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FREEDOM TO FEAR

A Terrifying and Deadly Backlash

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So determined were most white Southerners to maintain their own way of life that they resorted to fraud, intimidation and murder in order to re-establish their own control of the state governments. . . . The new civil war within the Southern states stemmed from an adamant determination to restore white supremacy.

—Historian Henry Louis Gates⁵⁸

During Reconstruction—the period of legal, political, and social re-creation that followed the Civil War—federal officials and troops remained in the South to enforce Black people’s new rights of freedom and citizenship and to administer educational and other programs for the formerly enslaved. For the first time, Black people in the region comprised a community of voters, public officials, landowners, wage earners, and free American citizens. But continued support for racial hierarchy meant that American slavery and the ideas underlying it could not be changed solely through elections and laws. As white people attacked Black people for asserting their rights, the Reconstruction era’s initial hope and progress gave way to devastating, deadly violence.

Most white people refused to accept Emancipation and Black citizenship. They instead responded to Reconstruction’s progress by using force and terror to disenfranchise, marginalize, and traumatize Black communities while killing countless Black people.



The 1866 New Orleans Massacre. (Harper's Weekly)

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Shortly after passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, white mobs began to target Black people simply for claiming their freedom.

On July 30, 1866, at what is today the Roosevelt Hotel, New Orleans was hosting a convention of white men working to make sure Louisiana's new constitution would guarantee Black voting rights. In the weeks leading up to the convention, local press denounced the attendees as traitors and invaders. "Within a short time," warned the *Louisiana Democrat*, "we may expect to see the State of Louisiana a member of the Union, with nigger suffrage, nigger Senators, and nigger representatives."⁵⁹

When local Black men staged a march to support the convention, the seething opposition erupted in violence as white police and mob members indiscriminately killed Black people in the area. "For several hours, the police and mob, in mutual and bloody emulation, contin-

ued the butchery in the hall and on the street, until nearly two hundred people were killed and wounded," a Congressional committee formed to investigate the massacre concluded in 1867. "How many were killed will never be known. But we cannot doubt there were many more than set down in the official list in evidence."⁶⁰

As Reconstruction continued, the terror attacks that white mobs committed grew more structured and group-based. "A lawlessness which, in 1865-1868, was still spasmodic and episodic, now became organized," W.E.B. Du Bois later observed. "Using a technique of mass and midnight murder, the South began widely organized aggression upon the Negroes."⁶¹

Organized and violent white resistance to Reconstruction was born in Pulaski, Tennessee, on December 24, 1865, when six Confederate veterans formed the first chapter of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).⁶² Functioning from its inception as a political paramilitary arm of white supremacist interests, the Klan engaged in a campaign of terror, violence, and murder targeting African Americans and white people who supported Black civil rights. The Klan and similar organi-

zations, including the Knights of the White Camelia and the Pale Faces, were largely independent and decentralized but shared aims and tactics to form a vast network of terrorist cells. By the 1868 presidential election, those cells were poised to act as a unified military force supporting the cause of white supremacy throughout the South.⁶³

In Georgia on October 29, 1869, Klansmen attacked and brutally whipped 52-year-old Abram Colby, a formerly enslaved Black man who had been elected to Congress by enfranchised freedmen. Shortly before the attack, a group of Klansmen comprised of white doctors and lawyers tried to bribe Mr. Colby to change parties or resign from office.⁶⁴ When he refused, the men brutally attacked him. Mr. Colby later testified before a Congressional committee:

“**[The mob] took me to the woods and whipped me three hours or more and left me for dead.**⁶⁵

In Chattanooga, Tennessee, when a Black man named Andrew Flowers defeated a white candidate in the 1870 race for justice of the peace, Klansmen whipped him and told him that “they did not intend any nigger to hold office in the United States.”⁶⁶

