Rediscovering the "Farmless" Farm Population: The Nineteenth-Century Census and the Postbellum Reorganization of Agriculture in the U.S. South, 1860–1900

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Historical analysis of the reorganization of agriculture in the postbellum American South has tended to exclude a sizable proportion of the region's free farm population. This "farmless farm population" consisted of household heads who reported a farm occupation on the 1860 and 1880 population censuses but who did not appear in the list of farm operators in the corresponding agricultural schedules. Using cross-sectional census data from 1860, 1880, and 1900 for eight counties in Tennessee, the author attempts to determine as precisely as possible the numerical importance of the farmless farm population and to demonstrate this group's corresponding capacity to distort analysis of such structural questions as the distribution of wealth, the extent of landlessness, or the prevalence of economic independence.

L'analyse historique de la réorganisation de l'agriculture dans le Sud des États-Unis d'après guerre a eu tendance à exclure une partie assez importante de la population emphytéote. Ces « paysans sans ferme » comprenaient des chefs de ménage qui déclarèrent une profession agricole aux recensements de la population de 1860 et de 1880, mais dont les noms ne figuraient pas dans les listes d'exploitants agricoles des registres agricoles correspondants. À l'aide de données transversales des recensements de 1860, de 1880 et de 1900 pour huit comtés de l'État du Tennessee, l'auteur tente de déterminer aussi précisément que possible le nombre de paysans sans ferme et de démontrer la capacité correspondante de ce groupe de fausser l'analyse de questions telles que la répartition de la richesse, l'ampleur de la paysannerie sans terre ou la prévalence de la dépendance économique.

PERHAPS MORE THAN for any other field of American history, scholarly understanding of the postbellum South has been shaped — and reshaped —

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by the changing interpretation of federal census data. A classic case in point would be the evolving assessment of the Civil War's impact upon the pre-war plantation elite. Because census enumerators recorded tenant plots as if they were separately owned farms (thus exaggerating the disintegration of the plantation system), for nearly a half-century after the Civil War social critics perused census figures on farm size and concluded that the combination of emancipation and military destruction had eliminated large landholdings and "wip[ed] out the last vestige of the planting aristocracy".[1] This misperception persisted until 1910, when a special census study revealed that the plantation remained the predominant form of landownership in a contiguous band of 325 Black Belt counties.[2] Significantly, historians' original misunderstanding of the war's effect did not stem from flawed census data — the published volumes made clear that tenant units had been enumerated as separate farms — but from their egregious misreading of the census reports. By inferring patterns of land ownership from statistics on farm units (whether rented or owned), scholars had reached an unwarranted conclusion based on an inappropriate application of basically accurate data.

A similar error continues to pervade historical analysis of the postbellum reorganization of southern agriculture. Relying heavily upon the manuscript agricultural schedules for 1860 (the last antebellum census) and 1880 (the first reliable postbellum census), scholars have intensively explored the changing wealthholding and occupational structure of the southern agricultural population.[3] In so doing, however, they have systematically excluded from consideration a large proportion of the population of interest. Nineteenth-century agricultural censuses consistently omitted from their pages a sizable proportion of the free farm population, one that evidently varied markedly both spatially and temporally. This excluded group, which I have labelled the "farmless farm population", consisted of household heads who reported a farm occupation on the population census (whether "farmer", "tenant", "farm labourer", or "farm hand") but who did not appear on the list of farm operators in the corresponding agricultural schedule. Sadly, their exclusion from historical analysis has seriously

1 See various similar assessments quoted by C. Vann Woodward in *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), p. 175.

2 U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Plantation Farming in the United States* (Washington: GPO, 1916).

3 The 1870 census was marred by a serious underenumeration of blacks, while almost the entire 1890 census was destroyed by fire. For an overview of the development of the federal census, see Margo J. Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). Recent surveys of the literature on postbellum reorganization include Harold D. Woodman, "Economic Reconstruction and the Rise of the New South, 1865–1900" in John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen, eds., *Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), pp. 254–307; and Lee J. Alston, "Issues in Postbellum Southern Agriculture" in Lou Ferleger, ed., *Agriculture and National Development: Views on the Nineteenth Century* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990), pp. 207–228.

distorted scholarly understanding of both the pace and process of southern agricultural reorganization after Appomattox.

Historians have long recognized that such a population existed during the nineteenth century. More than 30 years ago Merle Curti identified its numerical importance in his classic study of Trempealeau County, Wisconsin.[4] Since then numerous subsequent studies have yielded similar findings for other areas.[5] Even so, scholars have consistently disregarded the farmless farm population when assessing the contours of agricultural change during the nineteenth century. For example, the two most widely used census samples relevant to southern agriculture exclude this group entirely. Created principally to explore questions of micro-economic behaviour rather than macro-economic structure, the Parker-Gallman 1860 sample (N = 5,229) and the Ransom-Sutch 1880 sample (N = 11,202) focus more upon farms than upon the farm population *per se*; both were drawn initially from the agricultural schedules (which identify farm operators only) and subsequently linked to population rolls to determine relevant personal and household data.[6] Although scholars frequently have used these or other similarly designed samples to address structural questions — the distribution of wealth, extent of landlessness, or prevalence of economic "independence", for example — in doing so they risk great distortion. Without information concerning the farmless farm population, any structural comparisons, either among regions or across time, are unwarranted and potentially badly misleading.[7]

4 See Merle Curti, *The Making of an American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier County* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), pp. 59–60. Note that, as defined here, the "farmless farm population" is not equivalent to the category that Curti identified as "farmers without farms". Curti narrowly defined the latter term to include only those individuals who were specifically classified as "farmers" on the population schedule yet were absent from the agricultural census. In contrast, I employ the term "farmless farm population" to include household heads reporting any agricultural occupation who were missing from the agricultural schedules, thus combining large numbers of farm labourers with Curti's "farmers without farms".

5 For the Midwest during the period 1860–1880, see Allan Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 64; Seddie Cogswell, Jr., *Tenure, Nativity, and Age as Factors in Iowa Agriculture, 1850–1880* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1975), pp. 6–13; and Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, *To Their Own Soil: Agriculture in the Antebellum North* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1987). With regard to the antebellum South, see especially Frederick A. Bode and Donald E. Ginter, *Farm Tenancy and the Census in Antebellum Georgia* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986), particularly pp. 38–44, 96–107.

