When the Impossible Suddenly Became Possible: A Reconstruction Mixer

By Adam Sanchez and Nqobile Mthethwa

Shortly after hearing in 1865 that she and others on her Florida plantation were no longer enslaved, Frances told a friend what she thought their future might look like: "This time next year all the white folks will be at work in the fields, and the plantations and the houses, and everything in them will be turned over to us to do with as we please." While her fantasy didn't become a reality, something remarkable did. Without saying anything to their former owner, on New Year's Day 1866, every freed slave on the plantation left.

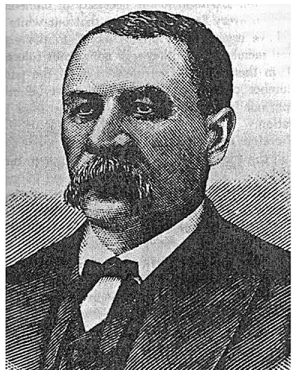
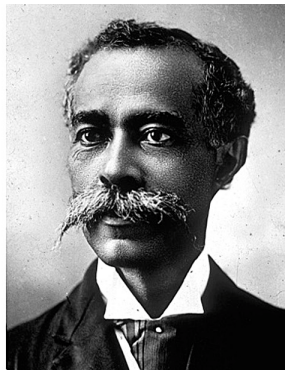
The ability of newly freed people to imagine their former owners serving them, or to walk off a plantation en masse in a society that had heavily policed Black movement, reveals the possibilities of a period where something that had only a few years prior seemed unthinkable was now a fact of life. Because, as historian David Roediger writes in his book *Seizing Freedom*, "If anything seemed impossible in the 1850s political universe, it was the immediate, unplanned, and uncompensated emancipation of four million slaves."

When this once seemingly impossible fate became a reality, it democratized and revolutionized U.S. society. The sense that the impossible could be made possible by the organization of oppressed people to fight against their oppression had implications far beyond the struggle against slavery. As Roediger documents, between 1865 and 1869, a series of "war-and-emancipation-inspired insurgencies . . . raised the possibilities for something like a 19th-century Rainbow Coalition, seeking to bring together the nation's aggrieved."

But ultimately racism and sexism tore these movements apart, and the consequences left Black people few allies to fight the insurgent white supremacists that one by one overthrew Reconstruction governments in the South.

This mixer aims to draw out many of these lessons for students by introducing them to individuals in the various social movements that followed the Civil War and their attempts to build alliances with one another. In the mixer, each student takes on the role of a different person involved in the



Frances Harper, William Sylvis, Isaac Myers , and John Roy Lynch are a few of the people featured in the role play.

social movements of the time. Several roles focus on the close alliance and tragic split between the feminist and abolitionist movement; other roles emphasize the important efforts to break down racism and sexism inside the emerging labor movement; a few roles touch on alliances that abolitionists built with the movements against Indian removal and for Cuban independence; lastly, several roles focus on the incredible transformation of Black life in the South — the key example of the impossible becoming possible.

As students meet other individuals in the room, they learn the revolutionary possibility of solidarity — the potential power of social movements working together. But these stories also reveal how racism, sexism, and classism can keep movements divided. For those today who care about movements for social justice and whether those movements might coalesce to form something even more powerful, this lesson opens a window into the possibilities and pitfalls such a project might face.

Materials Needed:

- Copies of "Reconstruction Mixer: Questions" for every student.
- One role for every student in the class.
- Blank nametags. Enough for every student in the class.

Time Required:

One class period for the mixer. Time for follow-up discussion.

Suggested Procedure:

1. Explain to students that they are going to do an activity about the social movements that emerged after the Civil War. Tell them that "Many people were inspired by the abolition of slavery to demand things that they had previously considered impossible. This meant that after the Civil War many new social movements emerged and there were some attempts to bring them together, but by 1870 those fighting for justice in different movements remained divided. In this activity we are going to meet many of the people involved in these movements to try to understand what brought them together after the Civil War and what ultimately kept them apart."

   Distribute one mixer role and a blank nametag to each student in the class. There are 21 roles, so in many classes some students will be assigned the same characters.

2. Have students fill out their nametags using the name of the individual they are assigned. Tell students that in this activity they will take on the role of the person they are assigned. Ask students to read their roles and to underline key points.

3. Distribute a copy of the "Reconstruction Mixer: Questions" to every student. Explain how the mixer will work: Students will circulate through the classroom, meeting other people who fought for justice. They will use the questions on the sheet as a guide to talk with others about their lives and to complete the questions as fully as possible. They must use a different individual to answer each of the eight questions. Read the questions out loud with students and have them star the questions that apply to their character.

4. After you've read through the questions, have students re-read their roles one or two more times and memorize as much as they can. It can be helpful to encourage students to turn over their roles and list three to five key facts about their character (especially ones that relate to the mixer questions — what movements were they a part of? Did they try to break or form alliances with other movements? etc.). Given that the roles are longer and more complex than most mixers, you might also ask students to write a short interior monologue about their hopes and fears for the future.

