

The Meaning of Emancipation in the Reconstruction Era

K. A. Cuordileone

New York City College of Technology, CUNY

Overview

The end of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery raised complicated issues and dilemmas for Americans during the Reconstruction era (1865-1877). After the Confederacy was defeated, the southern states were devastated physically and economically, their political infrastructures were no longer legitimate, and millions of slaves were now legally free. If the South was to be transformed into a *free labor* economy, and if the southern states were to be readmitted to the union, a "reconstruction" of the South was necessary. But reconstructing the South, as Lincoln once said, was "fraught with great difficulty." What would happen to the Confederates who had seceded from the Union and brought on the Civil War? Would they be punished? If so, how so? What role, if any, would former Confederates now play in the southern states? What about the millions of people who had been enslaved? Would they be given rights? What kind of rights? How would former slaves now earn a living in a free-labor economy? Would they be granted land? Would they now have access to educational institutions? And how would white southerners, who had fought long and hard to maintain the states-rights doctrine that kept slavery alive, be kept *in line*? Once former slaves were granted rights under the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution, would (or could) the federal government *enforce* those rights in the southern states? These questions were played out in the political debates and partisan battles that occurred at the federal and state levels of government. In another sense, they were also played out in the daily lives and experiences of newly-freed people.



Thomas Nast, *Emancipation*, 1865. Library of Congress

This exercise focuses on the meaning and reality of emancipation for African Americans. How did life change for ex-slaves in the South during the Reconstruction era? What did emancipation mean to former slaves in terms of their hopes and expectations? What did emancipation mean in terms of the realities of their lives after the Civil War? Finally, if Reconstruction in some sense failed them, why? Was a greater degree of change possible given the players involved and the circumstances?

Objectives

1. Synthesize information, interpret primary sources, draw conclusions and make coherent and persuasive arguments
2. Evaluate the achievements and limitations of Reconstruction-era social, political and economic changes and acts for newly-freed people
3. Understand the key events, figures, political issues and legislative debates in the Reconstruction Era

Prerequisites

Before you start this assignment, be sure you understand the key events and issues of Reconstruction. Read the chapter on Reconstruction in your textbook to get an overview of the period. Be sure you know the meaning and significance of terms such as Radical Republicans, the Freedmen's Bureau, the Black Codes, "forty acres and a mule," sharecropping, Black Reconstruction, the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments, the Civil Rights Acts, Andrew Johnson, Charles Sumner, Frederick Douglass, the Ku Klux Klan, the Redeemers, and the Compromise of 1877. (*Tip*: it might also be helpful to review this Visual Timeline of Reconstruction at <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/exhibits/reconstruction/timeline.html> to highlight the major events and developments of the era.)

Opening In-class Warm-Up Exercise (15 minutes--optional)

Working in groups, examine with your class-partners one of the five Thomas Nast illustrations below. Thomas Nast was an illustrator for the popular magazine *Harper's Weekly* and a Radical Republican.

- Discuss the scene, paying attention to details and what they might mean. Discuss the "message" that the illustration conveys to you.
- Note the date of the illustration. Given that Nast was a Radical Republican, what does the illustration tell you about the political mood of the Radical Republicans at that time?

Emancipation (1863, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/odyssey/archive/05/0509001r.jpg>)

Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction and How it Works (1866, <http://www.harperweek.com/09Cartoon/BrowseByDateCartoon-Large.asp?Month=September&Date=1>)

King Andy (1866, <http://www.harperweek.com/09Cartoon/BrowseByDateCartoon-Large.asp?Month=November&Date=3>)

This is a White Man's Government (1868, <http://blackhistory.harperweek.com/7Illustrations/Reconstruction/ThisIsAWhiteMansGov.htm>)

Worse Than Slavery (1874, <http://blackhistory.harperweek.com/7Illustrations/Reconstruction/UnionAsItWasBI.htm>)

Core Exercise

Step One: Voices of Former Slaves

Below you find several selected interviews with former slaves, the first three of which were conducted by the Federal Writer's Project (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro00.html>) in the late 1930s (popularly known as the "WPA Slave Narratives"). These stories allow us to briefly revisit slavery so that we may fully appreciate the meaning of freedom. Here you find ex-slaves' personal recollections of life under slavery in *the Old South*, as well as some memories of the Civil War, emancipation, and life in the Reconstruction years. Remember, these ex-slaves were very *old* by the time they were interviewed in the 1930s and 1940s, and their dialect was "reproduced" by the interviewers in the written transcriptions (see Notes on the Language of the Narratives at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snlang.html>). So their stories can be a little tricky to follow at times.

Examine all of these sources below, including Jourdan Anderson's letter to his former master. As you do, take notes while considering the following questions *wherever* they may apply. Post three separate answers to each of the following questions on the Discussion Board. Remember to read the student- postings that came in before you, and respond to what other students have said wherever you can.

- What is most striking, interesting or surprising to you about the thoughts and memories of these former slaves?
- How did each of them experience their emancipation during and after the Civil War?
- Do you find anything particularly revealing about the preoccupations, grievances or concerns these former slaves discuss in their stories? For example, why do you think Fountain Hughes was so preoccupied with the problem of debt?

