

Part One

Monopoly and Upheaval

1877-1914



Prologue

From the Civil War
to the Great Uprising of Labor:
Reconstructing the Nation

1865-1877



Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution

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**Conclusion: The Continuing Struggle over
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SHORTLY AFTER THE CONFEDERATE capital of Richmond, Virginia, fell to Union troops in April 1865, an ex-slave, whose name is recorded only as Cyrus, decided he would no longer work in the fields. Emma Mordecai, the mistress of Rosewood plantation where Cyrus lived, questioned him about his refusal. Cyrus responded with a radically new interpretation of the relationship between former slaves and their former masters. He rejected a regime under which “it seems like we ’uns do all the work and [only] gets a part.” Now, he continued, “there ain’t going to be no more Master and Mistress, Miss Emma. All is equal. I done hear it from the courthouse steps. . . . All the land belongs to the Yankees now, and they gonna divide it among the colored people. Besides, the kitchen of the big house is my share. I help build it.”

Cyrus’s eloquent response to Miss Emma raised a fundamental question: whether those who had “built” America would share in the fruits of their labor. Such questions would echo through not only the dozen years that followed the end of the Civil War, but also the century and beyond, from Reconstruction’s end to the new millennium—the period covered in this volume of *Who Built America*? For those who are beginning the story with Volume 2, this prologue briefly summarizes some of the key developments in the dozen years following the end of the Civil War that are the subject of the last chapter of Volume 1. It focuses particularly on matters of labor and politics and especially on three key events: Reconstruction, the Centennial celebration of 1876, and the great railroad strikes of 1877.

“Railroad Riot”

The Sixth Regiment of the Maryland National Guard fire on railroad strikers and sympathizers in the streets of Baltimore during the July 1877 “Great Uprising.” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, August 4, 1877 — American Social History Project.

Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution

The South's defeat in 1865 settled two major debates: Would the union survive? Would America remain half slave and half free? But other political disputes went unresolved. Who would hold economic and political power in the South in the war's aftermath? How would the land be worked and how would labor be organized? What would freedom mean for the four million former slaves? The answers to these momentous questions would define the era known as Reconstruction.

African Americans Act on Freedom African Americans' unceasing efforts to secure economic, political, and familial rights made them central players in the Reconstruction drama. Ex-slaves expressed their newfound freedom in diverse ways. For some, it was as specific and personal as the decision to take a new name; for others, it was as fundamental as uniting their family in a single household. Freedom meant dressing as one pleased, perhaps wearing a colorful shirt or hat. It was also refusing to be deferential to one's former owner. Soon after the Confederacy's final defeat, freedpeople in Richmond, Virginia, for example, held meetings without securing white permission, and they walked in Capitol Square, an area that had previously been reserved for white residents, refusing to yield the sidewalks to approaching white men and women.

Freedom also meant that thousands of freed slaves could travel unrestricted and search for loved ones who had been sold away or displaced under slavery or during the war's upheavals. Thousands of freedmen and women placed advertisements in newspapers searching for family members. Former slaves hastened to formalize long-standing relationships, officially registering and solemnizing their marriages as a way to restore their rights to family life. For the first time, many freedpeople set up households in which men could take their place as head of the family, women could refuse full-time fieldwork, and parents could protect their children. When white planters tried to retain African American children as laborers under the guise of apprenticeships, freedpeople fought them in court and often won. These households served as one base for constructing new social and political relations in the post-emancipation period.

The first years after emancipation also saw a tremendous upsurge in African American demands for education and control over their churches. Freedpeople built schools and hired black teachers. They also challenged white domination of biracial congregations and founded their own churches, such as the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. These independent churches became the moral and cultural centers of African American life, and their preachers—along with schoolteachers and



The Great Labor Question from a Southern Point of View

An 1865 cartoon in the northern Republican magazine *Harper's Weekly* contrasts the idle planter with the industrious former slave. "My boy," the planter says hypocritically, "we've toiled and taken care of you long enough — now you've got to work!" *Harper's Weekly*, July 29, 1865 — American Social History Project.

ex-soldiers — emerged as community leaders. The churches often hosted political meetings, including dozens of conventions, meetings, and rallies at which freedmen raised demands for full civil equality, including, for example, access to education and the right to bear arms, vote, and serve on juries.

The newly free Americans saw land ownership as the key to realizing their independence and ensuring their freedom. Many believed that they were entitled to land in return for their years of unpaid labor, which had created the wealth of the cotton South and the industrialized North. "Our wives, our children, our husbands, have been sold over and over again to purchase the lands we now locate upon; for that reason we have a divine right to use the land,"

