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Tillery, North Carolina:

One Hundred Years of Struggle in a Black Community

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To all of the people in Tillery, and especially the Grant family, without whom this work would not have been possible.
INTRODUCTION

Economically speaking, Tillery North Carolina has always been a marginal place. Located in the Northeastern Coastal Piedmont, it has always been farm territory, where for the majority of people for the majority of time, the object was not profit, but subsistence. Very closely linked with Tillery's marginality—indeed, an integral part of it—is its racial composition. The population of the town, township, county and region is predominantly black. This has always been true, whether one looks at the ratio of plantation masters to slaves, or at the ratio of town, township, and county governments to the people they represent. In most instances the racial imbalance has also meant an imbalance in social, economic and political opportunity, with the upper hand invariably going to the white minority. These facts have colored the area's history; all of what went on there, and goes on still, must be seen with both marginality and racial imbalance, in mind.

Tillery's history is not one of success, but of struggle. Since slavery blacks in Tillery have sought to break their dependence on a white minority which has systematically denied them education, political power, and economic opportunity. The nature of their oppression has changed; so has the nature of their attempts to overcome it. The thesis which follows will examine how the systematic oppression of blacks in Tillery has changed throughout the one hundred years of its history. It will likewise examine
different ways blacks have sought to overcome this oppression.

During the first chapter of Tillery's history, blacks sought independence within the existing structure of white domination. From 1889 until approximately 1925, they supplemented their meager income as tenants and sharecroppers by working in Tillery's saw mill, or in one of its half-dozen white-owned establishments as cooks, clerks, or washer women. When the saw mill shut down and most of Tillery's stores closed, black wage earners either left Tillery in search of other factory jobs, or they returned to their farms as tenants.

In 1934, a New Deal Resettlement program came to Tillery offering black tenants the opportunity to own land and operate their own farms. The project comprised 17,000 acres of farmland and nearly three hundred farm families. Many saw Resettlement as a way to overcome the systematic oppression and poverty of the sharecropping system. However, because of poor management, structural flaws, and racism, Resettlement in many ways ended by reinforcing the very dependency and oppression that blacks, in coming to the project, had sought to overcome. As a result, many settlers left Tillery, forsaking their struggle to gain independence through land and education. In 1943, the farm project was liquidated, and units sold to individual farmers.

Some blacks chose to continue the struggle. They remained in Tillery, and have worked throughout the last
forty years to achieve the independence promised them by Resettlement. They have initiated farm cooperatives, community action groups, voter registration drives, and adult education classes. Their activism has often been frustrated. Landloss, outmigration, and the difficulty of owning a small farm have consistently challenged what gains Tillery citizens have made.

Most of Tillery's history rests with the many citizens who lived it. The oral testimony of approximately ten individuals forms the bulk of my research. Throughout the course of a year I have come to know Tillery, spending days at a time in the community, and complementing my interviews with land records from the Halifax County courthouse. My research on the Resettlement project is based primarily on information gained from the Farm Security Administration files at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. I have supplemented my work with sources from the Robert W. Hudgens collection, Duke University Manuscript Department, as well as from the North Carolina Collection at UNC Chapel Hill, and from the Southern Historical Collection also at Chapel Hill.

Though Tillery's is not a success story, this is all the more reason to understand the town's past. In its marginality, it is one of many. There are thousands of Tillyers throughout the South, for whom the struggle for independence has been relentless, and for whom there have been many defeats and few successes. Tillery's story is all
their stories; perhaps understanding this one will shed light on all of them.
Chapter One

Making Do

De landlord is landlord, de polititicans is landlord, de judge is landlord, de shurf is landlord, ever'body is landlord an we ain' got nothin'! -from 'Ain't Got No Screens', published interview by Bernice Kelly Harris in Such As Us

Tillery was incorporated in 1889 by the Conoconnara's several former plantation owners. Soon thereafter Harold H. Fries, a Northern capitalist, came to the area to start a lumber company. His presence provided the stimulus for business and trade, and for approximately thirty years, Tillery prospered.

Even at the peak of its prosperity, Tillery was small. Twenty years after its incorporation in 1889, the town could claim only 400 inhabitants— an increase of fifty percent from its original population. This figure is hardly representative, however, for it overlooks the many farmers
and laborers living around Tillery in Conoconnara township who outnumbered the townspeople seven to one.¹

Indeed, it was the farmers and laborers who sustained the town, since it was through their labor that the lumber company cut logs, the restaurant served meals, and the landlords earned the capital to open businesses. Yet these laborers do not figure prominently in the business directories and newspaper articles which chronicle Tillery's brief prosperity. Their work and their struggle remain hidden by the centuries of poverty and oppression which made them common laborers to begin with.

This first chapter sets the stage for Tillery's hundred-year evolution. It covers the physical, social and material conditions that allowed the town to flourish. It at the same time illuminates those ways in which black farmers and laborers helped to sustain the town, and in so doing, attempted to work toward their own independence. Section One will discuss the presence and needs of an elite planting class. It will also discuss the resulting oppression of black laborers and tenants. Section Two will discuss the beginnings of Tillery town, and the ways in which blacks attempted to benefit from Tillery's prosperity. Section Three will discuss Harold H. Fries and the North Carolina Lumber Company, and the ways in which both the man and the mill affected blacks in Tillery.
Before the Civil War, the Roanoke Valley in Northeastern North Carolina was plantation country. Some of the wealthiest landowners in the state reaped their profits from the fertile banks of the Roanoke, planting cotton and corn, and raising droves of hogs. One of these landowners was Thomas Devereux, owner of eight plantations throughout Halifax and Bertie counties, and keeper of some 1600 slaves. Of his eight plantations, he chose Conoconnara for his home, erecting there "on a bluff commanding a fine view of the Roanoke River," a stately mansion,"with many fine halls."\(^2\) Bordering the Conoconnara plantation was the property of Major John Tillery, who also owned slaves and a large estate. Together, these lands formed what is today the Conoconnara township, and Tillery town.

One of the first mentions of what seems to be Tillery appears in M. Devereux's memoirs. It appears as "a huddle of houses standing irregularly in a grove of Magnolia Oaks," boasting only a store which doubled as a post office, and a long "piazza [with] men lounging in chairs tilted against the wall, [who] squirt tobacco juice [and] lazily report the countryside news as to the opening of cotton, the state of the river, etc."\(^3\)

Devereux's was certainly a pastoral description. If
nothing else it conveyed the area as it must have appeared to one who had the leisure to set her description to words. For the majority of the area's other inhabitants, life in the Conoconnara must hardly have been pastoral. Halifax was one of the biggest plantation counties in North Carolina; as such, most of the people who lived and worked there were slaves. There were few towns; Devereux had to drive nearly twenty miles by carriage if she wanted to "attend to business" in the county capital of Halifax.4

For the rich plantation lords of the Antebellum era, isolation was only a minor drawback when compared with the pleasureable and profitable life of plantation farming. For them, isolation was a natural as oriental carpets, fine silk clothing, and Negro slaves.5 When the war came, ravaging planters' homes and forcing them to relinquish much of their luxury and all of their slaves, many landowners were bitter. They scorned the Yankee for intruding where he did not belong, and they scorned the Negro for claiming a freedom which he was not capable of. In late 1865, M. Devereux wrote in her journal

The Negro emancipation has been accomplished--the unfortunates have been thrust blindfolded upon the ills of a state of which they know nothing....They occupy themselves ceaselessly with trying on their new chains--seeing how little work they can accomplish and yet be fed, and endeavoring to be slave and free at the same moment--a slave on the food, shelter and clothing question, but free when labor is concerned....6
For the slaves themselves, however, Emancipation was a cause for celebration. The opportunity to earn wages, and to "go wherever you want to go" signaled the first of many steps toward the freedom and equality which they had prayed for.

The Yankees told us slaves 'you all is free, free. You work for the people you have been living with if you want to, or go wherever you want to go. They must pay you wages if you stay with them. You are your own bosses now and what you work for is yours.' Chile, that was what we had prayed for and God had heard our prayers. 7

Slaves were not the only ones who faced change. After nearly two centuries of plantation farming, landowners were forced to enter a changing society. Never again would agriculture be as profitable as industry; if planters wanted to maintain their standards of luxury, they would have to find other ways. One way was to indulge in industry and trade. Another, which was much simpler and therefore the first to be used, was the system of tenant farming.

Despite slaves' hopes, and landowners' fears, Emancipation did little to challenge the old order. Though plantation size had shrunk considerably, white landowners still maintained their properties, and while blacks had gained their freedom, they were still landless servants, now nominally paid. Whites fully realized that land was power, and rather than sell their property, they rented it to their former slaves. Former plantations were divided into farms of
approximately forty acres each. Tenants would then rent the plots and use part of their harvest as rental payment.

The terms of the rental agreement classed workers in one of two general categories. Sharecroppers were those families which had a definite agreement with the operator whereby the family furnished only labor in cultivating an agreed-upon acreage. They received in return a specified share of the crop. Cash croppers were those families who furnished some or all of the work stock and tools.

While sharecropping was by far the more common of the two tenant systems throughout the South, the Conoconnara region, in the years dating from Reconstruction until well into the next century, reported an overwhelmingly high incidence of cash cropping. Although there is no specific reason for such an aberration, one answer according to a former Tillery sharecropper is that

sharecroppin', the farmer has it better. Let's say I own some land and you come work for me, pickin' my crops. Now I can either pay you, say, $15 up front and then you pick all my crops and don't get none of them even if it's a good year and there's a big harvest. You ending up pickin' more than I paid for. Or we can agree on, say, you get half of whatever there is, and if it's a good year you done good, and if it's a bad year so it's a bad year.

By paying in cash rather than in crops, landowners accomplished several things. First, they made the farmer a wage laborer, dependent on a meager cash flow. Second, they deprived the farmer the chance of selling his goods on the
open market, which may or may not have brought him a significant return. Third, landowners increased their own chances for profit, since they had superior means and could sell their aggregate crops in lucrative markets, while paying only a nominal fee for having them grown and harvested.

By 1900 there were 246 farmers in the Conoconnara township. Of these, sixty-eight percent were tenants and of the tenants, ninety percent were black. The township was under the control of a white minority. In an area where land meant both wealth and power, blacks had neither. Whites not only owned the land, but controlled the marketplace.

Rarely could blacks read or write, and tenants who operated their farms in exchange for a portion of their crops were often cheated out of their profits by landlords who took advantage of the tenants' lack of schooling. Often, when "settling time" came, the landlord would "take the whole crop and say we was in debt," leaving tenants with no return on their year's labor, and no money to buy such things as salt or shoes. As a result, tenants were forced to buy their bare essentials on credit, either form the landlord or a local merchant who would in turn would charge interest rates as high as thirty percent. To further dependence, some landlords would not allow their tenants to plant a family garden, so that farmers had to buy all their food in the general store. Often, food the store was strictly rationed. One sharecropper who lived not far from Tillery in Seaboard, North Carolina summed up his
rental arrangements by saying,

We never had a fair deal....Every time he settled wid us he took de inside track and 'lowed us what he pleased. We knowed it, but twa'n't no use to complain....We knowed we wouldn't get nothing dat way but cussin'....I don't mind workin' hard; I 'specs that. But it is hard, after you you done the best you can, to be cussed at and talked to like a dog.13

Similarly, a former tenant in Tillery stated that there was little difference between tenant farming and slavery.

Sometimes things was so bad we couldn't hardly make a living at farming. After all our dues was paid, there wasn't nothin left for shoes or whatever. So we was workin' for the White man, just like in slavery days.14

The conditions in which most tenants lived speak in support of such an assertion. As tenants, few owned their homes. Their dwellings were old and decrepit, and many farmers, after gaining their freedom, lived in the same houses that they had as slaves. None of the houses, until at least 1930, had water or electricity, and none had toilets.15

For many tenants, the only way to escape the debt cycle was to plant every acre with cash crops such as cotton or corn. Cash crops brought a high market return, and tenants hoped that a good harvest might bring them desperately needed cash. While these crops brought money, however, they also depleted the soil. Even though farmers planted
every acre, they often did not get the returns they had hoped for. As their debts increased, many tenants could leave their farms in search of new land. The average length of tenure in the South in 1910 was seven years. Such an unsettled lifestyle prohibited many farmers from gaining tenure; their insecure status made obtaining outside credit loans nearly impossible.

Beginning in 1910, census reports show a sixty percent drop in the population of Conoconnara township. One reason may be the enticements of wage labor in many of the nation's growing industrial centers towards the middle of the decade. The proliferation of labor unions, combined with increased demands on production during the First World War, sent industry searching for large pools of un-unionized, unskilled, wage-hungry workers. Southern Blacks, tired of a farm depression that had gripped the South since disenfranchisement, flocked eagerly North.

Just as the big northern industries opened their arms to poor Negroes, so they promptly fired their workers when they were no longer profitable. The rapid influx of available labor between 1910 and 1920 soon caused a surplus, and when the First World War ended, industrial needs were significantly diminished. Workers were sent back to their farms in record numbers, overburdening an already ailing rural economy.

Clearly in this system of tenant farming, the practices which allowed the former plantation lord to maintain his wealthy status, forced the former slave to remain in his...
The ailing Southern economy in the years following the Civil War forced both landowners and tenants to look Northward. Tenants flocked to where the money was; landowners held open their arms and their pocketbooks, and invited the money to come to them.

II

Tillery, from the time of its inception until at least 1925, was a boom town of sorts, one in which a modicum of wealth was generated quickly by a very few. The same men who ran the stores and owned the land, made the laws and governed. At one time, the mayor was also the postmaster, the tax collector doubled as police chief, the superintendent of health was also the city physician, and the board of aldermen seated at once one of the wealthiest landowners in the county (who was also county commissioner and a justice of the peace), as well as the biggest merchant in town.19

After twenty years of struggling and slim profits in the tenant business, Conoconnara landlords were ready to try commerce and industry. In 1888, some of the biggest landowners in the county, among them P.C Gregory, J.R. Tillery, N.L. Norfleet, J.P Futrell and A.J. Jones, pooled their resources and created Tillery town. The Wilmington-to-Weldon Railroad, begun in 1836, had recently been
completed, making the once isolated Roanoke Valley accessible to travellers from Virginia and South Carolina, and the Scotland Neck-Kinston road, custom cut for the Conoconnara township, passed right through the center of town. By the time Tillery was granted its Articles of Incorporation in 1889, the town could boast 258 inhabitants.  

1889 was an eventful year for Tillery. It grew from a huddle of houses to a full-fledged town. Inhabitants were eager to see it grow; a snippet from a local newspaper read in March of that year:

Our people here are busy; merchants seem to be doing well, and we have room for other merchants, would give them a welcome among us, and believe they would do well....The health of the place is good. Have heard of families who anticipate making this their home. To them we would say, come, we extend to you a cordial greeting.  

Such enticements must have proved successful, for a mere five months later, a wealthy capitalist from New York by the name of Harold H. Fries had come to Tillery, bought 6,000 acres, and set up the town's own North Carolina Lumber Company. The same day that Fries' notice of incorporation was posted in the paper, the following article appeared:

In consequence of the recent investments made by Northern capitalists in Tillery, several houses will soon be erected there. Messrs Futrell and Tillery will build a large store and other buildings will soon be erected. We learn that every house in
the town will soon receive a new coat of paint.  

