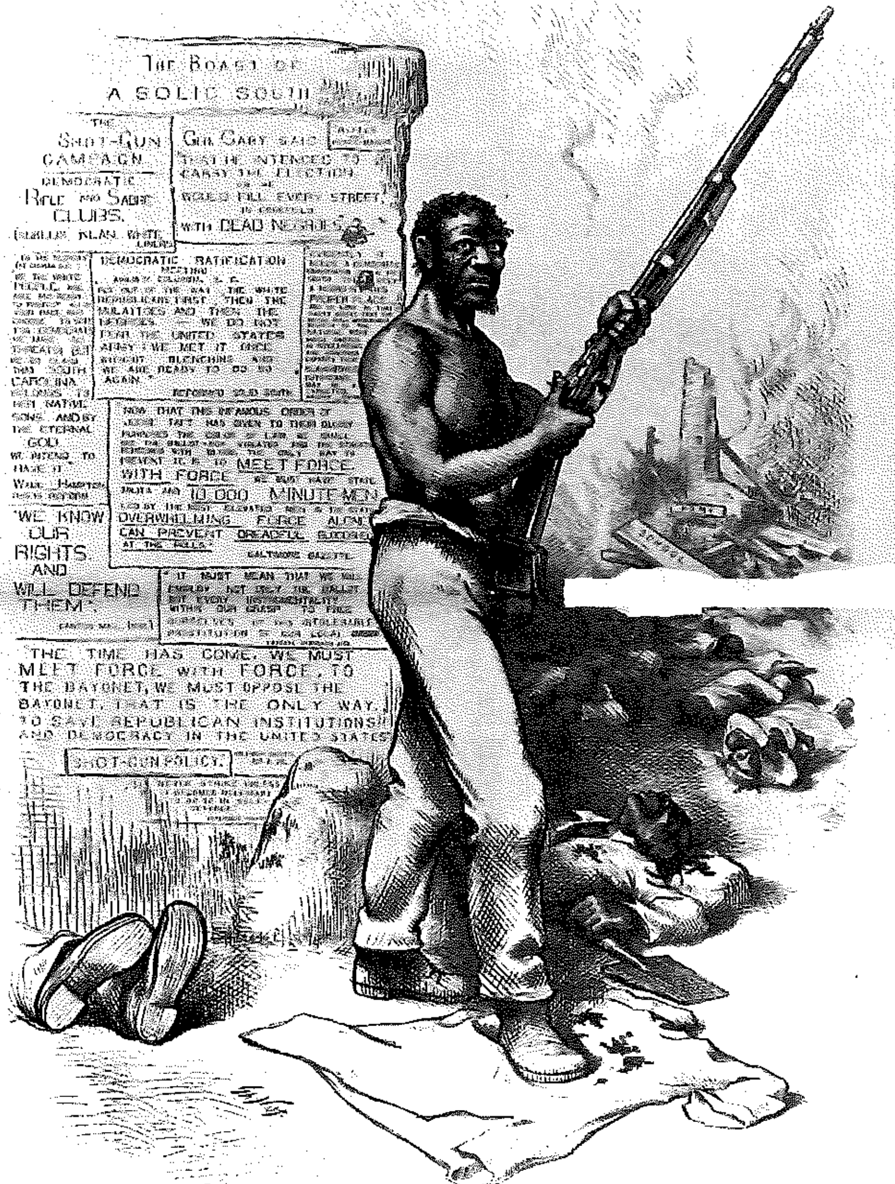
12

Reconstructing the Nation

1865–1877



The Beginnings of Reconstruction

African Americans Build New Lives After Emancipation

Freedpeople Explore the Meaning of Freedom

Freedpeople Need Votes and Land

The Drama of Reconstruction Unfolds

President Johnson Versus Congress

The Black Codes

Radical Reconstruction

African Americans Become a Force in Southern Politics

Republican Party Activism in the South

The End of Reconstruction

Southern Democrats and the Klan "Redeem" the South

The Final Assault on Reconstruction

Conclusion: Still Searching for Freedom

IN 1871, ABRAM COLBY, a former slave and an elected Republican representative in the Georgia legislature, testified before a joint congressional committee investigating the dramatic upsurge of racial violence against African Americans in the years following the Civil War. Colby told the senators and representatives that in October 1869, thirty members of the Ku Klux Klan had broken into his house and — in front of his wife, mother, and young daughter — dragged him out of bed. They "took me to the woods and whipped me three hours or more and left me for dead," Colby testified, adding that he received this punishment because he had demanded that the army protect freed slaves' personal safety and right to vote. When the committee members asked him to describe his assailants, Colby noted, "Some are first-class men in our town. One is a lawyer, one a doctor, and some are farmers." Colby never recovered from his injuries.

Abram Colby's harrowing experience illustrates the failures as well as the successes that were inherent in the task of rebuilding the nation following the Civil War: vigilante violence, often fatal conflict over the right of African American men to vote, courageous African American insistence on self-determination and participation in the political process, and federal intervention in the South to help assure freedpeople's rights. The Union victory in April 1865 had settled two major debates but left everything else in doubt. The United States of America was preserved; slavery was dead, and African Americans were now free. But who would hold and exercise economic and political power in the postwar South? What kind of labor system would replace slavery? Who would lead the South politically? What would freedom mean for the four million former slaves? Answers to these questions were widely contested and would emerge only after two decades of

He Wants a Change, Too

In the wake of the July 4, 1876, massacre in Hamburg, South Carolina (when local armed whites fired on outnumbered black militiamen who were participating in an Independence Day celebration, murdering five), Thomas Nast's cartoon was unusual in promoting armed self-defense by freedpeople. Thomas Nast, *Harper's Weekly*, October 28, 1876 — American Social History Project.

intense political and social struggle, a struggle that contemporaries hopefully called Reconstruction.

Racial conflicts in the former Confederacy continued to disrupt efforts at reunification, and a protracted financial crisis dashed hopes for a quick economic recovery. In response, northern political and business leaders focused their efforts on revitalizing the economy through reconciliation between North and South rather than protecting racial advancement in either region. Thus, as the nation approached its one-hundredth anniversary, the old planter aristocracy—under the protection of a revived Democratic Party—returned to power, controlling a nonslave but still exploitative system of agricultural labor.

The failure of Reconstruction to transform southern race relations shaped the nation as a whole. Still, it was freedpeople who paid the highest price. Outgunned, both figuratively and literally, they were left with few alternatives. Yet they did not give up. Those who remained in the South established a dense network of autonomous community-based institutions, including black schools, churches, and businesses, to keep their democratic hopes alive within an oppressive and racist system.

The Beginnings of Reconstruction

Reconstruction began not in 1865, but in the midst of the Civil War itself. Early in the war, the Union Army quickly captured and occupied several areas in the deep South, including the Sea Islands off of the South Carolina coast and much of southern Louisiana and the key port city of New Orleans. Slavery rapidly disintegrated in these areas under Union Army control. Yet the occupation by the Union Army seemed to fuel rather than calm sectional and racial tensions. Union troops in New Orleans, for example, under the command of General Benjamin Butler, served as a constant irritant to local whites; and Confederate women as well as men repeatedly harassed the soldiers. At the same time, the presence of federal troops in the city raised the expectations of African Americans, who assumed that Union forces would not only free and protect them, but also assure their rights as citizens. The federal troops met neither the worst fears of the Confederates nor the best hopes of the African Americans.

As in other southern cities, blacks in New Orleans faced segregation in nearly all public accommodations—theaters, restaurants, inns, streetcars, railroads, schools, and churches. For instance, African Americans were forced to ride only in streetcars that were marked with a black star. They were abused and harassed for demanding to be treated as equals or simply for failing to defer to whites by giving way on sidewalks, doffing their hats, and lowering their eyes. Because New Orleans had a large population of African Americans who had been free and had achieved some measure of

Disrespecting the Dead
In the aftermath of the New Orleans riots, coverage in the illustrated press was critical of the city's police, including their "inhuman conduct" toward the victims of the violence. *Harper's Weekly*, August 25, 1866 — American Social History Project.

economic autonomy even before the Civil War, freedpeople in that city were quick to challenge such vestiges of slavery. In 1865, for instance, the local black newspaper, the *New Orleans Tribune*, published calls for direct action against segregated streetcars: "Let every colored citizen of New Orleans, on and after the fifteenth of August, enter into any car . . . and if ordered out— take a seat, and if afterwards ejected, sue the company." When open seating on the streetcars was finally achieved in 1867, the newspaper turned its attention to public schools and other segregated institutions.

Such challenges to southern racial norms occurred in many cities after the defeat of the Confederacy. African Americans often assumed that the presence of Union troops and federal officials would assure their protection as they asserted their humanity and sought equal rights under the law. Yet even as northern newspapers derided the "rebel rabble," outraged by Confederates' continued defiance, many white Union soldiers and officials stationed in the South were ambivalent about, or outright opposed to, blacks' pursuit of racial equality. In Memphis and New Orleans, local authorities stood by or actively participated as whites slaughtered blacks in orgies of racist violence.

Developments in New Orleans, Memphis, and other southern cities reflected both the promise and the limits of Reconstruction. Following a brutal civil war, no actions by individuals, groups, or the government could restore the nation to daily life as Americans remembered it. African Americans avidly sought change, hoping to gain the economic opportunities, political rights, and personal autonomy that had been denied them under slavery. Most southern whites hoped instead for a return to traditional ways. Although recognizing that slavery was gone, they nonetheless imagined a South in which whites regained economic, political, and social power and blacks remained subordinate in status and limited to manual labor. Among northern whites, many supported expanding rights for blacks in the

immediate aftermath of war, in part to ensure the resurrection of the southern economy. Certainly, the Republican Party hoped to benefit at the polls from the surge of African Americans into electoral politics. Indeed, some Republican leaders viewed the punishment of Confederate leaders and the enhancement of black rights as going hand in hand. Still, their commitment to racial advancement generally fell well short of full equality.

African Americans Build New Lives After Emancipation

When the Civil War ended with the Confederacy's defeat and the abolition of slavery, the future seemed frighteningly uncertain to most Americans. Yet newly emancipated African Americans could savor the taste of freedom on plantations and in towns and cities across the South. Most viewed land and political participation as the two most important foundations for freedom, but they also sought to reunite families, legalize marriages, establish churches, gain an education, and earn a decent wage.

Freedpeople Explore the Meaning of Freedom The meaning of freedom could be as specific and personal as the decision to take a new name or the ability to dress as one pleased, or it could take the form of refusing to be deferential to one's former owner. A Charleston, South Carolina, planter complained: "It is impossible to describe the condition of the city—It is so unlike anything we could imagine—Negroes shoving white persons off the walk—Negro women drest in the most outre style, all with veils and parasols, for which they have an especial fancy." In Richmond, Virginia, freedpeople held meetings without securing whites' permission. They also walked in Capitol Square, an area that had previously been restricted to whites, refusing to give up the sidewalks when whites approached. In countless ways, large and small, freedpeople demonstrated that the end of slavery meant the end of petty control by whites.

Freedom also meant the ability to reunite families. Thousands of freed slaves set out on searches for loved ones who had been sold away or displaced during the war's upheavals. A northern correspondent reported meeting a middle-aged ex-slave—"plodding along, staff in hand, and apparently very footsore and tired"—who had walked six hundred miles in search of his wife and children. As one government official noted, for many ex-slaves, "the work of emancipation was incomplete until the families which had been dispersed by slavery were reunited." Emancipation also made it possible for thousands of couples to formalize long-standing relationships. People who had been unable to marry before the war because of separation or their masters' objections, as well as those who had been allowed to "marry" only informally, sought out northern missionaries and Union officers to officially register and solemnize their unions. And many

"There Was Never Any Pay-day for the Negroes": Jourdon Anderson Demands Wages

For newly emancipated slaves, securing their liberty meant finding the means of support to obtain land or otherwise benefit from their own labor, as Jourdon Anderson made clear in this 1865 letter to his former owner. He addressed Major Anderson from Ohio, where he had secured good wages for himself and schooling for his children.

Sir: I got your letter and was glad to find you had not forgotten Jourdon, and that you wanted me to come back and live with you again, promising to do better for me than anybody else can. . . .

I want to know particularly what the good chance is you propose to give me. I am doing tolerably well here; I get $25 a month, with victuals and clothing; have a comfortable home for Mandy, —the folks here call her Mrs. Anderson), —and the children—Milly, Jane and Grundy—go to school and are learning well; the teacher says Grundy has a head for a preacher. They go to Sunday-School, and Mandy and me attend church regularly. . . . Now, if you will write and say what wages you will give me, I will be better able to decide whether it would be to my advantage to move back again.

As to my freedom, which you say I can have, there is nothing to be gained on that score, as I got my free papers in 1864 from the Provost-Marshal-General of the Department of Nashville. Mandy says she would be afraid to go back without some proof that you are sincerely disposed to treat us justly and kindly; and we have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you. . . . I served you faithfully for thirty-two years and Mandy twenty years. At twenty-five dollars a month for me, and two dollars a week for Mandy, our earnings would amount to eleven thousand six hundred and eighty dollars. Add to this the interest for the time our wages has been kept back and deduct what you paid for our clothing and three doctor's visits to me, and pulling a tooth for Mandy, and the balance will show what we are in justice entitled to. . . . Here I draw my wages every Saturday night, but in Tennessee there was never any pay-day for the Negroes any more than for the horses and cows. Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those who defraud the laborer of his hire.

In answering this letter please state if there would be any safety for my Milly and Jane, who are now grown up and both good-looking girls. You know how it was with Matilda and Catherine. I would rather stay here and starve, and die if it comes to that, than have my girls brought to shame by the violence and wickedness of their young masters.

Reprinted in Lydia Maria Child, *The Freedmen's Book* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1865), 265–267.

children who had lost their parents during the war were now legally adopted by relatives or friends.

The postwar years also saw a tremendous upsurge in African American demands for education. Over 90 percent of black adults in the South were illiterate in 1860, and idealism and pragmatism now fueled their desire to secure an education. Some wanted to read "the word of God" on their own. Others wanted to read and do sums to protect themselves in a world of wage labor and signed contracts. In Savannah, a large number of black residents, led by a group of ministers, formed the Savannah Education Association in December 1864. Within three months, the association had raised nearly $1,000 and had hired 15 black teachers, who began their work with 600 pupils. Freedpeople built and maintained schools and hired black teachers all across the South in 1865 and 1866. Drawing on their own scarce resources and with help from northern missionary groups and the federal government, African Americans converted some places that symbolized the oppression of slavery—such as the old slave markets in New Orleans and Savannah—into schoolhouses.

