

I wrote this essay for an application for a Georgia Historic Site Marker. It was by necessity a short, objective, historical essay explaining the reasons that Clarence Jordan and Koinonia Farm should receive Georgia Historic Site recognition. It was submitted to the Georgia Historical Society, and Koinonia Farm was awarded a Georgia Historic Site Marker.

Clarence Jordan & Koinonia Farm

Clarence Leonard Jordan was born in Talbotton, Georgia on 29 July 1912, the seventh of ten children in his family.¹ He joined the Baptist church at the age of twelve and was thereafter a practicing Christian. In 1933 Jordan earned a B.S. degree in agriculture from the University of Georgia with the aim of enabling himself to one day help poor farmers to increase their farming abilities.² He participated in the ROTC, but abruptly resigned his commission and became a pacifist upon reflecting on Jesus' commandment, "Love your enemies."³ In 1936 he earned his doctorate in Greek New Testament at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.⁴ While attending seminary, he volunteered in hospitals and orphanages in inner city Louisville, where he witnessed the effects of poverty on individuals and families. During these years, he also befriended a young librarian, Florence Kroeger, and the two were married in July 1936. After earning his doctorate in 1939, Jordan accepted a position directing a mission in a predominantly African-American slum in Louisville.⁵ Here he became acquainted with many black families who had relocated to the city from impoverished rural areas. Under his guidance, the charity was transformed into an organization that involved those it served and held interracial ministerial and deacons' meetings.⁶

Jordan's formative years and experiences motivated him to embody in his work and life the principles he found in the New Testament: brotherhood, simple living, and pacifism. As a result, the Jordans, along with another couple, Martin and Mabel England, founded an agriculture-based religious community called Koinonia Farm outside of Americus, Georgia in 1942.⁷ (*Koinonia* is an ancient Greek word that in the New Testament signifies fellowship, community, sharing, and generosity.⁸) Koinonia Farm focused, in its early years, on providing economic opportunities for the area's debt-burdened rural sharecroppers, most of whom were African-American. With Jordan's agricultural education, he hoped to share farming methods that would raise the standard of living of impoverished local farmers of all races.

Daily routine consisted of hard work on the land and in the buildings, study of the Bible, and fellowship at noon meals. Members held finances in common, but Koinonia was not separated from the greater community: members were active in the local community, attended local churches, and sold their goods in local markets. Local citizens, both white and black, were hired to help, and all workers were paid equal wages and shared worship and the noon meal.⁹

Koinonia Farm's interracial character was a rarity in 1940s Georgia, and marked Koinonia as an important presence in the nation's struggle to resolve the conflict between the equality stated in the constitution and the inequality experienced by its citizens. The farm's foundation was typical of the southern Baptist faith tradition of using the New Testament's message as grounds for action.¹⁰ Although many white individuals and groups, both religious and secular, engaged in charity work with African-Americans at the time, Koinonia went further ideologically through its daily interracial interactions on an equal basis. Its opposition to materialism and militarism, and its embrace of economic sharing, simple lifestyle, reconciliation, and forgiveness, were also beyond normative Christian action at the time.¹¹ Many believed Jordan and Koinonia were communist, but their commitment to pacifism, a non-materialistic lifestyle, and religious faith made this allegation untenable.

Koinonia had no official leader, but Jordan's consistency and charismatic personality marked him as the *de facto* director of the community. Jordan had gained eminence as a theologian and was a popular speaker, often traveling through the United States preaching the New Testament and speaking against racism. Listeners frequently noted his sense of humor, powerful style of delivery, and straightforward language. He was among the founders of the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen.¹² Also a writer, he published in 1952 the now well-known work Sermon on the Mount, his analysis of Jesus' famous teachings. This work was a key influence in Koinonia's formation.¹³ As an agriculturalist, he invented the mobile peanut harvester and other farming innovations.¹⁴

