

Reconstruction in the South

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This drawing of African-American soldiers returning to their families in Little Rock, Arkansas, after the war captures the joyous spirit of many former slaves upon gaining their freedom. They were soon to find out that freedom did not necessarily mean equality during Reconstruction of the South. From Wikimedia Commons

The Reconstruction period came after the Civil War and was a time of change and disorder. Congress set up new governments in the South to guarantee the new rights of slaves.

Southern whites wished to keep African-Americans as semi-slaves. Southern whites gave them few civil rights and rejected equality for blacks. African-Americans, on the other hand, wanted full freedom and land of their own. Not surprisingly, there were frequent clashes. Some took the form of race riots, but terrorism against African-American leaders was more common.

During this time, Southern whites and blacks began trying to get their farms back into operation to make a living. The Civil War was fought mainly in the South. Nearly all the men of fighting age took part in the war, and many were killed. Likewise, many farms were destroyed or neglected. Indeed, the most important developments were slow changes in Southern society. African-Americans could now legally marry. They left white churches and formed their own churches, which became centers for the African-American community. Without land or money, most former

slaves had to continue working for white masters, but they were not willing to live in the old slave quarters.

A new labor system in the South

Sharecropping gradually became the labor system in most of the South. It forced former slaves to work as "sharecroppers" for large landowners. Most African-Americans lacked money and land of their own, so they worked on plantations for a part, or "share," of the harvest. Planters, short of money, favored the system because it did not require them to pay cash wages; African-Americans preferred it at first because they could live in their own cabins on pieces of land they rented. They also had some independence in choosing what to plant, usually cotton, and how to plant it. However, the sharecropping system kept African-Americans dependent on white plantations, which kept them in poverty. As a whole, though, the South was desperately poor throughout the Reconstruction era. A series of disastrously bad crops in the late 1860s, followed by a period when farmers couldn't sell their crops for high prices in the 1870s, hurt both whites and blacks.

The governments set up in the Southern states by Reconstruction were fairly honest and effective. Though the period has sometimes been called "Black Reconstruction," most of the governments in the South were not made up of African-Americans. There were no black governors, only two black senators and a handful of congressmen. Likewise, South Carolina had the only legislature controlled by blacks. Those African-Americans who did hold office were as able and honest as whites. These governments were expensive, but large amounts of state money were necessary to rebuild after the war and to establish — for the first time in most Southern states — a public school system. This period is often called Congressional Reconstruction or Radical Reconstruction because these Radical Republicans had now taken control of Reconstruction.



Most Southern whites opposed racial equality

Some Southern whites in the mountainous areas and planters of farmlands were willing to cooperate with the African-Americans and their Northern-born "carpetbaggers." "Carpetbagger" was a word used to describe whites from the North who traveled South with only a satchel, or carpetbag, of possessions. Many of these "carpetbaggers" moved South to make money. They purchased land, rented plantations or went into business with Southern planters in hopes of making money from cotton. "Carpetbaggers" were different from "scalawags," a term given to white Southern Republicans by their enemies in the South. "Scalawags" were planters who supported the national government's plan for Reconstruction. There were not very many of these scalawags, who were hated by Southern whites. "Scalawags" in the South were small farmers, who did not own slaves. Others were merchants, artisans and other professionals who had remained loyal to the Union during the Civil War.

Most Southern whites remained fiercely opposed to equality for African-Americans. Sometimes their hostility was expressed through terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. Groups like the KKK sought to punish African-Americans who tried to gain their rights. The KKK also tried to

drive out whites who helped blacks in the South. More often, Southern whites showed their opposition by supporting the Democratic Party, which had been pro-slavery. Southern whites also waited for the time when the North would tire of supporting the Reconstruction.

