Slave Emancipation in the United States – Jubilee: from Slaves to Freepeople

“When war was begun,” the former slave Booker T. Washington recalled in 1901, “every slave on our plantation felt and knew that, though other issues were discussed, the primal one was…slavery. Even the most ignorant members of my race on the most remote plantations felt in their hearts, with a certainty that admitted of no doubt, that the most perceptive among the Union military commanders to confront the ‘problem’ of what to do with slave refugees.

Many of the common plantation negroes, and day laborers in the towns and villages, were reporting little schools themselves. Everywhere I found among them a disposition to get their children into schools, if possible. I had occasion very frequently to notice that porter in stores and laboring men in warehouses, and cart drivers in the streets, had spelling books with them, and were studying them during the time they were not occupied with their work. Go into the outskirts of any large town and walk among the negro inhabitants, and you will see children and in many instances grown negroes, sitting in the sun alongside their cabins studying.”

U.S. National Archives
Letter Issued by General Rufus B. Saxton to Mark Lincoln’s Issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation

The 1st South Carolina Volunteers were recruited from among former slaves on the Union-occupied coast and sea islands south of Charleston from mid-1862 onward. They were deployed in Georgia and Florida during the war and were involved in the taking of Charleston and in the occupation of Savannah. The commander of the Georgia expedition recalled that the SC Volunteers “fought with stirring enthusiasm and bravery. For slavery is an everlasting beacon-light, marking a way to liberty and the hopes of a people, it seems to be flashing the occasion that it should not pass unmarked by those whose hopes is come to brightness and to bliss. Such a day to you is January 1, 1863. I therefore call upon all the colored people in this Department to assemble on that day at the Head Quarters of the 1st Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers, to hear the Proclamation of the President, and to witness in each other manifestations of joy as may be called forth by the occasion. It is your duty to carry this good news to your brethren who are in slavery. Let all your voices, like harp, yel, join hand and heart in the grand chorus of liberty — ‘We are free!’ ‘We are free.’”

R. SAXTON,
Help, Give, and Military Generosity.

U.S. Library of Congress

Although, as slaves sensibly from the beginning, slavery was at the root of the conflict between North and South, President Abraham Lincoln proved a reluctant emancipator. Though morally repulsed by slavery, Lincoln sought in the early period of the war to reach a settlement that would have restored the Union “as it was”—with slavery intact. He offered compensated emancipation to slaveholders in the ‘border states’ in an attempt to dissuade them from joining the Confederacy, and at several occasions countermanded orders by Union commanders aimed at undermining slavemasters that alienated him from abolitionists like Wendell Phillips and the escaped slave Frederick Douglass. To the sounds of ‘John Brown’s Body,’ they jubilantly waved makeshift rag banners; to the tune of the ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic,’ they anthemically bashed and flourished the Union flag, dancing with the smoke-choked air, they lingered in the dusty streets as Federal soldiers paraded, honing and giving thanks.

As white Richmond retreated behind shutters and blinds, black Richmond spontaneously took to the streets. From the moment Union troops entered the city—“Richmond at last!” black Union veterans exclaimed—crooked, the dried and the unslaved, household servants and household cooks, rented maids and hired embroilers, joined the revelers to catch a glimpse of the spectacle. No longer enslaved, they thrust out their hands to be shaken or pressed the soldiers with offerings—gifts of fruit, flowers, even lumps of sugar. Federal officers riding alongside prisoners steadied for the figure banners and marched with them by roads. But the zone was uninvaded, no rule reigned, they had been outmaneuvered from smoking, publicly swearing, carrying pigeons, purchasing newspapers, in procuring almsmen, no one to the sounds of John Brown’s Body, they jubilantly waved makeshift rag banners to the tune of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, they anthemically bashed and flourished the Union flag, dancing with the smoke-choked air, they lingered in the dusty streets as Federal soldiers paraded, honing and giving thanks.

