

Sharecropping: “The South’s New Peculiar Institution”

by Jay B. Martens

The system of sharecropping is perceived by many historians to have originated as a scheme concocted solely by the planters of the postbellum South and forced upon the freedmen. These planters, according to this accepted historical view of sharecropping, organized themselves in an attempt at collusion to limit the labor options and alternative employment schemes to force the freedmen into the system of sharecropping to keep them servile and repressed. Furthermore, this historical view also implies that sharecropping immediately resulted after the abolishment of slavery with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. Both of these views, however, are erroneous. Rather, sharecropping gradually emerged in the postbellum South after a period of experimentation with many other systems for the employment of freed labor that became only firmly engrained and institutionalized throughout the postbellum South about a decade after the Civil War.¹ In addition, sharecropping emerged as a compromise between the planters and the freedmen. The planters sought a system of labor to allow them to adequately cultivate their lands and turn a profit and were hoping for a system that mirrored slavery as closely as possible. The freedmen, conversely, were seeking “substantive change” to obliterate as many of the objectionable features of slavery as possible and attempt to acquire their own land and autonomy. As the system of sharecropping first emerged in the period of Reconstruction, the system of sharecropping contained features that each faction was seeking.

The over four million freedmen that were emancipated in 1865 greeted the news of their freedom with tears of joy and immediately set

out to enjoy their new freedom. The first test of their newly found freedom resulted when many of the freedmen “up and went” to roam the countryside and enjoy their mobility. These freedmen also used this opportunity of moving around the postbellum South to stake out the land as they waited in great anticipation for the “forty acres and a mule” that it was rumored each freedman would receive after the federal government confiscated the lands of the rebels. This dream, however, quickly vanished when President Andrew Johnson granted a general amnesty to all Confederate rebels, and the Radical Republicans in Congress refused to seize the land of the southern planters because it clashed with the deeply held belief in the United States of the sanctity of private property.²

After the realization of their dream proved illusory, many of the freedmen settled down in shantytowns near the major southern cities and towns with the hopes of finding work there as far away from the plantations as they could possibly get. However, the infant state of southern industry was just incapable of meeting the vast demands for jobs created by the freedmen. Furthermore, these emancipated freedmen began to realize they were in rather sorry condition. The institution of slavery had kept the freedmen without any property (except for the shirts on their back), poorly educated and illiterate, and with a history of being docile, following orders, and remaining subservient to their masters rather than as independent decision makers. In desperation and at the urgings of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands—also known as the Freedmen’s Bureau—many of the freedmen reluctantly sought to return to the rural South and offer the only thing that they had, their labor.³

Also compelling many of the freemen to return to the rural plantations throughout the postbellum South were newly enacted Black Codes that were passed by the legislatures in the southern states to define the legal status of the freedmen after emancipation. Many of these Black Codes were passed by legislators working on the assumption that the freedmen would not work unless forced to do so. Therefore, most states’ Black Codes contained provisions similar to the vagrancy law contained in Section 5 of the Mississippi Black Code: “Be it further enacted, That every freedman, free Negro, and mulatto shall, on the second Monday of January, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-six, and annually thereafter, have a lawful home or employ-

¹ Ralph Shlomowitz, “Bound’ or ‘Free?’ Black Labor in Cotton and Sugarcane Farming, 1865-1880,” *The Journal of Southern History*, 50 (November 1984), 591.

² Wesley Allen Riddle, “The Origins of Black Sharecropping,” *Mississippi Quarterly*, 49 (1995), 54; William Bruce Wheeler and Susan D. Becker, *Discovering the American Past*, Vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 31.

³ Riddle, “Origins of Black Sharecropping,” 54-5.

ment....”⁴ The penalty for vagrancy violations could result in the arrest of the freedmen and fines imposed. Furthermore, any freedman unable to pay the fine could have their labor contracted by the courts until the fine was paid.⁵

With the highest demand for labor throughout the postbellum South being back on the plantations, many of these freedmen found themselves compelled to seek a new life from the very place they had hoped to escape. This return of the freedmen to their rural origins was greatly welcomed by the Southern planters who found themselves in desperate need of the freedmen’s labor. This great desperation for labor helped to empower the freedmen with a significant degree of bargaining power to prevent themselves from being completely subjugated by the southern planters. Sensing the power of the desperately needed freedmen, planters attempted to establish planter organizations or cartels to better control the black laborers.⁶