6 For an introduction to the samples, see Robert P. Swierenga, "Quantitative Methods in Rural Landholding", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 13 (1983), pp. 787–808.

7 In their model investigation of tenancy in antebellum Georgia, Bode and Ginter found that the proportional size of the farmless farm population varied so dramatically in 1860 that "their presence on the returns ... must at least qualify *any possible* [original emphasis] inference one makes from a comparative analysis of landholding structure either in any particular census year or between 1880 and previous census years." See *Farm Tenancy and the Census*, p. 40.

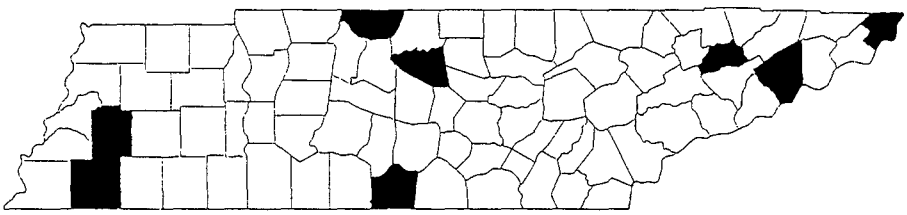

Figure 1 Sample Tennessee Counties, 1860. The sample counties are Grainger, Greene, and Johnson (East Tennessee); Lincoln, Robertson, and Wilson (Middle Tennessee); Fayette and Haywood (West Tennessee).

Table 1 Statistical Profile of Sample Tennessee Counties, 1860

	East	Middle	West
Mean farm size in improved acres	79.8	108.2	206.1
% of household heads owning slaves[a]	10.4	36.3	62.4
% of farm operators planting cotton	0.5	4.4	89.9

a) Figures apply to slaves owned or rented within the county of enumeration only.
Source: Eight-county sample.

An outline of geographical and temporal variations in the farmless farm population of Tennessee from the eve of the Civil War to the close of the nineteenth century lends empirical substance to such concern. The conclusions are based upon cross-sectional census data from 1860, 1880, and 1900 for eight counties specifically selected to reflect the agricultural diversity for which the state was famous. Three of the counties are situated in mountainous East Tennessee, in the late nineteenth century a predominantly white, small-farming, non-cotton region; three lie in Middle Tennessee, a prosperous, mixed-farming section that was characterized by heavy dependence upon black labour for the commercial production of foodstuffs; and two are in West Tennessee, a former plantation region wholeheartedly committed to the cotton economy (see Figure 1 and Table 1).[8] Stretching from the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River and varying dramatically in racial composition, importance of tenancy, and prevalence of commercial orientation, the sample counties afford an examination of the farmless farm population in a variety of agricultural contexts.

8 The agricultural characteristics of the state's three grand divisions are discussed in J. B. Killebrew, *Introduction to the Resources of Tennessee* (1874; Spartanburg, S. C.: The Reprint Company, 1974), pp. 350–369; and Eugene W. Hilgard [Special Agent], *Report on Cotton Production in the United States* (Washington: GPO, 1884), pp. 391, 409–411.

The goal of the investigation is not primarily to examine the function or status of the farmless farm population, an important question in its own right but one that goes far beyond the evidence presented here. Nor is it to present a methodological model for subsequent study: like most other scholars in the field, I initially approached the study of southern agriculture unaware of the importance of the farmless farm population, and I have derived estimates of their importance in Tennessee in a sometimes indirect and rather inefficient manner. Instead, the principal objectives are, first, to determine as precisely as possible the numerical importance of the farmless farm population and, second, to demonstrate their corresponding capacity to undermine the value of ostensibly valid indicators of structural variation or change.

The Farmless Farm Population in 1860

An informed accounting of the farmless farm population in Tennessee before the Civil War is a task made considerably easier by the extensive labours of Blanche Henry Clark while a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University during the 1930s. Under the direction of Frank L. Owsley, Clark transcribed data from the manuscript agricultural censuses for both 1850 and 1860 for every farm in 18 Tennessee counties, including the eight selected for this study. By cross-referencing both the population and slave censuses, she was also able to record the number of slaves and value of real estate owned by each farm operator, as well as to develop a list of farmers and farm labourers who headed households listed on the population census but who were excluded from the census of agriculture.[9] The figures in Table 2, which show the distribution of household heads among four basic agricultural categories, are based upon all farm households in the eight counties and are derived from Clark's worksheets.

Two aspects of the data presented in Table 2 are particularly striking. The first is the sheer number of agricultural household heads included within the farmless category; the second is the significant variation across the state in their relative numerical importance. Considering the entire eight-county sample, just under one-fourth (23 per cent) of free heads of farm households were not enumerated on the agricultural schedules. At the regional level the proportion so excluded ranged from a low of 17 per cent in the sample Middle Tennessee counties to 32 per cent in those of East Tennessee. Clearly, any structural assessment of antebellum southern agriculture that fails to account for such a large and irregularly distributed subset of the free farm population constitutes, at best, gross speculation.

The precise status of this large farmless group is a matter of conjecture

9 Despite the prodigious effort required, Clark largely ignored the farmless farm population in the monograph that resulted from her labours. See *The Tennessee Yeomen, 1840–1860* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1942).

Table 2 Percentage Distribution of Free Farm Households in Tennessee, with Lower- and Upper-Bound Tenancy Rates, 1860

	East	Middle	West
Appearing on both population and agricultural schedule (%)			
1) owner-operators	55.9	66.1	67.5
2) definite tenants	11.2	17.7	10.7
Appearing on population schedule only (%)			
3) landowners	4.4	4.7	7.3
4) landless	28.4	11.5	14.4
Estimated tenancy rate (%)			
Lower-bound[a]	16.7	21.1	13.7
Upper-bound[b]	39.7	29.1	25.2

a) Equivalent to [2 /(1 + 2)].
b) Equivalent to [(2 + 4)/(1 + 2 + 3 + 4)].
Source: Eight-county sample, see text.

and in all likelihood will never be known with certainty. Depending upon the region, between one-eighth and one-third reported the ownership of real wealth on the schedule of population. Scholars have variously hypothesized that such household heads were either farmowners who had just arrived in the community (and thus had no agricultural production to report for the previous year), retired farmers, or landowners who rented out their property to one or more tenants.[10]