5. It's helpful to lay out a few rules for the mixer: 1) Students assigned the same person may not meet themselves. 2) Engage with each other one on one rather than in large groups. 3) It's not a race; the point is to learn

from each character's experience, so spend time listening to one another; don't just scribble down answers to the questions. 4) Students should not show their roles to anyone; this is a conversation-based activity. 5) Tell students not to adopt accents in an effort to try more authentically to represent their individual. (These can invite stereotyping.)

6. Ask students to stand up and begin to circulate throughout the class to meet one another. Sometimes to get them out of their seat it's helpful to require that the first person they talk to is sitting across the room.
7. When it seems like students have had sufficient time to fill out all or most of the questions, ask them to sit back down and silently write on a few debrief questions.
8. Here are some possible questions:
   - Out of all the people you met, whose story did you find most interesting. Why?
   - Historian David Roediger writes about how the self-emancipation of enslaved people during the Civil War inspired others to demand things that previously would have seemed impossible. Did you encounter these themes of "self-emancipation" or making "the impossible possible" while meeting any characters? What does this say about the time period following the Civil War?
   - Was it possible for different social movements to work together after the Civil War? What brought them closer? What pushed them apart?
   - Was it inevitable that these social movements would be driven apart? Why or why not?
   - What role did racism play in preventing social movements from coming together? What about classism?
   - By 1870, those fighting for justice in different movements remained divided and it would be decades before these movements again converged. What do you think were some of the consequences of this division?
   - What connections do you see between the social movements you encountered in this mixer and what's going on today? Can you think of any examples of contemporary social movements working together or clashing with one another?
9. Afterward, ask students to share some of their conclusions with the whole class. ■

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Reconstruction Mixer: Questions

1. Find someone who was enslaved before the war and accomplished something afterward that they never could have under slavery. What did this person accomplish?

2. Find someone who worked for both Black rights and women's rights. Who is this person and what did they do to help both causes?

3. Find someone who contributed to or has an opinion about the split between those fighting for Black rights and those fighting for women's rights. What did they do that contributed to this split? Or what is their opinion about this split?

4. Find someone who tried to build an alliance between Black and white workers or farmers. What did this person do? What can they tell you about how poor white and Black people did or did not work together during Reconstruction?

5. Find someone who tried to build an alliance between those fighting for women's rights and those fighting for workers' rights. What did this person do? What can this person tell you about why the alliance did not last?

6. Find someone who connected the struggle for Black rights to a fight other than the women's or workers' movements — for example, the fight against war, the struggles of Indians for their land or Cubans for independence. Who is this person and what did they do?

7. Find someone who can tell you about efforts to form a new third party or the role the Republican Party played in uniting or dividing various social movements. Who is this person and what is their opinion about political parties? Do you agree?

8. In your role, find someone you could take common action with. Come up with one idea for the action you might take together to further the causes you are passionate about. Who is the person and what action might you take together?

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Although I am known mostly for my work fighting for women's right to vote, early in my career I worked against slavery. After the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, I helped form the Women's National Loyal League (WNLL) to work toward a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery. The badge for the WNLL represented a Negro, half-risen, breaking his own chains. The enslaved were freeing themselves during the war and we wanted our badge to reflect that. The WNLL gathered more than 400,000 signatures to support the 13th Amendment.

After the war, I helped to form the American Equal Rights Association (AERA) to campaign for the rights of both women and Blacks. But most male abolitionists, like Wendell Phillips, believed that it was the "Negro's Hour" and that now was not the time to demand women's rights. They called women's suffrage an impossible demand — but they knew that only a few years earlier the abolition of slavery was also seen as impossible. For them, the alliance that abolitionists had built with the Republican Party was more important than women's rights.

When both Black suffrage and women's suffrage were on the ballot in Kansas, local Republicans came out against women's suffrage. In response, Susan B. Anthony and I brought pro-slavery, pro-women's suffrage Democrat George Francis Train to Kansas to help us win Democratic votes. Train also provided funds for our weekly women's rights newspaper, *The Revolution*. But this alliance with a pro-slavery Democrat split the AERA.

I hoped that the government would extend the rights of citizenship to both African Americans and white women, but when it became clear that in the 14th and 15th amendments only Black men would be granted those rights, I opposed their passage. For me it was inconceivable that educated white women would still be denied the right to vote while the U.S. enfranchised "Africans, Chinese, and all the ignorant foreigners the moment they touch our shores."

Until 1872, I held out hope that African Americans, women, and labor could unite to form a new third party. But I gave up on that hope.

Wendell Phillips

I joined the abolitionist movement in the 1830s and soon became known as "abolition's Golden Trumpet" because of my skills as a speaker. After the war, I became president of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and argued against other abolitionists who wanted to dissolve the society because slavery had been abolished. I believed that the work of abolitionists was not fully completed until Black people gained civil and political rights.

In addition to fighting to end slavery, I was an early champion of women's rights. I wrote articles in support of the cause and aided activists in their petition campaigns for women's suffrage. But I was also practical. I realized that the abolition of slavery made possible what only a few years ago seemed impossible. I knew that "These are not times for ordinary politics; these are formative hours. The national purpose and thought ripens in 30 days as much as ordinary years bring it forward."