WPA Interview with Lee Guidon (<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/S?ammem/mesnbib:@field%28AUTHOR+@od1%28Guidon,+Lee%29%29>, click *view page images*, then *next page* through pg. 126).

WPA Interview with Henry Blake (<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/S?ammem/mesnbib:@field%28AUTHOR+@od1%28Blake,+Henry%29%29>, click *view page images*, then *next page*, through pg. 179).

WPA Interview with "Aunt" Rhody Holsell (<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/S?ammem/mesnbib:@field%28AUTHOR+@od1%28Holsell,+Rhody%29%29>, click *view page images*, through pg. 199).

Audio Interview with Fountain Hughes (<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/afcesnbib:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28afcesn000030%29%29>). If you have Real Player or MP3 programs, click one of the "audio formats" to hear this former slave's voice in a tape-recorded interview made in 1949. This interview is about 30 minutes long. You may read the text of the interview if you do not have the necessary audio programs.)

Jourdon Anderson (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6369>), Letter to his former master (1865)

Step Two: Political Issues and Debates

Each of the primary sources below reflect the political debate and legal issues surrounding Reconstruction. Examine these sources and take notes while considering the following questions *wherever* they may apply. Post your answers on the Discussion Board.

- What were the political developments during Reconstruction that made freedom, as ex-slaves perceived it, possible?
- What obstacles (social, legal, economic, or political) stood in the way of ex-slaves actually achieving a meaningful degree of freedom?
- Consider the tensions and disagreements between members of Congress and between Congress and the President. What were the Radical Republicans up against when they fought for the rights of newly freed people?

Thaddeus Stevens Speech, 1865 (<http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/documents/1851-1875/thaddeus-stevens-speech-of-december-18-1865.php>)

Harper's Weekly (<http://blackhistory.harppweek.com/4Reconstruction/338TheRightWayBestWay.htm>), "Toward Racial Equality: The Right Way, The Best Way," June 3, 1865

Address to Congress by Convention of Negroes, 1865 (<http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/documents/1851-1875/address-of-a-convention-of-negroes-held-in-alexandria-virginia-august-1865.php>)

Andrew Johnson, Veto of the first Reconstruction Act, March 2, 1867 (<http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/andrew-johnson/veto-for-the-first-reconstruction-act-march-2-1867.php>)

Charles Sumner, Opinion on the trial of Andrew Johnson, 1868 (<http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/documents/1851-1875/charles-sumner-opinion-on-the-trial-of-andrew-johnson-1868.php>)

Frederick Douglass (<http://www.frederickdouglass.org/speeches/index.html#wants>), "What the Black Man Wants," Speech to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (1865) *Note: You may stop at the 6th paragraph that begins "There are, however, other reasons..."*

Senator Charles Sumner (<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/civilwar/recontwo/sumner.html>), Debate with Senator Hill (1871)

The 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments (<http://www.usconstitution.net/const.html#Am13>)

Civil Rights Act of 1866 (<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-civil-rights-act-of-1866/>)

Civil Rights Act of 1875 (<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/civil-rights-act-of-1875/>)

Step Three: Writing Assignment

(5-6 double-spaced typed pages. See general guidelines.)

Assume you live in a southern state (choose a state and create an identity for yourself) and the year is 1877. Reconstruction is ending. Some commentators and politicians are proclaiming that the work of Reconstruction is done. The South now has a free-labor economy, the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments have given former slaves new rights, and it is time to *move on*, they say.

You have been given the task of writing an editorial for your local newspaper assessing Reconstruction—that is, what it has accomplished or failed to accomplish for African-Americans in the southern states. Newly-freed people had hoped to be emancipated—legally, politically, economically and socially. To what extent, in your opinion, had they become so in the Reconstruction years?

In your editorial, be sure to consider the following issues:

- What positive developments have occurred since the end of the Civil War for African-Americans in the South? Conversely, what are the shortcomings of Reconstruction policies and legislation?
- Consider the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution and what each of these amendments mean, both in theory (legally) and in practice (in real life) for freed African-American men and *women*.
- Why is Reconstruction coming to an end? Should it come to an end? Why?
- If you conclude that Reconstruction has been (to some degree) a failure, think about where the problem lies. Could things have turned out differently? If so, how so? What would it have taken to make Reconstruction more successful in terms of providing a greater degree of advancement for freed people?

****Important Note:** You must use specific examples from these primary sources and be as factual and informative as possible. Do not simply take on the voice of a windy moralizer. Rather, demonstrate that you have closely examined these sources and that you understand the key issues (legal, economic, political). Use evidence from the sources you have examined to make your points.

Supplemental Sources

Should you wish to read more about the era, or clarify some issues you are unsure about, here are some helpful and informative websites on this era that you may consult.