The large majority in each region, however, were apparently landless, and their function is even more problematic. On the one hand, they may have been tenants who, for a variety of possible reasons, were omitted from schedule IV and whose acreage and production were grouped with that of the owner of the rented plot. Frederick Bode and Donald Ginter, who have studied the intricacies of Georgia's antebellum census in minute detail, hypothesize that at least some of these landless farmers were sharecroppers, labourers who worked a specific plot of land but were essentially employees of the landlord, receiving as wages a share of the crop that they helped to produce.[11] Alternatively, these landless individuals may have been unskilled agricultural labourers, household heads who worked by the day, month, or year as hired hands on farms operated by others. Although historians have uncritically assumed that free white labour was insignificant in the antebel-

10 Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt*, pp. 63–64; Cogswell, *Tenure, Nativity, and Age as Factors in Iowa Agriculture*, pp. 7–8; Curti, *The Making of an American Community*, pp. 59–60.

11 Bode and Ginter, *Farm Tenancy and the Census*, pp. 90–113.

lum South,[12] Tennessee Civil War veterans interviewed in their old age occasionally referred to its importance during the pre-war era. An East Tennessee veteran, for example, related that his father "generally had two or three farm laborers who boarded at his house", while another veteran from the region remarked simply that his father "always had hired hands". Recalling that his father "always had such working for him", a slaveholder's son observed that, in his community at least, "the non-land owners hired as farm laborers".[13]

Whether such landless individuals were tenants or agricultural labourers, their presence seriously distorts the interpretive and comparative significance of tenancy rates as scholars have traditionally computed them, that is, as the proportion of farm operators enumerated on the schedule of agriculture who rented the land that they farmed. When the Census Bureau began to publish statistics on tenancy in 1880 it adopted this logical strategy, and scholars who have estimated tenancy rates for years prior to 1880 have similarly limited their analyses to the agricultural schedules to permit comparisons with late nineteenth-century figures.[14] This approach is eminently reasonable, of course, provided that one desires to focus exclusively upon farm operators and the institutional importance of agricultural tenancy. Since the first investigations of tenancy by early twentieth-century historians — men such as Benjamin Hibbard, Lewis C. Gray, and Paul Wallace Gates — scholars have frequently attached far broader significance to such statistics, however.[15] Specifically, they have commonly treated tenancy rates as fair indicators of landholding structure among the entire agricultural population and, by extension, as barometers of the extent of opportunity and "economic democracy" among rural Americans as a whole.

While it is doubtful whether such inferences are ever justified, they are patently unwarranted with regard to antebellum Tennessee, as a comparison of the lower- and upper-bound tenancy rates in Table 2 makes evident. The lower-bound rates have been computed in the traditional manner, by deter-

12 See, for example, Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), pp. 44–45. For an early treatment of the subject that criticized the tendency to overlook the importance of free white labour, see Alfred Holt Stone, "Free Contract Labour in the Ante-Bellum South" in *The South in the Building of the Nation* (Richmond: Southern Historical Publication Society, 1909), vol. 5, p. 140.

13 Gustavus W. Dyer and John Trotwood, compilers, *The Tennessee Civil War Veterans Questionnaires* (Easley, S.C.: Southern Historical Press, 1985), vol. 4, pp. 1435–1437; vol. 2, pp. 541–542; vol. 4, p. 1670. See also Clark, *The Tennessee Yeomen*, pp. 18–19; Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (Washington, D.C.: The Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1933), pp. 500–501.

14 Bode and Ginter, *Farm Tenancy and the Census*, p. 40.

15 Donald Winters reviews early scholarly concern over the implications of high tenancy rates in "Agricultural Tenancy in the Nineteenth-Century Middle West: The Historiographical Debate", *Indiana Magazine of History*, vol. 29 (1982), pp. 128–153.

mining the percentage of farm operators listed in the agricultural schedules who reported no real wealth on the population rolls.[16] In contrast, the upper-bound estimates take into account not only the operators enumerated on the census of agriculture but also all landowning and landless heads of farm households listed on the population census only, some of whom may have been unenumerated operators. While the latter figures likely exaggerate substantially the tenancy rate in each region, they do constitute precise estimates of total landlessness among all free farm households and, unlike the lower-bound estimates, they may properly be used for inter-regional comparison.[17]

An examination of the two sets of estimates reveals why standard tenancy rates cannot sustain — and should not be expected to sustain — the interpretive burden often imposed upon them by social and agricultural historians. Because of the size of the farmless farm population in Tennessee, tenancy rates based solely upon the agricultural census substantially understate the extent of landlessness in the free farm population as a whole, sometimes seriously so. (In the sample counties of both East and West Tennessee, for example, the upper-bound rates are nearly or more than double the lower-bound rates.) Furthermore, because the farmless farm population was not evenly distributed across the state, standard (lower-bound) tenancy rates yield a grossly distorted impression of interregional variation. Specifically, differences in overall landlessness among the regions are far greater than the standard tenancy rates would suggest. The implications of these findings for the study of antebellum southern history are extensive. In ignoring the farmless farm population, historians of the antebellum South risk seriously underestimating both the extent of landlessness and the importance of free white labour to the region's economy, while exaggerating, among other things, the degree of economic independence and self-sufficiency among the free population.

16 Following Bode and Ginter's precise terminology, the lower-bound figures in their table 2.5 would be "level II" estimates of the tenancy rate. To ensure perfect comparability with their estimates for antebellum Georgia, I have purged the sample of farmers categorized by Bode and Ginter as types "b" and "c", i.e. farmers reporting no crop production and little or no livestock. Unless explicitly defined otherwise, subsequent references to "tenants" are to "type a" farm operators on schedule IV (those with some arable production) who reported no real estate on schedule I. See *Farm Tenancy and the Census*, pp. 15, 112–113. In addition, a comparison of real estate values reported on schedule I with farm values given on schedule IV suggests that between 6.1% and 8.0% of owner-operators in each region owned only a portion of their farms and rented the remainder, i.e. the value of their farm exceeded the value of their real wealth. Such operators might more properly be classified as "tenants in part". If these operators are classified as tenants rather than owners, the tenancy rates increase to 21.8% in East Tennessee, 27.3% in Middle Tennessee, and 20.6% in West Tennessee. It should be noted, however, that at least some of the discrepancies in "value of real estate owned" and "value of farm" were likely the result of enumerator error; also, some small proportion may have represented farm units jointly owned by two or more individuals. See Bode and Ginter, *Farm Tenancy and the Census*, p. 51; and Atack and Bateman, *To Their Own Soil*, pp. 110– 111.

