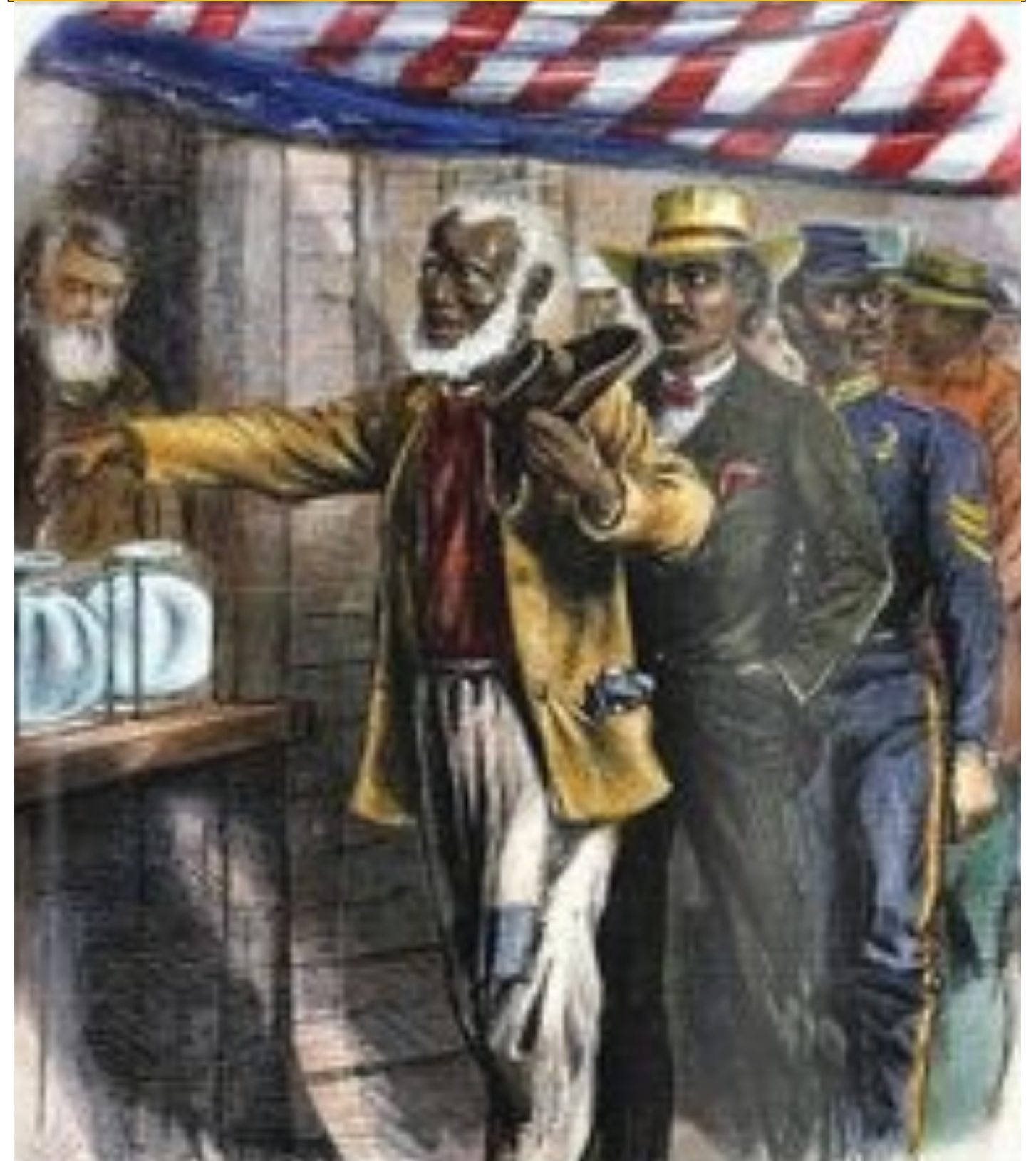


Preamble to the United States Constitution

We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

RECONSTRUCTION

Revising a Nation





United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service
Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park
1207 Emery Highway
Macon, Georgia 31217-4399



5620-2020

Ref.: Reconstruction

Dear Sir/Madame:

In 2011, the sesquicentennial of the Civil War kicked off with conferences, public lectures, government proclamations, and even balls and galas. As Reconstruction's anniversary begins, however, there is no such fanfare and few signs of public reckoning, much less celebration.

Reconstruction has long suffered such neglect. The National Park Service, steward of the nation's Civil War battlefields and a leader in interpreting the war for the public, in 2011 did not have a single site dedicated to that vital and controversial period. Now, on the cusp of significant Reconstruction anniversaries, the Park Service is ready to change how Americans remember Reconstruction, to help push the era—in all its complexity—back onto the map of America's collective memory.

