

RECONSTRUCTION: WHEN FREEDOM BROKE



ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What was the promise of Reconstruction and what achievements did Black people make toward this promise?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Define Reconstruction and describe some of the key achievements of this era.
- Explain the significance of the Reconstruction Amendments (the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution).
- Investigate the Freedmen’s Bureau and its role in aiding Black Americans during Reconstruction.
- Analyze primary source material to better understand the perspectives of Black Americans during Reconstruction, the challenges they faced and their accomplishments.
- Create a poster representing key achievements of Black Americans during Reconstruction in one area, such as employment, education, voting and elected office and land ownership.



LEARNING STANDARDS

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



TIME NEEDED

65 minutes + time for students to complete research project



MATERIALS

- AV equipment to listen to/view audio and video clips, and to project a website
- *Thomas Nast’s “Emancipation”* handout (one copy to project or one per student)
- *Thomas Nast’s “Emancipation” Explained* handout (one copy for teacher reference)
- *The Promise of Reconstruction* handouts (one set of each of the following per small group)
 - *Employment*
 - *Education*
 - *Voting and Elected Office*
 - *Land Ownership*
- Access to laptops or tablets



VOCABULARY

13 th Amendment	emancipation/emancipated	HBCUs
14 th Amendment	Emancipation	Juneteenth
15 th Amendment	Proclamation	reconstruction
“40 acres and a mule”	enslaved	secede/secession
Civil War	Freedmen’s Bureau	

Procedures

PART I

Defining Reconstruction (45 mins.)

NOTE

Mrs. Laura Smalley was born into slavery on a plantation in Hempstead, Texas, on an unknown date in the 1800s. She was interviewed in 1941 as part of *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*. This collection contains more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery gathered in the 1930s as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

1

Tell students that they will listen to an audio recording of a former enslaved woman, Mrs. Laura Smalley, who recounts her life at the end of the Civil War, when enslaved people were emancipated. Share the background information from the note. Then project the page with the transcription and interview (1:49), and play the recording: <https://hearingvoices.com/webworks/juneteenth-emancipation>. After, discuss the following questions:

- Mrs. Smalley's timeline and memories seem to be a bit confused. Why might this be? How did her enslavers keep them in the dark about events that were taking place during and after the Civil War?
- Why did Mrs. Smalley think her enslaver ("old master") was dead? Why do you think the enslaved people did not know he was fighting in the war?
- Why didn't "old master" tell the enslaved people they had been emancipated at first?
- Why was there a big dinner on the 19th? What is the significance of this date? [*June 19, 1865—Juneteenth—is the day Union soldiers landed in Texas with news that the Civil War and slavery had ended.*]
- What does Mrs. Smalley say it was like for her family after "freedom broke"? What does she mean when she says, "turned us out just like...you turn out cattle"?
- What choices and resources do you imagine most former enslaved people had available to them after "freedom broke"?
- How did it feel to hear the actual voice of a former enslaved person? How was this different from reading about the experiences of enslaved people in a book?

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- 2 Ask students if they know the name of the period immediately following the Civil War, when “freedom broke,” or anything about this era. Allow a few volunteers to share their ideas. Post the following definition on the board and review with students.

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.

- 3 Show the video, “Reconstruction in Four Minutes” (4:45): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CKcGj4Cq8E>. As students watch, have them note information that confirms or negates what they discussed earlier, and generate at least one question that they have about Reconstruction. Post their questions on the board.

- 4 Highlight the “Reconstruction Amendments” noted in the video and their critical importance in laying the foundation for a more equal life for Black Americans. Form small groups and assign each one of the Reconstruction Amendments—the 13th, 14th or 15th Amendment. Have groups consult one or more of the sources below and investigate what rights and freedoms their assigned amendment provided.

SOURCES

National Constitution Center: <https://constitutioncenter.org/learn/educational-resources/historical-documents/the-reconstruction-amendments>

Teaching Tolerance: <https://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/reconstruction.pdf>

Fasttrack Teaching Materials: https://www.fasttrackteaching.com/ffap/Unit_1_Reconstruction/U1_Reconstruction_Amendments.html

Kids Encyclopedia: https://kids.kiddle.co/Reconstruction_Amendments

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- 5** In their groups, have students prepare a brief oral summary of the amendment in the voice of a 19th century member of Congress (encourage them to have fun with the old-time role play). Then create new small groups that include a mix of students who studied different amendments. Have them perform their old-time oral summaries and question one another about the significance of each amendment.

