CHAPTER 11

Promises and Pitfalls of Reconstruction

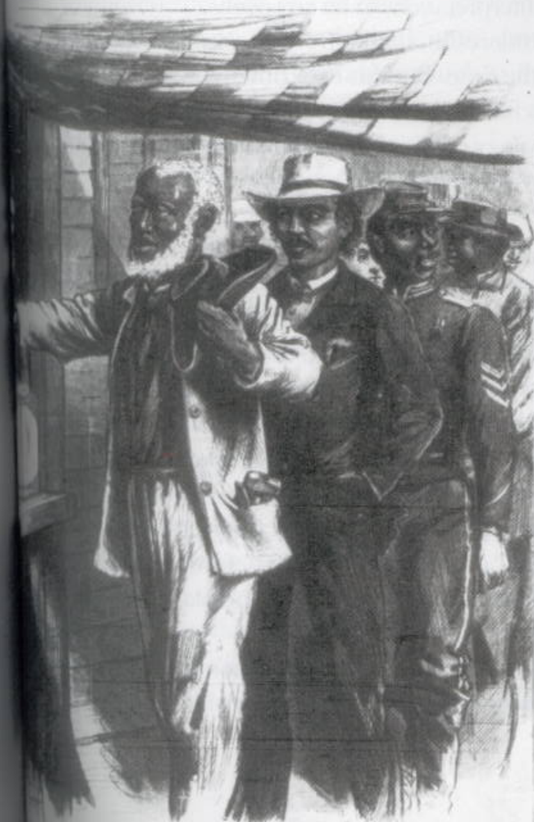
Presidential Reconstruction

Radical Reconstruction

The Social Consequences of the War

Economic Adjustment

Reconstruction's End



Enfranchisement of African Americans
One of the first manifestations of citizenship was exercising the franchise. Here an African American casts his ballot.

In December 1863, as the Civil War still raged, President Abraham Lincoln unveiled his plan for readmitting the seceded southern states into the Union. He hoped to reconstruct the South with sufficient leniency and magnanimity that the nation might bind its wounds and be quickly restored to its former unity. In the very same month and year, Frederick Douglass, at the thirtieth anniversary of the American Anti-Slavery Society, gave eloquent voice to a far more novel and radical vision of national reunification. "We are fighting for something incomparably better than the old Union," Douglass intoned, "we are fighting for unity . . . in which there shall be no North, no South, no East, no West, no black, no white, but a solidarity of the nation, making every slave free, and every free man a voter."

When the war finally ended, African Americans met in state conventions in various parts of the United States and, in the spirit of Douglass's words, demanded equality under the law. Nowhere was this more evident than in the former Confederate states, where the defeated South confronted the stark reality of several million freed slaves as well as the many thousands of recently discharged black soldiers, who expected in return for their loyalty the "blood-bought right" of suffrage.

The era of Reconstruction, which lasted from 1865 to 1876, marked one of the most turbulent and controversial chapters in American history, and yet it also marked an unprecedented moment in interracial democracy. It was shaped by presidents and congressmen, by military officials and businessmen, by religious denominations and teachers, but it was also profoundly shaped by blacks themselves, especially former slaves. Blacks struggled persistently against white southerners' attempts to reduce their free status to nominal slavery. And in this all too brief but wondrous sweep of years, African Americans represented themselves and broader constituencies in local, state, and national office. The election of blacks never led to "Negro rule" or "Negro domination," as was the prevailing historical interpretation of Reconstruction for more than half of the twentieth century. Given the limits placed on blacks' ability to control their economic and political destinies, historians today recognize such interpretations to be erroneous.

However, it would be equally erroneous to underestimate the freed blacks' role in shaping the political, economic, and social policies of the time. But this experiment in a new racial order ultimately failed: by 1877 white supremacists had "redeemed" the Southern states, and as the nineteenth century progressed, the ideology of white superiority would undermine with a vengeance the fulfillment of democracy in America.

Presidential Reconstruction

The Northern victory in 1865 gave the Republican party the upper hand in determining the fate of the largely Democratic South. Republican commitment to the end of slavery had brought about the Thirteenth Amendment. It was not simply that slavery was no longer legal in the former Confederacy. The loyal border states were also required to abolish slavery, thus freeing many thousands of slaves there. The South had to conform to the national standard of free labor, but ending slavery also created a curious paradox. By freeing the slaves, the Thirteenth Amendment had nullified the Three-fifths Compromise, making it possible for the South to return with even greater congressional representation than before the war. No longer would 4 million slaves be counted as three-fifths of persons for the purposes of either taxation or congressional apportionment.

Republicans pondered the troubling implications of this fact and grew increasingly determined to prevent the southern state governments from falling into the hands of irreconcilable

ex-Confederates. Emphasizing the treasonous actions of southern secessionists, they extolled the Republican party's role in saving the nation from complete destruction and warned that former slaveholders would quickly seize the opportunity to re-enslave blacks.

The struggle between Republicans and Democrats over control of the southern states was accompanied by an internal struggle within the Republican leadership itself—specifically between the president and Congress over the authority to define the conditions of the South's readmission. It was the function of the president, so Abraham Lincoln believed, to outline the postwar agenda and to execute the measures necessary to reorganize the rebel states. As states collapsed under the Union forces, Lincoln appointed military governors over them until civil authority could be established.

Lincoln's Ten Percent Plan

Lincoln exhibited a generosity of spirit to the citizens of the former Confederacy, extending general amnesty except for certain high-ranking civil and military officials. Under his plan, a state could be readmitted to the Union if one-tenth of its eligible voters in 1860 swore an oath of loyalty to the United States and accepted the abolition of slavery. Often called the Ten Percent Plan, Lincoln's reconstruction policy was early on criticized by some members of Congress for being too lenient. Radical Republicans demanded congressional, not presidential oversight of Reconstruction and in 1864 proposed the Wade-Davis Bill, which disfranchised a larger number of ex-Confederates and required a majority of whites in each southern state to swear loyalty to the Union. Lincoln refused to sign this bill.

Lincoln and the Congress disagreed, as well, over the status of the freedpeople. All during the war Lincoln had entertained the hope that a substantial number of blacks would choose to emigrate from the United States. He was unsuccessful in securing congressional cooperation for this purpose, and blacks themselves vehemently opposed the idea. This sentiment is reflected in a meeting of Norfolk blacks, who proclaimed: "We are Americans, we know no other country, we love the land of our birth." Blacks meeting in Nashville likewise renounced the idea of emigration, preferring, as they stated, to "impress upon the white men of Tennessee, of the United States, and of the world that we are part and parcel of the American Republic." Sentiments such as these made clear to the Republican party that its Reconstruction policies would have to be premised on the continued presence of African Americans in the United States.

In March 1864, after two prominent New Orleans creoles of color, wine dealer Arnold Bertonneau and plantation engineer Jean Baptiste Roudanez, traveled to Washington to present their community's petition for the suffrage, Lincoln wrote to Governor George Michael Hahn of Louisiana asking "whether some of the colored people may not be let in [to the elective franchise] as, for instance, the very intelligent, and especially those who have fought gallantly in our ranks." When the Louisiana constitutional convention met later in the year, it failed to extend voting rights to anyone of African descent, even those individuals of considerable intellectual and economic achievement.

Andrew Johnson's Policies

From Congress's viewpoint, the pendulum had swung too far toward the executive branch. The accession to the presidency of Andrew Johnson after the assassination of Lincoln only deepened the conflict between the two branches of government. Johnson's earlier dislike of the plantation elite had initially elicited sympathy from Congress, but once in the office of president, he appeared to shift his sympathies in favor of them. Johnson appointed provisional governors in the Southern states and called on state legislatures, which at the time were based only on white voters, to modify their constitutions in harmony with that of the United States.

To the consternation of the Republican Congress, he rejected outright the idea of black suffrage and began to dictate Reconstruction policy. Johnson left no doubt that he intended to leave the decision of black suffrage to the individual states. His position essentially negated the possibility of black suffrage. Moreover, Johnson extended pardons to thousands of Confederates who had been excluded from the general amnesty. Historian Eric Foner notes that "Johnson's policies had failed to create a new political leadership to replace the prewar 'slaveocracy'—partly because the President himself had so quickly aligned with portions of the old elite." The perception of Johnson as the South's champion and friend enraged both Radical and Moderate Republicans. A growing number of congressmen anxiously strove to restore balance among the three branches of government.

