

# Working Papers

## **Everything You Own Belongs to the Land: Land, Community, and History in Tillery, North Carolina**

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## **Center for Social Development**

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## Introduction

It was mostly by accident that the issue of land-ownership and land loss in rural African-American communities came to my attention. Working for then Congresswoman Eva Clayton, a Democrat representing the 1<sup>st</sup> District of North Carolina, a disadvantaged rural district in Eastern North Carolina, I was responsible for interacting with several of her constituents who were directly involved in the *Pigford v. Glickman* black farmers class action lawsuit. *Pigford v. Glickman* was a class action lawsuit filed by African-American farmers alleging systematic discrimination in farm programs by the US Department of Agriculture. Eventually, the plaintiffs and the Department of Agriculture settled the case by signing a consent decree that resulted in government settlements to black farmers totaling hundreds of million of dollars. By most accounts, the settlement of the case was not only a major victory in terms of financial remuneration to black farmers, but also a significant civil rights achievement for rural African-Americans.

However, despite the settlements, it was obvious that the black farmers with whom I interacted continued to regard the Department of Agriculture with enormous suspicion and hostility. Over time, it slowly became clear that this suspicion stemmed not just from being discriminated against by the Department of Agriculture, but was footed in something much deeper. In fact, the *Pigford v. Glickman* case resonated not just with farmers in African-American communities in the South, but throughout the communities themselves. One of the recurring issues raised by the suit was that of the dispossession of land and the feelings of powerlessness that this dispossession engendered in many individuals. Gradually, I began to hypothesize that the power and emotions underlying the class action suit resulted not just from differential access to federal farm programs, but from the loss of black land, and with it, the concomitant benefits that the land bestowed. As such, *Pigford v. Glickman* stood not just for the discrimination documented in the class action itself, but was a synecdoche for a much larger narrative of struggle of land, wealth, and power.

This paper explores the dynamic that I first encountered in my interactions with black farmers in Eastern North Carolina and seeks to bring together two areas of research in hopes that each can illuminate the other.

The first has to do with the role of wealth and assets on the political, educational, and economic outcomes of disadvantaged Americans. In looking at the determinants of family and community well-being and self-perceptions, researchers and policymakers have begun to interrogate the role of wealth, broadly defined by Oliver and Shapiro (1995) as, “the total extent...of an individual’s accumulated assets and access to resources....Wealth is anything of economic value bought, sold, stocked for future disposition, or invested to bring an economic return (p. 30).” As efforts to understand the important role of assets in familial economic security have grown, increased attention has been devoted to strategies to foster the accumulation of wealth, especially for poor and working class families.

The second issue is related to themes of assets and wealth, but adds to this body of literature a new line of inquiry into land ownership in rural, African-American communities in the Southern United States. In the 1<sup>st</sup> Congressional District of North Carolina - part of the historical “Black

Belt” stretching from the Mississippi Delta to Southern Virginia - African-Americans have struggled to acquire and maintain landholdings and to benefit from the productive capacities of land. Those who have been able to acquire land have worked mightily to prevent its disappearance from black hands.

Based upon my personal interactions, and further prodded by an Associated Press investigative series entitled, “Torn from the Land (2001),” it seemed to me that land ownership had been ignored in the research on assets and on the role of assets in family and community well-being. Thus far, the literature on assets and wealth has focused predominantly on home ownership. However, land is an important and symbolic form of wealth in some rural African-American communities. With land continuing to play an important role in many communities and with the loss of it continuing unabated, I saw an opportunity to supplement existing literature on assets through the lens land ownership in hopes that it would confirm this literature in some ways but also, due to its particularity and specificity, diverge in others.

### **Study Purpose/Research Question**

This paper will explore how black land-ownership and black land loss have affected the political, educational, and economic outcomes of African-American families. The goal is not a quantitative measurement of the effects of land ownership in the African-American community, but an understanding of the dynamics of land ownership in the local context of one community and the manner in which land-ownership and land loss determine the actions, expectations, and self-perceptions of African-American families within this singular community. The lines of inquiry that I explore include the following:

1. How has land ownership and the lack thereof affected the political, educational, and economic expectations of African-American individuals and families?
2. In rural, minority, and agriculturally dominated regions, are families who are not landholders less confident in their ability to successfully participate in these arenas or more pessimistic about their ability to improve their economic situation?
3. In certain African-American communities, does land, more than other productive assets (eg., homes, businesses) play a role in the choices that these communities make, or affect their self-perceptions in ways that alternative assets do not?
4. Are landowners more likely to play active, participatory roles in the economic and political lives of their communities than those who do not own land or who have lost land?

This paper will first review existing literature and studies in these areas, including both the extant research on assets and wealth as well as what is known about African-American land holding and land loss from the antebellum period until today. It will then place this research alongside data collected through interviews with black land-owners in rural North Carolina and deliver a preliminary analysis based upon the intersection of these interviews and the existing research.

### *The Importance of Assets*

Traditional research into family and economic policy has focused on income as the primary measure of economic security and familial self-sufficiency. This line of reasoning assumes that

if families have sufficient income to cover their basic expenses in a given month, then it is reasonable to assume that they have achieved a measure of adequate economic security. However, prompted largely by the publication of Michael Sherraden's *Assets and the Poor* (1991), researchers have moved away from a sole focus on income sufficiency towards a more complex equation of both income and assets. Their basic premise is that, even with identical incomes, an asset-rich family and an asset-poor family have very different capacities to deal with economic hardship.

The distribution of assets, or wealth, in the United States is unequal. In 1998, the wealthiest one-half percent of all Americans held 22.9 percent of the net worth. The figures for the top one percent and 10 percent of households are, respectively, 30.1 percent and 62.8 percent. On the bottom rung of the population, approximately 20 percent of American families own less than \$5,000 in net worth, and 8 percent - one in every twelve Americans - have negative financial worth (Kennickell, as cited in Beeferman, 2001).

When broken down by race, the highly stratified nature of asset-distribution becomes even more evident. In his book, *Being Black, Living in the Red*, sociologist Dalton Conley (1999) shows that, even among families with similar income levels, the asset differential between blacks and whites is remarkable. Using data from 1994, Conley explains that the average white family held assets valued at a level seven times higher than a black family with comparable income. Among families with incomes of \$15,000 annually, white families held an average of \$10,000 in assets while a similarly earning black family had zero. Moving up the income range to income levels above \$75,000, white families held an average of just over \$300,000, while black families were a little less than one-third of that amount, or \$114,600 (Conley, 1999).

