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New Program Celebrates Accomplishments of

Century Black Landowners

BY CATHY LANDRY

With fluctuating prices, family differences over land management and mission, and so many other factors, it is not easy to hold onto a family farm or forest for more than one generation – let alone 100 years or more.

It's even harder when laws and customs seek to force you from your land just because of the color of your skin.

Century Black Landowners endured Black Codes, Jim Crow and persistent discrimination to retain their family land. The Winston County Self Help Cooperative (WCSHC) formed the Black Century Landowners' Recognition Program (BCLORP) in 2018 to recognize and honor Black American families that have overcome

the many challenges they faced and passed down their land legacy for at least 100 years.

BCLORP is not only a recognition program. It is designed to encourage Black landowners to hold onto their lands and to encourage Black non-landowners to become landowners. WCSHC, formed in 1985 at the height of the farm crisis, also provides these families, and other Black landowners, information, resources, and knowledge to help them access state and federal funds.

T'arie Todman, WCSHC community outreach specialist
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE WINSTON COUNTY SELF HELP COOPERATIVE

"Our goal is to bring information that our landowners might not be aware of to the surface," said T'arie Todman, WCSHC community outreach specialist. "Our other goal is to provide education on resources and to help these landowners with such things as accessing and filling out applications for programs."

The cooperative also conducts land visits to see individual operations, she said. "We want to know how they run their business and provide expertise on how they could make things even better," Todman noted.

For Todman, the BCLORP program is personal. She is a Black century landowner. Her family's legacy starts with Jack Miller, a freedman, and his wife, Ellen, who purchased 40 acres of land in Louisville, Winston County, Miss., in 1877. One year later, they purchased another 40 acres. Today, this family of Tree Farmers not only owns the original 80 acres – purchased for a total of $250 – but has added about 320 more acres.

The Millers' odds of keeping the land were long. Despite the abolishment of slavery and Reconstruction's stated goal of helping former slaves, Black Codes quickly emerged, threatening the newly freed. These Black Codes dictated to Black Americans who could purchase land, who could legally marry and who could hire them. The codes also limited Black Americans' access to the courts and denied their right to vote, testify, or serve on juries or state militias. Mississippi released its first set of Black Codes in 1865, two years after the Emancipation Proclamation, explained Todman citing extensive research she conducted on the period.

Even with the codes and widespread discrimination, newly freed Blacks bought property, even in the Deep South. With the combined resources of a few black ministers, entrepreneurs and educators, more than 50 Black-owned lending institutions were established by 1911 with annual transactions worth more than $20 million. By 1910, about 16.5% of land in the South was Black-owned, but by 1928, most whites would not sell property to Blacks even if Blacks had the cash and were willing to pay more for the land than whites, Todman explained.

A great deal of Black-owned land loss occurred during the early 20th century, largely due to Jim Crow segregation laws and the Great Migration, the mass exodus of southern Blacks to the North, she explained. The number of

Black-owned farms has dropped by more than 97% since 1920, from 926,000 to just 18,800 today.

This is why the staff of the Winston County Self Help Cooperative, made up of century landowners, were driven to develop the BCLORP program, Todman said. “We want to celebrate those families that held onto their land for a century or more, but we also want to recognize that each time we lose Black landownership, we lose a piece of our ancestral legacy.”

Todman said no other recognition program was dedicated to Black landowners. Moreover, many of the other registries had onerous standards that many Black landowners were unable to meet, in many cases because records simply were not available. BCLORP’s only requirement is proof of deed reflecting the family’s ownership for 100 years or more.

Growing the BCLORP registry has been slow, Todman acknowledged, but she is not discouraged. “We need to get the word out more, and that’s what we are trying to do. We talk at conferences and other events. We know that the word spreads from one farmer or landowner to the other. As more people learn about the project, we believe more will join,” she added.

Still, many Black century landowners are reluctant to sign up. “I think for many there is always fear – driven by generations of experiences and family stories – that their land could be targeted if they advertise the fact that they have held onto it for so long. So, they stay under the radar,” Todman said. “I know it can be difficult to understand if you’ve never lived it. But it’s a real concern for many. I hope that, in time, some of these families will feel more comfortable having a light shined on their amazing accomplishment.”

The Williams family at the entrance to their 195-acre forestry, farming and rental property operation in Enfield, N.C.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE WILLIAMS FAMILY

The Fourtee Acres Story

Fourtee Acres is a 45-acre Black-owned family forestry, farming and rental property operation in Enfield, N.C., established and owned by Tyrone and Edna Williams, along with their three sons, Trevelyn (35), Tremaine (30) and Tyron (26).

“The name Fourtee Acres is a play on the proverbial ‘forty acres and a mule’ that was promised to African-Americans after slavery, with a twist to acknowledge the ‘four T’s: Tyrone and the three boys,” said Tyrone and Edna Williams, adding that the “double e’s” at the end represent the “energizing effort” that Edna brought to the family and her commitment to continuing the legacy of the Williams name.

The four Ts also represent the Williams family’s framework for keeping forest and farmland within families. These are: *talking*, including having difficult discussions about the future and death; taking the *time* to develop relationships, particularly if there are multiple owners of the property or several people that will take over the property; developing *trust* among owners or prospective owners; and entering a family trust and putting other legal documents in place to ensure a straightforward and successful transition which leads to the *treasure* of land retention for generations to come.

