In North Carolina, a Black farmer purchased the plantation where his ancestors were enslaved— and is reclaiming his family's story, his community's health, and the soil beneath his feet.

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In the months before Patrick Brown was born in November 1982, his father, Arthur, lay down on a road near the family's farm to prevent a caravan of yellow dump trucks from depositing toxic soil in his community. The governor of North Carolina had authorized the dumping of the soil, contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, which had been linked to cancer, in the rural county.

A preacher and a farmer, the elder Brown knew the chemicals would likely leach into the sandy loam and clay soil of Warren County, located in North Carolina's northeastern Piedmont region, up near the Virginia border. He knew they could contaminate the water and make residents sick — and like hundreds of his fellow protesters, he believed that his

community was being targeted because it was one of the poorest in the state, populated mostly by people of color.

“That’s my dad right there,” says Patrick Brown, 41, pointing on his phone to a black-and-white photo of his father being arrested. Around 55 years old at the time, Arthur wears a suit, tie, and round spectacles, and he is being carried away by three helmeted police officers, one holding him under each arm, another under his legs. Looking straight ahead, he appears dignified, calm, and self-assured.

Ultimately, the protest was not successful. The state dumped 7,097 truckloads — 40,000 tons — of toxic soil in a Warren County landfill. Though the community was forced to live alongside hazardous waste, their actions gained the attention of prominent civil rights and environmental leaders — and ignited the national environmental justice movement. It raised awareness that polluting industries and toxic waste facilities are often sited in communities of color and established how ordinary citizens can organize to fight back. Many national and international climate-justice actions today, in fact, grew directly out of the model established in Warren County.

The protest also shaped the legacy inherited by the child born a few months later. “That’s how I got my name, PCB — Patrick Chandler Brown,” Patrick says. “I was named after what happened.”

Patrick’s connection to his land in Warren County — and his commitment to building sovereignty for his family and community — stretches back two generations past his father, to his great-grandfather Byron, who was enslaved nearby until the end of the Civil War. Patrick currently operates Brown Family Farms on the land that Byron worked as a sharecropper once he was freed.

In the rural Hecks Grove community — less than a mile from where Robert E. Lee’s daughter Annie Carter Lee was buried after dying at 23 of typhoid fever — the land has a long and complicated history. Patrick, who was named North Carolina’s Small Farmer of the Year by North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University this year, grows almost 200 acres of industrial hemp for both oil and fiber, and 11 acres and several greenhouses of vegetables — beets, kale, radishes, peppers, okra, and bok choy. He also cultivates 75 acres of wheat, 83 acres of soybeans, 65 acres of corn, and 45 acres of hardwoods and pine trees.

On a cloudy morning in April, Patrick stands outside the incubation house that holds trays of vegetable starts, each marked with a popsicle-stick label, mapping out the work for the day. The clouds hang dark gray in the sky, and tender new leaves emerge from the towering willow oak behind the brick ranch farmhouse at the center of the farm’s production area.

At 6 feet, 1 inch, Patrick has large round eyes and a dark beard peppered with gray. He's serious, measured, and focused, but also kind. Today he wears a dark gray button-up work shirt with two patches on it — one says "Brown Family Farms & Produce, Est. 1865," the other "Patrick / Owner" — tucked neatly into a pair of black cargo pants. The white soles of his well-worn leather work boots are covered in dirt.

"Ideally, we'd get this sweet corn in the ground today," he says, indicating a bag of organic seed and a nearby half-acre plot of loose brown soil. In about a month, the second or third week of May, he will plant almost 200 acres of hemp, the cornerstone of his operation.

Fourth-generation farmer Patrick Brown sits on the steps of the Oakley Grove plantation, where his great-grandfather Byron was enslaved. Brown purchased the plantation in May 2021 and is in the process of renovating it.

In this work with the land, Patrick is carrying out acts of reclamation, finding ways to push back against the systems designed to oppress people of color. In a county that was intentionally poisoned — and a world suffering from a changing climate — he is reviving the soil under his feet by transitioning away from pesticide-dependent row crops like tobacco to industrial hemp, which is known to sequester carbon and remediate soil, and using earth-friendly organic and regenerative methods.

And in a region where many residents suffer from diet-related illnesses and do not have easy access to grocery stores selling fresh foods, Patrick offers vegetable boxes through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, as well as by producing hemp-derived CBD products meant to reduce chronic pain by holistic, nonpharmaceutical methods.

“He is incredibly business-oriented and entrepreneurial, but he is grounded, he’s literally grounded in the earth and the values of Black family life,” says Jereann King Johnson, a Warrenton organizer and cultural historian who has long known the Brown family and hosted Patrick on a public panel discussion about Black land ownership and land loss a couple of years ago. “The values that have been instilled in him from his family — of being a good steward of the land, caring for the community, being a good businessperson — that whole legacy of the Brown family — when you see him and talk to him, he is enshrined in those values.”