PART II

The Achievements of Reconstruction (20 mins. + time for group research projects)

NOTE

If students have access to laptops or tablets, the image can be viewed online at <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/pnp/pga/03800/03898r.jpg>.

- 6** Project or distribute the handout *Thomas Nast's "Emancipation,"* and review the introduction as a class. In small groups, direct students to analyze this famous lithograph, which imagines the difference that Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation would have on former enslaved people. Have groups create a T-chart with before and after conditions for Black people according to Nast. Use the handout *Thomas Nast's "Emancipation" Explained,* as needed to guide students' work.
- 7** As a class, discuss students' observations. Highlight Nast's emphasis on the themes of safe and adequate housing, public education and paid work. Ask students which of these predictions they think were realized during the period of Reconstruction.
- 8** Comment that Black people showed tremendous agency, imagination and innovation in building free lives with limited resources during Reconstruction. Note that the U.S. government aided Black people through an agency called the Freedmen's Bureau, and share the following brief summary:

"The Freedmen's Bureau, formally known as the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, was established in 1865 by Congress to help millions of former Black slaves and poor whites in the South in the aftermath of the Civil War. The Freedmen's Bureau provided food, housing and medical aid, established schools and offered legal assistance. It also attempted to settle former slaves on land confiscated or abandoned during the war. How-

ever, the bureau was prevented from fully carrying out its programs due to a shortage of funds and personnel, along with the politics of race and Reconstruction.”¹

- 9 Tell students they will conduct research, using primary documents from the Reconstruction era, to learn more about the achievements of Reconstruction in the areas of: (a) employment, (b) education, (c) voting and elected office, and (d) land ownership. Have students select one topic to study further and form small groups based on their chosen topics. Distribute the relevant *Promise of Reconstruction* handouts to each group and provide them with access to laptops or tablets.
- 10 Assign groups to review at least two of the primary documents on the handouts and consult one to two additional sources on their topic. After conducting their research, groups should create a poster representing key ideas, people, places and/or events related to their topic and the “Promise of Reconstruction.” Groups can create physical posters or design them digitally using online tools such as Glogster, Canva and Emaze.
- 11 When the posters are complete, display them in the classroom or in an online gallery (e.g., Voodoochilli), and allow groups to present their work. Conclude the lesson by conducting a discussion using the questions on the next page and by revisiting the questions students posed in step 3 of this lesson.

¹ “Freedmen’s Bureau,” History.com, last modified October 3, 2018, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/freedmens-bureau>.



Discussion Questions

1

What accomplishments during the Reconstruction era most stood out to you? What personal qualities did Black Americans exhibit in order to accomplish these things?

2

What challenges and obstacles did Black people encounter as they tried to rebuild their lives?

3

How did the U.S. government both help newly freed Black Americans and hinder their efforts?

4

How did Reconstruction change life for Black people? How did it change the United States?

5

What does it mean to be free? What does it mean to be equal? Do you think Black Americans secured freedom or equality during the Reconstruction era?

6

Do you think the promises of the Reconstruction era were fulfilled? Why?

7

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

- As of 2021, there have only been 11 Black senators in the history of the United States, and two of them were elected during the Reconstruction era—Hiram Revels (served 1870-1871) and Blanche K. Bruce (served 1875-1881). Assign students to research these senators and learn how they advocated for the needs of Black people following the Civil War. Then direct students to research how one modern-day Black senator is working on behalf of Black Americans. Have them compare the types of issues and needs addressed by early and current U.S. senators.
- Have students watch the PBS Independent Lens film *Tell Them We Are Rising: The Story of Black Colleges and Universities* (<https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/tell-them-we-are-rising>). Discuss the history of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs)—from the pre-Civil War era to today—and their significance for Black Americans. Assign students to choose one HBCU and investigate its unique history, which they can share through a brief oral report or multimedia presentation.
- Discuss that while there are few memorials to the Black heroes of the Reconstruction era, there are over 700 statues and monuments in the U.S. honoring the Confederacy. Have students analyze the map of “Confederate Symbols in the U.S.” at <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2017/confederate-monuments>. Investigate possible reasons for the large number of tributes to people and events that propped up slavery as opposed to the Black people who helped to rebuild our country after the Civil War.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

