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Resettlement and Land Development Programs in the Black Belt Region of Alabama

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# **The Origins of the Tuskegee National Forest:**

Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Resettlement and Land Development Programs in the Black Belt Region of Alabama

**SARAH T. WARREN**

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Southern agricultural and resource extraction systems have produced socioeconomic disruption for segments of the population and ecological disruption across certain landforms. There have been numerous attempts to remediate both disturbances, by reforming present conditions or by reclaiming prior conditions. Social and ecological remediations are not always tied together in space and time. However, in several parallel attempts of New Deal agencies to reform and reclaim, scholars can find examples where socioeconomic and ecological evidence intersects. Such is the case in Macon County, Alabama, where the heritage of a New Deal land utilization program and a resettlement program are closely entwined.

To illustrate the coincidence of landownership patterns and processes with ecological patterns and processes, we have chosen a physical area of

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roughly eleven thousand acres—the land that now comprises the Tuskegee National Forest. Although the Tuskegee National Forest is the smallest in the national forest system, the history of landownership and land use in this one small area is a microcosm of similar processes throughout the Black Belt South. One hundred years intervened between the final removal of the Creek Indians in 1836 and the New Deal resettlement of black farmers, sharecroppers, tenants, and shopkeepers from the Tuskegee Land Utilization Demonstration Project in 1936–38. During this time, frequent exchanges of land, fragmentation and consolidation of farming land, and loss of both social and biological diversity resulted in severe degradation.

The Tuskegee National Forest in the present day is only partially reminiscent of the habitat found in eighteenth-century central Alabama. When William Bartram traveled through Macon County in the 1770s, he described the area as a mosaic of ecosystems: “savannahs, groves, cane swamps and open pine forests, watered by innumerable rivulets and brooks.” He was “continually in sight of the Indian plantations and commons adjacent to their towns.” According to Bartram and other observers, land was held in common by a town or village. Although farming plots were allocated to individual families, much of the peak-season farming labor was conducted in common without regard to family demarcations. The forested areas were sources of game, fish, and household materials. However, the primary hunting grounds were in the black prairies to the southwest, where territorial conflict with the Choctaw Indians was common.<sup>1</sup>

European settlement pierced Alabama via its central river system, eventually separating Creek and Choctaw from one another and from the black prairie. Through a constant stream of treaties, the Alabama Creeks absorbed their Georgia cousins and gave up territory. By the time of Alabama statehood in 1819, the Creeks had already ceded fourteen million acres. By 1825 Creek rights to self-government were superseded by Alabama laws, and many Creeks began to relocate to land reserved for them in Oklahoma. In a final treaty signed in 1832, the remaining Creeks of eastern Alabama ceded all of their lands east of the Mississippi to the

1. William Bartram, *The Travels of William Bartram* (New York: Facsimile Library, 1940), 318.

United States government; most of the territory was added to the public domain.<sup>2</sup>

These additions to the public estate were surveyed into six-mile-square townships. A census of the remaining Creeks was conducted to assist in allocation of former territorial lands according to treaty rights. Following the survey and census, chiefs and family heads could select a whole or half section respectively, “which tract shall be reserved from sale for their use for the term of five years, unless sooner disposed of by them.” After five years, those Creeks who wished to remain and who had transformed (“improved”) the land for permanent agriculture were to “receive patents therefor in fee simple.” The treaty additionally ensured that intruders (land-hungry white squatters) would be removed for this five-year period—but only after they had harvested existing crops. However, if illegal settlers had already made significant improvements and in so doing “had not expelled the Creeks from their [land],” they might not be forced to leave. In addition to various annuities and land awards, \$100,000 was to be paid to the Creek tribe to assist in the settlement of debts.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Treaty of 1832 ostensibly provided for landownership by Creeks in former Creek territory, Article 12 confounded the issue:

The United States are desirous that the Creeks should remove to the

2. For comprehensive reviews of the interactions between Alabama Creeks and the United States and Alabama governments, see M. E. Young, *Redskins, Ruffleshirts, and Rednecks: Indian Allotments in Alabama and Mississippi, 1830–1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961); E. H. Yamaguchi, “Macon County, Alabama: Its Land and Its People from Pre-History to 1870” (Ph.D. diss., Auburn University, 1981); Michael D. Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal: Creek Government and Society in Crisis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982); M. L. Ellis, “The Indian Fires Go Out: Removing the Creeks from Georgia and Alabama, 1825–1837” (Ph.D. diss., Auburn University, 1982); M. C. Mackin, “The Creek Nation and the Expansionists” (Ph.D. diss., Auburn University, 1934); Henry deLeon Southerland, *The Federal Road Through Georgia, The Creek Nation, and Alabama, 1806–1836* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989); M. J. Rohrbaugh, *The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of American Public Lands, 1789–1837* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968). See also Benjamin H. Hibbard, *A History of the Public Land Policies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965).

3. Yamaguchi, “Macon County, Alabama”; Young, *Redskins, Ruffleshirts, and Rednecks*; United States Government, “Treaty of 1832 made at the City of Washington, between Lewis Cass, thereto specially authorized by the President of the United States, and the Creek Tribe of Indians,” Articles 1, 2, 4–6.

country west of the Mississippi, and join their countrymen there; and for this purpose it is agreed, that as fast as the Creeks are prepared to emigrate, they shall be removed at the expense of the United States, and shall receive subsistence while upon the journey, and for one year after their arrival at their new homes: Provided, however, that this article shall not be construed so as to compel any Creek Indian to emigrate, but they shall be free to go or stay, as they please.