In addition to pointing out the bare fact of unequal distribution, these theorists argue that wealth/assets play a critical role in economic security for a number of reasons. First, they are important because they provide an economic cushion that enables families to weather periods of economic difficulties, such as periods of joblessness or increased economic obligations (i.e. medical expenses, car repairs, etc.). As a result, two families with similar incomes have very different abilities to cope with economic duress. The family with adequate net liquid assets is able to draw down on these accumulated resources to bridge the difficult time to one of greater economic stability. However, the second family, with few assets or, like the bottom 30 percent of American families, with zero or negative net assets, has no financial recourse, and is thus more likely to find itself with no economic alternatives (Boshara, 2001).

Secondly, asset-theorists argue that, in addition to enabling families to weather turbulent financial times, assets are important for the role that they play in thinking and planning for the future. When an individual or a family has an asset-base, these theorists argue, it allows them to look forward and plan ahead in a manner that is very different from that which comes from income alone. With their assets, they have a foundation from which to seek additional assets and plan for the future. With assets in hand, be it a home, land, or a business, individuals feel more grounded and more secure for future possibilities. Ray Boshara, summarizing the thesis first proposed and developed by Michael Sherraden in his book *Assets and the Poor* (2003), says:

When people begin to accumulate assets, their thinking and behavior changes as well. Accumulating assets leads to important psychological and social effects that are not achieved in the same degree by receiving and spending an equivalent amount of regular income. These behavioral effects of asset accumulation are important for household 'welfare' or well-being (Boshara, 2001, p. 2.005).

Assets are not just about the present, but are important for the imagined futures that they enable. The same theorists argue that the opposite is also true. Whereas the presence of assets allows healthier futures to present themselves, the lack of assets constrains futures and consigns individuals and families to positions from which they have few alternatives. Oliver and Shapiro make this clear:

Perhaps no single piece of information conveys the sense of fragility common to those on the lowest rung of the economic ladder as the proportion of children who grow up in households without assets. Reducing all of life's chances for success to economic circumstances no doubt overlooks much, but resources nonetheless provide an accurate measure of differential access to educational, career, health, cultural, and social opportunities. In poignantly reciting the hopes they have for their children, parents recognize the importance of resources (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995, p. 89-90).

Third, theorists argue that asset-holding contributes to psychological well-being and satisfaction, neighborhood stability, political, social, and civic engagement, as well as educational attainment and socially desirable youth behaviors. In some of these areas, these theories have yet to be adequately proven; for example, in the link between asset (home) ownership and psychological satisfaction and mental health, as well as whether asset ownership contributes to socially desirable behavior among youth (Rohe, 2001). However, in other areas, research studies have largely confirmed the positive effects of asset ownership.

Using a comparison between homeowners and renters, Peter Rossi and Eleanor Weber (1996) found that homeowners are significantly more likely to be engaged in political and civic endeavors. With evidence from the General Social Survey (GSS) and the National Survey of Families and Households, they determined that, compared to renters, homeowners are consistently more involved in local and national politics than are renters. Homeowners also vote in local elections in higher proportions. DiPasquale and Glaeser (1999) found that increased levels of civic participation among homeowners are tied to increased neighborhood stability.

Scanlon and Page-Adams (2001) in a comprehensive literature review of the effects of assets, in their case homeownership, concluded that researchers can draw four conclusions from the existing literature:

1. There is a correlation between home-ownership and property values at the neighborhood level;
2. Residential stability is positively associated with home-ownership;
3. Homeowners are more actively involved in the upkeep and maintenance of their property;
4. Homeownership is associated with increased social and political activity on the local and neighborhood level.

Another area in which asset ownership and wealth are particularly relevant is in the area of education: educational financing, educational expectations, and educational attainment. In his chapter on assets and education, "From Financial to Social to Human Capital," Dalton Conley (1999) demonstrates the vital importance of wealth to education. In addition to the quantitative data, Dalton relies on a telling anecdote to illustrate his points.

In 1980, the wealthy businessman Eugene Lang was en route to a school in Harlem to give a speech to a class of sixth-graders. The intended speech was to cover the value of entrepreneurialism, hard-work, and education. As he traveled through the predominantly poor, minority neighborhood, Lang was compelled by the ruin and poverty of the neighborhood to discard his prepared speech, thinking it simplistic to solely extol these virtues in the face of such overwhelming poverty and deprivation.

Rather than giving the speech that day, Lang made a promise to the children present. Lang told the students that if they were successful in completing high school, that he would finance their college education at the institutions of their choice. Lang provided to the children a savings account of sorts, to be drawn down for the purpose of an education and the promise of a future with hope.

Years later the educational achievement of those children was re-examined. Of the 61 children in the class, 54 graduated from high school and over half, or 32, went on to college. The high school drop out rate in the area averaged between 50 percent and two-thirds of all students.

Conley also provides evidence for the critical role that assets play in educational attainment, showing that, for both high school and college graduation rates, the net liquid assets of a family play a statistically significant role; the greater the assets, the higher the chances of graduating. Conley also shows that family liquid assets and net worth are statistically associated with the likelihood that a student will be held back a grade or suspended or expelled from school. Conley's research is corroborated by additional research. Green and White (1997), found that, compared to children whose parents rent, children of homeowners are more likely to finish high school. Aaronson (2000) also found a positive correlation between home-ownership and graduation rates, especially for low-income children.

Conley also examines the role of assets in the financing of education, particularly secondary education. Looking at the academic year of 1992-1993, he found that the average net cost for students attending public four-year institutions was \$7,326, and for private schools was \$11,552. For students from low-income families, the disparities are less, but nonetheless significant: \$5,070 and \$5,872 respectively.

Given these net cost figures, it is not surprising that some research reports that individuals from low-income families tend to enroll in less-selective colleges...since there is an association between selectivity and costs. Since families are more likely to pay for college expenses out of wealth rather than out of current income (because of the enormous costs associated with postsecondary schooling), assets should have a similar – if not stronger – effect on predicting the selectivity of educational institutions attended (p. 59).

The selectivity of the school attended, however, has a further role in determining lifetime earnings, even among students of similar aptitude. After adjusting for aptitude, Caroline Hoxby (1998) found that two students fare differently depending on the selectivity of the school they attend. The student attending the more selective college receives a higher return in earnings over the course of a lifetime.

