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Reconstruction: African Americans and the Promise of Failure

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Abstract
One version of this project initially was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an Introduction to African American History and Culture course. This work centers on the era of Reconstruction from 1862-1877. Reconstruction was promoted to address how the seceded Southern states would be brought back into the Union, reinstate self-government, and declare how freedmen would be treated and recognized by a respective state and its constitution. The purpose of this essay is to examine how advancement by blacks was pronounced but not sustained. This analysis focuses on politics, economics, and education whereby blacks strove for equality. A number of organizations helped Blacks to make gains during this time, including the Freedmen’s Bureau, the American Missionary Association and the black church, among others. Although blacks received aid during this brief period, after the Hayes-Tilden Compromise (1877) the clock for them was turned back. Their presence in politics was nearly absent, sharecropping was a way of life for many, and education remained a principal concern. To understand what was put in place during Reconstruction is to understand what blacks lost.

Key Terms:
- Hayes-Tilden Compromise
- Freedmen’s Bureau
- Reconstruction
The Civil War was fought from 1861-1865. When the war ended and the 13th Amendment (1865) to the United States Constitution abolished slavery, census statistics state that about four and one-half million people of African descent were free. The war had been fought to federalize the economy, and in the equation simply the slaves had become free. President Abraham Lincoln declared: “I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided.”

By the end of the war, about ninety to ninety-five percent of people of African descent remained in the South. Given the social construct of race ascribed to a people politically defined as either black or white, relocating to the North would have interfered with its economic system heightened competition for jobs.

The purpose of this essay is to examine how advancement by blacks after the Civil War was pronounced but not sustained, as they were unable to preempt interference from the white power base under a newly emerging and strengthening federalized economy. The timeframe governing this analysis is the era of Reconstruction, beginning with Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, issued in September 1862 and enforced 1 January 1863. Focus will center on aspects of politics, economics, and education. The intent is to show that blacks made gains at the local and state level in politics and economics, but could not maintain a secure base for operation and advancement once abandoned by the federal government when the Freedmen’s Bureau folded in 1870. A second factor accounting for further lack of support for blacks was the Hayes-Tilden Compromise (1877). When the compromise removed federal troops from the South, any gains by blacks, other than in education, were dismantled. Further examination will show support from the black church and other religious organizations for reinforced education.

After the Civil War, immediate attention centered on healing a nation; not necessarily to forge equality between blacks and whites, but to keep whites unified and empowered under a new federalized economy. Nonetheless, an agency to assist blacks and other casualties of war, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen’s Bureau) was established on March 3, 1865. This agency was to be in place for one year, and Major General Oliver O. Howard was chosen as its commissioner. Congress voted to extend the life of the bureau by overturning President Andrew Johnson’s veto.

During and after the war, Lincoln’s plan for reconstruction called for emancipation of slaves to secure the Union. After the war, he stood firmly on pardoning Southern whites who supported the United States. He declared that it would be expedient to allow ten percent of a southern white voting population to write a respective state constitution so long as it supported the abolishment of slavery. The Northerners thought this plan was not harsh enough. However, before Lincoln could proffer potential change, he was assassinated. Andrew Johnson assumed the presidency and introduced his own plan for reconstruction. Johnson’s plan called for the pardon of every southern white, their participation to organize and attend conventions to launch new state governments, their agreement to dissolve institutional slavery, and their execution of an oath of loyalty as citizens committed to rejoining the Union. Southern Whites agreed to Johnson’s plan, although they viewed it as a slap in the face to state rights. However, this potential plan covered only one side of the battlefield for justice. On the burnt side of the battlefield, the story evolved along a different line of offense and defense.

Reconstruction looked promising to blacks mainly because slavery was abolished. In 1865, 1868, and 1870, the Reconstruction Acts were ratified as a condition for the South’s reentry into the Union. Respectively, the 13th amendment
abolished slavery, the 14th granted citizenship to blacks, and the 15th accorded black men the right to vote. These amendments assured that state governments in the South would be secured by Republican backing and the African American vote. Blacks contributed to their communities by being elected to serve in various political capacities, including Congress, the Senate, and state governments. They helped to draft and promote legislation that not only favored blacks but all people. Thus it was essential that the congressional Supplementary Reconstruction Act (1867) empowered military commanders to oversee registration for black and white voters.

Two years after the Civil War ended, ballots cast by blacks had a significant impact on politics. Southern whites voiced disfavor, but were powerless to interfere given vote protection from black and white soldiers stationed by the national government. But the victory did not last long. For example, P.B.S. Pinchback was the first black lieutenant governor and then served briefly as acting governor of Louisiana. His gubernatorial reign as governor lasted only 35 days. Eventually, he also was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and then the Senate as the first black, but never was seated in either. Pinchback’s presence in these settings might have allowed a political voice to aid blacks at the national level.

