

Reconstructing the South: What Really Happened

A follow-up lesson to “Reconstructing the South,” using primary source documents to reveal key outcomes of the Reconstruction era.



By Mimi Eisen and Ursula Wolfe-Rocca

For the two days Ursula’s 10th-grade U.S. history classes devote to the Zinn Education Project activity, [Reconstructing the South](#), the room is loud with students discussing, debating, pleading, and persuading.

I think it is fine to grow *some* cotton, but if it is our land, we should get to decide what we grow.

But the Northerners are not going to just give us the land for nothing. We have to make it profitable for them.

We were forced to put the needs of others above our own for centuries. Do you really want some white person telling us what to do with the land we have a right to?

The activity, written by Bill Bigelow, has students imagine into the perspective of newly freedpeople grappling with six critical questions about how to organize and build a post-slavery society. Students, adopting the perspective of a freedperson, are asked:

1. Who should own and control the plantations?
2. Would you be willing to promise the Northern politicians that, in exchange for acknowledging your right to the land, you would continue to grow cotton?
3. What should happen to Confederate leaders?
4. Who should be allowed to vote in the new

South? Everyone? Only formerly enslaved people? Only those who were loyal to the United States during the war? Women?

5. How will freedpeople be protected?

6. What conditions should be put on the Southern states before they are allowed to return to the Union?

After they have discussed and wrestled with all six questions, students always quickly ask, “OK, so what really happened?!” Bigelow writes, “And that’s where we want to leave students with this activity: eager to learn about ‘what really happened,’ how the actual human beings resolved these questions.”

We designed the activity outlined below to direct students’ curiosity and excitement from the role play into the process of finding out “what really happened” by analyzing and discussing a wide assortment of primary source documents.

The challenge (and fun) of this activity is that although the lesson asks straightforward questions — who should own and control land? How will freedpeople be protected? — These documents do not always straightforwardly answer them. Often, the answers are only partial; sometimes the “what happened” proved only temporary; the perspective and position of the authors can be hard to parse; and students may end up with more questions than they started out with. No, this selection of speeches, newspaper articles,

contracts, letters, and laws is not a Google search bar that will spit out answers in mere seconds. So it is critically important that students be given sufficient space and time to talk with each other throughout all portions of this activity. And these documents are not to be tackled alone; rather, they should be pored over, analyzed, and deciphered in conversation with others.

Materials Needed

- File folders
- Enough copies of each document set for each small group
- Enough copies of the [note-taking sheet](#) for the whole class

Suggested Procedure

1. If possible, set up the room with tables or stations around which a group of about three or four students can sit and comfortably, read, write, and discuss. You will want to have at least five table groups, since there are five “folders” of documents organized around themes: Land, labor, suffrage, safety/

protections, and the Confederate coalition. In a big class (30 students or more), you might double that and have two table groups for each set of documents.

2. Tell students that they are going to examine a bunch of documents from the Reconstruction era that, when taken together, reveal what really happened with regard to many of the questions raised in the “Reconstructing the South” role play. Hand out the note-taking sheet. Go over each of the columns and clarify what kind of information students should write down. It might be a good idea to do one document together as a whole class before breaking out into table groups. One document we did not include in any of the folders, but that would be rich for discussion is a broadside issued by Captain. L. Horrigan, Assistant Commissioner, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, & Abandoned Lands in Louisiana in 1865.

Sample notes you might co-construct with students for this document are filled out below.

Document Description —What is it (letter, speech, newspaper article, contract, law, etc.)? —What year was it created? —Author?	What’s Happening? What’s It About? —Provide a brief summary of what is being talked about or addressed. —What opinions and/or facts are shared?	How does this document relate to what you discussed and decided in the role play? —Land? Labor? Confederate leaders and Southern states? Voting rights? Safety?
—Poster or public notice	—Gov’t official trying to get freedpeople to work	—Our class decided freedpeople should get land seized from Confederate
—1865 —Capt. L. Horrigan, Freedmen’s Bureau	—What kind of work? —Says that the freedpeople should not wait around hoping to get land —Last line seems to be a threat — what will happen to them if they don’t work?	—Plantation owners, but this gov’t official says that’s not going to happen —It’s not completely clear from this but our class didn’t think freedpeople would work for former owners/enslavers. Is this guy saying they should?!

Warn students that analyzing these documents will not always be simple and that they should be prepared to feel confused by some of what they read. Assure them that this is OK. Point out that the model above includes questions and wonderings. The key thing is to use the conversations in their small groups to move from confusion to greater clarity. Emphasize that before they write anything down on their note-taking sheet, they're going to want to do a lot of talking.

3. Ask students to get started reading and discussing the first document in their assigned set. Each folder will include multiple documents that address the same theme, and each document includes an explanatory caption. It is worth taking a moment to talk with students about how to use the captions. The captions provide critical context for understanding the meaning of each document, so students should not skip them; at the same time, students should know that they will not glean everything important from only the captions — the captions and documents should be understood as working hand-in-hand.

Students should read the folder documents in order, as they are arranged chronologically to give students a feeling for the dynamism of the era. Reading through the documents to do with land, for example, students will find a Freedmen's Bureau official assert in 1864 that the "immediate possession of the land without purchase is the indefeasible right of the Negro;" a year later, Radical Republican representative Thaddeus Stevens will offer a route toward that end: "We propose to confiscate all the estate of every rebel belligerent whose estate was worth \$10,000, or whose land exceeded two hundred acres in quantity." But when students look at the data set, "Negro Landholders in Various States of the United States," collected by Atlanta University in 1900, they will see strong proof that Stevens' plan never came to pass. Each set of documents displays a microcosm of the larger trajectory and struggle of

Reconstruction: Black people and their allies organizing for freedom and a new social order, and their opponents thwarting those efforts at every turn.

4. Students will need at least 20-30 minutes to read, discuss, and take notes on each set of documents. We do not recommend that students read all the document sets. Instead, you could have students only read one or two of the five sets, get into mixed groups, and share with each other what they learned. Two possible questions for students to discuss in table groups:

- What is the story your document set tells about what happened to freedpeople during Reconstruction?
- What was the most powerful document you looked at and why?

5. Once students have had a chance to share with each other, bring the class together for a debrief discussion. In our experience, conversations are usually richer if we give students a chance to write before a discussion. Some possible reflection questions:

- A. What did you learn were the real-world outcomes to the big questions we considered in the "Reconstructing the South" role play?
- B. What were you confused about?
- C. What was your favorite document? Why?
- D. What was the most disturbing document? Why?
- E. How do these documents help us understand our world today?

Where next?

Where you might go next with this lesson will depend on a variety of factors, including how long you have to devote to Reconstruction, what kind of writing (Essay? Poetry? Historical fiction?) you're building toward with your students, and whether you're focusing on contemporary issues or hewing more narrowly to the past. If you have time, the trial role play, "[Who Killed Reconstruction?](#)" would be an excellent follow-up. The activity encourages students to take a broader view than offered by most textbooks of how Reconstruction was destroyed, looking not just at white supremacist terrorism, but also at the role

of the major political parties (and their wealthy backers), and at the systems of white supremacy and capitalism. Encountering the themes and patterns revealed in this lesson's sets of documents will only deepen students' ability to think critically about Reconstruction's demise. Find many more resources on Reconstruction at the Zinn Education Project [website](#).

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Reconstructing the South: What Really Happened

HANDOUT

Folder _____

Document Description —What is it (letter, speech, newspaper article, contract, law, etc.)? —What year was it created? —Author?	What's Happening? What's It About? —Provide a very brief summary of what is being talked about or addressed. —What opinions and/or facts are shared?	How does this document relate to what you discussed and decided in the role play? —Land? Labor? Confederate leaders and Southern states? Voting rights? Safety?

Reconstructing the South: What Really Happened

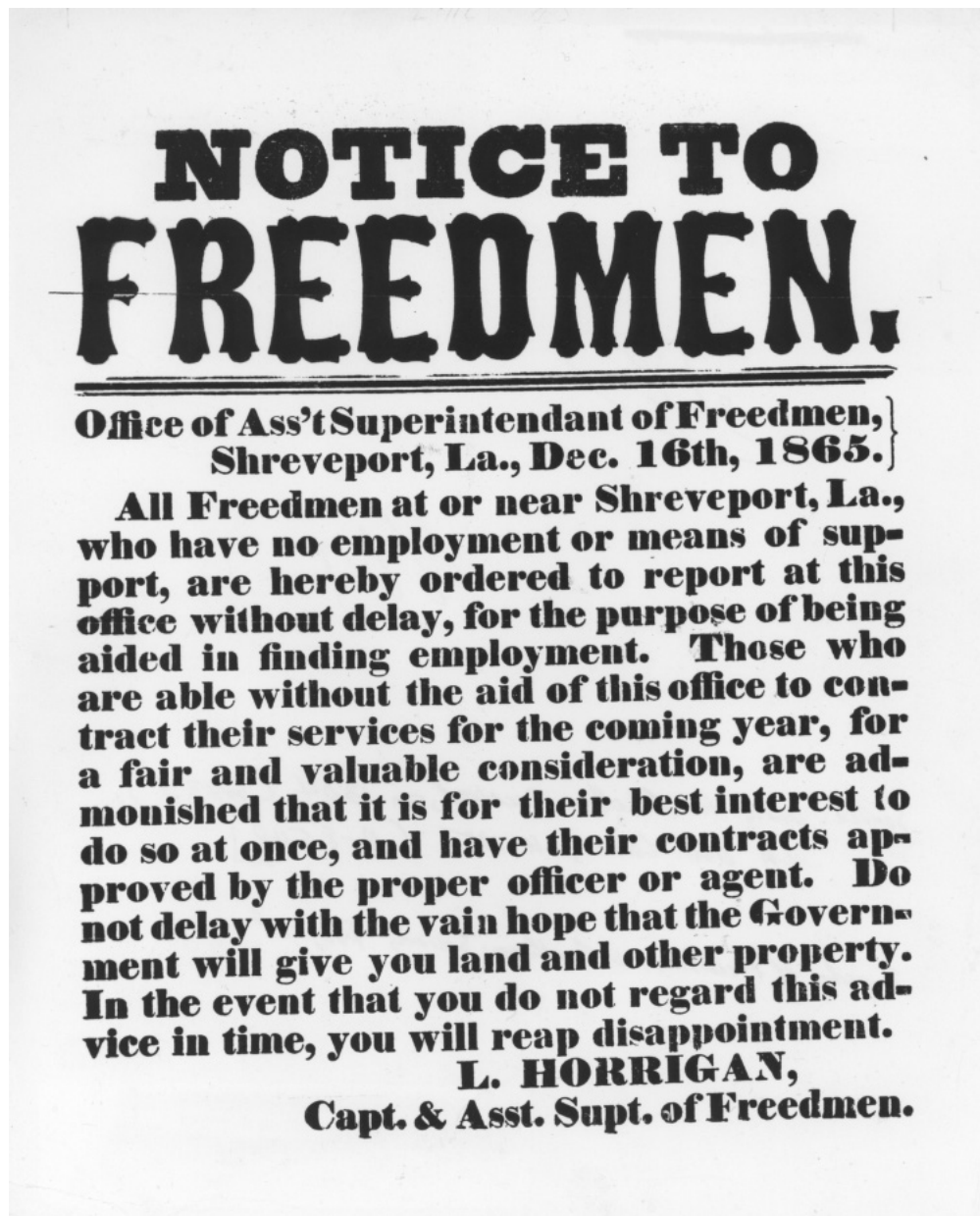
DOCUMENTS

The following documents are included as handouts. Sources are listed on each document, and many are accessible online.