Under Presidential Reconstruction, southern states established new constitutions and governments, which immediately resolved to curb the freedom of blacks through the passage of laws, called Black Codes. These laws bore a remarkable resemblance to the antebellum Slave Codes. The right to make contracts was allowed the freedpeople, but such contracts were designed to lock in, control, and compel black laborers to work under extremely oppressive conditions, thus reinforcing their subordinate position. Blacks who quit their jobs could be arrested and imprisoned for breach of contract. Vagrancy laws imposed heavy penalties on unemployed black men, women, and even children. For example, the Black Codes permitted the "apprenticeship" of black orphans or children with parents the state deemed unfit. Judges bound such minors, usually in their early teenage years, to white employers without any compensation to the child laborers or their parents. The courts in Maryland and North Carolina did not even require the consent of black parents to apprentice their children to white "guardians."

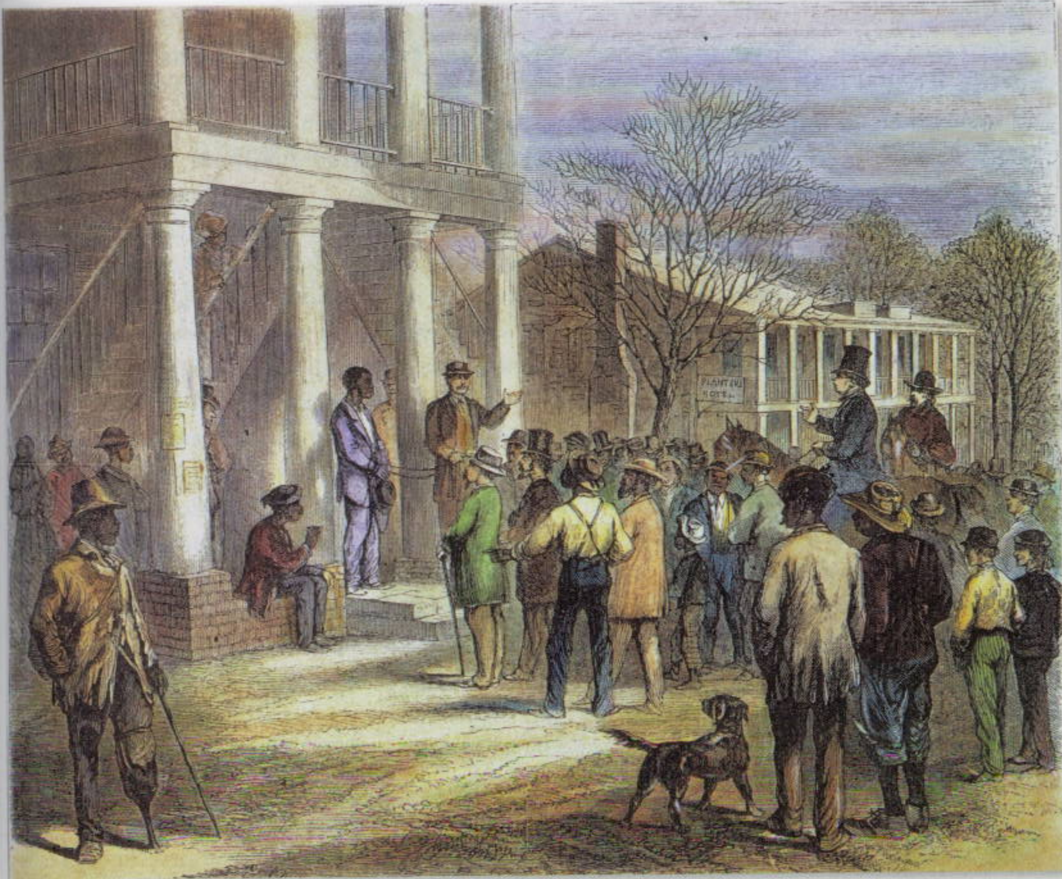
Black Codes

Black Codes disallowed black testimony in court, except in cases involving members of their own race. They limited the areas in which blacks could purchase or rent property. The southern state laws imposed numerous fines for seditious speech or talk perceived as threatening to whites, for insulting gestures or acts, for violation of curfew, and for the possession of firearms. Most important, the new state governments denied blacks the right to vote—leaving them helpless to change the laws. The prospect of full citizenship and true representative government appeared faint under Presidential Reconstruction.

When Congress met in December 1865, the southern elections had brought chilling although not unexpected results. As far as the Republicans in Congress were concerned, the path to reunion under the presidential plan had become crystal clear. The newly elected southerners included the vice president of the Confederacy, four Confederate generals, five Confederate colonels, six Confederate cabinet officers, and fifty-eight members of the Confederate Congress. Led by the wily Republican leader Thaddeus Stevens, Congress refused to recognize the validity of the southern elections and vigorously argued for a sterner policy toward the South. Stephens proposed that Congress assume authority over Reconstruction, arguing that the president's policy had been essentially provisional. Congress then adopted Stevens's resolution, which called for the creation of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction to inquire into the condition of the southern states and make recommendations.

Congress Takes Charge

Conditions were certainly terrible for the freedpeople. In 1866, with southern whites in almost complete charge of Reconstruction, a kind of guerrilla warfare was being waged against blacks. The head of the Freedmen's Bureau in Georgia, for example, complained that bands of men calling themselves Regulators, Jayhawkers



Selling a freedman to pay his fine at Monticello, Florida

A black code in Florida made disobedience a crime. This freedman was sold for up to one year's labor for disobeying his former owner.

and the Black Horse Cavalry were committing the "most fiendish and diabolical outrages on the freedmen" with the sympathy of the populace and the reconstructed governments as well. Formed as white protective societies, those organizations ran riot all over the South. While southern legislators enacted the new Black Codes, vigilante groups set out to keep "the Negro in his place."

Freedmen's Bureau agents portrayed incidents of violence in their reports. One agent conveyed his frustration in 1866, stating: "A freedman is now standing at my door, his tattered clothes bespattered with blood from his head caused by blows inflicted by a white man with a stick and we can do nothing for him. . . . Yet these people flee to us for protection as if we could give it."

Congress's passage of the Civil Rights Act in the spring of 1866, over Johnson's veto, provided blacks with protections against the Black Codes and acts of violence. The Act stipulated the right of blacks to testify in court as well as to enjoy the "full and equal benefit of all laws and proceedings for the security of person and property, as is enjoyed by white citizens." By the year's end, bureau agents had been empowered to observe local judicial proceedings involving the freedpeople and to play an advocacy role in helping them to attain

fundamental justice in the courts. The bureau was responsible for organizing "freedmen's" courts and boards of arbitration, which had civil and criminal jurisdiction over minor cases in which one or both parties were ex-slaves. They were often successful at securing justice for former slaves, as in the case of a white physician in Maryland who assaulted a black without provocation and was taken by the bureau agent to the state supreme court, which admitted the testimony of blacks and convicted the physician.

A confluence of northern interests began to promote black suffrage as being crucial to a policy that would ensure the gains made during the war. Black and white abolitionists supported the enfranchisement of black men on the basis of black soldiers' defense of the Union. Pragmatic Republicans, fearful of the political consequences of a South dominated by Democrats, maintained that black suffrage in the South would aid in the continued growth of the Republican party. Industrialists with an eye on markets and cheap labor in the South supported the suffrage for blacks in order to deter the reemergence of the powerful agrarian interests that reigned in the prewar era. The concerted efforts of these groups substantially limited Johnson's ability to determine the fate of Reconstruction.

The president's vetoes, his disparaging racial remarks, his opposition to the proposed Fourteenth Amendment, and his acrimonious attacks on Thaddeus Stevens, Charles Sumner, and other northern leaders, sent Congress on the warpath for control of Reconstruction. The fight between the president and Congress escalated into a bitter public spectacle. Johnson carried his fight with Congress to the American people, admonishing voters to return to Congress in the fall of 1866 men who would support his program. His conduct during the well-known campaign tour ("swing around the circle") was received so negatively that he was soundly repudiated at the polls.