In addition to admiring his approach to farming, Johnson respects the way he thinks beyond his own operation and advocates for policies that benefit others, especially young farmers and farmers of color — those the system excludes. “He is a guiding light for young farmers,” she continues. “It’s not just the practice of farming that he is engaged in, but also exploring ways to best pursue resources through America’s bigger farming system.”

On top of farming, Patrick works full time for the social justice nonprofit Nature for Justice, which helps communities at the frontlines of the climate crisis work toward solutions. As director of farmer inclusion, his job is to distribute $1.7 million over five years to farmers of color in North Carolina to help them implement regenerative farming methods.

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In 2021, Patrick carried out the ultimate act of reclamation, purchasing the plantation house and surrounding 2.5 acres where his great-grandfather Byron had been enslaved. “Now I own it,” he says, holding in his palm the weighty set of skeleton keys that unlock the doors of Oakley Grove house and the outbuildings surrounding it. Over the next few years, he has

plans to create a family museum, event venue, and education center for young farmers and farmers of color — ways to honor his family, make extra income, and serve farmers like him. While his ancestors were forced to inhabit this place, he is choosing to, and transforming it into a space that serves *his* needs.

Farming Through Four Generations

In the early 19th century, Oakley Grove plantation was owned by a medical doctor named Lafayette Browne and his wife, Mary Ann Falcon Browne. At its peak, it was a sprawling 7,000-acre operation that raised tobacco, cotton, and wheat with the labor of more than 175 enslaved people. It was such an agricultural player that the state of North Carolina ran railroad tracks to the property to export its goods up north.

Driving his white farm truck from the plantation house through the former Oakley Grove territory last year, Patrick emphasizes its size. From the main house, we drive at 45 mph for 10 minutes, and we're still on former plantation land. "All of this, on the left side of the road, is all plantation, all the way down here," he says as we descend a hill. "It was huge. It was *huge*." He shudders to imagine the amount of backbreaking work it would have taken to manage all that land without the help of modern-day farm equipment.

After Lafayette died in his early 40s in 1841, his son Jacob managed the plantation alongside his mother — and at one point inherited a young woman of color named Lucinda Fain, who is said to have had very light skin. Exploiting the unequal power dynamic, as was common on Southern plantations, Jacob arranged for Fain to work as a cook in the big house and had multiple children by her. Byron, the first of nine, was born in 1850. Because his skin was fair, he worked in the house, where his grandmother Mary Browne groomed him to become an overseer.

(Jacob went on to have many more children by a white woman. While his white descendants spell "Browne" with an "e" on the end — and inherited all of his land and wealth — his descendants of color, as was often the case, were forced to drop the last vowel, and inherited nothing. During our visit, Patrick takes me to a Browne family graveyard tucked back in the woods, which holds the white descendants of Lafayette, Mary Ann, and Jacob. "Watch out for copperheads," he says, as we make our way through the tall grasses to the granite headstones. "This is where I found out I had a lot of cousins.")

In 1865, when he was 14, Byron was walking through the woods when he ran across a Confederate soldier, who told him that the Civil War had ended and he could no longer be forced to work for free. He returned to the plantation house to share the news with his mother and sister Flora, then fled on foot to the southeast side of Warren County, to the township of Shocco. He found work there as a sharecropper, on a farm down present-day Lickskillet Road.

When the owner of the land where Byron was sharecropping died, he willed Byron at least 10 acres. By the time Byron passed away in 1931, he had accumulated 2,000 acres, on which he grew timber and raised livestock. “My great-great-grandfather looked Caucasian, so he carried himself as if he was,” Patrick says.

When Byron died, he willed 200 acres of land and increments of cash to each of his children, but most of them had migrated north because they “wanted to get as far away from Warren County as they could,” Patrick says. His grandfather Grover was the only one who elected to stay and farm — and as a result (to the dismay of his siblings), he inherited a sum of more than $100,000.

Grover established a peach orchard in 1935, and cultivated grain and raised livestock until the late 1970s. On the side, he ran a general store that contained a butcher shop — and even had part ownership of a bodega in Brooklyn, New York.

“My grandfather was a stubborn old man,” Patrick says, pointing out a black-and-white photograph of Grover, sitting next to Arthur on a picnic table bench, wearing a suit and tie with his mouth turned down into a sour expression. “He was very business oriented. He never smiled. When he was in the field, he had suits on. He was a people’s person with respect and honor and dignity, but small talk and stuff like that? That wasn’t him.”

Patrick’s father, Arthur, was born in 1927. Though two of his fingers were webbed on each hand, he never let that get in the way — and, in fact, played catcher for semi-pro baseball teams. “He never used it as an excuse,” Patrick says.

