

Slavery was a particularly dark moment in American history, but the Civil War ended slavery and paved the way for the comparatively enlightened period we now enjoy. African Americans, of course, desired freedom intensely, but once it was granted, do you suppose their lives were suddenly easy?

### Reconstruction

One of the big questions for rebuilding the United States after the war was where African Americans would fit in the new order. Constitutional amendments were passed to help answer this question, but enforcing these laws was another matter. The 13th amendment abolished slavery. The 14th mandated that states treat men of all races equally. The 15th gave African American men the right to vote. Though these were steps in the right direction, they were hard to enforce.

Some formerly enslaved people were able to enjoy privileges they had previously only dreamed of. In addition to being able to legally vote, they could attend school and hold public office. From the mid-1860s through the mid-1870s, 16 African Americans sat in Congress. In 1870, the first African American was elected Senator. The achievements of Hiram Rhodes Revels would have been grand on any scale, all the more so because they happened in the post-war upheaval. First a barber, then a minister, Revels served in the war and also established schools for freedmen before taking his seat in the Senate. P.B.S. Pinchback's career was no less stellar. In 1872, then-Lieutenant Governor of Louisiana Pinchback became the first African American governor when the Louisiana legislature filed impeachment proceedings against Governor Wardor. Though Pinkney only held the office for the 35 days remaining in Wardor's term, he was able to pass 10 laws for the state of Louisiana in that brief period. He later helped establish Southern University, an African American college still going strong in Baton Rouge today.



An 1872 lithograph of the first African American members of the United States Congress. During Reconstruction, two African Americans served in the Senate and 14 in the House of Representatives.

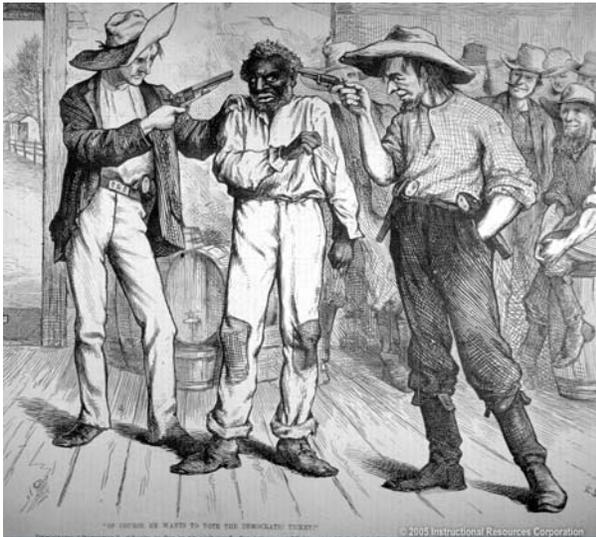
A few places in the South, such as New Orleans, Louisiana, briefly tried to integrate all groups of people. The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands was established in 1865. Its mission was to ease the transition from slavery in the South, since the collapse of the plantation system left four million people suddenly homeless and jobless. Perhaps the bureau's biggest achievement was founding 3,000 schools for African Americans. Other

public relief efforts sprang up here and there. Despite these efforts, however, life for African Americans was still a daily struggle to win employment, justice, and equality. The Civil War was over, but the battle had just begun for African Americans.

### Deconstruction

No sooner had the window of opportunity opened then it came crashing down. In the South especially, the war had a damaging impact. Lands were ravaged. The economy was in a shambles. Poor whites found themselves even poorer. And now they had to compete against ex-slaves for jobs. Very quickly, resentment grew and festered. This resentment was mostly aimed at African Americans. As many whites saw it, African Americans were the cause of the war and all of its physical and socio-economic casualties.

After Lincoln's assassination in 1865, President Andrew Johnson played a key role in returning African Americans to pre-war conditions. Right on the heels of President Lincoln's reforms, he turned back the clock. Sidestepping the new amendments that had just granted many new freedoms, he gave states control over how they wanted to treat African Americans. Southern states supported Johnson's changes and worked quickly to restrict the rights granted to African Americans under Lincoln.



In this 1876 voting cartoon, two white men are intimidating the African American voter to ensure that he casts his vote for the candidate they support.

Black codes, which severely restricted opportunities for African Americans, were passed. These laws, which varied from state to state, systematically limited African Americans' freedoms and rights. Black codes made it illegal to be unemployed, taxed those who tried to find non-farming jobs, made renting or owning land very difficult, prohibited gun ownership, and constantly reminded African Americans that they were considered inferior. Even the right to vote was denied to many.

"Literacy tests," which were so

hard that anyone would have struggled to pass, made sure that the mostly uneducated ex-slave population would not be casting any ballots. The Alabama test had 68 questions concerning the United States legal system and

government. Do you know the answer to the question, “What words are required by law to be on all coins and paper currency of the U.S.?” To pass this test, you had to know that and a whole lot more!

It was during this time that white supremacy terrorist groups emerged, most notorious among them, the Ku Klux Klan. Founded by a group of Confederate army veterans in 1866, the Klan quickly began to use violence to spread their ideas. The group’s original founders tried to break it up when its tactics became increasingly violent, but the Klan had already grown too big. Born in Tennessee, its influence spread to every state in the South. Wanting to suppress African Americans in the sphere of politics, they resorted to beatings and, later, to lynching. President Andrew Johnson supported white supremacy. He was the first U.S. president to be impeached by the House of Representatives in 1868. The Senate reinstated him by a single vote.

