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A Study of Southern Black Landownership, 1865-1940: The Bridgeforth Family of Limestone County, Alabama

Nancy Anne Carden
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

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Michael McDonald, Major Professor

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A STUDY OF SOUTHERN BLACK LANDOWNERSHIP, 1865-1940:
THE BRIDGEFORTH FAMILY OF LIMESTONE
COUNTY, ALABAMA

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Nancy Anne Carden

August 1990

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ABSTRACT

When dealing with southern blacks after emancipation, historians have traditionally focused on the plight of those freedmen who were unable to realize their aspirations of becoming landowners. The majority of blacks were forced into tenant farming which seriously limited their economic, political and social position in the South for years to come. In spite of the problems of white resistance to black landownership, a lack of credit sources, and white violence and racism, 25 percent of southern black farmers did acquire land by 1910. This study deals with one family of landowners in Limestone County, Alabama between 1865 and 1940.

The acquisitions of the Bridgeforth family began with George Bridgeforth, an ex-slave, in the 1870s, and have continued through the present with his grandson, Darden Bridgeforth, one of the largest black farmers in Alabama. Using deed, mortgage, and tax records, this study shows how the family increased their holdings over the years.

One of the major factors in their success was the role of George Ruffin Bridgeforth, who worked under the guidance of Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute in the early 1900s. Influenced by Washington's ideas, Bridgeforth established an all black community of landholders in Limestone County in 1910. The Beulahland community thrived until the

early 1930s, when the Tennessee Valley Authority's plan for the Wheeler Dam and Reservoir threatened its survival. George Ruffin Bridgeforth began writing to the agency, and the resulting correspondence provides insight into Bridgeforth's ideology concerning black landowning. It also illustrates the tension that existed within the authority in particular and the New Deal in general regarding the position of blacks in a white-dominated society.

In spite of the Authority's lack of assistance, Beulahland and the Bridgeforth family continued to prosper. At the same time, their interaction with the federal government provided them with the means to confront local governmental policies which discriminated against blacks. As a result, in the late 1930s, they increasingly turned their attention to issues such as black voter registration and equal educational opportunities for blacks.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For many years, the extent of southern black landownership after the Civil War was either largely ignored or underestimated. Except for W. E. B. DuBois, who began exploring the topic in the early twentieth century, most historians, before the 1960s, focused on land tenancy, which involved a much larger proportion of the black rural population. Recently, however, social and economic historians have given the topic more attention. Many of the recent studies resulted from the realization that since 1900 "blacks have lost in excess of 9 million acres of rural land."¹ Concerned with the implications this tremendous loss of wealth had, and will continue to have, on the black population of the south, researchers attempted to ascertain why some southern blacks acquired land and others did not.²

An additional factor in the increased interest in the topic has been the influence of revisionist and post-revisionist historians, who, beginning in the 1960s, shifted

¹ Leo McGee and Robert Boone, The Black Rural Landowner--Endangered Species: Social, Political, and Economic Implications (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979) xvii.

² Included in these works would be Leo McGee and Robert Boone's The Black Rural Landowner--Endangered Species, "Black Farm Operators and Farm Population, 1900-1970: Alabama and Kentucky" by A. Lee Coleman and Larry D. Hall, "Black Political Power and the Decline of Black Land Ownership" by William E. Nelson, Jr..

the focus of the black role in southern history from one of being acted upon to ways in which blacks survived in spite of the overwhelming racism and violence against them. Many of these accounts focused on attempts by blacks after emancipation to control their own destiny for "blacks' quest for economic independence . . . remained central to the black community's efforts to define the meaning of freedom."³

Several works by economic historians have focused on landownership of blacks in the belief that the 25 percent of blacks who acquired land by 1910, in spite of the numerous factors working against them, is highly significant. Using tax and census data, these accounts attempt to quantitatively determine which particular factors aided and hindered land acquisition.⁴ While these writers disagree on the extent to which certain factors, such as black proportion of population

³ Eric Foner, "Reconstruction Revisited," Reviews in American History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982) 83. Included in these accounts are Rehearsal for Reconstruction by Willie Lee Rose, Joel Williamson's After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction, 1861-1877, Janet Sharp Hermann's The Pursuit of a Dream, Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction by Nell Painter, and "The Politics of Black Land Tenure" by Manning Marable.

⁴ Among these works are One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation by Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, "Accumulation of Property by Southern Blacks before World War I" by Robert Higgs, "Accumulation of Property by Southern Blacks before World War I: Comment and Further Evidence" by Robert A. Margo, "Negro Farm Ownership in the South" and "Rural Ownership of Land by Blacks in Georgia: 1920 and 1960" both by James S. Fisher, and Gavin Wright's Old South, New South.

and the survival of the plantation economy in a particular area, influenced black acquisition, there are several conclusions they share in common. First, all agree that the in the years immediately following the Civil War, acquiring land was particularly difficult for freedman due to a total lack of resources and established credit, and while there were many communal efforts to acquire land during this time, the majority of ownership came about through individual effort of direct purchases of land. Except for Ransom and Sutch, all have concluded that there were significant increases in the black purchases of land after 1880, and that the peak of land ownership came between 1910 and 1920.

Most of these authors tend to agree that, in order to obtain land during this period, blacks had to prove themselves acceptable to the white community, and, that while the numbers of black owners continued to grow, their holdings tended to be "of small size and on inferior soil."⁵ Manning Marable, on the other hand, emphasizes factors that these authors ignore. He attributes the increase to a rise in the number of black owned banks, and hence credit sources, increasing black literacy, and the development of black intellectual thought of the period which saw black landownership as the "only hope for

⁵ Gavin Wright, Old South, New South: Revolution in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War (New York: Basic, 1986) 104.

the salvation" of the race.⁶ This ideology led to the growth of agricultural colleges, and, as a result, "within a single generation, thousands of young black men were trained in the agricultural sciences."⁷ Marable and other authors believe that the desire for land was so great that it overshadowed the threats of white violence against black acquisition, with some blacks moving into areas with a "history of lynchings and mob violence, so long as land could be purchased at low prices."⁸

In the 1870s, George Bridgeforth, an ex-slave, began purchasing land in Limestone County, Alabama. By the 1980s, his grandson was one of the largest black farmers in Alabama. "A Study of Southern Black Landownership, 1865-1940: The Bridgeforth Family of Limestone County, Alabama," will show how the family accumulated property. How do the Bridgeforths fit into the above patterns? Most of their wealth was accumulated in the peak period between 1880 and 1920, and before 1880 and after 1920, there was few additions to their holdings. George Bridgeforth's purchases before 1900 were dependent on the assistance, and therefore approval, of James Bridgeforth and other whites in the community. Beginning with

⁶ Manning Marable, "The Politics of Black Land Tenure, 1877-1915," Agricultural History 53 (1979): 142-152.

⁷ Marable 146.

⁸ August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, From Plantation to Ghetto (New York: Hill, 1976) 233.

George Ruffin Bridgeforth, however, the family's acquisition of property came about as a result of the influence of Tuskegee and Booker T. Washington. While the number of black landowners and holdings decreased after 1920, they withstood the economic pressures of these times, and managed to retain their land. Another way in which they did not follow the typical pattern was in the amount of land they owned. While the majority of black landholdings remained marginal and smaller than those of whites, the Bridgeforths controlled more acreage than did the majority of white landowners in Limestone County.

Additional factors began to play an important role in the continuation of the family's economic well-being in the 1930s. They were content to live their lives separate and apart from the white community until their livelihood was threatened. As it became evident that, in spite of their economic success, the family was not being treated equally by the local, white-controlled Soil Conservation agency, they turned to the federal government for assistance. For the first time, members of the family began to speak out against inequality, using the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) as the intermediary in their relationship with the white community. While their actions brought no assistance from TVA, having once confronted racist policies would make it easier to do so in the future. The interaction between the community and TVA reflects the

ambivalence within the agency toward blacks, and reveals the limitations of New Deal policies as they were applied to blacks in the repressive atmosphere of the South in the 1930s. While the Bridgeforths were not the typical black southern family in the years 1865 to 1940, the story of their struggle to control specific aspects of their lives is an important one.

CHAPTER II

INITIAL ACQUISITION, 1865-1900

In the forty years preceding the Civil War, the newly formed state of Alabama grew tremendously as pioneers came to take over the "last great Indian hunting ground east of the Mississippi."⁹ The vast majority of these new arrivals settled on small tracts of land, built rude log cabins, and became self-sufficient farmers. The rich river bottoms were claimed by wealthier slaveholders able to afford the \$50-\$100 per acre for prime cotton land on the Tennessee, Tombigbee, and Alabama rivers, leaving the less expensive hill country for the majority of these recent migrants.¹⁰

Bounded on the north by the Tennessee state line and on the south by the Tennessee River, Limestone County, in the northern hill country, became the destination of many migrants from the south-central counties of Tennessee.¹¹ The population of the county grew from about 10,000 in 1820 to

⁹ Virginia Van der Veer Hamilton, Alabama; A Bicentennial History (New York: Norton, 1977) 3.

