

Sharecropper contract, 1867

Introduction

Immediately after the Civil War, many former slaves established subsistence farms on land that had been abandoned by fleeing white Southerners. President Andrew Johnson, a Democrat and a former slaveholder, soon restored this land to its white owners, reducing many freed slaves to economic dependency on the South's old planter class.

The freedmen, who wanted autonomy and independence, refused to sign contracts that required gang labor, and sharecropping emerged as a compromise. Landowners divided plantations into 20- to 50-acre plots suitable for farming by a single family. In exchange for the use of land, a cabin, and supplies, sharecroppers agreed to raise a cash crop and give a portion, usually 50 percent, of the crop to their landlord. Landowners extended credit to sharecroppers to buy goods and charged high interest rates, sometimes as high as 70 percent a year, creating a system of economic dependence and poverty.

This 1867 contract between landowner Isham G. Bailey in Marshall County, Mississippi, and two freedmen stipulates different arrangements for each man's family. Both Charles Roberts and Cooper Hughs were to raise cotton and corn and give more than half of the cotton and two-thirds of the corn they raised to Bailey, but the Roberts family was to receive 487 pounds of meat to the Hughs family's 550 pounds. Additionally, Charles Roberts and his wife agreed to do housework for an additional \$50 a year, while the Hughs family agreed to tend the livestock for no additional compensation.

As a symbol of their newly won independence, freedmen had teams of mules drag their former slave cabins away from the slave quarters into their own fields. Wives and daughters sharply reduced their labor in the fields and instead devoted more time to home and childcare. But the exploitative sharecropping system also helped ensure that the South's economy became almost entirely dependent on a single crop—cotton—and an increasing number of Southerners, white and black, were reduced to tenant farming, working as laborers on land they did not own.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and the transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. In what ways did African Americans in the South demonstrate an understanding of their

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newly gained rights?

2. Critics of sharecropping claimed it was “slavery with a paycheck.” To what extent do you agree or disagree with this evaluation? Explain your answer.
3. In what ways did sharecropping perpetuate (continue) the dependence of African Americans on white landowners?

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Image

The State of Mississippi Marshall County

Articles of agreement made and entered in to this
 1st day of January A.D. 1867, between I. G. Bailey of the first
 part and Cooper Hughes Freedman and Charles Roberts freedmen
 of the second part Witnesseth

The said parties of the second part, have agreed and do by
 these presents agree and bind themselves to work for the said
 party of the first part during the year 1867, on the farm
 belonging to said party of the first part near Early Grove in
 said County upon the following terms and conditions to wit
 the said Cooper Hughes freedman with his wife and one other
 woman, and the said Charles Roberts with his wife Hannah
 and one boy are to work on said farm and to cultivate forty
 acres in corn and twenty acres in cotton, to assist in putting
 the fences on said farm in good order and to keep them so and
 to do all other work on said farm necessary to be done to
 keep the same in good order and to raise a good crop and
 to be under the control and directions of said I. G. Bailey
 and to receive for their said services one half of the cotton
 and one third of the corn and fodder raised by them on
 said farm in said year 1867 and the said Charles Roberts
 Freedman with his wife Hannah further agrees and
 binds themselves to do the washing and darning, and all other

[Freedmen's contract between Isham G. Bailey and freedmen Cooper Hughs and Charles Roberts],
 January 1, 1867 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC04522.11)

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necessary house work for said I G Bailey and his family during said year 1867 and to receive for their said services fifty dollars in money at the expiration of said year 1867 and the said Cooper Hughes Friedman further agrees and binds himself to give the necessary attention of feeding the stock of Cattle and milking the cows twice daily belong to said I G Bailey, and do the churning when ever necessary during the said year,

And the said I G Bailey party of the first part, agrees and binds himself to furnish necessary Mules and farming implements to cultivate said crop and to feed said Mules to furnish said Cooper Hughes Friedman and his family five hundred and fifty pounds of meat, to furnish said Charles Roberts Friedman and his family four hundred and eighty seven pounds of meat and to give said parties of the second part, one half of the crop of Cotton and third of the crop of Corn and fodder cultivated and raised by them in said year 1867



In witness whereof we hereto set our hands and seals the date first above written

signed Sealed and acknowledged by I G Bailey Seal
 my presence this 14th day of 1867 Cooper Hughes Seal
 A B Conley Seal Charles Roberts Seal
 Justice of the Peace

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Transcript

[Freedmen's contract between Isham G. Bailey and freedmen Cooper Hughs and Charles Roberts],
January 1, 1867 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC04522.11)

The State of Mississippi Marshall County

Articles of agreement made and entered into this 1st day of January AD 1867, between IG Bailey of the first part and Cooper Hughs Freedman and Charles Roberts Freedmⁿ of the second part

Witnesseth

The said parties of the second part, have agreed and do by these presents agree and bind themselves to work for the said party of the first part during the year 1867, on the farm belonging to said party of the first part near Early Grove on said County upon the following terms and conditions to Wit the said Cooper Hughs Freedman with his wife and one other woman, and the said Charles Roberts with his wife Hannah and one boy are to work on said farm and to cultivate forty acres in corn and twenty acres in cotton, to assist in putting the fences on said farm in good order and to keep them so and to do all other work on said farm necessary to be done to keep the same in good order and to raise a good crop and to be under the control and directions of said IG Bailey and to receive for their said services one half of the cotton and one third of the corn and fodder raised by them on said farm in said year 1867 and the said Charles Roberts Freedman with his wife Hannah further agrees and binds themselves to do the washing and Ironing, and all other [2] necessary house work for said IG Bailey and his family during said year 1867 and to receive for their said services fifty dollars in money at the expiration of said year 1867 and the said Cooper Hughs Freedman further agrees and binds himself to give the necessary attention of feeding the Stock of cattle and milking the cows twice daily belong to said IG Bailey, and do the churning when ever necessary during the said year,

And the said IG Bailey party of the first part, agrees and binds himself to furnish necessary Mules and farming implements to cultivate said crop and to feed said Mules to furnish said Cooper Hughs Freedman and his family five hundred and fifty pounds of meat, to furnish said Charles Roberts Freedman and his family four hundred and eighty seven pounds of meat and to give said parties of the second part, one half of the crop of cotton and third of the crop of

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corn and fodder cultivated and raised by them in said year 1867

In witness whereof we hereto set our hands and seals the date first above written

Signed Sealed and acknowledged { I.G. Bailey {Seal}

[*strikeout*]

My presence this 14 May AD 1867 { Cooper [*inserted*: his mark] Hughs {Seal}

AB Conley {Seal} { Charles [*inserted*: his mark] Roberts {Seal}

Justice of the Peace

[*docket*] 1867 Cooper & Charles