Folder	Pages	Document
N/A Sample Document	7	Dec. 16, 1865, broadside “Notice to Freedmen” from L. Horrigan
Land	8-9	March 25, 1864, letter from Edward S. Philbrick to Albert G. Browne
Land	10-11	June 15, 1864, letter from Rufus Saxton to Edward S. Philbrick
Land	12	Jan. 12, 1865, meeting minutes of interview between Black religious leaders and U.S. army officials
Land	13	Sept. 6, 1865, transcript of Thaddeus Stevens speech
Land	14-15	Feb. 12, 1866, land certificate for James Hix
Land	16	1900, W. E. B. Du Bois infographic on Black landholding in the South
Labor	17	Dec. 28, 1863, letter from Edward S. Philbrick to Alpheus Hardy
Labor	18-19	Aug. 28, 1865, labor contract of Truss B. Hall and Robert McKenzie
Labor	20-21	1867, labor contract of Cooper Hughs, Charles Roberts, and Isham G. Bailey
Labor	22-23	November 1867, “The Labor Question” article in the <i>Freedmen’s Record</i>
Labor	24	1876, article by James C. Waters in the <i>Christian Recorder</i>
Labor	25-26	September 1893, “Never Allowed to Be Dear” article in the <i>Chicago Times</i>
Suffrage	27	July 1865, “The Perils and Duties of the Hour” article by Calvin Fairbank in the <i>Christian Recorder</i>
Suffrage	28	May 1, 1866, transcript of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper speech
Suffrage	29	1871, lithograph print commemorating the 15 th Amendment
Suffrage	30	1876, montage of the “Radical Members of the First Legislature After the War” in South Carolina in 1868
Suffrage	31	c. 1877, montage of the members of the Mississippi state legislature for 1874–1875
Suffrage	32-33	March 24, 1894, article in the <i>Woman’s Era</i>
Safety/Protections	34	Oct. 6, 1865, letter from N. B. Lucas to assistant commissioner of the Freedmen’s Bureau
Safety/Protections	35	February 1867, letter from “Black injions” threatening John Abraham and William Perry
Safety/Protections	36	April 20, 1871, Third Enforcement Act (Ku Klux Klan Act)
Safety/Protections	37-38	April 5, 1873, letter from William Ward to Jacob Johnson
Safety/Protections	39	Jan. 26, 1874, petition to Congress from Black Georgia residents and politicians
Safety/Protections	40-41	Nov. 1, 1883, “Civil Rights” article by John Patterson Green in the <i>Christian Recorder</i>
Confederate Coalition	42	April 1866, letter from George W. Corliss to Freedmen’s Bureau assistant commissioner
Confederate Coalition	43	Feb. 5–7, 1867, letters from Wm. V. Turner and O. D. Kinsman
Confederate Coalition	44	March 2, 1867, Reconstruction Act “to provide for the more efficient Government of the Rebel States”
Confederate Coalition	45	May 18, 1867, “Release of Jefferson Davis” article in the <i>Christian Recorder</i>
Confederate Coalition	46	Oct. 17, 1868, “The Coming Struggle” article in the <i>Christian Recorder</i>
Confederate Coalition	47	Dec. 25, 1868, proclamation from Andrew Johnson

Context: In 1865, the federal government founded the Freedmen's Bureau to help formerly enslaved African Americans and poor white Southerners navigate the economic realities of the post-slavery South. Black people and Bureau agents did not, however, always see eye to eye. One role of the agency was to oversee work contracts between freedpeople and white landowners. In many cases, Bureau agents acted not in the interests of the freedpeople, but of landowners eager for cheap labor.

Broadside Facsimile



Source: [Freedmen and Southern Society Project](#)

Context: The South Carolina Sea Islands were on a faster Reconstruction timeline than much of the rest of the South. By 1861, the Union already occupied the Islands and formerly enslaved people were organizing to establish new lives for themselves and their families. As soon as 1862, the U.S. government supported the travel of Northern (and mostly White) missionaries, businessmen, and teachers to travel to the Sea Islands. In this letter, Edward Philbrick, a businessman from Boston, reports on the reaction of freedpeople to learning that land seized from Confederate plantation owners would be put up for auction by the U.S. government rather than awarded to the freedpeople who had toiled for decades on it without compensation. Philbrick himself purchased 8,000 acres of this land for less than a dollar an acre, becoming the Islands' largest landowner.

Letter Transcript

From Edward S. Philbrick to Albert G. Browne, March 25, 1864

Boston March 25th 1864

Dear Sir

I was at the Church on St. Helena Island S. C. on Sunday Feb. 14th '64 when the news was published that the instructions concerning the pre emption of public lands issued at Washington Dec 30th 1863, authorizing pre emption of the lands in the Sea Islands, were suspended by more recent orders.

Rev. Mansfield French 1 was there and spoke on the subject for some time. I heard him use the following language on this occasion — sympathizing with the disappointment of the negroes in not being allowed to take possession of the land — viz. “If the time comes when you have to give up what God has just given you, let it cost the Government a struggle to turn you off! Cling to your land! Hang on! Dont give it up till you are driven off! Go on planting & sowing your patches. If you are finally driven off I shall weep with you. God is on your side. Changes may come but God can change it back”.

1 Rev. French was a hospital chaplain of volunteers from New York.

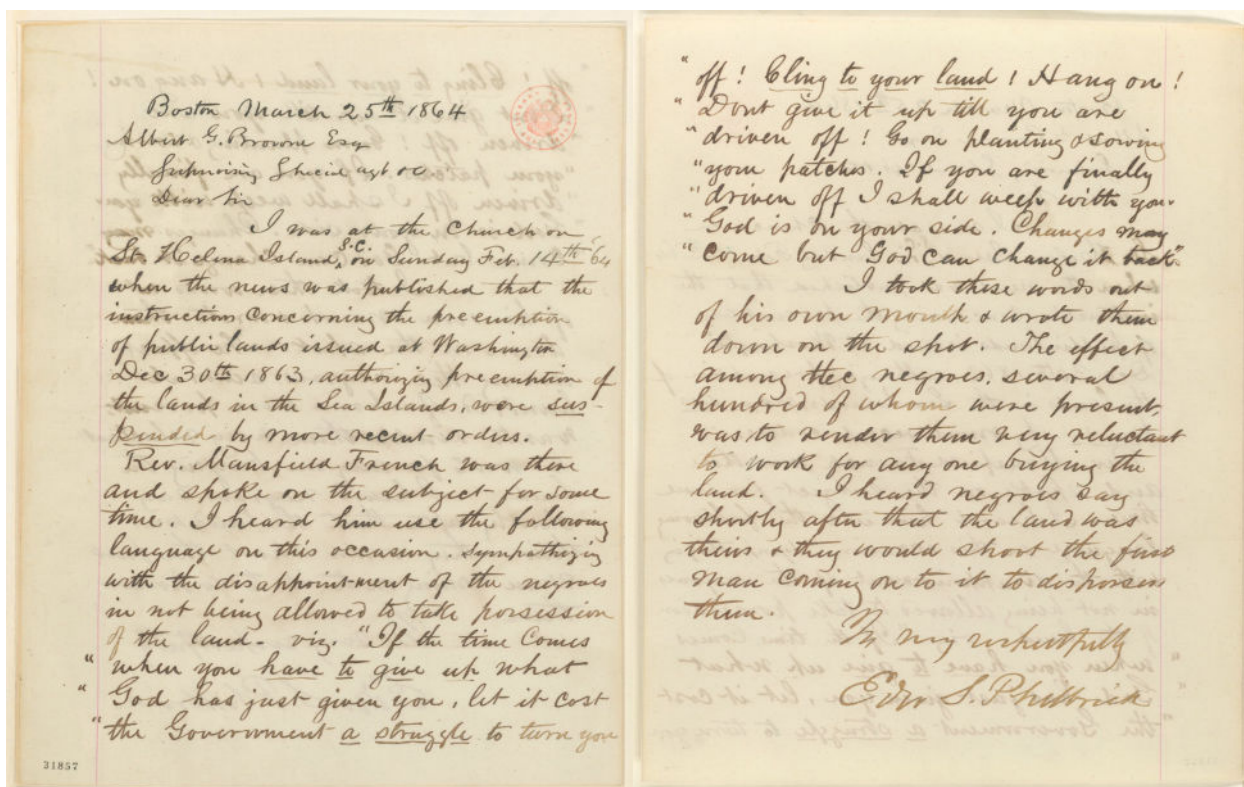
I took these words out of his own mouth & wrote them down on the spot. The effect among the negroes, several hundred of whom were present, was to render them very reluctant to work for any one buying the land. I heard negroes say shortly after that the land was theirs & they would shoot the first man coming onto it to dispossess them.

Yrs very respectfully

Edw S. Philbrick

Source: [Library of Congress](#)

Letter Facsimile (excerpt)

Source: [Library of Congress](#)

Context: In 1862, General Rufus Saxton was appointed military governor of the Union-occupied Sea Islands. This June 1864 letter to white businessman Edward Philbrick reflects their ongoing private conversation and public disagreement about land policy in the Sea Islands. The U.S. government had seized land from Confederate enslavers. In 1862 and 1863, Philbrick bought up 8,000 acres of that land, hoping to continue the cultivation of cotton — but with free, rather than enslaved, Black labor. Saxton believed formerly enslaved people should have a pathway to owning much of the land, and worried that not enough acres were being set aside by the U.S. government for freedpeople.

Letter Transcript (excerpts)

... The immediate possession of the land without purchase is the indefeasible right of the negro, and I am less able to perceive the pertinence of allowing the withholding of it from him a fraud and wrong. Neither do I believe that a “purely commercial basis” is the proper starting point of an enterprise designed, even ultimately, for the benefit and elevation of the negro. But I do not propose to discuss that scheme here and now, but only to notice the specification of particulars, on why you think my letter has done you injustice.

... I must dissent most emphatically from your views of what justice and his [the freedman’s] best interests demand from us. Your policy being accepted as the general policy for the administration of the lands, the field of speculation will be open to all indiscriminately. What protection do you propose for the negro against white men of another character and unhonorable purposes?

What chance has he to get land out of the clutches of the human vulture, who care for him only as they can gorge themselves upon his flesh? If you had seen the hungry swarms gathered here at the land sales in February, I think your views concerning the exclusion of whites would be somewhat modified. The white man has made the negro what he is. The experience at [Port Royal] and elsewhere is far from demonstrating that white men indiscriminately are waiting to do him justice, and may be safely permitted to govern his affairs. What you call “special privileges to the negroes to the exclusion of whites,” seems to me to be vital to the safety and hope of advancement of the negro, — the plainest justice and the wisest policy.