¹⁰ Charles S. Davis, The Cotton Kingdom in Alabama (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1974) 28.

¹¹ Davis 22.

almost 16,500 in 1850.¹² While the southern part of the county, containing the more fertile and expensive Tennessee Valley cotton lands, was dominated by large slaveholding operations, smaller slaveholders and yeomen tended to settle in the northern part of the county. Called the Barrens, this northern region was the extension into Alabama of the highlands of Tennessee.¹³ Despite their name, areas within the Barrens, especially the river hills surrounding the Elk River, were quite conducive to agriculture. In some places the Elk River flowed through a three to four mile wide basin which was bordered on each side by cliffs. The steep, fertile hills which dotted the basin were "much desired as farming lands, notwithstanding the natural disadvantages to which they were subject."¹⁴

James W. Bridgeforth, a slaveholder and farmer from Giles County, Tennessee was one of these settlers. In 1855, after the death of his wife, Bridgeforth moved to Limestone County, settling on a "small rise overlooking the Sugar Creek bottom lands."¹⁵ The house he built in no way resembled the mansions

¹² U.S. Census Office, Seventh Census: Population (Washington: GPO, 1853) 194.

¹³ U. S. Census Office, Report on Cotton Production in the United States (Washington: GPO, 1884) 103-104.

¹⁴ Report on Cotton Production 104.

¹⁵ Christine Edwards and Faye Axford, Lure and Lore of Limestone County (Tuscaloosa: Portals Press, 1978) 140.

of the large antebellum planters. The simple two-story clapboard structure was only several steps above the log cabins favored by many frontier families in northern Alabama.¹⁶ While it is not known how much land Bridgeforth owned, it is possible, using slave ownership as an indicator of wealth, to determine that he became one of the more prosperous farmers in the county.⁹ By 1860, Bridgeforth owned 14 adult slaves and 17 under 16 years old.¹⁰ In the same year, out of the 666 slaveholders in Limestone County, only 81 owned more than 30 slaves.¹¹

As in other northern Alabama counties in the years preceding the Civil War, tensions ran high in Limestone County when talk turned to the issue of secession. The county was sharply divided between the larger planters, who tended to favor secession, and the rest of the county's population, who supported the "co-operationist" view of the surrounding sixteen counties. In January of 1861, when the northern counties sent delegates to the state convention to "urge the

¹⁶ Edwards and Axford 140.

⁹ Gavin Wright, Old South, New South (New York: Basic, 1986) 19. As Wright and other authors have shown, the majority of wealth held by slaveholders was in slaves, not property.

¹⁰ U. S. Census Office, Manuscript Slave Census for 1860 (Washington: GPO, 1864) Pleasant Grove, Beat #7.

¹¹ U. S. Census Office, Eighth Census (Washington: GPO, 1864) 223.

more cautious course of concerted action with other Southern states," many of the delegates refused to sign the ordinance of secession.¹² The secessionist William Lowndes Yancey was burned in effigy in Limestone County, and, even after Alabama voted to secede, "the United States flag still flew over courthouses in Athens and Huntsville."¹³

Although it is unknown where James W. Bridgeforth stood on the issue of secession, being one of the larger planters, he, in all probability, supported secession. Once the conflict started, he apparently, like many of his neighbors, supported the Confederacy. At least one son, James W. Bridgeforth, Jr., served with the 32nd Tennessee Infantry during the war.¹⁴ Unlike other areas of Alabama, the northern counties experienced a great deal of fighting and much of the area was devastated as a result of the two armies contesting the land.¹⁵

In the chaos immediately following the Civil War, ex-slaves faced many problems regarding their future. Where would they live? How would they provide for themselves and their families? What opportunities, if any, did the future

¹² Hamilton 24.

¹³ Hamilton 24-25.

¹⁴ Edwards and Axford 140.

¹⁵ Peter Kolchin, First Freedom (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972) 3.

hold for them? For some ex-slaves, the choice was a simple one. Free for the first time in their lives, they immediately took to the road, moving into urban areas or the Black Belt counties where their labor was in demand. Many chose to remain in their home counties, but moved to plantations where they would receive better treatment. Still others continued to work for their former masters.¹⁶ Many freedmen in the Tennessee Valley left. The black population of the region fell by 17.2 percent in the period from 1860 to 1866, and, between 1866 and 1870, while other counties in the the Tennessee Valley began to gain back black population, Limestone County dropped another 3.4 percent.¹⁷

George Bridgeforth, a young male slave on the James Bridgeforth plantation, was one of these who chose to stay with his ex-master. Born in Tennessee in 1838, George came to Limestone County with James in 1855.¹⁸ During the war, when not helping run the plantation, George served as James Bridgeforth, Jr.'s personal servant in the Confederate Army.¹⁹ At the end of the war, as George's grandson recalls, he was given two options by his master:

¹⁶ Kolchin 22-23.

¹⁷ Kolchin, 14-15.

¹⁸ Manuscript Slave Census, Pleasant Grove Beat #7.

¹⁹ Edwards and Axford 140, and William Bridgeforth, personal interview, December, 1983.

He said, 'George, you're free.' My grandfather had never heard the word free, didn't know what it meant. 'I'm not your master anymore, you're not my slave, you're free to do whatever you want to do. If you want me to, I'll give you \$100 and you can go anywhere else and work or you can stay here with me and I'll pay you \$10 a month and give you room and board.' My grandfather said let him sleep on it. So the next morning he got up and told him he'd stay.²⁰

George's decision to stay was probably based on several factors. In 1862, he had married Jennie, a slave from the neighboring Andrews plantation, and they had started their family.²¹ In addition, George's aspiration to become an independent landowner was probably a consideration in his decision to remain in the area where he had family and community ties. George shared the desire to own land with many other freedmen.

Living in an agricultural economy, "the ex-slave felt that his economic independence required the acquisition of land."²² As it became apparent, following the war, that the federal government would not provide land, those freemen who sought to become landowners found three major stumbling blocks in their path: a lack of resources, an inability to obtain

²⁰ William Bridgeforth, personal interview, December 1983.

²¹ U. S. Census Office, Manuscript Census Limestone County, Alabama (Washington: GPO, 1902) Pleasant Grove Beat #7, 3.

²² Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, One Kind of Freedom (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977) 81.

credit, and white resistance to black landownership.²³ In spite of these obstacles a small number of freedmen acquired land in the years immediately following the war. In Alabama, the accident of geography often played a key factor as "the proportion of blacks owning land varied inversely with the quality of land and the number of blacks in the population."²⁴ In other words, George Bridgeforth, living in the northern part of Limestone County, an area where "land was relatively cheap, Negroes few, and black labor not heavily in demand," stood a better chance of fulfilling the dream of landownership than did freedman in the Black Belt of Alabama.²⁵

Although it is not known exactly when George purchased his first acreage, he was paying real estate taxes by 1877, apparently on a forty-acre tract.²⁶ This was in spite of the fact that the 1870s were a lean period in Southern agriculture, and that the price of cotton had fallen by nearly 50 percent between 1872 and 1879.²⁷ While other black and white yeomen found themselves driven into the ranks of sharecroppers

²³ Ransom and Sutch 81.

²⁴ Kolchin 136.

²⁵ Kolchin 136.

²⁶ Limestone County, Alabama, Tax Abstract (1877) Pleasant Grove Beat #7.

²⁷ Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Business (New York: Harper, 1988) 535.

and laborers, George increased his holdings.²⁸ In 1880, George sold the forty-acre tract for \$330, using the money as a down payment on an eighty-acre tract costing \$750.²⁹ How was George Bridgeforth, an ex-slave starting with no resources, able to accomplish this feat?

In spite of having geography in his favor, the problems of obtaining money and credit and overcoming white resistance still remained. While the \$10 a month in wages James offered him at the end of the war was not a lot of money, "given fifteen years, one might expect that even blacks who began freedom completely destitute would have managed to accumulate the means necessary for the purchase of land."³⁰ Assuming George raised the money by hard work and thrift, he still faced the larger and more threatening problem of white resistance to black landownership. As his grandson recalls, George turned to his ex-master for assistance:

²⁸ Foner 537.

²⁹ Limestone County, Alabama, Deed Record, Book 20 (1880) 356 and Deed Record, Book 65 (1880) 46.