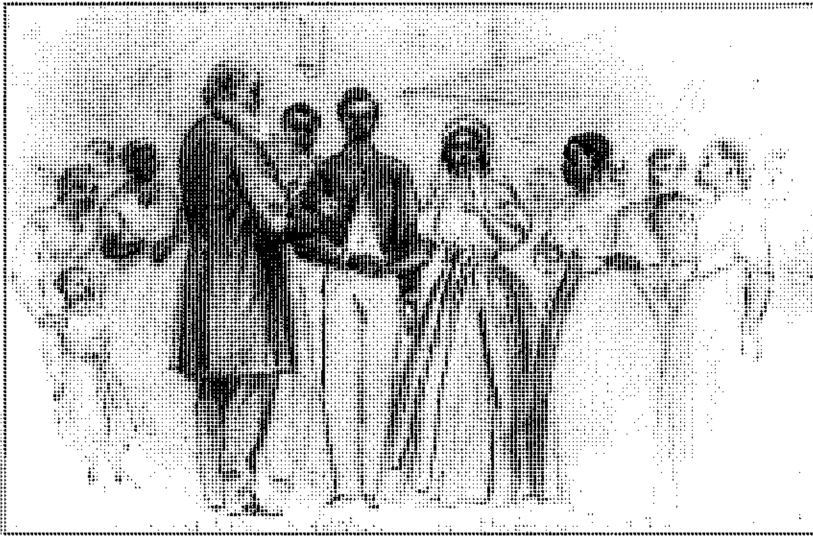
"The negroes migrate to Louisiana and Texas in search of paying labor."

Traveling

African Americans exercised their new freedom in many ways; one of them was traveling where and when they chose. This engraving was published in Edward King's *The Great South*, one of many postwar surveys of southern life. Northerners were curious to learn about the region that they had defeated in war. (J. Wells Champney [W. L. Sheppard, del.]), Edward King, *The Great South* . . . (1875) — American Social History Project.

Freedpeople also quickly established churches that were independent of white control. Religion had been a fundamental institution before the war, but most slaves had been forced to worship in biracial churches headed by white preachers. Freedpeople now challenged white domination of biracial congregations and even replaced white preachers with black ones, as did the African American members of the Front Street Methodist Church in Wilmington, North Carolina, early in 1865. When such efforts failed, as they frequently did, many black congregants pooled meager resources to construct new church buildings as permanent symbols of their desire to practice their religion as they chose. The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church was the most famous of these independent churches. But Baptist churches attracted the largest number of freedpeople after the war, mainly because this denomination's decentralized, democratic structure allowed for popular ministers, enthusiastic worship services, and local control of church affairs. "The Ebony preacher who promises perfect independence from White control and directions carries the colored heart at once," observed an officer of the American Missionary Association. The independent black church rapidly became the moral and cultural center of African American life.

But maintaining black freedom demanded continual struggle, especially in rural areas, which were still dominated by whites. On Henry



Defying Stereotypes
After drawing a military wedding scene in Vicksburg, Mississippi, in June 1866, which subsequently was reproduced as an engraving in *Harper's Weekly*, pictorial journalist Alfred Waud showed the sketch to a local white "lady." Her immediate response was disbelief: "the decent appearance of the party and the taste shown in the bride's apparel [was] exaggerated for the sake of appearances." This, Waud assured the incredulous woman and *Harper's Weekly's* readers in general, "was not the case; the scene is given just as it appeared." Alfred R. Waud, *Marriage of a Colored Soldier at Vicksburg by Chaplain Warren of the Freedmen's Bureau*, c. June 1866 — The Historic New Orleans Collection, accession no. 1965.71.

Watson's plantation in Alabama, for example, workers had chosen to remain on the plantation after emancipation, but they quit work in June 1865. Watson responded in January 1866 by proposing a harsh labor contract that set up strict work rules and limited mobility. But the freedpeople rejected this contract in a "most defiant manner." In disgust, Watson rented the plantation to his overseer, who leased individual plots to freed families.

That was not the only way in which Watson's workers demonstrated their interpretation of freedom. "The women," Watson complained in 1865, "say that they never mean to do any more outdoor work, that white men support their wives, and they mean that their husbands shall support them." All over the South, black women both embraced public efforts to gain a political voice and sought to move out of field labor and domestic service to concentrate on their own familial duties. Those who were employed in white households also tried to remove themselves from the dangers of sexual abuse that came with such employment. To black women, these were crucial efforts to erase remnants of their slave past, but Watson saw them only as reflections of a desire to be "idle."

Other whites, long accustomed to African American subservience, were enraged by the new assertiveness among blacks and resorted to violence to punish it. When, in the course of a dispute, an Arkansas ex-slave told her former white mistress, "I am as free as you, madam," the white woman struck her. Later that day, learning that a "negro had sauced his wife," the planter horsewhipped the black woman. A North Carolina planter shot an employee, his former slave, after a quarrel over food. He later justified the murder by noting that the freedman's "language and manner became insolent." Such incidents were symptoms of the deep conflict that was generated between black and white Southerners by the lack of agreement on the meaning of emancipation, particularly in relation to political and economic freedoms.

Freedpeople Need Votes and Land To ensure that emancipation meant lasting change, southern blacks needed the power that was invested in the ballot and the independence that came with property ownership. Though in certain ways, this vision of political and economic independence echoed the republican ideals that many white Americans embraced, freedpeople imagined their advancement in collective as well as individual terms.

"It's Slavery Over Again": Martin Delany Urges Black Self-Determination

In this speech, delivered in the summer of 1865 to the freedpeople of the South Carolina Sea Islands, Martin R. Delany, a longtime black abolitionist, Union Army officer, and now a federal official, condemns the northerners who purchased cotton plantations in the area, and exhorts resident African Americans to resist wage labor. Delany's words were recorded by Alexander Whyte, Jr., a white Union Army officer who thought Delany's views too radical.

I came to talk to you in plain words so as you can understand how to throw open the gates of oppression and let the captive free—In this state there are [hundreds of thousands] of able, intelligent, honorable negroes, not an inferior race, mind you, who are ready to protect their liberty. The matter is in your own hands. . . . I want to tell you one thing: Do you know that if it was not for the black man this war never would have been brought to a close with success to the Union, and the liberty of your race . . . ? I want you to understand that. Do you know it? Do you know it? Do you know it? (Cries of "Yes! Yes! Yes!") They can't get along without you. [Yet,] yankees from the North . . . come down here to drive you as much as ever. It's slavery over again: northern, universal U.S. slavery. But they must keep their clamps off. . . . They don't pay you enough. I see too many of you are dressed in rags and shoeless. These yankees talk smooth to you, oh, yes! Their tongue rolls just like a drum. (Laughter.) But it's slavery over again as much as ever it was.

Herbert G. Gutman Archive, American Social History Project.

Consequently, preachers, along with schoolteachers and ex-soldiers, emerged as community leaders, and churches often housed political meetings.

Religion and politics mixed easily in the first years after the war. In Richmond, Virginia, for example, African American men, women, and children met at the 4,000-seat African Baptist Church to discuss proposals to be presented to the 1867 state constitutional convention. In decisions made by standing votes or voice votes, women had their opinions counted alongside men. In Raleigh, North Carolina, a Freedmen's Convention was held at the AME church in 1865. Participants elected a black preacher from the North as their chairman and petitioned the white legislators to assist in the "education for our children," "protection for our family relations," and "the reunion of families which have long been broken up by war or by the operations of slavery."

African Americans held dozens of such conventions, meetings, and rallies across the South in 1865 and 1866. They raised demands for full civil equality and called for universal manhood suffrage, which, in the words of one delegate, was "an essential and inseparable element of self-government."

Plowing in South Carolina
An 1866 engraving portrayed a freedman as a farmer cultivating his homestead. For most mid-nineteenth-century Americans, the image symbolized honesty, responsibility, and independence. James E. Taylor, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, October 29, 1866 — American Social History Project.

In some communities, African Americans organized militia companies and "justice committees" as a way of both embracing their responsibilities and claiming their rights as American citizens. The statewide freedmen's conventions and the communitywide attempts to craft a collective agenda were the first steps that ex-slaves took toward the independent political activity that characterized the era of Reconstruction.

Freedpeople were equally committed to obtaining land. They realized that without ownership of property, they would remain in a fundamentally subservient position to their economically powerful former masters. "Every colored man will be a slave, and feel himself a slave," a black soldier argued, "until he can raise his own bale of cotton and put his own mark upon it and say this is mine." Freedpeople argued that they were entitled to land in return for their years of unpaid labor. "Our wives, our children, our husbands, have 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," argued freedman Baley Wyat in a speech in Yorktown, Virginia, protesting the eviction of blacks from land they had been assigned by the Union Army during the war. "And then didn't we clear the land, and raise the crops of corn, of cotton, of tobacco, of rice, of sugar, of everything? And then didn't them large cities in the North grow up on the cotton and the sugar and the rice that we made? . . . I say they has grown rich, and my people is poor."

Many southern blacks firmly believed that the federal government would help them to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Just before the end of the war, the Republican-dominated Congress established the Bureau of

"The Presence of Some Authority": Eliphalet Whittlesey Speaks for the Freedmen's Bureau

Many agents of the Freedmen's Bureau viewed themselves as mediators between two deserving groups: former slaves and former masters. In the following report from October 1865, Colonel Eliphalet Whittlesey, an assistant commissioner for the Freedmen's Bureau in North Carolina, discusses the order imposed on black life and labor in the Raleigh area since his arrival the previous June, when he had found "much confusion." Then freedpeople, "exhilarated by the air of liberty," had "committed some excesses," while planters, "suddenly stripped of their wealth," looked "upon the freedmen with a mixture of hate and fear."

... [M]any freedmen need the presence of some authority to enforce upon them their new duties.... The efforts of the bureau to protect the freedmen have done much to restrain violence and injustice. Such efforts must be continued until civil government is fully restored, just laws enacted, or great suffering and serious disturbance will be the result. Contrary to the fears and predictions of many, the great mass of colored people have remained quietly at work upon the plantations of their former masters during the entire summer.... In truth, a much larger amount of vagrancy exists among the whites than among the blacks....

The report is confirmed by the fact that out of a colored population of nearly 350,000 in the State, only about 5,000 are now receiving support from the government.... Our officers ... have visited plantations, explained the difference between slave and free labor, the nature and the solemn obligation of contracts. The chief difficulty met with has been a want of confidence between the two parties.

... Rev. F. A. Fiske, a Massachusetts teacher, has been appointed superintendent of education, and has devoted himself with energy to his duties.... the whole number of schools ... is 63, the number of teachers 85, and the number of scholars 5,624. A few of the schools are self-supporting, and taught by colored teachers, but the majority are sustained by northern societies and northern teachers. The officers of the bureau have, as far as practicable, assigned buildings for their use, and assisted in making them suitable; but time is nearly past when such facilities can be given. The societies will be obliged hereafter to pay rent for school-rooms and for teachers homes. The teachers are engaged in a noble and self-denying work. They report a surprising thirst for knowledge among the colored people—children giving earnest attention and learning rapidly, and adults, after the day's work is done, devoting the evening to study.

Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction, 39th Cong., 1st sess. (1866).

Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands, known as the Freedmen's Bureau. It was created to assist freed slaves by issuing supplies, providing medical aid, establishing schools, dividing confiscated plantation lands, and supervising labor contracts. General Oliver O. Howard headed the bureau, and many of its 900 agents and officials were army officers. Committed to

"THE POPULAR IDEA OF THE FREEDMEN'S BUREAU—PLENTY TO EAT AND NOTHING TO DO."

The Popular Idea of the Freedmen's Bureau — Plenty to Eat and Nothing to Do

An 1866 cartoon lampoons popular misunderstanding about the policies of the Freedmen's Bureau as well as persistent racist beliefs about freedpeople's laziness. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, October 6, 1866 — American Social History Project.

ideals of self-sufficiency, they did much to aid blacks with education and medical care. African Americans throughout the South turned to the bureau to protest brutality, harsh working conditions, and the hostility and inattention of local courts and police. Although such requests often went unanswered, most bureau agents were at least committed to guiding the South toward northern patterns of free labor relations, which one Tennessee agent called "the noblest principle on earth."

But there were limits on how far the bureau would go in supporting the economic interests of blacks against white planters. In fact, in many areas of the South, the Freedman's Bureau adopted extremely coercive labor policies. In the spring of 1865, for example, the bureau issued stringent orders that restricted blacks' freedom of movement and required them to sign one-year labor contracts with large landowners. If freedmen refused to sign, the bureau withheld relief rations. "Freedom means work," declared General Howard in 1865, and his policies ensured that African Americans would continue to work the lands of their former masters.

Despite the bureau's limitations, many southern blacks continued to believe that the federal government would confiscate the slave owners' land and distribute it among the freedpeople. "This was no slight error, no trifling idea," reported an observer in Mississippi, "but a fixed and earnest conviction as strong as any belief a man can ever have." General William Tecumseh Sherman's Field Order Number 15, which distributed confiscated plantation lands to African Americans during the final months of the war, only reinforced this heartfelt conviction.

It was unclear whether President Lincoln would endorse Sherman's order. Lincoln's assassination before he decided how to proceed left the matter up to Vice President Andrew Johnson. After Johnson, a southerner and a senator from Tennessee before the Civil War, was elevated to the presidency, he rescinded Sherman's field order. In doing so, he gave encouragement to recalcitrant planters and a bitter defeat to freedpeople.

Planters and freedpeople alike understood that black land ownership would destroy whites' basic control over labor and lead to the collapse of the plantation economy. "The negroes will become possessed of a small

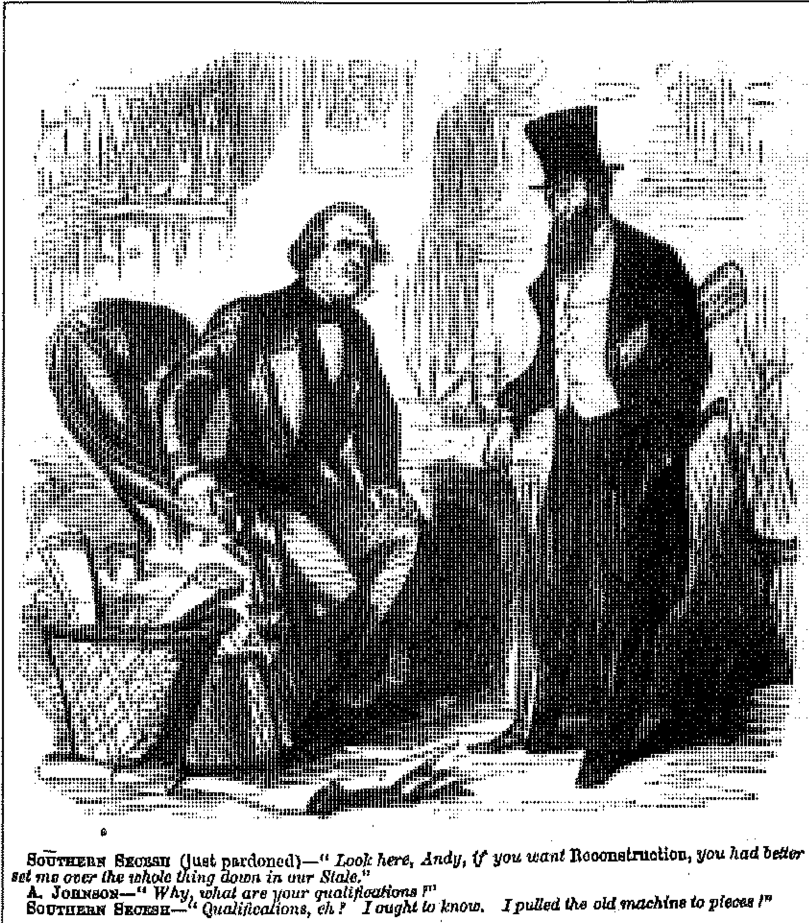
freehold, will raise their corn, squashes, pigs, and chickens, and will work no more in the cotton, rice, and sugar fields," concluded one Alabama newspaper. If even a few independent black farmers succeeded, concluded one Mississippi planter, "all the others will be dissatisfied with their wages no matter how good they may be and thus our whole labor system is bound to be upset."