And again, one week later:

TILLERY ON THE RISE
Since the recent investment at Tillery by Robinson and Fries, the town is looking up...we learn that Mr. J.R. Tillery has generously given a lot and the lumber for a church there...Mr. J.P. Futrell is interested in the matter, and will push it through we suppose.

It seems that Fries' investment was just what the several local landowners, deprived of their plantations merely a generation earlier, were thirsting for. They hoped that the savvy Northern capitalist would bring life and commerce to this corner of the Roanoke Valley; for a good thrity years, their wishes were granted.

A visitor to the town between 1900 and 1925 would see a dirt road lined with wooden buildings, some of them painted. He would see a post office, a municipal house, a school, and a livery stable. He would see a grist mill and a saw mill and a small wooden chapel. All tolled, the town had a host of goods and services to offer. Between the W.H. Randolph Company ("Gregory's Place"), and N.L. Stedman's store, the visitor would find boots & shoes, clothing, hats & men's furnishings, dealers in ice, brokers, cotton buyers, cotton gin, dealers in grain, dry goods & notions, grist mill, millenary & fancy goods, carriages, coffins, retail grocers, and wholesale grocers. To this was added a violin teacher and a vineyard, a hardware store, a
telephone company from Henderson, the Roanoke Navigation and Power Company, and a furniture manufacturing plant (part of Gregory's store).\textsuperscript{24}

Perhaps the most impressive testimony to the town's success was the W.H. Randolph General Merchandise building, which consumed a good portion not only of Tillery's commerce, but of the town's main street, as well. Around 1913, the store employed 15 clerks, several of whom slept upstairs. Four passenger trains and freights stopped in Tillery every day, and the store operated a kitchen and a dining room.

It was a booming business in those days as customers flocked off the trains. 'In 1924 [the store's manager recalls] we put $34,000 into the bank in one month--and a dollar was a dollar then.'\textsuperscript{25}

Shoppers came from all the surrounding towns, including Scotland Neck, Dawson, Enfield, and Weldon. They even came from Southampton county, Virginia.

Along when I was comin' up, Tillery was a nice town. There used to be houses back there, and stores too. Had a big hall there. It was a big place down bottom, then folks stay ed upstairs. I think it had about eight rooms, and there was a saloon. Sometimes they'd have music and folks be dancin'.\textsuperscript{26}

Like all towns, Tillery also had a poor section. These were the homes of the Negroes who were not tenant farmers. Instead, they rented their homes from the Lumber
Company, just outside of town alongside the railroad track. They worked as either mill hands, farm laborers, cooks, washer-women, or railroad hands. Very few of them were employed as store clerks, since "those jobs was reserved for the white men's sons." 27

Most all the colored folks in town could rent a house down the railroad....There was seven, eight, ten eleven houses there. They houses was built sturdy though, from good lumber, but mighty few folks even had two rooms and a kitchen. When I come up, kitchens wasn't on the house. They was back a ways. Only white folks had kitchens. But we did have, you know, hogs. And we slept in wooden beds. All the children slept together and maybe the parents would take the small ones in with them.... And most of the women they was cooks in the restaurants or in the houses, or they was washer women. The men would work in the mill and the women would work for White folks. That's the way it was. 28

Although their freedom was greatly restricted by poverty and racism, blacks, by "working for white folks", and also working for one another, attempted to garner wages and skills. According to one Tillery native, "there wasn't nothin' else you could do, 'cept try to make your life decent. Didn't have time for nothin' else." 29

Besides working in the mill, or as cooks and washerwomen, some blacks worked at trades or small businesses. From approximately 1900 until 1920, one man (name unknown) owned a butcher store which he opened on Friday and Saturday to supplement his usual farm income. The butcher's nephew, Oscar Tillery, recalled that his uncle
and others "had cows and they killed them, or they farmed hogs to make money on the side." In addition to butchering and hog farming, some blacks cut hair. As one Tillery inhabitant recalled, "they cut hair because everybody got hair that needs cuttin'. Barbers ain't never goin' to run out of no jobs so long as folks' hair keep growin.'" Many people, black and white, took on boarders. Of the fifty-eight households in town, nearly half had boarders. In 1900, boarders comprised fourteen percent of the town population. Most of these either worked at the saw mill, or in one of the town's businesses. Such a high incidence of roomers is a telling sign: a significant portion of the town's inhabitants did not consider Tillery their home. They had no financial or emotional ties there. The fact that the majority of boarders were young unmarried men means that they had no familial ties either. And so, while Tillery was indeed booming, it was built on shaky ground. For the few landowners who founded Tillery, however, such things were hardly a consideration. The coming of freight trains and industry had brought commerce and wealth to their ailing agricultural fortunes. To some extent, even blacks benefitted from the increased activity in Tillery. It allowed them an alternative to the tenant farm.
Harold H. Fries' arrival in Tillery could not have been timed more perfectly. The town had only recently been incorporated; its businesses were young and full of potential, and the lumber industry was one of the hottest new capital-generating prospects to hit the South since textile mills. Beginning in the late 1870's, following the repeal of the Southern Homesteads Act which had restricted land use only to homesteaders, great areas of virgin forest were opened to land speculators and lumbermen, laying the foundation for a rapid, large-scale, mechanized exploitation.

The greatest influx of speculators and lumbermen to the South was in the decade form 1890 to 1900, an influx which was surely aided by the rapid extension of railroad facilities after 1880. In 1889 there were some 53,000 men employed in lumbering in the South. By 1909 the number had grown to 262,000, and four out of every five acres of timberland un use were in private hands.

In 1890, North Carolina reported 688 lumber and saw mills; by 1900, there were nearly three times that amount. Most of these were small establishments, privately run, which could move their operation from place to place,
depending upon the availability of timber. The average amount of capital investment for these mills was $3,500, and the average number of employees ranged between three to seven. The North Carolina Lumber Company, established by Fries in 1889, was slightly out of the ordinary. Firstly, Fries didn't know nothin' about lumber. He was a doctor from up there in New York City, and he was a millionaire. He owned 2, 3 factories in the North that made medicine, see, so he didn't come around here but two or three times a year. In May he'd make his last trip here, until the winter, say, November. He'd start huntin' about six or seven days, go back to New York, come back again and bring seven or eight. That house he live in was called Mansion Hill. He always kept three or four folks workin there all the year. He was a big bird man, Dr. Fries. And that was my job, to watch for his pheasants, ducks.35

But though Fries knew nothing abut lumber, he did know how to make money. When he bought 6000 acres of land and an already existing saw mill from J.R Tillery and others in 1888, for approximately $8000, the operation was listed as having "moderate" credit ($500-$1000 estimated wealth). After a name change, a hiring spree, and the infusion of $125,000, the North Carolina Lumber Company was listed in several state directories as having "good" credit. By 1922, it was worth $600,000, and had a workforce ranging anywhere between fifteen to twenty-five men.36

The years between 1910 and 1925 were the Lumber Company's--and Tillery's--most successful. Adding to their
prosperity, strangely enough, was the Caledonia State Prison Farm, housing some 2000 prisoners.

Caledonia folks, their women and everything, when they come out, they stayed right here. Tillery was a big town then. When them prisoners get out, sometimes they'd come here and they was mean, look for a fight, shoot somebody or something like that, and get away. 37

Many prisoners found work at the saw mill. It was hard, cheap labor with a rapid turnover, and long hours. As a result, the majority of those who worked at the saw mill were black.

It was all colored folks that worked the mill. Most of 'em lived down the railroad, in them houses down there. It sure wasn't no women's work! But most anyone that wanted a job could get one at the mill.....Some of us would cut it and load it with mules, bring it to the mill. Then there was the saw--and you had to be big to do that--load it up on the rollers so they could edge it and trim it and then it pass on to be stacked up in the yard to dry it. Then there was the planing to make it even and it was ready to go... We worked hard at the mill, we sure did.[A common schedule for mill workers throughout the state would consist of six-day work-weeks; twelve hours Monday-Friday, and six on Saturday.] 38

By 1910, more than one-fifth of all blacks in industry were lumbermen. Because of the rough work to be performed, they were usually preferred as common laborers, outnumbering whites six to four, while in the skilled jobs, whites outnumbered Negroes, two to one. 39

Before logs could be brought to the mill, a lumbering
crew had to go into the forest and fell trees. In the case of the North Carolina Lumber company, usually two crews composed of five men each would work long, hard hours. Lumbering was the most physical of all jobs involved in the lumber business. Most of the men who worked in the woods were therefore stout, young (between the ages of nineteen and thirty-five) and unmarried.40

Like the mill workers, lumbermen had long days. They would rise around 5:00 a.m.; work commenced at 6:00 or as soon as it got light. Work continued until 6:00 p.m., with usually not more than a fifteen minute break for lunch at noon.41

Despite long hours, heavy work, and bad pay, the North Carolina Lumber Company never had trouble finding workers. The opportunity for work offered to Southern men, Black and White, better incomes than they had ever known in agriculture, and they flocked to it. In addition, many wage earners worked only part-time in the industry, shifting back and forth between agriculture and work in the woods.

Seasonal factors were important determinants of the earnings of both mill and woods workers. A mixture of climactic and market factors influenced the length of the logging season. The fact that most men employed by the lumber company were also part-time farmers or farm hands, meant that business slowed in the months between March and September. The North Carolina census reported that in 1890, the prime employment months were between January and June, with the average monthly wage for males over sixteen being
$22.03. This amount, when supplemented by the approximately $100.00-$200.00 grossed by sharecroppers in 1900, added significantly to the cash that blacks brought home."  

Workers did different things with the money they earned. Some of them "saved....money so's to make a better life, move up." Others "drunk it all away with liquer, or they lost it gamblin' or just spent it all before it even got warm in their pocket." Those who saved their money had to find less costly ways of enjoying themselves. They might "play baseball, with a ball made from old socks," or they might "be social, goin' from house to house, eat a little somethin' at each place, and then move on to the next one." Or, they might save all their socializing for Sundays "after meeting, everybody'd be out there in their Sunday best, and sometimes we'd have a dinner."  

Aside from church gatherings or a Saturday afternoon baseball game, however, most blacks in Tillery had little time for socializing. "What's leisure time? We ain't never heard of leisure time when I come up. We work hard all the day and went to sleep at nite, and on Sunday, it was goin' to meetin', and that's all we did. It was hard times then, we had to work, work, all the time."  

Thus, Harold Fries and the North Carolina Lumber Company provided blacks in Tillery with if not leisure time, then at least some extra cash. Though their relation with him was peripheral at best, most of the working people in and around Tillery must have thought well of him. He provided
many needed jobs with his saw mill, and in the 30's, when
the lumber company closed down and Fries became the sole
owner of the land, he proved to be a good landlord—or an
unconcerned one at least—who charged low rents compared to
the other landowners in the area, and who occasionally even
bordered on philanthropy.

Fries was the best man I worked for. When he come here, it kind of upset the
folks around here that had money, because he paid too much and they
worried about that. Dr. Fries, I remember when he was tipping my cousin
when he'd leave here he give 'em five dollars in gold and ten dollars in
paper—that was before Hoover. Used to
give them clothes and stuff like that.
They could go anywhere they want, Rocky
Mount, anywhere, and he'd pay for it.
Any place you go, folks know Dr. Fries.
Like say you wanted to go have a suit
made. Tell them where you're goin' and
he says send it to the company. I go
there and buy what I want, and they send
[the bill] to Dr. Fries.47

Fries contributed to Tillery in other ways, as well. In
1920 he donated for a minor fee some town acreage to be used
for the Bank of Tillery (which functioned for a year or two
before folding), and in 1923, he made an outright grant to
the Halifax County Board of Education so that blacks around
town could build schools.

We had an old school called Shady Grove
and that's where I went. Had another
one, Tillery Chapel, but that burned
down. The one across from church, that
was a white school, and when they cut
that out and sent all the whites to
Scotland Neck, the colored people wanted
that school and Dr. Fries got it for
them. He had two schools, and give the
Until 1923, Tillery prospered. However, growing overcrowding and unemployment amongst tenant farmers throughout the twenties in Conoconnara starkly contrasted with the prosperity of Tillery town. Tillery's small economy could not accommodate the hundreds of blacks who had returned to the farm from Northern factories after losing their jobs.

Though Harold Fries' presence in Tillery had provided wages and, indirectly, education, blacks in Tillery still lacked perhaps the most important opportunity of all. They lacked land. They owned neither the farms or the businesses where they worked. And so, when the depression came in 1929, and when three years later the lumber company lost its charter, there was no incentive to draw—or keep—laborers in Tillery. As other towns around the area continued to grow, adding stores, textile and cotton mills, the steady stream of visitors which had flowed through Tillery for the past thirty years, slowed to a trickle. Most of the original town officers had long since resigned their posts, and many of the small enterprises energetically begun at the town's inception, had boarded up their windows in search of easier business.

You see the way Tillery is now? You see how it's all boarded up down there? Well that's how it was when I come in '38. It even looks better now cause they got an ABC store there and a filling station and a post office and the store.
There is no doubt that Tillery profited from the commercial and industrial activity of its early years. This activity created a town where before there was nothing. However, because of the nature of such activity, Tillery's prosperity was only superficial. The many black laborers in and around town benefitted from Tillery's business only so long as its landowners and entrepreneurs were around to pay wages. Tillery's prosperity was one generated by elites and outsiders, for elites and outsiders. When prosperity gave way or moved elsewhere, those parts of the population which were neither outsiders nor elites, for whom moving elsewhere was not an option, and for whom the economic and political intricacies of building a town were overshadowed by a longstanding history of social oppression, remaind in Tillery, no better off than before.
1 United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Statistics of Population at the Eleventh Census (June 1890) Volume I.


3 Ibid., p. 45.

4 Ibid., p. 46.


8 The average percentages of cash tenants v. share tenants in Halifax Co. and in North Carolina for 16 years 1890, 1900, 1910 and 1920 were as follows:

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<td>1920</td>
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10 North Carolina Manuscript Census, Conoconnara Township, 1900.

11 Terrill and Hirsch, Such, p. 94.


13 Terrill and Hirsch. Such, p. 89.


17 Edward S. Brunner and Irving Lorge, Rural Trends During the Depression Years (New York, Caprice Press, 1937), p. xii.

18 Ibid., p. xii.

19 The North Carolina Year Book. (Raleigh, News and Observer) 1904.


21 The Scotland Neck Democrat "Tillery Items," March 14, 1889.

22 Ibid., Aug. 22, 1889.

23 Ibid.

24 The North Carolina Year Book 1904.


26 Interview with Oscar Tillery, Tillery North Carolina, Nov. 8, 1985.


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 North Carolina Manuscript Census, Conoconnara Township, 1900.


Interview with Oscar Tillery, Aug. 4, 1985.


Interview with Oscar Tillery, Aug. 4, 1985.


Jenson, Lumber, p. 77.


Ibid.


Interview with Oscar Tillery, Aug. 4, 1985.

Ibid.


Interview with Oscar Tillery, Aug. 5, 1985.

Ibid.