On the night of March 6, 1871, a mob of armed white men hanged a Black man named James Williams in York County, South Carolina, and terrorized the local African American community, assaulting residents and burning homes.⁶⁷ Mr. Williams, enslaved before the Civil War, had recently organized a coalition to protect the freedom of Black people in York County.⁶⁸ White residents circulated rumors claiming that he posed a threat,⁶⁹ and as his former enslaver later testified, his presence “caused a great deal of uneasiness.”⁷⁰ Details of the lynching were sparsely documented but federal officials arrested and prosecuted several alleged members of the mob. One testified during trial that, after hanging Mr. Williams, the mob stopped to get “some crackers and whiskey.”⁷¹ Despite the admission, all charges were later dismissed or discontinued and no one was ever held accountable for Mr. Williams’s death.⁷²

The Memorial at the EJI Legacy Pavilion in Montgomery, Alabama, is inscribed with the names of 500 Black people lynched during Reconstruction. (Jose Vazquez)



York County, South Carolina

In 1871, federal investigators found evidence of 11 murders and more than 600 whippings and other assaults in York County, South Carolina, where nearly the entire white male population had joined the Klan.⁷³ When local grand juries failed to take action, federal authorities urged President Ulysses S. Grant to intervene, describing the state as “under the domination of systematic and organized depravity” that created a “carnival of crime not paralleled in the history of any civilized community.”⁷⁴ More than 60 years later, W.E.B. Du Bois described Klan violence as “armed guerilla warfare” and estimated that, between 1866 and mid-1867, the Klan committed 197 murders and 548 aggravated assaults in North and South Carolina alone.⁷⁵

Indiana to Missouri

A similar white terrorist campaign started in Indiana and spread throughout the country. Calling themselves “whitecaps,” mobs of poor, white farmers targeted Black people they viewed as economic competition and threatened them with death if they refused to abandon their land or give up their jobs. In most cases, local law enforcement’s indifference or inability to protect Black residents allowed the whitecaps to commit violence and murder without fear of legal repercussions.⁷⁶ In Missouri, one newspaper reported that the whitecaps had “become almost as formidable and mysterious as the famous Ku-Klux.”⁷⁷

Warren, Kentucky

In Warren, Kentucky, on September 5, 1868, a white mob affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan surrounded the house of William Glasgow, a Black man and former Union soldier who had pledged to vote in favor of Black rights in the upcoming election. The mob demanded that he come outside. When Mr. Glasgow refused, the mob broke into his house and killed him in front of his wife, then went to another cabin and hanged an “inoffensive negro” who had also served in the Union Army.⁷⁸





The Memorial at the EJI Legacy Pavilion features the locations and estimated death tolls of 34 Reconstruction-era massacres that targeted Black communities. (Jose Vazquez)

St. Helena Parish, Louisiana

Less than two months later, on October 29, 1868, a white mob in St. Helena Parish, Louisiana, seized and shot to death John Kemp, a literate Black coroner and active political organizer.⁷⁹

Columbia, Florida

Later that fall, Prince Weaver, a prominent African American in Columbia, Florida, hosted a social gathering at his home. Five or six disguised men fired on the gathering, killing 13-year-old Samson Weaver and severely wounding three others. Prince Weaver reportedly had “been warned against” holding political meetings at his house. After the attack he learned that the shots were intended to kill him and fled his community in search of safety.⁸⁰

These acts were not committed only by marginalized extremists. Countless white people participated in attacking and killing Black people to defend white supremacy.

As historian Eric Foner explains, the “wave of counter-revolutionary terror that swept over large parts of the South between 1868 and 1871 lacks a counterpart either in the American experience or in that of the other Western Hemisphere societies that abolished slavery in the nineteenth century.”⁸¹

The growing wave of terror and racial violence persisted throughout Reconstruction. As white communities grew increasingly bold and confident in their ability to kill Black people with impunity, the violence expanded beyond organized groups like the Klan.

In the first years after Emancipation, Black people who bravely seized new opportunities to exercise political power, pursue education, and resist economic exploitation risked their own lives to chart a new path. Racial violence killed many and terrorized many more with the knowledge that their long-sought and hard-won freedom now placed them in danger.