A great deal of evidence of such attempts on behalf of the planters to control the labor market exists. After carefully researching southern planter’s journals, historian Ralph Shlomowitz found many editors and commentators on southern agriculture urged such combinations to devise “A well regulated ... system of labor” with a “general plan of hiring” to undermine the market forces of the newly freed labor.⁷ Furthermore, in a publicly issued proclamation put forth by the freedmen of Norfolk, Virginia, in 1865 mention of such attempts by the planters was made:

... county meetings have been held, at which resolutions have been adopted *deploring*, while accepting, the abolition of slavery, but going on to pledge the planters composing the meeting, to employ no Negroes save such as were formerly owned by themselves, without a written recommendation from their late employers, and threatening violence towards those who should do so, thereby keeping us in a state of serfdom, and preventing our free selection of our employers; they have also pledged themselves, in no event, to pay their late adult slaves more than \$60 per year for their labor.⁸

⁴ “Mississippi Black Code (1865): The Civil Rights of Freedmen in Mississippi,” from *Mississippi, Laws of the State*, 1865 (Jackson, Miss., 1896), 82-6, rpt. *American History Online*, <http://longman.awl.com/history/primarysource_16_1.htm>.

⁵ “Black Codes,” from *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/article/view/BB/jsb1.html>>.

⁶ Riddle, “Origins of Black Sharecropping,” 54-5.

⁷ Shlomowitz, “Bound’ or ‘Free?’” 571.

⁸ “Address from the Colored Citizens of Norfolk, Virginia, to the People of the United States (1865),” from *America Past and Present Online*, <http://occ.awlonline.com/bookbind/pubbooks/gar-raty_awl/chapter16/medialib/primarysources1_16_1.html>.

The formation of these planter cartels has been the chief reason why many historians have concluded that the system of sharecropping that eventually emerged after the Civil War was solely the result of the collusion on their part. Further examinations of these cartels, though, shows that they were largely unsuccessful and have been much over-rated. A contemporary journalist in the postbellum South writing in the *Southern Cultivator*, a southern agricultural journal, noted that “it is a proverbial that farmers cannot unite on anything.” The *Southern Cultivator* further noted, “It is impracticable to control the operations of individual farmers by any sort of resolutions or covenants or pledges. There are too many of them; they are too widely separated; they cannot meet in mass conventions; their circumstances and surroundings are too varied and diverse.”⁹ This journal noted the problems of agricultural organizations for farmers were too diverse and widely scattered and have different interests because of local and regional climates, soil quality, transportation systems, and markets to unite behind common goals or even agree upon those common goals. Later in the nineteenth century, these would be the same barriers that made the Populists so hard to organize and keep united.

Further undermining these planter cartels was the severe labor shortage. Historians estimate that there was a decline of between 28 and 37 percent in the number of hours worked by the black population of the South after the Civil War. This decline resulted from a number of factors. The freedmen were simply not willing to work as long or as hard as they had been compelled to work under slavery. In the words of Reconstruction historians Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, “[E]mancipation gave the ex-slaves the freedom to lighten his burden and, for the first time, reserve a portion of his time for himself.”¹⁰ Furthermore, women and children of the freedmen generally remained outside the new labor forces being formed. The decline of the labor available is estimated to have resulted in a decline of 36.5 percent in the production of crops throughout the South.¹¹

This shortage of labor could be most crucial during the “critical periods” of the growing season. The production of cotton saw a number of critical periods where the unavailability of a sufficient labor force at these times could threaten the entire success of the crop. Among these critical periods were times following heavy rains when weeds and grass would engulf the fields, and laborers were needed as soon as possible to save the crop. The second critical period was during the maturation of the cotton, for the bolls had to be picked immediately. If not, they

⁹ Cited in Shlomowitz, “Bound’ or ‘Free?’” 571.

¹⁰ Daniel W. Crofts, “From Slavery to Sharecropping,” *Reviews in American History*, 23 (1995), 458.

¹¹ Riddle, “Origins of Black Sharecropping,” 56-7.

could be bleached out by the sun or discolored by the rain, both of which would decrease the crops' market value.¹²

In the context of these labor shortages, the planter organizations and cartels would be undermined as the competition to acquire the needed labor led many planters to disregard any agreements the cartels may have made out of economic necessity. For example, an 1874 edition of the *Southern Cultivator* lamented: "When the negroes were set free, many agriculturists ... found themselves without laborers.... Each one said to himself ... I must get laborers by some hook or crook, or I shall be ruined in a short time.—Under the circumstances, it is not at all strange, that the negroes have had things their own way to an alarming extent, and have been flattered and cajoled, and begged and implored, and whiskied and allowed latitude...." An 1877 edition further found, "Every one seems to fear that everybody else would get ahead of him and that he would have no labor at all. Hence a universal rush at the negro—each out bidding the other, the negro in the mean time feeling like a maiden with a dozen suitors at her feet—entire masters of the situation."¹³

