

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	vii
How to Use This Book	xi
Research Topics for <i>Defining Moments: Reconstruction</i>	xv

NARRATIVE OVERVIEW

Prologue	3
Chapter 1: Slavery and the Civil War	7
Chapter 2: Presidential Reconstruction	21
Chapter 3: White Southern Resistance	37
Chapter 4: Radical Reconstruction	45
Chapter 5: Segregation in the South	63
Chapter 6: The Civil Rights Movement	81
Chapter 7: Legacy of Reconstruction	95

BIOGRAPHIES

Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885)	109
<i>President Who Enforced Congress's Radical Reconstruction Policies</i>	
Wade Hampton III (1818–1902)	115
<i>South Carolina Politician Who Sanctioned Violent White Resistance</i>	
Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911)	119
<i>Social Reformer and Poet Who Publicized the Struggles of Freedpeople</i>	
Oliver O. Howard (1830–1909)	123
<i>Union General Who Oversaw the Freedmen's Bureau</i>	
Andrew Johnson (1808–1875)	127
<i>President Who Fought with Congress over Reconstruction</i>	

Joseph H. Rainey (1832–1887)	132
<i>Former Slave Who Served in the U.S. Congress during Reconstruction</i>	
Hiram R. Revels (1827–1901)	135
<i>Minister and First African-American Member of the U.S. Senate</i>	
Robert Smalls (1839–1915)	139
<i>Former Slave Who Became a Union War Hero and U.S. Congressman</i>	
Thaddeus Stevens (1792–1868)	143
<i>Leader of the Radical Republicans in Congress during Reconstruction</i>	

PRIMARY SOURCES

Congress Issues the Wade-Davis Manifesto	149
Black Residents of Nashville Petition for Equality	152
A Former Slaveholder Reacts to Emancipation	156
A Southern Girl Relates the Hardships of Reconstruction	160
A Journalist Describes Postwar Destruction in the South	163
Andrew Johnson Pardons Confederates	167
Freedpeople in Virginia Demand Voting Rights	170
The Mississippi Legislature Enacts Black Codes	172
Thaddeus Stevens Opposes Presidential Reconstruction	176
Radical Republicans Pass the Reconstruction Acts	180
Wade Hampton III Promotes White Control of the South	184
A Black Legislator Resists Efforts to Unseat Him	187
A Black Leader Testifies about Racial Violence	191
Booker T. Washington Looks Back on Reconstruction	193
Eric Foner Examines the Legacy of Reconstruction	196
Important People, Places, and Terms	201
Chronology	207
Sources for Further Study	215
Bibliography	217
Photo and Illustration Credits	221
Index	223

Chapter Two

PRESIDENTIAL RECONSTRUCTION



What is freedom? Is it the bare privilege of not being chained?
If this is all, then freedom is a bitter mockery, a cruel delusion.

—James A. Garfield, 1865

The North's victory in the Civil War settled two major issues: it ensured that slavery would no longer be practiced in the United States; and it established the fact that states were not allowed to secede from the Union. But it also raised a number of important new questions that would need to be addressed during the postwar Reconstruction period. Federal authorities debated about how to rebuild the war-ravaged South, what conditions the Southern states should meet to be readmitted to the Union, whether to punish Confederate leaders, and how much assistance to provide in securing the rights of newly freed slaves.

The assassination of President Abraham Lincoln only a few days after the Confederate surrender deprived the nation of his leadership during this difficult transitional time. Instead, the job of overseeing Reconstruction went to Vice President Andrew Johnson, a Southern Democrat whose lenient policies did little to improve the lives of freedpeople and generated fierce opposition among Republicans in Congress.

Destruction in the South

At the conclusion of the Civil War, homes, farms, schools, churches, factories, roads, and railroad lines lay in ruins across the defeated South. Most of the war's battles had been fought in Confederate territory. In addition, during

the last six months of war the Union had adopted a strategy known as “total warfare,” which involved destroying as much enemy property as possible.

Union leaders knew that the Confederate troops counted on support from white landowners as they fought their way across the South. The cities,



Children sit in the rubble of a church in Charleston, South Carolina, that was one of countless buildings destroyed during the Civil War.

homes, farms, and fields that dotted the landscape provided the Confederate forces with food, supplies, and hiding places, which enabled them to prolong the war. Northern leaders decided that eliminating these sources of support would create hardships for the South's soldiers and citizens and reduce their willingness to continue the fight. "We are not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people, and must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war," Union General William T. Sherman explained. "We cannot change the hearts of those people of the South, but we can make war so terrible [and] make them so sick of war that generations would pass away before they would again appeal to it."¹

Sherman put his strategy into practice during the winter of 1864–65, when he launched his famous March to the Sea. After capturing the city of Atlanta, Georgia, Sherman led 60,000 Union Army troops eastward across the state to the coastal city of Savannah. Along the way, they destroyed anything that could potentially be used by the Confederate Army, including factories, warehouses, and crops. They set fire to cities, sabotaged railways, looted homes, and stole livestock. By the time it was over, Sherman's army had left a 300-mile swath of ruin in its wake. Likewise, Union forces led by General Philip H. Sheridan ravaged the grain-producing countryside of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, destroying 2,000 barns and 700 mills. Sheridan reportedly told his men that "The people must be left with nothing but their eyes to weep with over the war."²

