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4. The State of Freedom Is the State of Self-Reliance

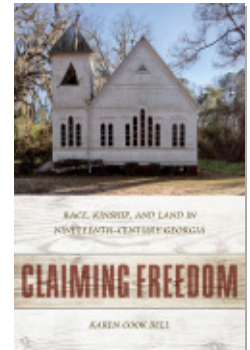
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THE STATE OF FREEDOM IS THE STATE OF SELF-RELIANCE

A people, to be free, must necessarily be their own rulers.



Martin R. Delany, *Political Destiny of the
Colored Race on the American Continent*

On June 4, 1870 Joshua C. Legree opened an account with the Savannah branch of the Freedmen's Bank. Three years earlier, Legree had been among the first to register to vote under the terms of the 1867 Reconstruction Act. Both his political activity and his desire to save the fruits of his labor underscored his determination to establish an independent life for himself, his wife, Mary, and daughter, Rina. For four decades, Legree remained politically active in the lowcountry, consistently paid a poll tax to retain voting rights, and built an economic foundation that included land and other forms of property. Elected as the first mayor of Burroughs, Georgia, in 1898, Legree relied on a network of men and women in the Ogeechee district, who shared the same collective experience of dispossession, to build a political base.¹ The postemancipation conduct of former slaves serves as an important frame of reference for delineating how they created meaningful structures of resistance out of what Clifford Geertz termed "webs of significance."² In lowcountry Georgia, these webs of significance consisted of elements of culture, which African Americans created and re-created both during their enslavement and after slavery ended.

African Americans defined their existence through kinship and community solidarity. They established autonomous communities, separated from white religious institutions, and created their own religious bodies. Lowcountry Georgians also maintained a rural-urban link through cooperative associations and cultural

commonalities.³ A rural-urban link developed as a result of railway transportation networks that connected the city of Savannah, the county seat, to plantation districts. These coastal areas maintained substantial black majorities and had been the centers of rice production. This rural-urban link was particularly salient after the Civil War, when African Americans established communities on the outskirts of Savannah. African Americans who settled on the rural fringes of Savannah became a group of “country dwelling city people” who held various occupations in Savannah, but who resided in rural and semirural areas. Rural and semirural African Americans shared a common cultural and religious bond.⁴ A shared political and cultural consciousness provided the ideological foundation for the emergence of Black nationalism and its multiple manifestations. Black nationalism developed in response to the slave trade and slavery and is predicated on the idea of racial unity and political unification. Political unification refers to the belief that the entire race has a collective destiny, comparable to that of a nation. Black nationalism and the formation of oppositional communities were a part of the same historical continuum.⁵

The ideology of white supremacy defined American social reality during the second half of the nineteenth century. The half decade which witnessed the redemption of the South reinforced white supremacy and the idea of a democracy for whites only. The Compromise of 1877, which certified Rutherford B. Hayes as president, marked the end of a tumultuous era. As the federal government abjured interfering in the affairs of the South and consented to the removal of federal troops, the Republican Party frayed into two factions, which ultimately weakened the viability of the party in the South and underscored the Republican Party’s weakened position toward protecting the political and economic rights of formerly enslaved people.⁶

In the lowcountry, African Americans remained the demographic majority and continued to hold office at the local and state level during the post-Reconstruction period, despite a decline in the size of the African American vote. Indeed, the year 1877 was a watershed year for African American voting as the new state constitution disfranchised all persons who owed city taxes levied since 1876, the year in which the new state constitution was adopted. By 1888 the number of African American legislators was cut to two: Anthony Wilson of Camden County and S. A. McIvor of Liberty County.⁷ Wilson and McIvor were among the first to register to vote in 1867 under the Reconstruction Act. The men had carved a political niches for themselves in their respective counties by serving as school teachers and political leaders.⁸

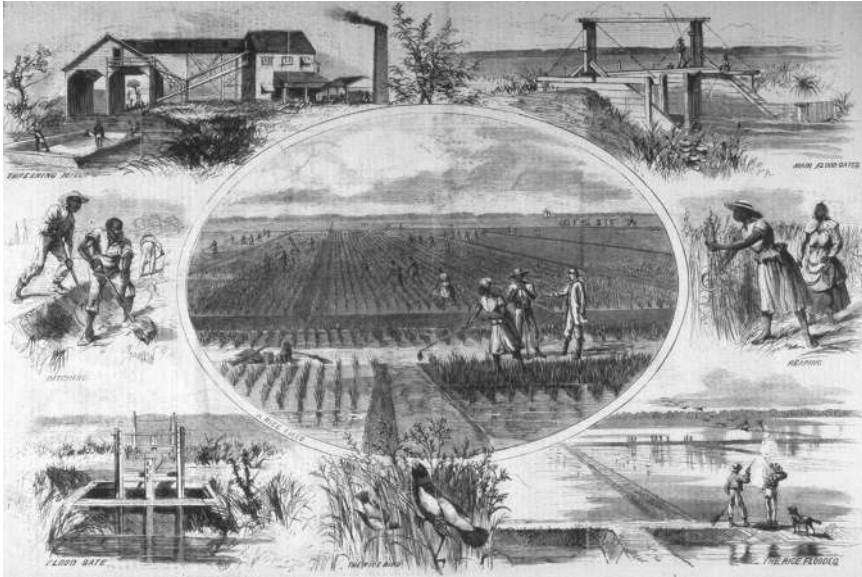
Coterminous with disfranchisement, Ku Klux Klan activity intensified throughout the state. Klan violence escalated in counties where African Americans were numerically in the minority. As the collective position of African Americans declined, there was a corresponding increase in the number of lynchings. Although most lynchings were not systematically recorded, the year 1899 represented the

