

## **A History of African-American Farmer Cooperatives, 1938-2000**

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The history of African-American agriculture and cooperatives in the South demonstrates the role of cooperation in maintaining independent farmers. It manifests this role in a more pronounced way than is evident in a general history of agricultural cooperatives in the U.S. The latter has been skillfully documented in the two-volume work of Joseph Knapp. His history ends in 1945, when the activities of black cooperatives had not as yet taken as visible a form as occurred since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s-1960s.

There is a growing body of historical research, using local archives and community newspapers from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, that is discovering how blacks often joined in many informal cooperatives. Some of them formed to purchase products and farm inputs. Others were involved with farm product marketing, mostly corn and vegetables and often utilized nothing more sophisticated than an outdoor market. In some cases, these cooperatives were a means for individuals to circumvent racial discrimination when trying to participate in commerce. Black churches initiated many of these informal cooperatives and have had a lasting influence, being very active in the more formal organizational activity that occurred during the Civil Rights Movement. A review of the history of struggle by black farmers for land ownership and farm operating independence helps develop an understanding for some of the special facets of black cooperatives.

The term “independent farmer” is often used for different purposes, ranging from description of a personality-type to justifications for farm policy. As a result, its meaning varies according to context. The meaning of this term has also evolved with changes in technology and marketing systems. About twenty-five years ago an independent farmer was generally defined as having freedom to make operating decisions while functioning in an interdependent market system.(Breimyer, 116-17; Lee, 40-43) While this definition is still valid, interdependencies in the farm economy are increasing and farm decision-making has become more coordinated and restricted over the last twenty-five years.

Another distinction that is more manifest today is that some farmers exercise independence in entrepreneurial decision-making over the activities of their farms, but they may not themselves perform the operations of those farms. Other farmers are direct or hands-on operators, and in their case, independence is in the making of operating decisions. A definition of independence that applies to both types of farmers is freedom to make farm business decisions that have variable risk and reward outcomes. Both types of farmers use cooperatives to maintain and strengthen their independence.

During the years of President Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty" some of the black farmer cooperatives received government financial assistance. In fact, these cooperatives are usually discussed in the context of rural development strategy, but that emphasis has obfuscated how their emergence was connected with enforcement of civil rights during the 1960s and with the long-term pursuit of operating independence by black farmers.

This paper has a twofold purpose to: 1) provide a chronology and historical background to the black farmer cooperatives that operate in the South today, and 2) examine their role in developing and maintaining the operating independence of member farmers. The first section of this paper discusses three historical developments that have influenced black cooperatives. The next section describes the impact of the New Deal period 1933-41 on black farmers and the government programs to organize cooperatives for rural development. The third section covers the increased organizational activity of black farmer cooperatives during the Civil Rights Movement. Lastly, the current system of black farmer cooperatives and institutional development is discussed.

This paper is a part of a longer research report on the historical struggles of black farmers for land and managerial independence. (Reynolds) Given the limited space of this paper and the broad scope of a historical background, a chronology of periods and events for 1865-1965 is displayed in Appendix Table 1.

