

# Sharecropping Contracts in the Reconstruction-Era South, 1867–1870



*Photographs taken in Calhoun, Alabama, by Richard Riley, ca. 1890s. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC05140.02)*

# Sharecropping Contracts in the Reconstruction-Era South, 1867–1870

BY ERIK BLOCH (Created in 2014, revised in 2024)

*Erik Bloch has taught English in Connecticut for more than twenty years.*

**GRADE LEVELS:** 9–12

**RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION:** Three 45-minute class periods

## OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary and secondary sources. These skills will enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate documents of historical significance.

Over the course of three lessons, students will examine two primary source documents in order to evaluate the practice of sharecropping for African Americans during Reconstruction. They will demonstrate understanding of the unit content by completing a written evaluation of the contracts, providing evidence from the two documents to support their arguments.

Students will be able to

- Read, analyze, and summarize two primary source documents
- Demonstrate comprehension of the content and structure of the documents
- Draw inferences and link the documents to the historical period
- Understand how labor has been regulated (e.g., sharecropping contracts)
- Identify a pivotal moment in African American history (e.g., emancipation)
- Complete a written response paper

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What could a sharecropping contract require from a sharecropper?
- What could a sharecropping contract require from a landowner?
- How free were freedpeople after emancipation?
- Within sharecropping families, who was the most and the least free?

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3: Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1A: Introduce precise claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that establishes clear relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1B: Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly, supplying evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience’s knowledge level and concerns.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1C: Use words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims.

## MATERIALS

- Source 1: Contract between Isham G. Bailey and Freedmen Cooper Hughs and Charles Roberts, January 1, 1867, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC04522.11
- Summary Organizers 1–3
- Overhead or ELMO projector, SMART Board, or similar display device
- Source 2: Sharecropping Contract between Campbell Brown for the Owners of Melrose Plantation and Frederick Lewis for Himself and His Squad of Freedmen, Bolivar County, Mississippi, March 12, 1870, Brown-Ewell Papers, 1803–1919, Tennessee State Library and Archives, [teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll18/id/2543/](http://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll18/id/2543/)
- Activity Sheet 1: Analyzing a Sharecropping Contract, 1870
- Activity Sheet 2: Compare and Contrast

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### Reconstruction, African Americans, and the Sharecropping Labor System by Felicia Jamison, University of Louisville

Reconstruction (1865 to 1877) was the period following the Civil War during which the US went through many large-scale changes. They consisted of creating federal institutions to help those who had remained loyal to the Union during the war and the restructuring of southern society following four years of war. Reconstruction at times included the military occupation of the southern states that had seceded from the nation.

Additionally, the country needed new policies to govern and protect the four million African Americans who were no longer enslaved. The Emancipation Proclamation of January 1863 had technically freed enslaved people in the states in rebellion, but no laws granted all African Americans citizenship.

During the period, Congress was dominated by sympathetic northern Republicans who passed several bills to support African Americans as they transitioned from slavery to freedom. The Thirteenth Amendment (1865) abolished slavery throughout the nation. The Fourteenth Amendment (1868) made African Americans citizens. The Fifteenth Amendment (1870) gave all men the right to vote. These amendments, commonly referred to as the Reconstruction Amendments, greatly improved the lives of newly freed people.

African Americans enacted their independence and freedom in a variety of ways throughout the period. Some people attempted to find family members who were sold away during slavery. Couples who had been together for decades could now legally marry. Black communities built their own institutions such as churches, schools, and businesses. Some even started independent towns in the South and Midwest.

Another newfound right involved being paid for one's own labor. While enslaved, African Americans were legally classified as property and were forced to work for free. Following emancipation, they could negotiate contracts and fight for fair wages whether working in the agricultural sector, in domestic service, or on the railroads.

Although some African Americans were able to eventually purchase land and work their own farms, this was not true for everyone. Many newly freed people became sharecroppers. The sharecropping labor system grew out of contractual labor compromises between former plantation owners and workers. Ideally, the sharecropper would work the land, earn a good harvest, and repay a portion of the crop to the landowner. The goal was to grow enough produce to support his or her family and to make a profit at the end of the season.

