While most white Southerners viewed the Confederate surrender as a devastating defeat, freed slaves and other African Americans across the South saw the end of slavery as a new beginning. Here, Mark Charles tallies the total number of black slaves in the United States on January 1, 1861, just before the Civil War began.

In May 1868, the newly emancipated slaves and freed blacks of Charleston, the Union army sought recruits for a war that had been transformed into a war to end slavery. The northern military had occupied some of the island ports south of Charleston since 1861, and from the ranks of escaped slaves had organized the First South Carolina Volunteers, later renamed the 3rd Infantry Regiment, USCT. Black soldiers proved eager to strike a blow against slavery, and found they had to struggle inside the northern ranks for equal treatment and conditions the military described as "a school of politics" for those men, who would play a crucial role in providing political leadership to black workers during reconstruction.

Sources: Harper's Weekly

In the period before the war, Charleston was one of the largest and most active ports in the South; up to 40 percent of the African immigrants into South America on slave ships had entered through Charleston, and, of course, a central supply center for rice and cotton, mainly those grown by slaves on the rice and cotton plantations and urban workers based on the "opportunities offered to the longshoremen through the Longshoremen's Protective Union."
The black longshoreman's war was at the center of an economic crisis, high publicized working-class movement that spread across the South, including agricultural laborers from the cotton fields and cotton plantations and urban workers based on the "opportunities offered to the longshoremen through the Longshoremen's Protective Union."

It seems to me important that... demand should be made and combinations entered into, to dislodge the Labor Cotton. It seems to me important that... demand should be made and combinations entered into, to dislodge the Labor Cotton. The plotters about have here been paying 75 cents (75c) per day...

Sources: Photo-Library of Congress, Document--Alford Hett (Labeled to Governor Robert E. Scott, 14 August 1868; Governor Scott Papers, South Carolina Department of Archives and History)

Fig 5, 6, 7 (Cotton Raft Heading Downriver toward Charleston; Cotton on the Docks, ca. 1870s; Draymen and Teamsters line East Bay Street, 1870s)

Black labor was crucial to every stage of the production of rice and cotton from planting and harvesting to transporting the finished crop to the docks in Charleston and loading it onto ships to export. In the political and social upheaval that followed emancipation, Charleston's black longshoremen were at the center of resistance, highly publicized working-class movement that spread across the South, including agricultural laborers from the cotton fields and cotton plantations and urban workers based on the "opportunities offered to the longshoremen through the Longshoremen's Protective Union."

The city's large workforce of black domestic workers also took to the streets during Reconstruction, picketing several times during Reconstruction for better wages and conditions.

Sources: Library of Congress, Frank Ledlie, Illustrated Newspaper (2)

Fig 8, 9, 10 (Charleston Street Vendors, 1870s; Phosphate Workers, Freedwomen Sorting Sea Island Cotton)

In some of the strikes carried out by black workers during Reconstruction, the longshoremen's influence on the workforce was evident. The union was organized on a local basis and had a strong influence on the city's black workers. They often acted in concert with other unions to pressure employers for better wages and conditions.

Sources: Mary Land Society

Fig 12 (Black and White Lowcountry Oyster Shuckers, ca. 1910)

White conservation worked hard to convince poor whites that their interests would be best served by overthrowing Reconstruction and installing a state government committed to white supremacy. In the minds of poor and working-class whites, Reconstruction had failed to deliver economic relief to former slaves and led them into occasional confrontations with Republican moderates.

The city's black tailors walked off the job for "their own special benefit," though the conservative press was probably correct in suggesting they were "imitating the example set by the longshoremen."

And the city's large workforce of black domestic workers also took to the streets during Reconstruction, picketing several times during Reconstruction for better wages and conditions.

Sources: Library of Congress, Frank Ledlie, Illustrated Newspaper (2)

Fig 11 (Isaac Meyers, African American labor leader)

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