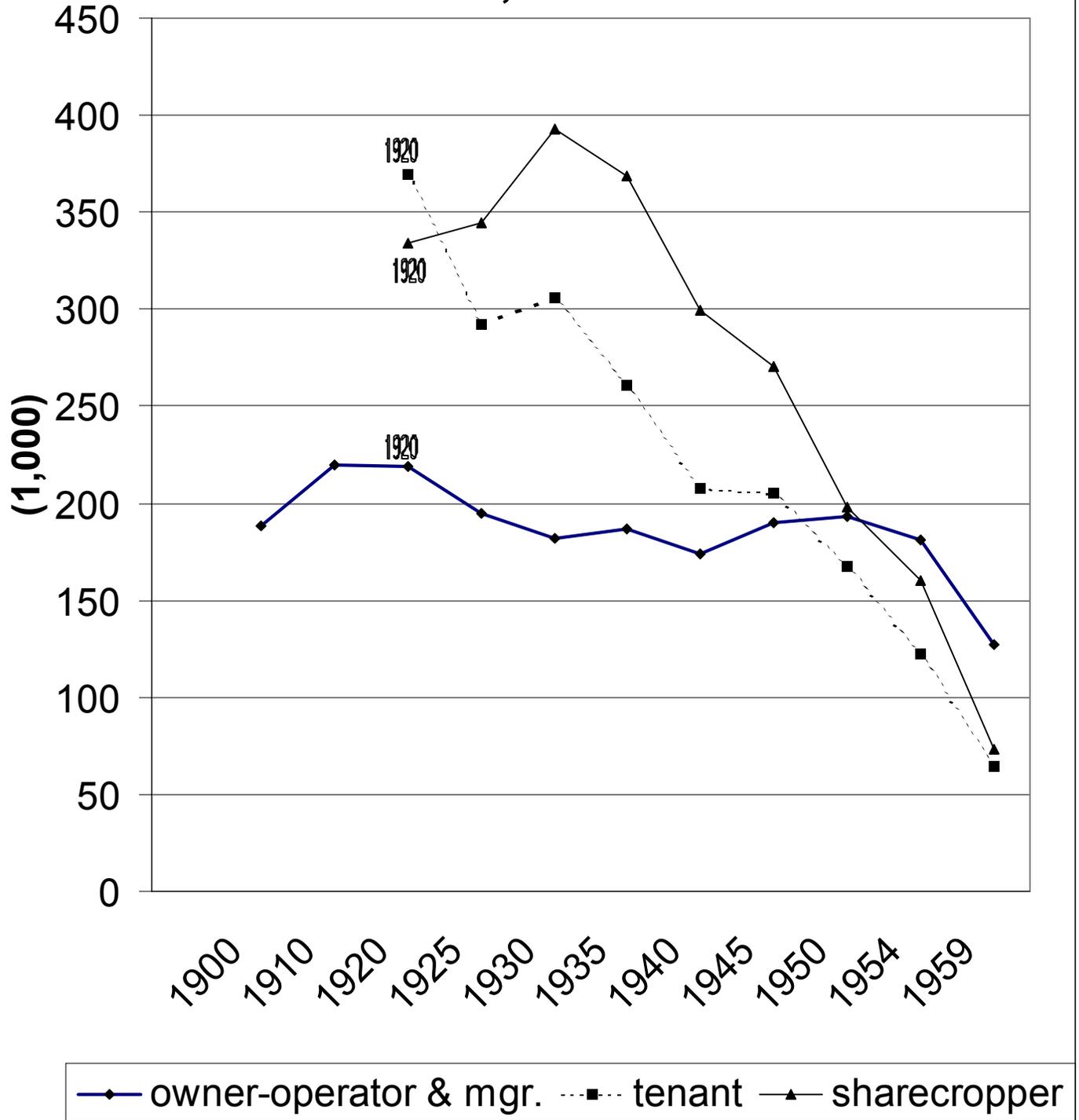
## Historical Background

Three background developments provide more perspective for understanding the emergence of a more visible form of cooperatives among black farmers by 1938 and development during the 1960s of a cooperative system that is designed to build and maintain farm operating independence. These three developments are 1) contracting methods for plantation farming that emerged after the Civil War, 2) the Alliance movement of the late 1880s and early 1890s, and 3) the land procurement and community development initiatives of Booker T. Washington.

The end of slavery brought a whole new set of working relationships to be negotiated and developed. The terms of production contracts varied in the extent of freedom of farm management decision-making. This topic is usually discussed in terms of movement along the so-called agricultural ladder. (Alston, 264) In the postbellum period wage-workers were at the bottom rung while owner-operators were at the top. Between these two rungs were the sharecroppers and then tenant farmers were a step up. In practice, there were intermediary rungs that were distinguished by the extent of independent decision-making and responsibility. For example, some tenant farmers operated as “managing-share tenants,” who, although required to grow cotton or other staples such as rice and tobacco, managed independently and furnished most of the variable inputs and equipment. (Woofter, xxi and 9-14) Even among sharecroppers there was a category of “bale-per-plow” contracts, that provided more operating-decision freedom. (Daniel 1985, 81)

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Census of Agriculture began collecting population data for the major rungs of the agricultural ladder. Figure 1 displays data from 1900-59 for three general rungs. The owner-operator category included full and part owners, as well as a relatively small segment of those who worked as independent farm managers. The sharecropper category was only provided in the census between 1920 and 1959. In other years, sharecropping was combined with a tenant category, “crop-share.” The latter involved different terms from those of sharecropping for division and control of output.

**Fig. 1- Nonwhite owner-operators, tenants, and sharecroppers in the South, 1900-59**



In addition, while the Census Bureau has collected data on black farmers, its series on farm operators that provided a sharecropper category used the designations white and non-white operators. The category non-white did not include Mexican-Americans, and for the South during this period it was almost identical with the data series for black farmers.

An evident inference from Figure 1 is that farm operators who own some farmland are less likely to exit from farming than those who contract to work for landlords. The large decline in non-white owner-operators and tenants after 1920 was due to the impact of low cotton prices. Figure 1 also shows that between 1920-30 there was an increase in non-white sharecroppers, many of whom may have fallen from the “ladder rungs” of tenants and owner-operators. Lastly, there was a general decline in farm operators throughout American agriculture during the 1930s that was in part due to increasing mechanization. However, the major labor-saving technology for cotton is in harvesting, which was not widely available until after World War II. Thus, the decline in black tenants and sharecroppers in the 1930s was to a large extent precipitated by farm policy of the New Deal, which is discussed in the next section of this paper.