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President Lincoln Enters Richmond on April 4th, 1865—Just Ten Days Before His Assassination

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Slave Emancipation in the United States – “A Revolution Half-Accomplished”

Early in the summer of 1865, Lincoln’s successor President Andrew Johnson dispatched former Union Major General Carl Schurz on a tour of the South to compile a report on conditions there. Between the time of Schurz’s departure from Washington and his return to Johnson’s office less than four months later, developments had taken a turn for the better. The president and his advisors were beginning to realize that the logic of the great revolution was “the most irrepressible democrats it is possible to conceive” as can be seen in the letter of a Carolina planter Belton O’Neal Townsend’s complaint that freedpeople “would die where they stood” if they were not provided with something better. As a result of Schurz’s report, Johnson dispatched former General Schurz to compile a report on conditions there. Johnson’s programme of Reconstruction and shifted momentum for Crime” and “Negroes Whipped for Punishment of Crime” The headlines for the newsprint illustration accompanying this illustration in the Forests of North Carolina, 1867 The prominent Civil War-era cartoonist Thomas Nast included this illustration as a critique of President Andrew Johnson’s programme of Reconstruction. The headlines for the newsprint illustration accompanying this illustration read “Negroes Sold as Punishment for Crime” and “Negroes Whipped for Punishment of Crime” The reaction against slavery policy gave the Radical Republicans the upper hand in setting the terms of Congressional Reconstruction and shifted momentum for the Republicans. Finally, the most common of these organisations that acted as trade unions, as local schools for the Republicans. Finally, the most common of these organisations that acted as trade unions, as local schools for emancipation phenomenon, even if the new conditions embedded a series of laws (known as ‘Black Codes’) that disfranchised former slaves landless, immobile and politically enfranchised. These laws were designed to prevent freedpeople from contributing to plantation agriculture and to plantations. County farmers often sold off plantation land that had been seized during the war and, where possible, to distribute lands to ex-slaves for settlement. Although in many places whites were at least as likely to former farmers to take advantage of Bureau services, freedmen were less likely as former slaves to take advantage of Bureau assistance.

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen’s Bureau) was established by Congress in 1865 to oversee the welfare needs of those left destitute by the war and, where possible, to distribute lands to ex-slaves for settlement. Although in many places whites were at least as likely to former farmers to take advantage of Bureau services, freedmen were less likely as former slaves to take advantage of Bureau assistance. The idea that food could be had without labour. In reality the Freedman’s Bureau was hopelessly overstretched and, in many places locally-rooted clubs, societies and drilling associations played a critical role in galvanizing the freedmen community and, after the election, delivering an almost unanimous vote for the Republicans. Finally, the most common of these organisations—the Union Leagues—developed in many places across the South into sophisticated and highly effective networks of communication that existed even earlier. The national Leagues were timbers of black in the control of whites who had led the region into secession. In his report—which Johnson would in the end support—their reaction to suggestions that the federal government was planning to remove the land granted them during wartime into former owner, he was told that freedpeople “would die where they stood before they would surrender their claims to the land.” At an 1867 mass meeting in Savannah attended by armed freedmen, Bradley calling for the division among black families of each belonging to the “niggers.” Later, as Reconstruction shifted under white paramilitary assault and federal indifference, Bradley would play a role in encouraging Black exodus to the West.

On the ground across the plantation South and in the halls of Congress, Johnson’s willingness to squash the radicalism of such a hard-fought war rekindled and recharged them, bringing an end to the limited plan of Reconstruction favoured by southern whites. In 1867 Radicals in Congress assumed control, drastically expanding the rights of former slaves (including granting the franchise to adult males), committing the federal government to the protection of those rights, and galvanizing freedpeople in their remarkable attempts to remake the land of their own.

While some slaves had managed to accumulate modest amounts of property and savings under slavery, most came to emancipation owning little but the clothes on their backs. Northern free-labour assumption that any economic gains and the new wage system would bring about economic independence seemed to many freedpeople a cruel joke, as their new labours over generations had not yielded either. Many looked to the federal government to redistribute some of the wealth and efficiency their owners had accumulated, but in doing so they would run directly up against moderation in the Republican Party wary of the precedents that might be in embarking on a program of confiscation.