17 These are equivalent to Bode and Ginter's "level IV" estimates. See *Farm Tenancy and the Census*, p. 113.

The Farmless Farm Population after the Civil War

Scrutiny of the same eight Tennessee counties in 1880 and 1900 reconfirms the importance of the farmless farm population to our understanding of southern agriculture in the nineteenth century. Unlike the figures for 1860, which are based on all farm households in the sample counties, the 1880 estimates are indirectly derived from a sample of 4,761 farm operators drawn initially from the agricultural schedules and linked subsequently to the population rolls to determine age, race, sex, and size of household.[18] Similar in general design to the Parker-Gallman and Ransom-Sutch samples, the data set is one that I constructed during the early stages of my investigation of Tennessee agriculture, long before I had come to realize the critical importance of the farmless farm population in understanding postbellum structural change.

To estimate the size and racial composition of this crucial group, I went back systematically through the population schedules, recording the total number of farm households by race. I then added to the total number of farm households on the population schedule the estimated number of farm operators from the agricultural census reporting non-agricultural occupations (determined from the original sample) to arrive at an estimate of the total size of the "true" agricultural population. With this figure and the estimated racial and occupational breakdown of farm operators (also derived from the sample), it was possible to estimate both the proportion of heads of farm households not listed on the census of agriculture as well as their racial and occupational composition. The results of this circuitous assessment are presented in Table 3. Unfortunately, the procedure does not afford individual-level data for those farm household heads recorded in the population census only, thus preventing a more detailed analysis of the group's characteristics (age, marital status, or family size, for example).[19]

Estimates of the farmless farm population in 1900, presented in Table 4, have been derived in yet a third manner. The agricultural schedules from that year have not survived, thus rendering impossible any method dependent upon the linkage of population and agricultural censuses. Fortunately, two new features of the population census introduced after 1880 make such

18 The sample is a composite of separate county samples, each stratified by tenure category. (In 1880 the agricultural schedules for the first time indicated the tenure of operators, classifying each as owner-operator, "rents for fixed rental", or "rents for shares of products".) In developing the sampling strategy I relied extensively on R. S. Schofield, "Sampling in Historical Research" in E. A. Wrigley, ed., *Nineteenth-Century Society: Essays in the Use of Quantitative Methods for the Study of Social Data* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 146–190.

19 Because after 1870 the population census did not request information from respondents with regard to property ownership, it is also impossible to determine what proportion of the farmless farm population owned real estate. Throughout the following discussion, I have assumed that all heads of farmless farm households were landless, an assumption likely close to the truth with regard to black households but less appropriate for white farmless households. This assumption, it should be noted, actually strengthens the argument made below that the number of white farmless households without land shrank substantially after 1860.

Table 3 Percentage Distribution of Farm Households in Tennessee, by Race, 1880

	East	Middle	West
Appearing on both population and agricultural schedule (%)			
Owner-operators			
White	61.2	61.6	65.6
Black	18.1	14.3	4.4
Definite tenants			
White	17.7	20.0	31.7
Black	24.7	24.6	47.9
Appearing on population schedule only (%)			
"Farmers"/"Farm Labourers"			
White	21.2	18.4	2.7
Black	57.2	61.0	47.7

Source: Eight-county sample, see text.

Table 4 Percentage Distribution of Farm Households in Tennessee, by Race, 1900

	East	Middle	West
Appearing on both population and agricultural schedule (%)			
Owner-operators[a]			
White	65.9	60.3	58.6
Black	40.2	23.8	10.5
Definite tenants[b]			
White	21.1	31.4	39.0
Black	21.3	39.1	84.0
Appearing on population schedule only (%)			
"Farmers"/"farm labourers"			
White	13.0	8.4	2.5
Black	38.5	37.1	5.5

a) Includes owners, part owners, and individuals who both owned and rented.
b) Includes both fixed-rent tenants, share tenants, and sharecroppers.
Source: Eight-county sample, see text.

linkage unnecessary. Beginning in 1890 the population schedules requested information regarding home ownership and encumbrance. By 1900 the "Ownership of Home" section of the enumerator's worksheet consisted of four short queries, the first three of which determined whether the household dwelling was owned or rented; if owned, whether it was owned "free" or mortgaged; and finally whether the home should be classified as a "farm

home'', an ill-defined designation reserved for the residences of farm operators.[20] Of greatest importance was the fourth question, an innovation first added in 1900. For each farm operator listed on the population schedule, enumerators were to record the ''Number of farm schedule'', thus identifying the location on the agricultural schedule of the corresponding farm return.[21] With this information it is simple, if somewhat time-consuming, to determine the structural contours of the farm population in the sample counties. The published agricultural census for 1900 contains aggregate, race-specific data on farm operators by county; the number and racial breakdown of farmless farm households can be attained by scanning the manuscript rolls for individuals who rented homes and reported agricultural occupations but for whom no farm schedule number was listed.[22]

Although numerous aspects of the 1880 and 1900 estimates are intriguing, some features bear directly upon two questionable themes in the historiography of the postbellum South, both of which have been bolstered significantly by the flawed interpretation of census data. The first theme involves the nature and pace of agricultural reorganization after emancipation and, in

20 The dichotomous question posed was simply: ''Farm or home?'' According to the Census Office, a distinction was to be made ''between a home which is occupied by a family engaged in farming, gardening, or any form of agricultural production, and a home which consists of only the dwelling and the ground upon which it stands, with the appurtenances thereto, but which is not occupied by what may be termed a farm family''. See U.S. Census Office, Twelfth Census [1900], vol. I, *Population*, part 2 (Washington: GPO, 1902), p. clxxxvii. The typical farm labourer may have lived on a farm but, by definition, he did not farm a specific plot of land like the sharecropper or tenant; his home, consequently, consisted ''of only a dwelling and the ground upon which it stands''. Although farm labourers would seem to have been ''engaged in farming'' or, at the very least, involved in some ''form of agricultural production'', the muddled definition adopted by the Census Office conflated location with occupation and essentially necessitated that all ''farm families'' operate farms. In the sample Tennessee counties the number of ''farm homes'' reported exceeded the number of enumerated farms by only 0.3%. Clearly, farm labourers who headed households did not live in ''farm homes'' under the census definition. See U.S. Census Office, Twelfth Census, vol. I, *Population*, pp. 692–694, and vol. V, *Agriculture*, pp. 122–125.

