

CHATHAM'S BLACK FARMERS—1922 to 2017

by Jim Wiggins, July 2021



Lange, Dorothea, photographer. House of Negro tenant family, Pittsboro, North Carolina, July 1939. Library of Congress.

Before the Civil War, agriculture in Chatham County was similar to agriculture in the rest of the Piedmont section of North Carolina. Farm sizes varied from plantations to subsistence farms. Farmers might own land, rent it, be enslaved workers for owners and renters, or be poor white migrant laborers.

The Civil War disrupted the agricultural landscape by requiring most farmers and farm produce to be used in the war effort, and by taking many farmers (mainly white farmers) away from their land and families. Many of those men did not return after the war, causing major changes to their families' welfare. Some veterans who did return had to borrow money to restart their

farms. Some were not able to acquire the needed funding; others were unable to pay their debts. Because of such circumstances, some lost their farms. Newly-freed formerly enslaved people had to find new positions in the changed agricultural landscape.

Reconstruction and the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery magnified the disruption by increasing the need of farm owners for people to work their land, of formerly enslaved Blacks and non-landowning whites for land to work, and for a new way to connect the two without using currency, as it was in short supply. As a result, the number of renters increased and a new type of farmer was created—the sharecropper or “cropper.” Renters provided their own farm implements, livestock, and seed; and in return for use of the owner's land, turned over about a quarter of their crop to the landowner. Sharecroppers had to rely almost entirely on the owner's provisions, and in return turned over at least half of their crop to the owner of the land they worked.

Without any form of currency, any supplies that sharecroppers acquired from a local county store (sometimes owned by the farm owner) had to be paid for out of the remaining share of their crop. This relationship was called the “crop-lien” system and was institutionalized in the State's 1877 Landlord and Tenant Act which required that the landowners retain possession of all crops with the tenant (renter or sharecropper) receiving a portion of the crop only after paying his debt to the landowner. It is easy to see how this system resulted in debt from which the tenants, particularly the sharecroppers, found it difficult to escape. Black farmers who were formerly enslaved and consequently did not own the necessary requisites for farming were disproportionately sharecroppers. But does this represent the total picture of Black farmers in Chatham County post-slavery?

A 1922 study commissioned by the NC State Legislature offers a glimpse into the life condition of Chatham's Black farmers at that time.¹ The 1922 study examined farming in three North Carolina counties—one on the coast, another in the mountains, and Chatham County in the Piedmont. In the two selected Chatham townships—Baldwin and Williams (now

covering the area from Bynum to the Walmart at the county line). Almost every farm family in the two Chatham townships was interviewed—145 Black and 190 white. Most of the farm owners were active farmers, living on and cultivating part of their land while letting out parcels to renters and sharecroppers. Much of the farm land in the townships was lying idle, with small cultivated acres—averaging only 18 acres cultivated by farm owners and 14 acres cultivated by each renter and sharecropper. Some farmers supplemented the farm work by taking jobs in cotton mills or working on roads, bridges, and UNC buildings. Bynum was the only village in the area.

The study found that among the 145 Black farmers 30% were farm owners, while 72% of the 190 white farmers were farm owners. On the other hand, 24% of Black farmers were sharecroppers, while only 7% of white farmers were. This tells only part of the story. The economic wealth of farmers was determined by the ownership of land and personal property such as farm implements, work stock, household goods, guns, and dogs. The average wealth of Black farm owners was \$2230, that of white farm owners was \$6234. The average wealth among farm renters was \$406 among Blacks and \$521 among whites. The average wealth of Black sharecroppers (\$108) was only 43% of that of white sharecroppers (\$251). To put this in a larger perspective, the average wealth of all Chatham County farmers in 1920 was \$567 compared to that of all Iowa farmers of \$8,113.

Most tenants (renters and sharecroppers) cultivated all of their land under a crop lien system, almost all in exhaustive crops—cotton, tobacco, and corn. These were commercial crops of benefit to their landlords. Wives regularly worked in the field as did children as young as seven or eight years old. The only exception to this method of production occurred in white renters who were living on larger family-owned farms where work was mitigated by other extended family members, such that wives and children were less likely to do fieldwork. (Think of this in the context of women who also gave birth every eighteen months.) Most tenant families also raised a small garden for home consumption plus a few chickens and possibly a horse, cow or hog.

Race did not play a role in the size or condition of farm homes. The average number of rooms in sharecropper homes was about three, while that of renter homes was four, and 5+ among landowners. Lack of electricity and indoor plumbing was the norm for all tenant homes. Only a small fraction of farm owners' homes had indoor plumbing. Only 15 of 153 tenant homes had access to an "outdoor closet"—an enclosed privy. Few of the tenant houses had screens and a majority had broken window panes and holes in the roof and/or floor. The most common convenience was the sewing machine which was found in more than half of the homes of owners and renters. A third of white owners had telephones. Sixty-nine percent of renters had buggies, while not a single sharecropper had one.