The quality of life for those acquiring even small amounts of land was far better in terms of personal freedom and economic well being, particularly in the period of agricultural prosperity during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some black farmers became prominent landlords during this period and were active investors in educational institutions and community development. (Grim)

According to Census surveys, the amount of acreage owned by non-white farmers in the South peaked at 12.8 million acres in 1910. While this category was not surveyed by the Census Bureau in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, W.E.B. Du Bois estimated the progress as follows: three million acres in 1875, eight million in 1890, and 12 million in 1900. (Aptheker,105)

Land ownership and prosperity, however, was not shared by a large majority of black farm operators. Historians have identified a general movement down the agricultural

ladder for most black farm operators that began in the 1890s and continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The decline was not always from a major rung to a lower one, but also conditions became more restrictive and exploitative within the sharecropping and tenant categories. (Curtin, 25; Higgs; Alston, 267) The worsening conditions for black sharecroppers and tenants coincided with the beginning of the Jim Crow Era in 1890 (see Appendix Table 1).

Sharecropping was not confined to blacks. In fact, the crop lien system led to many foreclosures on small white farmers, who started to become sharecroppers in increasing numbers by the 1880s. Conditions worsened correspondingly for white sharecroppers, whose bargaining efforts for better terms were thwarted by threats of replacement by blacks. (Woodman, 229)

A second background development is the Farmers Alliance of the 1880s and early 1890s as a significant period of cooperative organizational activity for black farmers. The Alliance spread throughout the Plains states and the South, with local cooperatives, but also with a more centralized cooperative marketing approach than had existed with the earlier Grange Movement. (Knapp 1963, 57-67) Many Alliance leaders wanted participation by black farm operators, and in 1886 the Colored Farmers Alliance and Cooperative Union was established. After the Alliance failed in an effort to implement ambitious marketing and financing programs, the movement was absorbed in the political activity of the Populist Party. (Goodwyn, 276-306)

The Alliance had a lasting impact by providing experience with cooperatives and introducing the application of unions to many black farm operators. In fact, unions were a more relevant form of collective action than cooperatives for those tenant farmers and sharecroppers without control on their share of products and limited prospects for moving up the agricultural ladder. (Woodman, 229)

The third background development is the land purchase and settlement programs initiated by Booker T. Washington. While these settlements were relatively modest, they had a

major influence in later years on New Deal programs and on the strategy of black farmer cooperatives. He worked with land improvement companies in the late 1890s to coordinate purchases of large tracts that were subdivided and sold to black farmers at low interest rates. At about the same time the Farmers' Improvement Society of Texas was formed among black farmers. This association emphasized cooperatives, using the Village Improvement Societies in the northeastern states as a model. It organized cooperatives for purchasing inputs and marketing produce, and developed working relationships with the Tuskegee programs. (Zabawa, 463-4)

The interaction between these agricultural education groups and some of the ideas of the cooperative movements in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century influenced the development of planned farming communities. The first of these was the Tuskegee initiated Southern Improvement Company in 1901, followed by the Tuskegee Farm and Improvement Company (Baldwin Farms) in 1914. Much of the commerce of these communities operated with purchasing and marketing cooperatives. (Zabawa, 465-9)

These three background developments influenced some of the initiatives for cooperative development in the New Deal programs of the 1930s. The New Deal was a major turning point in U.S. agriculture and policy, which had both negative and positive impacts on black farmers.

### New Deal Agriculture

The New Deal was for the most part a bad deal for black farmers. Under the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1933, cotton was supported by restricting acreage and guaranteeing minimum prices. The immediate impact of this reduction in planted acreage was displacement for many black and white tenants and sharecroppers. There were also fairly widespread reports of landlords who were not distributing the share of payments that belonged to their tenants or sharecroppers. (Woofter, 67; Fite, 141-2; Daniel 1985, 101-4) The New Deal also marked a turn to significantly more provision of government services, the distribution of which was controlled by politically connected

groups in rural communities. For much of the South that system resulted in diminished access to services for many blacks which, as alleged in lawsuits against USDA, has persisted into recent years.

Another unintended consequence of the AAA was to raise entry barriers to farm ownership. Numerous studies estimate that commodity price supports raise the price of farmland over time by as much as 15 to 20 percent as a national average. (Floyd; Ryan) The commodity programs are tied to specific lands, which capitalizes the future value of the programs into the value of the land.

Although farmland prices were depressed during the 1930s, ownership was often infeasible for those, like many blacks, who had diminished access to AAA programs. Incentives for land purchases and expansions of farm acreage were increased for those with access to AAA programs. Between 1930 and 1935 white farm owners and tenant operators increased farmland acres in the South by 12 percent, or over 35 million acres, but farmland acreage owned by nonwhite farmers declined by almost a half a million over the same period. (Census) The gains in land values from the commodity programs accrued once it became evident that commodity programs would persist. For those who added to their land holdings during the Depression, the benefits were gained when acreage restrictions for cotton and other program crops were eased or lifted in later years.

