

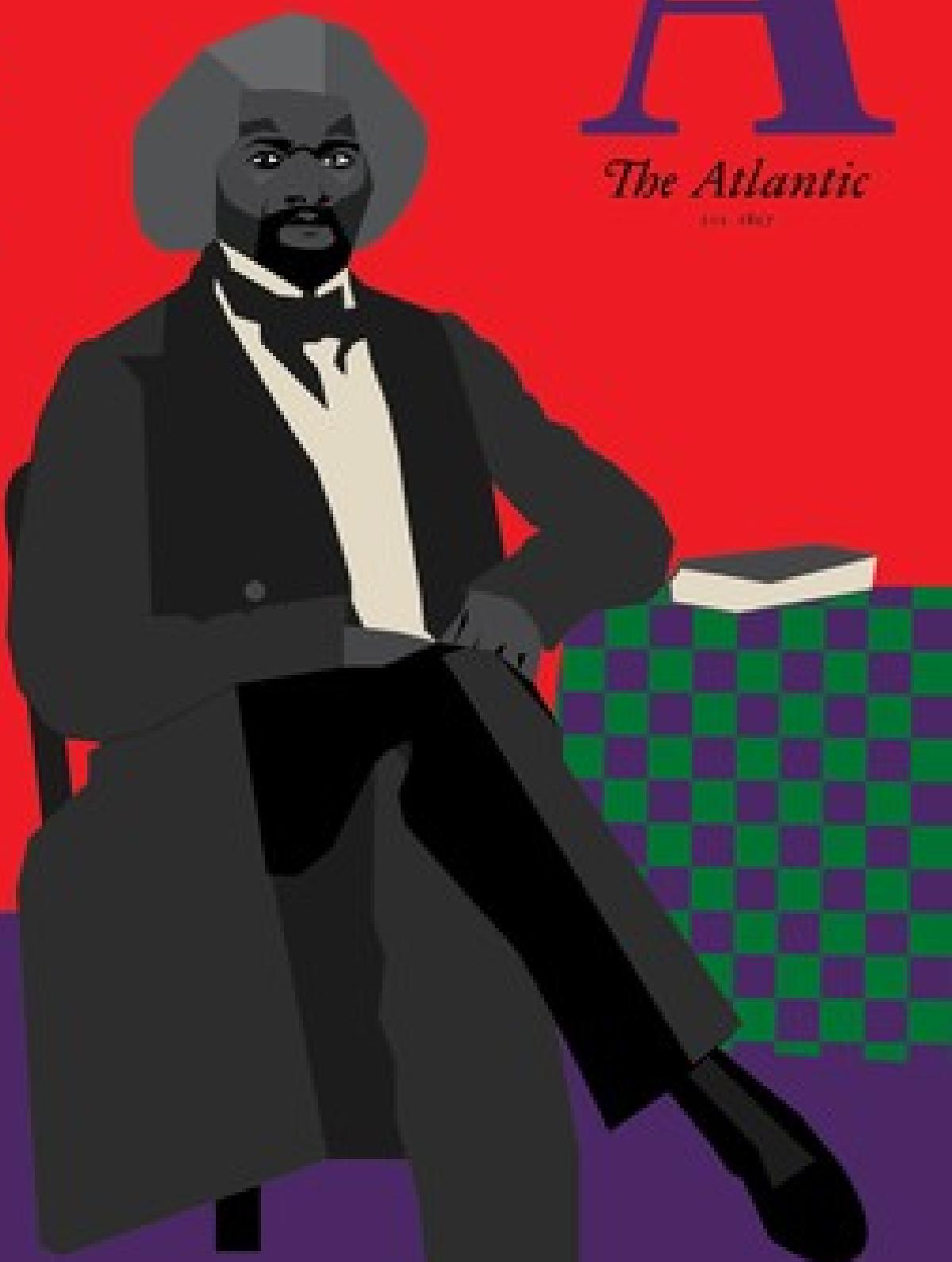
DECEMBER 2021
THEATRE AND CULTURE

TO RECONSTRUCT THE NATION

Learning from America's most
radical experiment

—
David W. Blight
Lonnie G. Bunch III
Drew Gilpin Faust
Eric Foner
Peniel E. Joseph
Vann R. Newkirk II

—
*Play This Ghost of
Slavery, a new play by
Anna Deavere
Smith*



The Atlantic

[Sat, 02 Dec 2023]

- [On Reconstruction](#)
- [Departments](#)

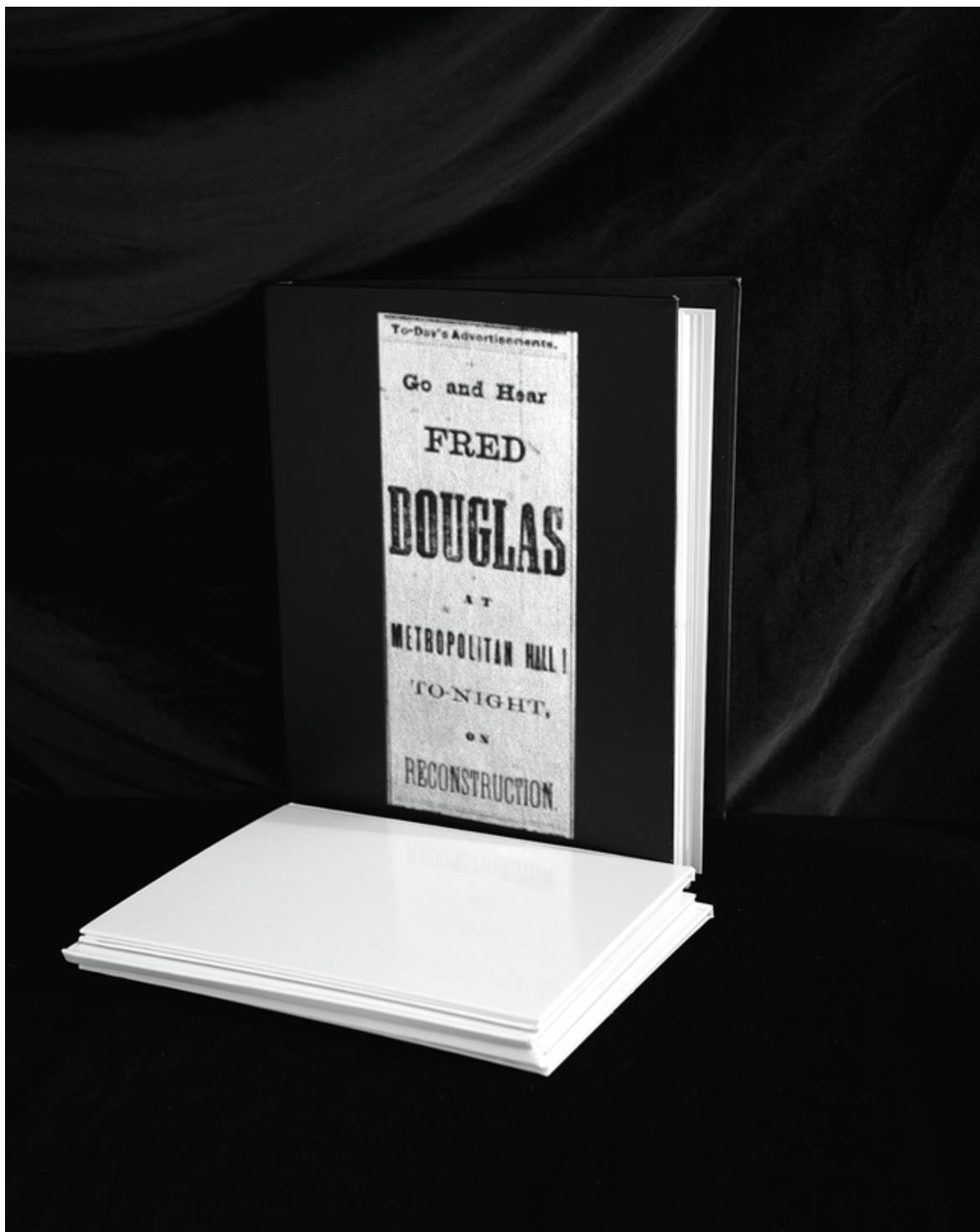
On Reconstruction

- [**Editor's Note: The Questions That Most Need Asking**](#)
- [**Why Is America Afraid of Black History?**](#)
- [**How Black Americans Kept Reconstruction Alive**](#)
- [**What The Atlantic Got Wrong About Reconstruction**](#)
- [**The Annotated Frederick Douglass**](#)
- [**Freedmen's Town**](#)
- [**How the Negro Spiritual Changed American Popular Music—And America Itself**](#)
- [**The Men Who Started the War**](#)
- [**How John F. Kennedy Fell for the Lost Cause**](#)
- [**How Reconstruction Created American Public Education**](#)
- [**The Confederate General Whom All the Other Confederates Hated**](#)
- [**Sitcom**](#)

The Questions That Most Need Asking

The Atlantic revisits Reconstruction.

by Jeffrey Goldberg



“Reconstruction,” by Frederick Douglass, appeared in the [December 1866 issue of this magazine](#). It was the most important article that *The Atlantic* published in the immediate postwar era. It was also, for its time, unusually concise, coming in at a mere 2,703 words. By contrast, *The Atlantic*'s [1860](#)

[endorsement of Abraham Lincoln](#), written by James Russell Lowell, had run to 7,331 words, and Lincoln himself was not mentioned until the 1,747th word. (The editorial did succeed, of course. And yes, I'm taking credit on behalf of *The Atlantic* for Lincoln's presidency.)

Douglass published his call for a radical reimagining of the American idea at an ambiguous but promising moment. Already, the infant project of Reconstruction—of the South, of the lives of newly liberated Black Americans, of the Constitution itself—was stimulating opposition that would, by 1877, prove shattering to the cause of equality. And yet Douglass was correct, [as his biographer David W. Blight writes in this issue](#), in understanding that “the United States had been reinvented by war and by new egalitarian impulses rooted in emancipation.” Douglass’s essay, which Blight brilliantly annotates for us, is “full of radical brimstone, cautious hope, and a thoroughly new vision of constitutional authority.”

The Reconstruction period has been a topic for *The Atlantic* across the centuries. This special issue, edited by our senior editor Vann R. Newkirk II, working alongside our editor-at-large, Cullen Murphy, and our managing editor John Swansburg, is meant to examine the enduring consequences of Reconstruction’s tragic fall at a moment—yet *another* moment—when the cause of racial progress faces sustained pressure. The idea for this issue emerged from a conversation I had not long ago with Lonnie G. Bunch III, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and the founding director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture. Bunch is, among other things, a stupendous builder, a conscientious American patriot, and an impresario of memory. He is also a scholar of the Freedmen’s Bureau archives, and the author of [a moving article about the bureau’s work](#).

Our conversation at first focused on the need to complete the exploration and digitization of the imperishably important archives, but then it ranged more widely. Both of us felt that, in this period of political and social reaction, revisiting the centrality of Reconstruction, and of promises made and broken, would be an apt subject for this magazine. Bunch writes in his article:

Librarians around the nation feel the chilling effects of book bans. Some individuals who seek to occupy the highest office in the land fear the effects of an Advanced Placement class that explores African American history—a history that, as education officials in Florida have maintained, “lacks educational value”; a history that does not deserve to be remembered.

As Newkirk, who has written a fascinating [article about the Fisk University choir](#), noted to me, “If the last seven years in this country have proven anything, it is to show just how unfinished, and fragile, the project of Reconstruction actually is.”

In the interest of memory, we asked our deputy editor Yoni Appelbaum, a historian by trade, to [examine *The Atlantic*'s mixed record](#) on questions of Reconstruction. I would prefer to tell you that Frederick Douglass spoke singularly for this magazine on the subject, but there is also the matter of Woodrow Wilson, a frequent contributor to *The Atlantic* in the years before he became president. Wilson was a prime contributor to a 1901 series in this magazine focused on Reconstruction. The series, which also featured W. E. B. Du Bois (thank goodness), has too much of a “good people on both sides” air about it. As Appelbaum notes, Wilson’s critique of Reconstruction was appalling. “The negroes were exalted; the states were misgoverned and looted in their name,” Wilson wrote. This went on, he continued, until “the whites who were real citizens got control again.”

Illumination is the point of this issue. We have great scholars, including Peniel E. Joseph, whose article, “The Revolution Never Ended,” focuses on [the Black Americans who continued the work of Reconstruction](#) even after federal troops withdrew from the South, and Drew Gilpin Faust, a former president of Harvard and a noted Civil War scholar, who [writes about the Secret Six](#), the men exposed after the war for having funded John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry. Eric Foner, in many ways the dean of Reconstruction scholarship, [writes on James Longstreet](#), the Confederate general who accepted the Union’s victory and took up the cause of rebuilding the nation.



The playwright and actor Anna Deavere Smith. (Kwaku Alston / HBO)

At the center of this issue, spread across 32 pages, you will find something surprising and glorious: [an original play by Anna Deavere Smith](#), a contributing writer at *The Atlantic* as well as a playwright, a performer, and an actual genius. I don't doubt that you will one day see the play, *This Ghost of Slavery*, on Broadway. When I first started talking with Smith about writing for this issue, she had predictably brilliant ideas for a long exploration of juvenile justice and its roots in the slave system, but we soon realized that an essay couldn't contain all that she was trying to achieve. So I suggested that she write a play. We recruited our national editor, Scott Stossel, to serve as her dramaturge. Spend time with this play. It will move you. Spend time with this whole issue, in fact: It asks, and answers, the questions that most need to be asked.

This editor's note appears in the [December 2023](#) print edition with the headline "The Questions That Most Need Asking."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/12/jeffrey-goldberg-reconstruction-issue-editors-note/675804/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

Why Is America Afraid of Black History?

No one should fear a history that asks a country to live up to its highest ideals.

by Lonnie G. Bunch III



This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)

In all my years doing research at the National Archives, I had never cried. That day in fall 2012, I had simply planned to examine documentary

material that might help determine how the yet-to-be-built National Museum of African American History and Culture would explore and present the complicated history of American slavery and freedom.

As I read through the papers of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands—the Freedmen’s Bureau, as it’s usually called—I decided to see if I could find records from Wake County, North Carolina, where I knew some of my own enslaved ancestors had lived. I had few expectations because I knew so little about my family’s history. From a surviving wedding certificate for my paternal great-grandparents, I’d gotten the name of my earliest-known family member, an enslaved woman named Candis Bunch, my great-great-grandmother. But scrolling through rolls of microfilmed documents from the Raleigh office of the Freedmen’s Bureau, I realized the chances were remote that I would find my ancestor.

But when I turned my attention to a series of labor contracts—designed to give the newly freed some legal protections as they negotiated working relationships with their former enslavers—I found a single page documenting a contract between Fabius H. Perry, who owned the plantation next to the one where my ancestors had been enslaved, and Candis Bunch. That page not only filled a void in my knowledge of my family’s history, but also enriched my understanding of myself.

I was amazed at what a single piece of paper could reveal. For two days of farm work in 1866, Candis received \$1, and for 44 days of work in 1867, she received \$11. The contract also revealed that her daughter Dolly was paid \$3 for housework. As I read further, the contract delineated what Candis owed Perry for the purchase of cotton and soap.

What reduced me to tears was the fact that, out of her meager earnings, Candis had spent 60 cents on two “baker tins,” more than the payment she received for an entire day’s work. I remembered how my paternal grandmother, Leanna Bunch, who resided in Belleville, New Jersey, and died two weeks before my fifth birthday, used to bake cookies in the shape of hearts and crescent moons to cajole me into napping. Did she use the very same tins that Candis had labored to buy? Had that been the beginning of a family tradition: No matter how difficult times may be, always help the children find some joy?

With this personal discovery came the realization that documents like these from the Freedmen's Bureau—well over a million pages, created out of bureaucratic necessity—could help African Americans today better understand themselves and their enslaved ancestors. These records, if made more accessible, could help all of us grasp the challenges, the pain, the losses, the courage, and the resiliency of a people who had both powered and endured the transition from slavery to freedom. They could bring the grand narrative of Reconstruction to a more human scale.

The people we encounter in the records of the Freedmen's Bureau call out to be remembered. Their lives, their sacrifices, are stories to be revealed and lauded. Stories such as these also provoke discomfort—and, in some quarters, resistance. Politicians have been elected by sowing fear about “divisive” history. Is it divisive to point out that African Americans believed in, and struggled toward, an aspirational America, an America that had made promises but had not yet delivered?

The hope that freedom would transform a people and a nation was captured [in a cartoon by Thomas Nast](#) that appeared in *Harper's Weekly* on January 24, 1863. Nast's drawing celebrated the Emancipation Proclamation, issued by President Abraham Lincoln a few weeks earlier. The left side of the image depicts the horrific impact of slavery: slave auctions and the destruction of families; backbreaking labor in the cotton fields; a woman being whipped. On the right, the benefits of freedom: a country at peace, with formerly enslaved children attending school; a Black worker drawing fair wages; Black and white figures showing mutual respect toward each other. The centerpiece is an image of a Black family that has achieved middle-class status, with well-clothed children and elders sitting by the hearth. Nast's cartoon looked forward to a future where fairness and freedom were the norm. That was the hope of Reconstruction, and the engine of that hope was the Freedmen's Bureau.

On March 3, 1865, after nearly two years of debate, Congress passed “[an Act to establish a Bureau for the Relief of Freedmen and Refugees](#).” Lincoln signed it into law the same day. The bureau, embedded in the War Department, was one of the first federal forays into social engineering, in some ways anticipating the more activist government policies of the New Deal and the Great Society. Simply put, its charge was to protect the basic

rights and help provide for the basic needs of the 4 million people who had been, until recently, enslaved.

The value and impact of the Freedmen's Bureau, from its inception until it was defunded, in 1872, cannot be overstated. At its peak, more than 900 bureau agents were located throughout the former Confederacy, in rural hamlets and urban centers. Among other things, these agents documented the violence that was at the core of white southern resistance to Reconstruction. They responded to and recorded the desire of the formerly enslaved to confirm their marital standing. They gave food to the poor and the indigent regardless of race. They helped establish Black educational institutions, from elementary "freedom schools" to colleges such as Shaw University, in North Carolina, and Howard University, in the nation's capital. More than 40 "freedmen's hospitals" served the sick, the malnourished, and those whose health had been damaged by the conditions of slavery. During a period when most in the South fought to violently overturn the changes implemented by Reconstruction, the Freedmen's Bureau was one of the few outlets where African Americans could address their needs, obtain legal assistance, and see some evidence that change was at hand. One could argue that the bureau was, in essence, a form of reparations.