But I also realized that abolition would not be complete unless Black men were recognized as citizens and given the right to vote. I urged women's rights activists to set aside women's suffrage for a while to focus on working for an amendment that would allow Black men to vote. I resisted attempts to merge the movement for Black rights with the movement for women's rights into a single organization and refused to mention or promote women's suffrage in the American Anti-Slavery Society newspaper. I argued we must focus on "one thing at a time."

In addition to championing the rights of women and Blacks, I understood that the next great question would be the rights of the laboring class and supported the movement to demand an eight-hour working day. And when the 14th and 15th Amendments were passed, I argued that they also granted citizenship to Indians and fought against the military removal of Indians from their land. I helped to organize public forums where Indians, such as Ponca chief Standing Bear, could tell their story and speak out against the country's Indian removal and extermination policy.

Frederick Douglass

Born into a life of slavery, I became famous after I escaped to the North, became an abolitionist, and wrote my bestselling autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. During the Civil War, I helped convince President Lincoln that Blacks should be allowed to fight in the Union Army, declaring that those "who would be free themselves must strike the blow."

I was also an early supporter of women's rights. I was the only African American at the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, supported women's right to vote, and promoted women's equality in my newspaper *The North Star*. After the war, I was voted vice president of the American Equal Rights Association, an organization formed to fight for the rights of women and African Americans.

But middle-class white women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony could not understand the plight of Black people in the South. While white women enjoyed some small say through the votes of men in their families, Black people had no such power. Without extending the right to vote to Black men in the South, it would leave freedpeople vulnerable to white attacks. White women were not being dragged from their homes and hung upon lamp posts, they were not in danger of having their homes burnt down; their children were not being prevented from entering schools. Stanton and Anthony didn't understand this, and when the Republicans moved to extend the right to vote for Black men without doing so for white women, they allied themselves with racist Democrats.

While I continued to champion equal rights for all, in 1869 I became president of the Colored National Labor Union and focused my attention toward the plight of Black workers. While Blacks were now free, they were stuck in the worst jobs and the traditional labor unions refused to let Black people be members. I helped Black workers fight for the right to have all trade unions and employment opportunities open to them. I knew that if Black and white laborers were divided by racism, they could never see that "both are plundered by the same plunderer."

Lucy Stone

I was the first woman from Massachusetts to earn a college degree and used my education to fight for justice. Like many women's rights activists, I started as an abolitionist before the Civil War. I spoke out against slavery and for women's rights at a time when women were often prevented from speaking publicly.

After the war, I traveled with Susan B. Anthony to try to convince abolitionist organizations to merge with the women's movement to campaign for equal rights for all. I was frustrated that many abolitionists, who I had worked with for years, felt the need to champion the rights of Black men first. Nevertheless, in 1866 we formed the American Equal Rights Association (AERA).

I helped lead the AERA's campaign in Kansas in support of two state referenda that would have given the right to vote to African Americans and women. I spoke to so many crowds in Kansas during the first three months of the campaign that I lost my voice and had to return home. But when I left, the campaign took an ugly turn and I was "utterly disgusted" when Anthony brought racist Democrat George Francis Train to campaign for women's suffrage and stopped championing the referenda for Black suffrage.

Unfortunately, this split between those who believed we needed to fight for Black rights first, and those who wanted to prioritize women's suffrage, only grew larger. I tried to argue both against abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Wendell Phillips, who believed that "the cause of the Negro was more pressing than that of woman's," and against women's rights advocates like Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who began to associate themselves with racists in the Democratic Party. Ultimately, however, Stanton and Anthony went too far when they came out against the 15th Amendment that gave Black men the right to vote. I and others who believed that the 15th Amendment was an important step in the right direction parted ways with Stanton and Anthony and created the American Woman Suffrage Association to continue to fight state by state for women's right to vote.

Frances Harper

I was born free in Maryland, a state with legalized slavery. I was raised in a strong abolitionist household and when I turned 25, I moved north to teach. A few years later, Maryland passed a law forbidding free Blacks from entering its borders or risk being enslaved. I was outraged that I could not return to my home state and became an anti-slavery activist. During the 1850s and 1860s I gave abolitionist speeches all across the country and was active in the Underground Railroad.

Like many female abolitionists, I became increasingly aware of the ways that women were oppressed. When my husband died in 1864, I was left with four children and his debt. Even though my lecture fees paid for our farm, the investment was legally my husband's, so his creditors confiscated my farm to pay his debt. After the war, I joined the American Equal Rights Association to fight for both the rights of women and Black people.

But more and more, people in the movement were choosing between working for the vote for white women *or* the vote for Black men. I believed that giving white women the ballot would not be a cure for our problems — after all, didn't many white women enslave Black people? I agreed with many who argued that we had to have a temporary focus on winning Black male suffrage. The hardships of Black women seemed to stem more from the fact we were Black than because we were women. I supported the 15th Amendment and was a founding member of the American Woman Suffrage Association in 1869. I increasingly criticized the racism of white suffragists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.