For a century and a half, the South's labor system had been based on the regimentation of slavery, and maintaining a similar system of labor regimentation became the planters' most important objective. One northern observer concluded correctly that planters "have no sort of conception of free labor. They do not comprehend any law for controlling laborers, save the law of force." Planters looked to their state governments to secure this "law of force." Consequently, the struggle over the meaning and extent of freedom for African Americans shifted back to the arena of politics.

The Drama of Reconstruction Unfolds

Reconstruction was a process that unfolded in two intertwined arenas: in battles between blacks and whites across the South and in struggles among political leaders in Washington, D.C. Decisions that were made in the nation's capital expanded or constrained the rights that African Americans could claim and the level of protection they could expect in asserting them. Yet the demands of southern blacks also influenced debates in Washington. As poor white Southerners and freedpeople organized in support of the Republican Party immediately after the war, the radical members of that party gained important leverage to reject President Johnson's plans for reconstruction. He hoped to return southern whites to power with few protections for newly freed blacks. For a brief time, however, progressive forces in the South converged with radical Republicans in the North to map out a radical vision of reconstruction that promised significant gains for African Americans in the South and the nation.

President Johnson Versus Congress Though Johnson was a Southerner, he had long viewed slaveholders as "an odious and dangerous aristocracy." A tailor by trade and entirely self-taught, Johnson resented the power that slaveholders held in his region, identifying personally and politically with the region's white yeoman farmers. When his state seceded from the Union, he remained in his Senate seat, the only senator from a seceding state to do so. This act led Lincoln to choose him as vice president in 1864. But Johnson's hostility to the planters did not make him a supporter of African Americans, who, he thought, as slaves, had participated with their masters in the oppression of yeoman farmers. One senator believed that Johnson



Pardoned

A cartoon in an illustrated newsweekly portrayed Andrew Johnson poised beside a basket overflowing with pardons to be distributed to former Confederate officials. "Look here, Andy," says a recently reinstated southerner, "if you want Reconstruction, you had better set me over the whole thing down in our state." *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, August 1865 — American Social History Project.

was "as decided a hater of the negro . . . as the rebels from whom he had separated."

In May 1865, with Congress in recess, Johnson calculated that he could win broad political support in the South by offering total amnesty to all white Southerners who would swear basic loyalty to the Union. On May 10, Jefferson Davis, who had gone into hiding as the Confederacy collapsed, was captured in Irwinsville, Georgia, and imprisoned. He and other members of the southern social and political elite were excluded from Johnson's automatic amnesty. Still, Confederate leaders could petition the president for a pardon on a case-by-case basis, and many did. Even Jefferson Davis served only two years in prison and then lived in relative obscurity until his death in 1889.

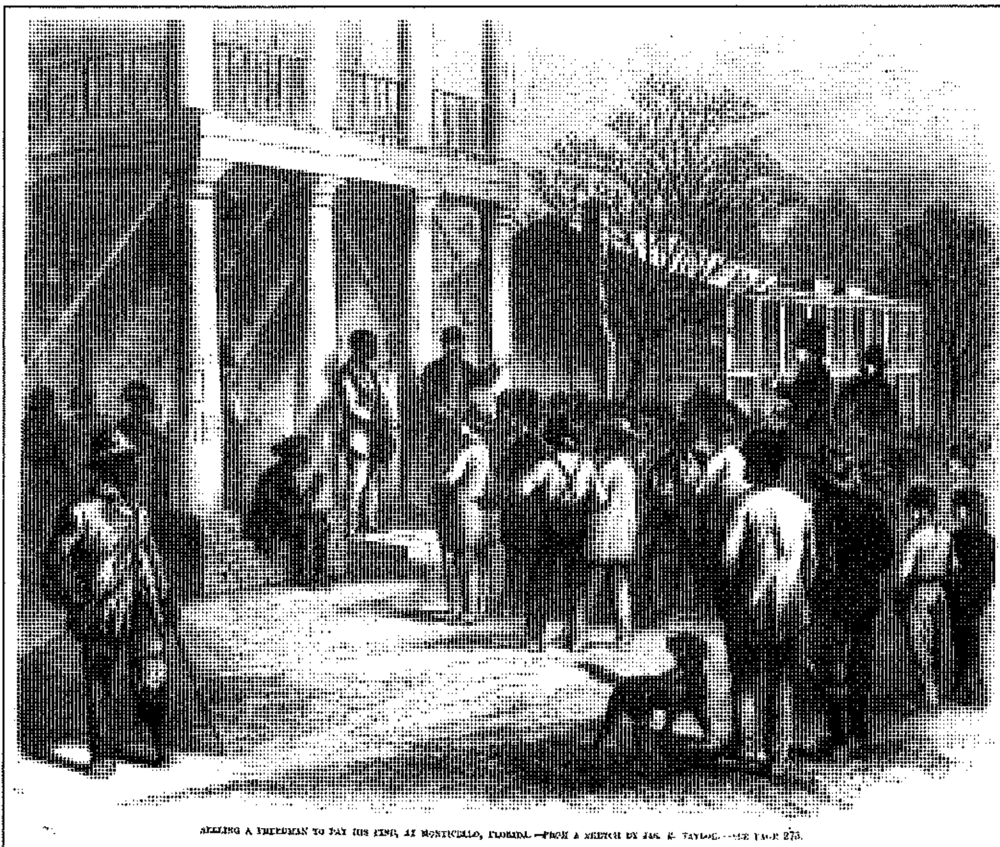
Johnson also demanded that for full readmission to the Union, southern states hold constitutional conventions to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery; cancel Confederate debts; and nullify the ordinances of secession. Once they had complied, the states were free to organize elections and reestablish governments. In the interim, Johnson appointed governors for the southern states, often conservatives who were hostile to the gains that African Americans had secured since 1863.

The readmission process proceeded rapidly, and nearly all the southern states held elections in the fall of 1865. Meanwhile, planters and Confederate officials flooded Johnson's desk with requests for pardons, most of which were granted. Although pleased to wield power over the South's former aristocrats, Johnson also believed that only planters possessed the experience, prestige, and power to "control" the volatile black population and that planters were therefore the best hope for the South's future.

Although in Johnson's view, Reconstruction was now complete, the outcome of the 1865 elections shocked many northerners. Ex-Confederates were elected to office in large numbers. Representatives who were chosen to fill vacated southern seats in Congress, for example, included the vice president of the Confederacy, four Confederate generals, five Confederate colonels, six Confederate cabinet officers, and fifty-eight Confederate

congressmen. More moderate elements—mainly former Whigs, Unionists, and "reluctant" secessionists—dominated the newly elected state governments in the South, but these men (all white) shared with the ex-Confederates a determination to rebuild the South's plantation society.

The Black Codes Immediately after the elections in 1865, the new state governments began to pass legislation that became known as the Black Codes. These codes attempted to ensure planters an immobile and dependent black labor supply through a series of rigid labor-control laws. Most states embraced the same basic provisions: a freedman found without "lawful employment" could be arrested, jailed, and fined. If he could not pay the fine, he could be hired out to an employer, who would pay the fine and deduct it from the worker's wages. In practice, this meant that any freedman who refused to work at a prevailing wage could be arrested as a vagrant. Other provisions prevented African Americans from entering any employment except domestic work or agricultural labor, allowed black children to be apprenticed to white employers for indefinite periods of time without parental consent, and set severe penalties even for petty theft. The overall effect of the Black Codes was to set the status of newly freed African Americans as landless agricultural laborers with no bargaining power and restricted mobility.



Selling a Freedman to Pay His Fine
"Special artist" James E. Taylor toured the South for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* after the Civil War, when the notorious Black Codes were being enforced. He sketched this scene in front of the county courthouse in Monticello, Florida, during the winter of 1866–1867, showing the auction of a freedman for his inability to pay a fine for an unspecified crime. James E. Taylor, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, January 19, 1867—American Social History Project.

"We Are Willing to Take Our Muskets": Freedmen Protest the Black Codes

The following letter—from the black citizens of Yazoo City, Mississippi, to a U.S. army commander—complains about various aspects of the state's Black Codes.

Yazoo City, January 20, 1867
Dear Sir

By Request I Send you the Proceeding of this Place. The Law in regard to the freedman is that they all have to have a written contract. Judge Jones, mayor of this place, is enforcing the Law. He says they have no right to rent a house nor land nor reside in town without a white man to stand for them. He makes all men pay Two Dollars for Licenses and he will not give a License without a written contract. Both women and men have to submit or go to Jail.

His Deputy is taking the people all the time. Men that are traveling are stopped and put in jail or Forced to contract. If this is the Law of the United States we will submit, but if it is not we are willing to take our muskets and serve three years Longer to have more liberty. We the undersigned Look to you for Protection and hope you will give it. You can write to any white man of this place and he can testify to the same.

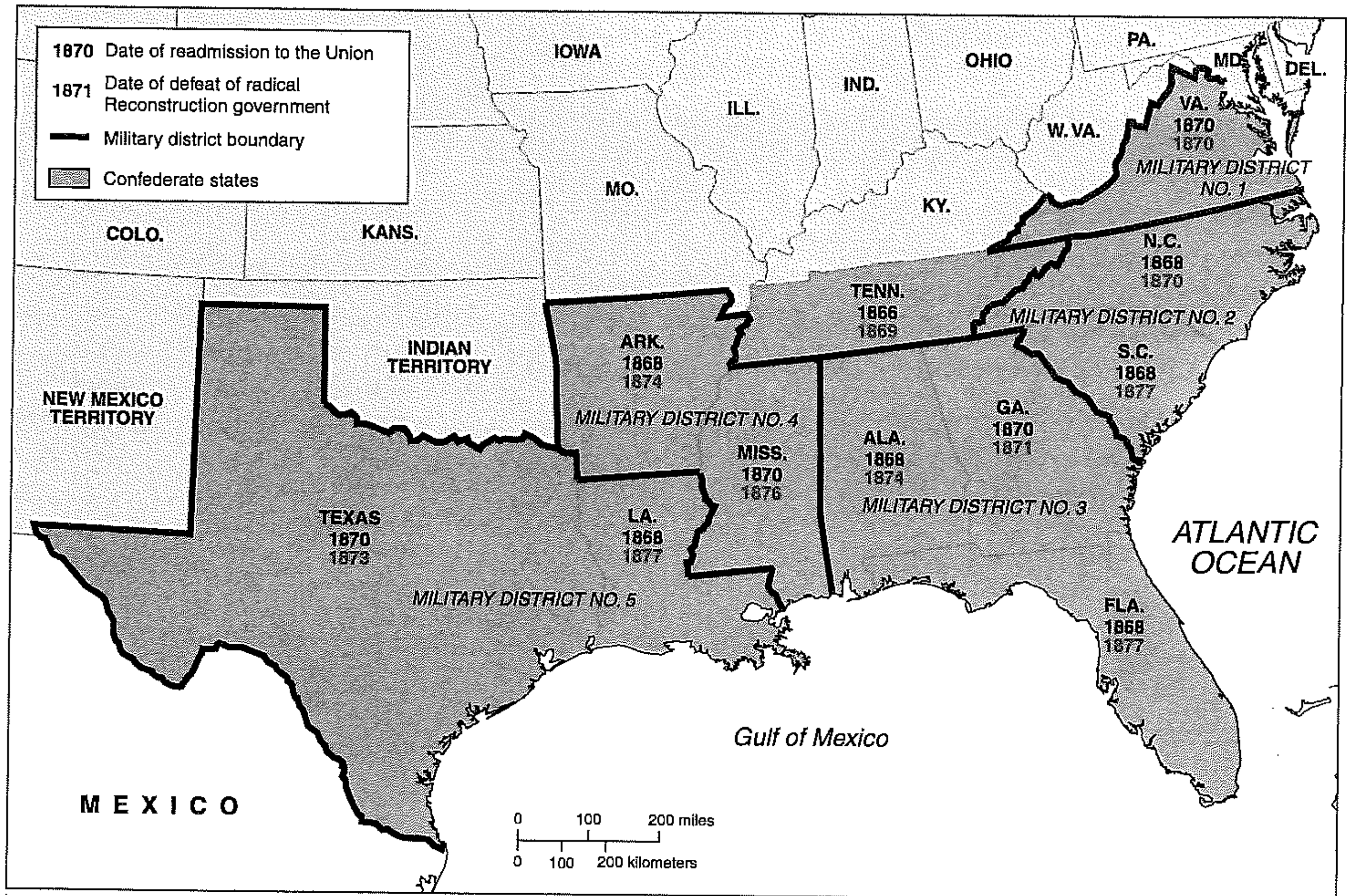
Yours Respectfully,
[signed by twelve men]

Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867, Series II: The Black Military Experience* (1982), 821.

The Black Codes were never effectively enforced, largely because of a labor shortage throughout the South and because of opposition from African American workers and Freedmen's Bureau agents. Their passage did have one important result, however. Many members of Congress and their constituents became enraged that such laws could be passed in the first place.

In 1865, the Republicans held a three-to-one majority over Democrats in Congress. Representative Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania and Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts led a group of Republican congressmen called Radicals, whose political roots lay in the prewar antislavery movement. They sought a vast increase in federal power to obtain new rights for the freedpeople and to revolutionize social conditions in the South.

