

## **African-American Land Loss and Sustainable Forestry in the Southeast: An Analysis of the Issues, Opportunities, and Gaps**

### **Abstract**

African-Americans' connection to the land is rapidly disappearing, and with it goes the cultural, political, and socio-economic capital that has helped this population, especially in southern states. There has been a severe decline in black landownership since 1910, resulting in rural counties with predominantly black populations becoming pockets of enduring poverty. Judicious investments in efforts to solve black land loss may lead to solutions to a larger problem: engagement of non-industrial private forestland owners in sustainable land management. Strengthening black forest-based communities as places to invest and live can build on this rich Southern heritage.

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### **Introduction**

African-Americans' connection to the land is rapidly disappearing, and with it goes the cultural, social, political, and economic capital that has helped this population, especially in southern states, withstand slavery, Jim Crow laws, and segregation. Initially, blacks worked the land for others until they were able to acquire land in the post-Civil War era. During 1870-1910, over one million Blacks gained access to land and farmed. This first generation of black landowners enjoyed stability and longevity of residence. Stability allowed them to provide institutional leadership in churches, schools, businesses, and social organizations, and to find other ways of employment off the farm to increase the family income (Raper, 1936). Use of land led to a sense of personal power and independence, which made land ownership valuable (Brown & Larson, 1979). Since the early 1900's, however, there has been a severe decline in farm ownership by blacks (Zabawa, 1991). Black farmers lost more land at a higher rate than their white counterparts. According to the 1997 Census of Agriculture, the number of farms owned by blacks in the USA fell, from 925, 000 in 1920 to 18,000 in 1992.

A mix of strategies such cost-share assistance programs have been used by diverse collaborators

and partners in an effort to stem African-American land loss and to foster stronger cultural, social, political, and economic capital in local communities (Christian, Fraser, Gyawali, & Scott, 2013). There are many assistance programs at the federal, state, and NGO levels that help blacks to maintain landownership and to more effectively manage land. Nembhard (2004) estimated that the Federation of Southern Cooperatives helped save/retain \$87.5 million worth of land (175,000 acres at an average of \$500 per acre) in black ownership. Despite this and similar efforts, black farm operations are generally categorized as exceedingly small. Black farmers have become as McGee and Boone (1979) suggested "an endangered species."

Awareness of such realities should assist agricultural Extension specialists to be more effective in the design and delivery of services to minority landowners. Furthermore, this article will help Extension professionals gain a historic perspective on black landownership in the Southeast as well as provide a model for other regions of the country to examine past, present, and future landownership challenges faced by minorities.

This article examines the problem of African-American land loss in the Southeast USA and proposes strategies to strengthen rural communities with the goal of stemming black land loss.

## Methods and Procedures

The article is based on a review, synthesis, and analysis of the literature, experiences gained by the authors during six years of collaboration with Limited Resource Landowner Education Assistance Network (LRLEAN), an organization of minority landowners in Alabama, supplemented by face-to-face discussions with knowledgeable individuals and professionals currently working on minority landownership and land management issues in the Southeast.

