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Farm Futures

Reluctant farm warrior still fights for justice

For three decades, John Boyd, Jr. and the National Black Farmers Association have been working to make farming more fair for all.



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February 27, 2025

14 Min Read



LOOKING FORWARD: John Boyd, Jr. has used lessons from his family's distant and not-so-distant past guide him towards creating a better future for black farmers. PAM CARAWAY

John Boyd, Jr., never planned to become an advocate. He would have happily lived the life of a simple farmer, anonymously tending his fields carved from southern Virginia trees.

But history got in the way, and Boyd found himself unable to turn a blind eye to injustice.

Today Boyd leads the [National Black Farmers Association](#), a national nonprofit he founded in 1995 to advocate for Black farmers and families. Over the past 30 years he's met multiple U.S. presidents. He's been a regular presence in the media and the court room. At one point he was a candidate for Secretary of Agriculture.

Truth be told, he could probably cash in and take a cushy job lending his name to the cause of his choice. But that's not his nature. Despite all he has experienced in his 59 years, Boyd remains a farmer at heart and a fighter by nature. And he's never forgotten from where he came.



family roots span generations in their namesake town, but it's a complicated legacy. That's because the Boyd surname originated from a local slaveowner who owned his ancestors. The old plantation home still stands today, a fading relic on a hill not far from Boyd's land.

As a kid, he never knew the significance of that home. All he knew was when the white family living there needed something Boyd and his family had to do it. In a way, it was still a plantation.

"Years after emancipation, the concept and ideas were still there," he says. "I didn't understand it as a kid. I didn't question it. I just knew that Miss Ethel lived in this huge house."

His father and grandfather later taught him that history. Today, Boyd can drive a short distance to the local Black church and proudly show where generations of his forefathers were laid to rest.

Growing up, Boyd spent lots of time with his grandfather, who was born in the 1800s, the youngest of 15 kids. He was a wise and spiritual man who taught him a few simple beliefs: that the land knows no color; Be good to the land and it will always be good to you; Land never mistreats anyone- people do.

"I kind of fell in love with that concept," Boyd recalls. "He said the only time he ever felt free was at home on his land. And I'll never forget that."

As a young teenager, he traveled with other local FFA students to the nation's capital. He was told the group included him because he was the only Black student in the chapter. Boyd wanted to go, but told his leaders he couldn't afford it. They said not to worry.

While touring the White House, a staffer came out and asked a few students to follow. Boyd assumed the staffer would buy them lunch. They walked into another room and there stood President Jimmy Carter.

Carter began asking Boyd questions about his background and family. He told the president his mom worked at a hospital and his dad farmed. He was a little afraid to tell Carter about his grandparents because he didn't want to get in trouble. The president assured him there'd be no repercussions.

Boyd revealed his grandparents were sharecroppers who farmed tobacco and sold a little whiskey on the side. Carter said that was much like his own background.

"I felt like the only guy in the room," Boyd says. "There were other kids with me, and I don't even remember them listening or saying anything."

Fighting to farm

For a time, Boyd set his sights on becoming a star athlete. When that didn't work out, he returned home intent on farming. One day, an elderly Black man by the name of Russell Sally told him he was selling his farm. Boyd admitted he couldn't afford it, but Sally said USDA had money for Black farmers.



Boyd finally got his loan on the condition he assume Sally's debt. According to Brown, things only got worse from there.

The local USDA official made it known he would only see Black people on Wednesdays. It may have been the 1980s, but Black farmers still entered though the back door. All of them were given the same 9 a.m. appointment time. While white farmers met privately behind closed doors, Black people were relegated to an open-door conference room. Boyd estimates there were often up to 80 Black farmers there at the same time, each making their case for USDA assistance. Among themselves they referred to it as "Black Wednesday."

Some would receive a fraction of what they requested. Many got nothing at all. The loan officer was fond of saying, "I ain't gonna lend you any of *my money*."

Among the many indignities Black farmers regularly faced, one moment in particular stands out to Boyd. As all the Black farmers sat in the same room during their shared allotted time, a white farmer walked in. He and the loan officer engaged in friendly conversation, making plans for a steak diner later. As the white farmer left, the loan officer handed him a \$157,000 farm operating loan check. The officer informed the white farmer he would need to return later and fill out his paperwork. The officer had gone ahead and written a check based on the previous year's financials.