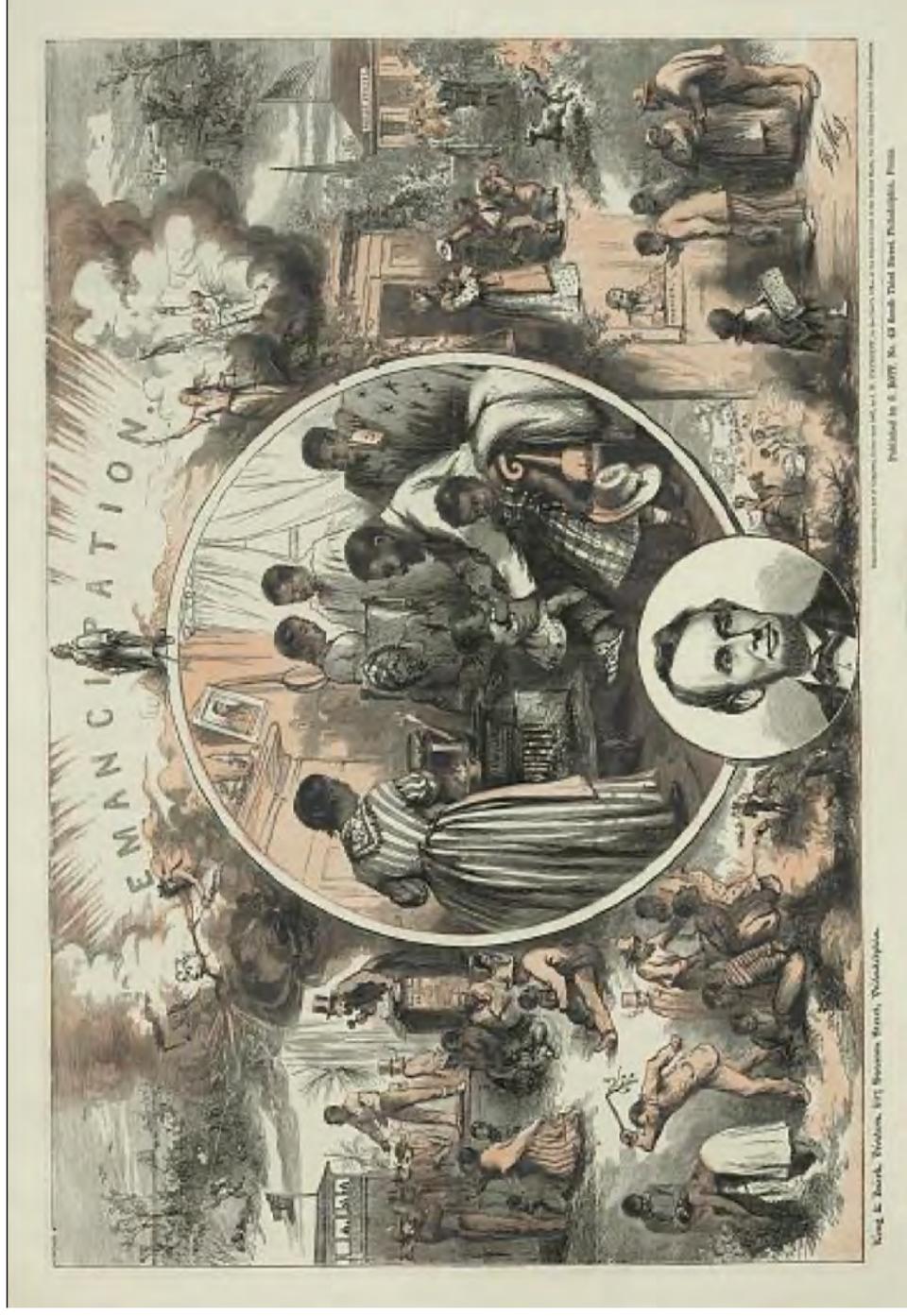
- + CBS Sunday Morning. “The Story of Reconstruction.” April 7, 2019. YouTube video, 8:13. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjetWrsQb-E>.
- + CrashCourse. “Reconstruction and 1876: Crash Course US History #22.” July 18, 2013. YouTube video, 12:59. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=newsS7p-MApl&t=504s>.
- + Digital Public Library of America. “Primary Source Sets: The Freedmen’s Bureau.” <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-freedmens-bureau#tabs>.
- + Facing History and Ourselves. “Video Lessons: The Reconstruction Era and the Fragility of Democracy.” <https://www.facinghistory.org/reconstruction-era/lessons>.
- + Library of Congress. “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938.” <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938>.
- + New Jersey State Bar Foundation Resources on the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments: <https://njsbf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/respect-fall-2012.pdf>
- + <https://njsbf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Respect-Winter-2007.pdf>
- + <https://njsbf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Respect-Winter-2015.pdf>
- + PBS Learning Media. “The Reconstruction Amendments.” <https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/ilwnet17-soc-us-reconamend/the-reconstruction-amendments>.