³⁰ Ransom and Sutch 83.

So he stayed there and he never really went out and negotiated for a farm either. He'd work and made the money, tell his master 'There's an old farm over there, will you see what you can do for me?' So they started with this twenty acres, add another forty or sixty or one hundred, and another forty, sixty, or one hundred--must have been over a period of thirty years.³¹

Both George and James Bridgeforth took risks with these purchases of land. Immediately after the war, many whites began expressing their opposition to black landownership. Fearing an independent black population out of control, some states enacted black codes which denied blacks this right. Although these laws were struck down by Radical Reconstruction governments, between 1868 and 1872, white opposition turned violent. In the wave of white violence against blacks which swept the region during this period, one of the primary targets was "those who achieved a modicum of economic success."³² Equally at risk were whites who sold land to blacks or loaned them money for land purchases for "they were not uncommonly threatened with physical violence."³³

How real was the threat of violence for George and James Bridgeforth? Pulaski, Tennessee, the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan, lay just over the Tennessee line from Limestone County. During the Civil War, Nathan Bedford Forrest, the

³¹ William Bridgeforth, personal interview, December, 1983.

³² Foner 29.

³³ Ransom and Sutch 86.

founder of the Ku Klux Klan, fought in and around Athens on numerous occasions. After the Klan supposedly organized its second national Klavern in Athens, one eyewitness of the period recalled viewing "a parade of Klansmen riding single file that stretched from . . . Elm Street to the former Luke Pryor home . . . fully a mile in length."³⁴ The Klan was officially broken up in 1871, and, although George and James Bridgeforth may never have experienced direct contact with them, the deeds of the Klan during those years "etched the Klan permanently in the folk memory of the black community."³⁵

In spite of these threats, Bridgeforth and other freedmen did acquire land, and by 1880, 9.8 percent of black southerners had become independent landowners.³⁶ Those who were able to achieve this dream had paid a price, however. They were forced to turn to the white community for support, and in the process had to appear "nonthreatening and well-behaved."³⁷ In other words, to get ahead during this time,

³⁴ Robert Henry Walker, Jr., History of Limestone County, Alabama (n.p.: Limestone County Commission and Robert Henry Walker, Jr., 1973) 136.

³⁵ Foner 443.

³⁶ Ransom and Sutch 83.

³⁷ Wright 107.

rural blacks had to "compromise their autonomy in order to gain it."³⁸

Despite the near collapse of the southern agricultural economy after the Panic of 1893, and the continued white resistance to black ownership, the number of landowners continued to rise during the latter years of the nineteenth century.³⁹ By 1885, Bridgeforth saved enough to purchase another 93 acres for \$1000.⁴⁰ Sometime before 1910, Bridgeforth purchased another 130 acres, bringing his total holdings to 303 acres, all in the Sugar Creek area on the Elk River, and making him the largest black landowner in Limestone County.⁴¹

In order to understand Bridgeforth's success, it is necessary to look at his farming operation. What kind of farmer was he? How did he operate from one year to the next? These questions are difficult to answer, for Bridgeforth, like most farmers of the period, left no written records. It is possible, however, using crop-lien records found in the Limestone County Courthouse, to piece together a rough sketch

³⁸ Wright 107.

³⁹ James S. Fisher, "Negro Farm Ownership," Annals of the Assoc. of American Geographers 63 (1973): 485.

⁴⁰ Deed Record, Book 65 (1885) 48.

⁴¹ Deed Record, Book 132 (1914) 609, and U. S. Census Office, Negroes in the United States: Bulletin 129 (Washington: GPO, 1915) 160.

of his operation. While the most prevalent arrangements in the South during the period were sharecropping and tenant-farming, crop-liens were an alternative for the landowner. Under this system a landowner borrowed money from a merchant to make his crop and repaid the debt after the harvest. As security, he put up his crop and "any other property . . . such as a mule."⁴² The first crop-liens appeared in Bridgeforth's name in the 1870s. In 1875, he borrowed \$33 from a Robert Patrick, and in 1878, Wilkinson & West, a local cotton gin, loaned him \$11.⁴³

In the 1880s, the amounts Bridgeforth borrowed increased. Twice he borrowed \$50 from a Henry Warten.⁴⁴ His major source of credit, however, was a local merchant and gin owner, H. Beasley. (A story told by C. Eric Lincoln, Duke professor of religion and history, who grew up in Limestone County, illustrates the possible white hostility Bridgeforth faced in dealing with his white creditors, especially the Beasley family. After Lincoln and his grandmother worked several days picking cotton for Beasley, he approached the merchant to get his pay, which Lincoln calculated at \$3.60. When Beasley

⁴² Gilbert C. Fite, Cotton Fields No More (Lexington: The UP of Kentucky, 1984) 5.

⁴³ Limestone County, Alabama, Mortgage Record, Book 16 (1875) 48-49, and Mortgage Record, Book 18 (1878) 457.

⁴⁴ Mortgage Record, Book 30 (1886) 225, and Mortgage Record, Book 31 (1887) 204.

flipped him a quarter, Lincoln questioned the amount. As a result, Beasley severely beat the 13-year-old, and warned him to never again "try to count 'round no white man.")⁴⁵

The collateral for these loans supply another source of information about Bridgeforth's operation. For one thing, an increase in the amount of livestock owned shows that Bridgeforth's operation prospered. In 1875, he only had a "one-eyed sorrel mare" for collateral, but by 1882, he used "a bay mare Molley, bay mare Salley, 1 red cow and calf, one sow and six shoats and his entire wheat, corn, cotton crop and all other produce raised."⁴⁶ By 1887, George not only grew crops on his own land, but rented additional acreage as well. For the \$115 he borrowed from Beasley that year, he put up as collateral "2 mares, 1 colt, 1 heffer(sic), 1 white cow and calf, another cow, 10 hogs, entire crop of corn and cotton raised by me on my place and elsewhere in Limestone County, Alabama."⁴⁷

The crop liens also show that Bridgeforth was going against the trends of Southern agriculture at the time. Those who rented land or worked on shares were often forced to put more and more of their acreage into cotton. Even farmers who

⁴⁵ Keith L. Thomas, "Past Imperfect," The Atlanta Constitution 13 Mar. 1988: 1H.

⁴⁶ Mortgage Record, Book 16 (1875) 48-49, and Mortgage Record, Book 23 (1881-1883) 611.

⁴⁷ Mortgage Record, Book 31 (1887) 563.

owned their land began raising more cotton at the expense of foodstuffs, and, as a result, they became less self-sufficient.⁴⁸ Bridgeforth, with enough land to provide grazing for livestock, was able to withstand this pressure. Instead of becoming indebted to local merchants he increasingly moved toward greater self-sufficiency and hence independence. George Bridgeforth, starting as an ex-slave with no resources and everything working against him, had found a way to not only survive the racial prejudice of the South, but to actually prosper in spite of his environment.

⁴⁸ Fite 89-90.

CHAPTER III

THE PEAK OF OWNERSHIP, 1900-1920

Between 1900 and 1920, the number of Southern black landowners continued to rise, reaching its peak between 1910 and 1920. Nationwide, the peak occurred in 1910, with 218,467 owners, comprising 24 percent of all black farm operators, controlling 15.7 million acres.¹ In Alabama, the numbers continued to rise between 1910 and 1920. In 1910, the number of black owners was 17,082 or 15.5 percent of all farm owners. By 1920, blacks comprised 18.1 percent of all farm owners and the numbers had risen slightly to 17,202.² Limestone County also followed this trend with the number of black owners increasing from 236 in 1910 to 305 in 1920.³ Beginning in 1920, when the "real price of cotton plummeted 60%," the number of owners gradually declined due to con-

¹ Fite 21 and Fisher 485.

² U. S. Census Office, Census of Agriculture (Washington: GPO 1922) 480.

³ U. S. Census Office, Negro Population: 1790-1915 (Washington: GPO, 1918) 701 and Census of Agriculture, 1920 492.

tinuing low cotton prices, the impact of the boll weevil, and increased violence against blacks.⁴

In addition to favorable economic factors, this increase in black ownership between 1900 and 1920 was influenced by the admonishments of Southern black leaders of the period. After the earlier promises of Reconstruction were laid to rest, black leaders shifted their emphasis from political to economic equality, in the belief that self-help, thrift, hardwork, and good character would allow blacks to be accepted into the larger society. Chief among the proponents of this philosophy, and one who would directly influence the Bridgeforth family, was Booker T. Washington. To understand this influence we must turn our attention to the Bridgeforth family.