Despite the constant intimidation and degradation, Boyd and the other Black famers remained polite and deferential. Even so, they rarely received the assistance they desperately needed. Boyd recalls pleading with the same loan officer who'd already turned down his \$10,000 operating loan request. He was hoping to convince the officer to give him \$5,000. At the time, Boyd was in danger of losing his farm. His marriage was falling apart, his first wife fed up with the constant struggles. After years of trying to remain calm, his frustrations boiled over.

"I said, 'man- I need some money to pay my farm workers,'" Boyd recalls.

The loan officer exploded, warning him not to talk to him like that. The officer told Boyd he would never get a loan because he was on the bank board. He called himself the most powerful man in the county.

"If you don't learn how to talk to me, you ain't gonna get it. You won't get a damn dime here,'" Boyd recalls the officer officer saying. "I'm the next thing to God in this country - don't you know?"

Boyd Responded, "I don't know what God looks like, but I know he looks nothing like you."

The loan officer spit tobacco juice on Boyd's shirt.

He recalls briefly blanking out before exchanging some non-Christian words with the official. Boyd then excused himself to the restroom before returning to ask once more if he would get any money. The officer said no and threatened to call the police if he ever came back.

Everyone watched silently as Boyd walked out the door. Office staff gathered outside to see him go to his beat-up truck. Years later, one of those workers told Boyd she thought he was going to kill the loan officer. But he didn't.



In the early 90s, Boyd was talking at an [NAACP](#) meeting about how badly USDA had treated him. The State Director of Civil Rights, Ava Marshall, told him she had heard worse stories. Unfortunately, most Black farmers at the time weren't speaking out.

Boyd sent formal complaints to USDA but never got a response. According to Boyd, Marshall began a formal investigation into allegations she'd been hearing across the country. She uncovered data for one year in which Boyd's local loan officer only made two farm operating loans to Black farmers. He'd granted 180 to white farmers.

The loan officer admitted to Marshall that he didn't like giving loans to Black farmers. He said they were lazy, only looking for checks on Friday. He also didn't deny throwing Boyd's loan application away. According to him, since he said he wasn't going to give him any money that year, there was no point in processing it.

As for the spitting incident, he claimed to have simply missed his target.

Mr. Boyd goes to Washington

"I didn't grow up saying I want to be like Martin Luther King, or I want to do civil rights work," Boyd says. "I just wanted to farm."

Still, he soon began leading small protests in Washington, fighting for Black farmers. Crowds were small in the beginning. Then his father offered some sage advice: getting people to care is an art and a skill. He suggested bringing a mule.

"Every Black person in this country over the age of 50 knows the significance of a mule and what it meant to a Black farm family," Boyd recalls his father saying.

The significance goes back to the Civil War when a federal order indicated freed slaves would each get 40 acres of land and a mule. The plan was later scrapped by Abraham Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson.

In earlier times, Black farmers often couldn't afford a horse, so they had a mule. When cars came along, many still relied on mules. Boyd recalls his grandfather still traveling to church by mule even when he owned a car later in life.

"The mule was transportation. It was plowing, working; it was recreational transportation," Boyd says. "To a Black man a mule was a member of his family."

Boyd brought a mule to a protest outside the White House. At one point, he tied it to the top of the fence so he could lace up his boots. As he did, the mule started leaning back, pushing on a gate. Reporters captured the moment on camera.

"The story was this Black farmer was up there trying to break into the White House with the mule," Boyd recalls. "It wasn't true, but it looked good."

Those pictures showed up in the Washington Post. It began a media onslaught. Boyd began receiving more attention than ever. Black farmers around the country reached out to learn how they could help.



National Black Farmers Association due to the way their case was presented.

With each setback, Boyd noted what the judges said, and worked to tighten up his case.

As he continued to strike out in court, Boyd found himself again in danger of losing his farm. At one point, creditors seized much of his aging equipment. Ironically, Boyd only got it back because his ex-wife had a lien on the property.

In December 1997, after returning from a protest that received national attention, he came home to a for-sale sign on his land. County officials said they were ready to sell him out. They'd even picked a buyer and encouraged him to sign the paperwork and make it easy on himself. Boyd refused to go along.