The Radical Republicans attracted only a minority of party members. The far greater number of "moderate" Republicans initially hoped for a rapid reunification of the nation and a return to good business relations between North and South. But like the Radicals, they were profoundly disturbed by the return of many ex-Confederate leaders to positions of

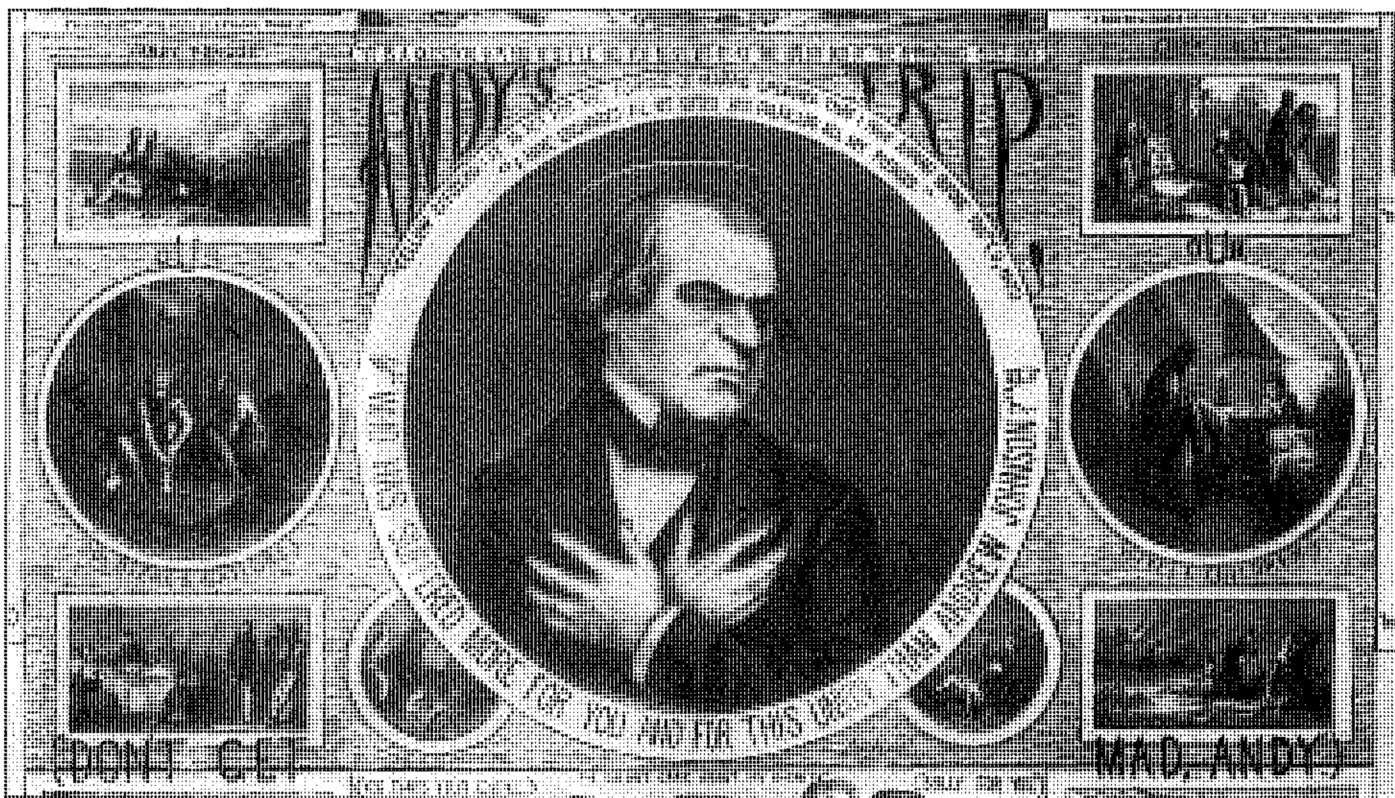


MAP 12.1 The Duration of Radical Reconstruction

The plan for Radical Reconstruction, including the establishment of military districts, was introduced in every state of the former Confederacy. But the duration of the Radical governments varied significantly. Radicals lasted only a few months in Virginia but held on for several years in Louisiana, Florida, and South Carolina. Because African Americans had much more access to voting rights and political office under Radical governments, they had significantly greater opportunities to engage in formal politics in the states where those governments maintained control for the longest period.

influence and the return of freedpeople to near-slave status by the terms of the Black Codes. Consequently, when Congress finally reconvened in December 1865, Radicals and moderates joined in refusing to seat the newly elected southern representatives, an act that initiated a confrontation with President Johnson and transformed the meaning of Reconstruction (Map 12.1).

Radical Reconstruction At the end of 1865, the Radicals established a joint committee of Congress to investigate the situation in the South. In the next few months, army officers, white southern Unionists, Freedmen's Bureau officials, newspaper reporters, and a handful of freedpeople testified to growing anti-Union sentiment, violence, and systematic oppression of the freedpeople. Joseph Stiles, a white Virginian who was loyal to the Union, complained, "It seems to me that the rapid promotion of rebels, the old politicians, to places of trust and honor, has had a great tendency to render treason popular instead of odious." Richard Hill, one of the few black witnesses, informed the joint committee that if the recently elected southern representatives were allowed to sit in Congress, "the condition of the freedmen would be very little better than that of slaves."



Mad Andy

An October 1866 *Harper's Weekly* cartoon views Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction policies as a betrayal of northern sacrifices during the Civil War. Thomas Nast, *Harper's Weekly*, October 27, 1866 — American Social History Project.

Such evidence convinced many congressmen that the rights of the freedpeople had to be guaranteed. The Republicans in Congress passed a bill that extended the life of the Freedmen's Bureau and expanded its powers. In addition, they passed a Civil Rights Bill that defined "all persons born in the United States (except Indians) as national citizens," granted freedpeople "full and equal benefit of all laws," and gave federal courts the power to defend their rights against interference from state governments. In this sweeping act, Congress nullified the Supreme Court's 1857 *Dred Scott* decision (which had denied citizenship to African Americans), undermined the Black Codes, and expanded the powers of the federal courts. Both bills marked a dramatic break from the deeply rooted American tradition of states' rights.

An outraged President Johnson vetoed both bills as unconstitutional infringements of states' rights, arguing that the "distinction of race and color" had been "made to operate in favor of the colored and against the white race." For many Republicans, these vetoes were the last straw. "Those who formerly defended [the president] are now readiest in his condemnation," said one moderate Republican. On April 6, 1866, Congress overrode Johnson's veto of the Civil Rights Bill, the first time in U.S. history that a major piece of legislation was passed over the president's objection. Three months later, Congress also overrode Johnson's veto of the bill to extend the Freedmen's Bureau. And congressional Republicans were prepared to go

"The Whole Fabric of Southern Society Must Be Changed": Thaddeus Stevens on Land Reform

In this 1865 speech delivered to a Republican gathering in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Radical Republican leader Thaddeus Stevens lays out a detailed case for redistributing southern land to freedpeople and others who had remained loyal to the Union.

We especially insist that the property of the chief rebels should be seized and appropriated to the payment of the national debt. . . . By forfeiting the estates of the leading rebels the government would have 394,000,000 of acres besides their town property, and yet nine-tenths of the people would remain untouched. Divide the land into convenient farms. Give, if you please, forty acres to each adult male freedman. Suppose there are 1,000,000 of them. That would require 40,000,000 acres, which deducted from 394,000 leaves 354,000,000 acres for sale. Divide it into suitable farms, and sell it to the highest bidders. I think it . . . would average at least $10 per acre. That would produce $3,540,000.

The whole fabric of southern society must be changed and never can it be done if this opportunity is lost. . . . How can republican institutions, free schools, free churches, free social intercourse exist in a mingled community of nabobs and serfs? If the South is ever made a safe republic let her lands be cultivated by the toil of . . . free labor. . . .

Nothing is so likely to make a man a good citizen as to make him a freeholder. Nothing will so multiply the production of the South as to divide it into small farms. . . . No people will ever be republican in spirit and practice where a few own immense manors and the masses are landless. Small and independent landholders are the support and guardians of republican liberty.

Speech of the Honorable Thaddeus Stevens Delivered in the City of Lancaster, September 7, 1865 (Lancaster, PA, 1865).

even further, preparing a constitutional amendment to guarantee civil rights to southern blacks.

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. Sumner wanted to make sure that blacks in the South, who were now citizens, would not be denied the right to vote because of a lack of property, for he believed that this was the only way to give the Republican Party political power in that region. Stevens argued that if the vote was to have any meaning, it needed to be backed up with economic power. Echoing the demands of freedpeople, he called for confiscating the land of 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."

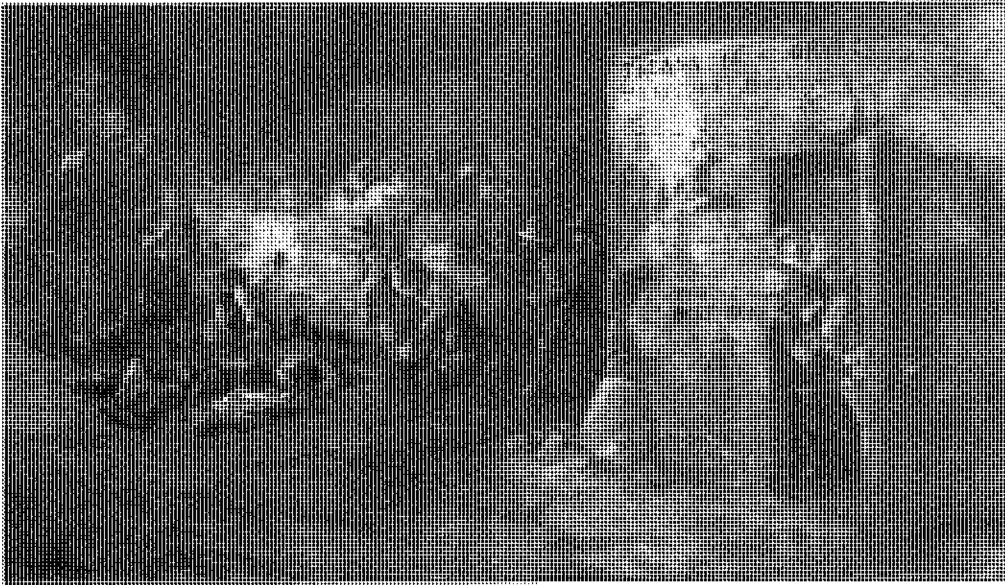
The best that the Radicals could achieve, however, was the Fourteenth Amendment, which passed both houses of Congress in June 1866. It granted full citizenship to African Americans and prohibited states from denying them "equal protection of the laws." This alone was a sweeping transformation of the constitutional balance of power. Until now, states had been seen as the guardians of the rights of their citizens against the power of the federal government. Now the roles were reversed.

Still, states were not required to grant black men suffrage. If they chose not to do so, however, their representation in Congress would be reduced in direct proportion. Most Republicans were not yet prepared to take the step of guaranteeing voting rights to black men, and the Radicals were forced to go along.

One group of political activists took a different position. As the members of Congress worked to pass the Fourteenth Amendment, women's rights activists called on them to place women and men—black and white—on an equal footing. Congress refused to pressure states to grant voting rights to women and instead, for the first time, inserted the word *male* into the Constitution. Although the movement for women's rights had long been intertwined with the abolitionist movement, women's rights' leaders Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony broke with the abolitionists and began searching for other allies in their drive for the vote. This would soon lead to a series of internal conflicts among suffragists and would complicate their relationships with advocates of both racial equality and labor advancement.

The concerns of woman suffrage advocates were overshadowed, however, by the president's appeal to southern legislatures to reject the Fourteenth Amendment. Encouraged by the president's position, all but one southern state (ironically, Johnson's home state of Tennessee) refused to ratify it. The congressional elections in the fall of 1866 thus became a referendum on the Fourteenth Amendment and Johnson's approach to Reconstruction. The Union had won the war, but it now appeared to be losing the peace.

In the months leading up to the 1866 congressional campaign, antiblack violence increased throughout the South. In Memphis, where a race riot erupted in May, the Union Army commander refused to intervene because, he claimed, "he had a large amount of public property to guard; that a considerable part of the troops he had were unreliable; that they hated Negroes too." Although he initially had many African American troops under his command, he demobilized most black soldiers who were stationed near the city in the months preceding the riot. A local white newspaper had then applauded the Union officer: "He knows the wants of the country, and sees the Negro can do the country more good in the cotton fields than in the [Army] camp." In July 1866, black laborers paraded in New Orleans to press



The Massacre at New Orleans
A panoramic painting by Thomas Nast shows Andrew Johnson as indifferent to the murder of freedpeople during the July 1866 New Orleans riot.
Thomas Nast, 1867, oil on canvas, 7 feet 10 3/4 inches × 11 feet 6 1/2 inches — Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

their demands for equal suffrage to a convention writing a new state constitution. Hostile white mobs dispersed the marchers, and African American convention delegates as well as spectators and marchers were beaten and shot in the ensuing melee. A congressional investigation later that year concluded that what began as a "riot" ended as a "massacre," in part because of the inaction of law enforcement agencies, army officers, and other government authorities. The Memphis riot took the lives of 46 African Americans; the one in New Orleans left 166 wounded and 34 blacks dead along with three of their white supporters.

The riots revealed what one northern newspaper called "the demoniac spirit of the southern whites toward the freedmen." This naked brutality led to a stunning victory for the Republicans in the November elections. They held their three-to-one majority in Congress and retained power in every northern state as well as in West Virginia, Missouri, and Tennessee. And among Republicans, the Radicals were the biggest winners.

The Republican mandate in 1866 encouraged the Radicals to present an even more sweeping agenda. They failed to achieve their most radical aim — the redistribution of land — but they did finally convince moderates to join them in embracing black voting rights. The Reconstruction Act of March 1867 — the centerpiece of what became known as "Radical" Reconstruction — passed over President Johnson's veto. The act divided the former Confederate states into five military districts. In each state, there would be constitutional conventions in which blacks would participate, backed up by protection from federal troops. These conventions were mandated to draft new constitutions, which had to include provisions for African American suffrage. Newly elected state legislatures were also required 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 a sweeping political revolution. In February 1867, a journalist writing in *The Nation* magazine summed up how the Civil War had revolutionized northern politics:

> Six years ago, the North would have rejoiced to accept any mild restrictions upon the spread of slavery as a final settlement. Four years ago, it would have accepted peace upon the basis of gradual emancipation. Two years ago, it would have been content with emancipation and equal civil rights for the colored people without extension of the suffrage. One year ago, a slight extension of the suffrage would have satisfied it.

Now Congress had overridden a presidential veto to enshrine African American suffrage in federal law.

African Americans Become a Force in Southern Politics The onset of Radical Reconstruction inaugurated a massive and unprecedented movement of freedpeople into the political arena. They staged strikes, rallies, and protests in cities all over the South during 1867—including Charleston, Savannah, Richmond, Mobile, and New Orleans—and small towns such as Meridian, Mississippi, and Tuskegee, Alabama. The first organized expression of freedpeople's political activity was the dramatic growth of the Union (or Loyal) League. The league had started as a national organization that encouraged the Union cause during the war. With passage of the Reconstruction Act, the Union League dispatched white and black organizers all over the South to found local chapters. They functioned as political clubs, providing a civics education for new members and encouraging support for the Republican Party and its candidates.

These local chapters soon broadened the league's mission to include more aggressive economic and political activities. They helped to build schools and churches, organized militia companies to defend communities from white violence, and called strikes and boycotts for better wages and fairer labor contracts. A number of local chapters were even organized on an interracial basis. One such racially mixed league in North Carolina debated questions such as disfranchisement, debtor relief, and public education, which members expected to be raised in the forthcoming state constitutional convention.