From the March 1901 issue: W. E. B. Du Bois on the Freedmen's Bureau

Simply by virtue of doing its work, the Freedmen's Bureau amassed records of the stories, hopes, and disappointments of a people on the cusp of freedom. These documents reveal the agency of the newly emancipated: Freedom was not given but was seized and created by people who "made a way out of no way." But the documents underscore how difficult the struggle was. Although they make the efforts of individuals and families visible and concrete, the records also reflect how the promise of Reconstruction was derailed by violence, northern apathy, and the rise of Jim Crow.

What reduced me to tears was the fact that my great-great-grandmother had spent 60 cents on two "baker tins," more than the payment she received for an entire day's work.

The documents unlock the names and experiences of people who are often invisible or silent in the conventional telling of history. A significant portion of the Freedmen's Bureau papers reflect the importance of family, of reconnecting with kin separated by the vagaries of slavery, of protecting children. With freedom came an unyielding desire to find oneself by finding those who'd been sold away. The Freedmen's Bureau, people hoped, could aid in restoring the bonds of family. In the documents, a freedwoman named Sina Smith described how her mother had been sold from Virginia to Tennessee "about eighteen years past ... by Colonel Marshall." Smith hoped that her mother, Eliza Williams, whom she was now able to "support ... in her old age," could be found, and noted that she was "a member of the Baptist Church" in Nashville.

Requests for assistance contained poignant details that might help locate a family member. A freedman named Hawkins Wilson wrote from Galveston, Texas, searching for his sisters, whom he had not seen in the 24 years since he'd been "sold at Sheriff's sale" in Virginia. "One of my sisters, Jane," he wrote, "belonged to Peter Coleman in Caroline County." Wilson's letter expressed a belief that the bureau could reconnect him with his family: "I am in hopes that they are still living ... and I have no other one to apply to but you." Wilson drafted an additional letter to be given to Jane. "Your little brother Hawkins is trying to find out where you are and where his poor old mother is ... I shall never forget the bag of biscuits you made for me the last night I spent with you." He continued by saying he had led a good life and had "learned to read, and write a little." He said that he hoped they might see each other, but added that if they did not "meet on earth, we might indeed meet in heaven." Given that the letter remained in the files of the Freedmen's Bureau, it is unlikely that Wilson was ever reunited with his family.

Numerous letters and depositions describe the frequent terrorist attacks aimed at controlling, intimidating, and killing the formerly enslaved. Some of the violence was random: Jacob Carpenter, from Gaston, North Carolina, stated to an authority that "he had been hunted [through the] town," dodging gunfire, and "that his life was not safe at any time." Tobe Jones, of Wilkes County, Georgia, went to visit his wife. Two men assaulted him; one, he recounted, "caught me by the collar and struck me with his fist. Several blows in the face ... [He] then picked up a rock and ran after me, and said he

would kill me." White vigilantes also conducted organized raids, focusing their ire on Black teachers and ministers and those bold enough to vote. In Tennessee, churches were burned. In Arkansas, "the school house for colored children at Phillips Bayou was burned down" and a teacher was "ordered to leave." Night riders—vigilantes intent on violently enforcing white supremacy—struck at those who worked to bring change to the South: On the night of April 18, 1868, 20 mounted men attacked the home of William Fleming, of Franklin, Tennessee; a few months later, in nearby Brownsville, "a party of freedmen were assaulted on their way home ... and four of their members shot." The Freedmen's Bureau agent stationed in Tennessee noted that "there is an organization ... who style themselves Ku, Klux and they are committing depredations on Colored people, property and outrages on their persons."

The bureau papers highlight the role of women during Reconstruction. Throughout the documents, one encounters Black women demanding fair labor contracts, insisting on respect and common courtesy, seeking and providing educational opportunities, and fighting on behalf of their families. The paperwork exposes the violence and sexual abuse that were all too common in the lives of Black women. When Harriett Kilgore, of Chickasaw County, Mississippi, worked for her former enslaver, Landon Kilgore, in 1865, she was punished for working too slowly. "I told him I had done nothing for him to whip me. He said he wanted to whip me for some time and that I thought that I was free." In September 1866, Rhoda Ann Childs, of Henry County, Georgia, was beaten, tortured, "and ravished" by an ex-Confederate soldier, in part because her husband had served in "the God damned Yankee Army." Amanda Willis was forced out of her mother's home near Springfield, Tennessee, and taken by a white man who "brought me down into the woods and had forcible connection with me." Women fought back. In Wilkes County, Georgia, in May 1866, Tempy Hill, a freedwoman, saw a white man strike another Black woman, her sister-in-law Lydia Hill. She left her work in the field and confronted him with the "intention of fighting him and to take up for her color." She struck the assailant with "a chunk of wood."

The notion of access—to education and to American history through an African American lens—was central to the creation of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which opened in 2016. I was its

founding director. The effort to create the museum ultimately led to a project to make Freedmen's Bureau records available to the broader public.

To begin the process of creating the museum, it was essential to understand the knowledge base of future visitors. For two years, starting in 2005, the museum conducted surveys throughout the country; reviewed an array of specialized reports on America's understanding of its past; and organized on-the-street interviews that focused on young, diverse participants.

The data revealed that respondents had strong and conflicting views about the role, impact, and continuing resonance of slavery in American life. Almost everyone believed that slavery was an important story. Many felt that the museum should focus on how slavery shaped the African American experience and the way that slavery, "America's original sin," was an essential element in the founding and evolution of the United States. An equal number felt that, although it was once important, slavery had little meaning and relevance for contemporary audiences. I remember vividly the day when a Black woman, returning from church, greeted me as we passed on the street. She thanked all those involved in building the museum. But as she hugged me, she whispered, "Whatever you do, don't talk about slavery." To her and others, the museum had a chance "to help folks get beyond slavery"—to no longer be constrained by a past that some felt was embarrassing.

What this divide made clear to the museum staff was the need to centralize slavery and freedom as forces that helped define and continue to influence American politics, culture, and economics. But that would not be enough. The museum needed to humanize slavery, so that visitors would recognize the strength and resiliency of the enslaved.

Besides slavery, members of the public were most interested in understanding their own family history. Today, programs like *Finding Your Roots*, on PBS, and commercial services like Ancestry .com have made personal history accessible and engaging. But in 2005, the way forward was less clear. In due course, the museum would establish the Robert Frederick Smith Explore Your Family History Center. As we considered the center's role, the staff realized that the biggest contribution would be to help illuminate the lives and histories of the enslaved. The obstacles to families

trying to recover the stories of enslaved ancestors were immense. For one thing, African Americans were not enumerated by name prior to the 1870 census.

One can tell a great deal about a country by what it chooses to remember. One can tell even more by what a nation chooses to forget.

The best way to get beyond this barrier lay in the Freedmen's Bureau documents. Generations of scholars, including [Ira Berlin](#), [Thavolia Glymph](#), and [Eric Foner](#), had researched the wealth of information that these papers contained and published scholarly monographs for academic audiences. But access to this trove was too important to be left in the hands of professional historians, or made possible only for those who could travel to the National Archives, in Washington, D.C., which owns and houses the original records.

This understanding led to the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau Project, whose aim was to create a digital portal that would make the bureau documents searchable by name and subject. Suddenly, hundreds of thousands of personal histories would be available not only to scholars but also to families in search of their ancestors and, by extension, in search of themselves: helping people find not embarrassment but strength and inspiration in their enslaved ancestors.

That portal could not have been built without an effective collaboration involving the museum, the National Archives, and a pioneering genealogical resource, FamilySearch—an organization dedicated to helping all people discover their family history. One major challenge was the need to review and transcribe upwards of a million pages of documents. Transcription was essential, because the records—written in 19th-century cursive by many different hands—are difficult for contemporary audiences to read. For this portal to have the desired reach, the documents needed to be transcribed by hundreds if not thousands of individuals—an army of trained volunteers whose energy had the additional benefit of helping generate support and enthusiasm for the museum itself in the years before its opening.

Much of the success of this ongoing transcription effort can be credited to FamilySearch and the community that it nurtured. Steeped in the traditions of the Mormon Church, FamilySearch had developed technology and

processes that proved essential. Quality control was built in. Following its lead, Freedmen's Bureau transcriptions are subject to a two-step review—first by a volunteer, then by a member of the Smithsonian staff. If additional edits are required at the final stage of review, the process begins again.

Today, people accessing the Freedmen's Bureau Digital Collection can see the original document as well as the transcription.

One can tell a great deal about a country by what it chooses to remember: by what graces the walls of its museums, by what monuments are venerated, and by what parts of its history are embraced. One can tell even more by what a nation chooses to forget: what memories are erased and what aspects of its past are feared. This unwillingness to understand, accept, and embrace an accurate history, shaped by scholarship, reflects an unease with ambiguity and nuance—and with truth. One frequent casualty of such discomfort is any real appreciation of the importance of African American history and culture for all Americans.

Why should anyone fear a history that asks a country to live up to its highest ideals—to “make good to us the promises in your Constitution,” as Frederick Douglass put it? But too often, we are indeed fearful. State legislatures have passed laws restricting the teaching of critical race theory, preventing educators from discussing a history that “might make our children feel guilty” about the actions and attitudes of their ancestors. Librarians around the nation feel the chilling effects of book bans. Some individuals who seek to occupy the highest office in the land fear the effects of an Advanced Placement class that explores African American history—a history that, as education officials in Florida have maintained, “[lacks educational value](#)”; a history that does not deserve to be remembered.

There is no reason to fear a history that, while illuminating the dark corners of America’s past, also displays values and expectations that are central to America’s identity: resiliency, family, education, fairness. The voices within the Freedmen’s Bureau papers demonstrate how the African American fight for access to education, economic opportunity, and basic human rights created paths that benefited all Americans.

Rather than running from this history, we should find in it sustenance, understanding, and hope. In the end, we can’t escape the past anyway. What

Joe Louis said of an opponent applies to the legacy of history: You can run, but you can't hide.

This article appears in the [December 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Archive of Emancipation.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/12/freedmens-bureau-act-project-records/675807/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

How Black Americans Kept Reconstruction Alive

The federal government abandoned Reconstruction in 1877, but Black people didn't give up on the moment's promise.

by Peniel E. Joseph



The Civil War produced two competing narratives, each an attempt to make sense of a conflict that had eradicated the pestilence of slavery.

Black Americans who believed in multiracial democracy extolled the emancipationist legacy of the war. These Reconstructionists envisioned a new America finally capable of safeguarding Black dignity and claims of citizenship. Black women and men created new civic, religious, political, educational, and economic institutions. They built thriving towns and districts, churches and schools. In so doing, they helped reimagine the purpose and promise of American democracy.

For a time after the war, Black Reconstructionists also shaped the American government. They found [allies in the Republican Party](#), where white abolitionists hoped to honor freedpeople's demands and to create a progressive country in which all workers earned wages. Republicans in Congress pushed through amendments abolishing slavery, granting citizenship, and giving Black men the ballot. Congress also created the Freedmen's Bureau, which offered provisions, clothing, fuel, and medical assistance to the formerly enslaved, and negotiated contracts to protect their newly won rights. With backing from the Union army, millions of Black people in the South received education, performed paid labor, voted in presidential elections, and held some of the highest offices in the country—all for the first time.

Black Reconstructionists told the country a new story about itself. These were people who believed in freedom beyond emancipation. They shared an expansive vision of a compassionate nation with a true democratic ethos.

Those who longed for the days of antebellum slavery felt differently. Advocates of the Lost Cause—who believed that the South's defeat did nothing to diminish its moral superiority—sought to “redeem” their fellow white citizens from the scourge of “Negro rule.” Redemptionists did more than offer a different story about the nation. They demanded that their point of view be sanctified with blood. They threatened the nation’s infrastructure and institutions, and backed up their threats with violence.

In a sense, the work of Reconstruction never ended, because the goal of a multiracial democracy has never been fully realized.

The Redemption campaign was astoundingly successful. Intimidation and lynchings of Black voters and politicians quickly reversed gains in turnout.

Reprisals against any white person who supported Black civil rights largely silenced dissent. This second rebellion hastened the [national retreat from Reconstruction](#). Federal troops effectively withdrew from the Confederate states in 1877. White southerners soon dominated state legislatures once again, and passed Jim Crow laws designed to subjugate Black people and destroy their political power.

The official Reconstruction timeline usually ends there, in 1877. But this implies that the Reconstructionist vision of American democracy ceased to exist, or went dormant, without the backing of federal troops. Instead, we should consider a long Reconstruction—one that stretches well beyond 1877, and offers a view that transcends false binaries of political failure and success.

This view allows us to follow the travails of the Black activists and ordinary citizens who kept the struggle for freedom and dignity alive long after the Republican Party and white abolitionists had abandoned it. Black institutions, including the church, the schoolhouse, and the press, kept public vigil over promises made, broken, and, in some instances, renewed during the long march toward liberation. Their stories show that freedom's flame, once boldly lit, could not be extinguished by the specter of white violence.

The concept of a long Reconstruction recognizes that a nation can be two things at once. After 1877, freedom and repression journeyed along parallel paths. Black Americans preserved a vision of a truly free nation in an archipelago of communities and institutions. Many of them exist today, and continue their work. This, perhaps, is the most important reason to resist the idea that Reconstruction ended when the North withdrew from the South: In a sense, the work of Reconstruction never ended, because the goal of a multiracial democracy has never been fully realized. And America has made its greatest gains toward that goal when it has rejected the Redemptionist narrative.

That the work of Reconstruction continued well after 1877 is illustrated by the life of Ida B. Wells, a woman who witnessed the death of slavery and fought against the beginning of Jim Crow. Wells kept alive the radical ideals of the Reconstructionists and punctured, through her journalism, the virulent mythology peddled by the Redemptionists. When Wells was born—in Holly

Springs, Mississippi, on July 16, 1862—her parents, Jim and Lizzie Wells, were enslaved. Later that year, the Union army took control of the town while staging an attack on Vicksburg. As they did elsewhere across the dying Confederacy, enslaved people in and around Holly Springs fled plantations for Union lines and emancipated themselves. But freedom proved contingent. Even when Union General Ulysses S. Grant made his headquarters in the town, Black refugees feared reprisals from their former enslavers. Their vulnerability to white violence, even under the watch of Union troops, foreshadowed the coming era.

After the war, Jim and Lizzie Wells chose to stay in Holly Springs. Jim joined [the local Union League](#), which supported Republican Party politics and was committed to advancing Black male suffrage. In fall 1867, when Ida was 5 years old, her father cast his first ballot. Ida remembered her mother as an exemplar of domestic rectitude whose achievements were reflected in her children's perfect Sunday-school attendance and good manners.

Ida grew up in a Mississippi full of miraculous change. She attended the first “colored” school in Holly Springs, a remarkable opportunity in a state that had been considered the most inhospitable to Black education and aspiration in the entire Confederacy. As a young girl, Ida read the newspaper aloud to her father’s admiring friends; just a few years earlier, it would have been illegal in Mississippi to teach her the alphabet.

In 1874, when Wells was 12, 69 Black men were serving in the Mississippi legislature, and [a white governor, Adelbert Ames](#)—placed in office partly by the votes of the formerly enslaved—promised to commit the state to equality for all. Around that time, Mississippi’s secretary of state, superintendent of education, and speaker of the House were all Black men.

The world around Ida was full of fiercely independent and economically prosperous Black citizens. These attainments buoyed her optimism for the rest of her life.

But the idyll of her childhood was brief. Redemptionist forces in Mississippi struck back against Black political power with naked racist terror. In December 1874, [a white mob in Vicksburg](#) killed as many as 300 Black citizens after forcing the elected Black sheriff, Peter Crosby, to resign.

Massacres and lynchings continued unabated across the state through 1875. By 1876, the number of Black men in the state legislature had fallen by more than half. Following the contested election that year, the new president, the Republican Rutherford B. Hayes, ordered the remaining active northern troops in the South to return to their barracks. Without the protection of federal troops, and with the symbolic abandonment by the president, Black people were on their own, completely vulnerable to voting restrictions, economic reprisals, and racial violence.

For Wells, the collapse of Reconstruction came at a moment of profound personal struggles. In 1878, her parents and one of her brothers died in a yellow-fever outbreak that killed hundreds in Holly Springs, leaving her, at 16, to care for five siblings, including her disabled sister, Eugenia. After Eugenia died, Wells moved to Memphis at the invitation of an aunt.

Wells's escape from Mississippi did not protect her from the indignities of racism. In 1883, after a visit to Holly Springs, Wells purchased a train ticket back to Memphis, riding first class on a segregated train. She moved to the first-class car for white ladies after being bothered by another passenger's smoking, and refused to go back to Black first class. Though barely five feet tall, Wells stood her ground until the white conductor physically removed her. She promptly filed suit and, initially at least, won \$700 in damages before her two cases were reversed on appeal by the Tennessee State Supreme Court.

The defeat spurred Wells to find another means of fighting Jim Crow. She longed to attend Fisk University, and took summer classes there. By the end of the decade, she had become the editor and a co-owner of the *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight*, the newspaper founded by the Beale Street Church pastor Taylor Nightingale.

Wells took over editorial duties amid a surge of anti-Black violence, which had remained a feature of the South even after the Redemptionists achieved their goal of removing federal troops from the region. In the 1880s, the incidents began to intensify. In 1886, at least 13 Black citizens were lynched in a Mississippi courthouse, where free Black men were testifying against a white lawyer accused of assault. Attacks on Reconstructionists continued from there. The more that Black men and women engaged in political self-

determination—choosing to own homes and businesses, to defend their families—the more thunderbolts of violence struck them. The bloodshed of Redemption was intended to touch the lives of all Black people in the South.

On March 9, 1892, that violence came to Wells's life, when a mob of 75 white men in Memphis kidnapped three Black men: Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart. Moss was an owner of the People's Grocery, an upstart Black cooperative that competed with the local grocery owned by William Barrett, who was white. The rivalry between the stores had escalated into a larger racial conflict, and Moss, McDowell, and Stewart had been sent to jail after guns were fired at a white mob that had attacked the People's Grocery. Wells knew Moss and his wife, Betty, whom she considered one of her best friends. She was godmother to their daughter Maurine.

Moss, McDowell, and Stewart were given no due process or trial. Another mob took the men from jail and shot each to death, refusing Moss's plea to spare his life for the sake of his daughter and pregnant wife. Their bodies were left in the Chesapeake & Ohio rail yard. The white-owned *Memphis Appeal-Avalanche* documented the horrors as fair justice for the troublesome Black men who had dared to fight white men.

In the *Free Speech*, Wells wrote a series of editorials decrying the killings and the constant threat of violence that Black Americans faced in the South, and urged northerners to renew their support for full Black citizenship. In one of those editorials, Wells called out the “threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women,” which was the justification for many lynchings. She filed the editorial shortly before a trip to the North. While she was gone, a group of men went to the *Free Speech*'s offices and destroyed the printing press, leaving a note warning that “anyone trying to publish the paper again would be punished with death.” She chose not to return to Memphis, and continued her campaign from New York.