peak year for documented lynchings in Georgia, with twenty-seven recorded.⁹ This period was characterized by a “global awakening of whiteness,” as lynching, colonization, imperialism, and the consolidation of whiteness, led to what W. E. B. Du Bois described in *The Souls of White Folk* as a “descent into hell.”¹⁰ Legal scholar Mark Weiner observed that “the vast majority of southerners, depended on lynching to maintain their distinctive social and cultural order”; lynching thus served as a defining act of justice and community for southerners.¹¹ In the lowcountry, African Americans maintained a demographic majority that mediated the development of insurgent Klan violence as African Americans could retaliate against such violence.¹²

The post-Reconstruction period was significant for the extension of self-determination strategies in lowcountry communities. Both Henry McNeal Turner and Martin R. Delany were central to this discourse on self-determination strategies, espousing both emigrationism and separatism.¹³ The establishment of the Liberian Exodus Joint Stock Steamship Company, formed in 1877 by Delany, B. F. Porter, and other prominent clergy in Charleston, South Carolina, advocated emigration to Liberia as a panacea for race hatred in America.¹⁴ Emigration represented the first salient effort by enslaved and free African Americans to establish an autonomous national state in order to gain freedom, independence, and self-reliance. Unable to function as citizen members within American society, African Americans who emigrated to Liberia would be able to acquire property, build institutions, and enjoy the rights and privileges of freedom.

The creation of an African American entrepreneurial class during the second half of the nineteenth century did not preclude social immunity to race prejudice and aspersions on their character. Former slaves who responded to the persuasive rhetoric of Henry McNeal Turner, pastor of Savannah’s St. James Tabernacle A.M.E. church, included entrepreneurs who accepted Turner’s proposition that “being sick or dying with fever in Africa was better than dying at the hands of a lynch mob in the U.S.”¹⁵ In 1877, 197 men and women influenced by Delany and Turner left Savannah for Liberia. The emigrationist thrust continued during the last two decades of the nineteenth century as 400 African Americans emigrated to Sierra Leone in 1887; in 1895 the steamship *Horsa* left the port of Savannah with 202 emigrants.¹⁶

The historical burden of enslavement, which carried with it the characterization of African Americans as lazy, irrational, and licentious, cast them as a discernible and separate group, a problem within the social framework of America. As former slaves remained engaged in politics, they husbanded their resources in support of emigrationist and separatist platforms that reinforced private and public transcripts of resistance. For the vast majority of African Americans, separatism, not emigrationism, emerged as the most viable alternative. Their cultural identity as descendants of Africans remained deeply rooted in the American past; thus many



Rice cultivation on the Ogeechee near Savannah. *Harper's Weekly*, January 5, 1867

perceived America as their home and endeavored to build communities and institutions there.

KINSHIP AND LAND IN THE LOWCOUNTRY

A prominent feature of lowcountry communities was the presence of three pivotal institutions: the family, the church, and mutual associations. These institutions served as reinforcements for the individual and the community as a whole. To a large extent, the self-defined thought and behavior displayed by former slaves emanated from the roles they assumed within these institutions, through which a network of kinship relationships developed. Kinship communities were not simply bound together by blood relations. Instead, community institutions structured relationship patterns that encompassed the entire community. For instance, churches functioned as extended kinship groups by providing emotional closeness and support in times of crisis.¹⁷

African Americans developed several strategies to sustain access to and control of land. In several communities, their land supported the growth of rice, which they valued as both a market crop and a dietary staple. The initiatives undertaken by African Americans to secure land through disciplined economic choices is central to understanding how they seized freedom. The extent to which they were successful depended on regional demographic factors, the degree of economic elasticity,

and the relative fluidity of race relations. The formulation of overt collective acts designed to secure land and establish autonomous communities in opposition to federal land restoration represented a salient effort to translate emancipation into substantive freedom.

Landownership was the symbol of group interactions and represented status to all those related to it. Landowners held a higher status than tenants or sharecroppers because they had gained a small foothold in the earth that provided a measure of independence. In the Burroughs community, located in the Ogeechee district of Chatham County, twenty-four men and women had obtained this measure of independence between 1870 and 1888. Their ages ranged from twenty-six to seventy-two at the time of their land purchase.¹⁸ Chatham County's agrarian-industrial economy enhanced the opportunities for African Americans to acquire land. In addition to wage labor, African Americans engaged in commercial farming and in entrepreneurial activities such as marketing produce and selling fish, shrimp, oysters, and crabs. These various forms of economic activity persisted into the twentieth century and expanded or contracted with structural changes in the county's economy. Although the vast majority of African Americans found it difficult to save and invest in land, the number of African American landowners in the county increased steadily between 1870 and 1900. Their landholdings averaged between nine and twenty-six acres. In the state of Georgia, African Americans owned 1,252,714 million of the 31,203,973 acres of improved land, or 4 percent of the total farming area.¹⁹

