

A Period of Change

Reconstruction, the period after the Civil War, sought to put a broken nation back together. For African Americans, it meant an end to slavery and the chance to have the same rights as other American citizens. Thanks to the Freedmen's Bureau and other government agencies, many newly freed African Americans learned to read and write. Many bought property and fought for the right to own their property.



An artistic depiction of Reconstruction shows Federal troops leading the way to peace in the South.

Although some white Southerners embraced the change, many were resentful and fearful of what the future would hold. The social order and economic way of life they had known was gone. White Southern Democrats sought to regain power over their communities. One way they attempted to do this was by preventing African Americans from voting. This began a long period of racial intimidation, or bullying, that threatened the new freedoms that African Americans had fought hard to obtain. Though Reconstruction ended in 1877, its impacts are still evident in society today.

Fragile Civil Rights

Radical Republicans in Congress fought to ensure equal rights for freed African Americans in the South. Soon after the war, though, many Southern states passed harsh black codes—laws that attempted to control African Americans in ways that looked much like slavery.

Many black codes came into existence after Congress passed the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. These constitutional amendments ended slavery, guaranteed citizenship and equal rights under the law, and gave African American men the right to vote. For the first time, African Americans were elected to public offices. This was a huge success for the Reconstruction efforts. Unfortunately, many white Democrats reacted to these successes with violence and intimidation.

The national attitude toward race worsened as well. Popular films, like *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, glorified the Old South and portrayed African Americans as inferior and dangerous. Many Northerners believed these stereotypes, too. Instead of working for equal rights, the federal government began to work against them. The Supreme Court upheld legal segregation in the landmark 1896 *Plessy*

Ferguson case. The court declared that separate accommodations for African Americans and whites were legal as long as they were “equal.” African American train cars, schools, and hospitals, however, were never equal to those of whites. The period from 1877 to 1954 is known for discriminatory laws and state-sanctioned, or approved, violence against African Americans. This was a failure of the Reconstruction period.

Reconstruction Successes

One positive legacy of Reconstruction is the public education system. During the period of slavery, it was illegal for white people to teach enslaved people how to read and write. When they won their freedom, African Americans were eager for education. The Freedmen’s Bureau oversaw the construction of nearly 3,000 schools for African Americans. It also helped newly freed African Americans work out labor arrangements and fight state court battles.



This wood engraving shows a Freedmen’s school in Mississippi.

After the Freedmen’s Bureau was dissolved in 1870, many of the schools it established continued and expanded. Most were funded by religious organizations and Northern charities. States also began operating public schools around this time, including some African American schools. These schools, however, received far less funding and resources than white schools. States refused to fund higher education for African Americans, but charities established some colleges. Many historically black colleges and universities that still operate today were created during this period. A few examples are Fisk University, Howard University, Hampton University, Spelman College, and Morehouse College.

Another success of Reconstruction was the idea of equal protection under the law. The addition of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave all people born in the United States citizenship and equal protection under federal law. This amendment made it illegal for any state to discriminate against any citizen and allowed equal representation in Congress based on the number of people in each state. This gave African Americans representation and protection on a federal level. The Fourteenth Amendment also contained a section that stated representatives could not be reelected to office if they had ever rebelled against the nation. This clause made it almost impossible for former Southern

white officials who opposed the ending of slavery to ever hold public office again. This was another success of Reconstruction. Though Reconstruction did not always lead to people having equal rights and protection, it did help people advance the cause of civil rights.

Lasting Legacy

During Reconstruction, some white people and African Americans worked together to unify the country without basing decisions on race. Once Reconstruction ended, however, many African Americans were forced to live a life very similar to the one they lived during slavery. Sharecropping was the primary means of making a living. This labor system worked to the advantage of property owners and kept African Americans in constant debt. Some newly freed even had to work for their former owners because they had no other options. African Americans even had to work for their owners because they had no other options.

The work of those in favor of equal rights during Reconstruction may have been successful initially, but after Reconstruction ended, many civil rights were lost. It was almost like enforcing slavery again with the re-introduction of black codes. The discrimination and segregation imposed by these codes and other rules like them lasted throughout the century following Reconstruction. It wasn't until the civil rights movement in the 1960s that full equality was achieved.

In the 1930s, African American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois challenged ideas about Reconstruction. He wrote a book that pointed out the highlights of the period. African Americans did, for a brief period, have equal rights and protection under the law. He noted the accomplishments of African American churches and educational institutions. He called for change. Although his voice was largely ignored by people in power, through the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization he helped to found, African American activists waged court battles aimed at breaking down the walls of segregation.

Historians argue that the foundation of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s was laid during Reconstruction. Some even call the civil rights movement the "Second Reconstruction." After a very long struggle filled with protests, marches, and legislative battles, the federal government passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964. This act ended discrimination based on race, color, religion, or birthplace. Segregation in public places was also ended with the passage of this act. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed. This act gave African Americans the right to vote as was initially established under the Fifteenth Amendment.

It took nearly 100 years after Reconstruction for the promises of freedom set forth with the Emancipation Proclamation to be fulfilled. Today, the Emancipation Proclamation is viewed as one of the greatest declarations in United States history. It is also important, however, to remember the 100 years following the Civil War. During this period, enslaved people were free but were still under the control of laws that discriminated against African Americans. The civil rights movement was a long-awaited success of the Reconstruction era.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** What was a success of Reconstruction?
 - A.** the Civil War
 - B.** the Civil Rights Act
 - C.** the public education system
 - D.** the declaration of the Emancipation Proclamation

- 2.** Why was education so important for newly freed African Americans?
 - A.** They knew it would help them get jobs.
 - B.** They wanted to learn alongside white people.
 - C.** The federal government required them to attend school.
 - D.** They had been prohibited from learning to read and write.

- 3.** Why is the civil rights movement sometimes called the Second Reconstruction?
 - A.** because African American citizens gained more rights
 - B.** because Federal troops again enforced laws in the South
 - C.** because new amendments were added to the Constitution
 - D.** because the civil rights movement lasted the same amount of time as Reconstruction

- 4.** Many owners of enslaved laborers were unhappy with the freedoms granted to formerly enslaved people. Why do you think it took nearly 100 years for African Americans to gain the full freedoms they were promised at the end of the Civil War? Use information from the passage to help support your answer.