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LAND AND LABOR

The Quest for Black Economic Independence on Virginia's Lower Peninsula, 1865-1880

by EDNA GREENE MEDFORD*

UNTIL quite recently, most of what we knew about antebellum slavery and the African-American experience in the postwar years resulted from generalizations regarding the cotton South. The tendency to focus on the heart of Dixie failed to take into account certain economic realities in the Upper South that shaped experiences under slavery and influenced freedpeople's adaptation to a new order. Fortunately, greater attention is now being directed toward that neglected region; consequently, a more comprehensive picture of slavery and of the former slaves' responses to the transitions taking place in the postemancipation South is developing.¹

This study seeks to add to that small but growing body of historiography by focusing on the six counties of Virginia known collectively as the lower peninsula. This Tidewater region encompassed five of the eight original shires in the colony—Elizabeth City, Warwick, York, James City, and Charles City. The sixth county—New Kent—was formed from the northern section of York. By 1860, the population of the lower peninsula numbered 30,000. Almost 60 percent of these inhabitants were black, one-fifth of whom were free.² The large black population reflected a heavy dependence on a slave work force and an emphasis, in an earlier time, on the tobacco crop toward which that labor was directed. Over the years cultivation of this single staple depleted the soil of necessary

* Edna Greene Medford is an assistant professor of history at Howard University. Portions of this essay are based on research that appears in the author's unpublished doctoral dissertation, "The Transition from Slavery to Freedom in a Diversified Economy: Virginia's Lower Peninsula, 1860-1900" (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 1987).

¹ On the Upper South, see Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, 1985); Crandall A. Shifflett, *Patronage and Poverty in the Tobacco South: Louisa County, Virginia, 1860-1900* (Knoxville, 1982); Robert Francis Engs, *Freedom's First Generation: Black Hampton, Virginia, 1861-1890* (Philadelphia, 1979). John T. Schlotterbeck's "Plantation and Farm: Social and Economic Change in Orange and Greene Counties, Virginia, 1716 to 1860" (Ph.D. diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1980) is also useful for the insight it provides into slavery in the Upper South.

² U.S. Census Bureau, *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*, vol. 1: *Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns . . .* (Washington, D.C., 1864), pp. 516-18.

nutrients and made farmers especially vulnerable when prices plummeted. Over-dependence on tobacco precipitated a severe economic decline that did not abate until lower peninsula planters embraced a program of diversification.³ Their plan called for a switch to cereal grains and livestock and the virtual abandonment of tobacco as a principal crop. Through all these changes slavery remained the cornerstone of the economy, having been successfully adapted to this mixed farming. Thus, by 1860, more than 1,300 peninsula residents owned slaves. Twenty-eight of them held at least fifty or more on large estates.⁴ Smaller farmers as well operated to strengthen slavery by absorbing excess labor through the system of hiring out.⁵

In many ways the postwar experiences of blacks on the lower peninsula paralleled those in the rest of the South. The 14,000 peninsula slaves who passed from bondage to freedom between 1861 and 1865 struggled to redefine their place in society in much the same way as freedpeople did elsewhere. Like former bondspeople in other areas, they fought to maintain some distance between themselves and former masters. They were determined to develop and control their own institutions, to experience freedom of movement and thought, and to exercise some influence over the conditions and terms of their employment.

It is significant, however, that their struggle to achieve independence was shaped by an economic system that differed from that of the Lower South. Mixed farming and opportunities for nonagricultural employment expanded the options of lower peninsula blacks. Consequently, they were able to achieve a degree of economic autonomy in two ways: first, by obtaining the kind of wage work that permitted them some control over the terms and conditions of their labor, and second, by acquiring the resources to become independent farmers. This situation contrasted sharply with black experiences in the cotton South, where the only options available to most freedpeople were the choice between working in the fields for paltry wages or sharecropping on "ole massa's" lands.⁶

³ Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill, 1986); Paul G. E. Clemens, *The Atlantic Economy and Colonial Maryland's Eastern Shore: From Tobacco to Grain* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1980); Avery Odelle Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606-1860*, University of Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences, 13 (Urbana, 1926); Carville Earle and Ronald Hoffman, "Staple Crops and Urban Development in the Eighteenth-Century South," *Perspectives in American History* 10 (1976): 29-31.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860: Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington, D.C., 1864), pp. 218-19. Shirley and Sandy Point plantations, both located along the James River, held more than 100 slaves just before the war.

⁵ Hiring out was a key feature of slavery in this area. Small farmers who could not afford to own slaves found them readily available for hire from the large planters in their communities.

⁶ Recent studies, especially Loren Schweninger's *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana, 1990), tend to challenge C. Vann Woodward's contention that "Negroes, with few exceptions, were farmers without land" (quotation in C. Vann Woodward, *Origins*

Because significant numbers of Virginia's lower peninsula freedmen and women managed to acquire land, or to engage in nonagricultural wage labor, or a combination of the two, they were able to escape the dependency that engulfed the majority of former slaves in the postwar South.