But in Washington things had taken an unexpected turn as well. President Johnson, who many Republicans had expected to implement a program of root-and-branch reconstruction, seemed more inclined to hand power back to those influential white who had led the region into secession. Johnson offered the ex-Confederates status lenient terms for re-entering the Union—terms that did not include substantive change for freedpeople. Though the majority of white landowners accepted that slavery as an institution could not be restored, many hoped to retain as much as possible of their former master. Under Johnson’s direction, they eliminated a series of laws (known as “Black Codes”) in the new state constitutions, aimed at keeping the former slaves landless, immobile and politically powerless. In some states former children were called “apprenticed out” to work in the fields and the laborers of petty offenders could be sold at auction for failure to pay debts. Left to their own devices, only Tennessee among the eleven former Confederate states ratified the 14th Amendment granting blacks equal rights of citizenship. In his report—which Johnson would in the end support—their reaction to suggestions that the federal government was planning to remove the land granted them during wartime into former owner, he was told that freedpeople “would die where they stood before they would surrender their claims to the land.” At an 1867 mass meeting in Savannah attended by armed freedmen, Bradley calling for the division among black families of each belonging to the “niggers.” Later, as Reconstruction shifted under white paramilitary assault and federal indifference, Bradley would play a role in encouraging Black exodus to the West.

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Slave Emancipation in the United States – Land and Labour

Almost universally, freedpeople linked their prospects for political equality to being able to secure land and establish themselves independently of their former owners. “Gib us our own land and we take care of ourselves,” a Charleston freedman told a travelling Northern correspondent. But while land, de ole massa can hir us or starve us, as they please.” In the closing months of the war, the federal government had raised freedpeople’s expectations that the property of the largest of the Southern planters might be redistributed among those who had worked it. But it was not to be.

Confiscation—regarded as a measure of basic justice by freed slaves who had never been compensated for their labour—was advocated by a vocal minority among the Radical Republicans, and among a large majority of poor union men. But the moderate Republican majority. And among a large majority of poor union men, the federal government had raised freedpeople’s expectations that the property of the largest of the Southern planters might be redistributed among those who had worked it. But it was not to be.

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Freedpeople Attempt to Resist Restoration of the lands granted under General Sherman’s Special Order Number 15, which established the ‘Sherman Reserve’ and set aside 400,000 acres of land along the southern Louisiana coast for settlement by freedpeople. While in one sense the order merely acknowledged an expropriation of land that had been underway since Union forces landed in the lowcountry in late 1864, it was the first time freedpeople perceived their federal government as an agent of land redistribution. To Sherman the military man these ‘moving clouds’ of escaping slaves who pursued his army like a ‘moving cloud’; hopeful that Union forces would live up to their role as deliverers. To Sherman the military man these ‘moving clouds’ of escaping slaves who pursued his army like a ‘moving cloud’; hopeful that Union forces would live up to their role as deliverers. To Sherman the military man these ‘moving clouds’ of escaping slaves who pursued his army like a ‘moving cloud’; hopeful that Union forces would live up to their role as deliverers. To Sherman the military man these ‘moving clouds’ of escaping slaves who pursued his army like a ‘moving cloud’; hopeful that Union forces would live up to their role as deliverers. To Sherman the military man these ‘moving clouds’ of escaping slaves who pursued his army like a ‘moving cloud’; hopeful that Union forces would live up to their role as deliverers. To Sherman the military man these ‘moving clouds’ of escaping slaves who pursued his army like a ‘moving cloud’; hopeful that Union forces would live up to their role as deliverers.
Slave Emancipation in the United States – A ‘Counterrevolution of Property’

The maintenance of slavery in the United States had rested, from its earliest beginnings, on violence—both the everyday coercion by which black laborers were compelled to work in the fields and the concentrated force required by the South: by the mid-1870s conservatives had brought perpetrators to trial. But suppression of the worst affected areas and taking vigorous action to compel to intervene, declaring martial law in the territories. During the 1870 elections, the level of atrocities paramilitary violence, and especially in isolated districts away from federal garrisons. In Piedmont and emancipation, but were most frequent in interior districts were from federal garrisons. In Piedmont and subsequent South Carolina, where Beacher was stationed, white attempt to reverse the slave system that had operated throughout the antebellum period. In addition, many armed bands of bushwhackers made up of undisciplined Confederate veterans carried out attacks, and through their actions were directed overwhelmingly at freedpeople, blacks and whites alike found themselves the targets of these armed bands.