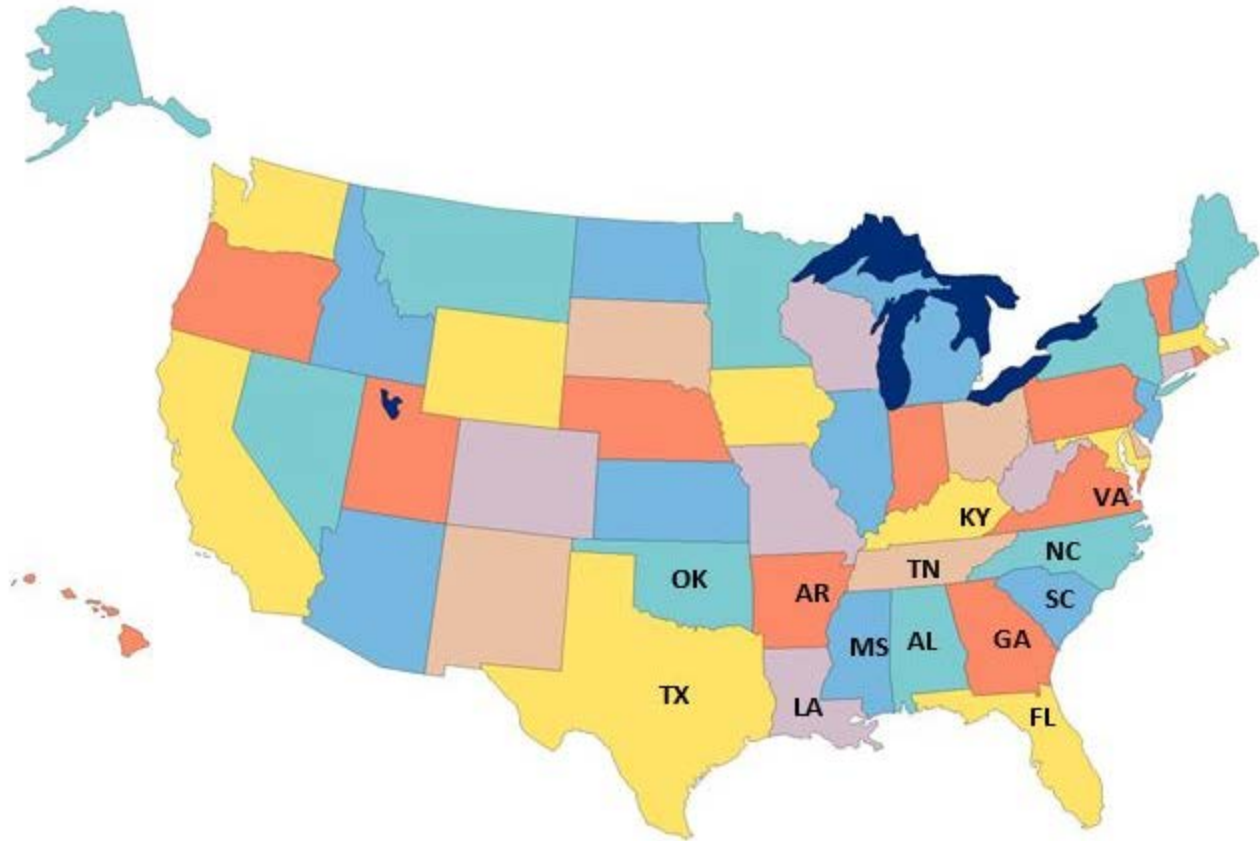
Land management and agricultural assistance programs funded and supported at the federal, state, or NGO community levels are generally administered on either a regional or state basis. Several such programs have been and are being implemented in the Southeast. In the context of this article the US Forest Service's definition of the geographic boundaries of Southeast has been adopted. In accordance with the US Forest Service's definition, the Southeast is comprised of the thirteen states of Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, and North Carolina (Figure 1).

### Figure 1.

States of the Southeast USA Catchment Area

(Source: based on map produced by Cartographic Research Lab, University of Alabama, AL.

Retrieved from: <http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/contemporarymaps/usa/basemaps/usa.jpg>)



## Results and Discussion

### African-American Land Loss

Land is a part of a cultural, social, political, and economic complexity, and the denial of access to land may have been a key element in black economic underdevelopment. At the same time that black landownership was in decline, rural counties with predominantly black populations became pockets of enduring poverty. Bukenya and Fraser (2003) found that six of the 10 counties with over 50% black populations in Alabama ranked among the bottom 12 of the state's 67 counties on income, education, and employment. Concomitant with black land loss was the decline in black voter participation rates and loss of political and social control of their communities.

The exodus of blacks from rural to urban areas was the trend for most of the 20th century. The potential heirs to farms moved away from the farm for a perceived higher standard of living and quality of life off the farm (Brooks, 1979). Blacks have become less involved in natural resource activities and are less likely to influence the policies of public land management organizations or businesses (Carr & Williams, 1993). Gilbert, Wood, and Sharp (2002) found that beyond its cultural significance in minority communities, rural landownership is particularly important because it is often one of the few and largest forms of wealth. Despite this significance, African-American landownership has declined not just because they sold the land and moved away, but also because many were driven from it by violence and through legal subterfuge.

Brown (1973) listed seven reasons for the rapid decline of black-owned land: tax sales, partition sales, mortgage foreclosures, failure to write wills, landownership limitations on welfare recipients, eminent domain, and voluntary sales. Beyond this, there is well-documented evidence that African-Americans were cheated out of, or driven off their land through intimidation, discrimination, violence, and even murder (Lewan & Barclay, 2001).