There was also a great deal of indirect evidence that has led some historians to conclude the planter cartels were unsuccessful. One of these indirect factors was the high rate of turnover among the black laborers in the postbellum South. The high rate of turnover illustrates that the planters were not able to effectively bind their labor and that the freedmen enjoyed a great deal of mobility and options. A second indirect factor that Shlomowitz perceives indicating the lack of success for these planter cartels was the price of cotton. As Shlomowitz rationalizes, if the planters had been successful in working to control the labor of the South, would they not have been successful controlling the price of cotton during this period as well? The price of cotton, however, declined dramatically during the period for the sole reason of lack of communication and organization among the planters to consciously limit the supply of cotton to help increase the price.¹⁴

Therefore, because of their scarcity and value the freedmen were able to exert some force on the marketplace and did help play a role initially to help determine under what type of system they were to labor and work. They were not at the complete mercy of the planters, who grew up in the antebellum South and sought to preserve many of the antebellum attitudes, in which the *status quo* was valued and change was resisted. These attitudes did prompt the planters to attempt to recreate a system of labor as closely resembling the conditions

¹² Shlomowitz, "Bound' or 'Free?'" 587-8.

¹³ Cited in Riddle, "Origins of Black Sharecropping," 573.

¹⁴ Shlomowitz, "Bound' or 'Free?'" 574, 577.

of slavery as they could after emancipation.¹⁵ This attempt on behalf of the planters was detected by the freedmen, as noted in the "Address from the Colored Citizens of Norfolk, Virginia, to the People of the United States":

The people of the North, owing to the greater interests excited by war, have heard little or nothing, for the past four years, of the blasphemous and horrible theories formerly propounded for the defence and glorification of human slavery, in the press, the pulpit and legislatures of the southern States; but, though they may have forgotten them, let them be assured that these doctrines have by no means faded from the minds of the people of the South; they cling to these delusions still, and only hug them closer for their recent defeat.¹⁶

Had the planters had their way, though, the system they originally preferred and found that most closely mimicked slavery was not sharecropping but gang wage labor. For a set wage, these freedmen would labor in gangs under the direct supervision of overseers much as slaves had done. For a slight reduction in wages, the owners also often provided housing for the gang laborers, which often times were nothing more than the old slave quarters on the plantations, and food rations or garden plots, also as they had during slavery. For example, James C. Beecher of the Freedmen's Bureau described a typical wage labor agreement that he presented to a group of freedmen on behalf of a local planter in a letter to a superior: "That they [the freedmen] were to retain their houses and gardens, with the privilege of raising hogs, poultry, etc. That he would pay for full hands, men \$12, women \$8 per month. They to find themselves—or he would pay \$10 per month to men, \$4 to women and ration them."¹⁷

This wage labor arrangement, though, became a short-lived arrangement because neither side was entirely satisfied with the arrangement. The planters started to find many flaws in the wage labor agreements they originally proposed. One problem was all the labor contracts would be made at the beginning of the season, so a set wage could not account for uncontrollable factors that could affect the harvests, such as poor weather, low prices, insect damage, and so on. Therefore, planters found they had the potential to suffer tremendous

¹⁵ Harold D. Woodman, "Sequel to Slavery: The New History Views the Postbellum South," *The Journal of Southern History*, 43 (November 1977), 554.

¹⁶ "Address from the Colored Citizens of Norfolk," from *America Past and Present Online*.

¹⁷ James C. Beecher, "Report on Land Reform in the South Carolina Islands (January 9, 1866)," from *America Past and Present Online*, <http://occ.awlonline.com/bookbind/pubbooks/gar-raty_awl/chapter16/medialib/primarysources3_16_3.html>.

losses from a poor harvest. A second problem that planters discovered with the wage labor system was the unreliability of the laborer in this system. The set wage system just did not offer the planter any insurance that laborers would be ready and on hand during those “critical periods” in the production of such crops as cotton. The third problem the planters found with wage labor was the shortage of currency circulating throughout the postbellum South, making it difficult for planters to pay laborers. Most of the planters’ wealth was wrapped up in the land they owned rather than in liquid assets available to pay the wage laborers. Furthermore, 59 percent of the planters’ capital investments in the past had been on slaves, and this monetary asset was lost with the emancipation of slaves. With the prices of cotton relatively high in 1865 and 1866, enough profit and currency was on hand for the planters to sustain the wage labor, but as the cotton prices began to fall after 1866, wage labor became more and more difficult to maintain.¹⁸