There were slightly more nonwhite owners of farmland in the South in 1935 as compared to 1930, an increase of 6 percent or 9,617 for full owners and a decrease of 13 percent or 5,571 for part owners. In contrast, white owners in the South increased by 13 percent or 139,646, and white part owners increased by 8 percent or 15,299, between 1930 and 1935. During the same five year period, white tenants increased by 145,763, while nonwhite tenants decreased by 45,049, which may have reflected differences in access to subsidies (Appendix Table 2). This increased entry by whites into farming appears to have been at least partly policy induced because it occurred during a period of acreage reduction for cotton and low commodity prices. In sum, the AAA programs raised

barriers to land ownership for black farmers and limited their opportunities to either stay in farming or to achieve the status of operating as independent farmers.

New Deal policy-makers did not neglect displaced tenants and croppers. Subsistence relief and resettlement programs were offered for these farm operators and their families during the mid-1930s. Such programs functioned more as a holding action for the unemployed than in addressing the economics of excess labor supply in southern farming. But during 1935-1941 the programs of the Resettlement Administration, followed by the Farm Security Administration (FS), were a substantial government effort to help tenants become independent farmers and to utilize cooperatives. (Knapp, 299-316; Baldwin, 193-211) Lending programs were established to enable tenants to purchase farmland and machinery. By analyzing credit-worthiness, these programs tried to target those with the most capability to farm efficiently.

Displaced tenants and sharecroppers who were selected for participation in some of the resettlement programs were in effect given an opportunity to develop as independent farmers. In many cases newly settled farms were in contiguous areas, which provided a basis for establishing cooperatives, which FS actively promoted and operated. These cooperatives included both traditional farm supply purchasing and marketing, but also a range of shared services. The latter included associations for joint ownership of farm machinery and breeding stock. (Baldwin, 203) These initiatives represented an awareness of the needs of new entrants to farming, of opportunities for farm ownership, and of the potential role of cooperatives in rural development, which had been put aside during the initial years of launching the AAA programs.

Many tenants did not have sufficient farming assets, equipment and skills, to qualify for land purchase loans, a problem that the Farm Security Administration sought to address by implementing two types of cooperatives: farm production and land-lease. The former projects failed due to insufficient property rights incentives. (Knapp, 316) But land-lease cooperatives utilized a more individual-based incentive system. These cooperatives received loans for leasing entire plantations that were subdivided into family farms for

subleasing to members. They also operated the plantation cotton gin and other facilities on a cooperative basis, in addition to farm supply purchasing. By 1940 there were thirty-one land-lease cooperatives with 949 black and 750 white farm families. (Knapp, 313)

An alternative program involved lending for acquisition of large tracts of land and subdivision into individually owned family farms. The Prairie Farms in Macon County, Alabama utilized this lending program to establish farms and community infrastructure. The Tuskegee Institute participated in planning the Prairie Farms community, which included a cooperative for purchasing and machinery sharing and a K- 12<sup>th</sup> grade school. (Zabawa, 480-3) Prairie Farms discontinued in the 1950s.

Farm Security Administration programs for farm ownership and cooperative development were phased out after 1941 although shared services, particularly farm machinery sharing cooperatives, were actively supported during WW II. (Sharing) In retrospect, these programs increased cooperative education and experience in the rural population. They likely contributed to the increase in farm ownership in the South between 1940 and 1945 (Appendix Table 2). Knapp's general assessment of the FS initiative with respect to cooperatives was that the government was too directly involved and idealism often crowded out the practical experience needed for long-term sustainability. (Knapp, 316)

Some of the cooperatives that were organized by these programs lasted for several years after 1941. A survey in 1946 showed that only 16 percent of the 25,543 cooperatives organized under Farm Security programs had gone out of business. (Baldwin, 203) Many of these closed during the 1950-59 period, which experienced the largest rural exodus in the nation's history (Appendix Table 3). This period was the turning point from increasing to decreasing numbers of cooperatives in the U.S.A. (Mather) Yet, the Mileston Farmers Cooperative in Tchula, MS was established by the F S programs and continues to serve its members today.

The government's FS programs established cooperatives with formal organizational structure and with the standard principles, whereas informal cooperation by black farmers had previously operated as buying clubs and group efforts in setting-up community outdoor markets. (Pitts, 21) The experience with cooperatives during the years of the Alliance probably carried over into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in these informal and less visible forms of cooperation. The FS programs also applied the ideas for land acquisition and community planning that Booker T. Washington had implemented. While black farmers continued these initiatives after the FS programs lapsed in 1941, deficient civil rights, such as barriers to voting, impeded their struggle for operating independence and use of cooperatives.

### Civil Rights Movement and Cooperatives

Black cooperatives became more visible to the general public as civil rights issues became prominent by 1954 (see Appendix Table 1). The Civil Rights Movement emboldened many black farmers to become more assertive of their rights to organize. The emergence of these cooperatives during the post-WW II period is remarkable in view of the limited access to government services that many black farmers experienced due to discrimination.