In spite of economic restrictions, African Americans in the state of Georgia continued to increase their landholdings. In the Ogeechee district, rural and semirural African Americans secured a measure of independence through the purchase of land and the establishment of communities such as Brownsville, Burroughs, Dittmersville, Fort Argyle, and Millersville.²⁰ Brownsville and Dittmersville maintained the highest property values, with average valuation at five hundred dollars.²¹ Freed people cooperated to purchase land and homes in other areas of Chatham County throughout the 1870s. Between 1873 and 1874 African Americans established the Southville community, where they built thirty homes with an aggregate value of ten thousand dollars. They also established mutual associations such as the Sons and Daughters of Southville, which paid \$150.00 for three parcels of land.²² This pattern of cooperation also developed in Brownsville and Dittmersville, where African Americans accumulated tracts of real estate valued individually between two hundred and two thousand dollars.²³ William Morgin, a farm laborer and member of First African Baptist Church, opened an account with the Freedmen's Bank in Savannah in 1867. Two years later, he purchased land for one hundred dollars in Dittmersville, located on the outskirts of Savannah in White Bluff.²⁴ Dittmersville and First African Baptist Church served as kinship communities for Morgin and other African Americans, such as Diamond Williams, a steamboat pilot, who paid two

hundred dollars for land in Dittmersville in 1868, and Robert Watt, a farm laborer, who paid one hundred dollars for land in Dittmersville in 1869.²⁵

African American families in the lowcountry adhered to a nuclear model. The desire for a stable family and their aspirations for land and other economic opportunities were interrelated. In Burroughs, 87 percent of the landowners maintained nuclear households in 1880.²⁶ For farmers, the family functioned as an economic unit. However, this varied with respect to the age of the children and the particular needs of the family. The wives of three out of the seven farmers remained at home as opposed to working in the fields. For instance, Fortune Watson, who produced 10,208 pounds of rice in 1879, recognized the importance of having his wife, Tilla, devote her time and energy to raising their four children who had not reached working age. In most farming families, however, every family member who was physically able engaged in some type of work. Invariably families utilized the savings of all family members to invest in land.²⁷ In a few cases, however, rice farmers also hired laborers to assist in performing arduous field work, paying between two and nine dollars per week for the time hired. Their economic activities revolved around the Atlantic and Gulf Railroad, which provided the means by which they transported locally grown vegetables and rice to Savannah.²⁸

Successful farming, whether commercial or for subsistence, required access to property other than land. Livestock, such as chickens, cows, draught animals, and pigs, provided farmers with the instruments to provide for their families and to earn additional income from marketing produce, including eggs, corn, sweet potatoes, and, in a few instances, cotton. In cases where women worked on family farms, they performed tasks such as planting, harvesting, and marketing produce. Family farming encouraged solidarity, individual initiative, and responsibility.²⁹ Both Sam Black and Toby Roberts were among the original land recipients after General William Sherman's Field Order No. 15. Although they found it difficult to save and invest in land, both men relied on the labor of their family and the draft animals they owned to meet their economic needs.³⁰

Landowners placed a high value on providing land for their children. For instance, William Ferguson paid \$130 for six acres of land (lot number nine) from January Stoney in 1876 "to hold in trust for Andrew Bryan," Ferguson's eight-year-old step-son, and "Matilda Ferguson," his eleven-year-old daughter.³¹ Stoney, who paid \$266 for seven acres, or lot number nine of Wild Horn, in 1874, may have migrated out of the area and purchased land in another area of Chatham County, as James Grant did in 1882.³² Grant, who paid \$373 for eighteen acres (lot number one) at Wild Horn in 1874, sold his holdings to Adam Young for \$300. Grant remained in the Ogeechee district but migrated closer to Savannah.³³ Affinal relations played a part in land transfers between David Roulabit and Elze Green. Roulabit, one of the original 1865 land recipients, purchased three lots (numbers six, seven, and eight)

of the Miller-Demere tract on November 1, 1888. On December 1, 1888, he sold five acres to Elze Green for \$60.11.³⁴

An important factor in examining property ownership among rural African Americans is their “level of living.”³⁵ The first generation of freedmen and freedwomen in rural districts lived for the most part as did other groups in agricultural areas during the late nineteenth century. In lowcountry Georgia, they raised their own poultry and vegetables, fished, hunted, produced a cash crop of rice or cotton, and engaged in some form of commerce. However, they still faced obstacles to economic advancement. Their small holdings precluded expanding their level of output. They were also vulnerable to fluctuations in national and international markets and faced natural disasters such as floods and hurricanes. Like their poor white counterparts, they were economically marginalized.³⁶

LANDOWNERSHIP AND WOMEN’S COMMUNITY NETWORKS

The establishment of an identity as self-sufficient agriculturalists and the concomitant reaffirmation as property owners provided women with a new ideological orientation. Caroline Ealy purchased twenty and three-quarters acres on January 10, 1873, paying \$415. Ealy’s estate consisted of “lot number three,” which bordered Chevis Road on the east.³⁷ Apart from Plenty Ancrum, Caroline Ealy held the largest tract in the Burroughs settlement. Other women who purchased land secured modest acreage. Hannah Green and Sarah Davis owned seven and five acres, respectively. Both Green and Davis held fiduciary deeds. Mingo Broughton served as trustee for Green, who paid \$140 for her property, which ran parallel with Chevis Road and which bordered the lands of Norris Weston on the north. Likewise, Robin Davis and Prince Wright acted on behalf of Davis, who paid \$200 for five acres “lying near Chevis road.”³⁸

The process by which women created networks and developed survival strategies to manage living during their enslavement provides important insights into gender, race, and class, and into the role of women, particularly women classified as head of household, in oppositional communities. These women struggled to give form and meaning to their lives through their participation in female benevolent societies, which encouraged women to save and invest in land. The issuance of possessory titles to women under Sherman’s Field Order reinforced the conditions under which women sought to establish new economic and political realities.

