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Blacks in Agriculture

The beginnings of Blacks in agriculture must begin with the earliest records of mankind as hunter-gatherer societies, who learned that land could be cultivated to produce food for their survival. The sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam indicate that the first man, Adam, was also the first gardener and farmer.

Agriculture has always been an essential function of human societies; in Africa, the varied climates and regions (desert, savannah, rain forests, mountains, river valleys, etc.) necessitated differing approaches to land cultivation, while also sparking the development of trade and merchant activity. Groups and individuals began to barter the crops they harvested (beyond the amount needed for themselves) in their immediate locations, and traveled beyond their local surroundings to buy and sell other products of their labor.

The institution of chattel slavery took the merchandising process to a horrible extreme with human beings, as well as agricultural and other natural resources, becoming products for purchase. In the case of Africans, this dehumanizing process led to their forced removal into other countries and regions of their home continent, Europe, Asia, and, eventually, the Americas and the “New World”.

The date 1619 is often cited as the beginning of African enslavement in what would become the United States, when “twenty negars” arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, a colony of Great Britain. Blacks were brought to work as forced labor in what was primarily an agrarian society, for the benefit of white settlers and colonists who had

begun the displacement of the native American (Indian) tribes, who, for the most part, resisted servitude through warfare and/or relocation to areas away from the whites.

The captured Africans were disengaged from their societies culturally and geographically and forced to endure the horrors of the “Middle Passage” in slave ships bound for the Americas; untold numbers of lives were lost in the brutal and savage journeys due to disease, murder, suicide, and other atrocities. The (un)fortunate ones who somehow managed to endure the voyages became a perverse example of “the survival of the fittest”, and were sold at market as human livestock shortly after arrival.

The majority of enslaved Africans were put to work in agricultural settings, primarily in the southern region of the colonies/states, where they provided unpaid labor producing large quantities of food and cash crops, including cotton, tobacco, and sugar. As a result, the landowners/slaveowners profited immensely, and by extension, the American economy in both domestic and international markets.

Beyond the meager amounts of food and clothing allowed for their subsistence, and the bare minimum in shelter, “field niggers” in the “slave quarters” in most cases had little of value or substance, and “no rights which a white man was bound to respect”. On the other hand, the “masters” enjoyed the fruits of slave labor in large farming and plantation settings, in cities and rural environments throughout the South.

While the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation supposedly brought an end to slavery as a way of life, the former slaves, for the most part, were still “tied to the land” and the landowners. The promise of “40 acres and a mule” never materialized; as a result, relationships changed into a system that came to be known as tenant farming or “sharecropping”.

Blacks continued to work as farmers, in many instances on the same land they worked as slaves, but their labor was provided in the faith and hope that over time, they could earn enough money/equity to own some part of the land after working it and “sharing its crops” and other products with whites. This became another exploitative relationship, where white landowners benefited from Blacks’ “cheap labor” without giving up control of the land and its resources. Despite the obstacles, a number of Blacks persevered to become owners of small family farms and homesteads. Large families were not uncommon, as children (and sons in particular) provided additional assistance to their parents as agricultural workers.

According to Dr. Robert D. Bullard, a leading expert on agriculture, in 1910 Black farmers owned over 16 million acres of farmland, and ten years later, there were 925,000 Black farmers. Other sources indicate that the total amount of Black-owned farmland may have been as high as 19 million acres at one point.

Agriculture and Black Education: From Reconstruction to Segregation

The overwhelming majority of Africans in America had been denied access to education, in fact and/or by law prior to the Civil War and emancipation. After the war ended in 1865, the “reconstruction” of the South involved a brief period where blacks were allowed to vote in significant numbers. Their impact on the Southern political system resulted in the election of African American legislators and public officials on the Federal, state, and local levels, who pushed for the rights of Blacks to receive education and other rights of citizenship until 1876, when reactionary elements used violence, the

electoral, judicial, and legislative systems to disfranchise Black officeholders and voters and effectively end their short season of political power and influence.