According to Oscar Tillery, the North Carolina Lumber Company had deforested most of its acreage by this time. It was not until 1940 that the practice of reforestation came to Eastern North Carolina. Pamphlet, Jack M. Jacobs "The History of Land Preservation in North Carolina" (n.p., 1983), p. 3.
Chapter Two

Forty Acres and a Mule

I aimed when I started out to own me a farm, but but it didn't turn out that way. - from "The Lees" Unpublished life history by Bernice Kelly Harris

The great Depression laid bare the underside of the American dream. For perhaps the first time in this nation's history, an entire population was confronted with the poverty and oppression that collectively in its notions of freedom of opportunity, individualism, and equality, it had chosen to ignore.

In the years between 1930 and 1940, millions of Americans faced starvation, chronic disease, and poverty; very few had the economic, educational or political means to combat these problems. Indeed, what for a small number of the population was a brief appaling nightmare beginning with the stock market crash and ending with the Second World War was for others merely the deepening of a way of life. Poverty and oppression for these people was nothing new; the fact that suddenly millions more shared
their plight only made survival more difficult.

In an attempt to aid those affected by the Depression, the government entered perhaps the most progressive period of social reform in its history. The "New Deal", as it was commonly called, constituted a long list of social aid programs aimed both at the temporary relief of those principally affected by the Depression, and at the fundamental rehabilitation of those for whom the Depression was only the last in a history of poverty. One of the more radical of the rehabilitative programs of the New Deal was Resettlement; one of the largest Resettlement projects ever undertaken was at Tillery, North Carolina.

Resettlement aimed to rehabilitate the nation's many sharecroppers and tenants by providing them with land, education, and community structure in a controlled setting. In order to institute its plan, the government purchased large tracts of land and divided them into any number of individual farm units. Each unit consisted of forty acres of farmland, a house and a barn. In addition to individual units, the government built a community meeting hall, store, grist mill and health facility, which all settlers were expected to patronize.

The major difference between Resettlement and most of the other relief programs was its emphasis on long-term rehabilitation rather than short-term money doles. Land and education were two of the major goals of Resettlement; as such they formed the basis of a plan to
redistribute wealth and power in rural America, and especially in the rural South.¹

The majority of rural Americans in the 1930's had for racial, social, and economic reasons been deprived of land and education. They had therefore been deprived of independence and security, depending instead on those select few who not only possessed the land but strictly controlled it; not only knew how to read and write but used these skills to cheat those who did not.²

Altogether one hundred farm communities were begun in the United States. Eight of these were all black; all of the eight were in the South.³ All Resettlement projects faced a difficult task; black projects in the South faced a monumental one. Nowhere else were social structures so rigid, so openly oppressive. If even a small portion of those black tenants and sharecroppers who participated in the project could become independent landowners and farmers, their example would be an important and encouraging sign that the stifling legacy of slavery could be overcome.

Several paradoxes inherent in the Resettlement plan made success difficult. In the case of Tillery, these paradoxes combined with the history of racism and social oppression to make the black struggle for land and independence even greater.

Chapter Two will outline both the structural paradoxes within Resettlement, and also the ways in which
racism and social oppression, so firmly entrenched in Southern life and thought, worked to undermine the project. Section One will outline the administrative history of the farm community program, and the basic premises of Resettlement. Section Two will deal with the beginnings of the Tillery Farms, and with the structural weaknesses within the farm project. Section Three will discuss the effects of racism on both administrators and settlers at Tillery Farms, and Section Four will highlight local opposition to the project.

I

Resettlement officially began in May 1933, when by executive order, President Roosevelt passed the Federal Emergency Relief Act. The act offered an alternative to the money dole relief system by creating a paid labor program for relief clients. It was administered by the several states, with the aid and supervision of a Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). The government, drawing from approximately $1.5 million specifically set aside for the FERA, matched all state expenditures in wages, materials, administration, etc. In return for these funds, it maintained a final say on all Emergency Relief programs.

Projects begun under the FERA ranged in scope from road construction to farm resettlement communities. The
farm projects were unique within the organization because they did not work within the existing social structure. Relief clients who participated in the road construction program, for instance, came to work each day and received wages; their home lives and their social lives were not affected. Resettlement participants, however, were asked to leave their homes, readjust their social customs, and forfeit wages in return for forty acres and a mule, and the eventual ownership of a farm.

Complete restructuring of people's lives and customs was necessary if Resettlement hoped to challenge the "culture of poverty" existing in the South and elsewhere for centuries. The essential components of Resettlement revolved around land and education as the first step in challenging the existing social, political and economic structure. Inherent in the challenge was the notion that

the cause of poverty for the majority of those affected lies outside the direct control of the individual thus so advantaged....Most poverty has a social origin, being grounded in the nature of our society, its culture, and the environment. The resources for lasting rehabilitation rest within the people themselves.

The possibilities rested within the people themselves; Resettlement's task was to nurture them. Landownership and education served as the most basic fertilizer. First, land provided the basis for a family
subsistence farm. Most tenant farmers had, by 1930, abandoned the subsistence farm in order to plant more of their land with cash crops. This shift was essential in a tenant system, where landlords demanded exorbitant fees for land and credit, and farmers often had only their crops as collateral. However, the less a farmer produced himself, the more he was forced to buy elsewhere. With hardly the cash to pay off his loan, a tenant bought his necessary food and clothing on credit, thereby deepening the vicious debt cycle. Resettlement, by reintroducing the family garden, aimed at breaking the debt cycle.

Resettlement hoped also to foster the tenant's understanding and control of his resources. These resources were both natural and financial. Many sharecroppers were unacquainted with good farming practices such as crop rotation, and proper fertilization. By educating settlers on how to grow a better crop, Resettlement aimed at making small farmers more efficient. Once they had grown a good crop, settlers also needed to know how to manage the money they earned from it. Since most tenants had constantly been in debt, they had had no need to manage their money--it all went to the landlord or creditor. Therefore, settlers needed to learn from the start such things as budgeting and the keeping of financial records. They needed to learn reading and mathematics, as well.

Most importantly, landownership and education
provided settlers with a sense of independence. As tenants, and particularly as blacks, most Resettlement clients had never been allowed the control of their own resources. Through the Resettlement projects, settlers were encouraged to participate in farm cooperatives, where they could buy and sell farm products and equipment as a group, thereby "eliminating the need for a middle man which is both costly and potentially unequitable for settlers."12

The FERA began its projects in 1934; two years later all Resettlement farms were transferred to a new federal organization. In 1936, President Roosevelt formally abolished the FERA and its state subsidiaries, and created the Resettlement Administration. Although much of what was begun under the FERA remained intact, state control of the project was relinquished to a regional office.

While this action sought to unify and integrate the many farm projects begun by the FERA and other organizations, it served at the same time to eliminate the possibility for a more specialized attack on poverty. The state-run program included county committees which performed "advisory functions" in meeting the individual needs of a given area. These needs included, for example, incorporating hog farming into the Resettlement loan plan, or allowing a local "root doctor" (black traditional medicine) to practice alongside a certified
medical doctor. By contrast, the regional program focused by necessity on "administrative control functions," such as deciding upon the eligibility requirements for applicants, or setting a limit on the number of loans allowed. Oppression and poverty, though they affected a great many throughout the country, nonetheless had their expression in very individual circumstances and struggles. In a regional approach to poverty, these struggles often were overlooked.

After operating twenty months, the Resettlement Administration was abolished, and the Farm Security Administration (FSA) created in its place. Unlike its predecessors, the FSA was not a public assistance organization. It was instead part of the United States Department of Agriculture, and was therefore subject to much stricter control by congress. As a result, the policies, expenditures and philosophies behind Resettlement had to meet with more widespread approval. Thus, they were further generalized, since many of the radical assumptions with which planners began the projects were not acceptable to more mainstream notions of reform.

Two important changes in the government's approach to rural poverty took place under the Farm Security Administration. First, there was a "shift from the idea that rehabilitation for the majority of families should be by resettlement to the idea that the major program should be rehabilitation "in place" through the standard
loan type of aid." Second, the government shifted its focus from allocating relief in the form of "many advances in kind to the almost exclusive use of direct money loans." 17

In general, these changes in focus led the government to assume the role of a low-interest creditor--little more. By 1940, administrators no longer had the time, patience or political backing for their initial plans to reform rural America. Taxpayers grew weary of funding experimental programs which, by 1943, had yielded only marginal results. With an increased emphasis on war production in the early forties, many of the early hopes of subsistence farming fell by the wayside. 18

For five years (1937-1943), the Farm Security Administration continued the projects. It completed settler selection and construction, but did not initiate any new farm communities. In 1943, the government began official liquidation of the projects, selling individual farm units first to project participants, and then to small farmers who met certain criteria. (See selection process next section.)

II
Of the five farm projects begun in North Carolina, the Tillery (later called Roanoke) Farm was the largest. It promised the relocation of 200-300 families, and comprised 17,818 acres of land.19 Among the properties purchased were the former Pierce, Jones, Fenner and Tillery plantations, and while many of the other projects were begun on low-quality farmland, the Tillery farms comprised some of the best farmland in Halifax county. Much of the land bordered the Roanoke river, a location with both blessings and burdens, for while this region promised rich, fertile soil, it also threatened farmers with the possibility of a devastating flood.

Although they had chosen a fine setting for their farm community, administrators had other troubles awaiting them. Several structural paradoxes inherent in the Resettlement plan limited the Tillery project's success. Although some of these paradoxes were not readily apparent to most settlers and administrators, they nonetheless undermined Resettlement's goal of creating a unified, self-sufficient group of small farmers. The first problems appeared in the selection process, and in the nature of the Resettlement "community".

Settlers for the Tillery Farm came from state relief roles. They were initially loaned land, a home, tools and livestock for three years. In this time, they were
expected to learn the basics of farm and home management, and of community cooperation. They were expected to follow strict home and farm guidelines, keep a record of expenses, and pay monthly installments towards purchasing their farm. If after three to five years, they had demonstrated adequate interest and potential, settlers gained title to the land, paying the remainder of their loan over a forty year period.  

Because of the nature of the program, Resettlement officials were very specific about the type of applicant they selected. First, farmers had to be already listed on state relief roles. Applicants had also to express the interest and ability to own a farm. This usually meant experience as a tenant (at least one year), as well as the presence of at least one able-bodied male. Third was the capacity to "profit from supervision and financial aid."  

Acceptance was determined by a selection committee. The committee consisted of a social service supervisor, a rural rehabilitation supervisor, one or two local landowners, and a local tenant. While the exact composition of the Halifax County selection committee is unknown, it is safe to assume that most of its members were white. This fact, while it presumably should not have played a part in the selection process, may nonetheless have shaped at least the black applicant pool as being those blacks who were "acceptable" to whites.
The type of applicant accepted for the project changed over time. In 1935-36, settlers had the lowest socio-economic status, the least amount of physical and financial resources, and were the most disadvantaged of those accepted at any time. By 1937, this group had proved unsuccessful as landowners and small farmers, and the applicant pool had "moved up a notch or two." An official summary of the Resettlement program in 1943 explained the shift from lowest to next-lowest economic status by saying "there have been more applicants than money [the acceptance ratio for farm projects was one in ten], larger case-loads than supervisors could handle..., pressure to make a good record..., and generally unfavorable loan experience with the low income group." According to Vance E. Swift, state director for the FSA from 1935-1946, such a trend was inevitable.

Unfortunately, we were obliged to be more selective with our applicants. Those on the lowest rung of the ladder were a very underprivileged group, and well simply, it got to be so they were a very, very poor investment for the government, and we were losing a great deal of money.

Reasons for the change in applicant type had their root in the administrative nature of Resettlement. Those of the lowest socio-economic status were the most needy; they were therefore the biggest risk. The
government, in attempting to redistribute wealth and power, was already taking a big risk; it needed to insure its investment by selecting those who would make the risk a success. Exclusion from a social reform effort aimed at helping those who were themselves victims of exclusion was thus the first of several paradoxes in Resettlement's approach to ending oppression for tenants and sharecroppers.

Another structural paradox concerned the displacement and relocation of hundreds of farm families. Though the government had purchased all its project sites, it could not, nor did it wish to, accommodate all those tenants already living on them. Original inhabitants were invited to apply to the farm program; not all of them were accepted or chose to stay. Relocation was made more difficult in 1936 when the Tillery farms were segregated. White farmers dwelling on the project since 1934, as well as white newcomers, were moved twelve miles away to the West Halifax tract. Blacks were placed on the Tillery farms. Only an estimated one-half of the original farm tenants at the Tillery site remained after the government stepped in.26

One former participant, in recalling the great flux of settlers at the time the projects were divided, cited wariness as a reason that so many farmers left.

I guess they was just scared. Some of our folks are funny in that way, you know, when something new coming
null
in, well they just don't know what to expect, I imagine. They sure didn't want any more trouble than they already got. 27

"Trouble" for blacks in rural North Carolina could mean many things. Most often, it signified some challenge to the existing order, in which whites were the masters and blacks, though ostensibly liberated, were still the slaves. 28 Perhaps some blacks feared retaliation from those who felt that blacks who participated were "...niggers gettin' out of hand," 29 or perhaps they had little faith that the government would live up to its claims. Indeed, the massive relocation of hundreds of families was an unprecedented move for the United States government; doubts about the success of any project which would cause so many families to leave their homes made participation seem risky. Thus, the project, in attempting to help some of the needy, drove away othrs. By forging a new community, it had necessarily to disrupt many old ones.

Not only did some farmers who had been born in Tillery leave, many new farmers from many different places, moved in. Most project families were strangers to one another; each had left a particular family, church, etc. to come to Tillery. Perhaps the only thing settlers had in common was their mutual oppression and the desire to overcome it. This rather unnatural social structure was in some ways intended by Resettlement planners. By
setting aside a certain plot of land, and by selecting certain types of farmers, planners sought to foster unity and cohesiveness amongst settlers. Such support was necessary if they were to challenge the monumental economic and social structure surrounding them. However, the unnatural social structure at Tillery farms also had adverse effects. While the newcomers had left their former homes, they did not abandon their social ties. Many settlers maintained close contact with their families and former churches, to the detriment of building a new community at Tillery Farms. As one participant noted:

there wasn't nothing bad meant. It's just moving to the project was a big step for most folks. They was leaving their homes, their families. They didn't know no one here. It took getting used to. You stick to what you know.

Original Tillery inhabitants who remained on the project also stuck to what they knew. They were slow to accept outsiders, and felt, possibly, invaded. Social ties between newcomers and original inhabitants were therefore slow to develop. One woman who came to the project in its final stages from another county hinted at the tenacity of old bonds when she said "you know we been here now forty years now [1947-1986] and we're still outsiders." Here was yet another paradox inherent in Resettlement. By bringing together a group of strangers with common interests, planners sought unity; in the
first few years of the project at least, project unity suffered due to prior social bonds.

More tangible problems than social bonds plagued the Tillery Farms. These involved paradoxes which obscured the true purpose of the farm communities so that settlers were confused and doubtful about their participation in the program. The most obvious confusion which emerged at Tillery concerned housing and loan agreements. One of the biggest obstacles for early settlers was the very unfinished state of the project. Although they had been promised forty acres of cleared land, a finished home, and a host of community facilities, those settlers who came to the project between 1934 and 1936 received none of these. Instead, they were placed in temporary row houses, one row for blacks, one row for whites, and were expected to walk or ride mules to their fields each day. Much of the land was uncleared; instead of farming their land, many settlers in the first two years received relief wages to clear it.33

The unfinished state of the project, as well as the strange social atmosphere and the general novelty of large-scale government reform caused many settlers to abandon the project early on. Between 1934 and 1937, "folks was coming and going all the time. Some of them hardly stayed a month or two. It wasn't until...1937 that folks stayed for longer."34 Here again, Resettlement itself was the biggest obstacle. It made
big promises; it often had a hard time living up to them.