The Black Conventions

Congress was not the only opponent of the policies of presidential Reconstruction. African Americans themselves mobilized in protest. Many were emboldened by the presence of black troops among the Union forces stationed in the postwar South. The *New York World* called black soldiers "apostles of black equality," since they championed the message of freedom and equality in their daily social relations. In numerous settings black soldiers proved themselves worthy of this title. They arrested lawless whites, helped to build schools and other community institutions for the freedpeople, gave advice in regard to labor contracts, demanded equal access to public accommodations, and voiced their opinions (some of which were described as "speeches of the most inflammatory kind") at political meetings.

Equally important were the statewide conventions held throughout the South in 1865 and early 1866. The conventions offered convincing evidence of black political mobilization against presidential reconstruction. The historian Steven Hahn has identified them as "the institutional harbingers of the Republican party." Approximately 150 delegates from communities and organizations throughout North Carolina assembled at the Loyal African Methodist Episcopal Church in Raleigh in 1865. They came by train, by horseback, and by foot. From the western and central sections of the state, some traveled secretly in the night so as not to attract the attention of white vigilantes. Others traveled openly under the protective eye of Union troops stationed in the eastern counties. Like black Americans in other states, the North Carolina delegates met in their own convention in the months following the Union victory and sent a petition to President Andrew Johnson, asserting:

> It seems to us that men who are willing on the field of danger to carry the muskets of a republic, in the days of peace ought to be permitted to carry its

Window in Time

Virginia Black Convention 1865

African Americans in Norfolk, Virginia, Demand Equal Rights, 1865

1st. *Resolved,* That the rights and interests of the colored citizens of Virginia are more directly, immediately and deeply affected in the restoration of the State to the Federal Union than any other class of citizens; and hence, that we have peculiar claims to be heard in regard to the question of its reconstruction, and that we cannot keep silence without dereliction of duty to ourselves, to our country, and to our God.

2d. *Resolved,* That personal servitude having been abolished in Virginia, it behooves us, and is demanded of us, by every consideration of right and duty, to speak and act as freemen, and as such to claim and insist upon equality before the law, and equal rights of suffrage at the "ballot box."

3d. *Resolved,* That it is a wretched policy and most unwise statesmanship that would withhold from the laboring population of the country any of the rights of citizenship essential to their well-being and to their advancement and improvement as citizens.

4th. *Resolved,* That invidious political or legal distinctions, on account of color merely, if acquiesced in, or voluntarily submitted to, is inconsistent with our own self-respect, or to the respect of others, placing us at great disadvantages, and seriously retards our advancement or progress in improvement, and that the removal of such disabilities and distinctions are alike demanded by sound political economy, by patriotism, humanity and religion.

5th. *Resolved,* That we will prove ourselves worthy of the elective franchise, by insisting upon it as a right, by not tamely submitting to its deprivation, by never abusing it by voting the state out of the Union, and never using it for purposes of rebellion, treason, or oppression.

6th. *Resolved,* That the safety of all loyal men, black or white, in the midst of the recently slaveholding States, requires that all loyal men, black or white, should have equal political and civil rights, and that this is a necessity as a protection against the votes of secessionists and disloyal men.

7th. *Resolved,* That traitors shall not dictate or prescribe to us the terms or conditions of our citizenship, so help us God.

8th. *Resolved,* That as far as in us lies, we will not patronize or hold business relations with those who deny to us our equal rights.

Source: "Address from the colored citizens of Norfolk, Va., to the people of the United States. Also an account of the agitation among the colored people of Virginia for equal rights. With an appendix concerning the rights of colored witnesses before the state courts" (New Bedford, MA, 1865).

> ballots; and certainly we cannot understand the justice of denying the elective franchise to men who have been fighting for the country [while it] is freely given to men who have just returned from four years' fighting against it.

With the Civil War over, these postwar conventions boldly proclaimed the motto: "Equal Rights before the Law."

In 1866, delegates to the South Carolina convention met in Charleston to demand the same opportunities and privileges enjoyed by whites—the right to an education, to bear arms, to serve on juries, to assemble peacefully, and to vote. In Mobile, Alabama, African Americans demanded the ballot, the abolition of the Black Codes, and measures for the relief of suffering. The Georgia black convention passed resolutions that demanded an end to the violence perpetrated against rural blacks and an end to the obstacles that prevented the establishment of schools for blacks. Blacks meeting in Nashville protested the state's Black Codes, while black Mississippians similarly protested such laws and asked, as well, for Congress to extend the franchise to the members of their race. The idea that universal manhood suffrage constituted "an essential and inseparable element of self-government" became an often repeated theme at the black conventions.

The New Orleans *Tribune*, the newspaper published by the city's creoles of color, editorialized in September 1866: "The negro of today, is not the same as he was six years ago. . . . He has been told of his rights, which have long been robbed." Black mobilization was especially strong in Southern cities, where churches and fraternal societies provided a sturdy infrastructure for political activism. Black political mobilization advanced more rapidly in places where the federal troops had remained the longest. According to the complaint of a sugar plantation owner, black agricultural workers were also mobilizing—"abandoning their work to attend political gatherings."

Black Mobilization

Although it was common for the free black elite of Louisiana and South Carolina to assume the political leadership, a new group of leaders, many of them from the rural counties, began to wield influence. For example, the editor of the *Tribune* made mention of "country delegates" who were "generally more radical than most of the city delegates." A resounding protest against the denial of rights sprang up in the low country and sea islands off South Carolina and Georgia, uniting together Freedmen's agents, black soldiers, and local freedmen in the demand for the suffrage and the repeal of all laws that discriminated against blacks. "By the Declaration of Independence," rang out the speaker's words at a gathering on St. Helena Island, "we believe these are rights which cannot justly be denied us."

Radical Reconstruction

By 1867 Congress had wrested control of Reconstruction from President Johnson and in the following year embarked on an unsuccessful effort to impeach him. Through passage of the Reconstruction Act of 1867, the ex-Confederate states (except Tennessee, where Reconstruction was moving according to Congress) were divided into five military districts under martial law. Each of the states was ordered to hold a new constitutional convention based on universal male suffrage, and no state was to be admitted until it ratified the Fourteenth Amendment, which guaranteed the citizenship of all persons born or naturalized in the United States and thus overturned the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision.

Also directly affecting African Americans was the Fourteenth Amendment's prohibition against state laws that abridged the civil rights of citizens or denied "equal protection of the

laws." Interestingly, the amendment created divisions in the old abolitionist vanguard. Some members of the American Anti-Slavery Society, such as Wendell Phillips and Frederick Douglass, tirelessly promoted enfranchising black men, while many of the Society's women's rights advocates opposed the gendered language of the amendment. Since the Fourteenth Amendment explicitly identified a congressional apportionment penalty for any state that abridged the voting rights of "male inhabitants," suffragists Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and similarly minded women condemned this gendered language and formed the American Equal Rights Association—outraged that the vote would not be universally extended at this propitious time of sweeping social and political change.

Phillips and Douglass, however, although faithful supporters of women's rights, rebutted the argument for conjoining black suffrage with the far more controversial issue of women's suffrage. They asserted that this was the "Negro's hour." Indeed, even black women—Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Sojourner Truth, both abolitionists and suffragists—were also divided over the suffrage issue. Harper called attention to the racial oppression endured by black women and men, while Truth, although recognizing racial injustice, asserted: "There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women, and if colored men get their rights and colored women not theirs, the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before."

The state constitutions drawn up in 1867 and 1868 were the most progressive the South had ever known. Most of them abolished property qualifications for voting and holding office; some of them abolished imprisonment for debt. Several sought to eliminate race distinctions in the possession or inheritance of property, and they introduced public education into the South. With the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, black men in the southern states and in the nation as a whole (most northern states denied the vote to blacks), finally gained the right to vote on an equal basis with white men. This far-reaching achievement—the creation of a black electorate—had the greatest effect in the former Confederacy, where black men not only voted but also held elected office at the national, state, and local levels.