One of the major effects of emancipation was the transformation which occurred within the black family. The control of the family and its labor passed from the hands of the master to within the family itself. As a result, immediately after the war whites complained that freedmen "have almost universally withdrawn their women and children from the fields, putting the first at housework and the

⁴ Robert Higgs, "Accumulation of Property by Southern Blacks before World War I," American Economic Review 72 (1982) 343, and Fisher 487.

latter at school."⁵ As blacks struggled economically to survive the hard times of the 1870s, many women and children found themselves once again in the fields. In spite of this, blacks continued to exert the new found control over their own labor, and the family "decided where and when black women and children would work."⁶ A major factor in George Bridgeforth's success during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the labor and support of his wife and children.

It has been estimated that for every forty acres under cultivation, one man and one mule were needed, and, by 1900, with at least 173 acres to farm at this time, the labor of his wife and children was essential to Bridgeforth's prosperity. By 1900, George and Jennie Bridgeforth's family had grown to nine living children. Two of their sons, William and Bascom, lived at home and assisted with the running of the farm.⁷ In addition to assisting their father, the sons also raised crops of their own, preparing for the day when they would start families. One son, William, borrowed his first crop money when he was only fourteen years old.⁸

⁵ Foner 85.

⁶ Foner 87.

⁷ Manuscript Census, 1900 Pleasant Grove Beat #7, 123.

⁸ Mortgage Record, Book 84 (1897) 57.

Two of the other sons pursued an education. After attending Tuskegee Institute, Issac(Ike) came back to Limestone County and started a farming operation adjacent to his father. The eldest of the Bridgeforth sons, George Ruffin, followed a slightly different track. While a boarding student at the Trinity School in Athens, Bridgeforth caught the eye of some of the school's teachers who encouraged him to continue his education. Upon his graduation from Trinity in 1894, he made his way to Talladega College. From there he traveled to Amherst, Massachusetts where he graduated from Massachusetts Agricultural College in 1901. In 1902, he found employment as a teacher of agriculture at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama.⁹

Bridgeforth's first years at Tuskegee were extremely busy ones. In addition to teaching courses on bee-keeping and livestock-raising, he became an assistant to George Washington Carver, the director of agriculture.¹⁰ Carver and Bridgeforth also team-taught the "Short Course in Agriculture." Started in 1904, the course ran for six weeks during the winter months. Its purpose was to educate and

⁹ Datie Russell, personal interview, July 1989, and Frank Lincoln Mather, Who's Who of the Colored Race (Chicago: 1915) 37.

¹⁰ Tuskegee Institute Annual Catalogue (Tuskegee: Tuskegee Institute Press, 1902-1918).

assist local farmers by helping them "solve some of their problems."¹¹

It was also during these early years that a running feud developed between Carver and Bridgeforth that would continue until Bridgeforth left the school in 1918. Bridgeforth and Carver's clash appeared to be an extension of ongoing conflicts between Carver and Booker T. Washington regarding Carver's administration of the Agricultural Department.¹² In addition a number of people working under Carver "resented the attention his laboratory work received at the expense of their own work."¹³ The complaints of Bridgeforth and other faculty members under Carver's authority eventually led to a restructuring of the department with Carver becoming the "Director of the Experimental Station and Agricultural Instruction," and Bridgeforth being named head of the new "Department of Agricultural Industries."¹⁴ Eventually the departments were reunited, and Bridgeforth became director of the new Agricultural Department. When Carver complained about having to work under Bridgeforth,

¹¹ Allen W. Jones, "The Role of Tuskegee Institute in the Education of Black Farmers," Journal of Negro History LX (1975): 261.

¹² Linda O. McMurry, George Washington Carver: Scientist and Symbol (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981) 58.

¹³ McMurry 58.

¹⁴ McMurry 62-65.

Washington "made it clear that Carver was Bridgeforth's subordinate and that 'in all matters of difference' Bridgeforth had the 'authority to decide.'"¹⁵ After Washington's death in 1915, the new president of the school, Robert Moton, sided with Carver in his criticism of Bridgeforth. Having lost his ally, Bridgeforth left Tuskegee in 1918 to take another job.¹⁶

In spite of these conflicts, Bridgeforth's early years at Tuskegee were exciting ones. In 1906, he became involved with one of the most successful programs ever run by the school. While the courses offered at the school were well-attended and popular among local farmers, Washington believed Tuskegee could have an even greater effect by taking demonstrations and lectures directly to the surrounding communities. Washington, Carver, and other professors at the school frequently made trips into the countryside to talk with and advise farmers, and out of these trips came the idea for a movable school of agriculture.¹⁷

Beginning in the summer of 1906, Bridgeforth drove a wagon, outfitted with farming equipment and supplies, into the communities surrounding Tuskegee. He began working in

¹⁵ McMurry 66.

¹⁶ McMurry 159-161.

¹⁷ Felix James, "The Tuskegee Institute Movable School, 1906-1923," Agricultural History, 45 (1971): 201-202.

an area by looking over individual farming operations, asking questions, and offering advice. Having visited individual farms, he then held a large outdoor meeting and demonstration. In addition to displaying the latest in farming equipment, Bridgeforth taught the proper use and application of fertilizers, as well as the benefits of raising vegetables, hogs, dairy cattle, and other food crops. While praising self-sufficiency, he also preached the "gospel of Tuskegee"--the importance of black landownership.¹⁸ When farmers asked how they could possibly obtain the resources to buy land, Bridgeforth would suggest cooperative buying efforts, using as an example the community started at Fort Davis by Rev. Moses Ellington.¹⁹

The idea of cooperative ownership had its origins in the efforts made during the Civil War to provide blacks with confiscated lands.²⁰ Starting with Reconstruction, there were numerous examples of blacks "who had pooled their resources to buy plantations, which they then divided among themselves."²¹ From the Sea Islands to Mound Bayou, groups

¹⁸ Booker T. Washington, "A Farmer's College on Wheels," World's Work, 13 (1906-1907): 8353.

¹⁹ Washington 8354.

²⁰ August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, From Plantation to Ghetto (New York: Hill, 1966) 150-152.

²¹ Meier and Rudwick 153.

of freedmen attempted to ensure their economic independence through collective ownership. The first such effort at Tuskegee was the Southern Improvement Company, started in 1900 by "the leading Northern reformers in the Southern educational movement."²² Founded to provide acreage to landless blacks in the country surrounding Tuskegee, the Southern Improvement Company was first and foremost a business venture, intended to provide its investors with financial rewards.²³ Similar in nature was the Tuskegee Farm and Improvement Company founded in 1914 by Booker T. Washington to enable Tuskegee graduates to purchase land of their own. Known as the Baldwin Farms, the company also made loans to landowners for crops and equipment. It too was run as "a business rather than a charitable" venture, and George Ruffin Bridgeforth served as its vice-president for several years.²⁴

In the fall of 1906, Bridgeforth turned the movable school over to Thomas M. Campbell, the "first black demonstration agent in the United States," but the lessons he had

²² James D. Anderson, "The Southern Improvement Company: Northern Reformers' Investment in Negro Cotton Tenancy, 1900-1920," Agricultural History 52 (1978): 111.

²³ Anderson 111-112.

²⁴ Louis R. Harlan, Booker T. Washington; the Wizard of Tuskegee (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983) 214, and Who's Who of the Colored Race 37.

both taught and learned while on the wagon remained with him for years to come.²⁵ While still at Tuskegee, Bridgeforth took these lessons and began to apply them to his own family and community in Limestone County. He started by purchasing land of his own, beginning with two lots in Athens which cost \$300, and in December, 1903, he acquired an additional 510 acres. Located next to his father's property on the Elk River, this tract cost \$4,500 and, while the deed was in George Ruffin Bridgeforth's name, his parents and brothers also owned part interest in the land. In 1909, three months before final payment was due, Bridgeforth paid off the land in full.²⁶ While these land purchases made the Bridgeforths the only black farmers in Limestone County in 1910 with over 260 acres, they were not content to stop with this accomplishment.²⁷

In October, 1910, incorporation papers were filed with the Limestone County Clerk for a company to be called the Southern Small Farm Land Company.²⁸ The object of the corporation was to:

²⁵ Jones 264.

²⁶ Mortgage Record, Book 67 (1903) 596-597.

²⁷ Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915
701.

²⁸ Limestone County, Alabama, Corporation Application (1910) 55-61.

