

## The Emergency Land Fund: Robert S. Browne, the Idea and the Man

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**Abstract** This article offers a snap shot of one of the several black institutions founded in 1972, by the late Robert S. Browne—the Emergency Land Fund (ELF). The idea of ELF—land ownership by blacks as an asset to build upon for economic well being, a cultural and social glue to ground a sense of family, place and community—was but another strategic and timely insight on the part of Robert S. Browne. The article is the story about the journey of ELF, a southern black-belt African American led institution, lead by Robert S. Browne it’s Chair, and it’s political, economic and policy impact on both public and private institutions, which for the most part, restricted and undermined the aspirations of black’s to own and benefit from landownership. It is also about the positive impact ELF had on rural black landowners, taking the form of organized networks challenging the discriminatory and land grabbing practices of both public and private sector actors. Robert S. Browne was a Man ahead of his time and a giant in the eyes of many who have follow his example today with asset development strategies that benefit communities of color.

**Keywords** Emergency Land Fund · Land ownership · Rural land

Robert S. Browne (Bob) and I met as a result of us both having articles published in 1971 in the *Black Scholar*, a national journal on contemporary Black culture, politics and economic issues. The theme of the 1971 Fall issue of the *Black Scholar* was black economics. Both of our articles focused on the Southeast of the United States—the black belt rural south. Bob’s piece dealt with both the crisis and opportunity related to black land ownership. Bob realized the potential of black land ownership—an economic asset to be leveraged and a pathway for social and economic equity. My piece was a political take on land and the control of same in

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the black belt, as a foundation to build an independence movement for black Americans—the Republic of New Africa (Brooks 1971).

I had read about Bob and his views and work before our articles in the *Black Scholar*. He was in my mind, ahead of his time—a Black heavy weight, intellectual, and black institution builder. Bob had done so much in such a short time. He had organized the Black Economic Research Center in Harlem, launched and published *The Review of Black Political Economy*, founded the 21st Century Foundation, and formulated the idea of a black land saving institution—the Emergency Land Fund (ELF). Bob was also sought out as an advisor to the several emerging black power and nationalist movements in the 60's and 70's. He wrote and lectured on reparations, social and economic Justice and was a serious anti war activist, especially having to do with the U.S. armed intervention in Viet Nam.

In 1973, the Black Economic Research Center, under Bob's leadership, published a research report “Only Six Million Acres: The Decline of Black Landownership in the Rural South.” The publication was widely circulated, was full of data, detailing the specifics of black land ownership and causes for the decline, and suggested that if no action was taken, blacks could be landless as soon as the early 1980s.

Shortly after having our articles published by the Black Scholar in the Fall of 1971, I received a phone call from Bob. This was a phone call that changed my life, personally and professionally. He was right to the point and said that he had read my piece in the Black Scholar and even though he didn't embrace all of what was suggested, he liked the way I had set up my arguments and the program strategy steps outlined for blacks to seek independence with land ownership and control as a center piece.

Bob's views on building black institutions was reflected in his 1967 *Ramparts* article, “The Case for Black Separatism” (Browne 1967). Bob shared with me his thinking on creating a black institution that would have as its mission the retention, acquisition and development of black owned land.

Bob could not have reached out to me at a better time. I was a doctoral student at UC Berkeley in City and Regional Planning, heavily involved on the political front trying to detail and promote a black nationalist agenda, and ready for an opportunity to put my rhetoric into action. Bob invited me to New York for further conversation. He shared with me the fact that he had secured resources from a donor source to implement the idea of a black land saving institution and that he needed help in doing so. We hit it off immediately and he asked me to join him as the first Executive Director and later President of ELF, and I accepted. Bob was the first ELF board chair, starting with its incorporation in 1971, and served in that capacity through 1986, when ELF merged with the Federation of Southern Cooperative, now with the combined title of Land Assistance Fund.

It was a rich and rewarding experience growing ELF with the wisdom and leadership of Robert S. Browne. For a 2 year period starting in 1972, ELF begin a learning and relationship building process with organizations, and key black rural activist, including a network of black farmers and landowners throughout the black belt south. We had established a national office in Atlanta Georgia and field operations in Mississippi, Alabama and South Carolina. ELF had formulated an

action and program agenda to address black land loss, retention, acquisition and development issues, and these issues were complex and not easy to get a handle on in the context of the history of racism and white privilege in the South.

ELF, by 1982, had matured into an organization with 50 staffers, a budget of \$750,000, an organized network of volunteers in 60 Mississippi and Alabama counties—county contacts serving as an early warning system and land utilization demonstration projects in partnership with other community-based organizations. ELF's most significant and perhaps lasting accomplishment was assistance in establishing a Southwide, membership association of 5,000 black farmers/landowners called the National Association of Landowners (NAL). The NAL was organized in five states and included members with a black belt land interest in several major mid western and northeast urban centers. The NAL, developed its own interest agenda, and became an advocacy and public policy interest group.

To give the reader some sense of how well grounded ELF was with its approach, fast forward 11 years from 1972 to a 1983 column by Monroe Anderson in the *Chicago Tribune*, "'Up South' has a Message for Blacks!"