As the Cultural Resources Specialist/Historian for Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park, one of my responsibilities is to research and obtain information, documents and artifacts associated with the current and future interpretive themes designated by the Washington Support Office (WASO) of the National Park Service (NPS). One of the major interpretive themes identified as being significant by the NPS in 2014 was the Reconstruction era. My initial research for this theme was to compile information relating to this historical era of American history and try to attempt to come up with a document that will help the American public in understanding this period.

The period known as Reconstruction was defined by the questions of race and power that Fredrick Douglass identified, questions that flowed logically and continuously out of the Civil War. Those same questions reverberate in many political debates today—debates over the meaning of equal protection of the law, over the right to vote, and over the limits of presidential and congressional authority, both in peacetime and in war. I urge all that read this document to learn as much as they can and commemorate this remarkable period.

Sincerely,

Lonnie J. Davis

Lonnie J. Davis

Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park
Cultural Resources Specialist/Historian

Reconstruction remains difficult to fathom and can be painful to discuss.

Historians have conducted large-scale studies of African American office-holding that dispel the myth of "negro rule" and show how difficult it was for African Americans—even during the heady days of Reconstruction—to get candidates elected to major offices. Against claims that African Americans emerged from slavery unprepared to live independently, historians have unearthed the wealth of institutions and cultural resources that people of African descent developed in slavery and cultivated after emancipation. Scholars have profiled the "carpetbaggers" as a group and as individuals, revealing that many were motivated not by crass self-interest but by a desire to help build a more democratic South. And in examining Republican congressmen, they have found not tyrants but the authors of many of the constitutional rights that Americans hold most dear.

Unfortunately, little of the new work has made it out of the halls of the academy and into public consciousness. Reconstruction remains difficult to fathom and can be painful to discuss. It is complicated to teach. The issues it raises are bracingly—but also distressingly—contemporary, and while the period has many heroes and heroines, it offers little in the way of happy endings.

The National Park Service's decision to commission a study of Reconstruction is therefore timely, significant, and consistent with its growing willingness to tackle difficult histories. Departing from the convention of marking only those events that can be narrated as positive or heroic, the Park Service has recently developed sites commemorating Japanese Internment during World War II, and the massacre of hundreds of Cheyenne and Arapaho people at Sand Creek by Coloradans enrolled in the U.S. Army. In perhaps no area has the re-making of the parks been more obvious than in the Civil War, where parks once concerned only with battles now provide information on what caused the war and extend the story from white soldiers on both sides to include the roles of black soldiers, slaves, and freed people.

By taking up Reconstruction, the Park Service moves into territory that is similarly sensitive and important. Over the next few years, the organization will compile information from historians, its own staff members, state historical societies, and the general public about the specific sites that would best capture Reconstruction's history. Identifying those sites and creating a framework for public engagement with Reconstruction cannot smooth out the complexity and travails of the era, but it can be a part of fulfilling the Park Service's mission of helping Americans grapple with this nation's history, a challenge that in the end means not just celebrating its victories but also remembering its tragedies and asking serious questions about defeats and wrong turns.

Reconstruction Era in the U.S. Scholars Roundtable

governments were established and functioning, the army remained but moved into the background. Federal troops were important components in the success of Reconstruction programs throughout the South, and their removal was equally important in the retrenchment and the Jim Crow Era that followed.

Dr. Brooks Simpson, Arizona State University

The End of Reconstruction

Nonetheless, Reconstruction soon began to wane. During the 1870s, many Republicans retreated from both the racial egalitarianism and the broad definition of federal power spawned by the Civil War. Southern corruption and instability, Reconstruction's critics argued, stemmed from the exclusion of the region's "best men"—the planters—from power. As Northern Republicans became more conservative, Reconstruction came to symbolize a misguided attempt to uplift the lower classes of society. Reflecting the shifting mood, a series of Supreme Court decisions, beginning with the Slaughterhouse Cases in 1873, severely limited the scope of Reconstruction laws and constitutional amendments.

By 1876 only South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana remained under Republican control. The outcome of that year's presidential contest between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel J. Tilden hinged on disputed returns from these states. Negotiations between Southern political leaders and representatives of Rutherford B. Hayes produced a bargain: Hayes would recognize Democratic control of the remaining Southern states, and Democrats would not block the certification of his election by Congress. Hayes was inaugurated; federal troops returned to their barracks; and as an era when the federal government accepted the responsibility for protecting the rights of the former slaves, nothing happened.

