The war passed from words to stones which the white children began to hurl at the colored. Several colored children were hurt and, as they had not resented the rock throwing . . . , the white children became more aggressive and abusive.

— T. Thomas Fortune, from Norfolk Journal and Guide, 1866
17

Reconstruction
1863–1877

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WHAT WERE the competing political plans for reconstructing the defeated Confederacy?

WHAT WERE the most important changes in the lives of African Americans in the years immediately following the war?

HOW SUCCESSFUL were Southern Republicans in reshaping southern society and government?

HOW DID the northern political landscape change in the decades after the Civil War?
ON A BRIGHT SATURDAY MORNING IN MAY 1867, 4,000 FORMER SLAVES
streamed into the town of Greensboro, bustling seat of Hale County
in west-central Alabama. They came to hear speeches from two dele-
gates to a recent freedmen’s convention in Mobile and to find out
about the political status of black people under the Reconstruction
Act just passed by Congress. Tensions mounted as military authori-
ties began supervising voter registration for elections to the upcom-
ing constitutional convention that would rewrite the laws
of Alabama. On June 13, John Orrick, a local white, confronted Alex
Webb, a politically active freedman, on the streets of Greensboro.
Webb had recently been appointed a voter registrar for the district.
Orrick swore he would never be registered by a black man and shot
Webb dead. Hundreds of armed and angry freedmen formed a
posse to search for Orrick but failed to find him. Galvanized by
Webb’s murder, 500 local freedmen formed a chapter of the Union
League, the Republican Party’s organizational arm in the South. The
chapter functioned as both a militia company and a forum to agitate
for political rights.

Violent political encounters between black people
and white people were common in southern commu-
nities in the wake of the Civil War. Communities
throughout the South struggled over the meaning of freedom in ways that reflected their particular
circumstances. The black–white ratio in individual
communities varied enormously. In some places,
the Union army had been a strong presence during
the war, hastening the collapse of the slave system
and encouraging experiments in free labor. Other areas
had remained relatively untouched by the fighting. In some areas, small
farms prevailed; in others, including Hale County, large plantations
dominated economic and political life.

West-central Alabama had emerged as a fertile center of
cotton production just two decades before the Civil War. There, African
Americans, as throughout the South’s black belt, constituted more
than three-quarters of the population. With the arrival of federal
troops in the spring of 1865, African Americans in Hale County, like
their counterparts elsewhere, began to challenge the traditional
organization of plantation labor.

Above all, freed people wanted more autonomy. Overseers
and owners grudgingly allowed them to work the land “in families,”
letting them choose their own supervisors and find their own provi-
sions. The result was a shift from the gang labor characteristic of the
antebellum period, in which large groups of slaves worked under
the harsh and constant supervision of white overseers, to the share-
cropping system, in which African American families worked small
plots of land in exchange for a small share of the crop.

Only a small fraction—perhaps 15 percent—of African
American families were fortunate enough to be able to buy land.
The majority settled for some version of sharecropping, while others
managed to rent land from owners, becoming tenant farmers. Still,
planters throughout Hale County had to change the old routines of
plantation labor. Local African Americans also organized politically.
In 1866, Congress had passed the Civil Rights Act and sent the
Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution to the states for ratifica-
tion; both promised full citizenship rights to former slaves. Hale
County freedmen used their new political power to press for better
labor contracts, demand greater autonomy for the black workforce,
and agitate for the more radical goal of land confiscation and redis-
tribution. Two Hale County former slaves, Brister Reese and James K.
Green, won election to the Alabama state legislature in 1869.

It was not long before these economic and
political gains prompted a white counterattack. In
the spring of 1868, the Ku Klux Klan—a secret
organization devoted to terrorizing and intimi-
dating African Americans and their white
Republican allies—came to Hale County.
Klansmen flogged, beat, and murdered freed
people. They intimidated voters and silenced polit-
cal activists. Planters used Klan terror to dissuade
former slaves from leaving plantations or organizing for higher
wages. With the passage of the Ku Klux Klan Act in 1871, the fed-
eral government cracked down on the Klan, breaking its power
temporarily in parts of the former Confederacy. But no serious
effort was made to stop Klan terror in the west Alabama black belt,
and planters there succeeded in reestablishing much of their social
and political control.

The events in Hale County illustrate the struggles that beset
communities throughout the South during the Reconstruction era
after the Civil War. The destruction of slavery and the Confederacy
forced African Americans and white people to renegotiate their old
roles. These community battles both shaped and were shaped by the
victorious and newly expansive federal government in Washington.
But the new arrangements of both political power sharing and the
organization of labor had to be worked out within local communities.
The Politics of Reconstruction

When General Robert E. Lee’s men stacked their guns at Appomattox, the bloodiest war in American history ended. More than 600,000 soldiers had died during the four years of fighting. Although President Abraham Lincoln insisted early on that the purpose of the war was to preserve the Union, by 1863 it had evolved as well into a struggle for African American liberation. Indeed, the political, economic, and moral issues posed by slavery were the root cause of the Civil War, and the war ultimately destroyed slavery, although not racism, once and for all.

The Civil War also settled the constitutional crisis provoked by the secession of the Confederacy and its justification in appeals to states’ rights. The old notion of the United States as a voluntary union of sovereign states gave way to the new reality of a single nation, in which the federal government took precedence over the individual states. The key historical developments of the Reconstruction era revolved around precisely how the newly strengthened national government would define its relationship with the defeated Confederate states and the 4 million newly freed slaves.

The Defeated South

The white South paid an extremely high price for secession, war, and defeat. In addition to the battlefield casualties, much of the best agricultural land was laid waste. Many towns and cities were in ruins. By 1865, the South’s most precious commodities, cotton and African American slaves, no longer were measures of wealth and prestige. Retreating Confederates destroyed most of the South’s cotton to prevent its capture by federal troops. What remained was confiscated by Union agents as contraband of war. The former slaves, many of whom had fled to Union lines during the latter stages of the war, were determined to chart their own course in the reconstructed South as free men and women.

Emancipation proved the bitterest pill for white Southerners to swallow, especially the planter elite. Conquered and degraded, and in their view robbed of their slave property, white people responded by regarding African Americans, more than ever, as inferior to themselves. The specter of political power and social equality for African Americans made racial order the consuming passion of most white Southerners during the Reconstruction years. In fact, racism can be seen as one of the major forces driving Reconstruction and, ultimately, undermining it.

Abraham Lincoln’s Plan

By late 1863, Union military victories had convinced President Lincoln of the need to fashion a plan for the reconstruction of the South (see Chapter 16). Lincoln based his reconstruction program on bringing the seceded states back into the Union as quickly as possible. His Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction of December 1863 offered “full pardon” and the restoration of property, not including slaves, to white Southerners willing to swear an oath of allegiance to the United States and its laws, including the Emancipation Proclamation. Prominent Confederate military and civil leaders were excluded from Lincoln’s offer, though he indicated that he would freely pardon them.

The president also proposed that when the number of any Confederate state’s voters who took the oath of allegiance reached 10 percent of the number who had voted in the election of 1860, this group could establish a state government that Lincoln would recognize as legitimate. Fundamental to this Ten Percent Plan was that the reconstructed governments accept the abolition of slavery.

Lincoln’s amnesty proclamation angered those Republicans—known as Radical Republicans—who advocated not only equal rights for the freedmen but also a tougher stance toward the white South. In July 1864, Senator Benjamin F. Wade of Ohio and

**WHAT WERE** the competing political plans for reconstructing the defeated Confederacy?

[Confederate Song, “I’m a Good Old Rebel” (1866) at www.myhistorylab.com](www.myhistorylab.com)
Congressman Henry W. Davis of Maryland, both Radicals, proposed a harsher alternative to the Ten Percent Plan. The Wade–Davis bill required 50 percent of a seceding state’s white male citizens to take a loyalty oath before elections could be held for a convention to rewrite the state’s constitution. The Radical Republicans saw reconstruction as a chance to effect a fundamental transformation of southern society. They thus wanted to delay the process until war’s end and to limit participation to a small number of southern Unionists. Lincoln viewed Reconstruction as part of the larger effort to win the war and abolish slavery. He wanted to weaken the Confederacy by creating new state governments that could win broad support from southern white people. The Wade–Davis bill threatened his efforts to build political consensus within the southern states. Lincoln, therefore, pocket-vetoed the bill by refusing to sign it within ten days of the adjournment of Congress.