For single and widowed women, the ownership of land emerged as the focal point of their struggle. Most embraced the end of institutionalized slavery by locating loved ones and rebuilding their families. For many women, however, the prospects of seeing children and husbands who had been sold away during slavery were dim. The plight of Mary McGill, who migrated to Savannah from South Carolina, underscores the painful circumstances that invaded the lives of many freedwomen.

McGill's husband, Joe, died shortly before the war ended. Together they had lost four children who had died at birth, and they had witnessed the sale of two daughters, Diana and Margaret, twenty years before the war began.³⁹

Freedwomen sought comfort from the personal pain slavery inflicted and the economic hardships they faced as a result of their gender and race through community networks that stemmed from the African American church. The experiences of African American women created a shared belief system or worldview that informed their roles in extended kinship institutions such as the church and mutual aid and benevolent societies. These institutions inculcated the doctrines of self-help and solidarity.

In the process of institution building, nearly every African American community in lowcountry Georgia sought to secure title to land for church purposes. In the A.M.E. church, as well as in other churches, committees on deeds and homesteads were established in each district of South Georgia for this purpose. In this arena, women enhanced the material foundation of the church not only through fundraising, but in some instances by providing land. Selina Stewart, who inherited the thousand-dollar estate of her father, James Stewart, sold a small parcel of the land to Mt. Zion C.M.E. church in order to "promote the welfare of the church."⁴⁰

To a large extent, African American churches were the institutional backbone of the Savannah branch of the Freedmen's Savings and Trust, which operated in the city from 1866 to 1874. In other areas of Chatham County, the trustees of the C.M.E. church in the Ogeechee district, Hillard Jackson, Limus Greene, Caesar King, Jacob Grant, and Francis Shaw, purchased one acre of land in 1879 from the Burroughs family. Additionally the Burroughs family, which owned Wild Horn plantation in the Ogeechee district, sold land to Mount Olive Baptist Church and the New Ogeechee Baptist Church, which maintained majority African American congregations. In 1864 Francis MacLeod bequeathed one thousand acres of Wild Horn to William Burroughs to hold in trust for his wife, Ann A. Burroughs (MacLeod's daughter), and their children, William Burroughs Jr., Joseph Burroughs, and Alethea Burroughs. Specified in each deed is the consent of Burroughs's wife and children. Church accounts were used to make improvements on buildings and to support educational activities. Moreover, church-related benevolent societies, such as the Mary Magdalene Society, the Ladies Galatian Society, and the Daughters of Nehemiah, complemented the mission of the church while promoting habits of mutuality.⁴¹

Female benevolent societies enabled African American women to form an independent power base within their communities. In Savannah-Chatham County, women assumed leadership positions in most female benevolent societies. On the basis of Elsa Barkley Brown's paradigm of female leadership, African American women led and served as community influentials, community activists, and elite leaders. Women categorized as community influentials held secondary positions

within the associations, such as secretary and treasurer. Community activists, on the other hand, were women who served as president and vice-president and who were chosen to lead at least twice.⁴² Similarly the elite leaders were women elected to primary positions more than three times. Between 1865 and 1885, 922 persons served as officers in Savannah's African American organizations. Women comprised 28 percent of the officers. Ninety-six percent of the 922 officers were former slaves.⁴³

The balance of power in a number of associations was not always equal; however, all members played some role in constructing a vision of community. Members in associations such as the Sons and Daughters of Jerusalem, the Sons and Daughters of Mount Sinai, and the Sons and Daughters of Zion coordinated their activities to achieve their objective of buying land. The Sons and Daughters of Mount Sinai, for instance, raised two hundred dollars to purchase a lot for the society. Likewise, the Jerusalem and Zion associations paid seventy-five dollars in 1883 and forty dollars in 1888, respectively, for small parcels of land.⁴⁴ Through their involvement in more than two hundred mutual aid and benevolent associations, African American women in Savannah played an instrumental role in building the material and spiritual foundation of Black institutions. Through these institutions, they formed intracommunity networks that provided support for self-reliant women seeking to build a land base.⁴⁵

Church-affiliated societies such as mutual aid benevolent associations played a pivotal role in the economic arena of women's lives. In the process of working together to enhance the institutional structure of the community, women, particularly those who were widowed, benefited from the various means by which these institutions taught saving to buy land. Women, like men, maintained deep-seated aspirations to invest in land, which was a tangible manifestation of their independence as well as an asset that might strengthen kinship and family ties. However, single and widowed women, particularly in rural areas, found it difficult to purchase land because of low wages and familial responsibilities. In spite of economic hardships, African American women in Savannah-Chatham County became landowners. By 1876, 117 African American women in Chatham County, most of whom were former slaves, owned land.⁴⁶

Compared with the total number of landowners in Savannah in 1870, the number of landowning African American women is significant. Savannah's rural-urban economy and the conterminous development of a plantation and industrial economy placed African American men and women in a comparatively good position to accumulate real and personal property. In 1870 their total value of land and personal property amounted to \$425,013. By 1900 this amount totaled \$914,320, an increase of 54 percent.⁴⁷ African American women emerged as landowners during this period through inheritance and through individual and collective efforts. Many of the women functioned as the head of the household due to the death of a

spouse or because of voluntary separation. Some landowners, moreover, were single women who sought to establish security for themselves. In 1870 and 1880, women headed one-fourth of the African-American families in Savannah.⁴⁸

