

Focus Question:

What was sharecropping, and how accurate is a history textbook's description of sharecropping?

Look at the picture below and answer the following questions:



Describe what you see in this picture.

What is this a picture of?

Why do you think that?

Spoiler Alert: This is not a picture of slaves on a plantation, but rather, sharecroppers working on a plantation in Georgia in 1898.

Directions: Do a close reading of the following textbook selection regarding sharecropping.

Sharecropping Textbook selection

From Digital History online textbook:

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=2&psid=3100

What the freed men and women wanted above all else was land on which they could support their own families. During and immediately after the war, many former slaves established subsistence farms on land that had been abandoned to the Union army. But President Andrew Johnson, a Democrat and a former slave owner, restored this land to its former owners. The failure to redistribute land reduced many former slaves to economic dependency on the South's old plantation owners and new landowners.

During Reconstruction, former slaves—and many small white farmers—became trapped in a new system of economic exploitation known as sharecropping. Lacking capital (money) and land of their own, former slaves were forced to work for large landowners. Initially, planters, with the support of the Freedmen's Bureau, sought to restore gang labor under the supervision of white overseers. But the freedmen, who wanted independence, refused to sign contracts that required gang labor. Ultimately, sharecropping emerged as a sort of compromise.

Instead of cultivating land in gangs supervised by overseers, landowners divided plantations into 20 to 50 acre plots suitable for farming by a single family. In exchange for land, a cabin, and supplies, sharecroppers agreed to raise a cash crop (usually cotton) and to give half the crop to their landlord. The high interest rates landlords and sharecroppers charged for goods bought on credit (sometimes as high as 70 percent a year) transformed sharecropping into a system of economic dependency and poverty. The freedmen found that "freedom could make folks proud but it didn't make 'em rich."

Nevertheless, the sharecropping system did allow freedmen a degree of freedom and autonomy far greater than they experienced under slavery. As a symbol of their newly won independence, freedmen had teams of mules drag their former slave cabins away from the slave quarters into their own fields. Wives and daughters sharply reduced their labor in the fields and instead devoted more time to childcare and housework. For the first time, black families could divide their time between fieldwork and housework in accordance with their own family priorities.

subsistence farms – farms where farmers grow food for themselves and their families

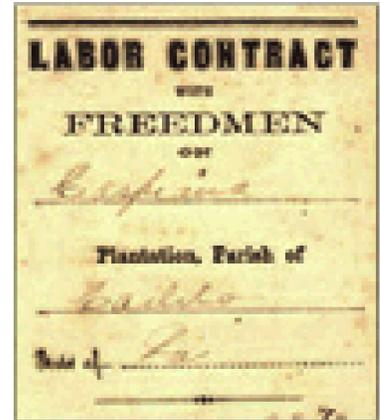
gang labor – a way of organizing workers used on plantations where a group works from sunrise to sunset under supervision.

Directions: Read the following contract and answer the questions.

A Sharecropping Contract: 1882 (Modified)

To everyone renting land, the following conditions must be agreed to:

For every 30 acres of land (rented by sharecroppers), I will provide a mule team, plow, and farming tools. The sharecroppers can have half of the cotton, corn, peas, pumpkins, and potatoes they grow if the following conditions are followed, but – if not – they are to have only two-fifths.



For every mule or horse furnished by me there must be 1,000 good sized rails (logs) hauled, and the fence repaired if I so direct. All sharecroppers must haul rails (logs) and work on the fence whenever I may order. The wood must be split and the fence repaired before corn is planted. No cotton must be planted by sharecroppers on their home patches of land. No sharecropper is to work off the plantation when there is any work for them to do for me.

Every sharecropper must be responsible for all farming gear placed in his hands, and if not returned must be paid for unless it is worn out by use.

Nothing can be sold from their (sharecroppers') crops until my rent is all paid, and all amounts they owe me are paid in full.

I am to gin & pack all of the cotton and charge every sharecropper an eighteenth of his part, the cropper to furnish his part of the bagging, ties, & twine.

The sale of every sharecropper's part of the cotton to be made by me when and where I choose to sell, and after taking all they owe me.

Source: Grimes Family Papers (#3357), 1882; Held in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

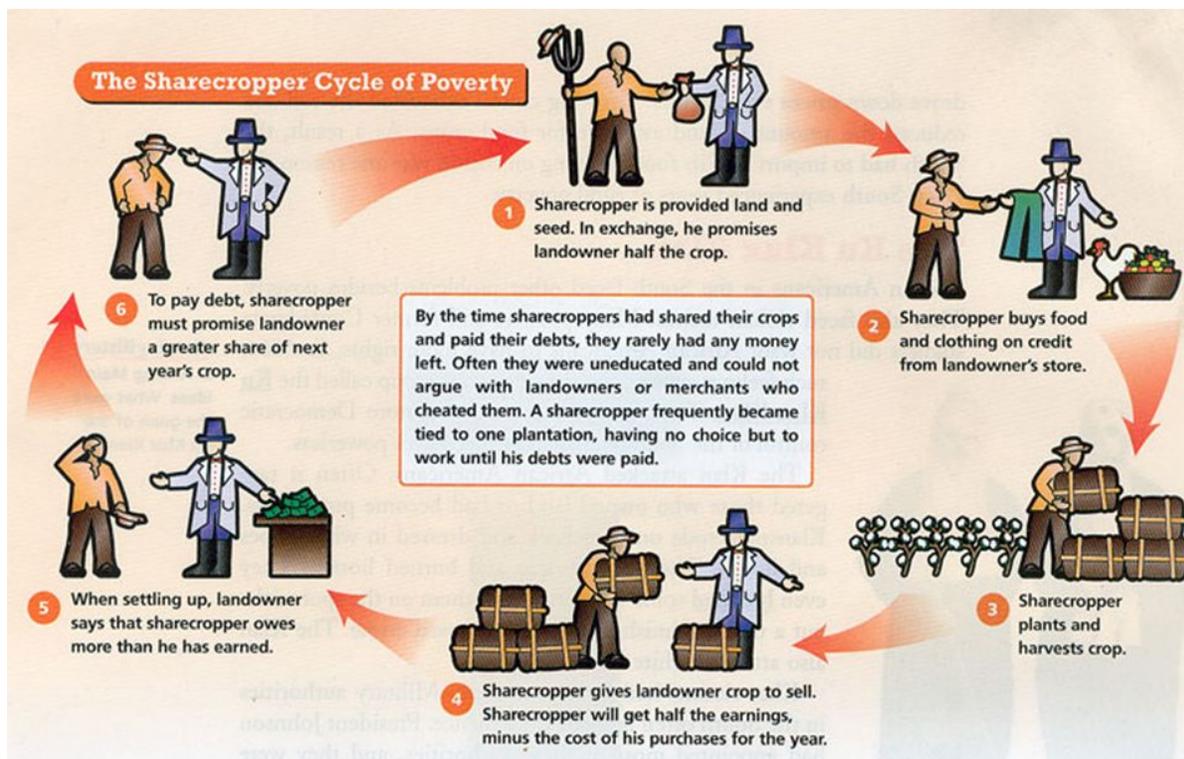
Sharecropping

Name _____

Directions: After reading the textbook selection and the contract, review the chart and answer the questions below.

- Did the textbook give an accurate portrayal of life under sharecropping? Why or why not?

- What were some differences between the description in the textbook of sharecropping and how it was presented in the contract?



Exit Question / Homework:

In one full paragraph, explain why sharecropping was NOT a good way for African-Americans in the South to make a living after the Civil War. Use information from both the textbook reading and the sharecropper contract. Use the back of this page for your paragraph.