That June, Wells wrote an essay, “The Truth About Lynching,” in the influential Black newspaper *The New York Age*. Wells reasoned that most anti-Black violence claimed its roots in economic competition, personal jealousy, and white supremacy. She also dispelled, again, the myth of Black-male sexual violence against white women. Wells pointed instead to the

number of mixed-race children in the old Confederacy—evidence of the sexual violence that white men had inflicted on Black women.

Wells's activism was more than a crusade to end lynching. She traveled the country and Great Britain to describe her vision of multiracial democracy. Frederick Douglass, who had escaped slavery and become the foremost civil-rights activist and journalist of the antebellum and Reconstruction eras, admired Wells and characterized her contributions as a “service which can neither be weighed nor measured.”

Wells first met Douglass in the summer of 1892, when he was 74; Douglass had written a letter to her saying he was inspired by her courage. The two developed a close friendship. “There has been no word equal to it in convincing power,” Douglass wrote of *Southern Horrors*, a pamphlet Wells published in 1892 based on her groundbreaking anti-lynching essay. The pair corresponded and worked together for the rest of Douglass’s life. With his death, in 1895, a torch was passed.

Wells’s efforts, in a period of racial fatigue among white audiences, helped continue the central political struggle of Reconstruction. She delivered hundreds of speeches, organized anti-lynching campaigns, and worked to galvanize the public against the Redemptionists. Wells told America a story it needed, but did not want, to hear.

Wells’s work also intersected with that of W. E. B. Du Bois, the scholar, journalist, and civil-rights activist who took a forceful stand against lynching. Their relationship was sometimes collegial, sometimes contentious; Wells never found with Du Bois the same rapport she’d had with Douglass. But she supported Du Bois’s then-radical view of the importance of Black liberal-arts education, and Du Bois was shaped by Wells’s advocacy and critiques.

Du Bois viewed the legacy of Reconstruction as crucial to understanding America. At the behest of another Black intellectual and scholar, Anna Julia Cooper, he published in 1935 his monumental *Black Reconstruction*. The book traced the origins of the violence that Wells denounced. He wrote that “inter-racial sex jealousy and accompanying sadism” were the main basis of lynching, and echoed Wells’s argument that white men’s violence against

Black women had been the true scourge of the South. Du Bois also wrote that the Reconstructionists were engaged in “abolition-democracy,” which he defined as a broader movement for social equality that went beyond political rights.

Du Bois’s scholarship paved the way for [a reconsideration of the era](#). He challenged the Redemptionist narrative of venal corruption and Black men who were either in over their head or merely served white northern puppet masters and southern race traitors.

[Read: What if Reconstruction hadn’t failed?](#)

Du Bois’s work is a starting point for contemporary histories. Eric Foner’s magisterial [*Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*](#), published more than half a century after *Black Reconstruction*, added texture to the story of the period, then largely untold. Foner’s work reframed the era as an unfinished experiment in multiracial democracy.

In this tradition of expansion, the historian Steven Hahn’s Pulitzer Prize-winning [*A Nation Under Our Feet*](#), published in 2003, widens earlier historical frameworks by looking beyond Reconstruction’s constitutional reforms. Hahn sought out the Black men and women who shaped Reconstruction at the state and local levels. More recently, the historian Kidada E. Williams’s [*I Saw Death Coming*](#) focuses on the daily lives of Black men and women during Reconstruction—witnesses to the violence of Redemption.

All of these works expand our conception of what Reconstruction was, and challenge the notion that the era came to an abrupt ending in 1877. They portray the era as a contested epic, where parallel movements for Reconstruction and Redemption rise, fall, and are recovered.

I first learned about Reconstruction from my late mother, Germaine Joseph, a Haitian immigrant turned American citizen whose love of history could be gauged by the crammed bookcases in our home in Queens, New York. My first lesson on Reconstruction came in the form of a story about Haiti’s revolution. Mom proudly informed me that Haiti had been the key to unlocking freedom for Black Americans: The [Haitian Revolution](#), she

explained, led to revolts of the enslaved, frightened so-called masters, and inspired Frederick Douglass.

Later, I found my way back to Reconstruction through an interest in the Black radical tradition, especially post–World War II movements for racial justice and equality. My mentor, the late historian Manning Marable, described the civil-rights movement, and the age of Black Power that followed, as a second Reconstruction. During this time, with a renewed interest in slavery and its aftermath, scholars rediscovered Du Bois's work.

My research and writing of late has revolved around interpreting the past 15 years of American history, from Barack Obama's ascent to the White House in 2008, to the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013, to Donald Trump's 2016 presidential election, to the events that followed George Floyd's murder in 2020. In my 2022 book, *The Third Reconstruction*, I argued that we might be living through another era filled with the kind of dizzying possibility and intense backlash that whipsawed the South during Wells's life.

Today's Reconstructionists have a vision for multiracial democracy that might astonish even Douglass, Wells, and Du Bois. Black women, queer folk, poor people, disabled people, prisoners, and formerly incarcerated people have adopted the term *abolition* from Du Bois's idea of abolition-democracy, and now use it to refer to a broad movement to dismantle interlocking systems of oppression—many of which originated in Redemption policy. They have achieved important victories in taking down Confederate monuments; sharing a more accurate telling of America's origin story and its relationship to slavery; and questioning systems of punishment, surveillance, and poverty.

But today's Redemptionists have had their victories as well. Their apocalyptic story of the present, one in which crime and moral decay threaten to destroy America, rationalizes a return to a past America and aims to dismantle the Reconstruction amendments that underpin fundamental civil rights. Redemptionists promote a regime of education that reverses the gains historians have made since the revival of *Black Reconstruction*.

The health of American democracy continues to rest upon whether we believe the Reconstructionist or Redemptionist version of history. Reconstruction, as a belief, as an ideal, outlasted the federal government's political commitments by decades. Black people, the country's most improbable architects, continued to make and shape history by preserving this rich legacy, and bequeathing it to their children. Their story has remained the heart of the American experiment both when the country has acknowledged them—and, most especially, when it has not.

This article appears in the [December 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Revolution Never Ended.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

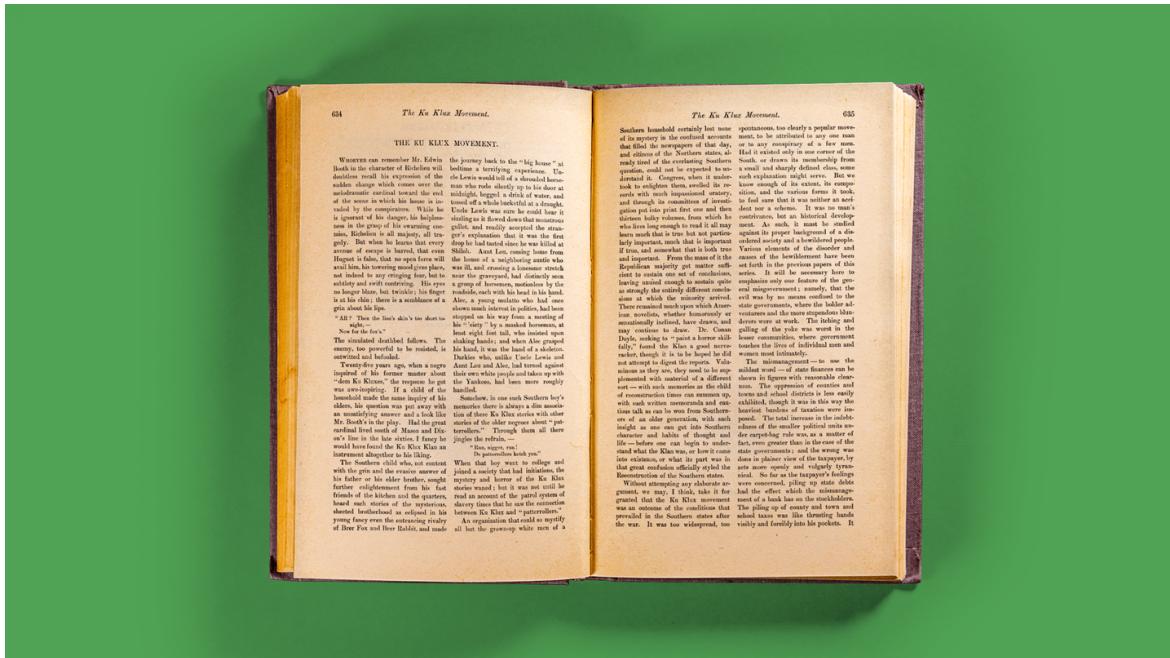
This article was downloaded by **calibre** from
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/12/how-long-reconstruction-period-black-americans/675805/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

What *The Atlantic* Got Wrong About Reconstruction

In 1901, a series of articles took a dim view of the era, and of the idea that all Americans ought to participate in the democratic process.

by Yoni Appelbaum



The last time *The Atlantic* decided to reckon with Reconstruction in a sustained way, its editor touted “a series of scholarly, unpartisan studies of the Reconstruction Period” as “the most important group of papers” it would publish in 1901.

That was true, as far as it went. The collection of essays assembled by Bliss Perry, the literature professor who had recently taken the magazine’s reins, was a tribute to the editor’s craft. The contributors were evenly split between northerners and southerners, and included Democrats and Republicans, participants and historians, professors and politicians. One had been a Confederate colonel, another a Union captain. The prose was as vivid as the perspectives seemed varied.

Yet “The Reconstruction Papers,” as [they were billed](#), were equally an indictment of the journalistic conceit of balance. Perry prided himself on the diversity of the voices he featured in his magazine. “It is not to be expected that they will agree with one another,” he once wrote. “Perhaps they will not even, in successive articles, agree with themselves.” That was a noble vision, but the forum he convened fell well short of the ideal. Despite their disagreements, on the most crucial points, the authors of his Reconstruction studies shared the common views of the elite class to which nearly all of them belonged—and much of what they wrote was both morally and factually indefensible.

The first essay came from Perry’s old Princeton colleague Woodrow Wilson—or “My dear Wilson,” as Perry addressed him. Wilson, then a prominent political scientist, focused on the constitutional legacies of the era—he believed Congress had overstepped its role by protecting civil rights—but slipped in [a broad critique of the enterprise](#). “The negroes were exalted; the states were misgoverned and looted in their name,” he wrote, until “the whites who were real citizens got control again.”

“It’s pretty much the plot of *The Birth of a Nation*,” Kate Masur, a historian at Northwestern University, told me. She meant that literally. D. W. Griffith’s flamboyantly racist film adapted quotes from the future president’s monumental *A History of the American People*, in which he expanded on the story he’d sketched in *The Atlantic*.

The [last essay in the collection](#) came from William A. Dunning, a Columbia University historian. The work of his students—who became known as the Dunning School—would promote the view that Black people were incapable of governing themselves, and that Reconstruction had been a colossal error. Dunning portrayed the end of Reconstruction as a reversion to the natural order, with Jim Crow enforcing “the same fact of racial inequality” that slavery had once encoded.

What came in between Wilson and Dunning was somehow even worse. One contributor lauded slavery for lifting “the Southern negro to a plane of civilization never before attained by any large body of his race” by teaching him to be “law-abiding and industrious,” and lamented that emancipation had encouraged idleness. Another wrote an apology for the Ku Klux Klan. Perhaps its murderous violence couldn’t quite be excused, he allowed, but the restoration of white supremacy was still “clearly worth fighting for” and “unattainable by any good means.” How could a magazine founded on the eve of the Civil War by abolitionists, which had fervently championed Reconstruction as it unfolded, ever have published such tripe?

The simplest answer is that, by 1901, many elite Americans had soured on the messiness of democracy. In the North, they met the surge of immigrants into industrial cities with creative efforts—civil-service reforms, independent commissions—to take power out of voters’ hands. Out West, they persecuted Chinese immigrants and excluded them from citizenship. In the South, they were busily amending state constitutions to strip Black voters of their rights and to enshrine Jim Crow. And in the territories that America had just acquired in the Spanish-American War, they were building an empire by force of arms. The old sectional divides could be healed, they found, through a new consensus—that only well-educated, propertied white men were capable of governing themselves, and that it was folly to give anyone else the chance to try.

Wilson and Dunning wrote their history as a just-so story, an explanation of why they deserved the privileges they enjoyed while others were better suited for subservient stations.

The essays on Reconstruction fit snugly within this consensus, finding that its fatal flaw had been an excess of democracy. To a man (and they were all

men), their authors agreed that granting newly emancipated Black men the right to vote had been a terrible mistake, producing corrupt governments that took from the propertied classes to support the poor. The debate was limited to why the mistake had happened, and how it could best be undone.

Except, that is, for one extraordinary contribution. Perry selected a rising star in the world of sociology, W. E. B. Du Bois, to [write about the Freedmen's Bureau](#)—the federal agency that had been charged with protecting the formerly enslaved. But Du Bois, the sole Black author invited to take part, had larger ambitions. The first and last lines of his essay were identical: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” In between, he sketched a vision of Reconstruction as an incomplete revolution, one that had accomplished much before its untimely end left the work for future generations to complete. “Despite compromise, struggle, war, and struggle,” he wrote, “the Negro is not free.”

[From the March 1901 issue: W. E. B. Du Bois on the Freedmen's Bureau](#)

Not many magazines of the era, the historian Gregory Downs told me, would have given him the assignment. “It signals a surprising openness to engagement and argument,” he said. In fact, Du Bois failed to interest *The Century*, perhaps the nation’s preeminent magazine, in an ambitious article on Reconstruction. *The Atlantic* helped introduce him to a national audience, and although it was the first time he tackled the subject, it would not be the last. His 1935 opus, [Black Reconstruction](#), became the foundation on which our modern understanding of the era is built.

After the last essay, [Perry appended a dispirited note](#). The gravest error of Reconstruction, he conceded, had been “the indiscriminate bestowal of the franchise upon the newly liberated slaves.” But he hastened to add that, unlike most of his essayists, he objected only to the pace of enfranchisement, not to the ultimate goal. *The Atlantic*, Perry wrote, still believed “in the old-fashioned American doctrine of political equality, irrespective of race or color or station.”

Today, the essays Perry gathered are of interest mostly as windows into a distant era. If there is a useful lesson to take from the Wilsons and the Dunnings, it lies not in any insights they purported to offer, but in their

delusions of objectivity. They wrote their history as a just-so story, an explanation of why they deserved the privileges they enjoyed while others were better suited for subservient stations. Du Bois, by contrast, looked to the past not to justify present-day hierarchies but to understand them, and to explore abandoned alternatives. The problem with America, he concluded, wasn't that democracy and equality had gone too far, but that they had not gone nearly far enough.

Perry's note closed by voicing his hope that “the old faith that the plain people, of whatever blood or creed, are capable of governing themselves” would eventually reassert itself. Today, at a moment when the old faith is faltering again, we might wish the same.

This article appears in the [December 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Atlantic and Reconstruction.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

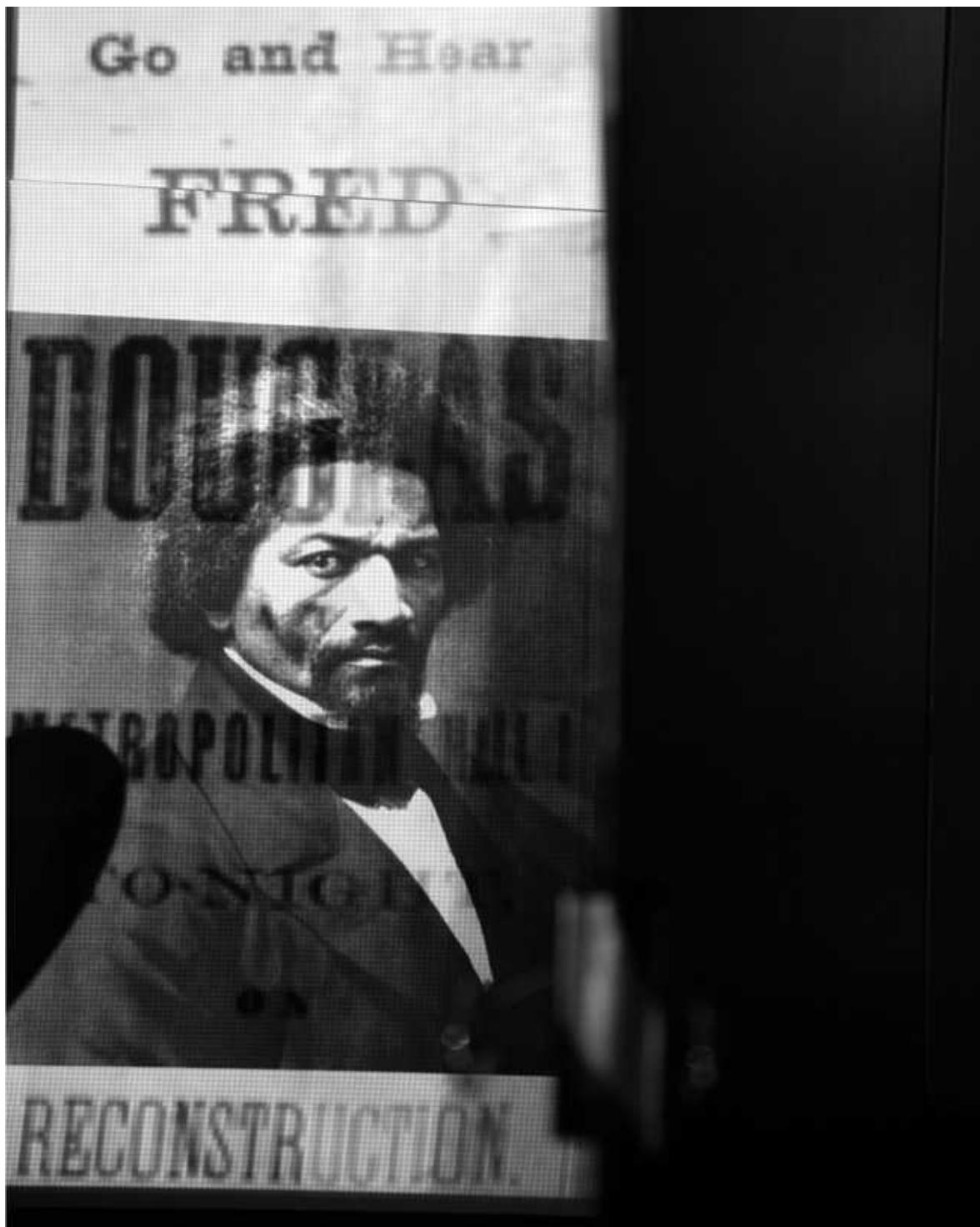
This article was downloaded by **calibre** from
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/12/journalism-reconstruction-coverage-web-du-bois/675806/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

The Annotated Frederick Douglass

In 1866, the famous abolitionist laid out his vision for radically reshaping America in the pages of The Atlantic.

by David W. Blight, Frederick Douglass



In his third autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, while reflecting on the end of the Civil War, Douglass admitted that “a strange and, perhaps, perverse feeling came over me.” Great joy over the ending of slavery, he wrote, was at times “tinged with a feeling of sadness. I felt I had

reached the end of the noblest and best part of my life; my school was broken up, my church disbanded, and the beloved congregation dispersed, never to come together again.” In recalling the postwar years, Douglass drew from a scene in a Shakespearean tragedy to express his memory of that moment: ““Othello’s occupation was gone.”” In Othello, Douglass perceived a character, the former high-ranking general and “moor of Venice,” who had lost authority and professional purpose. Douglass harbored a special affinity for this most famous Black character in Western literature, whose mental collapse and horrible end lingered as a warning in a famous speech: “O, now, for ever / Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!”