Thus the Creeks were awarded opportunities to claim land in their own names, but were simultaneously encouraged to leave. Departure inducements included funds for schooling and arms, one blanket for each family, and “[a]s soon as half their people emigrate, one blacksmith shall be allowed them, and another when two-thirds emigrate, together with one ton of iron, and two hundred weight of steel annually, for each blacksmith.”<sup>4</sup>

Those who remained in Alabama after 1832 to work their claims faced social and environmental conditions never part of their traditional culture. Indeed, the goal of the 1832 treaty was to divide the towns and transform the Creeks into Jeffersonian yeoman farmers. Land formerly treated as a common resource was bounded by arbitrary lines cutting north-south and east-west. Agriculture, in which labor and resource inputs had once been pooled, was individualized. Forest land clearance was required by the term “improvement,” as conversion to permanent agriculture validated a land claim. However, because Creek families were separated from their former townships, the labor necessary for forest clearance had to be hired or slaves purchased. The wildlife habitat was fragmented. The Treaty of 1832 succeeded not only in splintering the land and resource base, but also the already-weakened Creek culture.

Dislocation was exacerbated by the “great Creek land frauds” that began immediately following the survey and census. Speculators from land companies began to purchase the “rights” to Creek claims and to unallotted lands. Removal contractors enticed the Creeks to move to Oklahoma. The land-hungry citizens of Alabama often encouraged white squatters to wait for preemption rights, which were granted by the Preemption Act of 1834 and subsequent preemption acts. Meanwhile, unallotted lands were

4. “Treaty of 1832,” Article 13.

sold at public auction in 1834 (and again in 1837 and 1838). Impatient with attempts to have the Creeks move voluntarily, in the middle of 1836 Alabama residents encouraged the militarization of removal. By February of 1837, five thousand Creeks from Macon County were moved toward Mobile and thence up the Mississippi River toward Tulsa.<sup>5</sup>

Nine counties were created out of the Creek territory, with Creek allotments concentrated in the southern portion. In Macon County, 73 percent of the land had been allocated for Creek settlers. The rest was unallotted (24 percent) or reserved for schools or other uses (3 percent). In the area eventually to become the Tuskegee National Forest, Creek allocations were organized in two strips (fig. 1). By the end of the 1830s, 87 percent of Creek claims had been taken over by land companies. By 1841, only eight Creek half-sections remained on record, and by 1857, no Creek names re-

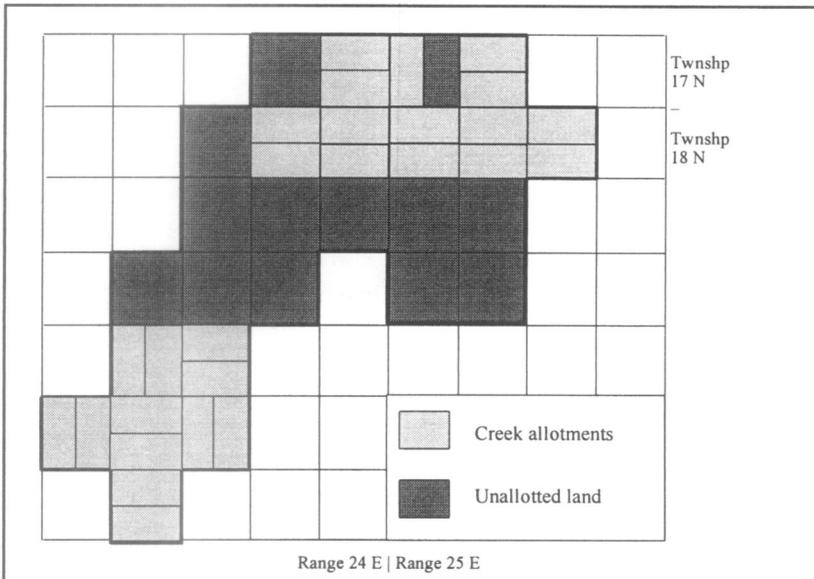
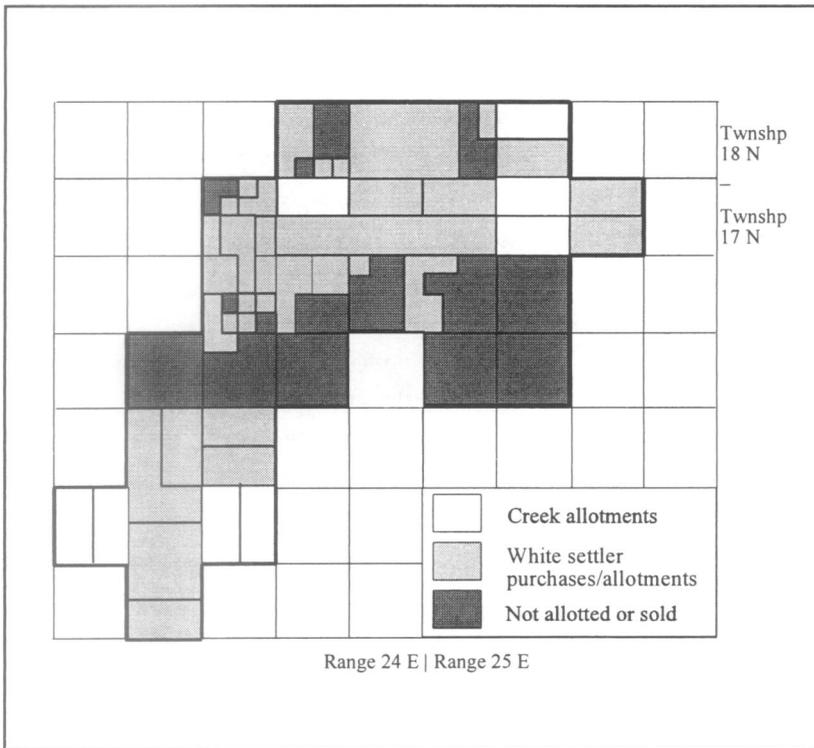


Figure 1. Creek allotments under the Treaty of 1832.