But I also believed we should not put off fighting for women's suffrage to some distant future. I wrote, "When they are reconstructing the government, why not lay the whole foundation anew. . . . Is it not the Negro woman's hour also? Has she not as many rights and claims as the Negro man?" I argued after the 15th Amendment was passed that the vote should immediately be extended to women.

Susan B. Anthony

I grew up in Massachusetts but moved to New York in the late 1830s. After being denied a right to speak at a meeting because I was a woman, I was inspired to fight for women's rights. Working closely with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, I started petitions for women's rights. I also promoted the anti-slavery cause by gathering signatures for the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery.

After the war, Stanton and I established the American Equal Rights Association calling for equal rights for all. But many abolitionists and Republicans felt that now was the "Negro's Hour" and did not support our call for women's right to vote. But I would rather cut off my right arm before I demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman. After all, if anyone should get the vote first, I thought we should "give it to the most intelligent," as I have said publicly.

So I went searching for other allies to promote our cause. I helped to form the Working Women's Association and was seated as a delegate at the congress of the National Labor Union (NLU), the first national labor federation in the United States. I was pleased that the NLU president urged labor organizations to embrace female workers and created a special committee on female labor. The committee called for forming labor organizations among working women and fighting to win federal and state laws for equal pay for equal work. Although women's suffrage was voted down, I was encouraged by the positive steps the NLU made. I hoped the alliance between labor and women could eventually lead to a new third party.

But that hope crumbled when during a printers' strike I appealed to the employers to hire women and establish a women's training school. Although I was simply trying to open opportunities for women workers, many in the labor movement accused me of encouraging the employers to use women as strikebreakers. At the next National Labor Union convention, I was expelled.

I continued to work for women's suffrage and was arrested and thrown in jail in 1872 when I voted in the presidential election.

William Sylvis

I was born in Pennsylvania and became an iron molder when I was 18. Iron molding was a dangerous job. We worked with hot metal furnaces and were paid little. We lived in company houses and shopped at the company store — everything we needed to survive we had to buy from our employer. It was wage slavery. In 1857, I joined the Philadelphia molders union when we went on strike to oppose a wage cut. We lost the strike, but I became a leader in the union. I believed that if workers could unite, they could fight for higher wages and improve their situation and society. In 1859, I became president of the National Union of Iron Molders.

Although the Civil War freed 4 million Black people from chattel slavery, I argued that they were now added to the millions of white wage slaves in the nation. I wrote that "we are now all one family of slaves together, and the labor reform movement is a second emancipation proclamation." I tried to further unite working people by forming the National Labor Union (NLU), the first national federation of labor organizations in the United States. In 1868, I was elected NLU president.

Most labor unionists were white men. I urged the NLU and the organizations affiliated with it to allow women and Black workers into the labor movement. I argued that this was the only way to prevent these groups from being used as strike-breakers. If we could unite the working people of our nation, white and Black, male and female, I believed we could form a powerful third party and take on the power of Wall Street.

I didn't support Reconstruction in the South and favored the soonest possible reconciliation between the North and the former Confederacy, but I did fight for the NLU executive committee to invite all persons in the labor movement, regardless of color or sex, to our convention in 1869. Unfortunately, I died before the convention. The convention encouraged the organization of separate unions for whites and Blacks and expelled women suffrage leader Susan B. Anthony for urging newspapers to hire women during a printers' strike.

Augusta Lewis

I was born in 1848, the year of the first women's rights conference. Orphaned as a young girl, I was raised in a wealthy home. My family paid for my education until the depression that followed the Civil War forced me, still in my teens, out into the workforce. I developed a deep sympathy for all those who had to work for a wage.

I became a typesetter and got a job at the *New York World*. In 1867, members of the International Typographical Union in New York, which like other labor unions did not allow women into their organization, went on strike. To fight the union, the owners of the *World* hired women, paid them less, and trained them to set type. Setting type was almost an all-male profession, but for a short time all my co-workers were women. After 10 months, the *World* reached a settlement with the union and fired all of the female typesetters they had trained. I wasn't fired, but I quit in support of the other women.

After this experience, at the age of 20, I joined with Susan B. Anthony to form the Working Women's Association (WWA). Anthony wanted the group to promote women's suffrage. Although I supported suffrage, I was skeptical that the vote would cure the economic inequality between men and women and thought that we should focus first on getting women good union jobs. Unfortunately, the WWA increasingly became dominated by middle-class women like Anthony who didn't understand the problems working women faced.

In 1868, in addition to starting the WWA, I also formed the Women's Typographical Union that quickly grew to more than 40 members. When the male Typographical Union again went on strike in 1869, we sided with the men and encouraged women not to take their jobs. We argued that we would be stronger if all workers fought together. But Anthony argued that women should again break the strike. It allowed the employers to claim they were supporting women's rights in their attempts to crush the union. By the end of 1869, the Working Women's Association disbanded.

Ira Steward

By the time I was 19, I was working 12 hours a day as a machinist's apprentice. I started to advocate for shorter hours and was fired. I was against slavery, and the same principles that led me to oppose the oppression of Black laborers in the South led me to demand the eight-hour day for all workers. I believed that after the Civil War the laborer felt that something of slavery remained, and something of freedom had yet to come.

