Section 1
The End of Slavery

Differing Reactions

With the collapse of slavery, many black people were quick to inform white people that whatever loyalty, devotion, and cooperation they might have shown as slaves had never been a reflection of their inner feelings and attitudes. Near Opelousas, Louisiana, a Union officer asked a young black man why he did not love his master. The youth responded sharply. “When my master begins to lub me, den it’ll be time enough for me to lub him. What I wants is to get away. I want to take me off from dis plantation, where I can be free.” In North Carolina, planter Robert P. Howell was deeply disappointed that a loyal slave named Lovet fled at the first opportunity. In contrast, some slaves, especially elderly ones, were fearful and apprehensive about freedom. On a South Carolina plantation, an older black woman refused to accept emancipation. “I is got a marster and mistiss! Dee right dar in de great house. Ef you don’ b’lieve me, you go dar an’ see.”

Emancipation was a traumatic experience for many former masters. A Virginia freedman remembered that “Miss Polly died right after the surrender, she was so hurt that all the negroes was going to be free.” Another former slave, Robert Falls, recalled that his master assembled the slaves to inform them they were free. “I hates to do it, but I must . . . You is free. Just as free as I am. Here I have raised you all to work for me, and now you are going to leave me. I am an old man, and I can’t get along without you. I don’t know what I am going to do.” In less than a year, he was dead. Falls attributed his master’s death to the end of slavery. “It killed him.”

Reuniting Black Families

As slavery ended, the most urgent need for many freed people was finding family members who had been sold away from them. Slavery had not destroyed the black family. Husbands, wives, and children went to great lengths to reassemble their families after the Civil War. For years and even decades after the end of slavery, advertisements appeared in black

GUIDE TO READING

What steps did African Americans take to reunite families divided by slavery?

What did freedom mean to nearly four million people who had been slaves?

How did most former slaves acquire land of their own?

What was the Freedmen’s Bureau and how effective was it?

KEY TERMS

Special Field Order #15, p. 393
Port Royal Experiment, p. 394
Freedmen’s Bureau, p. 394
Southern Homestead Act, p. 398
sharecropping, p. 399

Guide to Reading/Key Terms
For answers, see the Teacher’s Resource Manual.

Living Words Audio Clip
Track 14 Remembering Slavery

Recommended Reading

newspapers appealing for information about missing kinfolk. The following notice was published in the Colored Tennessean on August 5, 1865:

Saml. Dove wishes to know of the whereabouts of his mother, Areno, his sisters Maria, Neziah and Peggy, and his brother Edmond, who were owned by Geo. Dove of Rockingham County, Shenandoah Valley, Va. Sold in Richmond, after which Saml. and Edmond were taken to Nashville, Tenn., by Joe Mick; Areno was left at the Eagle Tavern, Richmond. Respectfully yours, Saml. Dove, Utica, New York.

In North Carolina a northern journalist met a middle-age black man “plodding along, staff in hand, and apparently very footsore and tired.” The nearly exhausted freedman explained that he had walked almost six hundred miles looking for his wife and children who had been sold four years earlier.

There were emotional reunions as family members found each other after years of separation. Ben and Betty Dodson had been apart for twenty years when Ben found her in a refugee camp after the war. “Glory! glory! hallelujah,” he shouted as he hugged his wife. Other searches had more heart-wrenching results. Husbands and wives sometimes learned that their spouses had remarried during the separation. Believing his wife had died, the husband of Laura Spicer remarried—only to learn after the war that Laura was still alive. Sadly, he refused to meet with her.

One freedman testified to the close ties that bound many slave families when he replied bitterly to the claim that he had had a kind master who had fed him and never used the whip. “Kind! yes, he gib men corn enough, and he gib me pork enough, and he neber gib me one lick wid de whip, but what’s my wife?—what’s my chill’en? Take away de pork, I say; take away de corn, I can work and raise dese for myself, but gib me back de wife of my bosom, and gib me back my poor chill’en as was sold away.”

**Reading Check**

What steps did African Americans take to reunite families divided by slavery?

**Land**

As freed people embraced freedom and left their masters, they wanted land. Nineteenth-century Americans of virtually every background associated economic security with owning land. Families wanted to work land and prosper as self-sufficient yeomen. Former slaves believed their future as a free people was tied to the possession of land. But just as it had been impossible to abolish slavery without the intervention of the U.S. government, it would not be possible to procure land without federal assistance. At first, federal authorities seemed determined to make land available to freedmen.
Special Field Order #15

Shortly after his army arrived in Savannah—after having devastated Georgia—Union general William T. Sherman announced that freedmen would receive land. On January 16, 1865, he issued **Special Field Order #15**. This military directive set aside a 30-mile-wide tract of land along the Atlantic coast from Charleston, South Carolina, 245 miles south to Jacksonville, Florida. White owners had abandoned the land, and Sherman reserved it for black families. The head of each family would receive “possessory title” to forty acres of land. Sherman also gave the freedmen the use of army mules, thus giving rise to the slogan, “Forty acres and a mule.”