Source: [Archives at Yale University](#)

Letter Facsimile (excerpts)

have since announced them, you might have failed to obtain so large an amount of land, & particularly the Buffin's Point & Cedar Grove plantations. I did not affirm that the opinions concerning your objects was correct, but disclaiming all personal knowledge of the matter, stated it as the ^{most} general belief, without vouching for or intending to affirm its truth. While regretting that your plans were so widely misunderstood, I have entire confidence in your personal integrity, & freely express my opinion that you said or did nothing intentionally to mislead the hopes of the friends of the negro. My view of the tendency & inevitable effect of your plan, as stated in my letter to the Tribune, are unchanged, & are confirmed more or less by your explanation in the Independent, & especially in your letter to me.

The immediate possession of the land without purchase is the indefeasible right of the negro, & I am less able to perceive the pertinence of calling that act of justice "fraud" than I am the propriety of calling the withholding of it from him a fraud & wrong. Neither do I believe that a "parcely commercial basis" is the proper starting point of an enterprise designed, even ultimately, for the benefit & elevation of the negro. But I do not propose to discuss that scheme here & now, but only to notice the specification of particulars, in which I think my letter has done you injustice.

"Taking them in their order" — Grammatically the words, "for a portion of the time," might qualify the preceding clause concerning rents. The following one, standing between & separated from both by a comma. An interrogative reformer of them to house, would better have been omitted. The point & aim of my criticism was, that you had reckoned those steps which cost you nothing, & are unfit for human dwellings, as an element of value, & a comfortable addition to the money wages. In your letter published in the Appendix to Prof. Child's Report, the rent of those hovels is set down at the equivalent of \$20.

It would be its inevitable result, under your administration & control. Even then you might find that you had worse a spirit you could not govern, — that the natural tendency would be stronger than your will. The plan sadly superficially many besides myself, proposed, as it was, by an association of capitalists, who had obtained possession of 1/10 or 1/12 of the entire surface of the P. R. islands for less than 4% of the minimum price of the public lands. It gives me pleasure to say that I have now no doubt that you intend justice to the negro, & it is not the lands you have obtained for what you believe to be his best interests. I must dissent most emphatically from your views of what justice & his best interests demand from us. Your policy being accepted as the general policy for the administration of the lands, the field of speculation will be open to all indiscriminately. What protection do you propose for the negro against white men of another character & less honorable purposes? What chance has he to get land out of the clutches of the human traffickers, who care for him only as they can gorge themselves upon his flesh? If you had seen the hungry swarms gathered here at the land sales in February, I think your views concerning the exclusion of whites would be somewhat modified. The white man has made the negro what he is. The experience at P. R., is far from demonstrating that white men indiscriminately are waiting to do him justice, & may be safely permitted to govern his affairs. What you call "special privileges to the negroes to the exclusion of whites," seems to me to be the vital to the safety & hope of advancement of the negro, — the plainest justice & the wisest policy.

You will not mistake my frank criticism of your policy as implying any personal disrespect. The misunderstanding of your purposes was unavoidable & involuntary, & in the circumstances perhaps unavoidable. The criticisms in the Tribune, excepting whatever may seem to suggest a question of the integrity of your motives, — & what may admit that suggestion is hypothetical & conditional — is just to my convictions than it should be without responsibility, or I shall

Source: [Archives at Yale University](https://archives.yale.edu)

Context: At the end of 1864, the Union Army, led by General William Sherman, arrived at the Port of Savannah along with tens of thousands of refugees seeking the protection of the U.S. government as they fled bondage. Sherman soon met with a group of Black religious leaders. A transcript of the meeting was published in the newspaper the next day. The group, almost all of whom had been enslaved (some as recently as just weeks before), elected a 67-year-old Baptist minister, Garrison Frazier, to represent them during the meeting.

Minutes Transcript (excerpts)

MINUTES OF AN INTERVIEW BETWEEN THE COLORED MINISTERS AND CHURCH OFFICERS AT SAVANNAH WITH THE SECRETARY OF WAR AND MAJOR-GEN. SHERMAN.

HEADQUARTERS OF MAJ.-GEN. SHERMAN,

CITY OF SAVANNAH, GA., Jan., 12, 1865–8 P.M.

Garrison Frazier being chosen by the persons present to express their common sentiments upon the matters of inquiry, makes answers to inquiries as follows:

. . . Third: State in what manner you think you can take care of yourselves, and how can you best assist the Government in maintaining your freedom.

Answer: The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor — that is, by the labor of the women and children and old men; and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare. And to assist the Government, the young men should enlist in the service of the Government, and serve in such manner as they may be wanted. (The Rebels told us that they piled them up and made batteries of them, and sold them to Cuba; but we don't believe that.) We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own.

Fourth: State in what manner you would rather live — whether scattered among the whites or in colonies by yourselves.

Answer: I would prefer to live by ourselves, for there is a prejudice against us in the South that will take years to get over; but I do not know that I can answer for my brethren. [Mr. Lynch says he thinks they should not be separated, but live together. All the other persons present, being questioned one by one, answer that they agree with Brother Frazier.]

Fifth: Do you think that there is intelligence enough among the slaves of the South to maintain themselves under the Government of the United States and the equal protection of its laws, and maintain good and peaceable relations among yourselves and with your neighbors?

Answer: I think there is sufficient intelligence among us to do so.

Source: [*Freedmen and Southern Society Project*](#)

Context: Thaddeus Stevens was a member of the House of Representatives from Pennsylvania. He led the “radical” arm of the Republican Party, which sought to use the power of the federal government to support freedpeople’s efforts to build economic and political power following the war. In this speech from September 1865, Stevens outlines his proposal for land: seize plantations from the wealthiest 10 percent of white Southerners and divide them “into convenient farms” for formerly enslaved people.

Speech Transcript (excerpts)

. . . But we propose to confiscate all the estate of every rebel belligerent whose estate was worth \$10,000, or whose land exceeded two hundred acres in quantity. Policy if not justice would require that the poor, the ignorant, and the coerced should be forgiven. They followed the example and teachings of their wealthy and intelligent neighbors. The rebellion would never have originated with them, fortunately those who would thus escape, form a large majority of the people, though possessing but a small portion of the wealth. The proportion of those exempt compared with the punished would be I believe about nine-tenths.

There are about six millions of freedmen in the South. The number of acres of land is 465,000,000. Of this, those who own above two hundred acres each number about 70,000 persons, holding, in the aggregate, (together with the States,) about 394,000,000 acres, leaving for all the others below 200 each about 71,000,000 acres. By thus forfeiting the estates of the leading rebels, the government would have 394,000,000 of acres, beside their town property, and yet nine-tenths of the people would remain untouched. Divide this land into convenient farms. Give, if you please, forty acres to each adult male freedmen. Suppose there are one million of them. That would require 40,000,000 of acres, which, deducted from 394,000,000, leaves 354,000,000 of acres for sale. Divide it into suitable farms, and sell it to the highest bidders. I think it, including town property, would average at least \$10 per acre. That would produce \$3,540,000,000 — three billions five hundred and forty millions of dollars.

. . . The whole fabric of Southern society must be changed, and never can it be done if this opportunity is lost. Without this, this government can never be, as it never has been, a true republic. Heretofore, it had more the features of aristocracy than of democracy. The Southern States have been despotisms, not governments of the people. It is impossible that any practical equality of rights can exist where a few thousand men monopolize the whole landed property. The larger the number of small proprietors the more safe and stable the government. As the landed interest must govern, the more it is subdivided and held by independent owners, the better.

Source: [New York Times Archives](#)

Context: In order to be eligible to get back land they owned prior to the war (during which time it was seized or abandoned), Confederates had to swear loyalty to the United States. On June 5, 1865, James Hicks took the following oath: “I, James Hicks, of the county of Elizabeth City, State of Virginia, do solemnly swear or affirm in presence of Almighty God, that I will henceforth faithfully support, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States...and that I will... faithfully support all laws and proclamation which have been made during the existing rebellion, with reference to the emancipation of slaves.” Less than a year later, Hicks was awarded this land certificate by the county clerk.

Land Certificate Transcript

Virginia to wit:

This is to certify that the lot of land in Hampton Elizh-City Co: bounded by King Street, Church St & Sinclair is charged to James Hix and his heirs forever upon the Commissioners books of this County. Also that the lot on the creek in the same place bounded by King, Armistead, Sempkins & the creek is charged to said James Hicks & his heirs forever, upon the Commissioners book's of this county. Given under my hand this 12th day of February 1866.

Wm. L. Howard Clerk of

Elizabeth City Co: VA

Source: [National Archives](#)

Land Certificate Facsimile

Virginia to wit:

This is to certify that the lot of land in Hampton Elizabeth City Co: bounded by King Street, Church Lot & Sinclair is charged to James Hicks and his heirs forever upon the Commissioners books of this County. Also that the lot on the Creek in the same place bounded by King, Armistead, Simpkins & the creek is charged to said James Hicks & his heirs forever, upon the Commissioners books of this County. Given under my hand this 12th day of February 1866.

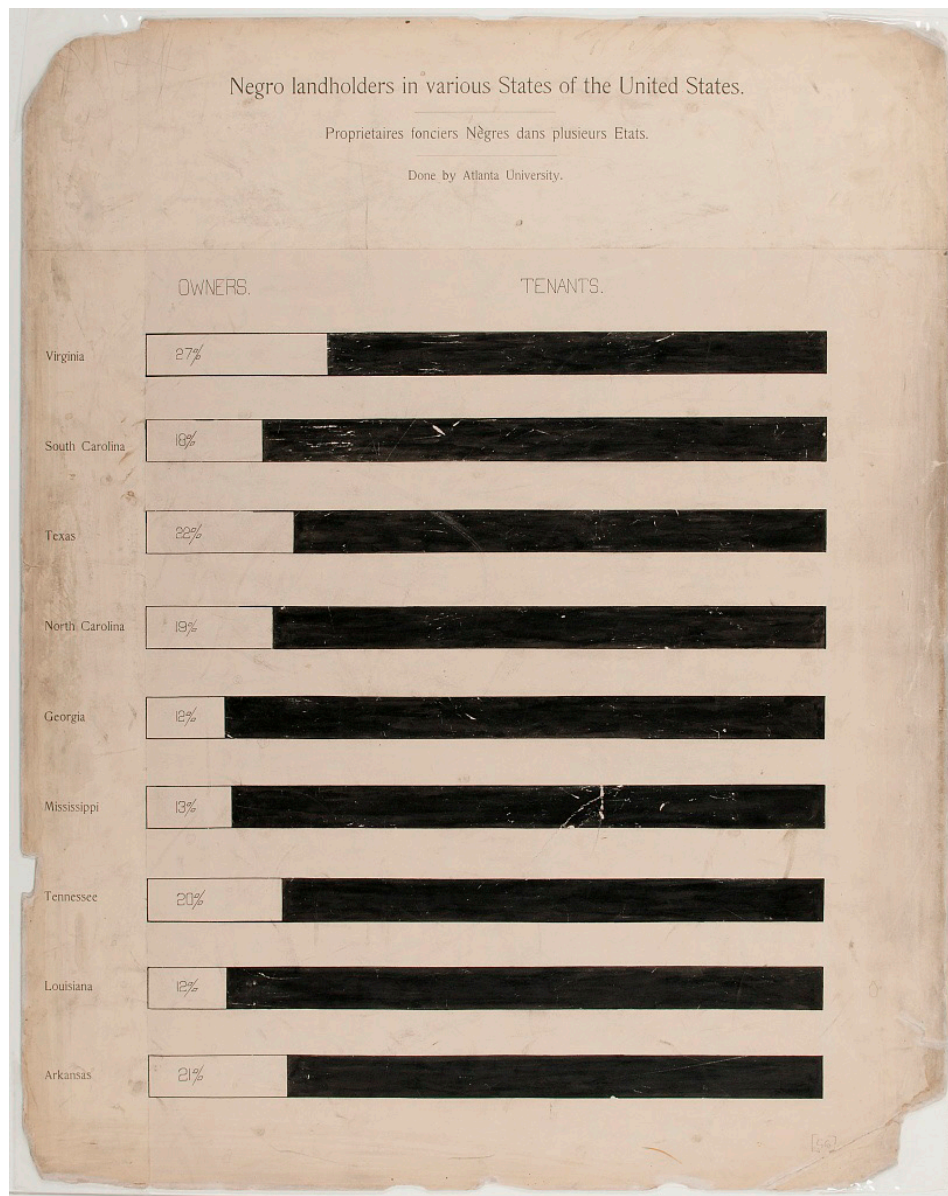
Wm. S. Howard Clerk of
Elizabeth City Co. Va