Federal intervention against white paramilitaries came for too late and was only temporarily effective, but when it did come, with a chorus of indignation from freedpeople and southern whites and the democratic press. Here a cartoon from Frank Leslie’s suggests that testimony to what became known as the Buford-Hays hearings is being fabricated, that the testimony of ‘mangled negroes’ is being bought and paid for, and, therefore, that the accounts of Klan atrocities are exaggerated. Testimony in the Buford-Hays race to twelve hundred volumes and more than 800,000 pages, and it is one of the important sources of black testimony about whites’s testimony in the early Reconstruction period.

While conservatives in the Democratic Party were continually frustrated that their recent swoop at both physical and economic coercion failed to swing over a section of black voters. Where they could exercise the franchise freely, freedpeople overwhelmingly voted the Radical Republican ticket, and in the end it was only through massive fraud and intimidation that conservatives were able to overthrow Reconstruction in Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina. In light of the well-documented fraud, there is more than a little irony in the suggestion, implicit in this cartoon, that blacks are being intimidated into voting the Republican by federal law.

Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper

Freedmen Forced to Vote the Radical Ticket

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Slave Emancipation in the United States — Back to Slavery

Writing in 1935, W. E. B. Du Bois asserted that the overture of Reconstruction brought an end to the "limitless effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world had ever seen." The principal victors of that turn of events were the former slaves and their descendants, who in the years to follow would experience a sharp and often brutal deterioration in their conditions. But as Du Bois wrote, "...we all rush about the same cause for this movement; we do not believe it possible, from the gain history and present aspect of affairs, for our people to live in this country peacefully, and to educate and do to their children's children to which degree they desire. They do not believe it possible; neither do I. I think it's so from reading history and from the present state of things around us..."

In a new era of rapid industrial expansion the federal government in Washington retreated from the interventionist role it had assumed after the Civil War. The public campaign aimed at restoring the rights they had won was met with mounting racial hostility and with the political sphere increasingly closed off to them, the focus of Southern society had managed to win while the electorate had hoped for something better. In the aftermath of Klan violence Hill led an exodus of local freedpeople to Liberia. In testimony before a Congressional committee he explained the rationale for leaving:

"The whole of the Federal troops from the South and the restoration of state power to conservative whites combined to suppress a series of bitter strikes approaching revolution in the coalfields of Western States these outrages are as bad as they are here. It was in Missouri, Tennessee and the other States. I say that the West is the West today as it was yesterday, and in the part where it is today..."

When in the mid-1950s black Southerners launched a public campaign aimed at restoring the rights they had lost more than seventy years earlier, both they and many of their white opponents understood the movement as a "Second Reconstruction" to wrest power from those who had held it before. Others were still hoping... for relief through the organization of third-party movements. When, in the mid-1880s, an agrarian-based third-party movement, the Populists, began to take root across the South, African Americans continued to take advantage of anti-imperialism. That is where my father came from. My father said to me, "...the whole of the Federal troops from the South and the restoration of state power to conservative whites began to suppress a series of bitter strikes approaching revolution in the coalfields of Western States, the outrages are as bad as they are here."

I found that in Liberia there was greater encouragement and hope of finding peaceful living and free schools and rich land... that those Western States toward which I had looked were... that in Liberia there was greater encouragement and hope of finding peaceful living and free schools and rich land... that in any place in the United States I have found of those conditions such a great deal to recommend it to move away to Africa. That is where my father came from..."

Despite the adversities they now confronted, black Southerners continued to take advantage of whatever openings existed to shape society to their interests. When, in the mid-1880s, an agrarian-based third-party movement, the Populists, began to take root across the South, African Americans were prominent in pushing it forward. In places like Birmingham and New Orleans, Georgia, and Mississippi, black workers and women played an important role in leading the movement towards labor politics. But in the face of mounting racial hostility and with the national sphere increasingly closed off to them, the focus of post-Reconstruction policies turned to 'building community' within the confines of state laws, a resort to which was not enough. The protest art that flourished in the 1950s, especially the "Liberation the Master Race," conveys the poverty that many white southerners felt in the New South.