As a preacher, Arthur — known as “Reverend Doctor A.A. Brown,” or simply “A.A.” — served more than six congregations over 60 years. “Everybody knew him — he was a patriarch in this community,” Patrick says. “He preached a lot of funerals, a lot of weddings; he would preach on Sundays and go to convalescent homes in the evenings. Monday through Friday, it was all farming; Saturday and Sunday was taking care of members of his church, providing some type of support to the community. He just did a lot.”

Larry Hedgepeth, a 70-year-old Black farmer with a white mustache and two gold teeth, rented and farmed Arthur’s land for 15 years after Arthur retired. He still grows soybeans in neighboring Vance and Franklin counties. He describes the reverend as a quiet, gentle man who always looked out for others. “He’d plant watermelons and take them to a person’s house, and if they weren’t home, he’d leave them on the porch. Same thing with butter beans, string beans, and tomatoes,” he says. “He was a community man.”

He was also an activist. In addition to asserting the right of his community to maintain a clean environment by protesting the toxic waste landfill, he was involved with voter registration projects alongside Eva McPherson Clayton, a friend of the Brown family and the first African American woman elected to Congress from North Carolina, serving five terms in the U.S. House of Representatives and holding a post on the Agriculture Committee.

“He was a standout person,” says Clayton, 89, over the phone while tending tomatoes in her backyard garden. “He was not only an advocate for justice, but he was an example of what you do trying to be responsible to have justice. He exemplified good citizenship, he exemplified good business, and he carried on his father’s tradition in farming.”

On the farm, Arthur raised some livestock and vegetables but mostly grew row crops like tobacco. Patrick’s mother, Celeste, was an educator. She served as a high school principal for 11 years and then worked two decades in the schools’ central office.

In 1998, after 52 states and territories signed a settlement agreement with the four largest tobacco companies in the U.S. to resolve lawsuits associated with the cost of treating smoking-related illnesses, Arthur accepted a buyout, distributed by the Golden LEAF Foundation, to help him transition away from the crop. He used the money to pay off the farm loans he had with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). A year later, however, he began having strokes — two while atop the riding mower out on the farm — and had to stop working. He began leasing his land to Hedgepeth, who grew tobacco, soybeans, and wheat.

In August 2020, Celeste went to the hospital for a heart valve replacement and died unexpectedly the next day from complications. Arthur passed away in February 2023 at the age of 95. Their joint tombstone, featuring a dove, a cross, and an oval portrait of them together, sits in the cemetery of the brick Union Grove Baptist Church, overlooking the family farm — and, on many days, their son out working the field, following in the footsteps of the three generations before him.

“I see it,” Clayton says. “He is aware that he has the honor, as well as the responsibility, of carrying on the tradition of his parents and his family.”

The PCB Protests — and Birth of a Movement

Oily in texture and without smell or taste, PCBs are synthetic compounds used in manufacturing transformers and other electrical equipment. And they’re nasty: They have been found to cause cancer, liver damage, skin lesions, and changes in behavior. In fact, the Toxic Substances Control Act banned them in 1979 from further production in the United States.

In the summer of 1978, however, a trucking firm hired by the Raleigh-based Ward Transformer Company took a shortcut in disposing of them. Tasked with recycling 31,000 gallons of PCB-contaminated oil, they instead dripped it — under the cover of darkness — along the roadsides in 14 North Carolina counties, including Warren.

Soon after, under the leadership of Governor Jim Hunt, the state government released its plan to dispose of the contaminated soil scraped up from the roadsides: It would establish a toxic-waste landfill in Warren County. At the time, the population of Warren County was 64 percent Black, the highest percentage of any county in North Carolina. The community most immediately surrounding the landfill site, Shocco Township, was 75 percent Black.

Over vehement community protest, the state moved forward with the plan. As the dump trucks advanced toward the new hazardous-waste landfill with contaminated soil, protestors — including Arthur — lay face up on the pavement of Sulphur Springs and Limer Town roads to block them.

During six weeks of protests, law enforcement officers arrested 523 people.

“I’m very proud of all that he did,” Patrick says. “He didn’t have to do that. We’re on this side [of the county], where the dumping wouldn’t really have too much of an effect, but it was an effect for the members of the community that he knew.”

“The protestors of Warren County put the term ‘environmental racism’ on the map,” wrote Dr. Robert Bullard, recognized as the father of the environmental justice movement, in his seminal work *Dumping in Dixie*, published in 1990. In the early 2000s, the state and Environmental Protection Agency collaborated to have the landfill site detoxified, for just over $17 million.

Patrick sees the government’s dumping of toxic waste in Warren County as connected to the county’s role as a center for Black life. In 1969, Durham attorney and civil rights leader Floyd McKissick developed a plan to transform an old Warren County plantation into a utopian metropolis called Soul City, dedicated to economic equality and empowering Black people.