Unfortunately, sharecropping rarely worked this way. Prior to planting the crops, the sharecropper had to borrow tools, seeds, and fertilizer from the landowner or a local merchant. After harvesting the crop, giving a large portion of it to the landowner to pay for rent, and repaying the landowner or merchant for supplies, the sharecropper typically ended the harvest season in debt. Many people in the South suffered from this exploitative labor system for decades.

State laws further forced African Americans to work the land, often as sharecroppers. During Reconstruction several southern states passed laws to restrict the rights of freedpeople. These laws, known as Black Codes, made it illegal for Black people to testify in court cases, serve on juries for cases involving only White litigants, serve in state militias, vote in elections, and own guns. These laws often pushed African Americans into agricultural jobs. Mississippi passed the first Black Code in 1865 at the beginning of Reconstruction.

Due to the prevalence of sharecropping, segregation, and racial violence, many African Americans left the South and migrated to the North during the 1910s. Unfortunately, they often suffered racial prejudice when they arrived in northern and midwestern cities.

*Felicia Jamison is an assistant professor of history and comparative humanities at the University of Louisville. She is working on a book project on "Reconstructing Freedom: Black Women and Property Ownership in the Rural South."*

## LESSON 1

### SHARECROPPING CONTRACT, 1867

BY ERIK BLOCH (Created in 2014, revised in 2024)

#### OVERVIEW

In the first lesson, students will close-read a sharecropping contract from 1867 and then analyze the text in order to understand the terms of the agreement and the pros and cons for the signers. They will demonstrate their comprehension by restating the ideas in their own words.

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What could a sharecropping contract require from a sharecropper?
- What could a sharecropping contract require from a landowner?
- How free were freedpeople after emancipation?
- Within sharecropping families, who was the most and the least free?

*Erik Bloch has taught English in Connecticut for more than twenty years.*

**GRADE LEVELS:** 9–12

**RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION:** One 45-minute class period

**UNIT OVERVIEW:** This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary and secondary sources. Over the course of three lessons, students will examine two primary source documents in order to evaluate the practice of sharecropping for African Americans during Reconstruction.

#### MATERIALS

- Source 1: Contract between Isham G. Bailey and Freedmen Cooper Hughs and Charles Roberts, January 1, 1867, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC04522.11
- Summary Organizers 1–3
- Overhead or ELMO projector, SMART Board, or similar display device

#### PROCEDURE

1. If students have some prior knowledge of Reconstruction and its effects on the lives of newly emancipated people in the South, the lesson may begin with Step 2 below. If students have limited or no knowledge of the period, you may share some information from the Historical Background in order to familiarize students with the topic.
2. Distribute copies of Source 1, the contract between Isham G. Bailey and freedmen Cooper Hughs and Charles Roberts, January 1, 1867.
3. Share read the document with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
4. Explain that the students will be analyzing the contract and learning how to do in-depth analysis of primary sources for themselves.
5. Distribute Summary Organizers 1, 2, and 3.

6. Display Summary Organizer 1 in a format large enough for the whole class to see. You will then model the activity for the class.
7. Explain that the objective is to select “keywords” from the text and then use those words to create a summary sentence that demonstrates an understanding of what the contract required.
8. Guidelines for Selecting the Keywords: Keywords contribute meaning to the text. Without them the selection would not make sense. These words are usually nouns or verbs. Don’t pick “connector” words (*are, is, the, and, so, etc.*). The text is 181 words in length, so the students can choose 6 to 8 words.
9. Prompt the class to choose keywords and survey the students’ choices as you model the activity. For example, they might choose *agreement, bind, work, farm, cultivate, order, and crop*.
10. When the final list of words has been selected and written in the Keywords section of the organizer, explain how to use the words to summarize the contract’s stipulations. This should be a class negotiation process. Write the final negotiated sentence(s) into the Summary section of the organizer. For example, “The men made an agreement to bind themselves to work, to cultivate crops on the farm, and to keep everything in order.”
11. Guide the students in restating the summary sentence in their own words. They do not have to use the keywords. Again, this is a class negotiation process. For example, “By this contract the freedmen agreed to grow crops and keep other things like fences in good repair.”
12. You may divide the class into pairs or small groups or have them work individually to carry out this same process with Summary Organizers 2 and 3. They can choose 6 to 8 keywords for each selection. Once all the students/ groups have completed the organizers, you can ask them to share out their restatements of the text.
13. Vocabulary: Discuss vocabulary that the students found confusing or difficult. Students can use the back of their organizers to make a note of these words and their meanings.
14. You may close the class with a discussion focusing on who benefited the most from this contract. They should provide evidence from the text for their answers.