As Union armies occupied parts of the South, commanders improvised a variety of arrangements involving confiscated plantations and the African American labor force. For example, in 1862 General Benjamin F. Butler began a policy of transforming slaves on Louisiana sugar plantations into wage laborers under the close supervision of occupying federal troops. Butler’s policy required slaves to remain on the estates of loyal planters, where they would receive wages according to a fixed schedule, as well as food and medical care for the aged and sick. In January 1865, General William T. Sherman issued Special Field Order 15, setting aside the Sea Islands off the

Special Field Order 15
Order by General William T. Sherman in January 1865 to set aside abandoned land along the southern Atlantic coast for forty-acre grants to freedmen; rescinded by President Andrew Johnson later that year.

“Decorating the Graves of Rebel Soldiers,” Harper’s Weekly, August 17, 1867. After the Civil War, both Southerners and Northerners created public mourning ceremonies honoring fallen soldiers. Women led the memorial movement in the South that, by establishing cemeteries and erecting monuments, offered the first cultural expression of the Confederate tradition. This engraving depicts citizens of Richmond, Virginia, decorating thousands of Confederate graves with flowers at the Hollywood Memorial Cemetery on the James River. A local women’s group raised enough funds to transfer over 16,000 Confederate dead from northern cemeteries for reburial in Richmond.
Georgia coast and a portion of the South Carolina Lowcountry rice fields for the exclusive settlement of freed people. Each family would receive forty acres of land and the loan of mules from the army—the origin, perhaps, of the famous call for “forty acres and a mule” that would soon capture the imagination of African Americans throughout the South.

Conflicts within the Republican Party prevented the development of a systematic land distribution program. Still, Lincoln and the Republican Congress supported other measures to aid the emancipated slaves. In March 1865 Congress established the Freedmen’s Bureau. Along with providing food, clothing, and fuel to destitute former slaves, the bureau was charged with supervising and managing “all the abandoned lands in the South and the control of all subjects relating to refugees and freedmen.” The act that established the bureau also stated that forty acres of abandoned or confiscated land could be leased to freed slaves or white Unionists, who would have an option to purchase after three years.

On the evening of April 14, 1865, while attending the theater in Washington, President Lincoln was shot and killed by John Wilkes Booth. At the time of his assassination, Lincoln’s reconstruction policy remained unsettled and incomplete. The specifics of postwar Reconstruction now had to be hammered out by a new president, Andrew Johnson of Tennessee.

**Andrew Johnson and Presidential Reconstruction**

Andrew Johnson, a Democrat and former slaveholder, was the only southern member of the U.S. Senate to remain loyal to the Union. In 1862, Lincoln appointed Johnson to the difficult post of military governor of Tennessee. There he successfully began wartime Reconstruction and cultivated Unionist support in the mountainous eastern districts of that state.

In 1864, the Republicans, in an appeal to northern and border state “War Democrats,” nominated Johnson for vice president. In the immediate aftermath of Lincoln’s murder, however, Johnson appeared to side with those Radical Republicans who sought to treat the South as a conquered territory. But this impression quickly faded as the new president’s policies unfolded. Johnson defined Reconstruction as the province of the executive, not the legislative branch, and he planned to restore the Union as quickly as possible. He blamed individual Southerners—the planter elite—rather than entire states for leading the South down the disastrous road to secession. In line with this philosophy, Johnson outlined mild terms for reentry to the Union.

In the spring of 1865, Johnson granted amnesty and pardon, including restoration of property rights except slaves, to all Confederates who pledged loyalty to the Union and support for emancipation. Fourteen classes of Southerners, mostly major Confederate officials and wealthy landowners, were excluded. But these men could apply individually for presidential pardons. (During his tenure Johnson pardoned roughly 90 percent of those who applied.) Significantly, Johnson instituted this plan while Congress was not in session.

By the autumn of 1865, ten of the eleven Confederate states claimed to have met Johnson’s requirements to reenter the Union. On December 6, 1865, the president declared the “restoration” of the Union virtually complete. But a serious division within the federal government was taking shape, for the Congress was not about to allow the president free rein in determining the conditions of southern readmission.
CHAPTER 17  RECONSTRUCTION, 1863–1877

FREE LABOR AND THE RADICAL REPUBLICAN VISION

Most Radicals were men whose careers had been shaped by the slavery controversy. One of the most effective rhetorical weapons used against slavery and its spread had been the ideal of a society based upon free labor. The model of free individuals, competing equally in the labor market and enjoying equal political rights, and the possibility of social and economic mobility, formed the core of this worldview.

Radicals now looked to reconstruct southern society along these same lines, backed by the power of the national government. They argued that once free labor, universal education, and equal rights were implanted in the South, that region would be able to share in the North’s material wealth, progress, and social mobility. In the most far-reaching proposal, Representative Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania called for the confiscation of 400 million acres belonging to the wealthiest 10 percent of Southerners to be redistributed to black and white yeomen and northern land buyers. “The whole fabric of Southern society must be changed,” Stevens told Pennsylvania Republicans in September 1865, “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?”

Northern Republicans were especially outraged by the stringent “black codes” passed by South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, and other states. These were designed to restrict the freedom of the black labor force and keep freed people as close to slave status as possible. Laborers who left their jobs before contracts expired would forfeit wages already earned and be subject to arrest by any white citizen. Vagrancy, very broadly defined, was punishable by fines and involuntary plantation labor. Apprenticeship clauses obliged black children to work without pay for employers. Some states attempted to bar African Americans from land ownership. Other laws specifically denied African Americans equality with white people in civil rights, excluding them from juries and prohibiting interracial marriages.

The Radicals, although not a majority of their party, were joined by moderate Republicans as growing numbers of Northerners grew suspicious of white southern...
intransigence and the denial of political rights to freedmen. When Congress convened in December 1865, the large Republican majority prevented the seating of the white Southerners elected to Congress under President Johnson’s provisional state governments. Republicans also established the Joint Committee on Reconstruction to investigate conditions in the South.

In the spring of 1866, Congress passed two important bills designed to aid African Americans. The landmark Civil Rights bill, which bestowed full citizenship on African Americans, overturned the 1857 Dred Scott decision and the black codes. Under this bill, African Americans acquired “full and equal benefit of all laws and proceedings for the security of person and property as is enjoyed by white citizens.”

Congress also voted to enlarge the scope of the Freedmen’s Bureau, empowering it to build schools and pay teachers, and also to establish courts to prosecute those charged with depriving African Americans of their civil rights. The bureau achieved important, if limited, success in aiding African Americans. Bureau-run schools helped lay the foundation for southern public education. The bureau’s network of courts allowed freed people to bring suits against white people in disputes involving violence, nonpayment of wages, or unfair division of crops.

But an angry President Johnson vetoed both of these bills. In opposing the Civil Rights bill, Johnson denounced the assertion of national power to protect African American civil rights, claiming it was a “stride toward centralization, and the concentration of all legislative powers in the national Government.” But Johnson’s intemperate attacks on the Radicals united moderate and Radical Republicans and they succeeded in overriding the vetoes.