21 It is not entirely clear why this innovation was added to the population schedule, but it may have been to serve as a further means of determining home ownership, given that the agricultural schedules included information on tenure. See U.S. Census Office, Twelfth Census, vol. I, *Population*, part 2, p. cxcii.

22 In the sample Tennessee counties, at least, enumerators appear to have been conscientious in recording farm schedule numbers on the population census. Overall, the total number of farms recorded in the published census exceeds by less than 0.5% the number of households accorded a farm schedule number on the manuscript population rolls. For the published figures, see U.S. Census Office, Twelfth Census, vol. V, *Agriculture*, pp. 122–125. I should note that, although the published volumes of the Twelfth Census do contain race-specific occupational data that afford insight into the continued importance of agricultural labour, the data pertain to all gainfully employed individuals over 10 years of age and cannot be aggregated at the household level in order to construct estimates comparable to those presented above for 1860 and 1880. Furthermore, because a significant number of farm operators reported non-agricultural occupations, the published occupational data notably understate the true agricultural population.

particular, the status of the South's more than four million former slaves. Considering the element of controversy that characterizes so many issues of importance in the field of southern history, scholars have exhibited a surprising unanimity both in describing the contours (though not the causes) of postbellum agricultural change and in assessing the post-war status of the freedmen. Indeed, agreement is so widespread with regard to certain basic factual details that one may speak without exaggeration of a "standard scenario" that is accepted by the vast majority of scholars.[23]

Freedmen and the Standard Scenario of Postbellum Reorganization

Briefly put, this conventional account maintains that, in the immediate aftermath of emancipation, former masters attempted to impose upon the freedmen a wage-based, gang-labour system that resembled slavery as closely as possible. This arrangement was extremely short-lived, however, collapsing primarily because of the staunch resistance of the freedmen, who resented such close white supervision, combined with the discouraging impact of disastrous crop failures in 1866 and 1867 that undermined white desire for the system as well. In the brief period of experimentation that followed, white landowners tested a variety of land and labour arrangements but, due to the demands of the freedmen, turned increasingly to sharecropping, an arrangement in which "individual family units, in payment for their labour on a separate parcel of land, receive a share of the output produced on that parcel of land."[24] The whole process was so "swift and thorough" that it was essentially complete by 1880 (if not much sooner), by which time, in the words of a prominent southern historian, sharecropping had become so overwhelmingly dominant among southern blacks that it had emerged as the region's "new peculiar institution".[25]

The figures pertaining to black heads of farm households in Tennessee, however, raise serious doubts with regard to this "standard scenario". As Table 3 shows, by 1880 significant proportions of the freedmen were indeed enumerated as farm operators in their own right, yet fully 15 years after the end of the Civil War roughly one-half to three-fifths of the state's black farm population was not accounted for on the agricultural census. By 1900, as Table 4 indicates, in all parts of the state there had been a marked shift of farmless black agriculturalists to some form of tenure enumerated on the agricultural schedules, yet only in the cotton-producing counties of West Tennessee had the farmless farm population become numerically unimportant.

23 I discuss this scenario fully in "Freedmen and the Soil in the Upper South: The Reorganization of Tennessee Agriculture, 1865–1880", *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 59 (1993), pp. 63–84. For citations to the relevant literature, see especially pp. 64–65, fn. 7.

24 Ralph Shlomowitz, "The Origins of Southern Sharecropping", *Agricultural History*, vol. 53 (1979), p. 575.

25 Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 12, 56 (quotation); Harold D. Woodman, "Post-Civil War Southern Agriculture and the Law", *Agricultural History*, vol. 53 (1979), p. 326.

If we assume for the moment that blacks who headed farmless farm households were typically labourers (as opposed to sharecroppers), then a picture of agricultural reorganization in Tennessee emerges that is decidedly at variance with the conventional scholarly account. Figure 2 outlines the contours of this reorganization by charting changes in the black farmless farm population as a proportion of all black non-owner-operators (farmless farm households plus definite tenants enumerated on the census of agriculture). As sketched in Figure 2, the transformation of Tennessee's rural labour system after emancipation appears to have been neither "swift" nor "thorough", but rather a gradual process that varied substantially in extent across the state. By 1900 wage labour among the freedmen had finally dwindled to insignificance in the state's Black Belt, yet almost 40 years after emancipation wage arrangements evidently continued to rival tenancy in importance in the mixed-farming regions further east.

Our severely limited understanding of enumerators' practices discourages an unequivocal rejection of the "standard scenario", however. Specifically, we need to know much more about how enumerators classified sharecroppers, a group that in fundamental respects resembled both farm labourers and tenants. (Like the farm labourer, the sharecropper received wages rather than paid rent and commonly laboured under close white supervision; like the tenant, he farmed a specific plot of land and worked alongside his family, rather than singly or in a gang.) Significantly, instructions to census enumerators in 1880 regarding agricultural occupations ("be very particular to distinguish between farmers and farm laborers"[26]) were so brief as to be essentially worthless, both to the contemporary enumerator and to the modern historian.

In contrast, instructions to enumerators in 1900 were as detailed as previously they had been vague, making absolutely clear that sharecroppers were to be categorized as tenants and that their operations were to be reported on the agricultural returns.[27] Consequently, it is theoretically possible that many of the farmless freedmen in 1880 were actually sharecroppers who were excluded from the agricultural schedules by poorly guided census enumerators who viewed them as more closely analogous to wage labourers than tenants. If true, this would rescue the "standard scenario" — at least with regard to

26 Carroll D. Wright with William C. Hunt, *The History and Growth of the United States Census* (Washington: GPO, 1900), p. 172.

