

## The Reconstructed South

The postwar South, where most of the fighting had occurred, faced many challenges. In the war's aftermath, Southerners experienced collapsed property values, damaged railroads, and agricultural hardships. The elite planters were faced with overwhelming economic adversity perpetuated by a lack of laborers for their fields. However, it was the newly freed slaves in the former Confederate states that faced the greatest challenge: what to do with their newfound freedom.

Blacks acquired new rights and opportunities, such as equality before the law and the rights to own property, be married, attend schools, enter professions, and learn to read and write. One of the first opportunities the former slaves took advantage of was the chance to educate themselves and their children. The new Radical Republican state governments took steps to provide adequate public schools for the first time in the south.

Nearly 600,000 black students, from children to the elderly, were in southern schools by 1877. Although State Reconstruction officials tried to prohibit discrimination, the new schools practiced racial segregation, and the black schools generally received less funding than white schools. Black churches, recognizing the importance of the education initiatives, helped raise money to build schools and pay teachers, and many northern missionaries moved south to serve as teachers.

Another opportunity the former slaves pursued was involvement in politics. When the Fifteenth Amendment offered the chance for suffrage, black men seized the opportunity and began to organize politically. The freedmen affiliated themselves with the Republican Party, and hundreds of black delegates participated in statewide political conventions. Blacks used the Union Leagues to organize into a network of political clubs, provide political education, and campaign for Republican candidates. Black women did not have the right to vote at the time, but they aided the political movement with rallies and meetings that supported the Republican candidates.

In the new state governments of the south, black participation was a novelty. As their political involvement grew, several freedmen were elected to office. Those who were elected generally had some education, had served in the Union Army during the Civil War, had been free before the 1860s, or had some prior experience in public service.

Nearly 600 blacks served as state legislators, and many participated in the local governments as mayors, judges, and sheriffs. Between 1868 and 1876 at the federal level, 14 black men served in the House of Representatives and two black men served in the Senate--Hiram Revels and Blanche K. Bruce, both born in Mississippi and educated in the north. The freedmen's involvement in politics caused a great deal of controversy in the south, where the idea of former slaves holding office was not widely supported.

While several black men held political offices, the top positions with the most power in southern state governments were held by the freedmen's white Republican allies. The Confederate-minded whites soon came to call them "carpetbaggers" and "scalawags," depending on their place of birth.

The Confederates described “carpetbaggers” as Northerners who packed all their belongings in carpetbag suitcases and rushed south in hopes of finding economic opportunity and personal power, which was true in some instances. Many of these Northerners were actually businessmen, professionals, teachers, and preachers who either wanted to “modernize” the south or were driven by a missionary impulse.

The “scalawags” were native Southerners and Unionists who had opposed secession. The former Confederates accused them of cooperating with the Republicans because they wanted to advance their personal interests. Many of the “scalawags” became Republicans because they had originally supported the Whig Party before secession and they saw the Republicans as the logical successors to the defunct Whig Party.

Some Southern whites resorted to savage tactics against the new freedom and political influence blacks held. Several secret vigilante organizations developed. The most prominent terrorist group was the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), first organized in Pulaski, Tennessee in 1866. Members of the KKK, called “Klansmen,” rode around the south, hiding under white masks and robes, terrorizing Republicans and intimidating black voters. They went so far as to flog, mutilate, and even lynch blacks.

Congress, outraged by the brutality of the vigilantes and the lack of local efforts to protect blacks and persecute their tormentors, struck back with three Enforcement Acts (1870-1871) designed to stop the terrorism and protect black voters. The Acts allowed the federal government to intervene when state authorities failed to protect citizens from the vigilantes. Aided by the military, the program of federal enforcement eventually undercut the power of the Ku Klux Klan. However, the Klan’s actions had already weakened black and Republican morale throughout the south.

As the Radical Republican influence diminished in the south, other interests occupied the attention of Northerners. Western expansion, Indian wars, corruption at all levels of government, and the growth of industry all diverted attention from the civil rights and well-being of ex-slaves. By 1876, Radical Republican regimes had collapsed in all but two of the former Confederate states, with the Democratic Party taking over. Despite the Republicans’ efforts, the planter elite were regaining control of the south. This group came to be known as the “Redeemers,” a coalition of prewar Democrats and Union Whigs who sought to undo the changes brought about in the south by the Civil War. Many were ex-plantation owners called “Bourbons” whose policies affected blacks and poor whites, leading to an increase in class division and racial violence in the post-war south.