## LESSON 2

### SHARECROPPING CONTRACT, 1870

BY ERIK BLOCH (Created in 2014, revised in 2024)

#### OVERVIEW

In the second lesson, students will close-read a sharecropping contract from 1870. They will answer critical thinking question to enable them to identify the most important aspects of the document and understand the relative power dynamics of the parties. They will demonstrate their comprehension by restating the ideas in their own words.

*Erik Bloch has taught English in Connecticut for more than twenty years.*

**GRADE LEVELS:** 9–12

**RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION:** One 45-minute class period

**UNIT OVERVIEW:** This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary and secondary sources. Over the course of three lessons, students will examine two primary source documents in order to evaluate the practice of sharecropping for African Americans during Reconstruction.

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What could a sharecropping contract require from a sharecropper?
- What could a sharecropping contract require from a landowner?
- How free were freedpeople after emancipation?
- Within sharecropping families, who was the most and the least free?

#### MATERIALS

- Source 2: Sharecropping Contract between Campbell Brown for the Owners of Melrose Plantation and Frederick Lewis for Himself and His Squad of Freedmen, Bolivar County, Mississippi, March 12, 1870, Brown-Ewell Papers, 1803–1919, Tennessee State Library and Archives, [teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll18/id/2543/](http://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll18/id/2543/).
- Activity Sheet 1: Analyzing a Sharecropping Contract, 1870

#### PROCEDURE

1. Distribute Source 2, the sharecropping contract between Melrose Plantation and Frederick Lewis.
2. Share read the text as described in Lesson 1. Ask the students for vocabulary words and encourage them to use context clues and discussion to figure out the meanings, particularly of words that are necessary to understanding the text.
3. Divide the class into small groups of three or four students.
4. Distribute Activity Sheet 1 with the critical thinking questions for this document. Have the groups work together to come to a consensus on the answers.
5. Have the groups share out their conclusions and discuss their responses as well as the evidence they used to get to those responses.

## LESSON 3

### SHARECROPPING CONTRACTS, 1867 AND 1870

BY ERIK BLOCH (Created in 2014, revised in 2024)

#### OVERVIEW

In the third lesson, students will compare and contrast the sharecropping contracts from 1867 and 1870. They will identify the most important aspects of the documents and understand the disadvantages of one over the other. The students will demonstrate their comprehension by providing evidence from the primary sources to support their conclusions.

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What could a sharecropping contract require from a sharecropper?
- What could a sharecropping contract require from a landowner?
- How free were freedpeople after emancipation?
- Within sharecropping families, who was the most and the least free?

#### MATERIALS

- Source 1: Contract between Isham G. Bailey and Freedmen Cooper Hughs and Charles Roberts, 1867
- Summary Organizers 1–3
- Source 2: Contract between Campbell Brown for the Owners of Melrose Plantation and Frederick Lewis for Himself and His Squad of Freedmen, 1870
- Activity Sheet 1: Analyzing a Sharecropping Contract, 1870
- Activity Sheet 2: Compare and Contrast

#### PROCEDURE

1. Display the following questions and ask students to identify evidence in the documents to support an answer:
  - a. Which sharecropping contract offered the best terms to sharecroppers?
  - b. What were those terms?
2. Have the students share their conclusions.
3. Distribute Activity Sheet 2 and have the students complete the questions and the chart. Students may work individually or in pairs.
4. Using their activity sheets, notes, and the supplementary chart, the students will draft a response paper of three to five paragraphs to the following questions:
  - a. How do the details, structure, and style of these two contracts reflect the perspectives and interests of the people who signed them?
  - b. How did these contracts perpetuate landowners' power?

*Erik Bloch has taught English in Connecticut for more than twenty years.*

**GRADE LEVELS:** 9–12

**RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION:** One 45-minute class period

**UNIT OVERVIEW:** This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary and secondary sources. Over the course of three lessons, students will examine two primary source documents in order to evaluate the practice of sharecropping for African Americans during Reconstruction.