The freedmen were also mostly unhappy with such wage labor arrangements. The closeness to the old slave system that made wage labor so preferable to the planters at first was the very reason it was found to be the most disagreeable to the freedmen who were hoping to escape from slavery and their previous conditions of servitude.¹⁹

Therefore, both the planter and the freedmen were pleased when the system of share wages evolved and began replacing the set wage labor agreements. The planters were pleased with the new share wages system because it was able to compensate for the shortcomings of the set wage labor agreements. First, the share wage system acted as a kind of insurance against a poor harvest because the burden was now equally shared between planters and laborers. Secondly, planters were able to force the laborer to stick around for the entire growing season, especially during the most critical periods, because the workers would have to remain through the harvest to collect their wages. The share wage system also enabled the planters to levy fines for missed work rather than having to resort to the only disciplinary recourse for missed work under the set wage system, which was dismissal. Therefore, this greater disciplinary control made the share wage system more preferable than the set wage system. Finally, the share wage system kept the planters from having to have ready cash on hand to pay the laborers the needed wages on a monthly basis.²⁰

The planters also found an additional benefit to this system. The share wage system encouraged members of the labor gang to carefully

¹⁸ Woodman, “Sequel to Slavery,” 530; Shlomowitz, “‘Bound’ or ‘Free?’” 588; Riddle, “Origins of Black Sharecropping,” 56-7; and Crofts, “From Slavery to Sharecropping,” 460.

¹⁹ Riddle, “Origins of Black Sharecropping,” 60; and John David Smith, “More Than Slaves, Less Than Freedmen: The ‘Share Wages’ Labor System During Reconstruction,” *Civil War History*, 26 (1980), 256.

²⁰ Woodman, “Sequel to Slavery,” 551; and Shlomowitz, “‘Bound’ or ‘Free?’” 588-9.

supervise each other, for the profits for all depended upon the performance of each. Thus, the Freedman’s Bureau noted, “...[I]f you find occasional exceptions among your employees, whose industry is not quickened by the dictates of self-interest, you have but to convince the industrious that they are working for the benefit of the sluggard ... and they will soon make it too uncomfortable for the laggard to continue his idleness.”²¹

The freedmen also found this system preferable. By receiving some stock in the crop being produced the laborers began to view themselves as partners in the business enterprises with planters for whom they were working. Furthermore, they saw the share wage system as a major step for them as well. They felt that by becoming partners with the planters they were gaining some level of equality with the planters.²²

Once the freedmen began to perceive themselves as partners and as an equal to the planter, though, they began to seek greater involvement in the business enterprises, such as more control over the hours and pace in which they worked. The freedmen still felt that the share wage system still very closely resembled slavery. This system still allowed the planters to have their laborers working in gangs under close supervision just as they had under the set wage system and under slavery. An examination of a typical share wage labor agreement shows just how closely this system mimicked many of the features of slavery. In the agreement between Dr. J. Rhett Motte and his share laborers on Exeter Plantation in St. John’s Parish, Berkley District, South Carolina, the share laborers agreed to work “diligently & ardently” and “to conduct themselves honestly and civilly.” Furthermore, they agreed to bring no “ardent spirits” onto the plantation. They were to bring no uninvited guests onto the plantation or to leave the plantation without permission, which would result in fines of fifty cents per day. Unexcused absences of more than three days were grounds for dismissal with that laborer’s share reverting back to the owner or to be split between the other laborers. In exchange for their “time and labor” the laborer would receive “comfortable quarters on the plantation” and a private garden plot.²³

The planters also began to perceive a minor flaw in this new labor arrangement. Because laborers’ income depended upon the success of the harvest, the laborers were often only interested in the work concerning the cultivation of the crop. They were not as readily willing to perform other farm work they had previously done as both slaves and set wage laborers, such as clear new fields, dig ditches, build fences,

²¹ Shlomowitz, “‘Bound’ or ‘Free?’” 593.

²² Woodman, “Sequel to Slavery,” 551.

