

INTRODUCTION

AFRICAN AMERICAN AGRICULTURE AND LANDOWNERSHIP

The Yeoman Farmer

The yeoman farmer is a self-sufficient farmer who owns his land on which he and his family work. The farm yields what the family needs for subsistence and some may produce a small profit as well. Traditionally, the ideal of the yeoman farmer comes from the English feudal system. This archetype carried its way to America and became a romantic notion often trumpeted by Thomas Jefferson as he heralded the small farmer as the backbone of America and its bright future. American independence was partly driven by the promise of landownership. The vision of the epitome of the American citizen plowing the new and fertile land to provide for his family, without being burdened by an overbearing and unfair government – and, very importantly, without being a burden to his fellow countrymen. Landownership was promised to every white,

(Below) African American Farmers Picking Cotton in South Carolina, 1902 (Library of Congress) **(Right)** Mississippi Woman Hoeing Cotton, 1937 (Library of Congress)



male citizen, even those of meager means. Westward expansion allowed for an abundance of land to be offered up to America's citizens for little to nothing. A citizen should be a landowner, but the promise went the other way as well, a landowner would be a true citizen.

A citizen has the right to his land, his family, his profits, and his vote. With landownership came wealth and influence in the early republic. Therefore, in many ways, landownership was the first step in becoming the ideal American. The African American yeoman farmer has a similar, yet different story. By the time of Emancipation, many white Americans were being toward burgeoning capitalistic cities. Profit and independence no longer lay in the countryside for many of that generation and the appeal of farming began to wear off by the latter half of the 19th century. Conversely, the average freedmen had spent generations in slavery and had not accumulated wealth or knowledge beyond the skills acquired on and for the plantation. The best hopes for freedom, independence, self-worth, and citizenship lay in farming and landownership.

The idea of the African American yeoman farmer has struggled with the juxtaposition of freedom and what appears similar to slavery. Juan Williams, journalist and author, wrote in a 2005 National Public Radio (NPR) article about African American farmers in America that "what looks like slavery is, in fact, the most courageous form of economic self-determination, and what looks like 'the simple life' is, in fact, a profoundly complex and risky economic undertaking." To take ownership of the land, to replace the master of the plantation with the men and women who reap and sow was the most powerful way to take charge of one's own financial freedom.



Williams goes on to say that to the former slaves "ownership of a farm meant more than owning a business: the deed to the land