5. Young, in *Redskins, Ruffleshirts, and Rednecks*, has exhaustively covered the tale of these and related land “frauds.” See also Rohrbaugh, *The Land Office Business*. For Macon County, see Yamaguchi, “Macon County, Alabama.”

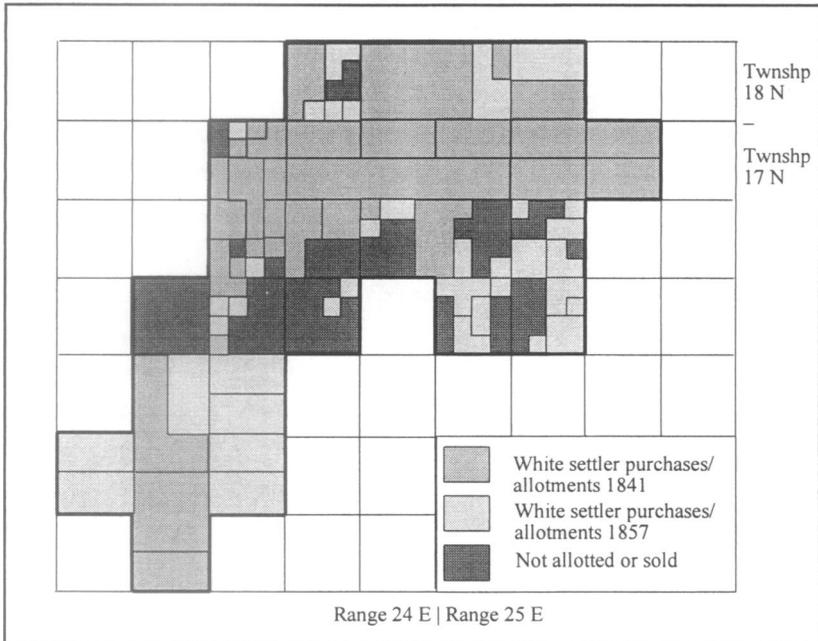


**Figure 2.** Land purchases and allotments in 1841.

mained on county rolls (fig. 2). The original twenty-seven claims had been divided into sixty-nine separate parcels, ranging in size from forty to one thousand acres (fig. 3).<sup>6</sup>

The same phenomena that contributed to Creek social and ecological breakdown also affected their white and black successors. Forest lands were cleared for farming; wildlife habitat and diversity declined as land was divided. Agricultural diversity decreased in favor of cotton. Heavily capitalized plantations were concentrated in the best lands, while more

6. Yamaguchi, "Macon County, Alabama." We are indebted to Glenn Drummond, Macon County engineer, for his assistance in deciphering the Creek land claims and patents in the present-day Tuskegee National Forest area and in the Prairie Farms area. Plat books and land transaction records can be found in the Probate Office and in the Tax Assessor's Office, Macon County Courthouse, Tuskegee, Alabama.



**Figure 3.** Land purchases and allotments in 1857.

marginal areas were settled by hardscrabble farmers. Land management was focused on individualized parcels and estates, rather than on a landscape.

The six thousand or so Creeks living in Macon County in 1830 were replaced by six thousand slaves and six thousand whites. By 1860, the black population had increased threefold compared to a white increase of only 62 percent. The Civil War, Reconstruction and redemption, reconsolidation of intensively cropped cotton plantations, expansion of cotton growing beyond its ecological limits, forest resource extraction, and eventually the boll weevil added to social, economic, cultural, and environmental stress. By 1910, the white population was half its 1860 high, and the black population was 5.5 times that of whites. In 1920, with agricultural depression already ensconced in the South, the census recorded 3,939 whites and 19,614 blacks in Macon County. There were 606 white farmers, among whom 47 percent were tenants, and 3,349 black farmers, among whom 86

percent were tenants. Both populations declined only slightly by 1930. White-operated farms averaged about 120 acres, while those operated by blacks averaged only forty-seven acres.<sup>7</sup>

As early as 1901, attempts were made to address the conditions of landless black sharecroppers and tenants. The Southern Improvement Company, the Tuskegee Farm and Improvement Company, and the Home Seekers Land Company were created by Tuskegee Institute and concerned investors in order to purchase land in Macon County and resell it to landless black farmers.<sup>8</sup>

In 1900 and 1901, two black families independently purchased nine parcels of land along the main highway between Atlanta and Montgomery (now U.S. 29). One family purchased 313 acres in four parcels from the estate of a white landowner who had died in 1898. A second family purchased five parcels totaling 338 acres from a plantation belonging to R. L. Stilwell. The next three purchases by blacks were also sizable: an 874-acre tract in the southwestern portion of present-day Tuskegee National Forest, a 140-acre tract in the northwestern portion, and a 147-acre tract contiguous to the land of the original black purchasers. In 1912, the Home Seekers Land Company purchased the remaining 1,146 acres of the Stilwell plantation. Between 1912 and 1915, the Home Seekers Land Company sold 381 acres of this to another black family. Also in 1915, one of the original black purchasers added 116 acres to the family's accumulated holdings, although this new parcel was considerably distant from their original purchases.