All designed to destroy the black vote, the grandfather clause, literacy tests, and poll taxes impeded further attempts to assert a black voice at the national level. Respective state voter registration laws negatively impacted the black vote. Walton and Gray offer additional perspective of black loss of power: “The Southern Republican Party which began as a coalition between blacks and whites came under severe attack by the Democratic Party after 1877…. To save the Party, white Republicans began to withdraw from the regular organization in numerous Southern localities and to set up all-white Republican clubs.” This faction was instrumental in blacks losing support at the state level which, in turn, never allowed them to secure a political voice and base at the national level.

Despite uncertainty and instability caused by the shifting fortune of political reconstruction, steadily the Southern states began moving toward economic recovery after the last shot of the Civil War was fired. The greatest stimulus to the American economy had been the war and the wartime economic policies of the federal government. The war had disclosed unlimited possibilities for the new industrial order, given raw materials were available in the South and West. During Reconstruction, economic power was tied inextricably to land ownership, which blacks did not possess.

While the South lacked adequate capital and additional support necessary to compete in a complex industrial order, the region was not without its advantages as an agricultural sector of the national economy. Many people were out of work; therefore, cheap laborers could be hired. Given the breakup of the plantation system, economic development played a principal part in stimulating the movement of people into Southern towns and cities. However, blacks did not get jobs in the new stores, factories, and mills. They were left to till the soil and perform domestic chores. An examination of the economic consequences of emancipation shows black labor was not separate from the demise of plantation life. Gone were the days of physical bondage, yet the uncertainty of economic advancement hit home hard. Unlike gains in politics during Reconstruction, blacks did not fare well relative to economics because they were dispossessed.

In One Kind of Freedom, Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch explain how a small body of white landowners continued to control employment opportunities. Without land ownership it was difficult for blacks to gain a foothold in the economy. Ransom and Sutch
further point out that Congress did not follow suit to support land redistribution for blacks. First, real estate is simply that, a foundation that is tangible and real. To own a piece of land is to be in accord with the maxim that the first law of nature is self-preservation. With a piece of land, one can grow food for sustenance, as well as cash crops for profit. One can build a house on land. One’s children can play in their own yard. As a rule, however, land for blacks in the South was not forthcoming. Land ownership would have accorded blacks a sense of independence. Even if their virtual forced labor after slavery saw them without pay until the end of a crop season year, land ownership would have served as a support base to hire their labor out to another contractor. But as long as they remained under the arranged living conditions of a former master, they were relegated to his demands. Without pay they could not rent another house, and no other form of surplus housing was available. So the shacks of slavery became the homesteads of perpetual paternalism.

Although the acquisition of land among former slaves would have sustained individual families, a small plot of land would not have served as a larger economic enterprise that could accommodate former slaves into an expansive employment network. Having been designated “property” under slavery, freedmen valued land ownership and had hoped after emancipation the federal government would give each of them “40 acres and a mule.” It soon became apparent this Civil War rhetoric would not be honored. Loren Schweninger addresses this struggle: “[T]he path to farm ownership was a long and difficult one. The legacy of bondage, the failure of government agencies to assist blacks, the lack of available funds, and the difficulty of simply maintaining one’s family kept the majority of blacks landless.”

In addition to the debate on land ownership, other economic factors that impacted blacks during Reconstruction were labor and employment patterns. The Civil War had not been fought to free the slaves, but to federalize the economy. Slaves simply became free in the downsizing. Free labor in the North and South had not been able to compete with slave labor. Prior to the war, a white man in the North had to go to work to make one item on an eight-hour shift; a white man in the South could sit on his front porch while fifty slaves each made the same item. Without question, the war had not been fought to bring blacks to the North to be equals in labor competition. Thus ninety-five percent of blacks were left in the South after the Civil War. It was not long after the war before state supreme courts in the South began to rule in favor of landowners, declaring that laborers had no right to land on which they worked. Wynne explains, “In view of the lack of ready cash and of the other unattractive features of the wage system, it was imperative that some alternative be found. The solution was found in tenant farming and sharecropping.” But what was a solution for the white landowner was a death trap for the black laborer, especially after any support that had been forthcoming from the Freedmen’s Bureau was put on hold by 1870. State laws embraced the contracts drawn up by land owners and planters without input from blacks.

Once the Freedman’s Bureau dissolved, the handwriting of economic doom for blacks was ingrained in loss. At this juncture, the federal government should have stepped in to override state laws that sanctioned labor contracts in favor of landowner and planters. Slavery had been abolished, blacks were citizens, and black men could vote. Thus blacks now came under the jurisdiction of federal civil rights, which were a mockery at the local and state level. Lack of protection from the federal government confirmed that Reconstruction was not designed to grant blacks equality.