In this rural environment where freedom, status, and economic security had always been defined by real property, freedmen and women pressed to stake their claim to the land. Surprisingly, their quest met with little resistance. Occasionally, hostile whites refused to sell to blacks, as occurred in York County, where withholding land was designed to disperse the overcrowded population in the first few years after the war.⁷ More common, however, at least in the immediate postwar period, was the practice of lower peninsula planters and farmers' selling their lands in large tracts that were beyond the financial reach of individual blacks. In such instances, African-Americans relied on third-party transactions. In Elizabeth City County, for example, forty-four freedpeople in the town of Hampton became landowners after the American Missionary Association purchased Wood's Farm, a tract of 175 acres. Most of the land was used in the establishment of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, but the association divided much of the remaining acreage into small lots and sold them to freedpeople.⁸ Blacks benefited from similar transactions in other counties as well, as northern whites took advantage of the depression caused by the war to buy land cheaply and redistribute it (at a profit of course) to former slaves.⁹

As one might expect, the group most capable of acquiring land in the years immediately after the war were those blacks who had been free before 1861. The lower peninsula's sizable free black population benefited from the head start those years of freedom permitted them. Although landholding by free blacks had not been widespread before the war, a few African-Americans had been able to circumvent attempts to proscribe their freedom by purchasing scattered tracts. A handful—such as Charles City County's Samuel Hampton, who managed to amass 360 acres before the war—distinguished themselves from the rest by acquiring sizable farms.¹⁰ Although the holdings of such black landowners hardly compared with those of even middling white farmers, these

of the New South, in Wendell H. Stephenson and E. Merton Coulter, eds., *A History of the South*, 9 [Baton Rouge, 1951], p. 205).

⁷ Alrutheus Ambush Taylor, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia* (New York, 1926), p. 130.

⁸ Edward H. Bonekemper III, "Negro Ownership of Real Property in Hampton and Elizabeth City County, Virginia, 1860-1870," *Journal of Negro History* 55 (July 1970): 176-77.

⁹ See Butler's Farm, Entry 88.33.28, in the Bradley Collection, Hampton Arts Commission, Hampton, Va. See also J. E. Davis, "The Old Butler Farm," *The Southern Workman* 34 (Feb. 1905): 88-91.

¹⁰ See Luther Porter Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia, 1830-1860* (New York and London, 1942).

African-Americans constituted the elite of antebellum free black society. In the postemancipation years, they continued to acquire land. Many of the land transactions that took place between 1865 and 1880 involved these "original" freepeople who were attempting to add onto pre-existing holdings.¹¹ By 1880, their real property provided an avenue by which their children could become landowners and also served as a source of land for the larger black community.

Before the war free blacks had been able to purchase land by working at a variety of seasonal and nonagricultural jobs. William Brisby of New Kent County, for instance, bought the fifty acres he owned before 1865 with money earned as a blacksmith, wheelwright, carpenter, and fisherman.¹² Although most of Brisby's counterparts throughout the lower peninsula may not have possessed his many skills, they were no less industrious. Some of them worked for the railroad, engaged in oystering and fishing, chopped and hauled wood, or worked at sawmills.¹³ It was quite common for them to combine one or more of these jobs with labor in the fields. Once they acquired land, many became independent farmers, but most continued to work at the various jobs that had enabled them to enter the landed class in the first place.¹⁴

In the postemancipation era, freedpeople followed the example of these free blacks. As was the case elsewhere in the South, most former slaves worked as farm laborers, but the availability of nonagricultural employment enabled them to supplement income from field work, and in some instances their primary livelihood came from alternative labor. In either case, nonagricultural wage labor enabled lower peninsula blacks, freeborn and freed, to acquire land more easily.