Plans for the final completion of the Tillery farms were underway by June 1936.35 The first buildings to be built on the Tillery project were a cooperative store and sixty individual farm houses. Roads were graded beginning in late 1936-37; as of November 1936, none of the land transferred from the NCERA had been paid for. Beginning in 1937, the Virginia Power and Electric company brought electricity to the project, and a public aid highway was under construction.36

Most of the work done on the project, aside from more specialized jobs, was performed by settlers and other relief clients under the Works Progress program. Workers received either monthly or hourly wages, which ranged from $.25/hour for unskilled labor to $1.65/hour for a fleet-type tractor operator. Often, wages paid by the government were higher than private contracting rates—a cause of consternation to private contractors, who felt they were being undermined as small businessmen.37 This feeling was to re-emerge some years later in Tillery as a specific struggle between community members and project participants. It will be dealt with in section four.

The government paid high wages to its relief workers; it also was not stingy in building project farm houses. It built one hundred 4-room, two hundred 5-room, and fifty 6-room houses at Tillery, all of frame construction and complete with electric wiring.
Houses were either one or two-story, with "a screened in porch in back, a small 'piazza' in front, a kitchen with sink, a pantry for canned goods, a sitting room, and...bedrooms. The houses were raised on brick underpinnings, and were painted white on the outside." Inside, the furniture varied, being either what the family had brought with them (these were usually meager), or purchased from the government for an additional $200. Outside facilities included a barn, poultry house, hog house, and a barn yard. The sanitary facilities and the water supply were generally excellent. Many settlers considered the houses very satisfactory, often "nearly perfect." I remember when we come to the project for the first time and my daddy told us this was our new house. It was so pretty, it was something, I tell you! It was so new you could smell the paint and we was so happy we felt like we was sittin on top of the world with our feet hanging down, swingin' in the air!

Good housing was no accident on the part of government planners. They wanted to raise the standard of living of farm families all across America; they felt housing, as a direct reflection of social status, economic means, and general attitude, was an important place to start. The tenant homes and shacks from which many settlers came bespoke very substandard living
Planners felt that any improvement was an important improvement, and if families could be given a more comfortable, more attractive place to live, perhaps the other attributes of good farm and home practices would follow.41

Unfortunately, nice houses did little to change the social history, outlooks and customs of the people who lived in them. Lifetimes of poverty and oppression were not erased by fine trim, or wood slats. This fact was most clearly elucidated by settlers' responses to the homes they lived in. Many families felt uncomfortable with the relatively fine homes in which they lived, and the mounting indebtedness which they, as forty-year tenants, faced.42 In some instances, settlers got rid of their old tenant furnishings and attempted to provide furnishings comparable to their house. This often resulted in an expenditure on house furnishings which was greater than their incomes could justify.43 And while most all settlers strove for some improvement in their living conditions, many would gladly have exchanged their fine project house for "a lower level of living but with a greater measure of freedom in using available income."44 One project participant felt that housing, despite its luxury, was a debt that not all settlers felt comfortable with.

I think some folks worried about being in debt a great deal. Back
Indeed, the notion of being in debt posed a serious problem for many settlers. It interfered with every aspect of their life on the project, and as such, it undermined the feeling of independence and self-sufficiency so crucial to Resettlement. As mentioned earlier, land ownership, subsistence farming, and financial responsibility were important goals of Resettlement. Administrators who created the projects had envisioned a situation in which the government would act as a generous and benificent lender, providing houses, 40-60 acre lots, two mules, feed and fertilizer. In return, they expected that the settler apply the "good farm and home practices" taught to him by project personnel, so that he could make regular and sustained payments on his farm. No profit on the part of the government was ever intended; administrators' greatest hopes for the financial success of the program were that the farms would eventually pay for themselves.\textsuperscript{47}

Administrators saw this plan as fair--nowhere else would settlers find such accomodation. However, most administrators came from social and economic backgrounds where such concepts as education, savings, fine living conditions, and working for the future had meanings and social connotations that were quite different from those
that project participants had. Many settlers had had no education; only some participants saw education as desirable or necessary. Furthermore, all settlers, as former tenants, were accustomed to much looser loan agreements (these agreements were rarely written down), and much shorter rental periods. Tenure on a given farm meant, for most settlers, anything from one to seven years. Rarely did any tenant remain on a farm longer than ten to fifteen years. 48

Coming from such a tenure history to a situation where they were expected to spend forty years paying off a Resettlement loan, tenants must have felt trapped. In 1937 an article describing the Roanoke Farms cited the long loan period as perhaps the most difficult aspect of the Resettlement project.

Forty years is a long time. What these projects mean is that a man keeps right on being a tenant as long as he lives. If he's lucky, doesn't die or get sick, or have too many bad years, his children may own a farm. Meanwhile, considering his interest payments, he's paid the government $8000 for a $5000 property. 49

Many settlers chose not to bear this forty-year burden, and left the project. There were certainly many outside enticements. One settler recalled that

Some folks, and I know a man myself who did this, they didn't like payin all that money to the government. The couldn't see
how it was helpin' them, see, they couldn't see that it was for their benefit to make all them payments. This fella, he came by one day and said he was movin' off the project, he didn't want nothing to do with farming. So he took that money they give him for seed or something, and bought himself a car instead and come riding through the project with the biggest smile on his face, I'm telling you. But that man was a fool, you understand, because in two years when that car need fixin', when its broke, his money's gone, his farm's gone, that man don't have nothin'. But I still got my two mules, and my farm and my house.

Such an attitude of perseverance was the exception rather than the rule. If the government was going to end oppression, many must have asked, why did it keep settlers enslaved to their farms? In requiring settlers to make regular payments under strict supervision and the threat of eviction if they did not comply, the government was indeed playing a familiar role. Although planners may have recognized the need for such actions, and the eventual positive outcomes of perseverance, most settlers did not possess the same foresight or faith in the Resettlement process. Paradoxically, for all intents and purposes, the very structure of the Resettlement plan oppressed settlers, and drove them away.
Structural paradoxes were not the only thing which undermined Resettlement's aim to end oppression. The presence of racism at Tillery—which itself the very embodiment of social oppression in the rural South—made many of the government's promises seem hypocritical.

Since the Roanoke Farms embraced segregated sister colonies, race relations assumed an even greater importance. Not only was there potential for tension between settlers and the outside community, there was potential for internal tension amongst project participants, as well. The most obvious example of discrimination on the part of settlers themselves came with the operation of the community Mutual associations.

Both the Tillery Mutual Association, black, and the Roanoke Farms Mutual Association, white, were theoretically settler-owned and run. They had separate boards of directors, separate meetings, and separate meeting places. The associations were responsible primarily for business transactions related to the farm, like the marketing, storage or preparation of certain crops. In theory, each mutual association was to have its own heavy farm equipment, for which settlers would pay a certain fee. All fees went to the association's general funds. They were returned to settlers, with other collected revenues like profits from crop sales, as dividends at the end of each year.
In practice however, things were not so equitable. Administratively, the two mutual associations were considered one; instead of having separate dividends, separate control of marketing procedures, and separate ownership of heavy farm equipment, these procedures were done through one organization, and not surprisingly it was the Roanoke Farms Mutual. In the rural south of the 1930's, black settlers should hardly have expected otherwise, and yet they protested bravely that these proceedings were unfair. In a letter dated August 31, 1939, to Mrs. Constance G.H. Daniel, an FSA administrator who had recently visited the project and who had apparently spoken with settlers about their rights and responsibilities, members of the Tillery Mutual Association summarized their situation as follows.

We are the homesteaders on the Tillery area of the Roanoke Farms which area is made up of the colored people. I know you understand from [the community manager]'s address that on this project there are two organizations, namely the TMA, colored, and the RFMA, white. Now the colored association does not have the chance under the local interpretation to operate separately from the white organization....We are asking for a chance and yet they fail to give us a chance. And here is a situation we have right now that we would like for you to get straightened out for us. We have some heavy farm equipment such as a peanut threshing outfit and the
Association's general manager, white, recommended to our board of directors that we sell [this equipment to individual homesteaders]. Now the board constitutes five members, we did not want to sell, but with such handicaps as we have we could not fairly do any better with no more help than we have. They explained to us that individual homesteaders could run them better at a better advantage than the association but we could not see it that way. And the [black] association is not satisfied at us passing a resolution to sell them. So we were wondering if it could be reconsidered right away before time to use them this fall... We would really like for someone in authority to see to it that we do have a fair chance.

No individual settlers signed their names. Presumably, they were too frightened that displeased white administrators on the project might retaliate against such an assertion of black rights. That blacks might fear retaliation was indicated by the rather obscure mention of "handicaps" on the part of black board members. A black board of directors, even despite discrimination, signified some sort of power on the part of black settlers. Board members most likely did not want to jeopardize their potentially powerful position by making themselves individually vulnerable to white usurpation of their position.

While it was not uncommon for other cooperative members across the country to rent their heavy farm equipment from the individual settlers, paying a rental
fee which would help defray the initial cost, members of the TMA obviously did not welcome the proposal. Either these members did not fully understand the virtues of individual ownership, or they were afraid of discriminatory practices. In truth, both of these possibilities probably played a role. Discrimination was most likely the more motivating factor, since blacks, as a minority, were in a defensive position.

Certainly, the fear of discrimination was not unfounded. Heavy farm equipment was an expensive and essential component of the modern farming encouraged on the projects. Settlers could not do without it. By placing equipment in the hands of individual owners, a certain general control over when the equipment was used, for how much and to what extent, was surrendered to the individual owner. He could presumably give his friends first use, at a lower rate, and force others to wait. In an occupation where success or failure is contingent upon timing and weather, such discriminatory practices might prove disastrous. Black settlers, operating out of a history of racism and dominance by whites could quite naturally assume that they would be given last priority in heavy equipment rental.

Another example of discrimination rested in the widespread dissatisfaction of blacks toward the white project doctor. In addition to a co-op farm
association, settlers also participated in a cooperative medical association. For a $30 annual fee, settlers who so chose could have complete medical coverage. Immediate facilities included a project doctor, an infirmary with six rooms, a "dope room"\textsuperscript{54}, an operation and examination room, a nurse's office and a bathroom. The infirmary had "modern" equipment (an x-ray machine, for example) and was built of stone.\textsuperscript{55}

In addition to these facilities members were promised hospital and surgical coverage, if necessary. The $30 membership fee was, by all standards, very reasonable. Annual revenues were expected to cover medical expenses, doctor's fees, and upkeep. Because all these things were expensive, settlers were pressured into obtaining membership—the medical association could only effectively function if all project participants were members.\textsuperscript{56}

Doctors in post-depression rural North Carolina were difficult to come by; doctors willing to participate in a financially ungratifying social program were even more so. Thus, when L.L. Mclendon, the Roanoke Farms manager, received complaints from the black families on the project about having to see a white doctor, he virtually ignored their complaints.\textsuperscript{57} The response Mclendon actually made, though the obvious one for a man in his position, is
nonetheless indicative of the status of race relations in and around Tillery. He said quite simply that

the funds do not permit the hiring of two doctors. We know the homesteaders are getting many times the service they would be paying for with the same amount of money anywhere else we have ever heard of. It would be impossible for us to employ a negro physician to attend the medical program with the white occupants.

In his response, McLendon overlooked the most significant aspect of the settlers' complaints. Clearly, their dissatisfaction with the white doctor meant that their needs and preferences were not being met. The Tillery farms, as a black settlement, was ostensibly a place where blacks could live, work and socialize freely and in the manner which most suited them; this, at least, was the reason given for the initial segregation of the projects in 1936. The fact that blacks complained to McLendon emphasized their willingness to challenge the discrimination which they had been promised would not exist at Tillery; the fact that McLendon did not take note of discrimination as a legitimate concern for settlers emphasized that he did not see it as a problem.

Judging from his response to settlers' complaints about the doctor, McLendon seemed to feel that black participants 'didn't know a gift horse when they looked it in the mouth.' If they knew what a good deal they were getting, he implied, they would hold their
A similar attitude was also expressed by Mclendon towards the heavy equipment issue. He wrote, in his response to the TMA's complaint about individual ownership, that "the decision [for individual ownership] was based on the fact that the machinery could be more equitably distributed...by placing units of this equipment strategically with key borrowers, who would arrange with the neighbors...and could deliver more efficient service." The benefits of efficiency and equitability were clearly not apparent to the members of the TMA; they either did not understand, were not told, or did not believe that these benefits were behind the association's decision.

Maclendon's practical treatment of these two struggles implied that he himself did not recognize or sympathize with the racial aspect of settlers' complaints. His behavior in these two instances prompts closer examination of Maclendon in his role as project supervisor.

Mr. L.L. (Mac) Mclendon came to the project with very good credentials. He had worked for years as a County extension agent for the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, and was highly regarded throughout the state for his work with farmers. As a graduate from A&M State College in agriculture, Mclendon had had much technical training in the most modern farm practices.
He himself was not a farmer, though his education served him well in his work as a county agent. Unlike the FSA, which worked with low-income tenants, the AAA worked primarily with established farmers—for whom poverty and oppression had not been as extensive or severe. While the FSA aimed primarily at rehabilitation of a desperate group, the AAA aimed at providing good example to those who even in their troubled state, were better off than most project participants had ever been. The AAA practice of selecting an exemplary farmer and prompting others to follow suit was thus not applicable in a resettlement situation.  

Difference in approach, combined with McLendon's own socio-economic background (he came from a "good" family in Anson Co., North Carolina, and had a brother who was a very successful lawyer in Greensboro) did not translate well to a Resettlement framework. McLendon was not used to dealing with lower-class farmers; he was often frustrated by their lack of education and their aloofness with technical assistance. He presumably did not realize that the procedure under government ownership was entirely different from that ever experienced by the families, and was somewhat bewildering to them....It was and still is a very difficult thing to eliminate the "country style" of doing things and substituting therefore an entirely new procedure for loans, collections,
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Maclendon is quoted as saying, early on in his time at Roanoke, that "I don't know how these folks will stand prosperity...I don't think they'll be able to handle it." Perhaps it was this doubt of settlers' competence at handling independence that prompted him to assume a paternalistic—and at times tyrannical—attitude towards blacks at Tillery. Indeed, one of Mclendon's superiors, in referring to his conduct at Roanoke farms, stated that Mclendon would have made "a good plantation manager...but not a good project manager." Such a description implied a master-slave relationship. As such, it described two aspects of Mclendon's style as project director. First it hinted that as 'master', Mclendon did more than supervise settlers—he somehow controlled them. Second, it suggested that Mclendon somehow put blacks in slave status.

Ideally, settlers were expected to understand their loan contracts, as well as the more intangible aspects of resettlement (such as the importance of landownership and farm and home classes to liberating them from oppression and poverty.) Ideally, too, project directors were expected to supervise—not manage. Mclendon undermined this essential aspect of resettlement by keeping settlers uninformed. Complaints were often made by settlers and by Mclendon's superiors that "no official understanding of what the people are expected to get [out of the
"project]" was ever reached between Mclendon and the settlers, and that furthermore, farmers at Tillery had "never had their contracts explained to them."\textsuperscript{65}

Though settlers may have been uninformed, they nonetheless realized the importance of their questions. Since Mclendon was so unresponsive, many settlers wrote to Washington for help. They asked the following.