A number of entities, including the Freedmen's Bureau, the American Missionary Association, and other religious organizations, became involved in efforts to establish schools for the education of blacks, with the majority of these institutions located in the South and border states. Even as these early schools were being established, education for Blacks varied greatly, especially in rural areas where "book learning" took a back seat to required and necessary labor during planting and harvesting seasons.

The debate over education for Blacks after slavery reflected the realities of American society at that time. On the one hand, many felt that education for Blacks should be designed to develop practical skills and trades which were necessary to ensure immediate survival, while others favored the development of schools which stressed the liberal arts and classical approach to intellectual development. The most negative groups and individuals did not want them to receive any education, and actively sought to harass, disrupt, and even destroy persons, groups, organizations, and facilities that promoted educational development.

The earliest institutions for the higher education of blacks also reflected these realities, and stressed either the classical/liberal arts approach (i.e., Fisk University in Tennessee, and Howard University in the District of Columbia); others emphasized "normal" education focusing on agricultural and industrial skill development and applications, with Tuskegee Institute in Alabama as the best-known example. Some institutions, such as Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and Hampton Institute in Virginia, sought to achieve a balance between liberal and industrial education.

Two African American leaders, Booker T. Washington (graduate of Hampton and first teacher/principal/president of Tuskegee) and W.E.B. DuBois (graduate of Fisk and first black Ph.D. from Harvard), became symbols of these two different philosophies. Washington's famous Atlanta Exposition address in 1895, and the publication of DuBois' literary masterpiece, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in 1903, among other works, became key documentation of their philosophical differences of the subject of black education.

Prior to the emergence of the majority of higher education institution for blacks and leaders such as Washington and DuBois, the U.S. Congress had begun the process of addressing the need for agricultural and industrial education alongside the liberal arts and classical educational model with the Morrill Act of 1862, which led to the development of state land-grant institutions.

The recently established black colleges and institutions were not included, for the most part, in the Morrill Act, although there were isolated instances where private and public institutions for blacks were allotted limited funding (Alcorn State University in Mississippi, Claflin University in South Carolina, Hampton Institute in Virginia, and Kentucky State College). The majority of funds were clearly designated for white state-supported institutions.

The success of the agricultural/industrial education philosophy, particularly at Hampton and Tuskegee, led to the Second Morrill Act in 1890. As both of these institutions were not state-supported, they were not given land-grant status (Tuskegee would later receive a special designation alongside the other 1890 schools); however, these institutions became the model for the public black colleges that would achieve this distinction. Many schools actually came into existence or were assured survival as a

direct result of the Morrill Acts, and some would incorporate the letter combinations “A&I”, “A&M”, “A, M, & N”, or “A&T” into their names to clarify their focus on agricultural education, along with industrial, mechanical, “normal” and/or technical training (i.e., Tennessee A&I, Florida A&M, Arkansas A,M, & N, North Carolina A&T).

Tuskegee Institute’s outstanding scientist, George Washington Carver, who came to the college as head of the division of agriculture in 1886, was a pioneer and innovator in developing agricultural research in the black land-grant college setting. His many other personal achievements, discoveries, and inventions, which had national and international implications in agriculture, business, and other fields of activity, brought worldwide recognition to the man and the college.

Carver became director of the first agricultural research station on a black campus, created conferences and institutes for black farmers and workers, and practically applied agricultural research by traveling directly to farm settings to provide assistance, conduct research and studies, and share his findings to benefit farmers directly in their immediate environment. His discoveries and applications were credited with saving the Southern agricultural system, and his products helped to create whole new industries.

The “Tuskegee system” was replicated in the black land-grant colleges in Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. Overall, the model was successful, as it was perceived as useful, practical, and less threatening to the Southern power structure and social order, which had evolved into the flawed doctrine of “separate but equal”. Segregation of the races, especially in the

Southern states, had been made legal as a result of the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case.