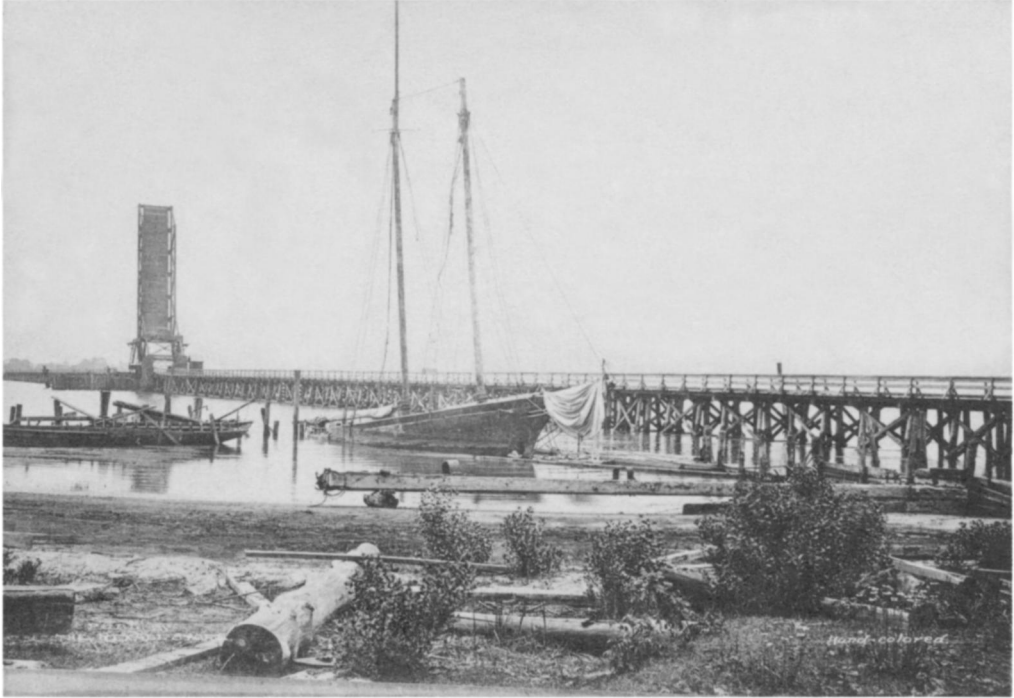
The nature and extent of nonagricultural employment varied in each county. In general, the southern end of the lower peninsula (specifically Elizabeth City, Warwick, and York counties) offered more varied employment opportunities than the northern end (Charles City, James City, and New Kent), which depended more heavily on agriculture. In these latter counties, a few blacks were able to find employment in such crafts as carpentry, blacksmithing, and boat building, while others took advantage of the demand for semiskilled and unskilled specialized labor

¹¹ Many of the postwar land deals of free blacks were for small tracts, but occasionally African-Americans who had been free before 1861 engaged in collective purchases that involved hundreds of acres. See John Wright Estate to Daniel Brown, Thomas Cotman, and Charles Cotman, deed, 26 Dec. 1884, Charles City County Deed Book 14, p. 303, Charles City County Courthouse, Charles City, Va.

¹² Testimony of William Brisby taken before the Southern Claims Commission, Southern Claims Case Files, 1877-88, Third Auditor's Office, Virginia, Claim #19,204, RG 56, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as DNA).

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau, Eighth Census, 1860, Manuscript Population Schedules for Virginia (microfilm), RG 29, DNA. See also Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, pp. 77-79.

¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, Eighth Census, 1860, Manuscript Population Schedules for Virginia.



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Many blacks on the lower peninsula took advantage of the opportunities provided by the presence of major waterways to engage in fishing and other water-related industries. This photograph, taken about 1914, shows the Mattaponi River at West Point.

such as teamstering.¹⁵ The bulk of nonagricultural black laborers at the northern end of the lower peninsula, however, became involved in forestry. These counties abounded in unimproved lands covered with oak, pine, maple, hickory, walnut, and poplar. Numerous sawmills employed blacks in processing large quantities of ship timber, railroad ties, and mine props. Cord wood was cut for local markets, and poplar was gathered for wood pulp destined for the North.¹⁶ Woodcutting served as an important source of supplemental income for farmers who cut and sold timber from their own lots, and it provided primary income for those who were landless. The latter might work for a sawmill or contract on their own to remove timber from private property. Some industrious blacks purchased timber and established their own sawmill operations. The enterprising William Brisby did just that. In 1885 Brisby bought pine, oak, and green timber from two local landowners. Shortly

¹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, Tenth Census, 1880, Manuscript Population Schedules for Virginia.

¹⁶ Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture, *Handbook of Virginia* (Richmond, 1885), pp. 15, 24.

thereafter he opened a sawmill, thus adding to an already long list of occupational pursuits.¹⁷

Blacks in the northern counties also found primary and supplemental income in fishing. Just as free blacks had fished in the James, the Pamunkey, the Chickahominy, and the Mattaponi, the great planters in the area had employed part of their slave labor force to harvest these same waters. (At Sandy Point in Charles City County, for instance, fishermen had been part of a force of more than 100 slaves.) After the war, former slaves continued to practice the skills they learned in bondage, and they continued to market their catch in the same manner that black fishermen had before the war by carting it to Richmond to be sold.¹⁸

Although only a small number of blacks in the northernmost counties received their primary income from nonagricultural labor, greater opportunities existed at the southern tip of the peninsula. In York County, one-fourth of the black population engaged in nonagricultural work as a primary occupation, in sharp contrast to Charles City, where census enumerators listed only 12 percent of blacks as so employed. The majority of people working in such alternative areas labored in the water-related industry, a thriving business made possible by the Chesapeake Bay, the two main rivers (the York and James), and lesser rivers and navigable creeks, which contained an abundance of fish and oysters. As with the northern counties, slaves at the southern tip were accustomed to labor on the water. Fishing with seines was a long-established practice. Improved transportation and technological advances in preservation enabled the industry to thrive as lower peninsula watermen took advantage of distant inland markets.¹⁹ By the 1880s watermen were experiencing a boom period. In York County, for instance, more than one-third of those blacks employed outside agriculture worked in a water-related industry.²⁰ Similarly, in Elizabeth City County in 1880 half of all black nonagricultural laborers worked on the water. An overwhelming number were oystermen.²¹

The work routine of the oystermen illustrates the reason black men pursued this type of work. Except for limitations imposed by nature, oysterers controlled when they worked and the duration of their labor. From their own boats, most of them “tonged”—scooped up the oysters

¹⁷ Joseph Leber and Lee Leber to William Brisby, deed, 28 Sept. 1885, New Kent County Deed Book 4, pp. 137, 138, Clerk's Office, New Kent County Courthouse, New Kent County, Va.