Rutherford B. Hayes to assume the presidency while guaranteeing no further federal interference in southern affairs. Yet the tumultuous period that followed the Civil War and the abolition of slavery did not suddenly come to an end in 1877. Republicans, politically weakened by a resurgent Democratic party, attempted to pass voting rights and educational bills in the 1880s and 1890s. In the 1880s, southern Democrats continued their campaign to disfranchise black voters across the south. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court eviscerated the Reconstruction legislation that had sought to define citizenship and extend its benefits to African Americans. In a series of devastating cases, the Court drastically limited the federal government's power to protect people's civil and political rights. By the end of the century, many—though not all—of Reconstruction's gains were in retreat as Southern state governments disfranchised black men and legalized the "Jim Crow" order of racial segregation and degradation. The Supreme Court quickly concurred in its 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, Reconstruction came to an end.

Dr. David Blight, Yale University

RECONSTRUCTION

Revising a Nation

Overview

Reconstruction is the period in U.S. history which has been identified as the years from 1865 to 1877. Reconstruction is one of the most complicated, poorly understood, and most significant periods in American history. The United States government faced the enormous question of how to usher the states of the former Confederacy back into the United States of America. The challenge was heightened by the constraints imposed by the U.S. Constitution and broader American skepticism about a strong centralized government. The result was a period of extraordinarily creative and meaningful policymaking, which gave rise to the nation's first federal civil rights laws, as well as three new constitutional amendments. It was a pivotal period in southern history, in which four million African Americans, newly freed from bondage, sought to establish schools and communities, and in which white southerners faced the challenge of both wartime defeat and slavery's abolition. Reconstruction's big questions -- about democracy, race, war, and region -- give it lasting resonance in our own time.



Reconstruction during the Civil War

In November 1861, Union naval and land forces captured Port Royal and the surrounding islands of South Carolina. Nearly all of the white land owners fled, leaving behind some 10,000 enslaved people who for the first time in their lives experienced their freedom.

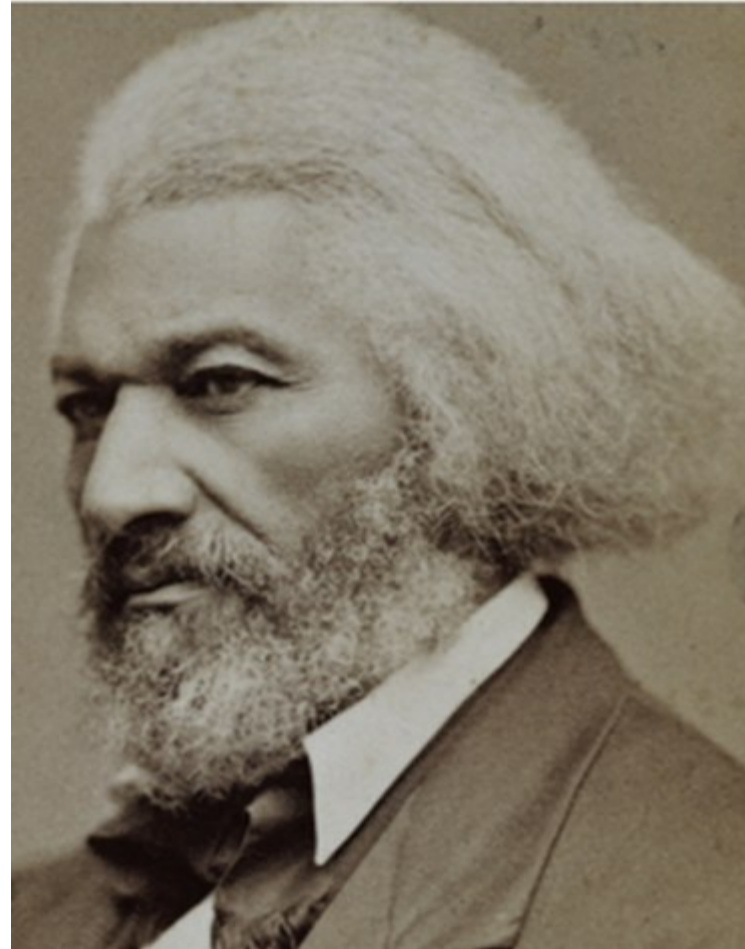
Above all else, the freedmen hungered for the two things denied them in slavery—land ownership and education. The federal government devised ways for them to acquire or at least use the abandoned land to grow crops and humanitarian groups from the North sent teachers to educate these eager learners, and to prove that freedmen could prosper outside the bonds of slavery.

When Union forces captured New Orleans and southern Louisiana, President Lincoln wanted to bring Louisiana and other Confederate states back into the Union as quickly as possible. He also believed that given the chance, loyal southerners would reconstruct their state governments with the acceptance that the institution of slavery would no longer exist. The debates in the convention to create a new Louisiana state constitution foretold issues that would be debated throughout the South, issues such as the role of blacks in the political structure and support for public education.