Kinship played an instrumental role in the community network of African American women. In some instances, landed kin helped landless family members acquire land. Illustrative of this is the Sheftall family, who helped family members acquire land by selling them portions of their property. Susan Sheftall and Eve Johnson each secured land from the estate of Margaret Sheftall, their grandmother, for ten dollars. Susan Sheftall, who worked as a launderer, had accumulated real property valued at two thousand dollars by 1870.⁴⁹ In most cases, women who purchased land secured modest acreage averaging between five and ten acres. Holdings that were large enough to build a home and maintain a garden represented an economic investment in a family estate. Women often took great care to include their children as co-owners of land. For instance, the premises of Kate Brown's deed stated "this indenture made November 4, 1882 between William Burroughs, Ann Burroughs, and Joseph and Alethea Burroughs, parties of the first part, and *Kate Brown and her children* [emphasis added] parties of the second part."⁵⁰

In other instances, women purchased land for their children. Illustrative of this is Nancy Singleton, who on behalf of her children paid one hundred dollars for five acres of land in the Burroughs community.⁵¹ Affinal relations also governed rights to land. Plenty Ancrum, for instance, "in consideration for the natural love and affection" and the sum of five dollars, conveyed one and one-half acre of his twenty-three acres to Tenah Murray.⁵² Thus, through an "internal land trade," women gained access to small parcels of land, which they equated with economic and personal independence. Through landownership self-reliant African American women redefined and reordered their lives and preserved their personal autonomy. For the most part, they relied on community networks that stemmed from the Black church to construct their vision of community. These networks were forged in the process of institution building and were strengthened by their collective efforts to build a land base for their communities.

Although not all whites in Savannah opposed selling land to African Americans, many conspired to keep African American landless by not selling to them. Out of a population of 27,515 in 1880, only 648 African American families owned land. An inverse relationship between the percentage of African American families in Savannah and the percentage who owned land persisted primarily because Chatham County maintained the highest land value per acre in the state of Georgia. This condition prevailed even during the 1870s, when land values dropped by 50 percent because of an economic depression. Moreover, although the amount of land African Americans owned more than doubled, from 1,055 acres in 1874 to 2,687 acres in 1880, the aggregate value of land decreased due to the economic depression, from \$192,000 in 1870 to \$79,000 in 1880. Similarly the per capita wealth of African

Americans declined from \$17.79 in 1870 to \$7.31 in 1880.⁵³ In Bryan and Liberty counties, which offered land at two to thirty dollars per acre, African Americans had greater success in purchasing land.⁵⁴

THE TOWN OF BURROUGHS

As economic and social oppression intensified at the turn of the twentieth century, the Burroughs community sought to obtain economic and social independence through self-segregation within the protective confines of an all-Black community. Burroughs became the only incorporated town in Chatham County in 1898, with residents serving as mayor, town council members, and constable. The town's boundaries extended six miles southwest of Chevis Road, encompassing the Miller and Fort Argyle communities. The incorporation of Burroughs reinforced the bonds of family and community, which informed the transfer and sale of land.⁵⁵ The "internal land trade" became the primary mechanism that gave other community members access to land. For instance, Apollo Blount and Frank Gladden, both of whom were over seventy in 1890, sold small plots from their holdings. Blount, whose wife, Binah, may have predeceased him, sold two and one-half acres of his ten acres to Elizabeth Agnew on April 21, 1890. Similarly Gladden sold one acre of his four and three-quarters acres to Bishop C. K. Nelson, who paid thirty-four dollars.⁵⁶

The subdivision of small tracts into even smaller parcels signaled a shift from cash crop farming to primarily subsistence agriculture. The small lots that men and women purchased were only large enough to build a home and maintain a small garden. This pattern continued in the 1890s and into the twentieth century. Between 1890 and 1907, fourteen African Americans purchased land from the Burroughs family.⁵⁷ During this seventeen-year period, they purchased seventy-seven acres, paying \$1,447 for plots which ranged in size from three-quarters of an acre to eleven and one-half acres, paying as much as \$18.85 per acre.⁵⁸ Six had made arrangements with Joseph and Alethea Burroughs, the son and daughter of William Burroughs, to purchase their land in installments. In most cases, they made final payment for their land but did not receive the actual deed until three to four years later, primarily because of the deaths of both Joseph and Alethea Burroughs.

Eight of the landowners were women whose husbands may have predeceased them and who continued to make payments on the land. Comfort Blake's title, for instance, specified that the land consisted of "seven acres set forth in the name of Amos Blake."⁵⁹ At age forty-nine, she made final payment to Joseph and Alethea Burroughs on November 27, 1899, and received the deed from Nina Burroughs, the granddaughter of William Burroughs, in 1904.⁶⁰ In other cases children took over payments and purchased the land. For instance, the heirs of Sallie Legree, J. C. Legree, Fred Legree, and C. Bradley paid \$230 for eleven and one-half acres at Wild Horn. Other women purchased land ranging from three-quarters of an acre to nine

and three-quarters acres. Five of the women worked as farm laborers and also relied on the contributions of their children to the family economy.⁶¹