27 "For census purposes the difference between a laborer on a farm and a tenant consists principally in these facts: A farm laborer is one who tills land on a farm and assumes no risk of crop failures or other contingencies. He has a definite wage assured him. A farm tenant is one who tills land and assumes more or less of the risk attending such cultivation." See U.S. Census Office, Twelfth Census, vol. V, *Agriculture*, part 1, quotation on p. 757 and specific examples on p. 756. See also Enoch Marvin Banks, *The Economics of Land Tenure in Georgia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1905), p. 83; and Robert Preston Brooks, *The Agrarian Revolution in Georgia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1914), pp. 55, 79.

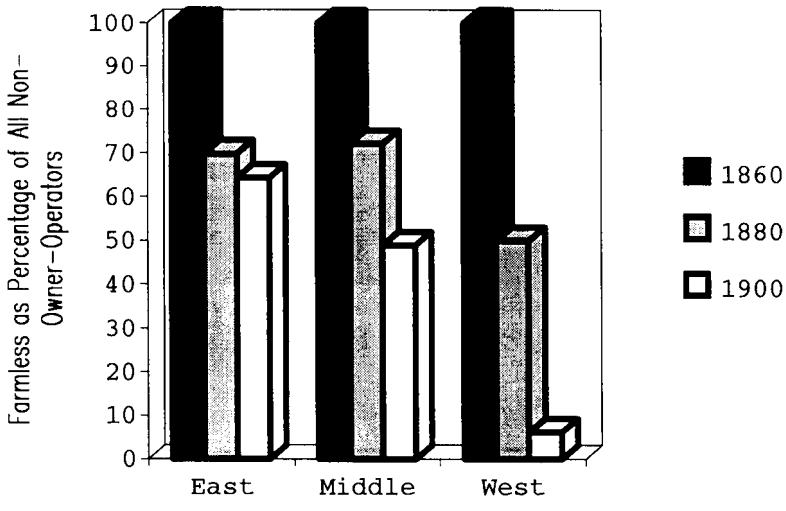

Figure 2 The declining importance of the black farmless farm population in Tennessee, 1860–1900 (heads of farm households only)

the Black Belt — and imply that the perceived shift among freedmen from farm labour to tenancy after 1880 was largely illusory, reflecting not a structural shift in farm occupations but rather a bureaucratic shift in census standards of classification.

There are no *a priori* reasons to accept such speculation, however. To begin with, in contrast to other southern states, Tennessee had no legally recognized distinctions between sharecropping and other forms of tenure. The Tennessee Supreme Court during the 1870s explicitly defined sharecroppers as "tenants in common of the crops" and ruled that, even prior to the harvest, the cropper's portion of farm output represented personal property, not wages.[28] Furthermore, intuition tells us that, given enumerators' vague guidelines in 1880, the simplest differentiation for them to have made was between household heads responsible for specific plots of land and those who were not. This informal "rule of thumb" would have prompted them to group sharecroppers with tenants on the agricultural schedule but to exclude farm labourers, who worked on a daily, monthly, or annual basis on farms operated by others. Given their limitations, it seems highly unlikely that census enumerators would have consistently tried to distinguish between sharecroppers and tenants, a distinction that required specific information concerning the capital and

28 Donald L. Winters, "Postbellum Reorganization of Southern Agriculture: The Economics of Sharecropping in Tennessee", *Agricultural History*, vol. 62 (1988), pp. 1–19. For the incorrect assertion that legal distinctions between share tenants and sharecroppers characterized every southern state, see Woodman, "Post-Civil War Southern Agriculture and the Law".

managerial inputs of respondents and the distribution of risk with their landlords.[29]

Regardless of their actual status, however, the very size of the black farmless farm population across the South necessitates a fundamental reconsideration of southern postbellum agriculture. There is compelling evidence to indicate that the patterns observed for Tennessee during the late nineteenth century were widely duplicated throughout the former slave states. Case studies of scattered rural communities in Georgia, Louisiana, Virginia, and North Carolina all reveal that, in 1880, the number of farmless among the freedmen exceeded both sharecroppers and tenants combined.[30] Furthermore, using Ransom and Sutch's estimates for 1880 of the racial composition of farm operators and the average household size of black tenants in the Cotton South, as well as published population figures for the 27 representative counties that they sampled, I estimate that the heads of black households enumerated on the census of agriculture in 1880 can account for barely one-third of the black population encompassed by their massive study.[31] Conversely, by 1900 the households of black farm operators listed on the agricultural returns account for more than 70 per cent of the total black population in these same counties, persuasive testimony that the trend observed for Tennessee similarly characterized the Lower South.[32]

This finding presents students of the postbellum South with an unsettling

29 For example, to distinguish between a sharecropper and a share tenant (an operator who paid a share of the harvest to the landlord as rent, rather than receiving a share of the harvest as wages), the enumerator would need to know the terms of the labour contract, in particular the responsibility of both parties with regard to the provision of work stock, seed, and animal feed, as well as the stipulated method for dividing the output after harvest.

30 See Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 157; Charles L. Flynn, Jr., *White Land, Black Labor: Caste and Class in Late Nineteenth-Century Georgia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), pp. 66–68; David Freeman Weiman, "Petty Commodity Production in the Cotton South: Upcountry Farmers in the Georgia Cotton Economy, 1840–1880" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1984), p. 417; Ronald L. F. Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor: From Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District, 1860–1890* (Westport, Conn.: The Greenwood Press, 1982), pp. 164–165; James R. Irwin, "Farmers and Laborers: A Note on Black Occupations in the Postbellum South", *Agricultural History*, vol. 64 (1990), pp. 53–60; and Robert C. Kenzer, *Kinship and Neighborhood in a Southern Community: Orange County, North Carolina, 1849–1881* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1987), p. 112.

31 The exact proportion is 33.7%. For the racial composition of farm operators, the average size of black tenant households, the total number of farms in the sample counties, and a list of the counties, see Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, pp. 84, 219, and 291–292. For the total black population in the sample counties, see U.S. Census Office, Tenth Census [1880], vol. I, *Population*, pp. 380–415. Ransom and Sutch do not give the average size of households headed by black owner-operators; I have assumed that they were no larger than analogous households in West Tennessee, the median size of which in 1880 was 6.0. See also Irwin, "Farmers and Laborers".

