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**TIES TO THE LAND—SHARECROPPING, BLACK LAND OWNERSHIP, AND
BLACK LAND LOSS**

*The fourth panel in the “Liberating Futures: Erasures, Reckonings, and Transformations” series
of public discussions*

June 4, 2022, at the Warren County Memorial Library, 11:00 A.M. to 12:30 P.M

Warrenton, N.C.: From the years following Emancipation well into the first three decades of the 20th century, terse notices regularly appeared in Warren County newspapers, warning all who might read these ads to “not harbor, hire, or shield” certain named sharecroppers. Those paying for these threatening notices were always white farmers; the persons named, in turn, were always Black sharecroppers who had decided to leave the farms they had been working, fleeing the unfair contractual conditions that kept them and their families bound to a form of modern-day slavery. While no law permitted white farmers to prohibit anyone else from “hiring or harboring” these departed farm laborers, those posting these notices knew that the legal system was on their side. Every Warren County law officer, after all, was white, and most were connected by kinship to the large landholders who had once profited from the labor of enslaved farmers. Sharecropping kept that oppressive system of forced farm labor firmly in place well into the 20th century. In 1910, more than half of the Black farm families in Warren County were sharecropping.

In that same year, however, more than 600 Black families owned the land they were farming in Warren County. These were farmers who had emerged from enslavement, owning virtually nothing—no land, no livestock, and little more than the clothes on their backs. Yet within the span of two generations, Black farmers owned thousands of acres of farmland in the county. And those numbers were steadily increasing.

But not for long. By the 1920s, the sale of Black land for the nonpayment of property taxes—a trend tightly tied to the commercial constraints of Jim Crow policies—had become a monthly occurrence on the Warrenton Courthouse stairs. White landholders slowly began reclaiming the county’s plantation-based economy. Federal farm policy during the Depression years only accelerated this trend, as the government choked assistance for Black farmers while creating generous subsidy programs for large white landowners. This pattern continued throughout the 20th century, leading to the loss of millions of acres of Black-owned farmland across the South. Warren County’s most recent Agricultural Census revealed that the current number of local Black-owned farms is less than *one-twelfth* of what it was in 1910.

The “Ties to the Land: Sharecropping, Black Land Ownership, and Black Land Loss” panel brings together a group of policy analysts, activists, attorneys, and farmers to reflect on the systems that have simultaneously connected Black farm families with the land and challenged their ability to own the fields in which they’ve labored for so many generations.

Panelists will discuss the legacy of sharecropping and Jim Crow farm practices, address the organized challenges being mounted against government policies that discourage and decimate Black farm ownership, review the relationship between land ownership and generational wealth, and offer strategies for reclaiming a future for Black farming.

Panelists:

- **Patrick Brown** – Fourth generation Black farmer, using conservation and regenerative agricultural practices and promoting Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs
- **Phyllis Craig-Taylor** – Professor of Law and former Dean of the NCCU School of Law; a member of the Heirs Property Retention Coalition, and a board member of North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers Land Loss Prevention Project, Inc.
- **Tracy McCurdy** – Executive Director of the Black Belt Justice Center, a legal and advocacy nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation and regeneration of African American farmlands and land-based livelihoods
- **Mary Sommerville** – Minister, life-time farmer, and community activist

The “Liberating Futures” series is a collaborative project of The 1921 Project, the Warren County Branch of the NAACP, the Warren County African American Historical Collective, UNC’s Descendants Project, and UNC’s Humanities for the Public Good Initiative.

This event is free and open to the public.

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