- Will Washington allow me the privilege of buying my own fertilizer, as a homesteader?

- Can a homesteader have any credit at the community store?

- Do I have the same privilege of selling my crop like I did last year or will I have to sell it in the FSA name?

- Does Washington require all I make to them and not leave me anything?

- If I have any hogs to sell does Washington require that money to be paid on debts too?

- Is it Washington rules that I should use this doctor and no other one?\textsuperscript{66}

According to Mclendon, all settlers knew the procedures.\textsuperscript{67} If in fact procedure had been explained, no time was ever taken to determine whether participants understood the explanation. Quite clearly, the above questions make point to fundamentally uninformed the settlers actually were. Mclendon's supervisors soon noted the contradiction. they issued a warning that he
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change his practices.

Someone...take the time to explain to Mac the fact that the [canned policy] answers to these criticisms are not the significant point in [the settlers'] bringing them up. It seems that such a misunderstanding on the part of homesteaders as to the reasons for some of the things we have done could have been avoided. I have an idea that the reason they wrote to someone off the project was because they did not feel free to talk to someone else at hand.

That settlers wrote to Washington with their complaints signifies another aspect of Mclendon's role as project 'master': they did not feel comfortable dealing with him. On more than one occasion he treated them, as one project participant put it, "like niggers."69 One example that Mclendon treated blacks differently than he did whites, was his allowance of credit at the white cooperative store. Although credit was not officially permitted at the community stores, there is some evidence that Mclendon overlooked this rule to the advantage of whites on the Roanoke arms project. The fact that the credit rule was being broken at Roanoke was indicated when a black settler wrote to Washington asking "why is it that we can't get credit at our association but can get it at the white association?"70

Mclendon dismissed the question with the statement that "no credit is available to any person at any place or at any time without an order on tis project."71
response implied that the settler was either misinformed or lying. It is doubtful, however, that a black settler would be moved to write Washington (a risky venture for many blacks who feared discriminatory retaliation) over mere hearsay. Apparently, it was common knowledge amongst some settlers that credit was a regular occurrence at West Halifax, and furthermore, that McLendon was aware of it.

Put it this way. Mr. McLendon was a very smart man. He got done what he wanted. I give him that. It's a fact that if he liked you he would look the other way, you know what I'm saying? Now we weren't never supposed to have credit, and I never did, but there was some folks who said you could get credit oever at the other project, and McLendon would look the other way. 72

Further evidence is found in a letter from J.O. Walker, director of the FSA Resettlement division, to Robert Hudgens, Assistant Administrator, describing the status of the Roanoke Mutual Association. Although Walker did not go into detail, he did make the statement that "credit sales have not been properly controlled by the organization." 73

The fact that McLendon knew about but overlooked an obvious breach in the rules to the sole advantage of white settlers is supported by another example that not only was he willing look the other way, he also saw
black settlers as ultimately expendable.

There was one [black] man, I forget his name its been so long, but he and Mclendon got on real good. We was all supposed to go in the front door of the office and wait our turns in there, it was always so crowded at the office. But this man, he could go in another door and be right in Mclendon's office, he didn't have to wait like the rest of us. If he needed something done, Mclendon would see to it. He was good to the man so's that man would come out and say good things about him. But you know this man went into Mclendon's office one day and say if Mclendon could do things for some other folks and Mclendon didn't like that. It wasn't but a month that that man had to leave the project. Mclendon said it was from Washington but I don't think so. [That man was] a good farmer and Mclendon could say anything he wanted and say it was Washington rules, and don't nobody know the difference.  

This was not the only incident of unofficial expulsion from the Roanoke Farms. Apparently Mclendon's black assistant on the Tillery farm, William C. Cooper, in 1939 got "to telling black folks our rights on the project, and Mclendon didn't like that. He just got rid of the man, like that."  

Further evidence of discrimination is found in a letter from H.H. Gordon to Mclendon, dated December 6, 1939. In the letter, he refers to a "failure on our part to include [negro personnel] in the staff
conferences in meetings of the project and field personnel, and...[a failure to distribute] all the material, procedure and otherwise which goes to the white personnel". 76

Finally, in November 1941, another statement was released which indicated Mclendon's true feelings about blacks, and about the project in general.

The personnel say that Mac planned to break up the Tillery end of the project into cooperative farms. That he didn't want Negro clients to become owners, that they had recommended at least twelve clients for lease and project contracts without results. 77

Mclendon was dismissed in 1941, two years before the projects began liquidation. In his five years as community manager, he had frustrated many of the plans and possibilities that administrators and settlers had hoped for. In the words of H.H. Gordon who finally demanded Mclendon's resignation,

it [had] been very evident that Mr. Mclendon was running the project to suit his own ideas without reference to procedure, and in direct conflict to good cooperative principles...I put all the cards on the table and told him that he had lost the confidence of the homesteaders and of the Washington office...Mclendon indicated that he had expected just such a thing. 78
In addition to McLendon's mishandling of the project, and the other structural difficulties with the resettlement plan, the Tillery farms faced yet another struggle: opposition of the local outside community not only to the racial composition of the project, but also to the very nature of resettlement as fostering independence of a traditionally oppressed group.

Objections to the racial composition of the Tillery project occurred early on, at the time of initial segregation at Roanoke Farms. The first complaints came in December 1936, when members of the Tillery PTA wrote to congressman J.H. Kerr in Washington.

Dear Mr. Kerr
We...are asking you to help us solve a very serious problem....We only have 112 pupils enrolled in our school and three teachers to teach them. We have three teachers this year because of our relief children. We understand that the plans are to move all of the white families from here. This would take...our teachers away, ruin our school, and cause much trouble in our community.

Opposition to the prospect of an all-black project was to become even more blatant, however. Three days after the PTA letter, Congressman Kerr received another complaint, this one with 97 signatures—
Dear J.H. Kerr

We, the undersigned citizens of Tillery and surrounding communities hereby request you to ask the government not to make the Tillery farm project a negro project alone as our population now is 98% colored.

Among the signatures were, notably, the names L.A. Parks, F.B. Cook, W.A. Cook, A.J. Jones, and J.E. Martin—names, it will be recalled, of some of the more prominent landowner-entrepreneurs in Tillery. This complaint, dated December 7, 1936, was the last heard until the new year.

On January 16, Congressman Kerr sent these complaints on to more qualified readers. In his plea to William W. Alexander, the head administrator for the FSA in Washington, Congressman Kerr stated that the Tillery site "is a very fine farming section; much better than the [West Halifax] area....The white residents of this Tillery section resent very much the colonization of negroes in their immediate vicinity...." 81

Despite all pleas to the contrary, the government went ahead with its plans for a separate white community. After "very careful consideration" of the complaints received, FSA officials in Washington decided that

If the suggestions made [by these citizens] were followed it
would mean the introduction of white families to a community already 98% colored, and surrounded by negro communities, and the reduction of the number of negro families to be resettled. This would necessitate the placing of some of the negro families on the white site which is surrounded by whites and has school facilities that would also be seriously affected. 82

Not only were the white citizens in Tillery threatened by having blacks in their vicinity, they were threatened by the existence of the project itself. With all its claims of self-sufficiency, resettlement posed a threat the economy of the region. In early 1938, a citizen's league (no names were specified) composed of "serious-minded young businessmen, willing and anxious to do what is best for their nation, their community, and themselves," 83 sent a petition to W.W. Alexander protesting the planned erection of community stores on the projects. The petition was neatly typeset, written in clear prose, and enumerated the grievances of of local businessmen.

First the petition stated that the Resettlement sites, both Tillery and West Halifax, were surrounded by small towns, country stores, schools and churches which were "amply able and anxious to care for all the needs of the settlers." Furthermore, these privately owned stores were "much nearer to many settlers than their own central stores would be." 84

Second, the 325 families who would live on the
Roanoke farms project represented approximately 1500 people, a "good-sized town in itself and an appreciable percentage of he county's population". Thus, the petition contended, project stores would severely deprive local businessmen of customers and profit.

Third, the petition challenged the very goals of having a cooperative community store. One of the reasons the government gave for having the store was that it wished to eliminate costly middlemen merchants. At the same time, the government promised merchants that the stores would not attempt to undersell local enterprises. Businessmen found these statements contradictory, stating that "if [you won't undersell us], no corners will be cut and no reson for having the stores other than convenience is evident." Petitioners further contended that the government-supervised cooperative system would demand the keeping of extra records by the stores--a record of each purchaser and his daily purchases--and that this would "increae the cost of operating the cooperatives instead of cutting corners."85

Businessmen ended their petition with an eloquent accusation of Resettlement planners, saying that the business people of Halifax county faced the Depression bravely, and that just as they were beginning to "see better times ahead", they were faced with a new problem.

Many call it government competition. Many feel here that the government is a willing party.
to a program which will paralyzed our businessmen and citizens who have carried the government through by paying taxes...the little businessman says he knows now who the Forogton Man is. He feels that his government has forgotten and forsaken him.

Here was an impressive document. Businessmen presented their argument clearly and in good prose. They turned the tables on the FSA's Resettlement ideal by making themselves out as the unfortunates. They turned the tables even further when they stated later in the petition that

There has developed a deep-seated distrust and suspicion bordering on hatred, on the part of the settlers toward businessmen and other citizens of the county....For some reason...the settlers have been led to believe that the merchants and other businessmen are their enemies, gouging them for unholy profits; they have been led to believe that the rest of the county "looks down on them" and wants nothing to do with them. We deplore this condition and condemn those responsible.

If these merchants so righteously condemned those responsible for propagating distrust and class hatred, they ironically condemned themselves. Settlers were in fact justified in their distrustful feelings towards merchants, who "had been supplying the farmers with groceries and fertilizer for a generation and charging as risk insurance 20 to 70% interest on all
Despite all eloquent pleas and protests on the part of local merchants, the FSA in 1937 went ahead with its plan to build community stores. As it turned out, merchants' fears about losing business were unfounded; "folks shopped at Tillery most all of the time for all sorts of things." Perhaps as a compromise, Mclendon struck a deal with Mr. A.J. Jones, the biggest merchant in Tillery, allowing Mr. Jones to be sole supplier of fertilizer, trucks, and seeds to the Roanoke Farms cooperatives.

Even though the community store issue was not as disasterous as originally thought, however, it gave rise to tensions which were not easily dispelled. Racism and distrust, already working to undermine Resettlement from inside the project bounds, thus worked also in the local community.
Never, in the nine years of the projects existence, was Roanoke Farms filled to capacity. Less than half of those farmers who participated at Tillery ever gained title to their land. Structural strains, racism, and local tension made life for project settlers difficult. Natural disasters, too, made life difficult. In August 1940, one of the biggest floods in Halifax County history swept through the Roanoke farms, devastating 9,500 out of the 10,000 acres in the vicinity of the Roanoke river. Most farms were completely devastated. As a result, many farmers left the project. They left their loans, their hard work, and their hopes of owning a project farm, as well. Other farmers, despite the devastation, stayed with the project, receiving government grants to rebuild their farms. Most of those who remained went on to buy their farms. In 1943, the first year of Roanoke's liquidation, 93 settlers became owners. These families, having faced the many contradictions of resettlement--having continued their struggle against oppression despite racism and natural disasters--would prove essential in sustaining the Tillery community after all outside administrators had gone.
Endnotes


3 Paul Conkin, Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program, (Ithica, Cornell University, 1959), Appendix.


5 Ibid., p. 16.


7 USDA, Ten Years, p. 5.


10 Kirk, Emergency Relief, p. 305.

11 Ibid.,


14 USDA, Ten Years, p. 3.
15 Conkin, New World, p. 73.
16 USDA, Ten Years, p. 7.
17 Ibid.
19 Kirk, Emergency Relief, p. 305.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., p. 303.; USDA, Ten Years, p. 5.
23 Interview with Vance E. Swift, Feb. 8, 1986.
24 USDA, Ten Years, p. 6.
26 No official data is available. This estimate was made by Oscar Tillery, August 1, 1985.
29 Interview with Gary Grant, Tillery, North Carolina, March 16, 1986.
30 Pioneering, p. 67.
31 Interview with Ruth Johnson, Jan. 12, 1986.
32 Interview with Florenza Grant, Tillery, North Carolina, Jan. 12, 1986.
33 Letter from Howard H. Gordon, FSA Regional Director, to William W. Alexander, Director FSA, June 12, 1940. N.A.
34 Interview with Ruth Johnson, Jan. 12, 1986.
35 Memorandum to Howard H. Gordon, n.d. N.A.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
40 Interview with Ruth Johnson, Jan. 12, 1986.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., p. 40.
44 Ibid., p. 44.
47 Clawson, *Experiments*, p. 35.
51 USDA, *Ten Years*, p. 39.
52 Letter from the Tillery Mutual Association to Constance G.H. Daniel, Regional Project Director, August 31, 1939. N.A.
53 The project director, L.L. Mclendon, had expelled settlers from the project in the past. See section three.
54 Memo from Howard H. Gordon, Regional Director, to George S. Mitchell, FSA Assistant Administrator, June 12, 1939. N.A.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Letter from L.L. McLendon, Roanoke Farms Manager, to Charles D. Faris, FSA Assistant Regional Director, Sept. 19, 1939. N.A.

58 Ibid.

59 Letter from Charles D. Faris, Assistant Regional Director, to George S. Mitchell, Assistant Administrator, Sept. 24, 1937. N.A.

60 Letter from L.L. McLendon to Charles D. Faris, Assistant Regional Director, Sept. 19, 1939. N.A.

61 Interview with Vance E. Swift, Feb. 8, 1986.

62 Letter from Howard H. Gordon, Regional Director, to George S. Mitchell, FSA Assistant Administrator, June 12, 1940. N.A.

63 Interview with Vance E. Swift, Feb. 8, 1986.

64 Letter from Howard H. Gordon to C. B. Baldwin, Oct. 8, 1941. N.A.

65 Memorandum from Constance G.H. Daniel, Regional Project Director, to George S. Mitchell, FSA Assistant Administrator, Nov. 7, 1941. N.A.

66 Letter from L.L. McLendon to Charles D. Faris, Assistant Regional Director, Sept. 19, 1939. N.A.

67 Ibid.

68 Letter from Robert W. Hudgens, Assistant Administrator, to Howard H. Gordon, Regional Director, Oct. 24, 1939. N.A.

69 Interview with "T" Lyons, August 1, 1985.

70 Letter from anonymous Tillery settler to Constance G.H. Daniel, Regional Project Director, August 18, 1939. N.A.

71 Letter from L.L. McLendon to Charles D. Faris, Assistant Regional Director, Sept. 19, 1939. N.A.


73 Memorandum from J.O. Walker, Resettlement Director, to Robert W. Hudgens, FSA Assistant Administrator, June 25, 1945. N.A.

74 Interview with William Taylor, Feb. 1, 1986.

75 Ibid.
Memorandum from Constance G.H. Daniel, Regional Project Director, to George S. Mitchell, FSA Assistant Administrator, Oct. 8, 1941. N.A.

Letter from Howard H. Gordon, Regional Director, to C.B. Baldwin, Nov. 1, 1941. N.A.

