

## **“The Meaning of Freedom” (1988)<sup>1</sup>**

*Eric Foner*

FREEDOM came in different ways to different parts of the South. In large areas, slavery had disintegrated long before Lee’s surrender, but elsewhere, far from the presence of federal troops, blacks did not learn of its irrevocable end until the spring of 1865. Despite the many disappointments that followed, this generation of blacks would always regard the moment when “de freedom sun shine out” as the great watershed of their lives. Houston H. Holloway, who had been sold three times before he reached the age of twenty in 1865, later recalled with vivid clarity the day emancipation came to his section of Georgia: “I felt like a bird out of a cage. Amen. Amen. Amen. I could hardly ask to feel any better than I did that day....The week passed off in a blaze of glory.” Six weeks later Holloway and his wife “received my free born son into the world.”

“Freedom,” said a black minister, “burned in the black heart long before freedom was born.” But what did “freedom” mean? “It is necessary to define that word,” Freedmen’s Bureau Commissioner O.O. Howard told a black audience in 1865, “for it is most apt to be misunderstood.” Howard assumed a straightforward definition existed. But instead of a predetermined category or static concept, “freedom” itself became a terrain of conflict, its substance open to different and sometimes contradictory interpretations, its content changing for whites as well as blacks in the aftermath of the Civil War.

Many Southern whites assumed that blacks confronted the demise of slavery entirely unprepared for the responsibilities of freedom. “The Negroes are to be pitied,…” wrote South Carolinian Julius J. Fleming, an educator, minister, and public official. “They do not understand the liberty which has been conferred upon them.” In fact, blacks carried out of bondage an understanding of their new condition shaped both by their experience as slaves and by observation of the free society around them. What one planter called their “wild notions of right and freedom” encompassed, first of all, an end to the myriad injustices associated with slavery. Like the Louisiana blacks interviewed by General Banks’s agents during the Civil War, many former slaves saw freedom as an end to the separation of families, the abolition of punishment by the lash, and the opportunity to educate their children. Others, like black minister Henry M. Turner, stressed that freedom meant the enjoyment of “our rights in common with other men.” “If I cannot do like a white man I am not free,” Henry Adams told his former master in 1865. “I see how the poor white people do. I ought to do so too, or else I am a slave.”

But underpinning the specific aspirations lay a broader theme: a desire for dependence from white control, for autonomy both as individuals and as members of a community itself being transformed as a result of emancipation. Before the war, free blacks had created a network of churches, schools, and mutual benefit societies, while slaves had forged a semiautonomous culture centered on the family and church. With freedom, these institutions were consolidated, expanded, and liberated from white supervision, and new ones—particularly political

---

<sup>1</sup> Eric Foner, “The Meaning of Freedom,” Ch. 3 from *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 77-123.

organizations—joined them as focal points of black life. In stabilizing their families, seizing control of their churches, greatly expanding their schools and benevolent societies, staking a claim to economic independence, and forging a distinctive political culture, blacks during Reconstruction laid the foundation for the modern black community, whose roots lay deep in slavery, but whose structure and values reflected the consequences of emancipation.

### **From Slavery to Freedom**

Long after the end of the Civil War, the experience of bondage remained deeply etched in blacks' collective memory. As one white writer noted years later, blacks could not be shaken from the conviction "that the white race has barbarously oppressed them." They took particular offense at contentions that American slavery had been unusually benevolent and that "harmonious relations" had existed between master and slave. "All of us know how happy we have been...." declared one black orator. "Have these gentlemen forgotten so soon to what ills we have been subjected?" Fundamentally, however, blacks resented not only the incidents of slavery—the whippings, separations of families, and countless rituals of subordination—but the fact of having been held as slaves at all. During a visit to Richmond, Scottish minister David Macrae was surprised to hear a former slave complain of past mistreatment, while acknowledging he had never been whipped. "How were you cruelly treated then?" asked Macrae. "I was cruelly treated," answered the freedman, "because I was kept in slavery."

In countless ways, the newly freed slaves sought to "throw off the badge of servitude," to overturn the real and symbolic authority whites had exercised over every aspect of their lives. Some took new names that reflected the lofty hopes inspired by emancipation. One Northern teacher in Savannah reported among her black pupils an Alexander Hamilton, a Franklin Pierce, even a General Joe E Johnston; in Georgetown, South Carolina, former slaves' new names included Deliverance Berlin, Hope Mitchell, Chance Great, and Thomas Jefferson. Many blacks now demanded to be addressed by whites as Mr. or Mrs. rather than by their first name, as was conventional under slavery.

Blacks relished opportunities to flaunt their liberation from the innumerable regulations, significant and trivial, associated with slavery. Freedmen held mass meetings and religious services unrestrained by white surveillance, acquired dogs, guns, and liquor (all barred to them under slavery), and refused to yield the sidewalks to whites. They dressed as they pleased, black women sometimes wearing gaudy finery, carrying parasols, and replacing the slave kerchief with colorful hats and veils. In the summer of 1865, Charleston saw freedmen occupying "some of the best residences," and promenading on King Street "arrayed in silks and satins of all the colors of the rainbow," while black schoolchildren sang "John Brown's Body" within ear-shot of Calhoun's tomb." Rural whites complained of "insolence" and "insubordination" among the freedmen, by which they meant any departure from the deference and obedience expected under slavery. On the Bradford plantation in Florida, one untoward incident followed another. First, the family cook told Mrs. Bradford "if she want any dinner she kin cook it herself." Then the former slaves went off to a meeting with Northern soldiers to discuss "our freedom." Told that she and her daughter could not attend, one woman replied "they were now free and if she saw fit to take

her daughter into that crowd it was nobody's business." "Never before had I a word of impudence from any of our black folk," recorded nineteen-year-old Susan Bradford, "but they are not ours any longer."

The presence of black troops among the occupying Union army reinforced the freedmen's assertiveness and inspired constant complaint on the part of whites. Black soldiers acted, in the words of the *New York World*, as "apostles of black equality," spreading among the former slaves ideas of land ownership and civil and political equality. They intervened in plantation disputes and sometimes arrested whites. ("It is very hard..." wrote a Confederate veteran, "to see a white man taken under guard by one of those black scoundrels.") Black troops helped construct schools, churches, and orphanages, organized debating societies, and held political gatherings where "freedom songs" were sung and soldiers delivered "speeches of the most inflammatory kind." In Southern cities they demanded the right to travel on segregated streetcars, taunted white passersby with remarks like "We's all equal now," and advised freedmen in cities like Memphis that they need not obey military orders to return to the plantations.

Among the most resented of slavery's restrictions were the rule that no black could travel without a pass and the patrols that enforced the pass system. With emancipation, it seemed that half the South's black population took to the roads. "Right off colored folks started on the move," a Texas slave later recalled. "They seemed to want to get closer to freedom, so they'd know what it was—like it was a place or a city." Blacks' previous treatment as slaves seemed to have little to do with the movement. "Every one of A. M. Dorman's negroes quit him," an Alabama planter reported. "They have always been as free and as much indulged as his children." The ability to come and go as they pleased would long remain a source of pride and excitement for former slaves. "The Negroes are literally crazy about traveling," wrote a white observer in 1877. "The railway officials are continually importuned by them to run extra trains, excursion trains, and so on, on all sorts of occasions: holidays, picnics, Sunday-school celebrations, church dedications."

Undertaken in the face of determined opposition from planters, the army, and the Freedmen's Bureau, the massive population movement of early Reconstruction appeared to Southern whites, many Northerners, and subsequent historians as an "aimless migration," proof that blacks equated freedom with idleness and "vagabondage." In fact, a majority of freedmen did not abandon their home plantations in 1865, and those who did generally traveled only a few miles. Those blacks who did move usually had specific reasons for doing so. Henry Adams, for example, left his Louisiana plantation in 1865 to "see whether I am free by going without a pass." (This was not an idle exercise. A group of whites accosted Adams on the road, asked the name of his owner, and beat him when he replied that he belonged to no one.) Some blacks abandoned predominately white upcountry counties to seek the fellowship of their own race. One freedwoman left a Georgia farm saying "she couldn't live anywhere where there was no more negroes than here." The postwar "exodus" also reflected the massive displacement of the black population that had occurred during the Civil War. Thousands of slaves "refugeed" by their owners to Texas now returned to Mississippi and Louisiana, while in South Carolina blacks removed from the Sea Islands early in the war returned home, sometimes crossing paths with former mainland slaves who had escaped to the islands and were now traveling home. And

considerable numbers, attracted by wages substantially higher than in the East, emigrated to Texas, Louisiana, and other southwestern states.

For a variety of reasons, Southern towns and cities experienced an especially large influx of freedmen during and immediately after the Civil War. In the cities, many blacks believed, “freedom was free-er.” Here were black social institutions—schools, churches, and fraternal societies—and here too, in spite of inequities in law enforcement, were the army (including black soldiers) and Freedmen’s Bureau, offering protection from the violence so pervasive in much of the rural South. “People who get scared at others being beaten go to the cities,” said a Georgia black legislator during Reconstruction. Between 1865 and 1870, the black population of the South’s ten largest cities doubled, while the number of white residents rose by only 10 percent. Smaller towns, from which blacks had often been excluded as slaves, experienced even more dramatic increases. The black population of Demopolis, Alabama, site of a regional Freedmen’s Bureau office, grew from one individual in 1860 to nearly 1,000 ten years later.

Black migrants who hoped to find an urban alternative to plantation labor and rural living conditions often encountered severe disappointment. The influx from the countryside flooded the labor market, undercutting the economic position of longtime city residents and consigning most urban blacks to low-wage, menial employment. Unable to obtain decent housing, black migrants lived in shanty towns that sprang up on the outskirts of Southern cities; in these districts of poverty, squalor, and periodic epidemics, the death rate far exceeded that among white city dwellers. The result was a striking change in Southern urban living patterns. Before the war, blacks and whites had lived scattered throughout Southern cities. Reconstruction witnessed the rise of a new, segregated, urban geography: “the main town, populated principally by whites, and containing the finest structures; and the ‘free town’ (which the whites often dub Liberia), consisting chiefly of wretched log cabins.” For all these reasons, the urban migration slowed dramatically after 1870 and the proportion of Southern blacks living in cities stabilized at around 9 percent.