On the empty stretch of red clay an hour north of Raleigh — 11 miles from the Brown family farm and 8 miles away from what would become the PCB landfill — McKissick planned to build a whole new city: houses, businesses, a school, a health center, tennis courts, etc. He envisioned that by the year 2000, the city would hold a population of 50,000 people and offer 24,000 jobs.

The project started out with a lot of promise. In 1972, President Richard Nixon granted it a $14 million loan guarantee to prepare the land for development. But once North Carolina elected conservative Jesse Helms to the U.S. Senate the same year, things took a turn. A series of articles in the Raleigh News & Observer falsely accused McKissick of corruption and fraud, and the feds withdrew support from the project in 1979. Now, aside from a

three-story concrete monolith proclaiming “Soul City” in modern sans serif script at the intended entrance to the community, the place is nearly a ghost town.

Growing up in Warren County — a place that has endured slavery, a utopian dream denied, and the dumping of toxic waste — shaped who Patrick has become. “My environment doesn’t define me,” he says. “It makes me more resilient, and proud.”

“Jesse Helms got elected and stopped the funding from coming in, because he found out that it was mostly for a community for Blacks,” Patrick says. “It was almost like, ‘I’ve got something for y’all — I’m going to dump this toxic waste on you.’ We were already on the map. There’s 100 counties in the state of North Carolina, but you chose our county to continue to pick on.”

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Tracy McCurty, executive director of the Black Belt Justice Center, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting Black farmers and landowners in the South, says that as the homeplace of Soul City, Warrenton and Warren County feel special. And, she says, “I see that Patrick, in his own way, is moving the spirit of Soul City forward.”

Early Days in the Tobacco Fields

Growing up in the 1980s and ’90s, Patrick helped out on the farm, mostly with the tobacco crop, after school and over summers. When he was 9, he started trucking the tobacco, or driving the loaded tractor from the fields where the hands were harvesting the leaves up to the barns where they were flue cured. “To fill up two barns, it would take us about nine hours,” he says.

When he was slightly older, he would also help the fieldhands top the tobacco, or break the flowers off to encourage the plant to grow wide rather than tall. “You’d get this tobacco wax all over your hands,” he says.

On Saturday mornings, Patrick would join his father at the tobacco auction in Henderson. The two would load a trailer and the bed of their red Chevy with giant sacks of cured tobacco leaves wrapped in burlap. Because the truck and trailer were so full, their German shepherd Nicki would scramble atop the truck's cab and ride on the roof all the way to the tobacco house.

"Everyone knew that was my dad, because they'd see his truck and his dog," he says.

They'd drive into the warehouse, where farmers would have their tobacco on display, and unload and unbundle the tobacco, laying it out in piles on open burlap sacks.

The white owner of the tobacco house exuded money and power, Patrick remembers. He'd wear brimmed hats, khaki pants, and wide suspenders, and he always had a cigar in his mouth. Patrick enjoyed the scene. At the same time, he saw his father lose out, over and over: The house would buy his tobacco wholesale at a low price, and then Arthur would look on as the auctioneers, with their rhythmic incantations, would drive up the price they were paid by companies like Philip Morris and RJ Reynolds.

The money they were able to take home was just enough. Nevertheless, Patrick says, "Tobacco is what fed and clothed us."

Patrick Brown runs Brown Family Farms in Warren County, North Carolina, on land that his great-grandfather worked. He grows organic vegetables and industrial hemp, as well as wheat, soybeans, and corn.

Periodically through his childhood, Arthur would drive Patrick north across the rural county toward the town of Littleton and park the truck in the driveway outside the locked metal gate of the Oakley Grove plantation where his great-grandfather had been born. Together, they would stare at the abandoned but majestic two-story house through the white oak, black walnut, sycamore, and spruce pine trees on its lawn.

"He was educating me," Patrick says of his father. "He would say, 'This is where our family ancestry originated, this is the plantation that we came from.'" But while Arthur wanted Patrick to know where his family had started, he did not mention the circumstances of Byron's tenure at the house. Only at the annual family reunions he attended after high school did Patrick learn from his other relatives that his great-grandfather had been enslaved at Oakley Grove.

"My dad didn't really talk about slavery much; that's just something that he didn't focus on," Patrick says. "He understood slavery and everything that people had gone through, but his image was his father — and his father was a no-nonsense type of guy that really felt superior to slavery. Grover couldn't relate to slavery in a way, because he felt like he was born into progress. His father [Byron] was wealthy, and all his kids were entrepreneurs. They didn't want any association with that property over in Littleton," says Patrick of his father and grandfather. "While they knew the history, they didn't relate to it."

Patrick, however, takes a different view. "Even if that plantation didn't relate to me and my success in life, I would not be who I am today if my great-grandfather didn't have to go through that portion of his life," he says. "I pay homage to *all* the generations, and I focus to catch up on the things I didn't focus on as a young person."