¹⁸ For a reference to slave fishermen in the northernmost counties of the lower peninsula, see A. Nicol, “Notes on Sandy Point Estate,” *Farmers' Register* 10 (Mar. 1841): 215.

¹⁹ “Peninsula Roots: A Special Series Exploring the Rich Heritage of the Virginia Peninsula: Part III, 1800's Watermen Flourished,” *Newport News Times-Herald*, n.d. [1978], p. 13 (reprint), Virginiana Room, York County Library, York County, Va.

²⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, Tenth Census, 1880, Manuscript Population Schedules, York County, Va.

²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Tenth Census, 1880, Manuscript Population and Agricultural Schedules, Elizabeth City County, Va.



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The independence and good pay of oystering lured many freedmen away from agriculture. Proficient tongers could earn as much as \$7.50 a day.

manually. Tongers usually worked for themselves under the terms of a license allowing them to harvest in public waters; some worked on the larger oyster grounds of private planters.²² Beyond the incentive that independence provided, oystermen were attracted to the monetary rewards. They could receive as much as ten cents a bushel when working for someone else, and they could harvest from fifteen to seventy-five bushels per day. At such rates an industrious oysterman could earn enough money to provide adequately for his family and, if he planned wisely, could save enough to carry his family through the off-season.²³ Oystermen were assured a higher standard of living than farm laborers and even more than the average farmer could expect to receive for his efforts.

The growth of oystering in the late nineteenth century opened up other nonagricultural job opportunities for blacks on the lower peninsula.

²² J. E. Davis, "Oystering in Hampton Roads," *Southern Workman* 32 (Mar. 1903): 156-62.

²³ Ibid. See also William Taylor Thom, "The Negroes of Litwalton, Virginia: A Social Study of the 'Oyster Negro,'" *Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor*, no. 37 (1901): 1126; Carl Kelsey, *The Negro Farmer* (Chicago, 1903), p. 33.

Some freedpeople—especially women and children—pursued work in oyster shucking. Although this occupation did not provide the kind of independence that tonging did, a skilled shucker could make a reasonable living. Men could earn at least \$4 per day if they were skillful and quick. Women and children received considerably less for their labor—about forty cents per day—but when added to the earnings of a male breadwinner, this seemingly insignificant contribution to the family economy not only ensured subsistence but also made it possible to acquire land. In addition, shuckers benefited from a quota system implemented by some employers that allowed workers to leave once they had shucked a minimum of thirty quarts.²⁴ The confinement of the workplace was thus offset by some ability to control the number of hours one labored.

As independence and the good pay of oystering lured more and more men away from the farm, whites (especially prospective employers outside the water-related occupations) complained that the industry discouraged blacks from working steadily and taught them that they could subsist with only a minimum of effort.²⁵ They charged the oystermen with failing to prepare for the off-season, with choosing to spend their wages as fast as they were earned rather than to save for hard times. Consequently, whites argued, when winter weather limited work, oystermen could not provide for their families. The most strident objections, however, concerned the siphoning off of labor from the farms. The opportunity to earn money by oystering was seen as a “constant deterrent to agricultural progress.”²⁶ Whites sought to stem the exodus of labor from the fields by enacting laws that taxed men who used their boats to carry on the trade. Such legislation affected both blacks who owned their vessels and those who worked for someone else.²⁷ Yet taxation failed to drive most of them out of the industry and back to the farms. When the oysterman left the harvesting beds, it was usually to work his own piece of land, and even then he did not completely shut himself off from the freedom he enjoyed on the water.

With the resources accrued from nonagricultural labor, and steeled in the knowledge that they could return to such work at any time, lower peninsula freedmen and women set out to enter the landed class. In none of the six counties did landholding by blacks become commonplace in the years immediately following emancipation. Between 1870 and 1880, however, as conditions stabilized, the quest for land brought better