Source: [National Archives](#)

Context: In 1900, a World's Fair was held in Paris. Forty countries participated in the fair, including the United States. One section of the United States' exhibit focused on African Americans. W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the exhibit's curators explained: "In this exhibit there are, of course, the usual paraphernalia for catching the eye — photographs, models, industrial work, and pictures. But it does not stop here; beneath all this is a carefully thought-out plan, according to which the exhibitors have tried to show: (a) The history of the American Negro. (b) His present condition. (c) His education. (d) His literature." This infographic was one of the items Du Bois included in the Paris exhibit hall.

Infographic Facsimile



Source: [Library of Congress](#)

Context: The South Carolina Sea Islands were one of few places in the South occupied by Union troops for most of the Civil War. By 1863, thousands of formerly enslaved residents were exploring the promise of working for themselves and nurturing land to call their own. At the same time, mostly white Northern teachers, missionaries, and businessmen traveled South to get involved in this flourishing community. Boston businessman Edward Philbrick bought 11 plantations, becoming the largest landowner of the Islands with hundreds of Black laborers as tenant farmers. In this letter, Philbrick boasts about his “proper management” of freedpeople and the wealth produced through raising cotton.

Letter Transcript

BEAUFORT, S. C, Dec. 28, 1863.

ALPHEUS HARDY, Treasurer:

DEAR SIR, — Enclosed please find my draft for one hundred dollars, for the relief of the families of Freedmen, in response to your circular. Please state to your committee and to any other gentlemen interested in the question of free labor, that I have disbursed the sum of \$20,000 during the past nine months among the Freedmen here, in the shape of wages, well earned, besides which they have now on hand ample provision to feed their families for twelve months to come, the fruit of their own toil.

I employ about 500 laborers — women and children, mostly, having a population of 920 on my lands. They have raised for me 73,000 pounds of clean Sea Island cotton this year, worth 50d. sterling in Liverpool, besides their own provision crops, above referred to. This has been done in hearing of Gen. Gilmore’s big guns on Morris Island, surrounded by camps, with no civil law, and without the help of the able-bodied men, who were all pressed into the military service, leaving the plantations with none but old men, women and children. I have no paupers, all the old and infirm being fed and clothed by their friends and children.

I mention these things to show how easy it is to render the negroes a self-supporting and wealth-producing class with proper management; and I, at the same time, fully appreciate the duty imposed upon us as a nation, to extend the area of charity where the unsettled state of the country renders industry impossible until time is given to re-organize and force to protect it. We are more fortunately situated than the people of the Mississippi Valley, and have got the start of them.

Respectfully yours,

E. S. PHILBRICK.

Source: [Civil War Notebook](#)

Context: The abolition of slavery did not automatically yield fair or safe working conditions for African Americans in the South. In 1865, the federal government founded the Freedmen's Bureau to aid formerly enslaved African Americans and poor white Southerners. One role of the agency was to oversee work contracts between freedpeople and white landowners. In many cases, Bureau agents failed or refused to negotiate labor contracts that included the security and wages freedpeople needed to build their lives after slavery. This contract from Aug. 28, 1865, stated that freedman Truss B. Hall would be paid very little for his labor and "obey all lawful commands as he use to when a slave."

Labor Contract Transcript

Office of Bureau of Refugees Freedmen &c.

For Robeson Co

Lamberton Aug 28th 1865

This instrument witnesseth that Robert McKenzie of Robeson Co agrees to pay Truss B. Hall \$4.00 per month until 25th day of December next for an in situation of the said Truss B. Hall rendering the Robert McKenzie true and faithful service and obey all lawful commands as he use to when a slave.

Robert McKenzie

Truss B. Hall

x his mark

Witnessed and approved

James Sinclair, agent of Bureau

Source: [DocsTeach](#)

Labor Contract Facsimile

Office of Bureau of Refugees Freedmen & C.
for Robeson Co
Lumberton Aug 28th 1865

This instrument witnesseth that Robert Mc Kenzie
of Robeson Co agrees to pay Truss B. Hall \$4.00 per month
until 25th day of December next for and in consideration
of the said Truss B. Hall rendering the Robert Mc Ken-
zie true and faithful service and obey all
lawful commands as he use to when a slave,
Robert Mc Kenzie
Witnessed and approved Truss B. Hall
James Duclain agent of Bureau. ^{his} ~~mark~~

Source: [DocsTeach](#)

Context: For centuries, the U.S. economy rested on the labor of enslaved people to produce cotton, rice, and other cash crops. With the legal abolition of slavery in 1865, many white landowners turned to sharecropping to continue profiting from Black labor. They leased land to formerly enslaved people in exchange for the cultivation of cash crops. Thousands of Southern Black families had few other options for survival and these arrangements left many of them vulnerable to exploitative markets, landlords, and politicians. Cooper Hughs and Charles Roberts, two freedmen in Marshall County, Mississippi, entered into this labor contract with landowner Isham G. Bailey in 1867. Among other items, the contract ordered Hughs to turn over more than half of the cotton and corn he cultivated to Bailey and tend to Bailey's livestock for no additional pay.

Labor Contract Transcript (excerpt)

. . . the said Cooper Hughs Freedman with his wife and one other woman, and the said Charles Roberts with his wife Hannah and one boy are to work on said farm and to cultivate forty acres in corn and twenty acres in cotton, to assist in putting the fences on said farm in good order and to keep them so and to do all other work on said farm necessary to be done to keep the same in good order and to raise a good crop and to be under the control and directions of said IG Bailey and to receive for their said services one half of the cotton and one third of the corn and fodder raised by them on said farm in said year 1867 and the said Charles Roberts Freedman with his wife Hannah further agrees and binds themselves to do the washing and Ironing, and all other necessary house work for said IG Bailey and his family during said year 1867 and to receive for their said services fifty dollars in money at the expiration of said year 1867 and the said Cooper Hughs Freedman further agrees and binds himself to give the necessary attention of feeding the Stock of cattle and milking the cows twice daily belong to said IG Bailey, and do the churning when ever necessary during the said year . . .

Source: [Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History](#)

Context: The New England Freedmen's Aid Society was founded in 1862 to support "the industrial, social, intellectual, moral, and religious improvement" of newly emancipated people. It published the *Freedmen's Record*, a monthly journal that promoted its mission and reported on the living conditions of African Americans in the South. The front page of the November 1867 issue featured a discussion on "The Labor Question." The author addressed claims that freedpeople were incapable of achieving economic success and independence, questioning the accuracy of these statements and the motives behind them. He cited the newfound prosperity of Black families in South Carolina, many of whom lived in slavery just a few years earlier and now worked for themselves.

Article Transcript (excerpt)

THE LABOR QUESTION .

SOME true friends of the negro think his desire and capacity for education a settled point, but doubt whether he is an industrial success, and they bring instances to prove their arguments. But, generally, these statements come from those who have tried to make the negro work according to their own plans, and for their own benefit. This may have been done with the best intentions in the world; but very often with very little skill or wisdom. Is it unnatural either, that the freedman should be a little jealous of working under control, and should prefer the consciousness of the freedom of his will every hour, every minute, at the risk of a doubtful subsistence even, to making a pledge for the future? We are told too, that the freedmen leave the plantations, and throng the cities, living by the lighter and more uncertain trades, rather than by agriculture. Should we not expect this? Was it not equally true of the Irish? The undeveloped man loves excitement and bustle, loves social gossip, and does not look far forward into the future. We should expect that the freedman must loathe the very thought of the cotton and rice plantations, and would think the pavements of the cities, which the Lincoln soldiers trod, far lovelier than the most brilliant verdure of the country. But, if the negroes have not worked very well for white men, they have done a pretty good business for themselves.

Imagine Wendell Phillips, or Samuel J. May, whom we used to consider as rather sanguine young men, saying, twenty years ago, "In four years from the date of emancipation, you shall find, within the limits of the district of Beaufort, S.C., 1,980 heads of families, who own and cultivate their own land, comprising 19,040 acres, for which the U.S. Government has received \$31,000; all this money will have been accumulated in their saving's bank at Beaufort." Is not that clever work for four years, in a country desolated by war, by a people with nothing to start with. . . .

Source: [Accessible Archives](#)

Article Facsimile (excerpt)

THE
FREEDMEN'S RECORD.

VOL. III. BOSTON, NOVEMBER, 1867. No. 11.

"THE FREEDMEN'S RECORD" is the organ of the NEW-ENGLAND BRANCH OF THE FREEDMEN'S UNION COMMISSION, lately NEW-ENGLAND FREEDMEN'S AID SOCIETY, and is published monthly by the Executive Committee.

All communications for or relating to the "RECORD" should be addressed to R. F. WALLCUT, 8 Studio Building, Boston; and must be accompanied by the name and address of the writer.

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Source: [Accessible Archives](#)

Context: In the decade following the Civil War, many white landowners across the South settled into the sharecropping system. Forced cotton cultivation continued to enforce Black poverty. Philadelphia's *Christian Recorder*, the official newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, addressed this issue in an early 1876 article. Here, James C. Waters of Natchez, Mississippi, discussed which crops African Americans should grow and which they should avoid, if possible. Dismayed at the amount of cotton freedpeople were still compelled to produce at their own expense, Waters urged land-owning African Americans to embrace their autonomy, seize opportunities to grow food they could eat, "and thus live."

Article Transcript (excerpt)

. . . The amount of cotton raised this year is enormous, and the roads are crowded with wagons constantly hauling it to the river where the champion steamer, Robert E. Lee, takes on five thousand bales every week, together with a score of others of even greater capacity. In Query: Will the people learn that the money can be made raising cotton at an expense of eleven cents and selling it for eight cents per pound. One year and a half ago cotton was worth 10 and three- eighths cents per point, and cost them no more to produce it than it does now; when its worth is less than half. It is the hardest work that ever a man undertook to try to convince the people (the colored people) that they ought to raise corn and other breadstuffs, and thus live. How can anything but poverty be the lot of the colored people when they pay heavy cases, buy pork, at 30 dollars per barrel, and pay 1,50 and 2 dollars a bushel for corn. Injustice to the planters (colored I mean) the owners of the land compel them to pay their leases in cotton, thus compelling them to make whether desirable or not a certain amount of cotton. There is cotton enough in this country and Liverpool to support the demands of the world, if not another bale is made for two years. When will our people who own their own land learn sense? . . .