Black Political Mobilization and White Backlash

The Black community mobilized after passage of the Reconstruction Amendments, organizing meetings, parades, and petitions calling for the implementation of their legal and political rights, including the right to vote. During the first two years of Reconstruction, Black people formed Equal Rights Leagues throughout the South. These groups held state and local conventions protesting discriminatory treatment and demanding the right to vote and equality before the law.⁸²



Hiram Revels, the nation's first Black senator. (National Archives)

As a result of this activism, in 10 of the 11 former Confederate states, approximately 80 percent of eligible Black male voters were registered by the summer of 1867.⁸³

As new local, state, and federal governments formed, scores of newly-emancipated Black men exercised their right to vote and organized campaigns to run for elected office.

When Senator Hiram Revels of Mississippi, the first African American elected to serve in Congress, took office on February 25, 1870, Senator Charles Sumner—a white Massachusetts



Robert Smalls, Civil War hero and Reconstruction-era Congressman. (Library of Congress)

politician who had helped lead the legislative civil rights efforts that followed the Confederate defeat—exclaimed: “All men are created equal says the great Declaration, and now a great act attests this verity. Today, we make the Declaration a reality.”⁸⁴

Sen. Revels was a Mississippi-born preacher and veteran of the United States Colored Troops who personified African American Emancipation and enfranchisement. In 1869, Black voters elected him to a seat in the Mississippi state senate. The next year, he was elected to fill a United States Senate seat previously occupied by a white enslaver.⁸⁵

Sen. Revels toured the country after taking office and was introduced to audiences as the “Fifteenth Amendment in flesh and blood.”⁸⁶ In an 1871 speech advocating for the end of school segregation, he declared, “I am true to my own race. I wish to see all done that can be done for their encouragement, to assist them in acquiring property, in becoming intelligent, enlightened, useful, valuable citizens. I wish to see this much done for them, and I believe God makes it the duty of this nation to do this much for them.”⁸⁷ Although he served only a year in office, Sen. Revels broke new ground for African Americans in Congress—and others followed.

In 1874, Robert Smalls was elected to Congress from Beaufort County, South Carolina. Twelve years earlier, while working as an enslaved crewman aboard the *Planter*, a Confederate ammunition transport ship, Mr. Smalls piloted the ship out of Charleston harbor and delivered it to the Union Navy. Recognized for his bravery and skill, he became one of the first African American pilots in the United States Navy. In the House of Representatives, Rep. Smalls fought tirelessly against racial segregation in the military, railroads, and restaurants.⁸⁸



(Library of Congress)

During Reconstruction, an estimated 2,000 Black men served in elected office from local and state positions all the way up to Congress.⁸⁹ Almost half of elected Black officeholders served in South Carolina and Louisiana, where Black people had the longest history of political organization. In most other states, African Americans were under-represented compared to their population. Some Black leaders had gained their freedom before the Civil War, while others had worked as skilled artisans during enslavement or served in the Union Army. A large number of Black political leaders came from the church, having worked as ministers during enslavement and in the early years of Reconstruction.

In all, 16 African Americans served in Congress during Reconstruction, more than 600 were elected to state legislatures, and hundreds more held local offices across the South.⁹⁰ The newly elected and racially integrated Reconstruction governments took bold action at the state level, repealing discriminatory laws, rewriting apprenticeship and vagrancy statutes that had widely led to Black people's re-enslavement and arrest after Emancipation, outlawing corporal punishment, and sharply reducing the number of capital offenses. African Americans also served on juries and won election to law enforcement positions like sheriff and chief of police.⁹¹

At the same time that African Americans were participating in government in unprecedented numbers, many white elected leaders worked to undermine and substantially diminish Black political power.

In his 1867 annual message to Congress, President Johnson declared that Black Americans had “less capacity for government than any other race of people,” that they would “relapse into barbarism” if left to their own devices, and that giving them voting rights would result in “a tyranny such as this continent has never yet witnessed.”⁹² This rhetoric from the nation’s highest office encouraged white people, especially in the South, who stood determined to destroy a politically-empowered Black voting bloc.