Returning to Conley's finding that family assets are among the most statistically significant predictors of high school and college graduation, the role of wealth and education in the reproduction of class positions becomes evident. The tropes of hard work and aptitude are seriously diminished in light of the manner in which wealth and the choices that it endows -- rather than aptitude -- leads to economic stability and success. For researchers interested in the mechanisms by which class structures and economic asymmetry are reproduced, these findings have major public policy ramifications.

A review of the literature illustrates that assets and wealth clearly matter. Viewed through several different lenses, the presence and the absence of assets have identifiable effects on individual, familial and community outcomes.

It is worth noting that much of this research has been, either explicitly or by implication, undertaken with two assumptions. First, asset-theory and research have focused upon economically disadvantaged urban and suburban populations. Second, its primary focus has been on home ownership.

These underlying assumptions, whether intentional or not, fail to recognize other areas of application where the insights of asset theory are not only relevant, but significant. First, asset theory and public policy should not only consider the means by which to foster asset growth, but should also consider ways in which to prevent the loss of assets currently held, particularly those held by minority and economically disadvantaged communities. Second, while maintaining the importance of home ownership among urban and suburban communities, it should recognize that among certain groups, for example, isolated rural communities, homeownership may not be the primary asset that can serve to anchor a family or a community.



### *Land-Ownership and Land Loss in the Black South*

One particular area of inquiry is that of land-ownership among African-Americans, particularly in the rural South. Though little known to many Americans, the history of African-American land ownership in the rural South is a story of triumph and loss.

Following the Emancipation Proclamation, freed slaves were hopeful that the federal government would provide the resources and the assistance to enable them to acquire land. On January 16, 1865, General Sherman designated 485,000 acres of land as abandoned. In the time thereafter, some 40,000 freedmen and freedwomen settled onto this land on 40-acre plots. Congress established the Freedman's Bureau and charged it with the resettlement of millions of freed slaves. Congress then passed the Southern Homestead Act, which, in theory at least, provided slaves with the opportunity to settle some 46 million acres of public land.

However, the hopes of land-ownership for blacks in the antebellum period soon proved to be premature. Almost immediately upon passing the Southern Homestead Act, the federal government began to take actions to nullify or mitigate the effectiveness of the anticipated land transfers to freed slaves. First, significant portions of the land originally controlled by the Freedman's Bureau, approximately half, were removed from its control. Second, the Commissioner of the Freedman's Bureau was instructed by President Johnson to restore to many pardoned confederates their original land. The net result of these actions was that the land transfer to freed slaves originally imagined turned out to be one more broken promise to freed slaves. According to Michael Lanza, seventy-two percent of those who acquired land under the Southern Homestead Act were white (Mitchell, 2001).<sup>1</sup>

Despite the broken promises of the US government and the enormous obstacles African-Americans faced in acquiring land, in the years following the Civil War, African-Americans were able to amass considerable land holdings. By the early 1920s, it is estimated that African-Americans owned between 16 million and 19 million acres of land, most of it in the rural South in what is now known as the Black Belt (Gilbert, Sharp, & Felin, 2001). At that time, there were over 920,000 farms operated by African-Americans in the United States (Wood & Gilbert, 2000).

The positive gains made by African-Americans in the years following the Civil War dropped precipitously in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, it was estimated that by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that African-Americans only owned a quarter of the land that they had held a century prior, and the number of African-American farmers in the United States had fallen from a peak of almost one million to only about 20,000 (Wood & Gilbert, 2000). During part of this period, from 1920 to 1940, scholars estimate that African-Americans were losing land at a rate of 350,000 acres annually (Meier, 1970). Over the past century, as the agricultural sector has been marked by growing concentration and economies of scale, farm holdings by both blacks and white have declined. However, the loss of black farms has taken place at a far faster rate than white farms. From 1900 to 1997, 98 percent of black farms disappeared. During the same

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<sup>1</sup> For the history of land distribution effort to freed slaves, I am indebted to Thomas Mitchell's more complete discussion of the matter. See Mitchell, T. (2001) *From Reconstruction to Deconstruction: Undermining Black Landownership, Political Independence, and Community Through Partition Sales and Tenancies in Common*. Northwestern University Law Review. Volume 95, Number 2.

period, the decline in white owned farms was approximately 65 percent (Wood & Gilbert, 2000). Despite representing much higher percentages of the US population, African-Americans today comprise only two percent of landowners, own just one percent of total acreage, and hold just one percent of the total value of land in the United States (Gilbert, Wood, & Sharp, 2002).

Unfortunately, far from being just a past history, recent studies and investigations, including a recent multi-part series from the Associated Press entitled “Torn from the Land (Lewan, 2001),” have shown that the loss of African-American land continues. In many cases, this has been achieved through a combination of subtle discrimination, overt intimidation, and underhanded legal maneuvers. Discriminatory state legal structures, local ordinances, and mechanisms such as partition sales systematically separated African-Americans from their land (Mitchell, 2001). In these situations, African-American land held jointly by a number of individuals, often in the same family, could be sold and broken apart even if only one out of a large number of owners of the land wished to sell his or her portion of it, allowing unscrupulous individuals to force the sale of a jointly held piece of property to redeem their small portion of it.

Even after these losses, land holdings by African-Americans in the South remain a significant asset of considerable economic value. Data from 1999 puts the value of African-American land at slightly under \$15 billion (Gilbert, 2002).

However, the damage inflicted by the loss of this asset base goes beyond simply economics. It also has cultural and emotional ramifications within the African-American community. Many African-Americans in the rural South continue to consider land-ownership within the context of a long history from slavery to the present. The African-American experience in the United States is founded upon the labors of African slaves upon land not under their control. After slavery, gaining control of land was central not just to economic liberation, but also to cultural self-determination. Indeed, one could cogently argue that any narratives of African-American oppression, deprivation, and liberation must include a treatment of land ownership.

