

THE MONUMENTAL ACHIEVEMENTS OF RECONSTRUCTION



ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What progress did Black people achieve during Reconstruction to create a more equal nation?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Define Reconstruction and identify some of the major achievements of this era.
- Investigate key people, places and events during Reconstruction that represent the ways in which Black people improved their lives following the Civil War.
- Explore the significance of Reconstruction Era National Historical Park and design a monument for it based on their research on Reconstruction.



LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



TIME NEEDED

90 minutes



MATERIALS

- AV equipment to watch a video and project an image
- *Emancipation Day in South Carolina* handout (one copy to project)
- *Design a Monument to Reconstruction* handout (one copy per student)
- Laptops or tablets for small group research
- Drawing paper and implements



VOCABULARY

13 th Amendment	emancipation	Freedmen's Bureau	Union
14 th Amendment	Emancipation Proclamation	plantation	U.S. Congress
15 th Amendment	enslaved	Reconstruction	U.S. Constitution



Procedures

- 1 Write “Reconstruction (1865–1877)” on the board and have students participate in a think-pair-share in which they discuss what they know about Reconstruction and the accomplishments of this era. Allow students to share some of their thoughts with the class and list key ideas on the board. Post and review the following definition:

Reconstruction: The period after the Civil War, from 1865–1877, when steps were taken to remedy the inequalities of slavery and bring the 11 states that had seceded back into the U.S.

- 2 Show the video “The Story of Reconstruction” (up to 5:25): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjetWrsQb-E>. Direct students to listen for information that confirms or negates what they discussed during the think-pair-share, and for additional examples of accomplishments during Reconstruction. After the video, discuss some of the following questions and continue to add to the information listed on the board in step 1.

- What is your reaction to the story of Robert Smalls, the enslaved man who captured a Confederate ship and later went on to become one of the first Black members of Congress? Had you heard this story before? Why do you think stories like his are not widely known?
- In the video, Reconstruction is described as a time of “unparalleled hope” and “irrational exuberance.” What do these terms mean? Why did many Black people feel this way about the period from 1865–1877?
- What were some major achievements of the Reconstruction era?
- What does the commentator mean when he says it was “the first time in this country or anywhere that an interracial democracy was created”?
- Upon seeing the portrait of a Black senator, Frederick Douglass is quoted as saying, “At last, the Black man is represented as something other than a monkey.” What did this quote make you think or feel?

- 3 Tell students that a memorial to Robert Smalls was installed at the Tabernacle Baptist Church in Beaufort, South Carolina, near the house where he was born into slavery (and which he later purchased). Point out that according to the video (2019), this memorial is the only known statue in the South of any of the pioneering Black congressmen of Reconstruction. Show students a photo of the memorial, featuring the quote in the note to the right, and have them do a few minutes of reflective writing in response.
- 4 Share that Reconstruction Era National Historical Park was established in the final days of the administration of President Barack Obama as a way to honor the Black heroes of the Reconstruction era. Add that Beaufort, South Carolina—Robert Smalls’ birthplace—was chosen as the site for this park because of its special history in the struggle for racial equality.
- 5 Display the handout *Emancipation Day in South Carolina*, which depicts one of the earliest public readings of the Emancipation Proclamation at Port Royal, near Beaufort, on January 1, 1863. In pairs, have students write a caption for this image that imagines how Black residents of the region might have felt upon hearing the news that President Lincoln had declared the enslaved people of the Confederacy free.
- 6 Tell students that they will be conducting research into other people, places and events in and around Beaufort related to Reconstruction. Based on their research, they will design a monument for Reconstruction Era National Historical Park that represents the accomplishments of Black people during Reconstruction.
- 7 Distribute the handout *Design a Monument to Reconstruction*, and review the instructions with students. Form small groups and assign each one topic to investigate or allow them to choose the topic based on their interests. Provide students with access to laptops or tablets, and allow them time to research and design their monuments.
- 8 Post the monuments that groups have designed and direct students to conduct a “gallery walk” to view their peers’ work. Alternatively, form new small groups with a mix of students who have researched different topics and allow them to share in this forum. Encourage students to discuss what stood out to them about the ways in which Black people improved their lives in the years following the Civil War.

NOTE

The Smalls memorial can be viewed at <https://southcarolinalowcountry.com/beauforts-hero-rob-ert-smalls-and-tabernacle-baptist-church>. The words below the statue read, “My race needs no special defense, for the past history of them in this country proves them to be the equal of any people anywhere. All they need is an equal chance in the battle of life.”

NOTE

Research design contests or competitions that might be available to students and consider entering their monument designs, or hold your own class- or school-wide competition.



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Conclude the lesson with a discussion using some of the questions below.

Discussion Questions

1

The Reconstruction era has been called a time of “unparalleled hope.” How did Black people channel their hope into progress during this period?

2

What qualities do you think it took for a largely poor Black population without much formal education to rebuild their communities and their lives?

3

What people, places or events from the Reconstruction era most surprised or stood out to you? Why?

4

How did the achievements of Black people during Reconstruction improve not only their own lives, but the nation as well?

5

Why do you think there are relatively few monuments in the U.S. that celebrate Reconstruction?

6

Do Black communities today face challenges that you can trace back to the time of the Civil War? Despite the achievements of Reconstruction, how has racism and inequality been ongoing in the lives of Black people?