New National Officials

During congressional Reconstruction, also called Radical Reconstruction, two African Americans went to the United States Senate—Hiram Revels and Blanche K. Bruce, both from the state of Mississippi. The symbolism of Revels as the first black senator was unmistakable. In 1870 he was chosen to fill out the term previously held and vacated by Jefferson Davis, former president of the Confederacy. Born free in North Carolina, Revels had migrated to Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois before the war. He received his education at a seminary in Ohio and at Knox College in Illinois and was ordained a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal church. During the war Revels recruited blacks for the Union army, founded a school for freedmen in St. Louis, and joined the army as chaplain of a black regiment in Mississippi. He settled in Natchez after the war and became prominent in state politics.

Between 1875 and 1881, Blanche K. Bruce sat in the Senate, the only black to serve a full term until the election in 1966 of Edward Brooke, a Republican from Massachusetts. Bruce was born a slave in Virginia. When the war came, he escaped from St. Louis to Hannibal, Missouri, and established a school for blacks. After the war he studied in the North for several years. In 1869 he went to Mississippi, entered politics, and moved up through a succession of offices from tax collector to sheriff and then to superintendent of schools. In the Senate he usually voted with his party and introduced a number of bills to improve the condition of blacks. When P. B. S. Pinchback was denied a seat in the Senate, to which he

The first black senators and representatives, in the Forty-First and Forty-Second Congress of the United States

One major manifestation of citizenship was sending persons, some former slaves, to Congress. Shown here are some of the first African Americans elected to the Senate and the House of Representatives of the U.S. Congress.

had been elected from Louisiana, Bruce spoke for him in vain. His wide range of interests as a lawmaker is seen in his introduction of bills on the Geneva Award for Alabama claims, another for aid to education and railroad construction, and one for reimbursement of depositors in the Freedmen's Bank. On the Pensions Committee, Bruce succeeded in having some pension bills passed. Another of his chief roles was on the Manufactures, Education, and Labor Committee. He also chaired the select committee on the Freedmen's Bank and conducted a thorough investigation of the causes for its failure.

Fourteen blacks served in the House of Representatives during the Reconstruction era, and six additional names were added to this number between 1877 and 1901, thus making a total of twenty blacks in the House between 1869 and 1901. Not included in this number is John W. Menard of Louisiana, who, although elected to the United States Congress in 1868, was denied a seat because of the contested nature of his election. Of the twenty black members of the House of Representatives, South Carolina sent the largest number, eight, and North Carolina followed with four, three of whom served after Reconstruction ended. Alabama sent three, and Georgia, Mississippi, Florida, Louisiana, and Virginia, one each.

It was in the Forty-First Congress (March 4, 1869 to March 3, 1871) that blacks, three of them, first made their appearance in the federal legislature. In the Forty-Second Congress (1871–1873), there were five. The peak was reached in the Forty-Third (1873–1875) and Forty-Fourth Congresses (1875–1877) with seven blacks. In length of service, Joseph

H. Rainey and Robert Smalls, both of South Carolina, led with five terms. John R. Lynch of Mississippi and Josiah Walls of Florida both served three terms, and six others served two terms each.

Most of the blacks in Congress had experience in public service before going to Washington, as delegates to constitutional conventions, as state senators and representatives, or as state or local officials. While they were chiefly concerned with civil rights and education, their efforts were not by any means confined to problems of blacks. Many fought for local improvements such as new public buildings and appropriations for rivers and harbors. Several, such as Walls of Florida and Lynch of Mississippi, promoted protective tariffs for home products. Walls advocated the U.S. government's recognition of Cuba. John A. Hyman of North Carolina advanced a program for relief of the Indians, and Charles E. Nash of Louisiana uttered a plea for intersectional peace.

Blacks as State Legislators

Blacks also served as state legislators, enacting laws that won both the praise and the condemnation of bitter partisans. It was in South Carolina that blacks wielded the greatest influence. Eighty-seven blacks and forty whites sat in the first legislature. From the outset, however, the whites controlled the state senate, and in 1874 the lower house as well. Although blacks held powerful political positions, no African American ever held the position of governor of South Carolina. Two blacks—Alonzo J. Ransier in 1870 and Richard H. Gleaves in 1872—served as lieutenant governors. Samuel J. Lee served as the state's speaker of the house in 1872, and Robert B. Elliott also served in the same position in 1874. Francis L. Cardozo, an accomplished black who had been educated at the University of Glasgow and in London, was South Carolina's secretary of state from 1868 to 1872 and treasurer from 1872 to 1876.

Robert Brown Elliott, born August 11, 1842, was among a number of African Americans who moved to the South after the Civil War. He is unusual, however, since he did not come from the North. He is thought to have been born in Liverpool, England of West Indian parents, although few facts related to his early life are known—partly because of his own fabrications. It is speculated that he may have even held British citizenship when he showed up in Charleston. It is clear that by 1867 he had positioned himself among South Carolina's black elite, marrying into the powerful free-black Rollin family and working as the associate editor of the black newspaper, the *South Carolina Leader.*

A brilliant and charismatic man, Elliott thrust himself into politics, rising in the ranks of the Republican party from that of a delegate at the state's 1868 Constitutional convention and in the same year was elected to the state legislature where he served as the chair of the committee on railroads. In 1870 Elliott was also elected to Congress, serving for two terms as the representative of a biracial district. He returned to South Carolina in 1874, serving two years as speaker of the state legislature. In 1876 he was elected the state's attorney general. An early and vocal opponent of disfranchisement through the poll tax and literacy test, Elliot advocated integration of public accommodations, although he stopped short of integrated public schools. Elliott's public life ended as the Democrats regained control of the South, and he died in poverty in New Orleans on August 9, 1884.

Mississippi also produced outstanding politicians at the state level. Forty black members, some of whom had been slaves, sat in the state's first legislature. In 1873 blacks held three significant positions: A. K. Davis was lieutenant governor; James Hill, secretary of state; and Thomas W. Cardozo, state superintendent of education. In 1872 John R. Lynch served as the Mississippi legislature's Speaker of the House, and at the end of the session a white

Democrat praised him "for his dignity, impartiality, and courtesy as a presiding officer." Lynch was soon after elected to the United States Congress, where he served in the House of Representatives from 1873 to 1877 and from 1882 to 1883.

Between 1868 and 1896 Louisiana had 133 black state legislators, of whom 38 were senators and 95 were representatives. Three blacks, Oscar J. Dunn, P. B. S. Pinchback, and C. C. Antoine, served as lieutenant governor, and Pinchback served as acting governor for forty-three days in the winter of 1873 when the white Republican Henry C. Warmoth was removed from the governorship. Antoine Dubuclet served as the state treasurer of Louisiana for the ten-year period between 1868 and 1878. In Alabama blacks sat in both houses of the legislature, but not in sufficient numbers to secure prominent positions. They helped to adopt the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, however, and put a state system of schools into operation.

Although elected to the first Reconstruction legislature of Georgia, blacks had difficulty in securing and retaining their seats. In September 1868 the legislature declared all black members ineligible, and not until almost a year later, when the state supreme court declared them eligible, did the ousted black legislators regain their seats. They introduced many bills on education, the jury system, city government reform, and women's suffrage. Georgia black legislators Jefferson Long and Henry McNeil Turner fought for better wages for black workers but found little support from their white Republican colleagues, who in many instances supported the industrialists over black landless farmers.

Black members of the Reconstruction governments of Florida and North Carolina focused primarily on legislation for relief, education, and suffrage. Jonathan Gibbs, superintendent of public instruction in Florida from 1872 to 1874, ardently championed equal rights. Henry S. Harmon of Florida led the fight for a satisfactory school law. With other black legislators he supported a homestead law and such measures as would provide greater economic security for the mass of citizens. North Carolina blacks helped to inaugurate a system of public schools. An outstanding worker in the field of education was the Reverend James W. Hood, who helped write the constitution of 1868 and served as assistant superintendent of education.

In Virginia twenty-seven African Americans sat in the first legislature, and others served in minor posts. However, as in the case of other states, they were not powerful enough to determine governmental policy except on the rare occasions when they could leverage their votes because of divisions between white factions. Concerning the exercise of influence, the same thing can be said of blacks in Tennessee, Arkansas, and Texas.