In 1866, Douglass took up his pen to try to capture this moment of transformation, both for himself and for the United States. For the December issue of this magazine that year, in an essay simply titled “[Reconstruction](#),” Douglass observed that “questions of vast moment” lay before Congress and the nation. Nothing less than the essential results of the “tremendous war,” he writes, were at stake. Would the war become “a miserable failure … a scandalous and shocking waste of blood and treasure,” or a “victory over treason,” resulting in a newly reimagined nation “delivered from all contradictions and … based upon loyalty, liberty, and equality”? In this inquiry, Douglass’s new role as a conscience of the country became clarified. His leadership had always been through words and persuasion, written and oratorical. How, now that the war was over, would he employ his incomparable voice?

From the beginning, Reconstruction had faced three paramount questions: Who would rule in the South (defeated ex-Confederates or the victorious North?); who would rule in Washington, D.C. (Congress or the president?); and what were the meanings and dimensions of Black freedom? As of his writing in December, Douglass declared that nothing could yet be “considered final.” After ferocious debates, Congress had enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and passed the Fourteenth Amendment, the latter still subject to ratification by three-quarters of the state legislatures. Violent anti-Black riots had occurred [in Memphis](#) and [New Orleans](#) that spring and summer, killing at least 48 people in the first city and at least 38 in the second. Much had been done to secure emancipation, but all remained in abeyance, awaiting legislation, human persuasion, and acts of political will.

As Douglass was writing, two visions of Reconstruction vied for national dominance in the fall elections. President Andrew Johnson, a Democrat from Tennessee, favored a policy of a lenient restoration, a plan that allowed for no Black civil and political rights and admitted the southern states back into the Union as quickly as possible. The Republican leadership of the House and the Senate, however, demanded a slower, harsher, and more transformative Reconstruction, a process that would establish state governments in the South that were more democratic. [Black civil and political rights](#) and enforcement mechanisms in federal law formed the backbone of these “Radical Republican” regimes.

Douglass was at this juncture a Radical Republican in [the spirit of Thaddeus Stevens](#), the congressman from Pennsylvania who led the effort to impeach Johnson. Like Stevens, Douglass argued vehemently that Johnson had to be countered and thwarted by any legal means necessary or the promise of emancipation would fail. Douglass believed at the end of 1866 that, though only at its vulnerable beginning, the United States had been reinvented by war and by new egalitarian impulses rooted in emancipation. His essay is, therefore, full of radical brimstone, cautious hope, and a thoroughly new vision of constitutional authority. In careful but clear terms, he described Reconstruction as a revolution that would “cause Northern industry, Northern capital, and Northern civilization to flow into the South, and make a man from New England as much at home in Carolina as elsewhere in the Republic.” In short, he sought an overturning of history, the expansion of human rights forged from the fact of African American freedom—and from an idealism that soon would be sorely tested. Revolutions may or may not go backwards, but they surely give no rest to those who lead them.

David W. Blight is the Sterling Professor of American History at Yale and the author, most recently, of Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom.

The assembling of the Second Session of the Thirty-ninth Congress may very properly be made the occasion of a few earnest words on the already much-worn topic of reconstruction.

Seldom has any legislative body been the subject of a solicitude more intense, or of aspirations more sincere and ardent. There are the best of reasons for this profound interest. Questions of vast moment, left undecided

by the last session of Congress, must be manfully grappled with by this. No political skirmishing will avail. The occasion demands statesmanship.¹

Whether the tremendous war so heroically fought and so victoriously ended shall pass into history a miserable failure, barren of permanent results,—a scandalous and shocking waste of blood and treasure,—a strife for empire, as Earl Russell characterized it, of no value to liberty or civilization,—an attempt to re-establish a Union by force, which must be the merest mockery of a Union,—an effort to bring under Federal authority States into which no loyal man from the North may safely enter, and to bring men into the national councils who deliberate with daggers and vote with revolvers, and who do not even conceal their deadly hate of the country that conquered them; or whether, on the other hand, we shall, as the rightful reward of victory over treason,² have a solid nation, entirely delivered from all contradictions and social antagonisms, based upon loyalty, liberty, and equality, must be determined one way or the other by the present session of Congress.

The last session really did nothing which can be considered final as to these questions. The Civil Rights Bill and the Freedmen's Bureau Bill and the proposed constitutional amendments, with the amendment already adopted and recognized as the law of the land, do not reach the difficulty, and cannot, unless the whole structure of the government is changed from a government by States to something like a despotic central government, with power to control even the municipal regulations of States, and to make them conform to its own despotic will. While there remains such an idea as the right of each State to control its own local affairs,—an idea, by the way, more deeply rooted in the minds of men of all sections of the country than perhaps any one other political idea,—no general assertion of human rights can be of any practical value. To change the character of the government at this point is neither possible nor desirable. All that is necessary to be done is to make the government consistent with itself, and render the rights of the States compatible with the sacred rights of human nature.³

The arm of the Federal government is long, but it is far too short to protect the rights of individuals in the interior of distant States. They must have the power to protect themselves, or they will go unprotected, spite of all the laws the Federal government can put upon the national statute-book.

Slavery, like all other great systems of wrong, founded in the depths of human selfishness, and existing for ages, has not neglected its own conservation. It has steadily exerted an influence upon all around it favorable to its own continuance. And to-day it is so strong that it could exist, not only without law, but even against law. Custom, manners, morals, religion, are all on its side everywhere in the South; and when you add the ignorance and servility of the ex-slave to the intelligence and accustomed authority of the master, you have the conditions, not out of which slavery will again grow, but under which it is impossible for the Federal government to wholly destroy it, unless the Federal government be armed with despotic power, to blot out State authority, and to station a Federal officer at every cross-road. This, of course, cannot be done, and ought not even if it could. The true way and the easiest way is to make our government entirely consistent with itself, and give to every loyal citizen the elective franchise,—a right and power which will be ever present, and will form a wall of fire for his protection.⁴

One of the invaluable compensations of the late Rebellion is the highly instructive disclosure it made of the true source of danger to republican government. Whatever may be tolerated in monarchical and despotic governments, no republic is safe that tolerates a privileged class, or denies to any of its citizens equal rights and equal means to maintain them. What was theory before the war has been made fact by the war.

There is cause to be thankful even for rebellion. It is an impressive teacher, though a stern and terrible one. In both characters it has come to us, and it was perhaps needed in both. It is an instructor never a day before its time, for it comes only when all other means of progress and enlightenment have failed. Whether the oppressed and despairing bondman, no longer able to repress his deep yearnings for manhood, or the tyrant, in his pride and impatience, takes the initiative, and strikes the blow for a firmer hold and a longer lease of oppression, the result is the same,—society is instructed, or may be.⁵

Such are the limitations of the common mind, and so thoroughly engrossing are the cares of common life, that only the few among men can discern through the glitter and dazzle of present prosperity the dark outlines of approaching disasters, even though they may have come up to our very

gates, and are already within striking distance. The yawning seam and corroded bolt conceal their defects from the mariner until the storm calls all hands to the pumps. Prophets, indeed, were abundant before the war; but who cares for prophets while their predictions remain unfulfilled, and the calamities of which they tell are masked behind a blinding blaze of national prosperity?[6](#)

It is asked, said Henry Clay, on a memorable occasion, Will slavery never come to an end? That question, said he, was asked fifty years ago, and it has been answered by fifty years of unprecedented prosperity. Spite of the eloquence of the earnest Abolitionists,—poured out against slavery during thirty years,—even they must confess, that, in all the probabilities of the case, that system of barbarism would have continued its horrors far beyond the limits of the nineteenth century but for the Rebellion, and perhaps only have disappeared at last in a fiery conflict, even more fierce and bloody than that which has now been suppressed.

It is no disparagement to truth, that it can only prevail where reason prevails. War begins where reason ends. The thing worse than rebellion is the thing that causes rebellion. What that thing is, we have been taught to our cost. It remains now to be seen whether we have the needed courage to have that cause entirely removed from the Republic. At any rate, to this grand work of national regeneration and entire purification Congress must now address itself, with full purpose that the work shall this time be thoroughly done.[7](#) The deadly upas, root and branch, leaf and fibre, body and sap, must be utterly destroyed. The country is evidently not in a condition to listen patiently to pleas for postponement, however plausible, nor will it permit the responsibility to be shifted to other shoulders. Authority and power are here commensurate with the duty imposed. There are no cloud-flung shadows to obscure the way. Truth shines with brighter light and intenser heat at every moment, and a country torn and rent and bleeding implores relief from its distress and agony.

If time was at first needed, Congress has now had time. All the requisite materials from which to form an intelligent judgment are now before it. Whether its members look at the origin, the progress, the termination of the war, or at the mockery of a peace now existing, they will find only one unbroken chain of argument in favor of a radical policy of reconstruction.

For the omissions of the last session, some excuses may be allowed. A treacherous President stood in the way; and it can be easily seen how reluctant good men might be to admit an apostasy which involved so much of baseness and ingratitude.⁸ It was natural that they should seek to save him by bending to him even when he leaned to the side of error. But all is changed now. Congress knows now that it must go on without his aid, and even against his machinations. The advantage of the present session over the last is immense. Where that investigated, this has the facts. Where that walked by faith, this may walk by sight. Where that halted, this must go forward, and where that failed, this must succeed, giving the country whole measures where that gave us half-measures, merely as a means of saving the elections in a few doubtful districts. That Congress saw what was right, but distrusted the enlightenment of the loyal masses; but what was forborne in distrust of the people must now be done with a full knowledge that the people expect and require it. The members go to Washington fresh from the inspiring presence of the people. In every considerable public meeting, and in almost every conceivable way, whether at court-house, school-house, or cross-roads, in doors and out, the subject has been discussed, and the people have emphatically pronounced in favor of a radical policy. Listening to the doctrines of expediency and compromise with pity, impatience, and disgust, they have everywhere broken into demonstrations of the wildest enthusiasm when a brave word has been spoken in favor of equal rights and impartial suffrage. Radicalism, so far from being odious, is now the popular passport to power. The men most bitterly charged with it go to Congress with the largest majorities, while the timid and doubtful are sent by lean majorities, or else left at home. The strange controversy between the President and Congress, at one time so threatening, is disposed of by the people. The high reconstructive powers which he so confidently, ostentatiously, and haughtily claimed, have been disallowed, denounced, and utterly repudiated; while those claimed by Congress have been confirmed.

Of the spirit and magnitude of the canvass nothing need be said. The appeal was to the people, and the verdict was worthy of the tribunal. Upon an occasion of his own selection, with the advice and approval of his astute Secretary, soon after the members of Congress had returned to their constituents, the President quitted the executive mansion, sandwiched himself between two recognized heroes,—men whom the whole country delighted to honor,—and, with all the advantage which such company could

give him, stumped the country from the Atlantic to the Mississippi,⁹ advocating everywhere his policy as against that of Congress. It was a strange sight, and perhaps the most disgraceful exhibition ever made by any President; but, as no evil is entirely unmixed, good has come of this, as from many others. Ambitious, unscrupulous, energetic, indefatigable, voluble, and plausible,—a political gladiator, ready for a “set-to” in any crowd,—he is beaten in his own chosen field, and stands to-day before the country as a convicted usurper, a political criminal, guilty of a bold and persistent attempt to possess himself of the legislative powers solemnly secured to Congress by the Constitution. No vindication could be more complete, no condemnation could be more absolute and humiliating. Unless reopened by the sword, as recklessly threatened in some circles, this question is now closed for all time.

Without attempting to settle here the metaphysical and somewhat theological question (about which so much has already been said and written), whether once in the Union means always in the Union,—agreeably to the formula, Once in grace always in grace,—it is obvious to common sense that the rebellious States stand to-day, in point of law, precisely where they stood when, exhausted, beaten, conquered, they fell powerless at the feet of Federal authority.¹⁰ Their State governments were overthrown, and the lives and property of the leaders of the Rebellion were forfeited. In reconstructing the institutions of these shattered and overthrown States, Congress should begin with a clean slate, and make clean work of it. Let there be no hesitation. It would be a cowardly deference to a defeated and treacherous President, if any account were made of the illegitimate, one-sided, sham governments hurried into existence for a malign purpose in the absence of Congress. These pretended governments, which were never submitted to the people, and from participation in which four millions of the loyal people were excluded by Presidential order, should now be treated according to their true character, as shams and impositions, and supplanted by true and legitimate governments, in the formation of which loyal men, black and white, shall participate.

It is not, however, within the scope of this paper to point out the precise steps to be taken, and the means to be employed. The people are less concerned about these than the grand end to be attained. They demand such a reconstruction as shall put an end to the present anarchical state of things

in the late rebellious States,—where frightful murders and wholesale massacres are perpetrated in the very presence of Federal soldiers. This horrible business they require shall cease.[11](#) They want a reconstruction such as will protect loyal men, black and white, in their persons and property; such a one as will cause Northern industry, Northern capital, and Northern civilization to flow into the South, and make a man from New England as much at home in Carolina as elsewhere in the Republic. No Chinese wall can now be tolerated. The South must be opened to the light of law and liberty, and this session of Congress is relied upon to accomplish this important work.

The plain, common-sense way of doing this work, as intimated at the beginning, is simply to establish in the South one law, one government, one administration of justice, one condition to the exercise of the elective franchise, for men of all races and colors alike. This great measure is sought as earnestly by loyal white men as by loyal blacks, and is needed alike by both. Let sound political prescience but take the place of an unreasoning prejudice, and this will be done.

Men denounce the negro for his prominence in this discussion; but it is no fault of his that in peace as in war, that in conquering Rebel armies as in reconstructing the rebellious States, the right of the negro is the true solution of our national troubles. The stern logic of events, which goes directly to the point, disdaining all concern for the color or features of men, has determined the interests of the country as identical with and inseparable from those of the negro.

The policy that emancipated and armed the negro—now seen to have been wise and proper by the dullest—was not certainly more sternly demanded than is now the policy of enfranchisement. If with the negro was success in war, and without him failure, so in peace it will be found that the nation must fall or flourish with the negro.[12](#)

Fortunately, the Constitution of the United States knows no distinction between citizens on account of color. Neither does it know any difference between a citizen of a State and a citizen of the United States. Citizenship evidently includes all the rights of citizens, whether State or national. If the Constitution knows none, it is clearly no part of the duty of a Republican

Congress now to institute one. The mistake of the last session was the attempt to do this very thing, by a renunciation of its power to secure political rights to any class of citizens, with the obvious purpose to allow the rebellious States to disfranchise, if they should see fit, their colored citizens. This unfortunate blunder must now be retrieved, and the emasculated citizenship given to the negro supplanted by that contemplated in the Constitution of the United States, which declares that the citizens of each State shall enjoy all the rights and immunities of citizens of the several States,—so that a legal voter in any State shall be a legal voter in all the States.

This article appears in the [December 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Annotated Frederick Douglass.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/12/frederick-douglass-atlantic-reconstruction-essay/675485/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

Freedmen's Town

How one photographer documented the disappearing landscape of Houston's Fourth Ward

by Dara T. Mathis



In 1984, [Elbert D. Howze](#), a Black Vietnam War veteran in his 30s, was studying photography at the University of Houston. After class one day, he drove about 10 minutes northwest into Houston's Fourth Ward. He wondered at the narrow streets, the tumbledown houses, and the proud community that seemed forgotten by the city. Howze had found his way to Freedmen's Town, a once-bustling neighborhood [settled by formerly enslaved people](#) in 1866—one of many such enclaves founded in the

Reconstruction era. Its streets were still paved with bricks that [the newly free](#) had laid in intricate patterns. Soon he was visiting the Fourth Ward with his camera “practically every day,” his widow, Barbara Howze, told me.

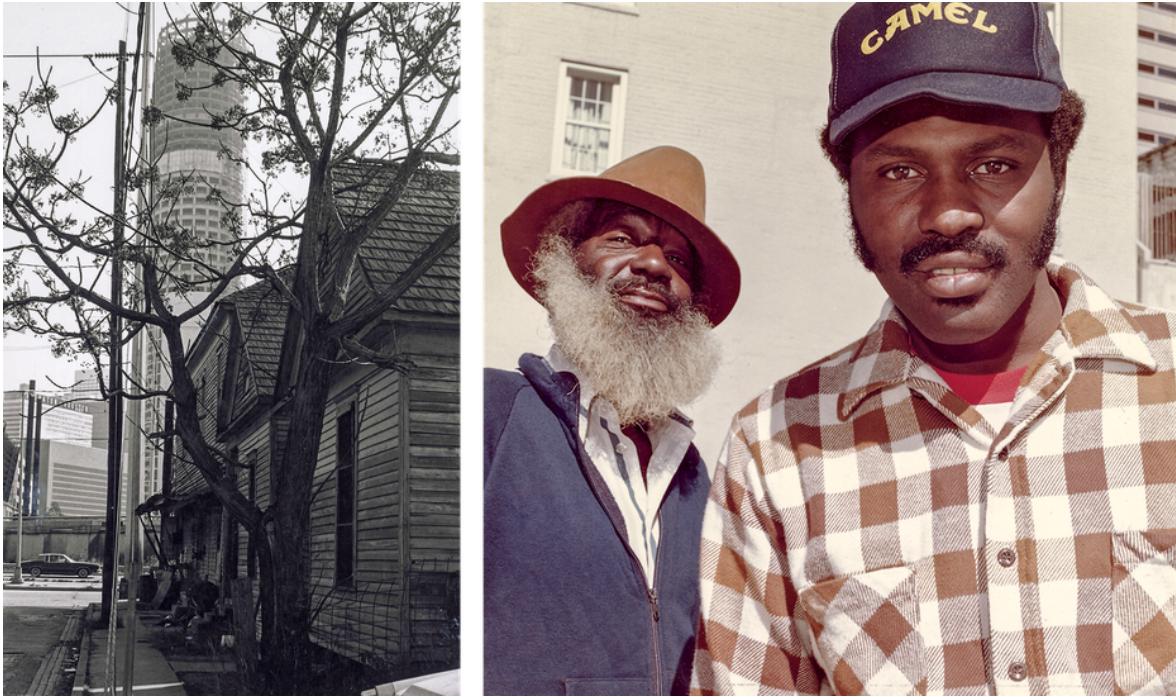
Howze arrived at a moment when the neighborhood was under threat. Since before World War II, the city of Houston had [used eminent domain to capture land](#), making way for whites-only housing and later I-45. By the late 1970s, Houston was in the midst of [an oil boom](#), and many landlords had sold their property to developers. Howze’s photographs documented what was left of a disappearing landscape, including the ward’s characteristic 19th-century shotgun cottages and the first Black public school in Houston, the Gregory School (bottom row, second from left). But above all, he let the neighborhood’s remaining residents fill the frame with their personality. The texture of their lives offers a corrective to erasure.



