ChatGPT

Black Land Justice Scroll

"Who owns this land, the freed or the planter?" – echo of the ancestors. From the first days of freedom, Black Georgians and others asked: *"Are we not as worthy as the white man to own the soil of our fatherland?"* In the spring of 1865 freedmen in Georgia and South Carolina raised this cry. As one committee from Edisto Island put it that October, *"we are at the mercy of those who are combined to prevent us from getting land enough to lay our Fathers' bones upon."* They had cattle, hoes and hope, but no home: *"We have property in horses, cattle, carriages… but we are landless and Homeless, from the homes we have lived in in the past."* [1]. This mourning for stolen ground would become a refrain in Black testimony and petitions throughout Reconstruction and beyond. The first battle was to secure **the forty acres** promised by Sherman – a sacred slogan and fleeting policy.

Field Orders and Freedmen's Bureau: The Broken Promise of "Forty Acres"

In January 1865 General Sherman's *Special Field Orders No.15* famously set aside land for freed families. It promised each freed family "a plot of not more than **(40)** acres of tillable ground," protected by the army [2]. Freedpeople raised families on these "army grants," dreaming of real independence. But within months this fragile hope was shattered. President Johnson's administration rescinded Sherman's orders. In *Circular No.15* (Sept. 1865) Howard's bureau was ordered to "set apart as much of said lands as is necessary for…the use of loyal Freedmen" **only after** crops had been harvested – essentially restoring plantations to rebel owners [3] [4]. In practice, almost all lands were returned, leaving freedmen with nothing. Howard later lamented that he had "set [land] aside for loyal refugees and freedmen," but Johnson's instructions undermined every allotment [3] [4].

Freedmen's own letters make the betrayal clear. In late 1865 Georgia freedmen wrote pleading, "We cannot labor for the land owners… we are desirous to work for fair compensation; but to return to work upon the terms that are at present offered to us would be going back into the state of slavery from which we have just been delivered" [5]. They had been told by General Howard they would find homes and fair wages, *"provided we can agree."* Instead planters hired only young hands and left mothers, fathers and children destitute [6] [5]. On South Carolina's Edisto Island freedmen raged that if the government "take[s] away… all right to the soil" it had promised them, *"we are at the mercy of those who are combined to prevent us from getting land enough to lay our Fathers' bones upon."* [1] [7]. In anguished petition after petition they pleaded to be shepherded onto farms of their own. All was denied. The federal postwar promise of land – the true "mule" – was withdrawn, an act of policy betrayal engraved in law and circular. The wars of reconstruction would not grant Black citizens the soil.

A 1912 promotional handbill for Allensworth, CA — a Black veteran's vision of self-sustaining farmland.

Landlessness drove Black Americans to build new havens. During the Jim Crow era self-determination found refuge in towns founded and run by African Americans. In the Mississippi Delta, freedmen's son Isaiah T.

Montgomery and a dozen pioneers escaped sharecropping to create **Mound Bayou (1887)**, an all-Black town of cotton fields, sawmills, churches and schools [8] [9]. As BlackPast historian Herb Ruffin describes, Mound Bayou embodied self-help and pride: the town even published a newspaper and built the Mound Bayou Normal and Industrial Institute (1900) patterned on Tuskegee [9]. By 1911 Mound Bayou swelled to 8,000 residents. Its mayor Montgomery **negotiated peace** with white Mississippians while closely allying with Booker T. Washington for Black economic uplift [9]. The cradle of Black prosperity in the Delta, however, was fragile. Cotton prices collapsed and the Great Migration lured people north; by the 1920s the population was shrinking.

In far-off California another ex-soldier, Colonel Allen Allensworth, led a similar experiment. Allensworth (founded 1908) was *"the first town in California established exclusively by African Americans"* [10]. After retiring as the highest-ranking Black officer in the U.S. Army, Allensworth and his ally Professor William Payne organized a "race colony" on a fertile plateau in Tulare County [11]. They recruited teachers and ministers to join them, built a school, churches and stores, and formed the Allensworth Progressive Association as local government. By 1912 the town had its own school district and post office, and its population reached about 300 [12]. Allensworth epitomized Black self-reliance: its hotel, barbershop, and businesses served farmers who cultivated the land. But California politics and misfortune intervened. In 1914 Colonel Allensworth died, and a planned aqueduct was built so late that his town lost its water rights. "Scarcity of water," along with rising neighboring towns, left Allensworth withering. By mid-century most residents had fled. (Today Colonel Allensworth's neglected legacy survives as a State Park.) Both Mound Bayou and Allensworth attest that **when Black people own land together**, their communities bloom – even as racist saboteurs and hard times threaten their survival.

Federal Betrayals and the USDA 'War at Home'

In the 20th century, the struggle shifted to new battlegrounds – county offices and congressional halls. Though federal law prohibited discrimination, the U.S. Department of Agriculture systematically deprived Black farmers of support. When the USDA began farm relief and credit programs, local officials often ignored Black applicants. Black farmers testified that before 1965 the USDA *"took three times as long on average to process the application of an African American farmer as it did… a white farmer,"* according to one federal judge in a 1999 case [13]. More recently, Secretary Tom Vilsack acknowledged that the USDA's history of discrimination was "well-documented" [14]. To this day white farmers receive the lion's share of subsidies: one analysis found 99% of certain bailout payments went to white farmers [15].