In June 1866, fearful that the Civil Rights Act might be declared unconstitutional, and eager to settle the basis for the seating of southern representatives, Congress passed the Fourteenth Amendment. The amendment defined national citizenship to include former slaves and prohibited the states from violating the privileges of citizens without due process of law. It also empowered Congress to reduce the representation of any state that denied suffrage to males over twenty-one. Republicans adopted the Fourteenth Amendment as their platform for the 1866 congressional elections and suggested that southern states would have to ratify it as a condition of readmission. President Johnson, meanwhile, campaigned in support of conservative Democratic and Republican candidates. His unrestrained speeches often degenerated into harangues, alienating many voters and aiding the Republican cause.

For their part, the Republicans skillfully portrayed Johnson and northern Democrats as disloyal and white Southerners as unregenerate. Republicans began an effective campaign tradition known as “waving the bloody shirt”—reminding northern voters of the hundreds of thousands of Yankee soldiers left dead or maimed by the war. In the November 1866 elections, the Republicans increased their majority in both the House and the Senate and gained control of all the northern states. The stage was now set for a battle between the president and Congress.

**CONGRESSIONAL RECONSTRUCTION AND THE IMPEACHMENT CRISIS**

In March 1867, Congress passed the First Reconstruction Act over Johnson’s veto. This act divided the South into five military districts subject to martial law. To achieve restoration, southern states were first required to call new constitutional conventions, elected by universal manhood suffrage. Once these states had drafted new constitutions, guaranteed African American voting rights, and ratified the Fourteenth Amendment, they were eligible for readmission to the Union. Supplementary legislation, also passed over the president’s veto, invalidated the provisional governments established by Johnson, empowered the military to administer voter registration, and required an oath of loyalty to the United States (see Map 17.1).
Tenure of Office Act  Act stipulating that any officeholder appointed by the president with the Senate’s advice and consent could not be removed until the Senate had approved a successor.

MAP 17.1
Reconstruction of the South, 1866–77  Dates for the readmission of former Confederate states to the Union and the return of Democrats to power varied according to the specific political situations in those states.

WHAT LED to the establishment of military districts in the South? How did white southerners resist northern efforts at reconstruction?

Congress also passed several laws aimed at limiting Johnson’s power. One of these, the Tenure of Office Act, stipulated that any officeholder appointed by the president with the Senate’s advice and consent could not be removed until the Senate had approved a successor. In this way, congressional leaders could protect Republicans, such as Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, entrusted with implementing Congressional Reconstruction. In August 1867, with Congress adjourned, Johnson challenged the Tenure of Office Act by suspending Stanton and appointing General Ulysses S. Grant interim secretary of war. In January 1868, when the Senate overruled Stanton’s suspension, Grant broke openly with Johnson and vacated the office. Stanton resumed his position and barricaded himself in his office when Johnson attempted to remove him once again.

Outraged by Johnson’s relentless obstructionism, and seizing upon his violation of the Tenure of Office Act as a pretext, moderate and Radical Republicans in the House of Representatives again joined forces and voted to impeach the president on February 24, 1868. To ensure the support of moderate Republicans, the articles of impeachment focused on violations of the Tenure of Office Act. Left unstated were the Republicans’ real reasons for wanting the president removed: Johnson’s political views and his opposition to the Reconstruction Acts.

An influential group of moderate Senate Republicans feared the damage a conviction might do to the constitutional separation of powers. They also worried about the political and economic policies that might be pursued by Benjamin Wade, the president pro tem of the Senate and a leader of the Radical Republicans, who, because there was no vice president, would succeed to the presidency if Johnson were removed from office. Behind the scenes during his Senate trial, Johnson agreed to abide by the Reconstruction
Acts. In May, the Senate voted 35 for conviction, 19 for acquittal—one vote shy of the two-thirds necessary for removal from office. Johnson’s narrow acquittal established the precedent that only criminal actions by a president—not political disagreements—warranted removal from office.

**The Election of 1868**

By the summer of 1868, seven former Confederate states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee) had ratified the revised constitutions, elected Republican governments, and ratified the Fourteenth Amendment. They had thereby earned readmission to the Union. In 1868 Republicans nominated Ulysses S. Grant, the North’s foremost military hero, as their nominee for President. Totally lacking in political experience, Grant admitted, after receiving the nomination, that he had been forced into it in spite of himself.

Significantly, at the very moment that the South was being forced to enfranchise former slaves as a prerequisite for readmission to the Union, the Republicans rejected a campaign plank endorsing black suffrage in the North. The Democrats, determined to reverse Congressional Reconstruction, nominated Horatio Seymour, former governor of New York and a longtime foe of emancipation and supporter of states’ rights.

The **Ku Klux Klan** emerged as a potent instrument of terror (see the opening of this chapter). Klan violence enabled the Democrats to carry Georgia and Louisiana, but it ultimately cost the Democrats votes in the North. In the final tally, Grant carried twenty-six of the thirty-four states for an Electoral College victory of 214 to 80. The Republicans also retained large majorities in both houses of Congress.

In February 1869, Congress passed the **Fifteenth Amendment**, providing that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” To enhance the chances of ratification, Congress required the four remaining unreconstructed states—Mississippi, Georgia,
Texas, and Virginia—to ratify both the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments before readmission. They did so and rejoined the Union in early 1870. The Fifteenth Amendment was ratified in February 1870. In the narrow sense of simply readmitting the former Confederate states to the Union, Reconstruction was complete.

Woman Suffrage and Reconstruction

Many women’s rights advocates had long been active in the abolitionist movement. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which granted citizenship and the vote to freedmen, both inspired and frustrated these activists. Throughout the nation, the old abolitionist organizations and the Republican Party emphasized passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and withdrew funds and support from the cause of woman suffrage. Disagreements over these amendments divided suffragists for decades.

The radical wing, led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, opposed the Fifteenth Amendment, arguing that ratification would establish an “aristocracy of sex,” enfranchising all men while leaving women without political privileges. They argued for a Sixteenth Amendment that would secure the vote for women. Other women’s rights activists, including Lucy Stone and Frederick Douglass, asserted that “this hour belongs to the Negro.” They feared a debate over woman suffrage at the national level would jeopardize passage of the two amendments. By 1869 woman suffragists had split into two competing organizations: the moderate American Woman Suffrage Association and the more radical National Woman Suffrage Association.
Amendment and Date Passed by Congress | Main Provisions | Ratification Process (3/4 of all States Including Ex-Confederate States Required)
--- | --- | ---
13 (January 1865) | • Prohibited slavery in the United States | December 1865 (27 states, including 8 southern states)
14 (June 1866) | • Confirmed national citizenship on all persons born or naturalized in the United States | July 1868 (after Congress made ratification a prerequisite for readmission of ex-Confederate states to the Union)
Reduced state representation in Congress proportionally for any state disfranchising male citizens
Denied former Confederates the right to hold state or national office
Repudiated Confederate debt
15 (February 1869) | • Prohibited denial of suffrage because of race, color, or previous condition of servitude | March 1870 (ratification required for readmission of Virginia, Texas, Mississippi, and Georgia)

Association (AWSA), which sought the support of men, and the more radical all-female National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) (see Chapter 13).

Although women did not win the vote in this period, they did establish an independent suffrage movement that eventually drew millions of women into political life. The NWSA in particular demonstrated that self-government and democratic participation in the public sphere were crucial for women’s emancipation.

**The Meaning of Freedom**

For nearly 4 million slaves, freedom arrived in various ways in different parts of the South. In many areas, slavery had collapsed long before Lee’s surrender at Appomattox. In regions far removed from the presence of federal troops, African Americans did not learn of slavery’s end until the spring of 1865. But regardless of specific regional circumstances, the meaning of “freedom” would be contested for years to come. The deep desire for independence from white control formed the underlying aspiration of newly freed slaves. For their part, most southern white people sought to restrict the boundaries of that independence. As former slaves struggled to establish autonomy, they built on the twin pillars of slave culture—the family and the church—to consolidate and expand African American institutions and thereby laid the foundation for the modern African American community.