A 1997 US Government Accountability Office (USGAO) report established that one quarter of 101 USA counties with the largest concentration of minority farmers had no minority employees in their Farm Service Agency offices (Molnar, Bitto, Brant, & Hoban, 2000). The Pigford Case, a class action lawsuit brought against the USDA alleging racial discrimination in its allocation of farm loans and assistance between 1983 and 1997, is typical of the distress and foreclosures African-Americans have had to endure. That case ended by the U.S. government agreement to pay \$2.5 billion in damages to 20,000 black farmers for loan discrimination practices. As of May 2002, only 40% of the 60% of farmers who have filed have received their awards (Cowan & Feder, 2009). More recently, the sense of injustice has been exacerbated by development pressure leading to higher taxes and the unscrupulous use of the laws that have an impact on heir property.

To explain the importance of inheritances and *in vivo* transfers, Darity (2008) explains that the key to understanding the relatively low net worth of Blacks is to recognize that most wealth acquisition today takes place via shifts in assets from the older to the younger generation. Blacks collectively had less wealth to transfer to subsequent generations, in part because:

- Enslavement restricted owning one's self and any other property;
- Racial land reform never took place as promised after the Civil War;
- During Jim Crow, black-owned land was seized violently and records destroyed;
- Up through the 20th century black land loss continued with urbanization, discriminatory public and credit policies; and
- The intestate status of many parcels.

The loss of the wealth is problematic and linked to the racial injustices of the past as these injustices directly affect the way of life of the descendants of those blacks who once owned land.

## **Connection Among African-Americans, Forestry, and Land Loss**

African-Americans' connection to forestland was evident throughout European exploration and settlement of North America. As slaves, they used the forests as a place for worship and refuge, were involved in clearing woodlands for agriculture, and worked as loggers and producers of naval stores (Leatherberry, 2000). During Reconstruction, circa 1862-1877, they became forestland owners and commercial producers (Lewis, 2006). Since then African-Americans' relationship with forests has been transformed. According to Mitchell (2001), the causes for this shift were:

- Inequitable distribution of resources, social structural barriers, and inadequate access to technical

assistance;

- Collective memories of Jim Crow;
- Industrialization; and
- Mechanization of agriculture in a rapidly changing economic landscape.

Across much of the Southeast, these factors have rendered the potential sale of land as the only realistic source of significant revenue from the land for many small landowners.

Over the past 150 years, intimacy with the forest gradually turned to fear and dissociation, because organizations opposed to black freedom, such as the Klu Klux Klan, used the forest to disguise their activities and as a venue for lynching. The mechanization of agriculture reduced the need for field labor, and many African-Americans migrated from the South to northern and western industrial cities (Schulman, 1991). Educational opportunities, higher paying jobs, and the availability of services and security in urban centers fuelled the migration. In the meantime, African-Americans became more disconnected from their forests as they relied less and less on the land for sustenance (Schweninger, 1997).

Expansion of the forest products industry in the region during the 1950s and 1960s was supposed to stimulate economic development. Instead poverty and inequality endured. Colocousis and Rogers (2010) found that communities closely tied to the region's forest resources were "marked by pronounced economic disadvantage and considerable racial inequality..., African-Americans and whites inhabit different economic worlds" Landownership represents sources of both income and wealth, and is thus linked to issues of power that underpin economic inequalities.

African-American forestland owners have diverse ownership objectives and generally manage their land-based resources less intensively than other non-industrial private forestland (NIPF) owners. Many African-American forestland owners pay little attention to their forest except when timber is harvested (Gan, Kolison, & Tackie, 2003). Schelhas (2002) argues that the African-American history of landownership, hunting, recreation, and access to Extension services and programs is dramatically different from that of white landowners and that these differences impact natural resource management. This is reflected in the fact that relatively few African-American landowners have formal forest management plans. They usually manage their land with little professional advice and minimal long-term planning. In reality, their culture of forest ownership is family centered rather than economically driven.