By the spring of 1865, many veterans of the decades-long movement to end slavery felt their work was finished. Confederate generals had surrendered, giving up the dream of a nation whose cornerstone was human bondage. And Congress had passed a constitutional amendment that—once ratified—would make slavery illegal throughout the land. Abolitionists had reason to feel satisfied.

Reconstruction (December 1866)

At a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in May, however, Frederick Douglass urged them to fight on. The Thirteenth Amendment was the beginning, not the end, of the effort to remake the nation. "Slavery is not abolished until the black man has the ballot," he told the crowd. "While the Legislatures of the South retain the right to pass laws making any discrimination between black and white, slavery still lives there."



Frederick Douglass
(Photo: Encyclopedia Britannica)

Dr. Thavolia Glymph, Duke University

Southern White Response to Reconstruction

During the restive years following the Civil War, the Reconstruction Era, often referred to as the nation's Second Founding or the first Civil Rights Movement—America saw a virulent backlash from white supremacists in response to profound political, economic, and educational gains made by African

Americans. During these years, more African Americans held office than at any other period in American history; in 2014 Tim Scott became the first African-American United States Senator elected in South Carolina since Reconstruction. The newly freed slaves during Reconstruction established churches, schools, and businesses, and negotiated labor contracts with their former owners.

Resigned to losing the war, their slaves, and much of their political clout, surviving southern elites were determined that the social structure of the antebellum South should not be upset. Re-establishing their control over local and state political systems was the means to ensuring continued white economic and social supremacy; they were not loath to use violence to achieve this end. Paramilitary groups including the Ku Klux Klan, the White League in Louisiana, and the Red Shirts in Mississippi and the Carolinas came into being for the sole purpose of terrorizing black and Republican voters, disrupting and suppressing the vote, and intimidating or murdering freedmen to restore white political supremacy.



Secret societies that terrorized African Americans
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Dr. Elaine Parsons, Duquesne University

An Army of Occupation

Few things rankled Southerners more than the United States soldiers stationed in their midst during Reconstruction – except when those were United States Colored Troops. They had already lost the war to these Bluecoats, and their presence was a constant reminder of their defeat. Further, they wanted everything to return to the way things were before the war. They wanted their former slaves to return to lives of subservience, and they wanted to regain their political clout. But, the “new birth of freedom” for the formerly enslaved people, and the new political order were radical and revolutionary, and the northern military presence in the five military districts in the South was essential for providing protection for African Americans and supporting the establishment of new governments. In most areas, once state reconstruction

the ideal of equality, is what doomed Reconstruction. The Ku Klux Klan and kindred groups began a campaign of murder, assault and arson that can only be described as homegrown American terrorism. Meanwhile, as the Northern Republican Party became more conservative, Reconstruction came to be seen as a misguided attempt to uplift the lower classes of society.

After doing everything they could free themselves and end slavery – including running away and aiding the Union army – southern blacks greeted slavery’s abolition with energy and ideas. Drawing on structures of family and community organization developed during slavery, these former slaves inaugurated schools and churches and mobilized for politics. Their political goals – particularly their desire for land and control of family and work arrangements – emerged from their experiences in slavery.

Most freed people saw the Republican Party as their best chance for advancing their claims in partisan politics and became Republicans through local branches of the party and an allied organization, the Union League. At its broadest, black political mobilization promised not just an improvement in African American life but a new way of thinking about freedom and equality, with implications for education, public health, the law, and almost every facet of governance. Aided by resources from the Republican Party, black political organizers canvassed the South, educating and registering voters. It was the most democratic moment in American history!

Dr. Heather Williams, University of North Carolina

Constitutional Reconstruction

The original U.S. Constitution gave state governments a great deal of latitude including the power to decide whether to permit slavery. The United States victory in the Civil War revealed a national consensus that slavery could no longer be permitted, and the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, was the first of three constitutional amendments that rewrote the balance of power between the states and the federal government. Looking to secure the basic rights of African Americans in the South, Congress passed a civil rights act that, for the first time which permitted federal authority to supersede that of the states in instances where individuals’ rights were not being respected. The Fourteenth Amendment established birthright citizenship and basic civil rights, and the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited racial discrimination in voting rights.

These amendments reflected the nation’s continuing ambivalence about local versus federal power. They allowed local authorities to establish laws that suited their own communities while also allowing the federal government to step in to protect certain basic rights. In the end, however, the Reconstruction amendments could not by themselves protect people. As political and judicial support for the amendments evaporated in the late 19th century, Americans violated the amendments repeatedly and with impunity. Yet the structure of American government was forever changed by these amendments, which explicitly repudiated race-based discrimination and established for the first time that all people living in the United States were entitled to a few basic rights.

