

## *Reconstruction and Retrenchment*

The Reconstruction Era started in 1865 filled with promise, hope, and equality. At the end of the deadliest war in American history, one in which 1 in 6 active soldiers had been killed and injured, it was a time for new beginnings. A time when the original Constitutional promises of liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness would be extended to an estimated 4 million former slaves.

Led by a faction of the Republican Party who called themselves the “Radical Republicans,” African Americans made several swift advances in politics, education, business, and religion. From 1868 through 1880, more than 1500 African Americans were elected to offices ranging from local mayors to federal Senators from Mississippi. During this emergent era, northern philanthropists, religious institutions (including Lutherans) and freed slaves, founded more than 90 colleges and trade institutions. Freed African Americans established public school districts in Georgia, South Carolina, and Mississippi.

African Americans made noticeable progress in the business arena during the first half-generation of Reconstruction, particularly in the areas of banking, insurance, fashion, and retail. African Americans established major business centers in Chicago, Atlanta, and other areas through the south. There was an emergent African American middle class with the rise of black focused newspapers such as the New York Amsterdam News, the Chicago Defender, the Memphis Free Speech and dozens of others.

In the first generation after the end of slavery, African Americans built churches - lots of them - of all denominations in every corner where they lived. The African American church played a central role in advancing adult literacy often sponsoring evening Bible study sessions in which the Bible was the main text for literacy acquisition for freed slaves.

These advances, however, were not without its challenges. And indeed, almost from the very beginning of Reconstruction, the forces of retrenchment were at work. One of the first efforts of retrenchment forces were the establishment of a series of laws that have since been labeled the *Black Codes*. The Black Codes were a series of laws designed to undermine African American progress and criminalize such outcomes like unemployment. These laws were selectively enforced on African Americans and designed to allow the invasion of their civil liberty under almost any pretense.

The Ku Klux Klan was founded in 1865, merely months after the passing of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendments which granted citizenship to slaves. By the 1870s, the Ku Klux Klan, combined with Jim Crow Laws, were having a significant impact in reestablishing white supremacy throughout the South. As an organization, the KKK produced a system of ongoing domestic terror incidents, and played a significant role in normalizing public hangings. During the initial era of Reconstruction (1865-1877), more than 2,000 hangings occurred. By the time the practice of hangings ended, more than 6,500 had their life ended. It would be remiss of us to note that public hangings were often public events. On many occasions, the entire town came to see these executions, and after the death, people often took “souvenirs” in the form of body parts.

The beginnings of the legalized segregation began to be implemented and the pace quickened with the federal troops leaving the south in 1877 after the disputed results of the election of 1876. For example, in Memphis, local officials in the early 1880s implemented a segregated seating system in public auditoriums and transportation. These laws were later upheld by various courts, and the march toward a more oppressive form of segregation was afoot.

The final elements of the retrenchment occurred with the systematic disenfranchisement of black voters in the South. From 1890 through 1905, every former Confederate state rewrote their state constitution and created onerous barriers for black voters. Beyond barriers, many states eliminated as many black voters from the voter rolls as possible. As an example, the number of registered black voters in Alabama went from 175,000 to fewer than 3,000 voters after their new state constitution was adopted. Under this systemic legal and social framework of Separate but Equal, the number of African American elected officials dropped precipitously.

The Wilmington North Carolina Coup of 1898 is an example of the type of resentment and grievance politics and how it was exploited to shift the political tide in favor of the forces of retrenchment. By 1901, George Henry White, having been gerrymandered out of office, became the last African American elected to Congress during the post-Reconstruction. Congressman White's farewell address is considered one of the most poignant speeches ever made in that chamber. And with his departure, it would be another 30+ years before another African American won a congressional seat (in Illinois), and another 65 years before the Voting Rights Act was passed.

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