### **Land, Community, and History in Tillery**

To supplement existing research, I traveled to Tillery, North Carolina. The Tillery Resettlement Farm, as this area was known at the time, was one of approximately 113 rural resettlement experiments, and one of only 13 African-American resettlement communities, developed by the U.S. Government in the 1930s and 1940s under President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. Spread over 18,000 acres, the Tillery Resettlement Farm was one of the largest resettlement projects and the largest African-American project in the United States. The Concerned Citizens of Tillery, a grassroots community group in Tillery dedicated to the well-being of this community, describes the promise of Tillery under the New Deal:

For hundreds of African-American families, Tillery was a place of hopes and dreams, and possibilities, a beginning for some and a new start for others. Families came from nearby North Carolina towns like Tarboro, Rocky Mount, Enfield, Northampton County, and as far away as Virginia, Georgia, and Florida. They came by mule and wagon. They came on beat up pick-up trucks, the cab filled with small children and the rest of their precious cargo hanging off the sides....To have a new house that nobody lived in

before... a room for the boys and a room for the girls and nobody would come in the cold of night to threaten us and make us move one more time (Concerned Citizens of Tillery, 1996, p. 1).

In Tillery, I interviewed five African-American individuals, all of whom were associated, either directly or indirectly, with the resettlement of Tillery under the New Deal and all of whom were acquainted with issues pertaining to land ownership and land loss in the community.

### *Sample and sample selection*

Interview participants were identified through snowball sampling with the assistance of colleagues residing in Eastern North Carolina already acquainted with the residents of the area. Those interviewed were familiar with issues related to land loss and some were community leaders in educating their fellow residents regarding the importance of preserving land held by African-Americans.

The sample is a small one, first, due to time constraints, but also because the goal of the interviews was depth and quality rather than quantity. Seeking individuals with rich stories to tell required individuals able to self-reflectively speak about land, assets, and their own familial and cultural histories.

Snowball sampling was utilized with the assumption that community leaders in Tillery and the surrounding area are due their own agency as subjects of study. Thus, it was appropriate that they present to me people whom they deemed appropriate for my purposes and theirs. Assuming that the generation of knowledge is both a negotiated and a political process mediated by the numerous goals of researchers and those interviewed, I purposefully relied on others to guide sample selection to make explicit my belief that the research process, as one that is negotiated, cannot be controlled solely through the intentions of the primary researcher.

One could argue that a larger sample size would better enable me to interview “typical” or “normal” subjects of interview. However, I would argue that looking for “normal” subjects in the community of Tillery is not the most important goal. There is nothing “typical” about the largest and one of the few remaining African-American settlement communities of the New Deal era. It is a community with a unique history. I was more interested in the specific paths that individuals within the community of Tillery have charted than in the extent to which they are synecdoches for a whole. If some find in the narratives the general reflected in the specific, then so much the better. However, my goal throughout has been the richness of the local rather than the generality of the typical.

### *Not One Tillery, but Three*

Prior to the interviews in Tillery, I imagined Tillery to be a fairly discrete community, bound together by its particular history founded on the New Deal resettlement of the 1930s. However, as is usually the case, the local is more complex than the general. In this case, though there is currently one town of Tillery proper, the interviewees all spoke to the presence of not one community in Tillery, but three.

The town of Tillery, North Carolina, was incorporated in 1889 and is located in the area of three major, former slave-holding plantations -- the Johnson Plantation, the Tillery Plantation, and the Devereux Plantation. According to census data from 1850, Thomas Devereux owned 8 plantations in two counties and counted 273 slaves in Halifax County alone, the county in which Tillery is located (Concerned Citizens of Tillery, 1996). Following Emancipation, Tillery was comprised of two communities, one of white landowners, and the other of black sharecroppers who, despite their legal status as freedmen, saw little, if any, substantial change in their way of life, remaining tied to the land through debt and economic hardship. The state of racial affairs and the opinions of white landowners following Emancipation might be seen in the journal entry of Margaret Devereux:

The Negro emancipation has been accomplished—the unfortunates have been thrust blindfolded upon the ills of a state of which they know nothing....They occupy themselves ceaselessly with trying on their new chains—seeing how little work they can accomplish and yet be fed, and endeavoring to be slaves and free at the same moment – a slave on the food, shelter and clothing question, but free when labor is concerned...(Devereux, 1906 as cited in Janke, 1986, p. 8).

This typified the situation until the arrival of a third community in Tillery, also black. Unlike the resident sharecroppers, this group arrived in Tillery riding the promise and hope of becoming landowners through the New Deal Resettlement Agency. They arrived some 300 families strong - starting in 1934, the year the Resettlement Program began, until 1943, when the project came to a conclusion with mixed success. Apparently, the racial sentiments present in the journals of Margaret Devereux had changed little in the intervening years, and the white residents of Tillery did what they could to prevent the Tillery Farms Resettlement Project from coming to Tillery, North Carolina. In a letter addressed to Congressman J. H. Kerr, 97 white residents of Tillery expressed their opposition to locating the Resettlement Community in their town writing, “Dear J.H. Kerr, we the undersigned residents of Tillery and surrounding communities hereby request you to ask the government not to make the Tillery farm project a Negro project alone as our population is now 98 percent colored (Concerned Citizens of Tillery, 1996, p. 3).” Despite white opposition, the Resettlement Project came to Tillery.

The arrival of the third community in Tillery created a triangle of three communities, each living in tension with the others to varying degrees. The white landowning community remained leery of both black communities, the old sharecropping community as well as the new landowning black residents. The sharecroppers, meanwhile, remained in debt to the white landowners but also expressed distrust of the incoming black families associated with the Resettlement Project. The Resettlement families arrived to find themselves distrusted by both.

The tense relationship between these three communities determined social relations in Tillery, not just during the Resettlement years, but for years to come. According to the individuals who were interviewed, this tension is present today, though not with the same force as in previous years. One of the individuals interviewed, Mr. G, the child of one of the families that participated in the Resettlement, described the relationship from the time of the New Deal until the present.

Let's just make the distinction. When I say Old Tillery, I'm talking about the descendants of the slaves. And New Tillery, New Tillery is New Deal people. In Old Tillery most of them were sharecroppers and new people were landowners....They were very much separated by the third community, the white community, who didn't want to lose control over the people, over the sharecroppers. And they created a really great division....[They did that by] saying were we were bigoted. We were, you know, smart niggers. That we, uh, didn't...for the most part a great number of us were fairer skinned. Um, and they used that as well to separate us. 'You know they think they better than you'....We've got a woman who turned 102 years old and she's a gracious lady but she still talks about it. Oh, the community is still pretty much divided.

Several of the individuals interviewed agreed that the divisions between "Old Tillery" and "New Tillery" affected relations between the two black communities in Tillery. To some extent, this was likely due to a lack of familiarity. As one current landowner in Tillery, Mr. H, described it, they simply did not know each other or grow up together, inevitably leading to distrust and wariness.