HANDOUT

Thomas Nast's "Emancipation"

Thomas Nast (1840-1902) was a famous editorial cartoonist, considered to be the "Father of the American Cartoon." He created "Emancipation" for the magazine *Harper's Weekly* in 1863, in response to President Lincoln's "Emancipation Proclamation." Issued on January 1, 1863, this proclamation set free all enslaved people in the 11 rebel states that had seceded from the Union.

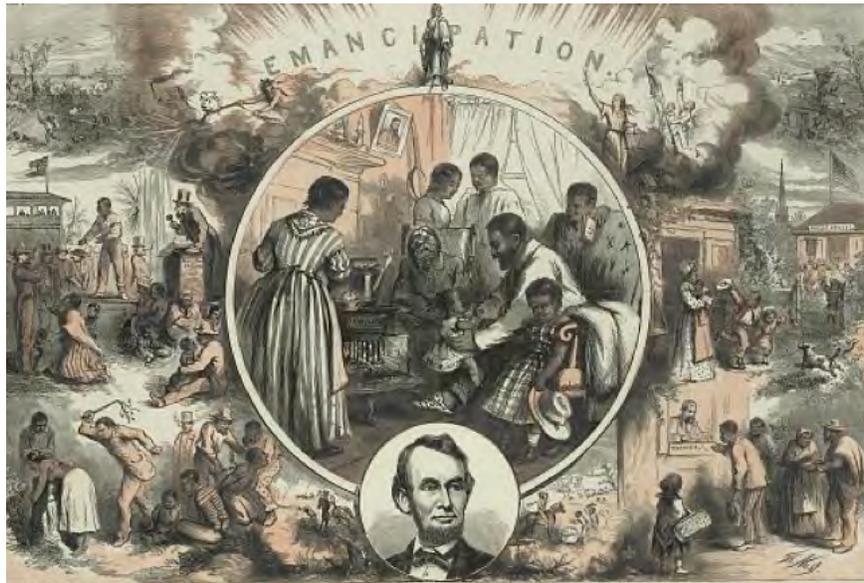
In "Emancipation of the Negroes—The Past and the Future," Nast depicts life for Black Americans before and after freedom. What predictions does he make? Which do you think were attained during the period of Reconstruction?



Thomas Nast. *Emancipation of the Negroes—The Past and the Future* (from "Harper's Weekly"), January 24, 1863, digital file from original print. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pga.03898>.



Thomas Nast's "Emancipation" Explained



The following description of Nast's lithograph is adapted from the Library of Congress:

- The central scene shows the interior of a freedman's home with the family gathered around a "Union" wood stove. The father bounces his small child on his knee while his wife and others look on.
- On the wall near the mantel hang a picture of Abraham Lincoln and a banjo.
- Below this scene is an oval portrait of Lincoln and, above it, Thomas Crawford's statue of "Freedom," which sits atop the dome of the U.S. Capitol.
- On either side of the central picture are scenes contrasting Black life in the South under the Confederacy (left) with visions of the freedman's life after the war (right).
- At top left, fugitive enslaved people are hunted down in a coastal swamp.
- Below, a Black man is sold, apart from his wife and children, on a public auction block.
- At bottom, a Black woman is flogged and an enslaved man branded.
- Above, two "hags," one holding the Cerberus (a multi-headed dog from Greek mythology that guards the gates of the Underworld), preside over these scenes and flee from the gleaming apparition of Freedom.
- In contrast, on the right, a woman with an olive branch and scales of justice stands triumphant. Here, a freedman's cottage can be seen in a peaceful landscape.
- Below, a Black mother sends her children off to "Public School."
- At bottom, a free Black man receives his pay from a cashier.
- Two smaller scenes flank Lincoln's portrait. In one, a mounted overseer flogs a Black field slave (left); in the other, a foreman politely greets Black cottonfield workers.

SOURCE: "Emancipation." Library of Congress. Accessed October 29, 2020. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004665360/#:~:text=Summary%3A%20Thomas%20Nast's%20celebration%20of,a%20%22Union%22%20wood%20stove.>



The Promise of Reconstruction: Employment

- 1 View** at least two of the primary documents below online.
- 2 Consult** one to two additional sources to learn about employment opportunities for former enslaved people following the Civil War. Examples include work in Black churches (e.g., the network of African Methodist Episcopal or AME churches), farming (including sharecropping), industrial work (e.g., factories and railroads), domestic work (e.g., maids and dishwashers), and government service (e.g., holding elected office).
- 3 Create** a physical or digital poster representing some of the key ideas, people, places and/or events related to your topic. Your poster should show the opportunities and challenges for Black Americans during Reconstruction.

Month	Wages
September 1866	\$ 11.00
October 1866	\$ 11.00
November 1866	\$ 11.00
December 1866	\$ 11.00
Total	\$ 44.00

Hampton Plantation Account Book, 1866–1868, South Carolina

<https://iowaculture.gov/history/education/educator-resources/primary-source-sets/reconstruction/hampton-plantation>

Former enslaved people sometimes worked for their former enslavers as wage laborers on plantations. This account book documents the wages of Black workers on a South Carolina plantation.

This instrument witnesseth that James H. Hester, Jr. of the County of Wayne, State of North Carolina, do hereby agree to pay to the said freedman the sum of \$100.00 per month for the term of one year, beginning on the 1st day of December next, and on the expiration of the said term to the said freedman the sum of \$100.00 in full for all faithful services rendered during the term of the said contract, and to be paid to the said freedman at the expiration of the said term, and to be paid to the said freedman at the expiration of the said term, and to be paid to the said freedman at the expiration of the said term.

A Freedman's Work Contract, 1865, North Carolina

<https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-freedmen-s-bureau/sources/116>

The Freedmen's Bureau witnessed and documented work contracts for newly freed Black people to ensure they would collect their wages.

Respectfully,
E. H. Hester, Jr.
Freedman

Received in full of the above account of
of E. H. Hester, Jr.
Jan 24, 1866
E. H. Hester, Jr.
Freedman

Letter to Claim Wages, 1866, North Carolina

<https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-freedmen-s-bureau/sources/113>

The Freedmen's Bureau helped Black people recover unpaid wages. This letter is to an employer who failed to pay one of his workers.



The Promise of Reconstruction: Education

- 1 **View** at least two of the primary documents below online.
- 2 **Consult** one to two additional sources to learn about education opportunities for former enslaved people following the Civil War. Examples include the Penn Center (one of the first schools for formerly enslaved people); Freedmen's schools (thousands were built by the U.S. government); and the establishment of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).
- 3 **Create** a physical or digital poster representing some of the key ideas, people, places and/or events related to your topic. Your poster should show the opportunities and challenges for Black Americans during Reconstruction.



Education Among the Freedmen, 1866–1870, South Carolina

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african-american-odyssey/images/05/0502001r.jpg>

The Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association published this newsletter featuring "Sea-island School, No 1—St. Helena Island, Established April 1862." Donations from various organizations aided 1,400 teachers in providing literacy and vocational education for 150,000 freedmen.



The Freedmen's Union Industrial School, 1866, Virginia

<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a38219/>

Northern teachers, mostly white women, traveled to the South to provide education for formerly enslaved women from primary to college levels. They taught literacy, arts, theology and vocational skills, such as sewing (as seen in this image).