Encourage the ownership of land and the stimulation of improved methods of farming among Negroes, to farm on a cooperative basis, to buy and sell land and merchandise, seed, fertilizers, farming utensils and other articles needed and of benefit to its members and also the public in general.²⁹

The president of the company was George Ruffin Bridgeforth, while Ike Bridgeforth served as vice-president and Watkins Cox was secretary and treasurer. The corporation listed 25 stockholders, with each share worth \$50. Thirteen stockholders controlled one to three shares each. The major shareholders were members of the Bridgeforth family. George and Jennie held 41 shares, while Ike, William, and Bascom together controlled 44 shares. George Ruffin and his wife, Datie, owned 89 shares, making them the largest shareholders. While the majority of the shareholders were from Limestone County, two were from Tuskegee, three from Missouri, and one was from New York.³⁰ W. R. Pettiford of Birmingham, a close friend of Booker T. Washington's and founder of Alabama's first black bank, The Alabama Penny Savings Bank, owned one share.³¹

Instead of cash, many of the smaller investors traded legal or financial work in exchange for shares in the com-

²⁹ Corporation Application 55.

³⁰ Corporation Application 56.

³¹ August Meier, Negro Thought in America: 1880-1915 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970) 143.

pany. The investments of the larger shareholders usually consisted of property they deeded over to the company. For example, Jennie Bridgeforth, in exchange for her interest in the 510 acres on the Elk River, received 19 shares of the company. George Ruffin and Datie Bridgeforth, the largest stockholders, deeded over their Athens lots as well as their interest in the 510 acre tract.³²

Following the formation of the Southern Small Farm Land Company, a series of complicated land and cash transactions occurred. After deeding their land to the company, some of the stockholders, mainly those in the Bridgeforth family, took out mortgages with the company on other tracts of land. Apparently, the object of these transactions was to dispose of land held in Athens and the northern part of the county, and, in exchange, receive portions of a tract in the southern part of the county on the Tennessee River. Why were the Bridgeforths moving their farming operation to this new location?

The Bridgeforth family had made an adequate living from the land on the Elk River, but the region was not ideal for cotton growing. Overall it was hilly and subject to erosion. The land on the Tennessee River, on the other hand, was level, fertile, and had always been prime cotton ac-

³² Corporation Application 59.

reage. Although owned by whites, the land was inhabited primarily by black tenants--the belief being that blacks were not as likely to be affected by the annual influx of mosquitoes. In December, 1910, George Ruffin and Datie Bridgeforth along with Watkins and Lelia Cox sold the Southern Small Farm Land Company 705 acres of land on the Tennessee River for \$14,200.³³ In the same month and continuing throughout 1911, the company began selling tracts of this land to both stockholders and individuals with no interest in the company. The price of the land varied between \$18-25 an acre, depending on the location and fertility of the soil. George and Datie Bridgeforth bought 52 acres for \$960, Watkins and Lelia Cox purchased 24 acres for \$625, and Ike Bridgeforth received 40 acres for \$1000. Two hundred and forty five out of the 500 acres sold in 1911 went to either Bridgeforth family members or company investors.³⁴

Who bought the other 265 acres? George Ruffin Bridgeforth was drawn to the Tennessee River area for potential resources other than just fertile land. The black tenant farmers living in the area played a crucial role in the idea

³³ Deed Record, Book 116 (1910) 236, 239-240.

³⁴ Deed Record, Book 109 (1910) 568-569, Deed Record Book 156 (1918) 156-157, Deed Record, Book 113 (1911) 366-375, 427-431, and Deed Record, Book 116 (1910) 234-235.

behind the Southern Small Farm Land Company. As William Bridgeforth recalled:

He (George Ruffin Bridgeforth) sold to Isom Malone, George Settles, Adam Lucas--sell to black families only. When he approached these black families about buying some land for yourself and farm for yourself, they said this is against the law, blacks are not supposed to do that. They went and ask some whites was it lawful for them to own land like anybody else, own mules, pay taxes like anybody else. The answer was it's all right. They bought land from the Small Farm. The idea was to get land into the hands of black persons.³⁵

At least two, if not more, of those who bought the remaining 245 acres had never owned land before. One one-hundred-acre tract was purchased by three couples from the same family.³⁶ George Ruffin Bridgeforth, by starting the Southern Small Farm Land Company, enabled landless blacks to become a vital part of this new all-black community known as Beulahland.

After the initial flurry of land transactions, the corporation apparently went out of business or at least ceased to operate as an active real estate company. The last transaction recorded in the Southern Small Farm name occurred in 1913, when Robert and Price Hendricks, white landowners, traded a tract of land on the Tennessee River

³⁵ William Bridgeforth, personal interview, December 1983.

³⁶ Deed Record, Book 113 (1911) 369-370, 429-431; Deed Record, Book 116 (1910) 234-235; Limestone County, Alabama, Tax Abstract (1900-1905), and Limestone County, Alabama, Tax Collector's Cash Book (1898-1906).

for a lot in Athens owned by the company.³⁷ While it is not known how successful the corporation was in terms of increasing the monetary wealth of its shareholders, by 1913, it had given rise to the formation of an all-black community of landowners. They owned some of the richest land in the county and all shared a stake in the survival of the black community of Beulahland--for these reasons alone the Southern Small Farm Land Company could be deemed a success.

In spite of the fluctuations in the cotton economy over the next years, the residents of Beulahland held on to their land, and some even increased their acreage. In 1913, George and Jennie Bridgeforth purchased another 46 acres in the community, and a year later, they sold all of their remaining land in the northern part of the county.³⁸ George and Datie Bridgeforth also added to their holdings, purchasing another 224 acres, and making them the largest landholders in the community.³⁹ Between 1917 and 1920, while one of the original families in the community sold their

³⁷ Deed Record, Book 128 (1913) 426-429.

³⁸ Deed Record, Book 132 (1914) 609, and Deed Record, Book 119 (1913) 502.

³⁹ Deed Record, Book 157 (1917) 92 and Deed Record, Book 156 (1918) 248.

land to another black couple, at least two new families purchased farms in Beulahland.⁴⁰

By the time of George Bridgeforth's death in 1922, he and Jennie could look with pride to their accomplishments. The ex-slaves had gone from owning nothing after the Civil War to having substantial holdings on some of the most fertile land in the county. Two of their sons had graduated from college, one going on to become a college professor and the other a successful farmer. Several of their other children were landowners in the all black community of Beulahland. After his death, the community would continue to prosper. Ike Bridgeforth started a timber business in the mid-1920s, and in addition to employing his sons, he also hired men from the community.⁴¹ After leaving Tuskegee in 1918, George Ruffin Bridgeforth became head of Kansas Vocational College in Topeka, and from there went to Tennessee Agriculture and Industrial College in Nashville.⁴² His Beulahland farm was run by tenants during those years, but he stayed in close contact with his family and often visited the community.⁴³

⁴⁰ Deed Record, Book 157 (1917) 50-54.

⁴¹ Darden Bridgeforth, personal interview, July 1990.

⁴² "Negro Educator Here is Recommended for Post," Alabama Courier/Limestone Democrat March 16 1933: 1.

⁴³ Datie Bridgeforth, personal interview, July 1989.

As the population of the community increased, so did its need for a school. In order to get an education, Beulahland's children boarded with friends or relatives in Athens while attending the Trinity School. In the 1920s, George Ruffin Bridgeforth gave the community land, and applied for a grant from the Rosenwald Fund to build an elementary school. The community supplied the timber and labor, while the fund provided other expenses. After the school was completed, the community collected money each year to pay teachers salaries, and took turns providing them with room and board. Older children still had to travel to Athens to the nearest black high school, but everyone could now receive at least a minimal education.⁴⁴

As the end of the decade approached, it appeared that Beulahland was a prosperous and growing community. The question that now remained was could its substantial success withstand the coming blows of the Great Depression?

⁴⁴ William Bridgeforth, personal interview, December 1983 and Datie Russell, personal interview, July 1989.

CHAPTER IV

BEULAHLAND AND THE NEW DEAL, 1920-1940

Between 1920 and 1930, black landownership in the South decreased due to boll weevil infestations in the early 1920s, and continued economic instability in the cotton market through out the rest of the decade. The general prosperity of 1916 to 1919, when cotton prices went as high as 35 cents a pound, was followed by the devastating experience of 1920, when prices fell to between 13 and 15 cents a pound.¹ Although the market recovered somewhat between 1922 and 1924, it was down again in 1925. By 1929, the price per pound dropped to 16 cents, and by 1931, it was down to 5 cents.² The depression struck the South particularly hard as "the income from farm production in the ten main cotton states dropped from \$2.4 billion in 1929 to only \$929 million in 1932."³

The effect on black and white landownership was immediate. In 1920, over 217,000 blacks owned land, but by 1930, fewer than 182,500 still controlled their own

¹ Fite 102.

² Fite 125.