In the fall of 1867, Southerners, black and white, began electing delegates to these constitutional conventions. The participation of freedpeople was truly astonishing: 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 a total of 265 African Americans were elected as delegates. These conventions were of tremendous symbolic and practical importance. For

the first time in U.S. history, blacks and whites met together to prepare constitutions under which they would be governed. The constitutions they produced were among the most progressive in the nation. They established public schools for both races, created social welfare agencies, reformed the criminal law, and drew up codes that more equitably distributed the burden of taxation. Most important of all, the constitutions guaranteed black civil and political rights, completing what one Texas newspaper called "the equal-rights revolution."

The intensity of black political participation that was demonstrated in these elections represented a dramatic turning point in southern politics. After 1867, the southern Republican Party won elections and dominated all of the new state governments. African Americans were prominent in many of these governments. Although they represented an actual majority only in South Carolina's legislature, blacks held 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.

THE BLACK VOMIT;

Or, The Bottom Rail on Top.

A new Farce composed by a Committee appointed from De-league, was played successfully for two days in Lynchburg. The principal characters were sustained by Kelso, Williams-son and other Black and White vultures specially imported for the purpose. ☞ This play is taken from scenes in Pandemonium, and has been arranged and put on the Stage for the purpose of inaugurating "HELL IN VIRGINIA."

"Two heads without a single thought."
"Two black hearts that beat as one."

Mongrels on their way to C. C. H.

The Representative from Lynchburg makes a Speech.

When Shall we THREE Meet Again? In de Convenshun.

White Supremacy Forever!
An anti–Union League handbill, 1867. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Unlike its northern counterpart, the southern Republican Party was, in the words of one black Republican leader, "emphatically the poor man's party." Ultimately, the party came to include poor white as well as poor black southerners, but in 1867, nearly 80 percent of southern Republican voters were black. Because of the Republican Party's central role in emancipation and enfranchisement, freedpeople demonstrated a near fanatical loyalty to it, placing the party with the church and the school as a central community institution. George Houston, an Alabama Union League organizer and Sumter County voter registrar, proudly asserted: "I am a Republican, and I will die one." The intensity of Houston's commitment echoed across the South.

"Remove This Vast Weight of Ignorance": Debating Compulsory Schooling in South Carolina

This debate among African American delegates to South Carolina's 1868 constitutional convention reflects the articulate, thoughtful, and pragmatic manner in which African Americans participated in politics during the Reconstruction period, despite racist claims about their inability to hold public office. The brief openness of southern politics during Reconstruction did succeed in bringing compulsory public education to all southerners, black and white.

R. C. DeLarge: The schools may be open to all, but to declare that parents shall send their children to them whether they are willing or not is, in my judgment, going a step beyond the bounds of prudence. Is there any logic or reason in inserting in the constitution a provision which cannot be enforced?

A. J. Ransier: I am sorry to differ with my colleague from Charleston on this question. I contend that in proportion to the education of the people so is their progress in civilization. Believing this, I believe that the committee has properly provided for the compulsory education of all children in this state between the ages named in the section.

J. A. Chesnut: Has not this convention the right to establish a free school system for the poorer classes? Then if there be a hostile disposition among the whites, an unwillingness to send their children to school, the fault is their own, not ours. Look at the idle youth around us. Is the sight not enough to invigorate every man with a desire to do something to remove this vast weight of ignorance that presses the masses down?

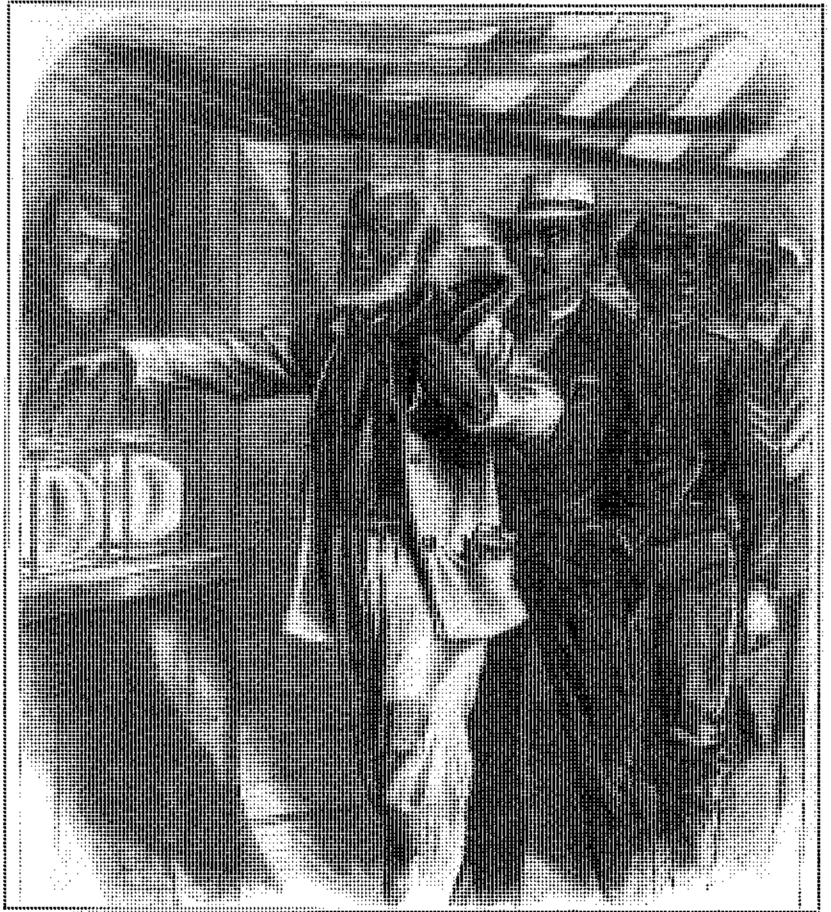
F. L. Cardozo: . . . some gentlemen . . . affirm that [the section of the constitution] compels the attendance of both white and colored children in the same schools. There is nothing of the kind in the section. It simply says that all the children shall be educated; but how, it is left with the parents to decide. It is left to the parent to say whether the child should be sent to a public or private school. There can be separate schools for white and colored. It is left so that if any colored child wishes to go to a white school, it shall have the privilege of doing so. I have no doubt, in most localities colored people will prefer separate schools, particularly until some of the present prejudice against their race is removed.

W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935), 397.

Moreover, although only African American men were granted the franchise, their wives and daughters considered voting to be a family affair. Some freedwomen continued to wield ballots in community meetings, and throughout the South, they influenced electoral politics by lobbying male voters, demanding that men use their new-found electoral rights, and

accompanying voters to the polls on election day. Within African American communities, then, the ballot was seen as a collective rather than an individual possession, and the Republican Party was seen as an organization to which women as well as men declared their loyalty.

Most blacks who were elected to state and federal offices were educated, and many were freeborn. At the local level, however, black political leaders often emerged from the ranks of the freedmen. James Alston was a slave-born shoemaker and musician in Macon County, Alabama; he headed the Union League chapter in Tuskegee, became the county registrar of voters, and later represented Macon County in the state legislature. Such small-town artisans possessed the skill and independence to represent the growing African American population in southern towns and villages as well as their rural constituents. Moreover, their work experience, which involved a good deal of contact with whites, helped them to link the black community with potential white allies.



The First Vote

An 1867 *Harper's Weekly* illustration features three figures symbolizing black political leadership: a skilled craftsman, a sophisticated city dweller, and a Union Army veteran. Alfred R. Waud, *Harper's Weekly*, November 16, 1867 — American Social History Project.

Republican Party Activism in the South White allies were essential. Only in South Carolina and Mississippi were blacks in the majority. To survive in the South, the Republican Party would need to develop a coalition that included some white support. Most visible among the white Republicans were those labeled "carpetbaggers." Carpet-covered valises were used as luggage in the mid-nineteenth century, and white Southerners used the term *carpetbaggers* to refer to white Northerners who traveled south to gain money and power. Yet some so-called carpetbaggers were black and anything but greedy. This was true of Martin Delany, who had risen to the rank of major in the Union Army and then served in the Freedmen's Bureau before settling down in Charleston. Many white carpetbaggers were similarly sincere in their commitment to black rights and Republican government.

Even more important to Republican successes in the South were the "scalawags" — native white Southerners who supported the Republican Party and were therefore viewed as traitors by many former Confederates.

Hiram Revels

In 1870, the Boston firm of Louis Prang and Company published a chromolithograph (an inexpensive type of color print) portrait of the first African American U.S. senator. One prominent admirer of the portrait was Frederick Douglass: "Whatever may be the prejudices of those who may look upon it," he wrote to Prang, "they will be compelled to admit that the Mississippi senator is a man, and one who will easily pass for a man among men. We colored men so often see ourselves described and painted as monkeys, that we think it a great piece of good fortune to find an exception to this general rule." L. Prang and Company (after a painting by Theodore Kaufmann), 1870, chromolithograph, 14 × 11 3/4 inches — Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Some were wealthy planters who nevertheless believed that the South's future must be built on industrialization, urbanization, and the construction of a wage-labor system. They sought governmental support for railroads, industry, and the establishment of a stable banking and currency system. But far more of the southern white Republicans were poor yeoman farmers from the mountain regions who had long resented the large planters' monopoly on land, labor, and political power. The southern mountain region had been a stronghold of Unionist sentiment during the war, providing a vital link to postwar Republicanism.

Economic changes added a new ingredient to yeoman support for the Republicans. Before the war, many small southern farmers had lived largely outside the market economy, producing most of their own food and necessities of life. But after the war, many of them were drawn into cotton planting, just in time to be hit hard by catastrophic crop failures in 1866 and 1867. The passage of new state constitutions containing provisions for homesteading and debtor relief led these struggling white farmers to become Union League and Republican supporters.

Most of the Republican Party's southern adherents, then, were poor people, black and white, who had a strong hostility to the planter aristocracy. In Georgia, the Republicans called on "poor men" to vote for the party of "relief, homesteads, and schools"; their nominee for governor proclaimed himself the "workingman's candidate." The "bottom rail" among both races voted overwhelmingly in 1867 and 1868 to reconstruct state governments and design laws to benefit all citizens.

During their period in power — from two years in Tennessee to eight years in South Carolina — these Republican governments constructed the beginnings of a welfare state for their citizens. They created a public school system where none had existed before. These schools remained segregated by race and were better in the cities than in the countryside, but there was real progress nonetheless. By 1876, about half of all southern children — white and black — were enrolled in school. And not only children went to school: a northern correspondent reported in 1873 that in Vicksburg, Mississippi, "female negro servants make it a condition before accepting a situation, that they should have permission to attend the night-schools."

Although school integration made little progress, several Radical governments did pass laws banning racial discrimination in other public

accommodations, notably streetcars, restaurants, and hotels. Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Florida made it illegal for railroads, hotels, and theaters to deny "full and equal rights" to any citizen. After 1869, South Carolina, with a black majority in the Republican-controlled legislature, required equal treatment in all public accommodations and in any business that was chartered or licensed by municipal, state, or federal authority. Much of this legislation proved unenforceable, but it showed that Republicans were committed to ending legal segregation.

Laws that helped both black and white landless agricultural laborers were another achievement of Radical rule. Radical Republicans repealed the notorious Black Codes and passed lien laws that gave farmworkers (both black and white) a first claim on crops if their employers went bankrupt. South Carolina went further, creating a state Land Commission with the power to buy land and resell it to landless laborers on long-term credit. By 1876, despite this commission's initial mismanagement, 14,000 African American families (about one-seventh of the state's black population) had acquired homesteads, as had a handful of white families. Other states chose to increase the property tax rate that was paid by large landowners, shifting some of the burden of new programs from poorer to wealthier residents.

Having local officials who sympathized with the plight of landless farmers proved especially beneficial to the rural poor. Locally elected magistrates and justices of the peace, many of them black, negotiated contract disputes between planters and laborers and usually decided in favor of the laborers. The poor thus gained a significant bargaining edge in their economic relations with employers. This became particularly clear in the late 1860s, when the economy improved and black agricultural workers could command higher wages. With the repeal of the Black Codes by progressive state legislatures, "the power to control [black labor] is gone," lamented one white southern newspaper.

Their new bargaining power enabled freedpeople to negotiate compromises with planters on how the land would be worked and who would reap its bounty. Rather than working in gangs for wages, individual black families now worked small plots independently, renting land from the planter for cash or, more commonly, for a fixed share of the year's crop. By 1870, "sharecropping" had

Equal (If Begrudging) Treatment

Trafficking in racist caricature, this 1874 cartoon also captured the unprecedented nature of antidiscriminatory legislation. "But I don't want to sleep with a Negro," exclaims a guest when confronted by the proprietor of a crowded hotel. "Well, it's the only double bed in the house," is the response, "and if I don't give him half of it I shall have to pay him five hundred dollars damages. You may either sleep with him or go into the street." *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, June 13, 1874 — American Social History Project.

become the dominant form of black agricultural labor, especially in the vast cotton lands. The system was a far cry from the freedpeople's objective of owning their own land, and later in the century, it became connected to a credit system that drastically reduced the workers' economic freedom. But in the short run, sharecropping did free 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 would be short-lived, however. Members and potential supporters of the southern Republican Party were constantly dissatisfied. Because the party was a fragile coalition of wealthy ex-Whigs, northern politicians, rural ex-slaves, free urban blacks, and poor white yeomen, it could not take any position without alienating at least part of its constituency. Its leaders, moreover, generally favored economic expansion. The promotion of transportation and industry, combined with large increases in state spending on schools and social programs, led to tremendous increases in taxes. This tax burden fell increasingly not only on the wealthy planters, but also on poor whites who owned little property. Revelations of political corruption among southern Republicans seeking to gain from the state's involvement in capitalist enterprise also contributed to the growing disaffection of white voters. And perhaps most important at this critical moment, the corruption provided Northerners with a rationale for losing interest in southern affairs. In 1869, Tennessee and Virginia became the first states to return to Democratic control, in a process that conservative whites called "redemption."

The End of Reconstruction

Two distinct forces converged to end Reconstruction. First, passage of the Reconstruction Act in 1867 had severely undercut the political power of the planter class, so they were now willing to turn to violence, economic intimidation, and fraud to regain political control of the South. Second, both northern public opinion and the northern Republican Party began to move sharply away from the original goals of Radical Reconstruction. Ordinary Northerners' commitment to the political and civil rights of African Americans had dwindled, as was indicated by Republican defeats in a number of northern states in 1867. Many Northerners were worn out by the long military and political battles and considered their obligation over when the most overt signs of southern resistance were removed. When a financial panic swept the nation in 1873, economic woes reinforced this sense of political exhaustion and caused many northern whites to refocus their attention on concerns closer to home.