While the farm had largely escaped attention in the 1940s, the 1950s and 1960s brought it to the forefront of southern United States society's conflicted and now strongly challenged views on race relations. Koinonia often endured violence from those who opposed its actions. The Ku Klux Klan, Americus and Sumter County Chamber of Commerce,¹⁵ the Georgia Council of Churches,¹⁶ and others repeatedly encouraged the Koinonians to leave Georgia. Persecution included a boycott of the farm, threatening phone calls, machine gun and rifle bullets fired at farm property, buildings, and members;

vandalism, cross-burning, and the repeated dynamiting of Koinonia's roadside produce stand.¹⁷ Local authorities did not act to stop these acts; the county judicial system suggested that the farm members had incited violent acts or even performed them to garner sympathy.¹⁸ Jordan was banned from preaching and lecturing at many college campuses, and Koinonia community members were expelled from the local Baptist church where they were active members.¹⁹ The integrated summer youth camp set up in 1956 had to be moved to the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee to remain safe for its participants.²⁰ Harassment worsened later that year when Jordan offered his signature to two African-American applicants to the University of Georgia. (Applicants needed the endorsement of two alumni, and Jordan thought it unlikely that most white alumni would sign a black person's application.)²¹ And in 1960, Koinonian parents had to file a federal court lawsuit to prevent the local high school's attempt to ban their children from attending. Once in school, the children endured silent treatment and other harassments.²²

In 1957, in an unusual appeal to governmental authority, Jordan wrote to President Dwight Eisenhower, requesting the protection of the National Guard and affirming the Koinonians' determination to remain on the farm: "We shall not run, for this is America. It is a land where free men have the right—and the duty—to walk erect and without fear in their pursuit of peace and happiness. Should this freedom perish from our land, we would prefer to be dead. We gladly offer our lives for this preservation."²³ Some families did move away to ensure their safety, but Jordan and other Koinonians would not. In May 1957, a seed store in the town of Americus that had agreed to sell to Koinonia was bombed.²⁴ This brought the action too close for comfort. The threat to the local economy finally caused such activity to be viewed negatively by the Chamber of Commerce and other influential groups, and the most serious harassment tapered off.²⁵

Jordan and Koinonia Farm used religious belief, rather than politics, law, sociology, or philosophy, as their primary guide to action.²⁶ The priority was improved race relations rather than civil rights. This approach to the problem of racism differentiated Koinonia somewhat from the greater civil rights movement. Jordan rarely pursued his key values through legal or political avenues, which he saw as systems subordinate to those of God. He did not approve of direct action (sit-ins, boycotts, marches, etc.). However, he would not curb his everyday activities even if they were not in accordance with the norms or laws of the surrounding society. Thus the daily routine at Koinonia, which aimed to create a community whose members were totally equal, was in many ways its most powerful action.²⁷ To quote Ann Coble in her history

Cotton Patch for the Kingdom, “Koinonia Farm became well known in Baptist circles, among the rising Christian counter-culture, and among a slice of both the progressive and the conservative churches that were interested in community life and in fighting racism... [as a] model of resistance to racial persecution for a diverse cross-section of American Christianity.”²⁸

Through the years that followed, Jordan and Koinonia Farm sought new ways of carrying out what Jordan often referred to as the “experiment.” As farming became less economically viable and many workers shifted to city or factory labor, the farm switched its means of empowering impoverished workers from agricultural education to supporting cooperatives and employing local workers in the Koinonia mail-order nut business. At times it served, as did several black churches in Americus, as a meeting place for civil rights groups such as Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), CORE, SLCC, as well as the labor and antiwar movements.²⁹ As scholar Tracy Elaine K’Meyer puts it, Koinonia contributed to the movement “a focus on relationships and reconciliation that went beyond desegregation and equal rights.”³⁰

Meanwhile, Jordan continued lecturing and writing. Without Clarence Jordan there would have been no Koinonia Farm, but without Koinonia Farm, Jordan may not have had the time and space to produce his writings and lectures. Jordan’s “Cotton Patch” version of the New Testament, a translation from the Greek into vernacular southern language and context, aimed to bring the Biblical message into a form understandable and relevant to 1960s Georgia. The idea of reconciliation in Christ was placed in the context of southern race relations.³¹ These translations were not solely Jordan’s project, however; according to then-member Con Browne, it was “a community exercise,” with many ideas arising during 5:00 a.m. Bible study sessions.³²

