The other ’68: Black power during Reconstruction

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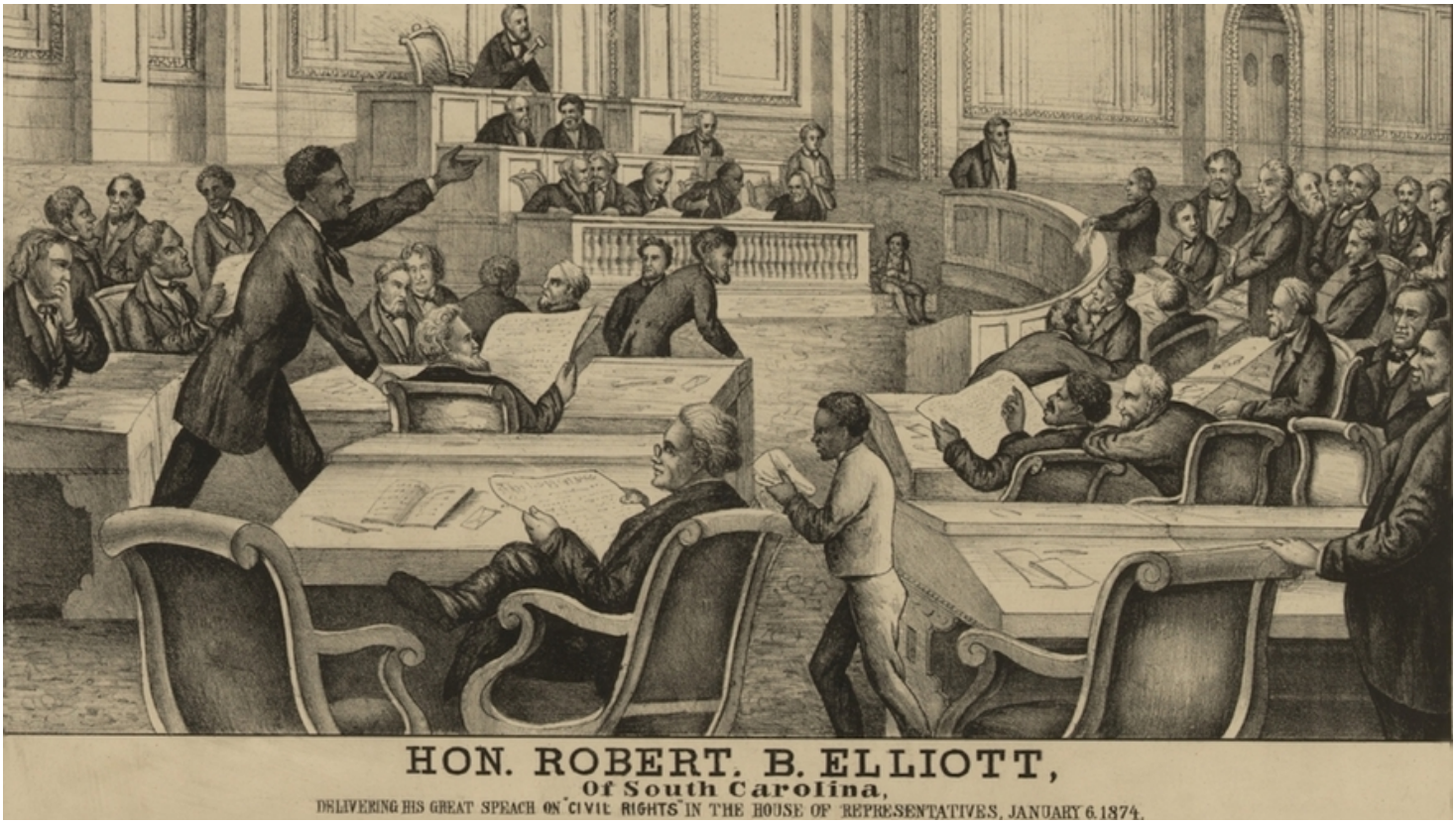


Image 1. Robert B. Elliott (1842-1884), of South Carolina, delivered a speech for an 1874 Civil Rights Act, in the U.S. House of Representatives.

All year long there have been commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the year 1968. It was a year that saw the emergence of a newly assertive Black Power movement in the United States. Many have celebrated the key moments of the Black freedom struggle in 1968. Yet 2018 also marks the 150th anniversary of another important, if largely forgotten year: 1868. That earlier year marked the height of Black Power during Reconstruction.

It's not surprising the anniversary of 1868 has been ignored, because Reconstruction is given little attention in classrooms across the country. The Reconstruction era began in 1865 after the Civil War. It was an attempt to transform the Southern states of the defeated Confederacy. Black Americans, including newly freed people, won the same rights and opportunities as all other Americans during Reconstruction. Sadly, many of the advances of the Reconstruction era proved to be temporary. Yet for a time — particularly during the year 1868 — it seemed as though anything was possible.

The year 1868 saw the ratification of the 14th Amendment, which granted citizenship and equal rights to Black Americans. It was also the year in which Black and poor white people throughout the South came together in common cause.