“The Fourth Ward is more than just a place,” Howze wrote. “It is a state of mind, but more importantly, it is people.” His regard for his subjects is reflected in their unstudied poses, the smiles intimating camaraderie. A boy, flanked by his buddies, stares back at the photographer. Two women show off a baby, their arms akimbo.



Howze died in 2015. Today his photographs are held in the Fourth Ward at the Gregory School, now restored as [an African American history center](#). They are an essential record of the historic neighborhood, where activists are [still fighting to save the brick streets](#) laid by the emancipated.



*All images: MSS 0171—Elbert D. Howze Photographs, African American History Research Center, Houston Public Library

This article appears in the [December 2023](#) print edition with the headline “Freedmen’s Town.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/12/elbert-d-howze-freedmens-town-houston/675808/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

How the Negro Spiritual Changed American Popular Music—And America Itself

In 1871, the Fisk University singers embarked on a tour that introduced white Americans to a Black sound that would reshape the nation.

by Vann R. Newkirk II



The Fisk Jubilee Singers, in a photograph from the 1870s (Source: Bettmann / Getty)

One of the treasures of Black history is preserved in a plain gray box, stashed away in a quiet room. In Nashville one morning, as the [Fisk University](#) campus shimmered in the summer heat, I walked into the archives of the Franklin Library to see it: a collection of papers from just after the Civil War about the founding of the university and others like it. I put on a pair of white cloth gloves to handle the pages. The stories I read in the collection were real, but they also felt to me like cosmology, recounting the beginnings of Black institutions I love and the arduous labors and journeys of the people who made them. The world described in the archive seemed especially malleable: open to possibility, and open to being shaped according to the hopes of the Black people in it.

One story in particular stood out, from the diary of a young woman named Ella Sheppard. In the summer of 1871, she was stuck waiting for a train home, in a hotel somewhere in the middle of Tennessee. She was traveling with a group of students, also Black, back to Nashville after singing at a concert in Memphis. Traveling in the South was dangerous for any Black person, let alone for a coed group of students making their way through the state where the Ku Klux Klan had recently been founded.

According to Sheppard's diary, the presence of the Black singers did indeed attract attention. A mob of local white men, engaged in what another source euphemistically described as "electioneering," began to threaten the students. As Sheppard recalled in her diary, the troupe left the hotel with the mob still in tow and walked to the railroad stop, where the choir began to sing a hymn. The mob melted away. As the train approached, Sheppard wrote, only the leader of the mob remained. He "begged us with tears falling to sing the hymn again."

The group did not yet have renown or even a name, but the encounter at the train stop was an omen. In time, the choir would become the world-famous Fisk Jubilee Singers, and the diary written by Sheppard, who served as the group's pianist and composer, preserves its origin story. Beyond that, the diary, and the other documents in that gray box, offer a founding story of the university itself. And they explain how the Negro spiritual went from being "slave music" to one of the most popular genres in America. Considered solely as cultural artifacts, the collection at Fisk—the delicate manuscripts,

the brittle newspaper clippings, the photographs, the musical arrangements —is a marvel.

In my hands, I also held crucial insights into the radical possibilities of Reconstruction, a period of American history that has been purposefully warped and misunderstood for generations. In the process of revealing and restoring—and understanding—the actual truth about that era, we might also glimpse a new opportunity for ourselves. We might even again pick up the project of reshaping the world.

In his foundational work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois devotes the last essay to “sorrow songs,” or Negro spirituals. He describes spirituals as radical folk music, their very existence a rebuttal to the notion that Black people were too primitive to hold political rights. Du Bois was himself a proud alumnus of Fisk University, and no stranger to the archive. In the essay, he provided a capsule history of “the pilgrimage of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.” It began shortly after the train-stop incident.

The year 1871 was a crucible. Six years after Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, the true terms of peace were still being negotiated—especially insofar as freedpeople were concerned. By 1871, Republicans in Congress had managed to have the states ratify the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. The 11 rebel states had been readmitted to the Union. Buoyed by the votes of Black men, five Black representatives held congressional seats. Congress had created a Department of Justice and given it a mandate to destroy the Ku Klux Klan. Fisk and dozens of other institutions, many of them supported by the Freedmen’s Bureau, had sprung up to educate Black students of all ages. They formed the nucleus of what we know today as historically Black colleges and universities. (My father recently served as the president of Fisk.)

But the revolution was faltering. Many northern white Republicans had grown weary of the constant federal oversight required to protect the rights of Black people in the former Confederate states. Their attention, and the nation’s, had turned west, to the country’s expansion and the bloody dispossession of the Indigenous people who lived there. The Freedmen’s Bureau would come to a formal end in 1872, but its efforts were already effectively exhausted. Meanwhile, former Confederates tallied rolling

successes in their “redemption” of southern governments—restoring themselves to power through violence and fraud.

It was in this environment that Fisk University’s choir—10 students, ranging in age from 14 to their early 20s—took to the road. Several singers had been born into slavery; one, [Benjamin Holmes](#), had read the Emancipation Proclamation aloud to those imprisoned with him in a slave pen in 1863.

They’d undertaken their journey in order to save their fledgling school. Fisk University had been founded in 1866 with the support of the American Missionary Association, an abolitionist organization that turned its energies to educating freedpeople after the war. But, with the primary objective of abolition met, donations dwindled. Fisk was one of several normal schools and universities that the AMA was now struggling to support. Campus conditions were miserable. Sheppard recalled in her diary that, in cold weather, students shivered through the night in substandard housing, with barely any protection from the elements. They subsisted on food that was nearly inedible. The situation at Fisk was a microcosm of Black life in the South: unprecedented promise and potential oblivion living under the same crumbling roof.

George L. White, a white former Freedmen’s Bureau official and Fisk’s treasurer, was aware of the dire circumstances. The future of the institution was in peril—as was the entire project of educating freedpeople in the South. But White had an idea: He believed that the small choir he’d founded could help save Fisk. He and Sheppard had constantly drilled the singers, taking time to practice whenever the group’s studies allowed. The concert in Memphis had showcased their talent, and perhaps the performance at the train stop had ordained their purpose.

White proposed a tour through the North, hoping to raise a sum of \$20,000 —about \$500,000 today. Most of the prospective audiences for these benefit concerts would be white: The director hoped to astonish them with the choir’s polish, and to rekindle the abolitionist fervor that had financially supported Fisk in its infancy.

Fisk’s faculty, and the parents of its students, thought White’s scheme was ridiculous. They called it a “wild-goose chase” and pointed to the real

dangers that a group of young Black students would face on the road. The AMA actively discouraged the tour, worried that a poor showing might, in fact, impede fundraising efforts. In an act of disobedience, White drew funds from the school's meager treasury, and the singers set out for Ohio.

The word *reconstruction* first brings to mind the idea of reconstituting what was, exactly as it was. Buildings may be reconstructed after disasters to the same specifications as before, defying the calamities that felled them. Ultimately the South was reconstructed in this way, with racial domination and labor exploitation as its foundation.

“The world was as unfamiliar to these untraveled freed people as were the countries through which the Argonauts had to pass; the social prejudices that confronted them were as terrible to meet as fire-breathing bulls.”

But *reconstruction* can mean something else, too. The word can connote taking the old and making it new, taking rupture and rubble as opportunities to fix fundamental faults, or to create new edifices altogether. For the span of just over a decade, America tried this definition on in starts and stops, attempting to fashion a truly new nation from the wreckage of the Civil War. The Fisk University singers were part of that effort, attesting to the truth that Reconstruction was not and never could be ended by the hand of the federal government.

As Du Bois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk*, and as Sheppard recounted in her diary, the early going for the singers was miserable, and dangerous. Lynchings and wholesale pogroms of Black communities were so common as to be unremarkable in the South, and threats of violence did not stop once Black people arrived in the North. According to the Fisk history, the students also faced the ire of white people who “spelled negro with two g’s.” White crowds often ridiculed the singers, and the group was regularly denied accommodation in white establishments. [As the Fisk history has it](#), “The world was as unfamiliar to these untraveled freed people as were the countries through which the Argonauts had to pass; the social prejudices that confronted them were as terrible to meet as fire-breathing bulls or the warriors that sprang from the land sown with dragons’ teeth.”

The singers tried to take things in stride. It was never lost on them that every tour stop was history made. When Sheppard was an infant, her own mother had been bound to the land, and was sold away from her like nothing more than livestock. The fact that, at 20, Sheppard could freely take a train to the North was at once ordinary and revolutionary.

For their early performances—in Nashville, Memphis, and Cincinnati—the singers mostly pulled from a repertoire of standard popular songs designed to showcase their equality with white choirs and to impress any sophisticates in the audience. This was no small thing. The belief in the intellectual, moral, cultural, and evolutionary inferiority of freedpeople was pervasive among even white liberals in 1871. Just three years earlier, the editors of the Philadelphia-based *Lippincott's Magazine* had argued against the proposition that “the negro, in his native state, knows what music is,” and ascribed any facility in music among Black people to clever mimicry or traces of white ancestry. According to Andrew Ward, the author of *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, a history of the Fisk University singers, the main interaction that most white northerners had with what they believed to be Black culture was the buffoonery of minstrelsy, mostly performed by white entertainers in blackface.

The choir found itself caught between white apathy and white hostility. At several venues, the singers barely sold enough tickets to cover their costs. In Chillicothe, Ohio, where George White used to teach, they drew enough of a crowd to instill hope of earning some money. But before they performed, they learned that the Great Fire, on October 8, had destroyed much of Chicago. They donated all of their proceeds from that night—less than \$50—to victims of the fire.

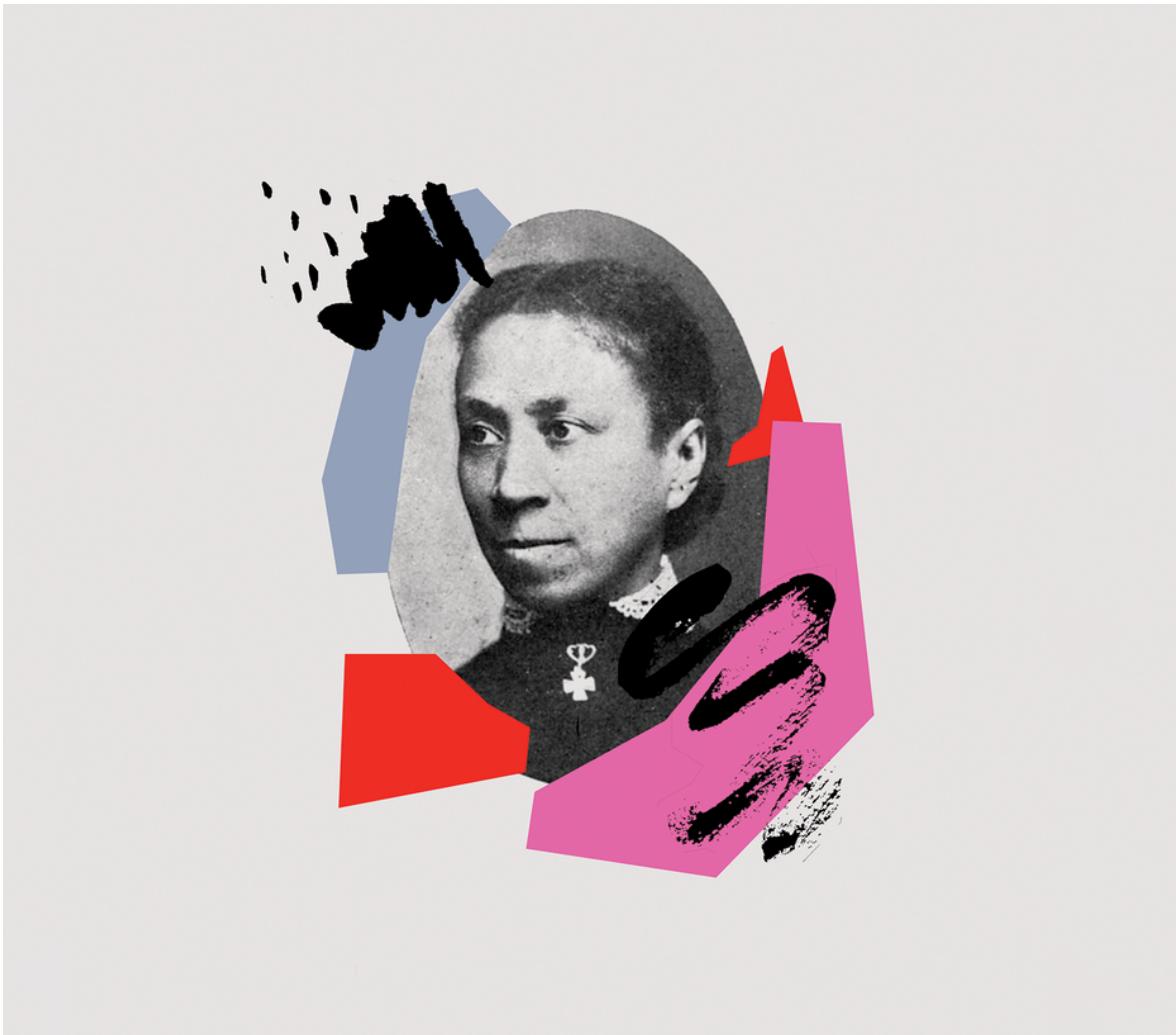
The autumn stretched on. White prayed for deliverance. He declared that the singers should take the name Jubilee after the year in the biblical cycle whose arrival was celebrated by the manumission of slaves and the absolution of debts.

A new way forward for what was now the Fisk Jubilee Singers presented itself during a concert one night in Oberlin, Ohio. Mostly in private, the singers had been practicing a new repertoire, songs that the majority of white people had never heard. They cobbled together snatches of work songs

and “sorrow songs” that many of the students, or their parents, had learned in the fields while enslaved. The minister and abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson had [written in the pages of this magazine](#) about his experience of the Negro spirituals sung by Black soldiers during his time as a Union officer, calling them “a stimulus to courage and a tie to heaven.” But, for the songs they sang, there were no songbooks to work from. White, Sheppard, and the singers wrote much of the music down for the first time, helping formalize the genre as they went.

[From the June 1867 issue: Negro spirituals](#)

Sheppard noted in her diary that the singers harbored a deep ambivalence about even practicing spirituals in private. The songs “were associated with slavery and the dark past, and represented the things to be forgotten,” she wrote. Spirituals were imbued with the pain and the shame of bondage, which several of the Fisk singers knew firsthand. The songs were also considered sacred. To some, putting lyrics to paper or accompaniment meant stripping the spirit from the spirituals. Even in front of the small, mostly Black crowds that the choir had entertained before setting out on tour, the spirituals had been mixed in sparsely.



Ella Sheppard, the pianist and composer for the Fisk Jubilee Singers (Photo-illustration by Gabriela Pesqueira. Source: New York Public Library.)

But that night in Oberlin, the Jubilee Singers did something different. As guests of a meeting of the National Council of Congregational Churches, they were given an opportunity to perform. Among the songs that they chose was “Steal Away,” one of the spirituals in their repertoire. The song begins with a plaintive call to “steal away,” which is then echoed by the choir. The song’s quiet opening lyrics eventually swell with force to deliver “the trumpet sounds in my soul.” The Jubilee Singers had announced themselves with thunder. As *The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer* wrote on November 17, “They sung with such effect that the scrip was as abundant as the applause, a market basket full of money being taken for the University.”

The praise from the choir's Oberlin performance helped them earn the notice of Henry Ward Beecher, an immensely influential abolitionist and preacher who had once sent rifles to John Brown's antislavery guerrillas in Kansas. Beecher invited the group to sing for his congregation in Brooklyn.

Traveling to the event, the singers knew that it would likely be their last chance to prove themselves and save the university. They expected Beecher's congregation to be a friendly crowd. The same church had backed Beecher's most extreme forays into abolition and had hosted escaped and former slaves before. But the singers also knew that even the expectations of friendly crowds could be misshapen by prejudice.

They chose to begin the Brooklyn concert with a dramatic innovation: singing from the church balcony, obscured from the crowd by a curtain, their spectral voices filling the nave. And they chose to lead with "Steal Away," the spiritual that had gotten them to Brooklyn in the first place. According to Fisk's account of the Jubilee Singers, "So soft was their beginning that the vast audience looked around to see whence came this celestial music.

Gradually louder and even louder the voices rose—to a glorious crescendo—and then back down to a mere whisper, 'I ain't got long to stay here.'" As they sang, the curtain was pulled back to reveal their faces. The audience's reception was rapturous: "They clamored for more—would not let the singers cease." Donations poured in. Beecher blessed the spirituals, though with an unfortunate image: "Only they can sing them who know how to keep time to a master's whip."

Ultimately, the Jubilee Singers became one of the most famous performing acts in the world. They toured through 1872, capturing the attention of both Black and white audiences. Their domestic success launched them abroad. They sang for Queen Victoria and for Kaiser Wilhelm I. In the end, George L. White's "wild-goose chase" raised not \$20,000 but almost \$100,000.

The tour saved Fisk University. But more than that, it preserved an art form. Spirituals such as "Steal Away" became the core of the Jubilee Singers' performances, and this expanding repertoire became the basis for the songbook of standards that still graces Black churches today. The spirituals captured the imagination of post-abolition literati. Mark Twain became

something of a Jubilee Singers groupie, attending several shows to experience the music that he called “the perfectest flower of the ages.”

Some white listeners came just for the music; some came for the spectacle; some claimed that the Jubilee Singers’ spirituals had made them more sympathetic to “the plight of the Negro.” But their reactions were secondary to what the new prominence of the form meant for the people who’d made it. After one show in Washington, D.C., the Jubilee Singers were thrilled to have an audience with Frederick Douglass, then the most famous Black man in America. He told the singers: “You are doing more to remove the prejudice against our race than ten thousand platforms could do.” He was so taken by the young people from Fisk that he sang for them “Run to Jesus,” a spiritual that he’d learned as a child. The singers transcribed his song on the spot, adding it to the songbook. In a playbill for a later concert, promoting the new song, the Jubilee singers wrote: “Thus, under the influence of this song, he at last gained his freedom, and the world gained Frederick Douglass.”