Another project begun at Koinonia was embarked upon by Jordan and relatively new members Millard and Linda Fuller, who first came to Koinonia in 1965.³³ In 1968, Millard Fuller and Clarence Jordan pioneered the housing ministry, an enterprise that sought to provide affordable housing to people with few resources by using donated building materials, the combined labor of homeowners-to-be and volunteers, and no-interest mortgages with small monthly payments.³⁴ The first house was completed in 1970, and eventually two unincorporated villages just north and south of Koinonia Farm were constructed. In 1976 this project gave birth to an independent, non-profit corporation, Habitat for Humanity, with Fuller as director. Since 1976, the

organization has built more than 175,000 houses in 100 countries, providing shelter for nearly 900,000 people.³⁵ Jordan, however, did not live to see the results of this effort. He died on October 29, 1969, during the construction of the first house. He died of a heart attack while working in his writing shack, and was buried simply in a wooden crate by the edge of one of the farm's pecan orchards.³⁶

After Jordan's death the Koinonia community continued to farm and to function as a seed-bed for projects grounded in its values. New Hope House was established in 1984 to advocate for prisoners on death row. In 1979, a small group of Koinonians established a sister community, Jubilee Partners, that assists refugees fleeing persecution abroad and resettling in the United States. And the Prison & Jail Project was founded in 1993, an antiracist grassroots organization working for justice in southwest Georgia's courts, jails, prisons, and law enforcement agencies.³⁷ These projects, and others inspired by or connected to Koinonia, have had far-reaching effects on social justice movements.

Scholarship on Koinonia Farm has been published steadily through the years, examining its theological grounds, intentional community, and social justice work. An award-winning documentary film on Koinonia's history, *Briars in the Cottonpatch* (2004), is airing on PBS stations across the nation this year. Jordan's writings have also been the subject of analysis and elaboration, including the 1981 adaptation of his Cotton Patch Version of the New Testament into "The Cotton Patch Gospel," a successful Broadway musical by Tom Key and Russell Treyz with music by Harry Chapin, frequently staged across the country.

Koinonia continues today, farming, providing hospitality to visitors, a volunteer program to those who would like to experience the community, and engaging in outreach, education, and home repair with neighbors of all ages. It remains a Christian organization open to people of all faiths, seeking to be a 'demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God.'

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- ¹ The Cotton Patch Evidence, p. 6
- ² Cotton Patch for the Kingdom, p. 32
- ³ Ibid., p. 34-5
- ⁴ The Cotton Patch Evidence, p. 17
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 21
- ⁶ Ibid., pp. 21-22
- ⁷ Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South, pp. 42-43
- ⁸ The Cotton Patch Evidence, p. 18
- ⁹ Ibid., pp. 18-19
- ¹⁰ Voices in the Wilderness, p. 53
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 59
- ¹² Ibid., p. 60
- ¹³ Cotton Patch for the Kingdom, p. 21
- ¹⁴ The Cotton Patch Evidence, p. 43
- ¹⁵ Voices in the Wilderness, p. 66
- ¹⁶ “Koinonia Farms: from the Times-Recorder and Tri-County News of Americus, Georgia” (website)
- ¹⁷ The Cotton Patch Evidence, pp. 106, 123, 125-126
- ¹⁸ Cotton Patch for the Kingdom, p. 19
- ¹⁹ The Cotton Patch Evidence, p. 76
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 107
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 106
- ²² “Interracial community that withstood racial attacks remains a spiritual haven” (newspaper article)
- ²³ Quoted in Cotton Patch for the Kingdom, pp. 64-65, from FBI files for 1/22/1957
- ²⁴ “Koinonia Farms: from the Times-Recorder and Tri-County News of Americus, Georgia” (website)
- ²⁵ A Rural Georgia Tragedy: Koinonia Farm in the 1950s, p. 3
- ²⁶ Cotton Patch for the Kingdom, p. 20
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 20
- ²⁸ Ibid., pp. 19-20
- ²⁹ Interracialism and Christian Community, p. 159
- ³⁰ Ibid., p. 162
- ³¹ Voices in the Wilderness, p. 56
- ³² Oral history given by Con Browne, 10/29/2004
- ³³ Voices in the Wilderness, p. 71
- ³⁴ The Cotton Patch Evidence, p. 215
- ³⁵ “A Brief Introduction to Habitat for Humanity” (website)
- ³⁶ The Cotton Patch Evidence, pp. 221, 232-233
- ³⁷ *Freedomways* #75, p. 2