While Fourtee Acres itself was formed in 1994 with the birth of Tyrone and Edna’s youngest, the property on which it sits, the 195-acre Williams Family Farm, dates to Tyrone’s grandparents, Tussie and

Roxanne Williams, married in 1910, who initially purchased 38 acres of land in 1916 for which they have a recorded deed. The Williams family, who can trace their family tree back to the early 1800s through census records, believes Roxanne's mother, Sennie, was a freewoman who farmed and owned a part of the property which is still part of the Williams Family farm; however, there is no deed to substantiate her ownership.

While the land was in the family for generations, the Williams family didn't start making a real go of forestry and farming until 2014, upon Tyrone's retirement. "We made some money off timber over the years, but it wasn't until Edna and I retired from professional careers that we started really celebrating and working the land," Tyrone said.

They own about 45 acres of the land as the Fourtee Acres and Tyrone and the Williams family leases 110 acres as cropland to a tenant farmer, he explained. Tyrone, who retired first, was determined to embrace sustainable forestry, make a living off the land, and pass the property to his sons. He quickly found a passion for woodland restoration, beginning a multiyear program that began with harvesting multiple tracts of mature loblolly pines in 2012, followed by a five-year reforestation project, leading to American Tree Farm and Forest Stewardship certifications.

The forest side of the operation is now thriving, but so too, is the farming side, which the family began in earnest in 2016 with Edna's retirement. "She wanted to try her hand at natural gardening, and then COVID hit," generating a boon for that side of the business. "We had been selling a little at farmer's markets, but with COVID, we were asked to help with food boxes for those families struggling during the pandemic," Tyrone said. "We've boosted yields," including crops atypical in their area. "Most people in our area think of collards and cabbage when they think of vegetables," Edna said. "We've been growing kohlrabi, low-acidity heirloom tomatoes, bok choy, daikon radishes and arugula. We want to allow our community, especially our African American community, to understand there are wider varieties of nutritious and delicious vegetables," Edna added. She said a local restaurant is now buying the farm's produce.

The family is also selling pecans from the six trees planted by Tyrone's grandfather.

"We call them *TussieRox pecans* as another nod to our legacy and my grandparents," he said.

Fourtee Acres is constantly looking for ways, including agritourism and events, to generate wealth and revenue, to make it easier for their sons when they inherit. "We believe in leaving things better than we found them, and to that end, we hope to share our story, our journey to enlighten, entertain and educate others," Tyrone said. He noted that Fourtee Acres has an active Facebook page designed to do just that. "In the words of my late father, Luther M. Williams: 'It is not how long one lives, but how well one lives.'"

As with all farmers and foresters, keeping land in the family isn't always easy. "The future that we see for our land is not necessarily what our sons see," Tyrone and Edna said. "So, what we need to do is make sure that the business pieces are in place, the legal pieces are in place, and the lines of trust and communication are open. We're building the frame, so all they have to focus on is their vision of the picture inside the frame."

The Thomas Harris Property: A Fight to Unlock Land and a Family Legacy

The Thomas Harris property in Waverly, Alabama, is another example of the difficulty of sustaining and keeping a century-plus-old Black-family property. And the battle isn't over for this family, as one descendant, Bernice Webb, continues to fight to unlock the land and her family's legacy.

Bernice Webb, owner of the Thomas Harris property in Waverly, Alabama.
IMAGE COURTESY OF BERNICE WEBB

The land was initially purchased in 1903 by Dennis and Sophie Thomas, who then deeded 92.5 acres to Jonas and Lula Thomas Harris in 1910. The property started as farmland, with Jonas, a former slave, and Lula, born in 1874 as a freewoman, and their 11 children growing and selling cotton, corn, potatoes, pecans and fruit. Cotton was the chief crop, as it was for most in Alabama. The family built a four-bedroom home, a syrup mill and a school for the community on the land.

By the 1920s and 1930s, Mrs. Webb said her family began to feel the country pressuring them to leave the farm and go into factories and industries in the North. A series of laws to reduce cotton production devasted many cotton farms, including the Webb's acreage.

The Webb family could no longer make a living on its small cotton yield. And despite hanging on for as long as she could, Ms. Webb left for Michigan for a better life in 1967, following an incident when she had to run 1.5 miles on dirt roads to get help when her son fell ill.

In 2012, while living in Michigan, Mrs. Webb learned that the neighbors in front of her ancestral property put a gate across the county road, making the farm inaccessible. The land is rich in timber, specifically hardwoods and pine, she said, but the heirs cannot harvest there because of the lack of entry.

To gain access and reclaim her legacy, Mrs. Webb moved back to Alabama in 2018. "I felt I had to return," she said. "It is my heritage. It is my family legacy. It has been passed down for more than 100 years. I was born on that property. I know that land. I know every acre of that property."

Mrs. Webb met with the neighbors, a white couple, in person twice. At each meeting, they refused to open or remove the gate that provides access to the property. They advised her of less favorable and impractical routes and ignored several subsequent letters for additional meetings for an amicable settlement, including requests to purchase the land around the gate.

She and her sons contacted the county commissioner, country engineer, county attorney and county sheriff, who all said a judge must order the neighbors to open the gate. But a judge said she should work it out with the neighbors, despite her documentation proving that she had done so without response. He then told her to bring them to court.

So, she did. But after $5,000 in attorney fees, her family's property remains blocked. Mrs. Webb has begun working with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, which she hopes will help her break through the roadblocks to allow her to return to her childhood home. Mrs. Webb admits that this process has been tedious, discouraging, frustrating and expensive. "Still, I feel obligated, on behalf of my family. Jonas, as a former slave, could never talk about his experiences because they were so painful," she said. "I must do everything I can to tell his story, the best I can, to my grandchildren and great grandchildren – from generation to generation to generation. This land is part of his story, so it's a fight well worth it."

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