

Freedmen and Women

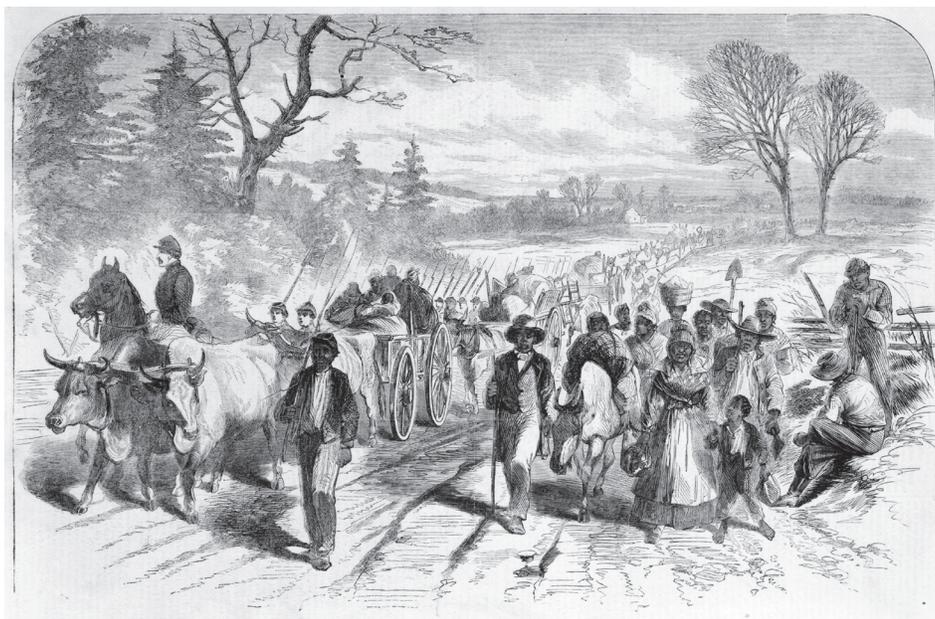
1865/1866: And now the war is over. This is a joyous time. The horrors of slavery have ended. In millions of gestures, large and small, Black people in America resisted slavery from its very beginning in 1619. You won your freedom and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution ended slavery once and for all. All through the summer of 1865 there have been parades and celebrations. It's a time of unbelievable excitement, but also apprehension. What exactly does freedom mean? What kind of lives will you have now? True, you are free to leave the plantation. You are free to go North. Free to travel. Free to seek out lost family members who had been sold off. But you're also free to starve, free to be attacked by angry whites seeking revenge, free to be kicked out of your homes by defeated plantation owners.

Consider all the problems you face: Even though you have lived your entire lives in the South working to make white people rich, you yourselves own nothing. The shack you live in is owned by your former owner. Same with all the tools, work animals, and seed. Even the clothes you have on are owned by your ex-master. Most important, you own no land. For the last 250 years, enslaved Black people were robbed of their labor and their knowledge in order to make white people rich and now in "free-

dom" you own absolutely nothing. Without land you will always be dependent, always forced to serve the property owners. You want to farm your own land, and grow food for your family.

And there are other problems: At least 90% of you are illiterate. Under slavery it was a crime to teach a slave to read or write. Some learned anyway, but most had no opportunity. Most of you own no guns. Almost all firearms are owned by your former masters and the whites who fought for the Confederacy. (Remember, however, that the Union Army still occupies much of the South, and some Union soldiers used to be held in slavery, like you.) Also you have no political rights: You can't vote or hold office.

Long ago, your people were kidnapped in Africa, stuffed into the bellies of stinking slave ships, stripped of your language, dumped in a strange land, punished for practicing your religion, frequently separated from your family members, and forced to labor with a whip at your back. The wealth of this country, both South and North, is because of *your* labor, *your* skills, *your* knowledge. You've suffered too much—and whites have profited too much—for you to be forced to wander the countryside as beggars. This is not your idea of freedom.



Library of Congress

Freed African Americans heading into Newbern, North Carolina. Harper's Weekly, Feb. 21, 1863.

Sharecropping

Most freedmen remained landless. Still, in a post-war economy where the demand for agricultural wage labor far outstripped the supply, freedmen had considerable bargaining power. Some struck, others slowed down cotton and rice production, and significant numbers refused to sign labor contracts. Planters and freedmen found themselves in a standoff. Neither side got what it wanted.

Most freedpeople didn't get 40 acres, let alone a mule. And most ex-slaveholders could not recruit and keep a cheap labor force of black contract labor because freedmen generally refused to work in gangs under white supervision on cotton, rice, and sugar plantations.

In the end the two sides compromised. The result was sharecropping. The system got its name because both the tiller of the soil and the owner of the land received a share of the harvest. In return for seed, materials, and the right to work the land, the farmer shared his harvest with the landlord. Freedmen considered sharecropping preferable to wage contracts. It allowed them to work individually at their own pace and to avoid white-supervised gang labor. For the planter, sharecropping was often the only way he could get freedpeople to produce cotton, sugar, rice, or tobacco.