³ Fite 120.

acreage.⁴ In Limestone County, there were 1768 white owners in 1920 and only 1384 by 1930. Black ownership in the county during the same years went from 492 to 236.⁵ Between 1930 and 1935, both groups improved somewhat with 1469 white and 261 black landowners.⁶

Although it is not known if any Beulahland owners lost their farms during these years, many of them took out mortgages on their property. Wash Settles was only one year late in paying off a \$1600 second mortgage he took out on his 125 acres.⁷ In 1923, Adam Lucas mortgaged 40 acres to the Federal Land Bank for \$700. While he did not lose his property in the lean years that followed, his final payment was made in 1934, seven years after it was due.⁸ The Federal Land Bank was also the source for a \$2500 mortgage taken out by George Ruffin and Datie Bridgeforth in 1926 and paid in full by 1935.⁹

⁴ Fisher 482.

⁵ Census of Agriculture (1920) 492, and U. S. Census Office, Census of Agriculture (Washington: GPO, 1927) 785.

⁶ U. S. Census Office, Census of Agriculture (Washington: GPO, 1937) 629.

⁷ Deed Record, Book 225 (1923) 31.

⁸ Deed Record, Book 162 (1923) 204.

⁹ Deed Record, Book 162 (1923) 315.

By the time of Franklin D. Roosevelt's election in 1932, Southern farmers were desperate, and his victory assured them "that the federal government would at last initiate some kind of bold farm relief program."¹⁰ While the New Deal has often been criticized for the damage it did to the lives of both black and white southern tenant farmers, many of the same policies that drove tenants from the land, favored the landowner.¹¹ As the depression deepened, landowners in Beulahland increasingly turned to the Federal government for assistance, and, although none of the families applied for or received public relief, other New Deal programs proved beneficial. Several took advantage of the lowered interest rates from the Federal Land Bank. For example, George Ruffin and Datie Bridgeforth had paid 5.5 percent interest for a mortgage taken out in 1926, but by 1936, interest rates for similar mortgages had dropped to four percent, and they refinanced their loan.¹² Several of

¹⁰ Fite 127.

¹¹ Pete Daniel, "The New Deal, Southern Agriculture, and Economic Change," The New Deal and the South, eds. James C. Cobb and Michael V. Namorato (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1984) 60.

¹² Deed Record, Book 162 (1923) 315, and Deed Record, Book 323 (1936) 260.

the Bridgeforths also took out mortgages on their property under the Emergency Farm Mortgage Act of 1933.¹³

Another program that benefited Beulahland's farmers was the Agricultural Adjustment Act(AAA), which in 1933 began paying farmers \$7 to \$10 an acre not to plant cotton.¹⁴ While AAA policies tended to favor larger landowners, and the payments to most small farmers were minimal, in 1934, at least four Beulahland owners received payments that ranged from \$50 to \$100.¹⁵ Tenants in the community, on the other hand, only received payments of between \$4 and \$50, and obviously the program was of little help to them.¹⁶

The federal program that would have the most impact on the community, however, was the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). "Designed to bring permanent help to a substantial number of southern farmers," TVA planned to construct Wheeler Dam and Reservoir on the Tennessee River in order to

¹³ Deed Record, Book 318 (1934) 43 and 100, and Deed Record, Book 323 (1936) 296.

¹⁴ Fite 131.

¹⁵ Fite 139, and Tennessee Valley Authority, Family Removal Questionnaires (Form 970). 1935. (Atlanta: Regional Archives Branch, Federal Archives and Record Center) Nos. 750, 781, 1011, 1012, and 1501.

¹⁶ TVA 970 Surveys, Nos. 695, 1016, 1104, and 1521. Two of these tenants worked on the George Ruffin Bridgeforth farm. While their AAA payments were not very large, it should be noted that both had comparatively large incomes from cotton sales for the year.

aid with flood and erosion control, generate electricity, and bring modernization to the communities surrounding the river.¹⁷ In 1934, the Authority began acquiring land along the banks of the Tennessee River. Eight hundred and thirty five families in a five-county area in northern Alabama were forced to relocate. Among these were at least 12 families from the Beulahland community. TVA relocation took about one-half of the community's land. Some families were totally unaffected, others lost portions of farms, and still others had to turn over their entire holdings.¹⁸

When first approached by TVA staff about selling their farms and moving, the community's residents responded with less than overwhelming enthusiasm. After the agency assured them they would receive good prices for their land and assistance in locating and moving to farms of equal value, most residents quietly packed their belongings and prepared to move. They also became aware of proposals for social change being discussed within TVA and the Roosevelt administration that they felt would be of benefit to the community. Aid to the landless tenants and small farmers, cooperative agriculture and fertilization projects, rural

¹⁷ Fite 149.

¹⁸ Tennessee Valley Authority, "Families of the Wheeler Reservoir Area," (Knoxville: TVA, 1935) 1, and TVA 970 Surveys.

electrification, and employment with TVA all sounded like good ideas. To understand how this hope and optimism turned to bitterness we must look to the community and the events which began in 1934.

The Wheeler Dam relocation project was the first time TVA worked with a large black population. While the black population of the five counties ran between 18 to 30 percent, over 50 percent of the families up for removal were black. The families were divided into groups according to their landholding status. Almost 80 percent of the group were either sharecroppers or tenants, while 13.6 percent were farm laborers. Owner operators only made up 7.1 percent of the total.¹⁹

Before relocation projects began, TVA sent in teams of investigators to talk with residents being moved from their homes. In these interviews, TVA compiled extensive sociologic and economic data on each family. The surveys conducted with residents of Beulahland offer insight into the daily lives and economic status of these families, but because only families affected by relocation were interviewed, the surveys were not necessarily representative of the entire community.

¹⁹ "Families of the Wheeler Reservoir Area" 3.

Of the eleven families interviewed by TVA, five were landowners, four were tenants, and two were laborers who worked for TVA clearing land.²⁰ Overall, the Beulahland families were about average in all categories covered in the survey except land ownership. Landowners made up 45 percent of the Beulahland population, compared to the 7.1 percent ownership in the total black and white population included in the survey.²¹

Like most families in the Wheeler area, the Beulahland residents lived in wood frame houses. The only difference was that their homes tended to be somewhat larger than those of other families. Most of the homes were clean and well-organized, the exception being one house already partially removed, which had all the furniture stored in one room. The homes were fairly well furnished and nine of the families owned sewing machines, three had phonographs, and two had radios or organs.²²

Facilities in the Beulahland homes were typical of others in the area. TVA reported that, in the entire Wheeler area, "not a single farm house had either a bathtub

²⁰ TVA 970 Surveys Nos. 695, 780, 781, 1011, 1012, 1016, 1104, 1118, 1436, and 1521. Because the two laborers did no farm work they will not be included in this discussion.

²¹ "Families of the Wheeler Reservoir Area" 4.

²² "Families of the Wheeler Reservoir Area," and TVA 970 Surveys.

or an inside toilet," and the Beulahland homes were no exception.²³ Families drew their water from nearby springs or wells and used tubs for bathing. Although the families tended to have about the same level of education as other blacks in the study, they subscribed to more magazines and newspapers than whites or other blacks. Women in the community tended to have more education than did their husbands. For example, one woman, married to a man with no formal education, had completed the eighth grade. The number of cars and trucks in the community was much higher than among other survey respondents. Forty percent of the families owned relatively new trucks, compared to less than 24 percent of whites and only nine percent of blacks. Two of the recently purchased trucks were used in logging and clearing operations for TVA.²⁴

The families, with a median of 25 years in the community, were extremely stable compared to others in the area. While their farms were about average in size, they produced slightly more in crops than did other farmers, which could mean they allowed shorter fallow periods. As a result, and because cotton and corn, the two principal crops grown, were particularly hard on the land, their future

²³ "Families of the Wheeler Reservoir Area" 11.

²⁴ "Families of the Wheeler Reservoir Area," and TVA 970 Surveys.

yields might have been reduced. While TVA noted that the "ability to get along on its cash crop, cotton, had made livestock relatively scarce" in the area, this did not apply to the Beulahland farmers.²⁵ Most of them owned at least one or two mules, hogs, and poultry. Cows, which were particularly scarce in the Wheeler area, were the favored animal in Beulahland, even among the tenants. Each family had at least one cow, and several owned four or five. All of the families grew food crops, and several of the landowners had above average yields in this category.²⁶

After TVA land purchases were completed, the Beulahland families that were to be relocated started looking for new farms, and all hoped to be able to remain in the immediate vicinity.²⁷ While George Ruffin Bridgeforth lost 365 acres to TVA, he still owned remaining acreage, and his brothers and three other owners purchased tracts from him. Several of the families simply moved their homes onto partial tracts which they were able to retain. For others, the process was more difficult. Land values in the area increased substantially when the larger white landowners, anticipating business development on the reservoir, refused to sell any of

²⁵ "Families of the Wheeler Reservoir Area" 15.