Ibid.

Letter from Tillery PTA to United States Congressman J.H. Kerr, Dec. 4, 1936. N.A.


Letter from J.H. Kerr to William W. Alexander, FSA Administrator, Jan. 16, 1937. N.A.

Letter from Howard H. Gordon, Regional Director, to George S. Mitchell, Assistant Administrator, Jan. 24, 1937. N.A.

Petition by Citizen's League of Halifax County, North Carolina, Feb. 2, 1938. N.A.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Interview with Ruth Johnson, Jan. 12, 1986.

Interview with William Taylor, Jan 12, 1986; Interview with Ruth Johnson, Jan. 12, 1986.

Interview with Vance E. Swift, Feb. 8, 1986.

Exact numbers are not available. The consensus among the four project participants interviewed was that the flood acted as "the straw that broke the camel's back"(Ruth Johnson), adding to the other structural and social pressures present at Tillery. William Taylor estimated that "thirty percent" of the project participants left after the flood.
Chapter Three

The Struggle Continues

"Blacks have got to help themselves."—Gary Grant

I don't know why other folks say that the project was a failure. I only know one thing. It gave me something I ain't had before. It gave me land. It gave me a farm. It gave me a chance to make it on my own. Who told you the farm project didn't do no good? I made a good life for myself and my children. A man can't ask for no more.

For most government officials in 1943, and for most students of New Deal farm policy, the Resettlement projects of the 1930's and early 1940's failed to aid America's rural poor. True, the projects—or Roanoke Farms at least—were vulnerable to racism, financial miscalculation, and poor management. For these reasons and others, they reached only a fraction of the nation's most needy farmers.

But as the opening quote makes clear Roanoke, despite its many failures, provided some small farmers
and black farmers in particular with several very real successes. "A farm," "a chance to make it on [one's] own," and "a good life for [oneself] and [one's] children," have emerged in the years since Roanoke as the essential themes in blacks' struggle for independence.

Political Scientist Lester M. Salamon, in his study of eight all-black Resettlement projects throughout the South, astutely documented that by providing black sharecroppers with land, the projects provided the essentials in the struggle for independence.

Given the importance of land in Southern economic life at the time, black landownership constituted a challenge to [the] chain of dependence at its most crucial link. Landownership, after all, meant self-employment, and hence a degree of independence from white control unavailable through almost any other means. It also meant managerial experience and the opportunity to exercise greater control over one's own life....Through the provision of land, supervision and community organization, [the Resettlement projects] converted the South's landless economic class in to 'self-reliant individuals' capable not only of economic survival, but also full participation in the social and political affairs of their communities.'

It was with land then--with a sense of ownership, community, and thereby power--that blacks in Tillery entered the most recent chapter of their struggle for independence. As events through the last forty years will show, they needed all the help they could get.
The last forty years of Tillery's history fall roughly into three parts. From the liquidation of the project in 1943 until 1968, Tillery citizens used their land, education, and their common bonding as a group of black farmers in a white society to forge a community infrastructure that would help them fight against the oppression surrounding them. Between 1968 and approximately 1978, ongoing struggles with farm foreclosures, landloss, outmigration, and racism overwhelmed and crippled citizens in a decade of virtual inaction. Beginning in 1978 and continuing into the present, two particular struggles—a school closing, and efforts to save Tillery farmers from foreclosure—culminated in dividing citizens and laying bare the essential components of what a struggling black community in America must face.

One family in particular figures prominently in these pages. Mathew and Florenza Grant and their children have, since their arrival in Tillery in 1947 been a source of energy, concern, and strength in Tillery's many struggles. They are not the only concerned or active citizens in Tillery, but they are the most consistently outspoken. Through their words and actions the Grants serve as spokespersons if not for the community at large, then at least for that part of the community dedicated to social change and the rights of black people. More than once, the Grants have met with
opposition not only from outside forces, but also from Tillery citizens themselves. Such opposition demonstrates the centrality of their efforts to the Tillery community. It does not necessarily mean that one party is right, and the other is wrong.

The planners at Roanoke Farms had gone to great lengths to insure community involvement on the part of settlers. Community involvement, of all the aspects of Resettlement, had been the most successful since it was the least controversial, most enjoyable, and most immediately gratifying of all project activities. In 1937, planners organized a singing group at Tillery which met regularly, gave concerts, and even prompted the genesis of another gospel group which performed in friendly rivalry with its predecessor. As of June 1940, the group boasted "almost equal numbers of older and younger people....The active part of the young people this year has made [the success of the group] possible." 

A community activity which called for more widespread social involvement was Family Day. Administrators declared a project-wide holiday and families gathered at the community center for music, games, food, and a generally festive atmosphere. One
project participant found that

Of all the things we done on the project, I think the Family Day was the most rewarding. It gave the settlers a chance to get together as neighbors and enjoy each other's company. Some of my best memories come from one Family Day or another. It was the only time folks really felt like part of [the project] community.

Most settlers attended such community activities as gospel concerts or a Family Days; their involvement in activities of more lasting import was, in comparison, tiny. The Resettlement Administration sponsored adult education classes, home and farm management classes, and a community cooperative; one former participant estimated that of the over one hundred families at Tillery farms at a given time, only a handful ever completed a reading course, and of the over 1000 individuals on the project, less than fifty were actively involved in running the Tillery Mutual Association.

Attendance, however, was not the sole measure of success for these activities. More important than the numbers who participated was the dedication which active members displayed. Those who did attend classes and help with the cooperative were those for whom independence was a serious goal; they realized that education and community involvement were vital elements for success. Such dedication was to play an important role years...
later in Tillery when the outside administrators were gone, and citizens had to come together for events less joyful than Family Day.

The approximately thirty farmers at Tillery who were active with the Mutual Association worked hard at making it a fully functioning organization. Perhaps the best indication of their dedication to the cooperative lay in their desire to achieve full and independent ownership of the cooperative facilities. After three years of close supervision, members, in May 1940, gathered $1,000 in unsigned pledges from Tillery homesteaders "for the purpose of taking over the cooperative facilities, particularly the store and grist mill, on a monthly rental basis."  

From 1940 until 1943 settlers rented the cooperative. In 1943, the government began liquidating the project and granting title to individual plots of land. Tillery Mutual applied for and received a quitclaim deed for the cooperative land and facilities. Here was the first example that some of the intended goals of the Resettlement program had, indeed, taken hold in Tillery. These farmers knew well the uniqueness of their operation. Nowhere else in the county could blacks furnish themselves with a grist mill and equitable prices for seed and fertilizer. Nowhere else could they pool together to use heavy farm equipment; nowhere else could they feel that they were active and vital participants in an economic venture. Though not extensive, community
involvement in a local cooperative had after six years matured to a full-fledged, independent, worker-owned enterprise.

Nonetheless, after two years of functioning independently, the TMA was unable to meet its costs. In 1945, members were forced to sell the cooperative. One of the most prominent reasons for the TMA's difficulty was the nature of the post-project community in Tillery. When the government began liquidation in 1943, many of the original project participants had left. In order to sell the remaining units, the FSA opened sales to all black tenants or sharecroppers having workstock and farm experience. In the seven years between 1943 and 1950, the government granted 105 quitclaim deeds; more than half of those deeds went to nonproject participants. Newcomers, seeking security in an unfamiliar and unfavorable setting, did not lend the support necessary to sustain the cooperative. Some were unaware of its existence. Others took their business elsewhere. For many homesteaders, the traditional furnishing arrangements still made sense.

We come here from Northhampton County, where my wife and I have family. That was our home before we came here--we didn't know nobody here--but we did know folks in Northhampton County. So for the first few years I would go there to get loans for the farm or buy groceries, because I knew I could get a good deal.
A "good deal" meant more to black farmers than just bargain prices. Often it signified the only reasonable means of obtaining food and/or farm credit, since very few white creditors dealt fairly with blacks. Thus, if a black farmer found a white merchant whom he could trust—one who would, for example, go to a local bank himself and furnish a loan, and lend that money, in turn, to a black man \textsuperscript{11}—that farmer would think seriously before leaving to join a venture run by poor blacks like himself who like himself had for centuries been at the mercy of whites and white society, and who, for all he knew, might turn up next planting season with not a penny in their cooperative, and not a body to run it.

Although some former participants did remain after liquidation, their presence alone was not enough to save the cooperative. An operation based on assumption of collective effort was dependent upon mutual cooperation; anything less, regardless of the reasons behind it, would be deadly.

The TMA's demise was not entirely in vain. When, in 1945, members of the TMA were forced to sell their holdings, they sought a black buyer. In this region where whites owned and controlled ninety-nine percent of the business, and sought to control as much of the other one percent as they could, a black buyer was essential if blacks in Tillery were to hold on to what little they had gained. Though members were unable to find a black
purchaser, they found the American Missionary Association—an organization dedicated to the advancement of blacks throughout the South since the Civil War. Although the AMA technically purchased Tillery's old community store/meeting hall, it allowed citizens to hold meetings and social functions there for only the cost of upkeep.\textsuperscript{12}

The American Missionary Association, as it happened, was a portentous landlord. In addition to owning Tillery's community center, the AMA was also the parent organization of the North Carolina Bricks school—one of the most progressive intitutions for black education in the South. The school was begun in 1890 by a gift of Mrs. Julia Elmer Brewster Brick of Brooklyn, New York. Brick donated over 1400 acres and provided for school facilities which allowed black sharecroppers and tenant farmers to acquire an elementary, high school, and finally in the 1950's, a junior college education.\textsuperscript{13} In a state where the average grade level completed for blacks in 1916 was the sixth grade \textsuperscript{14}, such an institution was exceptional. Until the 1930's the Bricks school functioned mainly as an agricultural and technical college, where blacks learned improved methods of planting, cultivation, and harvesting. When, in 1930, the government developed similar farm programs, Bricks turned its emphasis to home economics, credit unions, and to industrial training.
The school was known throughout the South and in progressive circles elsewhere for its strong emphasis on inter-racial cooperation. Even FSA assistant director George Mitchell knew of Bricks, as he sought early on in the project (exact date unknown), to link farmers in Tillery with farmers throughout the Northeast Piedmont. He suggested that

the commission on inter-racial cooperation...organize an inter-racial committee in the vicinity of the project if one is not already in existence. The idea would be to develop responsible inter-racial leadership with a view to having channels well established through which any difficulties that might develop ...could run...In view of the proximity of Bricks, probably the nucleus of such a committee is already in existence.

Though it never developed formal ties with the farm project, Bricks, through its connection with the AMA, came to Tillery in the early 50's to initiate Decisions for Progress, a regional citizen's action group dedicated to community improvement. If newcomers had been responsible for the demise of one community institution, they were also responsible for the genesis of another. This new institution was built quite literally on the foundation of the TMA, since it emerged through the rental agreement between Bricks (the AMA designated the people at Bricks as proxy), and the Tillery cooperative grounds.
Early in 1954, Judson King, president of Bricks, sent a letter to citizens in Tillery asking them to participate in Decisions for Progress. "As members of a poor, rural community," he wrote, "you must be aware of the many areas which desperately need attention. These problems can only be solved if citizens like yourself work together...I urge you to attend." Some citizens in Tillery apparently did attend, for it was not long before the Tillery Improvement Association (TIA), a satellite of Decisions for Progress, was born. TIA had as its headquarters the Tillery community center, with Judson King serving as the association's venerable first director.

A founding member of the TIA was Mrs. Florenza Grant, who came to Tillery from Northampton County with her husband in 1947. She, and another newcomer, Mrs. Thelma Manley, were also members of the regional steering committee for Decisions for Progress. In describing the early years of the TIA, Grant singled out Judson King as the source of inspiration for members. She singled out illiteracy as the community's biggest problem.

It was through the help of Mr. King that the Association got going in the early years. At that time the biggest problem was education. The folks that live here--now I'm not talking about the project people--lived in shanties, with weeds so tall you couldn't hardly see the house, and they would fish or hunt, but it was all they knew. We saw
we had to educate them. If we didn't do it, surely the white folks weren't going to.17

Education was therefore the most immediate aim of the TIA. A handful of concerned homesteaders—most of them newcomers who had imported their educational skills18—set about organizing reading workshops, home improvement workshops, and basic community involvement activities. Two of the most successful projects in TIA's early years were Family Day, and friendly neighborhood rivalries—reminiscent of the rivalries and Family Days of an earlier time. As Grant recalled

Everyone got involved in some way or another. We had big social gatherings and garden contests to see who had the nicest yard. Things like that gave the people pride in their community and that was something new for most folks.19

Pride of ownership and community bonding were important for a people who were outcasts in their own land. They built confidence from within, but more was needed than simply the right psychology. All the emotional and spiritual bonding in the world would not change the fact that blacks were fettered in a systematic chain of dependence and inequality. Imposed on them by whites, it had been maintained staunchly by denying blacks the vote and the education that whites, for centuries, used against them.20 If blacks in Tillery
were really to "make a good life" for themselves and their children, they needed to challenge not only the poverty existing within their community, but the racial oppression at the root of such poverty.

The chance to battle external oppression came in February 1954. The NAACP asked Tillery citizens if they were ready to open a chapter in their community. "Most all the farmers in Tillery joined up." Mathew Grant, the group's first president, recalled the degree of community support.

That group of people [farmers in Tillery], was eager and progressive. Because, you see, it was a new frontier, and they was lookin' for better things. They was concerned about voting, all of us were poor and we wanted something better.22

On March 9, 1954, Tillery received the first NAACP charter ever to come to lower Halifax. Residents worked hard to make it a functioning organization.

At the time the NAACP come in, blacks didn't do nothin' with politics. It wasn't but three blacks registered in all of Conoonndara precinct. The whites had a man up there at the registration office, made you read a portion of the constitution—the hardest most difficult to pronounce part—and then you had to write it and if you misspell a word, you won't qualify. We worked hard to break that up.23
Registration was only allowed on certain days, at certain times, at certain places. For months, those blacks who could read and write went to the registration office, asking if they could register.

That man who run the office, it got so he be shakin' every time he saw some of us pull up. I remember one day, Mathew, Russel Manley and some of the others went down—they didn't want no women, it was dangerous—they went down and came back up a while later and said Florenza, get dressed, you're goin' to vote. So I got dressed real nice, you got to look nice, you don't go lookin' like a poor ol' nigger—I got dressed and went down to register. Thelma Manley come with me too, but we acted like we didn't know one another, and we walked right in that office, and the man so shakin', he was so nervous! And I said, 'I'd like to register to vote please' and he got even more nervous, and he told me to read the hardest part he could find, and I read it, perfect as could be. I read it better'n he could have, I'd guess, the way he was makin' such a fuss. So that was how I registered.

Slowly, Blacks in Tillery began to assert their long suppressed sense of independence. Voter registration was an essential struggle, and though not all the citizens in Tillery were educated enough in 1954 to undergo the rigorous requirements for registration, those who could, did. Those who could, did other things too; later the same year, in the wake of Brown v. Board of Education, Russell Manley and Raymond Moore, both Tillery citizens,
attempted to enroll their daughters in a nearby white high school. Florenza Grant recounted the event as it was told to her by her brother, Raymond Moore.

