



Tent City

Conditions in the South


In the South, social status and economic levels were indistinguishable. One condition dictated the other. After the end of the Civil War, millions of formerly enslaved Africans remained in the eleven states of the former confederacy, often on the same plantations on which they had been enslaved. Though state-supported chattel slavery had ceased, a new system arose to replace the South's insatiable need for cheap labor.

Replacing chattel slavery was not easy for landowners. The appearance of federal laws and the Freedmen's Bureau assisted in establishing a brief period of economic and political independence for African Americans. But landowners began to use violence and subterfuge to keep those formerly enslaved within a chattel-like environment. The new system which would manifest itself and alter the "new South" for the next century became generically known as "tenant farming" or "sharecropping."

Working for "shares"

Essentially, African-American farmers did not own land on which they lived nor did they have any decision in the crops selected or the manner in which crops were planted. Such a condition made them vulnerable to the various methods used by former slaveholders to manipulate their lives.

The working arrangement generally involved working the land for a share of the crops produced, or "sharecropping." There were arrangements, mostly among whites, in which land would be rented for a fixed price in money or farm commodities produced during the year. By the 1930s, over half, about 60 percent, of all



cotton farms in the South were operated by tenants. After World War II, mechanization transformed the agricultural South and migrations of African Americans had removed much of the tenant labor force from the old plantations. Yet, an oppressive social caste system still dictated the lives of African Americans who remained without any representation or advocacy among the civil authorities. These conditions became the foundation for a pursuit of freedom, both economic and social among African Americans in the black belt counties of Alabama and elsewhere in the South. African Americans, living under these conditions, felt that obtaining the vote had the potential to improve the quality of their lives and so they marched for that right.

A place to call home

After the Voting Rights Act was signed on August 6, 1965 by President Lyndon Johnson, literacy tests were suspended, federal monitors were appointed to watch over elections, and the U.S. Attorney General was directed to challenge the use of poll taxes by states.

In that same month, Jonathan Daniels, an Episcopal seminarian helping desegregation efforts in Hayneville, Ala., was shot and killed there. And, white landowners in Lowndes County, retaliating against tenant farmers who registered, voted, or engaged in any voting rights activities, threw them off the lands where they worked and lived. In December, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Lowndes County leaders helped several dispossessed families stay together and remain in the county by setting up a "tent city" on the Matthew Jackson family land at this point on U.S. Highway 80. They bought tents, cots, heaters, food, and water and helped several families turn "tent city" into a temporary home. Despite harassment—including shots regularly fired into the encampment—residents persevered for over two years as organizers helped them find new jobs, permanent housing, and new lives.