Farming Transformed:
Sharecropping Part 1
1860s-1920s

At Levine Museum of the New South, we look at how Charlotte and the surrounding area has changed since the end of the American Civil War in 1865. These changes range from the types of jobs people have held to the constitutional rights we hold dear today. When we think about the New South, we like to define it as:

• A Time — The New South is the period of time from 1865, following the Civil War, to the present.
• A Place — The New South includes areas of the Southeast U.S. that began to grow and flourish after 1865.
• An Idea — The New South represents new ways of thinking about economic, political and cultural life in the South.

This lesson plan explores the life and work of southern sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the years following the Civil War.

Objective: Students will learn about sharecropping and tenant farming and will understand how the sharecropping system differed for white and African American farmers as well as landowners by studying historical images after 1865.

Essential Question: Was sharecropping a fair system for everyone involved?

Standards Addressed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.G.1</td>
<td>Understand how human, environmental and technological factors affect the growth and development of North Carolina.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.E.1</td>
<td>Understand how a market economy impacts life in North Carolina.</td>
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<td>6.H.2</td>
<td>Understand the political, economic and/or social significance of historical events, issues, individuals and cultural groups.</td>
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<td>7.H.1</td>
<td>Use historical thinking to analyze various modern societies.</td>
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<td>8.H.1</td>
<td>Apply historical thinking to understand the creation and development of North Carolina and the United States</td>
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<td>8.H.3</td>
<td>Understand the factors that contribute to change and continuity in North Carolina and the United States.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AH1.H.1.2</td>
<td>Use historical comprehension to reconstruct meaning of a passage, differentiate between facts and interpretation, analyze data in maps and analyze visual literary and musical sources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AH1.H.1.4</td>
<td>Use historical research to formulate historical questions obtain data from a variety of sources, support interpretations with evidence and construct analytical essays using evidence to support arguments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AH1.H.4/ AH2.H.4</td>
<td>Analyze how conflict and compromise have shaped politics, economics and culture in the United States.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AH1.H.5/ AH2.H.5</td>
<td>Understand how tensions between freedom, equality and power have shaped the political, economic and social development of the United States.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AH1.H.7/ AH2.H.7</td>
<td>Understand the impact of war on American politics, economics, society and culture.</td>
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Glossary:

- **Civil War (1861-1865)** - the war fought between the Northern states and Southern states, with slavery at the root of the cause.
- **Reconstruction Era (1865-1877)** - the time period after the Civil War during which the federal government worked to rebuild the south. Farming was reinvented and African Americans gained new rights.
- **Sharecropping** - a farming agreement in which families rented small plots of land from a landowner, and gave a portion of the crop back to the landowner each year.
- **Tenant farming** - a farming agreement in which families rented small plots of land from a landowner in exchange for a payment.

Farming after the Civil War

After the Civil War, many newly freed African Americans and poor white farmers became part of the sharecropping and tenant farming system throughout the South. Landowners would allow these poor farmers to work on their land in return for either money or a large percentage of their crops. Whatever the sharecroppers and tenant farmers had left went to food and supplies. Three out of four black farmers and one out of three white farmers in North Carolina worked on someone else’s land. Many poor farmers started out in debt and struggled to pay it off. When the price of cotton dropped from overproduction in the 1880s, many cotton farmers lost their land and became tenants one someone else’s farm.

Farmers planted cotton in the spring and then harvested it in the late summer to early fall. Farmers would pick cotton all day, sometimes for at least twelve hours. The bags of cotton they picked could reach 100 pounds.

**Sharecroppers** often lived in small houses with no running water or electricity. Everyone in a farm family worked, including the children. Typical jobs for children included feeding animals, churning butter, carrying firewood and water, picking cotton and even emptying the family chamber pots (toilets) in the morning. Children only went to school when the farm work slowed down.

Farmer, by Dorothea Lange, 1939; courtesy of the Library of Congress.
Activity 1: Studying Historical Photos

Use the “SEE” approach to study the historical photos. Write your responses on a separate sheet of paper.

S. Who is the subject of the picture? What is his/her expression?

E. What experience does the image capture? What is happening in the scene? In the background?

E. How would you evaluate the photograph? What is the message you take away it?

Farming family, by Dorothea Lange, North Carolina, 1939; courtesy of the Library of Congress.
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Picking cotton; courtesy of the Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library.
Children working in a cotton field; courtesy of the Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library.
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Child churning butter, by Dorothea Lange, 1939; courtesy of the Library of Congress.
Family plowing the field, *Burke County, 1905; courtesy of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.*