The Union League During most of Reconstruction, the Union League and smaller organizations, such as the Lincoln Brotherhood and the Red Strings, faithfully delivered the black vote to the Republican party. The Union League of America, a predominantly white organization in the North, was organized during the war in order to rally military and civilian support. During Reconstruction it branched out into the South to protect the fruits of the Northern victory, and it soon became the spearhead for Southern Republicanism. By the fall of 1867, chapters of the League had formed throughout the South. As the Freedmen's Bureau and other Northern agencies grew in the South, the Union League, too, grew powerful, attracting a large number of African Americans.

Since black men constituted the most numerous enfranchised group in many areas, the League depended on them for the bulk of Republican strength. For example, South Carolina alone had eighty-eight chapters, and it was said that almost every black in the state was enrolled. Ritual, secrecy, night meetings, and an avowed devotion to freedom and equal

rights made the league especially attractive to black men. During elections, black voters looked to their league chapters for guidance on voting. If they had any doubt about the straight Republican ticket, the league had only to remind them to vote for the party of Abraham Lincoln and of deliverance. A vote for Democrats, they said, constituted a vote for the return of slavery.

Black women also played a role in "getting out the vote" and in shaping political decisions in their communities. Although black women, like all American women, could not vote, they did not remain silent during electoral campaign. A *New York Times* reporter noted the presence of black women in the audience at local Republican and state constitutional conventions in October 1867. He and other observers stated that, in contrast to white women, who were quiet spectators at political meetings, black women shouted from the balconies, forcing their voices into the debates. As historian Elsa Barkley Brown has pointed out: "African American women in Virginia, Mississippi, South Carolina and elsewhere understood themselves to have a vital stake in African American men's franchise." The fact that only men could exercise the franchise did not mean that women remained silent or unaware of the power of the vote.

Black Women and the Black Community

Finally, black communities throughout the nation championed the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which attempted to clarify beyond all doubt the rights of African Americans to freely use public accommodations. The act made illegal the discriminatory practices that existed in every region of the nation, denying African Americans equal access to public transportation, places of amusement, and public houses, such as inns and taverns. Its authors, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts and former Union general turned Congressman Benjamin Butler, had originally included the integration of public schools and cemeteries, although this was rejected by both Democrats and moderate Republicans. One of the bill's most vocal opponents was Alexander Stephens of Georgia, the former vice-president of the Confederacy, who was granted the opportunity to speak on the floor of the House of Representatives on January 4, 1874. The black congressman Robert Brown Elliott was permitted the rebuttal of Stephens's position.

Before an audience of packed galleries, Elliott rose in an eloquent defense of blacks' civil rights, positing: "What you give to one class, you must give to all; what you deny to one class, you shall deny to all. . . . Is it pretended anywhere that the evils of which we complain, our exclusion from the public inn, from the saloon and the table of the steamboat, from the sleeping-coach on the railway, from the right of sepulchre in the public burial ground, are an exercise of the police power of the state?" Unfortunately, Charles Sumner never lived to see the act signed into law, and the act itself proved to be shortlived. In 1883 the Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional.

The Social Consequences of the War

The end of the Civil War may have brought closure to the death and devastation of the battlefield, but it opened a Pandora's box of social problems. The magnitude of disorder and suffering was tremendous: abandoned lands, lack of food and clothing, the many thousands of displaced persons, successive crop failures, and the transition from slave to free labor on the part of millions of black people. No civil authority reigned in the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas. Public buildings and private homes had

Robert Brown Elliott speaking before Congress

On January 6, 1874, Elliott delivered a ringing speech in the U.S. House of Representatives in support of the Sumner civil rights bill. Elliot was responding in part to words uttered the day before by Virginia congressman John T. Harris, who claimed that "there is not a gentleman on this floor who can honestly say he really believes that the colored man is created his equal."

been burned to the ground. Everywhere suffering and starvation loomed. Another striking feature of the time was that of ex-slaves searching for husbands, wives, or children who years earlier had been separated by sale or other transactions. Historian Herbert Gutman argued that nothing better illustrated the remarkable resilience and commitment of black family members than their efforts to reunite with one another.

The Freedmen's Bureau

The responsibility for a comprehensive and unified program of relief and rehabilitation for the newly emancipated came under the auspices of the Freedmen's Bureau. Former slaves in army camps and freedpeople after the war looked to the Freedmen's Bureau to register and legalize slave unions in marriage. Many searches for family members began with poignant letters written to the Freedmen's Bureau. The bureau aided

Window in Time

Hawkins Wilson's Letter to Freedman's Bureau

[*Galveston, Tex.*] May 11th, 1867

Dear Sir, I am anxious to learn about my sisters, from whom I have been separated many years—I have never heard from them since I left Virginia twenty four years ago—I am in hopes that they are still living and I am anxious to hear how they are getting on—I have no other one to apply to but you and am persuaded that you will help one who stands in need of your services as I do—I shall be very grateful to you, if you oblige me in this matter—One of my sisters belonged to Peter Coleman in Caroline County and her name was Jane—Her husband's name was Charles and he belonged to Buck Haskin and lived near John Wright's store in the same county—She had three children, Robert, Charles and Julia, when I left—Sister Martha belonged to Dr. Jefferson, who lived two miles above Wright's store—Sister Matilda belonged to Mrs. Botts, in the same county—My dear uncle Jim had a wife at Jack Langley's and his wife was named Adie and his oldest son was named Buck and they all belonged to Jack Langley—These are all my own dearest relatives and I wish to correspond with them with a view to visit them as soon as I can hear from them—My name is Hawkins Wilson and I am their brother, who was sold at Sheriff's sale and used to belong to Jackson Talley and was bought by M. Wright, Boydtown C. H. You will please send the enclosed letter to my sister Jane, or some of her family, if she is dead—I am, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

ALS Hawkins Wilson

Source: Hawkins Wilson to Chief of the Freedmen's Bureau at Richmond, 11 May 1867, enclosing Hawkins Wilson to Sister Jane, [11 May 1867], Letters Received, ser. 3892, Bowling Green VA Asst. Supt., BRFAL [A-8254].

former slaves as well as white refugees by furnishing supplies and medical services, establishing schools, supervising contracts between ex-slaves and their employers, and managing confiscated or abandoned lands, which included leasing and selling some of those lands to former slaves. Between 1865 and 1869, it issued 21 million rations, approximately 5 million going to whites and more than 15 million to blacks. By 1867 the bureau oversaw forty-six hospitals staffed by physicians, surgeons, and nurses. Its medical department spent more than $2 million to improve the health of ex-slaves and treated more than 450,000 cases of illness, thus helping to reduce the death rate among former slaves and to improve sanitary conditions.

The Freedmen's Bureau was the first large-scale federal welfare program in the United States. Despite Southern hostility and the inefficiency of many of its agents, the bureau demonstrated that the government could administer an extensive program of relief and rehabilitation and suggested a way in which the nation could grapple with its pressing social problems. There were certainly cases where bureau agents sided with planters' interests to

the detriment of black families, but many blacks also perceived agents to be fair adjudicators of labor problems and came to the bureau with their grievances. The bureau contained corruption and inefficiency. It also achieved notable successes in ministering to human welfare.

Freedmen's Bureau agents, as well as the freedpeople themselves, believed that education was the key to the successful transition from slavery to freedom, and it was in the realm of education that Reconstruction left its most positive and enduring legacy for blacks. Bureau agents consistently remarked on the great value that freedmen placed on education—their burning desire to learn. But because of lack of funds, the bureau did not put its energies, for the most part, into establishing schools but rather into coordinating and working closely with Northern religious societies, philanthropic organizations, and other groups committed to schools for the freedpeople. The bureau supervised day school, night schools, Sunday and industrial schools, as well as colleges.

The Pivotal Role of Education

Bureau agents were greatly assisted in this task by blacks already established as educators in their communities. Indeed Freedmen's Bureau officials repeatedly expressed surprise at discovering black educational settings in churches, basements, and private homes. When the northern societies went south they would also encounter communities in which blacks themselves raised money to purchase land, build schoolhouses, and pay teachers' salaries. By 1870, according to the historian Eric Foner, more than one million dollars had been raised by blacks for educational purposes. As impressive as this was, funding on the part of blacks was insufficient for the magnitude of the task of building and maintaining schools and colleges for several million freedpeople. Thus the aid of the Freedmen's Bureau and northern religious denominations was crucial.