- America's Reconstruction (<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/EXHIBITS/RECONSTRUCTION/index.html>): This site is an exhibit based on the work of the well-known scholar of Reconstruction, Eric Foner. This site has a useful Visual Timeline (<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/exhibits/reconstruction/timeline.html>, found under "additional resources"), and here there are documents, lithographs and other visual images too.
- Harper's Weekly: Reports on Black America 1867-1874 (<http://blackhistory.harperweek.com/4Reconstruction/ReconLevelOne.htm>) contains a wide variety of articles, illustrations and political cartoons from the Reconstruction era.
- American Experience | Reconstruction: The Second Civil War | PBS (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/index.html>). This site has some interesting primary sources as well as short Video Clips (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/program/index.html>) from the PBS series on Reconstruction on topics such as suffrage or sharecropping. Also check out The Myths of Reconstruction (http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/plantation/sf_myths.html#a) as discussed by historians.
- Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938 (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>) contains over 2,300 WPA slave narratives, as well as photographs, prints, music and other sources. In addition to the audio recordings (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/>), this site contains

thousands of interviews with former slaves who speak of their experiences during and after slavery and the civil war.

- Library of Congress, the Civil War and Reconstruction (<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/civilwar/>) The Library of Congress website contains many valuable primary sources on all eras of U.S. History including Reconstruction as well as some brief overviews of the period.
- The Freedmen's Bureau Online (<http://www.freedmensbureau.com/>). This site is completely focused on the Freedmen's Bureau and provides many valuable documents and records (e.g. marriage records, labor contracts).
- African American Odyssey: A Quest for Full Citizenship (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aointro.html>). This site is a museum-like exhibit that offers documents, images, maps and artifacts relating to African-American history from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. The exhibit on Reconstruction contains everything from Thomas Nast images and prints of various African-American leaders to plantation account books and church pamphlets.
- Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (<http://www.nypl.org/locations/schomburg>). This site is devoted to the global study of Black culture-- the collection emphasizes the Americas, the Caribbean and, Sub-Saharan Africa. Nice collection of visual sources from the Reconstruction years.
- The Impeachment of Andrew Johnson (<http://www.andrewjohnson.com/>). Johnson's impeachment is highlighted on the Harper's Weekly site (see above). Nice primary and secondary source material surrounding the impeachment.
- University of North Carolina: Documenting the American South (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/>). This site is sponsored by the University Library of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Especially interesting is the "First-Person Narratives of the American South"-- a collection of diaries, autobiographies, memoirs, travel accounts, and ex-slave narratives written by Southerners.
- History Matters (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/>). This site, a joint project sponsored by the American Social History Project with George Mason University, is an extremely useful site for exploring primary source documents in all of American History. Great set of links to all major U.S. History websites: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/www.taf>.

Alternative Assignments

Exhibition Review: Go to the website African American Odyssey: A Quest for Full Citizenship at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aointro.html>, and under "exhibit sections" click the link to "Reconstruction." Read through the very short history of the Reconstruction era and then look at the images (click for enlargement or elaboration). Be sure to look at BOTH Parts I and II. Take notes on the following questions.

- How does this exhibit shape your view of the impact of emancipation and Reconstruction on newly-freed African-American people? In other words, what overall impression does this site give you about the Reconstruction years?
- How did the lives of newly-freed men and women change during Reconstruction era, given what you have seen on this site? In your answer, identify FIVE examples of changes that this website has called to your attention and briefly describe the nature of the changes.
- What are the strengths and limitations of a virtual exhibition like this? Is there anything significant in the "story" of Reconstruction that is left *out* in this exhibit? If you were to add other artifacts or documents to this exhibit, what would they be, and how would they give a different *feel* to the exhibit?

This exercise could be done 1) in the form of a BB posting, 2) as an in-class group assignment with or without a writing component, or 3) as an essay.

Instructor's Annotations

The primary aim of this assignment is twofold: 1) to inspire students to delve into the experience of Reconstruction from the perspective of former slaves (which usually leads them to criticize the shortcomings of Reconstruction policies) and then 2) get students to confront the vexing political issues and challenges that made the Reconstruction of the southern states so difficult. In short, it is easy for students to criticize and catalogue the failures of Reconstruction; it is much harder to analyze the policy debates and problems that Radical Republicans faced as they attempted to bring meaningful change to the south.

There are so many great primary sources relating to Reconstruction that I had to eliminate here in order to make this assignment more manageable. We agreed to emphasize the WPA narratives because they give the students such an unforgettable experience (especially the audio recording of Fountain Hughes). These narratives are rather challenging to "teach" in any formal sense and instructors may find that they must provide more than the usual help in guiding students through them. With the goal of exposing students to these sources without bogging them down with too much instructor-commentary (all too often, I think, we tend to give excessive amounts of instructions on these assignments, which in the end turn the students off), I have sacrificed more specific questions, notations, and background for each source. I assume that instructors will, at their discretion, fill-in some of the blanks wherever they see fit.

Any of these exercises could be modified to fit an instructor's needs. For example, the opening warm-up exercise could be given as a take-home BB posting assignment (though I find that analysis of illustrations works better when students are in groups, where they can collectively brainstorm on interpretation). Also, the essay/editorial assignment's questions could be turned into a shorter Blackboard Posting assignment. (Given that Reconstruction is often the first topic of the semester in the second half of a US History survey sequence, some instructors could find it problematic to give an essay assignment so soon in the semester.)