Dr. Michael Les Benedict, Ohio State University

The end of slavery, Douglass argued, would never be secured if the nation's four million ex-slaves were left to the mercies of their Southern white neighbors. State governments would use racially discriminatory legislation to impoverish and immobilize former slaves, and they would never voluntarily permit black men to vote. The antislavery movement must press forward, lobbying the government to do more to protect and empower black Southerners, lest the moment's potential be lost.

Significance of Reconstruction Era

For all its significance, however, Reconstruction seems more difficult to remember than to forget. *The New York Times'* innovative and successful *Disunion* series is ending, echoing predecessors like Ken Burns’ epic documentary, *The Civil War*, which skipped Reconstruction almost entirely.

There is a great deal to look at. Reconstruction was a nearly unprecedented period of transformation. While most slaveholding societies—with the exception of Haiti—refused to enfranchise ex-slave men upon emancipation, the United States extended the vote to black men, and Southern constituencies soon elected black men to Congress, state legislatures, and crucial local offices including sheriffs and assessors.

This political transformation, pressed forward by the lobbying of Douglass and hundreds of thousands of freed people and white Republicans, transformed the South in turn. New state governments created public schools and hospitals, and black people and their white allies founded colleges, churches, and benevolent organizations.

Instead of facing exclusion from legal systems, some black Southerners now ran them. Once treated as property, they could now legally own property, and many struggled heroically to do so. Once prohibited from reading, they now built schools and flooded them with teachers and students. Once blocked from the legal protections of marriage, they now registered their unions and claimed the privileges commonly associated with both marriage and parenthood.

And these grassroots transformations also remade the country. New constitutional amendments refashioned American citizenship and promised new rights. After the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment established national citizenship, protected the federal debt from repudiation, and promised individuals equal protection and due process of law. The Fifteenth Amendment attempted to outlaw racial discrimination in the right to vote. Together, these amendments were a second founding of the nation, a remaking of citizenship and rights so broad as to stand with the constitutional convention itself as a signal moment in the making of America.

At the same time, Reconstruction was also a period of disappointment and disillusionment. For the many white Southerners who had sympathized with and fought for the Confederacy, wartime defeat was compounded by the federal government's policies, which led to loss of mastery over their slaves and loss of political power as black men too were allowed to vote. Many lashed out violently. In bloody campaigns of terror, they prevented African Americans from voting, killed thousands of freed people, raped untold numbers of black women, and thus reestablished control. By the end of the century, many—though not

all—of Reconstruction’s gains were in retreat as Southern state governments disfranchised black men and legalized the "Jim Crow" order of racial segregation and degradation. The Supreme Court quickly concurred in its 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision.

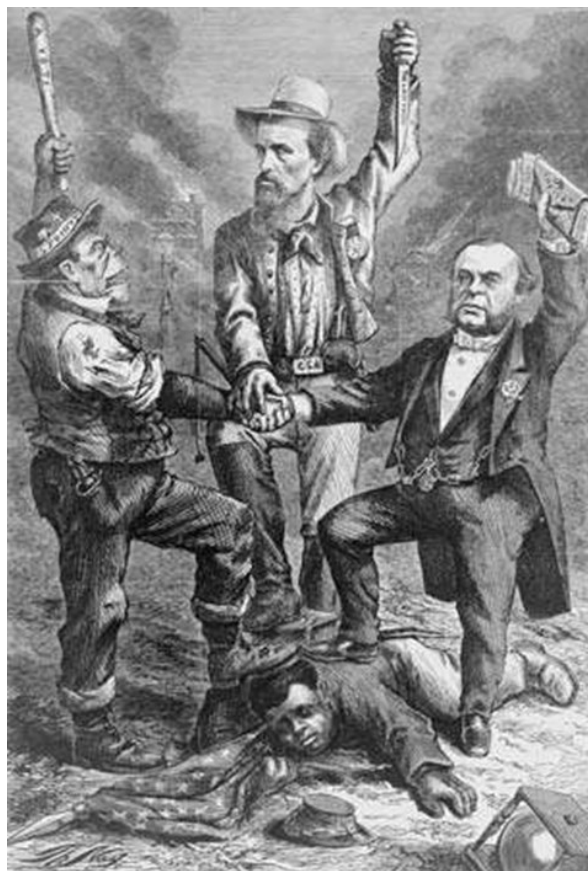
Amid the tumult, a search for meaning emerged among writers of all kinds, including northern news reporters dispatched to the South, white Southern memoirists striving to make sense of their commitment to a failed cause, and activists who sought with diminishing success to draw attention to the plight of black communities.