Of all the motivations for black mobility, none was more poignant than the effort to reunite families separated during slavery. “In their eyes,” wrote a Freedmen’s Bureau agent, “the work of emancipation was incomplete until the families which had been dispersed by slavery were reunited.” In September 1865, Northern reporter John Dennett encountered a freedman who had walked more than 600 miles from Georgia to North Carolina, searching for his wife and children from whom he had been separated by sale. Another freedman, writing from Texas, asked the aid of the Freedmen’s Bureau in locating “my own dearest relatives,” providing a long list of sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles, and in-laws, none of whom he had seen since his sale in Virginia twenty-four years before. As late as the turn of the century, black newspapers carried advertisements that testified to the human tragedies that formed an everyday part of slavery. A typical plea for help appeared in the Nashville Colored Tennessean:

During the year 1849, Thomas Sample carried away from this city, as his slaves, our daughter, Polly, and son....We will give \$100 each for them to any person who will assist them...to get to Nashville, or get word to us of their whereabouts.

Usually, such quests ended in failure, and others produced wrenching disappointment when spouses were located who had remarried. But few scenes were as affecting as the reunion of long-separated relatives. "I wish you could see this people as they step from slavery into freedom," a Union officer wrote his wife in May 1865. "Men are taking their wives and children, families which had been for a long time broken up are united and oh! such happiness. I am glad I am here."

Strong family ties, it is, clear, had existed under slavery, but had always been vulnerable to disruption. Emancipation allowed blacks to reaffirm and solidify their family connections, and most freedmen seized the opportunity with alacrity. During the Civil War, John Eaton, who, like many whites, believed that slavery had destroyed the sense of family obligation, was astonished by the eagerness with which former slaves in contraband camps legalized their marriage bonds. The same pattern was repeated when the Freedmen's Bureau and state governments made it possible to register and solemnize slave unions. Many families, in addition, adopted the children of deceased relatives and friends, rather than see them apprenticed to white masters or placed in Freedmen's Bureau orphanages. By 1870, a large majority of blacks lived in two-parent family households, a fact that can be gleaned from the manuscript census returns but also "quite incidentally" from the Congressional Ku Klux Klan hearings, which recorded countless instances of victims assaulted in their homes, "the husband and wife in bed, and...their little children beside them."

But while emancipation thus made possible the stabilization and strengthening of the preexisting black family, it also transformed the roles of its members and relations among them. One common, significant change was that slave families, separated much of the time because their members belonged to different owners, could now live together. More widely noticed by white observers in early Reconstruction was the withdrawal of black women from field labor. The nineteenth century's "cult of domesticity," which defined the home as a woman's proper sphere, was never thought to apply to blacks and certainly not to slaves. Although men performed the heaviest tasks, like plowing and splitting rails, on most plantations slave women regularly worked in the fields, and sometimes comprised a majority of the agricultural labor force. Among the slaves themselves, however, labor seems to have been divided along sexual lines, with men chopping wood, hunting, and assuming positions of leadership (such as driver and preacher), while women washed, sewed, cooked, gardened, and assumed primary responsibility for the care of children. Like free women, female slaves found that their responsibilities did not end when the "workday" was over.

Beginning in 1865, and for years thereafter, whites throughout the South complained of the difficulty of obtaining female field laborers. Thus was lost, as a Georgian put it, "a very important per cent of the entire labor of the South." The editor of *The Plantation* lamented that black women would no longer "pick cotton, which is a woman's work....They will merely take care of their own households and do but little or no work outdoors." In both cities and rural areas, black women also proved reluctant to labor as domestic servants in white homes, and those who did frequently refused to live in their employer's residence. "House servants are difficult to get out here," wrote a resident of upcountry Georgia. "Every negro woman wants to set up house keeping." Many contemporaries, who viewed white women who remained at home as paragons of the domestic ideal, saw their black counterparts as lazy and slightly ludicrous. Planters,

Freedmen's Bureau officials, and Northern visitors all ridiculed the black "female aristocracy" for "acting the lady" or mimicking the family patterns of middle-class whites. White employers also resented their inability to force black children to labor in the fields, especially after the spread of schools in rural areas. "The freedmen," a Georgia newspaper reported in 1869, "have almost universally withdrawn their women and children from the fields, putting the first at housework and the latter at school."

As these comments indicate, contemporaries appeared uncertain whether black women, black men, or both, were responsible for the withdrawal of females from agricultural labor. There is no question that many black men considered it a badge of honor to see their wives working at home and believed that, as head of the family, the man should decide how its labor was organized. In one part of Louisiana, where planters attempted to force black women into the fields, freedmen insisted that "whenever they wanted their wives to work they would tell them themselves; and if [they] could not rule [their] own domestic affairs on that place [they] would leave it." But all blacks resented the sexual exploitation that had been a regular feature of slave life, and shared the determination that the women no longer labor under the direct supervision of white men. And many black women independently desired to devote more time than had been possible under slavery to caring for their children and to domestic responsibilities like cooking, sewing, and laundering. Tasks like these, arduous enough in the days before electricity and running water in the rural South, were made even more time-consuming by the demise of the plantation slave quarter, where children were cared for by elderly slave women and household chores often done collectively.

The shift in the locus of black female labor from the fields to the home proved, in large measure, a temporary phenomenon. The rise of renting and sharecropping, which made each family responsible for its own plot of land, placed a premium on the labor of all family members. "A man takes more or less land according to the number of his family," reported Northern journalist Charles Nordhoff after his trip across the South in 1875. "Where the negro works for wages, he tries to keep his wife at home. If he rents land, or plants on shares, the wife and children help him in the field." The dire poverty of many black families, deepened by the depression of the 1870s, made it essential for women as well as men to contribute to the family's income. Throughout this period, a far higher percentage of black than white women and children worked for wages outside their homes. Where women continued to concentrate on domestic tasks, and children attended school, they frequently engaged in seasonal field labor. This was the pattern at Davis Bend, Mississippi, where most black women listed their occupation as "Keeping House" or "At Home" in the 1870 census, but labored in the fields, often with their children, at cotton-picking time. Thus, emancipation did not eliminate wage labor by black females and children, but it fundamentally altered control over their labor. The family itself, rather than a white owner or overseer, now decided where and when black women and children would work.

For blacks, liberating their families from the authority of whites was an indispensable element of freedom. But the family itself was in some ways transformed by emancipation. Although historians no longer view the slave family as "matriarchal," it is true that slave men did not function as economic breadwinners and that their authority within the household was ultimately inferior to that of their masters. In a sense, slavery had imposed upon black men and women the rough "equality" of powerlessness. With freedom came developments that

strengthened patriarchy within the black family and institutionalized the notion that men and women should inhabit separate spheres.

Outside events strongly influenced this development. Service in the Union Army enabled black men to participate more directly than women in the struggle for freedom. The Freedmen's Bureau designated the husband as head of the black household, insisting that men sign contracts for the labor of their entire families and establishing wage scales that paid women less than men for identical plantation labor. The Freedmen's Bureau Act of 1865 spoke of assigning land to every "male" freedman and refugee; the Southern Homestead Act of 1866 allowed women to claim a portion of the public domain only if unmarried. Political developments further reinforced the distinction between the public sphere of men and the private world of women. In the early days of freedom both men and women took part in informal mass meetings, although from the start men alone served as delegates to organized black conventions. After 1867 black men could serve on juries, vote, hold office, and rise to leadership in the Republican party, while women, like their white counterparts, could not. Militia units and fraternal societies were likewise all-male, although they often had ladies' auxiliaries. And male leaders of the black community promoted a strongly patriarchal definition of the family and woman's role. Black preachers, editors, and politicians emphasized women's responsibility for making the home "a place of peace and comfort" for men, and urged them to submit to their husbands' authority. Militant Virginia political leader Thomas Bayne had a severely restricted definition of women's "rights": "It is a woman's right to raise and bear children, and to train them for their future duties in life."

Not all black women placidly accepted the increasingly patriarchal quality of black family life. Indeed, many proved more than willing to bring family disputes before public authorities. The records of the Freedmen's Bureau contain hundreds of complaints by black women of beatings, infidelity, and lack of child support. "I notice that some of you have your husbands arrested, and the husbands have their wives arrested," declared Holland Thompson, one of Alabama's leading black politicians, in an 1867 speech. "All that is wrong—you can settle it among yourselves." Some black women objected to their husbands' signing labor contracts for them, demanded separate payment of their wages, and refused to be liable for their husbands' debts at country stores. And some women, married as well as single, opened individual accounts at the Freedman's Savings Bank. Yet if emancipation not only institutionalized the black family but also spawned tensions within it, black men and women shared a passionate commitment to the stability of family life as a badge of freedom and the solid foundation upon which a new black community could flourish.

### **Building the Black Community**

Second only to the family as a focal point of black life stood the church. And, as in the case of the family, Reconstruction was a time of consolidation and transformation for black religion. With the death of slavery, urban blacks seized control of their own churches, while the "invisible institution" of the rural slave church emerged into the full light of day. The creation of an independent black religious life proved to be a momentous and irreversible consequence of emancipation.

In antebellum Southern Protestant congregations, slaves and free blacks had enjoyed a kind of associate membership. Subject to the same rules and discipline as whites, they were required to sit in the back of the church or in the gallery during services, and excluded from Sabbath schools and a role in church governance. In the larger cities, the number of black members often justified the organization of wholly black congregations and the construction of separate churches. In 1860 Richmond boasted four black churches with a combined membership of over 4,000. Many such institutions achieved a considerable degree of autonomy, even though the law required that the pastors be white. Some of these white ministers, like Rev. Robert Ryland of Richmond's First African Baptist Church, treated their black parishioners with genuine respect and allowed black deacons and class leaders elected by the members to exercise real authority; others seemed to have no broader concept of Christianity than the biblical injunction that servants obey their masters. ("The black people of this country hate that passage," one black minister remarked after the war, "and I cannot get my people to like it, even now.") Although generally constructed with funds contributed by blacks, church buildings, by law, belonged to white trustees. In the countryside, nearly every plantation had its black preacher, usually a "self-called" slave with a knowledge of the Bible and "some little smattering of theology." Their secret after-dark religious meetings provided a rare opportunity for slaves to congregate and express their sorrows and aspirations free from white surveillance.

In the aftermath of emancipation, the wholesale withdrawal of blacks from biracial congregations redrew the religious map of the South. Two causes combined to produce the independent black church: the refusal of whites to offer blacks an equal place within their congregations and the black quest for self-determination. The end of slavery does not appear to have altered the views of many white clergymen as to the legitimacy of the peculiar institution or the desirability of preserving unaltered blacks' second-class status within biracial churches. The "whole doctrine" of the scriptural justification for slavery remained intact, declared the General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church in December 1865; as late as the 1890s, Southern ecclesiastics were still denouncing the idea of the inherent sinfulness of slaveholding. While initially urging blacks to remain within their congregations, most white ministers insisted that the old inequalities—separate pews, the white monopoly on church governance—must continue.

