

From Slavery to Sharecropping

Overview

After the Civil War, a central element of the Southern economy – slavery – was abolished. As newly freed people sought rightful payment for farming and former masters strove to maintain their control and profits, a system of sharecropping and tenant farming developed. In this lesson, students will learn about the history of sharecropping and tenant farming through a Power Point presentation and discussion, photo analysis, and reading primary source documents. Students will apply their knowledge creatively by writing and performing a role play between a sharecropper and landowner.

Grade

5

North Carolina Essential Standards for 5th Grade Social Studies

- 5.H.2.3- Compare the changing roles of women and minorities on American society from Pre-Colonial through Reconstruction.

Essential Questions

- What is sharecropping and tenant farming and when did these systems develop?
- What were the advantages and disadvantages of sharecropping?
- What were conditions like for sharecropping families?
- Describe the relationship between landowners and sharecroppers.
- What similarities and differences existed between sharecropping and slavery?

Materials

- Tenant Farming & Sharecropping in North Carolina, handout attached
 - This reading should be assigned as homework the evening before facilitating the lesson.
- From Slavery to Sharecropping Power Point, available in the Database of K-12 Resources (in PDF format)
 - To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click “View” in the top menu bar of the file, and select “Full Screen Mode”
 - To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to CarolinaK12@unc.edu
- “Agreement Between Landowner & Sharecropper,” attached
- “Not Free Yet,” Henry Adams testimony and questions, attached
- Partner Role Play, assignment attached

Duration

70-90 minutes (can be split over 2 days)

Preparation

Assign the attached reading and questions, “Tenant Farming & Sharecropping in North Carolina,” to students the evening before facilitating this lesson.

Procedure

Warm-Up: An Image of Sharecropping

1. As a warm-up, project the image on Slide 2 of the "From Slavery to Sharecropping Power Point" and ask students to write down their first impressions and thoughts regarding the picture. Encourage students to think creatively by prompting as they write, reminding them there is no right or wrong answer:
 - What do you see here?
 - What observations can you make regarding the people (clothing, age, activities, emotional state, etc.) and setting?
 - What do you think is taking place in this image?
 - When (year, time, season, etc.) and where might this photo have been taken? What evidence makes you think this?
 - What is the story behind this image? (What was taking place before, during, and after this picture was taken?)
 - If the people pictured could speak, what might they say?
 - If you were to give this image a title, what would you title it and why?

Once students have gathered their first impressions and interpretations on paper, allow them to report back to class and discuss.

Tenant Farming and Sharecropping

2. Explain to students that the image they are viewing relates to their homework reading (see "Preparation" above), since it is of a sharecropper in the early 1900s, Ask students to take out their homework and review the reading they completed, allowing students to share their answers to the questions. Further discuss the system of sharecropping, pointing out additional advantages and disadvantages of such a system:
 - Advantages: provided an option for families who had no other choice; if the system was operated legitimately, farmers could feed their families and make a bit of profit. Freed slaves, who often had no other options, would be able to work for themselves and hopefully earn enough to survive.
 - Disadvantages: involved very hard labor and a low standard of living; tenant farmers generally moved from one farm to another thus it was hard to make friends or send children to school; North Carolina land was often eroded and drained of nutrients so successful crops were not a given. Also discuss with students how many previous slave owners used sharecropping to their advantage as a means to keep freed Blacks on the same land doing the same work. In some cases, unfair sharecropping simply replaced the cruel institution of slavery.

Origins of Sharecropping: The End of the Civil War

3. Explain to students that while sharecropping and tenant farming were utilized in the United States up until the 1950s in some areas, you want them to focus on the period when these systems developed, which was after the Civil War. Use slides 3-19 to convey additional knowledge to students. Teachers may want to instruct students to take notes, but should ensure the PPT be used as a basis for class discussion rather than lecture. Take time to have students critically examine the various images of sharecroppers that are pictured (i.e., on slides 8, 14, 18, & 19), using probing questions such as:
 - What do you see? What observations can you make regarding the people (clothing, age, activities, emotional state, etc.) and setting?
 - What do you think is taking place in this image?
 - When (year, time, season, etc.) and where might this photo have been taken? What evidence makes you think this?
 - What is the story behind this image? (What was taking place before, during, and after this picture was taken?)
 - If the people pictured could speak, what might they say?
 - If you were to give this image a title, what would you title it and why?