Lesson Extensions

- Assign students to investigate the Digital Public Library of America's "Primary Source Set" on the Freedmen's Bureau (<https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-freedmen-s-bureau#tabs>) or the 15th Amendment (<https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-fifteenth-amendment>). Have them create a collage depicting key ideas, people and events they learned about as part of their exploration.
- The term "40 acres and a mule" is a famous phrase that is associated with Reconstruction. Ask students to deduce the meaning based on what they know about the needs of newly freed Black Americans. Then have students watch the PBS Learning Media video "Forty Acres and a Mule" (4:08, <https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/mr13.socst.us.forty-acres/forty-acres-and-a-mule>) and/or read the excerpt from General William T. Sherman's "Special Field Orders, No. 15" (https://d43fweuh3sg51.cloudfront.net/media/media_files/Special_Field_Order_15_Student_Handout.pdf). Discuss the significance of "40 acres and a mule" and the desire among Black people for land during the Reconstruction era.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + American Battlefield Trust. "Reconstruction: The Civil War in Four Minutes." April 25, 2017. YouTube video, 4:45. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CKcGj4C-q8E>.
- + Digital Public Library of America. "Primary Source Sets: The Freedmen's Bureau." <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-freedmen-s-bureau>.
- + Dillard, Coshandra. "Teaching Juneteenth." *Teaching Tolerance*, June 12, 2019. <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/teaching-juneteenth>.
- + Facing History and Ourselves. "Video Lessons: The Reconstruction Era and the Fragility of Democracy." <https://www.facinghistory.org/reconstruction-era/lessons>.
- + PBS Learning Media. "The Reconstruction Amendments." <https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/ilwnet17-soc-us-reconamend/the-reconstruction-amendments>.



Emancipation Day in South Carolina



"Emancipation Day in South Carolina"—The Color Sergeant of the 1st South Carolina (Colored) Volunteers addressing the regiment, after having been presented with the Stars and Stripes, at Smith's Plantation, Fort Royal Island, January 1—from a sketch by our special artist—see page 275.

SOURCE: *Emancipation Day in South Carolina*, 1863. Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly.
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Emancipation_Day_in_South_Carolina_\(1863\),_by_Frank_Leslie%27s_Illustrated_Weekly.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Emancipation_Day_in_South_Carolina_(1863),_by_Frank_Leslie%27s_Illustrated_Weekly.png).



Design a Monument to Reconstruction

NAME: _____

- 1 Visit the website for Reconstruction Era National Historical Park to learn more about the park and Reconstruction: <https://www.nps.gov/reer/index.htm>. BONUS: If you have time, read the presidential proclamation establishing the park: <https://www.nps.gov/reer/learn/proclamation.htm>.
- 2 Choose one of the topics below to research. Review at least two sources and take notes on key people, places, events and other important facts.
- 3 Design a monument for Reconstruction Era National Historical Park based on what you learned. Choose a person, place or event that is an important part of the story of Reconstruction and freedom for Black Americans. Create your monument by sketching it, building a model of it or designing it online. Include a plaque with a brief paragraph describing it.

TOPIC	RESEARCH SUBJECT	SOURCES
The freedom to vote and serve as an elected representative	Robert Smalls , who escaped from slavery, served in the Union Army and was one of the first Black people elected to Congress	<p>Robert Smalls (U.S. House of Representatives) https://history.house.gov/People/Detail/21764</p> <p>Which Slave Sailed Himself to Freedom? https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/which-slave-sailed-himself-to-freedom/</p> <p>Robert Smalls (American Battlefield Trust) https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/robert-smalls</p> <p>Tabernacle Baptist Church—Resting Place of Robert Smalls and home of Robert Smalls monument http://www.beaufortsc.org/50-things-to-do/resting-place-of-robert-smalls</p> <p>Robert Smalls House, a National Historic Landmark http://www.nationalregister.sc.gov/beaufort/S10817707017/index.htm</p>



Design a Monument to Reconstruction (continued)

The freedom to
get an education

Penn School,
one of the first southern
schools created to educate
formerly enslaved people

Penn Center History Timeline

<http://www.penncenter.com/explore-penn-centers-history>

Penn Center

<https://southcarolinalowcountry.com/penn-center>

Charlotte Forten (first Black teacher at the Penn School)

<https://www.pbs.org/onlyateacher/charlotte.html>

Brick Baptist Church (first site of the Penn School)

<https://www.nps.gov/reer/planyourvisit/brick-baptist-church.htm>

TOPIC

The freedom to
own property

RESEARCH SUBJECT

Green-Meldrim House,
where Union General
William T. Sherman—
after meeting with Black
leaders—issued the order
to redistribute property
once owned by Confederate
landowners to Black people
(known as “40 acres and a
mule”)

SOURCES

Sherman's Headquarters During the Civil War

<http://stjohnssav.org/worship/visit/green-meldrim-house>

The Story Behind '40 Acres And A Mule'

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/01/12/376781165/the-story-behind-40-acres-and-a-mule>

The freedom to
self-govern

Mitchelville, the first
self-governing community
of formerly enslaved people
during the Civil War

Mitchelville: The Hidden Town at Dawn of Freedom

<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-16754502>

Mitchelville History

<https://exploremitchelville.org/history>

Mitchelville: One Town's Blueprint for Reconstruction

<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/mitchelville-one-towns-blueprint-reconstruction>