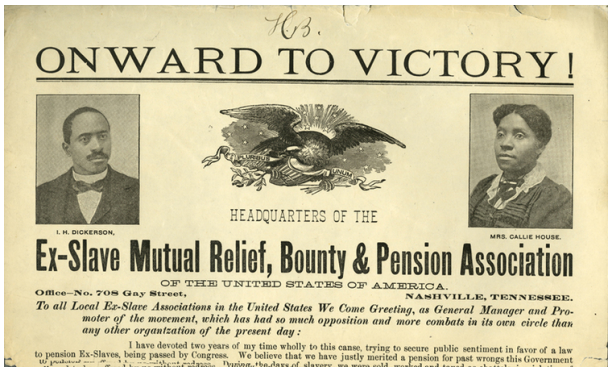
In state after state, Black men, many of them formerly enslaved, gathered with white men, many of them poor. Together they rewrote the constitutions of the South.

After The War

Things were very different in the years immediately following the Civil War, however. For many Black Americans it seemed as if freedom would not be that different from enslavement. After Abraham Lincoln's assassination in 1865, Andrew Johnson, his replacement as president, pardoned former enslavers and returned their land, which had been given to freed Black Americans.

Encouraged by Johnson's actions, white Southern plantation owners soon began trying to regain their former power over Black Americans. They mounted violent attacks on Black Americans in order to intimidate formerly enslaved people back into submission. Southern states passed new laws known as Black Codes, which attempted to reintroduce enslavement by another name. For example, Mississippi forbade Black Americans from renting or leasing land and demanded that freed people carry proof they had entered into a labor contract. If they couldn't supply that proof, they could be jailed. In South Carolina, Black people unwilling to be farm workers had to get special permission from a court.

But throughout the South, Black people refused to go back. They banded together and defended each other from white attacks. They mounted strikes and other actions to prevent plantation owners from reintroducing enslavement-like conditions. They organized Black political conventions across the South to demand the right to vote, schools, fair wages and land. They marched, protested and flooded Congress with petitions.



These efforts were successful.

When Congress convened in 1866, they refused to seat the delegates from Johnson's state governments. Instead, they came up with their own Reconstruction plan. It required states to hold new conventions to rewrite state constitutions and adopt the 14th Amendment. This period is often called Congressional Reconstruction or Radical Reconstruction because these Radical Republicans had now taken control of Reconstruction.

A new voter-registration process was also begun. Soon, Black citizens were a majority of the voters in Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Georgia. In South Carolina, there were nearly two Black people registered for every white person. They voted for more diverse delegates to the constitutional conventions.

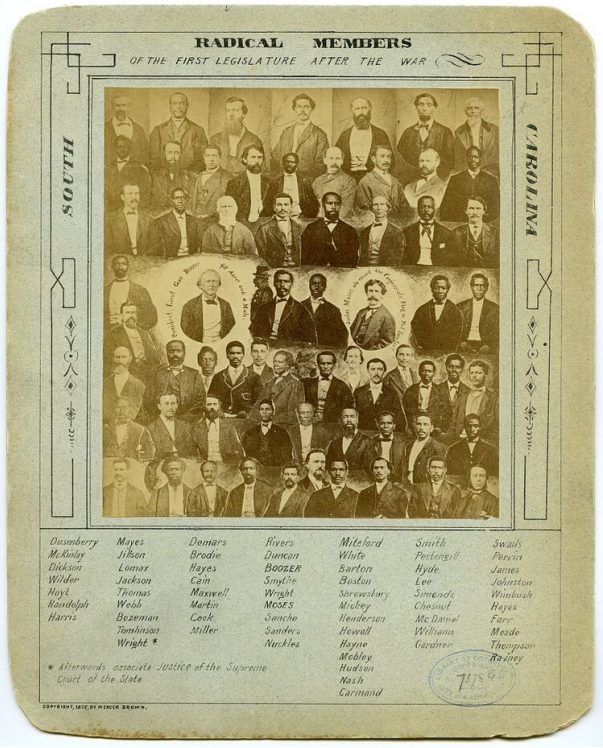
Constitutional Conventions Across The South

Between November of 1867 and June of 1868, multiracial constitutional conventions met in Southern state capitol buildings. They fought hard to make Southern constitutions socially and economically just. The Mississippi state convention passed a tax for the relief of needy freedmen. In Alabama, a resolution passed that allowed freedmen to collect back pay from former enslavers.

At a time when even most Northern states restricted the vote to white men, every convention extended the right to vote to Black men. A few delegates pushed to give the vote to women as well. The South's new laws also protected Black civil rights. Unlike in the North, Black citizens could now hold office and serve on juries.

The Reconstruction conventions provided for the first public schools throughout the South. A few states even required integration. Louisiana's constitution, for example, declared that no schools could be "established exclusively for any race."

People who were enslaved only 10 years earlier were now voters and elected officials. This inspired others to fight for what they had previously thought was impossible. Women's rights activists demanded the right to vote. Workers marched for an eight-hour workday. For a brief time, activists in these different movements began to forge alliances and learn from one another.



These bold advances reveal what could happen when Black and white people — and men and women — worked together. And the ultimate failure of these efforts shows how racism, sexism and classism can be used to divide movements. The breakdown of the alliances formed in 1868 helped bring about Reconstruction's end. Soon after, the white elite took back power and implemented new racist laws. These laws reversed the gains made under Reconstruction and deepened inequality.

Yet 1868 proved that what had seemed completely impossible only a decade before could in fact happen. Four million formerly enslaved people wielded significant political power in the South. These Black Southerners led a political revolution that for a short time advanced the interests of all poor and working-class people, Black and white. The year 1868 is one we should remember and learn from.

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