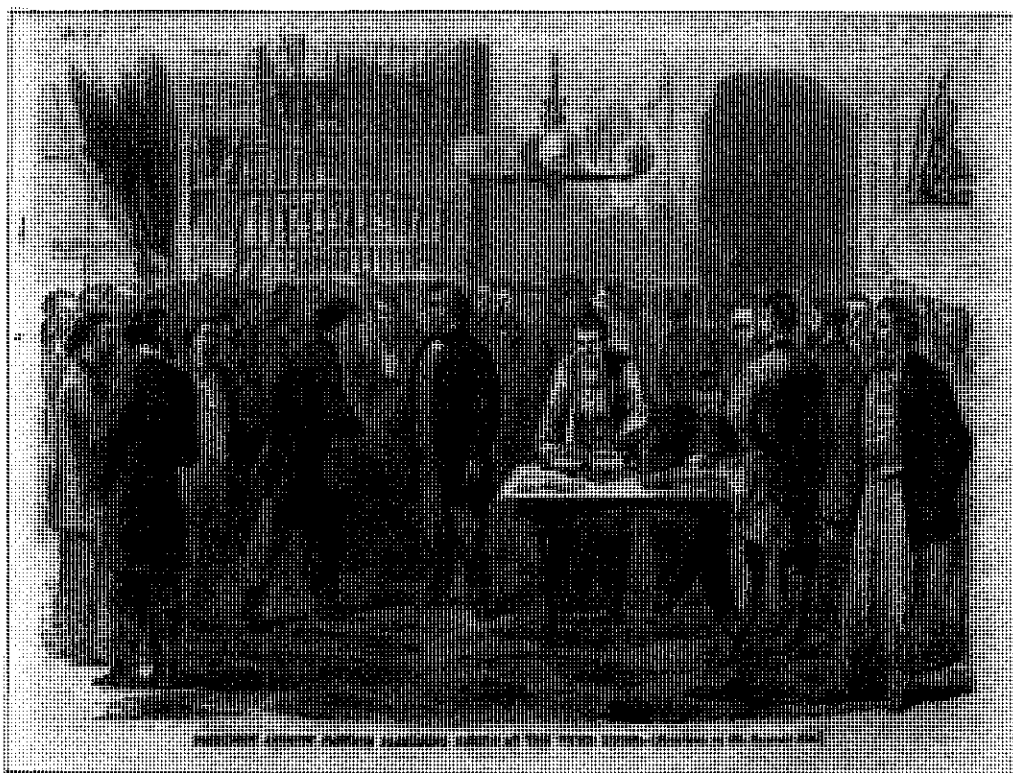
declared freedman Bayley Wyat in protesting the eviction of African Americans from land assigned to them by Union troops during the war. Wyat and others knew all too well that without land, they would remain fundamentally subservient to the economic power of their former owners. "Every colored man will be a slave, and feel himself a slave," one soldier argued, "until he can raise his own bale of cotton and put his own mark upon it and say this is mine."

Many southern blacks trusted the federal government, acting through the Freedmen's Bureau (which Congress had set up just before the end of the war), to help them achieve economic self-sufficiency. The bureau's 900 agents and officials, many of them idealistic Union army officers, did much to aid the freedpeople with education and medical care in the war's aftermath. And although the Freedmen's Bureau adopted extremely coercive labor policies throughout the South, the freedpeople continued to turn to bureau agents to protest brutality, harsh working conditions, and the hostility and inattention of local courts and police.

The struggles over the meaning of emancipation generated constant conflicts between black and white southerners. The enduring power of white southerners set boundaries on black freedom. These boundaries were especially narrow in rural areas still dominated by whites, who reacted badly to any assertion of personal freedom by former slaves. During the first year of freedom, countless incidents of violence were directed against freed slaves for simply expressing their personal independence.

Plantation owners especially opposed black southerners' efforts to secure land. Planters and freedpeople alike understood that black landownership would destroy white control of labor in the South and would lead to the collapse of the plantation economy. If even a few independent black farmers succeeded, concluded one Mississippi planter, "all the others will be dissatisfied with their wages no matter how good they may be and thus our whole labor system is bound to be upset." To maintain control, planters looked to their state governments. The struggle over the meaning and extent of freedom for African Americans would now shift to the political arena.

Presidential Reconstruction and Its Critics By the end of 1865, former supporters and leaders of the Confederacy again controlled state governments. The lenient pardoning policies of President Andrew Johnson enabled these men to reassert their dominance. Johnson, a tailor from Tennessee, had been the only southerner who chose to remain in his seat in the U.S. Senate after his home state seceded from the Union. His reward for that decision was selection as Lincoln's running mate in 1864, and he became president when Lincoln was assassinated in April 1865. As president, Johnson believed that only the planters possessed the experience, prestige, and power to control the volatile black population and that the planters were therefore the best hope for the South's future. In May 1865, Johnson offered total amnesty to white southerners who would swear basic loyalty to the Union. He allowed the Confederate states to be rapidly readmitted to the



Pardoned

President Andrew Johnson pardons former Confederates in the White House. Stanley Fox, *Harper's Weekly*, October 14, 1865 — American Social History Project.

Union as long as they ratified the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, repudiated the Confederate debt, and nullified the ordinances of secession. Once they had complied, they could organize state elections and reestablish governments, a process that was completed in nearly all southern states by the fall of 1865. For Johnson, Reconstruction was now complete.

The fall elections returned many ex-Confederates to office, and they immediately passed legislation favoring the interests of planters. In particular, the Black Codes, a series of rigid labor-control laws, defined the status of newly freed African Americans as landless agricultural laborers with no bargaining power and restricted mobility. A freedman who was found to be without "lawful employment," for example, could be arrested. The laws attempted to ensure that planters would have an ongoing immobile and dependent supply of cheap labor and to keep African Americans in a subordinate status. Some laws barred blacks from handling guns or possessing alcohol; others required that they be off city streets by a specific hour.

Authorities never fully enforced the Black Codes, largely because of labor scarcity and the opposition of African American workers and Freedmen's Bureau agents. Nonetheless, their passage enraged Radical Republicans, a group of congressmen whose political roots lay in the antebellum antislavery movement. Led by Representative Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania and Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, the Radicals sought a vast increase in federal power to obtain new rights for the freedpeople and to revolutionize social conditions in the South. Although Republicans held a three-to-one majority in Congress, most were moderates. But even they were profoundly disturbed by the Black Codes and by the restored power and influence of the ex-Confederate leaders who had passed these laws. In December 1865, moderates joined Radicals in refusing to seat the newly elected southern congressional representatives. This action initiated a confrontation with President Johnson and, in the process, transformed the meaning and nature of Reconstruction.

One of the first steps in this transformation occurred in early 1866, when Congress passed a civil rights bill that conferred U.S. citizenship on the freedpeople, granted them "full and equal benefit of all laws," and gave federal courts the power to defend the rights of these new citizens from interference by state governments. This bill nullified the Supreme Court's 1857 *Dred Scott* decision (which had denied citizenship to African Americans), expanded the powers of the federal courts, marked a dramatic break from the deeply rooted American tradition of states' rights, and placed the federal government squarely on the side of extending citizenship and defending individual rights. An outraged President Johnson vetoed the legislation as an unconstitutional infringement of states' rights. But the Republican Congress overrode Johnson's veto in April 1866, the first time in U.S.

history that a major piece of legislation was passed over a president's objection. Three months later, Congress also overrode Johnson's veto of a bill to extend the life and power of the Freedmen's Bureau.