²³ Smith, “More Than Slaves, Less Than Freedmen,” 260-261.

and so on, for this work did not specifically result in increased profits for them from the harvests.²⁴

Therefore, both the freedmen and the planters were willing to continue experimenting with new labor arrangements trying to make up for the deficiencies each began to find in the share wage system. The next step in this evolution was sharecropping. The types of share contracts negotiated by the planters and the croppers were varied. The main feature of this new system, though, was to divide the plantation into small farm units with each unit going to one family. The cropper provided his labor to plant, maintain, and harvest a set portion of land for a set percentage or share in the profits from that crop. The planter provided the land, housing, seed, tools, and stock to the croppers and received the remaining portion of the crop. In the early experiments into sharecropping, the cropper generally received between one-tenth and one-eighth of the crop in addition to food, shelter, and clothing. As time progressed, the croppers began to get a larger portion of the crop. The standard percentage had increased to one-fourth by 1868 and to one-half by 1870.²⁵

Legally, this new sharecropping arrangement recognized the croppers as employees, not tenants. Therefore, the planters were still able to exercise a great deal of control over the croppers with the sharecropping contracts. These contracts would specify what was to be produced. For example, a contract between planter George A. Washington and J. M. and M. L. Andrews in Tennessee required the croppers “to cultivate fifty acres in corn & ten (10) or more in tobacco.” Like most early sharecropping contracts, the agreement required “Crops to remain under the direction of Washington and by himself sold.”²⁶ Another contract from the Grimes family of North Carolina more clearly spells out the control the planter wielded over the crop:

Nothing to be sold from their crops, nor fodder nor corn to be carried out of the fields until my rent is all paid, and all amounts they owe me and for which I am responsible are paid in full....

The sale of every cropper’s part of the cotton to be made by me when and where I choose to sell, and after deducting all they owe me and all sums that I may be responsible for on their accounts, to pay them their half of the net pro-

²⁴ Crofts, “From Slavery to Sharecropping,” 459.

²⁵ Smith, “More Than Slaves, Less Than Freedmen,” 257; Crofts, “From Slavery to Sharecropping,” 458; and Riddle, “Origins of Black Sharecropping,” 62-3.

²⁶ Cited in Donald L. Winters, “Postbellum Reorganization of Southern Agriculture: The Economics of Sharecropping in Tennessee,” *Agricultural History*, 62 (1988), 13.

ceeds.²⁷

These sharecropping contracts also contained penalties to be assessed for non-compliance. As per the Washington-Andrew’s contract above, the Andrews were required “to pay for fifty acres of corn land at seven dollars per acre & ten (10) acres of tobacco land at twelve dollars & fifty cents per acre in money” should they not plant the required acreage of each crop outlined in the contract. Or as another contract read: “Should the said John fail to comply with the above [conditions], or neglect his crop Washington has the privilege [sic] of paying him twelve dollars per month & dismissing him.”²⁸

In addition to providing the planters with control over the managerial aspects of the crop, sharecropping also allowed the planters to exert a great deal of influence over their workforce in other areas, such as housing, schooling, and credit extension that normally would have remained outside the managerial control of free labor. The idea of paternalism that was so deeply engrained in the planter mentality toward blacks in the antebellum South endured into the postbellum South and into sharecropping. This paternalism and control can be seen in the sharecropping contract between Joe Curry and A. D. Nielson of Hardeman County, Tennessee, in which the cropper was required “to work faithfully and well..., to demean himself as a laborer, and do all other things as a good servant ought to do....”²⁹

The planters also found a further benefit in this system of sharecropping in addition to helping keep blacks dependent and subordinate. Sharecropping helped the planter bring back the labor of women and children that was lost in the immediate post-war period, for sharecropping plots were generally contracted to and operated by entire families. Thus, the planters were able to recapture some of the lost manpower and productivity that they had vanished under the set wage and share wage systems.³⁰

Likewise, the freedmen also saw many benefits to the system of sharecropping. Sharecropping allowed the croppers to gain some control over their economic livelihood as well as a limited amount of autonomy. Because of the dispersal of the sharecroppers, it became impossible for the planters to monitor and supervise the croppers on a day-to-day basis. Thus, the croppers obtained autonomy from the close and direct supervision of the gang labor systems. This autonomy was extremely important to the croppers, as one journalist reported after

²⁷ “A Sharecrop Contract (1882),” from *Grimes Family Papers* held in the Southern Historical Collection University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, rpt. *American History Online*, <http://longman.awl.com/history/primarysource_16_2.htm>.

²⁸ Cited in Winters, “Postbellum Reorganization of Southern Agriculture,” 13.

²⁹ Cited in Winters, “Postbellum Reorganization of Southern Agriculture,” 15.