From their introduction to the Atlantic shore along the eastern seaboard of what
eventually would become the United States, blacks gravely were concerned about education. For two hundred fifty years they had been in bondage and had wanted to be educated as much as they longed for freedom. Not only did blacks want to read and write, they wanted to do so without secrecy or threat. Fortunately, the situation changed for blacks during Reconstruction. Had it not been for the Freedmen’s Bureau, a number of social services would not have been dispensed. Whereas the Bureau eventually fell short in sustaining economic and political support for blacks, its contribution to establishing a base for education remained entrenched.

Before the Civil War, the South had no comprehensive system of education. How would such funds have been forthcoming with a regional as opposed to a federalized economy? Robert Smalls, a Civil War hero and congressman from South Carolina, served in both houses of the South Carolina legislature, respectively. During his political career, this African American pushed legislation that established the first public school system in the U.S. in South Carolina. In extended fashion under the leadership of Maj. Gen. Howard, the Freedmen’s Bureau set up a system of organized public education throughout the South. The Bureau provided teachers and essential equipment such as desks, chairs, and books.

Congress did not support the Bureau financially in its first year but thereafter continued endorsement. Had not it been for the conjunctive efforts of missionary and aide societies with the Freedmen’s Bureau, the support base for education would have been lax. In addition to the American Missionary Association, several religious denominations aided in establishing approximately 3,000 schools for over 150,000 students in the South.8

In 1867 Congress began to set aside funds for schools for freedmen. The Freedmen’s Bureau spent a total of five million dollars to set up schools for blacks. Tougaloo College, Dillard University, and Fisk University were founded, and Howard University was named for General Howard and established with aid from the Freedmen’s Bureau. Certainly, there were those who opposed education for blacks, but support from Northerners interested in the “elevation of the negro” was substantial, including teachers recruited from the North and funding for their salaries.9

Unfortunately, the Freedmen’s Bureau did not continue to finance education. Given tabs on finances and education, funds had to be applied to other programs to address pressing needs of freedmen. After 1869, Congress did not renew many of the Freedmen’s Bureau activities and provided limited support for education for only one more year.10 The majority of schools established by the Freedman’s Bureau were in towns, so much of the rural areas went without service. However, many of the blacks taught in those schools later became teachers of the next generation, instilling in others values already instilled in them. Franklin and Higgingbotham summarize the organization’s educational accomplishment: “By 1870 the educational work of the Freedmen’s Bureau ended, and the task of education fell to local communities and northern religious organizations. The bureau had spent more than $5 million in schooling ex-slaves, and 247,333 pupils attended 4,329 schools.” 11

The desire for blacks to learn and to seek education uprooted them out of the rural areas and into the towns and cities so that their children could have access to an education. At night after school, the children came and taught the parents. Not only did blacks gain knowledge in the Freedmen schools, they also gained life skills. A number of schools required students to take care of personal hygiene, to maintain proper grooming, and to keep house. These schools also taught blacks how to look for jobs, and to reconnect
kinship ties that had been severed because of slavery.

The short-lived era of Reconstruction floated along the wind of change. By 1874 the Democratic Party had regained power in the House of Representatives; the Radical Republicans had retreated. Riddleberger sheds light on the retreat by spotlighting the Liberal Republicans: “The terms of the compromise proposed by the Liberal Republicans in 1872 were too theoretical and too vague to be acceptable to the South. The more tangible rewards, such as railroad and political patronage that the regular Republicans offered in 1877, brought much better results.” Their stance culminated in Reconstruction ending on May 1, 1877 when federal troops were removed from the South and whites undertook measures to eradicate any progress made by blacks.

After the federal troops were pulled out of the South, the gains made by blacks during Reconstruction were finally blown away by the Supreme Court mandate of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) that “separate but equal” would reign as the law of the land. Overall, Reconstruction failed African American people. The fruit of their labor was plucked away from them. The impact that blacks made on politics was null and void, and in the economic arena they still could be used for forced labor. Primarily, their fight to hold center stage with education served as their forward march to bear the torch. This rings true because the one public institution held by blacks has been the black church. Thus even when federal support for education no longer was forthcoming at the national level, religious denominations supported by blacks and others could provide a coffer to sustain blacks in education.

Reconstruction can be juxtaposed against one who has been told he or she has only a certain amount of time to live before leaving earth. One tries to engage all that is possible before departure, traveling unchartered territory, doing and saying what he or she always dreamed. The high of that life has been reached, and the low encroaches at a steady pace. Before the last breath, one final push is made, and then life is eclipsed. From 1896 to 1954, *Plessy v. Ferguson* was mandated with an iron fist, and even after overturned, ten years elapsed and more blood spilled before passage of an all-encompassing Civil Rights Act (1964) and Voting Rights Act (1965).

The torch for progress remains lit. May the runners for freedom continue to be showered in wisdom and fortitude to stay the course and go the full distance as contributors to a more just and humane society. The transatlantic trail of tears has been traversed all the way to the highest seat of the United States government. Today an African American, Barack Hussein Obama occupies the White House as the 44th President of the United States. His election serves as the more visual means of a reconstructed nation.

**Endnotes**


**Bibliography**


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