This was a sentiment suggested by Ms. C as well. Ms. C is the daughter of sharecroppers in Old Tillery, who is able to straddle both Old and New Tillery. She grew up in Tillery but left for the city for almost 40 years before returning to Tillery. She too initially ascribed tensions between Old Tillery and New Tillery to a lack of familiarity between the communities, telling of the reception that she received upon coming back to Tillery, "I call it plain ignorance. And people resent me even though my family has been here for 7 generations. I'm still a new person because I didn't stay here." However, upon further reflection, she attributed the tension not just to a lack of familiarity, but also to asset ownership, describing her return to Tillery with a quality automobile and with the deeds to two homes in her city of residence for the previous 38 years.

It is difficult to say that land-ownership alone is the reason for community divisions between Old Tillery and New Tillery. In any community, the structure of community relations is far too complex and historically embedded to be based on one sole factor. It is likely that much of it was attributable to the sudden arrival of a new group of individuals, landowners or not, who were not attuned to the hum of daily life in Tillery. It is equally likely that the divisions between Old and New Tillery, while present, are now eclipsed by more current concerns. As Mr. H said, "Those distinct lines, you gotta look for them. They're there, but you gotta look for them."

One interview shed particular light on the role that land ownership may have played in creating a division between Old Tillery and New Tillery. Mr. L. was a sharecropper native to Tillery who received land under the Resettlement Project, the only native-born son to participate in the Resettlement. It was interesting that, during the course of the interview, Mr. L also said that he considered the lack of acquaintance to be the primary reason for division between the two communities. However, later during the conversation, he also mentioned in passing that he was often seen as someone from New Tillery. Mr. L grew up in Tillery and today, at 87 years old, continues to own several hundred acres of land. Save for a three-month period of work in a Baltimore steel plant, Mr. L has been a long-time resident of Tillery. If acquaintance with the community is what divides the Old from the New Tillery, Mr. L has as much right as anyone to claim membership in the community of Old Tillery. The fact that, despite his origins in Old

Tillery and his ongoing residence, Mr. L was considered by some to be New Tillery, may speak volumes to the fact that far from being only a matter of economics, land ownership also played and continues to play a significant role in social cohesion and community relations.

### *Land Ownership and Education*

Current research on assets makes much of the role of assets in the financing of education and in educational attainment. As noted previously, the research of Aaronson (2000), Conley (1999), and Green and White (1997) have documented the positive effects of asset-ownership on educational attainment, in particular, high school graduation. When interviewing individuals in Tillery about land-ownership, the topic of education surfaced repeatedly.

The difference in educational opportunity between landowners and sharecroppers was noted by several individuals. Though both the children of sharecroppers and landowners worked in the fields with their families, the children of landowners had the freedom to attend school as they chose, whereas the children of sharecroppers attended school at the leisure of their employer. Mr. G, the child of a landowner in the Resettlement community, spoke of it this way:

One of the interesting things about the land piece is that those of us who owned were, whose parents were buying land, education was important....But those over on the other side of town, where the old, where the descendents of the slaves were, I could go to school and be the only child in my class for a whole month, and because they were sharecroppers and they had to stay home whenever the landowner said.

Mr. L, who grew up as a child in a sharecropping family, noted during our conversation that they attended school when it rained because, on those days, they were unable to work in the fields. “I finished second grade. You go to school on a rainy day. When you see it raining like this you know you are going to school tomorrow.” Mr. L returned to school during his sixties.

All the interviewees emphatically agreed that land ownership played a role in both the educational expectations as well as the educational attainment of their families. Several participants noted that the number of high school and college graduates was significantly higher among landowning families in Tillery than among non-landowning families. Mr. L described how, whenever his daughter needed financial assistance at school, he would sell products from his farm and send the money to her. His daughter, who was sitting next to him during his interview, described the importance of land in her education, “All of my life...the land fed me, clothed me, provided recreation for me, provided security for our home....It educated me. This was a time before Pell grants. We didn’t have any grants to go to school. It was the land that did it.”

A look at the educational attainment of the children of the landowners is remarkable. Mr. W, who never had the opportunity to go to school, or, as he put it, “never received proper training”, had five children. All of them finished high school, and four attended college. One received a master’s degree and worked at the *Washington Post* for several decades. Mr. H has two children, both of whom finished college. Mr. L has two biological children and raised two children from his extended family. All four finished high school, and two finished college. However, land-ownership did not play a decisive role in the education of all families. Ms. C, who came from a

family in Old Tillery that did not own land, had three children. One “decided to major in husbands and babies.” Her son finished high school and completed two years of college. Her second daughter has two master’s degrees and has completed 60 credits in a doctoral program, leaving her a dissertation short of a Ph.D. Mr. G, the son of a landowning family, finished college and came back to Tillery to teach at the Tillery school for 12 years.

The way in which a lack of education contributed to land loss was a topic that also came up in several conversations. Two of the interview participants, Mr. H and Ms. C, told of how their families had owned land in earlier generations, but had lost the land due, in part, to a lack of knowledge about how to retain that land. Mr. H’s grandfather owned land but lost it due to the fact that he never asked for a deed when he bought the farm. When the seller died, the heirs simply reclaimed the land. Mr. H is currently involved in efforts to retain black land and points to the necessity of education in doing so:

Well, it’s gotta be done through education. If you go to the reasons that black, well there’s a lot of reasons that blacks lose land...lack of wills. Lack of education about the value of the land...when you educate people about actually what is happening, you know, then they begin to become an issue and they begin to put that issue in their children and what have you. Then it gets to be a lot better. But in areas where nobody gets that education...it just slips away and you got communities upon communities, probably all over the country that, if you go back, that has happened.

Interestingly, in describing the critical role that land played in the education of themselves and their children, land ownership, for all of its power in enabling educational attainment, also played a paradoxical role in removing people from the land. By enabling landowners to educate their children and providing the children of landowners with opportunities never afforded to their parents, the land opened up new opportunities and expanded the horizon beyond the farm community of Tillery to schools in distant places and better-paying jobs in the city. Among landowners, as Mr. G said, “you were going to finish high school and you were going to college. That was not in question.” But, though the educational aspirations of landowners and their children cohered around land ownership and the opportunities it afforded, their desire to remain on the land as farmers did not.