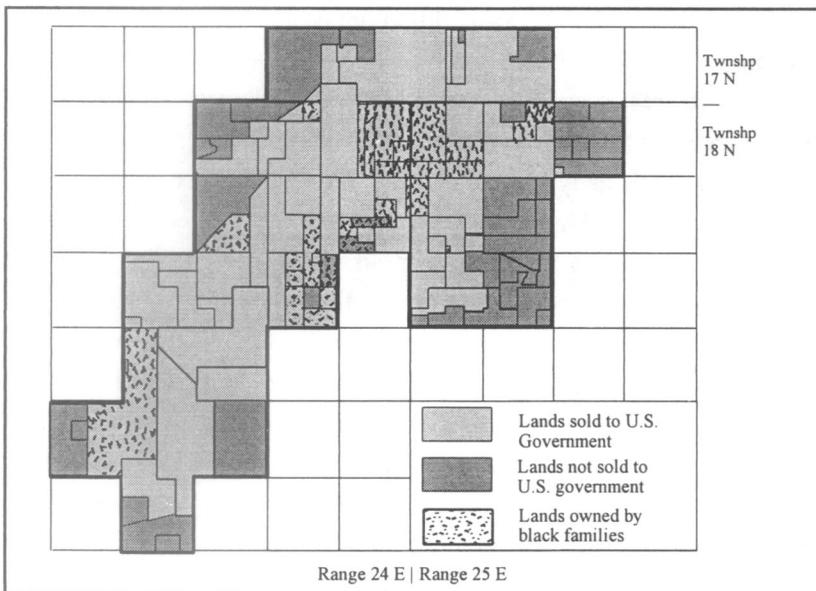
Within fifteen years of the first known purchases by black families, black landholdings in present-day Tuskegee National Forest totaled nearly 1,900 acres. A few additional purchases were made by African Americans in the 1920s and early 1930s, including nearly two hundred acres sold from the Home Seekers Land Company holdings. At the time of federal land option and purchase in the mid-1930s, black individual and corporate land-

7. See Yamaguchi, "Macon County, Alabama," for census data up to 1860. *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Population, Alabama; Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, State Compendium, Alabama; Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Agriculture, Alabama.*

8. See Zabawa and Warren, "From Company to Community: Agricultural Community Development in Macon County, Alabama, 1881 to the New Deal," *Agricultural History* 72 (Spring 1998).

holdings had reached 3,242 acres, or about one third of the land now in the Tuskegee National Forest. Most of this land had been repeatedly mortgaged and on at least one occasion had passed out of and then back into ownership by the original black family (fig. 4).<sup>9</sup>

By the 1920s, out-migration from the area had been exacerbated by the profound effects of the boll weevil on the southeastern cotton economy. Cotton culture had already begun to migrate westward to escape the insect, which left “in its wake crop devastation so severe that farms began to disgorge large numbers of tenants and sharecroppers.” Not all farm operators, however, moved away from their home bases. When even more tenants were “disgorged” by the New Deal Agricultural Adjustment Administra-



**Figure 4.** Status of land in the Tuskegee Submarginal Area, 1938.

9. Many of the Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration land-acquisition files were turned over to the National Forests of Alabama by the Soil Conservation Service when the agency transfer was completed. These files include the title abstracts required by the RA for land purchase. The land acquisition records are maintained by the USDA Forest Service, National Forests in Alabama, Montgomery, Alabama. Land ownership patterns have also been reconstructed from plat books and transaction records maintained by the Probate Judge and the Tax Assessor, Macon County Courthouse, Tuskegee, Alabama.

tion's (AAA) acreage reduction policies, the farm labor surplus reached crisis proportions. Other federal programs attempted to absorb the unemployed farm workers into southern industry; some, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), used labor in the countryside.<sup>10</sup>

Between the natural and the administrative acreage reductions, enough agricultural land was released to endow an unintended rural development: growth of the South's "third forest." Although the new forest grew rapidly on abandoned fields, it did not always mimic the forest mosaic that Bartram had observed. Land not completely devastated by intensive cultivation might revert to forest through old field succession patterns; land severely degraded in terms of soil structure, fertility, and erosion seemed to require human intervention. Although the CCC is often credited with the renewal of present-day forest wealth in the post-World War II South, at least one additional rural agency contributed to forest resurgence. The land utilization and resettlement programs of the Resettlement Administration (and its precedent and antecedent organizations) added fragments to the forest estate—especially in the national no-forests in Alabama.<sup>11</sup>

In the spring of 1934, the federal and state emergency relief administrations had replaced direct relief programs with the concept of "rural rehabilitation." Rural rehabilitation corporations were established, some of which included land purchases for rural projects. Other agencies were active in land planning and purchase. The Farm Credit Administration addressed farm debt adjustments; the Land Economics Division of the Department of Agriculture, the National Resources Board, and the Department of Interior's Subsistence Homesteads programs addressed both marginal land problems and stranded populations. Most of the programs shared goals that combined soil conservation with reductions in rural poverty. In April of 1935 President Roosevelt established the Resettlement Administration (RA) to combine and coordinate similar programs throughout the government. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration's

10. F. B. Friedel, J. C. Cobb, and M. V. Namorato, *The New Deal and the South: Essays* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1984), 7.