Plus, he says, he feels solidly in a position where he can look at the painful parts of his family's past straight on. "Now it's OK to talk about, because now we actually have a little bit of ownership in the process," he says. "It's like full circle."

Breaking Away From the Farm

Though Patrick's childhood was steeped in farm work, he was not eager to carry on the family business. "Farming for us was like a chore," he says. "Our payment was food,

clothing, and a comfortable place to live. It wasn't a 'I get $100 at the end of the week like everybody else was getting paid that worked here.' I myself wanted to leave here when I turned 18 and graduated from high school and go to college, because I had worked since I was 9 or 10 years old, and I didn't think that this was all to life that I needed to see. I wanted to make my own way."

After high school, Patrick studied business administration and played football at the nearby Fayetteville State University, then secured a job outside Washington, D.C., as an account executive in the real estate market for the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Limited. He made good money, but rather than putting it into the farm, he splurged. "I was young, I was in my 20s. I hadn't made any money like that ever in my life. I was flying to Vegas, I was going to the Caribbean and traveling the world and hanging out with friends," he says. "I felt independent, but I made dumb decisions."

At the end of 2008, he was laid off during the recession. He spent just over half a year back at the farm and then got a position as a contract agricultural advisor in Afghanistan. Unlike most Americans in the country, who lived on military bases, he lived among locals in Afghan villages and taught residents how to grow, trellis, and sell grapes — to give them an alternative to growing poppies for the opium trade.

"I wouldn't say it was a waste of time," he says, "but I really put my life in jeopardy for something that really wasn't going to make a difference." He and his team would return to villages six months after they had left, and the Taliban would be back in control and the villagers back to growing poppies.

Justice White, Patrick Brown's nephew, works full time on the farm with his younger brother Isaiah. The two oversee the cultivation of vegetables for the farm's Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program.

After a year in Afghanistan, Brown earned a high-level security clearance and was able to get a job with the Department of Defense, which he held for 16 years, until June 2023. The whole time he worked for the government in the D.C. area, Patrick would commute to North Carolina every weekend to help his parents with the farm. He soon realized that on the farm, he felt alive, and comfortable, in a way he didn't elsewhere — in a suit, at meetings, jet-setting across the world. "Coming here, where no one knows I'm here

— I'm just out here working on my tractor — I'm just enjoying the landscape and the atmosphere and the environment."

He secured his present job in June 2023, as director of farmer inclusion for Nature for Justice, and has flipped his schedule. Now he spends his weekdays in North Carolina on his farm and traveling the state to speak with other farmers, connecting them with incentives, and his weekends in Virginia with his family, where his wife and their son, born in 2013, still live. It's a two hour and 52-minute drive from doorstep to doorstep, he says.

While for the last two decades he worked a career job to get by and support his family, "I'm 100 percent ag focused now," he says. And his full-time Nature for Justice job gives him an advantage that his father, who depended solely on the farm for income, did not have. He can experiment with different crops and approaches and purchase modern equipment to help him do the work.

He realizes he has a huge opportunity in the land that his ancestors stewarded and passed down to him. "I'd be a dummy — which I was for the last 20 years — by not taking advantage," he says. And the knowledge and experience he developed in college and while working for the government have made him savvy at navigating the system to his own benefit, and the benefit of others working the land.

Opting Out of a Discriminatory System

On a mid-June morning, the farm is a com-fortable 77 degrees outside, with an occasional breeze. Small white cabbage butterflies flit among the dandelion weeds and the rows of produce over in the hoop house. A couple hundred feet away, I can see the corn Patrick planted back in April standing now a couple feet tall.

Yesterday, while he was harvesting a field of wheat, the belts in Patrick's John Deere combine seized up, and the giant machine jammed. This morning, while he waits for help, he reaches a pitchfork up into a back compartment of the machine to pull out the straw that got stuck. "Oh, what a day," Patrick says. "I can't cut wheat until I get that fixed."

Meanwhile, across the yard, in the shade of the willow oak, Brown's two nephews, Justice and Isaiah White — his older sister's kids, both in their mid-20s, both full-time employees on the farm — sit on overturned buckets in the back of a low trailer amidst a sea of purple kale leaves. The trailer is still hitched to the old orange tractor they used as they harvested two long rows from a nearby field.

Across the road, peacocks shriek. They must be pets? Justice and Isaiah don't know for sure, but, "If you scream loud enough, they'll scream back," Isaiah says, reaching down to select a handful of the deep purple leaves, then clipping their stems and fastening a rubber band around the bundles. A FreshPoint Sysco truck will be picking up as many boxes as they have packed tomorrow morning, so Patrick has asked them to work quickly.

Patrick takes his position as the steward of his family's land seriously. "My primary mission is to make sure this land that I inherited has the capacity to generate income in agriculture for future generations — whether it be my nephews, their children, my son, or his children," he says.