**Moving About**

The first impulse of many emancipated slaves was to test their freedom. The simplest, most obvious way to do this involved leaving home. Throughout the summer and fall of 1865, observers in the South noted enormous numbers of freed people on the move. Yet...
many who left their old neighborhoods returned soon afterward to seek work in the general vicinity or even on the plantation they had left. Many wanted to separate themselves from former owners, but not from familial ties and friendships. Others moved away altogether, seeking jobs in nearby towns and cities. Between 1865 and 1870, the African American population of the South’s ten largest cities doubled, while the white population increased by only 10 percent.

Disgruntled planters had difficulty accepting African American independence. Many could not understand why so many former slaves wanted to leave, despite urgent pleas to continue working at the old place. The deference and humility white people expected from African Americans could no longer be taken for granted. Indeed, many freed people went out of their way to reject the old subservience. Moving about freely was one way of doing this, as was refusing to tip one’s hat to white people, ignoring former masters or mistresses in the streets, and refusing to step aside on sidewalks.

**African American Families, Churches, and Schools**

Emancipation allowed freed people to strengthen family ties. For many former slaves, freedom meant the opportunity to find long-lost family members. To track down these relatives, freed people trekked to faraway places, put ads in newspapers, sought the help of Freedmen’s Bureau agents, and questioned anyone who might have information about loved ones. Thousands of African American couples who had lived together under slavery streamed to military and civilian authorities and demanded to be legally

*An overflow congregation* crowds into Richmond’s First African Baptist Church in 1874. Despite their poverty, freed people struggled to save money, buy land, and erect new buildings as they organized hundreds of new black churches during Reconstruction. As the most important African American institution outside the family, the black church, in addition to tending to spiritual needs, played a key role in the educational and political life of the community.
married. By 1870, the two-parent household was the norm for a large majority of African Americans.

For many freed people, the attempt to find lost relatives dragged on for years. Searches often proved frustrating, exhausting, and ultimately disappointing. Some "reunions" ended painfully with the discovery that spouses had found new partners and started new families.

Emancipation brought changes to gender roles within the African American family as well. By serving in the Union army, African American men played a more direct role than women in the fight for freedom. In the political sphere, black men could now serve on juries, vote, and hold office; black women, like their white counterparts, could not. Freedmen’s Bureau agents designated the husband as household head and established lower wage scales for women laborers. African American editors, preachers, and politicians regularly quoted the biblical injunction that wives submit to their husbands.

African American men asserted their male authority, denied under slavery, by insisting their wives work at home instead of in the fields. African American women generally wanted to devote more time than they had under slavery to caring for their children and to performing such domestic chores as cooking, sewing, gardening, and laundering. Yet African American women continued to work outside the home, engaging in seasonal field labor for wages or working a family’s rented plot. Most rural black families barely eked out a living and, thus, the labor of every family member was essential to survival.

The creation of separate African American churches proved the most lasting and important element of the energetic institution building that went on in postemancipation years. Before the Civil War, southern Protestant churches had relegated slaves and free African Americans to second-class membership. Even in larger cities, where all-black congregations sometimes built their own churches, the law required white pastors.

In communities around the South, African Americans now pooled their resources to buy land and build their own churches. Churches became the center not only for religious life but also for many other activities that defined the African American community: schools, picnics, festivals, and political meetings. The church became the first social institution fully controlled by African Americans. In nearly every community, ministers, respected for their speaking and organizational skills, were among the most influential leaders. By 1877, the great majority of black Southerners had withdrawn from white-dominated churches, with most African American Christians belonging to black Baptist or Methodist churches.

The rapid spread of schools reflected African Americans’ thirst for self-improvement. Southern states had prohibited education for slaves. But many free black people managed to attend school, and a few slaves had been able to educate themselves. Still, over 90 percent of the South’s adult African American population was illiterate in 1860. Access to education thus became a central part of the meaning of freedom.

African American communities received important educational aid from outside organizations. By 1869, the Freedmen’s Bureau was supervising nearly 3,000 schools serving over 150,000 students throughout the South. Over half of the roughly 3,300 teachers in these schools were African Americans, many of whom had been free before the Civil War. Other teachers included dedicated northern white women, volunteers sponsored by the American Missionary Association (AMA). The bureau and the AMA also assisted in the founding of several black colleges, including Tougaloo, Hampton, and Fisk, designed to train black teachers. Black self-help proved crucial to the education effort. Throughout the South in 1865 and 1866, African Americans raised money to build schoolhouses, buy supplies, and pay teachers. Black artisans donated labor for construction, and black families offered room and board to teachers.
CHAPTER 17
RECONSTRUCTION, 1863–1877

LAND AND LABOR AFTER SLAVERY

Most newly emancipated African Americans aspired to quit the plantations and to make new lives for themselves. Some freed people did find jobs in railroad building, mining, ranching, or construction work. Others raised subsistence crops and tended vegetable gardens as squatters. White planters, however, tried to retain African Americans as permanent agricultural laborers and restricting the employment of former slaves was an important goal of the black codes.

The majority of African Americans hoped to become self-sufficient farmers. Many former slaves believed they were entitled to the land they had worked throughout their lives. But by 1866, the federal government had already pulled back from the various wartime experiments involving the breaking up of large plantations and the leasing of small plots to individual families. President Johnson directed General Howard of the Freedmen’s Bureau to evict tens of thousands of freed people settled on confiscated and abandoned land in southeastern Virginia, southern Louisiana, and the Georgia and South Carolina Lowcountry.

In communities throughout the South, freed people and their former masters negotiated new arrangements for organizing agricultural labor. In Hale County, Alabama, for example, local black farmhands contracted to work on Henry Watson’s plantation in 1866 deserted him when they angrily discovered that their small share of the crop left them in debt. Local Union League activists encouraged newly freed slaves to remain independent of white farmers, and political agitation for freedmen’s rights encouraged them to push for better working conditions as well. Yet few owners would sell or even rent land to blacks. Watson, desperate for field hands, finally agreed to subdivide his plantation and rent it to freedmen, who would work under their own supervision without overseers. By 1868, Watson was convinced that black farmers made good tenants; like many other landowners, he grudgingly accepted greater independence for black families in exchange for a more stable labor force (see Map 17.2).

By the late 1860s, sharecropping and tenant farming had emerged as the dominant form of working the land. Sharecropping represented a compromise between planters and former slaves. Under sharecropping arrangements that were usually very detailed, individual families contracted with landowners to be responsible for a specific plot. Large plantations were thus broken into family-sized farms. Generally, sharecropper families received one-third of the year’s crop if the owner furnished implements, seed, and draft animals or one-half if they provided their own supplies. African Americans preferred sharecropping to gang labor, as it allowed families to set their own hours and tasks and offered freedom from white supervision and control. For planters, the system stabilized the workforce by requiring sharecroppers to remain until the harvest and to employ all family members. It also offered a way around the chronic shortage of cash and credit that plagued the postwar South.

THE ORIGINS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN POLITICS

Hundreds of African American delegates, selected by local meetings or churches, attended statewide political conventions held throughout the South in 1865 and 1866. Convention debates sometimes reflected the tensions within African American communities, such as friction between poorer former slaves and better-off free black people, or between lighter- and darker-skinned African Americans. But most of these state gatherings concentrated on passing resolutions on issues that united all African Americans. The central concerns were suffrage and equality before the law.

The passage of the First Reconstruction Act in 1867 encouraged even more political activity among African Americans. The military started registering the South’s electorate, ultimately enrolling approximately 735,000 black and 635,000 white voters in the
MAP 17.2
The Barrow Plantation, Oglethorpe County, Georgia, 1860 and 1881 (approx. 2,000 acres) These two maps, based on drawings from Scribner’s Monthly, April 1881, show some of the changes brought by emancipation. In 1860, the plantation’s entire black population lived in the communal slave quarters, right next to the white master’s house. In 1881, black sharecropper and tenant families lived on individual plots, spread out across the land. The former slaves had also built their own school and church.