This is one of those stories that sounds too good to be true.

There are about 100,000 blacks in Chicago who can lay claim to some half million acres of rural land in the Deep South, most of it selling at somewhere between \$500 to \$1000 an acre. Translated into dollars and common sense, that means there are 100,000 blacks here who can lay claim to \$500 million to \$1 billion in rural land. That's enough money to buy the Sears Tower twice over.

Just think what an extra \$500 million or so could do for the economy on the city's economically depressed South and West Sides. It could purchase and refurbish Wisconsin Steel or be used as construction and operating capital to build two dozen factories on the West Side.

The idea of all that money being available to 100,000 black Chicagoans sounds too good to be true, but it shouldn't because the story is true. But there is one hitch: Much of the Land is inheritance property and too many Chicagoans either don't know they have it or aren't sure how to go about getting it. That's where Joe Brooks, the president of the Emergency Land Fund (ELF) comes in.

For the past 12 years, ELF has been helping poor blacks families in the Deep South hold onto their farm land by giving legal, technical and financial counseling assistance. In most cases, the blacks were elderly and illiterate. When they weren't losing their land because they couldn't pay the mortgage, they were losing it by means just short of fraud or theft—through tax sales schemes, partition sale ploys, resulting from the lack of estate planning and wills, and outright foreclosure.

While the ELF was attempting to keep them from being kicked off their land, it repeatedly faced the problem of having to find absentee landowners—scattered heirs with a land interest sometimes not know to them, before anything could be done. Many times the landowners had migrated up North. Five out of eight, or about 740,000 of the 1.2 million black Americans who own rural land in the South, where living in the North—Up-South.

These absentee landowners were people who inherited part or a parcel of property from relatives, too often without a formal will thus exposing the land to third party land grabs through the legal, but suspect public lands sale process. That lack of communication and knowledge of how to protect your land interest, has proven costly; while urban blacks are increasingly a tenant class, blacks are losing some 500,000 acres, worth \$200 million each year.

Black Chicagoans are sitting on a gold mine and don't know it, Joe Brooks says. "We're talking about a billion dollars in real wealth. That's why it's so important for urban blacks to pay more attention. To fight this problem, ELF decided to concentrate some of its efforts "Up South" where the majority of the black landowners are. Next week ELF, NAACP, SCLC and PUSH will hold an Up South day and Mayor Harold Washington has proclaimed that day "Black Rural Landowners and Emergency Land Fund Day."

Who knows, if ELF's effort works here, before it's over, the South Side may rise again. (Anderson 1983)

The 'Up South' connection was important and strategic for ELF. ELF was in a process of connecting scattered family members to a real asset development and wealth building opportunity. Our ability to do this was also tied to hard data and research, something that Bob as an economist encouraged ELF to be about—data driven problem solving and solutions.

One important data set that ELF developed, was an outgrowth of a commissioned study of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), that ELF conducted to estimate the land holdings of blacks who held an undivided interest in rural land, resulting from the original owners having no estate plan or will. With no will, establishing ownership, you have no clear title to that land. What you have is an idle resource, not leveraging capital to create wealth, and most important, land with undivided interest of scattered heirs, is a prime target for third party speculators who may pay an heir a fraction of what an undivided interest might be worth or forcing a public sale of the entire track of land and all heir interest lost in the process.

The extent of black heir property ownership is significant. USDA conducts an Agricultural census every 5 years, adding up farm land and determining various tenure patterns—owned or leased. Land to be counted in the census, had to be in some form of production, earning at least \$500. annually. Black land holdings were often missed in this count for many reasons, but most often because the land was idle, not producing an income because of the clouded heir title. Not being counted is like out of sight, out of mind which also translates into USDA resources and programs not reaching a significant class of black rural land owners. From the 1969 census for example we were able to determine that blacks owned 6 million acres of farmland producing an income for its owners. We learned from the ELF black heir land study that there were up to 5–7 million acres of rural land held by scattered black heirs, over and above the land counted in the official USDA census—we identified some of those heirs in Chicago as well as others in major northern urban cities.

The Black Heir Property Study ELF conducted—1979–81, was a signature effort for ELF. We not only convinced the USDA to fund this effort, with the argument that it was in their interest to have rural black heir property data to inform their extension

and research programs, but most important for ELF this hard black heir property data allowed us to step up our advocacy and policy reform work. One example of this advocacy work, was the passage of a bill in Alabama in 1982 based on the ELF black heir property findings, that provided opportunity for heirs to have the first right of refusal to purchase their heir interest in the event of a public sale of that property at set fair market price.

This was considered revolutionary at the time—a law in Alabama protecting the land interest of blacks. It happened because whites also die without wills, we had hard data to make the case, and most important an informed legislative champion—the late Alabama State Senator Michael Figures, who was a former ELF staffer and board member.

ELF attempted to change the crisis of black land loss, to an opportunity.

A landless people is a helpless people—this expression may have less meaning in a modern industrial society than in an agricultural society for in an industrial society it is capital rather than land and labor which produces the maximum economic and political returns. However, at a time when America's black community is struggling to identify and define its place within a pluralist society, the swift decline in black landownership must be viewed with alarm—the loss of an asset and wealth building opportunity.