By 1876, another set of laws emerged to belittle African Americans in a new way. These “Jim Crow laws” made segregation legal. Couched in the rhetoric that African Americans should be “separate but equal,” this was just one more way African Americans were sent the message that they were considered different and would be treated so.

### **Forks in the Road**

It must have been difficult for newly freed people to be promised opportunities only to see them continually denied. It seemed that most whites in the South were doing everything possible to reestablish the conditions that had existed under slavery. Pressure to return to the plantations increased as the economy continued to sag. But newly freed African Americans faced countless uncertainties and could not trust their former owners to act fairly.

The experience of Jourdan Anderson provides a firsthand look at some of the feelings a formerly enslaved person experienced while trying to navigate free life alongside whites. Jourdan Anderson had been enslaved by Colonel P. H. Anderson in Big Spring, Tennessee until 1864, when he escaped to freedom. After the Civil War ended, Anderson was living and working in Dayton, Ohio, when he received a letter from his former master. The Colonel asked him to come back to work at his old home.

Suppose you were in Jourdan Anderson’s shoes: How do you think that you would have responded to such a letter? The Colonel revealed his reliance on Anderson. In fact, such a request may not have been unusual, since landowners faced a shortage of workers once slavery ended. Southern landowners were desperate to get people to do all of the farm work previously done for free by

enslaved African Americans. Without workers, their land had little value and their wealth was threatened.

Most formerly enslaved people had few resources and no formal education to equip them for life in post-war America. But they had important choices to make. One of the goals of the Freedmen's Bureau was to get formerly enslaved people working the plantations once again but under fair conditions. Rumors of a government plan to give "forty acres and a mule" to African Americans to help them get started in producing their own crops turned out to be a myth for all but a few, so it became nearly impossible for African Americans to work their way out of poverty.

One arrangement for newly freed citizens was sharecropping, though this was far less desirable than owning one's own land. In exchange for a share of the harvest, sharecroppers farmed the land for the landowners. Some landowners got what they wanted out of the bargain, but African Americans rarely made out as well. In many ways, sharecropping was similar to slavery.

Many newly freed African Americans were drawn to the West. All sought—and some found—better treatment and work. Some towns even sprang up with an all-African American population. Brooklyn, Illinois, founded by free and escaped African Americans in 1820, is usually credited as being the first town settled by African Americans. The town's motto "Founded by Chance, Sustained by Courage" reflects the spirit of its earliest residents and those who came to Brooklyn looking for a new life as free people. The Freedmen's Bureau helped to support the establishment of other African American towns during Reconstruction. They helped to establish 20 such towns in Oklahoma alone.

### **"Sustained by Courage"**

Jourdan Anderson replied to his former owner's letter; Anderson's letter was printed in *The New York Daily Tribune* on August 22, 1865. Jourdan Anderson's description of his life is probably representative of what town life would have been like for many African Americans. Just like the motto of Brooklyn, Illinois, says, he would have had to draw on a lot of courage.

Jourdan Anderson says he is "doing tolerably well." He is earning \$25 a month plus food and clothing and has a comfortable home for himself, his wife Mandy, and three children, who are going to school. Then, he asks his former master to tell him how much he will be paid if he returns to the Colonel's service. He needs this information to decide whether it's to his advantage to move back to Tennessee. He calculates what he believes his former master owes him for his

past service. Under the circumstances, it's hard not to admire Anderson for standing up for himself in this way. He proceeds,

*I served you faithfully for thirty-two years, and Mandy twenty years. At twenty-five dollars a month for me, and two dollars a week for Mandy, our earnings would amount to eleven thousand six hundred and eighty dollars. Add to this the interest for the time our wages have been kept back, and deduct what you paid for our clothing, and three doctor's visits to me, and pulling a tooth for Mandy, and the balance will show what we are in justice entitled to.*

This paragraph highlights many of the subtler hardships enslaved people faced. In 32 years, Anderson received medical care only three times, and his wife only once in 20 years. Once they were freed, things didn't improve greatly, particularly for Mandy Anderson, who even as a free person earns considerably less than her husband.

Having finally escaped living the worst nightmare he could have imagined, Anderson was surviving as a free American. He clearly preferred the new life he worked so hard for, no matter how difficult. The Andersons did not return to the Colonel in Tennessee, opting to stay and fend for themselves in Ohio. Although it's very easy to see that Anderson probably made the same choice that any of us would have, consider the disadvantages he may have faced by not returning to the South. Here's a final question to think about: Once you had gained freedom, could you forgive a man who enslaved you? Why or why not?

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** Which program offered a few formerly enslaved people the chance to own land?
  - A.** sharecropping
  - B.** Jim Crow laws
  - C.** “forty acres and a mule”
  - D.** Black codes
  
- 2.** What was the main condition Jourdan Anderson set for Colonel Anderson if he were to return to work for the Colonel?
  - A.** give Jourdan back pay for the work he and his wife did as slaves
  - B.** pay his wife a total of \$27 a month
  - C.** respect Jourdan and his wife
  - D.** provide adequate health care
  
- 3.** What did white Southerners have the hardest time accepting about living side-by-side with ex-slaves during Reconstruction?
  - A.** black codes
  - B.** the right of African Americans to vote and hold office
  - C.** sharecropping
  - D.** the Freedmen’s Bureau
  
- 4.** Life after slavery, as you know, was not easy. How was life after the civil war similar to life under slavery? Use examples from the reading passage to support your answer.