

How did the period of Reconstruction bring promise and progress for Black Americans?

Reconstruction was a relatively short-lived era following the Civil War that lasted from 1865 to 1877. During this time, many Americans grappled with the dramatic social, economic and political changes that were taking place in the nation. With the end of legal chattel slavery came many questions related to the rights and opportunities for formerly enslaved people. They were now in charge of their own destinies. How would they move from chains to productive citizenship? Would they succeed or would their efforts to build independent lives be thwarted?

The Reconstruction era was a time of great possibility, and to help fulfill this possibility Congress established the “Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands,” with the goal of helping millions of “former black slaves and poor whites in the South in the aftermath of the Civil War.”¹ The Freedmen's Bureau provided food, housing, medical aid, education and legal assistance to formerly enslaved people. It also promised to reallocate abandoned and confiscated southern land—“40 acres and a mule”—to the newly emancipated, “who had endured hundreds of years of unpaid toil.”² Though this order would later be reversed by President Andrew Johnson, many Black people seized the opportunity to move away from the plantations of their imprisonment and form new, freer communities.

In addition to providing social and economic aid, the U.S. Congress also laid the legal and political foundation for equality by passing the Reconstruction Amendments. The 13th Amendment, ratified in 1865, stated, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime...shall exist within the United States.” This amendment marked the first time slavery was addressed in the U.S. Constitution (though the phrase “except as punishment for crime” created a loophole that would later be used to persecute Black people). The 14th Amendment, ratified in 1868, granted former enslaved people citizenship rights, and “equal protection of the laws.” The 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870, gave formerly enslaved Black men the right to vote, stating: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” By enacting these amendments, government officials sought to right the wrongs of an institution Lincoln once called “an unqualified evil to the Negro, the white man, and the State.”³

With new rights in place, Black communities mobilized during Reconstruction, voting and serving in government in significant numbers. Historian Eric Foner wrote that, in 1870, “hundreds of blacks were serving as city

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

2 Carol Anderson and Tonya Bolden, *We Are Not Yet Equal: Understanding Our Racial Divide* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 15.

3 Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at Edwardsville, Illinois, September 11, 1858,” in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume 3, ed. Roy P. Basler, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln3/1:13?rgn=div1:view=fulltext>.

policemen and rural constables... [and] in the courts, defendants confronted black magistrates and justices of the peace, and racially integrated juries."⁴ Over 1,400 Black men held office during Reconstruction—more than 600 in state assemblies and 16 in the U.S. Congress, the majority of whom were born into slavery.⁵ In 1872, the number of Black state and federal legislators in the South peaked at 320, a level that was not surpassed for well over a century.⁶

During this era, Black Americans also took advantage of new educational opportunities. In partnership with Northern missionary and aid societies, the Freedmen's Bureau created

hundreds of new schools throughout the South, staffing them with Black and white teachers, providing supplies and even publishing a "freedmen's textbook." By the end of 1865, more than 90,000 former enslaved people were enrolled in public schools.⁷ Thousands of these students went on to attend the more than 90 institutions of higher learning that were established between 1861 and 1900 to educate newly freed men and women.⁸ Many of these historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) continue to serve Black students today, including Shaw University, Talladega College, Howard University, Morehouse College and Hampton University.

4 Susan Cianci Salvatore. *Civil Rights in America: Racial Voting Rights*, Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, and National Historic Landmarks Program, 2009. https://www.nps.gov/subjects/tellingallamericansstories/upload/CivilRights_VotingRights.pdf.

5 Salvatore, *Civil Rights in America*.

6 J. Morgan Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 19.

7 Jim Warren, "Black History Month: Newly emancipated slaves eagerly enrolled in Freedmen's schools," *Lexington Herald Leader*, February 3, 2013, <https://www.kentucky.com/news/state/kentucky/article44401104.html>.

8 National Museum of African American History and Culture, "5 Things To Know: HBCU Edition," <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/5-things-know-hbcu-edition>.