²⁶ "Families of the Wheeler Reservoir Area," and TVA 970 Surveys.

²⁷ TVA 970 Surveys.

their land.²⁸ As a result, many of the remaining residents were forced to move to Pete's Corner, about ten miles away.²⁹

While TVA promised assistance in finding land of equal value, among all the families moved, only one, the Bascom Bridgeforth family, received any help from the agency. After Bridgeforth refused to move, the agency finally got involved. As his son, William, recalled:

They started negotiating and they were talking about \$17.50 an acre and he absolutely refused to take that. They re-negotiated again for something like \$25 an acre. He refused that. He was still hanging on. Others around him had sold and he said 'no, I'm not going to sell. I'm going to Ohio. I've got a lawyer up there and you all are just trying to take my land.' He was just bluffing about the lawyer. So, he didn't sell until they offered him \$50 and he took \$50. Whites didn't have any problems getting their \$50, but lots of black people sold for alot less than \$50.³⁰

As Bascom Bridgeforth found, TVA treated blacks and whites differently, and the only way the black community would receive equal treatment was to make demands. George Ruffin Bridgeforth discovered the same to be true when he began dealing with the agency. Returning to Limestone

²⁸ William Bridgeforth, personal interview, December, 1983.

²⁹ Tennessee Valley Authority, "Family Case Summary Sheets" and "Colored Farmers Relocated," (Knoxville: TVA Technical Library), and TVA 970 Surveys.

³⁰ William Bridgeforth, personal interview, December, 1983.

County in 1933, he made his home in Athens, and frequently visited his farm and family in Beulahland. After a life spent teaching agricultural theory, he now had the time and opportunity to put that theory into practice. During the next five years he corresponded regularly with TVA in an attempt to get the agency's assistance and approval for a series of projects to benefit what remained of Beulahland. He began writing letters to the agency in 1934, and the ensuing correspondence revealed not only Bridgeforth's vision of what the community could be, but also his willingness to forge beyond that vision into the realm of black equality. In addition, the letters illustrated how TVA perceived blacks in general and the Beulahland community in particular, as well race relations between the agency and the people it was created to serve.

The letters also reflected the conflict within TVA over how to deal with the black population. Officials like A. L. Snell and W. G. Carnahan of the Family Removal Section, representing the more liberal view, tended to support Bridgeforth's proposals, and actively worked to get them approved. They never indicated that Bridgeforth's motives were less than sincere and seemed to recognize his concern for the community's welfare. These same officials were also the ones expressing concern for the agency's adverse affect on the people of the Wheeler Reservoir. At one point, Car-

nahan, stated that he believed the agency should do everything possible to accommodate the community in "view of the rather difficult problems we face in the readjustment of Negro population."³¹ He had visited the community and was "quite impressed with the attitude of the Negroes we interviewed."³² These officials left TVA by 1939, however, and with them went the agency's concern for the special problems of blacks in the Tennessee Valley.

Opposing this faction were those officials who came to dominate and control TVA after 1939. Not wanting to offend local whites, they worked within the confines of southern racism. Most of these officials were located in Knoxville, never had direct contact with Bridgeforth or the community, and yet questioned Bridgeforth's integrity and motivations. They also made the final decisions concerning the community. For instance, in denying his request to use bricks from an old house on TVA property to construct a club house for the proposed recreation area, Bridgeforth was characterized as "a trouble maker and the Authority should have as little to do with him as possible."³³ On another occasion, John Neely, who never met Bridgeforth, referred to him as "that

³¹ W. G. Carnahan to L. N. Allen, 22 June 1938.

³² Carnahan to Allen.

³³ Nancy Grant, "Blacks, Regional Planning, and the TVA," diss., U of Chicago, 1978, 278.

colored man who has caused the Authority more trouble in the operation of its lands than almost anyone else."³⁴ TVA management was obviously not used to dealing with outspoken and assertive blacks.

Bridgeforth's first request to the agency, in 1934, involved establishing "a new community with model school facilities, a town church, and a recreation center" with a modern sanitation and water system.³⁵ Initially TVA was interested in the relocation of entire black communities, and even talked of finding "isolated areas away from whites" for the communities.³⁶ The agency later backed down on this idea and decided that local agencies should assume responsibility for decisions regarding these black communities. As a result, the agency's position was to "unofficially discourage the development" of Bridgeforth's proposal. This decision was also based on an agency report characterizing him as a "wily entrepreneur more interested in selling his tracts of land to relocated families than building a model community for humanitarian purposes."³⁷ As a result of this report, some TVA officials doubted Bridgeforth's motives.

³⁴ John Neely to L. N. Allen, 30 August 1937, as quoted in Grant, 278.

³⁵ Grant 273.

³⁶ Grant 272.

³⁷ Grant 274-275.

There may have been some truth to their beliefs, for after all Bridgeforth's examples came from the Southern Improvement Company and the Tuskegee Small Farm Company, both of which were started with profit as the primary goal.

What TVA administrators failed to realize is that the two motives of profit and public service did not necessarily conflict. George Bridgeforth always had at heart the interests of the community and less fortunate blacks.³⁸

Bridgeforth's next proposal involved creating a black recreation area next to the Beulahland school. A. L. Snell, head social worker of the Family Removal Section for the Wheeler Reservoir, recommended that TVA comply with the request, for the community had "sufficient interest and influence to make this a worthwhile project."³⁹ In letters to Bridgeforth, Snell indicated that the proposal would be approved. What the agency failed to tell Bridgeforth was that they had questions regarding "the attitude of white people near this location, and the likelihood of their misinterpreting a lot of noise and hilarity for undesirable

³⁸ Datie Russell, personal interview, July, 1989. In this interview Ms. Russell spoke of her father's upbringing of his children. Even though they were relatively better off than some black families, he admonished them to always consider the welfare of all blacks. During the summers, the daughters were encouraged to teach in rural black communities in order to see how poorer blacks lived and to be of assistance to those people.

³⁹ A. L. Snell to W. G. Carnahan, 9 July 1936.

behavior."⁴⁰ They even went so far as to contact all the white landowners and renters near the property, including heirs to one piece of land who lived in Kentucky, to gain their permission for the project. When one of the heirs questioned what the park would do in terms of the resale value of the land, Snell assured him that if white prospective buyers objected to the park, it would be closed down. Even after receiving a satisfactory analysis from the health division concerning sanitation and mosquito control at the proposed site, TVA management withheld its approval of the park, and eventually Bridgeforth's request was shelved.⁴¹

One incident in particular illustrated the complexity of the relationship between Bridgeforth and the agency. When first approached about selling their land, the Beulahland farmers were promised that "if the authority's lands were ever used by private individuals the former owners would have the 'refusal' or first chance at its use."⁴² For several years after removal, Beulahland farmers were allowed to use their former lands for pasturing, hay, and water for

⁴⁰ A. L. Snell to W. G. Carnahan, 16 June 1936.

⁴¹ TVA correspondence file, Beulahland Community, June-July 1936.

⁴² Bascom Bridgeforth and Plea Orr, Letter to H. A. Morgan, April 1938, TVA Technical Library, Knoxville.

livestock. In the spring of 1938, however, TVA turned the land over to the Limestone County Soil Conservation District, an agency staffed solely by local whites. Within a few weeks, the tractors of white landowners moved across the fields which, in the previous fall, had been prepared by the black farmers with their mule-drawn mowers and pans.

Convinced the agency was conspiring against them, the black farmers of Beulahland and Orrsville, a nearby community, fired off letters to H. A. Morgan, TVA board member, and Will Alexander, Director of the Farm Security Administration. Calling themselves the Beulah-Orrsville Co-operative Marketing Association, they spoke of their problems:

Our money crop is being threatened by reducing our cotton acreage and we must turn to livestock and other crops for support for our families, and to pay our taxes. We turned over our little homes in many cases against our will with the sacred promise that the owners would have chance to use the lands they sold not covered by water. . . . We shall look with great disfavor on the big seed growers from other sections using these lands that were promised.⁴³

George Ruffin Bridgeforth's letter to Will Alexander was even more direct in defining the problem as one of white versus black, and small landowner versus large, mechanized operations:

⁴³ Bascom Bridgeforth and Pleas Orr to H. A. Morgan, April 1938.