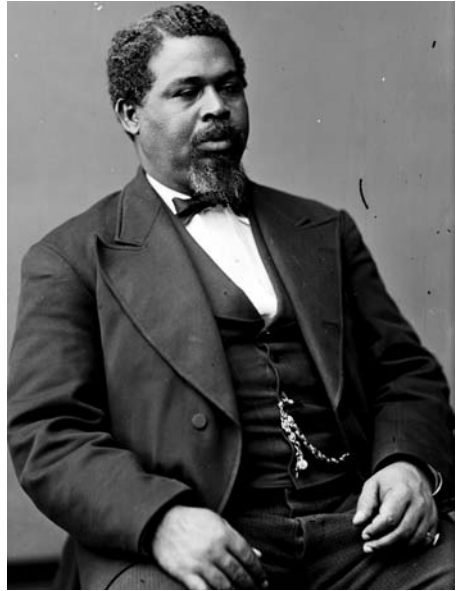
The wartime destruction in the South continued to take a toll on citizens of the region following the Confederate surrender. Countless people lost their homes, farms, businesses, and savings during the war and lived in poverty afterward. The South's economy was in tatters, and Confederate money became worthless. Many citizens found it difficult to obtain the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter. When Northern journalist John T. Trowbridge toured the South in 1865, he found "ruins and rubbish, mud and mortar and misery. The burnt streets [of Atlanta] were rapidly rebuilding; but in the meanwhile hundreds of the inhabitants, white and black, rendered homeless by the destruction of the city, were living in wretched hovels"³ (see "A Journalist Describes Postwar Destruction in the South," p. 163).

Even wealthy planters who had once lived in luxury struggled to make ends meet in the postwar South. Many people had supported the Confederate cause by investing large sums of money in war bonds, only to lose it all when the South's defeat made them worthless. Some plantation owners were reduced

Robert Smalls (1839–1915)

Former Slave Who Became a Union War Hero and U.S. Congressman

Robert Smalls was born on April 5, 1839, in Beaufort, South Carolina. His mother was an enslaved woman named Lydia Polite who worked as a housekeeper for John K. McKee. Although the identity of Robert's father is uncertain, it was widely speculated that he was the offspring of McKee's son, Henry. This presumed link to his owner's family helped shield Robert from the harsh realities of slavery. As a child, he was allowed to do things that were forbidden to other enslaved children, and he often got away with making mischief.



Grows Up in Slavery

Enslaved African Americans who did not conform to the harsh rules and expectations that guided race relations in the South risked being whipped, beaten, or killed. Smalls's mother feared that her son might be in danger if he did not understand this situation. When Smalls was ten years old, she asked McKee to send him to work in the fields in order to experience the reality of slavery. But seeing the conditions endured by enslaved people on plantations enraged young Smalls. Rather than learning his place and becoming more cautious and subservient, he became even more defiant and vowed to fight the cruel injustice of slavery.

After two years on the plantation, Smalls was sent back to the McKee household. He regularly acted out in violation of the laws guiding slave behavior, which resulted in his being arrested and taken to the Beaufort jail more than once. Each time, the McKee family would pay a fine and take Smalls back home. McKee finally decided to send the young man to Charleston, South Carolina, where he was allowed to work independently. Although he had to forfeit most of the money he earned to McKee, Smalls got to keep one dollar per week to cover his expenses. He soon discovered that he could stretch his income further by using his dollar to purchase tobacco and candy, and then reselling the products at an inflated price.

A Journalist Describes Postwar Destruction in the South

*The Northern journalist Sidney Andrews spent the summer of 1865 traveling through the defeated South and interviewing its residents. He spent much of his time in areas of Georgia and South Carolina that had been devastated by Union General William T. Sherman's famous March to the Sea. In the following excerpt from his book *The South since the War*, Andrews describes the scenes of destruction and the shortages of basic goods he encountered. He also reveals the depths of humiliation and hatred felt by former Confederate supporters.*

The war was a long time in reaching South Carolina, but there was a vengeance in its very breath when it did come—wrath that blasted everything it touched, and set Desolation on high as the genius of the State. “A brave people never before made such a mistake as we did,” said a little woman who sat near me in the cars while coming up from Charleston; “it mortifies me now, every day I live, to think how well the Yankees fought. We had no idea they could fight half so well.” In such humiliation as hers is half the lesson of the war for South Carolina.

Columbia is in the heart of Destruction. Being outside of it, you can only get in through one of the roads built by Ruin. Being in it, you can only get out over one of the roads walled by Desolation.... Sherman came in here, the papers used to say, to break up the railroad system of the seaboard States of the Confederacy. He did his work so thoroughly that half a dozen years will nothing more than begin to repair the damage, even in this regard.

