

## The Black Codes

When Congress convened in December 1865, the legislative members from the newly reconstituted southern states presented themselves at the Capitol. Among them were Alexander H. Stephens--who was the ex-vice-president of the Confederacy--four Confederate generals, five colonels, and several other rebels. After four bloody years of war, the presence of these Confederates infuriated the Congressional Republicans, who immediately denied seats to all members from the eleven former Confederate states.

Adding to the controversy, the new southern legislatures began passing repressive "Black Codes." Mississippi passed the first of these laws designed to restrict the freedom of the emancipated blacks in November 1865. The South intended to preserve slavery as nearly as possible in order to guarantee a stable labor supply.

While life under the Black Codes was an improvement over slavery, the codes identified blacks as a separate class with fewer liberties and more restrictions than white citizens. The details of the Codes varied from state to state, but some universal policies applied. Existing black marriages were recognized, blacks could testify in court cases involving other blacks, and blacks could own certain kinds of property.

In contrast, blacks could not serve on a jury and were not allowed to vote. They were barred from renting and leasing land and in many states could not carry firearms without a license. The Codes also had strict labor provisions. Blacks were required to enter into annual labor contracts and could be punished, required to forfeit back pay, or forced to work by paid "Negro catchers" if they violated the contract. Vagrants, drunkards, and beggars were given stiff fines, and if they could not pay them, they were sentenced to work on a chain gang.

Most former slaves lacked capital and marketable skills and had only manual labor as a means of support. The black activist Frederick Douglass explained: "A former slave was free from the individual master, but the slave of society. He had neither money, property, nor friends. He was free from the old plantation, but he had nothing but the dusty road under his feet."

Thousands of freedmen became sharecropper farmers, which led them to becoming indentured servants, indebted to the plantation owner and resulting in generations of people working the same plot of land.

The situation in the south left Northerners wondering what they had gone to war for, since blacks were essentially being re-enslaved. Even moderate Republicans started to adopt the views of the more radical party members. Johnson's lenient Reconstruction plan, along with the South's aggressive tactics, led Congress to reject Johnsonian Reconstruction and create the Joint Committee on Reconstruction.