The opposite argument can be made in the sense that some cooperatives arose because of discrimination. For example, some farmers found their access to supplies or markets blocked if they were known to be members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This situation prompted black farmers in Clarendon County, NC to organize the Clarendon County Improvement Association in 1956 as a way to circumvent discrimination. It provided small loans, farm supplies, and services. When area gins would not receive cotton from black farmers, the cooperative transported member cotton to distant facilities for ginning. (Daniel 2000, 247) Circumventing discrimination was also the purpose of forming the Grand Marie Vegetable Producers Cooperative, Inc. in Louisiana in 1965, after brokers boycotted some growers for their civil rights activities. (Marshall, 51)

While cooperatives helped reduce members' exposure to potential racial discrimination in commercial dealings, the formation of associations elicited antagonism and reprisals from racist business owners. The Clarendon County Improvement Association lost access to credit from local banks, but it was able to borrow from the NAACP and also received funds from the United Automobile Workers for purchasing farm machinery. (Daniel 2000, 247) One of the largest and widely publicized black cooperatives to emerge in the late 1960s was South West Alabama Farmers Cooperative Association (SWAFCA). It encountered numerous boycotts from local business and discriminatory actions from political leaders.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the right to organize cooperatives was a part of the overall interests of the Civil Rights Movement in the South. (Marshall, 47-8)

The Movement in the 1960s inspired a wellspring of leadership and willingness to work together that fostered black farmer cooperatives. Civil rights workers lent a hand in cooperative development, and many of these included religious leaders, continuing a tradition of churches in support of cooperatives. For example, the Reverend Francis X. Walter founded the Freedom Quilting Bee in Alabama in the early sixties. Father A .J. McKnight organized the Southern Consumers Cooperative (SCC), and several credit unions during the 1960s-1970s. (Marshall, 37-40)

Father McKnight also contributed significant institutional development for black cooperatives with the founding of the Southern Consumers Education Foundation (SCEF) in 1961. His work drew attention and support from the Cooperative League of the USA (CLUSA), the Credit Union National Association (CUNA), and other national organizations.<sup>2</sup> These organizations and some foundations helped establish the Southern Cooperative Development Program (SCDP) in 1967. The SCDP offered cooperative education and technical assistance to cooperatives and credit unions located primarily in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. After its first two years in operation, the SCDP realized a need to focus assistance on twenty-five associations, rather than spreading its resources on new cooperative development. (Marshall, 42)

The year 1967 also saw the founding of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC) by representatives from 22 cooperatives across the South. The FSC’s purpose was similar to the SCDP in providing cooperative education and business planning assistance. In 1970 SCDP merged into FSC. After being founded by 22 cooperatives, FSC had 80 members after only two years. By the mid-1970s it had 130 cooperatives in its membership. (Voorhis, 212) Table 1 is a condensed version of FSC membership data in 1969 that was published in the Marshall and Godwin study. The total number of families reported by selected states includes some double counts because some belonged to more than one cooperative, and a total membership is not reported. The FSC draws from 14 states, but over time Alabama and Mississippi have consistently accounted for a large share of its membership.

FSC’s primary mission is to save family farms for black Americans. It offers a wide range of services in consulting, research, and training in agriculture and cooperatives, as well as providing a political voice to government policy-makers. Its latter role involves public education about improving government policies for supporting family farmers.

Table 1 – Federation of Southern Cooperatives membership, 1969

States	Agricultural		Credit Unions		Consumer		Other <sup>a</sup>		Total	
	co-ops	members	co-ops	members	co-ops	members	co-ops	members	co-ops	members
AL	2	1,825	6	2,784	3	230	3	2,789	14	7,398
MS	5	1,875	1	500	3	1,080	8	1,482	17	4,937
LA	3	290	4	1,833	--	--	1	2,050	8	4,183
Other <sup>b</sup>	14	1,992	5	801	9	1,720	13	578	41	5,091
Total	24	5,982	16	5,918	15	3,030	25	4,303	80	--

<sup>a</sup> Other cooperatives include handicraft, small industry, and fishing.

<sup>b</sup> Other states are Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

The largest cooperative in FSC’s membership in its early years was SWAFCA that organized in 1967 with 1,800 farm families. It epitomized the spirit of the Civil Rights

Movement in asserting freedom from discrimination and pursuit of economic uplift for poor families. Its initial membership grew out of discussions among black cotton farmers who wanted to diversify into vegetable crops but needed a marketing outlet. A large-scale membership campaign was included in voter registration drives and in the Selma-to-Montgomery “March for Freedom” in 1965 (see Appendix Table 1). Civil rights workers and organizations such as the National Sharecroppers Fund and CLUSA participated in its formation. (Marshall, 46)

SWAFCA achieved some marketing successes, despite having to deal with harassment from some white politicians and business leaders. Although members were predominantly black, SWAFCA vegetable marketing programs attracted membership from some white farmers. (Voorhis, 96) Nevertheless, it encountered problems in establishing durable marketing programs. Marshall and Godwin observed that its management was not up to serving such a relatively large membership, and they noted that, “. . . members had very limited understanding of cooperative principles.” (Marshall, 47-9) FSC worked diligently to shore-up management and cooperative education deficiencies, but market access problems and size of SWAFCA’s membership proved too unwieldy for sustaining operations past the mid-1980s.