11. See for example USDA Forest Service, *The South's Fourth Forest: Alternatives for the Future* (1988), and Louisiana State University, *The South's Third Forest: Opportunities, Action, Responsibilities* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1973).

(FERA) land and rural rehabilitation programs were the first to be transferred into the Resettlement Administration, followed by all AAA land policy work and the regional and state planning efforts of the National Resources Board. The RA also inherited thirty-three Subsistence Homestead and nineteen FERA homestead projects.<sup>12</sup>

Tuskegee Institute had, as mentioned above, already been instrumental in various projects designed to enable farm ownership by landless blacks.<sup>13</sup> In December 1934, Tuskegee Institute hosted a planning meeting to map out a proposal for a “Macon County Planned Land Use Demonstration” area. In attendance were Tuskegee University president Robert M. Moton, W. A. Hartmann and Ray Crowe of the AAA’s Land Policy Section, and Thad Holt, R. K. Greene, Donald Comer, Thomas Cannon, A. P. Morgan, and H. C. Ryding of the Alabama Rural Rehabilitation Corporation.<sup>14</sup> Application for the project was made to the AAA, which approved the Tuskegee Planned Land Use Demonstration (TPLUD) in January of 1935. In February, the project manager—Thomas N. Roberts—reported for duty. By March, with the start-up staff in place, the TPLUD began formal operations; it was soon placed under Resettlement Administration aegis.<sup>15</sup>

The six main objectives of the TPLUD were (1) to use the submarginal

12. Numerous texts and documents trace the evolution of land management planning and resettlement efforts in the Resettlement Administration and its successor agency, the Farm Security Administration. Among the most detailed are P. K. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976); Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); Senate Select Committee to Investigate the Activities of the Farm Security Administration, *Hearings Before the Select Committee of the House Committee on Agriculture to Investigate the Activities of the Farm Security Administration*, 78th Congress, 1st sess., 11–28 May 1943, 7 June–2 July 1943, and 3 July 1943–3 May 1944 (4 volumes); Will W. Alexander, “Rural Resettlement,” *Southern Review* 1 (1936): 528–39; G. S. Wehrwein, “An Appraisal of Resettlement,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 19 (February 1937): 190–202; Donald Holley, “The Negro in the New Deal Resettlement Program,” *Agricultural History* 45 (Summer 1971): 179–93, 195–200; Lester M. Salamon, “The Time Dimension in Policy Evaluation: The Case of the New Deal Land-Reform Experiments,” *Public Policy* 27 (Spring 1979): 129–83.

13. See Zabawa and Warren, “From Company to Community,” for more detailed analysis.

14. R. G. Pasquill Jr., “History of the Tuskegee Land Utilization Project, 1935–1938,” USDA Forest Service, National Forests in Alabama, Montgomery, Alabama, unpublished paper, n.d., 5–6.

15. T. N. Roberts, project manager, “A Brief Resume of the Progress of the Tuskegee Planned Land Use Demonstration,” 11 January 1936, file 000-700, box 27, Record Group 96, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

area for forestry, wildlife protection, pasture, recreation, and erosion control; (2) to assist qualified families in purchasing and operating small farms; (3) to assist less qualified farmers in farm management by providing part-time employment, improving educational facilities, and encouraging self-help; (4) to aid families occupying poor or submarginal farms; (5) to eliminate the need for federal or local relief for farm families; and (6) to reduce governmental costs and increase the local tax base. The procedures envisioned were thus to reclaim and reform the submarginal land and to reform the extant economic and social structure.<sup>16</sup>

Initial scouting of suitably marginal land in Macon County was accomplished soon after the AAA application was approved. The area chosen was dramatically eroded (fig. 5). According to project plans and reports,<sup>17</sup>

Extending toward the southern end of the [purchase] area the land rises abruptly giving the appearance of steep slopes. It is on these southern slopes that the soil erosion is extremely pronounced and much havoc has been wrought to the land. Deep gullies, furrowed hillsides and sand bot-tomed valleys greet the eye from every angle. Attempts at hillside ter-racing have brought only moderate results because the heavy, spasmodic rainfalls soon destroy their usefulness. The absence of trees on the hill-sides is a constant reminder of the exploitation of the forest resources of the purchase area. Creeks where fish abounded twenty years ago are vir-tually sand beds or mud holes. Fish and aquatic life is at its lowest ebb in the history of the area. The openness of the country has driven wildlife to other areas; firewood for the present inhabitants is at a premium.

The initial vision for TPLUD called for the purchase of about 40,000 acres of submarginal land in northeastern Macon County. However, in August of 1935, the entire land acquisition program of the RA was revised downward. Both the TPLUD land acquisition authorization and its fund-ing were reduced by 75 percent (from 40,000 to a little over 10,000 acres and from \$360,000 to \$92,500). The TPLUD reduction actually surpassed that of other projects in the southern region (Region V); according to T. N.

16. Pasquill, "Tuskegee Land Utilization Project," 5–6.

17. *Ibid.*, 5.