Historically, black farmers/landowners have had to sell their land in the face of mounting financial and legal pressures. They have had to rid themselves of accumulated debt; been victimized by unscrupulous attorneys, realtors and land speculators; and have received separate and unequal treatment at the hand of the South's land tax, partition sale and foreclosure system. In addition, there was discrimination in the provision of program services and resources traditionally offered by the federal government (USDA) to black landowners. That is, as a farmer/landowner, the black landowner is at a distinct disadvantage in comparison to his white farmer counterpart as regards to access to capital, markets and information supplied with public funds through various USDA programs including any provision in the most important Farm Bills.

For example, ELF early in its life noted in 1975, that blacks received 321 (3.1%) of the 10,400 farm ownership loans made by the Farmers Home Administration, a USDA agency. The average value in 1975 of farm ownership loans made to whites was \$33,000 while the value of black loans averaged \$20,000, 60% of the value of white loans. It was also significant that the black farm population throughout the South comprised on average in 1975 as much as 30% of the total farm population in certain areas and as high as 40% in Mississippi. Mississippi just so happened to be the poorest state in the union, with the highest concentration of black owned land. Further, in 1975 only 40% of black eligible farm operating units versus 59% for their white counterpart were Soil Conservation Service Cooperators. Soil Conservation Service Cooperators can participate in a number of cost-sharing programs for land improvement, the result of which is a direct public subsidy—again, out of site out of mind.

Blacks accumulated land against tremendous odds. There was no homestead program for blacks and in the context of overt racism, black operated farms reached a peak of 925,000 in 1920; of these 98% then as now were in the South. The loss since 1920 has been more pronounced for black operated farms than for all farms. By 1969 the number of black operated farms had dropped by 90% to 87,000

compared to a drop of 64% for all farms in the South. And since 1950 the rate of decline has accelerated for black operated farm units. In 1976 Dr. Lester Salmon then at Duke University and now at a policy center at Johns Hopkins, found in a study using 1969 USDA census data, that black farm units do just as well or better than their white counterparts on a gross return per acre basis (Salmon 1976). However, that same study estimated the current annual loss of black rural land at 330,000 acres. That translated to over 6,000 acres per week, an equity loss to blacks valued conservatively at 1.8 million dollars per week or nearly 100 million annually.

This was the problem that ELF found when it went into business in 1972. Up until then, there had been no discernible effort to keep the black farmer actively engaged in farming or to derive other benefits as landowners. The result has been that quietly, inexorably, and perhaps deliberately, the black community has been effectively severed from the land. That America's black population has been transformed from an almost entirely rural-based people to a people unemployed in declining urban cities should have given some urgency in addressing the problem—The absence of policy, racial discrimination and general neglect has contributed to the sharp decline of black land ownership in the South.

It is not too late to address the problem of black land loss. Thirty years later the Robert Browne inspired ELF continues to attempt to stem the loss through the merged Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF). Based on the last USDA census 20,000 black farm units remain, controlling 1.5 million acres, in addition there are an estimated 4–6 million acres of unclaimed acres of land that may be owned by black heirs. Some have suggested that without the institutional presence of ELF and now the FSC/LAF, there would be no black land left to save. Then as now, FSC/LAF provides direct assistance to black farmer/Landowners. This assistance has been financial and legal to address the tax, partition and mortgage foreclosure problems; education in providing landowners property related information designed to avoid land loss; and technical and management assistance in an attempt to substitute for the USDA programs that are not extended to the black farm and rural landowner population on an equal basis. And most important, FSC/LAF has become an ever present advocacy and public policy organization. Bob Browne remained a board member of FSC/LAF until his death in 2004. Bob would be proud to see how his vision continues to preserve black land ownership.

## Conclusion

In 2006, Tavis Smiley published *Covenant With Black America* (Smiley 2006). It was a NY Times best sellers for several weeks. It included a chapter on black rural America and addressed in part the loss of black owned land. We are reminded that General William T. Sherman issued Field order 15, January 16, 1865, which in many ways was the first covenant with black America. Field order 15 set aside thousands of acres of land for ex-slaves divided into 40 acre plots, along with an army mule. Field order 15 was in response to the ex-slaves desire to achieve true freedom and economic sustainability and their insistence that land was a key to accomplishing these goals.

Unfortunately, that covenant was broken by the government that refused to recognize Blacks as citizens and valued them only as laborers and consumers; yet neither the broken covenant, a hostile government, nor the KKK could sway freed slaves from their quest to own land. That land base not only provided its owners and their families with some degree of economic independence, it also had a social and political impact that extended throughout the civil rights movement and beyond. Black Landowners were the ones most likely to vote, run for office, become community organizers and leaders of the movement in the black belt rural South.

Landownership by Blacks has historically served as a psychological and transformative mechanism, conveying pride and power, a role it continues to play today. For blacks, as for others, land ownership has been a cultural glue providing a sense of place, self, family and community. The significance of land and its role in the evolution of black America cannot be over emphasized.

Robert Browne recognized the significance of black land ownership; if he were alive today he would be leading the charge to preserve black ownership.

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