

## CHAPTER 6

# “I Am Going to Die on This Land”

**F**or most freed slaves, farming was the work they knew best. As slaves, they had raised most of the cotton, tobacco, rice, sugar, and hemp crops that farmers and planters sold for profit, as well as most of the food grown for the table.

When the government’s promise of forty acres and a mule wasn’t fulfilled, most freed people had no choice but to continue working for their former master. With the support of the Freedmen’s Bureau, many freed people bargained for better working conditions. They refused to work in labor gangs under the supervision of an overseer. They bargained for



**For families such as this Georgia one, freedom meant the right to work for themselves and reap the fruit of their own labor and to live together as a family.**

Stereograph by J. N. Wilson, Savannah; PR 065-0081-0009, negative no. 50475; Collection of the New York Historical Society

**A freedman plows his leased land in South Carolina. For many freed people, sharecropping was an important first step to land ownership and independence from their former masters.**

*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, October 20, 1866; Library of Congress*



the right to use the landowner's tools and draft animals. As free workers, they wanted to be treated with dignity and paid for their labor.

Without money to buy land, many freed people sought to rent it, so that they could raise their own food and crops to sell, just as white farmers did. They also wanted to work together as a family, something many hadn't been allowed to do as slaves. Some freedwomen refused to work in the fields, preferring to care for their children and tend their own gardens.

Like many former slaves, George Taylor didn't know his exact age, but figured he was twenty-three when the war ended. He didn't

have land, a house, or money, but he burned with desire to improve daily life for himself and his young wife in Colbert County, Alabama.

"I worked night and day," said George about the first years after freedom. "And had about two or three hundred cords of wood cut, that I got a dollar a cord for; I had men hired to cut the timber laps already down.

I was making two or three dollars a day." This was a remarkable achievement for a former slave.

By 1868, George had his own cabin and had started to eke out a living on sixty acres he leased from a white farmer who furnished the stock and feed and seed and would pay George half of the crop. This system of farming was called sharecropping, or tenant farm-

ing. Under the sharecropping system, the landowner sold the worker food and supplies such as seed, mules or horses, and permitted him a parcel of land to farm. This arrangement allowed families to work together, setting their own pace and profiting from their own labor. Each sharecropping family kept a share of the crop—usually one-third—and gave the rest to the landowner to sell.

Many white landowners refused to rent land to black people, but others, land rich and money poor, found that sharecropping suited them. The war had devastated their finances, leaving them without cash or sources of credit to pay wages. This form of farming eased their labor problems, providing them with a dependable, year-round work force.

At first, sharecropping seemed a desirable compromise for the freed people and the landowners. It even satisfied racist white Northerners who preferred to keep black labor in the South, thereby reserving the better-paying mine, mill, and factory jobs for white men, women, and children.

But soon sharecropping proved disastrous for many freed people. Although some landowners were fair and honest, others cheated their workers. They set the workers' shares at the lowest possible level and



**In Virginia, white men shoot at black workers, driving them off the fields they had harvested, depriving them of wages.**

*Harper's Weekly*, March 23, 1867; General Research Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundation

overcharged them for supplies. With the help of the Ku Klux Klan, they robbed the workers at harvest time, forcing the sharecroppers off the land and keeping the crop for themselves.

The military governor of Virginia reported that some planters killed their workers so they wouldn't have to honor the labor contracts. In most places, it proved futile to arrest the planters. "A gentleman who commits a homicide of that kind gets his gentlemen friends together—and they are nearly all magistrates—and they examine and discharge them," said Governor John Schofield.

Some landowners looked for any infraction, no matter how small, as an excuse not to honor the labor contract. "In the months of August and September mostly," said Robert Meacham, a black state senator from Florida, "when the crops are laid by, the slightest insult, as they call it, or the slightest neglect, is sufficient to turn them off, and according to the contract, they get nothing."

Other planters simply refused to pay, resenting the idea of paying their former slaves. "Old marse said, 'You is all free, but you can work on and make dis crop of corn and cotton; den I will divide up wid you when Christmas comes,'" said Fred James from Newberry, South Carolina. "Dey all worked, and when Christmas come, marse told us we could get on and shuffle for ourselves, and he didn't give us anything. We had to steal corn out of de crib."

In these instances, the Freedmen's Bureau sent out agents to arrest the planters and farmers. White Southerners resented the way that the bureau sided with the freed people, taking their word against a white man's word. "They listened to every sort of tale that any dissatisfied negro might choose to tell," complained P. T. Sayre, an Alabama planter. "They would send out and arrest white men, bring them in under guard, try them and put them in jail."

But the Freedmen's Bureau could not effectively protect the four million freed slaves from unscrupulous employers or from Klan violence, because Congress never provided enough money or staff to carry out the tasks. At most, the Freedmen's Bureau had only nine hundred agents spread across the eleven Southern states, with often

only one agent per county. The agents faced a daunting job, considering one county might have a population of ten thousand to twenty thousand freed people.