During the mid-1970s SWAFCA attempted to shift its operations from marketing vegetables to producing gasohol. The late Albert Turner, who was a civil rights leader and an experimental engineer, led this endeavor.<sup>3</sup> In the 1970s he developed a process for gasohol production that utilized corn, vegetables, and organic residues supplied by SWAFCA. He adapted a pick-up truck to run on gasohol and drove from Alabama to Washington, DC to promote his plans. His proposals also included feed by-products and methane from cattle waste for electricity generation, but they were all denied funding from government agencies. (Zippert)

## The Black Farmer Cooperative System

SWAFCA's experience underlines the importance of the cooperative training and consulting services of FSC. The founders of FSC anticipated that the impetus for organizing and joining cooperatives in the 1960s was overreaching the cooperative know-how and experience of directors and members. Their work has required adaptation to local needs and to the limited income and resources of many cooperative members. Some activities and services that might seem non-essential to cooperatives in other regions of the U.S. have been critically important for black farmer survival in the South. FSC or its member cooperatives have introduced and coordinated adoption of various vegetable crops to replace cotton. Obtaining sufficient volume of a new crop for a marketing program involves extensive outreach, and unlike other agricultural regions, is not accomplished by simply issuing production contracts.

In the early 1970s FSC purchased several tracts of land in Epes, Alabama for establishing a demonstration farm and training center. When a new vegetable or fruit crop is identified as suitable for local growing conditions, FSC provides training in production and marketing to area farmers. This center has also helped many young farmers, not only with production techniques, but also with training in cooperative principles and procedures.

A critical service that is probably least likely to be routinely offered by cooperatives or service organizations in other regions of the U.S. is the assistance to farmers for obtaining and retaining land. The Emergency Land Fund (ELF) helps farmers finance land acquisition and retain their holdings through budget and tax planning. Its work carries on a tradition that goes back to Booker T. Washington in counteracting social and institutional biases against black ownership of farmland. In 1985 the ELF merged with FSC to form the Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund (FCS/LAF).

Black farmer cooperatives are increasingly moving in the direction of value-added activities and market development. Several have vegetable packing facilities to serve supermarket buyers. Others are packing high-value products like pecans and pepper

growers are bottling a branded hot sauce. Several livestock projects have also been implemented. (FSC/LAF annual report 2000)

The current membership of the FSC/LAF is 75 cooperatives and credit unions. Its membership includes the majority of predominantly black rural cooperatives and credit unions in the South. Some non-member cooperatives work with FSC/LAF state associations or with universities. Table 2 lists these organizations by their status as agricultural cooperatives, credit unions, other rural cooperatives, and by location in a few of the major states and for the South in total.

The involvement of USDA in providing research and cooperative education assistance to black farmers has increased in recent years, but is short of meeting needs. (Rotan) Information from the Rural Business-Cooperative Service is distributed through publications, internet, and by technical assistance. In recent years field offices of both Rural Development and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) are providing technical assistance to black cooperatives. Several agricultural universities have also stepped up their work on cooperative development and have established centers for small farm development. This emphasis is having an impact. When several black

Table 2 – Black cooperatives and credit unions in the South

location	Agricultural co-op	Credit Unions	Other co-ops <sup>a</sup>	Total
AL	6	6	6	18
MS	8	3	3	14
GA	7	3	4	14
SC	11	0	3	14
Other <sup>b</sup>	8	7	5	20
Total	40	19	21	80

<sup>a</sup> Other cooperatives include handicraft, small industry, fishing, housing, and day-care.

<sup>b</sup> Other states are Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.

farmers in north Florida wanted to organize a marketing cooperative in 1995, they received technical assistance from NRCS and the Agricultural Marketing Service of USDA. Other institutions contributed to establishing the New North Florida Cooperative, such as Florida A & M University. The cooperative receives, washes and packages a variety of fruits and vegetables for shipment to schools throughout their region. (Karg)

The “aging of agriculture” is a concern of U.S. farm policy as the average age of American farmers is steadily increasing, having reached 54.3 years in the last census. For many young blacks an aversion to farm life is potentially more salient than for young whites. Sociological studies have observed that at least since the 1960s there has been a general feeling among young southern blacks that farming is an unattractive career, and that metropolitan life and work is the gateway to prosperity and social status. (Beale, 200) However, cooperatives are playing a role in teaching younger generations about the rewards of farming. The Beat 4 Cooperative in Mississippi has an innovative youth program, where young people participate in a full range of both farming and marketing activities. (FSC/LAF annual report 1994-95) They are also involved with computer applications for farming and business, which is particularly appealing to many young people.