Source: [Accessible Archives](#)

Context: “Never Allowed to Be Dear” appeared in the *Chicago Times* in September 1893, nearly 30 years after the legal abolition of slavery in the United States. The article discussed the afterlife of slavery in the South, featuring critiques from several labor and civil rights leaders. Journalist and anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells noted that Black people were, at once, “never allowed to get out of debt” and “the greatest wealth-producing factor of the South.” Labor activist George E. McNeill urged white laborers to unite with African Americans along class lines against wealthy white supremacists, so that working-class people across the country could achieve upward mobility. Writer and orator Frederick Douglass compared “slavery days” to the system of exploitation that followed.

Article Transcript

Never Allowed to Be Dear.

Miss Ida Wells, a colored teacher, who, because she was spirited enough to resent prejudice and oppression, was obliged to leave her work in the south, said the black people in the south were never allowed to get out of debt. Their former masters traded on their credulity and ignorance. The southern white does not want the black man to leave, for the black man is the greatest wealth-producing factor of the south, and no one knows it better than the white man.

George E. McNeill, in a five-minute speech, declared that the labor movement knew no color. The churches might close their doors, associations might ostracise, but the labor unions of the world were always open to the black man. The American Federation of Labor does not admit the word “white” into its constitution. The civilization of the white laborer cannot be lifted higher unless it lifts the black race with it, and ought not be lifted higher unless it did lift the black race, the yellow race, and every other race with it. Mrs. M. G. Jones of Omaha and Lloyd G. Wheeler of Chicago also made five-minute speeches. Chairman Douglass was called away by press of business, but before going said that the laborer of the south was not only a mortgaged laborer, but he was a victim of the mortgage system, and also a victim of the system of being paid for his labor by means of script from the hand of the man who employed him on the store that he was compelled to patronize. He said that in slavery days the master said: “You shall be a slave or die.” Today the employer in the south says: “You shall work for me at the wages I propose or you shall starve.” This, Mr. Douglass said, was the result of the system by which the laborer was always in debt to his master and could never better his position by changing his occupation.

Source: [Black Women's Suffrage Digital Collection](#)

Article Facsimile

Never Allowed to Be Dear.

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Source: [Black Women's Suffrage Digital Collection](#)

Context: This newspaper column was written by Calvin Fairbank, a New York abolitionist who spent almost two decades in prison in Kentucky for his work aiding in the escape of enslaved people from captivity. Writing in July 1865 for Philadelphia's *Christian Recorder*, the official newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, his concern turned to voting rights. He warns that the failure to enfranchise Black men will enable rebels to "re-organize and reconstruct the southern States upon the old basis."

Article Transcript (excerpt)

THE PERILS AND DUTIES OF THE HOUR

. . . We shall be no better off than before this war, nor so well, if rebels with amnesties in their pockets, evidences of their former treason, are allowed to re-organize and reconstruct the southern States upon the old basis, in opposition to the rights of the best friends of the Union, and the only loyal people of the South.

Under the present programme, the rebel who left his large plantation, and, during four years, murdered our citizens with all his might, will return to them with his amnesty, occupy them, and override the only friends of the soldier and the Union, who, after saving the country's fortunes when they must have been lost without his aid, must go landless, and without protection against any unfriendly legislation which these rebels may see fit to enact.

That giving the right of suffrage to the black man is the only sure way of saving the country, is quite clear, take it from any point of view we may.

1. It is inconsistent with republicanism to make any distinction in civil privileges among those born on her soil, on account of race or color. Hence, it is positively unjust to deprive the colored man of any republican rights, even had he done no service for his country.

2. Having rescued and saved the country, when she must without him have been overwhelmed by her enemies, it is unjust, and most ridiculous and shameful to push him aside and deny him the rights of a citizen, which in times past were not denied him, save in the State of South Carolina.

3. If the United States will but study her own interests, laying aside the question of justice, to this people, they would insure to the black man the right of suffrage. . . Now when they were slaves they were counted as three-fifths of the representative basis, and 4,000,000 men counted 2,400,000 votes. Now, counting every person a unit, as provided by the Constitution of the United States, adds 1,600,000 to the representative basis of the South, and gives them nearly twelve members of Congress, and we must lose them. Give the right of suffrage to the freed people of the South, and all is safe. What if they are not educated? They are as intelligent as the whites. They are loyal, and the whites are not. Do not give them the right of suffrage, and what will be the result? . . .

Source: [Accessible Archives](#)

Context: On May 1, 1866, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a poet, novelist, abolitionist, and political activist, addressed the 11th National Women's Rights Convention in New York. Many white women suffragists in attendance threatened to oppose the proposed 15th Amendment, which stated that the "right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude," but left intact the ability of the government to deny voting rights on the basis of gender. Harper used her opportunity at the podium to demand the Convention consider the position of Black women in their deliberations about suffrage, sharing both her own experience and that of Harriet Tubman, whom she refers to as "Moses."

Speech Transcript (excerpts)

... We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul. You tried that in the case of the negro. You pressed him down for two centuries; and in so doing you crippled the moral strength and paralyzed the spiritual energies of the white men of the country.

... I do not believe that giving the woman the ballot is immediately going to cure all the ills of life. I do not believe that white women are dew-drops just exhaled from the skies. I think that like men they may be divided into three classes, the good, the bad, and the indifferent. The good would vote according to their convictions and principles; the bad, as dictated by preju[d]ice or malice; and the indifferent will vote on the strongest side of the question, with the winning party.

You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs. I, as a colored woman, have had in this country an education which has made me feel as if I were in the situation of Ishmael, my hand against every man, and every man's hand against me. Let me go to-morrow morning and take my seat in one of your street cars — I do not know that they will do it in New York, but they will in Philadelphia — and the conductor will put up his hand and stop the car rather than let me ride.

... In advocating the cause of the colored man, since the Dred Scott decision, I have sometimes said I thought the nation had touched bottom. But let me tell you there is a depth of infamy lower than that. It is when the nation, standing upon the threshold of a great peril, reached out its hands to a feebler race, and asked that race to help it, and when the peril was over, said, You are good enough for soldiers, but not good enough for citizens.

We have a woman in our country who has received the name of "Moses," not by lying about it, but by acting out (applause) — a woman who has gone down into the Egypt of slavery and brought out hundreds of our people into liberty. The last time I saw that woman, her hands were swollen. That woman who had led one of Montgomery's most successful expeditions, who was brave enough and secretive enough to act as a scout for the American army, had her hands all swollen from a conflict with a brutal conductor, who undertook to eject her from her place. That woman, whose courage and bravery won a recognition from our army and from every black man in the land, is excluded from every thoroughfare of travel. Talk of giving women the ballot-box? Go on. It is a normal school, and the white women of this country need it. While there exists this brutal element in society which tramples upon the feeble and treads down the weak, I tell you that if there is any class of people who need to be lifted out of their airy nothings and selfishness, it is the white women of America.

Source: [Archives of Women's Political Communication](#)

Context: This print was created in about 1871 to honor and commemorate the formal adoption of the 15th Amendment on March 30, 1870. The central image depicts a parade that took place in Baltimore to celebrate the passage of the new voting amendment.

Print Facsimile



Source: [Library of Congress](#)

Context: This montage is titled, “Radical Members of the First Legislature After the War.” It includes photos of many of the Black members of the South Carolina legislature, which was the first legislature in the country — in 1868 — to have a Black majority. The term “radical” refers to the Radical Republicans, a group of politicians within the Republican Party who sought to use the power of the federal government to protect and expand the freedom of formerly enslaved people during Reconstruction. This photomontage was printed in 1876 and distributed by opponents of the Radical Republican platform.

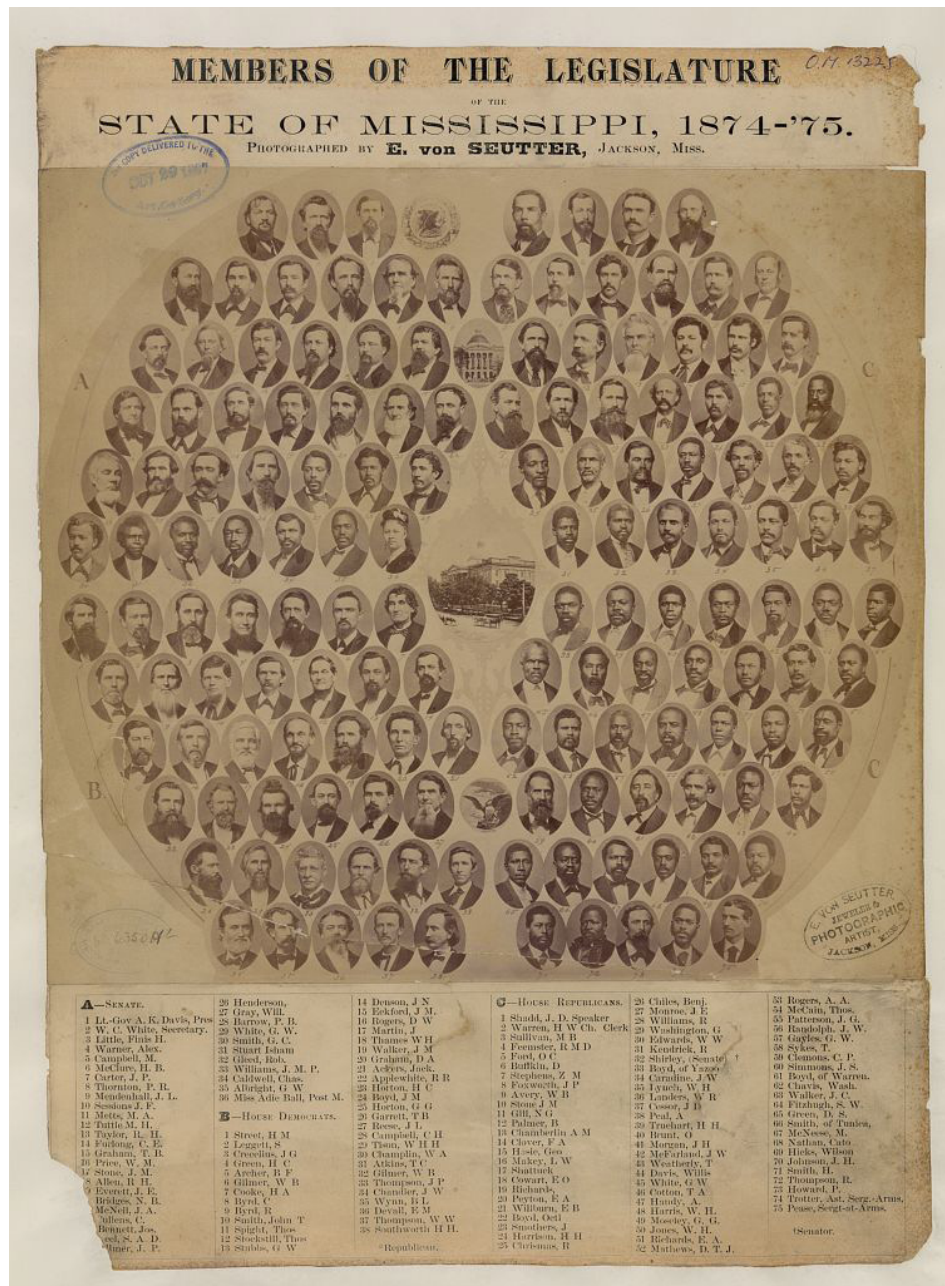
Montage Facsimile



Source: [Library of Congress](#)

Context: This montage depicts the members of the Mississippi state legislature for 1874–1875. The photos are arranged into three sections: A (Senate), B (House Democrats), and C (House Republicans).