Given the alternatives of admitting blacks as equal members or acquiescing in the formation of separate black churches, most Southern whites took the second course. Some, like Richmond's Ryland, went even further; he resigned his pastorship of Richmond's First African Baptist Church and arranged for the deed to be transferred from the white trustees to the black members. Elsewhere, however, the ownership of church property provoked bitter controversy. A case in point is the dispute over control of the Front Street Methodist Church in Wilmington, North Carolina, whose congregation before the war numbered about 1,400, two thirds of them black. When Union soldiers occupied the city early in 1865, the black members informed Rev. L. S. Burkhead "that they did not require his services any longer as Pastor...he being a rebel," and proceeded to elect a black minister in his place. Gen. John M. Schofield, emulating Solomon, ordered that the spiritual day be divided equally between the races, each with a minister of its own choosing. The conflict continued into 1866, with the Reverend Mr. Burkhead preaching in the old manner (although a few blacks, he complained, ostentatiously attempted to sit downstairs during his sermons). Eventually, the white minority regained control and most of the blacks left

to form an independent congregation. In other similar disputes, however, blacks were able to win title to the church buildings they had constructed as slaves.

Throughout the South, blacks emerging from slavery pooled their resources to purchase land and erect their own churches. Before the buildings were completed, they held services in structures as diverse as a railroad boxcar, where Atlanta's First Baptist Church gathered, or in an outdoor "bush arbor," where the First Baptist Church of Memphis congregated in 1865. The first new building to rise amid Charleston's ruins was a black church on Calhoun Street; by 1866 ten more had been constructed. In rural areas, former slave preachers and missionaries from the North spurred the creation of religious institutions. 1866 was "a year of revivals" in Georgia, and in 1867 North Carolina witnessed a series of immense outdoor meetings. Whites sometimes attended these gatherings along with blacks, generally sitting in separate sections and often listening to their own preachers, but at one "old fashioned camp meeting" in 1867 several hundred Georgia whites were moved to take seats "on the rude log seats in the midst of the negroes." In the countryside, construction of church buildings proceeded more slowly than in the cities. Often a community would build a single church, used in rotation by the various black denominations.

By the end of Reconstruction in 1877, the vast majority of Southern blacks had withdrawn from churches dominated by whites. On the eve of the war, 42,000 black Methodists worshipped in biracial South Carolina churches; by the 1870s, only 600 remained. Cleveland County, North Carolina, counted 200 black members of biracial Methodist churches in 1860, ten in 1867, and none five years later. A partial exception to this pattern was the Catholic Church, which generally did not require black worshippers to sit in separate pews (although its parochial schools were segregated). Some freedmen abandoned Catholicism for black-controlled Protestant denominations, but others were attracted to it precisely because, a Northern teacher reported from Natchez, "they are treated on terms of equality, at least while they are in church." And Catholicism retained its hold on large numbers of New Orleans free blacks who, at least on Sunday, coexisted harmoniously with the city's French and Irish white Catholic population.

Northern whites who ventured South to proselytize among the freedmen proved no more successful than Southerners in winning black converts, partly because of their ill-disguised contempt for uneducated black ministers and their emotional services. Teachers employed by the American Missionary Association used Bible classes to inveigh against "heathenish habits such as shouting" and "unchristian" behavior like that of the black funeral mourner who "clapped her hands, threw them over her head screaming 'glory to God' ...dancing up and down in front of the pulpit." Most Northern missionaries believed the old-time slave preachers must be replaced by new men trained in theology. Only a few listened long enough to appreciate that these preachers often exhibited a remarkable command of the Bible and were capable of genuine eloquence. Army Chaplain George H. Hepworth recognized in one uneducated Louisiana minister a man of "genius," whose sermons employed phrases "epic in grandeur"; he spoke of "the rugged wood of the cross" to which Christ had been nailed, and how "the earth was unable to endure the tremendous sacrilege, and trembled." Baptist missionary Isaac Brinckerhoff lamented the ignorance of black churchmen and ridiculed the Georgia minister who opened Sabbath services by inviting the congregation "to tumble with him through the third chapter of John." Yet in South

Carolina Brinckerhoff encountered a black preacher who caused him to feel “ashamed of myself”:

He talked about Christ and his salvation as one who understood what he said....Here was an unlearned man, one who could not read, telling of the love of Christ, of Christian faith and duty in a way which I have not learned.

Blacks, Northern missionaries quickly learned, preferred to worship in churches with ministers of their own race. The African Methodist Episcopal Church gained ascendancy over its white-dominated rivals, both Northern and Southern, in the competition for the allegiance of black Methodists. But the black emissaries sent south by the AME encountered problems of their own, for many insisted upon the need for an educated ministry and demanded more sedate services than Southern blacks were accustomed to. “The old people were not anxious to see innovations introduced in religious worship,” an AME leader later wrote, recalling how one black minister from the North with an undemonstrative preaching style was mocked as a “Presbyterian” by his Southern flock. For these and other reasons, Baptist churches attracted the largest number of freedmen. The Baptists’ decentralized, democratic structure and the fervor of their services meant that slave preachers could establish churches without being beholden to bishops promoting an educated ministry, as in the AME, while the freedmen could worship as they pleased. By the end of Reconstruction, black Baptists outnumbered all the other denominations combined; taken together, the Baptist churches formed the largest black organization ever created in this country.

The church was “the first social institution fully controlled by black men in America,” and its multiple functions testified to its centrality in the black community. Places of worship, churches also housed schools, social events, and political gatherings. In rural areas, church picnics, festivals, and excursions often provided the only opportunity for fellowship and recreation. The church served as an “Ecclesiastical Court House,” promoting moral values, adjudicating family disputes, and disciplining individuals for adultery and other illicit behavior. In every black community, ministers were among the most respected individuals, esteemed for their speaking ability, organizational talents, and good judgment on matters both public and private. “You know those who are the real leaders in every community of freedmen,” wrote a white North Carolinian in 1868, “are religious exhorters.” One visitor to the South remarked, however, that such men “are rather preachers because they are leaders than leaders because they are preachers,” for, as one of the few available positions of power and prestige, the ministry inevitably attracted those with leadership potential.

Inevitably, too, preachers came to play a central role in black politics during Reconstruction. Many agreed with AME minister Charles H. Pearce, who held several Reconstruction offices in Florida, that it was “impossible” to separate religion and politics: “A man in this State cannot do his whole duty as a minister except he looks out for the political interests of his people.” Even those preachers who lacked ambition for political position sometimes found it thrust upon them. Often among the few literate blacks in a community, they were called upon to serve as election registrars and candidates for office. Over 100 black ministers, hailing from North and South, from free and slave backgrounds, and from every black

denomination from AME to Primitive Baptist, would be elected to legislative seats during Reconstruction. And among the lay majority of black politicians, many built a political base in the church. Alabama legislator Holland Thompson, for example, had played a leading role in Montgomery's Baptist affairs since his days as a slave. Rare indeed was Frederick Douglass, the only prominent black political leader who not only lacked a tie to the black church but repudiated its mystical, evangelical rhetoric.

Throughout Reconstruction, religious convictions profoundly affected the way blacks understood the momentous events around them, the very language in which they expressed aspirations for justice and autonomy. Blacks inherited from slavery a distinctive version of Christian faith, in which Jesus appeared as a personal redeemer offering solace in the face of misfortune, while the Old Testament suggested that they were a chosen people, analogous to the Jews in Egypt, whom God, in the fullness of time, would deliver from bondage. "There is no part of the Bible with which they are so familiar as the story of the deliverance of the Children of Israel," a white army chaplain reported from Alabama in 1866.

Emancipation and the defeat of the Confederacy strongly reinforced this messianic vision of history. Blacks endowed these experiences with spiritual import, comprehending them in the language of Christian faith. "These are the times foretold by the Prophets, 'when a nation shall be born in a day'," declared the call for a black political gathering in 1865. A Tennessee newspaper commented in 1869 that freedmen habitually referred to slavery as Paul's Time, and Reconstruction as Isaiah's Time (referring perhaps to Paul's message of obedience and humility, and Isaiah's prophecy of cataclysmic change brought about by violence). God, who had "scourged America with war for her injustice to the black man," had allowed his agent Lincoln, like Moses, to glimpse the promised land of "universal freedom" and then mysteriously removed him before he "reached its blessed fruitions."

Under some circumstances, such faith can produce quiescence, a belief that the contrivances of man are inadequate to bring about divine purposes. But during Reconstruction, black Christianity inspired not inaction but political commitment. When one speaker at a black political meeting complained of preachers who spoke more "of politics than of Christ," he was silenced by shouts of "Politics in Christ." Throughout Reconstruction, black republicanism was grounded in "the great Christian principle of the brotherhood of man." Even nonclerics used secular and religious vocabulary interchangeably, as in one 1867 speech recorded by a North Carolina justice of the peace:

He said it was not now like it used to be, that...the negro was about to get his equal rights....That the negroes owed their freedom to the courage of the negro soldiers and to God....He made frequent references to the II and IV chapters of Joshua for a full accomplishment of the principles and destiny of the race. It was concluded that the race have a destiny in view similar to the Children of Israel.

Indeed, for black political leaders, the Bible—the one book with which they could assume familiarity among their largely illiterate constituents—served as a point of reference for understanding public events. When in 1870 North Carolina's House impeached Governor Holden, seventeen black legislators issued an address that began: "Know ye that since the time

that Haman conspired to destroy all the Jews who dwelt in the Persian Dominions...no wickedness hath been devised that will bear any comparison with some of the measures proposed by the dominant party in the present General Assembly.”

The rise of the independent black church provides only the most striking example of the thriving institutional structure blacks created in the aftermath of emancipation. A host of fraternal, benevolent, and mutual-aid societies also sprang into existence. Even before the Civil War, free blacks had formed fraternal organizations, and secret societies of various kinds had existed among the slaves. In early Reconstruction, blacks created literally thousands of such organizations; a partial list includes burial societies, debating clubs, Masonic lodges, fire companies, drama societies, trade associations, temperance clubs, and equal rights leagues. Often spawned in black churches, they quickly took on lives of their own. By the 1870s, over 200 such organizations existed in Memphis, 400 in Richmond, and countless others were scattered across the rural South. Although their activities generally took place away from white observation, they appeared in public in the processions and celebrations that seemed ubiquitous, especially in Southern cities, during Reconstruction. Black parades commemorated special occasions like the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, but the largest celebrations were reserved for January 1 (the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation) and July 4—days on which Southern whites generally remained indoors.