Many people in the North critiqued slavery by arguing that enslaved people consumed less than free workers and that hurt the economy. I pointed out that free workers were paid little and forced to work long hours, so they also consumed very little. Most workers worked from sunup to sundown. An eight-hour day for 10-hour pay would raise the standard of living for all. When I first started making these arguments, many thought an eight-hour day was impossible, as most workers didn't even have a 10-hour day. But after the war, the idea spread rapidly.

In 1865, I took these arguments to the Union of Machinists and Blacksmiths and the larger organization of working people that we were a part of, the Boston Trades Assembly. Both organizations endorsed the campaign for an eight-hour day. I became the organizer and president of the Boston Eight-Hour League. Within a year, eight-hour leagues were established all over the country. By 1867, state eight-hour laws had been passed in Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, New York, and Connecticut. In 1868, Congress enacted an eight-hour day for government employees. These laws, however, weren't enforced and had many loopholes, so most workers still worked long hours.

I continued to fight for eight hours and used my position in the labor movement to support Reconstruction in the South — even as many in the North turned against it. In 1877, the Boston Eight-Hour League, that I helped form, was one of the only U.S. labor organizations to oppose the removal of federal troops from the South. Unfortunately, many white workers remained against Black rights and the labor movement remained divided by race.

Isaac Myers

I grew up in Baltimore and at the age of 16, I began to work as a caulker — sealing cracks between ships' wooden planks. By the age of 20, I was supervising the caulking of some of the largest ships in Baltimore.

In 1865, white caulkers went on strike. Joined by white ship carpenters, they demanded that Blacks working in the shipyards be fired. They were supported by the city government, which kicked out more than 1,000 Black workers. When Black workers met to respond, I proposed that we form a cooperative to buy a shipyard. We began raising funds and Black people from all over the country donated to our cause. We were able to purchase a shipyard and by the end of 1866 we employed more than 300 Black workers. As we expanded, we employed white workers also.

I set out to organize the growing number of Black labor organizations to fight for our rights and against discrimination. I was invited to speak at the National Labor Union (NLU) convention in the summer of 1869. I told white workers that Black workers were ready to join them in a common struggle. I encouraged the white unions to let Blacks in to their organizations and denounced actions like those in Baltimore where white workers went on strike against Blacks. Although we remained in separate local organizations, the NLU decided to welcome Black labor unions into the national federation.

I issued a call for a Black labor convention and more than 200 representatives met to form the Colored National Labor Union. We demanded legislation that would give Black people full equality and an educational campaign in the white unions to overcome the opposition to Blacks. I was voted president and toured the country encouraging Black workers to organize for our demands.

But when our white allies in the NLU demanded that Black union members abandon the Republican Party and form a new Labor Reform Party, we disagreed. We feared that this would help to elect racist Democrats. As a result, after 1870, Blacks weren't invited back to the NLU convention.

Newton Knight

In 1858, my family settled on a small farm in Jones County, Mississippi. When the Civil War began, I volunteered to fight for the Confederacy. In 1862, the Confederacy passed the "Twenty Negro Law" that allowed men who owned 20 or more slaves to return home. As more of us poor white farmers died, it became clear that poor men were fighting a rich man's war. I deserted the army and returned home. I was shocked by what I found. The farms were run-down. The crops had failed. While children went hungry, the Confederacy imposed a tax system that allowed the army to take supplies from families.

When more soldiers deserted, we formed the "Knight Company" to defend Jones County citizens from Confederate troops. We were aided by local whites and Blacks, some still enslaved. The Knight Company, numbering more than 100 men, declared ourselves "Southern Yankees" and successfully overthrew the Confederate government in Jones County. One enslaved woman, Rachel, helped us as a spy and supplied us with food. In return, I promised to work for Black freedom. I fell in love with Rachel and had a child with her.

After the war, I was appointed relief commissioner. In this position, I distributed food to the poor and helped liberate enslaved children who had not been freed. I was active in the local Union League — an organization of mostly Black and some white Republicans — that met in secret, educated each other on politics, and organized to protect ourselves from the Ku Klux Klan. Republican Ulysses Grant was elected president in 1868. In 1870, Mississippi at last approved a new constitution that guaranteed Black civil and voting rights. Republicans swept political offices across Mississippi. I was appointed U.S. marshal for southern Mississippi and I campaigned to build an integrated school in Jones County.

In the election of 1875, however, violence and fraud kept Republicans from voting. The governor pleaded with President Grant to send troops, but he refused. The Democrats took back power in Mississippi and began to turn back the clock. I retreated to my farm, married Rachel, and lived with my interracial family until my death.

Henry Highland Garnet

I was born into slavery in 1815 in Kent County, Maryland. When I was 9 years old, I escaped slavery with my family and we settled in New York City.

It was at the Oneida Theological Institute where I became known for my skills as a speaker and developed my philosophy on abolitionism. Eventually, I became a minister. In 1843, I spoke to the delegates of the National Negro Convention in Buffalo, New York, where I called for a militant slave revolt against the plantation owners of the South. Many abolitionists at the time thought my call for self-emancipation was too radical. But it was ultimately the enslaved rebelling — running away, refusing to work on the plantations, taking up arms, and joining the Union Army — that won the Civil War.