#### *Community Cohesion, Involvement, and Participation*

Researchers who study assets have spent considerable time examining whether homeownership leads to increased community involvement and political activity. Studies have confirmed this to be the case. Scanlon and Page-Adams (2001) in a comprehensive literature review, found increased local social and political activity to be one of the primary effects of homeownership. The research on home ownership demonstrates that the presence of assets serves to bring a community together and to strengthen the ties of homeownership families to the community.

Based upon the interviews in Tillery, it appears that land ownership operates in much the same manner as homeownership. Of those interviewed, all were engaged in the community. All are members of the Concerned Citizens of Tillery, a grassroots community organization that was founded in the seventies to fight the planned closing of the last school in Tillery. Following that effort, the group continued and continues today to meet regularly. Mr. H was the youngest of the

landowners in Tillery interviewed, and the last to arrive in the community, purchasing a plot of land for a house in Tillery in the 1970s and beginning to farm in the area in 1980. One reason Mr. H chose Tillery was because of the high rate of African-American land ownership and the level of community participation. Mr. H describes the town of Tillery as a “progressive community” characterized by people who want to educate their children, improve their lifestyle, and interact with others. He believes that the community participation is directly related to the land.

Well it’s related to that quality of life that has come up through land ownership and through farming and what have you. I mentioned earlier to you that they are interested in bettering themselves....They are interested in more things, greater things, better opportunities. So that actually breeds more political action and what have you. It all goes back to the land.

Mr. W spoke of how he couldn’t wait to leave Tillery. Like many others, he joined the service and served in the military from 1941 to 1945. Before leaving Tillery, he worked for others as a sharecropper. Angry at doing other people’s work for twenty-two years, he described himself as a “walking time-bomb” before he left Tillery. A few years later, he returned with several thousand dollars in his pocket and the goal of being “his own boss.” He relayed with obvious satisfaction an encounter that he had when he returned to Tillery. The men for whom Mr. W’s father was working, asked “Boy, you coming back here to work for us?” Mr. W chuckled as he recalled turning to them and declaring that he wouldn’t be working for them anymore.

Tillery was also the home of the Tillery Improvement Association in the early 1950s. In 1954, the same year as the Brown v. Board of Education decision, members of the Tillery Improvement Association demanded that their children be enrolled in white schools. The same individuals challenged voting requirements for African-Americans by refusing to read and write the Constitution at the polling stations. From the Tillery Improvement Association, grew the first chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Halifax County.

The inverse of the active political and community participation of landowners, was the lack of community involvement by those who did not own land. According to Mr. G, all of the members of the Tillery Improvement Association were landowners associated with the Resettlement Community. Whereas the landowners were more likely to advocate and agitate for themselves, the non-landowners and day-laborers were muted. Mr. W spoke of being a landowner and the difference between himself and others in the community who did not own land.

I think at some point they don’t want to talk about it. They’d rather keep quiet, just like being in slave time. My thing was, I knowed the conditions and I wanted to get out of it and help someone else if I could. But you don’t help people unless you gonna help yourself. You know. And there was a whole lot of people that couldn’t get helped. They pretend they are doing fine and people don’t know how to bond with them. Talk with them or whatever.



Though several individuals raised the issue of community and political participation, each was careful to frame it within the parameters of the social and economic freedom and confines. Landowners, they pointed out, were free of the system of sharecropping, day-labor, and indebtedness that dominated the existence of those who did not own land. In the same manner that the children of sharecroppers and day-laborers were not free to send their children to school as they wished, neither did they have the freedom to challenge, without fear of retribution, the social and economic order in which they were enmeshed. Their lives were, as Mr. H put it, “just a matter of survival.” Mr. G, speaking of how the members of the Tillery Improvement Association had challenged voting laws in the fifties, said, “None of the Old Tillery were involved in that. That scared them because the, the landowner threatened to put you out if you went over and got involved in that.” Thus, while confirming that land ownership affects community and political participation in a manner that is consistent with the extant research on homeownership, there are differences as well. The relative quietism of the sharecropping community that was due to a fear of economic and physical retribution, indicates that this is not a simple question of asset-ownership versus non asset-ownership. Rather, this fact ties land ownership and assets to a particular history of racial discrimination, terror, and intimidation.

#### *Land and Economic Opportunity*

Land ownership, like homeownership and other assets, plays a significant role in the lives of those who were and are fortunate enough to own land in Tillery. In terms of educational opportunity and political and community engagement, it is evident from the individuals that I interviewed that there were noticeable differences between landowners and sharecroppers. Not only were their aspirations more far-reaching, but so too were their actions and attainment.

Similar to the effects of landownership on education and political engagement, landownership played an important role in the economic well-being and opportunity of landowners. At various times, the interviewees stressed not just the economic gains and opportunity afforded to them when they acquired land initially, but the way in which the land continued to contribute to their economic well-being. When Mr. W returned from the military service with \$3,000, he used this money to buy his farm. He saw it as an opportunity for him to do something for himself, and the benefits still accrue to him today. As he put it, “The same money is working for me now as far as I’m concerned....You see I’m sitting here. That’s the only reason I’m here.”

During the time of the Resettlement, it was customary for farmers and sharecroppers to receive money once a year. Due to the seasonal nature of their employment, they would receive a lump sum payment and then would be required to stretch the payment for the entirety of the year. It was a difficult and precarious way to live, especially for the sharecroppers who, through a variety of mechanisms, accrued enough debt during the previous year that by the time they received their payment, much of it was already owed to the landowner. Even for farmers who controlled or owned some land, it was difficult, because the majority produced row-crops and commodities and depended on a single harvest and sale. Mr. W described how he used his land to alter this cycle.

My daddy and the people of the day, they would get an allowance. A lump allowance to live on for a year. And so, uh, when we first got married I tried and, uh, my wife didn't like it. She said, no, I don't want to be owing nobody for no food. Let's produce our own food. Get out and own it and be our own producer. And that's what we did.

Not only did Mr. W and his family eat the vegetables that they produced, they also sold them to others. After some years, Mr. W explained, he and his wife "got so good at growing vegetables," and their vegetables were so well-regarded in the area, that people would call them to place orders, and Mr. W would drive around the area and deliver vegetables to people's homes. While his white customers appreciated his produce, they were not happy with his farming success, which came to include row-crops, vegetables, and livestock.

I had all kinds of approaches. You know, around that time I was getting ready to pay the farm off and I was sellin' maybe a \$1,000 worth of hogs a week. And the [white] cashier came from behind the counter and pulled me and said, 'every time you come down here with \$1,000...it's just too much money'. And I said, 'ma'am, how much should it be?' She never said. A whole lot of things would come out.