The Radicals in Congress sought an even more sweeping approach. Stevens and Sumner envisioned not just civil rights for African Americans, but a total transformation of southern society. Echoing the demands of freedpeople, Stevens called in 1866 for confiscating the land of the planters and distributing it among the ex-slaves. "The whole fabric of southern society must be changed," he proclaimed, "and never can it be done if this opportunity is lost." The best the Radicals could achieve, however, was the Fourteenth Amendment, which passed both houses of Congress in June 1866 and was then sent to the states for ratification. When finally approved in 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment granted full citizenship to African Americans and prohibited states from denying them "equal protection of the laws." This dramatically transformed the constitutional balance of power. Previously, Americans had viewed states as the guardians of the rights of their citizens against the power of the federal government. Now the roles were reversed.

President Johnson issued an appeal to southern legislatures to reject the new amendment. Encouraged by Johnson's position, all southern states but one (ironically, Tennessee) refused to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment. The Union had won the war but now appeared to be losing the peace. The fall 1866 congressional elections thus became a referendum on the Fourteenth Amendment and on Johnson's opposition to extending Reconstruction. As voters considered the issues, increasing antiblack violence spread through the South. In Memphis in May and in New Orleans in July, local authorities stood by or actively participated as white southerners slaughtered African Americans. In the wake of this racist brutality, Republicans scored a landslide victory in the November 1866 elections, and the biggest winners among them were the Radicals.

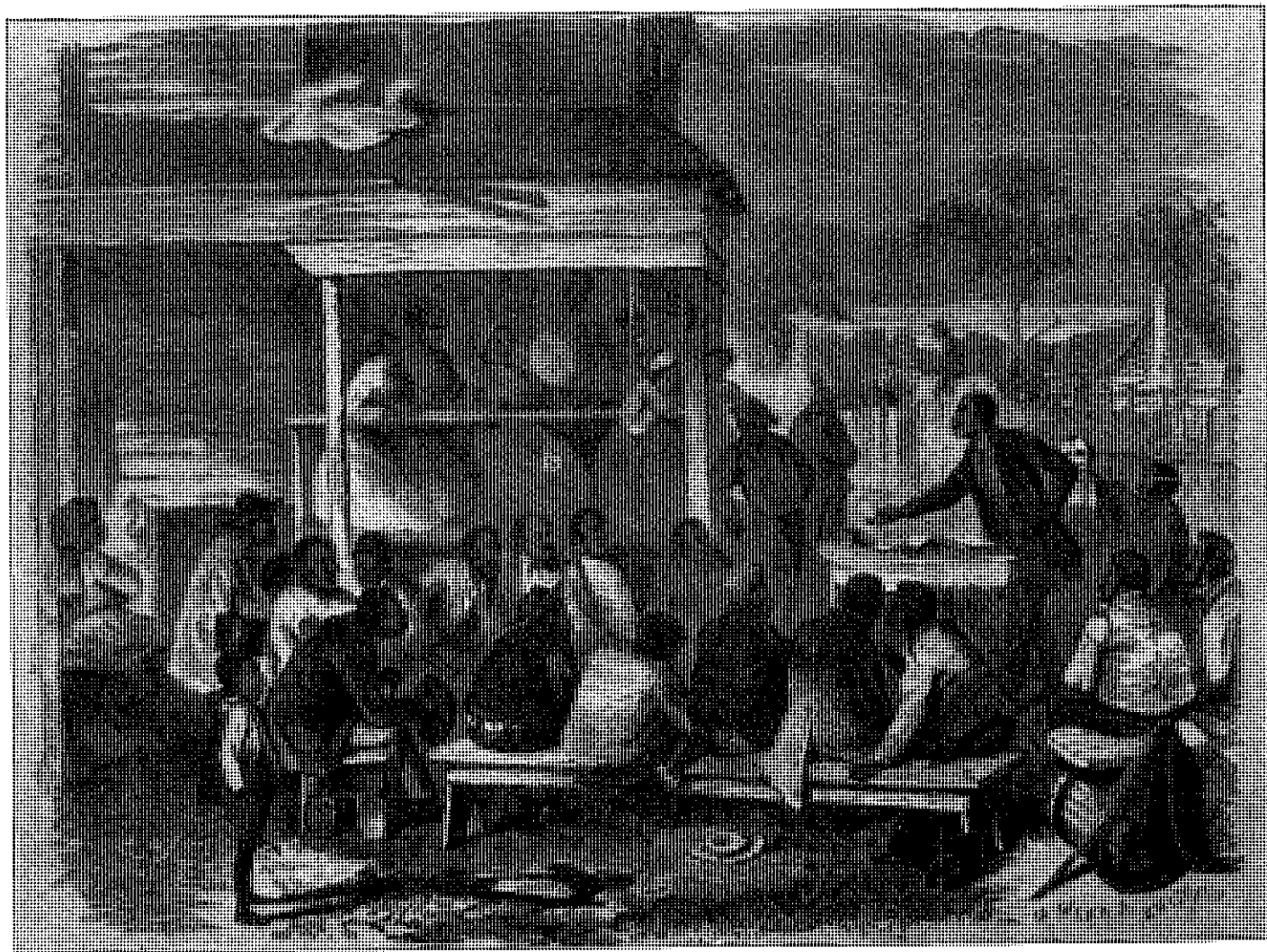
Radical Reconstruction The Republican mandate encouraged the Radicals to present an even bolder agenda, which became known as Radical Reconstruction. The centerpiece of this agenda, the Reconstruction Act of March 1867, passed over President Johnson's veto, and it divided the former confederate states into five military districts. Each state was required to hold a constitutional convention and to draft a new state constitution. African Americans, protected by federal troops, would participate in the conventions, and the new constitutions would include provisions for black suffrage. The act also required newly elected state legislatures to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment as a condition for their readmission to the Union. The guarantee of black voting rights seemed to many Americans to represent the final stage of sweeping political revolution.