**IN WHAT** states was sharecropping the most prevalent? In what states was it least prevalent? What explains the patterns you note?

ten unreconstructed states. Five states—Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina—had black electoral majorities. Fewer than half the registered white voters participated in the elections for state constitutional conventions in 1867 and 1868. In contrast, four-fifths of the registered black voters cast ballots in these elections. Much of this new African American political activism was channeled through local Union League chapters throughout the South.

Begun during the war as a northern, largely white middle-class patriotic club, the **Union League** now became the political voice of the former slaves. Union League chapters brought together local African Americans, soldiers, and Freedmen’s Bureau agents to demand the vote and an end to legal discrimination against African Americans. It brought out African American voters, instructed freedmen in the rights and duties of citizenship, Republican party organizations in Northern cities that became an important organizing device among freedmen in Southern cities after 1865.
Changing Images of Reconstruction

After the Civil War, northern journalists and illustrators went south to describe Reconstruction in action. They took a keen interest in how the newly freed slaves were reshaping local and national politics. A drawing by *Harper’s Weekly* illustrator William L. Sheppard titled “Electioneering in the South” clearly approved of the freedmen’s exercise of their new citizenship rights. “Does any man seriously doubt,” the caption asked, “whether it is better for this vast population to be sinking deeper and deeper in ignorance and servility, or rising into general intelligence and self-respect? They can not be pariahs; they can not be peons; they must be slaves or citizens.”

Thomas Nast was the nation’s best-known political cartoonist during the 1860s and 1870s. During the Civil War he strongly supported the Union cause and the aspirations of the newly freed slaves. But by 1876, like many Northerners originally sympathetic to guaranteeing blacks full political and civil rights, Nast had turned away from the early ideals of Reconstruction. Nast used grotesque racial caricature to depict southern African Americans and northern Irish immigrants as undeserving of the right to vote. The aftermath of the disputed 1876 presidential election included charges of widespread vote fraud from both Republicans and Democrats. Nast’s view—published in *Harper’s Weekly* in December 1876, while the election’s outcome was still in doubt—reflected concerns among many middle-class Northerners that the nation’s political system was tainted by the manipulation of “ignorant” voters in both the South and the North.
and promoted Republican candidates. Not surprisingly, newly enfranchised freedmen voted Republican and formed the core of the Republican Party in the South. For most ordinary African Americans, politics was inseparable from economic issues, especially the land question. Grassroots political organizations frequently intervened in local disputes with planters over the terms of labor contracts. African American political groups closely followed the congressional debates over Reconstruction policy and agitated for land confiscation and distribution. Perhaps most important, politics was the only arena where black and white Southerners might engage each other on an equal basis.

**Southern Politics and Society**

By the summer of 1868, when the South had returned to the Union, the majority of Republicans believed the task of Reconstruction to be finished. Most Republican congressmen were moderates, conceiving Reconstruction in limited terms. They rejected radical calls for confiscation and redistribution of land, as well as permanent military rule of the South. The Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and 1868 laid out the requirements for the readmission of southern states, along with the procedures for forming and electing new governments. Yet over the next decade, the political structure created in the southern states proved too restricted and fragile to sustain itself.

“The First Vote,” Harper’s Weekly, November 16, 1867, reflected the optimism felt by much of the northern public as former slaves began to vote for the first time. The caption noted that freedmen went to the ballot box “not with expressions of exultation or of defiance of their old masters and present opponents depicted on their countenances, but looking serious and solemn and determined.”
Southern Republicans

Three major groups composed the fledgling Republican coalition in the postwar South. African American voters made up a large majority of southern Republicans throughout the Reconstruction era. Yet African Americans outnumbered whites in only three southern states; Republicans would have to attract white support to win elections and sustain power.

A second group consisted of white Northerners, derisively called “carpetbaggers” by native white Southerners. Most were veterans of the Union army who stayed in the South after the war. Others included Freedmen’s Bureau agents and businessmen who had invested capital in cotton plantations and other enterprises. Although they made up a tiny percentage of the population, carpetbaggers played a disproportionately large role in southern politics. They won a large share of Reconstruction offices, particularly in Florida, South Carolina, and Louisiana and in areas with large African American constituencies.

The third major group of southern Republicans was the native whites pejoratively termed “scalawags.” They had even more diverse backgrounds and motives than the northern-born Republicans. Some were prominent prewar Whigs who saw the Republican Party as their best chance to regain political influence. Others viewed the party as an agent of modernization and economic expansion. Loyalists during the war and traditional enemies of the planter elite (most were small farmers), these white Southerners looked to the Republican Party for help in settling old scores and relief from debt and wartime devastation.

Southern Republicanism also reflected prewar political divisions. Its influence was greatest in those regions that had long resisted the political and economic power of the plantation elite. Thus, southern Republicans could dominate the mountainous areas of western North Carolina, eastern Tennessee, northern Georgia, and southwestern Virginia as much as Democrats controlled other areas. Yet few white Southerners identified with the political and economic aspirations of African Americans. Moderate elements more concerned with maintaining white control of the party, and encouraging economic investment in the region, outnumbered and defeated “confiscation radicals” who focused on obtaining land for African Americans.

Reconstructing the States: A Mixed Record

With the old Confederate leaders barred from political participation, and with carpetbaggers and newly enfranchised African Americans representing many of the plantation districts, Republicans managed to dominate the ten southern constitutional conventions from 1867 to 1869. Most of these conventions produced constitutions that expanded democracy and the public role of the state. In 1868, only three years after the end of the war, Republicans came to power in most of the southern states. By 1869, new constitutions had been ratified in all the old Confederate states.

Republican governments in the South faced a continual crisis of legitimacy that limited their ability to legislate change. They had to balance reform against the need to gain acceptance, especially by white Southerners. Their achievements were thus mixed. In the realm of race relations there was a clear thrust toward equal rights and against discrimination. Republican legislatures followed up the federal Civil Rights Act of 1866 with various antidiscrimination clauses in new constitutions and laws prescribing harsh penalties for civil rights violations.

Segregation, though, became the norm in public school systems. African American leaders often accepted segregation because they feared that insistence on integrated education would jeopardize funding for the new school systems. Segregation in railroad cars and other public places was more objectionable. By the early 1870s, as black influence...
and assertiveness grew, laws guaranteeing equal access to transportation and public accommodation were passed in many states. By and large, though, such civil rights laws were difficult to enforce in local communities.

In economic matters, Republican governments failed to fulfill African Americans’ hopes of obtaining land. Republicans tried to weaken the plantation system and promote black ownership by raising taxes on land. Yet even when state governments seized land for nonpayment of taxes, the property was never used to help create black homesteads.

Republican leaders envisioned promoting northern-style capitalist development—factories, large towns, and diversified agriculture—through state aid. Much Republican state lawmaking was devoted to encouraging railroad construction. But in spite of all the new laws, it proved impossible to attract significant amounts of northern and European investment capital. The obsession with railroads withdrew resources from education and other programs. As in the North, it also opened the doors to widespread corruption and bribery of public officials. Railroad failures eroded public confidence in the Republicans’ ability to govern.

**White Resistance and “Redemption”**
The emergence of a Republican Party in the reconstructed South brought two parties, but not a two-party system, to the region. The opponents of Reconstruction, the Democrats, refused to acknowledge Republicans’ right to participate in southern political life. Republicans were split between those who urged conciliation in an effort to gain

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*The Ku Klux* Klan emerged as a potent political and social force during Reconstruction, terrorizing freed people and their white allies. An 1868 Klan warning threatens Louisiana governor Henry C. Warmoth with death. Warmoth, an Illinois-born “carpetbagger,” was the state’s first Republican governor. Two Alabama Klansmen, photographed in 1868, wear white hoods to hide their identities.
white acceptance and those who emphasized consolidating the party under the protection of the military.