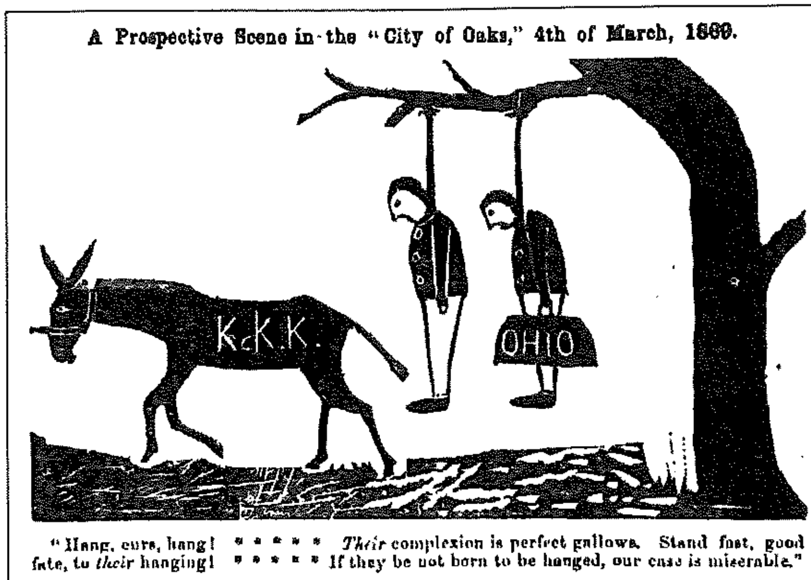
Southern Democrats and the Klan "Redeem" the South Economic issues loomed large even during Radical Reconstruction. Indeed, the first

official sign of retreat from Reconstruction occurred on the economic front when Congress refused to confiscate planters' lands and distribute them among the freedpeople. Throughout 1867, Radicals Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens had proposed a number of confiscation schemes. Echoing Thomas Jefferson, Stevens proclaimed, "Small independent landholders are the support and guardians of republican liberty." But northern businessmen and moderate Republicans effectively blocked land redistribution efforts for two reasons. First, many of them firmly believed that government had no business redistributing property. Second, and perhaps more important, they feared the economic consequences of ending plantation production of raw cotton, which remained the nation's single largest export and an important source of foreign revenue.

Other indications of waning enthusiasm for Reconstruction were apparent in the nation's capital. In 1868, Radical Republicans persuaded the House of Representatives to impeach the president for his efforts to subvert the Reconstruction program. In the subsequent trial before the U.S. Senate, however, moderate Republicans cast the deciding votes, narrowly acquitting Johnson. His successor, Ulysses S. Grant, elected in 1868, was a popular Union Army general. Grant's ascendancy to the presidency coincided with the emergence of a new group of moderate leaders in the Republican Party following the death of Thaddeus Stevens in 1868. These men, known as the Stalwarts, had none of the idealism of the Radical Republicans. Their sole objective was to maintain the power of the Republican Party. By 1870, the Stalwarts had stripped Stevens's Radical Republican ally, Charles Sumner, of power.

By 1872, the end of Grant's first term of office, it was starkly obvious that national Republican leaders were willing to abandon southern blacks to cultivate northern business support—support that depended on a revitalized southern economy. Northern politicians were prepared to retreat from social and political experimentation and leave the South's economic revitalization in the hands of the former slave owners. Now black Republican voters were the only remaining obstacle to the return of conservative white rule.

Initially, large planters tried to use their economic power to limit freedpeople's political activities. In Alabama, for example, one landlord required two black laborers to sign the following contract before he would hire them: "That said Laborers shall not attach themselves, belong to, or in any way perform any of the obligations required of what is known as the 'Loyal League Society,' or attend elections or political meetings without the consent of the employer." Without land, African Americans depended on planters for employment, but even so, this economic pressure was not very successful. Another planter complained bitterly that the Civil War and the Radical program had totally destroyed "the natural influence of capital on



A Prospective Scene in the "City of Oaks," 4th of Morch, 1869

A September 1868 edition of the Tuscaloosa, Alabama, *Independent Monitor* proposes the treatment its Republican opponents should receive if they lose the upcoming presidential election. The editor of the Democratic newspaper was the Grand Cyclops of the Ku Klux Klan in Tuscaloosa. Tuscaloosa *Independent Monitor*, September 1, 1868 — Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

labor, of employer on employee." The result was that "negroes who will trust their white employers in all their personal affairs . . . are entirely beyond advice on all political issues."

When economic pressure proved inadequate, planters turned to more violent methods of intimidation. Their most important and effective weapon was the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan was, in essence, the paramilitary arm of the southern Democratic Party. Founded by Confederate veterans in Tennessee in 1866, the Klan grew rapidly after the advent of Radical Reconstruction. Although many of its rank-and-file members were poor men, its leaders were mainly prominent planters and their sons. As a white minister who traveled through Alabama reported in 1867:

> They had lost their property, and worst of all, their slaves were made their equals and perhaps their superiors, to rule over them. They said there was an organization, already very extensive, that would rid them of this terrible calamity . . . the organization of the Ku Klux Klan . . . seemed to answer precisely the design expressed by these men.

By 1868, the Klan had a wide following across the South. The Klan terrorized individuals and freedpeople's organizations. Night riders targeted black Civil War veterans and freedmen who had left their employers or complained about low wages. Freedpeople who had succeeded in breaking out of the plantation system and were renting or buying land on their own were in particular danger because they defied white supremacist assumptions of racial superiority and were often physically isolated. According to one Georgia freedman, "whenever a colored man acquires property and becomes in a measure independent, they take it from him."

Hooded Klansmen broke up meetings, shot and lynched Union League leaders, and drove black voters away from the polls all across the South. The targets of Klan violence were rarely chosen at random. James Alston, an early Union League organizer and by 1870 a Republican member of the Alabama legislature, reported that he was shot by the Klan because of his political activities. Alston had been one of five African American Radicals from his area who had gone to Washington for President Grant's inauguration in 1869. When asked about the fate of the other four, he replied, "I am the only man that is living. Everyone [else] is killed that went there to the

"Kill Him, God Damn Him": Betsey Westbrook Testifies About Klan Violence

In the courthouse of Demopolis, Alabama, before a congressional committee investigating the Ku Klux Klan, Betsey Westbrook recounts the murder of her husband, Robin Westbrook. The testimony offered by freedpeople at the 1871 hearings on the KKK detailed a horrifying litany of brutal violence and intimidation.

They came up behind the house. One of them had his face smutted and another had a knit cap on his face. They first shot about seven [shotgun] barrels through the window. One of them said, "Get a rail and bust the door down." They broke down the outside door. . . . one of them said, "Raise a light." . . . Then they saw where we stood and one of them says, "You are that damned son of a bitch Westbrook." The man had a gun and struck him on the head. Then my husband took the dog-iron and struck three or four of them. They got him jammed up in the corner and one man went around behind him and put two loads of a double-barreled gun in his shoulders. Another man says, "Kill him, God damn him," and took a pistol and shot him down. He didn't live more than half an hour.

My boy was in there while they were killing my husband and he says, "Mammy, what must I do?" I says, "Jump outdoors and run." He went to the door and a white man took him by the arm and says, "God damn you, I will fix you too," but he snatched himself loose and got away.

Q—Did you know any of these men?

A—Yes, sir. I certainly knowed three.

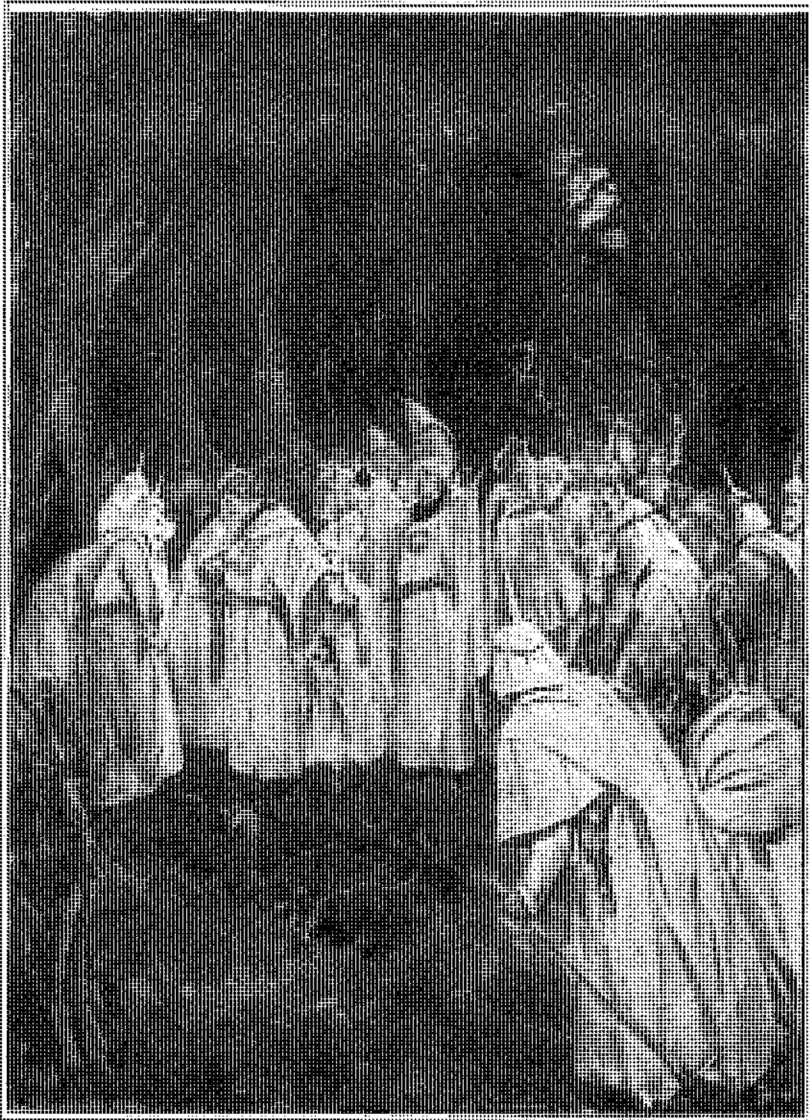
Q—What were they mad at your husband about?

A—He just would hold up his head and say he was a strong Radical [Republican]. He would hang on to that.

House of Representatives Report 22, 42nd Cong., 2nd Sess. (1871).

inauguration of Grant." Such targeted violence profoundly affected postwar politics. Even though African Americans fought back valiantly, the Klan succeeded in destroying Republican organizations and demoralizing entire communities of freedpeople.

Despite the Republicans' general movement away from further intervention in the South, moderate Republicans were not yet ready to stand by and allow their party in the South to be terrorized and destroyed by violence. Congress finally acted in 1869 when members approved the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution (ratified in 1870). This time, however, federal officials, already in retreat from Radical Reconstruction, enacted only a lukewarm compromise. The amendment declared that the right of U.S. citizens to vote could not "be denied or abridged" by any state "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." This careful wording left open the possibility of using numerous non-race-related means, such as



"Dedicated to the Men of the South Who Suffered Exile, Imprisonment and Death for the Daring Service They Rendered Our Country as Citizens of the Invisible Empire"

By the turn of the century, popular novels such as Thomas Dixon, Jr.'s *The Traitor* transformed the bloody record of the Ku Klux Klan (now softened by the euphemism "Invisible Empire") into tales of gallantry, sacrifice, and latter-day knighthood. (L. D. Williams) Thomas Dixon, Jr., *The Traitor: A Story of the Fall of the Invisible Empire* (1907) — American Social History Project.

poll taxes and literacy tests, to restrict black voting. Moreover, the amendment said nothing about the right to hold elective office.

In March 1871, a series of grisly events in Meridian, Mississippi, shocked the nation and galvanized Congress to act more forcefully. The Meridian authorities had arrested three African American leaders who were organizing freedpeople to resist Klan night riders. Charged with delivering "incendiary speeches," the men were put on trial. In the midst of the first day's proceedings, shots rang out in the courtroom — probably fired by a white spectator — killing two of the defendants and the Republican judge. In the rioting that followed, 30 African Americans were brutally murdered.

A joint congressional committee that was appointed to hear testimony in Washington and across the South (including in Meridian) listened while witnesses estimated that the Klan had killed or beaten thousands of freedpeople and their white allies in the previous four years. They heard the wives and daughters of black Republican leaders testify to being whipped and raped, often on more than one occasion and by more than one assailant.

Aghast at tales of such violence and fearing the demise of the Republican Party in the South, Congress passed a series of enforcement acts that imposed harsh penalties on those who used organized terrorism for political purposes. In April 1871, the Ku Klux Klan Act became law. For the first time, certain individual crimes against citizens' rights were punishable under federal law. Later in the year, President Grant declared martial law in parts of South Carolina and, though he had earlier removed federal troops from many parts of the South, dispatched U.S. Army units to the area. Hundreds of Klansmen were indicted and tried by the U.S. attorney general in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Mississippi. The federal government had broken the Klan's back, at least temporarily. The election of 1872, which saw Grant reelected, was the most peaceful in the Reconstruction period.

But other groups rapidly arose to replace the KKK. The Democrats gambled that neither Congress nor the president would act decisively to prevent further political violence and fraud. The gamble paid off. After the 1872 election, Republicans in the North continued their steady retreat from the defense of African American rights.