Previous generations relied mostly on commodity crops for their income, but Patrick takes a different approach. One of his key tenets is planting a diversity of specialty crops that can both supply his community with fresh vegetables and create a variety of income streams — and to sell CSA shares at the beginning of the growing season to offset the farm's upfront costs. While his predecessors — and most farmers — take out loans or rely on credit to run their businesses, borrowing against their expected harvests to purchase equipment, seeds, and other supplies, Patrick has never borrowed money or relied on loans or grants. He has seen firsthand the harm that debt can cause farmers, especially farmers of color.

The USDA has a long history of discrimination in its allocation of farm loans — confirmed by numerous agency-commissioned studies. In the 1980s and '90s, North Carolina farmer Timothy Pigford and other Black farmers filed a class action lawsuit against the USDA, saying the agency — via its local county committees — would deny Black farmers loans or force them to wait longer for approval than nonminority farmers. Additionally, the suit says, the agency failed to investigate and respond to allegations of discrimination.

Patrick saw his father experience the USDA's discriminatory lending practices. The agency was frequently slow to approve Arthur's request for loans and disperse the money. "They would continue to ask for more information, more documentation, in order to feel comfortable giving him a loan each and every year," Patrick says.

The delays in payment could be devastating. With tobacco as his principal cash crop, Arthur needed to purchase fertilizer before December and prepare the land for planting by February or March. When the loan money was delayed, he would have to fertilize and plant late, and the farm would operate under stress all year, often experiencing low yield — and reduced profits — as a result.

Patrick Brown's nephew Justice White pauses while harvesting organic purple kale. Brown thinks a lot about improving the land and the family business in preparation for passing them down to the next generation.

In 1999, a $1 billion settlement was negotiated in the Pigford cases. Claimants were supposed to receive payments soon after, but because of confusing paperwork and processing issues, very few did. Congress appropriated money for an additional round of payouts in 2010 but similar issues abounded. Last July, the USDA issued $2 billion in financial assistance to farmers it had discriminated against through its lending programs; before that, however, most Pigford claimants had received payouts of $50,000 or less, just a tenth of what an average midsize farm spends in a year, and fewer than 3 percent — 425 farmers total — had received the debt relief they were entitled to as part of the lawsuit.

The older Black farmers who were involved with the Pigford cases regret having gotten entangled with the industrial agriculture paradigm and the USDA, says McCurty of the Black Belt Justice Center. "The elders refer to the USDA as the last plantation," she says. "It really is modern-day sharecropping. It's entrapment, so they can never have economic autonomy."

Because of the systemic discrimination, the number of Black farmers in the U.S. has fallen precipitously over the last century. Between 1910 and 2017, the percentage of Black farmers declined from 14 percent to less than 2 percent. Today, the approximately 40,000 Black farmers remaining in America own less than 1 percent of the country's farmland.

In large part due to the systemic discrimination, the number of Black farmers in the U.S. has fallen precipitously over the last century. Between 1910 and 2017, the percentage of Black farmers declined from 14 percent of all farmers to less than 2 percent. Today, the approximately 40,000 Black farmers remaining in America own less than 1 percent of the country's farmland. "I can count on one hand the number there are in Warren County that's still row cropping, not just backyard gardening," Patrick says. "There's hardly any of us left."

And the disparities continue: In 2022, the USDA granted direct loans to only 36 percent of applicants who identified as Black compared with 72 percent of applicants who identified as white, according to an analysis by National Public Radio. That's why Patrick has opted out of the loan system. "I don't want to have to be praying and hoping that in order for me to have a good crop in the ground this year, I've got to wait for money from USDA to plant on time," Patrick says. "I saw my dad deal with it. And I promised I would never operate this farm like that."

In this often hostile environment, the farmers of color who *do* remain support each other, sourcing produce from one another to fill out their orders and helping each other with broken equipment and other issues.

Hedgepeth comes over in the afternoon to help Patrick fix the combine, which is still clogging up every time Patrick tries to run it down a row of wheat. Patrick adjusts the bolts that control the straw-release door on the back of the machine so it's open 6 inches wider than it was, and then he and Hedgepeth climb the five-step ladder up front.

Patrick enters the glassed-in cockpit and fires up the machine, releasing a groan and a plume of smoke into the air. As he advances down a new row, Hedgepeth hangs off the side of the deck to see if the combine is releasing the straw onto the ground like it should. He gives Patrick a thumbs up.

Finally, the combine is fixed, and — after a day's delay — the harvesting can continue. Hedgepeth enters the cockpit and takes the seat beside Patrick. Up high over the field, the two farmers — one older, one younger, both with an intimate knowledge of this land — sit side by side as they run up and down several more rows, leaving a row of freshly cut straw in their wake.

On the ground at the end of the run, Hedgepeth picks up a harvested kernel and examines it closely. He nods approvingly. "I believe that's as good as you're gon' get," he says.