Among the schools founded in this period that received aid and leadership from the Freedmen's Bureau were Howard University (named after the Freedmen's Bureau head General Oliver O. Howard), Hampton Institute, St. Augustine's College, Atlanta University, Fisk University, Storer College, and Biddle Memorial Institute (now Johnson C. Smith University). The American Missionary Association, and the societies of the Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians, were all active in establishing schools, and by 1867 schools had been set up in counties throughout the former Confederacy. Two years later nearly 3,000 schools, serving over 150,000 pupils, reported to the bureau, the supervision of which monopolized much of the agents' time.

Educators, Black and White

Teachers came down from the North in large numbers. Many were missionaries, focused as much on ridding the freedpeople of the cultural vestiges of slavery in their speech, worship practices, and other behavioral and belief patterns, as on teaching them to read, write, and do arithmetic. The names of these white educators, such as Edmund Ware at Atlanta University, Samuel C. Armstrong at Hampton Institute, Erastus M. Cravath at Fisk University, and Oliver O. Howard at Howard University, continue to be renowned today because of their roles in the history of the black colleges and universities. Yet there were hundreds of other educators, white and black alike, whose tireless work in the creation of black schools during the Reconstruction era is far less known.

In 1869 there were 9,503 teachers in schools for former slaves in the South. Although some white teachers were southerners, a majority of whites came from the North. The number of black teachers also steadily increased with each cohort of graduates. After the war, urban blacks took immediate steps to set up schools, sometimes teaching in abandoned warehouses or in former slave markets, as was the case in New Orleans and Savannah. In Richmond, just weeks after Lee's surrender, 1,000 black children and 75 adults attended

schools established by the city's black churches and also by the white American Missionary Association.

The schools established by the Freedmen's Bureau, northern societies, and southern blacks themselves endeavored to inculcate new values of free labor, which would generate prosperity for capital and labor alike. Maine-born bureau agent John N. Bryant expressed this perspective, when he stated: "That man who has the most wants will usually labor with the greatest industry. . . . The more intelligent men are the more wants they have, hence it is for the interest of all that the laborers shall be educated."

By 1870 the educational work of the Freedmen's Bureau ended, and the task of education fell to local communities and northern religious organizations. The bureau had spent more than $5 million in schooling ex-slaves, and 247,333 pupils attended 4,329 schools. The shortcomings in the education of blacks arose not from a want of zeal on the part of teachers but from ignorance of the needs of blacks and from the necessary preoccupation of students with the problem of survival in a hostile world.

Black Churches

In addition, southern black churches offered both spiritual and material relief during Reconstruction. Church buildings played as important a public role as a spiritual one. They were much more than places of worship. They served as the setting for political meetings and rallies. Indeed many of the early black politicians were ministers. Schools for the freedpeople were often conducted in churches. Church members, especially through missionary societies, in both the South and North, had longstanding traditions of mutual aid. After the war they sacrificed their meager earnings to support social services and education.

During the era of Reconstruction the number of independent churches blossomed. No longer bound by Southern laws that silenced their preachers or proscribed their organizations, African Americans withdrew from white churches after securing their freedom. The African Methodist Episcopal church, which had only 20,000 members in 1856, boasted 75,000 ten years later. In 1876 its membership exceeded 200,000, and its influence and material possessions had increased proportionally. The Baptists enjoyed phenomenal growth. Local churches sprang up overnight under the ministry of both educated and unlettered preachers. In 1866 the black Baptists of North Carolina organized the first state convention. Within a few years, every Southern state had a large black Baptist organization. Total membership increased from 150,000 in 1850 to 500,000 in 1870.

As the first social institutions fully controlled by blacks in America, these churches gave blacks an opportunity to develop leadership, and it is no coincidence that many outstanding Reconstruction leaders were ministers. Bishop Henry McNeal Turner of Georgia, the Reverend Richard H. Cain of South Carolina, and Bishop James Walker Hood of North Carolina were a few of the political leaders who gained much of their experience in the black church.

Economic Adjustment

It was one thing to provide temporary relief for former slaves and another to guide them along the road to economic stability and independence. The release from bondage of 4 million persons had serious implications for the economic structure of the South. White planters, in an effort to reestablish themselves, were anxious to secure labor at the lowest possible price; and if in their own minds they conceded the right of blacks to be free, they

seldom took to heart that blacks had a right to refuse work. Many prospective employers therefore sought to force blacks to work, and the Black Codes were formulated with this specific intention.

The Desire for Land

The ex-slaves resisted signing their names to labor contracts in 1865 and 1866 for a variety of reasons. The freedpeople feared binding themselves to a new form of enslavement. They scorned the low wages offered and lacked confidence that planters would be fair in their dealings. Many were exhilarated by their new liberty, especially the freedom to move about as they liked. Some traversed the Old Confederacy in defiance of the resented slave pass that had proscribed their movement. Mobility presented the opportunity to ascertain what freedom actually meant. Thus they struck out on foot or other modes of transport to find different work or to work at higher wages, to relocate in urban areas, to search for loved ones, and to get land for farms of their own.

In the black belt areas, especially, the idea of owning land was held in considerably more favor than wage labor. Blacks in agricultural regions more than those in cities perceived landownership as the source of economic independence, and they championed it with no less fervor than voting rights and civil rights. Their claim to land was based on their perception of the historic role of black slaves in the economic development of the American nation. The ex-slave Bayley Wyat said as much when the army uprooted him and other freedpeople from their settlement near Yorktown, Virginia. Wyat was quoted as offering the following testimony: "We has a right to the land where we are located. For why? I tell you. Our wives, our children, our husbands, has been sold over and over again to purchase the lands we now locates upon; for that reason we have a divine right to the land. . . . And den didn't we clear the land, and raise de crops ob corn, ob cotton, ob tobacco, ob rice, ob sugar, ob everything. And den didn't dem large cities in de North grow up on de cotton and de sugars and de rice dat we made? . . . I say dey has grown rich, and my people is poor."

The freedpeople's desire for land proved to be a constant challenge to the Freedmen's Bureau. For blacks who were displaced by the war, the Bureau undertook a mammoth task of resettlement, since many of the former slaves were homeless and penniless. Some had been thrown off the land by landowners, while others refused to sign unfair labor contracts and simply left plantations of their own accord, insisting that the property belonged to them. In 1865 the freedpeople, particularly in the South Carolina and Georgia low country, but in other areas as well, were convinced through rumor and hearsay that the federal government planned to redistribute abandoned and confiscated land in forty-acre plots around Christmas time or in the early new year of 1866. This impression stemmed from the Confederates' apprehension during the war that the federal government planned to seize their land and convey it to ex-slaves, and also from the Congressional bill creating the Freedmen's Bureau, which made reference to dividing abandoned land into forty-acre parcels for lease and sale.

"Forty acres and a mule," as a gift of the government, was never realized after the Civil War, but whenever they could, blacks acquired land to achieve economic security. Some were able to buy property when the federal government opened millions of acres of public land under the Southern Homestead Act of 1866, in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Florida, to all settlers regardless of race. Within a year ex-slaves secured homesteads in Florida covering 160,960 acres, and in Arkansas they occupied 116 out of 243 homesteads. By 1874 blacks in Georgia owned more than 350,000 acres of land. However, at the state level white hostility to black land ownership, especially in those states with large black populations, prevented the freedmen from becoming a significant proportion of the persons who acquired the land.

Although the Radicals in Congress had initially perceived the Southern Homestead Act as playing a more important role in alleviating the plight of the freedpeople, millions of whites turned out to be the primary beneficiaries. Congress repealed the Southern Homestead Act in 1876, the very year when Reconstruction was coming to an end. Thus by the mid-1870s land ownership in the South was represented by between 4 to 8 percent of all freed families. The majority of blacks remained in rural areas, but a considerable number abandoned dreams of land ownership and migrated to the urban centers of both the North and South. It was in the cities that the Freedmen's Bureau, churches, fraternal societies, and other black community-based institutions and traditions existed. During the Reconstruction era the black population in the South's ten largest cities doubled in size, while the white population grew by only ten percent.