**Figure 5.** In 1935, the most severely eroded lands in Macon County, Georgia, became part of the Tuskegee Land Utilization Project. In 1959, the Forest Service created the Tuskegee National Forest from these restored lands. *Arthur Rothstein, Farm Security Administration Collection, Library of Congress.*

Roberts, the average budget cut in Region V was between 25 percent and 50 percent. However, the diminished plan was approved by President Franklin Roosevelt in September 1935.<sup>18</sup>

Among the fifteen land utilization projects in which southern blacks were to participate (table 1), the TPLUD was the only project entirely managed by African Americans. T. N. Roberts was a graduate of Hampton Institute, with a master's degree from the University of Wisconsin. The development and planning engineer, Richard B. Collins, graduated from Tuskegee Institute, with added graduate work at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The project conservationist, Richard H. Richardson, had bachelor's degrees from Morehouse College and Tuskegee, with additional soil conservation training at the University of Georgia. Many other clerical and support staff had attended black colleges and universities in the South. The

18. Roberts, "Progress of the Tuskegee Planned Land Use Demonstration," 1.

labor force at TPLUD was predominately black, comprised primarily from among the unemployed in Macon County. With Works Progress Administration (WPA) funding, the staff was expected to increase to at least 250 laborers and 20 administrators. At one point project employment reached a high of about 350 workers. Project offices were initially on the Tuskegee campus, and the institute was involved in the TPLUD day-to-day activities. A "full Negro staff" was endorsed, and plans for the future designation of Tuskegee Institute as the lead administrative body continued as originally envisioned.<sup>19</sup>

At the end of 1936, the Resettlement Administration was shifted into the Department of Agriculture. Its administrator, Rexford G. Tugwell, resigned; Will Alexander assumed leadership. Land utilization programs such as the TPLUD were transferred to the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, and all land purchases for resettlement were halted. Lease agreements and easements on most of the TPLUD submarginal land had already been negotiated, although the first payments were not made until late 1936. When the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act was passed in 1937, ten mil-

19. T. N. Roberts, project manager, "Answers to Some Questions Generally Asked about the Tuskegee Development Project-LD AL 8, United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Division of Land Utilization" (hereafter "Answers"), undated, file 6, folder Federal Funds, Tuskegee University Archives, Tuskegee, Alabama; F. D. Patterson, president, Tuskegee Institute, to Will Alexander, assistant to the administrator, Resettlement Administration, 7 February 1936, file 00-900, box 27, Record Group 96, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Patterson's letter states, "In a conference here on February 2, Dr. Hartman candidly and frankly endorsed a full Negro staff. . . ." An unidentified staff person of the TPLUD prepared a summary of statements of intention to make Tuskegee Institute the eventual administrative agency. According to this undated document, the preliminary proposal states, "It is proposed that Tuskegee Institute be appointed the administration agent for this project," Plan, January 1935, 8, Miscellaneous Papers on the Tuskegee Land Utilization Program, National Forests in Alabama, Montgomery, Alabama (hereafter referred to as Plan, date, page). The final plan states, "Tuskegee Institute is the Administrative Agency for the project and is cooperating with the Resettlement Administration in the plan of development of submarginal land" (Plan, September 1935, 30). The preliminary acquisition plan states, "From the initiation of the project, and in all subsequent discussions, it has been affirmed that the future operation and administration of the project would be handled jointly by Tuskegee Institute and the Federal Government" (Plan, May 1936, 25). See also a statement prepared for the chief of the Soil Conservation Service, "Summary Description of Tuskegee Land Utilization Project, LA-AL 8," 16 October 1939, Miscellaneous papers on the Tuskegee Land Utilization Program, National Forests in Alabama, Montgomery, Alabama (hereafter referred to as Misc. Papers.)

**Table 1.** Land Utilization Projects Designed for Negro Participation

<i>Project</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Counties</i>	<i>Acreage</i>
LD-AL 8	Tuskegee	Macon	10,358
LD-AL 9	West Alabama	Bibb, Hale, Perry, Tuscaloosa	97,482
LD-AL 10	Pea River	Coffee, Dale	32,335
LD-AK 3	Crowley's Ridge	Lee, Phillips	22,531
LD-GA 3	Piedmont	Jasper, Jones, Putnam	118,703
LD-GA 7	Northeast Georgia	Habersham, Stephens	44,451
LD-GA 8	Coastal Flatwoods	Brantley, Ware	32,600
LD-KY 1	Kentucky Forest	Bell, Harland	25,000
LD-LA 2	Claiborne Parish	Claiborne	18,488
LD-MS 8	Northeast Mississippi	Choctaw, Noxubee, Oktibbeha, Winston	8,500
LD-MS 9	Natchez Trace	Chickasaw, Pontotoc	26,809
LD-NC 4	Jones & Salters Lake	Bladen	30,000
LD-SC 3	Clemson College	Anderson, Oconee, Pickens	24,968
LD-SC 4	Sandhills	Chesterfield, Darlington	96,248
LD-SC 5	Poinsett	Sumter	27,936

SOURCE: Max J. Wasserman, director, Finance and Control Division, Resettlement Administration, Washington, D.C., to Monroe N. Work, editor, Negro Year Book, Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, 26 August 1936, and 14 September 1936, box 4, folder 4, Resettlement Administration, 1936, Tuskegee Archives, Tuskegee University, Tuskegee, Alabama.

lion dollars were allocated for experimental "tenant purchase" programs, and the act authorized loans to farm tenants, farm laborers, sharecroppers, and others for the acquisition of farms. Thus, by the time the Resettlement Administration was completely dismantled, a substitute structure remained to administer work at TPLUD and other land utilization programs.<sup>20</sup>

The first years of land development work on TPLUD were full of energy. Periodic progress reports told of successes in soil conservation and erosion control, forestry, pasture and grazing improvement, recreation development, construction, and general land rehabilitation. Despite funding cuts and shortages, the RA's submarginal land development goals were more than adequately fulfilled (table 2).<sup>21</sup>

How was the second goal—that of resettling residents displaced from

20. *Tuskegee News*, 1 October 1936, 1.