Although rural African Americans were economically marginalized, they continued to profit from a community network that provided social and religious reinforcement. In Burroughs the “church became the center for everything” and played a major role in holding the community together.⁶² Three churches provided spiritual and social uplift: Mount Olive Baptist, New Ogeechee Baptist, and St. Bartholomew’s Episcopal. At these institutions parishioners learned the price of rice and heard about upcoming elections. Moreover, weddings, funerals, summer revivals, church suppers and bazaars provided much of the community social life, and youth groups, women’s missionary societies, and meetings of deacons and elders gave African Americans the opportunity of self-government denied them in the larger society. Residences and farmlands were clustered around these institutions, which not only underscored their centrality, but were also an indication of the settlement’s growth into a town with social institutions. These institutions were less than one mile apart and were connected by Chevis Road, the main artery of the community. Hence, for the Burroughs community, land and religion had complementary roles in that these two elements structured the community.⁶³

Churches, moreover, served as institutional linkages between rural and urban African Americans. For instance, Mount Olive Baptist Church at Burroughs included in its membership Brother Richard H. Howard, who was also a member of St. James Tabernacle A.M.E. Church in Savannah. Additionally the New Ogeechee Baptist church at Burroughs was the site of the Tenth Session of the Zion Baptist Association’s teachers convention, which included representatives from Darien (McIntosh County) and Brunswick.⁶⁴ Mutual associations also provided support and promoted solidarity. Illustrative of this is the Labor Union Protective Association (LUPA) and the Georgia Benevolent Fishermen’s Association (GBFA), which promoted economic independence by directing various business enterprises. In 1892 the LUPA, which opened a grocery store on the Ogeechee Neck, consisted of carpenters and other skilled African American tradesman who united as a result of exclusion from all white unions. The LUPA also provided burial services to members who invested a percentage of their savings for such purposes. The LUPA was a vital link between rural and urban African Americans. Its board of directors included J. C. Legree, the mayor of Burroughs, and S. Snelson, an African American surgeon and physician in Savannah. Similarly the GBFA, chartered in 1894, encouraged business enterprises in the oyster industry by securing a lease of two thousand acres of oyster ground in the county; at one time it reported over one thousand dollars in income.⁶⁵

Burroughs, like other African American communities, regarded institutional property as an essential element in establishing oppositional communities. Mars Ward, who owned four hundred dollars in real estate, bequeathed one acre of his

fifteen acres on Burkhalter Road in the district to the Second Baptist Church in Savannah.⁶⁶ African Americans also purchased land to house mutual associations and secret societies, which were the centers of rural and urban social life. Both mutual associations and secret societies encouraged savings from their members in the form of monthly dues. At Burroughs, the Burroughs Union Club purchased eight and one-half acres of land for \$250.⁶⁷ By 1880 a total of 193 mutual aid societies and clubs were formed by African Americans in Savannah and the outlying districts of Chatham County. Their primary purpose involved providing burial services and aid to the sick. They also sent money to cities hit by disaster and worked with associations when epidemics plagued Savannah.⁶⁸

In addition to mutual societies, African Americans in the town of Burroughs held membership in secret societies, such as the Masons for men and the Order of the Eastern Star for women. These societies promoted solidarity and reinforced individual self-esteem. The Burroughs Union Club, adjacent to St. Bartholomew's church, served as the meeting place for the societies.⁶⁹ An integral feature of these associations was the opportunity they provided for members to unite for community-related activities that were often held in Savannah, including celebrations commemorating Emancipation Day, Liberian Independence Day, the adoption of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and President Lincoln's birthday. Summer excursions, which included picnics and steamboat rides, also reinforced community networks. These activities strengthened the bond between rural and semirural African Americans.⁷⁰

Freedom's first generation had fostered the development of kinship and solidarity through the reinforcement of individual self-esteem, a sympathetic understanding of their mutual plight, and various expressions of love, manifested in the sale and transfer of property. As freedom's second generation matured, they inherited not only the institutions that served as the cornerstone of Burroughs and similar communities throughout the South, but also their parents' land, and they maintained an ethos of cooperation that helped others become landowners. Land was the primary economic asset that they could pass on to their children. Although they owned a comparatively small amount of land, it represented their portion of the "tree of life" that they could pass on to their children.

Children secured land not only by inheritance, but also through their own efforts. However, their holdings were much smaller than those of their parents, primarily as a result of the division of land among heirs and also because of the scarcity of available land. Industrial magnate Henry Ford purchased nearly all of the former rice plantations on the Ogeechee Neck and in Bryan County. As land became scarcer, African Americans relied on kinship networks to secure small parcels.⁷¹ Kinship and co-residential relationships informed the transfer and sale of family land. Men and women relied on these bonds for intergenerational land transfers, as well as for fictive kin land sales. Moreover, members of the community

had a mutual responsibility for one another, which they maintained through shared experiences. Inheritance patterns generally took the form of exclusive rights of ownership, such as heir and successor property, or usufruct rights, in which an “activator” of the estate maintained a right to the house or land.⁷²

Landowners typically transferred land by means of deeds and, in a few instances, wills. Through the warranty clause of each deed, landowners held fee simple title, which protected the rights of their heirs to the land. Referred to as heirs’ property, this type of arrangement was most prevalent among rural African Americans, who often maintained family land in the names of their parents. Although wills were not very common among rural African Americans, particularly among those with small holdings, a few African Americans in the district made legal provisions for the disposition of their property. Deeds often reflected the pronouncement of wills.⁷³ Emanuel Heidt’s will, for instance, provided for the distribution of one-half acre of his estate to his daughter Crispy Arkwright, and three-quarters of an acre to his granddaughter, Pinkey Sheppard. Each paid one dollar to Sambo Crawford, who served as administrator for Heidt’s estate. Both Sheppard and Arkwright had maintained independent households in close proximity to Heidt’s.⁷⁴