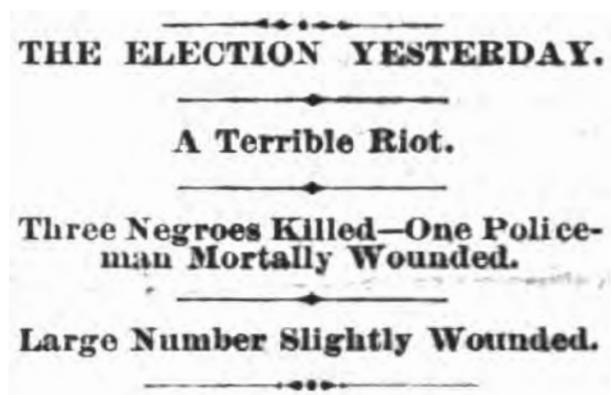
In August 1870, a Black legislator named Richard Burke was attempting to organize a meeting of African Americans in Sumter County, Alabama, when he was shot and killed near his home. Mr. Burke was accused of encouraging armed Black people to stage a protest in Livingston, Alabama, but the *Southern Republican* newspaper reported that the charges against Mr. Burke were most likely made up as an excuse to kill him for his political leadership.⁹³

Across the United States, white mobs waged bloody massacres to prevent Black communities from exercising their voting rights.

In September 1868, two Black politicians known as Colonel Pearce and Captain Murphy

attempted to enter the town of Camilla, Georgia, to speak at a public event. An armed mob of white men met them outside town and warned them that white residents were prepared to respond with violence if they honored their speaking engagement. When the men refused to be intimidated by the mob, the sheriff informed them that “the people would not allow Radical[s] to speak at Camilla.” Instead of offering the Black men protection, the sheriff threatened them against exercising their constitutional right to assemble. At the courthouse, a white mob violently attacked Colonel Pearce, Captain Murphy, and several other Black people attending the event. In the end, newspapers reported that seven African Americans, including a woman and a baby, had been killed and at least 30 other people were wounded.⁹⁴

Less than two months later, on election day in Savannah, Georgia, a group of Black men standing in line at a polling station were accused of blocking the door and an altercation between Black and white voters ensued. Responding police officers fired into the crowd, injuring at least 20 people and killing three Black people: Sam Parsons, Peter Hopkins, and a third unidentified victim.⁹⁵ Massacres in New Orleans in 1868 and in Eufaula, Alabama, and Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1874, are among the many more examples.



Headline reporting election violence in Savannah, Georgia. (Atlanta Constitution, Nov. 7, 1868)

Fighting for Education

During enslavement, white people restricted or denied Black people's access to education. The myth of racial difference was rooted in the "fact" of Black inferiority and intellectual incapacity and their resulting dependence on benevolent white "masters." Yet white hostility to Black literacy and education was actually evidence that enslaved people *wanted* to learn, and that the development of Black knowledge—particularly knowledge of their own claim to rights and freedom—was a threat to white racial dominance.

"In most of us colored folks was the great desire to [be] able to read and write," John W. Fields, 89, recalled in 1936, decades after he was emancipated from enslavement in Ken-

tucky. "We took advantage of every opportunity to educate ourselves. The greater part of the plantation owners were very harsh if we were caught trying to learn or write. . . Our ignorance was the greatest hold the South had on us."⁹⁶

By the outbreak of the Civil War, nearly every Southern state prohibited the education of enslaved people and barred them from possessing reading material or writing instruments. Some of these laws authorized death as punishment.⁹⁷ On two different occasions in 1854, white "slave patrollers" in Mt. Meigs, Alabama, burned alive enslaved Black people suspected of possessing anti-slavery pamphlets.⁹⁸

At the end of the Civil War, the ability to read and write became a symbol of freedom in the Black community.

Black students in class at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, 1902.
(Library of Congress)





African American students on the lawn of Howard University, 1867. (Library of Congress)

Schools for African Americans were places “where the children of a once enslaved people may realize the blessing of liberty and education,”⁹⁹ Frederick Douglass stated in one of his final speeches. “Education . . . means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light only by which men can be free.”¹⁰⁰

Although Black schools were illegal in most Southern states, free African Americans had built, funded, and maintained small schools across the South for more than 3,000 Black children by 1860.¹⁰¹ By 1863, 5 percent of enslaved people had secretly learned to read and write.¹⁰² In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, newly emancipated African Americans established additional schools in churches and other gathering places.