As the distance between home and doctor averaged eight miles, doctor visits were infrequent for those of tenant status. The difference in whether births were attended by a doctor or midwife was more a function of race than tenant status. For example, 84% of white croppers were attended by a doctor, while 57% of black croppers were attended by a midwife. Vaccinations for smallpox and typhoid were rare in any tenant group. Folk medicine was the prevalent form of medicine. For example: Mole's feet worn around the neck to make teething easy; goose grease for sprains and burns; sulfur and lard to cure piles.

There were nine elementary grade schools (all but one a single-teacher school) serving the two races—three for Blacks and six for whites. Black male tenants averaged one to two years of school and about 45% could read and write. White male tenants averaged three to five years of school and 88% could read and write. Of the tenant children ages six to fifteen, about half of whites could read and write. Among Black tenant children, education depended greatly on tenant status. Among children of Black renters, about 70% could read and write, while only 26% of the children of Black sharecroppers could do so. At the time of the study, North Carolina law required that children between the ages of 8 and 15 be in school for at least four months of the year. The low levels of education and ability to read and write, particularly among Black sharecroppers, would undoubtedly have significant implications for long-term voting opportunities because of the State voting requirement to pass a literacy test involving reading a section of the Constitution—in effect until 1965.

There were four churches serving Blacks in the two townships and eight white churches. Most families had a church membership and attended church regularly, where farm families of different statuses socialized with one another. The only exceptions were the white sharecroppers who said they didn't have transportation or appropriate clothes. Tenant houses contained few books, but almost everyone had a Bible.

Were Black tenants stuck at the bottom of the agricultural ladder? The study provides evidence of substantial upward mobility. Among Black owners at the time of the study, three-fourths had been sharecroppers. Eighty-seven percent had purchased their land, though the source of the funds to do so is not known. Some funds may have been acquired as a result of working at money-paying jobs such as those at nearby UNC. More than 86% of Black renters were the sons of sharecropper fathers. This was in contrast to white farmers. More than 30% of white landowners received the land by gift, inheritance, or marriage. About half of the white renters were expected to move into ownership through inheritance or marriage.

Among the Blacks who were sharecroppers at the time of the study there were indications of being stuck at the bottom of the ladder. None had themselves been farm owners and only 9% had previously been farm renters. On the other hand, there was much downward mobility between generations as 70% of Black sharecroppers at the time of the study had renter or owner fathers. Among white sharecroppers the situation was much the same. How many of these cases involve younger farmers who are simply starting as sharecroppers on their farming careers cannot be determined from the study report.

This 1922 study offers only a snapshot of post-slavery Black farming in Chatham County, but it provides one of the few sources of detailed information we have located on the subject. The plight of farm tenants—Black and white, renters and sharecroppers—continued into the Great Depression. Under the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1933, farmer owners were paid to reduce cotton acreage. The New Deal's agricultural supports helped most farm owners (disproportionately white), but were, for the most part, a bad deal for farm tenants (disproportionately black). The immediate impact of reduced cotton acreage was displacement for many black and white renters and sharecroppers. Many landlords did not distribute the share of government payments that was intended to go to their tenants.²



Wolcott, Marion Post, photographer. Negro tenants picking cotton on Highway 15 about seven miles south of Chapel Hill. Chatham County, North Carolina. Sept 1940.

Some tenants in other Southern states formed unions (usually segregated at the local level) to address the threatened loss of tenancies during the Depression, for example, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the Sharecroppers Union.³ Strikes were held, followed by violent reprisals. In response, government commissions favored turning tenants into land owners; but tenants themselves thought the specifics made most of them ineligible and instead favored rural cooperatives. With the exception of a few “demonstration experiments,” the efforts failed when funds were redirected to build the WWII industry. But at the

same time, that industry was the beginning of the next revolution in agricultural employment. In increasing numbers, the suffering tenant farmers left the farm to take the new wage-based industry jobs. Wage-based employment also began to invade the agriculture sector. Tenant farmers became paid farm laborers and the tenant unions faded away.

These events had little if any influence in Chatham County or anywhere else in North Carolina. One reason is that farm tenancy had already been examined in North Carolina. One example is the 1922 study cited above. State officials had authorized the study based on the belief that tenancy was a major cause of low agriculture productivity. State land commissions recommended both of the 1930s solutions (increased farm ownership and rural cooperatives) though they were suspicious of sharecroppers, particularly Black sharecroppers, as not having the attributes of successful agriculture producers. However, both schemes were largely unsuccessful.