The victors in this war of words and interpretation were those who believed Reconstruction had been a disastrous mistake. Those writers made the villains of Reconstruction almost legendary: foolish or violent black Southerners, corrupt white Northern carpetbaggers, and tyrannical Republican politicians who oversaw an era of unjust, unconstitutional federal intervention.

Political Reconstruction

Reconstruction actually began in December 1863, when Abraham Lincoln announced a plan to establish governments in the South loyal to the Union. Lincoln granted amnesty to most Confederates so long as they accepted the abolition of slavery, but said nothing about rights for freed blacks. Rather than a blueprint for the postwar South, this was a war measure, an effort to detach whites from the Confederacy. On Reconstruction, as on other questions, Lincoln’s ideas evolved. At the end of his life, he called for limited black suffrage in the postwar South, singling out the “very intelligent” (prewar free blacks) and “those who serve our cause as soldiers” as most worthy.

Lincoln did not live to preside over Reconstruction. That task fell to his successor, Andrew Johnson. Once lionized as a heroic defender of the Constitution against Radical Republicans, Johnson today is viewed by historians as one of the worst presidents to occupy the White House. He was incorrigibly racist, unwilling to listen to criticism and unable to work with Congress. Johnson set up new Southern governments controlled by ex-Confederates. They quickly enacted the Black Codes, laws that severely limited the freed people’s rights and sought, through vagrancy regulations, to force them back to work on the plantations. But these measures aroused bitter protests among blacks, and convinced Northerners that the white South was trying to restore slavery in all but name.



“This Is a White Man's Government,” political cartoon by Thomas Nast, published in Harper's Weekly, Sept. 5, 1868. Depicted standing atop a black Civil War veteran are a “Five Points Irishman,” Ku Klux Klan founder Nathan Bedford Forrest, and Wall Street financier and Democrat August Belmont.

Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Freedmen Bureau

Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands in 1865 to assist in the reconstruction of the South and to aid formerly enslaved individuals transition to freedom and citizenship. Administered by the War Department, the Bureau followed the department’s war-inspired record-keeping system. These handwritten records include letters, labor contracts, and lists of food rations issued, indentures of apprenticeship, marriage and hospital registers and census lists. They provide a unique view into the lives of newly freed individuals and the social conditions of the South after the war.

The Bureau was responsible for providing assistance to almost four million formerly enslaved individuals and hundreds of thousands of impoverished Southern whites. The Bureau provided food, clothing, medical care, and legal representation; promoted education; helped legalize marriages; and assisted African American soldiers and sailors in securing back pay, enlistment bounties, and pensions. In addition, the Bureau promoted a system of labor contracts to replace the slavery system and tried to settle freedmen and women on abandoned or confiscated land. The Bureau was also responsible for protecting freedmen and women from intimidation and assaults by Southern whites. The Bureau set up offices in major cities in the 15 Southern and border states and the District of Columbia.

To blacks, freedom meant independence from white control. The Freedmen Bureau attempted to provide African Americans the opportunity to solidify their family ties and to create independent religious institutions, which became centers of community life that survived long after Reconstruction ended. The former slaves also demanded economic independence. Blacks’ hoped that the federal government would provide them with land had been raised by Gen. William T. Sherman’s Field Order No. 15 of January 1865, which set aside a large swath of land along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia for the exclusive settlement of black families, and by the Freedmen’s Bureau Act of March, which authorized the bureau to rent or sell land in its possession to former slaves. But President Johnson in the summer of 1865 ordered land in federal hands to be returned to its former owners.

The dream of “40 acres and a mule” was stillborn. Lacking land, most former slaves had little economic alternative other than resuming to work on plantations owned by whites. Some worked for wages, others as sharecroppers, who divided the crop with the owner at the end of the year. Neither status offered much hope for economic mobility. Under-funded by Congress and opposed by President Andrew Johnson, the Freedmen Bureau only operated between 1865 and 1872.

