

## A Piece of the Pie: African American Land Ownership

Dorothy Granberry, Geneva Miller Historical Society



The American Civil War resulted in the emancipation of more than four million African Americans held in slavery. Although the Freedmen's Bureau was created to assist with the transition from bondage to freedom, there was no national program of land reform for the freedmen. Some freedmen went to Nebraska and other points west to settle on newly opened lands, however, the majority of freedmen preferred to remain in the South near kith and kin. This failure to create and institute a viable program of land redistribution, at a time when farming was the basis for making a living, created a major impediment

for the formerly enslaved as they strove to become free Americans.

Among the earliest known landowners of African descent in Haywood County was Cato Walker and his first wife, Patty. Walker had acquired a 250 acre farm by 1872. The Walkers purchased the tract for \$7500 payable in three installments of \$2500 each. During the latter part of the 1800s increasingly more African American families acquired farms through hard work and diligently saving their money, for example Ed Bailey and Matt Wills in the Prospect Community and Marion Sweet and Henry Carney in the St. John Community. The Nelson Bond Family in the Oakview Community also purchased a farm during this period. Today, this land is still held by Bond descendants and the farm is recognized as a TN Century Farm.

These landholding families built substantial farmhouses, barns and other outbuildings. Marion and Celia Sweet from the St. John Community erected an eight room, two-story farmhouse. This house provided shelter through the early 1970s when Marion and Celia Sweet's adult grandchildren and great grandchildren built brick bungalows to replace the white frame house. Marion Sweet's great grandson recalled that Marion's son, Henry Sweet, was quite conscientious about paying the taxes on the farm and keeping up with the receipts in order to prevent unscrupulous persons from contriving to take this farm land.