Collective memory also could have played a role in the failure of cooperatives to take hold in Chatham, because the Chatham County Farmers Alliance—a cooperative organization of yeoman farmers and tenants—began in the late 1880s but failed in the late 1890s. During this period the Alliance’s political wing—the Populist Party—gained political control of the state and particularly Chatham County, which one historian referred to as a “Hotbed of Populism.”⁴

There were fifty Alliance local clubs in Chatham, second only to Wake County. The clubs were open to white farmers, 16 years or older. (There were Colored Farmers’ National Alliance and Cooperative Union clubs in some other counties, but no record can be found of one in Chatham.) On the other hand, the political wing of the Alliance, the Populist Party, needed the support of Black Republican farmers to achieve its political agenda, which included fixing railroad freight rates, lowering the interest rate on lien-debt, funding warehouses to store cash crops until prices increased, and raising school taxes for the purpose of increasing the farmers’ literacy rates making them more eligible to vote. In the 1892 elections, Chatham’s Alliance was successful in electing Populist Party candidates to the State Legislature and Chatham was the only county to vote for the losing Populist candidates for governor and U.S. House of Representatives.

By the mid-1890s, the coalitions that made up the Populist Party had begun to splinter, primarily as Republican support for the political power of Black farmers waned. This was exacerbated by the traditional white supremacy ideology and the Wilmington racial violence in 1898. Eventually, no segment of the coalition offered support of Black political power and the Populist Party lost its power along with that of their Black farmers. The one remnant of this period in Chatham was the Farmer's Alliance Store in Siler City which survived until 2018.

In 1925 there had been 1,081 Black farmers in Chatham County which was 31% of all the Chatham farmers. There were 488 Black-owned farms which was 21% of all the farm owners.⁵ By the 1959 Agriculture Census, there were 278 Black farmers which represented almost an 43% reduction in Black farmers in Chatham County in the preceding 34 years. There were 185 Black owners in 1959, which was 12% of all Chatham farm owners.⁶ Fast forward another 50+ years and the 2017 Agriculture Census indicated a further 90% reduction in Black farmers with only 24 Black farmers ("operators/producers") in Chatham County, which was 1% of all Chatham farmers.⁷

An early explanation for the decrease in the number of Black farmers was the "push" of Jim Crow and the 30s depression followed by the "pull" of the jobs in the WWII industry where discrimination had been prohibited by Roosevelt's executive order—leading to the migration of many Blacks to other states or to non-agricultural jobs. Lack of access to legal resources led many Black farms to be left without clear title or wills to make clear who was to acquire the property. This common inheritance issue made it easier for others to take Black land. More recently, the role of discriminatory loan practices of federal government agencies has been acknowledged as a contributing factor in the decline of black farm owners.

Thus, although the demise of slave-based agriculture occurred at a revolutionary pace via the Civil War and constitutional amendments, continued change in Chatham's agricultural landscape is taking place at a 100-year-long evolutionary pace. Could the absence of Black farmers from Chatham's rural landscape be close at hand?

¹ The [full text of this article is available on Google Books](#). See pages 56-98. A similar article was published later by Branson. See E. C. Branson, Farm Tenancy in the Cotton Belt: How Farm Tenants Live, Social Forces, 1:3 (Mar 1923), 213-221. A more detailed discussion of the study can be found in "How Farm Tenants Lived in Chatham County," on the CCHA website: <https://chathamhistory.org/pdfs/HowFarmTenantsLivedinChathamCounty.pdf>

² Black Farmers in America, 1865-2000, USDA RBS Research Report 194. <https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/RR194.pdf>

³ Donald H. Grubbs Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal, U of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, 2000.

⁴ Beeby, James M., Revolt of the Tar Heels: The North Carolina Populist Movement, 1890-1901, University of Mississippi Press, 2008. See more in this article on the CCHA website: <https://chathamhistory.org/pdfs/ChathamCountyaHotbedofPopulism.pdf>

⁵ <https://lib-usda-05.serverfarm.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1925/01/26/1556/Table-01.pdf>

⁶ <http://lib-usda-05.serverfarm.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1959/01/26/866/Table-03.pdf>

⁷ 2017 Ag Census data:

[https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1, Chapter 2 County Level/North Carolina/st37_2_0053_0053.pdf](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/North_Carolina/st37_2_0053_0053.pdf)

[https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1, Chapter 2 County Level/North Carolina/st37_2_0051_0051.pdf](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/North_Carolina/st37_2_0051_0051.pdf)

Photo credits:

Lange, Dorothea, photographer. [House of Negro tenant family. This is a larger house than usual box type. Has several rooms, unscreened, but well kept. Part of the family is sitting on the porch resting on Saturday afternoon. The oldest son on the mule is on his way to visit a neighbor. Pittsboro, North Carolina. July 1939] From Library of Congress: America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945. [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsa+8b33927\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8b33927))) (accessed 3 March 2010).

Wolcott, Marion Post, photographer. [Negro tenants picking cotton on Highway 15 about seven miles south of Chapel Hill. Chatham County, North Carolina. Sept 1940.] [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsa+8c13884\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8c13884))) (accessed 3 Mar 2010).