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An Alabama newspaper that reflected the views of local planters, the *Selma Argus*, recognized that sharecropping was “an unwilling concession to the freedman’s desire to become a proprietor. . . .” In an editorial, the *Argus* commented that if African American farm labor was permitted to rent and sharecrop, “the power to control him is gone.”

Yet sharecropping was very different from landownership. Sharecropping gave farmers an important measure of control over their work, yet still left them dependent on a landlord for land, and often seed, equipment, and credit.

Even so, during Radical Reconstruction, the system of sharecropping frequently worked to the advantage of the cropper and to the disadvantage of the landlord. That’s because local magistrates and justices of the peace who settled disputes between tenants and landlords tended to be Republicans. In fact, in many instances the local officials were African Americans. But with the end of Reconstruction, the Democratic Party regained control of local governments and appointed magistrates and justices sympathetic to the old planting class. Public officials now allowed landlord-merchants to manipulate the payment of shares for seed and materials in ways that reduced croppers to a permanent state of debt, poverty, and dependence.

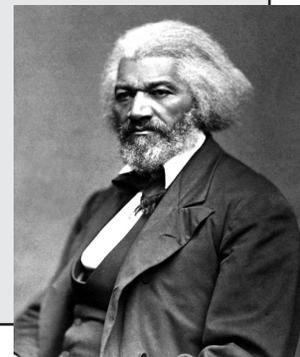
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You say that you have emancipated us. You have and I thank you for it. But what is your emancipation?

When the Israelites were emancipated they were told to go and borrow of their neighbors—borrow their coin, borrow their jewels, load themselves down with the means of subsistence; after they should go free in the land which the Lord God gave them. When the Russian serfs had their chains broken and were given their liberty, the government of Russia—aye the despotic government of Russia—gave to these poor emancipated serfs a few acres of land on which they could earn their bread.

When you turned us loose, you gave us no acres. You turned us loose to the sky, to the storm, to the whirlwind, and worst of all, you turned us loose to the wrath of our infuriated masters.

—Frederick Douglass, *summing up the failure of Reconstruction*



Frederick Douglass, ca. 1879.

National Archives

Reconstructing the South: Problems

You are part of a delegation of African Americans who, up until recently, were enslaved. You are traveling to Washington, D.C., to demand legislation that will make sure that freedmen and women become truly free and are able to advance socially, politically, educationally, and economically. Before you leave, there are a number of key questions that you must agree upon. These are difficult questions, and your answers to them could determine whether your future is one of progress or misery.

- 1. SITUATION:** Right now, almost no ex-slaves in the South own any land. Legally, most of you don't even own the clothes you are wearing. All your lives you have lived and worked on plantations owned by wealthy whites. Some people argue that the legitimate owners of the Southern plantations are you, the freed slaves. They say that for almost 250 years, your people are the ones who did all the work and made the plantations profitable—and that because of your sacrifices, rightfully the plantations should belong to you. And, remember, these white plantation owners are traitors. They began a war that killed more than 600,000 people. Why should they get to keep the land that *you* worked on all those years? Others say that this might be the moral thing to demand, but it would be politically unwise. Ultimately, it will be Northern politicians who will be deciding your fate. Remember, like Abraham Lincoln, most of these people were never abolitionists. And now that you are free, they will be reluctant to take away the property of other white people to give it to Black people. For one thing, they may worry that this would set an example for poor whites in the North to take over the property of rich whites. They, too, could say that the factories were built with their labor and they should own them. Northern politicians may also worry that if you owned the land, you might want to grow food instead of cotton, and this could have a negative impact on the Northern economy.

QUESTION: Now that the war is ended, who should own and control these plantations?

- 2. QUESTION:** Would you be willing to promise the Northern politicians that if they gave you land, that you would continue to grow cotton?

ARGUMENTS: Some of you argue that, of course, you have to give politicians this assurance, otherwise you'll get nothing from them. They argue: Look, we may not want to grow cotton, and we may not want to make promises to anyone, but we have to be realistic; these people care about Northern industries maintaining their supply of cheap cotton more than they care about your desires. It's better to get something than to get nothing. Others of you argue that to offer this promise is just to trade in one kind of slavery for another. What kind of freedom is it when you are forced to grow a crop you don't want to grow? Cotton is a "sorrow" crop, associated with slavery. You can't eat cotton and growing it makes you dependent on cotton dealers—all white—to market your product. And it makes you vulnerable to prices of cotton going up and down, something you have no control over. If it's your land, you should be able to grow what you want.

3. **SITUATION:** There are still lots of Confederate (Southern) military officers and political leaders at large in the South. True, the war is over. But these are the people who actively led the slave owners' fight to keep slavery.