Providing land for one’s children and controlling land deeds and land use were important ways by which the members of the first generation ensured rights to their children’s labor and secured for themselves care and support in old age. Accordingly they generally retained control of their land until well into their old age and made legal provisions for the disposition of their property prior to their deaths. For instance, at age seventy Jacob Shellman, who had received ten acres under Sherman’s Field Order in 1865, “in consideration of love and affection, and the sum of \$5.00” conveyed his five acres, which contained the family home, to his children Lizzie, Ralph, Lucretia, and Mary Shellman, on January 20, 1907.⁷⁵

While agriculture continued to provide a livelihood for the majority of African Americans in lowcountry Georgia, most barely scratched out a living from the land. Moreover, obtaining capital to reinvest in their small holdings was difficult for rural African Americans. However, some landowners secured capital by issuing debt deeds against their property. Richard Crawford, for instance, issued a debt deed in 1907, using his ten acres as collateral. Crawford, who had paid \$200 for ten acres at Wild Horn in 1872, received \$140 from H. A. Fountain, one of the few white residents in Burroughs. In two years, Crawford repaid the total amount.⁷⁶

By 1910 farming for most African Americans in Chatham County entailed cultivating small plots that averaged between three and nine acres. This represented a 300 percent drop in total farm acreage from 1890 to 1910.⁷⁷ Both the older and younger generations of landowners at Burroughs continued to farm, planting small plots of rice and sugarcane. They also earned income from fishing, dipping rosin from pine trees, and distilling turpentine. The lumber industry proved attractive, especially in nearby Bryan County, where it had superseded the rice industry. From

the Ogeechee Neck, men sometimes traveled daily back and forth to Bryan County, where they worked at the Ford lumber mills.⁷⁸

Sons generally followed the occupation of their fathers, while daughters assumed the familial role of their mothers, which included engaging in farm labor. However, in Burroughs a few men held high-status positions, such as mayor, sheriff, and town council member, in addition to working as farmers. In 1910, 44 percent of the landowners in Burroughs made their living as farmers; in 1920, 81 percent of the landowners were farmers. In contrast with the 1910 landowners, the vast majority of African American landowners in 1920 (73 percent) were over the age of forty (see Tables 6–8).⁷⁹

Acquiring small parcels of land, however, did not solve the economic plight of rural African Americans in Chatham County in the first two decades of the twentieth century. As the larger society denied them access to credit and the market, their economic prospects were limited due to the land-based economic and political power of the new ruling class, which included Henry Ford. As historian Eric Foner aptly writes, “the autonomy offered by landownership was defensive rather than the springboard for sustained economic advancement.”⁸⁰ All-black towns such as Burroughs did not prosper economically, primarily because the communities were a closed economic group with a relatively small population. In 1912 the town’s population was two hundred.⁸¹ From 1913 to 1917, the population remained listed at two hundred. Moreover, reinvestment in the community remained proscribed due to the persistence of race-based economic exploitation and the lack of adequate monetary resources.

In the political arena, Burroughs created its own system of governance. However, in the areas of trade and education it remained dependent on the urban center. Nonetheless, the autonomy and group cooperation offered through self-segregation within the protective confines of an all-Black community may have compensated for the low material condition of Burroughs.⁸² The urban center maintained jurisdiction over capital crimes such as murder, but Burroughs maintained its own courthouse and system of punishment. For instance, misdemeanor offenders performed roadwork, one of the public services cut off by the county.⁸³

The second generation, like the first, placed a high priority on acquiring land. In Burroughs the number of landowners increased slightly between 1910 and 1920. Moreover, the proportion of male landowners increased dramatically. Whereas in 1910 men made up 54.1 percent of the landowners; by 1920 they were 74.5 percent.⁸⁴ The “internal land trade” contributed to this increase. David Roulabit, for instance, sold small plots of his twenty-five acres to Flander Grant, John Shellman, and Barney Preston between 1916 and 1919. The amount they paid totaled \$180.⁸⁵

For the residents of Burroughs, gaining even a small foothold in the earth held both real and symbolic importance. For rural African Americans landownership was a form of resistance, an attempt to take charge of their own destinies. They

continued to rely on landed kin and co-residents to secure small plots of land. On Fort Argyle road, for instance, Richard Lachison, who had received fifteen acres under Sherman's Order, purchased one half acre from Clara and Sam Lowman, who owned fourteen acres.⁸⁶ The real and symbolic importance of owning land is underscored by Gertrude Green, who stated that "one lady worked all day for 5 cents, but somehow she managed to buy five acres."⁸⁷

By the early twentieth century, however, unanticipated strains began tugging at rural communities such as Burroughs. Small landholdings, especially those of an acre or less, could support a dwelling and a kitchen garden but left little room to raise an agricultural surplus for sale or even to pasture a cow. Most important, small landholdings did not conveniently subdivide. Moreover, with land becoming scarcer and the price of available land rising, the option of purchasing additional land grew less likely. In the face of this challenge, landholding families devised different strategies. Chief among these was the tacit agreement whereby only one or two grown children (and their spouse and children) continued to live on the family plot while others moved away—to other rural districts in Chatham County, or to Savannah or other urban areas in the North as well as the South.