Offering social fellowship, sickness and funeral benefits and, most of all, a chance to manage their own affairs, these voluntary associations embodied a spirit of collective self-improvement. Robert G. Fitzgerald, who had been born free in Delaware, served in both the U.S. Army, and Navy, and came to Virginia to teach in 1866, was delighted to see rural blacks establishing churches, lyceums, and schools. “They tell me,” he recorded in his diary, “before Mr. Lincoln made them free they had nothing to work for, to look up to, now they have everything, and will, by God’s help, make the best of it.” Linking blacks across lines of occupation, income, and prewar status, the societies offered the better-off the opportunity for wholesome and respectable association, provided the poor with a modicum of economic insurance, and opened positions of community leadership to men of modest backgrounds. (Among the leaders of Memphis’ religious and benevolent societies, the majority were unskilled laborers.) Moreover, the spirit of mutual self-help extended outward from the societies to embrace destitute nonmembers. In 1865 and 1866, blacks in Nashville, Jackson, New Orleans, and Atlanta, as well as in many rural areas, raised money to establish orphanages, soup kitchens, employment agencies, and poor relief funds. In some areas, such as a poverty-stricken corner of West Virginia, black organizations contributed money to aid suffering poor whites.

Perhaps the most striking illustration of the freedmen’s quest for self-improvement was their seemingly unquenchable thirst for education. Before the war, every Southern state except Tennessee had prohibited the instruction of slaves, and while many free blacks had attended school and a number of slaves became literate through their own efforts or the aid of sympathetic masters, over 90 percent of the South’s adult black population was illiterate in 1860. Access to education for themselves and their children was, for blacks, central to the meaning of freedom, and white contemporaries were astonished by their “avidity for learning.” A Mississippi

Freedmen's Bureau agent reported in 1865 that when he informed a gathering of 3,000 freedmen that they "were to have the advantages of schools and education, their joy knew no bounds. They fairly jumped and shouted in gladness." The desire for learning led parents to migrate to towns and cities in search of education for their children, and plantation workers to make the establishment of a school house "an absolute condition" of signing labor contracts. (One 1867 Louisiana contract specified that the planter pay a "5 per cent tax" to support black education.) Adults as well as children thronged the schools established during and after the Civil War. A Northern teacher in Florida reported how one sixty-year-old woman, "just beginning to spell, seems as if she could not think of any thing but her book, says she spells her lesson all the evening, then she dreams about it, and wakes up thinking about it."

For many adults, a craving "to read the word of God" provided the immediate spur to learning. One elderly freedman sitting beside his grandchild in a Mobile school explained to a Northern reporter, "he wouldn't trouble the lady much, but he must learn to read the Bible and the Testament." Others recognized education as indispensable for economic advancement. "I gets almost discouraged, but I does want to learn to cipher so I can do business," an elderly Mississippi pupil told his teacher. But more generally, blacks' hunger for education arose from the same desire for autonomy and self-improvement that inspired so many activities in the aftermath of emancipation. As a member of a North Carolina education society put it in 1866, "he thought a school-house would be the first proof of their *independence*."

Northern benevolent societies, the Freedmen's Bureau, and, after 1868, state governments, provided most of the funding for black education during Reconstruction. But the initiative often lay with blacks themselves, a pattern established in the early days of the war. Mary Peake, the daughter of a free black mother and an English father, in 1861 established the first school for blacks in Hampton, Virginia, before the arrival of Northern teachers. When the Gideonites arrived in the Sea Islands in 1862, they found two schools already in operation, one of them taught by a black cabinetmaker who for years had conducted secret night classes for slaves. After the war, urban blacks took immediate steps to set up schools, sometimes holding classes temporarily in abandoned warehouses, billiards rooms, or, in New Orleans and Savannah, former slave markets. By the end of April 1865, less than a month after Union troops occupied the city, over 1,000 black children and seventy-five adults attended schools established by Richmond's black churches and the American Missionary Association. "Joy incomparable" was expressed by those who gathered for the opening. In rural areas, Freedmen's Bureau officials repeatedly expressed surprise at discovering classes organized by blacks already meeting in churches, basements, or private homes. Charles Hopkins, a freedman and Methodist preacher, in 1866 "obtained a room in a deserted hotel" in Greenville, South Carolina, "and began giving spelling and reading lessons." And then there was the seemingly ubiquitous learning that took place outside school—children teaching their parents the alphabet at home; laborers on lunch breaks "poring over the elementary pages"; the "wayside schools" described by a Bureau officer:

A negro riding on a loaded wagon, or sitting on a hack waiting for a train, or by the cabin door, is often seen, book in hand delving after the rudiments of knowledge. A group on the platform of a depot, after carefully conning an old spelling book, resolves itself into a class.

Throughout the South, blacks in 1865 and 1866 formed societies and raised money among themselves to purchase land, build schoolhouses, and pay teachers' salaries. Some communities voluntarily taxed themselves, while in others black schools charged tuition, although often a certain number of the poorest families were allowed to enroll their children free of charge. Robert G. Fitzgerald's salary was raised by a monthly tuition charge of twenty cents. However, he gave much of the money away to poor black families, and in 1869 abolished the fee altogether, to render his school accessible to "rich and poor, black and white, high and low." Black artisans donated their labor to construct schoolhouses, and black families offered room and board to teachers to supplement their salaries. The sums expended—\$800 to purchase a lot in Georgetown, South Carolina, \$2,000 to support fifty-six Georgia schools in November 1865—represented a genuine sacrifice for a largely impoverished community. Contemporaries could not but note the contrast between white families seemingly indifferent to education and blacks who "toil and strive, labour and endure in order that their children 'may have a schooling'." As one Northern educator remarked: "Is it not significant that after the lapse of one hundred and forty-four years since the settlement [of Beaufort, North Carolina], the Freedmen are building the first public school-house ever erected here."

By 1870, blacks had expended over \$1 million on education, a fact that long remained a point of collective pride. "Whoever may hereafter lay claim to the honor of 'establishing'...schools," wrote a black resident of Selma in 1867, "I trust the fact will never be ignored that Miss Lucy Lee, one of the emancipated, was the pioneer teacher of the colored children,...without the aid of Northern societies." But poverty undercut black educational efforts, forcing many schools to turn to the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern societies for aid. "We have plodded along this far, the best we could," wrote Florida freedman Emanuel Smith in April 1867, requesting the American Missionary Association to furnish and help pay the salary of a female teacher. "This is the first application that has been made to any source for help since we have been free." (Smith specified a woman because, as he explained, "I suppose they can be had on cheaper terms.")

"Without help we can do nothing," a South Carolina freedman concluded in 1867. But with outside help came the prospect of outside control, as events in Savannah illustrate. When Sherman captured the city in December 1864, local black ministers immediately established the Savannah Educational Association, which by February had raised nearly \$1,000, engaged fifteen black teachers, and enrolled 600 pupils in schools. Simultaneously, AMA missionaries from the North, headed by Rev. S. W. Magill, a white Georgian who had resided in Connecticut during the war, arrived in the city intent on educating the freedmen. Hoping to uplift blacks by providing them with "Christian education," Magill believed the black teachers incompetent and their school system "radically defective." "It will not do," he concluded, "to leave these people to themselves." The Bureau agents who reached Savannah in mid-1865 shared these assumptions, and withheld funds from the black school system. By 1866, unable to finance its schools, the Savannah Educational Association had no alternative but to turn them over to the AMA, which replaced the black teachers with its own white employees, retaining a few of the blacks as assistants. Ill-will generated by these events lingered. "There is jealousy of the superintendence

of the white man in this matter,” one Northern teacher remarked. “What they desire is assistance without control.”

Inevitably, the first black teachers appeared hopelessly incompetent in Northern eyes, for a smattering of education was enough to place an individual in front of a class. Acutely aware of their lack of preparation, some teachers worried about the poorly written reports they drafted for Freedmen’s Bureau education officials. “I have no education only what I gave myself by chance so I ask you to excuse my unqualified address,” one wrote; another poignantly explained, “I never had the chance of goen to school for I was a slave until freedom....I am the only teacher because we can not doe better now.” Yet even an imperfect literacy, coupled with the courage often required to establish a rural school in the face of local white opposition, marked these teachers as community leaders. Black teachers played numerous roles apart from education, assisting freedmen in contract disputes, engaging in church work, and drafting petitions to the Freedmen’s Bureau, state officials, and Congress. Robert Harris, a free black from Cleveland who had come to North Carolina to teach, passed up his usual summer trip to Ohio in 1869 because his family was “so connected with the educational, religious, social, and industrial affairs of the people that we cannot be spared.” Like the ministry, teaching frequently became a springboard to political office. At least seventy black teachers served in state legislatures during Reconstruction. And many black politicians were linked in other ways to the quest for learning, like Alabama Congressman Benjamin S. Turner, an ex-slave “destitute of education,” who personally funded a Selma school.

Not surprisingly, the majority of black teachers who held political office during Reconstruction had been free before the Civil War. Indeed the schools, like the entire institutional structure established by blacks during Reconstruction, symbolized the emergence of a community that united the free and the freed, and Northern and Southern blacks. The process occurred most smoothly in the Upper South, where the cultural and economic gap between free blacks and slaves had always been less pronounced than in the coastal cities of the cotton states. While generally lighter in color than slaves, most Upper South free blacks were poor urban workers or farm laborers, often tied to the slave community through marriage and church membership. It was not uncommon after the Civil War to find free blacks like John Overton of Cedar Grove, North Carolina, heading educational societies composed mostly of freedmen. Many Northern-born blacks who ventured south after the end of the war also linked their fortunes to those of the former slaves. “I class myself with the freedmen,” wrote Northern black teacher Virginia C. Green. “Though I have never known servitude they are in fact my people.”

In cities like New Orleans, Mobile, Savannah, and Charleston, however, affluent mulatto elites responded with deep ambivalence to the new situation created by emancipation. In 1866 Rev. Henry M. Turner expressed alarm at disputes within his church in which “the blacks were arrayed against the brown or mulattoes, and the mulattoes in turn against the blacks.” Educated members of the free black elite often found the freedmen’s religious practices excessively emotional, and were appalled by the anti-intellectualism of ex-slave preachers. (One sermon of the most famous “old-style” preacher, John Jasper, entitled “The Sun Move,” “disproved” the heliocentric theory of astronomers.) Free blacks welcomed the end of slavery, but many resented the elimination of their unique status and feared being submerged in a sea of freedmen. Even in New Orleans, where politically conscious free blacks had already moved to make common cause

with the freedmen, a sense of exclusivity survived the end of slavery. The Freedmen's Bureau found many free blacks reluctant to send their children to school with former slaves. In Mobile, too, free mulattoes were divided between those who embraced the new order and emerged as social and political leaders during Reconstruction, and others who cultivated the goodwill of local whites in the hope of maintaining their elite position. The Mobile *Nationalist*, founded by a group of free blacks in 1865, excoriated the Creole Fire Company for acceding to white demands not to display an American flag during a parade, and for putting on airs of "supposed superiority." Yet the same paper advised the freed men to "put away 'nigger' plays and songs" and adopt the "plays and amusements [of]...free men and women."