21. T. N. Roberts, "Answers," 1-4; W. A. Hartmann, regional director of southeastern states, to C. F. Clayton, Division of Project Organization, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1 October 1938, 2-3, Misc. Papers.

**Table 2.** Tuskegee Land Utilization Demonstration Project  
Progress Reported in 1938

<i>Forestry</i>	<i>Pasture/Grazing</i>	<i>Wildlife</i>
1,750,000 trees planted on 1,700 acres;	200 acres cultivated and seeded; 1,600 acres cleared;	50 acres for food and cover crops;
5-acre nursery for 1,000,000 trees/year;	11 miles of fencing and cross lines	300 pair quail released;
30 miles of firebreaks;		2 miles of streambank improvement;
Forest stand improvement;	<i>Trail Construction</i>	56,000 fish stocked in streams;
Forest fire prevention	35 miles of truck trails; 10.5 miles of telephone lines;	500 percent increase in small game populations
<i>Erosion Control</i>	1 fire tower;	
5,000 check dams constructed;	1 corral and loading ramp;	
40,000 kudzu crowns planted;	3 cattle guards	
800 acres of terraces;		<i>Recreation</i>
2,000 acres improved tree and grass cover;		60 acres cleared;
2 miles of diversion ditches		2 picnic areas (shelters, ovens, tables, toilets, etc.); 4 wayside parks

SOURCE: Roberts, "Answers"; W. A. Hartmann, regional director, Southeastern States, to C. F. Clayton, Division of Project Organization, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1 October 1938, 2-3, Miscellaneous Papers on the Tuskegee Land Utilization Program.

the submarginal acreage—accomplished? In 1935, the population of the submarginal area was 91.6 percent black and 8.4 percent white. It was estimated then that approximately four hundred farm families lived in the area, with a median family size of seven—thus nearly 2,800 people. Many of the youth who had earlier migrated toward northern industries had returned after 1929, reoccupying abandoned homes in the purchase area and eking out a living. Average gross income per family was about \$220 per year; however, only 12.5 percent of the residents were on relief or welfare.<sup>22</sup>

Buildings in the purchase area were dilapidated shanties with primitive sanitary facilities. Eight to fifteen people might live in a two-room cabin. It was reported in 1935 that only three new homes had been built within

22. Pasquill, "History of the Tuskegee Land Utilization Project."

the submarginal area in the previous fifteen years. A 1936 survey of the buildings to be razed in the purchase area indicated little in the way of salvageable housing. The average diet consisted of the "three M's" (meat, meal, and molasses). As a result of the meager diet and poor sanitary conditions, pellagra, gastrointestinal upsets, nervous conditions, malaria, typhoid, and diphtheria were common illnesses. Many of the children had to walk three to five miles to one of the nine purchase area schools, although the few white children were bused to public schools in nearby towns. Teachers, trained at Tuskegee Institute, taught in overcrowded conditions; there were 864 pupils on the rolls, but only 16 teachers.<sup>23</sup>

Of the 400 resident families, an early estimate indicated that although original plans had called for resettlement of 50 families, there were actually 133 requiring some type of relocation assistance. As land payments were made (the first occurring in October of 1936), and after land purchase options for resettlement purposes ceased (December 1936), relocation activities accelerated (fig. 6). By the summer of 1938, 29 families had moved to Prairie Farms in western Macon County and a further 29 made independent arrangements. Rehabilitation loans and grants were provided to 42 families who moved away, and 33 families remained living in the purchase area, eventually to be relocated off the project. Many of those who remained on or near the purchase area formed the work force funded by WPA and supervised by Roberts and his staff (fig. 7).<sup>24</sup>

In September 1937, the Resettlement Administration was absorbed into the Farm Security Administration, although the land utilization projects remained within the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. As the war loomed, WPA funds for worker salaries declined. Discussions were reopened with the Tuskegee Institute about transfer of project responsibilities, but the institute had been financially devastated by the depression. Tuskegee president F. D. Patterson intended to approach philanthropies for project funding. It was suggested that the Bureau of Agricultural Economics continue to manage TPLUD until such external funding could be obtained by Tuskegee. Even when the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) assumed

23. Ibid.

24. T. N. Roberts, "Answers," 1-4; Hartmann to Clayton, 1 October 1938, 2-3, Misc. Papers; Zabawa and Warren, "From Company to Community"; T. N. Roberts, "Answers," 4.



**Figure 6.** The Tuskegee Land Utilization project required the removal of 133 families before the restoration of the land could be completed. Most families moved to other lands in Macon County, but 42 moved away. *Preuss Polk, National Forest of Alabama Collection.*

project management at the end of 1938, Tuskegee Institute still hoped to assume responsibility for the work.

About one-third to one-half of the TPLUD land was to be managed for grazing, and about half for forestry. Another important aspect of the project, however, was to create recreational facilities for the black population of Macon and surrounding counties. In 1939, a Department of Conservation was created in Alabama, and in 1940 plans were made for this new entity to expand the recreational work already completed in the TPLUD. About 440 acres were thus leased to the Department of Conservation (DOC) at about the same time that the SCS joined in project management at the end of 1939. In only a year, however, the DOC terminated the lease it had made for this recreational development.<sup>25</sup>

25. H. H. Bennett, chief, Soil Conservation Service, to M. S. Eisenhower, land use coordinator, 6 April 1940; L. J. Leffelman, chief, Regional Land Management Division, Soil Conservation Service, Atlanta, to E. G. Grest, chief, Land Management Division, Soil Conservation Service, Washington, D.C., 13 May 1940, Misc. Papers.



