

legacy of poverty and debt. Following Emancipation, it was rare for freedmen to have anything of their own, this meant that in order to farm land they would have to first borrow the land as well as the means to farm it. Landowners would provide tenants with the crop seed and implements to farm, along with necessities of life. These advances were on credit that would be taken out of the next crop, known as a crop-lien. A second crop-lien could be put upon the farmer by the furnishing merchant. This was someone who could provide the family with necessary furnishings on credit. Sometimes this was also the landowner either directly or indirectly. If the crop did not sell well enough to pay off the liens, debt would roll over to the next year with 10% interest, or more. Thus, began the terrible cycle of debt peonage that entrapped many African American farmers in poverty and unable to raise themselves up no matter how willing and industrious.

If a tenant farmer did manage to pay off a lien, the next step would be to purchase his own farm implements and draft animals so that he would be free of at least one obligation to the landowner. If a sharecropper had to borrow these things, then he was only able to keep one-third of the crop raised. But if he had his own implements and animals, then he could keep one-half of the crop. This brought up his socioeconomic status to that of a cash renter, though it did little to save him from debt peonage. As tenancy replaced slavery in the latter half of the 19th century, it reached a peak in Alabama in the 1920s. By the Great Depression, tenancy described over half of all Alabaman farmers, a quarter of whom were sharecroppers. That number continued to drop with the coming of

**(Upper Right)** The Booker T. Washington Agricultural School on Wheels, an iteration of the Movable School, Circa 1930s (National Archives and Records Administration) **(Lower Right)** "Wagon Load of Cotton Coming Out of the Field in the Evening, Mileston Plantation, Mississippi Delta, Oct. 1939." (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Digital Collections)



World War II, which changed the agricultural economy substantially. Men who grew up on a tenant farm were drawn away by the draft, the TVA, or by the ordnance plants, like Redstone Arsenal. When they returned home, few of them went back to farming.

## African American Farmers and Landowners in North Alabama

The Tennessee River provides rich soil for crops such as cotton. Most of North Alabama, with the exception of DeKalb County and parts of Jackson and Marshall counties, has large, flat floodplains which are conducive to plantation agriculture. After Emancipation, North Alabama's communities of color were subsequently located in areas that were previously overspread with plantations. Ostensibly, the plantations did not disappear with the end of the Civil War and slavery. Large landowners were able to retain the majority of their land and slavery was replaced by sharecropping and tenant farming. King Cotton ruled the South well into the 20th century and the shadow of plantation slavery kept people of color disenfranchised.

Tenant farmers of North Alabama relied on cotton, but also corn to feed their families and their livestock. The agricultural censuses of 1870 and 1880 show that most of the time, farmers planted just as much corn as they did cotton. The U.S. Non-Population, or Agricultural, Census did not distinguish between farmers based on race until 1900. The categories devised for the 20th century included "white" and "non-white," which in some areas included Native American or Asian, but there were little to no people of these populations in North Alabama by that time. Overall, census records show that from 1900 to 1920, the number of non-white farming landowners increases. By 1920 there was a peak in the number of non-white landowners; although, 1910 was the peak for the number of acres owned by non-white people in the South. In that year,