Passage of the Reconstruction Act in March 1867 undercut the political and economic power of the planter class and fostered political activity among freedpeople. A massive and unprecedented movement of freedpeople into the political arena soon followed. Black southerners created Union (or Loyal) Leagues, which helped to build schools and churches. The leagues also organized militia companies to defend communities from white violence and called strikes and boycotts for better wages and fairer labor contracts. They even organized a number of local chapters on an interracial basis.

In the fall of 1867, southerners began electing delegates to the state constitutional conventions. Freedpeople participated in astonishing numbers. Women joined in local meetings to select candidates. Between 70 and 90 percent of eligible black males voted in every state in the South, and they elected 265 African Americans as delegates. For the first time in American history, blacks and whites met together to prepare constitutions under which they would be governed. The constitutions that they produced were among the most progressive in the nation. They created social-welfare agencies, reformed the criminal law, and more equitably distributed the burden of taxation. Most important, the constitutions guaranteed civil and political rights to both black and white Americans.

The intensity and extent of black political participation transformed southern politics. After 1867, the southern Republican party, with heavy support from African Americans, dominated all the new state governments. Although they represented an actual majority only in South Carolina's legislature, black Americans captured a total of six hundred legislative seats in southern states. Between 1868 and 1876, southern states elected fourteen black representatives to the U.S. Congress, two black U.S. senators, and six black lieutenant governors. In addition, thousands of African Americans served local southern communities as supervisors, voter registrars, aldermen, mayors, magistrates, sheriffs and deputies, postal clerks, members of local school boards, and justices of the peace.

White allies were essential to black political success. With African Americans in a majority only in South Carolina and Mississippi, the Republican Party needed to develop a coalition that included some white support. White "carpetbaggers"—northerners who traveled to the South with inexpensive suitcases made of carpet to participate in Reconstruction—were perhaps most visible, but the "scalawags," the native white southerners who supported the Republican Party, were most critical to Republican successes in the South. Most scalawags were poor yeoman farmers from the southern mountains who had long resented the large planters' monopoly on land, labor, and political power. Most of the Republican Party's southern adherents, then, were poor people, black and white, with a strong hostility to the planter aristocracy.



During their period in power—from two years in Tennessee to eight in South Carolina—the Republican governments made important economic and legal gains for black and white working people. They created a public school system where none had existed before. These schools, though segregated by race and better in the cities than in the countryside, were nonetheless a symbol of real progress. By 1876, about half of all southern children were enrolled in school—a vast increase, since few Southern communities had tax-supported public schools before the Civil War. Several Radical governments also passed laws banning racial discrimination in public accommodations, notably streetcars, restaurants, and hotels.

New laws helped landless agricultural laborers, both black and white. Radical Republicans passed lien laws that gave farm laborers a first claim on crops if their employers went bankrupt. And the repeal of the notorious Black Codes enabled some people to achieve their dream of land ownership. By 1876, 14,000 African American families in South Carolina (about one-

Electioneering in the South

A *Harper's Weekly* engraving captured freedpeople actively engaged in the 1868 election campaign. W. L. Sheppard, *Harper's Weekly*, July 25, 1868—American Social History Project.

seventh of the state's black population) had acquired homesteads, as had a handful of white families.

Freedpeople now negotiated a new kind of compromise with planters on how the land would be worked and who would reap its bounty. Rather than working in gangs for wages, individual families now tended small plots independently, renting land from planters for cash or, more commonly, for a fixed share of the year's crop. By 1870, "sharecropping" had become the dominant form of black agricultural labor, especially in the vast cotton lands. The system was a far cry from the freedpeople's first objective, which was to own land, and it became connected to a credit system that drastically reduced workers' economic freedom later in the century. But in the short run, sharecropping freed black workers from the highly regimented gang-labor system, allowing them a good deal of control and autonomy over their work, their time, and their family arrangements.

These very real economic and legal gains did not occur without cost. The southern Republican Party experienced constant tensions within the fragile coalition that was its base. Large increases in state spending on schools and social programs, combined with the ongoing promotion of transportation and industry, led to tremendous hikes in taxes. This tax burden fell increasingly not only on wealthy planters, but also on poor whites who owned little property. Revelations of political corruption among Republican officials (e.g., bribery of state officials by railroads looking for government aid) compounded the growing disaffection of white voters.

The End of Reconstruction The Republican Party's loss of political power and influence among its white constituents was clear in 1869, when Tennessee and Virginia became the first states to return to conservative Democratic control. This political retreat—a process that conservatives called "redemption"—could not have happened without a sharp change in northern public opinion and the movement of the northern Republican Party away from the original goals of Radical Reconstruction.

Ordinary northerners had only a limited commitment to the political and civil rights of African Americans, and after 1867, Democrats defeated Republicans in a number of northern states. Many northern politicians claimed that they were simply worn out by the long military battles of the Civil War and the political battles that followed. With the removal of the most overt signs of southern intransigence, their support for further change weakened. Waning enthusiasm for Reconstruction was evident in the failure to drive Andrew Johnson from office after his impeachment by the House of Representatives in 1868; the U.S. Senate failed by one vote to remove Johnson from office for his efforts to undermine Reconstruction.

Moderate Republican leaders who came to power in the late 1860s were willing to abandon southern blacks in order to cultivate northern business

support. That support depended on revitalizing the southern economy and retreating from the social and political experimentation that had defined Reconstruction's early years. Northern politicians were now prepared to leave the fate of the South, economically if not yet politically, in the hands of the former slave owners. Northern Republicans therefore began removing federal troops from the region, leaving large planters free to "redeem" the South as they saw fit.