³⁰ Woodman, “Sequel to Slavery,” 546; and Riddle, “The Origins of Black Sharecropping,” 66.

overhearing one cropper who claimed that the privilege of this autonomy over working for stated wages “was worth \$50 a year.”³¹

When the system of sharecropping first appeared, there was a much greater degree of autonomy for the croppers than would eventually be the case. Planters realized that in such arrangements the only recourse they had if the croppers choose to ignore the advice or orders of the planters was to dismiss and evict the croppers. This ultimatum, though, was counter-productive for the planters if they wanted to assure themselves of the necessary labor to cultivate all of their lands. Because of the continued labor shortage, these planters simply could not treat the croppers as inferior as they may have liked. Tyrannical planters found it very difficult to find and to keep laborers and croppers. Conversely, planters that were generous and who treated their laborers and croppers well found a ready supply of labor. Therefore, the economic interests of the planters to get and to retain the best laborers and croppers prevented them from being as oppressive and controlling as they may have liked for fear of driving away those good laborers.³²

While the system of sharecropping at first allowed the cropper a degree of autonomy, this autonomy soon eroded. By dividing plantations up into small units and contracting those units to individual cropper families, the planters were able to divide and isolate the croppers, which may have helped to impede any labor organization among the croppers. Secondly, Reconstruction was ending in the 1870s. As the Reconstruction of the South was terminated, the Freedman’s Bureau—which had helped work to protect the freedmen as free laborers—was dissolved, and “Redeemer” governments that were controlled by the planters began to take back and restrict many of the rights and privileges gained by the freedmen under the Reconstruction governments. Thus, the appearance of the “Jim Crow” laws begin to make their appearance for the first time, and these laws started to consume the autonomy of these sharecroppers.³³

Most damaging, though, to the sharecropper were the poor economic conditions that started to plague the postbellum South in the 1870s. Cotton prices continued to decrease making it more and more difficult for the croppers to make enough money to continue the evolution of the labor and land arrangements in the South. Furthermore, the decrease in the cotton prices led to larger and larger debts incurred by the croppers, which made the crop lien system more pervasive

³¹ Riddle, “Origins of Black Sharecropping,” 66; and Shlomowitz, “Bound’ or ‘Free?’” 584-5.

³² Riddle, “Origins of Black Sharecropping,” 62-3; Winters, “Postbellum Reorganization of Southern Agriculture,” 18; and Shlomowitz, “Bound’ or ‘Free?’” 575.

³³ Susan A. Mann, “Sharecropping in the Cotton South: A Case of Uneven Development in Agriculture,” *Rural Sociology*, 49 (1984), 424; Crofts, “From Slavery to Sharecropping,” 458-9; and Wheeler and Becker, *Discovering the American Past*, 28.

throughout the South, and it is this crop lien system that proved so detrimental to the southern blacks and not sharecropping *per se*. The crop lien system began to take form only after court rulings throughout the South made the croppers, not the planters, the sole owner of the crop from the time it was planted. Thus, the harvest, the sell, and the price received for the crop became the sole responsibility of the croppers, who were now required in the sharecropping contracts to simply deliver the planter’s portion of the crop to a “designated area.” Now the cropper, the sole owner of the crop, had the legal right to grant a lien on that crop to receive credit from local merchants. Many of these local merchants, though, were the planters themselves. These planter/merchants began to devise and use the crop lien system to retain some of the power over the crops and the croppers in light of the recent legal changes and the greater autonomy that had been gained by the freedmen with the development of sharecropping.³⁴

The croppers became dependent upon the crop lien system because they lacked any money of their own. The only assets the croppers possessed when they signed the contracts were their labor and the future profits from the crop they were going to plant. Therefore, it was the crop that was inevitably put up for collateral for any loan or credit advance they received. The local merchants often had a “territorial monopoly” that required the croppers “to deal with him on his own terms.”³⁵ For example, a typical crop lien agreement contained the basic provisions of this agreement between Robert Marr and William B. Thomas of Haywood County, Tennessee, in 1873: “I hereby give him [the merchant] a lien on my share of the crop and give him the right to sell the crop as it may be gathered and apply my portion of the proceeds to the satisfaction of any claims he may have for advancements.”³⁶

The influence of the merchants in the sharecropping system resulted in a greater concentration on the production of cotton, for that was the easiest crop to convert into cash in the postbellum South. The croppers also seemed to have a preference on the concentration of cotton, which was the only cash crop that could easily and economically be produced on the small holdings of the cropper. Like a gambler, the croppers sought a good year in cotton production, believing that the good year would net them enough profit to clear them of their debts and leave them with a surplus, which they hoped would eventually enable them to purchase farms of their own.³⁷

This concentration on cotton, though, became the problem for the

³⁴ Crofts, “From Slavery to Sharecropping,” 458-9; and Winters “Postbellum Reorganization of Southern Agriculture,” 57.