It was in August of '54, and they had just passed the integration law. Even though they passed the law, there was still black schools and white schools, just like before. So they got their girls dressed up pretty, and went on over to the [white] school. First thing the girls done was ask to use the ladies room (they didn't have no colored ladies room at a white school), and the principal turned red in the face, but he told them they could go ahead. Then they asked to register the girls. That principal couldn't go that far, and he made an excuse that even though there was a law, they needed a chance to make arrangements. He said they weren't ready to have blacks in their school.

Although blacks did not succeed then in enrolling their children in white schools, they had made a start. With the support of the NAACP, as well as the support of their community members, blacks had begun in this first decade since Resettlement to build on the groundwork that landownership had laid.

The Tillery chapter of the NAACP continued its voter registration drives throughout the fifties and into the sixties. The Tillery Improvement Association complemented registration drives by conducting basic reading and writing classes, and offering seminars on Civil Rights. Civil Rights in the early sixties assumed a special importance in North Carolina. The Greensboro
North Carolina lunchcounter sit-in on February 1, 1960 marked the beginning of student participation in the Civil Rights movement. While similar demonstrations had occurred before in other regions of the country, never in the past had they prompted such a widespread response. Within two months, the sit-in movement had spread to fifty-four cities in nine states. By mid-April, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had formed in Raleigh, North Carolina to further Civil Rights activities. Members of the Tillery NAACP and the TIA had reason for hope that their efforts in this small rural community would soon be united with other efforts throughout the state, the South and the nation.

Not all Tillery citizens were empowered by local stirrings of black assertiveness. Some preachers in the Tillery community saw the lunch counter sit-ins as fundamentally opposed to the good christian ethic which preached perseverance, and obedience. Preachers were strong community leaders; their words commanded respect which often overrode and contradicted the efforts of community groups to motivate wary citizens. Florenza Grant recalled

Around the time when they was having all those sit-ins, it was something for the folks out here in Tillery. Those preachers didn't like it that blacks were finally doing something for themselves. I remember our preacher standing at the pulpit an hollering in the loudest strongest voice he knew,
'GO GET YOUR CHILDREN NOW!' He wanted parents to drive all the way out to Greensboro and bring their children home to Tillery. And you know, some folks did it too.

Thus, ironically, preachers who had dedicated their lives to the liberation of blacks' souls, succeeded in fostering their physical oppression. Reason for this lay, perhaps, in the fact that the church had traditionally been the source of all community activity. The recent activity outside of the church must have competed with the strong support and weekly following that black preachers enjoyed. Furthermore, Civil Rights, with its emphasis on black liberty and assertiveness, must have challenged the fundamental preachings of those black ministers who adhered to endurance and submission in earthly struggles.

Some Tillery citizens continued to be active despite the church. In 1958, citizens organized their first annual farm picnic. It recalled some Resettlement practices. Not only was it reminiscent of Family Day, the picnic also had elements of cooperation among farmers. In 1963, at the TIA's fifth annual picnic, the United Church Herald, published by the United Church of Christ, described the assertiveness of Tillery's farmers.

With the theme 'Farming in the Space Age' [farmers in Tillery] planned for the year ahead and for the years after that. During the formal part of the meeting, several white farm-equipment
representatives sat in the audience. They had accepted the invitation of Tillery to display their equipment on groundspace rated at...$15. These men have learned that the Tillery farmers will buy equipment only from firms that will participate in [their] annual picnic. It is estimated that the gross value from the 1962 exhibitors has reached the sum of $100,000. That amount of money becomes staggering with the realization that ten years ago most of the farmers were cultivating small plots with mule-drawn plows.29

The article went on to mention one Tillery farmer in particular, who "has 800 acres in rented land in tobacco, corn, soybeans and cotton. His crops are typical of the area. So is his forward outlook." The farmer was Mathew Grant.

Forward outlook characterized not only Tillery's farmers, but also its youth. When asked what she felt was the most successful activity that the TIA undertook during the sixties, Florenza Grant cited Tillery's teenage club.

We reached a lot of kids who really needed support. In the sixties it was a hard time for young blacks, and we did a lot of things to help get them thinking positive about themselves and their future. I would say most of those kids ended up in some college or another. That was very good for that time. 30

In an era when blacks, and especially young blacks, were compelled to break the oppression which had set upon
them for centuries, "thinking positive about [oneself] and [one's] future" meant many things. While protests were raging on the Campuses of UNC Greensboro and A&T College, young blacks in Tillery watched and waited for their chance to join in the struggle. Tillery's teen-age club aimed at building strength and self-confidence on the part of its members by sponsoring speakers and community outreach activities. It sponsored dances and field trips, and meetings in which young people could express their concerns and questions about their place not only in the Civil Rights struggle, but in America in general.31

In addition to organizing a teen-age club, the TIA in the sixties continued its emphasis on education. Through grants provided by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the TIA sponsored many practical programs, designed to equip blacks with the skills they needed to survive in an era when whites had grown especially hostile to Negroes determined to make it on their own. Such programs included auto-training courses, training for plumbing, home upholstery, high school equivalency testing, basic reading writing and mathematical skills, and basic information seminars on civil rights.32
The early sixties marked the TIA's most active time; unfortunately, such an active agenda was paralleled in the latter half of the decade by almost complete inaction. Support for the organization dwindled as families left their farms and moved North, or sent their children off to college or to the Vietnam war. At the same time, a rapid and dramatic decline of black-owned land in Tillery worked with outmigration to slowly undermine the pride and independence of ownership, the community, and the chance for education that settlers had been working toward since the time of Resettlement. It would not be until the 1980's, with most of Tillery's youth gone and most of its farmers either retired or landless, that the community would face its struggles with renewed determination.

Between 1940 and 1950, the Conoconnara township had grown in population by six percent. During the two decades following 1950, however, Connoconara's population decreased dramatically, so that by 1970, almost 800 persons or forty-four percent of the population had either died, or moved elsewhere. In the years between 1960 and 1970, Halifax county also experienced a drastic decline in population, when 12,235 of its 58,956 inhabitants left the county. Of these 12,235, ninety percent were black, and while the population change rate for whites in the county actually increased
by 2.9 percent, that for blacks decreased by almost twenty percent.\textsuperscript{34}

The number of farms and farmers also declined in Halifax county. Between 1962 and 1970, agricultural employment in the region declined by twenty-seven percent, while the average size of farms in Halifax county increased by forty-six percent. On a state level, similar shifts occurred, though they were not as drastic. The number of acres in farms experienced an eleven percent decline between 1964 and 1969, while the average size of farms increased nine percent during the same period.

Thus, though farms had grown in terms of acreage, the amount of labor necessary for operation lessened. In addition, the county's total acreage in farms decreased by fifty percent, signifying that more land was being used for purposes other than farming. This fact, complemented by a twelve percent shift from the rural to the urban population, meant that the traditionally agricultural lifestyle of the region finally would be ended.\textsuperscript{35}

The situation was particularly acute in Tillery. Of the ninety-four black farmers owning project land in 1943, only fifty-seven still owned their land thirty years later. Only an estimated ten of those landowners actively farmed. Furthermore, of the 5,815 acres owned by original black participants, only 2,905 remained in black hands by 1973.\textsuperscript{36}

Such a drastic loss of black-owned land did not
concern Tillery inhabitants alone. Black landloss had been an issue for millions of blacks throughout the South, beginning during emancipation when freedmen were first given access to land. For fifty years after emancipation blacks worked diligently to build their resources as rural Americans. Throughout the Blackbelt, they organized small agricultural fairs, exhibiting swine, cows, sheep, and other livestock, vegetables, and cotton. With the financial support of Northern philanthropic organizations, for example the Bricks School, thousands were trained to become both independent and self-sufficient at scientific farming, something denied to them under slavery, which only exploited their labor. 37

Booker T. Washington was perhaps the most famous and influential advocate of blackbelt agricultural development. In a speech entitled "How to Build a Race", given in 1898, Washington stressed the necessity of black-owned farms to the development of blacks as a race in America.

We are living in a country where, if we going are to succeed at all we are going to do so by what we raise out of the soil. Without this, no people can succeed. No race which fails to put brains into agriculture can succeed; and if you want to realize the truth of this statement go with me this month into the back districts of Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama and you will find these people almost in a
starving condition, slowly starving to death and yet they are surrounded by a rich country. 38

Blacks had to fight for every acre. The most frequent obstacle to black landownership was white refusal to sell to blacks. Other obstacles included acts of terrorism like house burnings and lynchings of those blacks courageous and lucky enough to buy a farm. Poverty also was a big obstacle; for a people plagued with malnutrition, landownership must often have seemed out of reach. 39

Nonetheless, some blacks succeeded. With the aid of philanthropic land grants, mass cooperation (sometimes hundreds of farmers would pool their resources to buy a tract of land for sale at auction), and some unprejudiced white land salesmen, blacks, by 1910, the peak year of black landownership in the United States, owned fifteen million acres. Of the 6.5 million farms in operation in 1920, an estimated one million were black-owned. 40 But while these numbers are encouraging, they must be put in perspective. At least five million farms in 1920 were operated by whites. By 1978, the number of black-owned farms had dropped ninety-four percent, to 57,000, while the number of white farms in operation had decreased only forty percent to 3.3 million. 41

The principal reasons for black landloss since 1920 included foreclosure due to tax delinquency, and a lack of education on the part of landowners. Many blacks
neglected to write wills, or were cheated out of their land by crafty white buyers. Some blacks did not realize the fundamental importance of landownership to black independence and stability; many others divided their land among numerous children who then sold their individual parcels. 42

Blacks were not the only farmers losing land. In an era where five percent of the nation's farms could account for forty-nine percent of all farm output and gross $200,000 each while seventy percent of all the nation's farmers grossed under 40,000, small farmers regardless of race competed in a tight market. Despite the difficulty that all small farmers experienced, however, black farmers in particular were the hardest hit. The decrease in black-owned farms between 1970 and 1980, for instance, was fifty percent higher than the decrease in white-owned farms, and while the median farm income for whites in 1981 was over $17,000, the median farm income for blacks was less than half that figure, or $7,584. 43

A key reason for the decrease of small farms, and of black farms in particular, rested partially with the major farm creditor in America—the government-backed Farmer's Home Administration (FmHa). Set up in 1946 to replace the Farm Security Administration, the FmHa had none of the older rehabilitative elements of farm aid that had earmarked its predecessor. The FmHa was designed as a government lending institution, little
more. As the FmHa moved into the 60's and 70's, its emphasis gradually broadened from helping only farmers to lending monies for housing improvement and the genesis of small business, all under a "rural development" plan. Concurrently, the FmHa's loan ceiling grew higher and higher, so that farmers could borrow more money and operate bigger farms. As well-established farmers across the country expanded their operations, they were able to out-produce small farmers, and sell their products at a price with which smaller farmers were unable to compete. Such increased competition between farmers, as well as a tightening of world agricultural markets throughout the 1970's, made it difficult for lower income farmers to make enough money to pay back operating loans. After years of accumulating debt, many small farmers were forced to sell their property, or had it taken away.

The situation, made more difficult for blacks because of racial discrimination, underscores and helps to explain what happened to Tillery. In 1981, the United States Commission on Civil Rights issued a lengthy report, *The Decline of Black Farming in America.* The study documented decades of discrimination and pinpointed the role of the Farmer's Home Administration in allowing it to continue. The report found that while the FmHa "is in a unique position to assist black farmers," the agency had "failed to advance, and in some cases may have
hindered, the efforts of small black farm operators to become a viable force in agriculture.\textsuperscript{48} In addition to losing farms, losing land, and losing people, citizens in the Tillery community faced another problem. Of the approximately 700 blacks remaining in the Conoconnara township, seventy percent were over fifty-five. Thirteen percent of the population included children under eighteen, leaving only seventeen percent between the ages of nineteen and thirty-four. Not only had people left the area in large numbers--and in the process relinquished over thirty percent of their land--but those people remaining in Tillery were by 1980 either too old or too young to raise families and earn incomes.\textsuperscript{49}
Outmigration and landloss took their toll on Tillery. In the years between 1968 and 1978, community involvement in the TIA had come to a virtual standstill. Only the youth group still functioned under the leadership of Gary Grant; throughout the 70's, the group "met, but didn't do much, we had a hard time just keeping it going."\(^5\)

Those citizens who remained in Tillery struggled to keep their farms, or if they had lost their land, struggled to find work in one of the area's half-dozen factories. All of the factories were white-owned and operated; all provided unskilled wage labor. Black factory workers were an expendable resource; in a region where thirty percent of the population lived below the poverty level, employers did not need to be choosy about who they hired and fired.\(^5\) No large-scale employment opportunities existed locally. The average commuting distance for most Tillery workers was thirty miles; some citizens drove as far as Richmond, Virginia, 150 miles away.\(^3\)

The only black-owned business in the Conoconnara which offered an employment to blacks was the Tillery Casket Company. In 1966 a mortician from Rich Square came to Mathew Grant with the idea of opening a casket
company in Tillery. P.A Bishop Jr. had been an acquaintance of Grant's; he was a skilled plastic surgeon who operated the family business in Northampton County. Bishop offered his expertise in return for a small investment of capital. Grant saw the offer "as an opportunity to give folks in Tillery jobs close by."52

Bishop did not prove to be a good partner. At the time of his offer, he had been on work parole for writing bad checks. After one year, Bishop had abandoned the Casket company. Grant continued the operation on his own. In 1970, he got an $80,000 loan to purchase a building and furnish equipment. Grant had only $1000 in operating capital. Compared with the $125,000 in operating capital that a lumber investor used in starting his business in Tillery nearly seventy years earlier, such a small amount seemed even smaller.53

The Tillery Casket Company was not a large operation. The mid-seventies marked its most successful period, when the company employed twelve local citizens with approximately thirty to forty hours of work each week. Workers assembled aluminum caskets; they ordered the materials from elsewhere. Most of those who worked at the casket company were men between the ages of forty and fifty who had lost their farms. Their salary was competitive with others in the area: minimum wage.

Though its size was small and its pay average, the Tillery Casket Company symbolized a determination to
"make it". In starting the company, Grant had not imagined a great personal profit. He had seen an opportunity for blacks to help themselves. This outlook was demonstrated even further in October 1983, when, due to high debts and little business, the Casket Company faced bankruptcy. Grant realized that the only way for him to save Tillery's one black company was to offer it to the workers themselves.

It was our only alternative. If everyone hadn't pitched in, we would have lost the company. Now I'm not saying we, the Grants, I'm saying we, black people in this area.

The casket company received help from the Self Help Credit Union in Durham, North Carolina in its conversion to worker ownership. It changed its name to the Eastern Casket company in order to address a wider clientele. Many blacks in the area did not patronize the Tillery Casket company; they chose to patronize larger, more efficient companies in Durham and elsewhere. The company continues to operate today, though its workers number only five and there is no steady employment available. The future is uncertain; though it has a sufficient amount of possible business, is unable to generate the operating capital necessary to compete with larger, white-owned firms. The casket company is but one bit of evidence that blacks in Tillery have continued, despite larger economic pressures, to forge independence
and cooperation. Their efforts are not always as unified as the Casket Company might imply.