The presence of black voters stood as the remaining major obstacle to the return of conservative rule. The large planters first tried to limit freedpeople's political activities by using economic power to threaten them with loss of employment. When economic pressure proved unsuccessful, the planters turned to more violent methods of intimidation. The Ku Klux Klan provided their most effective weapon. Founded by Confederate veterans in Tennessee in 1866, the Klan grew rapidly after the advent of Radical Reconstruction. Many of its rank-and-file members were poor men, but its leaders tended to be prominent planters and their sons. The Klan was in essence the paramilitary arm of the southern Democratic Party, systematically employing violence against freedpeople and their organizations. Klan night riders terrorized individual freedmen who refused to work for their employers or complained about low wages. They targeted black Civil War veterans and freedpeople who had succeeded in breaking out of the plantation system. Hooded Klansmen broke up meetings; threatened, shot, and lynched Radical and Union League leaders; and drove black voters away from the polls all across the South. Such targeted violence profoundly affected postwar politics in the South. Even though African Americans fought back valiantly, the Klan succeeded in destroying Republican organizations and demoralizing entire communities of freedpeople.



Political Theater

A ticket of admission to watch the Andrew Johnson impeachment proceedings. General Collections, Library of Congress.

In the face of such incredible violence, Congress finally acted. In 1869, it approved the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The amendment (ratified in 1870) stated that the states could not deny or abridge the right to vote “on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” (The notable absence of “sex” from this list kept women from voting.) It did allow numerous “nonracial” means of limiting suffrage; southern states would later introduce poll (voting) taxes and literacy tests to restrict black voting. Nevertheless, the Fifteenth Amendment demonstrated that moderate Republicans were not yet willing to stand by and allow their party in the South to be terrorized and destroyed by violence.

In March 1871, a series of grisly events shook the nation and galvanized Congress to take further action. In the small town of Meridian, Mississippi, Klansmen and their supporters had brutally murdered thirty African Americans. Congress appointed a committee to investigate. Aghast at the tales of carnage they heard, members of Congress passed a series of enforcement acts imposing harsh penalties on those who used organized terrorism for political purposes. The Ku Klux Klan Act, for example, made certain crimes against a citizen’s rights punishable under federal, not state, law. President Ulysses S. Grant, who had been a victorious Union army general before being elected president in 1868, declared martial law in parts of South Carolina and dispatched U.S. Army troops to the area in 1871. The U.S. attorney general indicted and tried hundreds of Klansmen in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Mississippi. The federal government had broken the Klan’s back, at least temporarily.

But 1872 marked the beginning of the end of the federal presence in the South. Groups similar to the Klan multiplied, using violence and intimidation to achieve Democratic victories. The Democrats assumed, correctly, as it turned out, that neither Congress nor the president would again act decisively to prevent political violence and fraud in the South.

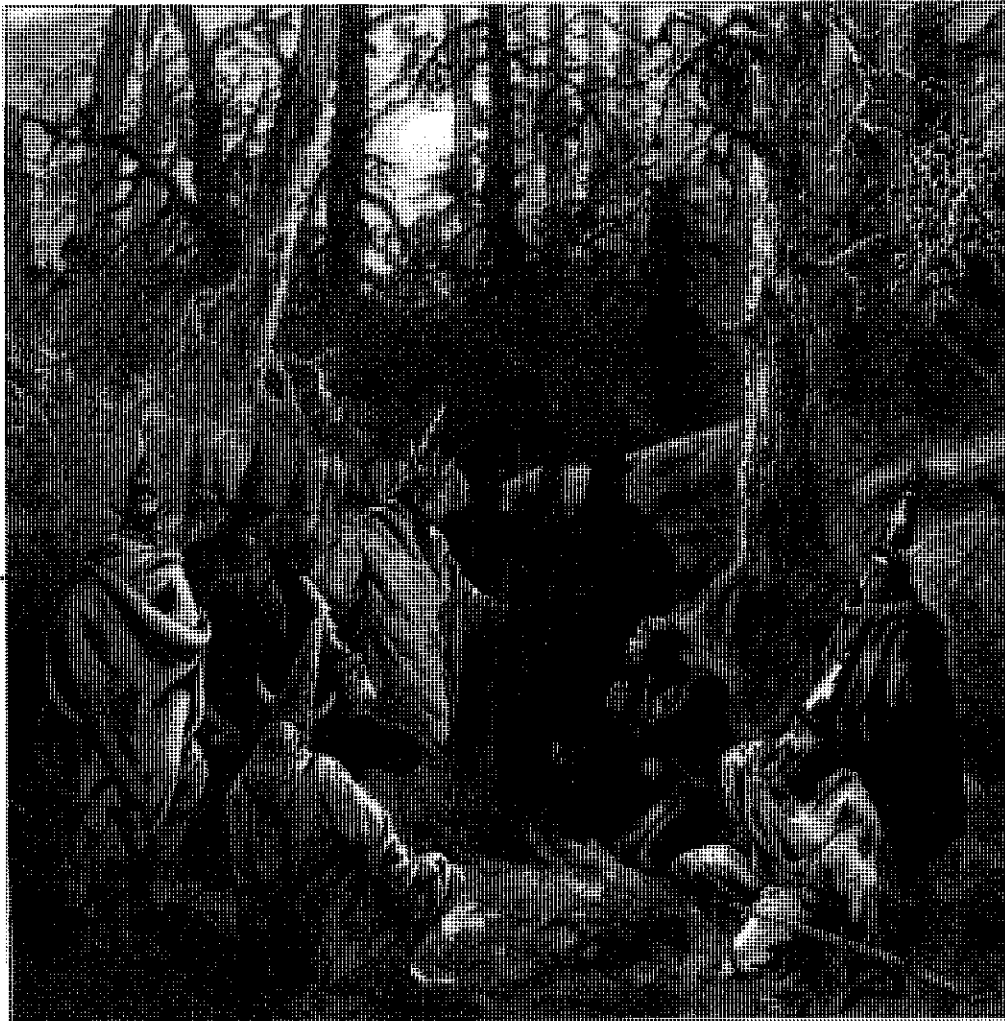
The economic panic of 1873, which launched a severe nationwide depression that would last more than five years, exacerbated the political retreat. Across the South, the depression drove many black landowners and renters back into the ranks of laborers, sharply reduced wage levels, and eventually helped to transform sharecropping into a system of peonage that bound laborers to creditors (landowners and merchants) through their debts. In the North, the depression encouraged businessmen to abandon the last remnants of Reconstruction. White working people, focusing their attention on immediate problems in their own workplaces and communities and still unconvinced by arguments for racial equality, also turned away from the radical Republicanism of the mid-1860s.

