

The Contract System

The slow descent into tenancy and peonage for many southern freedpeople began in disappointment. The widespread myth that the government would provide "40 acres and a mule" died hard but soon and former slaves soon realized that they would have to make their way with no land, livestock, tools, or money—only their ability to work. Within a year after the war's end the Freedmen's Bureau began to assist owners and freedmen in a contract system for the production of crops. It was an attempt to protect freedmen by putting them back to work on a negotiated basis. Under the system owners were given control over their workers' lives and freedpeople continued to occupy quarters, although they were charged for their own maintenance and for time off. The system was resented by freedpeople -- it seemed too much like slavery ... and it created enormous tensions every Christmas when contracts were to be signed.

In 1866, workers were hired under contracts, with yearly contracts commencing on January 4 ... with monthly wages ranging from \$4 to \$10, with working days per month ranging from 22 to xx'. Nursing mothers received half-pay. Among the workers having accounts in the 1866 ledger were Albert Goodson, Alexis Petit, Francoise Petit, Andrew Toussaint, Rosalie Toussaint, Louisa Toussaint, Simon Toussaint, Peggy Toussaint, Collins Page, Dorcino Antoine, Louisa Antoine, Derzilin Nagot, Marie Nagot, John Errante, Margaret Errante, Gregoire Francois, Auguste, Gregoire Francois, Jack Jones, Fanchonette Bob, Melanie Francois, Neville John Louis, Honore Jules and Stephen Smith. Continuing to work on contract in 1868 were carpenter Solomon

Wilson, Solomon Williams, Minique Toussaint, Hosie Stephens, Kitty Butler, and others.

The administrator's account for 1868 indicates that on December 28, 1868, "tohands--their pay & share for 1868, ... \$3,449.98" and for 1867, pay for hands was \$594.33. The ledger does show, however, that after all deductions were made for the sharecroppers, most were slightly in debt to the Prudhomme estate at the beginning the 1869 season.

Interestingly, at least one worker labored on a share contract in 1866, just after the war. This was Rene Plaisance who received \$163.62 on December 31, 1866, "his wages being a share of one fourth of mares which should go to the horses! and "a portion of his share on the horses."¹

1. Oakland Plantation, Its People Testimony by Anne Malone
pp. 111-115