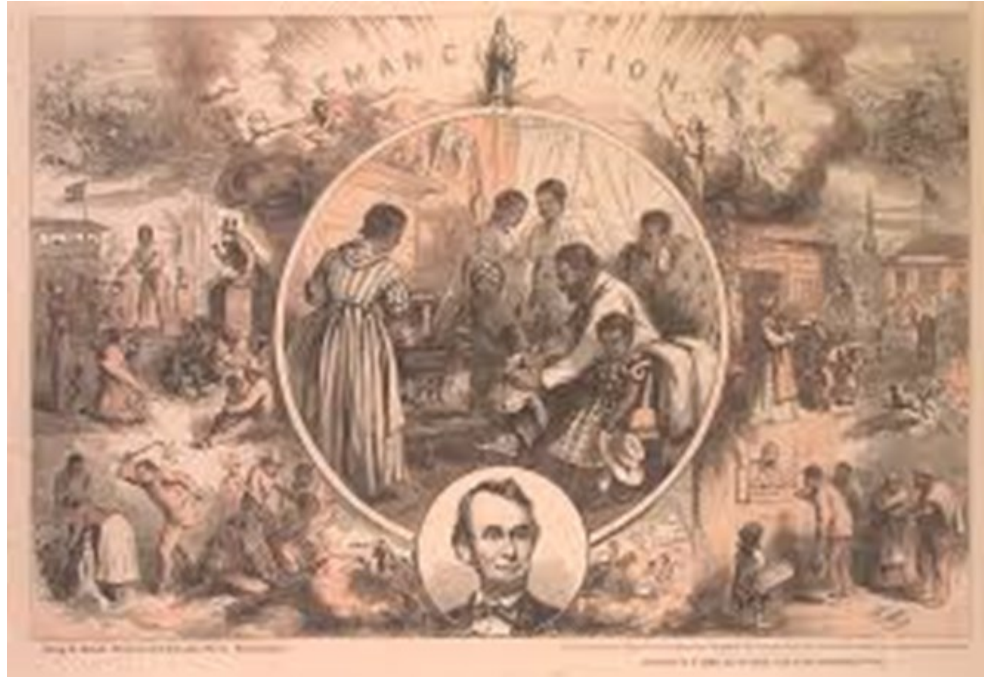
Black Mobilization

Reconstruction also made possible the consolidation of black families, so often divided by sale during slavery, and the establishment of the independent black church as the core institution of the emerging black community. But the failure to respond to the former slaves’ desire for land left most with no choice but to work for their former owners.

It was not economic dependency, however, but widespread violence, coupled with a Northern retreat from

From Slavery to Free Labor in the South

Immediately following the Civil War and adoption of the 13th Amendment, most states of the former Confederacy adopted Black Codes, laws modeled on former slave laws. These laws were intended to limit the new freedom of emancipated African Americans by restricting their movement and by forcing them into a labor economy based on low wages and debt. Vagrancy laws allowed blacks to be arrested for minor infractions. A system of penal labor known as convict leasing was established at this time. Black men convicted for vagrancy would be used as unpaid laborers, and thus effectively re-enslaved.



EMANCIPATION
National Archives, Washington D.C.

The Black Codes outraged public opinion in the North and resulted in Congress placing the former Confederate states under Army occupation during Reconstruction. Nevertheless, many laws restricting the freedom of African Americans remained on the books for years. The Black Codes laid the foundation for the system of laws and customs supporting a system of white supremacy that would eventually become known as Jim Crow.

Slavery was officially outlawed, but what labor system would take its place in a region where people had forced other people to work without pay for two centuries? While many landowners hoped to continue, as much as possible, the coercive relationships that had characterized slavery, freed people – unlike slaves – had some say over the conditions in which they worked. Without the constraints of slavery, some freed people left agricultural work and headed to towns; others preferred growing food instead of cash crops; others sought to choose the landowner they worked for and to protect their families from oversight and abuse by landowners. Many hoped one day to own their own land, and some managed to acquire land and farm independently. The U.S. Congress established the Freedmen’s Bureau to help implement a new system of free labor in the South. But the agency was temporary and underfunded, and after a period of experimentation with a variety of rural labor patterns, farm labor in the South came to be characterized by an exploitative sharecropping system that ultimately snared both white and black farmers in cycles of debt to large landowners.

Dr. Steven Hahn, University of Pennsylvania

With Congress out of session for the eight months following his inauguration, new President Andrew Johnson announced that the former Confederate states would be restored to the United States once they renounced the Confederate debt and banned slavery. Johnson’s plan came to grief as white southerners passed “black codes” in the states, violently attacked African Americans in several cities, and elected leading Confederates to represent them in Congress. At first Republicans in Congress tried to work within Johnson’s framework, passing a Civil Rights act and the Fourteenth Amendment and extending the Freedmen’s Bureau.

When Johnson resisted those plans, Congress overrode his vetoes and seized control of federal policy, in the winter of 1867 unveiling a new plan for reconstructing the rebel states. Most dramatically, Congress now insisted that black men be allowed to vote and hold office, just as white men did. To accomplish this transformation of southern politics, Congress put the former Confederate states under military oversight, from which they would be released once they had made new constitutions and sent new delegates to the Capitol. Just two years earlier, it had seemed the rebel states would rejoin the Union with minimal disruptions to their basic political structures; now, a political revolution was at hand.