- What do you notice about the age of those represented in the images? How do you imagine their lives compare and contrast with your own as young people today?
- Based on what you have learned and see in these images, what were living conditions like for sharecropping families?
- How do you think sharecropping affected the health and lifespan of these families?
- Why do you think people decided to be sharecroppers?

A Sharecropping Contract

4. Slides 9-11 deal with contracts for sharecropping. When going over this information, pause on Slide 11 and break students up into groups of 3-4. Provide each group with a copy of the attached primary source document, which is a copy of an actual sharecropping contract from 1879. Tell students to imagine that they are a team of lawyers and that John Dawson has brought them this contract to review for him; he wants to know if it is a good deal and whether or not he should agree to it. Tell students they have a great responsibility and that even though the document might be written in legal language and thus difficult to quickly understand, they must work their hardest for John Dawson and be able to tell him exactly what this contract is stating. Tell students to assign a discussion leader and a note-taker and give them around 15 minutes to review the contract.

Afterwards, discuss the contract as a class:

- According to the contract, what is Dawson responsible for?
- What powers does Solid South have over Dawson?
- What does the contract stipulate regarding how long Dawson can use and live on the land?
- What arrangement is made regarding supplies?
- What arrangement is made regarding Solid South's cotton gin? Does this seem like a fair deal? Why or why not?
- How does Solid South secure his payment of rent and supplies? What might this mean for Dawson?
- Based on your critique of this contract, is it fair? Why or why not?
- Who does the contract benefit overall? What evidence makes you draw this conclusion?
- Why might Dawson agree to sign this contract? (Remind students that many former slaves were unable to read. Since even a literate person may have trouble with such legal language, an illiterate person would likely be at the mercy of the landowner to "explain" to them what the contract was saying. The likelihood of that explanation being honest was slim. Also, many former slaves were poor, without options, and intimidated by widespread violence after the Civil War. Thus many former slaves agreed to sharecropping contracts, such as this one, that were designed to keep them poor.)

Tell students to assume that Dawson signed the contract and ask them to predict what may have happened to him as he sharecropped for Solid South.

Not Free Yet

5. Upon completion of the Power Point, give students the attached primary source, "Not Free Yet," explaining that it is a first-hand account from former slave Henry Adams, who testified before the U.S. Senate in 1880 about the early days of his freedom, describing white planters' unfair labor practices and the violent, intimidating atmosphere in which ex-slaves felt compelled to work for their former masters. Teachers should let students know in advance that the passage contains racial slurs, and that while such racist language was a reality faced by those enslaved and newly freed, this is language that is unacceptable to use. Ensure students understand the importance of their sensitivity and maturity regarding such history. Instruct students to read the passage and answer the questions that follow.

- **Teacher Note:** Teachers with limited time can assign this reading for homework, discussing it and completing the remaining activity the following day.

6. As a culminating activity, partner students up and give them the attached role-play assignment sheet, which instructs them to write and perform a realistic dialogue between a sharecropper and a landowner. Discuss with students the importance of historical accuracy, but ask that they refrain from using any racial slurs. Also encourage students to explore all of the realistic ways the scene could end up.
7. Allow students to perform their scenes for classmates. Before performing, review your expectations for respectful audience members and encourage students to offer positive feedback after each scene. (Teachers with limited class time can only have volunteers present, or can have students get into groups of 4-6 and present in these smaller clusters.) After scenes have been presented, review and close with a culminating discussion:
 - Based on what we have discussed and examined, how would you describe the systems of tenant farming and sharecropping?
 - What do you think would have been most difficult about sharecropping after the Civil War?
 - What similarities and differences existed between sharecropping and slavery? Do you feel sharecropping simply extended slavery into a time when all people were to be free, or did it provide opportunities for freed people to start a life? Explain.
 - What characteristics were necessary for a person to be successful as a sharecropper?

Additional Activities

- Research African American founded communities in NC, such as Raleigh's Oberlin Village or the coast's Princeville, where African Americans worked to create a new life beyond the inequalities of slavery and sharecropping. (See Carolina K-12's unit, "Against All Odds: The African American Founding of Princeville, NC," available in the Database of Civic Resources.)
- Research organizations such as the Farm Service Agency, the National Farmers Alliance, and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Evaluate the effectiveness of these agencies in helping improve the life of sharecroppers.
- Research the Great Migration, when many African-Americans who wanted to avoid the racial segregation of Jim Crow laws in the South sought refuge in the supposed "Promise Land" of the North. Many sharecroppers were also forced to seek employment in the North when the boll weevil infestation of Southern cotton fields eliminated farm work. (See Carolina K-12's lesson "The Industrial Revolution: Life in the Cities.")