Only federal intervention could have prevented the renewed violence that reinstalled white Democratic regimes throughout the South. But President Grant’s administration, which had acted forcefully against the Klan

in 1871, turned down requests for federal troops in 1875. The North no longer seemed outraged by political violence directed against freedpeople.

Capitalizing on this weariness, Northern Democrats scored important victories in the 1874 elections and subsequently took control of the House of Representatives. Thus, beginning in 1875, Democrats increasingly challenged Republican dominance in Washington, D.C., as they rebuilt their party from the shambles of the war. The revived Democratic Party united most of the South, and it attracted a growing number of workingmen in northern industrial areas by attacking the increasing concentration of wealth and corruption in politics.

In the 1876 presidential election, the Democrats seemed on the verge of victory. Their candidate, Samuel J. Tilden, captured a majority of the popular vote and appeared to have won in the electoral college as well. But Republicans, backing Rutherford B. Hayes, disputed the returns in Louisiana, South Carolina, and Florida and threw the election into question. Nearly three months of wrangling and intrigue followed, accompanied



Terror

Members of the Ku Klux Klan of Moore City, North Carolina, prepare to execute a victim in August 1871. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, October 7, 1871 — American Social History Project.

not only by growing panic in the business community, but also by widespread fear of renewed war between North and South.

In late February 1877, only a few weeks before the new president was to be inaugurated, pressure from businessmen and politicians forced a resolution to the conflict. In the Compromise of 1877, the Democrats yielded the presidency to Hayes. In exchange, they received a share of federal appointments (including the appointment of at least one southerner to Hayes's cabinet), federal assistance to southern railroads, and the by then largely symbolic final removal of federal troops from the southern states. The agreement cleared the way for the removal of African Americans from national and local politics and the collapse of the Republican Party in the South. A key figure in securing the compromise was the Democratic iron magnate Abram Hewitt. A journalist described Hewitt as a man "with one hand upon his heart and the other hand in his pocket." Hewitt, speaking for himself and for other businessmen who were coming to believe that they could best achieve their goals by supporting both parties, announced, "I would prefer four years of Hayes's administration to four years of civil war." The compromise to resolve the disputed election of 1876 thus brought the end of Reconstruction and what one historian has aptly dubbed "reunion and reaction."

The Centennial and the Other America

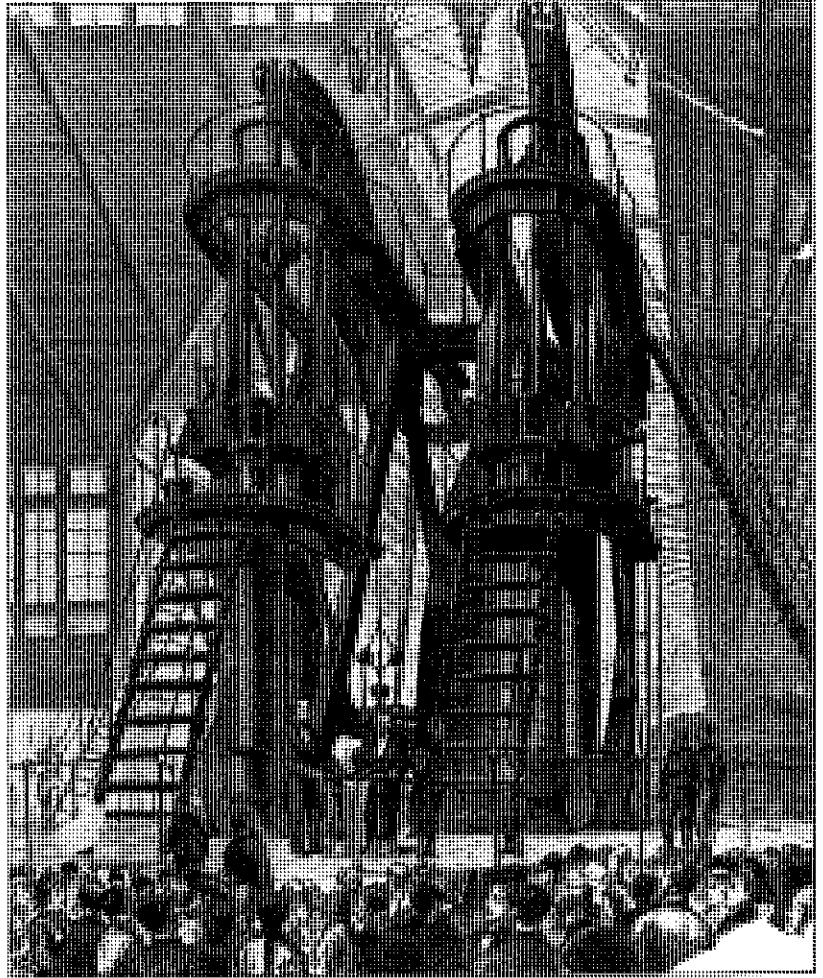
The year that resulted in the hotly contested presidential election also marked a venerable anniversary for the United States that seemingly provided an opportunity for celebration. The republic had survived for a century since declaring its independence from England. Although only a decade had passed since the end of the bloody Civil War, some Americans believed that their country deserved a spectacular birthday party—a centennial celebration that would display the nation's achievements in industry, science, agriculture, and the arts. Designed to meet these heady expectations, the Centennial Exposition opened on 450 expansive acres in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park on May 10, 1876. Ten million people, from every state and more than thirty countries, flocked to the party over the next six months.