I opposed the U.S.-Mexico War because I knew the real aim was to reimpose slavery on Mexico, which had abolished it decades earlier. I travelled the country and the world preaching about the ills of slavery. In 1865, I gave a speech to the U.S. House of Representatives urging them to adopt the 13th Amendment. I was the first African American to deliver a sermon to Congress.

After the war, although slavery in the United States had been abolished, our brothers and sisters in Cuba were still in bondage. In 1868, a war broke out on the island as Cubans fought for their independence from Spain. Cuban revolutionaries like José Martí linked the struggle against slavery to the fight against the Spanish. I knew we had to help their efforts and formed the Cuban-Anti Slavery Committee in New York City in 1872. I met with Cuban liberation leaders to form an international coalition to spread emancipation across the globe. At a mass meeting in New York City, I urged people to link the Black freedom struggle with the liberation movements in Latin America. We gathered 500,000 signatures to advance the cause of freedom and delivered the petition to President Grant to recognize the independent Republic of Cuba.

Lydia Maria Child

I was born in Massachusetts in 1802. I became involved in the anti-slavery movement in 1831 and wrote *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*, the first major study of slavery published in the United States. I also helped to edit the memoirs of fugitive Harriet Jacobs, telling the story of her sexual exploitation under slavery and her successful struggle to free herself and her children.

During and after the Civil War, I continued to use my writing to calm white fears of emancipation and push for full citizenship and suffrage for African Americans. I was an early supporter of women's rights, but also thought that after the war, voting rights for Black men should be prioritized over women's suffrage. I believed that if Black men were not given full legal and political equality they could never truly be free from slavery. Therefore, I worked hard for the passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments. This issue caused a split in the women's suffrage movement between those abolitionists like myself and others like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony who prioritized women's suffrage.

As the struggle for civil rights was debated in the North and the South, there was a new surge of white Americans moving West. To secure land for these newly arriving whites, the federal government continued to remove Indian tribes from their native land onto reservations. I wrote *An Appeal for the Indians,* which called for an end to the violent genocide against Native Americans and for a more humane policy toward these "peoples less advanced than ourselves." I argued that U.S.-Indian relations consisted of an "almost unvaried history of violence and fraud," and that we must add to the "vigilant watch over the rights of black men" a new campaign supporting the rights of "red men." I lost many friends because of my involvement in social issues, but I continued to advocate for truth and justice by opposing slavery and Indian removal, and working for women's rights.

P. B. S. Pinchback

I was born free in 1837. My mother was a freed slave and my white planter father was her former enslaver. I was raised in Mississippi on my father's plantation, but when my father died, my mother and I moved to Ohio because she was afraid that the white side of the family would attempt to enslave us.

During the Civil War I fought as a Union soldier in the all-Black 1st Louisiana Native Guard. I became one of the few Black soldiers to reach the rank of captain, but I decided to quit because of discrimination I faced from white officers. After the war, my family and I moved to Alabama, but quickly had to move again to New Orleans because of white supremacist violence.

It was in New Orleans where I decided to become politically active. In 1867, I was elected to the constitutional convention and played a role in crafting the 1868 Louisiana Constitution. Later that year I was elected state senator. Nearly half the Louisiana legislature was Black.

As a legislator, I championed the rights of those still in chains. Black political leaders across the South played an important role in the Cuban solidarity movement—an effort to support those leading the fight to end slavery in Cuba and support its independence from Spain. I was a leader of the Cuban Anti-Slavery Committee. I helped to pass a resolution through the Louisiana legislature urging the U.S. Congress "to give material assistance" to help liberate enslaved Cubans. At the 1873 Convention of Colored Men in Louisiana, we placed defeating the "barbarous rule of Spanish authority in Cuba" alongside the effort to fight KKK violence.

In 1871, I briefly became the first African American governor when Governor Henry Warmoth was impeached. I also should have become the first Black U.S. senator from Louisiana, but the racist U.S. Senate refused to seat me. During my time in Louisiana politics, I served on the Louisiana State Board of Education and became the director of New Orleans public schools. I cared deeply about public education. In 1879, I helped found Southern University, a historically Black college.

W. J. Whipper

I was born free in Philadelphia, the son of a prominent abolitionist. During the Civil War, I volunteered to fight in the Union Army and at the end of the war was part of the occupying force in South Carolina. I became a lawyer in 1865 and tried to help Black people who were denied their legal rights. I also taught in a Freedmen's Bureau school to educate newly freed men, women, and children. I moved to Beaufort, a city in the South Carolina Sea Islands, and along with Robert Smalls founded the first Republican political organization in South Carolina.

I was elected to the 1868 state constitutional convention in South Carolina and took a leading role, supporting free public education for all South Carolinians and equality before the law. I introduced a resolution to make South Carolina the first state to allow women to vote. I argued that the legal system we were creating would rest on "insecure foundations" until "women are recognized as the equal of men." Now that slavery was abolished, and delegates were meeting across the South to rewrite state constitutions, I knew there was a huge opportunity. We could have built a legal system of equality for all regardless of race or sex. Unfortunately, most of my fellow delegates felt that women's suffrage was too radical, and the amendment was voted down.