³⁵ Woodman, “Sequel to Slavery,” 539.

³⁶ Cited in Winters, “Postbellum Reorganization of Southern Agriculture,” 9.

³⁷ Woodman, “Sequel to Slavery,” 542.

southern economy and specifically for the sharecroppers. This concentration resulted in a lack of diversity in the crop production of the South. The whole economy was based solely upon the success and/or failure of a single commodity. Furthermore, this continued emphasis on the production of cotton resulted in an overproduction of the crop, which explains the falling cotton prices throughout the postbellum South in the 1870s. Not only did this emphasis result in an overproduction of cotton, but it also resulted in a scarcity of foodstuffs throughout the South, which led to an increase in the prices of grain and corn. Inevitably, this scarcity of foodstuffs meant the cropper had to turn to the local merchants to buy the high price foodstuffs and could only exchange the overabundant and cheap cotton they had produced. This exchange worked to the benefit of the merchant and to the disadvantage of the cropper.³⁸

In addition to the market disadvantage in which the croppers found themselves, the creditors often extracted large rates of interest on goods sold on credit to croppers. Estimates by researchers show that goods bought on credit by the croppers were 40 to 110 percent more than goods bought with cash.³⁹ Therefore, in the words of historian Eric Foner, "...[T]he credit system that grew up alongside sharecropping quickly undermined its promise of autonomy."⁴⁰

The autonomy of sharecropping came to an end when the crop lien system resulted in debt peonage. Debt peonage was where someone was forced to work to pay off a debt. Ultimately because of the nature of the markets and the exploitation of creditors, the croppers were kept in perpetual debt. In order to repay the debt, the creditors would demand the croppers remain farming in that location until they had cleared themselves of their debt, which seemed to be never ending.⁴¹ Henry Blake, a sharecropper, explains how this system of crop liens and debt peonage worked to revert the freedmen back into virtual slaves:

When we worked on shares, we couldn't make nothing—just overalls, and something to eat. Half went to the white man, and you would destroy your half, if you weren't careful. ... The white folks don't give no itemized statements. No, you just had to owe so much. ... If you didn't make no money, that's all right; they would advance you more. But you better not leave and get caught. They'd

³⁸ Woodman, "Sequel to Slavery," 539-41.

³⁹ Mann, "Sharecropping in the Cotton South," 418.

⁴⁰ Cited in Crofts, "From Slavery to Sharecropping," 459.

⁴¹ Mann, "Sharecropping in the Cotton South," 426.

keep you in debt. They were sharp.⁴²

In addition to the loss of autonomy for the croppers with the introduction of crop liens and debt peonage, sharecropping had other problems that started to appear to the disadvantage of the croppers and the southern economy as a whole. Because both parties shared the profits, neither party had much interest in making investments toward land improvements or maintenance that would have had long-term advantages. In the short term, any such improvements undertaken in this system would have had to result in an increase in profits at least twice the cost of the improvements for either party to break even. Furthermore, sharecropping was based upon yearly contracts. These contracts had to be renegotiated after each harvest, and there was always a threat of eviction for the cropper. Therefore, the uncertainty of a cropper to continue farming a specific piece of land acted as a disincentive for the cropper to make many long-term advancements as well, for those improvements may not actually benefit the cropper beyond the current contract period. Without such improvements to the land, though, the productivity of South began to decline.⁴³

Therefore, as historian John David Smith has concluded, "Yet as long as land and capital were concentrated in the hands of planters and merchants, the blacks would remain virtually enslaved. ... Not until the blacks farmed their own land did they become freedmen in the truest sense of the term."⁴⁴ The freedmen realized the importance of owning their own land, and they fully expected the system of labor and land ownership to continue to evolve. They perceived sharecropping to be just one step in this evolution with some form of land tenancy, either share or set rate tenancy, to be the next step in the process followed by the attainment of the ultimate goal, land ownership.