The major exhibition buildings were gigantic. In this still largely rural nation, Agricultural Hall covered more than ten acres. Inside, visitors marveled at the latest mowing and reaping machines. But the centerpiece of the Exposition was the 700-ton, 40-foot-high Corliss Double Walking-Beam Engine, which generated 1,400 horsepower, enough to drive all the other machines in the enormous hall. Powered by a steam boiler in an adjacent building and running almost silently, the engine was an awesome creation, representing in the beauty of its motion, design, and power the very essence of the new industrial age.

Some Americans, however, were less enthralled by the sights, grandeur, pomp, and sense of marvel of the Centennial Exposition. They viewed it less as a celebration of the nation's achievements than as a diversion from hard and bitter daily reality. Neglected and sometimes stifled by the lavish festivities, these "other Americans" — women, African Americans, American Indians, and workers — raised issues that would resonate far into the future.

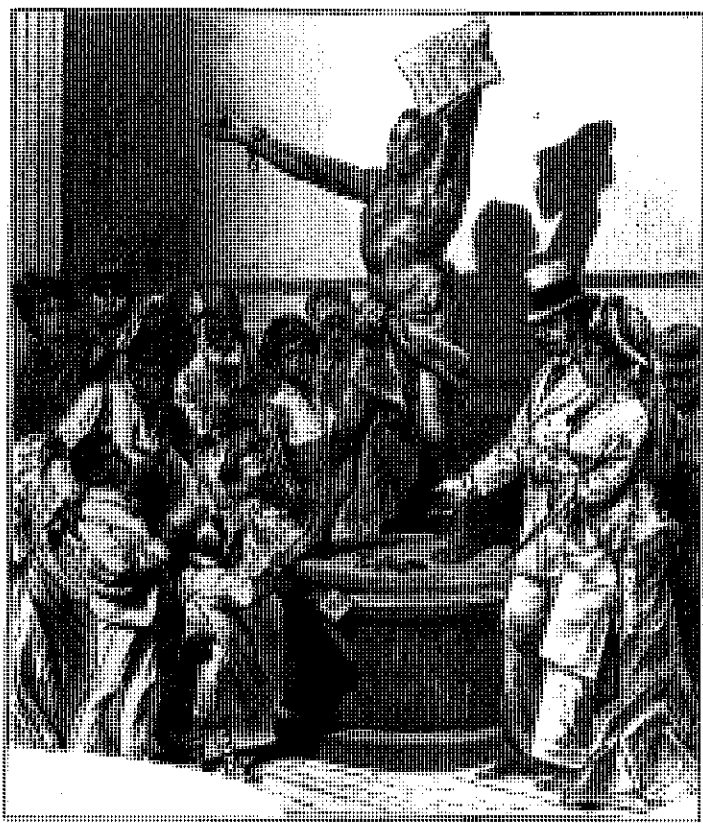
The Centennial's Women's Pavilion, for example, was fraught with division. Paid for with contributions from across the country, the pavilion presented visitors with crafts, inventions, and institutions established and conducted by women. But to many observers, the displays seemed no more than curiosities, a glimpse of a quaint and separate world. The National Woman's Suffrage Association — as if announcing the division between the pavilion planners who espoused the private, "domestic" sphere and the advocates who demanded a wider role for women in American society — held its founding meeting in New York City on the same day that the Women's Pavilion opened in Philadelphia. And at the Centennial's July Fourth ceremonies, feminists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony disrupted the proceedings to read a Woman's Declaration of Independence. "We cannot forget, even in this glad hour," it proclaimed "that while all men of every race, and clime, and condition, have been invested with the full rights of citizenship under our hospitable flag, all women still suffer the degradation of disfranchisement."

But if women's participation was limited, that of African Americans was virtually nonexistent. African American women, who had helped to raise funds for the Centennial, found no place in the Women's Pavilion. The crews that constructed the Centennial buildings included no black workers, and visitors saw African Americans doing only menial tasks or performing in the Southern Restaurant, where (as a guidebook described it) "a band of old-time plantation 'darkies' . . . sing their quaint melodies and strum the banjo." This pervasive racism manifested itself again during the Centennial's opening ceremonies. Frederick Douglass — escaped slave, militant aboli-



The Great Corliss Engine

The Corliss Engine was one of the main attractions when the Centennial Exposition opened in May 1876. President Ulysses Grant and Emperor Dom Pedro II of Brazil ventured into Machinery Hall to see the largest steam engine in the world start up (as depicted in this illustration). Moments later, hundreds of machines sprang into motion throughout the fairgrounds, powered by the 1,400-horsepower giant. The Corliss Engine served as a symbol of the fair — as an object of national pride, exemplifying the triumph of industrialism over craft production. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, May 20, 1876 — American Social History Project.



The Freed Slave

African Americans were generally unwelcome at the 1876 Centennial Exposition. But one exhibit attracted the interest of black visitors to the Philadelphia fairgrounds: a statue by an Austrian sculptor commemorating emancipation. Fernando Miranda, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, August 5, 1876 — American Social History Project.

tionist, and acknowledged leader of the nation's African Americans—had been invited to sit on the opening-day speakers' platform, although he was not given an opportunity to speak. A policeman, convinced that no black man belonged among the invited dignitaries, barred Douglass's way until a U.S. senator finally intervened on his behalf.

Even America's Indian population played a more pronounced—if not more popular—role than that of African Americans. The Smithsonian Institution had mounted a massive Centennial exhibit of Indian artifacts, replete with pottery, tepees, totem poles, and life-size costumed mannequins. But in July 1876, news reached the Centennial that belied this notion of Indians as a “museum people”: the military victory of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors at the Battle of Little Big Horn in Dakota Territory, where General George Custer and more than 200 U.S. Army soldiers perished. Many white visitors viewing the material

artifacts of destroyed Indian cultures shared the feelings of novelist William Dean Howells, who wrote, “The red man, as he appears in effigy and in photograph in this collection, is a hideous demon, whose malign traits can hardly inspire any emotion softer than abhorrence.”