## **Source 1: Contract between Isham G. Bailey and Freedmen Cooper Hughs and Charles Roberts, 1867**

The State of Mississippi Marshall County

Articles of agreement made and entered into this 1st day of January AD 1867, between IG Bailey of the first part and Cooper Hughs Freedman and Charles Roberts Freedmn of the second part Witnesseth

The said parties of the second part, have agreed and do by these presents agree and bind themselves to work for the said party of the first part during the year 1867, on the farm belonging to said party of the first part near Early Grove in said County upon the following terms and conditions to Wit the said Cooper Hughs Freedman with his wife and one other woman, and the said Charles Roberts with his wife Hannah and one boy are to work on said farm and to cultivate forty acres in corn and twenty acres in cotton, to assist in putting the fences on said farm in good order and to keep them so and to do all other work on said farm necessary to be done to keep the same in good order and to raise a good crop and to be under the control and directions of said IG Bailey and to receive for their said services one half of the cotton and one third of the corn and fodder raised by them on said farm in said year 1867 and the said Charles Roberts Freedman with his wife Hannah further agrees and binds themselves to do the washing and Ironing, and all other necessary house work for said IG Bailey and his family during said year 1867 and to receive for their said services fifty dollars in money at the expiration of said year 1867 and the said Cooper Hughs Freedman further agrees and binds himself to give the necessary attention of feeding the Stock of cattle and milking the cows twice daily belong to said IG Bailey, and do the churning when ever necessary during the said year.

And the said IG Bailey party of the first part, agrees and binds himself to furnish necessary Mules and farming implements to cultivate said crop and to feed said Mules to furnish said Cooper Hughs Freedman and his family five hundred and fifty pounds of meat, to furnish said Charles Roberts Freedman and his family four hundred and eighty seven pounds of meat and to give said parties of the second part, one half of the crop of cotton and third of the crop of corn and fodder cultivated and raised by them in said year 1867.

Source: Contract between Isham G. Bailey and freedmen Cooper Hughs and Charles Roberts, January 1, 1867, The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC04522.11.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

PERIOD DATE \_\_\_\_\_

## Summary Organizer 1: Sharecropping Contract, 1867

### *Original Text*

The State of Mississippi Marshall County

Articles of agreement made and entered into this 1st day of January AD 1867, between IG Bailey of the first part and Cooper Hughs Freedman and Charles Roberts Freedmn of the second part Witnesseth

The said parties of the second part, have agreed and do by these presents agree and bind themselves to work for the said party of the first part during the year 1867, on the farm belonging to said party of the first part near Early Grove on said County upon the following terms and conditions to Wit the said Cooper Hughs Freedman with his wife and one other woman, and the said Charles Roberts with his wife Hannah and one boy are to work on said farm and to cultivate forty acres in corn and twenty acres in cotton, to assist in putting the fences on said farm in good order and to keep them so and to do all other work on said farm necessary to be done to keep the same in good order and to raise a good crop. . . .

### *Keywords*

---



---



---



---

### *Keyword Summary*

---



---



---



---



---

### *In Your Own Words*

---



---



---



---



---

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

PERIOD DATE \_\_\_\_\_

## Summary Organizer 2: Sharecropping Contract, 1867

### *Original Text*

... and to be under the control and directions of said IG Bailey and to receive for their said services one half of the cotton and one third of the corn and fodder raised by them on said farm in said year 1867 and the said Charles Roberts Freedman with his wife Hannah further agrees and binds themselves to do the washing and Ironing, and all other necessary house work for said IG Bailey and his family during said year 1867 and to receive for their said services fifty dollars in money at the expiration of said year 1867 and the said Cooper Hughs Freedman further agrees and binds himself to give the necessary attention of feeding the Stock of cattle and milking the cows twice daily belong to said IG Bailey, and do the churning when ever necessary during the said year, . . .

### *Keywords*

---



---



---



---

### *Keyword Summary*

---



---



---



---



---

### *In Your Own Words*

---



---



---



---



---

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

PERIOD DATE \_\_\_\_\_

## Summary Organizer 3: Sharecropping Contract, 1867

### *Original Text*

... And the said IG Bailey party of the first part, agrees and binds himself to furnish necessary Mules and farming implements to cultivate said crop and to feed said Mules to furnish said Cooper Hughs Freedman and his family five hundred and fifty pounds of meat, to furnish said Charles Roberts Freedman and his family four hundred and eighty seven pounds of meat and to give said parties of the second part, one half of the crop of cotton and third of the crop of 6 Sharecropper contract, in said year 1867.