Name: _____

Tenant Farming and Sharecropping in North Carolina



By the year 1869 the **Civil War** had ended and **Reconstruction** was underway. Those enslaved were free under the **Thirteenth Amendment**, yet recovery for the South continued to be slow and harsh. It became clear that Congress would not be granting land to impoverished freedmen, and the concept of “40 acres and a mule” became a distant memory. Free Blacks, as well as poor Whites, had to find a way to make a living in a Southern region devastated for years to come by the after affects of war. Many people were left without money or land; however, they did have the skills to be able to grow crops. Likewise, landowners often had plenty of land but little money for wages. Thus, many turned to a system of farming called **tenant farming** and **sharecropping**.

Tenant farmers usually paid the landowner rent for farmland and a house. They owned the crops they planted and made their own decisions about them. After harvesting the crop, the tenant sold it and received income from it. From that income, he paid the landowner the amount of rent owed.

Sharecroppers seldom owned anything. Instead, they borrowed practically everything — not only the land and a house but also supplies, draft animals, tools, equipment, and seeds. The sharecropper contributed his, and his family’s, labor. Sharecroppers had no control over which crops were planted or how they were sold. After harvesting the crop, the landowner sold it and applied its income toward settling the sharecropper’s account. Most tenant farmers and sharecroppers bought everything they needed on credit from local merchants, hoping to make enough money at harvest time to pay their debts.

By 1880, more than 1/3 of NC farms operated under systems of sharecropping or tenant farming. While this system may have assisted some poor people in earning a bare living, landowners were easily able to take advantage of vulnerable workers and unfortunately, tens of thousands of farmers fell down the tenancy ladder rather than moving up it. Some farmers lost everything because of crop failures, low cotton prices, ill health, exhaustion of the soil, excessive interest rates, or inability to compete with tenant labor.

Many sharecroppers were freed slaves, working the same land that they had once been enslaved upon. Sharecroppers were also often uneducated and could not read or write, thus landowners could easily take advantage of the situation. Landowners were in charge of selling the crops and keeping records of any debt the sharecropper owed them. While sharecroppers always held hope that the yield of crops would be large, and that their debt (often for items like seeds and tools) had been paid to the landowner, sharecroppers often ended up empty handed. The landowner need only tweak the numbers a bit, and a sharecropper would remain indebted to the landowner year after year. If the sharecropper tried to leave, he could be jailed for running out on such debt, legitimate or not. The legal system was likely to take the word of a rich, white landowner over a poor person and/or freed slave. The sharecropper system could thus be very profitable for a landowner, but a never-ending, unfair cycle for a sharecropper and his family. Landowners could also order sharecroppers to leave their land at any point for any reason. Such would often occur if a sharecropper became ill or injured.

The **Industrial Revolution** and the **First World War** brought temporary prosperity to both agriculture and forestry in North Carolina. Agriculture expanded to meet the increased demand for food and fertilizers were becoming available. However, sharecroppers saw little of this brief time period of prosperity, since the twenties and thirties brought the **Great Depression**. The boom years of the WWI were over and farm prices again dropped severely. Cotton sold for 35 cents per pound in 1919 but dropped to only 6 cents per pound in 1931. Total national farm income was 16.9 billion in 1919, and only 5.3 billion in 1932.

The rural pattern at this time in North Carolina was small farms, poverty, and a terribly poor standard of living. In 1923 a survey was made of 351 rural families in Chatham County, North Carolina, both white and black. Almost half were tenants and sharecroppers. None of the 175 had running water, and only eight even had outside bathrooms. The others had no sanitary facilities whatsoever. **The average daily income for a member of a sharecropping family was 9 cents.**

Sources: <http://www.agr.state.nc.us/stats/history/history.htm> (this is an old link but this might be a place to search for this information
<http://www.ncagr.gov/stats/general/history.htm>)
<http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/T/TE009.html> (This link is also not working)

1. Summarize the system of tenant farming and share cropping. Why did these systems develop?
2. Why did many freed slaves become sharecroppers? What do you think would be at risk for a freed slave to become a sharecropper on his former master's plantation?
3. If you had to choose between being a tenant farmer or a sharecropper, which would you choose and why?
4. How would you characterize the life of a sharecropper?
5. What were the risks involved in tenant farming and share cropping?
6. In what ways were sharecroppers often taken advantage of?