After New Orleans, the South's largest and wealthiest community of free blacks resided in Charleston, although the free elite there was neither as rich nor as culturally distinct as its Louisiana counterpart. Before the war, no free person of color in Charleston owned as much property as the richest New Orleans mulattoes. The Charlestonians spoke English and worshipped at Protestant churches (although, unlike the slaves, they were mostly Episcopalians or Presbyterians), and they could not bear arms or testify in court against whites. Nonetheless, the Charleston free elite was no less conscious of the gap separating themselves not merely from the slaves, but from the city's poorer free blacks—a gap institutionalized in organizations like the Brown Fellowship Society, which excluded men with dark skins.

Arriving in Charleston in November 1865, John R. Dennett found some members of the free elite cultivating the old spirit of exclusiveness. Others, however, had taken the lead in organizing assistance for destitute freedmen and in teaching the former slaves. In June 1865, Francis L. Cardozo took charge of the AMA's largest Charleston school, which enrolled over 1,000 pupils. The son of a Jewish businessman who had married a free black woman, Cardozo had been educated in the city, left in 1858 to study at the University of Glasgow, and served as pastor of a New Haven Congregationalist church during the Civil War. Despite his privileged background, Cardozo made no distinction between free and freed children and ridiculed the idea that mulattoes learned more quickly than blacks. Other sons and daughters of prominent free families, mostly young people in their twenties, fanned out into the South Carolina countryside as teachers and missionaries (something that would have been impossible for the French-speaking New Orleans elite). Several thereby acquired positions of local political leadership, and later returned to Charleston as constitutional convention delegates and legislators. Thus the children of the Charleston elite cast their lot with the freedmen, bringing, as they saw it, modern culture to the former slaves. This encounter was not without its tensions. But in the long run it hastened the emergence of a black community stratified by class rather than color, in which the former free elite took its place as one element of a new black bourgeoisie, instead of existing as a separate caste as it had in the port cities of the antebellum Lower South.

In the severing of ties that had bound black and white families and churches to one another under slavery, the coming together of blacks in an explosion of institution building, and the political and cultural fusion of former free blacks and former slaves, Reconstruction witnessed the birth of the modern black community. All in all, the months following the end of the Civil War were a period of remarkable accomplishment for Southern blacks. Looking back in January 1866, the Philadelphia-born black missionary Jonathan C. Gibbs could only exclaim: "we have progressed a century in a year."

## The Economics of Freedom

In no realm of Southern life did blacks' efforts to define the terms of their freedom have implications as explosive for the entire society as the economy. Blacks brought out of slavery a conception of themselves as a "Working Class of People" who had been unjustly deprived of the fruits of their labor. Reprimanded by a planter for laziness—"You lazy nigger, I am losing a whole day's labor by you"—a freedman responded, "Massa, how many day's labor have I lost by you?" Former slaves had no reluctance to express assertively their sense of having been wronged. "We have built up their houses and cultivated their lands...." declared black minister Willis Hodges. "If they were to pay us but twenty-five cents on the dollar, they would all be very poor."

For blacks, the abolition of slavery meant not an escape from all labor but an end to unrequited toll. "We scorn and treat with contempt the allegation ... that we understand Freedom to mean idleness and indolence," a mass meeting of Petersburg, Virginia, blacks resolved in June 1865. "But we do understand Freedom to mean industry and the enjoyment of the legitimate fruits thereof." To white predictions that they would not work, blacks responded that if any class could be characterized as "lazy," it was the planters, who had "lived in idleness all their lives on stolen labor." Blacks deeply resented incessant allegations of indolence and incapacity. "They say we will not work," complained a Virginia freedman. "He who makes that assertion asserts an untruth. We have been working all our lives, not only supporting ourselves, but we have supported our masters, many of them in idleness." It is certainly true that many blacks expected to labor less as free men and women than they had as slaves, an understandable aim in view of the conditions they had previously known. "Whence comes the assertion that the 'nigger won't work'?" asked an Alabama freedman. "It comes from this fact:...the freedman refuses to be driven out into the field two hours before day, and work until 9 or 10 o'clock in the night, as was the case in the days of slavery." As for predictions that they would be unable to care for themselves in freedom, one ex-slave responded: "We used to support ourselves and our masters too when we were slaves and I reckon we can take care of ourselves now."

Yet freedom meant more than simply receiving wages. Freedmen wished to take control of the conditions under which they labored, free themselves from subordination to white authority, and carve out the greatest measure of economic autonomy. As in the case of their families, churches, and social life, economic emancipation meant freedom from white control. Probably the most ubiquitous example of this ambition was the widespread reluctance of freedmen to continue working in gangs under the direction of an overseer. Blacks "don't want any white man to control them," a Bureau agent reported. On one Georgia plantation, the hiring of an overseer in 1865 "enraged the negroes so much" that they "ran off and went to Macon," with the result that the planter had to hire white laborers to harvest his crop.

The desire to escape from white supervision and establish a modicum of economic independence profoundly shaped blacks' economic choices during Reconstruction, leading them to prefer tenancy to wage labor, and leasing land for a fixed rent to sharecropping. Above all, it inspired the quest for land of their own. Indeed, the same blacks arraigned for idleness sacrificed

and saved in the attempt to acquire land, and those who succeeded clung to it with amazing tenacity. “They will almost starve and go naked before they will work for a white man,” wrote a Georgia planter, “if they can get a patch of ground to live on, and get from under his control.” Owning land, the freedmen believed, would “complete their independence.” Without land, there could be no economic autonomy, for their labor would continue to be subject to exploitation by their former owners. “Gib us our own land and we take care ourselves,” a Charleston black told Northern correspondent Whitelaw Reid, “but widout land, de ole masses can hire us or starve us, as dey please.”

To those familiar with the experience of other postemancipation societies, blacks’ “mania for owning a small piece of land” did not appear unusual. Throughout the Western Hemisphere, the end of slavery was followed by a prolonged struggle over the control of labor and access to land. Freedmen in Haiti, the British and Spanish Caribbean, and Brazil all saw ownership of land as crucial to establishing their economic independence, and their efforts to avoid returning to plantation labor were strenuously resisted by the planter elite and local political authorities. Unlike freedmen in other countries, however, American blacks emerged from slavery convinced that the federal government had committed itself to land distribution. A millennial expectation of impending change swept through the South as the end of 1865 approached. A story circulated that the Freedmen’s Bureau had received a “great document” bearing four seals, to be opened on January 1 to reveal the “final orders” of the federal government. Belief in an imminent division of land was most pervasive in the South Carolina and Georgia low country, with its tradition of black autonomy and the unique experience of Sherman’s Field Order 15. But the idea was shared in other parts of the South as well, including counties that had never been occupied by federal troops. For some blacks, moreover, land distribution seemed a logical consequence of emancipation. “If you had the right to take Master’s niggers,” one Virginia freedman told an army officer, “you had the right to take Master’s land too.” Others contended that “the land ought to belong to the man who (alone) could work it.” Most often, however, blacks insisted that their past labor entitled them to at least a portion of their owners’ estates. As an Alabama black convention put it: “The property which they hold was nearly all earned by the sweat of *our* brows.”

In its most sophisticated form, the claim to land rested on an appreciation of the role blacks had played in the evolution of the American economy. When the army evicted blacks it had earlier settled on land near Yorktown, Virginia, freedman Bayley Wyat gave an impromptu speech protesting the injustice:

We has a right to the land where we are located. For why? I tell you. Our wives, our children, our husbands, has been sold over and over again to purchase the lands we now locates upon; for that reason we have a divine right to the land....And den didn’t we clear the land, and raise de crops ob corn, ob cotton, ob tobacco, ob rice, ob sugar, ob everything. And den didn’t dem large cities in de North grow up on de cotton and de sugars and de rice dat we made?...I say dey has grown rich, and my people is poor.

In some parts of the South, blacks in 1865 did more than argue the merits of their case. Hundreds of freedmen refused either to sign labor contracts or to leave the plantations, insisting

that the property belonged to them. A Virginia freedman informed his former owner that he was “entitled to a part of the farm after all the work he had done on it. The kitchen belonged to him because he had helped cut the timber to build it.” On the property of a Tennessee planter, former slaves not only claimed to be “joint heirs” to the estate but, the owner complained, abandoned the slave quarters and took up residence “in the rooms of my house:”

My foreman Sidney, having a wife and several children,...has brought them into my parlour. He claims the land from the lane to the river embracing all the houses and was so assured of his rights, that he dug up a nursery of young apple trees on my son’s farm, and planted him an orchard. Randal, a boy I gave Mrs. Williams by his own consent, joined the Yankey army early in the war, has now returned, removed his wife and children...into my dining room. Jo and Andy two impudent whelps who rode boldly off from my home at Anderson with Stoneman’s raiders ...have gone to my farm and are in my private bed room.

Few freedmen were able to maintain control of property seized in this manner, although, as will be related, the process of dispossession was prolonged and sometimes violent. A small number did, however, obtain land through other means, squatting on unoccupied real estate in sparsely populated states like Florida and Texas, buying tiny city plots, or cooperatively purchasing farms and plantations. Blacks in Hampton, Virginia, established Lincoln’s Land Association, under the direction of a local Baptist minister, and acquired several hundred acres of land, worked collectively by a group of families. Two Texas freedmen purchased 4,000 acres on credit and, in the tradition of white land speculators and small-town boosters, went about advertising for settlers from the East. And a number of discharged black soldiers invested their bounties and back pay either in small farms or, collectively, in plantations. One regiment stationed in Louisiana accumulated \$50,000 for this purpose.

These, however, were isolated instances. The vast majority of blacks emerged from slavery lacking the ability to purchase land even at the depressed prices of early Reconstruction, and confronting a white community united in the refusal to advance credit or sell them property. Thus, they entered the world of free labor as wage or share workers on land owned by whites. The adjustment to a new social order in which their persons were removed from the market, but their labor was bought and sold like any other commodity, proved in many respects difficult. For it required the abandonment of some traditions inherited from slavery and the adaptation of others to the logic of the economic market, where the impersonal laws of supply and demand and the balance of power between employer and employee, rather than custom, justice, or personal dependency, determines a laborer’s material circumstances.