With the aid of the Freedmen’s Bureau, philanthropy from Northern aid societies, and funding from state Reconstruction governments, Black schools quickly opened across the South. Government agencies and charities provided most of the funding, but African Americans emerging from enslavement actively pursued educational opportunities for themselves and their children. Despite their minimal resources, Black communities purchased land, constructed buildings, and raised money to hire teachers.

Rural Black families moved nearer to towns and cities to give their children access to schools. And children, in turn, shared knowledge with older people who had to work rather than attend class, reviewing the day’s lessons with their parents and grandparents after school hours.

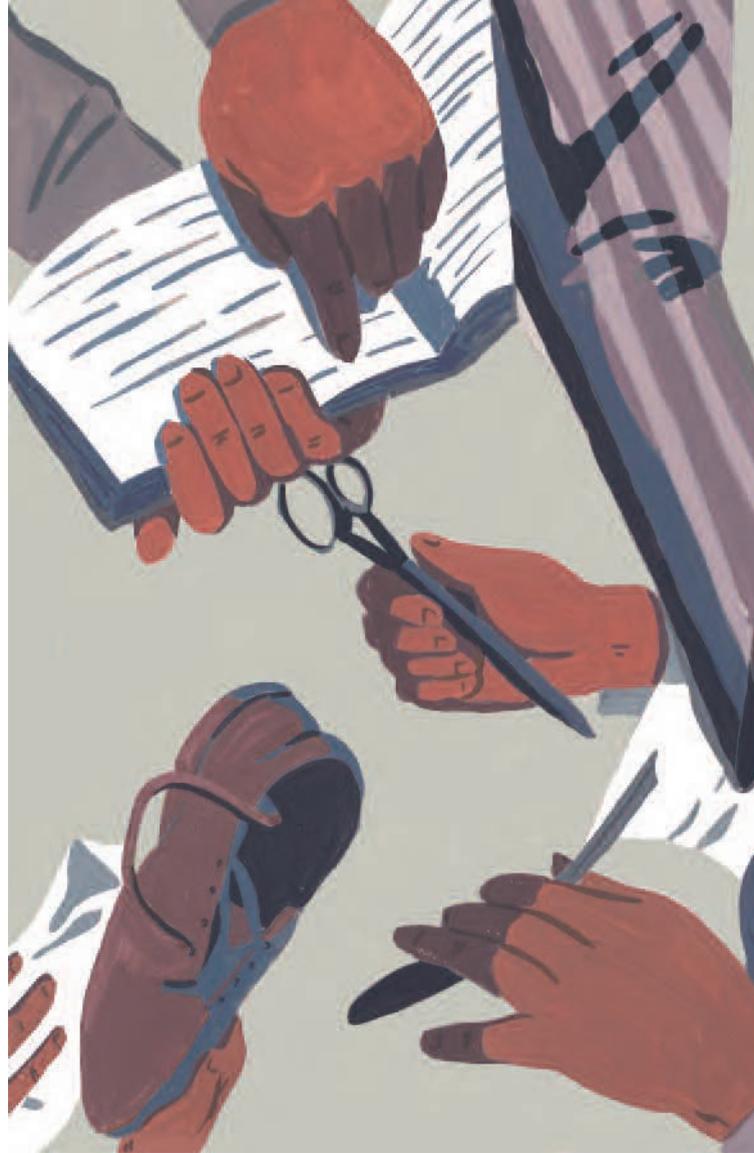
“ [A Black person] riding on a loaded wagon, or sitting on a hack waiting for a train, or by the cabin door, is often seen, book in hand delving after the rudiments of knowledge. A group on the platform of a depot, after carefully conning an old spelling book, resolves itself into a class.¹⁰³

—Freedmen’s Bureau official

The first years after Emancipation also witnessed the creation of the nation’s first Black colleges, including Howard University in Washington, D.C., and Fisk University in Tennessee.

Black education was a target of violence as white communities clung to ideas of Black inferiority and sought to trap Black people in a “freedom” limited to subservience.