From its founding in 1868 through the early 1870s, the Ku Klux Klan waged an ongoing terrorist campaign against Reconstruction governments and local leaders. Just as the institution of slavery had depended on violence and the threat of violence, the Klan acted as a kind of guerrilla military force in the service of the Democratic Party, the planter class, and all those who sought the restoration of white supremacy.

In October 1870, after Republicans carried Laurens County in South Carolina, bands of white people drove 150 African Americans from their homes and murdered thirteen white and black Republican activists. In March 1871, three African Americans were arrested in Meridian, Mississippi, for giving “incendiary” speeches. At their court hearing, Klansmen killed two of the defendants and the Republican judge, and thirty more African Americans were murdered in a day of rioting. The single bloodiest episode of Reconstruction era violence took place in Colfax, Louisiana, on Easter Sunday 1873. Nearly 100 African Americans were murdered after they failed to hold a besieged courthouse during a contested election.

Southern Republicans looked to Washington for help. In 1870 and 1871, Congress passed three Enforcement Acts designed to counter racial terrorism. The most sweeping measure was the Ku Klux Klan Act of April 1871, which made the violent infringement of civil and political rights a federal crime punishable by the national government. By the election of 1872, the federal government’s intervention had helped break the Klan and restore a semblance of law and order.

The Civil Rights Act of 1875 outlawed racial discrimination in theaters, hotels, railroads, and other public places. But the law proved more an assertion of principle than a direct federal intervention in southern affairs. Enforcement required African Americans to take their cases to the federal courts, a costly and time-consuming procedure.

As wartime idealism faded, northern Republicans became less inclined toward direct intervention in southern affairs. They had enough trouble retaining political control in the North. In 1874, the Democrats gained a majority in the House of Representatives for the first time since 1856. Key northern states also began to fall to the Democrats. Northern Republicans slowly abandoned the freedmen and their white allies in the South. Southern Democrats were also able to exploit a deepening fiscal crisis by blaming Republicans for excessive extension of public credit and the sharp increase in tax rates.

Gradually, conservative Democrats “redeemed” one state after another. Virginia and Tennessee led the way in 1869, North Carolina in 1870, Georgia in 1871, Texas in 1873, and Alabama and Arkansas in 1874. In Mississippi, white conservatives employed violence and intimidation to wrest control in 1875 and “redeemed” the state the following year. Republican infighting in Louisiana in 1873 and 1874 led to a series of contested election results, including bloody clashes between black militia and armed whites, and finally to “redemption” by the Democrats in 1877.

Several Supreme Court rulings involving the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments effectively constrained federal protection of African American civil rights. In the so-called Slaughterhouse cases of 1873, the Court issued its first ruling on the Fourteenth Amendment. In its ruling, the Court separated national citizenship from state citizenship and declared that most of the rights that Americans enjoyed on a daily basis—freedom of speech, fair trials, the right to sit on juries, protection from unreasonable searches, and the right to vote—were under the control of state law. The ruling in effect denied the original intent of the Fourteenth Amendment—to protect against state infringement of national citizenship rights as spelled out in the Bill of Rights.

Three other decisions curtailed federal protection of black civil rights. In United States v. Reese (1876) and United States v. Cruikshank (1876), the Court restricted congressional
power to enforce the Ku Klux Klan Act. Future prosecution would depend on the states rather than on federal authorities. In these rulings, the Court held that the Fourteenth Amendment extended the federal power to protect civil rights only in cases involving discrimination by states; discrimination by individuals or groups was not covered. The Court also ruled that the Fifteenth Amendment did not guarantee a citizen’s right to vote; it only barred certain specific grounds for denying suffrage—“race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” This interpretation opened the door for southern states to disenfranchise African Americans for allegedly nonracial reasons.

Finally, in the 1883 Civil Rights Cases decision, the Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional, holding that the Fourteenth Amendment gave Congress the power to outlaw discrimination by states but not by private individuals. The majority opinion held that black people must no longer “be the special favorite of the laws.” Together, these Supreme Court decisions marked the end of federal attempts to protect African American rights until well into the next century.

**King Cotton: Sharecroppers, Tenants, and the Southern Environment**

The Republicans’ vision of a “New South” remade along the lines of the northern economy failed to materialize. Instead, the South declined into the country’s poorest agricultural region. In the post–Civil War years, “King Cotton” expanded its realm, as greater numbers of small white farmers found themselves forced to switch from subsistence crops to growing cotton for the market (see Map 17.3).
A chronic shortage of capital and banking institutions made local merchants and planters the sole source of credit. They advanced loans and supplies to small owners, tenant farmers, and sharecroppers in exchange for a lien, or claim, on the year’s cotton crop. They often charged extremely high interest rates on advances, while marking up the prices of the goods sold in their stores. At the end of the year, sharecroppers and tenants found themselves deep in debt to stores for seed, supplies, and clothing.

As the “crop lien” system spread, and as more and more farmers turned to cotton growing as the only way to obtain credit, expanding production depressed prices. Competition from new cotton centers in the world market, such as Egypt and India, accelerated the downward spiral. As cotton prices declined alarmingly, to roughly eleven cents per pound in 1875 to five cents by the early 1890s, per capita wealth in the South fell steadily, equaling only one-third that of the East, Midwest, or West by the 1890s. Small farmers caught up in a vicious cycle of low cotton prices, debt, and dwindling food crops found their old ideal of independence sacrificed to the cruel logic of the cotton market.

To obtain precious credit, most southern farmers, both black and white, found themselves forced to produce cotton for market and, thus, became ensnared in the debt-ridden crop lien system. In traditional cotton-producing areas, especially the black belt, landless farmers growing cotton had replaced slaves growing cotton. In the Upcountry and newer areas of cultivation, cotton-dominated commercial agriculture, with landless tenants and sharecroppers as the main workforce, had replaced the more diversified subsistence economy of the antebellum era. These patterns hardened throughout the late nineteenth century. By 1900, over one-third of the white farmers and nearly three-quarters of the African American farmers in the cotton states were tenants or sharecroppers.

Reconstructing the North

Abraham Lincoln liked to cite his own rise as proof of the superiority of the northern system of “free labor” over slavery. “There is no permanent class of hired laborers amongst us,” Lincoln asserted. “Twenty-five years ago, I was a hired laborer. The hired laborer of yesterday, labors on his own account today; and will hire others to labor for him tomorrow.” But the triumph of the North brought with it fundamental changes in the economy, labor relations, and politics that brought Lincoln’s vision into question. The spread of the factory system, the growth of large and powerful corporations, and the rapid expansion of capitalist enterprise all hastened the development of a large unskilled and routinized workforce. Rather than becoming independent producers, more and more workers found themselves consigned permanently to wage labor.

The Age of Capital

In the decade following Appomattox, the North’s economy continued the industrial boom begun during the Civil War. By 1873, America’s industrial production had grown 75 percent over the 1865 level. Between 1860 and 1880, the number of wage earners in manufacturing and construction more than doubled, from 2 million to over 4 million. During the same period, nearly 3 million immigrants arrived in America, almost all of whom settled in the North and West.

The railroad business both symbolized and advanced the new industrial order. Shortly before the Civil War, enthusiasm mounted for a transcontinental line. Private companies took on the huge and expensive job of construction, but the federal government funded the project, providing the largest subsidy in American history.
The Union Pacific employed gangs of Irish American and African American workers to lay track heading west from Omaha. Meanwhile the Central Pacific, pushing east from California, had a tougher time finding workers, and began recruiting thousands of men from China. Some 12,000 Chinese laborers (about 90 percent of the workforce) bore the brunt of the difficult conditions in the Sierra Nevada where blizzards, landslides, and steep rock faces took an awful toll. But after completion of the transcontinental line threw thousands of Chinese railroad workers onto the California labor market, anti-Chinese agitation grew among western politicians and labor unions. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, suspending any further Chinese immigration for ten years.