**Figure 7.** The workers on the Tuskegee Land Utilization Project established a tree nursery to provide seedlings for land restoration. Here, a work crew, paid by the Works Progress Administration, builds a seed bed. *Arthur Rothstein, Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress.*

In early 1940, the financial future and completion plans for the TPLUD reached uncertainty of crisis proportions. A continued decline in WPA funding for fiscal years 1939–40 and 1940–41 and constraints on SCS funding threatened to slow down or stop the reclamation progress. Patterson turned to Senator Lister Hill and to Edwin Embree (then president of the Julius Rosenwald Fund) for assistance. Both gentlemen approached Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace and the chief of the SCS, H. H. Bennett, on behalf of the Tuskegee program.<sup>26</sup> According to Embree,

[A] committee of regional and Washington officials of the Department [of Agriculture] and of the Soil Conservation Service have visited this

26. Patterson to Senator Lister Hill, Washington, D.C., 21 February 1940, Misc. Papers; Edwin R. Embree, president, Julius Rosenwald Fund, to Henry A. Wallace, secretary, Department of Agriculture, 26 February 1940, Misc. Papers.

project and heartily approved carrying it forward until it could be transferred to Tuskegee Institute. I understand also that there is a counter-movement to eliminate all development work on the project for the 1940–41 fiscal year. . . .

In view of the fact that the Tuskegee project will serve not only the Negro youth of Alabama but, in its educational aspects, Negro youth throughout the southern region, it would appear that the additional \$100,000 which is estimated as needed to complete the project, far from being a waste, would be a sound investment. Since this is the only land use project in the entire country for Negroes and the only project in Region 2 for which the government is not providing adequate funds for completion, it would seem to me that the killing or curtailing of this project would represent gross discrimination.

In a response that promised SCS funds through Title III of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, Wallace assured Embree that “the original objective of making this project available for administration by the Tuskegee Institute will be kept continually in the foreground, and I can assure you that the Institute will be given every opportunity to take over the administration of the project.” Wallace mentioned, too, the six-month furlough that all SCS employees were to begin in mid-June. In a follow-up letter to Patterson, Wallace indicated his pleasure that “it has been possible for the SCS to make definite plans to complete the project in such a way as to place it in satisfactory condition for administration by Tuskegee Institute.” Although warning of the need for continued appropriations for SCS, Wallace assured Patterson that “every effort will be made to complete it within the two-year period.”<sup>27</sup>

Thus began a twenty-year period of tumult in the TPLUD, exacerbated by war expenses and by conflicting federal, state, and local and academic interests. Eventually, a neutral party, the USDA Forest Service, was called in to settle the fray. In 1959, the Forest Service—with the goal of emphasizing revenue-producing activities and administering the original forestry

27. Wallace to Embree, 20 March 1940. A similar assurance was sent by Wallace to Hill, 9 March 1940, Misc. Papers; Wallace to Patterson, 31 May 1940, Misc. Papers.

and conservation objectives of the Tuskegee Planned Land Use Demonstration project—created the Tuskegee National Forest. Thus land that had once been a forested ecosystem, that was transformed into a wasteland, and that was then rejuvenated, finally came under an agency focused on multiple-use forest management.

In ecological terms, the vision of the New Deal conservationists has been a great success. Sub-marginal land has become productive, not only for timber, but also soil conservation, wildlife habitat, and recreation. This reclamation has occurred concurrently with forest regeneration across the state of Alabama. Now throughout the state 68 percent of the land area is forested, and Macon County exceeds, at 74 percent, the state average.<sup>28</sup>

The Tuskegee National Forest is *public* land—in a state which holds less than 5 percent of its total land for the public trust. Alabama scores last in the amount of state-owned hunting lands; only 2 percent of the total land area is freely available for hunting. There is some irony here: a rich hunting, gathering, and agricultural society that had no discernable philosophy of real property was replaced by a socially and economically segmented agricultural society which champions the concept of private property. Although wildlife is “fugitive” (not property until caught) and under state protection, it can best be captured on private land. Tuskegee National Forest is one of the very few free and open hunting areas in the Black Belt counties.<sup>29</sup>

The new forest—initially managed by T. N. Roberts and R. H. Richardson—is once again supervised by African American district rangers and by the first black national forest supervisor in the United States. Of the African Americans who sold land to the federal government, many still own land in and around the Tuskegee National Forest, although black owners are outnumbered by white and corporate landowners, and the size of their

28. J. S. Vissage and P. E. Miller, “Forest Statistics for Alabama Counties—1990,” Southern Forest Experiment Station, New Orleans, *USDA Forest Service Resource Bulletin SO-158*, 1991, 4–5.

29. Sarah T. Warren, “Private and Public Hunting Lands in the Southeastern United States: Effects of Changing Property Patterns on Rural Communities” (paper presented at “Voices of the Commons,” the meeting of the International Association for the Study of Common Property, 5–9 June 1996, Berkeley, California).

holdings is small. Of the African Americans who were resettled to Prairie Farms and other locations, ongoing research indicates mixed results. But in an area where once an indigenous community was purposefully split apart and then relocated out of sight and out of mind, today there are success stories of communities moved, resettled, and strengthened.<sup>30</sup>

30. Zabawa and Warren, "From Company to Community."