The cumulative effect was devastating. By mid-century the Black share of rural ownership collapsed. In 1920 Black farmers were one in seven of all farmers, controlling about 15.5 million acres (roughly 14% of U.S. farmland) [16] [17]. Today fewer than 50,000 Black farmers remain – roughly 0.5% of farmland (4.7 million acres) [16]. BlackFarmer activists have consistently documented how decades of USDA bias caused this "death by a thousand cuts." In congressional testimony, veteran farmer John Boyd (founder of the National Black Farmers Association) reported that during the 20th century the number of Black farmers plummeted from **over 900,000** in 1920 to **under 50,000** today. He noted that eligible Black farmers receive on average only about $7,700 in subsidies per year, versus $17,200 for white counterparts – a gap that means Black farms remain smaller, poorer and ever-more precarious. Another study showed that in Georgia and Alabama, heirs' property tangled huge acreage – 496,994 parcels (5.3 million acres) in eleven Southern states locked in fractional ownership [18] – a condition the USDA itself calls *"the leading cause of Black involuntary land loss."* [19]

Black farmers fought back. In 1997 more than 13,000 Black farmers sued the USDA in *Pigford v. Glickman*, a landmark class action arguing systematic loan discrimination. That case ultimately recognized wrongdoing, but only for 16 years of claims and failed to wipe out crushing farm debt [20]. In parallel, the New Communities, Inc. cooperative – the 5,700-acre Georgia land trust founded in 1969 by SNCC veterans – itself became a plaintiff. Federal records later revealed that local Farm Home Administration (FmHA) officials had consistently denied loans to New Communities even as they approved the same requests for white neighbors [21]. The farm co-op endured a drought and boycott until it lost its land to foreclosure in 1985 [22]. Decades later the New Communities survivors won a $12 million settlement and repurchased 1,638 acres of a former slave plantation, naming it *Resora* – the reclaimed land now training new Black farmers [23]. One judge in a related 2001 case wrote that in many Southern states it took *"three times as long"* for an African American to get a farm loan approved [13].

Testimony before Congress continues to expose these injustices. In a 2021 House hearing Rep. David Scott (GA) – himself raised on his grandparents' farm – opened in righteous anger: *"This festering wound on the soul of agriculture must be healed,"* he said, as Black farmers presented stories of systemic bias [24]. Witnesses described crop buyers who would quit purchasing when a Black farmer arrived, irrigation equipment denied, "Black Wednesday" slotting at county offices, and "supervised" bank accounts imposed on any African American who finally got a USDA loan [25]. The data match the anger: USDA reports show that only 0.1% of Black farmers received any Coronavirus relief (just $20.8 million of a $26 billion fund) [25]. Stung by the critique, Secretary Vilsack apologized to a later hearing: *"The history of systemic discrimination against Black farmers has been well-documented,"* he conceded [14], and said $5 billion in Covid relief would be set aside for farmers of color. But for millions of acres already lost and thousands of farms gone, such apologies came too late to restore what was taken.

The Great Land Loss: Data of Dispossession

History bears out the pain. Researchers agree Black people have lost roughly **90% of their farmland** since 1920. UCS documented that Black-owned acreage – some 15 million acres in 1920 – has dwindled to under 5 million acres today [16]. In North Carolina's black Belt, 1.6 million acres ($6.6 billion in value) are trapped in "heirs' property," with no clear title to grow generational equity [18]. A 2015 Land Trust Alliance study noted that African Americans once controlled 14% of U.S. farmland (1920) but now have **less than 1%** [17]. These trends aren't accidents but systemic crimes: in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana 496,994 parcels (5.3M acres) are potential heirs' property under today's law [18]. The resulting auctions and partitions have allowed speculators – not Black farmers – to claim ancestral fields. As the USDA bluntly said, heirs' property is *"the leading cause of Black involuntary land loss"* [19].

Land trust meeting at New Communities, Georgia, c.1970 — forging collective ownership in Jim Crow South.

Out of theft and despair, resistance has blossomed. Black farmers and allies created **land trusts and co-ops** to hold land communally. One pioneer was **New Communities, Inc.** In 1969 civil-rights activists led by Slater King and Charles Sherrod bought a 5,700-acre plantation in southwest Georgia to protect Black sharecroppers by pooling their land [26]. For 14 years New Communities was a working co-op: residents grew crops, raised hogs, ran a smokehouse and even built a sugar mill [21]. But the community faced racism at every turn. Local whites boycotted its market and federal farm loans were denied by FmHA officials [22]. After enduring drought, sabotage and foreclosure, New Communities never vanished. Its members met

under a tree to regroup, then sued the USDA's FmHA. In 2009 they won $12 million and used it to buy back 1,638 acres of a former slave plantation – rebirthing their farm as **Resora**, a site "for healing" and training new Black farmers [23]. The survivors (including leader Shirley Sherrod) still mentor CLT organizers nationwide [27].