Two recent events demonstrate that in Tillery independence and cooperation are issues which not only unify, but also divide the community. The closing of Tillery's one black school in 1981 brought citizens to a degree of activity which recalled the days of voter registration. It highlighted their struggles for both jobs and education, and ironically pitted these struggles against one another. The efforts of some farmers to save their land likewise highlighted Tillery's struggle for independence and cooperation. They demonstrate that blacks, despite all they have gained, must continue to work with and for each other, since in Gary Grant's words, "nobody else will." 55

In 1979, the Halifax County school board announced that, due to a steady drop in enrollment, the Tillery Chapel School would close at the end of the 1979 school year. Of the approximately 150 students in grades k-8, ninety-eight percent were black. Only two white families in the Tillery school district sent their children to Tillery Chapel Elementary; the others enrolled their children in an all-white private academy in another part of the county. 56

Since the Tillery Improvement Association dissolved in 1968, the school had been citizens' one community link. For almost ten years, life had slowly trickled out of Tillery, beginning with the outmigration of youth
during the sixties, and continuing with landloss and farm foreclosure throughout the seventies. Already, most citizens of working age in Tillery were required to leave their homes every day for work in factories. Now Tillery's children would also leave their homes travelling fifteen to seventeen miles to spend most of their days in a town which was not their own. In short, Tillery would become nothing more than a cluster of houses, most of them delapidated, in which citizens ate and slept, but hardly lived.

True, there were seven churches in the community, to which the majority of its members belonged, but as one citizen pointed out, church and school performed different community functions, and met different community needs.

[The school] was the only thing that citizens at that time spoke of in the plural possessive:our. We only had the school and the churches, and when we speak of the churches, it's my or your church. So in a real sense, the school was all we had.

The above statement implies that church affiliations divided the community, while the school, because it was common to all, brought citizens together. "Progressive members of the community," said Gary Grant, a Sunday School teacher at Tillery Chapel, "understand that churches keep us separated. We have built three new churches in the last thirty years; six of the seven churches we have in Tillery are all within seven miles
from downtown Tillery.\textsuperscript{58} For many citizens, loyalty to one's own congregation came before loyalty to the community at large. While spiritual needs could be met on a fragmented basis, political and social needs could not. The school, as the hub of the community, remained as the only forum for political and social activity.

Official reasons for closing the school centered largely on financial issues. Tillery Chapel Elementary had experienced a consistent decline in enrollment for at least ten years. The Halifax county school system could not afford to maintain any school which was not filled to capacity; therefore, Tillery's school, regardless of its social importance, must be closed.\textsuperscript{59} Tillery citizens understood the financial situation; they did not understand why Tillery alone was singled out.

Many felt that Tillery Chapel Elementary was no more financially liable than some of the district's other schools. They felt that Tillery had been "dumped on," "jilted", and "singled out" for racial reasons.\textsuperscript{60} Gary Grant, Tillery inhabitant, spokesperson for Tillery citizens during the controversy, and subsequent school board member, was very vocal about the way in which administrators handled the closing.

There were other solutions to the problem than just closing the school permanently. We suggested redefining the district boundaries, or maybe bringing in more grades. It didn't do any good. We were singled out
as a scapegoat, and don't you know arrangements for the closing were already underway even before citizens knew about it? They completely, completely ignored us. 61

The school board's apparent lack of concern for Tillery's grievances aroused indignation and anger on the part of parents, senior citizens, and children. In the first show of collective concern since the voter registration drives of the fifties and sixties, concerned citizens met early in 1979 to discuss what they could do to save their school. 62 They became the Concerned Citizens of Tillery (CCT), adding to a group of approximately ten citizens who had organized in 1978 to revive the community center which had, since 1968, fallen to disrepair. According to Gary Grant, one of the founding members of CCT, membership at the time of the school issue reached "ninety percent of the people in Tillery." 63

Despite the hostility they received, citizens worked throughout the spring of 1979 to reverse the board's decision. They succeeded only in postponing the closing for another year. In May, 1981, Tillery Chapel Elementary closed its doors permanently to the children of Tillery. On June 10, of the same year, over one hundred Tillery parents, children, and other concerned citizens staged a protest against the closing. They walked ten miles from the school to the school board administrative building. "We are not troublemakers, "
one protester said,

we are just ordinary hard-pressed, small-town, rural poor Americans seeking to utilize our interest and power as taxpayers and voting citizens, in the education and the economic development of our children....With the greatest confidence, we expect our voices to be heard above the quiet clamour of ratified political and social forces organized close to our school.

Still the school board would not reverse its decision. Throughout the summer of 1981 complainants continued to attend board meetings. "We have been put in a mighty offensive position," one citizen said, "offensive because we know you have ignored our pleas. Since the march, the board has continued with their original plan. We note that the school has been emptied of all of its furnishings...." All these efforts failed to open Tillery school.

The struggle did not end there, however. After the school had been closed, local citizens and board members debated what sort of operation should take its place. Some residents, in an attempt to save at least the spirit of the institution, suggested alternate educational possibilities such as a gifted and talented program, a day care center, a cultural arts center, or even an extension of the Halifax Community College. Other citizens, presumably those who had no children and who worked outside of Tillery, felt the school buildings should be
turned over to a sewing factory, thereby bringing much needed employment to the area, and allowing some workers to remain in the community. The proposed factory would employ thirty workers, presumably chosen from people in the Tillery area. Opponents of the factory felt that such an outcome would never happen--that in allowing their school facilities to be gutted and fitted for manufacture, citizens would turn their backs on all they had struggled to prevent.

The struggle was particularly difficult [for those who opposed the sewing factory] because we knew the jobs they were promising were never going to happen. They wouldn't hire local people to work in their factory, we told people that they were just going to come in and leave, but it didn't do no good. They put the factory in anyway. And what was so hard, you see, was blacks weren't fighting this thing together. We were fighting ourselves. Now how do you think we're ever going to fight the white man if we can't even agree on what's for our own good?

In the spring of 1982, the Tillery Sewing Factory, Inc. moved into the abandoned school buildings. It guttted the classrooms, stripped all existing wiring, and installed sewing machines.

Gary Grant, in a speech he made to the school board just after the sewing factory had arrived in 1982, poignantly described the loss which blacks in Tillery felt, and their anger towards those administrators who
ignored their struggle. "There are those of you here," he said, "who want to forget about the two years the citizens in the Tillery school district fought to keep their community school. You want the issue forgotten because it makes you feel...comfortable that the right decision was made to...turn [our school] into a factory."

Grant went on to say that despite its closing, the school continued to be important because of the wide implications it had on the entire county educational system. According to Grant, the closing "denies access to educating and incorporating young students and a self-assertive community as legitimate partners in the educational process." He described the "historic significance" of the one existing community school as the "hub of cultural and social involvement, and togetherness and stability of the community," and expressed the sentiment that the educational values of the Tillery parents had been subjugated to the internal interests of school board members. For Grant, the school had been closed in order to "safeguard [the] corporate economic interests" of the white-owned sewing factory. Grant stated further that the input and cooperation of Tillery parents and students was "never asked for or considered in the decision to close our school." In a final statement which summarized the effects of the school issue on the community, Grant stated that

the handling of
the...school...breeds despair and
frustration and mistrust for parents and citizens...and sows seeds of self-destruction and social instability....

Of the thirty positions promised to local citizens, only two materialized. In 1985, three years after it had come to Tillery, the sewing factory closed down and moved to a nearby town. No Tillery inhabitants work at the new site; the old Tillery Chapel School building built in 1932, has remained vacant ever since the sewing factory's departure.

The events speak for themselves. Citizens united after years of slumber to preserve their one remaining community institution, and failed in the midst of outside obstacles beyond their control. Their attempts are significant; so is their failure. Both echo Tillery's long history, its social oppression, and its struggle for independence and community. Both emphasize as well Tillery's struggle with the external world, and within itself.

Another recent struggle, that of a number of local citizens' attempts to save their farms, demonstrates the perpetual challenge to black land, and thereby black stability. According to Leo McGee and Robert Boone in their collection of essays entitled The Black Rural Landowner: Endangered Species, land constitutes "possibly the largest equity resource controlled by blacks in the South". It has been eroding for decades due to ignorance, racism, and also neglect. In Tillery,
in 1983, Mathew Grant received a foreclosure notice. He needed $3000 or else he would lose his farm. No local creditors would advance him the money; the Halifax County FmHa office (the source of the foreclosure notice) refused to do further business with him. Lacking other alternatives, Grant thought of ways to raise the money himself. He thought of the casket company, which had been worker owned for two years, and thought, "if [blacks] can lend money to corporations that are worker-owned, why can't they lend money to a farmer?"69

What resulted was the Committee To Save Black Land, organized in April 1983 by Mathew Grant, his sons, and approximately fifteen other concerned businesspeople, social workers, farmers and church personnel. Members initiated a Land Loss fund, set up particularly to provide cash when none was available from any other sources.

We knew there were many other aspects to land loss than just the monetary aspect. We knew that so many blacks didn't know legally what they were up against with the FmHa. So education was a big part of it. Sometimes, all you'd need was legal counseling. But when you done all your counseling and the man wants cash, and you can't get it—all the education, lawyers, management skills—won't help you unless you get money.69

The committee recognized one other vital resource in addition to money for black farmers struggling to keep
their farms. This resource was the black community itself. Lack of community support for black farmers was made clear at the committee's first meeting.

I had folks tell me right then and there that they felt for the farmers, but it was their own fault--they didn't manage properly, they didn't borrow properly, and why should [other blacks] stick their necks out? It's the same old thing of getting your own hump over the fence. Another fellow at that same meeting--he was a black county extension officer you understand--said he couldn't be associated with us because we used the word 'black' in our name. Now I ask you, what was he ashamed of? And I ask you something else: with blacks like that in a position to change things, how are we ever going to help ourselves?

In response to both these needs, the Committee organized a fundraiser banquet. At the banquet, they would speak to blacks frankly about the problems which confronted them, while also raising cash for one or several particularly needy farmers in the area. The name of the chosen recipient would not be made public. Only the amount donated, and the reasons for the fundraiser were openly announced. On June 14, 1983, approximately 150 citizens attended the committee's first annual Miss Black Earth Pageant. Gary Grant was the committee's presiding spokesman.

How many of you realize that black people only have as much power as they are willing to take and as
much as the white man is willing to give up to us?...The poor farm situation for black farmers can be attributed to several factors including new farm technology, an ailing economy, and disastrous weather conditions. But the situation has more to do with the unwillingness of the ruling class, particularly in southern states, to rid itself of the brutal and political exploitation of blacks. In other words, if you are a black farmer dealing with local banks, the FmHa, and other traditional lending institutions, racial prejudice is calculated and legally determined.... Blacks must stop fighting each other. We must unite on a local level.

The committee raised $6,000 at that banquet, and was able to save Grant from foreclosure. It has continued to hold fundraisers--Black Earth Pageants and others--and has in the years since 1983 expanded its emphasis outside of Halifax County to include blacks throughout the Northeast piedmont. While black support has not diminished since 1983, neither has it significantly grown. As of March 1986, most, if not all, of the half-dozen farmers in Tillery had received foreclosure notices.

As with their struggle to save the school, blacks were and continue to be confronted with the many larger obstacles which have confronted them for decades. The Resettlement project, though it did not solve their problems, did help some blacks face their struggles more independently. In Gary Grant's own words, "land is power in America. Ownership of land makes a family independent
and educates children and gives one a strong strong voice in the decision-making processes which govern our lives."^72
Conclusion

There is no happy ending to this story. Blacks in Tillery continue to fight poverty, racism, and dependency. Despite such strides towards equality as voter registration drives and school integration they must still struggle for even the most basic forms of independence: land and education. Where once they were in debt to their former plantation masters, they are now in debt in the government; where once they sought jobs from individual white merchants, they now seek jobs from white-owned factories.

While there is no happy ending, however, there are lessons to be learned from Tillery's struggle. As events throughout the last one-hundred years demonstrate, blacks in Tillery have not stopped striving for independence. They have used those resources available to them—wage labor, the chance to own a farm, and finally, the rudiments of community organization—to acquire and maintain some stake in a society which systematically challenges their self-sufficiency.

Systematic oppression is not the only obstacle. Disunity within the Tillery community itself has more than once impeded its progress. Divided loyalties to church and to individualism have often made the
collective confrontation of common problems a problem in itself, leaving blacks to fight their collective struggle singly, or not at all.

Still, Tillery's history is a dignified history—-one in which blacks have demonstrated time and again their determination to "make it," despite many obstacles and many failures. It is even more dignified because the struggle continues; if for no other reason than this, Tillery's story deserves to be told.
ENDNOTES

1 Interview with William Taylor, Tillery, North Carolina, Jan. 12, 1986.


3 Ibid., p. 32.

4 Letter from Charles Frazer, Assistant Regional Director to R.S. Ryan, Regional Personnel Advisor, June 17, 1940, FSA & Predecessor Agencies 1935-1940, Roanoke Farms, BAE, R.O. 16, N.A.

5 Interview with Ruth Johnson, Jan. 12, 1986.

6 Interview with William Taylor, Jan. 12, 1986.

7 Letter from L.L. MacLandon, Project Director, to C.D. Faris, May 24, 1940, N.A.

8 Land Records, Halifax County Courthouse, Halifax, North Carolina.

9 Ibid.

10 Interview with Mathew Grant, Tillery, North Carolina, March 15, 1986.

11 Ibid.


13 Pamphlet, "Franklinton Center" (n.p. United Church of Christ, n.d.)


15 Letter from George S. Mitchell, PSA Assistant Director, to William W. Alexander (n.d.) N.A.

16 Letter from Judson King, President, Bricks School, to Florenza Grant, Jan. 12, 1954. Grant Personal Papers.
17 Interview with Florenza Grant, Tillery, N.C. March 15, 1986.

18 For instance, the Grant family attended Creecy High school in Rich Square, Northampton County. The school had formerly been a private black boarding school where students from all over the country could receive an education. The school was started by the Creecy family, one member of whom acted as principal from its inception in the 1930's until 1980.

19 Interview with Florenza Grant, March 15, 1986.


21 Interview with Mathew Grant, March 16, 1986.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Interview with Florenza Grant, March 15, 1986.

25 Approximately four percent of Tillery's citizens registered to vote between 1954 and 1960. Estimate by Mathew Grant.


27 Chafe, Civilities, p. 99.

28 Interview with Florenza Grant, March 16, 1986.


30 Interview with Florenza Grant, March 16, 1986.

31 Ibid.


34 Ibid., p. 35.
36 Salamon, Experiment, figure II.
39 Peach, Southern Blacks, p. 41.
40 McGee and Boone, Landowner, p. 7.
42 McGee and Boone, Landowner, p. xix.
43 Lerza, Family Farm, p.2.
46 Lerza, Family Farm, p.1.
48 Ibid.
49 There are no official statistics available specifically for Tillery. These are estimates based on the Halifax County Development Plan, 1976, and on an informal census taken by Gary Grant in 1981.
50 Interview with Gary Grant, March 16, 1986.
51 N.C. Dept. of Economic Resources. Development Plan, p. 40, 43.
52 Interview with Mathew Grant, March 16, 1986.
54 Interview with Gary Grant, March 16, 1986.
55 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
61 Interview with Gary Grant, March 15, 1986.
63 Interview with Gary Grant, March 16, 1986.
66 Interview with Evangaline Grant-Briley, Tillery, North Carolina, March 16, 1986.
68 McGee and Boone, Landowner, p. xix.
69 Interview with Gary Grant, March 16, 1986.
70 Ibid.
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