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## Charles Hinsley: Whatever became of 40 acres and a mule?

Charles Hinsley Guest columnist

Feb 21, 2021

**M**ost Black people, if not all, have heard at one time or another the expression, “40 acres and a mule.” And when we hear that saying, we typically think of the time during the Civil War era when slaves were granted their freedom.

So, whatever happened to the 40 acres and a mule?

Perhaps the best place to start this story is the beginning.

After securing a decisive victory in the Confederacy’s stronghold in Savannah, Ga., on Jan. 16, 1865, Gen. William T. Sherman, the commander of the Union Army, issued Special Field Order No. 15. That order authorized freed slaves to receive 400,000 acres of land.

Among the directives in Sherman's order:

Section I: “The islands from Charleston, south, the abandoned rice fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea, and the country bordering the St. John river, Florida, are reserved and set apart for the settlement of the negroes now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States.”

And Section III: “... So that each family shall have a plot of not more than (40) acres of tillable ground, and when it borders on some water channel, with not more than 800 feet water front, in the possession of which land the military authorities will afford them protection, until such time as they can protect themselves, or until Congress shall regulate their title.”

But those freed slaves never got their 40 acres and a mule. President Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor, overturned the order in the fall of 1865.

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Even so, by 1910, approximately 210,000 Black people owned more than 14 million acres of land, mostly in North Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi and South Carolina. This is considered the greatest period of land ownership among Black Americans in U.S. history. Since then, however, Black land ownership has continued to decline.

Biased and discriminatory federal and state policies were key factors. These policies have allowed Black family-owned land to be taken away through predatory and manipulative banking practices, as well as discriminatory practices by the Department of Agriculture, which has traditionally favored white farmers in awarding loans and financial subsidies.

Black landowners also have been common targets of eminent domain laws. These laws allow the federal government to possess your land in the name of public works projects such as roadways, government buildings or public utilities work.

So, why is this history relevant now? Because landmark legislation — the Justice for Black Farmers Act — was filed on Nov. 19 in the U.S. Senate to rectify the wealth disparity for African American descendants of slaves.

“Overtly discriminatory and unjust federal policy has robbed Black families in the United States of the ability to build and pass on intergenerational wealth,” said Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.), a co-sponsor of the bill.

“Black farmers and ranchers have been historically excluded in agricultural industries and inequities in federal aid have stripped them from their land. It is not only our responsibility to investigate this systemic discrimination, we must end and correct it so the next generation of Black farmers can bloom,” Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) added.

The Justice for Black Farmers Act would:

- End discrimination within USDA.

- Protect remaining Black farmers from land loss.
- Restore the land base lost by Black farmers.
- Create a farm conservation corps.
- Empower historically Black colleges and universities as advocates for Black farmers.
- Assist socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.
- Enact systemic reforms to help *all* farmers and ranchers

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When the Rev. Garrison Frazier, who was born in Granville County, N.C., and was a slave until 1857, was asked by Sherman what the Negro most wanted, he replied, “Land ... to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor ... and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare. ... We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it on our own.”

When asked that same question 155 years later, Kamal Bell, a 29-year-old African American farmer who is founder of Sankofa Farms in Cedar Grove, replied, “A lot of the problems that Black farmers face now can be resolved by us owning land and having our own space.”

I encourage you to support the Justice for Black Farmers Act so we can at least hold on to what little portion of those 40 acres and a mule that we did get.

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