The golden age of the Jubilee Singers was brief. Sheppard, the pianist and composer, had endured chronic illness even before the tour. Exhausted by the group’s barnstorming, White and several other members also took ill. As white supremacists in the South steadily destroyed Black civil rights, and as the North lost interest in protecting those rights, traveling as a Black coed group grew too dangerous. In 1877, when Congress officially ended Reconstruction—ratifying the deal that gave Rutherford B. Hayes the presidency and effectively withdrew federal troops from the South—the goings-on at Black universities were no longer considered by most liberal white people to be matters of their concern. With the coming of Jim Crow, institutions such as Fisk would form a network of care for Black folk—places where the true possibilities of Reconstruction could be preserved, even if neglected by the rest of America. The Jubilee Singers have been part of this effort; they still perform at concerts across the country.

But Negro spirituals went on to change the country as a whole. In America’s fragmented antebellum culture, before the advent of true mass media, the closest thing to “national music” had been the traveling farce of minstrel shows. Yet during Reconstruction, both the live performance and sheet music of Negro spirituals exploded in popularity. Spirituals prefigured the

rise of the blues—a direct successor—as the first truly national popular music. The Black writer and activist James Weldon Johnson, [writing in 1925](#), called spirituals “America’s only folk music and, up to this time, the finest distinctive contribution she has to offer the world.”

Through the efforts of the freedpeople themselves, the songs that had sustained them in the fields became a national art form. This transformation was not without cost. It wouldn’t be long before Black music was co-opted by white musicians and consumers. The early radio recordings of spirituals were often performed by white singers, and marketed to white audiences. For much of white society, the spiritual was the music of the freedpeople—minus the freedpeople.

For this reason, many radical Black scholars later considered the preservation and proliferation of the spiritual to be the ultimate capitulation—a sacred piece of Black culture saved only by performing it for people who largely thought that Black culture was unworthy.

Maybe there is another conclusion. After all, the spiritual was always meant to be performed in public, in full view of the overseer’s watchful eyes. But beneath the surface, the lyrics and rhythms of spirituals carried messages among the enslaved about kinship, about love, about daily life, about the freedom of the “promised land,” and even about rebellion. Insubordinate messages persisted precisely because, like the editors of *Lippincott’s Magazine*, the overseers believed that Black culture was counterfeit, and that the people chopping cotton in the fields could not turn words into effective weapons. The insurgency of the spiritual always relied on white consumption. It was the poison in the master’s tea.

Today, the legacy of Reconstruction most often surfaces in its legal consequences. The Fourteenth Amendment, in particular, has been the subject of major recent Supreme Court rulings on voting rights and abortion rights—the concept of equal protection under the law has never ceased being contentious. But the story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers shows that the Constitution was not the only aspect of America subject to renegotiation during Reconstruction. The singers had set out to perform popular white music, in the main, but they soon found purpose in remaking American music in their own image. The same was true of every other element of life

into which freedpeople entered. Throughout Reconstruction, societal assumptions—about labor relations, gender roles, the makeup of families, the means and ends of education, and much else—were in flux across the country, driven by the efforts of emancipated Black people in the South.

Experiments in new ways of living propagated wherever Black people pressed feet to earth. “Freedmen’s towns” flourished across the South, with all manner of governance. Would-be utopias winked in and out of existence. In coastal South Carolina, freedpeople soon became the majority of farm operators on the Sea Islands. There, they resisted guidance from the Freedmen’s Bureau (and the hopes of their former enslavers), rejecting the local market economy in favor of building spontaneous pastoral communes out of former plantations, and growing crops for subsistence instead of the market.

Across the South, freedpeople reconstituted families pulled apart on the auction block, but did so along much looser kinship lines than the nuclear family unit. In Savannah, Georgia, Black women amassed tracts of land in their own names to pass on to their children. Many freedpeople forsook the surnames of their enslavers, or even the first names they’d been given. Renaming was often an act of both radical purpose and plain descriptiveness: Freeman remains a common last name today.

In music and otherwise, it was clear that the main goal of Reconstruction—as it existed in the hearts and minds of the people being reconstructed—was not to leave the country as it was, but to shake the foundations of possibility. It was in this pliable reality that the Fisk Jubilee Singers began to make their mark.

The potency of spirituals and their insurgent history were clear to Du Bois. He tried to make his case, often writing in publications that endorsed the bigotry—sometimes clothed, sometimes naked—of his white contemporaries. In 1901, as a young scholar still relatively new to the white literary scene, Du Bois wrote for [a series on Reconstruction in *The Atlantic*](#). Alongside skeptical essays from the [historian William A. Dunning](#) (who founded the school of American history that claimed the policy of making Black people citizens was a mistake) and Woodrow Wilson (who argued that freedpeople had [not been fit to vote](#)), Du Bois wrote, “[The granting of the](#)

ballot to the black man was a necessity, the very least a guilty nation could grant a wronged race.”

From the December 2023 issue: What *The Atlantic* got wrong about Reconstruction

In his essay, Du Bois helped begin a slow reckoning with history that continues today. He did so not merely through his own insight and intellect, but through the revolutionary act of taking the freedpeople and their ambitions seriously—by describing what they wanted from Reconstruction.

For most of the past century, that history of possibility and Black self-determination during Reconstruction was considered too dangerous to teach. Du Bois’s own work on the topic was ignored by white historians as long as he lived, and textbooks inspired by Dunning littered classrooms in the South (and the North) even during my own childhood. To this day, the most famous and widely seen depiction of ostensible Black life during Reconstruction might be the racist 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, the D. W. Griffith epic that portrays Klansmen as heroes saving the South from Black savages and was endorsed by Wilson during his time as president. That fact suggests just how much the real story of Black Reconstruction has been obliterated from the public eye.

A growing movement on the right today again finds the history obscured by Wilson, Dunning, and the rest to be too inconvenient or perilous for schools and libraries. Agitation against depictions of Black history and agency is often grounded in the claim that it unfairly makes white people of the present feel guilty for the sins of the past. But that might just be cover for the real reason. Perhaps the true danger of Black history—especially of the era when the formerly enslaved seized and shaped their freedom—is that it shows us that there are more and better possibilities than the present.

That was the fundamental message of most spirituals, and of the sacred code of the promised land. That message is kept in a box of documents in a campus library. Even when salvation seems beyond reach, it may still be in our own hands.

In late August 2022, I walked into a building full of people in Drew, Mississippi. Folding chairs had been crammed everywhere they could be crammed, from the bathroom hallway to the front doors. We had all gathered there for [a belated memorial service for Emmett Till](#), the boy brutally lynched in that very town by white men in 1955. Local citizens, dignitaries, schoolchildren, journalists—everyone was packed together.

After the processional, after the greetings and prayers, the [Valley Singers](#) of Mississippi Valley State University took the floor. They began a rendition of “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” written by James Weldon Johnson and set to music by his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, in 1900. The first two verses of the song evoke the trials of Blackness in the past and present. The choir sang Johnson’s lyrics with triumph, their voices filling the space.

Johnson was born in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1871, the same year the Jubilee Singers set out on their tour. Their story inspired his own work cataloging and interpreting spirituals; he dedicated his first book on spirituals to “those through whose efforts these songs have been collected, preserved, and given to the world.” The history of the Jubilee Singers had been important to him. The lyrics and composition of his own anthem were inflected by the spirituals they rescued.

To Johnson, the revival of the spiritual “marked a change in the attitude of the Negro himself toward his own art material; the turning of his gaze inward upon his own cultural resources.” In his view, those cultural resources were themselves the power to build, and not just imitate—to shape a world. The song we all heard in that hot room in Mississippi was a tribute to a legacy that allowed us to be there in the first place.

Sweat dripped down my face as the singers brought the song home. The final verse slowed down to a quiet, piercing prayer. And then, a final, exulting march: “Shadowed beneath Thy hand / May we forever stand.” Even in that room, blanketed in Mississippi heat, I felt chills.

This article appears in the [December 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Years of Jubilee.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/12/fisk-university-jubilee-singers-choir-history/675813/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

The Men Who Started the War

John Brown and the Secret Six—the abolitionists who funded the raid on Harpers Ferry—confronted a question as old as America: When is violence justified?

by Drew Gilpin Faust



Harpers Ferry seemed almost a part of the neighborhood when I was growing up. Granted, it was across the state line, in West Virginia, and slightly more than a half-hour drive away from our Virginia farm. But it took us almost that long to get to the nearest supermarket. And I felt connected by

more than roads. The placid, slow-moving Shenandoah River, which flowed past our bottom pasture, becomes raging white water by the time it joins the Potomac River at Harpers Ferry, 35 miles downstream.

Nature itself seems to have designed Harpers Ferry to be a violent place. Cliffs border the confluence of the two rivers, and the raw power generated by their angry convergence made the site ideal for the national armory established there around 1800. It manufactured some 600,000 firearms before Union troops burned it down in 1861 to keep it out of Confederate hands. Five battles took place at Harpers Ferry, and the town changed hands 12 times.

But none of this is what Harpers Ferry is primarily remembered for. It is known instead for an event referred to at the time as an “insurrection,” a “rebellion,” or a “crusade,” but today most often called just a “raid.” On October 16, 1859, a year and a half before the attack on Fort Sumter, in South Carolina, the white abolitionist John Brown set out to seize the federal arsenal and distribute arms to enable the enslaved to claim their freedom. His effort ended quickly and ignominiously. Badly wounded, he was carted off to jail in nearby Charles Town to be tried and executed, as were a number of his followers. In a sense, though, his insurrection was never put down.

Brown, a brilliant publicist, made himself a martyr. He used the six weeks between his capture and his execution to define and defend his actions. He grounded them in a moral imperative to free the enslaved, invoked the nation’s revolutionary legacies, and warned of the conflagration to come. The “crimes of this guilty land,” he scrawled in a note he pressed on a guard shortly before his hanging, “will never be purged away; but with Blood.”

Within just a few years, Americans would look back at Brown across the gulf of the Civil War and identify him as a sign of what was ahead, imbuing his sacrifice with almost supernatural meaning. Showers of meteors had filled the skies in the weeks between Brown’s capture and his execution, reinforcing perceptions that his life and death had been a singular, numinous occurrence. In the words of a song improvised by a battalion of Union soldiers as they headed south to war not two years after his death, “John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave, but his soul goes marching

on.” Even the attendees at his hanging seemed in retrospect to prefigure the future: Brevet Colonel Robert E. Lee was present as the commander of the U.S. troops who had captured Brown. Thomas J. (not yet “Stonewall”) Jackson led a unit of Virginia Military Institute cadets. John Wilkes Booth, President Abraham Lincoln’s future assassin, hurried from Richmond to Charles Town in a borrowed uniform to join a militia troop sent to police the hanging. [He hated Brown’s cause but admired his audacity.](#)

Many upstanding northern citizens—as well as much of the press—condemned Brown’s lawlessness. But others, Black and white, hailed his attack on slavery and mourned his death. On the day of his execution, 3,000 people gathered in Worcester, Massachusetts, to honor Brown; 1,400 attended a service in Cleveland. A [gathering of Black Americans in Detroit](#) honored the “martyr” who had “freely delivered up his life for the liberty of our race in this country.” The celebration of John Brown by Black Americans rested in the hope, and later the conviction, that his actions had set an irreversible course toward freedom—a second founding, its birth in violence as legitimate as the first one had been.

When does war start? When does violence become justified? When does it shift from prohibited to permitted and even necessary? Those questions hang in the air at Harpers Ferry, compelling us to ask: When did the Civil War actually begin—and end?

Brown drew the admiring attention of almost every prominent American writer—Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, Longfellow, Whittier. But some among the nation’s northern elite did more than praise and defend Brown. Thinking back in his autobiography to events half a century earlier, and relying on a diary he kept in the 1850s, the abolitionist and writer [Thomas Wentworth Higginson reflected on](#) what a duty to morality demands when “law and order” stand on “the wrong side” of right and justice.

For him, this was not a theoretical question. He was thinking about the role he’d played long before armies massed on battlefields. He was thinking about the process by which “honest American men” had evolved into “conscientious law-breakers,” until “good citizenship” became a “sin” and bad citizenship a “duty.” Higginson was one among a small group of prominent white men who had known about the Harpers Ferry raid in

advance and provided the financial support that enabled Brown to buy weapons and equipment. They came to be known as the Secret Six.

During the 1850s, a succession of legislative and judicial measures had tightened slavery's grip on the nation. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 compelled the North to become complicit in returning those who had escaped slavery to southern bondage. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 overturned the Missouri Compromise of a generation earlier, which had restricted the expansion of slavery into the northern territories. The Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision, in 1857, established that no Black person could be considered a citizen or hold any "rights which the white man was bound to respect." The perpetuation of slavery and racial injustice appeared to have become enshrined as an enduring national commitment, with the federal government assuming the role of active enforcer. Faced with such developments, the Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass found himself losing hope of ending slavery through moral suasion or political action; he came to see violence as necessary if emancipation was ever to be accomplished. Slavery itself, he believed, represented an act of war. The justification for violence already existed; whether—and how—to use it became more a pragmatic decision than a moral one.

[White abolitionists, too, became radicalized by the developments of the 1850s.](#) The group that became the Secret Six included five Boston Brahmins and a lone New Yorker, all highly respectable citizens, well educated, of good families and heritage; all men of means and in several cases very substantial means. The path that the Six took toward violence began with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. The prospect and, soon, the reality of Black people being apprehended on the streets of Boston or New York and summarily shipped to the South brought the cruelty and arbitrariness of slavery directly before northerners' eyes. Three men who would later be part of the Six were early members of the Boston Vigilance Committee, established to prevent the enforcement of fugitive-slave legislation.

Samuel Gridley Howe was a graduate of Brown University and Harvard Medical School. He claimed descent from a participant in the Boston Tea Party, and had demonstrated his commitment to republican government by serving as a surgeon in the Greek Revolution in the 1820s.

Theodore Parker was a powerful preacher and Transcendentalist whose radicalism so marginalized him within Unitarianism that he established his own independent congregation of some 2,000 members. His oratory attracted legions of followers, who shared his reformist and antislavery views.

Higginson, descended from one of the original settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Divinity School and held a pulpit with a fervently antislavery Worcester congregation. He suffered his first battle wound in the unsuccessful effort to free [Anthony Burns](#), who had fled enslavement in Virginia and was seized in Boston in 1854 under the provisions of the new act. With the encouragement of the Boston Vigilance Committee, the city erupted. Parker incited a crowd with a fiery speech at Faneuil Hall, and [Higginson distributed axes to those assembled outside the courthouse](#) where Burns was being held. He himself led an assault on the building with a battering ram. In the ensuing melee, a courthouse guard was killed and Higginson suffered a saber wound on his chin, leaving a scar he proudly displayed for the rest of his life. Higginson viewed the effort to free Burns as the beginning of a “revolution”—the shift from words to action he had sought. The killing of the guard, he later reflected, was “proof that war had really begun.” Violence had become both necessary and legitimate. (Burns was captured and returned to Virginia, but his freedom was eventually purchased by northern abolitionists. He attended Oberlin and became a minister.)

Higginson, Parker, and Howe soon turned their attention to Kansas, where a battle was escalating over whether the territory should become a slave state or a free state. In the spring of 1856, proslavery forces attacked a town founded by antislavery settlers from Massachusetts. John Brown, a longtime opponent of slavery who had joined his sons in Kansas with the intention of preventing its permanent establishment there, sought retribution; he and his allies killed five proslavery men in front of their families in a place called Pottawatomie. This murderous act hovered over Brown’s reputation—and later his legacy—instilling doubts in some potential supporters and leading others simply to deny that Brown had played a role in the killings, a stance that was aided by Brown’s own misrepresentations.

But to many, Brown's extremism was a source of attraction, not revulsion. The newly created Massachusetts State Kansas Aid Committee channeled outside support. Higginson sent crates of rifles, revolvers, knives, and ammunition, as well as a cannon, to Kansas. He celebrated Kansas as the equivalent of Bunker Hill—a “rehearsal,” he later called it, for the more extensive violence to come.

It was because of Kansas that the six men who would conspire to support the Harpers Ferry raid found one another and identified Brown as the instrument of what they had come to regard as necessary violence. Like Parker, Higginson, and Howe, Franklin Benjamin Sanborn and George Luther Stearns had become active supporters of the Massachusetts State Kansas Aid Committee. A Harvard graduate who was a schoolteacher in Concord, Sanborn had been deeply influenced by Parker's preaching while he was in college. Sanborn's Transcendentalist ideas, with their skepticism about existing social structures and institutions, were further reinforced by his Concord neighbors Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Stearns was a wealthy manufacturer whose ancestors included some of the original settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony as well as an officer in the American Revolution. Long active in abolition, he had established a station of the Underground Railroad near his Medford home and drew on his considerable fortune to send weapons to Kansas free-state settlers.

The last of the Six was Gerrit Smith, said to be the wealthiest man in New York State. Smith, like Stearns, would supply significant financial support to Brown. He had long been active in politics, seeking the destruction of slavery through political means, but by 1856 he had come to believe that it was time, as he put it, to move beyond ballots and start “looking to bayonets.” Parker, too, was preaching more forceful measures. “I used to think this terrible question of freedom or slavery in America would be settled without bloodshed,” he wrote to Higginson. “I believe it no longer.”



ARREST AND RESCUE OF FRANK H. SANBORN, ESQ., AT CONCORD, MASSACHUSETTS, ON THE NIGHT OF APRIL 3, 1860.—[SEE FICKLING PAGE.]

The attempted arrest, in April 1860, of the Secret Six member Franklin Benjamin Sanborn by federal authorities—which the citizens of Concord, Massachusetts, prevented. A contemporaneous etching from *Harper's Weekly*. (Wikimedia)

By the end of 1856, under the leadership of a commanding new territorial governor, violence in Kansas had begun to subside, and a free-state electoral victory seemed all but assured. The following year, Brown began traveling throughout New England and New York to raise money for a fresh attack on human bondage—his new plan as yet unspecified. In Boston, he presented Sanborn with a letter of introduction from Smith. Sanborn in turn arranged for Stearns, Howe, and Parker to meet Brown. Uncertain what Brown intended, Higginson at first kept his distance, even though Sanborn pressed him, insisting that Brown could do “more to split the Union than any man alive.” The ideals of the once noble American experiment could be sustained only by separating from slavery or by destroying it.

In February 1858, Brown revealed his plan for the Harpers Ferry attack to Smith and Sanborn. Not long after, all of the Massachusetts conspirators met with Brown in his Boston hotel room and formally constituted themselves as the Secret Committee of Six to support Brown in planning and financing the raid. Stearns was to be the official chair, Sanborn the secretary. They would keep careful records, with an elaborate ledger and a dues schedule. It was as if a clandestine organization of accountants had set to planning an uprising.