Black cooperatives are not only a resource for the young, but also for their community. Many of the packing cooperatives offer local markets for vegetables and fruits, as well as shipping to distant urban locations. Seasonal demand for labor is often met by family, friends, and community. In a recent newspaper article, a schoolteacher from Ohio describes her joy in having a summer job in her rural hometown with the Missouri Bootheel Small Farmers Produce Cooperative. (Owen) This type of community feeling and participation was also evident in cooperative case studies. (Rotan) In other words, cooperatives provide a way for many blacks to discover the rewards of farm life that might otherwise be a lost experience.

## Cooperatives and Independent Farmers

The history of black farmers demonstrates many of the ways cooperatives build and sustain managerial and operating independence. It also demonstrates the limited utility of cooperatives to producers without decision-making responsibility. The importance of independent farmers to the purpose of cooperatives is usually a tacit assumption. But this assumption is more explicit and salient for black than for white farmer cooperatives because their members have had to struggle to achieve and sustain the status of independent farmers. In this regard, the enforcement of civil rights was a major step in the development of black farmer cooperatives but did not mark their beginnings.

The challenge to independent farming today resides in the increased industrialization of agriculture, which uses a form of contracting to exert more control over farming operations and technology. Contemporary production contracting offers opportunities to many agricultural producers that they perceive as better than available alternatives. There is a variety of contracting methods, many of which have reduced economic uncertainty and improved the earnings of farmers. Yet, some of today's production contracting systems remove many critical parts of farm enterprise decision-making and may reduce the flexibility of farmers to adapt to changing market trends. To the extent that contracting would diminish the individual's control of his/her farm and adaptability of its enterprise, cooperatives would then have an increasingly important role in offering alternatives for independent farmers.

The future of independent farmers depends on competitive strategy in relation to contracting systems that eliminate independence from producers. Economic survival will depend on being low-cost producers and supplying consumer-desired products as effectively as the alternative contracting systems. Independent farmers have a potential to supply markets with more variety and to serve diverse consumer preferences. But they will also have to produce with the same food safety standards and environmental protection achieved by highly controlled agricultural contracting systems. Cooperatives

can have an important role in coordinating the operations and investments needed for this type of agriculture.

The most effective way for cooperatives to counter potential challenges to the entrepreneurial independence of farmers is to focus on business strategy for earnings maximization. In other words, cooperatives usually perform better when not pursuing a broad range of objectives. Benefits such as strengthened entrepreneurial independence of farmers, or even community development, arise indirectly when cooperatives pursue business objectives while adhering to core principles of cooperation.

The future of an industrialized agriculture may greatly shrink the population of independent farmers. Correspondingly, agricultural cooperatives would lack a distinctive rationale. The study of agricultural history, especially that of blacks, provides a long view and perspective for understanding what it means to be a farmer and how prosperity is usually served when farmers have the freedom and the availability of alternatives for making enterprise choices.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> SWAFCA had been approved for an Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) grant, but in June 1967 Alabama Governor Lurleen Wallace vetoed it. The Director of the OEO, Sargent Schriver, overrode the veto (Marshall 48).

<sup>2</sup> Father McKnight was inducted into the Cooperative Hall of Fame in 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Turner was the Alabama director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He was a leader of voter registration drives and confronted considerable danger in these activities during the 1960s. He was chosen by the SCLC to lead the mule train that carried Dr. Martin Luther King in the funeral procession.

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Appendix Table 1 – A chronology for the history of development of black farmer cooperatives, 1865-1965.

