

THE SOIL OF U.S. HISTORY: “FORTY ACRES AND A MULE” AND THE FAILURES OF RECONSTRUCTION



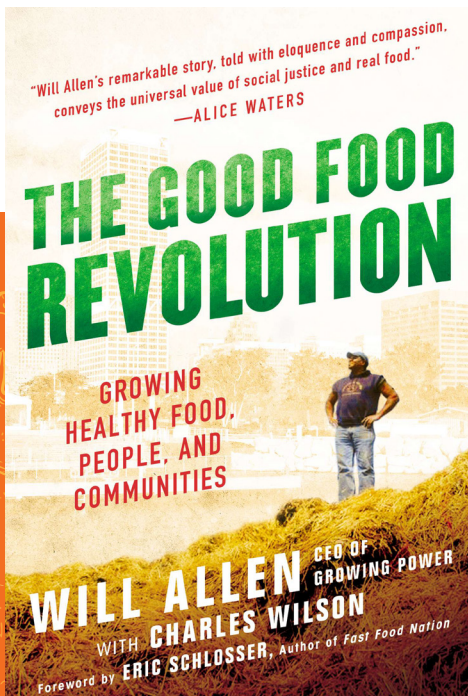
*Photo by Dorothea Lange,
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According to Allen, rather than committing to a more generous Reconstruction policy envisioned by Union General George Sherman in which each Black family would have received “forty acres and a mule” from confiscated plantation land to grow their economic wealth, the Andrew Johnson administration and the Freedman Bureau’s Act of 1866 instead enabled **a system of sharecropping such that former slaveholders were allowed to keep their lands while also exploiting the new social precarity of freed slaves.** This is because sharecropping often heavily indebted Black tenant farmers as they were forced to borrow capital from white wealthy landowners during the planting system before being “reimbursed” after the harvest system. Per Allen, sharecropping created a “cycle of debt” that impoverished newly freed Black Americans while simultaneously creating a new form of socio-economic dependency on Southern white landowners.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE HISTORY OF RECONSTRUCTION?

HOW MIGHT THE POLICY OF “FORTY ACRES AND A MULE” HAVE TRANSFORMED U.S. HISTORY AND CULTURE, SOCIALLY AND ECONOMICALLY?

DID THE HISTORY OF SHARECROPPING SHAPE YOUR OWN FAMILY HISTORIES OR COMMUNITIES?



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