QUESTION: What do you propose should happen to these Confederate leaders?

ARGUMENTS: Some of you argue that the top leaders should be executed or at least imprisoned for the rest of their lives. They argue that these ex-Confederate leaders are guilty of mass murder because they led an illegal war—a war that killed more than 600,000 human beings and caused great suffering. These people also argue that not only do Confederate leaders deserve to be executed because of their role in the war, but more importantly they also pose the greatest danger to your freedom. These are the people who will be desperate to return to slavery days and they have the money and leadership capabilities to organize secret armies to push you back into slavery. Others argue that if you appear to want revenge, and go after the most popular white leaders in the South that it will poison relations between Blacks and whites, and damage the long-term possibility for racial harmony. They argue that the best way to get white Southerners to rise up against you is to kill or imprison their leaders. They say that we need to put the war behind us, and that so long as you have rights and resources, you don't need to hurt anyone else.

4. **SITUATION:** Before the war, enslaved Blacks counted as 3/5 of a person in determining how many U.S. representatives a state was entitled to—even though, of course, Blacks held in slavery had no vote. Now that slavery has ended, Blacks will be counted as full people whether or not they are allowed to vote. Ironically, if former slaves *don't* vote, this could mean that the white-controlled South could become even more powerful.

QUESTION: Who should be allowed to vote in the new South? Everyone? Only former slaves? Only those who were loyal to the United States during the war? Women?

ARGUMENTS: This is a controversial and complicated issue: Some people say only those with land should vote, because they are the ones who have the most stake in society and they are the most stable people. Some argue that only people who can read should be able to vote, because otherwise people will not vote intelligently. Others say this sounds good, but if landownership or literacy were qualifications for voters, then people who would be able to vote would be mostly rich white people with educations. Some argue that any Southerner who picked up arms against the U.S. government should not be allowed to vote—that these people proved that they were disloyal to the United States and should not now be rewarded with the vote. Besides, anyone who supported the Confederacy and slavery will now use their vote to work against your freedom. Others believe that if you try to deny the vote to all those who supported the Confederacy that would mean taking it away from most white Southerners, and this would make it seem like you were trying to impose a Black government on the South. Denied the vote, whites might turn to rebellion or terrorism and begin murdering Blacks. As you know, many of those who made up the abolition movement in the North were white women. They argue that now is the time to demand a Constitutional amendment that would give everyone the vote: white men, white women, Black men, Black women. Freedom and democracy is in the air, and this is the time to create a whole new society based on equality. Others say that if you demand the right for women to vote, this will make you look radical and foolish and no one will take you seriously. It will be seen as radical enough just demanding the vote for Black men, but to add women to the mix will doom your movement.

5. SITUATION: Most of the guns in the South are owned by whites. Many people who fought with the Confederacy still have their weapons from the war. Temporarily, the South is occupied by the Union army. Many white Southerners, probably most of them, would like nothing better than to return Blacks to slavery. There has been talk of a new organization, called the Ku Klux Klan, designed to terrorize Blacks and their white supporters, and to return the South to slavery.

QUESTION: How will the Black freedmen and women be protected from the revenge of the defeated soldiers and from the plantation owners?

ARGUMENTS: One proposal would be to keep the Union army in the South, and perhaps to even bring in more troops. Some people argue that the Confederate army might not have been able to defeat the Union army, but it *would* be able to defeat the newly freed Black people. Therefore the Union army will be needed for years. Others argue that the presence of Union soldiers will continue to anger white Southerners and some other solution must be found. Some argue that no Confederates should be allowed to own guns. Others counter that this would not be a solution and would continue to anger white Southerners. Some suggest that the Union army should arm Blacks, so that they can defend themselves from possible attacks from whites. Others say that more guns in the South will just lead to more violence.

6. QUESTION: What conditions should be put on the Southern states before they are allowed to return to the Union?

ARGUMENTS: Some Northerners say that the Southern states never actually left the Union, so these states should be allowed back into the United States immediately. After all, didn't Lincoln wage the war based on the belief that secession was illegal? Others say this is ridiculous, the Southern states would just re-elect the rich racists who led the country to Civil War—the Southern states left the Union and organized a separate country, with a new constitution and president. The 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution ended slavery forever. However, if the South is allowed to re-enter the Union without any changes, what would stop them from passing laws that would bring back slavery under a different name? Here are some possibilities you might consider: Southern states can rejoin the Union after they ratify (approve) the 13th amendment abolishing slavery. Others say this isn't enough, that the Southern states need to create new state governments that are democratically elected by the people, including now-freed Black people. Others say that this is not the business of the federal (U.S.) government, that it's up to each state to decide who gets to vote or not. Some Northerners say that the South should be ruled as conquered territory for several more years. It's too early to even raise the question of allowing the former Confederate states back into the Union. What do you think?