

# RECONSTRUCTION: A SUCCESS THAT HAS SHAPED AMERICA

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Reconstruction was a period between 1863 to 1877 and was one of the most critical events in American history. This era had many impacts that can still be seen today, like giving former slaves more rights, paving the way for African American voting, and allowing former slaves to thrive economically. With all these impacts, Reconstruction was a massive success that built America into what it is today.

During the years of Reconstruction, America changed and adapted to suit the political environment it now found itself in, America had just come out of the Civil War and four million slaves had just been freed. The Confederacy employed many slaves to help maintain the rail lines and other forms of infrastructure, because of this a 1865 census “placed Negro mechanics at 100,000 and whites at only 20,000.”<sup>1</sup> With a five-to-one margin in mechanics and a very skilled and specialized job, the newly freed slaves had a lot of control over the future of the South. Being skilled laborers meant that if they didn’t work the economy would barely be able to keep itself moving and surviving. The freed slaves shaped the economy into the one that it is today, focused mainly on manufacturing and producing many different goods. Today companies like Delta Airlines, CNN, and Home Depot are all based in formally Confederate states. If it was not for the newly freed slaves' influence on the economy right after the Civil War, then the South’s economy would not be as robust as it is today.

Reconstruction can also be considered a success in the fact that it gave the newly freed slaves many opportunities when it came to education. The Freedmen's Bureau was one of the leading organizations when it came to efforts like this in one report to Congress it was reported that there were “975 schools, 1,405 teachers, and 90,778 pupils. But these figures were not a true

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1. Sumner Eliot Matison “The Labor Movement and The Negro During Reconstruction,” The Journal of Negro History 33, no. 4 (1948): 429, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2715920>.

exhibit of the actual increase.”<sup>2</sup> This education was all state-funded and allowed kids and younger adults to get a head start in life. It has been proven time and time again that one of the most effective tools in creating equality is education, education creates a level playing field. The Freedmen's Bureau also helped establish colleges and universities in the South like Howard University in Washington, D.C., and Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia. These colleges have been educating students for over 100 years and influencing American history by doing so. Many notable people have attended HBCUs including Oprah Winfrey and Samuel L. Jackson. If it was not for the Freedmen's Bureau educating newly freed slaves, then American history would have been much different.

Reconstruction allowed former slaves to get on their feet and gain the rights of every other American citizen. This is highlighted by Eric Foner when he states, “former slaves now stood on equal footing with whites.”<sup>3</sup> Many different laws and amendments were implemented during this era; many of these had large and widespread effects. One of the biggest laws of the time was the Civil Rights Act of 1871 also known as the Ku Klux Klan Act which allowed the federal government to use military force to suppress extremist groups. Because this was a federal law the states could do very little about it, with this law nine South Carolina counties were placed under martial law to stop the violence. There were also a handful of very notable amendments that were passed during Reconstruction like the 14th and 15th Amendments. The 14th Amendment states that any person born in the United States became a citizen effectively making all the freed slaves citizens and the 15th Amendment granted African American men the

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2. “Congressional Report on the Freedmen's Bureau, 1868” (Report, Washington DC, 1868)

3. Eric Foner, “Rights and the Constitution in Black Life during the Civil War and Reconstruction,” *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 3 (1987): 874, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1902157>.

right to vote. All these laws and amendments changed the nation's political landscape and allowed the freed slaves to prosper.

Reconstruction also brought along many different social and political changes. One of the most important ones was the 15th Amendment, when this was implemented "people who opposed black suffrage [soon] embraced it a few years later."<sup>4</sup> The 15th Amendment allowed the black population to have more of a say in how the country was run as they now could vote and voice their opinions. Many would do so and would start to elect black senators and congressmen to national office, the list of these people includes many prestigious names like Hiram Revels, Joseph Rainey, Edward Brooke, and Barack Obama all these men have had a major impact on the course of the nation. Even to this day when leading up to election season political commentators often talk about the black vote because they have so much sway over the outcomes of an election. This kind of influence could not have been possible without the 15th Amendment and Reconstruction.

Some people may consider Reconstruction to be a failure, but this couldn't be further from the truth. People with this viewpoint often state that "slavery has been an intrinsic part of conditional and federal law"<sup>5</sup> and that it will never change away from it. People say that because it was so embedded in American laws that they would be very hard to change and would never do so. However, during Reconstruction, many laws, amendments, and reforms were put in place to change this like the 14th and 15th Amendments. Even if slavery was embedded deep into American laws in politics the federal laws and amendments could change this, and they did.

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4. Eric Foner, "The Supreme Court and the History of Reconstruction-and Vice-Versa," *Columbia Law Review* 112, no. 7 (2012): 1592, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41708159>.

5. Foner, 1586

Without Reconstruction, the South would be in a much different place. Reconstruction was a success because it paved the way for African American rights and allowed them to strive economically, socially, and politically. This was all because of the laws and amendments that were passed like the 14th and 15th Amendments, the schools that the Freedmen's Bureau set up, and the portion of the skilled labor market that the freed slaves controlled. Reconstruction was very influential because it impacted World War 1, World War 2, and today. If it were not for Reconstruction America as it is now would not be around and it would not be as fair and equal.

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