Agreement between Landlord and Sharecropper

This agreement, made and entered into this 18th day of January, 1879, between Solid South, of the first part, and John Dawson, of the second part.

Witnesseth: that said party of the first part for and in consideration of eighty-eight pounds of lint cotton to be paid to the said Solid South, as hereinafter expressed, hereby leases to said Dawson, for the year A. D. 1879, a certain tract of land, the boundaries of which are well understood by the parties hereto, and the area of which the said parties hereby agree to be fifteen acres, being a portion of the Waterford Plantation, in Madison Parish, Louisiana.

The said Dawson is to cultivate said land in a proper manner, under the general superintendence of the said Solid South, or his agent or manager, and is to surrender to said lessor peaceable possession of said leased premises at the expiration of this lease without notice to quit. All ditches, turn-rows, bridges, fences, etc. on said land shall be kept in proper condition by said Dawson, or at his expense. All cotton-seed raised on said land shall be held for the exclusive use of said plantation, and no goods of any kind shall be kept for sale on any said land unless by consent of said lessor.

If said Solid South shall furnish to said lessee money or necessary supplies, or stock, or material, or either or all of them during this lease, to enable him to make a crop, the amount of said advances, not to exceed \$475 (of which \$315 has been furnished in two mules, plows, etc.), the said Dawson agrees to pay for the supplies and advances so furnished, out of the first cotton picked and saved on said land from the crop of said year, and to deliver said cotton of the first picking to the said Solid South, in the gin on said plantation, to be by him bought or shipped at his option, the proceeds to be applied to payment of said supply bill, which is to be fully paid on or before the 1st day of January, 1880.

After payment of said supply bill, the said lessee is to pay to said lessor, in the gin of said plantation, the rent cotton herein before stipulated, said rent to be fully paid on or before the 1st day of January, 1880. All cotton raised on said land is to be ginned on the gin of said lessor, on said plantation, and said lessee is to pay \$4 per bale for ginning same.

To secure payment of said rent and supply bill, the said Dawson grants unto said Solid South a special privilege and right of pledge on all the products raised on said land, and on all his stock, farming implements, and personal property, and hereby waives in favor of said Solid South the benefit of any and all homestead laws and exemption laws now in force, or which may be in force, in Louisiana, and agrees that all his property shall be seized and sold to pay said rent and supply bill in default of payment thereof as herein agreed. Any violation of this contract shall render the lease void.

[signed]

Solid South

John Dawson
X (his mark)

Excerpt from Nell Irvin Painter, Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977; Source: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/sharecrop/ps_dawson.html

Not Free Yet

Freed by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865, former slave Henry Adams testified before the U.S. Senate fifteen years later about the early days of his freedom, describing white planters' unfair labor practices and the violent, intimidating atmosphere in which ex-slaves felt compelled to work for their former masters.

The white men read a paper to all of us colored people telling us that we were free and could go where we pleased and work for who we pleased. The man I belonged to told me it was best to stay with him. He said, "The bad white men was mad with the Negroes because they were free and they would kill you all for fun." He said, stay where we are living and we could get protection from our old masters.

I told him I thought that every man, when he was free, could have his rights and protect themselves. He said, "The colored people could never protect themselves among the white people. So you had all better stay with the white people who raised you and make contracts with them to work by the year for one-fifth of all you make. And next year you can get one-third, and the next you maybe work for one-half you make. We have contracts for you all to sign, to work for one-twentieth you make from now until the crop is ended, and then next year you all can make another crop and get more of it."

I told him I would not sign anything. I said, "I might sign to be killed. I believe the white people is trying to fool us." But he said again, "Sign this contract so I can take it to the Yankees and have it recorded." All our colored people signed it but myself and a boy named Samuel Jefferson. All who lived on the place was about sixty, young and old.

On the day after all had signed the contracts, we went to cutting oats. I asked the boss, "Could we get any of the oats?" He said, "No; the oats were made before you were free." After that he told us to get timber to build a sugar-mill to make molasses. We did so. On the 13th day of July 1865 we started to pull fodder. I asked the boss would he make a bargain to give us half of all the fodder we would pull. He said we may pull two or three stacks and then we could have all the other. I told him we wanted half, so if we only pulled two or three stacks we would get half of that. He said, "All right." We got that and part of the corn we made. We made five bales of cotton but we did not get a pound of that. We made two or three hundred gallons of molasses and only got what we could eat. We made about eight-hundred bushel of potatoes; we got a few to eat. We split rails three or four weeks and got not a cent for that.

