

signified the end of their days as slaves, as sharecroppers, as workers for someone else. To be a landowner meant status as a voter, taxpayer, and citizen. Thus, possession of land represented a defiant step toward racial equality with white farmers, who had constituted the heart of the ruling class in the early 1800s southland.”

To the generations of African Americans in the South – mostly former slaves and their decedents – the farm was more than land, more than food-producing soil, more than an economic investment. To them, the farm was a life of self-sufficiency and a social status of worth and emerging wealth. The African American yeoman farmer quickly became the symbol of a strong, independent African American man to whom the community could center around and look up to for inspiration and guidance. The independence of farming on land that one owned had the added benefit of providing for future family endeavors. The wealth of landownership eventually allowed for family members to open businesses, schools, and churches – integral pieces around which to form a community. These essential ties to the land and family create stable and long-lasting communities.

(Below) “Cotton on Porch of Sharecropper’s Home, Maria Plantation, Arkansas, October 1935.” (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Digital Collections)



Landownership, therefore, is more than an economical investment, it is key to the cultural and political empowerment of a community. Studies during the 1970s on African American landownership affected by welfare programs of the Great Depression revealed that a landowner’s children were more likely to receive a higher education and work in white-collar jobs than a comparable tenant farmer. Landowners and the children of landowners were more likely to participate in the Civil Rights Movement as landowning farmers were their own bosses and not subjected to the pressure of losing their jobs and livelihoods if persecuted by white managers or landowners. The results of this statistical study are reflected in the historical documents of North Alabama, particularly in the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) records.

Forty Acres and a Mule

Despite federally-supported Reconstruction programs like the Freedmen’s Bureau, in the end, the government was not much help to the former slave as its moral obligations were effectively torn when it came to providing aid. On one hand, there were an estimated four million newly freed slaves who had nothing and no way to support themselves – but were willing if given initial assistance. On the other hand, the defeated Confederates who lost land and property – including



(Left) Drawing of “The Freedmen’s Bureau” by A.R. Waud, Harper’s Weekly, July 25, 1868 (Library of Congress) **(Above)** “Valley Land Corn Pickwick Reservoir;” November 3, 1937; Records of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), Record Group 142; National Archives and Records Administration – Atlanta, Photograph No. 3464 F.