After the convention, I was elected to the South Carolina House of Representatives as part of the first ever majority-Black state congress and continued to support women's suffrage. I married Frances Anne Rollin, the daughter of the most prominent free Black family in Charleston. Frances and her sisters ran a salon known as the "Republican Headquarters" and she became my closest political advisor. Frances' sister Lottie chaired the first-ever meeting of the South Carolina Women's Rights Association, which I supported. I served as a South Carolina Representative until 1876 and when the Democrats took over the state government, I fought against their efforts to disenfranchise Black voters.

Charlotte "Lottie" Rollins

I was born in 1849 to a free wealthy Black family in Charleston, South Carolina. Education was important to my parents and they sent my four sisters and me to attend schools in the North. After the war, my sister Katherine and I opened and taught at a school for freed people in Charleston. I wanted to pass the benefits of education on to newly freed Black men and women.

I became well known as a clerk in the office of a South Carolina congressman. My sisters and I ran a salon known as the "Republican Headquarters," and used our political influence to fight for equal rights. I loved the poetry of Lord Byron and believed in his verse that those "who would be free, themselves must strike the blow." For me, a Black woman, this meant I must fight for full suffrage and political rights for women. When my sisters and I were interviewed by the *New York Herald* because of our political influence, I proposed the Republican Party run me for vice president in the upcoming election.

In 1869, I went before the South Carolina House of Representatives to make my case for women's suffrage. In 1870, I organized the first women's rights convention in South Carolina and formed the South Carolina Women's Rights Association. At a speech during a Women's Rights convention in 1870, I declared, "We ask for suffrage not as a favor, not as a privilege, but as a right based on the grounds that we are human beings and as such entitled to all human rights." The following year I led a rally at the state capitol demanding women's suffrage and in 1872, I was chosen as a delegate to the national convention of the American Woman Suffrage Association.

Although I was able to win several white and Black Republicans to fight to amend the state constitution to give women the right to vote, the measure proved too controversial. After a heated debate in the legislature, which even included a fistfight, women's suffrage was defeated.

Benjamin Montgomery

I was enslaved by the family of Jefferson Davis, one of the wealthiest and most influential families in Mississippi. Jefferson Davis, was the president of the Confederacy. When I was first sold to the Davises I tried to escape but was recaptured. On their plantation I learned to read and write, survey land, repair machines, navigate steamboats, and design buildings. I became a skilled mechanic and invented a steam-operated boat propeller. I applied for a patent but was denied because I was enslaved. Acknowledging my talents, the Davises made me the manager of the plantation store and eventually the entire plantation.

When the Union Army approached during the Civil War, the Davises fled, leaving me in charge. I tried to help lead the hundreds of enslaved people who stayed behind supervising production of corn and vegetables to feed the community. But after Union soldiers burned the plantation mansion, and Confederate troops burned our crops, it became clear that staying was too dangerous. I took my wife and four children to Ohio until the war ended.

At the end of the war, I headed back and along with formerly enslaved people, and newly freed refugees, began to farm the land. I leased the land from the Freedmen's Bureau and quickly tripled my initial investment with a successful cotton crop. We were now free, prosperous, Black farmers on the land that only a few years ago we had worked as slaves.

When President Andrew Johnson pardoned Davis, the title for the land went back to him. But I had raised enough money to buy it from him. By 1873, my family was the third largest cotton producer in Mississippi with an award-winning crop. But when I was appointed justice of the peace, our white neighbors were infuriated at the thought of a Black judge. The increasingly hostile racial politics, combined with falling cotton prices and floods, eventually led me to sell the plantation back to Jefferson Davis. But my son continued the family legacy by co-founding Mound Bayou, a successful all-Black colony in Northwest Mississippi.

Abram Colby

I was born into slavery in Greene County, Georgia. My mother was enslaved and my father was our owner. In 1851, after more than 30 years in slavery, my father freed me.

After the Civil War, I built a local chapter of the Georgia Equal Rights Association. We organized against employers who were cheating Black freedmen out of wages and still whipping them. We couldn't get a fair hearing in the courts, so I appealed to the military general in control of Georgia to address our grievances. He never responded.

But Congress put Georgia under military occupation after the Georgia legislature rejected the 14th Amendment and sent Alexander Stephens, the vice president of the Confederacy, to Congress. Black voters across the state registered to vote for the first time. In Greene County, Blacks became a majority of registered voters.

We organized ourselves into companies and marched to the polls. I was elected to represent Greene County in the Georgia House of Representatives. But the Georgia Democrats argued that the state Constitution did not give Blacks the right to hold public office. Many white Republicans voted with the Democrats to expel Black legislators.

The Ku Klux Klan stepped up their attacks on Republican voters. When I ran for re-election, I was offered $5,000 to join the Democratic Party, but I told them "I would not do it if they give me all the county was worth." Twenty-three KKK members then came to my house in the middle of the night, pulled me out of bed, and took turns whipping and beating me.