Montage Facsimile



- | | | | | |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| <p>A—SENATE.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Lt.-Gov. A. K. Davis, Pres. 2 W. C. White, Secretary. 3 Little, Finl. H. 4 Warner, Alex. 5 Campbell, M. 6 McClure, H. B. 7 Carter, J. P. 8 Thornton, F. R. 9 Manselohall, J. L. 10 Sessions, J. F. 11 Mettes, M. A. 12 Battle, M. H. 13 Taylor, H. H. 14 Parkins, C. E. 15 Graham, T. B. 16 Price, W. M. 17 Stone, J. M. 18 Alton, H. B. 19 Everett, J. E. 20 Bridges, N. B. 21 McNell, J. A. 22 Jellens, C. 23 Bennett, Jos. 24 Sells, S. A. D. 25 Turner, J. P. | <p>B—HOUSE DEMOCRATS.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Street, H. M. 2 Lezard, S. 3 Crocibus, J. G. 4 Green, H. C. 5 Archer, B. F. 6 Gilmer, W. B. 7 Cooke, H. A. 8 Boyd, C. 9 Boyd, R. 10 South, John T. 11 Slight, Thos. 12 Stockstill, Thos. 13 Smith, G. W. | <p>C—HOUSE REPUBLICANS.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 14 Denson, J. N. 15 Eekford, J. M. 16 Rogers, D. W. 17 Martin, J. 18 Thomas, W. H. 19 Walker, J. M. 20 Graham, D. A. 21 Ashby, Jas. C. 22 Appleschite, R. R. 23 Horton, H. C. 24 Boyd, J. M. 25 Horton, G. G. 26 Garrett, T. B. 27 Reese, J. L. 28 Campbell, C. H. 29 Lezard, S. 30 Tison, W. H. H. 31 Champlin, W. A. 32 Atkins, T. C. 33 Gilmer, W. B. 34 Thompson, J. P. 35 Chandler, J. W. 36 Wyatt, H. L. 37 Devall, E. M. 38 Thompson, W. W. 39 Southworth, H. H. 40 *Republican. | <p>C—HOUSE REPUBLICANS.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 41 Chiles, Benj. 42 Monroe, J. E. 43 Williams, R. 44 Warren, H. W. Ch. Clerk. 45 Sullivan, M. B. 46 Fenester, R. M. D. 47 Ford, O. C. 48 Rutkin, D. 49 Stephens, Z. M. 50 Foxworth, J. P. 51 Avery, W. B. 52 Stone, J. M. 53 Gill, S. G. 54 Palmer, B. 55 Chamberlin, A. M. 56 Clover, F. A. 57 Hise, Geo. 58 Slack, J. W. 59 Shattuck. 60 Coyart, E. O. 61 Richards. 62 Peyton, E. A. 63 Cotton, T. A. 64 Handy, A. 65 Harris, W. H. 66 Mossey, G. G. 67 Jones, W. H. 68 Richards, E. A. 69 Matthews, D. T. J. | <p>C—HOUSE REPUBLICANS.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 70 Rogers, A. A. 71 McCain, Thos. 72 Patterson, J. G. 73 Randolph, J. W. 74 Gables, G. W. 75 Sykes, T. 76 Clemons, C. F. 77 Simmons, J. S. 78 Boyd, of Warren. 79 Davis, Wash. 80 Walker, J. C. 81 Fitzhugh, S. W. 82 Green, D. S. 83 Smith, of Union. 84 McNeese, M. 85 Nathan, Cato. 86 Hicks, Wilson. 87 Johnson, J. H. 88 Smith, H. 89 Thompson, R. 90 Howard, P. 91 Trotter, Asst. Secy. Arms. 92 Paine, Secy. Arms. 93 *Senator. |
|---|---|--|--|--|

Source: [Library of Congress](#)

Context: The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was formed in 1890. Like many of its precursors, it was mostly dominated by middle- and upper-class white women who were less concerned with the status of newly freedpeople than they were with winning the vote for white women. This 1894 news item from the *Woman's Era* — the first newspaper published by and for Black women in the United States — quotes the journalist and anti-lynching activist, Ida B. Wells. She shares her thoughts on NAWSA's choice of annual meeting venue and what it means for the participation of Black women in the conference.

Article Transcript

The next annual convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association will be held in Atlanta, Ga. This is a departure and proceedings will be watched with interest. Miss Ida B. Wells speaks of it and of an incident connected with the recent convention of Washington as follows: —

Of course the colored woman suffragist won't be in it at all in that prejudiced town, it's bad enough in Washington, but there they can speak out in meeting and sit in the body of the hall with other delegates. But colored Washington is agog over treatment accorded Mrs. A. J. Cooper last week. She was sent as a committee of one to invite Rev. Anna Shaw to address the Colored Woman's League. This lady was at the Riggs House and Mrs. Cooper went to the elevator to go up to the ladies' room; the elevator boy refused to allow her to enter, stating that orders had been given to permit no colored person to go up in the elevators. Mrs. Cooper sent Rev. Shaw a note explaining the situation and that lady came flying down to see her, expressing her righteous indignation, but that did not change the rules of the house. To a Chicagoan (?) the whole thing is such a ridiculous farce. Mrs. Cooper had, less than a year ago been thrown out of a waiting room in North Carolina, but one doesn't always expect such things under the dome of the Capitol.

Source: [Internet Archive](#)

Article Facsimile

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Source: [Internet Archive](#)

Context: At the end of the Civil War, the federal government established the Freedmen's Bureau to aid formerly enslaved African Americans and poor white Southerners. A Bureau agent wrote this letter to his assistant commissioner on Oct. 6, 1865, from Chattanooga, Tennessee. He reported that in the Sequatchie Valley, a white-majority region, white working-class residents had begun targeting freedpeople, attempting to force them out of the area. He also notes the possibility of extending protection "in some shape" to Black residents, but it is unclear if or how these agents followed through.

Letter Transcript

Chattanooga Tenn. Oct 6th 1865

Capt.— I have the honor to forward to you the following information which I recd. to day from Gen'l: Spears of Pikeville Bledsoe County Tenn. — He states that the poorer class of whites in Sequache Vally are very bitter toward the freedmen and punish them severely — They have ordered all of the Black's to leave the Valley — Their reason for so doing is, because the orriginal owners of the slaves are leasing them lands and the white laboring class is bitterly opposed to it. The men enter the houses of the freedmen and rob them of their money and clothing. The genl states that protection will have to be granted to the freedmen in some shape. He also states that the home-guards there are the worst enemies the freedmen have — He will keep me posted in regard to the matter I think of going up there next week I will report the state of things as soon as I return. Very Respectfully Your Obt Servt

N. B. Lucas

Source: [*Freedmen and Southern Society Project*](#)

Context: In February 1867, two freedmen in Henry County, Kentucky, received this anonymous threat from white supremacists. John Abraham and William Perry had begun working for themselves, drawing hostility for showing their freedom and independence. This group of white supremacists claimed not to interfere with freedpeople who worked for their “former masters,” but “bitterly opposed” Black land ownership and autonomy. They threatened Abraham and Perry with violence and arson unless the two men abandoned their land and moved to the North. Perry forwarded the notice to the Freedmen’s Bureau, and the assistant commissioner, Gen. Sidney Burbank, issued a warning to white residents. Citing the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which affirmed equal protection under the law, he stated that “assaults on the person or property” of Black residents was illegal and would result in arrests and prison confinement enforced by the U.S. army.

Letter Transcript

Notice

to John Abraham and william perry Believeing this to be a white mans Country we are bitterly opposed to negroes settieng up to farming for themselves therefore we have concluded to brake it up we do not wish to interfear with those that are att work for thare former masters but having reliable information that it is hard to tell whitch is the negroe you or your former oner therefore you will have to share the sam fate of the ballance so you had better get rededy to emigrate north of the ohio river prty soon for go you must if we see that you are making any preperation to leave we will give you ample tim to get away but if not we will honor you with our presence
pretty soon and if we have to come we will come with a colts pistole in one hand and a fire brand in the other the young black Smith as he is not a tiller of the soil can stay with his master if he will behave him self. So fare well till we meet again

Black injions

Source: [Freedmen and Southern Society Project](#)

Context: In the early years of Reconstruction, freedpeople organized with the federal government to pass civil rights laws and solidify Black freedom. In response to these strides toward racial justice, the Ku Klux Klan expanded into every Southern state to terrorize African Americans and their allies. By 1870, white supremacist violence and destruction had become so widespread that Congress issued a series of Enforcement Acts to preserve Black people's right to equal protection under the law. The third of these acts, passed in 1871 and excerpted here, granted the federal government power to protect constitutional rights through its military force. Federal courts, including many Black jury members, soon prosecuted hundreds of violent white supremacists and helped dismantle the Klan for a generation. Other white terror organizations rose up in the 1870s, and the Klan would resurge in the 1910s, but this law is still used to defend voting and other rights from "force, intimidation, or threat."

Act Transcript (excerpts)

. . . SEC. 2. That if two or more persons within any State or Territory of the United States shall conspire together to . . . oppose by force the authority of the government of the United States, or by force, intimidation, or threat to prevent, hinder, or delay the execution of any law of the United States, or by force to seize, take, or possess any property of the United States contrary to the authority thereof, or by force, intimidation, or threat to prevent any person from accepting or holding any office or trust or place of confidence under the United States, or from discharging the duties hereof. . . or shall conspire together, or go in disguise upon the public highway or upon the premises of another for the purpose, either directly or indirectly, of depriving any person or any class of persons of the equal protection of the laws, or of equal privileges or immunities under the laws, or for the purpose of preventing or hindering the constituted authorities of any State from giving or securing to all persons within such State the equal protection of the laws, or shall conspire together for the purpose of in any manner impeding, hindering, obstructing, or defeating the due course of justice in any State or Territory, with intent to deny to any citizen of the United States the due and equal protection of the laws, or to injure any person in his person or his property for lawfully enforcing the right of any person or class of persons to the equal protection of the laws, or by force, intimidation, or threat to prevent any citizen of the United States lawfully entitled to vote from giving his support or advocacy in a lawful manner towards or in favor of the election of any lawfully qualified person as an elector of President or Vice-President of the United States, or as a member of the Congress of the United States, or to injure any such citizen in his person or property on account of such support or advocacy, each and every person so offending shall be deemed guilty of a high crime, and, upon conviction thereof in any district or circuit court of the United States . . . having jurisdiction of similar offences, shall be punished by a fine not less than five hundred nor more than five thousand dollars, or by imprisonment, with or without hard labor, as the court may determine, for a period of not less than six months nor more than six years, as the court may determine, or by both such fine and imprisonment as the court shall determine. . . .

