

LAND OWNERSHIP AND BLACK ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Author(s): Edward J. Pennick

Source: *The Black Scholar*, January-February-March 1990, Vol. 21, No. 1, HUNGER IN BLACK AMERICA (January-February-March 1990), pp. 43-46

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41067672>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Taylor & Francis, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Black Scholar*

JSTOR

# LAND OWNERSHIP AND BLACK ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

---

by Edward J. Pennick

**A**lmost every family farmer in America is experiencing hardship. Many are facing the inevitable loss of land that has been in their families for generations. The situation for black farmers however, is far more serious than that faced by their white counterparts.

In addition to difficult economic conditions, black farmers still have to contend with the age old problem of discrimination. At a time when money is extremely tight, the black farmer finds it almost impossible to borrow enough to develop a successful operation. Where once it was too little too late, today two out of ten black farmers receive nothing at all.

Primarily because of this lack of access to capital, nearly one-third of all black farmers went out of business during the period from 1982-1987, according to the Department of Agriculture. Other alarming statistics relating to black farmers include:

—The decrease in numbers of black farmers is ten times that of white farmers.

—Blacks are losing land at an annual rate of nearly 500,000 acres. The total black land base is less than four million acres.

—The decline of black owned land represents a net annual loss of nearly 2.5 billion dollars to the black community.

There are those who do not consider this a crisis. They believe that blacks are poor farm-

ers and managers and therefore do not deserve to be landowners. They feel that blacks should be laborers either in the fields or in factories. Unfortunately, many of those believers are themselves black.

The fact is, that black farmers as a group, when compared to other farmers, depend more heavily on farming as an income and have less off-farm employment. One has but to look at recent black unemployment statistics to know this is true. Additionally, the net farm related income earned per dollar value of land and buildings represents a 15 percent return on investment by black farmers compared to nine percent by white farmers. In short, the black farmer makes six cents more for every dollar invested than does the white farmer.

Blacks, then, actually are better farmers but continue to lose their land simply because they cannot get adequate farm financing and operating capital. They also do not receive essential land utilization information or technical and marketing assistance — all of which, according to law, they are entitled to.

We have a maximum of 10 years to reverse the trend in land loss, for at an annual loss rate of five million acres, all black-owned land will be lost by the turn of this century.

There is hope for the survival of the black landowner, but it is the responsibility of Black America to make it happen. We can no longer sit idly by and hope the government will do its job fairly and equitably. The old axiom that

the squeaky wheel gets the grease still holds true. Just consider the uproar that was and continues to be raised by white farmers, many of whom call themselves small family farmers, but own or operate thousand of acres, making them millionaires. If they are suffering, then the black farmer is on his death bed. Yet, with few exceptions, there is no organized effort to make the plight of the black farmer a national issue worthy of presidential and congressional action.

We cannot put the blame for this lack of attention solely on the shoulders of the system or whites in general. We, too, must share the blame from the grassroots black to the so-called black leader. Of all the black leaders, both locally and nationally, how many have provided us with a real and viable plan for economic independence? When asked for one, nine times out of 10, they will say that in order for us to achieve economic independence, we must have jobs.

By jobs, they mean working for the established employment producing industries, which are well over 95 percent white-owned and controlled. By no stretch of the imagination should this be called economic independence, in fact it is economic dependence. The first and most important step in achieving economic independence is the ownership and control of land. This fact was well recognized by our forefathers from the time of slavery. Land ownership to them was viewed as essential because with it they would be able to have farms, raise their own food and generate income. They saw their very survival as directly related to being able to utilize the land. This desire for land led blacks to acquire nearly fifteen million acres by 1920. Although we now have only a fraction of that amount, there is a definite resurgence within the black community to become landowners.

The opportunity to acquire, retain and develop land is once again presenting itself, just as it did over a hundred years ago. The question is, are we as a people ready and willing to seize that opportunity. If we are, we must

begin today, organizing around the issue of black landownership. Those who profess interest in assisting the poor, especially the poor who happen to be black, should give black landownership and development a higher priority than it has been accorded over the past 70 years. The black land loss problem must take its rightful place alongside the more glamorous and "safe" issues, e.g., voter registration, school integration and affirmative action. Without economic development, the value of these issues is greatly diminished. The battle for civil rights and economic independence should be inseparable, and the most logical tool to achieve a significant degree of economic independence for blacks is through land ownership.

Those whites concerned about the poor must also take care not to use the Third World to soothe their consciences. The need for land reform, one of the reasons for revolutions in some Third World countries, exists in the Third World south of the United States. Until the problem is solved in the south, then it is hypocrisy to claim support for these Third World nations. Before we can successfully export compassion, we must first show it at home.

As in all successful endeavors, especially in organizing people, we must start at the grassroots level. Each landowner and potential landowner must be dedicated to retaining and developing his land and take the necessary steps to do so.

First, a landowner should have a will to ensure that his or her wishes as they relate to the land they own are carried out after death. Next to voluntary sales, the lack of a will is the primary cause of black land loss. So if a landowner does not have a will, the land is already in serious jeopardy, and chances are, not long after his death, the land will forever be erased from the black landowner column.