The raid's actual occurrence surprised them—with both its timing and its swift and disastrous outcome. On October 16, 1859, Brown and a party of 21 seized the federal arsenal, eventually taking several dozen hostages. The uprising of the enslaved that Brown expected never materialized, and local militia soon cut off the bridges that were the only escape route. Brown and his men blockaded themselves in the armory's fire-engine house, where they exchanged intermittent gunfire with the troops surrounding them. On October 18, Colonel Lee and a regiment of U.S. Marines broke down the engine-house door. Wounded by a saber cut, Brown was taken prisoner and transported to the nearby Charles Town jail. Ten of Brown's men, including two of his sons, were killed; seven, including Brown, were captured and later executed. Four civilians were killed, as was one Marine. To the great dismay of the Secret Six, Brown's papers and correspondence were found at the farm where Brown had been living in Maryland.

The Six were stunned. In the press and in government offices, accusations flew. Many suspected that Frederick Douglass must have played a role. More than a decade before the raid, Douglass had met Brown and been moved by their conversations to question his own belief in the possibility of a peaceful end to slavery. "My utterances," he later wrote, "became more and more tinged by the color of this man's strong impressions." When Brown took up arms in Kansas, Douglass's appreciation for his boldness and conviction was only enhanced. Yet Douglass proved unwilling to join Brown when he revealed his Harpers Ferry plans. The scheme struck him as dangerously impractical and risky—"a steel-trap."

In the years since 1859, John Brown and his raid have become a touchstone in America's struggle to reconcile—or at least represent—the complex connections between force and freedom.

In the aftermath of the raid, Douglass seemed almost embarrassed that he had not offered Brown more support, that he had permitted realism to trump daring. He could not conceal his admiration for the would-be liberator's courage, but concerns for his own survival won the day. Douglass fled north to Canada and then to England, where he remained for nearly half a year.

Although Douglass was all too aware of his vulnerability, the Six, protected by their social position, had been defying authority with seeming impunity for years. Their recognition of personal peril came as a shock. The Six had embraced violence out of both entitlement and desperation. In public and private communications, they frequently invoked their revolutionary heritage, their biological connections to the country's Founders—to those who had pitched tea into Boston Harbor and fought at Lexington and Bunker Hill. This was a legacy—and a responsibility—that required them to act with equivalent courage and decisiveness. They believed that in some sense, they owned the nation, and their sense of privilege fueled a confident assumption of immunity from serious consequence. But with Harpers Ferry, it seemed, they might have gone a step too far.

Letters from Smith, Stearns, Howe, and Sanborn were found among Brown's papers and featured in the press before the end of October. Five of the Six were quickly exposed and excoriated. (Parker, who had left the country before the raid in a futile search for a cure to his tuberculosis, was identified within a few months.) Smith fell into a frenzy of worry about being indicted. After becoming, according to his physician, "quite deranged, intellectually as well as morally," he was committed in early November to the Utica Lunatic Asylum. After consulting a Boston lawyer, Sanborn, Stearns, and Howe made their way to Canada (and Howe published an article disavowing Brown). All three returned to the U.S., but Canada remained a refuge. Howe and Sanborn went back and forth twice. Higginson, both at the time and later, was contemptuous of his fellow conspirators' cowardice. John Brown deserved better from them. "We of the Six," he maintained years later, "were not—are not—great men." But Brown, he believed, was.

Higginson neither hid nor fled. He busied himself raising money for Brown's defense and endeavoring to devise a scheme to facilitate Brown's escape. But even for Higginson, who seems never to have contemplated a

battle or a risk he didn't relish, these plans seemed too far-fetched. Instead, with admiration, Higginson watched Brown's display of undaunted courage throughout his trial as he refused to plead insanity or back down in his commitment to ending slavery through whatever means necessary. Brown would do far more from the grave than he could have ever imagined accomplishing in life. Higginson spent the day of his sentencing with Brown's wife and the remaining members of his family on their bleak and remote upstate-New York farm.

The congressional committee appointed in December to investigate the origins and supporters of Brown's raid proved only a feeble threat to the six conspirators. Higginson, to his disappointment, was never called to testify at all. Howe and Stearns dodged, equivocated, and at times outright lied. Smith was judged too unwell to attend. Parker died in Italy in May 1860 without ever returning to the United States. Sanborn's fears were at last realized when the U.S. Marshals he had eluded for so long arrived at his house in Concord to compel his testimony. Citizens of the town rose up to prevent his removal while a judge sympathetic to Sanborn was located to issue a writ of habeas corpus. In the end, the congressional hearings were a tepid affair, likely because southern representatives came to recognize that the less attention given to abolitionist voices, the better.

The next battle in the war that Brown had begun would not be long in coming. While he bided his time, Higginson published in February 1860 the first of a series of articles in *The Atlantic* that he referred to as his "Insurrection Papers." After writing essays on "[The Maroons of Jamaica](#)" and "[The Maroons of Surinam](#)"—Black groups who had escaped enslavement to establish their own independent societies on the fringes of white settlement—he proceeded to publish admiring essays on [Denmark Vesey](#), [Nat Turner](#), and [Gabriel](#), men who had embraced violence in their efforts to overturn American slavery. In addition to his writing, Higginson devoted the 16 months between Brown's execution and the firing on Fort Sumter to reading about military strategy and drills, and to practicing shooting and swordplay. In 1862, this man of words returned to the world of action. He would fulfill "[the dream of a lifetime](#)" as the colonel commanding the First South Carolina Volunteers, a regiment of the formerly enslaved. This commission embodied what he had believed in for so long:

the mobilization of force in the cause of Black freedom, as well as the arming of Black men in their own liberation.

Both during and after the war, the careers of the Secret Six fell along a spectrum. Stearns never went to war himself but recruited thousands of Black troops into what he referred to as “John Brown regiments”; when the war was over, he helped found the Freedmen’s Bureau, which provided land and other assistance to newly freed African Americans. Howe worked with the Sanitary Commission, a relief agency founded to support sick and wounded soldiers, and, like Stearns, was involved with the Freedmen’s Bureau after the war. Smith emerged from the Utica asylum fragile and aversive to any conversation about Harpers Ferry. He gave a significant amount of money to Stearns’s Black regiments. And yet, in 1867, he was also among those who paid the bond that freed Jefferson Davis from prison. Sanborn appointed himself the custodian of Brown’s legacy, publishing four books and some 75 articles about him. (Many of the articles [appeared in this magazine](#).) Sanborn cultivated the memory of a kinder, gentler Brown, downplaying the violence he had perpetrated. He did not know until the 1870s that Brown had lied to him about his central and murderous role at Pottawatomie.

Higginson was unapologetic. In 1879, when he remarried after the death of his first wife, Higginson chose Harpers Ferry as the site for their honeymoon, introducing his bride to prominent landmarks from the raid, the trial, and the hanging. Higginson never forgave himself for not doing more to support Brown and for failing to persuade him to adopt a plan that was more likely to succeed. To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the raid, in 1909, Higginson joined Sanborn, the only other surviving member of the Secret Six, and Howe’s widow, Julia, in Concord, where they were interviewed by a journalist. (Julia Ward Howe had in 1862 published on the cover of *The Atlantic* different lyrics for the tune of “John Brown’s Body”: the immortal words of “[Battle Hymn of the Republic](#).”) As a writer and an activist, Higginson had remained deeply engaged in public life, notably on behalf of women’s rights; his views on race and Black suffrage tended to shift with time and circumstance, and he was far from the radical of the prewar years. But in the Concord interview, he expressed no second thoughts about his commitment to violence on behalf of abolition—either at Harpers Ferry or within the legitimating framework of the Civil War.

I learned the story of John Brown at an early age. It might have been that my father told my siblings and me about the history of Harpers Ferry as we drove along Route 340, peering down the cliffsides at the town and the rushing water below. Or Brown might have been one of those historical personages whose names we just knew, inhaled from the Virginia air around us. People like Stonewall Jackson and John Mosby and Turner Ashby, who had all likely ridden across the very fields surrounding our house. When I was growing up, I was always proud to live in a place associated with so many famous forebears. It was many years before I thought to question what their fame and vaunted heroism had been in service of.

[From the August 2019 issue: Drew Gilpin Faust on race, history, and memories of a Virginia girlhood](#)

But I knew from the outset that Brown's renown was different. He was, I was told, a madman, undertaking a scheme that was doomed to fail—a suicide mission. When I wrote about Brown for my first term paper in high school, that was the story I told.

From 1859 onward, many observers, reporters, and, later, historians adopted the view that Brown was insane, and by the mid-20th century, when I was in school, it had become a widely held assumption among white Americans. Rather than a “meteor” anticipating or inaugurating the larger war that would end slavery, Brown became no more than an aberration. Violence was reduced to a mental-health problem. The interpretation reassuringly diminished the moral force of Brown's actions and suggested that only madness could lead to dreams of overthrowing white dominance and Black subordination. This message was intended to emphasize the strength and immutability of the racial hierarchies that remained in place well after slavery's end, surviving Reconstruction and enshrined in Jim Crow. It minimized the threat Brown posed and by implication all but removed him—and his insistence on the moral evil of slavery—from any place in explanations of the Civil War's origins. The Lost Cause portrait of a conflict fought by two honorable opponents who differed primarily on constitutional views about states' rights could remain intact and unchallenged.

Intransigent former Confederates turned from organized military force to beatings, burnings, whippings, shootings, and lynchings in the effort to

suppress newly gained Black freedom.

Even in the days just after the raid, though, there were those who insisted on acknowledging the historic import of Harpers Ferry as well as the sanity and determination of John Brown. Governor Henry Wise of Virginia came to Harpers Ferry to interview Brown after his capture and rejected the idea that Brown was a lunatic: “They are mistaken who take him to be a madman,” he said. He left with an impression of him as “a man of clear head … cool, collected, and indomitable.” A sane Brown was far more dangerous. If his actions were rational, then the South must regard them as proof that the North was plotting the violent overthrow of slavery. The South, Wise insisted, needed to take active measures to defend itself and its way of life. One South Carolina politician described the raid as “fact coming to the aid of logic”: the South’s worst fears made real. Harpers Ferry was the moment that changed everything. The rabidly proslavery Wise and the radical abolitionist Higginson agreed on little else, but this they regarded as self-evident.

To accept slavery as the cause of the Civil War dictates setting the conflict within a longer trajectory of violence, one that starts at least with John Brown rather than Fort Sumter. Higginson would perhaps have us date the war from his saber cut in 1854. Douglass might well argue that it began in 1619. And when did the Civil War end? Historians studying the era after Appomattox have in recent years emphasized the persistence of violence through and beyond Reconstruction, as intransigent former Confederates turned from organized military force to beatings, burnings, whippings, shootings, and lynchings in the effort to suppress newly gained Black freedom. The war, the historians argue, simply continued in other forms. It is as difficult and complicated to say when the Civil War ended as to determine when it began.

In the years since 1859, John Brown and his raid have become a touchstone in America’s struggle to reconcile—or at least represent—the complex connections between force and freedom. The United States was founded in violent resistance and then guaranteed its survival as a nation eight decades later in a bloody Civil War. Violence is at the heart of our national mythology. The Secret Six drew explicitly on that mythology in their writing. It is central to our national creed. But violence has also, as Frederick

Douglass reminds us, rested at the core of the social and legal order that mandated and sustained the oppression of millions of Americans from the early 17th century into our own time. Violence could enslave and violence could free. The purpose mattered. As Douglass declared, looking back on the Civil War in a Decoration Day speech honoring the Union dead in 1883, “Whatever else I may forget, I shall never forget the difference between those who fought for liberty and those who fought for slavery.”

The Black community did not forget that Brown had fought for liberty. After the war, his raid and his death continued to be commemorated across the North. In a stirring address at Storer College, founded in Harpers Ferry in 1867 to educate African Americans, Douglass insisted that Brown had not failed, but had begun the “war that ended slavery.” W. E. B. Du Bois held Brown in similarly high esteem. In 1906, the second gathering of the Niagara Movement, the predecessor of the NAACP, was held at Harpers Ferry in acknowledgment of Brown’s contributions to Black rights.

Delegates from the NAACP met there in 1932 intending to dedicate a plaque in Brown’s honor. In a speech at that meeting titled “The Use of Force in Reform,” Du Bois expressed few compunctions about the use of violence: Brown, he said, “took human lives … He took them in Kansas and he took them here. He meant to take them. He meant to use force to wipe out an evil he could no longer endure.”

Langston Hughes used poetry rather than oratory to address African American readers as he invoked the lingering memory of John Brown. Hughes, whose grandmother had been married to one of the Black conspirators killed in the raid, celebrated “John Brown / Who took his gun, / Took twenty-one companions / White and black, / Went to shoot your way to freedom.” [Hughes recalled](#) that his grandmother had preserved her husband’s bullet-ridden shawl. As a small boy, he was sometimes wrapped in it. “You will remember / John Brown,” Hughes insisted.

But, fittingly, given his defining commitment to nonviolence, Martin Luther King Jr. remained silent on Brown. Even as the keynote speaker at a centennial observance of Brown’s raid, King did not mention the man once. The place of violence in the centuries of struggle for Black freedom has been long contested, and by the mid-1960s, King faced growing demands from Black activists urging forceful resistance to white threats and assaults

instead of the Gandhian passivity that underpinned his philosophy. Malcolm X regarded Brown as “the only good white the country’s ever had.” The Black Power movement that challenged King’s vision of a Beloved Community could claim deep roots.

Barack Obama reflected the long tradition of Black appreciation for Brown in his 2006 book, *The Audacity of Hope*. Brown’s “willingness to spill blood,” Obama said, demonstrated that “deliberation alone” would not suffice to end slavery. “Pragmatism,” he concluded, “can sometimes be moral cowardice.”

As a nation, we are unable to get over John Brown. And as a nation, we have not figured out what violence we will condemn and what we will celebrate. I found myself unspeakably moved as I stood before Nat Turner’s Bible in the National Museum of African American History and Culture. At the same time, I am horrified by the violence of the January 6 rioters and by what I regard as widespread threats to the rule of law. We pride ourselves on being a country with a written Constitution that sets peaceful parameters for government. Yet the Supreme Court established by that Constitution has issued rulings providing that the citizenry may be armed not just for recreational hunting, but with weapons, including assault rifles, that are frequently purchased with an eye toward resisting that very government. Lawmakers walk the floors of the Capitol with pins shaped like AR-15s in their lapels. The rule of law seems historically and inextricably enmeshed in the tolerance—even the encouragement—of violence.

In the years leading up to the Civil War, antislavery Americans like the Secret Six turned to what Higginson—with a keen awareness of the oxymoron—called conscientious lawbreaking. Douglass came to embrace the legitimacy of violence, but recognized it as justified “only when all other means of progress and enlightenment have failed”—and only when there is a “thing worse than” violence that makes it necessary.

The existence and endurance of our nation has depended on that careful discernment, on that conscientiousness, in deciding when we truly face a “thing worse than.” It is not merely a historical question. A deep-seated ambivalence about violence defines us still.

This article appears in the [December 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Men Who Started the Civil War.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

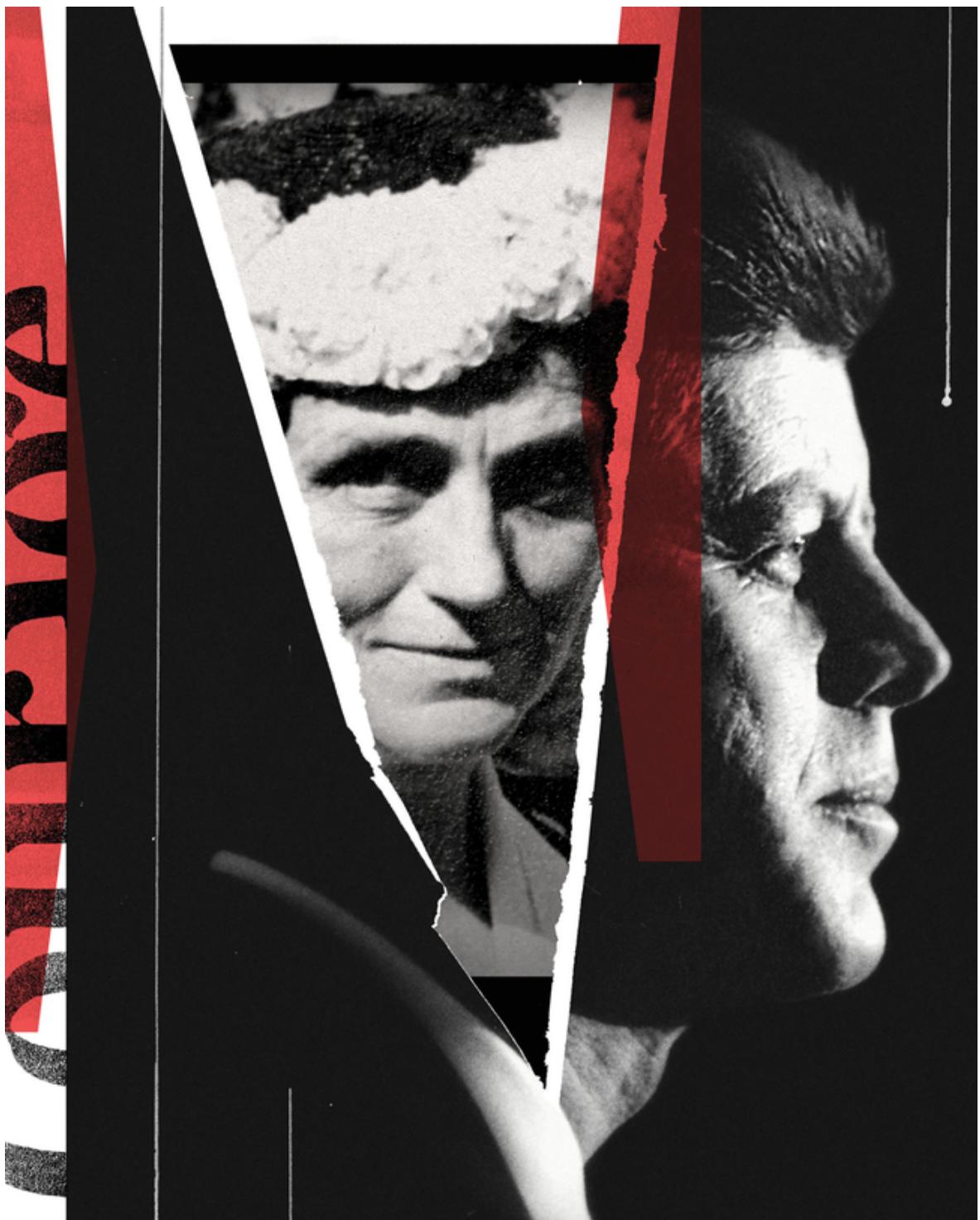
This article was downloaded by **calibre** from
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/12/harpers-ferry-raid-john-brown-abolition/675814/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

How John F. Kennedy Fell for the Lost Cause

**And the grandmother who
wouldn't let him get away with it**

by Jordan Virtue



John F. Kennedy took George Plimpton by surprise after a dinner party one evening when he pulled his friend aside for a word in the Oval Office. The president had Reconstruction on his mind—really, though, he wanted to discuss Plimpton's grandmother.