Tenancy, though, remained out of reach for most of the croppers. In tenancy, the tenant had a great deal more freedom than the cropper enjoyed. In share tenancy, the planter would provide the tenant with only the land and housing. All the seed, fertilizers, tools, etc. were provided by the tenant. For rent the tenant generally paid the planter a portion of the crop harvested, generally one-third of all grains and one-fourth of all cotton produced. The freedmen at first agreed to sharecropping rather than tenancy for the practical reason that they lacked the necessary resources to become tenants. With no money or assets, the freedmen were not immediately able to buy their own seeds, fertilizers, and tools; thus, the freedmen first became sharecroppers because

⁴² George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Connecticut, 1972), vol. 8, 175-179, rpt. *Slave Narratives*, ed. Steven Mintz, <<http://vi.uh.edu/pages/mintz/45.htm>>.

⁴³ Woodman, "Sequel to Slavery," 539; and Riddle, "Origins of Black Sharecropping," 70-1.

⁴⁴ Smith, "More Than Slavery, Less Than Freedmen," 263.

the planters still provided all the necessary resources to cultivate and harvest a crop. After a few years of sharecropping, the croppers hoped to earn enough money to purchase the necessary resources to become tenants. Then after a few years of tenancy, the freedmen hoped they would have been able to save enough money to purchase their own farms.⁴⁵

As discussed above, however, the combination of falling cotton prices, the development of the crop lien system and debt peonage, and discriminatory and racist legislation all combined to make it difficult for the cropper to earn enough cash surplus to purchase the needed equipment and resources to become a tenant farmer or to purchase their own land. Researchers have concluded that the cost to acquire the freedman's dream of "forty acres and a mule" would have been about \$450. By 1879, the average sharecropper made approximately \$250 each year. Using these figures, it is estimated that a cropper would have had to save 10 percent of their income each year for eighteen years, which became an impossibility once the system of sharecropping was paired with the crop lien system. And while merchants and planters were willing to extend credit to sharecroppers, almost no credit was available for capital purchases such as land. Therefore, by 1880 only 9.8 percent of the land cultivated in the postbellum South was owned by blacks, and the number of plantations comprising 500 acres or more had actually increased in all southern states.⁴⁶

In the long run, this system of sharecropping ultimately worked to limit the opportunities of freedmen, but is it solely responsible for the "static, hopeless poverty and debt cycles" that kept the southern black impoverished in the period following the Civil War? As the evidence discussed thus far illustrates, the answer would have to be no. Sharecropping itself was a system of labor that was found most acceptable to all involved when it was originally devised between the competing interests of the planters, who sought to recreate a system as close to the antebellum practice of slavery as possible, and the freedmen, who sought to ultimately own their own land. The failure of the blacks to achieve prosperity in the postbellum South was the result by and large of the overall failure of the southern economy. No one in the South made vast economic gains after the Civil War because of declining cotton prices. Therefore, as historian C. Vann Woodward has concluded, black poverty was symptomatic of poverty in general, which was "a continuous and conspicuous feature of Southern experience

⁴⁵ Woodman, "Sequel to Slavery," 553; Smith, "More Than Slavery, Less Than Freedmen," 257; and Winters, "Postbellum Reorganization of Southern Agriculture," 2.

⁴⁶ Winters, "Postbellum Reorganization of Southern Agriculture," 2; Robert Tracy McKenzie, "Postbellum Tenancy in Fayette County, Tennessee: Its Implications for Economic Development and Persistent Black Poverty," *Agricultural History*, 61 (Spring 1987), 28; Riddle, "Origins of Black Sharecropping," 64; and Mann, "Sharecropping in the Cotton South," 417.

since the early years of the Civil War."⁴⁷ This overall poverty in which the South found itself mired led to the development of the truly evil crop lien system and debt peonage, which are the real culprits in the virtual re-enslavement of the freedmen.

So ingrained did this institution of sharecropping become in the experience of the southern black, though, that it survived well into the twentieth century and began to give way only with the introduction of forces from outside the South. First came the boll weevil infestations that forced all parties involved in southern agriculture to seek crop diversification to safeguard against complete losses of entire harvests. The improvements in transportation also were significant, especially with the introduction of the automobile, which weakened the local monopolies of merchants, and this greater competitive market worked to weaken the crop lien system and free the croppers from debt peonage. The third outside factor was the wartime demands for labor that encouraged black croppers to move out of the South into the northern industrial cities. This movement created a new labor shortage and greater competition for that labor throughout the South and offered blacks many other labor alternatives.⁴⁸ Only after these three forces began to take effect did the southern blacks begin their recovery from the scars of slavery and the *de facto* slavery brought about by sharecropping coupled with crop liens and debt peonage.

⁴⁷ Cited in Woodman, "Sequel to Slavery," 525.

⁴⁸ Woodman, "Sequel to Slavery," 539-40.