In September I asked the boss to let me go to Shreveport. He said, "All right, when will you come back?" I told him "next week." He said, "You had better carry a pass." I said, "I will see whether I am free by going without a pass."

I met four white men about six miles south of Keachie, De Soto Parish. One of them asked me who I belonged to. I told him no one. So him and two others struck me with a stick and told me they were going to kill me and every other Negro who told them that they did not belong to anyone. One of them who knew me told the others, "Let Henry alone for he is a hard-working nigger and a good nigger." They left me and I then went on to Shreveport. I seen over twelve colored men and women, beat, shot and hung between there and Shreveport.

Sunday I went back home. The boss was not at home. I asked the madame, "where was the boss?" She says, "Now, the boss; now, the boss! You should say 'master' and 'mistress' – and shall or leave. We will not have no nigger here on our place who cannot say 'mistress' and 'master.' You all are not free yet and will not be until Congress sits, and you shall call every white lady 'missus' and every white man 'master.'"

During the same week the madame takin' a stick and beat one of the young colored girls, who was about fifteen years of age and who is my sister, and split her back. The boss came next day and take this same girl

(my sister) and whipped her nearly to death, but in the contracts he was to hit no one any more. After the whipping a large number of young colored people taken a notion to leave. On the 18th of September I and eleven men and boys left that place and started for Shreveport. I had my horse along. My brother was riding him, and all of our things was packed on him. Out come about forty armed men (white) and shot at us and takin' my horse. Said they were going to kill ever' nigger they found leaving their masters; and taking all of our clothes and bed-clothing and money. I had to work away to get a white man to get my horse.

Then I got a wagon and went to peddling, and had to get a pass, according to the laws of the parishes, to do so. In October I was searched for pistols and robbed of \$250 by a large crowd of white men and the law would do nothing about it. The same crowd of white men broke up five churches (colored). When any of us would leave the white people, they would take everything we had, all the money that we made on their places. They killed many hundreds of my race when they were running away to get freedom.

After they told us we were free – even then they would not let us live as man and wife together. And when we would run away to be free, the white people would not let us come on their places to see our mothers, wives, sisters, or fathers. We was made to leave or go back and live as slaves. To my own knowledge there was over two thousand colored people killed trying to get away after the white people told us we were free in 1865. This was between Shreveport and Logansport.

Excerpt from *Senate Report 693, 46th Congress, 2nd Session (1880)*. Reprinted in Dorothy Sterling, editor, *The Trouble They Seen: The Story of Reconstruction in the Words of African Americans*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1994.

Source: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/sharecrop/ps_adams.html

Answer the following questions on notebook paper:

1. What advice does Henry's former master give him when he "frees" him? What do you think his motive is in giving such advice?
2. Why did Henry refuse to sign the contract presented by his former master?
3. Is the working relationship between the former slaves and their former master a profitable one for them? Explain.
4. Why does Henry not take the pass from his boss?
5. What happens to Henry as he travels to Shreveport?
6. Describe the Madame's mentality. How does this illustrate the complexities of freedom for Blacks after the Civil War?
7. Why does Henry decide to leave the place of his former enslavement?
8. What happens to Henry and the 11 freed people with him as they travel away?

9. What rights and legal protection does Henry have as a freed slave? How do you imagine this would feel to know you could be robbed with no recourse?

10. How do you imagine Henry would describe the freedom he has experienced thus far?

Partner Role Play: Sharecropper and Landowner

Based on the following roles, determine what each person would realistically say and do given the situation. Write a dialogue between these two people that may have occurred right after the Civil War. Be prepared to read/perform your scene in front of class. Your scene should have a beginning, middle, and end, and should be no longer than 3-4 minutes (2-3 pages). While your scene may involve a dispute and should be written with historical accuracy, please refrain from using any racial slurs.

- One of you will assume the role of a **sharecropper** living in North Carolina in the late 1860s. The landowner doesn't realize this, but you have learned how to read and write, and you have been keeping your own records of the amount of debt you owe the landowner, as well as the amount of crops that have been yielded. Your records say you are owed money, but you have a feeling the landowner is going to try to cheat you.
 - One of you will assume the role of a **landowner** in North Carolina. The sharecropper and his family currently living on your farm are hard workers and because of them, you have been able to have successful crops that have produced quite a profit. You don't want to lose them, so you have fixed your records to show that the sharecropper is in debt to you for another year of work.
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