Land was important economically for several reasons. First, land-ownership, despite the jealousy or tensions that it may have caused, gave an individual respect and the standing to navigate economic structures. Land also provided collateral for loans, which was crucially important for farmers who typically required annual operating loans in order to run their farms. Accessing these loans was not a simple matter of economics, but of social networks and status. In a small town where the social networks are tight, and privacy is a commodity as costly as land, an individual needed to be in good standing with the community lenders. Respect, standing, social networks, and economics were inextricably bound.

Perhaps most importantly, land was a productive rather than a static asset. It provided economic opportunity and a chance to solidify their economic foundation. Mr. L contrasted his position as a landowner to that of his brothers, working in the mills of New York and Baltimore. Though their mill jobs covered the necessities, they did not expand opportunity. Speaking of his brother's jobs in the mills, Mr. L said, "You work in a steel plant and you wouldn't of had no clothing, wouldn't of had no mules, wouldn't of had no car. You wouldn't have nothing but food." Mr. L spent three months in Baltimore with his brothers, only to return to Tillery to begin farming. In time, Mr. L's brothers followed him back to Eastern North Carolina to farm alongside their brother.

In contrast, Mr. L had all of these things and more – things that were beyond his reach during his youth as a sharecropper. The land and its productive capacities allowed him to step beyond the wage labor that his family and colleagues pursued. Land had a multiplying effect, providing collateral and income for the purchase of goods that were a part of the life Mr. L sought for himself and for his family.

Land is the best thing in the world to have. This home. If I have didn't have this home, you couldn't all sit here [a point that Mr. W made as well]. It's very important to own....I'd rather be in the shape of having the land...the car belongs to the land. *Everything you own belongs to the land* [author's emphasis].

### *Land, Race, and Power*

This comment in particular, “everything you own belongs to the land,” is striking in its power and as testament to the esteem in which, not just Mr. L, but the others as well, hold land. In this simple statement, the themes of education, economics, and community participation, cease to be separate areas of inquiry, but instead are seen as the composite parts of a complex narrative. It is a narrative of struggle and success and of the efforts of a community not far removed from slavery to overcome a history not of their making, nor of their choosing.

By separating out the themes of education, economics, and political engagement, it is possible to situate the ownership of land within the larger context of research on asset-ownership in general. The interviews with Mr. G, Mr. H, Mr. W, Ms. C, and Mr. L clearly indicate that land-ownership, like home-ownership, has positive effects on a number of individual and family outcomes. Land ownership enabled individuals like Mr. L, who grew up sharecropping and was able to attend school only through the second grade, to graduate four children from high school and two from college. Land ownership played a role in spurring a group of individuals to march their children to the segregated white school in Eastern North Carolina and demand that they be enrolled. It provided a means for sharecroppers and their children to escape the cycle of debt and deprivation that was, for many, the only way of life that they knew and to become, as Mr. W put it, “my *own* self.” Insomuch as land ownership enabled all of these things, it is generally consistent with research on the role of assets, and therefore, ought to be included within that context. While the economic value of land ownership in rural, African-American communities does not approach that of homeownership, its historic and symbolic value is significant.

Though, based upon the assessments of the residents of Tillery themselves, one can reasonably assert that land ownership impacted the lives of those able to attain land, reverse causality may have played a role as well. Though land ownership may have contributed to the education, community activism, and economic success of individuals, the drive that moved individuals to seek land may have also been that which propelled them towards education, community participation, and economic gain in the first place. The task of relocating to a new town and starting a new life was itself a major undertaking that may have attracted individuals and families already predisposed to strive for things that their peers may have deemed unattainable. As a result, it is necessary to allow that such predispositions may have moved certain individuals to seek out land in the first place rather than vice versa.

The story of land ownership in Tillery, North Carolina is embedded in a larger historical and cultural narrative that prevents land-ownership from being neatly situated within asset research and theory alone. This is a story that begins with slavery and continues past the Emancipation Proclamation and *de jure* freedom from slavery. This story continues through the establishment of the Tillery Resettlement project in 1932 to the present. It is a story of white privilege, black power and powerlessness, and the determining and interconnected roles of wealth, power and self-determination.

From the beginning of the Tillery Resettlement Project, there were efforts to prevent African-Americans from obtaining land, and with it, the benefits that it conferred. First, it was the 97 residents of white Tillery who wrote to their Congressman, J.H. Kerr, urging him to block the location of the Resettlement project in the area. Then, African-Americans who were placed under the Resettlement Plan were located on low-quality farmland along the floodplain of the Roanoke River, while whites received the higher quality land on the west side of the county. From the very start, things were far from equal, a sentiment expressed by Mr. H while discussing the difference between black land ownership and white land ownership.

They [the whites] owned it historically. They. They were there. It was given to them but it was a struggle for us to get there. You know, in Tillery, they owned plantations back there....So in their offspring, it was just given to them. You know, it was just given to them. They didn't have to go through the brainpower of acquiring it and keeping it. They weren't faced with all the obstacles that was put upon the black landowners. All they had to do was *maintain*. We had to *obtain* [author's emphasis].

Over the course of my interviews, a recurring theme was the struggle of African-Americans in Tillery to overcome racism, both overt and subtle. With regard to education and land, for the many sharecropping families in Tillery, the white landowners decided if and when the children of sharecroppers would go to school. Mr. L, the son of sharecroppers, knew as a child that, "you go to school on a rainy day." Meanwhile, the children of landowners, Mr. G among them, were free to attend school without fear – "I could go to school and be the only child in my class for a whole month."

White landowners also used the lack of education of many African-Americans to take their land from them. Mr. H's father was a landowner, living for years on the land that he had purchased from a white landowner. However, his failure to insist upon a physical deed to the land when he purchased it, provided him with no legal recourse when the family that sold him the land reclaimed it. Similarly, Ms. C learned only later in life that her Grandmother had been willed land long ago but had never received it.

That some African-Americans in Tillery, even prior to the resettlement project, were able to acquire land but were then prevented from passing along their land to their kin is significant, because of the important role that assets play in the intergenerational transfer of wealth. Those born into money are much more likely to pass along wealth to their own families. Whereas those born into few financial assets must, from their earliest days, navigate their financial futures without the advantages of endowed wealth. Though economists disagree on the extent to which wealth is passed down from generation to generation, with some estimating that upwards of 80 percent of wealth is due to intergeneration transfers and others putting the number at 20 percent, it is clear that inherited wealth confers distinct advantages (Oliver & Shapiro, 1997). The fact that certain African-Americans were denied the use of these mechanisms by which gifts of wealth are passed along from parents to children, illustrates the extent to which they faced obstacles to wealth accumulation at every step.

