



FREEDOM'S SEEDS: REFLECTIONS OF FOOD, RACE, AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT MONICA M. WHITE

Freedom farmers

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*If you sell a Black man a pick up truck, he'll
use it to make money and buy all the land in
Sumpter County, sell him a Cadillac...*
— Reverend Wendell Paris, member,
Federation of Southern Cooperatives

Reverend Wendell Paris is currently assistant pastor at the New Hope Baptist Church of Jackson, Mississippi. He and his brother George,

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and George's wife Alice, were all activists and organizers in the civil rights movement in Alabama and were early leaders of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC). I was honored to meet him at the FSC training center in Epes, Alabama, and subsequently to interview him. Like his mentor, Fannie Lou Hamer—the legendary civil rights leader of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party—Rev. Paris is deeply committed both to Black civil rights and to farming as a strategy to freedom.

Through Rev. Paris and his family, I was able to locate several founding members of the FSC. When I asked them to describe the contributions of farmers to the movement, they all pointed me to Lowndes County, Alabama. They told me about the Matthew Jackson family, Black landowners who allowed Freedom Riders to camp on their land during Freedom Summer of 1964. Not only did they feed and house the civil rights activists, they also offered them protection. It was on the Jackson farmland that Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap

Brown, Bob Mantz, and Ralph Featherstone organized as members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) for what would become the nationwide black power movement. In 1965, Lowndes County was 80% African American, yet not one citizen had the right to vote. Charged up with the belief that African Americans should have the right to freedom, full participation in the political process, and the right to protect their community, they organized the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, also known as the Black Panther Party (Carson, 1981).

My interest in researching the critical role of Black farmers in the civil rights movement sprang in part from observing African Americans in my native Detroit returning to our agricultural roots as a strategy for food security and food sovereignty. By the time I spoke with him, I recognized that our people had turned to agriculture as a strategy for freedom and liberation since before plantation slavery. Yet many researchers who came before depicted the story of Black farmers as saturated with privation and suffering. I read of land loss, aging Black farmers and the concerns about retaining land in the family, blatant discrimination, and a digital divide and that often stands between Black farmers and the resources the USDA provides to White farmers (Daniel, 2013). Members of the Black community in Detroit were using agriculture as a way to rebuild, as a strategy toward liberation, making the land an ally. I knew that agriculture must have been used to uplift in the past as well, and Reverend Paris and other members of the FSC showed me how.

My goal in researching, writing about, and documenting historical and contemporary examples of *Freedom Farmers* is to challenge the persistent frame of agriculture as a site of oppression for African Americans. Slavery, sharecropping, and tenant farming do not tell the whole story. The richness and complexity that is our agricultural history can be detailed from a place of resistance.

The canonical accounting of Black freedom struggles reveals the key role of charismatic leaders, preachers, students, and Black social and political institutions like the church; sites and locations of resistance like employment, lunch counters, schools, and the voting booth; and gendered



Reverend Wendell Paris.

(Photo by Monica M. White)

experiences and contributions. It says almost nothing about Black farmers—no stories of the families who were proud Black farmers like that of Mr. Ben Burkett.

Reverend Paris had just made the statement at the start of this column, about selling the Black man a pick-up truck, when Mr. Burkett pulled up to the FSC training center in Epes where we were talking. Mr. Burkett had a truck bed filled to the brim with sweet potatoes from the Indian Springs Farmers Cooperative. As he told me, Mr. Burkett has never filled out a job application because he has always worked for the family business, for himself. As a fourth-generation farmer from Petal, Mississippi, he now runs the family business on almost 300 acres of land that has been in his family since 1889. Named “B&B Farms” by Mr. Burkett’s parents in 1939, Benny and Bessie, his father started Indian Springs Cooperative along with eight other farmers in 1977 as a way to pool their resources, purchase materials, and collectively



Mr. Ben Burkett.

(Photo by Monica M. White)

market their harvests to save on expenses and boost profits. Mr. Burkett says that it is only because of the cooperative that he has been able to maintain the land and continue the legacy of his great-grandparents. They, like many African Americans during the time, saw farming as “a way of life. That’s all they knew. They grew up on the farm and that was all that they knew to do.” The knowledge of food production, the pride of growing for themselves and their families and their community, and a love of the land were all passed down to Mr. Burkett. He in turn has shared this with his daughter, Darnella Burkett-Winston, and his granddaughter, Denver. These legacies are not separate from the Black freedom struggle, and I am determined that they should not be lost.

¹ I started this research project before I met Dr. Jessica Gordon Nembhard, whose path-breaking 2014 book *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* documents the centuries-long effort of

I have had to undertake significant digging to find the records of agricultural cooperatives that date back to the late 1880s, when the Colored Farmers’ Alliance was founded. I learned that W. E. B. Du Bois was a major booster and investor in agricultural cooperatives, and that singer and activist Harry Belafonte raised money for Fannie Lou Hamer’s cooperative, Freedom Farms Cooperative.¹ I discovered that FSC had once had many chapters throughout the American South.

The Freedom Farmers I interviewed spoke about the self-determination of the farmer, the autonomy and the freedom to take a stand that agriculture conferred. They told me that agricultural cooperatives made it possible for Black farmers to find communal success. Black landowners played a critical role in their communities throughout the South through social and political institutions. They built schools, banks and other lending arrangements, health care clinics, and newspapers—which were often used for teaching literacy in the under-resourced school systems. They shared resources and bought land together, shared tools, and planted on the moon cycle to get the biggest harvest for the highest profit. Agricultural cooperatives helped Black farmers care for their families and build their communities. They lived the statement of Fannie Lou Hamer: that as long as she had “a pig and a garden,” no one could tell her what to do.

I had long suspected that contemporary Black farmers are working in a proud tradition; through research I have learned that was right. Our ancestors lived, breathed, planted, and harvested dreams of freedom and self-sufficiency on their farms; they live again through us.

References

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African Americans to participate in collective action and economic cooperatives as a strategy of Black freedom, with special attention to W. E. B. DuBois’s scholarship.