Farming for Climate

It's late August, and it's hot. Sweat drips down my back. I walk with Patrick over fields that several weeks ago held onions, peppers, okra, beans, sugar peas, and other vegetables. His boots crunch over dry soil and dead grass.

“Normally by this time of year, by the second week of August, we’d have fall crops in the ground,” he says. But the fields remain empty. “We’re too afraid that if we put fall crops in the ground like we’ve done the last 15 to 20 years, we’d lose them to heat.”

When Patrick took over the farm, he decided to take it in a new direction. Concerned about the changing climate, Patrick is trying to use his land as a force for good — through strategies that also make financial sense. A key to this approach is growing hemp, which the federal government legalized in 2018 after prohibiting its cultivation for several decades, spurred by the war on drugs and its association with marijuana. (To note: Hemp contains only .3 percent of psychoactive THC and does not produce a high.) A fast-growing and high-yield plant, hemp suppresses weeds, thrives without fertilizer and pesticides, and requires less water than many other crops. Plus, it sequesters carbon: “Over 90 to 100 days, an acre of hemp sequesters just as much carbon as a pine tree would over 20 years,” Patrick says.

Because North Carolina was among the states that allowed hemp cultivation prior to its federal legalization, Patrick started planting hemp in 2015 for the oil in its flower, used to produce CBD — and he patented a company called Hempfinity, which produces CBD teas, gummies, salves, lotions, and tinctures. “We wanted to try to figure out an alternative to slow down the use of pharmaceutical drugs, like Oxycontin,” he says. Then in 2018, he began growing industrial hemp for the fiber of its stalks, which can be used to create everything from fabric to building materials. He sells the hemp to BioPhil Natural Fibers in Lumberton, which processes it into woven materials, textiles, and clothing.

Patrick also partners with Patagonia and VF Corporation (owner of The North Face, Vans, Timberland, and JanSport) — which are both interested in developing domestic supply chains for industrial hemp and have commissioned him to help with the research and development of its cultivation. Each year, he sends the companies data on his fields, capturing information on things like plant genetics, stalk densities, soil composition, and the amount of carbon the plants are sequestering.

Because hemp fiber only recently became legal to grow across the U.S., the industry is still in its infancy, and parts of the supply chain — like processing plants — are still few and far between. While Vans sources the majority of the cotton for its canvas shoes from the U.S., most of its hemp comes from China, says Emily Alati, Vans’ director of materials innovation and sustainability. The company would eventually like to source more of its hemp fiber domestically, from minority farmers in particular, with the hope of increasing the diversity of the farmers in its supply chain. (Most of its cotton growers are white males and around 65 years old, Alati says.)

Patrick is proving instrumental in helping the global company figure out how to make this transition and identify gaps in its supply chain, says Alati, who visits Patrick on his farm about once a year. “What I love about Patrick is his willingness to jump into anything new and try it,” she says. “Working with Patrick is helping us understand how we can support and potentially fund minority farmers to embrace regenerative hemp or regenerative cotton, so that we can start to shift our supply chain over time. We don’t know what we don’t know, and Patrick has been so critical in helping us understand.”

Isaiah White harvests kale at his family’s fifth-generation farm in Warren County, where the U.S. environmental justice movement was born in 1982 out of protests over the siting of a hazardous-waste landfill.

Patrick and I drive less than a minute up the road to visit the closest hemp field to the main farm, the one right downhill from the cemetery at the home church. At full height, the deep green stalks of his hemp plants stand 16 feet tall and pretty thin, about the circumference of a thumb. But because Patrick cut most of this field two days ago, the stalks lay flat and are browning on the ground — drying naturally in a process called dew retting, where the cellular tissue and gummy substances rot away, causing the fiber to separate from the stem. After a week and a half, he will rake the stalks into 4-by-5-foot bales and send them off for processing.

So far, he's pleased with the new crop. "Hemp puts more into that land than it takes out," he says. "Every year, my yields are better, and I'm putting less and less into the land. I'm building the soil." That's hard to do with a crop like tobacco, because of the amount of chemicals it takes to produce it, he says. With synthetic fertilizer costing up to $900 per ton in 2022 and 2023, the natural feeding of the soil has the added benefit of saving him money and making his farm more profitable, he says.

Beyond growing climate-friendly hemp, Patrick employs numerous farming techniques that benefit the soil and sequester carbon. While he has not invested in obtaining the official USDA certification (which is not worth it financially, he says), he farms his hemp and veggies by organic methods. He fertilizes with compost tea, a mixture he creates of compost and water.

Where he can — in his hemp, wheat, and soybean fields — he does not till the soil, a practice that disrupts its composition and releases carbon. He rotates his crops rather than planting the same thing in each plot every season, which builds soil nutrients and organic matter. And he plants cover crops each winter — barley, cereal rye, hairy vetch, red crested clover, and wheat — rather than leaving fields bare, which can prevent erosion, fix nitrogen, and sequester carbon.