32 The exact proportion is 70.8%, based on the assumption of constant average household size between 1880 and 1900. For race-specific published data on farm operations and total population in the 27 counties, see U.S. Census Office, Twelfth Census, vol. I, *Population*, and vol. V, part 1, *Agriculture*.

dilemma. If the standard scenario is incorrect, then scholars have seriously misrepresented the extent of post-emancipation reorganization and the nature of postbellum racial dynamics. On the other hand, should subsequent research show the conventional account to be accurate (by proving that farmless blacks were, in fact, sharecroppers), then scholars must grapple with the knowledge that the agricultural census of 1880 (and, to a lesser degree, that of 1900) excluded massive numbers of sharecroppers, thus disguising the true values of important variables such as the number and size distribution of farm units and the quantity of labour employed on enumerated farms.[33] Until scholars do much more to explore the prevalence and function of the farmless black farm population, the most positive possible assessment of the "standard scenario" can only be: "not proven".

The Implications of Increasing White Tenancy

Another crucial feature of the postbellum data that deserves comment is the declining proportional importance of the white farmless farm population relative to the number of definite tenants identified on the schedule of agriculture. This second theme is important because it distorts the interpretive significance of rising tenancy rates among whites, a trend that scholars frequently cite when discussing the deteriorating economic position of southern yeomen in the aftermath of the Civil War.

The most common line of argument maintains that, as marginal farmers were sucked "into the vortex of the market economy" after Appomattox, they were victimized by a combination of plummeting commodity prices and soaring interest rates for agricultural credit, the latter dispensed primarily in the form of crop liens from neighbourhood merchants.[34] The inexorable result was cotton "overproduction", debt peonage, and ultimately the widespread reduction of individual smallholders from independent ownership to tenancy. The latter institution, "which might have marked the first step up the agricultural ladder[,] signalled instead the loss of land by former owners": rather than an avenue of upward mobility, it had become a "path of proletarianization". In employing standard tenancy rates to support such hypotheses, however, scholars have relied upon data taken solely from the agricultural census to answer structural questions with regard to the entire farm population that the agricultural census cannot answer.[35]

33 Officials of the Twelfth Census surmised that, when enumerators excluded sharecroppers from the agricultural schedules, they most commonly grouped both their acreage and output with that of the landlord. See U.S. Census Office, Twelfth Census, vol. V, part 1, *Agriculture*, p. lxviii.

34 Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, p. 148.

35 Harold Woodman, "Post-Civil War Southern Agriculture and the Law", *Agricultural History*, vol. 53 (1979), p. 337; Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, p. 162. For similar views, see also Barbara Jeanne Fields, "The Nineteenth-Century American South: History and Theory", *Plantation Society in the Americas*, vol. 2 (1983), p. 20; James Roark, *Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), p. 193;

By equating every increase in tenancy with the dispossession of individual farmers, historians have widely misinterpreted the spiralling tenancy rates that characterized every southern state after 1865. In reality, individual dispossession is only one of several factors that potentially contribute to rising rates of agricultural tenancy.[36] For example, as communities mature, the natural increase of population may press against a rigid land constraint to produce an upsurge of tenancy characterized less by the failure of established landowners than by the frustration of the young and aspiring. A similar if less common set of circumstances occurred in West Tennessee, where changing patterns of in- and out-migration among whites after emancipation also led to an increase in tenancy. No longer forced to compete against slave labour, landless whites from other regions migrated optimistically to the Cotton Belt, while the landless already residing there became less likely to move on. Like population growth due to natural increase, such changes in patterns of migration placed considerable strain upon available resources and made the acquisition of land more difficult; ironically, the more positive perception of opportunity in the area contributed to an expansion of tenancy.[37] Obviously, rising tenancy rates may reflect decreases in upward mobility as well as increases in downward mobility.

Significantly, however, changing rates of tenancy need not reflect anything about patterns of mobility between the landed and landless. Implicitly if not explicitly, scholars regularly assume in their assessments of farm tenure that the only alternatives are farm tenancy or independent ownership. Yet, as a federal report observed some 70 years ago, "the real alternative is, in very many cases, between farm tenancy and working on a farm for wages." It follows that standard tenancy rates could also rise due to institutional shifts among the landless from agricultural labour to any form of tenancy or sharecropping enumerated on the agricultural census.[38] In postbellum Tennessee

and Forrest McDonald and Grady McWhiney, "The South from Self-Sufficiency to Peonage: An Interpretation", *American Historical Review*, vol. 85 (1980), p. 1111.

36 None of the scholars cited in note 35 has undertaken the tedious longitudinal record-linkage analysis necessary to determine with any precision the actual extent of individual downward mobility. Steven Hahn, for example, cites figures for the Georgia Upcountry indicating that the overall rate of land ownership dropped between 1873 and 1890 and concludes that "the Upcountry was fast becoming a territory of the dispossessed." Hahn has not traced a single farmer across time, however (the only longitudinal evidence he cites is a federal study of a Georgia county in the 1920s), and he ignores alternative explanations also consistent with the evidence of rising landlessness. See *The Roots of Southern Populism*, pp. 168, 164.

37 See my *One South or Many? Plantation Belt and Upcountry in Civil War-Era Tennessee* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), chap. 3, which confirms the speculation of Gavin Wright in *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), p. 112.

38 E. A. Goldenweiser and Leon E. Truesdell, *Farm Tenancy in the United States* (Washington: GPO, 1924), p. 14. Two decades earlier, officials of the Twelfth Census criticized the "almost universa[l]" assumption that the number of tenants was "increasing at the expense of the number of owners".

such shifts occurred frequently among whites, most notably in the east and west prior to 1880 and in eastern and middle parts of the state between 1880 and 1900.

As the lower- and upper-bound tenancy estimates in Table 5 reveal, the proportion of white farm households without land rose significantly after 1860 in both the Middle and West Tennessee counties. Had the analysis been confined to the farm operators listed on the agricultural census (as postbellum studies typically are), it would have appeared that the shock inflicted by war and emancipation was far more severe in West Tennessee than elsewhere. The standard (lower-bound) rate of tenancy among enumerated farm operators more than doubled in the western cotton-producing counties but rose only modestly in the other mixed-farming regions, a finding that fits nicely with scholarly emphasis upon the deteriorating status of smallholders in the Cotton South.