Most freedmen welcomed the demise of the paternalist attitudes and mutual obligations of slavery—in this sense they eagerly embraced the free market, with its promise of individual mobility, personal autonomy, and freedom to choose among employers. But many, especially elderly blacks no longer able to work, insisted that their owners responsibilities had not died with bondage. The oldest freedman on a South Carolina plantation indignantly informed his former master, “he was going to die on this place, and he was not going to do any work either.” Other blacks saw no reason why emancipation should mean a diminution of either the privileges or the

level of material well-being they had previously enjoyed. The slave, after all, possessed one customary “right” no free laborer could claim—the right to subsistence. “He that works we believe has a right to eat,” a mass meeting of Petersburg blacks resolved in 1865. Harvard graduate Henry Lee Higginson, who with his wife and two friends purchased a Georgia plantation in 1865, found that the freedmen believed “they ought to get all their living and have wages besides, all extra.” They did not, Mrs. Higginson concluded, understand “the value of work and wages.” Other whites complained that freedmen had an “exorbitant” idea of what remuneration their labor ought to bring. “Each one seems to think his share will be worth a fortune,” wrote the manager of a Mississippi plantation at the end of 1865. For their part, blacks resented being offered as annual wages sums far below what planters had paid before the Civil War to rent slaves for the year. (“The negro...” a Union army officer commented, “thought it strange he was not worth as much as before.”)

Beneath these “misunderstandings” lay the fact that blacks entered the new market in labor with their own purposes in view. Former slaves, to be sure, proved eager to enjoy the material amenities of freedom. They patronized the stores that sprang up throughout the rural South, purchasing “luxuries” ranging from sardines, cheese, and sugar, to new clothing—denims, shoes, handkerchiefs, and calico dresses. They saved money to build and support churches and educate their children. And they quickly learned to use and influence the market for their own ends. The early years of Reconstruction witnessed strikes or collective petitions for higher wages by black urban laborers, including Richmond factory workers, Jackson washerwomen, New Orleans and Savannah stevedores and mechanics in Columbus, Georgia. In rural areas, too, plantation freedmen sometimes bargained collectively over contract terms, organized strikes, and occasionally even attempted to establish wage schedules for an entire area. Late in 1866, after crop failures had left sharecroppers with only a meager return, South Carolina freedmen held mass meetings to consider terms for the coming year. At one such gathering, attended by over 1,000 blacks, speakers insisted “when their children were naked and starving, they could not work for so little, [and] claimed that one-half the crop should be their due.” Blacks took full advantage of competition between planters and nonagricultural employers, seeking work on railroad construction crews, and at turpentine mills and other enterprises offering pay far higher than on the plantations. Freedmen used the market for their own benefit in additional ways. One group of Mississippi laborers no longer sold eggs and poultry raised on their own time to the planter, as under slavery, but marketed them to the highest bidder.

Slavery, however, did not produce workers fully socialized to the virtues of economic accumulation. Despite the profits to be earned in early postwar cotton farming, many freedmen evinced a strong resistance to growing the “slave crop.” “If ole massa want to grow cotton,” said one Georgia freedman, “let him plant it himself.” A. Warren Kelsey, dispatched by a group of Northern textile manufacturers to investigate prospects for the resumption of plantation agriculture, reported from upcountry South Carolina that cotton was “associated in the negroes’ mind with memories of the overseer, the driver and the lash, in fact with the whole system of slavery.” Moreover, another Northern visitor observed, blacks realized cotton would be sold by their employers and “pass out of their reach,” while food crops could be consumed.

Those blacks who managed to acquire farms or who simply squatted on unoccupied land often seemed content to pursue subsistence agriculture. “We never planted cotton, because we

could not eat this,” a Texas freedman recalled decades after emancipation. “I made bows and arrows to kill our meat....We never came to the store for nothing.” Such extreme self-sufficiency was rare indeed in nineteenth-century America. More typical were the freedmen in central Mississippi who, according to a local planter, preferred to live “by cultivating a small patch of corn and cotton and by raising a few hogs,” or the Sea Island blacks who spent most of their time on food production, displaying interest in cotton only to “supply them with spending money.” These blacks sought to farm in the manner of peasants in other parts of the world and white yeomen in the South—concentrating on food crops as a first priority, and only to a lesser extent on cotton or other staples to obtain ready cash. Rather than choose irrevocably between self-sufficiency and farming for the market, they sought to avoid a complete dependence upon either while taking advantage of the opportunities each could offer. As “cotton detective” Kelsey shrewdly recognized, it was precisely the ability to choose, to organize their economic lives as independently as possible, that blacks most valued:

The sole ambition of the freedman at the present time appears to be to become the owner of a little piece of land, there to erect a humble home, and to dwell in peace and security at his own free will and pleasure. If he wishes, to cultivate the ground in cotton on his own account, to be able to do so without anyone to dictate to him hours or system of labor, if he wishes instead to plant corn or sweet potatoes—to be able to do *that* free from any outside control....That is their idea, their desire and their hope.

Here was a definition of economic freedom that corresponded to the traditional republican ideal of a society of autonomous small producers. Thomas Jefferson would have fully appreciated this ambition to be master of one’s own time, free from the coercion of either an arbitrary master or the impersonal marketplace.

Historical experience and modern scholarship suggest that acquiring small plots of land would hardly, by itself, have solved the economic plight of black families. The fate of the white yeomanry would soon demonstrate the precariousness of small farmers’ hold on their land in the postwar South. Land is only one of the scarce resources of underdeveloped rural societies; where not accompanied by control of credit and access to markets, land reform can often be a “hollow victory.” And where political power rests in hostile hands, small landowners often find themselves subjected to oppressive taxation and other state policies that severely limit their economic prospects. In such circumstances, the autonomy offered by land ownership tends to be defensive, rather than the springboard for sustained economic advancement. Yet while hardly an economic panacea, land distribution would have had profound consequences for Southern society, weakening the land-based economic and political power of the old ruling class, offering blacks a measure of choice as to whether, when, and under what circumstances to enter the labor market, and affecting the former slaves’ conception of themselves. (Well into the twentieth century, blacks who did acquire land were more likely to register, vote, and run for office than other members of the rural community.) One might argue that immediate landownership would have encouraged blacks to lapse into self-sufficiency, with disastrous consequences for Southern economic development. Yet in the South, as in most parts of the hemisphere, the survival of the

plantation system produced only economic stagnation, and as things turned out, blacks lacked even the partial shield against economic exploitation afforded by ownership of land.

Blacks' quest for economic independence not only threatened the very foundations of the Southern political economy, but, as will be related, put the freedmen at odds with both former owners seeking to restore plantation labor discipline and Northerners committed to reinvigorating staple crop production. But as part of the broad quest for individual and collective autonomy, it remained central to the black community's effort to define the meaning of freedom. Indeed the fulfillment of blacks' "noneconomic" aspirations, from family autonomy to the creation of schools and churches, all depended in considerable measure on success in winning control of their working lives and gaining access to the economic resources of the South.

### **Origins of Black Politics**

If the goal of autonomy inspired blacks to withdraw from religious and social institutions controlled by whites and to attempt to work out their economic destinies for themselves, in the polity, "freedom" meant inclusion rather than separation. Recognition of their equal rights as citizens quickly emerged as the animating impulse of Reconstruction black politics. In the spring and summer of 1865, blacks organized a seemingly unending series of mass meetings, parades, and petitions demanding civil equality and the suffrage as indispensable corollaries of emancipation. The most extensive mobilization occurred in areas that had been occupied by Union troops during the war, where political activity had begun even before 1865. Union Leagues and similar groups sprang up in low country South Carolina and Georgia, their meetings bringing together Freedmen's Bureau agents, black soldiers, and local freedmen, to demand the vote and the repeal of all laws discriminating against blacks. "By the Declaration of Independence," declared a gathering on St. Helena Island, "we believe these are rights which cannot justly be denied us."

Political mobilization also proceeded apace in Southern cities, where the flourishing network of churches and fraternal societies provided a springboard for organization, and the army and Freedmen's Bureau stood ready to offer protection. In Wilmington, North Carolina, freedmen in 1865 formed an Equal Rights League which, local officials reported, insisted upon "all the social and political rights of white citizens" and demanded that blacks be consulted in the selection of policemen, justices of the peace, and county commissioners. By midsummer, "secret political Radical Associations" had been formed in Virginia's major cities. Richmond blacks first organized politically to protest the army's rounding up of "vagrants" for plantation labor, but soon expanded their demands to include the right to vote and the removal of the "Rebel-controlled" local government. In Norfolk, occupied by the Union Army since 1862, blacks early in 1865 created the Union Monitor Club to press their claim to equal rights, and in May hundreds attempted to vote in a local election. A mass meeting endorsed a militant statement drafted by former fugitive slave Thomas Bayne: "Traitors shall not dictate or prescribe to us the terms or conditions of our citizenship."

In Louisiana, where black politics had advanced furthest during the war, the *New Orleans Tribune* and its Radical allies continued to press the issue of black suffrage. A September 1865

convention composed of native white Radicals, Northerners like the young provost judge and future governor Henry C. Warmoth, and prominent members of the free black elite, voted to affiliate with the national Republican Party, called upon Congress to govern Louisiana as a territory, and demanded full legal and political equality for blacks. Meanwhile, mobilization penetrated the sugar country, with laborers, one planter complained, abandoning work at will to attend political gatherings. In November, as white Louisianans went to the polls, a Republican-sponsored "voluntary election" attracted some 20,000 voters, mostly blacks in New Orleans and the surrounding parishes, who "elected" Warmoth to serve as Louisiana's "Territorial delegate" to Congress. "The whole Parish was in an uproar" on election day, reported an army officer, with hundreds of freedmen abandoning the plantations, "stating that they were going to vote."

Statewide conventions held throughout the South in 1865 and early 1866 offered the most visible evidence of black political organization. Several hundred delegates attended these gatherings, some selected by local meetings occasionally marked by "animated debate," others by churches, fraternal societies, Union Leagues, and black army units, still others simply appointed by themselves. "Some bring credentials," observed North Carolina black leader James H. Harris, "others had as much as they could do to bring themselves, having to escape from their homes stealthily at night" to avoid white reprisal. Although little information survives about the majority of these individuals, certain patterns can be discerned from the fragmentary evidence. The delegates "ranged all colors and apparently all conditions," but urban free mulattoes took the most prominent roles, and former slaves were almost entirely absent from leadership positions. One speaker at the Tennessee gathering doubted it should be called a "Negro convention" at all, since its officers were "all mixed blood," some "as white as the editor of the *New York Herald*." Charleston free blacks, along with six Northern-born newcomers, dominated South Carolina's gathering, and at Louisiana's Republican state convention nineteen of the twenty black delegates had been born free. But other groups also came to the fore in 1865. In Mississippi, a state with few free blacks before the war, ex-slave army veterans and their relatives comprised the majority of the delegates. Alabama and Georgia had a heavy representation of black ministers, and all the conventions included numerous skilled artisans. Many of the delegates, especially those born free, were relatively well-to-do, although the very richest blacks held aloof, too linked to whites economically and by kinship to risk taking an active role in politics.