SEC. 3. That in all cases where insurrection, domestic violence, unlawful combinations, or conspiracies in any State shall so obstruct or hinder the execution of the laws thereof, and of the United States, as to deprive any portion or class of the people of such State of any of the rights, privileges, or immunities, or protection, named in the Constitution and secured by this act, and the constituted authorities of such State shall either be unable to protect, or shall, from any cause, fail in or refuse protection of the people in such rights, such facts shall be deemed a denial by such State of the equal protection of the laws to which they are entitled under the Constitution of the United States; and in all such cases, . . . it shall be lawful for the President, and it shall be his duty to take such measures. . . as he may deem necessary for the suppression of such insurrection, domestic violence, or combinations. . . .

Source: [United States Senate](#)

Context: Republicans won the 1872 Louisiana governor's race and other local offices by a narrow margin, sparking white supremacist violence throughout the state. White terror groups descended on Colfax the following spring to seize control of the town's parish government. William Ward, a Black politician and militia captain, wrote to a local preacher on April 5, 1873, to ask for help in protecting African Americans in Colfax. When he did not receive a reply, Ward left town to find assistance, as poorly armed Black troops and residents took shelter at the local courthouse. He was still away on April 13, when an armed mob of white supremacists targeted the courthouse and killed dozens of Black troops and residents. The Colfax massacre would become the Reconstruction era's worst single incident of racial violence. Shortly thereafter, in *United States v. Cruikshank*, the Supreme Court encouraged more white terror by ruling that the 14th Amendment, granting equal protection under the law, did not apply to violence inflicted by individual citizens.

Letter Transcript

Colfax, La

April 5 th 1873

Rev. Jacob Johnson

Dear friend as I Reseve your ancer you Will Du Me and all hour colord Pepel all the helpe in the world at this time hour Pepel are in trouble and I ask you in the name of hour Liberty and hour Children Writes Come to hour Sistence as many as will and can and that feels that we are Citisens. I can Command all I Lack is helpe. I have Bin in gage 3 ays and this day I had a Battle did not amount to But Little. One man I think wounded By all a Count he fell But got off and Between know and Monday we will have heavey times and we are.

I am in need of all the helpe we Can get. If it was Grant Parish men we could manage this But I Seen Men today from Win Parish and the Rebels kill Jesey McKinney today and they takeing Charley Harris and Carry him of in the woods today and I am Satisfide they have kill him and Jentilmen We are in need off all the helpe We Can Get I hope the Brothers Will Come to each others a Sistence as the Whites does.

Very truly yours

Capt William Ward

Source: [Records of Rights](#)

Letter Facsimile

Colfax La
April 5th 1873

Dr Rev. Jacob Johnson Dear
friend as I believe your ancestor
will do me and all our kindred
Peper all the helpe in the World at
this time our Peper ^{is} in trouble
and I ask you in the name of
our Liberty and our Children
Writes come to our Sistine as may
as will and can and that feels that
we are citizens I can command
all I lack is helpe I have Bin
in gage 3 days and this day I
had a Battle didnt Renout to
But Little one now I think wounded
By all a Court he fell But got off
and Breteman know and Monday
He will have heavy times and we an

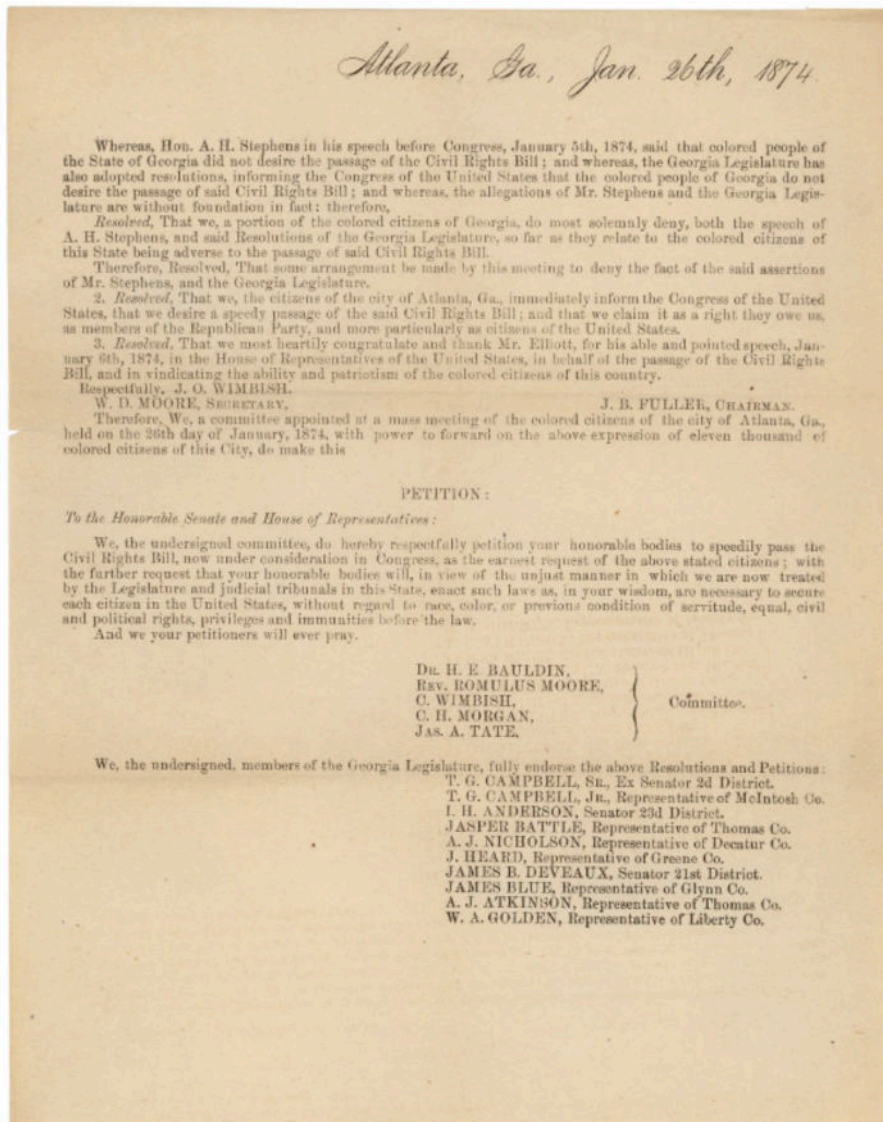
of all the helpe
I was Grant Parish
Manage this Part
I do from Win
Rebels kill my
and they taking
and carry him
to day with I am
and kill him and
we in need off all
and let I hope the
same to each other
in white clove

y truly yours
Wm Ward

Source: [Records of Rights](#)

Context: In January 1874, Congress debated a civil rights bill that would prohibit racial discrimination in access to public facilities, accommodations, and transportation. With the backing of the Georgia legislature, congressman and former vice president of the Confederacy Alexander Stephens attempted to convince Congress that Black people in his state did not want this civil rights bill to pass. On Jan. 26, 1874, a committee of Black Georgia residents and politicians submitted this petition to Congress. They disputed Stephens' claims, encouraging Congress to "speedily pass" the bill. The petition cited South Carolina congressman Robert B. Elliott, who argued against Stephens in the House and praised this civil rights legislation as a "great measure of national justice." Congress moved forward with the bill, passing the Civil Rights Act of 1875. It would be the last federal civil rights law passed until the 1950s.

Petition Facsimile



Source: [United States House of Representatives](#)

Context: The Supreme Court struck down the Civil Rights Act of 1875 in October 1883. Eight of the nine justices rejected the constitutional right to equal protection under the law. Philadelphia's *Christian Recorder*, the official newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, published the responses of two Black lawyers on Nov. 1. In this excerpt, lawyer and Ohio congressman John Patterson Green argued that the Civil Rights Act in question "was never of any practical utility in the South" because it was not enforced. Still, he predicted, the Supreme Court declaring such protections unconstitutional set a dangerous precedent for destroying the legal status and freedoms of African Americans in the United States.

Article Transcript (excerpt)

CIVIL RIGHTS

. . . The Civil Rights Act has been declared unconstitutional and void by the highest legal authority in the land; from the decision there is no appeal, save to God and the people. By this decision the colored people of the United States have lost only little practically, if this is to be the end of it; but when we reflect on the unlimited power possessed by the Supreme Court, for the good or evil of our people, and the evident willingness on the part of the judges to use that power to prejudice and jeopardize our interests in this our native land, it causes a shudder to pervade us, and we intuitively ask, "What next?" The Civil Rights Act was never of any practical utility in the South; for it was never true that a colored man could get any accommodations equal with those given to the whites in that section, no matter how respectable soever he might be or how heavy his purse. On common carriers, in hotels, theaters and places of public resort he was a marked and proscribed man, down to the enunciation of the late decision, although the act stood upon our statute book and had not been declared unconstitutional.

In the North, where popular sentiment sustained it, the colored man has generally been treated differently, and I presume this would have been the case in the absence of all law on the subject; nor do I apprehend that, in those sections where such a law could be enforced, it will make any difference in the treatment of colored people, now that it has been declared unconstitutional. So I say its present practical effect will not greatly injure us; but will this end the matter? "Aye! There's the rub." Does not this action of the Supreme Court establish a precedent for the interfering with an unsettling the entire legal status of the former slave population in this country? Will not the next question be raised under the Thirteenth or Fourteenth amendments? And is it not barely possible that the next dictation will be that they are unconstitutional and void? . . .

Source: [Accessible Archives](#)

Article Facsimile

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Source: [Accessible Archives](#)

Context: Nathan Bedford Forrest was a former Confederate general who, before the Civil War, had profited immensely from slavery and owned two cotton plantations in the Mississippi Delta region. After the Confederacy's defeat, Forrest continued to operate his plantations with Black labor and became a leader of the Ku Klux Klan. In April 1866, Freedmen's Bureau Officer George W. Corliss inspected several Mississippi plantations and wrote back to his assistant commissioner. Corliss noted that Forrest's plantations had more laborers than all of the others he'd visited. He also reported that nearly every formerly enslaved person working on Forrest's plantations owed money to the ex-Confederate leader "for clothing and articles which they needed."

Letter Transcript (excerpts)

. . . General N B Forrest's plantation, the last I visited, and on which is employed the greatest number of hands of any place I visited I will speak of particularly inasmuch as influences exercised over them, extends in some degree over Freedmen on the neighbouring plantations.

General Forrest works about 140 hands on two plantations, contracted with by the month, for the year 1866. His contracts range higher than any others I found: for 1" class hands he pays \$20. per month and subsists them, deducting actual costs for dependents.

While I was there he rearranged his contracts and disposed of a few hard cases by transferring them to another planter near Friars Point; So that he has now a large force and in excelent condition.

. . . Before rearranging his contracts I had the Freedmen assembled and spoke to them in regard to their duties, their condition and their rights: And expressed my aprobation of the new contracts which they then signed & are manifestly well satisfied

I examined his accounts with his hands at his own request and found that almost every one of them are in his debt from \$25. to \$90. for clothing and articles which they needed. He informed me, as also did others in the neighbourhood that when the Freedmen arrived there from Georgia, many of the children were entirely destitute of clothing and some of the men and weomen were nearly so; consequently they were furnished with many articles they needed in advance. . . .

