

## SHARECROPPING CONTRACT

[December 23, 1865]

Thomas J. Ross agrees to employ the said Freedmen to plant and raise a crop on his Rosstown Plantation for the year 1866 in Shelby County, Tenn. On the following Rules, Regulations and Renumerations.

. . . Ross agrees to furnish the land to cultivate, and a sufficient number of mules & horses and feed them to make and house said crop and all necessary farming utensils to carry on the same and to give unto said Freedmen whose names appear below one half of all the cotton, corn and wheat that is raised there for the year 1866 after all the necessary expenses are deducted . . .

. . . And we the said Freedmen agrees to furnish ourselves & families in provisions, clothing, medicine and medical bills and all, and every kind of other expenses that we may incur on the plantation for the year 1866 free of charge to said Ross. Should the said Ross furnish us any of the above supplies or any other kind of expenses, during said year, we are to settle and pay him out of the nett proceeds of our part of the crop the retail price of the county at time of sale or any price we may agree upon—The said Ross shall keep a regular book account . . . to be adjusted and settled at the end of the year . . .

We furthermore bind ourselves to and with said Ross that we will do good work and labor ten hours a day on an average, winter and summer . . . The time we are going to and from work shall not be computed or counted in the time . . . We further agree that we will loose all lost time, or pay at the rate of one dollar per day, rainy days excepted . . .

We furthermore bind ourselves that we will obey the orders of Ross in all things in carrying out and managing the crop for the year and further bind ourselves that we said Freedmen will keep up the fences around the enclosures, and lots especially and if any rails be missing by burning or otherwise destroyed by said Freedmen, we will pay for them or otherwise reconstruct the fence anew at our expense . . .

All is responsible for all farming utensils that is on hand or may be placed in care of said Freedmen for the year 1866 to said Ross and are also responsible to said Ross if we carelessly, maliciously maltreat any of his stock for said year to said Ross for damages to be assessed out of our wages for said year, all of which is understood by us Freedmen in the foregoing contract, or agreement, Ross assigning his name and ours following. It is further agreed by us whose names appear below that we will keep a sufficiency of firewood hawled up at all times and make fires in the room of Ross, when desired, attend to all stock properly, under direction of said Ross . . .<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from records at *The Freedmen's Bureau Online*, <http://freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/contracts/miscellaneouscontracts.htm>.

## HE WAS ALWAYS RIGHT AND YOU WERE ALWAYS WRONG

*Henry Blake, a freedman from Arkansas, describes how sharecropping limited his freedom in these words:*

When we worked on shares, we couldn't make nothing, just overalls and something to eat. Half went to the other man and you would destroy your half, if you weren't careful. A man that didn't know how to count would always lose. He might lose anyhow. They didn't give no itemized statement. No, you just had to take their word. They never give you no details. No matter how good account you kept, you had to go by their account, and now, Brother, I'm tellin' you the truth about this. It's been that way for a long time. You had to take the white man's work on note, and everything. Anything you wanted, you could git if you were a good hand. You could git anything you wanted as long as you worked. If you didn't make no money, that's all right; they would advance you more. But you better not leave him, you better not try to leave and get caught. They'd keep you in debt. They were sharp. Christmas come, you could take up twenty dollar, in somethin' to eat and as much as you wanted in whiskey. You could buy a gallon of whiskey. Anything that kept you a slave because he was always right and you were always wrong if there was a difference. If there was an argument, he would get mad and there would be a shooting take place.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> From *Henry Blake, Little Rock, Arkansas*, Federal Writer's Project, US Work Projects Administration (Manuscript Division), Library of Congress, available at the *History Matters* website, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6377/>.