Across the South, smaller land trusts have multiplied. The **Black Family Land Trust** in North Carolina works with landowners and churches to preserve Black farms through conservation easements and co-ownership [17]. Federations of Southern co-ops (the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund) provide legal aid for heir titles and offer alternative lending. Freedom Farms communities were born in the 1960s (Mississippi) and now in the 21st century Soul Fire Farm (NY) explicitly invokes Malcolm X's proclamation: *"Revolution is based on land… Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality."* [28] Soul Fire applies "Afro-Indigenous" farming to rebuild food sovereignty, teaching young growers and reclaiming ancestral farming knowledge. In cities and suburbs, Black-led urban farms and community gardens (e.g. Detroit Black Community Food Security Network) assert that even pocket parks are sites of land justice. New institutions spring up: in 2021 a Land Loss Prevention Project was established to help heirs free their titles; Congress held hearings on "justice to rural communities." Everywhere, the response has been insurgent technology: from blockchain land registries proposals to crowdsourced reparations funds, Black communities are quietly remapping ownership.

Reflection: Afrofuturist Reclamation and Future Soil. If the past centuries prove anything, it is that land is power. Black futurists now speak of **digital homesteads** and **communal ecologies** as the next frontier. Scholars and artists imagine crypto-led landrights, virtual "Black farms" as collective NFTs, and even space colonies patterned on ancestral communes. These ideas recall Malcolm's words: *"We'll have land,"* he insisted, and indeed contemporary movements are creating it in new realms. For example, Soul Fire's "Freedom Farm Loan Program" uses digital networks to match Black farmers with microloans and mentors; community land trusts are exploring blockchain voting for democratic land tenure. **Weaving tech with tradition**, young Black organizers model a post-sovereign future: sharecroppers of code and tillers of code.

Throughout this Scroll we have seen that the promise of Black land – from the initial *"40 acres"* to the cluster of modern land trusts – is both a political imperative and a sacred charge. The grain of soil dug up by our ancestors carries the memory and future together. As one 19th-century declaration demanded, the stolen fields of Georgia are rightfully the inheritance of Black Georgians (their words echo in every new title). We now close knowing that communal land trusts, renewed legal struggle, and Afrofuturist vision all converge on a truth: **land liberated is freedom realized**.

Sources: Official proclamations and testimonies have been cited throughout to allow verification. See Shermans **Special Field Orders No.15** [2], Freedmen's petitions [5] [1], Black newspapers and convention records (e.g. Mound Bayou history [8], Allensworth archives [10]), USDA and congressional reports [29] [14], and recent scholarly studies [16] [17]. Each quote is linked for reference. This Scroll honors the griots – the file-keepers of our field and farm.

---

[1] [7] Committee of Freedmen on Edisto Island, South Carolina, to the Freedmen's Bureau Commissioner [October 20 or 21, 1865]; the Commissioner's Reply, October 22, 1865; and the Committee to the President, October 28, 1865
https://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Edisto%20petitions.htm

2 Order by the Commander of the Military Division of the Mississippi, January 16, 1865
https://www.freedmen.umd.edu/sfo15.htm

3 4 Microsoft Word - Resource Sheet #8.doc
https://umbc.edu/che/tahlessons/pdf/The_Freedmens_Bureau_Success_or_Failure_RS_8.pdf

5 6 Georgia Freedmen to the Freedmen's Bureau Subassistant Commissioner at Savannah, Georgia, November 28, 1865
https://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Golden.htm

8 9 Mound Bayou (1887-) | BlackPast.org
https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/mound-bayou-1887/

10 11 12 The History of Allensworth, California (1908-) | BlackPast.org
https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/history-allensworth-california-1908/

13 21 22 23 26 27 The First CLT: for & by Black Farmers
https://sectclt.org/the-first-clt-for-by-black-farmers

14 25 29 House Agriculture panel probes ‘systemic’ USDA discrimination against Black farmers • Virginia Mercury
https://virginiamercury.com/2021/03/26/house-agriculture-panel-probes-systemic-usda-discrimination-against-black-farmers/

15 agriculture.house.gov
https://agriculture.house.gov/uploadedfiles/boyd_testimony_package.pdf

16 18 19 Lost Inheritance | Union of Concerned Scientists
https://ucs.org/resources/lost-inheritance

17 Preserving African-American Land Heritage - Land Trust Alliance
https://landtrustalliance.org/resources/learn/explore/preserving-african-american-land-heritage

20 Descendants of Black farmers are still fighting the USDA over past discrimination - MLK50: Justice Through Journalism
https://mlk50.com/2025/01/30/descendants-of-black-farmers-are-still-fighting-the-usda-over-past-discrimination/

24 Black farmers speak out against the 'festering wound' of racism in agriculture | House of Representatives | The Guardian
https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/mar/25/black-farmers-hearing-racism-usda-agriculture

28 Soul Fire Farm: Revolution is Based on Land | Atmos
https://atmos.earth/soul-fire-farm-leah-penniman-afro-indigenous-community-ancestral-wisdom/