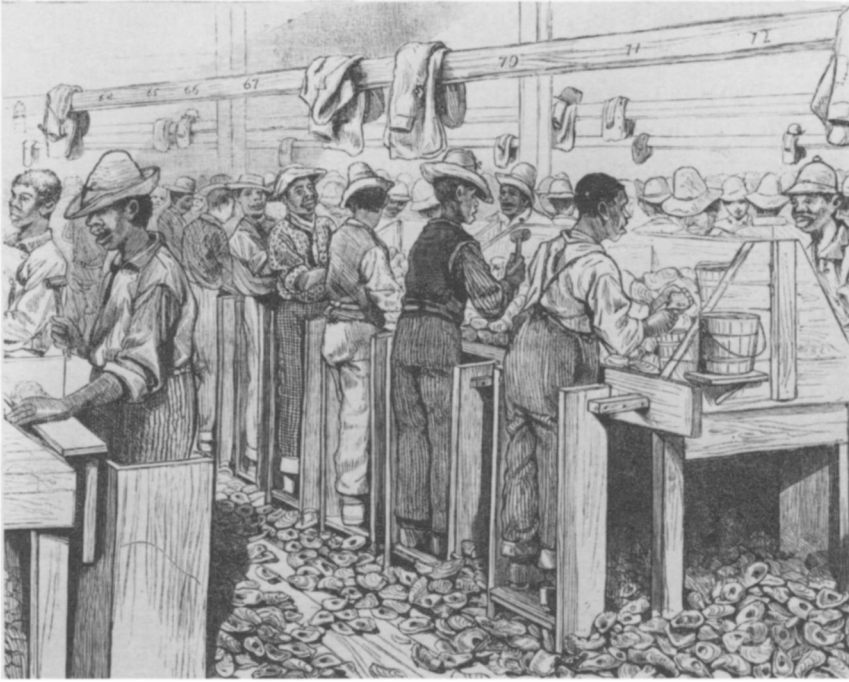
²⁴ Thom, “Negroes of Litwalton, Virginia,” p. 1127.

²⁵ Kelsey, *Negro Farmer*, p. 35.

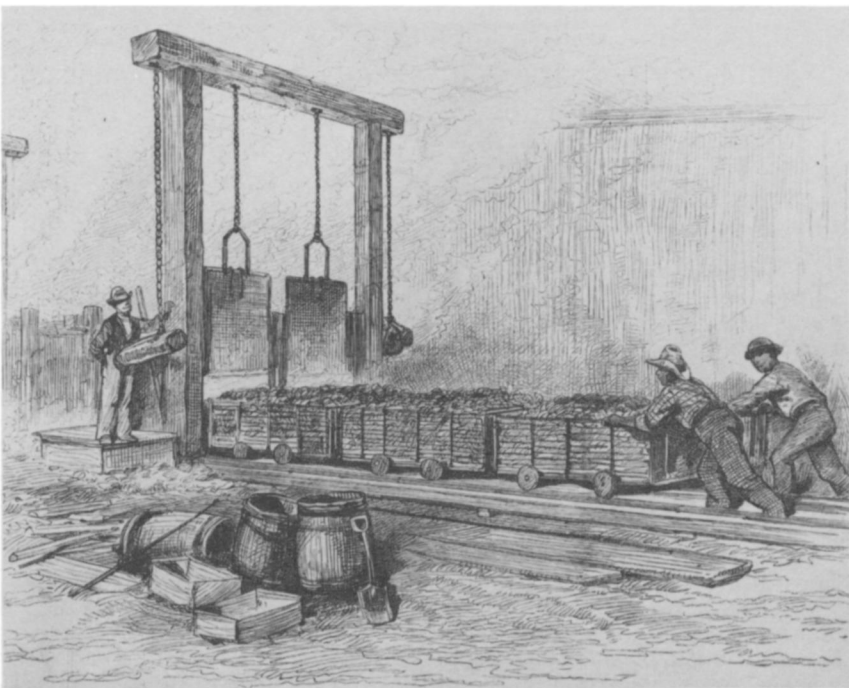
²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ On the efforts of black politicians to combat the oyster laws, see Luther Porter Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders in Virginia* (Norfolk, 1945), pp. 75–76, 87.

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Although oyster shucking did not provide the same independence that tonging did, the wages earned by skilled shuckers could supplement family income, ensure subsistence, and make possible the acquisition of land.

results. Acquisition was uneven, reflecting specific circumstances characteristic of individual counties. Patterns that emerged in Charles City and York counties represent the range of experiences of lower peninsula blacks as they sought land.²⁸

In terms of acreage, the largest counties on the lower peninsula lay in the northern half; Charles City, New Kent, and James City were more than twice the size of the remaining three counties. Before the war large estates had been most common in Charles City. Here, stretched out along the James, lay the great plantations: Shirley, Westover, Sandy Point, and Berkeley. Each encompassed several thousand acres. Other, more modest estates pressed inland or lay along the banks of lesser waterways. Remarkably, many of the great plantations remained intact, although some experienced changes in ownership after the war.²⁹ But freedpeople were among those who benefited when debt and the ravages of war led to the breakup of some of the lesser estates, and former slaves were able to acquire a few acres from time to time from the larger plantations as well.³⁰ The deeds that document the transactions between these white sellers and black purchasers read like a who's who among the wealthy and powerful in Charles City. John Gregory, a former Virginia acting governor, figures prominently in these documents, as do John Lamb, an influential county official, and members of the prestigious Clopton, Wilcox, and Vaiden families.³¹

By 1880, blacks in Charles City County had made significant strides toward landownership. In that year one-fourth of all adult workers classified themselves as farmers, a category that included those who worked their own lands as well as those who rented. An overwhelming majority of these farmers—75 percent—owned the land on which they labored (see Table 1).³² Black-owned farms were modest in size and value. They averaged only thirty-six acres and were worth just over \$200.³³ In contrast, farms countywide averaged 158 acres, with values of about \$1,200.³⁴ A handful of elite blacks, however, managed to acquire more sizable holdings, sometimes more than 100 acres. One of the most

²⁸ Charles City and York were chosen to represent the northern end and the southern tip of the lower peninsula, respectively, because each best reflects the conditions faced by the black rural population in their area.