Within six months, forty thousand freed people were working 400,000 acres in the South Carolina and Georgia low country and on the Sea Islands. Former slaves generally avoided the slave crops of cotton and rice and instead planted sweet potatoes and corn. They also worked together as families and kinfolk. They avoided the gang labor associated with slavery. Most husbands and fathers preferred that their wives and daughters not work in the fields as slave women had had to do.
The Port Royal Experiment

Meanwhile, hundreds of former slaves had been cultivating land for three years. In late 1861 Union military forces carved out an enclave around Beaufort and Port Royal, South Carolina, that remained under federal authority for the rest of the war. White planters fled to the interior, leaving their slaves behind. Under the supervision of U.S. Treasury officials and northern reformers and missionaries who hurried south in 1862, ex-slaves began to work the land in what came to be known as the **Port Royal Experiment**. When Treasury agents auctioned off portions of the land for nonpayment of taxes, freedmen purchased some of it. But northern businessmen bought most of the real estate and then hired black people to raise cotton.

White owners sometimes returned to their former lands only to find that black families had taken charge. A group of black farmers told one former owner, “We own this land now, put it out of your head that it will ever be yours again.” And on one South Carolina Sea Island, white men were turned back by armed black men.

**Reading Check**

How did most former slaves acquire land of their own?

The Freedmen’s Bureau

In early 1865, Congress created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands—commonly called the **Freedmen’s Bureau**. It was created as a temporary agency to assist freedmen to make the transition to freedom. The bureau was placed under the control of the U.S. Army. General Oliver O. Howard was put in command. Howard, a devout Christian who had lost an arm in the war, was eager to aid the freedmen.

The bureau was given enormous responsibilities. It was to help freedmen obtain land, gain an education, negotiate labor contracts with white planters, settle legal and criminal disputes involving black and white people, and provide food, medical care, and transportation for black and white people left destitute by the war. However, Congress never provided sufficient funds or personnel to carry out these tasks.

The Freedmen’s Bureau never had more than nine hundred agents spread across the South from Virginia to Texas. Mississippi, for example, had twelve agents in 1866. One agent often served a county with a population of ten thousand to twenty thousand freedmen. Few of the agents were black because few military officers were black. John Mercer Langston of Virginia was an inspector of schools assigned to the bureau’s main office in Washington, D.C.; Major Martin R. Delany worked with freedmen on the South Carolina Sea Islands.
The need for assistance was desperate. Thousands of black and white Southerners endured extreme privation in the months after the war ended. The bureau established camps for the homeless, fed the hungry, and cared for orphans and the sick as best it could. It distributed more than thirteen million rations—consisting of flour, corn meal, and sugar—by 1866. The bureau provided medical care to a half million freedmen and thousands of white people who were suffering from smallpox, yellow fever, cholera, and pneumonia. Many more remained untreated.

In July 1865 the bureau took a first step toward distributing land when General Howard issued Circular 13 ordering agents to “set aside” forty-acre plots for freedmen. But the allocation had hardly begun when the order was revoked. It was announced that land already distributed under General Sherman’s Special Field Order #15 was to be returned to its previous white owners.

The reason for this reversal in policy was President Andrew Johnson, who had become president after Lincoln’s assassination in April 1865. He began to pardon hundreds and then thousands of former Confederates and restore their lands to them. General Howard was forced to tell black people that they had to relinquish the land they thought they had
A Freedmen’s Bureau Commissioner Tells Freed People What Freedom Means

In June 1865 Charles Soule, the commissioner of contracts for the Freedmen’s Bureau, told a gathering of freedmen in Orangeburg, South Carolina, what to expect and how to behave in the coming year:

You are now free, but you must know that the only difference you can feel yet, between slavery and freedom, is that neither you nor your children can be bought or sold. You may have a harder time this year than you have ever had before; it will be the price you pay for your freedom. You will have to work hard, and get very little to eat, and very few clothes to wear. If you get through this year alive and well, you should be thankful. . . . You cannot be paid in money, for there is no good money in the District, nothing but Confederate paper. Then, what can you be paid with? Why, with food, with clothes, with the free use of your little houses and plots. You do not own a cent’s worth except yourselves.