School in Liberty County, Georgia, about 1890

<https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-freedmen-s-bureau/sources/110>

The Freedmen's Bureau established schools throughout the South, such as this one created by the Freedmen's Bureau in Georgia between 1865 and 1870.



Howard University Medical School, Washington, D.C., 1868

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Medical_faculty_\(IA_101487174.nlm.nih.gov\).pdf](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Medical_faculty_(IA_101487174.nlm.nih.gov).pdf)

Howard University was among the first historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) established in the South following the Civil War. This flier announces their first medical session in 1868, just three years after emancipation.



The Promise of Reconstruction: Voting and Elected Office

- 1 **View** at least two of the primary documents below online.
- 2 **Consult** one to two additional sources to learn about opportunities to vote and hold office for former enslaved people following the Civil War. Examples include the ratification of the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, people like Tunis G. Campbell (the Georgia clergyman and politician who organized for voting rights), organizations like the Union League of America (a patriotic club that lobbied for Black political rights), and the achievements of the 2,000 Black men who won office in the South between 1869 and 1877.
- 3 **Create** a physical or digital poster representing some of the key ideas, people, places and/or events related to your topic. Your poster should show the opportunities and challenges for Black Americans during Reconstruction.



The First Vote, 1867

<http://objectofhistory.org/objects/extendedtour/votingmachine/?order=2>

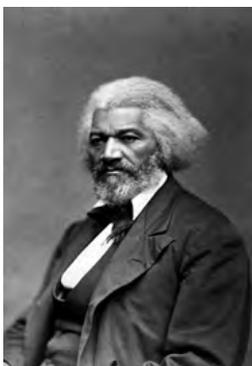
The 15th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, ratified March 30, 1870, provided the right to vote to all male citizens. This illustration from Harper's Weekly in November 1867 imagines the first voting experience for Black men.



The First Colored Senator and Representatives, 1872

<https://digital.librarycompany.org/islandora/object/digitool%3A129464>

Once Black men were able to vote, they worked to elect members of their own communities to public office. From 1869-1899, more than 20 Black men—mostly former enslaved people—were elected to the United States Congress. This Currier & Ives lithograph depicts the first seven Black members of Congress.



Reply of the Colored Delegation to the President, 1866

<https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/4391>

A delegation of Black leaders, including Frederick Douglass, met with President Andrew Johnson in the White House in 1866 to persuade him to change his approach to freedom and reconciliation. Among other issues, they argued for the right to vote for Black people and a new political party bringing together freedmen and poor whites. Johnson could not be persuaded, and Douglass wrote this open letter for publication in newspapers.



The Promise of Reconstruction: Voting and Elected Office

- 1 **View** at least two of the primary documents below online.
- 2 **Consult** one to two additional sources to learn about opportunities for land ownership for former enslaved people following the Civil War. Examples include General William T. Sherman's order leading to "40 acres and a mule," the Homestead Acts (granting public lands to individual families), and the many towns founded by former enslaved people after the Civil War (such as Shankleville and Kendleton in Texas).
- 3 **Create** a physical or digital poster representing some of the key ideas, people, places and/or events related to your topic. Your poster should show the opportunities and challenges for Black Americans during Reconstruction.



"Negroes of Savannah," 1865

<http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/savmtg.htm>

This newspaper account, from February 13, 1865, describes a meeting between Black religious leaders and Union military authorities to discuss matters relating to former enslaved people in Georgia. When asked about caring for themselves, leaders replied, "The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor."



Special Field Order No. 15, 1865

<http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/sfo15.htm>

In 1865, Union General William T. Sherman issued a set of military orders resulting in the confiscation of 400,000 acres of land that once belonged to Southern plantation owners, and the redistribution of this land to freed Black people in parcels of up to 40 acres ("40 acres and a mule"). The plan—which would have settled 18,000 formerly enslaved families along the Atlantic coast of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida—was later revoked by President Andrew Johnson.



Rev. Ulysses L. Houston, 1865

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2008675489>

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/the-truth-behind-40-acres-and-a-mule>

Baptist minister Ulysses L. Houston, one of the pastors who met with Union General William T. Sherman, led 1,000 Black people to Skidaway Island, Georgia, where they established a self-governing Black community with Houston as the governor.