Last year all of our little farms where we had tried to make some kind of living for our families and pay our taxes, were turned over to the big men of the county that could afford to buy tractors and combines. . . . There can be no question about it was all set up for a few big men from the towns and other sections. . . . The TVA agent in Decatur, Mr. M. W. Rice, seems to be the poor man's worst enemy. Unless we can get some relief and get the continued use of our lands taken from us there will be about 25 colored families soon to go on relief.⁴⁴

These letters were referred to the manager of Muscle Shoals Properties, John Neely, who served as the direct liaison between the TVA board and the northern Alabama divisions of the agency. Neely in turn referred the matter to L. A. Allen, the Reservoir Property Manager in Knoxville, directing Allen to request a written report from W. M. Rice, the department's representative in Decatur. After contacting the community, Rice determined that:

The real reason and explanation to their letter is that they, like most small farmers, are in bad financial condition and in an effort to better that condition seek the use of idle TVA property which they believe can be had for little or nothing per acre.⁴⁵

Rice also drew up a chart indicating the number of acres each farmer had sold to TVA, how many acres remained, the number of acres each had bought, and the number of acres under cultivation. Using this data, Rice concluded that:

⁴⁴ George Ruffin Bridgeforth to Will Alexander, April 1938.

⁴⁵ W. M. Rice to John Neely, 23 April 1938.

All of them are just as well off and several are in better condition than before the sale of property to TVA. The method and mode of life in these communities is equal to or better than in the past.⁴⁶

Rice's analysis of the situation was based on the fact that six of the the twelve landowners had increased their acreage. His appraisal, however, failed to note the quality of the land. The land in question was, in fact, hillier and not as fertile as the land that had been taken by TVA. At the same time, the acreage of the remaining six owners had actually decreased.⁴⁷

While Rice's evaluation of the situation was accepted by his superiors, he also had his critics. W. G. Carnahan, Population Readjustment Advisor, noted that "Mr. Rice's appraisal of whether or not the Negroes are adversely affected by the TVA program is slightly optimistic and might not bear close examination."⁴⁸ The Beulahland residents were not the only relocated farmers with this problem. In its final report on readjustment for all families, the Reservoir Family Removal Section noted that only eight percent of the new farms had "better land and lay of soil," while 69 percent were removed to land that was "generally

⁴⁶ Rice to Neely.

⁴⁷ Rice to Neely.

⁴⁸ W. G. Carnahan to L. N. Allen, 22 June 1938.

poor and less satisfactory than land on which the family formerly lived."⁴⁹ In spite of Carnahan's remarks, the agency refused to make any concessions to the Beulahland farmers. Neely suggested that nothing be done for the moment, apparently in the hope that the problem would disappear.

Tired of waiting for the agency to act, Bridgeforth put yet another proposal before TVA. This proposal not only reflects what he perceived to be the perfect solution to the problem, but it also laid forth his thoughts concerning the future of the black farmer in the South--thoughts that sounded a great deal like those of Booker T. Washington in the early twentieth century:

That all lands formerly owned by the Southern Small Farm Land Company . . . be used for educational and demonstration purposes to teach the colored people better methods of farming, management, soil building, the keeping of 60-100 cows with pure bulls . . . and the growing of truck and marketing the same in a cooperative manner. Such a policy would remove these lands in the community from the present system as well as remove doubt and fear now existing. A demonstration in living at home.⁵⁰

Though the proposal for a demonstration farm was never taken seriously by top management in the agency, several

⁴⁹ Tennessee Valley Authority, "Population Readjustment Wheeler Area," (Knoxville: TVA, 1935) 13.

⁵⁰ George Ruffin Bridgeforth to G. B. Phillips and M. W. Rice, 23 May 1938.

local officials believed Bridgeforth's suggestion had merit. Both Carnahan and M. A. Wilson of Reservoir Property Management believed the idea was workable and encouraged management to seriously consider the proposal. In spite of their recommendation the plan failed to win approval, and this was the last time Bridgeforth requested assistance from TVA.⁵¹

⁵¹ Carnahan to Allen.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This last encounter with TVA did, however, bring about change in the Beulahland community. In Rice's report to Neely, he reaffirmed the growing tendency within the agency to withdraw support from the small farmer and encourage development of corporate, mechanized operations:

The whole trouble lies in the lack of efficient organization in the farming industry which we all know about. The Authority, of course, is not responsible for that but their problem is referred to the Authority because we have idle land. . . . They resent the fact that last year few of them were able to get seed sowing contracts. The answer to that is--due to their small means it was not practical to give them contracts. They were not equipped to save seed and were unable to get that equipment.¹

It was a vicious circle: they were to blame for their problem because they were inefficient and small, but because they were inefficient and small they could not improve their operations. Therefore, the seed contracts went to the larger, white farmers who had the resources.

The Bridgeforths were not the kind of people to stand by and let opportunity pass. Within a year, both George and Bascom Bridgeforth purchased tractors, and, shortly after that, both started the first dairy operations in the coun-

¹ Rice to Neely.

ty.² For several years, George Bridgeforth organized the residents of Beulahland in cooperative gardening projects, and he always took time to teach management and farming practices to young farmers in the community.³

Bridgeforth's efforts to improve the community did not end with agricultural innovation, however. Realizing economic success would not ensure black equality, he began working to improve the education of blacks in the county, and pushed for equal pay for black and white teachers.⁴ In 1933, Bridgeforth became one of the first blacks in the county to register to vote since the early 1900s, and he continued to encourage voter registration among blacks up until the time of his death in 1954.⁵

To the end, George Bridgeforth persisted in his dream of the independent black farmer, a dream he erroneously believed was shared by TVA. Shortly before his death he heard that TVA was having a huge parade in Athens to celebrate the accomplishments of the agency in northern Alabama. Realizing that TVA had failed to solicit black representation--in

² Darden Bridgeforth, personal interview, July 1990.

³ William Bridgeforth, personal interview, December 1983.

⁴ Datie Russell, personal interview, July 1989.

⁵ Limestone County, Poll Tax Records, 1933-1954, and William Bridgeforth, personal interview, December 1983.

an area where blacks accounted for one-quarter of the population--Bridgeforth decided to enter a float. He went to his own expense to construct the float. Along with Pleas Orr, a neighbor, he created a scene representing the small farmer in the Tennessee Valley. The float contained a farm complete with machinery, replicas of farm animals, an electric fence, a pasture, and various kinds of crops. Bridgeforth included TVA on the float--the agency represented agriculture in general. While he may have had TVA on the float "representing" agriculture, the "real" looking farm on the float which was his ideal was ironically never shared by TVA--in fact, TVA's "real" farm would have been white agribusiness.

Today, many of the Bridgeforth family still live in Beulahland. The dream of independent landowner and farmer still lives on in the family. Darden Bridgeforth came back into farming in 1945 after working with his father, Ike, in the timber business for many years. Today, he and six of his sons, who chose to follow him into agriculture, own over 1,400 acres and rent another 5,100 acres. They run one of the largest black farming operations in Alabama today.

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APPENDIX

Release Form

You are invited to participate in the gathering of oral history involving the community of Beulahland, Alabama. Your participation will consist of one or more interviews that will be either audio-taped or recorded in written notes. You will be identified and credited as the source of the information you provide. The notes or tape of your interview will remain in the possession of Nancy Carden, Project Director, 3001 Sevier Avenue, Apt. 4, Knoxville, TN 37920, 615-573-9949. Her thesis committee, consisting of Michael McDonald, Cynthia Fleming and James Cobb, will have access to the tapes or notes.

Information provided by you will be used in Ms. Carden's thesis for the Master's Degree in History from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and any published articles that result from this thesis. You will be credited in any written work for the information you provide.

The topic of the thesis is the history of the Beulahland community and the Bridgeforth family from the period of Reconstruction through the 1940s. Possible topics that will be dealt with in the course of the interview include family history, agricultural practices, and the effect of TVA removal in the 1930s on the community.

Your participation will be voluntary and you may decline or withdraw from participation at any time without penalty or prejudice. The interviewer will be happy to provide answers to any questions you may have about the project.

I have read and understood this explanation of the Beulahland oral history project and have had my questions about it answered satisfactorily. I voluntarily agree to participate.

Orden Bridgeforth
Name

7-23-90
Date

Signature

VITA

Nancy Anne Carden was born in Knoxville, Tennessee on March 11, 1948. She attended elementary and secondary schools in Florida and Tennessee, and was graduated from Clinton High School in Clinton, Tennessee in June, 1966. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in History with highest honors in June, 1984. From 1984 until 1986, she was a graduate and teaching assistant in the Department of History at the University of Tennessee. Her Master of Arts degree in History was awarded in August, 1990. Between 1986 and 1987, she was a Lyndhurst Fellow in the Department of Education at the University of Tennessee.

The author is currently employed with the Knox County school system. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa, the National Council for Social Studies, the National Education Association, and Knox County Education Association.