Fields and Freedom

How farming agreements shaped work after the Civil War

8.C.13.3.B "Describe the expansion of the tenant and sharecropper systems which enabled landowners to reestablish a labor force severely restricting economic mobility."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two reasons tenant farming and sharecropping spread, circle two details that show how landowners gained a labor force, and number three steps that show how debt could keep workers from owning land.

Who Worked the Fields?

1. After the Civil War, a Southern landowner might have fields but little cash to pay wages. Emancipation ended slavery, and formerly enslaved people sought control over their work. Many freed families wanted farms of their own but could not afford land. Some poor white families also lacked land. To get crops planted, landowners divided large estates into smaller plots and offered families land to farm. Over time, tenant farming and sharecropping spread across the South, providing landowners with a labor force without paying workers regular wages.

2. A tenant farmer rented a plot, often paying with cash or part of the crop, and might supply tools and seed. A sharecropper usually had fewer resources. The landowner provided land and often a cabin, tools, seed, or a work animal. In return, the sharecropper gave the landowner an agreed share of the harvest. Both systems let families work a plot rather than earn a fixed wage. They also kept landowners' fields planted and harvested because workers' income depended on the crop.

3. Before harvest, families often needed food and supplies on credit, with the expected crop as security for repayment. A poor harvest or low cotton prices could leave little after rent, the landowner's share, and debts were paid. Some workers then had to borrow again for the next season. With little money saved, buying land or moving to better work was difficult. The systems gave many families some choice about where to work, but they also helped landowners keep a dependable workforce and limited workers' chances to build wealth.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why did landowners and families without land turn to tenant farming and sharecropping after the Civil War?

2. How did tenant farming and sharecropping differ in what a worker might provide and what a worker owed?

3. How did these farming agreements help landowners reestablish a labor force without paying regular wages?

4. How could a poor harvest make it harder for a worker to become a landowner?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine a county where insects destroy much of the cotton harvest. In four or five sentences, explain how tenant farming and sharecropping could keep landowners' fields farmed next season and how the smaller harvest could affect families' chances to buy land. Include one difference between a tenant and a sharecropper.

ANSWER KEY

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GRADE 8 · 8.C.13.3.B

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two reasons tenant farming and sharecropping spread, circle two details that show how landowners gained a labor force, and number three steps that show how debt could keep workers from owning land. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why did landowners and families without land turn to tenant farming and sharecropping after the Civil War?	**Landowners needed workers but had little cash for wages. Many freed families and some poor white families wanted to farm but could not afford land.**
2	How did tenant farming and sharecropping differ in what a worker might provide and what a worker owed?	**A tenant might supply tools and seed and pay rent in cash or crops. A sharecropper usually relied on the landowner for more supplies and owed an agreed share of the harvest.**
3	How did these farming agreements help landowners reestablish a labor force without paying regular wages?	**Landowners offered plots for families to farm. Workers planted and harvested the fields, and their income depended on the crop rather than regular wages.**
4	How could a poor harvest make it harder for a worker to become a landowner?	**A poor harvest could leave little after rent, the landowner's share, and debts were paid. The worker might need to borrow again and have too little saved to buy land.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Landowners could continue to offer plots instead of paying regular wages, so families might return to plant the fields. A tenant could still owe rent after losing cotton to insects. A sharecropper would give the landowner a share of the smaller harvest and might have fewer supplies of their own. Both families might need more credit to buy food and seed for the next crop. Repaying debt could leave too little money to buy land, keeping the families dependent on these arrangements.

Accept explanations that connect access to land with labor for landowners and connect crop losses or debt with reduced savings. Students may describe tenants paying rent in cash or crops.