Similarly, differential access to, and ownership of land, structured the political activism and community engagement in Tillery. This was not a simple matter of land ownership, but of how the sharecroppers who did not own land were unable to participate in such activities for fear of retribution from the landowners for whom they worked. Threatened with the loss of what little they had, or being “put out,” acquiescence was the option that ensured food and shelter. There were surely exceptions to this, one of them being Ms. C and her family who, despite being sharecroppers, managed to operate independently. For many sharecroppers, engaging in community activities that would upset the racial equilibrium was a risk not worth taking.

African-Americans in Tillery not only had to deal with the efforts of whites in the area to keep them from the land, but also to navigate the waters of distrust fomented by whites between landowners and non-landowners. Mr. G spoke of how the white community used the success of one black community, New Tillery, to breed suspicion in the other, Old Tillery: “We had cars. We had tractors. We had all the things that white folk had and that made white folk mad and made them teach black folk to be mad with us, Old Tillery, because they didn’t have the same things.”

Throughout Tillery, the intersection of land, power, and powerlessness dominate. Where African-Americans, despite efforts to prevent it, were able to acquire land, their ability to independently exercise power, educational, economic, or political, increased significantly. Where forces prevented the acquisition of land by African-Americans, powerlessness continued.

In the Tillery experience of land ownership and land loss, one can isolate past and current vestiges of racial discrimination and, therein, the deprivation of the African-American community from both opportunity and power. The Tillery experience illuminates historical patterns of racial discrimination, here related to land ownership and land loss, that continue to determine the standing of African-Americans to this day. In *Black Wealth, White Wealth* (1995), Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro rely heavily on the concept of the *sedimentation of racial inequality*. They argue that in the differential wealth between white and blacks in the United States, one can see the layers upon layers, or accumulated sediment, of discrimination and institutionalized racism. This sediment continues to play a determining role in the lower economic status of African-Americans into the present.

To argue that blacks form the sediment of the American stratificational order is to recognize the extent to which they began at the bottom of the hierarchy during slavery, the cumulative and reinforcing effects of Jim Crow and de facto segregation through the mid-twentieth century. Generation after generation of blacks remained anchored to the lowest economic status in American society. The effect of this inherited poverty and economic scarcity for the accumulation of wealth has been to ‘sediment’ inequality into the social structure....What is often not acknowledged is that the same social system that fosters the accumulation of private wealth for many whites denies it for many blacks, thus forging an intimate connection between white wealth accumulation and black poverty (Oliver, 1995 p. 5).

Oliver and Shapiro’s concept of sedimentation provides a theoretical method by which to trace current economic disparities into past asymmetries and discrimination. It also provides a rebuttal

to those who argue that the discrimination in the United States is a thing of the past, and that since the Civil Rights Era, minorities have had economic opportunities equal to other Americans.

Oliver and Shapiro focus their discussion of the sedimentation of racial inequality primarily within the context of federal policy after World War II, demonstrating how racist federal policies were instituted through the Federal Housing Administration, welfare and income support policy such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and the Internal Revenue Code. They show that federal policy blatantly discriminated against African-Americans and prevented them from participating in the post-war expansion of the middle-class, predicated as it was on an unprecedented explosion of wealth and asset-holding by the newly minted members of the American middle-class.

Though they touch briefly upon the issue of land ownership by African-Americans, Oliver and Shapiro mostly bypass the rural, African-American communities where land was an important economic asset. However, just as federal policies prevented urban African-Americans from taking part in the upward mobility of the post-war period, the policies also prevented rural blacks from acquiring land and removed them from land that they already held. Though Tillery was not a unique case, it was certainly an uncommon one. Whereas Tillery was a site for the transfer of land to African-Americans, elsewhere in America, African-American land was being vacated and liquidated at alarming rates. African-American land ownership peaked in 1920, approximately a decade before the Tillery Resettlement Farm experiment was operating. While many African-Americans, the majority of them residing in cities, were prevented by federal policy from participating in the post-war economic expansion of assets, rural African-Americans were systematically deprived of an asset that they already held.

The history of African-American land ownership and loss is significant because it demonstrates that racial bias in the United States relating to assets and wealth does not solely involve the denial of equal opportunity, but also resulted in the active removal of African-American wealth. A double-disadvantage occurs, first, through the prevention of the accumulation of assets, and second through the abolition of assets already accumulated.

The fact that land loss in the African-American community continues unabated (see Lewan, 2001, Mitchell, 2001) into the present, by means both dubiously legal and outright discriminatory, indicates that sedimentation of economic disadvantage and racial inequality continue today. Though steps may have been taken to address some of the discriminatory practices that resulted in this sedimentation, such as the passage of equal housing opportunity laws, in the continued removal of rural African-Americans from their land, we can see the practices today that will be tomorrow's sediment of racial inequality.

## **Conclusion**

The study of land ownership in rural communities like Tillery and, most likely, throughout the Southern United States, unlocks a narrative of racism and power that includes both the triumphs of many African-Americans as well as the grievous misdeeds of white America. Land provides a line of inquiry with which to trace this narrative back from those African-Americans who are alive today and not far removed from a history of sharecropping and of slavery. Land, for these

people, is not just one asset among many, but is a culturally and historically privileged site where the struggle for full participation is both memorialized and, for many even today, lived.

This is, I believe, why the people of Tillery spoke so passionately about the land and why the few remaining on and in possession of the land cling mightily to it. This is also why Tillery, as the site of a land resettlement project, flawed and compromised as it was, is an important and valuable resource that should be held up for the story that it tells. At the end of my interview with Mr. L, his daughter stopped by to drop off some dinner. As she sat down for a few minutes and pondered the importance of land and Tillery to her, she said it best,

I'm proud of Tillery. We just don't fit the mold of your average, poor black family in an economically depressed area. I know I'm a little bit prejudiced in that way but we don't exactly fit that mold. There are a few of us who have returned home....There may be some things we gave up to do it but the things that we gained are precious to us....We don't want a whole lot and we don't demand a whole lot and we're happy. But we just, pardon the expression, we're gonna fight the hell out of somebody to keep the land.

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