In his shift to climate-friendly ag, Patrick has tried to bring other farmers along with him. In 2022, he applied for a USDA Climate-Smart Commodities grant, a project that would connect Black and historically underserved farmers — prioritizing the legacy farmers involved with the Pigford case — with retailers and historically Black colleges and universities. Following the model Patrick has established with his own farm, the idea was to help these farmers transition to climate-smart agriculture and hemp production.

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— Tracy McCurty

While the USDA did not end up funding the proposal — instead directing a good portion of the grant money to big-ag players like Tyson Foods, which received $60 million — McCurty said the legacy farmers appreciate Patrick's vision. "The Black farmers, the elders, they love Patrick. I mean, it makes them proud to see the next generation running with the baton. And not just that, but that he reached back to them to show them a pathway out," she says.

"There can be no justice for Black farmers without justice for the Pigford legacy farmers and what they endured," McCurty continues. "And

what I appreciate is that Patrick went back and really sat with the elders to try to incorporate them into this larger vision he had of restoring the Black agricultural land base through industrial hemp."

Patrick's day job with Nature for Justice (an organization that *did* receive Climate-Smart grant money) — which consists of incentivizing Black farmers, 75 so far, to adopt many of these regenerative practices — marries his interests in mitigating climate change, making farming more profitable, and staving off land loss among Black farmers.

Former Rep. Clayton admires Patrick's tenacity and his concern for others, especially new and nonwhite farmers. "He's willing to push buttons to get things done; he's willing to advocate at the highest levels open to him," she says. "He's getting more new farmers in because he's willing to fight the battles of equity."

Patrick Brown purchased the Oakley Grove plantation in May 2021. "It's a breath of fresh air to feel like you own the property that your family was enslaved on," he says.

Purchasing the Plantation

Patrick continued his periodic trips to the Oakley Grove plantation house into adulthood. The house was owned by a relative of Mary Falcon Browne until 2001, when the North Carolina Preservation Authority took ownership. In 2020, a Duke University doctor purchased the property under protective covenants from the Authority.

One day, when Patrick was visiting with his young son Clayton, the owner was there, and he and Patrick got to talking. The doctor had been collecting family history from the white side of the Browne family. “He was surprised I knew my family history like I did,” Patrick says.

Realizing that Patrick had a stronger connection to the house than he did, the doctor eventually offered to sell Patrick the house. In May 2021, Patrick purchased it and the 2.5 acres surrounding the house in a private sale. “I was like, ‘Wow, I can’t believe I purchased it,’” Patrick says. At the same time, he came face to face with the ugly realities. “When I first got these keys and documents from the other side of the family — the ledgers, the wills — I saw how they were willing off people like they were merchandise.”

Jerreann King Johnson visited the plantation with Patrick in 2022 after hosting him on the Black-land-loss panel. “When I got out of the car and walked onto the land, under that huge stand of oak trees, I got chills. I could have cried, because I felt like that land was coming back to where it belonged,” she says. “I felt so happy and joyful, knowing that the land, the house, and the property were in Patrick Brown’s hands. I felt so hopeful and encouraged, that this young Black man had the consciousness and foresight to acquire the property.”

The house was built on a high brick foundation and in two parts. The original, humbler part, now the back, was built in 1800. And the more elaborate second part was added in 1859 and attributed to the renowned architect Jacob Holt.

“This is where the Browns started,” Patrick says as we cross the shaded lawn to approach the house. The white paint has worn off of most of the siding, giving the house a distressed look, and while two rows of boxwood bushes line what was once a front walk, the front porch and stairs are missing.

We circle around to the back and climb the rotting wooden staircase to the back porch. I carefully place my feet on boards that look like they won’t collapse under my weight. Patrick uses the giant gold skeleton keys to open the door. The light inside the house is filtered and subdued.

While the few rooms that had been partially renovated by a previous owner have finished drywall, in most of the house, the original wall interiors — made of lath, or narrow strips of wood, and plaster — are exposed. Boards and long pieces of molding are stacked on the

floor and lean against the walls for future use. “All the wood in this house is original,” Patrick says.

Back on his own farm later in the day, Patrick reflects on the centuries of people and events that have led him here, to the gently sloping acreage on the far side of the county, to the tractor parked in the side yard, to the hemp growing by his parents’ graves. “I’m thankful for my dad and his father and my great-grandfather for working at what they did so long, to be able to give me access to the land,” he says.

After nearly two decades working mostly off the land, Patrick now feels he’s doing what he was meant for — in the planting, in the harvesting, even in the fixing of the jammed combine. “This is my passion,” he says. “This is where I belong.” ◊

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Cornell Watson is a dope-ass black photographer.
