

Sharecropping in Virginia

Notes for the Teacher

Of course slaves were elated by the thought of freedom afforded them at the end of the Civil War. However, life for them was not easy. What could former slaves do now? Where could they go? Owning nothing and having no employment prospects left them with no choice. As a result, most former slaves remained on plantations as sharecroppers, a new and insidious form of legalized slavery.

Former slave owners rented their land to blacks in exchange for a portion of the crop grown. They sold seed and livestock to blacks, greatly reducing any profit the former slaves might make. In fact, once a contract was signed, blacks became, once again, the legal property of their former masters because the rent and cost of goods sold to the former slaves far exceeded what they could produce. As the years passed, debt piled up and the amount owed grew so large, no sharecropper could hope to pay the debt in his lifetime. Leaving the farm was no option as this was considered a breach of contract and the farmer was immediately arrested and then required to work the farm as punishment. Anyone resisting was put to death.

Activities:

1. Before sharing this information with students, have them (in small groups) solve the following problem:

You and your teammates are slaves in Virginia who have just been given your freedom. What will you do? Where will you go? Plan your life for the next five years. Keep in mind the following:

- You can neither read nor write;
- You own nothing and have no money;

- Your only job skills are the ones you used as a slave;
- Segregation and discrimination are legal and no one will hire you;
- You have a family to support. They need a place to live and food to eat right now.

Have groups share their solutions to the problem. (Do not be surprised if no solution can be found.) Be sure that students work within the parameters given. As an example, if a group says the family will move, remind them that they have no money and no possessions as well as no way to travel except by walking. It is possible the family would be arrested as vagrants. End the discussion with students understanding that freed slaves had no options. Then, introduce the concept of tenant farming or sharecropping.

2. Distribute copies of "A Sharecrop Contract (1882)" and go over together as a class. Use the following questions to generate a discussion. Take time for students to explore the questions and possible answers.

- Did the freedmen have an alternative to the sharecropping system? Why or why not?
- What responsibilities did the landowners have?
- Why could sharecropping be called legal slavery?
- What penalties were built into the contract?
- How could the contract be changed to make it fair?

3. Distribute copies of the table, "Sharecropping During Reconstruction," as well as the map of Virginia showing counties in 1880 and the map illustrating where the majority of slaves in Virginia were located. Discuss how the information on the table is organized and what the columns mean. Have groups of students work together to color the map of the counties. Use the following color coding:

- Color green Virginia counties with 0-10% sharecroppers.

- Color yellow Virginia counties with 11-20% sharecroppers.
- Color orange Virginia counties with 21-30% sharecroppers.
- Color red Virginia counties with over 30% sharecroppers.

Following, have students compare the map showing major slave holding areas with sharecropping counties colored red. As a class, discuss the findings. Allow students to make true statements about what they see. Post the statements in the room along with the completed maps.