²⁹ Some of the great estates were purchased by urban-based investors who eventually resold the land in parcels. Those planters who retained title sold small pieces to local blacks as well.

³⁰ John M. Coski, "The New Old Order in Charles City County: Reconstruction and Race Relations, 1865–1900," in James P. Whittenburg and John M. Coski, eds., *Charles City County, Virginia: An Official History* (Salem, W. Va., 1989), p. 80.

³¹ See Charles City County Deed Books 12–20.

³² U.S. Census Bureau, Tenth Census, 1880, Manuscript Agricultural Schedules, Charles City County.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *Tenth Census, 1880*, vol. 3: *Report on the Productions of Agriculture as Returned at the Tenth Census (June 1, 1880)* . . . (Washington, D.C., 1883), pp. 94, 137.

TABLE 1
Land Tenure among Blacks in Charles City County, 1880

Tenure	% of Farmers*	Average Acres	Average Farm Value
Owners	75	36	\$206
Cash Renters	8	43	176
Share Tenants	17	58	277

N=235

*Represents percentage of all farmers

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Tenth Census, 1880, Manuscript Agricultural Schedules, Charles City County, RG 29, National Archives.

successful was Ferdinand Wynn, a freeborn black man who amassed more than 400 acres valued at \$2,000. Former slaves were less likely to acquire substantial holdings in so short a time, but one—William Page—was already well on his way to becoming one of the most prosperous black landowners in the county. In 1868 he acquired his first piece of land—five precious acres—from John Gregory and his wife Amanda. For the next twenty years Page purchased land at regular intervals; he was involved in at least a dozen transactions and accumulated more than 200 acres by himself and twice that amount held collectively with two of his neighbors.³⁵

In York County freedpeople's efforts to acquire land paralleled those in Charles City, but less available land at the southern end of the lower peninsula and a slightly larger population of both whites and blacks limited the size of holdings and compelled some prospective landowners to enter into rental agreements. In 1880 more than one-third of all adult black laborers in the county were farmers; approximately 50 percent of them owned the land they worked (see Table 2). Although York's black-owned farms tended to be smaller than those in Charles City—about twenty acres—their value (\$243) was slightly higher.³⁶ County farms overall averaged fifty-five acres and were worth about \$520.³⁷

³⁵ See John M. Lamb and Mary Lamb to William Page, deed, 12 Jan. 1870, Charles City County Deed Book 12, p. 151; John M. Lamb to William Page, deed, 4 Dec. 1872, *ibid.*, p. 430; John Lamb to William Page, deed, 21 June 1877, Charles City County Deed Book 13, p. 111; John Gregory and Amanda Gregory to William Page, deed, 1868, *ibid.*, p. 215; John Lamb to William Page, deed, 16 Aug. 1881, *ibid.*, p. 489; E. Ball to William Page, deed, 22 Sept. 1884, Charles City County Deed Book 14, p. 284; John Lamb to William Page, 1885, *ibid.*, p. 364; Special Commissioner George L. Christian to William Page et al., deed, 18 June, 20 Nov. 1886, *ibid.*, p. 490.

³⁶ Computed from U.S. Census Bureau, Tenth Census, 1880, Manuscript Agricultural Schedules, York County.

³⁷ Computed from U.S. Census Bureau, *Report on the Productions of Agriculture, 1880*, pp. 96, 138.

TABLE 2
Land Tenure among Blacks in York County, 1880

Tenure	% of Farmers*	Average Acres	Average Farm Value
Owners	51	20	\$243
Cash Renters	39	11	105
Share Tenants	10	26	224

N=229

*Represents percentage of all farmers

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Tenth Census, 1880, Manuscript Agricultural Schedules, York County, RG 29, National Archives.

The marginal nature of black landholdings virtually assured low rates of production. Most black farmers limited themselves to growing small quantities of cereal grains, primarily corn. A few of them (18 percent in Charles City and 7 percent in York) grew wheat, a crop that was more profitable than corn when planted in good soil. Wheat had been the principal cash crop for farmers of the lower peninsula before the war, but by 1870 the area had been eclipsed by the northern and western wheat-growing regions of the state.³⁸ In the postwar period, only large white-owned farms grew significant quantities of wheat. Blacks, because they tended to hold the poorest, least productive land, exhibited a reluctance to commit time, energy, and capital to a crop that would yield only marginal return on their investment.