As a result of this movement, the rural population in Chatham County had begun to decline. Between 1900 and 1910 the rural population declined from 16,995 to 14,626, a decrease of 13.9 percent.⁸⁸ As early as 1914 African Americans in Georgia were departing from Savannah on trains destined for northern cities. The exodus was greatest in Southwestern areas of Georgia, where African Americans owned a comparatively small amount of land and where the boll weevil had damaged cotton crops. In Georgia, more African Americans owned land in the wiregrass and coastal regions than in the black belt. In McIntosh County, for instance, 87 percent of African American farm operators owned their land in 1910 compared with only 2 percent in Dougherty County.⁸⁹ Migration from the rural areas of Chatham County was not as pronounced as in other areas of Georgia. In these areas, men and women developed their own institutions and struggled to improve their economic condition through landownership. Moreover, although children who could not gain access to land migrated out of Burroughs, the autonomy offered through self-governance and the complementary roles of land, religion, and family played a fundamental part of holding the community together.⁹⁰

During the first decade of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois traveled extensively throughout Georgia to assess the historical and contemporary problems facing African Americans. His survey of Dougherty County, Georgia, published in the *Souls of Black Folk*, and his study of black landownership in coastal Georgia for the U.S. Labor Department in 1906 illuminate the experiences of African Americans in the post-Civil War South and Reconstruction's legacy for both regions. With a population of one million, Georgia had the highest concentration of African

Americans in the country at the turn of the twentieth century.⁹¹ For Du Bois, one needed to only travel to Dougherty County to understand the race question in America. It was here that 80 percent of the black population worked the same land they had once worked as slaves, where 66 percent of the black population remained illiterate, and where slavery continued under a new form of capitalism.⁹² Conversely, in the lowcountry, according to Du Bois, freedmen and freedwomen at Woodville, Ogeechee, and Belmont united and purchased land; they held 56,000 acres by 1909.⁹³ Half a decade earlier, Booker T. Washington, in his “Atlanta Compromise” speech, articulated a philosophy of separation and accommodation as the best strategy for black advancement, and this influenced the Black town movement in the South. In Georgia, all-Black towns included Archery (Sumter County), Cannonville (Troup County), Greenough (Mitchell County), and Leroy (Burke County).⁹⁴

The formation of Burroughs represented the apogee of African American resistance to political, economic, and social injustice. The town’s charter of incorporation advanced the principles of self-help, moral uplift, and racial solidarity through its governing body.⁹⁵ The residents of Burroughs accumulated the resources to purchase land and other forms of property in numerous ways. In some cases, pre-Civil War opportunities to accumulate cash and property had existed that placed freedmen and freedwomen in a better position to acquire land. Both the struggle for and the acquisition of land knit families and communities together. Families pooled resources and passed acquired land from one individual to another and from one generation to the next. Mutual and protective associations promoted landownership both rhetorically and by encouraging their members to purchase land with their savings. When church congregations succeeded in purchasing land, the buildings and grounds served as visible reminders of the fruits of frugality and as centers for the perpetuation of a sense of community and other attendant values.

Although it was a mixed blessing, the incorporation of Burroughs further exemplified this independence. Most important, incorporation allowed the community’s residents jurisdiction over a wide range of civil affairs. Perhaps none of these prerogatives meant more than adjudication of the law. Communities such as Burroughs represented safe havens from the racial discrimination endemic to local and state government throughout the South at the turn of the century. The struggle of the residents of Burroughs to own land made these and other achievements possible. Few other rural communities in Georgia or elsewhere in the South enjoyed such amenities. In most plantation areas, sharecroppers had comparatively little control over their labor, their dwellings, or the future.⁹⁶

The abysmal status and condition of African Americans throughout the rural South created the impetus for sustained protest movements during what historian Rayford Logan termed the “nadir.”⁹⁷ Throughout the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries, African Americans devised strategies and organized institutions to enable them to protest against economic subordination and de jure segregation. These movements were led by both African American elites and grassroots community intellectuals. In twenty-five cities throughout the South, these two groups organized boycotts against segregated public transit systems and engaged in legal assaults against legal disfranchisement.⁹⁸

The deteriorating status of African Americans led to migration to northern cities during the first two decades of the twentieth century.⁹⁹ When the strains of growing families and a declining land base began to threaten the strategy of land acquisition, families adapted. Selected family members would continue to occupy and use family land, while other family members moved away. Through the device known as heirs' property, they maintained common interest in the land of their forebears. Over time, heirs' property would prove vulnerable to encroachment by outsiders desiring access to land. But in the early twentieth century, it epitomized a strategy for achieving a measure of independence on the land—one of the highest priorities of African American southerners from the dawn of freedom and even before.

TABLE 6. Landowners and Renters, Burroughs, Georgia 1910–1920

1910	N=100	%	1920	N=89	%
Owned Free Home/Farm	48	48	Owned Free Home/Farm	55	61.7
Rented Home/Farm	52	52	Rented Home/Farm	34	38.2

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Manuscript Population, Chatham County, 6th Militia District, 1910–1920.

TABLE 7. Age of Landowners, Burroughs, Georgia 1910–1920

AGE CATEGORY			AGE CATEGORY		
1910	N=48	%	1920	N=55	%
19–29	10	20.8	19–29	5	9.0
30–39	11	22.9	30–39	10	18.1
40–59	10	20.8	40–59	26	47.2
60–90	17	35.4	60–90	14	25.4

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Manuscript Population, Chatham County, 6th Militia District, 1910–1920.

TABLE 8. Gender Analysis of Landowners, Burroughs, Georgia 1910–1920

1910	N=48	%	1920	N=55	%
Female	22	45.8	Female	14	25.4
Male	26	54.1	Male	41	74.5

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Manuscript Population, Chatham County, 6th Militia District, 1910–1920.