On May 10, 1869, Leland Stanford, the former governor of California and president of the Central Pacific Railroad, traveled to Promontory Point in Utah Territory to hammer a ceremonial golden spike, marking the finish of the first transcontinental line. Other railroads went up with less fanfare. The Southern Pacific, chartered by the state of California, stretched from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and on through Arizona and New Mexico to connections with New Orleans. The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe reached the Pacific in 1887 by way of a southerly route across the Rocky Mountains. The Great Northern, one of the few lines financed by private capital, extended west from St. Paul, Minnesota, to Washington’s Puget Sound.

Chinese immigrants, like these section gang workers, provided labor and skills critical to the successful completion of the first transcontinental railroad. This photo was taken in Promontory Point, Utah Territory, in 1869.
Railroad corporations became America’s first big businesses. Railroads required huge outlays of investment capital, and their growth increased the economic power of banks and investment houses centered in Wall Street. Bankers often gained seats on the boards of directors of railroad companies, and their access to capital sometimes gave them the real control of the corporations. A small group of railroad executives, including Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jay Gould, Collis P. Huntington, and James J. Hill, amassed unheard-of fortunes.

Some of the nation’s most prominent politicians routinely accepted railroad largesse. The worst scandal of the Grant administration grew out of corruption involving railroad promotion. As a way of diverting funds for the building of the Union Pacific Railroad, an inner circle of Union Pacific stockholders created the dummy Crédit Mobilier construction company. In return for political favors, a group of prominent Republicans received stock in the company. When the scandal broke in 1872, it politically ruined Vice President Schuyler Colfax and led to the censure of two congressmen.

Other industries also boomed in this period, especially those engaged in extracting minerals and processing natural resources. Railroad growth stimulated expansion in the production of coal, iron, stone, and lumber, and these also received significant government aid. For example, under the National Mineral Act of 1866, mining companies received millions of acres of free public land. Oil refining enjoyed a huge expansion in the 1860s and 1870s. As with railroads, an early period of fierce competition soon gave way to concentration. By the late 1870s, John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company controlled almost 90 percent of the nation’s oil-refining capacity.

**Liberal Republicans and the Election of 1872**

With the rapid growth of large-scale, capital-intensive enterprises, Republicans increasingly identified with the interests of business rather than the rights of freedmen or the antebellum ideology of “free labor.” State Republican parties now organized themselves around the spoils of federal patronage rather than grand causes such as preserving the Union or ending slavery. Republicans had no monopoly on political scandal. In 1871 New York City newspapers reported the shocking story of how Democratic Party boss William M. Tweed and his friends had systematically stolen tens of millions from the city treasury. But to many the scandal represented only the most extreme case of the routine corruption that now plagued American political life.

By the end of President Grant’s first term, a large number of disaffected Republicans sought an alternative. The Liberal Republicans, as they called themselves, emphasized the doctrines of classical economics. They called for a return to limited government, arguing that bribery, scandal, and high taxes all flowed from excessive state interference in the economy.

Liberal Republicans were also suspicious of expanding democracy. They believed that politics ought to be the province of “the best men”—educated and well-to-do men like themselves, devoted to the “science of government.” They proposed civil service reform as the best way to break the hold of party machines on patronage.

Most Liberal Republicans opposed continued federal intervention in the South. The national government had done all it could for the former slaves; they must now take care of themselves. In the spring of 1872, a diverse collection of Liberal Republicans nominated Horace Greeley to run for president. A longtime foe of the Democratic Party, Greeley nonetheless won that party’s presidential nomination as well.

Grant easily defeated Greeley, carrying every state in the North and winning 56 percent of the popular vote. But the 1872 election accelerated the trend toward federal
abandonment of African American citizenship rights. The Liberal Republicans quickly faded as an organized political force. But their ideas helped define a growing conservative consciousness among the northern public. Their agenda included retreat from the ideal of racial justice, hostility toward trade unions, suspicion of immigrant and working-class political power, celebration of competitive individualism, and opposition to government intervention in economic affairs.

**The Depression of 1873**

In the fall of 1873, the postwar boom came to an abrupt halt as a severe financial panic triggered a deep economic depression. The collapse resulted from commercial overexpansion, especially speculative investing in the nation’s railroad system. Over the next two years more than 100 banks folded and 18,000 businesses shut their doors. The depression that began in 1873 lasted sixty-five months—the longest economic contraction in the nation’s history until then.

The human toll was enormous. As factories began to close across the nation, the unemployment rate soared to about 15 percent. In many cities the jobless rate was much higher. Many thousands of men took to the road in search of work, and the “tramp” emerged as a new and menacing figure on the social landscape. Farmers were also hard hit by the depression. Agricultural output continued to grow, but prices and land values fell sharply. As prices for their crops fell, farmers had a more difficult time repaying their fixed loan obligations; many sank deeper into debt.

Mass meetings of workers in New York and other cities issued calls to government officials to create jobs through public works. But these appeals were rejected. Indeed, many business leaders and political figures denounced even meager efforts at charity. They saw the depression as a natural, if painful, part of the business cycle, one that would allow only the strongest enterprises (and workers) to survive. The depression of the 1870s prompted workers and farmers to question the old free-labor ideology that celebrated a harmony of interests in northern society. More people voiced anger at and distrust of large corporations that exercised great economic power from outside their communities.

**The Electoral Crisis of 1876**

With the economy mired in depression and the Grant administration weakened by scandals, Democrats looked forward to capturing the White House in 1876. Democrats nominated Governor Samuel J. Tilden of New York, who brought impeccable reform credentials to his candidacy. In 1871 he had helped expose and prosecute the “Tweed Ring” in New York City. As governor he had toppled the “Canal Ring,” a graft-ridden scheme involving inflated contracts for repairs on the Erie Canal. In their platform, the Democrats linked the issue of corruption to an attack on Reconstruction policies. They blamed the Republicans for instituting “a corrupt centralism.”

Republican nominee Rutherford B. Hayes, governor of Ohio, also sought the high ground. As a lawyer in Cincinnati he had defended runaway slaves. Later he had distinguished himself as a general in the Union army. Hayes promised, if elected, to support an efficient civil service system, to vigorously prosecute officials who betrayed the public trust, and to introduce a system of free universal education.

On an election day marred by widespread vote fraud and violent intimidation, Tilden received 250,000 more popular votes than Hayes. But Republicans refused to concede victory, challenging the vote totals in the electoral college. Tilden garnered 184 uncontested electoral votes, one shy of the majority required to win, while Hayes received 165 (see Map 17.4).
The problem centered on twenty disputed votes from Florida, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Oregon. In each of the three southern states two sets of electoral votes were returned. In Oregon, which Hayes had unquestionably carried, the Democratic governor nevertheless replaced a disputed Republican elector with a Democrat.

The crisis was unprecedented. In January 1877, Congress moved to settle the deadlock, establishing an Electoral Commission composed of five senators, five representatives, and five Supreme Court justices; eight were Republicans and seven were Democrats. The commission voted along strict partisan lines to award all the contested electoral votes to Hayes. Outraged by this decision, Democratic congressmen threatened a filibuster to block Hayes’s inauguration. Violence and stalemate were avoided when Democrats and Republicans struck a compromise in February. In return for Hayes’s ascendance to the presidency, the Republicans promised to appropriate more money for southern internal improvements, to appoint a Southerner to Hayes’s cabinet, and to pursue a policy of noninterference (“home rule”) in southern affairs.

