the District of Columbia), the presiding Judge in the class action lawsuit of Timothy Pigford, et al., v. Dan Glickman, Secretary, U. S. Department of Agriculture held a fairness hearing wherein the Black farmers and those representing the other side gave testimony as to what they called ‘the fairness and adequacy’ of the lawsuit. Like many of those Black farmers present that day, Thomas Burrell felt then that the lawsuit was not adequate. One of the original plaintiffs in the case against the U. S. Department of Agriculture and the alleged racist and discriminatory practices of the old Farmers Home Administration, Burrell had hopes of seeing America’s Black farmers gain more than a paltry monetary payment from their admitted wrongdoers. ‘In 1982, it was predicted that unless something changed at USDA, Black farmers could be extinct by the year 2000,’ said Gary Grant, president of Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association. ‘We have dropped from almost one million in 1920 to less than 18 thousand in 1998. The class action lawsuit ensures - from my perspective - the total demise of the Black farmer in America within the next five or six years.’”

Another class-action lawsuit filed in October 2022 charged the federal government with not paying the settlements which had been agreed upon in earlier legal rulings. During subsequent administrations, the U.S. Department of Agriculture agreed to pay up to \$2.4 billion to aggrieved African Americans.

Black farmers organizations say that they continue to suffer under the institutional racism of the USDA and other financial institutions. Land loss has not let up while impoverishment of

African Americans in the rural South remains constant.

Image: John Boyd and member of the National Black Farmers Association



[An Associated Press report](#) on the latest legal action by African American farmers says:

“John Boyd Jr., president of the National Black Farmers Association and one of four plaintiffs in the lawsuit, said that the new programs don’t match the USDA’s earlier offer to pay off 120 percent of the debt of farmers who are socially disadvantaged.... He said the guarantee of future federal debt relief caused some farmers to invest in their farms, only to be left in worse financial condition after the law changed and payments were delayed. The lawsuit is pending in the U.S. Court of Federal Claims, and Boyd said he hopes it will put pressure on the government to act.”

These developments portend much for the ability of the federal government and courts to address the fundamental issues of national oppression and economic exploitation against African Americans. The more than one century of Black land loss has its counterpart in urban and suburban areas as well. During the Great Recession beginning in 2005 and beyond, African Americans lost more than half of their household wealth through subprime mortgage lending which impacted the entire country.

Under capitalism the problems of farm and household losses have not been effectively addressed. The reparations needed to compensate for these aspects of national oppression can only be resolved under a socialist system where land can be nationalized in the interests of workers and farmers.

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