In fall 1870, white mobs burned “nearly every colored church and school-house” in Tuskegee, Alabama.¹⁰⁴ In Calhoun County, Alabama, that year, a white mob outraged at the growth of a local Black school lynched four Black men named Tony Cliff, Berry Harris, Caesar Frederick, and William Hall, and also killed William Luke, a white man who had moved to Alabama from the North to teach freedmen.¹⁰⁵ A Georgia newspaper reported merely that “several negroes and one white man have been buried to their long home through the false teachings of that white man.”¹⁰⁶



Resisting Economic Exploitation

“ The slave expected to get 40 acres of land and a mule but nobody got it as far as I know. We never got nothing.

—Ellis Ken Kannon, a Black man enslaved in Tennessee as a youth¹⁰⁷



Emancipated Black Americans sought education and work to realize the promise of freedom. (Illustration by Jamiel Law)

At the end of the Civil War, most Black people lived in the South, where agriculture remained the dominant industry and land ownership had long been the clearest path to economic independence and self-sufficiency. For the many Black people thrust into freedom with years of experience working the land for white profit, scholar Edward Royce explains the prospect of finally holding their own land “gave them the opportunity to reap the fruit of their own labor and to take care of themselves” and held the potential to “make them truly free.”¹⁰⁸ Many formerly enslaved people dreamed that Emanci-

pation would bring that opportunity, but for most it never materialized.¹⁰⁹

News circulated after the war that the federal government was committed to land distribution. Whatever may have been planned, President Lincoln’s April 1865 assassination by a Confederate sympathizer killed the prospect of meaningful Black economic advancement. Vice President and Tennessean Andrew Johnson rose to the presidency initially promising to punish Southern “traitors,” but by 1866 he had issued 7,000 pardons to secessionists.¹¹⁰

Johnson also rescinded orders granting Black farmers tracts of land that the Union had seized from Southern white rebels during the war and instead returned the property to former Confederates.¹¹¹ This left Black people vulnerable to white Southerners who still held the vast majority of land and resources and remained determined to exploit Black labor—“free” or not.

“There is really no difference, in my opinion whether we hold them as absolute slaves or obtain their labor by some other method,”¹¹² a white Alabamian remarked in 1866. Another white Alabama resident similarly described the white South’s idea of post-war restoration:

There is a kind of innate feeling, a lingering hope among many in the South that slavery will be regvanized in some shape or other. They tried by their laws to make a worse slavery than there was before, for the freedman has not now the protection which the master from interest gave him before.¹¹³

”

Left to navigate the “free market” from a position of generations-long disadvantage, in a system dominated by white people determined to maintain racial inequality, Black people found that freedom often meant poverty and desperation. Because most formerly enslaved people lacked the cash to buy land outright, and white landowners routinely refused to provide them credit, the government’s refusal to provide targeted assistance meant that most freedmen could not build their own farms.

Instead of facilitating Black land ownership, President Johnson’s policies ushered in sharecropping—a new practice that soon replaced slavery as a primary source of agricultural labor and Black exploitation in the South.¹¹⁴

Under the sharecropping system, Black laborers cleared, planted, and harvested land they did not own in exchange for a share of the crop, minus costs for food, supplies, and lodging (often in the same quarters they had inhabited while enslaved). Because the Johnson administration required landowners to pay off their debts to banks first, white people frequently shirked their duty to pay Black sharecroppers, who had no recourse.¹¹⁵ Even when they were paid, Black sharecroppers were typically disadvantaged by the contracts they’d signed under duress, and they were often told that their debt to the landowner was higher than their wages. This trapped many Black families in a cycle of debt for generations, preventing them from accumulating capital to build wealth or buy their own property.