Zabawa, Siaway, and Baharanyi (1990) reported that making an economic return from a small forest parcel may be critical to small landowners' abilities to retain land while maintaining their economic well-being. Generally, most NIPF owners are not realizing the full benefit of their forestland (Hughes et al., 2005). Gan et al. (2003) argued that, given the constraints African American forestland owners face, they must engage in active stewardship of their forests. However, African-American forestland owners who generally own smaller land acreages (i.e., 100 acres or less) and small forested tracts (i.e., 50 acres or less), are not well served by contemporary capital-intensive logging

operations, which are not designed to harvest tracts under 50 acres (Bailey, Hartaska, Dubois, & Lindsey, 2004). Consequently, most owners of smaller forested lands have few, if any, options for harvesting and marketing their timber (Dubois, Erwin, & Straka, 2001). Current evidence also indicates low participation by minorities in government supported conservation and forest management practices (Bell, Roberts, English, & Park, 1994; Molnar et al., 2000). The fundamental problem is trust. Given the history of relationships between African-Americans and public agencies, many are reluctant to participate in agency-sponsored events (Mitchell, 2001).

Carefully designed Extension and outreach programs have the potential of helping to restore trust, particularly with minority NIPF owners, "by serving as a resource for information and technical assistance, promoting forest stewardship" (Munsell & Germain, 2004). Commitment of minority landowners to effectively manage their forestlands will no doubt indirectly lead to strengthening of their community involvement and attachment.

## Stemming African-American Land Loss

Non-profit organizations and groups have assisted and educated African-Americans on their rights as well as on how to maintain and increase their asset holdings. They continue to provide such services (Table 1).

**Table 1.**

List of Selected Non-Profit Organizations Addressing Land Loss Issues in Southeast USA

Organization	Organizations' Background and Focus
The Land Loss Prevention Project (LLPP)	Founded in 1982 by the North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers to curtail epidemic losses of black owned land in NC. LLPP broadened its mission in 1993 to provide legal support and assistance to all financially distressed and limited resource farmers and landowners in NC ( <a href="http://www.landloss.org/">http://www.landloss.org/</a> ).
Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association (BFAA)	Formed in 1997, BFAA boasts a membership of over 1,500 farmers nationwide, and 21 state chapters. BFAA was also organized to monitor the USDA and the historic 1999 Class Action Lawsuit Settlement Pigford vs. Glickman. BFAA is committed to seeing that every black farmer gets his/her award settlement and that the USDA stops its practices of discrimination against black farmers ( <a href="http://www.bfaa-us.org/">http://www.bfaa-us.org/</a> ).
The Southern Coalition for Social Justice	The Coalition was founded in 2007 in Durham, NC by a multi-disciplinary group, predominantly people of color, who believe that families and communities engaged in social justice struggles need a team of lawyers, social scientists, community organizers and media specialists to support them in their efforts to dismantle structural racism and oppression

	<a href="http://www.southerncoalition.org/">(http://www.southerncoalition.org/)</a> .
Land Tenure Center, University of Wisconsin -- Madison	The Center, founded in 1962, works in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and North America on issues of land tenure and land use, agrarian reform, land markets, legislative drafting, land registration and titling, institutional dimensions of rural development, and environmental/natural resource management. The Center also produces significant publications covering the intersection between the latest research and public policy ( <a href="http://www.superpages.com/bp/Madison-WI/University-of-Wisconsin-Land-Tenure-Center-L2062759080.htm">http://www.superpages.com/bp/Madison-WI/University-of-Wisconsin-Land-Tenure-Center-L2062759080.htm</a> ).
Black Family Land Trust (BFLT)	BFLT, incorporated in NC in 2002, works with other conservation groups, black grassroots organizations, and community economic development corporations to conserve and protect minority owned land for community use, historic preservation, and economic development purposes. BFLT's efforts are concentrated in SC, NC, AL and VA. ( <a href="http://bflt.org/index.shtml">http://bflt.org/index.shtml</a> ).
The Concerned Citizens of Tillery, NC	Founded in 1978 to promote and improve the social, economic, and educational welfare of the citizens of Tillery and the surrounding community through the self-development of its members - envisions a sustainable community that builds on the natural, historic and cultural resources to promote economic independence, development of heritage and agricultural tourism ( <a href="http://members.aol.com/tillery">http://members.aol.com/tillery</a> ).
Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law	Formed in 1963 to assist with voting rights, fair housing, employment discrimination, environmental justice, and community economic development. The Community Development Project mobilizes the skills of transactional lawyers in the private bar to serve historically disadvantaged minority communities to promote racial, social and economic justice: 1) Brick and Mortar Development – Community Housing Development Organizations (CHDOs), Land trusts, Health Clinics, and 2) Asset Development - Heir Property-Title Clearing 'land ownership by multiple heirs as tenants in common' ( <a href="http://www.lawyerscommittee.org/about">www.lawyerscommittee.org/about</a> ).
Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC)	FSC, started in 1967 with headquarters in GA, strives toward the development of self-supporting communities, assists in the development of cooperatives and credit unions as a collective strategy to create economic self-sufficiency, and to assist in land retention and development, especially for African-