The railway section of the route from Charleston lies mostly either in a pine barren or a pine swamp, though after passing Branchville we came into a more open and rolling country, with occasional signs of life. Yet we could not anywhere, after we left the immediate vicinity of the city, see much indication of either work or existence. The trim and handsome railway stations of the North, the little towns strung like beads on an iron string, are things unknown here. In the whole seventy-seven miles there are but two towns that make any impression on the mind of a stranger—Summerville and George's—and even these are small and unimportant places. Elsewhere we stopped, as it appeared, whenever the train-men pleased—the “station” sometimes existing only in the consciousness of the engineer and conductor.

Branchville was, however, noticeable because of the place it once occupied in Northern anxiety. There is where Sherman was to meet his fate. Have we forgotten how the Richmond papers of early February spoke? They were not at

IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

Abolitionist

A person who opposes slavery and supports efforts to end the practice.

Black Codes

A series of discriminatory laws passed in Southern states during Reconstruction that were designed to restrict the rights and freedoms of former slaves and prevent them from gaining political or economic power.

Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands

See Freedmen's Bureau

Carpetbaggers

Northerners who moved to the South looking for business opportunities after the Civil War ended.

Civil Rights Act of 1866

A law passed over President Andrew Johnson's veto that eliminated the Black Codes, declared all persons born in the United States to be citizens, and granted African Americans legal rights.

Civil War

A conflict that raged from 1861 to 1865 and pitted the Northern half of the United States against the eleven Southern states that seceded from the Union to form the Confederate States of America.

Confederate States of America

The separate nation formed by the rebellious Southern slaveholding states during the Civil War.

CHRONOLOGY

1600s

European settlers establish colonies in North America and import enslaved people from Africa to perform the hard physical labor necessary to clear land, build homes, and plant and harvest crops. *See p. 7.*

1783

The United States gains its independence from Great Britain. *See p. 8.*

1793

The invention of the cotton gin leads to a significant increase in demand for slave labor in the South. *See p. 8.*

1808

Congress bans the importation of enslaved people into the United States, and most Northern states outlaw the practice of slavery. *See p. 10.*

1820

The Missouri Compromise eases sectional tensions over slavery by simultaneously admitting Maine as a free state and Missouri as a slave state; Congress also draws an imaginary line across the country at 36°30' latitude and declares that slavery will not be permitted north of that line. *See p. 12.*

1830

Over a thirty-year period, the Underground Railroad provides some form of assistance to 100,000 fugitives seeking to escape from slavery; the economic value of this lost property and labor is estimated at more than \$30 million. *See p. 11.*

1848

The first women's rights convention in U.S. history is held in Seneca Falls, New York. *See p. 58.*

1854

The Fugitive Slave Act makes it a crime to assist or shelter an enslaved person who has escaped from bondage and requires people in the North to cooperate with slaveholders seeking to capture and reclaim runaways. *See p. 12.*

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INDEX

A

abolitionist movement, 9–11, 119–20, 144
African Americans
 civil rights movement, 81–94, 99, 103
 political achievements during
 Reconstruction, 54–61, 194–95
 race relations, 103–6
 shift in political allegiances of, 84–85
 service in Union Army, 16–18, 141, 153
 voting rights, 27, 47, 50–53, 57–58, 64,
 92–94, 105–6, 170–71
African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church,
 119, 136
Alcorn University, 137
Alvord, Henry H., 4–6
AME. *See* African Methodist Episcopal (AME)
 Church
American Association of Colored Youth, 121
American Women's Suffrage Association, 121
Andrews, Sidney, 163–66
Anthony, Susan B., 58

B

Back-to-Africa Movement, 77
Battle of Gettysburg, 19, 124–25, 144
Birth of a Nation, 196
Black, Amos, 42
Black Codes, 37, 41, 49, 50, 55, 116,
 172–75, 197
Black Reconstruction in America (Du Bois), 199
Blair, Francis P., Jr., 57

Booth, John Wilkes, 25, 27
Bowers, Claude, 196
Bragg, Braxton, 24
Breckinridge, John C., 14
Bridges, Ruby, 86
Brighter Coming Day, A (Harper), 122
Browder v. Gayle, 87
Brown, John, 10, 119
Brown, Linda, 82
Brown v. Board of Education, 82–86
Bruce, B. K., 195
Bullock, Rufus, 195
Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and
 Abandoned Lands. *See* Freedmen's Bureau

C

Cain, Richard, 59
carpetbaggers, 43, 64, 195, 196
Chamberlain, Daniel Henry, 117
Civil Rights Act
 of 1866, 49–50, 197
 of 1875, 70, 75
 of 1964, 91
Civil Rights Cases, 75
civil rights movement, 81–94, 99, 103
 See also African Americans; Jim Crow;
 segregation
Civil War, 15–20, 96, 98, 196
 African Americans in, 16–18, 141, 153
 destruction in the South during, 16,
 21–24