Many Black farmers had to take high-interest loans as their only means of purchasing exorbitantly-priced necessities, deepening the debt trap. When they tried to enforce contracts at the end of the season or negotiate better ones, they were met with violence from landowners or organized “regulators” who used terror to force agreement.¹¹⁶

A white manager weighs cotton picked by African American sharecroppers circa 1870. (CORBIS)





In freedom, Black men, women, and children worked together to gain knowledge and share it with one another. (Illustration by Jamiel Law)

Despite these overwhelming obstacles, some African Americans did manage to acquire land, build businesses, and achieve social mobility during Reconstruction. In a few cases, Black people in the South obtained assistance from the Freedmen's Bureau and combined personal resources to buy shared farms or small plots of land.¹¹⁷ Shortly after the war's end, some Black people—particularly those in or near larger cities—also began to open small businesses and establish themselves as blacksmiths, barbers, shoemakers, builders, and grocers.¹¹⁸

In Nashville, Tennessee, in 1871, a formerly enslaved Black man named Henry Harding owned and managed one of the city's most popular hotels and built a net worth of \$35,000. He later became one of the two largest Black taxpayers in Davidson County.¹¹⁹

In Washington, D.C., the availability of some government jobs and establishment of Howard University created a magnet for Black intellectuals and civic leaders. African Americans who moved to the nation's capital purchased property, built successful businesses, and pursued education for themselves and their children. In the years following the war, "the District of Columbia witnessed more than a doubling in the number of Black [people] who owned businesses (156 to approximately 318) and a significant increase in their average real and personal property holdings."¹²⁰

More than 90 percent of Black Americans resided in the South by 1870, and only 1 percent (30,000) of the more than three million African Americans in the region owned land.¹²¹

Many Black people became ensnared by a new form of slavery through the criminal law—convict leasing.

As the Southern labor market faced a void left by Emancipation, Southern legislators used a loophole in the Thirteenth Amendment—which banned involuntary servitude *except as punishment for crime*—to establish convict leasing.

After creating discriminatory “Black Codes” to criminalize newly freed Black people as vagrants and loiterers, states passed laws authorizing public officials to lease prisoners to private industries. While states profited, prisoners earned no pay and faced inhumane, hazardous, and often deadly working conditions. Under these laws, thousands of Black people were forced into a brutal system that historians have called “worse than slavery.”¹²²

The convict leasing system worked to re-enslave Black people using the criminal justice system. (Illustration by Jamiel Law)



In Mississippi, convict leasing began in 1868. Colonel Edmund Richardson, a white man and antebellum millionaire who used convict labor to rebuild his fortune,¹²³ signed a contract with the state allowing him to keep all profits from the labor of imprisoned men—nearly all of whom were Black and formerly enslaved.¹²⁴ According to an 1871 state report reviewing the leasing system, Richardson doled out labor assignments by race, sending only Black convicts to clear and build levees on swampland he owned in the Delta. The few white prisoners and old and sick Black prisoners remained at the state penitentiary in Jackson.¹²⁵ Though largely uncritical, the report reviewing Richardson's operation between 1868 and 1871 documented dozens of prisoners killed by violence or disease.¹²⁶

The widespread economic exploitation of Black people continued for generations after slavery's end. Those who challenged this system of domination faced threats, violence, and even murder.

Late in the summer of 1865, a white mob brutally killed six Black men in Duplin County, North Carolina: Charles Winters, John Hirst, John Middleton, Thomas Bradley, and two men whose names were not recorded.¹²⁷ According to the testimony of a Union soldier, the six men had entered into a sharecropping agreement with their former slaveowner and continued to work on the plantation where they had been enslaved.¹²⁸ When the white man later tried to evict the men without compensation for the work they had done, they insisted on their right to be paid. In response, the white man gathered his armed white neighbors, including law enforcement officers, and killed all six Black men.¹²⁹ While some newspapers attempted to justify the violence by reporting that one of the Black men tried "to run away while his house was being searched for stolen property," other reports made no attempt to conceal the white

landowners' intent "to terrify the negroes into leaving without their share of the crop."¹³⁰ This kind of violence was widespread.

In a January 1866 letter to the Freedmen's Bureau, Brevet Major General Clinton B. Fisk, stationed in Centreville, Tennessee, reported that white residents were using rampant violence to maintain economic control over Black people. "Since April 15, 1865," he wrote, referencing the date of President Lincoln's death, "there have been numerous outrages committed against freedmen in this district."