### *Keywords*

---



---



---



---

### *Keyword Summary*

---



---



---



---



---

### *In Your Own Words*

---



---



---



---



---

## **Source 2: Contract between Campbell Brown for the Owners of Melrose Plantation, and Frederick Lewis for Himself and His Squad of Freedmen, 1870**

This contract made and entered into this 12th day of March, 1870, between Campbell Brown for the owners of Melrose Plantation and Frederick Lewis for himself and his squad of freed men, witnesseth; that said parties agree to plant cotton and corn together in Melrose Plantation for the year 1870, on the following terms:

1. The owners are to furnish the land, wagons, teams, harness ploughs and farming utensils of every sort, feed for the teams and all supplies necessary in making the crop, except provisions for the hands, free of charge.
2. The hands are to furnish all the labor necessary in making the crop and putting it into market.
3. The amount of land to each squad and the proportion of cotton and corn are to be determined by the owners.
4. The hands are to class themselves and determine for themselves, the scale on which they are to be paid.
5. The crop is to be divided equally between the owners and the freedmen, except that where extra good seed is furnished, a special agreement will be made concerning it and seed raised from it.
6. The cotton is to be divided at the gin – the freedmen paying out of their portion for all advances made them by the owners – including transportation furnished those brought from South Carolina.
7. The owners retain control of the management of the crop, which is to be cultivated according to their judgment or that of their agent.
8. Should the hands or any one of them fail or refuse to work the crop, when called on by the owners or their agent, to do so, the latter may hire labor for it, the expense to be deducted from the offender's share of the crop.
9. For gross misbehavior or repeated breach of this contract, the owners may without formal process of law, turn off the offender, who thereupon forfeits his interest in the crop.
10. Each squad agrees to furnish its one proportion of wood for the owners use at their mansion house, during the season.
11. The owners agree to allow wages at the rate of twenty dollars (\$20.#) per month for the labor of Rufus Petty, a member of said Frederick Lewis's squad during the year – said twenty dollars to be credited on the a/c. of the squad for rations, etc.

Witness our hands and seals, this twelfth day of March, A. D. 1870.

Campbell Brown [Seal]  
his  
Fred<sup>k</sup> Lewis [Seal]  
mark

Source: Sharecropping Contract between Campbell Brown for the Owners of Melrose Plantation and Frederick Lewis for Himself and His Squad of Freedmen, Bolivar County, Mississippi, March 12, 1870, Brown-Ewell Papers, 1803–1919, Tennessee State Library and Archives, [teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll18/id/2543/](http://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll18/id/2543/).

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

PERIOD DATE \_\_\_\_\_

## Activity Sheet 2: Analyzing a Sharecropping Contract, 1870

### *Important Phrases*

Which phrases or sentences in the 1870 sharecropping contract are the most important or powerful? Choose three and give the reason for your choice.

Phrase 1:

\_\_\_\_\_

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phrase 2:

\_\_\_\_\_

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phrase 3:

\_\_\_\_\_

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### *Critical Thinking Questions*

- How are the crops to be split between the landowners and sharecroppers?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

- Who has the most and least power in this agreement? What is the evidence for that conclusion, i.e., what happens if a sharecropper does not fulfill the contract? Who is mentioned in the contracts but does not sign them?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

PERIOD DATE \_\_\_\_\_

## Activity Sheet 2: Compare and Contrast

Which contract offered the best terms to sharecroppers? What were those terms? Use the chart to map your reasons.

Circle your preferred contract:                      1867 Contract                      1870 Contract

Which seems more sympathetic to sharecroppers, who had recently been emancipated and had few possessions? Why?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Which of the two contracts is easier to read / understand? Why might this be relevant for sharecroppers who, as enslaved people, had been legally forbidden to read and write?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Complete the chart below:

Appealing Aspects of Chosen Contract	Specific Evidence	Unappealing Aspects of Unchosen Contract	Specific Evidence