

5.1.2.1: Introduction

After the Civil War, much of the South lay in ruins. “It passes my comprehension to tell what became of our railroads,” one South Carolinian told a Northern reporter. “We had passably good roads, on which we could reach almost any part of the State, and the next week they were all gone—not simply broken up, but gone. Some of the material was burned, I know, but miles and miles of iron have actually disappeared, gone out of existence.” He might as well have been talking about the entire antebellum way of life. The future of the South was uncertain. How would these states be brought back into the Union? Would they be conquered territories or equal states? How would they rebuild their governments, economies, and social systems? What rights did freedom confer upon formerly enslaved people?

The answers to many of Reconstruction’s questions hinged upon the concepts of citizenship and equality. The era witnessed perhaps the most open and widespread discussions of citizenship since the nation’s founding. It was a moment of revolutionary possibility and violent backlash. African Americans and Radical Republicans pushed the nation to finally realize the Declaration of Independence’s promises that “all men were created equal” and had “certain, unalienable rights.” White Democrats granted African Americans legal freedom but little more. When black Americans and their radical allies succeeded in securing citizenship for freedpeople, a new fight commenced to determine the legal, political, and social implications of American citizenship. Resistance continued, and Reconstruction eventually collapsed. In the South, limits on human freedom endured and would stand for nearly a century more.

Learning Objectives

After completing this section, students should:

- Have a general understanding of the history of African Americans within the context of American History.
- Be motivated to become interested and active in African American history by comparing current events with historical information.
- Be able to discuss the origins, evolution, and spread of racial slavery.
- Be able to describe the creation of a distinct African-American culture and how that culture became part of the broader American culture.
- Be able to analyze the long-term implications of Reconstruction for African Americans.
- Be able to judge the legacy of the Reconstruction.

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