”
The violence committed was generally death. The Rebels adopted this course to keep them in bondage up til June last when a federal garrison was stationed at this place. During the rebellion the freedman was kept under the control of their rebel masters by violence for if any left their former master they sent the young bands of Bushwhackers after him and when was found he was deliberately shot down. This deterred many from leaving and this today keeps them from getting remuneration for their work which they perform under dread of maltreatment . . . I know of some 5 or 6 having been killed in that manner all for the above purpose.¹³¹

The Freedmen's Bureau

In March 1865, Congress established the Freedmen's Bureau to provide formerly enslaved people with basic necessities and to oversee their condition and treatment in the former Confederate states. In practice, the Bureau often fell short at this vast and historic undertaking, as white mobs and institutions throughout the South continued to oppress, attack, and exploit African Americans during Reconstruction. Local Bureau offices served as central community locations to document reports of violence committed against freed people, register Black people to vote, verify labor contracts between formerly enslaved people and employers, provide food and medical care, establish schools, and perform marriages.¹³² The offices often faced both internal and external impediments to carrying out these functions.

Many of the Bureau's difficulties began when it was established as a division of the War Department and authorized to operate for only one year after the war's end. Congress appropriated no budget for the Bureau and instead left its staffing and funding to the military¹³³—an institution ill-suited for the task of overseeing the complex social restructuring required to counter the effects of centuries of enslavement and entrenched racial hierarchies. Some lawmakers proposed making the Bureau a permanent, independent agency or making it part of the Interior Department but those ideas met bipartisan opposition.¹³⁴ In 1866, President Johnson vetoed Congress's first attempt to extend the Bureau's operations beyond one year. The measure was rewritten and passed over a second veto.¹³⁵

Bureau offices were poorly staffed and under-resourced, unable to cope with the numerous needs of formerly enslaved people still facing widespread violence and discrimination alongside the trauma and poverty borne of generations in bondage. The Bureau Commissioner's office was responsible for overseeing operations in the entire former Confederacy with a staff of just 10 clerks. As of 1868, the Bureau had only 900 officials to serve millions of formerly enslaved people across the South.¹³⁶

Local Bureau offices quickly became targets for racist violence. Many white people in the South saw the Bureau as a symbol of unjust federal occupation and resented that federal officials were working to assist formerly enslaved people while Southern white communities remained devastated by the failed Confederate rebellion. White Southerners greatly hindered the Bureau's ability to enforce federal law by denying its authority. When two freedwomen brought a case against a white man named Maynard Dyson in Virginia in 1866, he ignored the Freedmen's Court's summons and refused to comply with the court's order that he compensate the women. Dyson's attitude was common, and strained resources rendered the Bureau largely powerless to force compliance.¹³⁷

In many instances, white Southerners' disregard for the Bureau escalated to violence against schools and teachers that educated Black children. In 1869, a white mob burned down a freedmen's school in Clinton, Tennessee. A teacher later explained in a letter to the Bureau that, days before the fire, the school had raised the American



Students and teachers outside the Freedmen's Bureau school on St. Helena's Island, South Carolina, 1866.

flag to celebrate the recent presidential inauguration of former Union General Ulysses S. Grant.¹³⁸ Bureau records document many attacks on schools, including in Travis County, Texas;¹³⁹ Queen Anne's County, Maryland;¹⁴⁰ and Rockbridge County, Virginia.¹⁴¹ In 1868, the white owner of a Clarksville, Tennessee, building that freed people wanted to use for a school declared that he would rather "burn it to the ground than rent it for a 'nigger school.'"¹⁴²

In the face of waning political will to protect Black people's lives and rights and under growing political pressure from the South, Congress unceremoniously dismantled the Freedmen's Bureau in 1872—seven years after the war's end, five years before the end of Reconstruction, and at the height of deadly violence targeting African Americans. Today the Bureau's records

supply some of the most detailed descriptions of the Reconstruction era, while also documenting the agency's own shortcomings and failures.

"The passing of a great human institution before its work is done leaves a legacy of striving for other men," W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in 1901.¹⁴³ While the Freedmen's Bureau was launched as a federal effort to provide support and protection to formerly enslaved people as they struggled to exercise new freedoms, the inadequate and incomplete commitment to that purpose enabled fierce white resistance to undermine the Bureau's effectiveness, and ensured that the work of protecting Black freedom would remain an unfulfilled task for years to come.