The Great Uprising of Labor

Some employers arranged excursions to the Centennial as a way of easing workers' growing discontent with the ravages of industrial capitalism. Railroad and coal-mining firms enthusiastically organized such trips, hoping that they would soothe the bitterness Irish mining families felt over the suppression of the recent “Long Strike” in eastern Pennsylvania and the destruction of their union. The Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company sent 1,100 men, women, and children from the Pennsylvania mines on an all-expense-paid trip to the Centennial. But the free trips could not conceal the deep—often bloody—rifts between capital and labor. As the miners visited the exposition in the spring of 1876, twenty fellow miners charged with being members of a secret, prolabor society called the Molly Maguires were being tried, found guilty of murder, and sentenced to death in a Schuylkill County courtroom less than 100 miles away.

A much greater challenge to the vision of industrial progress hallowed by the Centennial developed just a few short months later. A massive

railroad strike, the first truly national strike in the country's history, symbolized a turning point in U.S. history. Although the strike failed in the short run, it marked the birth of a working-class movement that was far broader and more powerful than anything seen before.

"The Great Uprising" of 1877, as the press called it, was brought on by the hard times of the 1873 depression, then in its fourth year. Railroad workers had suffered one wage reduction after another since the onset of the depression. On July 16, 1877, Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) workers in Martinsburg, West Virginia, staged a spontaneous strike in response to yet another wage cut. Three days later, as the strike intensified, President Rutherford B. Hayes ordered federal troops into West Virginia to protect the B&O and the nation from "insurrection."

The use of federal troops in a domestic labor dispute incited popular anger across the country. In Baltimore, the Maryland state militia fired on huge crowds of workers, leaving eleven dead and forty wounded. Work stoppages rapidly spread north and west along the railroad lines to Pennsyl-



July 22, 1877

The scorched interior of the Pennsylvania Railroad upper roundhouse the day after the battle between Philadelphia militia and Pittsburgh strikers. S. V. Albee, *The Railroad War* — Paul Dickson Collection.

vania, where in Pittsburgh, the strike reached its most dramatic climax. Because many Pittsburgh citizens sympathized with the railroad workers, the Pennsylvania Railroad sought help from the state militia, based in Philadelphia. But when the troops reached Pittsburgh on July 21, 1877, a large and angry crowd of strikers and sympathizers met them. Unnerved by the reception, the soldiers suddenly thrust their bayonets. Crowd members threw rocks, and the troops answered with a volley of rifle fire, killing twenty Pittsburgh citizens, including a woman and three small children.

News of the deaths spread quickly. Pittsburgh residents, including thousands of workers from nearby mills, mines, and factories, converged on the Pennsylvania Railroad yards. By dawn, they had set fire to the railroad roundhouse, where the militiamen had retreated. Twenty more Pittsburgh residents and five soldiers lay dead at the end of the ensuing gun battle.

In the next few days, the strike spread across the Midwest. Workers—skilled and unskilled—took over entire towns, shutting down work until employers met their demands. The same railroad and telegraph lines that had unified the nation and laid the groundwork for the full emergence of industrial capitalism now linked and unified workers' protests. Without any central organization (most national unions were defunct as a result of the depression), the conflict spawned local committees, many led by radicals, that provided unity and direction to the strike. In Chicago, for example, the conflict quickly became a citywide general strike. Open class warfare featured running battles between police and strikers and vigilante groups among businessmen and professionals mobilized against the workers. In St. Louis, thousands of workers participated in a general strike that, although largely peaceful, shut down virtually all of the city's industries while government officials fled. Black workers took an active role in that strike, closing down canneries and docks. When an African American steamboat worker, addressing a crowd of white workers, asked, "Will you stand to us regardless of color?" the crowd responded, "We will! We will! We will!" Racism prevailed in other strikes, however, particularly in the Far West. In San Francisco, a crowd that had gathered to discuss strike action ended up rampaging through the city's Chinese neighborhoods, killing several residents and burning buildings.

Conclusion: The Continuing Struggle over Who Built America and Who Deserves Its Rewards

Participants in the Great Uprising of 1877 directed their anger mainly against the railroads and the unchecked corporate power they typified, not against capitalism as a whole. Working people in 1877 were seeking to set limits on the system's unbridled economic power and (like the former slave Cyrus in 1865) to assert workers' right to an equitable share of the economic



bounty they helped to produce. Despite the nationwide mobilization of workers, the strikers failed in the face of the massive power of the railroads and their allies in state and national government. But no matter which side Americans had supported in the strike, few who surveyed the death and destruction left in its wake could find solace—let alone take pride—in the memory of the unmitigated industrial progress that had been celebrated at the Centennial a short year before.

The Great Uprising demonstrated that the United States was not immune to the class-based conflict that had plagued Europe since the birth of industrial capitalism. That conflict would intensify at critical moments over the coming years, but it would never recur in quite the way it had in the summer of 1877. The chapters that follow detail the changing divisions that dominated American life in the years after the end of Reconstruction and the great railroad strike. First and foremost among these divisions was the conflict between capital and labor. But the chapters also chronicle the struggles of women, African Americans, American Indians, and European, Latino, Asian, and Caribbean immigrants as they attempted to achieve

1876 — *On Guard*

Even as Americans celebrated the Centennial, they remained uneasy about the nation's future. In 1876, few could ignore the effects of three years of economic depression. But as this Currier and Ives print indicated, many Americans blamed the nation's problems on agitators and ideas from abroad. Currier and Ives, 1876, lithograph — Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

greater rights and inclusion in American society. Working people repeatedly asserted their right to share in what they perceived as the egalitarian promise of the American Revolution. These claims to a “republican” heritage and invocations of working for the common good were often counterpoised against an emphasis on the sanctity of private property and an acquisitive individualism espoused by wealthy elites and their publicists. The struggles between these contrasting world views were played out in an international arena increasingly dominated by the United States but also fundamentally shaped by the American people’s experience of war, economic dislocation, and ideological conflict. In the process, working people like Cyrus who “helped build” America would repeatedly ask whether they would receive an equal share of its bounty.