The prominence of free blacks, ministers, artisans, and former soldiers in these early conventions established patterns that would characterize black politics for much of Reconstruction. From among these delegates would emerge such prominent officeholders as Alabama Congressman James T. Rapier and Mississippi Secretary of State James D. Lynch. The most remarkable continuity in black leadership occurred in South Carolina, for among the fifty-two delegates to the November 1865 convention sat four future Congressmen, thirteen legislators, and twelve delegates to the state's 1868 constitutional convention. In general, however, what is striking is how few of these early leaders went on to positions of prominence. Only two of Alabama's fifty-six delegates (William V. Turner and Holland Thompson) later played significant roles in Reconstruction politics, a pattern repeated in Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, and Arkansas. In most states, black political mobilization had advanced far more rapidly in cities and in rural areas occupied by federal troops during the war, than in the bulk of the plantation counties, where the majority of the former slaves lived. The free

blacks of Louisiana and South Carolina who stepped to the fore in 1865 would remain at the helm of black politics throughout Reconstruction; elsewhere, however, a new group of leaders, many of them freedmen from the black belt, would soon supersede those who had taken the lead in 1865.

The debates at these conventions illuminated conflicting currents of black public life in the immediate aftermath of emancipation. Tensions within the black community occasionally rose to the surface. One delegate remarked that he did not intend “to have the whip of slavery cracked over us by no slaveholder’s son”; another voiced resentment that a Northerner (Pennsylvania-born James W. Hood) had been chosen president of North Carolina’s convention; and the printed proceedings of the South Carolina convention included a discreet reference to the “spirited discussion” produced by a resolution referring to blacks’ making “distinctions among ourselves.” Relations between the races caused debate as well. A resolution urging blacks to employ, wherever possible, teachers of their own race, was tabled by the North Carolina delegates after considerable debate, and replaced by one thanking Northern societies for their efforts on behalf of the freedmen. By and large, however, the proceedings proved harmonious, the delegates devoting most of their time to issues that united blacks rather than dividing them. South Carolina’s convention demanded the full gamut of opportunities and privileges enjoyed by whites, from access to education to the right to bear arms, serve on juries, establish newspapers, assemble peacefully, “enter upon all the avenues of agriculture, commerce, [and] trade,” and “develop our whole being by all the appliances that belong to civilized society.” Georgia’s resolutions complained of violence inflicted on rural blacks, efforts to prevent freedmen from establishing schools, and attempts to keep from blacks the church property “paid for by our own earnings while we were in slavery.”

The delegates’ central preoccupation, however, was equality before the law and the suffrage. A number of New Orleans and Charleston free blacks, to be sure, still flirted with the idea of confining black suffrage to a privileged minority through some combination of property and educational qualifications, although they insisted that such requirements apply to both races. (“If the ignorant white man is allowed to vote,” declared a petition of prominent Charleston free blacks, the “ignorant colored man” should be enfranchised as well.) Yet at the 1865 conventions, speaker after speaker echoed the view that universal manhood suffrage constituted “an essential and inseparable element of self-government.” In justifying their demand for the vote, the delegates invoked America’s republican traditions, especially the Declaration of Independence, “the broadest, the deepest, the most comprehensive and truthful definition of human freedom that was ever given to the world.” “The colored people,” Hood would declare in 1868, “had read the Declaration until it had become part of their natures.” The North Carolina freedmen’s convention he chaired in 1865 portrayed the Civil War and emancipation as chapters in the onward march of “progressive civilization,” embodiments of “the fundamental truths laid down in the great charter of Republican liberty, the Declaration of Independence.” Such language was not confined to the convention delegates. Eleven Alabama blacks, who complained of contract frauds, injustice before the courts, and other abuses, concluded their petition with a revealing masterpiece of understatement: “This is not the pursuit of happiness.”

There was more here than merely familiar wording. Like Northern blacks steeped in the Great Tradition of prewar protest, the freedmen and Southern free blacks saw emancipation as

enabling the nation to live up to the full implications of its republican creed—a goal that could be achieved only by abandoning racial proscription and absorbing blacks fully into the civil and political order. Isham Sweat, a slave-born barber who wrote the address of North Carolina’s convention and went on to serve in the state legislature, told John R. Dennett that Congress should “declare that no state had a republican form of government if every free man in it was not equal before the law.” Another 1865 speaker destined for Reconstruction prominence, Louisiana’s Oscar J. Dunn, described the absence of “discrimination among men” and “hereditary distinctions” as the essence of America’s political heritage. Continued proscription of blacks, Dunn warned, would jeopardize the republic’s very future, opening “the door for the institution of aristocracy, nobility, and even monarchy.”

Like their Northern counterparts during the Civil War, Southern blacks proclaimed their identification with the nation’s history, destiny, and political system. The very abundance of letters and petitions addressed by black gatherings and ordinary freedmen to officials of the army, Freedmen’s Bureau, and state and federal authorities, as well as the decision of a number of conventions to send representatives to Washington to lobby for black rights, revealed a belief that the political order was at least partially open to their influence. “We are Americans,” declared a meeting of Norfolk blacks, “we know no other country, we love the land of our birth.” Their address reminded white Virginians that in 1619, “our fathers as well as yours were toiling in the plantations on James River” and that a black man, Crispus Attucks, had shed “the first blood” in the American Revolution. And, of course, blacks had fought and died to save the Union. America, resolved another Virginia meeting, was “now our country—made emphatically so by the blood of our brethren.” “We stood by the government when it wanted help,” a delegate to Mississippi’s convention wrote President Johnson. “Now...will it stand by us?”

Despite the insistent language of individual speeches, the convention resolutions and public addresses adopted a moderate tone, offering “the right hand of fellowship” to Southern whites. The Virginia convention proved an exception, for its address spoke of “injuries deeper and darker than the earth ever witnessed in the case of any other people.” At one point, the Virginia delegates changed the wording of a public statement from “our former masters” to “our former oppressors.” Elsewhere, however, a far more conciliatory approach prevailed. Leaders of North Carolina’s convention advocated “equal rights, and a moderate conservative course in demanding them.” One rural delegate who proposed that the assembly demand admission to the state’s constitutional convention, then in session in Raleigh, was denounced as “absurd and foolish,” and the gathering “respectfully and humbly” petitioned the state government for education and equality before the law, while avoiding reference to the suffrage. Georgia’s delegates, divided between advocates of universal suffrage and those favoring a literacy or property test, compromised by claiming “at least conditional suffrage.” Even the South Carolina convention, forthright in claiming civil and political equality and in identifying its demands with “the cause of millions of oppressed men” throughout the world, took pains to assure the state’s white minority of blacks’ “spirit of meekness,” their consciousness of “your wealth and greatness, and our poverty and weakness.”

To some extent, this cautious tone reflected a realistic assessment of the political situation at a time when Southern whites had been restored to local power by President Johnson, and Congress had not yet launched its own Reconstruction policy. But the conventions’ mixture of

radicalism and conciliation also mirrored the indecision of an emerging class of black political leaders still finding their own voice in 1865 and 1866, and dominated by urban free blacks, ministers, and others who had in the past enjoyed harmonious relations with at least some local whites and did not always feel the bitter resentments of rural freedmen.

Nor did a coherent economic program emerge from these assemblies. Demands for land did surface at local meetings that chose convention delegates. One such gathering in Greensboro, Alabama, heard speakers call for “land or blood,” while at Tarboro, North Carolina, where two candidates presented themselves to 1,500 blacks, the one who called for a division of the land was unanimously elected. Yet such views rarely found expression among the conventions’ leadership. Virginia’s delegates pointedly observed that the Freedmen’s Bureau Act had promised blacks access to land, Georgia’s petitioned Congress to validate the Sherman land grants, and South Carolina’s requested Congress to place “a fair and impartial construction” upon the “pledges of government to us concerning the land question.” But by and large, economic concerns figured only marginally in the proceedings, and the addresses and resolutions offered no economic program, apart from stressing the “mutual interest” of capital and labor, and urging self-improvement as the route to personal advancement. The Arkansas resolutions even remarked that blacks “are destined in the future, as in the past, to cultivate your cotton fields.” A number of conventions chided idle freedmen for “vagrancy and pauperism,” and urged them to remain on the land, labor diligently, and save money in order to purchase homesteads.

Thus, the ferment rippling through the Southern countryside found little echo at the state conventions of 1865—a reflection of the paucity of representation from the plantation counties and the prominence of political leaders more attuned to political equality and self-help formulas than to rural freedmen’s thirst for land. Nor did the conventions’ eloquent appeals for civil and political equality accomplish anything, for all were ignored by the intransigent state governments of Presidential Reconstruction. As a result, enthusiasm for such gatherings waned. Among the states of the Confederacy, only Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Texas witnessed black conventions in 1866. One delegate noted that his constituents believed “we do nothing but meet, pass resolutions, publish pamphlets, and incur expenses, without accomplishing good results.”

While understandable, this indictment was perhaps unfair, for these early black conventions both reflected and advanced the process of political mobilization. Some Tennessee delegates, for example, took to heart their convention’s instruction to “look after the welfare” of their constituents. After returning home, they actively promoted black education, protested to civil authorities and the Freedmen’s Bureau about violence and contract frauds, and struggled against unequal odds to secure blacks a modicum of justice in local courts. Chapters of the Georgia Equal Rights and Educational Association, established at the state’s January 1866 convention, became “schools in which the colored citizens learn their rights.” Spreading into fifty counties by the end of the year, the association’s local meetings attracted as many as 2,000 freedmen, who listened to speeches on issues of the day and readings from Republican newspapers. And, although plagued by financial problems and the difficulty of reaching an overwhelmingly illiterate audience, the emerging black press also promoted the spread of political education. By 1866, nine (mostly short-lived) black newspapers had joined the New Orleans *Tribune*. Edited by two white Northerners, but owned and managed by a black board of directors, the Mobile *Nationalist* sent agents into the countryside to solicit subscriptions, report

on local conditions, and urge freedmen “to stand up like men on behalf of [their] rights.” Blacks able to read the *Nationalist*, one Alabama white complained, absorbed “the ‘radicalism’ it contains,” became “*pugnacious*,” and no longer exhibited proper respect for their former owners.

