

Section 5

African Americans during Reconstruction

This section will help you meet the following objectives:

8.4.03 Assess North Carolina's role in the Civil War and the war's impact on the state.

8.4.04 Assess the roles played by individuals at the state and national levels during the Civil War and Reconstruction.

8.4.05 Analyze the impact of Reconstruction on the state and identify why it came to an end.

8.5.01 Analyze the importance of the agriculture, textile, tobacco, and furniture industries to the economic development of the state.

As you read, look for:

- how the freedmen lived
- the growth of the sharecropper system
- vocabulary terms **Freedmen's Bureau**, **sharecropper**

After the Civil War, African Americans across North Carolina were freed. Many celebrated with massive parades in Raleigh and New Bern on July 4, 1865. For a time, thousands lived in refugee camps run by the Union army. They took up jobs wherever someone hired them. The passage of the Black Codes, however, restricted the freedmen in new ways. Most had to sign annual labor contracts that restricted where they could go, what they could do, and how much they made. Some were even whipped, just like they had been under slavery. Blacks in prison could be rented out for work.



Because the Black Codes kept them in a form of slavery, African Americans actively sought to gain their rights. Freedmen from sixty-one counties held a convention in Raleigh in the fall of 1865 to protest restrictions on their citizenship rights. They established the North Carolina Equal Rights League to advance their interests. Later, they formed an education association to build schools and worked through the Freedmen's Bureau to operate them. The **Freedmen's Bureau** was a federal agency set up by Congress in 1865 to provide food, clothing, shelter, and education for the former slaves.

An independent black church life was also begun. The African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church was organized in the state. By 1869, there were more than fifty black ministers serving the denomination. Across the state, blacks who had attended white churches as slaves began to leave and form their own congregations. Hundreds were established by 1870. Ministers quickly assumed an important role in leading the freedman communities. The leader of the A.M.E. Zion Church, the Reverend J. W. Hood, was one of the authors of the 1868 state constitution.

African Americans often formed their organizations and institutions in the face of great opposition. White citizens in Statesville opposed the founding of a black school in 1867, even though blacks were going to pay for it themselves. Whites in Magnolia threatened to burn down the first black school in their town. In other places, matters went better. Some rich planters in Lincoln County paid for two schools in 1867, one for white children, the other for the children of their former slaves.

Did You Know?

The African Methodist Episcopal Church was formally organized in 1816 in Philadelphia. Today, it has over 3.5 million members.

African Americans as Republicans

To gain better rights, black leaders became active in the Republican Party once it was established in 1867. When twenty black representatives were elected in 1868, one freedman said, "Our status is settled. We are men."

Counties in the east where blacks were a majority always sent



Above: The A.M.E. Church spread into the South after the Civil War. The Poplar Run A.M.E. Zion Church in Winfall was built around 1890.

Opposite page: Scores of northern teachers came to North Carolina after the war to teach the freedmen. One of the early schools operated at James City, south of New Bern.



Above: John Adams Hyman was elected state senator for six years. In 1874, he became the state's first African American representative in Congress. **Below:** This two-story slave apartment at Stagville housed sharecroppers after the Civil War.

black representatives to Raleigh during Reconstruction. One, John A. Hyman of Warren County, had been sold and sent to Alabama while a slave but had returned to North Carolina to become a grocer. In the legislature, black representatives continually tried to advance the interests of blacks struggling to get over slavery. For example, black legislators suggested that trial juries be set up in proportion to the racial makeup of a county. If, for example, a third of the population were black, then four of the twelve jurors should be black. This law did not pass, but the black legislators never stopped trying.

Despite the terrorism of the Klan, black justices of the peace held courts and did their duties until the convention of 1875 gave the legislature the power to replace them with whites. Even after the Conservatives took power in 1876, blacks continued to be elected to the legislature, since the Fifteenth Amendment protected their voting rights.

The Rise of Sharecropping

Most freedmen never had the time or opportunity to participate in public life. They had to struggle to overcome the problems left over from slavery and still make a living for themselves and their families. Often, the local leaders for the black community had been free before the war and had a head start on prosperity and reputation. Former field hands had to start from scratch.

Many former slaves had to take work wherever they could get it. Often they moved to towns like Monroe or Tarboro to find work in stores





and shops. Many more worked for white farmers as hired hands doing whatever tasks they were assigned. Because this was too much like the old days, thousands of black men quickly tried to rent land and farm on their own. Since cash was scarce after the war, the landowner and the renter often split the proceeds from selling the crop raised on the rented land. The arrangement came to be called **sharecropping**. Most North Carolina black families quickly became sharecroppers during Reconstruction.

Sharecropping made sense, given the times, but it had drawbacks. Both the landowner and the sharecropper gambled that there would be a crop to sell at harvest, but the owner got the money first. If the rent took all the profits, then the sharecropper got nothing that year. Plus, most sharecroppers had to borrow money to pay for seeds and other supplies during the farm year; often, they could not pay all their bills. It was difficult, then, to ever escape the debt payments year after year since the interest rate was high. Many black families did little more than get by. In some counties of the east, black sharecroppers were the majority of the farmers by the 1870s.

Above: For many of the blacks in the late 1800s, sharecropping was not much different than slavery.

It's Your Turn

1. What was the purpose of the Freedmen's Bureau?
2. Why did many freedmen become sharecroppers after the war?