Neither did black farmers embrace the lucrative truck farming industry. By the 1880s growing vegetables for northern markets had become increasingly widespread in the Hampton Roads area and along the Eastern Shore of Virginia. In the lower peninsula counties, trucking was especially significant on white-owned farms in Elizabeth City and Warwick.³⁹ Yet, even there, blacks did not attempt to grow truck vegetables in large quantities.⁴⁰ Presumably, what they did produce was sold in the local market or was grown for domestic consumption.

Black farmers also might have increased production rates if they had engaged in raising livestock, but such enterprises required greater capital outlay than most could afford. Typically, they raised no more than half a dozen hogs, a few chickens, and a cow or two. Most African-

³⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, Published Agricultural Censuses for Virginia, 1860, 1870, 1880.

³⁹ Allen W. Moger, *Virginia: Bourbonism to Byrd, 1870-1925* (Charlottesville, 1968), p. 81; U.S. Census Bureau, Tenth Census, 1880, Manuscript Agricultural Schedules for Virginia.

⁴⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, Tenth Census, 1880, Manuscript Agricultural Schedules, Elizabeth City and Warwick counties.

Americans had the benefit of the labor of draft animals, although at least one-fourth of black farmers were forced to work their lands without access to their own horses, mules, or oxen.⁴¹

Low rates of production indicate that most black farmers were precluded from significant involvement in the marketplace. Undoubtedly, they may have had some difficulty acquiring the cash for large-scale agricultural production, even when they had sufficient quantities of good land, but it is also possible that their exclusion from the marketplace reflects their reluctance to become dependent on those whites who had the resources to place them within the market economy. Blacks on the lower peninsula viewed farming less as an avenue for commercial success than as part of a larger plan of subsistence. This type of farming met their need for independence, especially when coupled with alternative wage labor.

Despite the opportunities for nonagricultural employment on the lower peninsula, some blacks failed to realize their dream of independence through landownership. Those who rejected out-migration or farm labor as viable options were compelled to consider entering into rental agreements with local landowners. Freedpeople first experienced the pitfalls associated with renting immediately following emancipation when they agreed to sharecrop on lands owned by white planters who could not (or would not) pay cash wages for labor. Dishonest record keeping and an unfair division of crops eventually discouraged black participation in such rental agreements. Consequently, by 1880 few freedpeople sought to earn a living by renting land.

Those blacks who chose to rent—whether for a share of the crop or for a fixed amount of money—presumably did so only when they had access to productive land under terms acceptable to them. Freedpeople had little incentive to enter into tenancy arrangements if the land whites made available for rent was too poor or too expensive to ensure subsistence. This circumstance probably explains in part the small number of blacks who rented land in Charles City in 1880. In that county, only 7 percent of blacks earning a living from agriculture were renters: 2 percent chose to make cash payments, and 5 percent farmed on shares. Unlike Charles City, almost one-fourth of blacks in agriculture in York County rented, but cash payments seemed to be the preferred method for those who did. Cash renters outnumbered share tenants by a ratio of four to one.⁴²

Tenant farms in York County tended to be a great deal smaller than those in Charles City, yet farm production values in York compared

⁴¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Tenth Census, 1880, Manuscript Agricultural Schedules for Virginia.

⁴² U.S. Census Bureau, Tenth Census, 1880, Manuscript Agricultural Schedules, Charles City and York counties.

favorably with those in the northern county. On farms rented for cash, production was nearly equal in the two areas, even though average tenant holdings were four times larger in Charles City. Similarly, production values on share tenant lands were greater in York, although such farms were only half the size of those in Charles City.⁴³

Because of the limited goals characteristic of most blacks engaged in farming, those freedpeople who gained access to land had, in varying degrees, made significant strides toward independence. Landowners were the most successful because they were freest from outside interference. Renters had less control over the farms they worked, but they too had greater autonomy than the majority of blacks, most of whom continued to work on someone else's land as hired hands. These wage-earning laborers made up from one-half to as much as two-thirds of the agricultural work force in some areas of the lower peninsula.⁴⁴ Their inability to acquire land made it harder for them to reach subsistence and left them the most dependent of black workers.

At first glance, the large number of farm laborers seems to suggest that most freedpeople had little chance of living independently. Agricultural workers were often employed by former owners who continued to view them in much the same way as they had during slavery. Autonomy was therefore much more difficult to achieve. Despite their difficulties, however, a significant percentage of these men held reasonable expectations of gaining access to land at some stage in their lives. Demographically, most laborers had not yet reached that point when they would have the best chance of making the transition from laborer to farmer. The average age of farmers was forty-eight, but approximately half of the laborers were under the age of thirty; an equal proportion were unmarried. Even among farm-laboring heads of household, the average age ranged from thirty-four to forty-four years, which was younger than that for farm owners in Charles City County and was below the average age of both owners and renters in York.⁴⁵

Moreover, as many as one-fifth of all farm laborers were the children or boarding relatives of farmers. Presumably, they worked on family lands on which the needs of the household economy replaced the exploitative demands associated with commercial farming. These men had the greatest potential eventually to become economically independent because they were the most likely to inherit the lands they worked.