Once the land is legally secure, the landowner must take the necessary steps to ensure that the land is properly utilized. The landowner should demand to be given equal opportunity

to use the many resources that are legally set aside for that purpose. The money controlled by the Farmers Home Administration, Extension Service and other government agencies belongs to the people regardless of color, if qualified. However, without pressure, these agencies tend to operate on the premise that black farmers either do not qualify for the money or do not need it. For some reason, white people have always felt that blacks do not need as much money as they do.

There are recorded cases where direct pressure has forced staff within these agencies to do their jobs fairly. In some instances, it has meant going to court, but when it comes to black land retention the end almost certainly justifies the means.

The three main ingredients to saving black-owned land are: 1) legally securing the land, 2) organizing, and 3) applying appropriate pressure, when necessary. These methods have been tested and do work. Over the past 20 years the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF) has employed them and is responsible for saving well over 500,000 acres of black-owned land.

There also has to be an accompanying strategy aimed at securing direct government intervention. In short, national legislation is required to keep Black America an integral part of America's agricultural system.

FSC/LAF realized that only through such legislation could the trend of black land loss be permanently reversed. With that in mind, FSC/LAF (with the help and support of various community-based organizations and churches) developed legislation known as the Minority Farmers Rights Act. This is an historic piece of legislation which would, among other things:

—Encourage restoration of the mission of the Farmers Home Administration as the lender of last resort, restoration of direct lending funds to at least 1985 levels, and advocate positive affirmative action in lending among

the credit institutions participating in any guaranteed loan program.

—Recognize that the Farmers Home Administration offices in some areas are understaffed to supply the service we advocate and to undertake the increased responsibilities of an expanded socially disadvantaged program. As a result, the bill would include increased FmHA staff specifically assigned to these activities in areas with high minority populations.

—Strengthen and staff an agency within the U.S. Department of Agriculture and at the state level to deal directly with the concerns of minority farmers.

—Develop an expanded outreach and education program involving the 1890 land grant colleges and community-based organizations such as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and similar agencies, engaging them in specific contracts to involve minority farmers in all aspects of USDA programs.

—Require affirmative action in employment and contracting by USDA agencies, including the Farmers Home Administration.

—Establish demonstration programs for minority youth and beginning farmers.

—Establish a stronger appeals process for complaints of discrimination by minority farmers.

The bill was submitted as an amendment to the 1990 Farm Bill. It was introduced in the Senate by Senator Wyche Fowler and passed unanimously. Representative Mike Espy of Mississippi introduced the House version and it will be considered during the upcoming session.

This is the first piece of legislation with the sole purpose of helping solve the minority land loss problem. Black organizations, churches, politicians, and others should begin to contact their representatives to ensure that the Minority Farmers Rights Act is part of the 1990 Farm Bill. It should be made clear to everyone that without the Minority Farmers

Right Act amendment there should be no farm bill at all.

Finally, black Americans can no longer watch passively as our land slips away. We must insist that our leaders address this issue, in fact we should make black land loss a litmus test by which we measure current and aspiring black leaders. If we do not deal with the issue of black land loss in a united and well organized manner, then, the problems of hunger and economic development will never be solved. Black Americans will remain dependent on the state, hoping for simple survival, and to be tolerated by the larger society.

The choice is ours. Time is running out.

**AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES** Program. Tenure-track assistant professorship at The University of Michigan-Flint beginning September 1991. A specialist in some area of African-American Studies with the Ph.D. or equivalent degree in African-American Studies, American Studies or the arts, humanities or social sciences expected by September 1. Teaching experience preferred; publications desired. A broad knowledge of African-American history and culture and a desire to assist in curriculum development in cross-cultural studies. Position subject to final budget approval. This University of Michigan campus is in Flint, a predominately Black populated city 60 miles northwest of Detroit and 60 miles north of Ann Arbor. It serves a diverse student body of 6,500. Send a letter of application, vita, and 3 letters of recommendation to Professor Melba J. Boyd, Director, African-American Studies, The University of Michigan-Flint, Flint, MI 48502-2186. Preliminary deadline, January 1, 1991, but search will continue until post is filled. Interviews at AHA (New York) in December 1990. UM-Flint is an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer, and strongly encourages the application of minorities and women.

**CARLETON COLLEGE  
Tenure-Track Positions  
Fall 1991**

All positions at Assistant Professor level (with Ph.D. by time of appointment). In extraordinary cases higher rank will be considered.

**English:** 19th and 20th century American Literature and expository writing, introductory and advanced courses. Interest in ethnic literature and/or creative writing desirable. Interviews at MLA Convention in Chicago. Application and vita to James McDonnell, Chair. Deadline: November 30.

**Psychology:** Two positions: 1) Neuroscience or physiological psychology, to teach courses in physiological psychology and/or neuroscience, introductory psychology and some courses in biological psychology from the candidate's interests; and 2) Social or personality psychology, to teach some of the core courses in social and/or personality psychology, introductory psychology, and one or two courses related to African/African-American Studies. Send cover letter describing teaching and research interests, vita, sample preprints or reprints and three reference letters to Peter Guthrie, Chair. Deadline: January 5.

**Romance Languages and Literatures (French):** Specialists in 17th, 18th or 19th century literature preferred. Seeking an active scholar with the ability to teach a wide range of language and literature courses. Send vita to Cathy Yandell, Chair. Deadline: November 30.

Carleton College is an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity employer. Women and minorities encouraged to apply. Carleton College, One North College Street, Northfield, MN 55057.