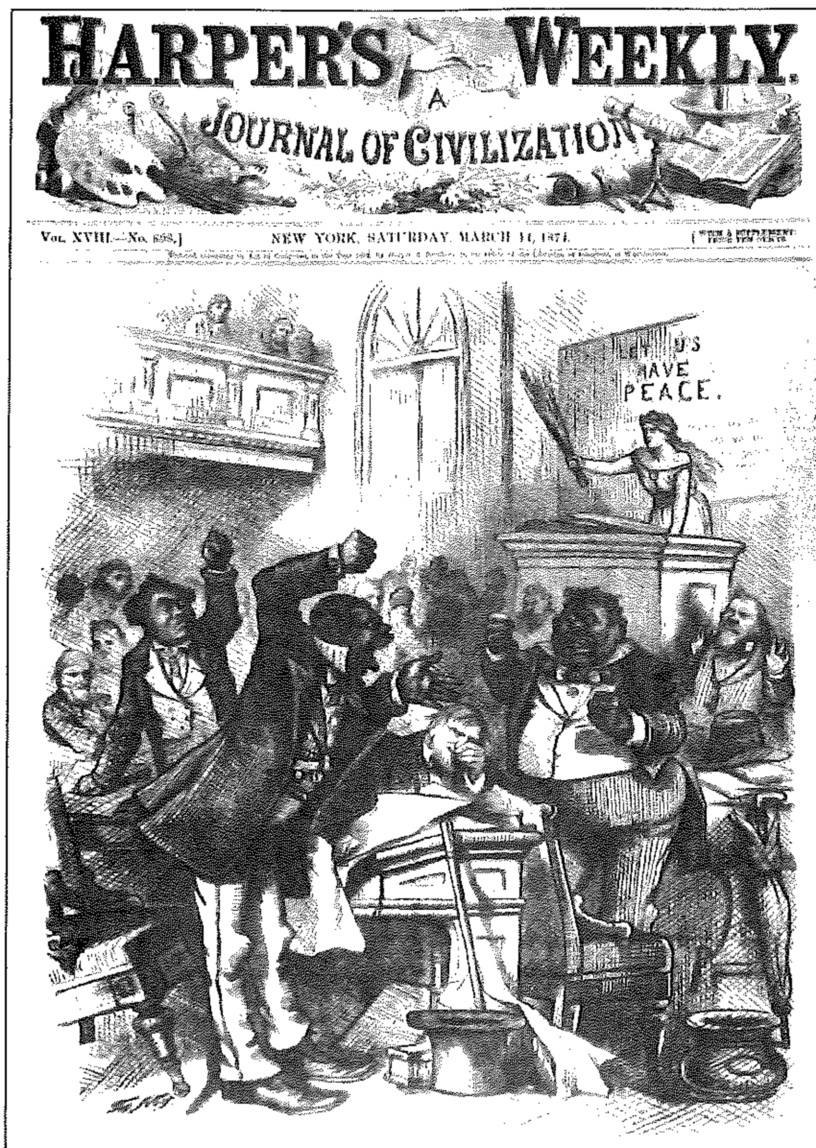
The national economy was expanding rapidly, and the Republican Party now became closely attuned to the interests of business. Concerned with investment possibilities in the South, businessmen and their political allies became increasingly weary of Reconstruction. A reunion between affluent whites in the North and South was finally within reach. For African Americans and poor whites, however, this newfound national unity among economic and political leaders meant that even the minimal protections afforded by federal troops and federal laws in the late 1860s and early 1870s were gradually withdrawn. Though small contingents of U.S. troops would remain in the South until 1877, Northerners and the federal government were clearly in retreat from their earlier support for Radical Reconstruction.

Klansman

A captured member of the Ku Klux Klan posed for a Holly Springs, Mississippi, photographer after turning state's evidence in the prosecution of Klan members under the 1871 law. © National Law Enforcement Museum, Washington, D.C. (2007.24.2).

The large planters now engaged in their final battle to "redeem" the South, struggling largely against freedpeople who had declining resources and few allies. Planters initially justified their actions with overt appeals to racism. As one planter put it, "God intended the niggers to be slaves." But the racism of their rhetoric cloaked another motivation: planters wanted a government-enforced system that would help them to reassert control over agricultural workers. As one leading southern Democrat declared, "We must get control of our own labor." In many areas of the South, the effort to regain control of blacks' lives and labors met substantial resistance from African Americans, sometimes in coalition with poor whites, throughout the late nineteenth century. Still, planters and their new industrial allies gradually achieved their main economic and political goals. As they did so, the South became a much more dangerous place for African Americans.

The Final Assault on Reconstruction Beginning in 1873, Americans who still advocated the reconstruction of race and class relations confronted the longest period of uninterrupted economic contraction in U.S. history—fully sixty-five months, well over five years. The entire nation suffered as businesses failed, banks collapsed, and massive unemployment became



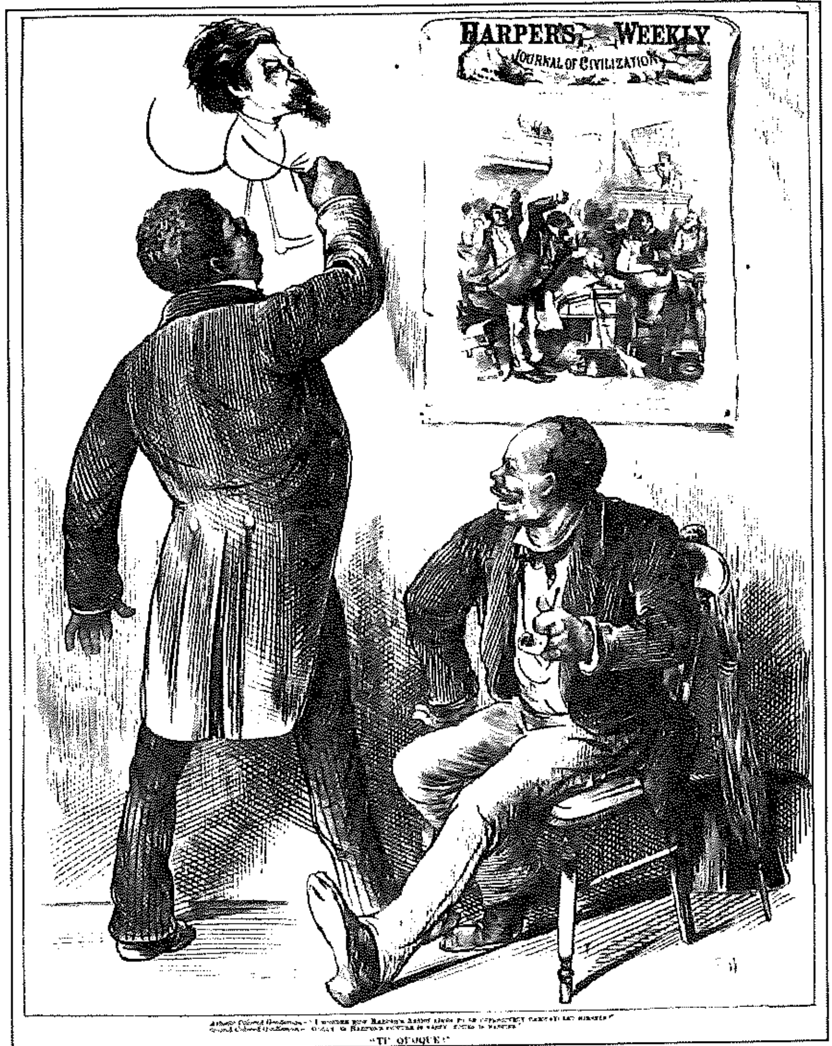
Colored Rule in the Reconstructed (?) State
Although Thomas Nast was an ardent supporter of equal rights, he often resorted to racial and ethnic stereotypes in his *Harper's Weekly* cartoons. Questioning the actions of some southern black Republican legislators, Nast drew the figure of "Columbia," symbol of the nation, chiding: "You are aping the lowest whites. If you disgrace your race in this way you had better take back seats." Thomas Nast, *Harper's Weekly*, March 14, 1874 — American Social History Project.

widespread (see Chapter 13). During the Panic of 1873, poor whites, new immigrants, and freedpeople alike saw their dreams of land ownership wither in the shadow cast by rapidly growing cities, wage labor, and long workdays. At the same time, many of the freedoms that southern blacks had gained in the late 1860s and early 1870s slipped away.

Southern landowners and employers, under the protection of the newly empowered Democratic Party, curtailed the potential for mass mobilization of poor whites and blacks in rural areas or their unionization in urban ones. New criminal codes in Georgia and elsewhere declared insurrection and incitement to insurrection to be capital offenses. Most southern legislatures increased penalties for theft, broadened the definition of arson, made it illegal to ride a horse or mule without the owner's permission, and restricted traditional access to land for the purpose of gathering wood, hunting, and fishing.

These codes were part of a larger pattern of discrimination that Democrats also directed against black Republicans and their white allies. In 1875, the Democrats' "Mississippi Plan" became a model for "redemption" in what was left of the reconstructed South: South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida. The first step in this plan was to use economic pressure, social ostracism, and threats of physical violence to force the remaining white Republicans back into the Democratic Party. Democrats simply made it "too damned hot for [us] to stay out," explained one white Republican who gave in to the pressure. The second step was to use a combination of economic and physical coercion to prevent African Americans from voting. One Democratic newspaper pledged to "carry the election peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must." Landlords informed African American sharecroppers that they could expect no further work if they voted Republican. Democrats also organized rifle clubs and physically attacked Republican picnics and rallies. Such violence proved to be the Democrats' most effective tool.

Vicksburg, Mississippi, was the scene of the worst political violence since the 1871 Klan murders in Meridian, Mississippi. In December 1874, responding to the continuing harassment of Republicans, Vicksburg's African American sheriff called on local blacks to help maintain the peace. But they were outnumbered and outgunned. White terrorists attacked a group of armed black deputies, killing 35 of them. With black voters intimidated, the Democrats won the county elections that same month, and the violence continued. It was directed primarily at local Republican leaders such as Richard Gray in Noxubee County. According to a fellow black Republican, Gray was "shot down walking on the pavements . . . because he was nominated for treasurer, and furthermore, because he made a speech and said he never did expect to vote a Democrat ticket, and also advised the colored citizens to do the same."



I Wonder How Harper's Artist Likes to Be Offensively Caricatured Himself?

Nast received a taste of his own medicine in this answering cartoon on the cover of the *New York Daily Graphic*. Such consciousness in the press about offensive imagery would not last long. By the 1880s, with the end of a national commitment to black equality, racist stereotypes characterized most published cartoons and illustrations. Th. Wust, *New York Daily Graphic*, March 11, 1874 — American Social History Project.

In response to this reign of terror and to the appeals of African Americans, Mississippi governor Adelbert Ames organized a state militia. Black men all around the state volunteered to serve in it, but Ames hesitated to arm them, perhaps fearing that this step would only result in greater violence. Although Ames requested President Grant's administration to send in federal troops, his request was denied. On election day, Republican supporters were thoroughly intimidated. Many stayed away from the polls, and the Democratic Party carried the state by thirty thousand votes. Mississippi had been "redeemed."

The presidential election of 1876 brought down the final curtain on the long drama of political Reconstruction (Map 12.2). The Republicans nominated Rutherford B. Hayes, governor of Ohio, as their candidate. He was a moderate Republican with a respectable Civil War record and a reputation for honesty. The Democrats, focusing on the corruption scandals that had rocked the Grant administration, chose New York's reform governor Samuel J. Tilden. Tilden had helped to break the grip of the notorious Tweed Ring in New York City. Although initial returns gave Tilden the election — including victories in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Indiana,

"A Dead Radical Is Very Harmless": Democratic Military Clubs in South Carolina

In 1876, using the Mississippi Plan as their model, the Democratic Party in South Carolina organized a chilling campaign of violence to steal the gubernatorial election. Their strategy, excerpted below, succeeded with the election of former Confederate General Wade Hampton. Items 2 and 16 appeared in a first draft of the plan and were marked "omit."

2. [It is decreed] That the Democratic Military Clubs are to be armed with rifles and pistols and such other arms as they may command. They are to be divided into two companies, one of the old men, the other of the young; an experienced captain or commander to be placed over each of them. That each company is to have a first and second Lieutenant. That the number of ten privates is to be the unit of organization. That each captain is to see that his men are well armed and provided with at least thirty rounds of ammunition. That the Captain of the young men is to provide a Baggage wagon in which three days rations for the horses and three days rations for the men are to be stored on the day before the election in order that they may be prepared at a moment's notice to move to any point in the County when ordered by the Chairman of the Executive Committee. . . .

11. Every Democrat must feel honor bound to control the vote of at least one Negro, by intimidation, purchase, keeping him away or as each individual may determine, how he may best accomplish it. . . .

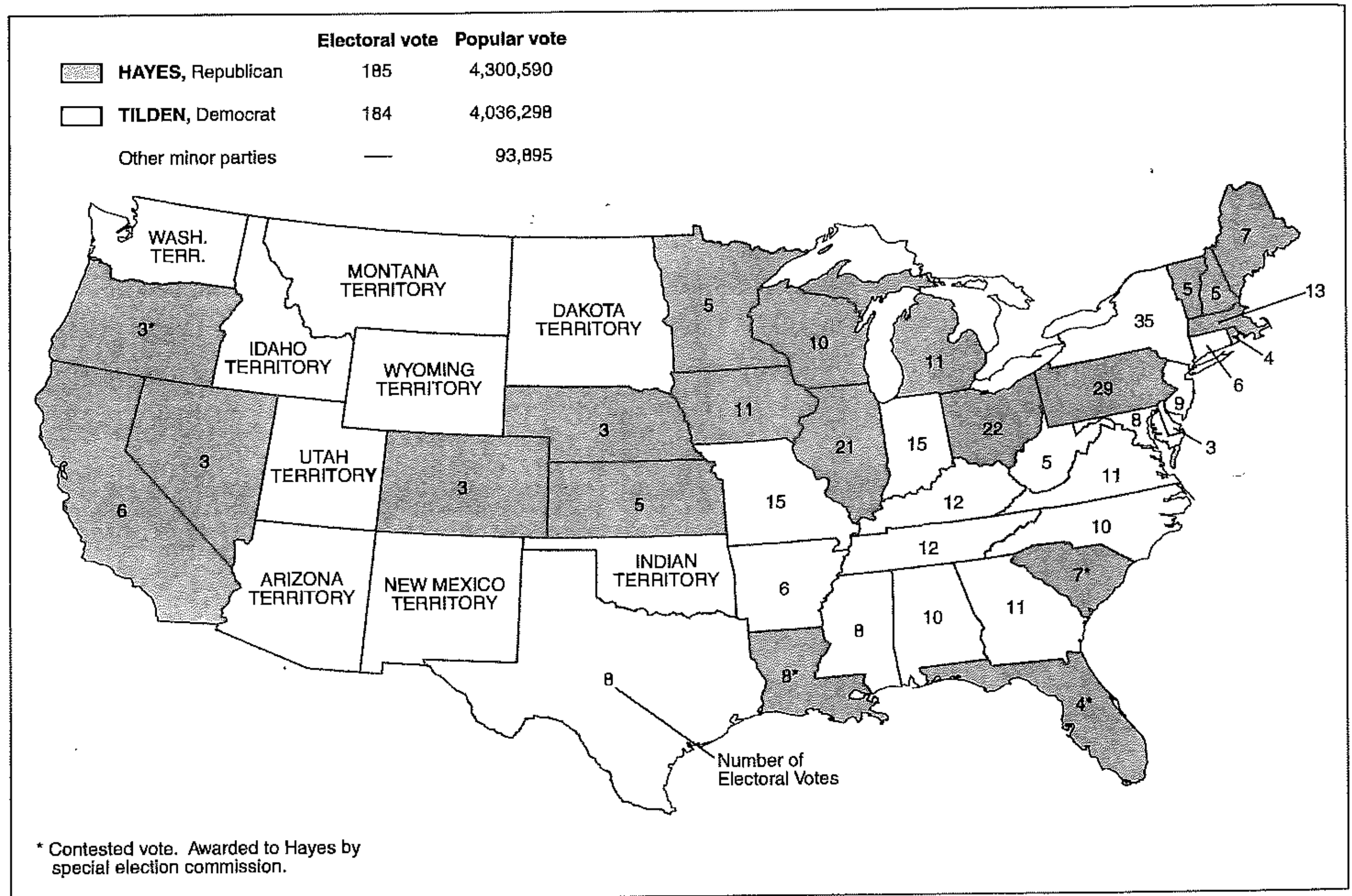
14. In speeches to negroes you must remember that *argument* has no effect upon them: They can only be influenced by their *fears*, superstition, and cupidity. . . . Treat them so as to show them, you are the superior race, and that their natural position is that of subordination to the white man. . . .

