



(Above) “Migratory Labors Cutting Celery, Belle Glade, Florida, January 1941.” (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Digital Collections)

successor, Andrew Johnson, reneged on the order. Johnson favored the former rebels over the former slaves and the April 1862 federal bill that promised \$300 per lost slave to Southern slaveholders, remained in place.

Scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes in a discussion of “forty acres and a mule” to “try to imagine how profoundly different the history of race relations in the United States would have been had this policy been implemented and enforced; had the former slaves actually had access to the ownership of land, or property; if they had had a chance to be self-sufficient economically, to build, accrue, and pass on wealth.” By ultimately leaving the plantations intact and providing few long-lasting opportunities for freedmen to educate themselves or acquire land, they had little choice but to return to the plantations. This time, contracts were made with the landowners – facilitated by the government – to make the former slaves into wage workers. But this did not go over well with freedmen who feared entrapment of debt and unfair conditions. They hungered for independence and responsibility, a connection to

the land that would provide for each family – privacy, individuality, and freedom. They were working toward the yeoman ideal but had to settle for tenant farming, sharecropping, and debt peonage – hardly the American dream.

Tenancy Farming

The yeoman ideal was not realized by all Americans, regardless of race. Rather than every man owning and tilling his own land, more often there were larger landowners and those who farmed that land. Tenant farming was the predominant form of farming in Alabama from the late 1800s through World War II. The word “tenancy” describes when the people who conduct the farming do not own the land. How they pay the owner of that land may differ and be incredibly complex. Sharecropping, a form of tenancy, involves the landowner renting land to a farmer who tends to the crops and gives a portion of the crop to the owner as payment; tenant farming – often cash renters in Alabama – had some

(Below) “Josh Taylor, Negro Foreman Who has been on Place for Fifty-Three Years, Knowlton Plantation, Perthshire, Mississippi Delta, Mississippi.” Circa 1930s. (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Digital Collections) **(Right)** “A Mule and a Plow” Poster from the Resettlement Administration, 1935 (Library of Congress)



arrangement with the landowner as to how much would be paid for renting the land.

While tenancy systems were preferable to wage-working, which commanded extremely low pay while requiring the freedmen to live and work much as before Emancipation, tenancy ensured a life and