An important family pattern of economic consequences was the attempt to withdraw, as much as possible, black females—often wives and daughters—from the wage-labor market and from the fields of the South. Indeed the large number of women and children who withdrew from the labor force in the early aftermath of peace contributed to the decline in per capita production. The editor of *The Plantation,* in 1865, complained that black women no longer picked cotton, "which is a woman's work. . . . They will merely take care of their own households and do but little or no work outdoors." Not only field laborers but domestic servants became more difficult to hire. A white resident in upcountry Georgia noted that "every negro woman wants to set up house keeping." However, women, who served as the sole support for their children or other family members, had to accept work wherever they could find it, which meant being limited to work as domestic laborers or as field hands and also being vulnerable to physical and sexual assault.

Women in the Labor Market

Black parents endeavored to exercise control over their children's labor in the fields; and especially after the expansion of schools in rural areas, they eagerly sent their children to school. "The freedmen," a Georgia newspaper reported in 1869, "have almost universally withdrawn their women and children from the fields, putting the first at housework and the latter at school." Although black families made collective decisions as to female members' labor, the male head of household had now taken on an authority impossible under slavery, where the master's rule prevailed.

Increasingly evident was the new assertive role of black men, especially as husbands and fathers—as the representatives of the family. According to historian Jacqueline Jones, the percentage of black male heads of families in the Cotton Belt in 1870 equaled the same high percentage (80 percent) of white male heads of households. Similar to white men, black men tended to be older than their wives, thus reinforcing their patriarchal authority.

Scholars note gender differences in the freedpeople's dealings with the Freedmen's Bureau. Women commonly complained about individual mistreatment, specifically the failure to compensate them for work already completed, but black men, while making similar complaints, commonly spoke for their larger households. Bureau records include numerous examples of male heads of households who specify which family members were to work and the nature of their employment. Such decisions were often based upon the attempt to protect wives and daughters from rape and other forms of assault. Indeed, Freedmen's Bureau agents note the aggrieved men who reported whites who assaulted their wives and other female family members. Such was the case in 1865 when the freedman Sam Neal made accusations against the Tennessee planter for whom he and his family worked. According to

Upland Cotton

Rendered in oil by genre painter Winslow Homer in 1879, this painting captures the lingering power of the slave South's tragic story—cotton, race, back-breaking labor.

Neal, his daughter had been the victim of the man's "several base attempts." Ironically, in families where black women did not work, some Freedmen's Bureau agents described this practice in such derisive terms as "female loaferism" and "playing the lady," thus criticizing black women for behavior considered perfectly appropriate for white married women.

In urban centers, whites lambasted black women for being insolent if they wore fashionable attire. In Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1865 young black women were ridiculed in the press for wearing black veils similar to those worn by their white counterparts. The idea that black women would cultivate the same fashion and leisure styles as white women seemed too much of a display of social equality on the part of women, who had historically been perceived only as laborers. This type of thinking is captured in the description of black women by John De Forest, a Freedmen's Bureau agent in South Carolina, who stated "myriads of women who once earned their own living now have aspirations to be like white ladies and, instead of using the hoe, pass the days in dawdling over their trivial housework, or gossiping among their neighbors." In reality, the great majority of black women never had the luxury to "keep house" or approximate white women's lifestyles. Their withdrawal from the fields had proved temporary at best. In the Cotton Belt in 1870 forty percent of black married women worked, primarily in the fields, while less than 2 percent of white married women listed an occupation other than homemaker. Freedmen's families occupied the lowest rung of the southern economic ladder, and almost three-fourths of all black household heads (compared to 10 percent of their white counterparts) worked as unskilled agricultural laborers.

Throughout the Reconstruction era African Americans resisted, as much as possible, the coercive and limiting conditions that characterized antebellum plantation agriculture. For example, at harvest time in 1865, Georgia blacks balked at the hiring of an overseer and walked off the plantation, leaving the planter without laborers. The freedpeople also rejected the gang-labor system as reminiscent of slavery, preferring instead to work in kin groups, known as the "squad system" and a harbinger of sharecropping. The wage system proved fundamentally unattractive to the freedpeople because of planters' failure to pay either part or all of the wages due to them.

Changing Conditions of Farm Labor

The reduction in overall per capita labor hours in the South was real, dropping by one-third of its prewar level. Planters' letters complain of laborers who "absent themselves when

they please, and lounge lazily about." However, the editor of a black newspaper declared in 1865 that black people need not be reminded to avoid idleness, since "the necessity of working is perfectly understood by men who have worked all their lives." To meet the urgent need for labor, the Freedmen's Bureau provided free transportation, and some planters even promised bonuses at harvest time. Planters found it expedient to be more flexible in enforcing labor contracts, and some employers went to unusual lengths to lure workers. A Tennessee planter, for example, offered the services of his wagon to carry blacks to a barbecue.

What solution there was, however unsatisfactory, came by negotiations between the white employer and the black worker, in some instances under the supervision of the Freedmen's Bureau. In the late 1860s sharecropping emerged as a "compromise," as a flawed resolution to the economic tug-of-war between the planters' need for greater stability and control over agricultural production and the freedpeople's need for less risk in economic compensation. The wages paid them in 1867, for example, were lower than those paid to the hired slaves of the Old South. In addition, greater freedom from white supervision prompted black families to sign contracts that gave them responsibility over the cultivation of crops on a specific plot of land and ownership of a percentage (between one-quarter and one-third) of the harvested crop.

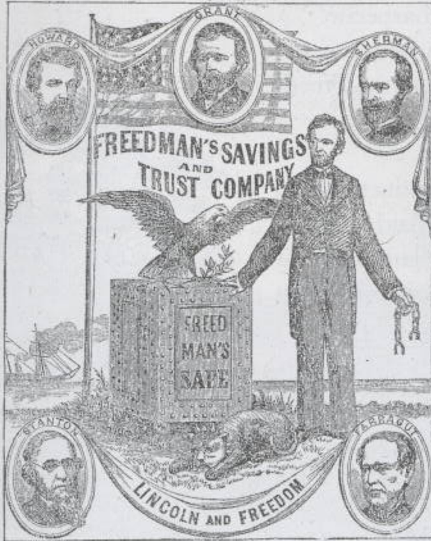
Sharecropping

Usually dependent on the planter to furnish fertilizer, farm tools, work animals, and seed, most sharecroppers quickly found themselves locked in a spiral of debt from which there was no escape. In the sharecropping system the cost of maintenance was so great that at the end of the year ex-slaves were indebted to their employers for most of what they had made and sometimes more than what they had made. The white South recovered much more rapidly than did the former slaves. By 1880 the South was producing more cotton than ever, while profits from sugar continued to improve, although at a slower rate than cotton. Black farm workers contributed greatly to the economic recovery of the South. As free workers, however, they gained little.

One effort to assist former slaves in their economic adjustment was the encouragement given them to save their money. There had been several experiments with savings banks for blacks during the war. After the allotment system was developed, many soldiers saved regularly in banks established for that purpose. Outstanding were the Free Labor Bank set up by General Banks at New Orleans, and another established by General Butler at Norfolk. Toward the end of the war, blacks were given an opportunity to save at the Freedmen's Savings and Trust Company, which was chartered by the federal government in 1865. The business of the organization, with William Booth as president, was confined to the black race, and two-thirds of the deposits were to be invested in securities of the United States.

The Freedmen's Bank

On April 4, 1865, the headquarters of the Freedmen's Bank, as it was called, was opened in New York. Within the next few months branches were started in Washington, New Orleans, Nashville, Vicksburg, Louisville, and Memphis. By 1872 there were thirty-four branches, with only the New York and Philadelphia offices in the North; by 1874 the deposits in all branches totaled $3,299,201. But unmistakable evidences of failure were apparent: there was inaccurate bookkeeping, and some of the cashiers were incompetent. Almost no black employees had been hired at the beginning, but gradually they were hired. Some, but not all, proved able to perform their tasks. Political influence was used to secure loans. At a time when his business was tottering, Jay Cooke borrowed $500,000 at only 5 percent interest, and Henry Cooke together with other financiers unloaded bad loans on the bank.



Keep this Book in good order.
Do not fold or roll it up.
Give immediate Notice if lost.