	Americans, but essentially for all family farmers. FSC does this with an active and democratic involvement in poor areas across the South, through education and outreach strategies ( <a href="http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com">www.federationsoutherncoop.com</a> ).
Winston County Self-Help Cooperative (WCSHC)	WCSHC of Mississippi was chartered in 1998. The Cooperative works county-wide and has focused on organizing its members, and coordinating members' training and education. One of WCSHC's flagship projects is its annual Saving Rural America Conference ( <a href="http://wcs hc.com/about-us.html">http://wcs hc.com/about-us.html</a> ).
Limited Resource Landowner Education and Assistance Network (LRLEAN)	LRLEAN in Alabama is an example of a black state-level organization which has operated under the banner of the Alabama Treasure Forest Association since its inception in 2006. LRLEAN has organized black landowners and has accessed resources for training, management plan development, and facilitated access to cost-share programs for its members. LRLEAN does not have a website.

Activists and legal assistance programs have and continue to support black families in danger of losing their land while encouraging others to establish or retain ownership. Since the Pigford Case, the USDA and other federal, state, and land management agencies, Extension agents, and other professionals have joined the effort. Many of these initiatives incorporate elements identified by Doron and Fisher (2002) in their study of the wealth gap between black and white southerners. They suggested three areas of wealth creation to effectively influence the low rates of asset ownership among blacks: income, savings, and inheritance and financial transfers. They recommended improving income and savings by technical training, financial education, and efforts to uncover and deal with barriers that impede asset accumulation. Inheritance and financial transfers require "community foundations to help bring more available funds into poor communities, increasing the number of African-American business ownership and slowing the rate of land loss for African-Americans" (Doron & Fisher, 2002).

Gilbert, Sharp, and Felin (2001) suggested that technical training, demonstration projects, technology transfer, small business management, and alternative income generation are critical strategies for revival of black farms and rural lands. Many of these were developed and employed by the 17 1890 (Black Land Grant) and Tuskegee Universities, with resources provided through the USDA's Small Farmer Program targeted to minority farmers. As a result of these efforts and increasing access to cost-share programs, more blacks are leasing their land for public services (ecosystem/conservation). Some, particularly the better educated landowners, are pursuing commercial opportunities through forest certification, longleaf pine restoration, hunting leases, and carbon credits.

Many middle-class blacks with a heritage in the South are choosing to retire there. These returning migrants are exploring new opportunities and retirement-based strategies for wealth building in areas that have been in decline. Stack (1996) estimates half a million blacks returned to the rural



South between 1970 and 1990. Falk, Hunt, and Hunt (2004) corroborate this finding: re-migrant and non-native blacks were more likely to reside in predominantly black and often rural locales. Most are retirees with higher socio-economic status. They suggest that "African-Americans have played a major role in rural American history. Loss of this culture and heritage would be a loss to all Americans. Moreover, the seeds of future economic growth may lie within this fertile cultural soil."

## **Use of Forestry Assistance Programs in Stemming African-American Land Loss.**

One of the first real NGO strategies to use forestry to stem land loss in the Southeast can be credited to the Ford Foundation's community-based forestry demonstration program. The program was initiated in 1999 to address a wide array of issues in communities characterized by high poverty rates. Against the background that most African-American landowners owned small tracts of forestlands that had both ecological and economic potential, another important objective of the Ford Foundation's initiative was to build individual and community wealth. The Foundation's undertaking was guided by the question of whether community-based forestry was an effective and sustainable strategy for forest restoration and conservation, community strengthening, land loss reduction, and poverty alleviation (Wyckoff-Baird, 2005). The major goal of the Foundation's project in the Southeast was to foster accelerated diffusion of best-practice strategies for forest and other forest-related resource-management, while engaging local communities in the decision-making process. Beyond building the conceptual framework in which many of the current players are operating, the Foundation's initiative also connected black forest landowners in the south with landowner groups across the country by building organizational capacity, peer learning, participatory research, networking, and policy development around the idea of community-based land development (Wyckoff-Baird, 2005).