Although few in number, the statewide conventions of 1866 illustrated the results of this ongoing process of politicization. Twice as many counties were represented in the Georgia and North Carolina gatherings as the year before, reflecting how organization had penetrated the black belt. In Greene County, North Carolina, unrepresented at the first state convention, blacks in 1866 held an election to choose a delegate from between two candidates who conducted “a regular canvass.” Former slaves now began to assume positions of prominence monopolized by the freeborn a year earlier, and the resolutions and speeches were noticeably more radical. North Carolina’s delegates heard militant speeches chastising whites for violence against freedmen, injustice to black laborers, and opposition to black education. Their resolutions demanded equal suffrage (an issue sidestepped in 1865), praised Charles Sumner, Thaddeus Stevens, and other Radical Republicans as “beacon lights of our race,” and urged blacks to combat economic inequalities by forming joint stock companies and patronizing, wherever possible, businessmen of their own race. The Tennessee convention called upon Congress to grant the state “a republican form of government” under which blacks could vote, bear arms, and educate their children. But even more striking than this new tone was the wholesale turnover in membership. Only a small minority of the 1865 delegates (seventeen of 106 in North Carolina, eighteen of 102 in Tennessee) reappeared in 1866. Even in South Carolina, with its continuity in black political leadership, Richard H. Cain observed that some early leaders, including prominent free blacks, had by 1866 “relapsed into secondary men; and the class who were hardly known” were stepping forward to assume prominent roles.

All in all, the most striking characteristic of this initial phase of black political mobilization was its very unevenness. In some states, organization proceeded steadily in 1865 and 1866, in others, such as Mississippi, little activity occurred between an initial flurry in the summer of 1865 and the advent of black suffrage two years later. Large parts of the black belt remained untouched by organized politics, but many blacks were aware of Congressional debates on Reconstruction policy, and quickly employed on their own behalf the Civil Rights Act of 1866. “The negro of today,” remarked a correspondent of the New Orleans *Tribune* in September 1866, “is not the same as he was six years ago....He has been told of his rights, which have long been robbed.” Only in 1867 would blacks enter the “political nation,” but in organization, leadership, and an ideology that drew upon America’s republican heritage to demand an equal place as citizens, the seeds that flowered then were planted in the first years of freedom.

## **Violence and Everyday Life**

The black community’s religious, social, and political mobilization was all the more remarkable for occurring in the face of a wave of violence that raged almost unchecked in large parts of the postwar South. Although wartime conflicts between white Unionists and Confederates, as well as the economic destitution that inspired local bands to prey upon the

property of others, contributed to the unsettled condition of Southern life, in the vast majority of cases freedmen were the victims and whites the aggressors.

In some areas, violence against blacks reached staggering proportions in the immediate aftermath of the war. In Louisiana, reported a visitor from North Carolina in 1865, “they govern...by the pistol and the rifle.” “I saw white men whipping colored men just the same as they did before the war,” testified ex-slave Henry Adams, who claimed that “over two thousand colored people” were murdered in 1865 in the area around Shreveport, Louisiana. In Texas, where the army and Freedmen’s Bureau proved entirely unable to establish order, blacks, according to a Bureau official, “are frequently beaten unmercifully, and shot down like wild beasts, without any provocation.” Susan Merritt, a freedwoman from Rusk County, Texas, remembered seeing black bodies floating down the Sabine River, and said of local whites: “There sure are going to be lots of souls crying against them in judgement,” In some cases, whites wreaked horrible vengeance for offenses real or imagined. In 1866, after “some kind of dispute with some freedmen,” a group near Pine Bluff, Arkansas, set fire to a black settlement and rounded up the inhabitants. A man who visited the scene the following morning found “a sight that apald me 24 Negro men woman and children were hanging to trees all round the Cabbins.”

The pervasiveness of violence reflected whites’ determination to define in their own way the meaning of freedom and their determined resistance to blacks’ efforts to establish their autonomy, whether in matters of family, church, labor, or personal demeanor. Georgia freedman James Jeter was beaten “for claiming the right of whipping his own child instead of allowing his employer and former master to do so.” Black schools, churches, and political meetings also became targets. White students from the University of North Carolina twice in 1865 assaulted peaceful black meetings, one a gathering to select delegates to a statewide black convention, the second a meeting of a black “secret society” addressed by a speaker from the state capital.

“Southern whites,” a Freedmen’s Bureau agent observed, “are quite indignant if they are not treated with the same deference that they were accustomed to” under slavery, and behavior that departed from the etiquette of antebellum race relations frequently provoked violence. Conduct deemed manly or dignified on the part of whites became examples of “insolence” and “insubordination” in the case of blacks. One North Carolina planter complained bitterly to a Union officer that a black soldier had “bowed to me and said good morning,” insisting blacks must never address whites unless spoken to first. An Alabama overseer shot a black worker who “gave him sarse”; a white South Carolina minister “drew his pistol and shot [a freedman] thru the heart” after he objected to the expulsion of another black man from church services. In Texas, Bureau records listed the “reasons” for some of the 1,000 murders of blacks by whites between 1865 and 1868: One victim “did not remove his hat”; another “wouldn’t give up his whiskey flask”; a white man “wanted to thin out the niggers a little”; another wanted “to see a d——d nigger kick.” Gender offered no protection to black women—one was beaten by her employer for “using insolent language,” another for refusing to “call him master,” a third “for crying because he whipped my mother.” The victims also included individuals who personified the ways freedmen had challenged customary racial mores. When delegates to the 1865 black conventions returned home, “many only found ashes and cinders.” A group of Virginia whites beat a black veteran merely for stating that he was proud to have served in the Union Army. “As one of the

disfranchised race,” said a Louisiana black, “I would say to every colored soldier, ‘Bring your gun home’.”

Probably the largest number of violent acts stemmed from disputes arising from black efforts to assert their freedom from control by their former masters. Freedmen were assaulted and murdered for attempting to leave plantations, disputing contract settlements, not laboring in the manner desired by their employers, attempting to buy or rent land, and resisting whippings. One black who refused to be bound and whipped, asserting that “he was a freeman and he would not be tied like a slave,” was shot dead by his employer, a prominent Texas lawyer. In parts of Tennessee, a Nashville newspaper reported early in 1867, “regulators...are riding about whipping, maiming and killing all negroes who do not obey the orders of their former masters, just as if slavery existed.” In the face of this pervasive violence, local leaders of society and politics remained silent, reluctant to hold other whites responsible for crimes against blacks. A resident of southwestern Alabama wrote the governor of his shock at hearing “men of standing...countenance disorder and abuse of negroes” and their refusal to “restrain young men in their violence.” John Wesley North, a Northerner who went to Knoxville after the war, in 1866 encountered a mob beating a freedman. When North intervened, the crowd dispersed, “evidently amazed that any person should venture to remonstrate against even the *murder of a black man.*” A local banker subsequently offered the Yankee this advice: “never in this country...interfere in behalf of a nigger.”

Considering the extent of white violence against blacks, it is remarkable in how few instances blacks attacked whites. Cases arising from assaults among blacks themselves appear not infrequently in the records of the Freedmen’s Bureau and local courts, but violence or even threats against individual whites were all but unknown. On some occasions, freedmen did band together and take the law into their own hands to suppress crime. In 1866, a group of armed blacks apprehended and delivered to the county jail three whites who had been terrorizing Orangeburg, South Carolina, freedmen, and in Holly Springs, Mississippi, blacks formed a posse to hunt down a white man guilty of the cold-blooded murder of a freedwoman. But the obstacles to such actions were formidable indeed, for the slightest evidence of blacks holding secret meetings or arming themselves sufficed to set off waves of fear among Southern whites. In Tennessee, according to Gen. Clinton B. Fisk, a black man shooting squirrels in the woods inspired rumors that hundreds of armed blacks were preparing to “rise en masse and kill off the white people.” As the year drew to a close, and talk of an impending division of lands by the federal government circulated among blacks, an insurrection panic gripped much of the white South.

New Year’s Day, 1866, came and went with no sign of a black uprising. Federal army officers concluded that Southern whites had behaved like “frightened old women” overwhelmed by a pathological fear of their former slaves. But anxiety about black rebellion, so reminiscent of prewar insurrection panics, reflected more than an irrationality born of slavery. Touring the South in 1865, Carl Schurz predicted that if freedmen chose to behave “as free laborers in the North act every day without causing the least surprise,” Southern whites would be seized by “a paroxysm of fright.” A federal officer investigating reports of impending insurrection in Kingstree, South Carolina, concluded that exaggerated fears “spring from dread on the part of the planters of the freed people asserting their rights of manhood.” Blacks bearing arms or, as at Kingstree,

marching “with red colors flying” to demand better contract terms, symbolized the revolutionary transformation in social relations wrought by emancipation.

Indeed, like the pervasive violence, insurrection panics underscored what might be called the “politicization” of everyday life that followed the demise of slavery. A seemingly insignificant incident reported to the state’s governor in 1869 by black North Carolinian A. D. Lewis graphically illustrates this development:

Please allow me to call your kind attention to a transaction which occurred to day between me and Dr. A.H. Jones....I was in my field at my own work and this Jones came by me and drove up to a man’s gate that live close by...and ordered my child to come there and open that gate for him...while there was children in the yard at the same time not more than twenty yards from him and just because they were white and mine black he would not call them to open the gate....I spoke gently to him that [the white children] would open the gate....He got out of his buggy...and walked nearly hundred yards right into my field where I was at my own work and double his fist and strick me in the face three times and...cursed me [as] a dum old Radical....Now governor I wants you to please write to me how to bring this man to jestus.

No record exists of the disposition of this complaint, but Lewis’ letter conveys worlds of meaning about Reconstruction: his powerful sense of place, his quiet dignity in the face of assault, his refusal to allow his son to be treated differently from white children or to let a stranger’s authority be imposed on his family, the way an everyday encounter rapidly descended into violence and acquired political meaning, and Lewis’ assumption (reflecting the situation after 1867) that blacks could expect justice from the government under which they lived. Most of all, it illustrates how day-to-day encounters between the races became infused with the tension inevitable when a social order, with its established power relations and commonly understood rules of conduct, has been swept away and a new one has not yet come into being. Only over time would the South’s new system of social relations be worked out. As David Swain, former governor of North Carolina, remarked in 1865, “With reference to emancipation, we are at the beginning of the war.”