1865-69	Emancipation and the Freedman’s Bureau—new terms and relationships for agricultural production. Churches assume a lasting role in community building and social cohesion.
1867-76	Reconstruction
1875	Congress passes Civil Rights Bill guaranteeing equal access to public accommodations regardless of race.
1877	Withdrawal of remaining federal troops.
1878	Beginning of black “exoduster” migrations to Kansas and the West.
1883	U.S. Supreme court declares Civil Rights Law of 1875 unconstitutional.
1886-92	Farmers Alliance and the Colored Farmers Alliance and Cooperative Union.
1890	Black land grant colleges. Mississippi constitution marked the beginning of Jim Crow Laws – disenfranchisement and segregation.
1891	Cotton pickers strike – divisive for the Alliance movement.
1896	Plessy v. Ferguson, U.S. Supreme Court declares “separate but equal” public facilities to be constitutional.
1900-19	Commodity price improvements and prosperity for black farm owners, while severe conditions for tenants and sharecroppers increases their involvement in unions.
1901	Tuskegee directed land purchase for planned farming community, the Southern Improvement Company.
1914	Tuskegee Farm and Improvement Company (Baldwin Farms).
1920-32	Period of recessions and natural disasters.
1933	Agricultural Adjustment Act cotton acreage reduction (plow-up). Southern Tenant Farmers Union calls public attention to the plight of displaced tenants and sharecroppers.
1937	Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act establishes the Farm Security Administration.
1941	Termination of the cooperative development programs of the Farm Security Administration.
1946	Farmers Home Administration replaces the Farm Security Administration for rural development services, but discontinues the programs for applying cooperatives to meet development needs.
1954	Brown v. Board of Education, U.S. Supreme Court strikes down the “separate but equal” doctrine that it had upheld since 1896. This decision is a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement.
1963	March on Washington, D.C. and Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream...” speech.
1964	Civil Rights Act of 1964 strengthens right of equal opportunity for all.
1965	On March 7 civil rights leaders and supporters march from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery, AL to protest continued suppression of voting rights. The march included voter registrations and membership sign-ups for the farmer cooperative, SWAFCA. Violent intervention by state troopers alarms national government leaders. On August 6 President Johnson signs a Voting Rights Act that provides for federal government intervention in states that limit voting from racial groups. On August 20 the Economic Opportunity Act is passed that establishes the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to conduct the “war on poverty.”

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Sources: James Oliver Horton, and Lois E. Horton. 2001. *Hard Road to Freedom*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, and Anthony Lewis. 1965. *Portrait of a Decade*. New York: Bantam Books.

Appendix Table 2 -- Number of farm operators and operating status for whites and nonwhites in southern states, 1900 to 1959

	1959	1954	1950	1945	1940	1935	1930	1925	1920	1910	1900
White, total	1,379,407	1,853,820	2,093,333	2,215,722	2,326,904	2,606,176	2,342,129	2,299,963	2,283,750	2,207,406	1,879,721
Full owners	856,864	1,145,372	1,269,641	1,348,076	1,185,788	1,189,833	1,050,187	1,173,778	1,227,204	1,154,100	1,078,635
Part owners	285,418	300,280	274,135	165,355	185,246	198,768	183,469	150,875	152,432	171,944	105,171
Managers	8,906	9,190	9,740	12,751	13,215	15,401	16,529	10,259	16,548	15,084	17,172
Subtotal	1,151,188	1,454,842	1,553,516	1,526,182	1,384,249	1,404,002	1,250,185	1,334,912	1,396,184	1,341,128	1,200,978
Tenants	180,569	291,562	391,109	513,280	700,482	854,326	708,563	686,315	660,188		
Croppers	47,650	107,416	148,708	176,260	242,173	347,848	383,381	278,736	227,378		
Subtotal	228,219	398,978	539,817	689,540	942,655	1,202,174	1,091,944	965,051	887,566	866,278	678,743
Nonwhite, total	265,621	463,476	559,090	665,413	680,266	815,747	881,687	831,455	922,914	890,141	740,670
Full owners	89,749	129,854	141,482	160,980	141,902	150,113	140,496	159,651	178,558	175,290	158,479
Part owners	37,534	50,736	51,864	28,252	31,361	35,952	41,523	34,889	39,031	43,177	28,197
Managers	290	381	239	442	365	381	829	667	1,770	1,200	1,593
Subtotal	127,573	180,971	193,585	189,674	173,628	186,446	182,848	195,207	219,359	219,667	188,269
Tenants	64,661	122,259	167,448	205,443	207,520	260,893	305,942	291,926	369,842		
Croppers	73,387	160,246	198,057	270,296	299,118	368,408	392,897	344,322	333,713		
Subtotal	138,048	282,505	365,505	475,739	506,638	629,301	698,839	636,248	703,555	670,474	552,401

Source: Census of Agriculture. Selected years, Washington, DC: Bureau of the Census

Appendix Table 3 -- Farm operators in the U.S. by race, 1900 to 1997

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year	total	black	white	other
1900	5,739,657	746,717	4,970,129	22,811
1910	6,365,822	893,370	5,440,619	31,833
1920	6,453,991	925,708	5,498,454	29,829
1930	6,295,103	882,850	5,372,578	39,675
1940	6,102,417	681,790	5,377,728	42,899
1950	5,388,437	559,980	4,801,243	27,214
1959	3,707,973	272,541	3,423,361	12,071
1964	3,157,857	184,004	2,957,905	15,948
1969	2,730,250	87,393	2,626,403	16,454
1974	2,314,013	45,594	2,254,642	13,777
1978	2,257,775	37,351	2,199,787	20,637
1982	2,240,976	33,250	2,186,609	21,117
1987	2,087,759	22,954	2,043,119	21,686
1992	1,925,300	18,816	1,881,813	24,671
1997	1,911,859	18,451	1,864,201	29,207

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Source: Census of Agriculture. Selected years. Washington, DC:  
Bureau of the Census