The day that changed his life

By then, the continued protests had caught the attention of then President Bill Clinton. He offered to meet with Boyd and other Black farmer advocates. That half-hour meeting, which included other government officials, turned into a three-hour marathon. At its conclusion, Clinton agreed to speed up investigations into discrimination at USDA. He also enacted a moratorium on farm foreclosures pending an investigation into civil rights violations. That moratorium applied not just to Black farmers, but white ones as well.

"That's the day that changed my life," Boyd says. "The moratorium saved them from selling my farm. That was the only thing to save me."

A USDA investigation later concluded Boyd had indeed been the victim of discrimination. To his knowledge, it was the first individual case USDA had settled. The local loan official was finally removed. Still, due to legal technicalities, the ruling only applied to Boyd. Justice for other Black farmers would have to wait.

Boyd credits then Virginia Governor Chuck Robb for being instrumental in helping him advance his cause. He worked to fund a USDA civil rights office that would help bring justice to victims of discrimination.

The national spotlight on Boyd grew brighter. He appeared on 60 Minutes and Nightline, a late-night television news program.

"All these people picked up on the story when it's some Black guy out there with a mule," Boyd says. "I ain't ever had a name. I'm just a good Black guy with the hat. A Black guy with the mule."

A force to be reckoned with

Boyd may still be a Black guy with a mule, but by the 2000s he'd also become a force in ag politics. His mother, Betty Jean, believes God had a plan for her son, though sometimes she couldn't see it. She helped him through some of the darkest moments when bills were piling up and the electricity was in danger of being cut off. She was often present when he tried to get his farm operating loans. According to her, they would go up that highway the same way they came back -- empty-handed.



"I told him that if you want something, you've got to go out and get it. Don't let nobody tell you what you can't do," she says.

He's met every president since Carter.

"If you'd have told me that in high school, I'd have told you, 'Man, you're a snowball laughing in hell because that can't be true,'" he says.

But happen it did. Though each had hugely different personalities, he says he never met a "bad" president. In his estimation, none of them knew as much about agriculture as Carter. Being a farmer himself, he understood the work ethic required and the challenges they faced.

The one who surprised him the most was George W. Bush. Shortly after Bush won the 2000 election, Boyd was invited to a meeting of agriculture leaders in Austin, TX. He went in not knowing what to expect. Turns out, he liked him a lot. Bush was a charismatic leader who commanded the room and talked freely with everyone.

Boyd's relationship with Barack Obama was quite different. They'd met years back when Obama was working as a community organizer. The two discussed ways to help those who had long faced discrimination. Later, when Obama was in the Senate, he co-sponsored legislation with Iowa Republican Chuck Grassley to make more Black farmers eligible for compensation resulting from discrimination cases.

When Obama was elected president in 2008, he considered Boyd for Secretary of Agriculture. While waiting for his interview, he struck up a conversation with a friendly woman sitting outside the office. The cabinet position would ultimately go to Tom Vilsack. Boyd later learned he'd been chatting with Vilsack's wife.

Boyd was on-hand in 2010 when Obama signed a law allocating \$1.15 billion to resolve cases involving discrimination against Black farmers. At the time, he said the law was about more than money. It was about justice.

More challenges remain

One of Boyd's greatest hopes is to see the country come back together. He considers himself an independent thinker whose views don't align completely with either political party.

In 2023, he announced he would not support President Biden's re-election bid. He felt the president had failed to adequately protect farmers from foreclosures. He condemned Biden's Inflation Reduction Act for not including sufficient debt relief for Black and minority farmers. He also blasted Biden for allocating billions to help Ukraine while, in his estimation, not doing enough to help Black farmers.

Recent events have brought even greater concerns. In February, Boyd declared a "state of emergency" for Black farmers and ranchers. He believes President Trump's decision to shutter USAID will threaten millions of farmers. He also worries cuts to various diversity initiatives at USDA could undo progress Black farmers have made over the past few decades.



back,” Boyd concludes.

And so, the fight continues. Just as it always has.

About the Author



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Joshua Baethge covers food and agriculture policy issues. Before joining Farm Progress, he spent 10 years as a news and feature reporter in Texas. During that time, he covered state and local government, community news, real estate,...

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