MILITARY RECONSTRUCTION

Military districts and commanding generals
 1 Schofield 2 Sickles 3 Pope 4 Ord 5 Sheridan

State
 1868 Date of readmission to Union
 1871 Date conservative rule reestablished

Tennessee had been readmitted before military reconstruction was established in 1867.

There followed a momentous political clash, the struggle between Johnson and the Republican majority (not just the Radicals) in Congress. Over Johnson's veto, Congress enacted one of the most important laws in American history, the Civil Rights Act of 1866, still on the books today. It affirmed the citizenship of everyone born in the United States, regardless of race (except Indians, still considered members of tribal sovereignties). This principle, birthright citizenship, is increasingly rare in today's world and deeply contested in our own contemporary politics, because it applies to the American-born children of undocumented immigrants.

The act went on to mandate that all citizens enjoy basic civil rights in the same manner "enjoyed by white persons." Johnson's veto message denounced the law for what today is called reverse discrimination: "The distinction of race and color is by the bill made to operate in favor of the colored and against the white race." Indeed, in the idea that expanding the rights of nonwhites somehow punishes the white majority, the ghost of Andrew Johnson still haunts our discussions of race.

Soon after, Congress incorporated birthright citizenship and legal equality into the Constitution via the 14th Amendment. In recent decades, the courts have used this amendment to expand the legal rights of numerous groups — most recently, gay men and women. As the Republican editor George William Curtis wrote, the 14th Amendment changed a Constitution "for white men" to one "for mankind." It also marked a significant change in the federal balance of power, empowering the national government to protect the rights of citizens against violations by the states.

In 1867 Congress passed the Reconstruction Acts, again over Johnson's veto. These set in motion the establishment of new governments in the South, empowered Southern black men to vote and temporarily barred several thousand leading Confederates from the ballot. Soon after, the 15th Amendment extended black male suffrage to the entire nation.

The Reconstruction Acts inaugurated the period of Radical Reconstruction, when a politically mobilized black community, with its white allies, brought the Republican Party to power throughout the South. For the first time, African-Americans voted in large numbers and held public office at every level of government. It was a remarkable, unprecedented effort to build an interracial democracy on the ashes of slavery.

Most offices remained in the hands of white Republicans. But the advent of African-Americans in positions of political power aroused bitter hostility from Reconstruction's opponents. They spread another myth — that the new officials were property less, illiterate and incompetent. As late as 1947, the Southern historian E. Merton Coulter wrote that of the various aspects of Reconstruction, black office holding was "longest to be remembered, shuddered at, and execrated."

The second African American elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, Jefferson Long served less than three months—the shortest term of any African-American Member—but nevertheless became the first black Member to speak on the House Floor. Speaking against the Amnesty Bill, which restored political rights to most former Confederates, Long pleaded with his colleagues to acknowledge the atrocities being committed by white supremacists in Georgia.

Instead of lauding the first African Americans elected to office as pioneers, history books most often skip them entirely. "A few, such as the senator from Georgia, Jefferson Franklin Long, are well known, but most have languished in obscurity. In addition, when modern historians have profiled them, they're often used as scapegoats for the utter disaster that was Reconstruction," writes Matthew Lynch, editor of *Before Obama: A Reappraisal of Black Reconstruction Era Politicians*. "Unfortunately, they were too far ahead of their time to be appreciated. Yet they still pioneered paths to power and influence that modern black politicians tread today, walking inexorably in the foot traces these towering figures left behind as a legacy to the future," he writes.

Positive aspects of the Reconstruction era are also prominently highlighted, such as the home of Blanche K. Bruce, the first African American to serve a full term as a U.S. senator. "Many other black leaders who were politically active during Reconstruction also settled in Washington, D.C., where they could hope to work for the federal government or at Howard University as professionals," the report says. Also suggested for memorialization in D.C. is the former home of journalist and abolitionist Mary Ann Shadd Cary, who taught in the city's black public schools during Reconstruction and went on to become the second African-American woman to earn a law degree.

There was corruption in the postwar South, although given the scandals of New York's Tweed Ring and President Ulysses S. Grant's administration, black suffrage could hardly be blamed. In fact, the new governments had a solid record of accomplishment. They established the South's first state-funded public school systems, sought to strengthen the bargaining power of plantation laborers, made taxation more equitable and outlawed racial discrimination in transportation and public accommodations. They offered aid to railroads and other enterprises in the hope of creating a New South whose economic expansion would benefit black and white alike.

One by one, the Reconstruction governments fell. As a result of a bargain after the disputed presidential election of 1876, the Republican Rutherford B. Hayes assumed the Oval Office and disavowed further national efforts to enforce the rights of black citizens, while white Democrats controlled the South.



Jefferson Franklin Long.
(Photo: Library of Congress)