Agriculture in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Other factors such as the industrial revolution which moved America away from being an agrarian society, continuing social and economic hardships faced by Blacks in the South, and the possibilities of better living and working conditions in the North, led to the migration of larger numbers away from the agricultural setting. In the first half of the twentieth century, the Great Depression of the 1930s, extended drought and other adverse weather conditions, and the demand for industrial workers during the two World Wars became incentives for many Blacks to abandon farming lifestyles and occupations. The increasing mechanization and industrialization of agricultural processes, involving huge tracts of farmland as opposed to small family farms, combined over time with the influx of immigrant workers from Mexico and other countries, further impacted the decline of Blacks as farmers and/or agricultural laborers.

Persons who chose to remain faced not only the dangers and humiliations of segregation in the South, but the challenges of maintaining families, livestock, and farmland in the midst of numerous uncertainties such as weather and other natural conditions, quality of harvested crops, and efforts to disfranchise them from farmland and other property regardless of status (landowners or tenant farmers).

The civil rights movement of the 1960s brought an end to legal segregation and re-established voting rights for Blacks in the South and elsewhere, leading to increased access to public accommodations, education, and elective offices. Even with these

landmark changes, challenges remained for Blacks in farming and agriculture in the “New South”, as well as in other parts of the nation. One notable example of progress with connections to agriculture was Michael Espy, who, when elected from Mississippi in 1986, was the first African American from his state to serve in Congress since the Reconstruction period a century earlier. Espy made history again when he was appointed as the first African-American Secretary of Agriculture in 1993, during the Clinton Administration.

Agricultural research has continued to thrive as an important component of the 1890 land-grant institutions, with ongoing support from the Federal government, foundations, and/or national/multinational corporations. Collaborations, partnerships, and other initiatives have been established and maintained with universities, governments, and other organizations in the U.S., emerging African nations, and other developing countries in various parts of the world to address immediate and long-term agricultural needs.

Black agricultural scientists, engineers, and researchers continue to conduct their work from the Black land-grant colleges and universities, as well as other institutions, and participate in the development of the next generation of scientists and scholars in the field. Their activities remain vitally important, as agriculture remains essential to the survival and progress of humanity in all parts of the world.

The decline in the number of Black (and white) farmers continued throughout the twentieth century, even as agriculture became the domain of large corporate interests. Black farmers, who continue to persevere despite their reduced numbers (from nearly 1 million in 1920 to around 18,000 by 1999; 1 % of U.S. farmers) and decades of land

loss, as recently as 2002 were still documented as owning 7.8 million acres of farmland. They have organized into associations such as the National Black Farmers Association and the Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association, and brought a class-action lawsuit involving approximately 22,000 Black farmers against the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1997 for discrimination in farm lending practices and unfair foreclosures of farms owned by African Americans.

The case was settled in 1999, with the government paying 12,597 farmers more than \$629 million in claims and has forgiven at least \$17.2 million in outstanding loans, according to USDA statistics. However, nearly 9,000 lost in efforts to file claims that were challenged by the USDA, and many say that they still face the same kind of discrimination that led to the lawsuit.

According to Gary Grant of Tillery, North Carolina, head of the Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association, the average age of Black farmers is 60 years old. The next generation is turning away from farming as an occupation, due in part to witnessing the hardships and challenges faced by their parents and elders, as well as the many other educational and career options now available to young Black people.

John Boyd of Mecklinburg County, Virginia, head of the National Black Farmers Association, is quoted as saying that if the current trends are not reversed, farming, which was Blacks' first occupation in America, "is going to be the first occupation to become extinct for black people". The Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association and other organizations are seeking to influence and collaborate with 1890 land-grant colleges, Black churches and religious organizations, other institutions, and individuals to educate

African Americans and others about the plight of the Black farmer and the continuing significance of agriculture.

Black people spend billions of dollars on food every year, but presently own only 19 supermarkets in the entire United States, according to reports and commentaries. Without Black farmers and land ownership, others would completely control the supply of food; in a worst-case scenario, we could not feed our own children. These realities underscore the ongoing need for, and importance of, continued African American involvement in all phases of agriculture in the 21st century.

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