Other initiatives that have facilitated the use of forestry as a strategy include the following

- Targeted outreach and provision of resources by federal and state agencies in collaboration with 1890 Institutions and non-profits.
- Network of black organizations collaborating, sharing, and leveraging resources at various levels.
- Engagement of conservation organizations (e.g., National Wildlife Federation, Land Trusts, and Conservation Fund).
- Increasing availability of and access to public and private opportunities (e.g., conservation easements and ecosystem service markets).
- Availability of legal services/actions, the ongoing settlement of the Pigford class action law suit, and education and services around estate and business planning.
- Efforts to establish cooperatives, education of landowners about alternative income from the land, and increased involvement of blacks in cost-share programs.

- Inspirational and educational benefits of demonstration projects, peer learning, and networking opportunities. The *Minority Landowner Magazine* is an example of an effort to showcase successful black landowners.
- Influx of higher income, better educated, and self-assured individuals who have assumed leadership around land-based development.
- Planned inter-generational transfer of land and cultural capital.

Magill, McGill, & Fraser, (2004) have concluded that "connecting woodland owners to forest stewardship education programs, a role ideally suited to Extension agents, will lead to increased fulfillment of woodland owner objectives." In general, however, initiatives that used forestry to stem land loss lacked coordination, cohesion of efforts, and the requisite financial, human, and institutional resources to take the efforts to the appropriate scale.

## **Implications**

There have been several initiatives aimed at addressing the problem of the decline of black landownership in the Southeast. However, the actions so far have resulted in gaps in efforts to link sustainable forest management to stemming land loss.

Blacks did much to create southern wealth, but they hold and enjoy very little of that wealth. Although many of the issues facing forestry in the South require coordinated action over large areas with diverse private and public ownerships (Schelhas, Zabawa, & Molnar, 2003; Wicker, 2002), short-term solutions to black land loss could include connecting these segments of the population in collectively responding to sustainable management of southern forests.

What seems to be most needed by current or potential black landowners are: (i) land, (ii) clear title, (iii) plans (estate, land management, and business), and (iv) access to affordable capital. What can be done to help requires an injection of funds to create self-sustaining efforts that include a multi-tiered, coordinated, and coherent response to black land loss. These funds could be used for the development of a "Black Land Bank" providing services; maps of black land holdings; databases of black land holdings for sale; legal/titling services; land financing mechanisms; and low-interest land improvement loans. Simultaneously, there is need for training and education on land improvement and land valuation, land management, and innovative Extension and outreach approaches. Funding will also be needed for convening of groups to leverage existing organizations' and institutions' (e.g., Extension, HBCUs, NGOs) efforts, and develop partnerships.

There is also need for a reality assessment of organizations currently engaged in efforts to reduce black land loss. Short-term investment may be needed to develop community leadership, bridge the inter-generational gap between senior minority landowners and their children/heirs, and develop long-term coordination of available investment/resources.

In the depressed areas of the rural South, much of the hope for real economic development lies in the ability of the sub-region to capitalize on the value of the forest in new and more equitable ways. Judicious investments in efforts to solve black land loss may lead to solutions to an even larger

problem: engagement of NIPF owners in sustainable land management at the landscape level. Strengthening black forest-based communities as places to invest and to live can build on the rich southern heritage.

Results of this analysis can serve as a useful informational and training reference for Extension personnel and outreach educators working in the Southeast. The success of these professionals in realizing their agency's objectives hinges on the extent to which they are aware of and sensitive to the historical, social, cultural, and economic experiences of their African-American clientele. This article provides a model for examining educational, technical, and financial assistance programs in all regions of the USA in relation to minority landownership, past, present, and future, particularly in the context of the changing national population demographic patterns.

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