Source: [*Freedmen and Southern Society Project*](#)

Context: The federal government established the Freedmen’s Bureau in 1865 to aid formerly enslaved African Americans and poor white Southerners. Some Bureau agents, however, favored traitorous ex-Confederates over African Americans who had fought to preserve the United States. In February 1867, a Black teacher in Wetumpka, Alabama, reported that the local agent had distributed crucial food supplies from the federal government to white ex-Confederate widows but denied them to Black residents. Two days later, a higher-ranking Bureau official ordered this agent to distribute these rations “without regard to color.”

Letter Transcripts

Wetumpka Ala Feb 5th 1867

Sir: I am requested by a colored woman, of our city, to write you. asking information about rations. The agent here — Mr McCutcheon — says that the provisions he has on hand is not for negroes, but for the poor white women. And have actually refused to issue any, to any of the colored applicants for assistance. Notwithstanding some of them, is in as much need, as the poor white women, referred to. The lady who requested me to write this, has a large family of little ones, and she is their sole support. I know her to be an industrious hard striving woman — yet she cannot get any aid, from the subsistence agent here, because she is not white and happened to get a husband killed, fighting to destroy the government. It certainly must be a great crime to be a Negro, I cannot view it in any other light. We the colored people have done all we could to aid the government, in her hour of need, and now our services are no longer needed, our women may suffer hunger, — when it is in the hands of the agents relieve their wants — simply because are black. Please write and inform me what course to pursue. Yours Respectfully

Wm. V. Turner

Montgomery Ala Febry 7th 1867

Sir A communication has been received at this from Wm. V. Turner, Wetumpka, stating that you refuse to issue any of the Government corn and bacon, in your charge, to the Colored people saying that the provisions are not for the negroes but for the poor white woman. I have enclosed Mr Turner an order, directing you to place on your distribution list a family whose case he more particularly refers to. The Asst Commissioner directs me to say that unless the rations intrusted to you are destrubuted without regard to color, the supply of provisions will be cut off from your district. Very Respectfully Your obdt servant

O. D. Kinsman

Source: [Freedmen and Southern Society Project](#)

Context: In 1867 and 1868, Congress passed the Reconstruction Acts to dictate how the secessionist Southern states would be allowed to rejoin the United States. The first set, excerpted here, split the former Confederacy into five military districts governed by the U.S. Army. The Acts also mandated each state draft a new and Congress-approved constitution, ratify the 14th Amendment, and grant Black men suffrage. President Andrew Johnson attempted to block this legislation with his veto power, but the Acts had enough support in both the House and Senate to override his vetoes. Tennessee was the only ex-Confederate state excluded from this readmission process, as it had already ratified the 14th Amendment and rejoined the United States in 1866.

Act Transcript (excerpt)

Chap. CLIII – An Act to provide for the more efficient Government of the Rebel States [Passed over President Johnson’s veto March 2, 1867]

Whereas no legal State governments or adequate protection for life or property now exists in the rebel States of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Florida, Texas and Arkansas; and whereas it is necessary that peace and good order should be enforced in said States until loyal and republican State governments can be legally established: Therefore,

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That said rebel States shall be divided into military districts and made subject to the military authority of the United States as hereinafter prescribed, and for that purpose Virginia shall constitute the first district; North Carolina and South Carolina the second district; Georgia, Alabama and Florida the third district; Mississippi and Arkansas the fourth district; and Louisiana and Texas the fifth district.

Sec. 2 And be it further enacted, That it shall be the duty of the President to assign to the command of each of the said districts an officer of the army, not below the rank of brigadier-general, and to detail a sufficient military force to enable such officer to perform his duties and enforce his authority within the district to which he is assigned.

Sec. 3 And be it further enacted, That it shall be the duty of each officer assigned as aforesaid, to protect all persons in their rights of person and property, to suppress insurrection, disorder, and violence, and to punish, or cause to be punished, all disturbers of the public peace and criminals; and to this end he may allow local civil tribunals to take jurisdiction of and to try offenders, or, when in his judgment it may be necessary for the trial of offenders, he shall have power to organize military commissions or tribunals for that purpose, and all interference under color of State authority with the exercise of military authority under this act, shall be null and void. . . .

Source: [BlackPast](#)

Context: Confederate president Jefferson Davis fled south at the end of the Civil War, and U.S. troops captured him in Georgia in May 1865. The federal government soon charged him with treason for leading the secessionist Southern states. Davis spent the next two years imprisoned at Fort Monroe in Virginia, but was never brought to trial. A group of businessmen and Republican elites contributed to Davis's prison bond, drawing "deafening applause" to the court that released him and outrage from many Radical Republicans. Philadelphia's *Christian Recorder*, the official newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, criticized Davis's release on May 18, 1867. This notice warned that a lack of consequences for Davis and other traitors to the country would only bring more violence and injustice.

Article Transcript (excerpts)

RELEASE OF JEFFERSON DAVIS.

The great event of the week is the release of Jefferson Davis from confinement. Just in proportion to the extent disloyalty at the South and North would manifest itself, if not restrained by federal power, would reverence have been overwhelmingly displayed for this fallen chief in his journey from the fort to the courtroom.

. . . The majority of the loyal men of this nation demand that Davis shall be tried speedily, not because they seek vengeance; for worse than death to him is his irretrievable fall from power; but because Davis is the embodiment of the doctrine of secession. If that is a doctrine sustained by the Constitution of our Government, then in accepting the presidency of the seceded States and raising the directing their armies, he did no unlawful act. But if secession, by one or more States, at their will, is without warrant of the constitution, and destructive to the life of the Government, then he is a traitor. Refuse to try him, and the question is left at issue, and may be again discussed amid the thunder of artillery and the flash of musketry on the bloody field of fratricidal war. Acquit him, and the right of secession is acknowledged, and, therefore, can be again repeated with impunity.

The nation ought to put a legal brand upon this representative of the so-called Confederacy. Whether they do it by suspension, or find a more pleasant way, let it be done, and the world know it, and generations yet unborn remember it. . . .

Source: [Accessible Archives](#)

Context: In the first presidential election following the Civil War, the Democratic platform urged “reconciliation” among white supremacists across the nation and opposed Black suffrage and civil rights. Former New York Gov. Horatio Seymour ran with former Union general and Missouri congressman Frances Preston Blair Jr. on this platform, readily embracing the ex-Confederates who had “inaugurated all the bloodshed and carnage” of the war. In October 1868, a month before the election, the *Christian Recorder* published this piece warning of the “calamities pending” if former Confederates and their sympathizers took the helm of the federal government. Republican Ulysses S. Grant won the election, with thousands of formerly enslaved people across the South voting for the very first time. Still, the author of this article had identified a growing “Lost Cause” Confederate coalition that would emerge stronger in the 1870s.

Article Transcript (excerpt)

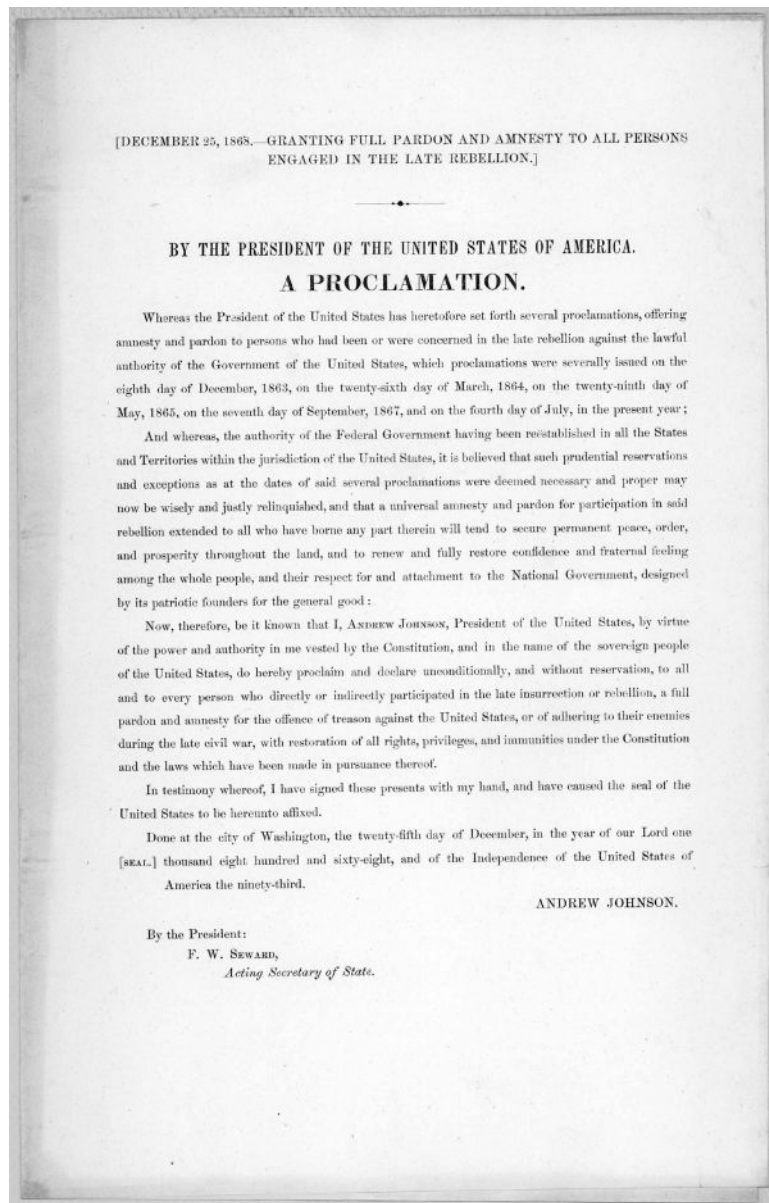
THE COMING STRUGGLE.

. . . And these same rebels, today, that inaugurated all the bloodshed and carnage that sent misery or sorrow to every loyal home, that filled the country with widows and orphans, and gave to every city, town and hamlet, legless and armless citizens. These men, I repeat, are enjoying the right hand of fellowship, with Seymour and Blair, and who will if they can get the power, reinstate the same order of things. The audacity of these rebel leaders is unparalleled in the history of nations, they are stalking abroad through the country, before the widows of their murdered and starved victims have left off their habiliments of mourning. Daring to tell men who are carrying a proof of their fidelity to their country, by an empty sleeve, that the Union and liberty they fought for, the laws of equality and justice that they voted for, are unconstitutional, and therefore, to be disregarded and overturned, and in the language of their leader Blair, if not by votes, why by the bayonet. These my friends are some of the truths to which I wish to call your attention; these are the calamities pending, that I ask you to pray God to avert. . . .

Source: [Accessible Archives](#)

Context: President Andrew Johnson initially sought to punish the most prominent Confederate leaders, but also sympathized with the secessionist South and opposed Black political and civil rights. He attempted to bring the former Confederacy back into the United States quickly with white supremacist laws and leadership intact. Congress challenged most of Johnson's efforts from 1866 to 1868, as he granted increasingly lenient pardons to ex-Confederates. At the end of his presidency, Johnson issued this proclamation of "full pardon and amnesty for the offense of treason" to all former Confederates "unconditionally and without reservation."

Proclamation Facsimile



Source: [Library of Congress](#)