The Freedman's Saving and Trust Company
To encourage thrift among the former slaves, Congress established the Freedman's Saving and Trust Company. A savings book from that bank is pictured here.

After the big financial houses failed in 1873, there was a run on the Freedmen's Bank, and many speculating officials resigned, leaving blacks to take the blame. In March 1874, Frederick Douglass was made president, but the bank was already a failure, although neither he nor the public was aware of the fact. When Douglass realized the truth, he resorted to desperate means to save the bank, using his own money and appealing to the Senate Finance Committee for more. The bank was placed in liquidation by Congress so that it could be reorganized, but it was too late. Confidence in the bank had been completely shattered, and on June 28, 1874, it closed. Thousands of black depositors suffered losses they could ill afford. Black leaders, some of whom were blameless, were castigated by their fellows, while the Cookes and others, who benefited most, escaped without public censure.

Reconstruction's End

Reconstruction did not come to an abrupt end in the southern states. As early as 1869, the ex-Confederates of Tennessee became enfranchised, and within a few months large numbers of white Southerners in other states reclaimed their citizenship through individual acts of amnesty. In 1871 the "ironclad" oath, which Congress had imposed at the beginning of Radical Reconstruction to disqualify many ex-Confederates, was repealed. In the following year a general amnesty restored the franchise to all but about six hundred ex-Confederate officials.

The political effect could be seen in the quick revival of the Democratic party in state after state. In 1870 the border states went Democratic; North Carolina and Virginia came under the control of Conservatives, who outnumbered the Republicans. In the following year Georgia Democrats returned to power. Other states began to witness an ascendant Democratic party, especially in counties with larger white electorates. In 1874 and 1875, voters in Texas, Arkansas, and Alabama put Democrats in office. By 1876 the only states that Republicans could claim were South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana. The "redemption" of the southern states had become a crusade to restore white "home rule" and overthrow the last vestiges of Republican hegemony.

The Reign of Violence

And white supremacists resorted to every legal and extra-legal maneuver to deny blacks political equality. Secret societies grew and spread when it became apparent to Southerners that their control was to be broken by Radical Reconstruction. For ten years after 1867 such organizations as the Knights of the White Camelia, the Constitutional Union Guards, the Pale Faces, the White Brotherhood, the Council of Safety, the '76 Association, and the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan flourished across the South, as well as local state-based organizations such as the White League of Louisiana, the White Line of Mississippi, and the Rifle Clubs of South Carolina. White Southerners expected to do by extralegal or blatantly illegal means what had not been allowed by law: to exercise absolute control over blacks, drive them and their fellows from the ballot box and elective office, and establish "white home rule."

The Radicals tried to seize the arms of the White Leagues, an attempt that resulted in a riot in New Orleans, killing 40 and wounding more than 100 people. Intermittent warfare continued through the election of 1876, and there was no peace until President Rutherford B. Hayes withdrew the federal troops the following year.

In South Carolina, the "Red Shirts" dominated campaign meetings and openly carried arms as a measure of "protection" against Radical "tyranny." Workingmen's Democratic Associations were organized, and whites were urged to employ only Democrats. Constant turmoil engulfed many sections of the state, particularly Edgefield County, where the racist demagogue Ben Tillman was rapidly becoming a public figure. However, even in the places where no riots occurred, whites kept blacks from the polls by other methods of intimidation. The crops of blacks were destroyed, their barns and houses burned, and they were whipped and lynched for voting Republican. Democrats organized patrolled polling places to guarantee "fair, peaceful, and Democratic" elections.

African Americans did not passively capitulate to this reign of terror. Even after beatings and other forms of intimidation, many defied their attackers, vowing to vote whatever the cost. In Bennettsville, South Carolina, blacks took more radical steps—arming themselves, patrolling the streets, and defying Klansmen to come for them. In Alabama, according to one observer, African Americans in one part of the state's black belt "invited a contest, saying they were willing to go out into an open field and 'fight it out.'" Such overt challenges, however, became increasingly rare. More and more blacks remained at home, and political power shifted with growing momentum from Republican to Democratic hands.

Disclosures of corruption in Republican governments also served to discredit and hasten the end of Radical Reconstruction. The case for Democrats was strengthened considerably as they pointed to misgovernment through bribery, embezzlement, misappropriation of funds, and other corrupt practices. The federal government was unable to rush to the defense of Southern Republican governments because it was having difficulty purging itself of corruption. It did not matter that white Southerners had also been corrupt before the war or that the provisional governments under Presidential Reconstruction were extravagant and corrupt. The Democrats were not in power in 1874 and consequently had all the advantages that "out groups" usually enjoy in such cases.

Corruption in Republican Governments

Even before 1876, the Republicans in Congress had begun to waiver on the feasibility and constitutionality of Reconstruction policies. Moreover, the deaths of Stevens, Sumner, Butler, and others among the old antislavery leadership left a vacuum that would be filled by younger congressmen, with less zeal for blacks. The new leaders were loyal party men, practical politicians who cared more about industrial interests in the North and South than about Radical governments in the South. The rising influence of Rutherford B. Hayes, James G. Blaine, Roscoe Conkling, and John A. Logan signaled a new direction for the Republican party—a turn to more profitable and practical pursuits.

Nor did the Supreme Court help to postpone the end of Reconstruction. As a matter of fact, its decisions had the effect of hastening the end. In 1875 several indictments under the Enforcement Act of 1870 charged defendants with preventing blacks from exercising their right to vote in elections, but in both the *United States v. Reese* (a Kentucky case) and in the same year in *United States v. Cruikshank* (a Louisiana case), the Court weakened considerably blacks ability to exercise their voting rights. In

Supreme Court Decisions

Reese the Court held that the Fifteenth Amendment did not confer the right of suffrage on anyone but rather "prevents the States or the United States'. . . from giving preference . . . to one citizen of the United States over another on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." In *Cruikshank*, the Supreme Court struck down the Enforcement Act of 1870, declaring it unconstitutional on the grounds that the "due process" and "equal protection clauses" of the Fourteenth Amendment applied only to state-imposed actions, not those of individual citizens.

African Americans could no longer expect much support from a court that permitted white southerners the freedom to settle their problems as they saw fit, even if it meant brushing aside the civil and political rights of black southerners.

The Campaign of 1876

The presidential campaign of 1876 between Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes and Democratic candidate Samuel J. Tilden determined Reconstruction's fate in the three states where Republicans still held power—South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida. In South Carolina and Louisiana, the hotly disputed election left each party claiming the victory and setting up competing governments. The gravity of the controversy led to the formation of a special commission, charged with deciding the presidency of the United States. In the meantime, to break the impasse, the Republicans promised not only to withdraw troops but also to assist the South in its long-cherished ambition to obtain federal subsidies for internal improvements and better representation in affairs in Washington.

The commission determined in favor of Hayes, who, once in office, promptly withdrew all troops, thus freeing southern politics from northern interference. A conciliatory Congress then removed other restrictions. In 1878 the use of armed forces was no longer permitted to monitor elections. In the next decade, the number of black voters dropped precipitously, although in some places blacks were able to elect members of their race, albeit in far fewer numbers, to public office. By the dawn of the twentieth century, however, southern blacks were effectively disfranchised.

For the great majority of white Americans, Reconstruction after the Civil War had proven to be a tragic era, riddled with problems and pitfalls that could be corrected only in a new and unequal racial order. For very different reasons, African Americans, too, concluded that Reconstruction had failed. They bemoaned the tragic loss of their civil and political rights. Reconstruction could be vindicated, blacks believed, only when the nation lived up to its promises of freedom and justice for all. In the late 1870s, the writing on the wall had appeared somewhat blurred but increasingly legible to discerning eyes.

And, for blacks, the future did not bode well. It must have seemed, to them, as if a cruel and mischievous editor's hand had begun to pen an indelible line through the text of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments—deleting their meaning and intent, while preserving merely a veneer of words. This line, drawn with cunning and malice, ran with equal mischief through southern political life, transforming the American two-party system into essentially one party. The writing on the wall appeared ever more clear and bold in the decades to come—this mysterious, seeming indelible line that ran with growing force through customs and laws, through schools and workplaces, through public buildings and transportation, and through the South and the North. The color line had become finally obvious to everyone.