Rainfall that previously would have infiltrated into the ground instead flowed downstream over the surface of the land, carrying away topsoil and carving rills and gullies into hillsides. As water carried sediment from upland areas to the streams and river valleys below, it buried low-lying areas, aggraded stream channels, and contributed to more frequent severe flood events. The net consequence of these changes was a positive feedback cycle of environmental devastation that made the hill country an exemplar of the soil erosion crisis faced by the nation in the 1930s.

*Historical Agriculture and Soil Erosion* is not simply a declension narrative. Trimble also takes great care to show how soil conservation initiatives, spear-headed by state and federal agencies in cooperation with private landowners, have largely succeeded at arresting erosion and reversing the damage. The moral of the story is that environmental degradation need not be permanent. Just as humans can be agents of destruction, they are also capable of restoring the natural world we inhabit.

Sam Stalcup
Independent Scholar


Forty acres and a mule became an unfulfilled dream, forcing most blacks following emancipation to remain on the land as tenants and croppers earning scarcely enough to keep alive. The agricultural and labor reforms of the New Deal provided no help for African American farm workers because southern Democrats in Congress were able to exclude them from wage and hours laws, keeping their income low and blocking the road to landownership. Nevertheless, the desire to own their own farms persisted and, against what would seem to be impossible odds, some blacks managed to get and hold on to land, and black tenants and croppers still hoped to become owners. With the growing success of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-twentieth century, we could expect that African American farmers would receive the government protection and support they had been systematically denied in the century following emancipation, especially after the creation in the USDA of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, the Federal Extension Service, and the Farmers Home Administration, agencies presumably designed to aid the
nation’s farmers. But, as Pete Daniel shows in his important new study, this did not happen.

Expanding agricultural science and technology in the mid-twentieth century led to the rise of agribusiness, supported by what Daniel calls “agrigovernment” (12). The USDA and its various agencies along with the land-grant colleges encouraged and supported the growth of large capital-intensive farms as the most efficient way to produce higher yields of food and fiber while lowering prices for consumers. Operators of small farms, lacking sufficient financial resources or without the ability to tap into available government aid could not survive, forcing tens of thousands of the poorer farmers throughout the country to leave the land.

If poorer small farmers everywhere were affected, African American farmers in the South, where almost all lived, were hit hardest of all. They were the smallest and poorest of the nation’s farmers, and the renters and croppers who did not own the land they worked were expelled when machines and chemicals replaced human and animal labor. Daniel convincingly demonstrates that those black farmers who owned or hoped to buy land faced systematic discrimination that blocked their access to available government resources and protection, and that they were deliberately and maliciously misled by USDA and land-grant college employees, most of whom were white despite the laws mandating integration.

When the Civil Rights Movement, fighting to extend voting rights and to integrate schools and public facilities, turned its attention to this discrimination and to the failure of government agricultural agencies to open positions to black farmers it forced a few token changes. But for the most part the USDA avoided significant change and evaded persistent and well-documented charges of unfair treatment of black farmers and government employees. Daniel documents his argument of discrimination and avoidance of reform in an impressive research effort that involved reading and analyzing an enormous body of manuscripts and reports in government and state college archives, in the papers of civil rights groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the NAACP, and others seeking reform, and in personal interviews with some of the people involved.

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