When the entire farm population is taken into account, however, a much different impression emerges. The overall proportion of landless households actually declined in East Tennessee and increased by approximately the same proportion, one-third, in both of the other sections. The reason why standard tenancy rates were so misleading is made plain in Figure 3, which depicts changes in the white farmless farm population as a proportion of all white non-owner-operators. Between 1860 and 1880, as the figure indicates, substantial shifts occurred among white agriculturalists in both East and West Tennessee. In both regions, but far more noticeably in the latter, the size of the farmless farm population shrank while the numerical importance of definite tenants grew. Although, as with farmless blacks, the precise status of farmless whites in 1880 cannot be determined with certainty, we may at least speculate that in the Black Belt counties of West Tennessee a large part of the drastic increase between 1860 and 1880 in the standard (lower-bound) rate of tenancy was caused by a shift among the landless from wage labour to tenancy, rather than by a downward shift from farm ownership.[39]

Fluctuations in the white farmless farm population continued to distort the interpretive significance of standard tenancy rates between 1880 and 1900. Because this population had already dwindled to insignificance by the beginning of the period in West Tennessee, the increase in the standard tenancy rate

Observing that the number of owner-operated farms had increased faster than the general agricultural population since 1850, they concluded that "such an increase can only be possible providing the increase in the number of tenants has been [at least partially] by the elevation of former wage employees to the position of farm tenants." See U.S. Census Office, Twelfth Census, vol. 5, *Agriculture*, part 1, p. lxxvii.

39 Thus confirming the speculation of Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, p. 104. In West Tennessee the proportion of landless farm household heads appearing on the agricultural schedule increased from approximately 43% in 1860 to 92% 20 years later. For the question at hand it is immaterial whether farmless whites in 1860 were wage labourers or sharecroppers unenumerated on the agricultural census. Either way, the shift toward definite tenancy would cause a rise in standard tenancy rates but no corresponding increase in overall landlessness.

Table 5 Lower- and Upper-Bound Tenancy Rates among White Farm Households in Tennessee, 1860–1900 (percentages)

	East		Middle		West	
	Lower[a]	Upper[b]	Lower[a]	Upper[b]	Lower[a]	Upper[b]
1860	16.7	39.7	21.1	29.1	13.7	25.2
1880	22.4	38.8	24.5	38.4	32.6	34.4
1900	24.3	34.1	34.2	39.7	40.0	41.4

a) The standard rate commonly computed by scholars, equal to the number of tenants enumerated on the agricultural schedule divided by the total number of operators (owners and tenants) on the same schedule.

b) The sum of tenants enumerated on the agricultural schedule and farmless farm households listed on population schedule only, divided by the number of total farm households. This rate constitutes an upper-bound estimate of overall landlessness among the entire population of farm households.

Source: Eight-county sample, see text.

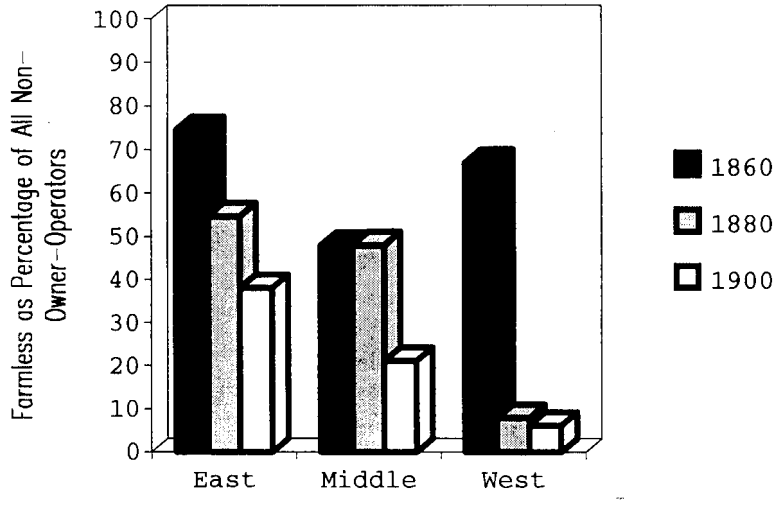

Figure 3 The declining importance of the white farmless farm population in Tennessee, 1860–1900 (heads of farm households only)

between 1880 and 1900 closely approximated the increase in overall landlessness as indicated by the change in upper-bound estimates. Elsewhere, however, changes in standard tenancy rates were highly misleading indicators of overall landholding trends. In Middle Tennessee a dramatic shift among the landless from the farmless farm category to some form of definite tenancy led to an increase of nearly 10 percentage points in the standard tenancy rates, yet the overall rate of landlessness (revealed by the upper-bound estimates) was nearly unchanged. In East Tennessee a similar shift prompted a smaller in-

crease in the standard tenancy rate while overall landlessness actually declined.

With practically no knowledge of farmless whites elsewhere in the South, it would be unwise to assume that their decline relative to definite tenants was widespread or, by extension, to argue that such a trend could constitute the primary cause of escalating tenancy rates throughout the region. Growing landlessness was a real phenomenon in the postbellum South, not a statistical illusion. Nevertheless, the Tennessee data make clear that scholars err whenever they simplistically equate rising tenancy rates with individual downward mobility. Nor is it even safe to assume that an increase in tenancy bespeaks an increase in overall landlessness. To the degree that emancipation created a window of opportunity for poor whites and prompted a relative shift from wage labour to tenancy, standard tenancy rates will consistently exaggerate the decline in landownership among the southern plain folk in the late nineteenth century.

Conclusion

This limited investigation of a single southern state suggests that a thorough study of the extent and function of the farmless farm population across the entire region could well lead to a fundamental reassessment of the war's effect upon both freedmen and common whites. Accurate knowledge of this powerless, voiceless, nearly invisible segment of the agricultural population is unequivocally instrumental to our understanding, not only of the institutional reorganization of southern agriculture, but also of the social and economic experiences of the southern common folk, both black and white. Such knowledge will not come easily, however. Ideally, three new public-use census samples for 1860, 1880, and 1900 are needed — samples that would include all regions of the South and would not be limited to farm operators only.[40] The very size of such an undertaking makes extensive institutional collaboration and support essential, and, in a period of financial retrenchment, scholars may be tempted to conclude that the obvious costs outweigh the potential benefits. Without the evidence such a project would provide, however, our understanding of the agricultural transformation of the postbellum South will always be incomplete, and may be simply wrong.

40 The Bateman-Foust sample of the rural North in 1860 constitutes the best model for emulation.