

# Life after Slavery for African Americans

## Overview

- The Thirteenth Amendment (1865) ended slavery, and slavery's end meant newfound freedom for African Americans.
- During the period of Reconstruction, some 2000 African Americans held government jobs.
- The black family, the black church, and education were central elements in the lives of post-emancipation African Americans.
- Many African Americans lived in desperate rural poverty across the South in the decades following the Civil War.

## **Emancipation: promise and poverty**

For African Americans in the South, life after slavery was a world transformed. Gone were the brutalities and indignities of slave life, the whippings and sexual assaults, the selling and forcible relocation of family members, the denial of education, wages, legal marriage, homeownership, and more. African Americans celebrated their newfound freedom both privately and in public jubilees.

But life in the years after slavery also proved to be difficult. Although slavery was over, the brutalities of white race prejudice persisted. After slavery, government across the South instituted laws known as **Black Codes**. These laws granted certain legal rights to blacks, including the right to marry, own property, and sue in court, but the Codes also made it illegal for blacks to serve on juries, testify against whites, or serve in state militias. The Black Codes also required black sharecroppers and tenant farmers to sign annual labor contracts with white landowners. If they refused they could be arrested and hired out for work.

Most southern black Americans, though free, lived in desperate rural poverty. Having been denied education and wages under slavery, ex-slaves were often forced by the necessity of their economic circumstances to rent land from former white slave owners. These **sharecroppers** paid rent on the land by giving a portion of their crop to the landowner.

In a few places in the South, former slaves seized land from former slave owners in the immediate aftermath of the [Civil War](#). But federal troops quickly restored the land to the white landowners. A movement among Republicans in Congress to provide land to former slaves was unsuccessful. Former slaves were never compensated for their enslavement.

## **Family, faith, and education**

Family, church, and school became centers of black life after slavery. With slavery's end, black women often preferred to be homemakers, though poverty pushed many back into the workforce.

Black churches became centerpieces of African American culture and community, not only as places of personal spiritual renewal and communal worship but also as centers for learning, socializing, and political organization. Black ministers were community leaders.

African Americans' desire for education found expression in the establishment of schools at every level, from grade schools for basic-education to the founding of the nation's first black colleges such as Fisk University and Howard University. The **Freedmen's Bureau** (1865-1870), a government agency established to aid former slaves, oversaw some 3,000 schools across the South, and ran hospitals and healthcare facilities for the freedmen.



THE MISSES COOKE'S SCHOOL ROOM, FREEDMAN'S BUREAU, RICHMOND, VA.—FROM A SKETCH BY JAS. E. TAYLOR.

Illustration of a classroom in Richmond, Virginia. White women are show teaching African American children to read.

Illustration of a Freedmen's Bureau school, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 1866. [Image](#) courtesy Library of Congress.

### Reconstruction

During the period of **Reconstruction**, which lasted from 1865 to 1877, Congress passed and enforced laws that promoted civil and political rights for African Americans across the South. Most notable among the laws Congress passed were three Amendments to the US Constitution: the **Thirteenth Amendment** (1865) ended slavery, the **Fourteenth Amendment** (1868) guaranteed African Americans the rights of American citizenship, and the **Fifteenth Amendment** (1870) guaranteed black men the constitutional right to vote.

African Americans actively took up the rights, opportunities, and responsibilities of citizenship. During Reconstruction, seven hundred African American men served in elected public office, among them two United States Senators, and fourteen members of the United States House of Representatives. Another thirteen hundred African American men and women held appointed government jobs.



Photograph of Hiram Revels.

**In 1870, Hiram Revels of Mississippi became the first African American man elected to the US Senate.** [Image](#) courtesy Library of Congress.

Led by Republicans in Congress, the federal government insisted on civil and political rights for African Americans in the face of fierce resistance by southern whites. Federal military occupation of the defeated Confederacy ensured African Americans' civil and political rights.

## **The KKK and the end of Reconstruction**

From the late 1860s white supremacists in the **KKK** (Ku Klux Klan) terrorized African American leaders and citizens in the South until, in 1871, the US Congress passed legislation that resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of Klan leaders and the end of the Klan's terrorism of Americans for a time. But over the course of the late 1860s and throughout the 1870s, the federal government's military presence was withdrawn from various southern states, and with the [Compromise of 1877](#), President Rutherford B. Hayes ordered the last federal troops in the South to withdraw.

With no troops to enforce the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, Reconstruction was at an end. Across the South lynching, disenfranchisement, and segregationist laws proliferated. It would not be until after the Second World War and the 1960s [Civil Rights Movement](#) that Jim Crow segregation would be outlawed.

### **What do you think?**

What economic, legal, and societal barriers did African Americans face after slavery?

Do you think that the federal government ought to have offered compensation—in money or land—to former slaves?

What accounts for the intensity of white race prejudice in the years after slavery's end?

Why do you think education and the church were so important to African Americans in the era after slavery?