Shortly after assuming office, Hayes ordered removal of the remaining federal troops in Louisiana and South Carolina. Without this military presence to sustain them, the Republican governors of those two states quickly lost power to Democrats. “Home rule” meant Republican abandonment of freed people, Radicals, carpetbaggers, and scalawags. It also effectively nullified the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and the Civil Rights Act of 1866. The Compromise of 1877 completed repudiation of the idea, born during the Civil War and pursued during Congressional Reconstruction, of a powerful federal government protecting the rights of all American citizens.
Conclusion

Reconstruction succeeded in the limited political sense of reuniting a nation torn apart by the Civil War. The Radical Republican vision, emphasizing racial justice, equal civil and political rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and a new southern economy organized around independent small farmers, never enjoyed the support of the majority of its party or the northern public. By 1877, the political force of these ideals was spent and the national retreat from them nearly complete.

The end of Reconstruction left the way open for the return of white domination in the South. The freed people’s political and civil equality proved only temporary. It would take a “Second Reconstruction,” the civil rights movement of the next century, to establish full black citizenship rights once and for all. The federal government’s failure to pursue land reform left former slaves without the economic independence needed for full emancipation. Yet the newly autonomous black family, along with black-controlled churches, schools, and other social institutions, provided the foundations for the modern African American experience.
American community. If the federal government was not yet fully committed to protecting equal rights in local communities, the Reconstruction Era at least pointed to how that goal might be achieved. Even as the federal government retreated from the defense of equal rights for black people, it took a more aggressive stance as the protector of business interests. The Hayes administration responded decisively to one of the worst outbreaks of class violence in American history by dispatching federal troops to several northern cities to break the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. In the aftermath of Reconstruction, the struggle between capital and labor had clearly replaced “the southern question” as the number one political issue of the day. “The overwhelming labor question has dwarfed all other questions into nothing,” wrote an Ohio Republican. “We have home questions enough to occupy attention now.”

**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. How did various visions of a “reconstructed” South differ? How did these visions reflect the old political and social divisions that had led to the Civil War?

2. What key changes did emancipation make in the political and economic status of African Americans? Discuss the expansion of citizenship rights in the post–Civil War years. To what extent did women share in the gains made by African Americans?

3. What role did such institutions as the family, the church, the schools, and the political parties play in the African American transition to freedom?

4. How did white Southerners attempt to limit the freedom of former slaves? How did these efforts succeed, and how did they fail?

5. Evaluate the achievements and failures of Reconstruction governments in the southern states.

6. What were the crucial economic changes occurring in the North and South during the Reconstruction era?

**KEY TERMS**

- Black codes (p. 416)
- Carpetbaggers (p. 428)
- Civil Rights Bill (p. 417)
- Congressional Reconstruction (p. 417)
- Compromise of 1877 (p. 436)
- Fifteenth Amendment (p. 419)
- First Reconstruction Act (p. 417)
- Freedmen’s Bureau (p. 417)
- Ku Klux Klan (p. 419)
- Liberal Republicans (p. 434)
- Radical Republicans (p. 413)
- Scalawags (p. 428)
- Sharecropping (p. 424)
- Slaughterhouse cases (p. 430)
- Special Field Order 15 (p. 414)
- Tenure of Office Act (p. 418)
- Union League (p. 425)
- War Democrats (p. 415)
Read and Review

Confederate Song, “I’m a Good Old Rebel” (1866)
Carl Schurz, Report on the Condition of the South (1865)
Mississippi Black Code (1865)
Jourdon Anderson to His Former Master (1865)
A Sharecrop Contract (1882)
Address from the Colored Citizens of Norfolk, VA (1865)
James T. Rapier, Testimony Before U.S. Senate (1880)

Research and Explore

Exploring America: Did Reconstruction Work for the Freed People?
Profiles
Tunis Campbell
Nathan Bedford Forrest

History Bookshelf: Ulysses S. Grant, Memoirs (1886)
Whose History Is it?: Flying the Stars and Bars: The Contested Meaning of the Confederate Flag

Reconstruction in Texas
The Promise and Failure of Reconstruction

Trials of Racial Identity in Nineteenth-Century America

Hear the Audio

Hear the audio files for Chapter 17 at www.myhistorylab.com.
The Freedmen’s Bureau established in 1865 by Congress provided freedmen with clothing, temporary shelter, food, and a series of freedmen’s schools across the South. Southern response was to fall into the use of terror to deter blacks from becoming economically independent using the agencies of groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Sharecropping, tenant farming, and peonage were insidious economic arrangements that placed whites and blacks in a form of economic slavery to large land holders in the South of the post-Civil War era.

The story of African Americans after the end of slavery is complex and varied. Some blacks attempted to seek out better places to establish their new lives while others remained in the security of the only home they had known as slaves.

An Act to Establish a Bureau for the Relief of Freedmen and Refugees, 1865

Be it enacted, That there is hereby established in the War Department, to continue during the present war of rebellion, and for one year thereafter, a bureau of refugees, freedmen, and abandoned lands, to which shall be committed, as hereinafter provided, the supervision and management of all abandoned lands, and the control of all subjects relating to refugees and freedmen from rebel states, or from any district of country within the territory embraced in the operations of the army, under such rules and regulations as may be prescribed by the head of the bureau and approved by the President. The said bureau shall be under the management and control of a commissioner to be appointed by the President, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate...
**When We Worked on Shares, We Couldn't Make Nothing**

**After Slavery** we had to get in before night too. If you didn’t, Ku Klux would drive you in. They would come and visit you anyway. . . . When he got you good and scared he would drive on away. They would whip you if they would catch you out in the night time. . . .

I’ve forgot who it is that that told us that we was free. Somebody come and told us we’re free now. I done forgot who it was.

After freedom, we worked on shares a while. Then we rented. When we worked on shares, we couldn’t make nothing, just overalls and something to eat. Half went to the other man and you would destroy your half if you weren’t careful. A man that didn’t know how to count would always lose. He might lose anyhow. They didn’t give no itemized statement. No, you just had to take their word. They never give you no details. They just say you owe so much. No matter how good account you kept, you had to go by their account and now, Brother, I’m tellin’ you the truth about this. It’s been that way for a long time. You had to take the white man’s work on note, and everything. Anything you wanted, you could git if you were a good hand. You could git anything you wanted as long as you worked. If you didn’t make no money, that’s all right; they would advance you more. But you better not leave him, you better not try to leave and get caught. They’d keep you in debt. They were sharp. Christmas come, you could take up twenty dollar, in some-thin’ to eat and much as you wanted in whiskey. You could buy a gallon of whiskey. . . . Anything that kept you a slave because he was always right and you were always wrong it was difference. If there was an argument, he would get mad and there would be a shooting take place. . . .

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**Sharecrop Contract, 1882**

To every one applying to rent land upon shares, the following conditions must be read, and agreed to.

To every 30 or 35 acres, I agree to furnish the team, plow, and farming implements, except cotton planters, and I do not agree to furnish a cart to every cropper. The croppers are to have half of the cotton, corn and fodder (and peas and pumpkins and potatoes if any are planted. . . .

Cropplers are to have no part or interest in the cotton seed raised from the crop planted and worked by them. No vine crops of any description, that is, no watermelons, musk melons, . . . squashes or anything of that kind, except peas and pumpkins, and potatoes, are to be planted in the cotton or corn. All must work under my direction. All plantation work to be done by the croppers. . . .

For every mule or horse furnished by me there must be 1000 good sized rails. . . . hauled, and the fence repaired as far as they will go, the fence to be torn down and put up from the bottom if I so direct. All croppers to haul rails and work on fence whenever I may order. Rails to be split when I may say. . . .

Each cropper must keep in good repair all bridges in his crop or over ditches that he has to clean out and when a bridge needs repairing that is outside of all their crops, then any one that I call on must repair it. . . .

No cropper to work off the plantation when there is any work to be done on the land he has rented, or when his work is needed by me or other croppers. Trees to be cut down on Orchard, House field & Evanson fences, leaving such as I may designate. . . .