By 1880, farm laborers earned rations and from \$8 to \$12 per month.⁴⁶ On the truck farms of the lower peninsula, daily wages amounted to

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., Manuscript Population Schedules, Charles City and York counties.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Taylor, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia*, p. 123.

seventy-five cents for men, fifty cents for women, and twenty-five to thirty-five cents for children.⁴⁷ Although wages were low, they were comparable to the value of production on an average black farm. The difference in the conditions of these two groups rested with the farmer's independence and his greater ability through his ownership of land to reach subsistence. Farm laborers were not inextricably tied to the land, however. They came and went as the economy demanded, spending time in the fields when they were needed, working in sawmills or fishing at other times, following the same work routine as subsistence farmers.⁴⁸ Although they did not have the independence of landowners, they had the opportunity to search for the best conditions and terms of employment.

The degree of economic independence that blacks enjoyed as a result of the lower peninsula's economy spilled over into the political sphere. The variety of employment options limited the extent to which whites could coerce deference from blacks or keep them away from the polls. Although they never dominated political officeholding, lower peninsula blacks served in a variety of capacities: as commissioners of revenue, court clerks, sheriffs, overseers of the poor, and most commonly justices of the peace.⁴⁹

The black political leadership on the lower peninsula consisted of a mixture of freeborn and former slave, native and transplanted, who combined their public service with farming and professional work, most commonly teaching, the law, and preaching. Such men as Daniel Norton of York County—who had been born a slave, escaped and went north before the war, and later returned home to practice medicine and farm his many acres—represented the interests of freedpeople in the state legislature and pressed for greater black participation in the political process. Former masters attempted to sway black political participation, but such efforts met with stiff resistance.⁵⁰

Although a certain degree of independence enabled lower peninsula blacks to run for office and vote for candidates of their own choosing with minimal interference from former owners, the party they steadfastly supported operated to limit their influence in politics. Even though they

⁴⁷ Moger, *Virginia: Bourbonism to Byrd*, p. 81n.

⁴⁸ Men listed as farm laborers in one part of the census might be listed later with a group of men operating a sawmill. See U.S. Census Bureau, Tenth Census, 1880, Manuscript Population Schedules, New Kent County, Va.

⁴⁹ Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders*, pp. 61–67.

⁵⁰ William Brooks to Orlando Brown, 25 Nov. 1867, 114:190, and 25 Apr. 1867, 114:2, in Letters Sent, ser. 4143, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, RG 105, DNA. A former slaveholder, alarmed over the formation of a secret political organization in York County, attended a meeting of the freedmen and voiced his objections. The freedmen were quick to remind him that they were free and had the right to make their own decisions.

were the backbone of the organization, blacks were stung by the failure of the Republican party to nominate them for office as frequently as their numerical strength and loyalty warranted. By 1878, disillusioned at being courted only when their vote was needed to elect a white candidate, blacks convinced themselves that participation at the polls held little advantage for them.⁵¹

In the early 1880s black enthusiasm for the political process resurfaced, however, when the Conservative party split over funding the state debt. Like black voters throughout the Old Dominion, those on the lower peninsula allied themselves with the Readjusters, the party led by William Mahone, who opposed total funding of the debt. Blacks supported the Readjuster position because they feared that money to repay the debt would be taken from funds intended for public education.⁵² For a while African-Americans returned to the polls and enthusiastically sought office. When the Readjusters lost power, black political fortunes declined once again. By 1902 a provision in the new state constitution completed the process of disfranchisement of the black electorate that had been under way since 1883, when the Democrats (Conservatives) gained control of the government.⁵³ As they faced these challenges to their political rights, lower peninsula blacks pressed even harder to control their economic lives.

The availability of nonagricultural wage labor greatly influenced the possibilities for economic independence among blacks of the lower peninsula. It provided a primarily rural people with options that at least enabled them to acquire subsistence with a minimum of dependency on former masters. Men who worked in the fields could supplement their incomes when their farms failed to provide an adequate livelihood. Blacks who found alternative, nonagricultural employment—fishing and oystering, teamstering, working with forestry products or working for the railroad—had a greater chance of successfully resisting the dependency that often engulfed rural African-Americans. Furthermore, because of the availability of these alternative jobs on the lower peninsula, blacks were more likely to acquire the money needed to purchase a little piece of land and become independent farmers. Through this plan of subsistence, the first generation of freedpeople on the lower peninsula made significant progress toward achieving economic autonomy.

⁵¹ Charles E. Wynes, *Race Relations in Virginia, 1870–1902* (Charlottesville, 1961), p. 14; Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders*, pp. vii–x. *The Southern Workman* 7 (Mar. 1878): 17 suggested that black participation in politics had declined because freedmen were “sure of freedom and an unmolested life.” Undoubtedly, many blacks would have disagreed with that assessment.

⁵² Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders*, pp. 78–81; Wynes, *Race Relations*, pp. 16–38.

⁵³ Wynes, *Race Relations*, pp. 51–67.