16. Never threaten a man individually. If he deserves to be threatened, the necessities of the times require that he should die. A dead Radical is very harmless—a threatened Radical or one driven off by threats from the scene of his operations is often very troublesome, sometimes dangerous, always vindictive. . . .

Francis Butler Simkins and Robert Hilliard Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Gloucester, MA: P. Smith, 1966), 564–569.

and most of the former Confederacy—disputes about the votes from three southern states that were still in Republican hands (Louisiana, South Carolina, and Florida) threw his victory into question.

In February 1877, a specially appointed electoral commission composed of ten congressmen and five Supreme Court justices—eight Republicans and seven Democrats—ruled eight to seven that the disputed votes in the three states belonged to Hayes. But there was no guarantee that the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives would accept this decision, and many Americans believed that the nation faced another civil



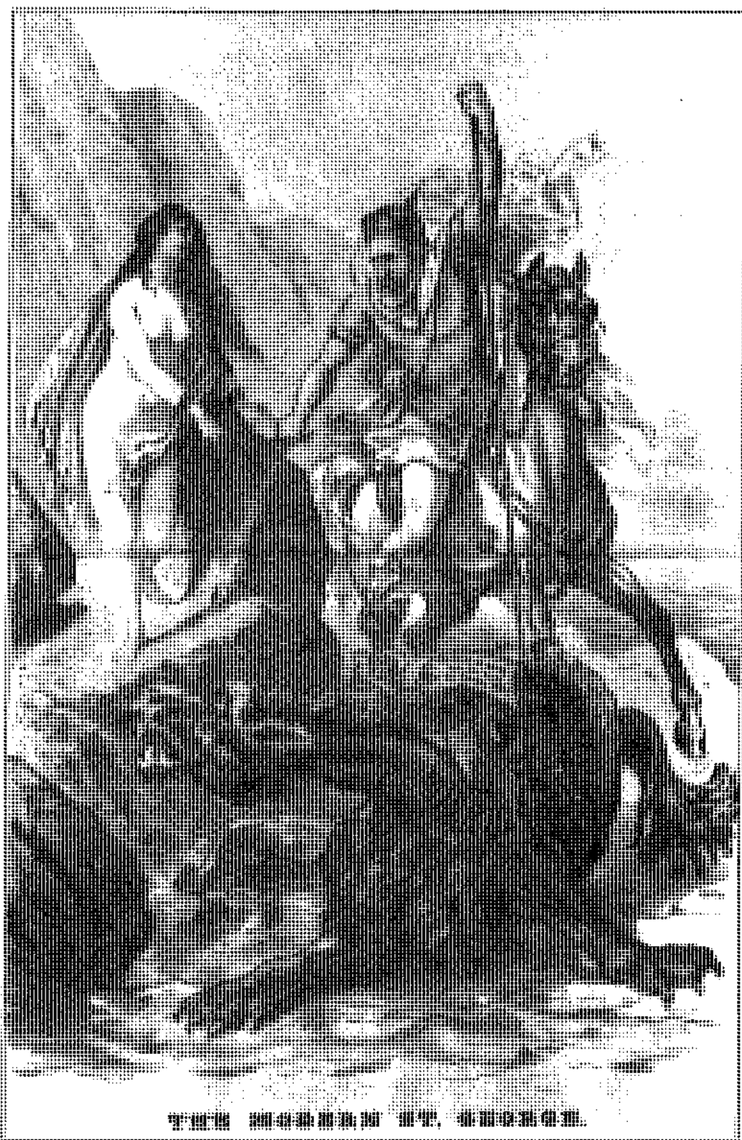
war. Leading Republicans now moved to the fore, working out an understanding with southern Democrats in Congress to assure Hayes's inauguration. In exchange for Democratic support, the Republicans promised to give southern Democrats a fair share of federal appointments and to remove the remaining federal troops from the South. They also agreed to provide federal assistance for southern railroad development as a boon to industrialization and the creation of truly national markets.

Hayes was inaugurated in March 1877. In April, he pulled out the few remaining federal troops from the capitals of Louisiana and South Carolina, allowing Democrats to return to power. Neither the southern Republican Party nor the freedpeople who were its most ardent supporters could rely any longer on federal protection against violence and intimidation.

MAP 12.2 The Election of 1876 Initially, it appeared that Democratic candidate Samuel J. Tilden had won the election of 1876. He captured a majority of the popular vote and was leading in electoral votes. Only a series of political maneuvers and a compromise by Republicans that involved the final withdrawal of federal troops from the former Confederacy allowed Rutherford B. Hayes to gain all of the contested electoral votes in Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina. With those votes in the Hayes column, he won the presidency by a single electoral vote.

Conclusion: Still Searching for Freedom

As one southern state after another was "redeemed," those African Americans who could left the South behind. Beginning in the mid-1870s, colonization schemes, which proposed migration to Africa or to midwestern states



The Modern St. George

Republican president Rutherford B. Hayes is portrayed in this cartoon from the satirical weekly *Puck* as the savior saint, freeing the South from the "misrule" of Reconstruction.
Joseph Keppler, *Puck*, May 2, 1877 — New-York Historical Society.

such as Kansas, became popular among freedpeople. Henry Adams, a Union Army veteran from Louisiana and a colonization organizer, claimed to have signed up 60,000 blacks from all parts of the South. "This is a horrible part of the country," he wrote. "It is impossible for us to live with these slaveholders of the South and enjoy the right as they enjoy it." Although not many made the journey to Africa, tens of thousands of southern blacks did migrate to Kansas, taking their name from the Bible's Book of Exodus. Few of these Exodusters succeeded in establishing themselves on Kansas farmland, however, and most had to settle for menial jobs in the state's towns.

Life was indeed repressive in the South after Reconstruction ended, but the fact that thousands of freedpeople were able to emigrate at all indicates that they had at least succeeded in preventing the reinstitution of slavery. Moreover, many of the gains that had been secured during the Civil War and Reconstruction could not be erased by "redemption." African Americans came out of this era having won control over their family and religious lives; having secured, however briefly, national legal guarantees of equal rights, including suffrage; and, perhaps most important, having created a legacy of successful collective action on which their heirs would draw in future struggles for civil rights. Nonetheless, by 1877, the free-labor society that black Americans and their Radical Republican allies had tried to hard to create during Reconstruction had become but a distant ideal.

Growing numbers of African Americans entered the industrial labor force. Unfortunately, they joined the industrial age at the moment of its worst crisis of the century, which drastically limited African Americans' opportunities to secure employment, especially in skilled jobs, much less to join labor unions. Yet even after the Panic of 1873 subsided, the reconciliation of political and business leaders from the North and South ensured that few African Americans would benefit from the revitalization of commercial agriculture and industry. At the same time, the failure of the South and the nation to recognize the contributions that African Americans had made and could make economically, socially, culturally, and politically

"Let Us . . . Resolutely Struggle On": Frederick Douglass on Reconstruction

In his third autobiographical narrative, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, *the nation's preeminent African American leader—whose career spanned the abolitionist crusade, the drama of war and emancipation, and, finally, the tragedy of the postwar era—summed up the political and moral lessons of Reconstruction.*

History does not furnish an example of emancipation under conditions less friendly to the emancipated class than this American example. Liberty came to the freedmen of the United States not in mercy, but in wrath, not by moral choice but by military necessity, not by the generous action of the people among whom they were to live, and whose good-will was essential to the success of the measure, but by strangers, foreigners, invaders. . . . They were hated because they had been slaves, hated because they were now free, and hated because of those who had freed them. Nothing was to have been expected other than what has happened, and he is a poor student of the human heart who does not see that the old master class would naturally employ every power and means in their reach to make the great measure of emancipation unsuccessful and utterly odious. It was born in the tempest and whirlwind of war, and has lived in a storm of violence and blood. When the Hebrews were emancipated, they were told to take spoil from the Egyptians. When the serfs of Russia were emancipated, they were given three acres of ground upon which they could live and make a living. But not so when our slaves were emancipated. They were sent away empty-handed, without money, without friends, and without a foot of land to stand upon. Old and young, sick and well, were turned loose to the open sky, naked to their enemies. The old slave quarter that had before sheltered them and the fields that had yielded them corn were now denied them. . . .

Inhuman as was this treatment, it was the natural result of the bitter resentment felt by the old master class; and, in view of it, the wonder is, not that the colored people of the South have done so little in the way of acquiring a comfortable living, but that they live at all.

Taking all the circumstances into consideration, the colored people have no reason to despair. We still live, and while there is life there is hope. The fact that we have endured wrongs and hardships which would have destroyed any other race, and have increased in numbers and public consideration, ought to strengthen our faith in ourselves and our future. Let us, then, wherever we are, whether at the North or at the South, resolutely struggle on in the belief that there is a better day coming, and that we, by patience, industry, uprightness, and economy may hasten that better day. I will not listen, myself, and I would not have you listen to the nonsense, that no people can succeed in life among a people by whom they have been despised and oppressed.

Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1882), 613–614.

assured that the nation as a whole would suffer from the deeply ingrained racism that thrived in the still unreconstructed United States.

The Years in Review

1862

- Union forces capture New Orleans in April and begin an occupation of the city.
- Northern reformers travel to the South Carolina Sea Islands, which have been under Union occupation since November 1861, to establish schools, churches, and self-government for the newly emancipated slaves there.

1863

- Newly freed black Sea Island residents purchase two thousand acres of deserted land from the federal government in an effort to distance themselves from the plantation system.
- President Lincoln's Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction allows any Confederate state to seek readmission to the Union if 10 percent of its voters take an oath of loyalty to the Union.

1865

- On January 16, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman issues Field Order Number 15, which distributes confiscated Confederate plantation lands to African Americans.
- President Lincoln endorses limited suffrage for African Americans.
- On April 15, John Wilkes Booth assassinates President Lincoln at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C.; Booth's accomplices also attempt to kill Secretary of State William Seward. Vice President Andrew Johnson of Tennessee assumes the presidency.
- The Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands is created to assist freed slaves.
- President Johnson offers total amnesty to white Southerners who would swear basic loyalty to the Union.
- Ex-Confederate officials are elected in large numbers to federal and state positions. Enraged Radical Republicans establish a joint committee of Congress to investigate.

1866

- The Fourteenth Amendment, granting full citizenship to African Americans, passes both houses of Congress. Encouraged by President Johnson, all but one of the southern states refuse to ratify it.

- Confederate veterans in Tennessee found the Ku Klux Klan.
- White violence against African Americans rocks Memphis in May and New Orleans in July; nationwide, shocked northerners vote for Republicans' benefit in the fall elections.
- Congress passes a bill that extends the life of the Freedmen's Bureau and the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which gives federal courts the power to defend freedpeople's rights against interference from state governments.
- President Johnson vetoes both bills as a federal infringement on states' rights; Congress overrides both vetoes.
- Radical Republicans Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens propose confiscating the land of ex-planters and redistributing it to freed slaves.

1867

- Large numbers of African Americans participate in politics by joining the Union Leagues that are spreading throughout the South.
- Congress passes the Reconstruction Act of March 1867 over President Johnson's veto. It mandates state constitutional conventions in which African Americans will participate, backed up by protection from federal troops.
- After two years of struggle by African Americans, New Orleans ends segregated seating on its streetcars.
- Radical Republicans are elected in southern states and pass laws supporting public education, the rights of landless laborers, and integration of public accommodations.

1868

- Republican Ulysses S. Grant is elected president.
- African Americans begin winning elected office in the South; between 1868 and 1876, fourteen black representatives are elected to the U.S. Congress, two are elected to the U.S. Senate, six are elected lieutenant governors, hundreds are elected to state legislatures, and thousands are elected to local offices.
- The U.S. House of Representatives impeaches President Johnson; the U.S. Senate acquits him.
- Radical Republican Thaddeus Stevens dies; a more moderate group of Republicans, known as the Stalwarts, gains control of the party.

1869

- Tennessee and Virginia revert to Democratic political control, beginning the state-level rollback of Reconstruction gains known as "Redemption."

1870

- The Fifteenth Amendment, granting all citizens the right to vote regardless of color, is ratified.

1871

- Shots ring out in the Meridian, Mississippi, courthouse during the trial of three African American men who had been accused of delivering "incendiary speeches"; a white spectator kills two of the defendants and the Republican judge, touching off rioting that kills 30 African Americans.
- The following month, Congress passes the Ku Klux Klan Act, making certain individual crimes against citizens' rights punishable under federal law.

1872

- Ulysses S. Grant is reelected; the Republican Party continues its retreat from the defense of African American rights.

1874

- In December 1874, whites in Vicksburg, Mississippi, attack a group of armed black deputies, killing 35 of them. Continued violence ensures a Democratic victory at the polls later that month.

1875

- President Grant denies Mississippi governor Adelbert Ames's request for federal troops to end the violence directed at Republican voters.

1876

- Initial returns in the presidential election give victory to Democrat Samuel J. Tilden, but in February 1877, a commission of congressmen makes Republican Rutherford B. Hayes president; to gain the presidency, congressional Republicans promise southern Democrats a fair share of federal appointments, removal of the remaining federal troops from the South, and federal assistance for southern railroad development.

1877

- President Hayes is inaugurated in March; in April, he pulls out the few remaining federal troops from the South.

Additional Readings

For overviews of Reconstruction, see: Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* (1992); W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935); Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863–1877* (1990); Eric Foner and Joshua Brown, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (2005); John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction: After the Civil War* (1961); and James M. McPherson and J. Morgan Kousser, eds., *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (1982).

For more on the political history of Reconstruction, see: Dan T. Carter, *When the War Was Over: The Failure of Self-Reconstruction in the South, 1865–1867* (1985); Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (1997); Michael W. Fitzgerald, *Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile, 1860–1890* (2002); Ann Gordon et al., eds., *African American Women and the Vote, 1837–1965* (1997); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (2003); Thomas Holt, *Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina During Reconstruction* (1977); Morgan J. Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880–1910* (1974); Peyton McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction: The Louisiana Experiment* (1978); Eric L. McKittrick, *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (1960); Michael Perman, *The Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1869–1879* (1984); and James Roark, *Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (1977).

For more on working people, see: Nancy Bercaw, *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of the Household in the Delta, 1861–1875* (2003); Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi* (1999); William Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers Since the Civil War* (1982); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (1985); Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (1977); Joseph P. Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800–1880* (1992); and Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1869–1870* (1994).

For more on newly emancipated African Americans, see: Carol Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen's Aid Movement* (2003); Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (1979); William S. McFeeley, *Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen* (1968); Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (1971); Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (1964); Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction, 1861–1877* (1965); and Jean Fagin Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (2005).

For more on the end of Reconstruction, see: Heather C. Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post–Civil War North, 1865–1901* (2001); Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (1993); Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (1971); and C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (1951).