In December 1869, Congress reimposed military rule on Georgia. The Black legislators who had been expelled were reseated. As Georgia's first Black legislators, we tried to pass bills creating a militia to protect freedmen, guarantee civil rights, and ensure equal access to public transportation. But we failed because the white Republicans were too weak.

I was re-elected to the House of Representatives in 1870, but Democrats won more than 80 percent of the seats. Despite intense violence, I continued to organize and speak out against racist terrorists.

John Roy Lynch

I was born into slavery in Louisiana. My mother was enslaved, and my father, the plantation overseer, was an Irish immigrant. He began to raise money to buy our freedom, but suddenly died and we were sold to a plantation in Mississippi. During the Civil War, I freed myself by running away and joining the Union Army.

After the war, I joined the Republican Party in Mississippi working as assistant secretary for the Republican State Convention. In 1869, the governor appointed me as justice of the peace in Adams County. In this position, I had significant authority. Now that Black people felt like they could get some justice, they would bring in white people for the smallest offense. In several cases, I was able to punish white planters who beat or threatened their Black workers — dispensing justice that was never received under slavery.

The same year I was elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives. And in 1872, by the time I was 25, I became the first African American Speaker of the House. Later that year, I was elected as part of the first generation of African American U.S. congressmen and traveled to Washington, D.C., to represent Mississippi. I was the youngest member of Congress. I advocated for the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which ended legal discrimination in public places and transportation, until the U.S. Supreme Court declared the law unconstitutional in 1883.

Back in Mississippi, racist Democrats unleashed a wave of violence and intimidation in an effort to take back power. I exposed Democrats for working with terrorists like the Ku Klux Klan and other paramilitary groups to overthrow the Republican Party and suppress the Black vote. But the federal government refused to intervene. I was re-elected to Congress in 1876 and 1880 but felt increasingly isolated as Democrats took back power by force across the state. As I grew older, I became increasingly concerned about the racist and inaccurate portrayal of Blacks by historians of Reconstruction. I wrote a book titled *The Facts of Reconstruction* to set the record straight.

Walter Moses Burton

I was born into slavery in North Carolina, but was later brought to Texas where I spent most of my life. The plantation owner I worked for, Thomas Burke Burton, taught me how to read and write.

When I was freed after the Civil War, Mr. Burton sold me several large plots of land, making me one of the wealthiest Black men in Fort Bend County. I became involved in politics, joined the Republican Party, and was soon elected president of the Fort Bend County Union League. The Union Leagues were secret interracial political organizations that educated voters, trained and nominated candidates for office, and provided armed protection at the polls and from white terrorists.

Ford Bend County was 80 percent Black and we were organized. In 1869, the first election held under the new Reconstruction constitution, I was elected both tax collector and the first ever African American sheriff in the United States. These were especially important local positions because Reconstruction governments raised taxes to provide money for public schools and to get wealthy white landowners to sell unused land to newly freed Blacks. It was my job to make sure taxes were paid and justice was given equally to Blacks and whites.

In 1873 I was elected to the Texas Senate, where I served for seven years. As a state senator, I advocated for public education and helped establish the first state-supported Black college in Texas. I also opposed the convict labor system that provided corporations and plantations with free Black labor. Because the 13th Amendment abolished slavery "except as a punishment for crime," Blacks who were convicted even on bogus charges could be re-enslaved.

No other county in Texas elected more Blacks to political office than Fort Bend. Long after Reconstruction had ended Black people were still in positions of power in our county. But white people outnumbered Black people in Texas two to one. Reconstruction was short-lived here and the Democrats took back control of the state government through fraud, violence, and intimidation in 1872.

Kate Mullany

I was born in Ireland in 1845, but a few years later my family moved to the United States. When I was 19, my father passed away and my mother became ill, leaving me the main breadwinner of the family.

I worked 12- to 14-hour days with other young women washing, drying, and ironing clothes, using harsh chemicals, and earning less than $4 a week. When we asked for a pay increase, employers ignored us, so we started discussing how to organize to demand higher wages and better working conditions. We had seen how male workers in the National Union of Iron Molders went on strike to win their demands. In 1864, I went on strike for five and a half days with more than 300 women who worked across 14 laundry companies. We won a 25 percent increase in wages and organized the Collar Labor Union, the first female labor union in the United States.

The following year, the Collar Laundry Union organized again for increased wages and our pay went from $8 to $14 a week. We often worked with and supported male labor unions and donated large sums of money when they went on strike.

In 1868, I was invited to attend the National Labor Union (NLU) convention. I was appointed by President William Sylvis to be the assistant secretary, becoming the first woman officer in the NLU. I coordinated national efforts with various working women's associations.

Our efforts gained support from suffragists like Susan B. Anthony and they helped us raise funds after we lost a difficult strike in 1869 to start our own collar manufacturing cooperative. But ultimately, I felt the most important rights for working women could be won only by organizing on the job with male workers. Anthony and her middle-class followers increasingly focused only on the right to vote. I was surprised when I went to speak to Anthony's Working Women's Association, to raise funds for our cooperative, that the women I met there did not at all seem like the working women I knew, who labored all day in a dirty shop.