You do not understand why some of the white people who used to own you do not have to work in the field. It is because they are rich. If every man were poor, and worked in his own field, there would be no big farms, and very little cotton or corn raised to sell; there would be no money, and nothing to buy. Some people must be rich, to pay the others, and they have the right to do no work except to look out after their property.

Remember that all of your working time belongs to the man who hires you: therefore you must not leave work without his leave not even to nurse a child, or to go and visit a wife or husband. When you wish to go off the place, get a pass as you used to, and then you will run no danger of being taken up by our soldiers.

In short, do just about as the good men among you have always done. Remember that even if you are badly off, no one can buy and sell you: remember that if you help yourselves, GOD will help you, and trust hopefully that next year and the year after will bring some new blessing to you.

What Do You Think?

The difference is that black people can no longer be bought or sold.

Based on Soule’s account, freedom does not mean that black people will have economic opportunities equal to those of white people.

Answers will vary.

Recommended Readings


What Do You Think?

According to Soule, what is the difference between slavery and freedom?

Does freedom mean that freed people will have economic opportunities equal to those of white people?

How should freed people have responded to Soule’s advice?

acquired. In a speech before some two thousand freedmen on South Carolina’s Edisto Island in October 1865, Howard pleaded with his audience to “lay aside their bitter feelings, and to become reconciled to their old masters.” A black man shouted a response, “Why, General Howard, why do you take away our lands? You take them from us who are true, always true to the Government! You give them to our all-time enemies. This is not right!” A committee rejected Howard’s appeal for reconciliation and forgiveness. They insisted the government provide land:

You ask us to forgive the landowners of our island. You only lost your right arm in war and might forgive them. The man who tied me to a tree and gave me 39 lashes and who striped and flogged my mother and my sister and who will not let me stay in his empty hut except I will do his planting and be satisfied with his price and who combines with others to keep away land from me well knowing I would not have anything to do with him if I had land of my own—that man I cannot well forgive.

Howard was moved by these appeals. He returned to Washington and attempted to persuade Congress to make land available. Congress refused. President Johnson was determined that white people would get their lands back. It seemed so sensible to most white people. Property that had belonged to white families for generations simply could not be given to freedmen. Freedmen saw matters differently. They deserved land that they and their families had worked without compensation for generations. Freedmen believed it was the only way to make freedom meaningful and to gain independence from white people. As it turned out, most freedmen were forced off land they thought should belong to them.
Southern Homestead Act
In early 1866 Congress attempted to provide land for freedmen with the passage of the Southern Homestead Act. More than three million acres of public land were set aside for black people and southern white people who had remained loyal to the Union. Much of this land, however, was unsuitable for farming and consisted of swampy wetlands or unfertile pinewoods. More than four thousand black families—three-quarters of them in Florida—did claim some of this land. But many of them lacked the financial resources to cultivate it. Eventually southern timber companies acquired much of it, and the Southern Homestead Act largely failed.

Sharecropping
By 1866 bureau officials tried to force freedmen to sign labor contracts with white landowners—putting black people once again under white authority. Black men who refused to sign contracts could be arrested. Theoretically, these contracts were legal agreements between two equals: landowner and laborer. But they were seldom freely concluded. Bureau agents usually sided with the landowner and pressured freedmen to accept unequal terms.

Occasionally, the landowner would pay wages to the laborer. But because most landowners lacked cash to pay wages, they agreed to provide the laborer with part of the crop. The laborer, often grudgingly, agreed to work under the supervision of the landowner. The contracts required labor for a full year. The laborer could neither quit nor strike.
Landowners demanded that the laborers work the fields in gangs. Freedmen resisted this system. They sometimes insisted on making decisions involving planting, fertilizing, and harvesting as they sought to exercise independence (see Map 12–1).

Thus it took time for a new form of agricultural labor to develop. But by the 1870s, the system of sharecropping had emerged and dominated most of the South. There were no wages. Freedmen worked land as families—not in gangs—and not under direct white supervision. When the landowner provided seed, tools, fertilizer, and work animals (mules, horses, oxen), the black family received one-third of the crop. There were many variations on these arrangements. Frequently black families were cheated out of their fair share of the crop.

**Reading Check** What was the Freedmen’s Bureau and how effective was it?

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**MAP 12–1. The Effect of Sharecropping on the Southern Plantation: The Barrow Plantation, Oglethorpe County, Georgia.**

With the advent of sharecropping, black people preferred to have each family cultivate separate plots of land.

Although many freed people worked the same land that they had as slaves, how does this map suggest the changes experienced by black people in family life, religion, education, and their relationships with white people?