Plimpton was lanky and lordly, famous for his patrician accent and his forays into professional sports. The *Paris Review* founder [did everything and knew everyone](#). He might edit literary criticism one day and try his hand at football or boxing the next. Plimpton had known Jackie Kennedy for years, and he had been friends with Robert F. Kennedy since their Harvard days.

He also had another, and very different, Kennedy connection. Plimpton's great-grandfather Adelbert Ames, a New Englander, had been a Civil War general and Mississippi governor during Reconstruction. He was an ardent supporter of Black suffrage. Kennedy had soiled Ames's reputation in his best-selling 1956 book, [Profiles in Courage](#), which had won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography the following year. The book ushered the junior senator from Massachusetts onto the national stage, effectively launching his bid for the presidency.

Kennedy's book presented a pantheon of past U.S. senators as models of courageous compromise and political pragmatism. One such man, Kennedy claimed, was Ames's racist Democratic rival, Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus Lamar II. A slaveholder, drafter of the Mississippi Ordinance of Secession, and Confederate colonel, Lamar later became the first ex-Confederate appointed to the Supreme Court after the Civil War.

Lamar and Ames were the preeminent politicians of Mississippi Reconstruction. They hated each other. (At one point, Lamar threatened to lynch Ames.) *Profiles in Courage* had relied heavily on the work of influential Dunning School historians—disciples of the Columbia University professor William A. Dunning, who [scorned Black suffrage](#) and promoted the mythology of the Lost Cause. Kennedy may have been genuinely misled by these historians, but he also aspired to higher office and needed to appeal to white southern voters. His book denounced Reconstruction, casting Ames as a corrupt, carpetbagging villain and Lamar as a heroic southern statesman.

[From the June 2021 issue: Why Confederate lies live on](#)

Ames's daughter Blanche—Plimpton's grandmother—was incensed. She sent meticulously researched letters to Kennedy, demanding that he correct

his book. Some of the letters had footnotes. Some had appendixes. Blanche would not let up, chasing Kennedy from the Senate to the presidency.

In Plimpton's telling, as Kennedy took his guests on an informal tour of the White House that evening, he motioned to Plimpton for a word. "George," he said, as Plimpton would recall, "I'd like to talk to you about your grandmother." Kennedy begged him to persuade Blanche Ames to stop writing, complaining that her correspondence "was cutting into the work of government."

Plimpton promised to try, but he knew it would be no use. "My grandmother was a Massachusetts woman," he later explained, and when Kennedy refused to amend *Profiles*, Blanche "did what any sensible Massachusetts woman would do: she sat down and wrote her *own* book."

Blanche Ames was born in Massachusetts in 1878, the year after Reconstruction ended in a political deal that awarded Rutherford B. Hayes, a Republican, the disputed presidential election in exchange for withdrawing federal troops from the South. Blanche had the Civil War in her blood. Benjamin F. Butler, a Union general, was her maternal grandfather; he had commanded Fort Monroe, in Virginia, and had designated fugitive slaves as "contraband of war," using a legal loophole that allowed refugees to seek protection behind Union lines. He later became governor of Massachusetts. Adelbert Ames, her father, won the Medal of Honor at First Bull Run and fought at Antietam and Gettysburg. After serving as the military governor of Mississippi, Ames became the state's senator and then its civilian governor. He was a champion of racial rights, embracing a personal "Mission with a large *M*" to support Black citizens.

Blanche, too, was a principled fighter, willing to risk her social privilege for the causes that she championed. Adelbert encouraged his daughters to attend college. Blanche went to Smith, where she became class president. At commencement, she delivered a forceful address promoting women's suffrage, with President William McKinley in the audience. Blanche helped spearhead the Massachusetts women's-suffrage movement, working as a political cartoonist for *Woman's Journal*. She [founded the Massachusetts Birth Control League](#). Once, Blanche sauntered onto Boston's Commonwealth Avenue carrying a hand-carved wooden penis to

demonstrate proper condom use; she was arrested, but police released her after realizing she was the daughter of one governor and the granddaughter of another. “If she was a man,” one historian has observed, “there would be five books” about her already.

Blanche Ames Ames acquired her distinctive, double-barreled name upon marrying the [prominent Harvard botanist Oakes Ames](#), who came from an unrelated dynastic strand of Ameses. A talented painter, Blanche illustrated some of Oakes’s books about orchids. The [Ames mansion at Borderland](#), their 1,200-acre estate outside Boston, was built entirely of stone to ensure that the library—the filming location for the 2019 movie *Knives Out*—would be fireproof. Adelbert Ames’s and Benjamin Butler’s Civil War-era swords can still be seen in the foyer. George Plimpton once used one to cut a cake at an anniversary party.

Profiles in Courage roused Blanche from her Borderland retirement. Eight decades had elapsed since the end of Reconstruction. The modern civil-rights movement was gaining momentum, with its promise of a second Reconstruction. Kennedy was not only taking the wrong side, but he was doing so by maligning Blanche’s father:

No state suffered more from carpetbag rule than Mississippi. Adelbert Ames, first Senator and then Governor ... [admitted] that only his election to the Senate prompted him to take up his residence in Mississippi. He was chosen Governor by a majority composed of freed slaves and radical Republicans, sustained and nourished by Federal bayonets ... Taxes increased to a level fourteen times as high as normal in order to support the extravagances of the reconstruction government.

Lamar, meanwhile, was cast as a “statesman” for whom “no partisan, personal or sectional considerations could outweigh his devotion to the national interest and to the truth”—a selfless patriot who had helped reconcile the nation.

The truth of the matter was very different. Reconstruction-era Mississippi under Ames’s leadership arguably held more political promise for newly enfranchised Black people than any other southern state. Before the Civil War, Mississippi had contained some of the richest counties in the nation,

but most Mississippians—some 55 percent—were enslaved. After the war, Mississippi was the poorest state in the Union. But the new state constitution worked to overturn the Black Codes—laws designed to limit the rights of newly freed African Americans—and Mississippi's Hiram Revels and Blanche K. Bruce became the country's first Black senators. Ames himself shared his gubernatorial ticket with three Black candidates.

Five of Kennedy's profiles focus on questions of slavery, the Civil War, or Reconstruction, and none of the featured senators took a progressive approach to Black rights.

Democrats swept the 1874 national midterm elections in what the historian Eric Foner has called a “repudiation of Reconstruction.” Mississippi Democrats saw an opportunity: By seizing control of the legislature in upcoming state elections, they could pass measures that would essentially end Black suffrage. The year 1875 became a struggle between Ames, the elected governor, and Lamar, who was then in Congress. Ames's administration had the support of Black voters. Lamar, meanwhile, embraced the so-called Mississippi Plan, which aimed to disrupt a legitimate election, by force if necessary. Lamar insisted that the Democrats had to win control of the state legislature to ensure the “supremacy of the unconquered and unconquerable Saxon race.” On Election Day, paramilitary terrorists called White Liners obstructed polling places, destroyed ballot boxes, and threatened to kill Black citizens who voted, as the journalist Nicholas Lemann has written in *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War*. Counties that were once overwhelmingly Republican saw the Republican vote drop to single digits. “A revolution has taken place,” Ames wrote to his wife, prophesying a bleak future for Mississippi. “A race are disenfranchised—they are to be returned to … an era of second slavery.”

[From the December 2023 issue: Eric Foner on Confederate general James Longstreet](#)

Democrats, elected by terrorism and led by Lamar, now threatened Ames with impeachment. They accused him of financial impropriety—including the high taxes that *Profiles* decried—despite his administration's relative frugality. To avoid impeachment, Ames resigned and fled the state. A U.S. Senate committee investigated the Mississippi elections and produced a

2,000-page document known as the “[Boutwell Report](#).” It concluded that Ames was blameless and that his resignation had been forced “by measures unauthorized by law.” No matter: Ames’s reputation lay in tatters.

The following year, during the presidential deadlock, Lamar helped broker the Compromise of 1877, which gave Hayes the presidency over Samuel Tilden in exchange for the return of “home rule”—rule by white-supremacist Democrats—to the South, effectively destroying national Reconstruction.

Profiles in Courage evades easy categorization. It is a historical work, written by a political team, heavily assisted by historians, and published for political gain. The book features eight senators, strategically distributed across time, space, and party. Five of the profiles focus on questions of slavery, the Civil War, or Reconstruction, and none of the featured senators took a progressive approach to Black rights. Three, including Lamar, were slaveholders. Questions about authorship arose early: Kennedy’s speechwriter Theodore Sorensen was rumored to be the true author. (He did, in fact, write most of the book.) Archival drafts reveal that the Georgetown University history professor Jules Davids helped overhaul the Mississippi chapter. The book’s historical vision, though, came from Kennedy.

Historians in recent years have acknowledged that the real problem with *Profiles* is not authorship but substance. As a critic, Blanche Ames got there first. Her personal copy of the book, a first edition, overflows with annotations. She drew arrows and corkscrew question marks around the paragraph about her father, her anger visible on the page. When Kennedy insisted that Lamar had written Mississippi’s Ordinance of Secession only after losing hope that “the South could obtain justice in the Federal Union,” Blanche thundered in the margins: “Lamar had sown the seed in 1861. He was sowing it again in 1874.”

In June 1956, Blanche sent a nine-page letter to Senator Kennedy, introducing herself as his friend Plimpton’s grandmother and urging “corrections of errata for your own sake as well as mine.” She recognized diplomatically that, “in a work as ambitious as ‘Profiles in Courage’ … there are bound to be some viewpoints to arouse controversy.” Nevertheless, she argued, ambition did not excuse historical inaccuracy.

Kennedy replied the next month. He was cordial, admitting that Reconstruction was “one of the most difficult sections” to write, not because of lack of material, but because of an abundance of “emotion-packed and strongly partisan” readings. It was a politician’s apology, suffused with qualifiers. He insisted that he had relied on “reputable authorities,” but granted that “it is possible, of course, that in so doing a particular individual or incident is slighted or inadequately or inaccurately described.” He added, “If such is the case in connection with my mention of your father … I am indeed sorry.” He assured Blanche that her message “succeeded in stimulating me to further research,” but warned that he did not expect *Profiles* to be reprinted, so there would be no correction.

Kennedy did, in fact, do further research. According to Plimpton, during that Oval Office conversation after the dinner party, Kennedy asked Plimpton what he knew about his great-grandfather, apparently eager to demonstrate his own knowledge. He reenacted how Ames would inspect his Civil War soldiers and shout “For God’s sake, draw up your bowels!,” causing White House personnel to burst in, worried by the uproar. The president had found this obscure detail in an equally obscure book, *The Twentieth Maine*, which was published a year after *Profiles*.

But between 1956 and 1963, *Profiles* was reprinted more than 30 times. Kennedy did not change his account of Adelbert Ames and L. Q. C. Lamar.

Kennedy’s intransigence only fueled Blanche’s campaign. She forwarded her letters to Harper & Brothers, giving the publisher “the first opportunity” to rectify where *Profiles in Courage* “falls short of the Code of Historians.” The publisher declined, claiming that too much time had elapsed for readers to be able to understand any corrections. Blanche combed through Kennedy’s acknowledgments and wrote to the professors who assisted with drafting or editing *Profiles*, hoping that the historians might put pressure on him.

They did not. There is no evidence that Davids, architect of the Lamar chapter, ever bothered to reply. Allan Nevins, at Columbia, backpedaled, claiming that the introduction he had written for *Profiles* “carried no endorsement of all details … I am sure the Senator will make correction where correction is proper.” Arthur Holcombe, at Harvard, patronizingly

suggested that Blanche had “misunderstood Senator Kennedy’s meaning.” Some of these academic historians may simply not have taken Blanche seriously: She was old, she was a woman, and she lacked scholarly credentials.

Blanche contacted a second circle of scholars, seeking a historian “free from bias” who might serve as an impartial biographer of Adelbert Ames. She steeped herself in the historiography of Reconstruction, coming to understand how closely *Profiles* followed the neo-Confederate historians Wirt Armistead Cate and Edward Mayes. “Cate copies Mayes and Kennedy copies Cate,” she wrote to the eminent Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison. “Now, unless corrected, modern and future historians may copy Kennedy! This method of writing history leads around in circles of quotations of half-truths. It is a false method.”

Morison suggested a few military scholars as potential Ames biographers, but mainly recommended “Negro historians” such as John Hope Franklin, Rayford Logan, and Alrutheus Ambush Taylor. “Adelbert Ames’ career as Governor was, I believe, more important than his military career,” Morison reasoned, “and he was the champion of the Negroes.” Blanche contacted a host of prominent academics, including C. Vann Woodward, whose books had criticized the Dunning School and challenged the myth that Reconstruction governments with Black elected officials were simply incompetent or ignorant. The *Profiles* team had paid no attention to this scholarship. Despite her efforts, no historian would commit to the project. So Blanche resolved to write a biography of Adelbert Ames herself.

Borderland became Blanche’s archive and fortress while she spent six years —1957 to 1963—researching and writing. When her granddaughter Olivia Hoblitzelle visited Borderland, she marveled at the piles of Civil War maps and books in the library. On one trip, Hoblitzelle recalled, her father asked, “How long is it now?” “Five hundred pages,” Blanche replied. When Hoblitzelle’s father asked, “Isn’t that enough?,” Blanche “looked him straight in the eye, and said, ‘Well, if Tolstoy could do it, so can I.’” When she finished, she was 86 years old.

Blanche’s research drew significantly on the work of Black historians, who had been publishing trenchant studies of Reconstruction for decades. White

historians had largely ignored this work, dismissing it as second-class scholarship. Blanche thought otherwise. Her bibliography cited W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America*, Franklin's *The Militant South*, John Lynch's *The Facts of Reconstruction*, Merl Eppse's *The Negro, Too, in American History*, and George Washington Williams's *History of the Negro Race in America*. Kennedy, meanwhile, had not cited a single Black author on Mississippi Reconstruction.

From the March 1901 issue: W. E. B. Du Bois on the Freedmen's Bureau

The stakes, Blanche believed, included not only her father's reputation but the very meaning of Reconstruction. Her final chapter, "Integrity and History," is a scathing condemnation of the traditional Reconstruction historiography Kennedy had parroted. Throughout the book, she linked Adelbert Ames's promotion of racial rights in the 1870s with the modern civil-rights movement—the second Reconstruction:

In this fateful year of 1963, our Congress has a unique opportunity with its overwhelming Democratic majorities ... Congress seems to hold the practical power to do away with the disgraceful suppression of Negro suffrage rights ... A hundred years has been too long to wait for application of these long-standing laws of equity.

Blanche Ames's book was published at the worst possible moment. In September 1963, she finished correcting page proofs for *Adelbert Ames, 1835–1933: General, Senator, Governor*. The book was lovingly bound in Sundour cloth and stamped in gold. It sold for \$12.50, about \$120 today—an old-fashioned, costly volume. Kennedy's mass-produced paperback, meanwhile, sold for less than a dollar. On November 22, 1963, as Blanche's book was going to press, Lee Harvey Oswald shot and killed Kennedy in Dallas.

With the president's tragic death, *Profiles in Courage* got a second life, landing back on the *New York Times* best-seller list. As Americans evaluated Kennedy's legacy, his prizewinning book seemed a natural place to start. A televised adaptation of *Profiles* had been in production at NBC before Kennedy's death. At that time, Blanche had urged Kennedy to use television as an opportunity to "bring your views into accord with the trend of modern

historical interpretation of the Reconstruction Period.” After the assassination, the network pressed ahead, framing the series as “one of the finest living memorials to President Kennedy.” But Blanche may have gotten through to Kennedy’s team in the end, at least as far as the television series: When it premiered, a year after Kennedy’s death, the planned segment on Lamar had been quietly dropped. It was the only original profile not to be featured on television.

But there was still the book. Blanche wrote to Sorensen in early 1964, trying to strike a tone of mutual interest: “Must we not find a way of correcting these obvious misstatements inadvertently restated by President Kennedy? Otherwise they will be perpetuated with greater force than ever, and I do not believe that he would have wished this. Do you?” There is no record that Sorensen replied.

Blanche lived to see the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Born a year after the end of the first Reconstruction, she was able to witness the start of the second. But when she died at Borderland, in 1969, a [belittling New York Times headline](#) read: “MRS. OAKES AMES, BOTANIST’S WIDOW; Illustrator of Her Husband’s Works on Orchids Dies.” Despite Blanche’s best efforts, her book sold only a few thousand copies.

In 2010, a few years before efforts to remove Confederate monuments gained traction across the country, a life-size statue of Lamar was erected outside his former home in Oxford, Mississippi. The L. Q. C. Lamar House Museum’s public-outreach efforts generally commemorate Lamar not as a white supremacist or an architect of the Mississippi Plan, but as the embodiment of Kennedy’s redemptive arc: “Southern secessionist to American statesman,” as the museum describes it. Ames is not mentioned at all; *Profiles* is highlighted throughout the museum.

In 1980, George Plimpton donated a copy of Blanche’s book to the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, in Boston. “President Kennedy would know,” he said, “that a Massachusetts woman will eventually have her way.” But Blanche Ames Ames has not had her way quite yet. At the library’s gift shop, visitors can buy a 50th-anniversary edition of *Profiles in*

Courage, published in 2006, with an introduction by Caroline Kennedy. The book has never been corrected.

This article appears in the [December 2023](#) print edition with the headline “Kennedy and the Lost Cause.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/12/jfk-profiles-in-courage-book-lucius-lamar/675815/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

How Reconstruction Created American Public Education

Freedpeople and their advocates persuaded the nation to embrace schooling for all.

by Adam Harris



Before the Civil War, America had few institutions like Antioch College. Founded in Yellow Springs, Ohio, in 1850, Antioch was coed and unaffiliated with any religious sect; it was also the first college in the nation to hire a woman to serve on its faculty as an equal with her male colleagues.

It was unquestionably progressive, and would not have been that way without its first president: Horace Mann.

Mann, the politician and education reformer from Massachusetts, sought to mold a certain kind of student: conscientious, zealous, inquisitive. For years, Mann had opposed slavery; he hoped his students would as well. He charged those he taught at Antioch to dedicate themselves to eradicating injustice with sedulous care. “Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity,” Mann told the graduating class of 1859.

Mary D. Brice was one of Mann’s students at Antioch, and she was a true believer in Mann’s vision. In December 1858, alongside her husband, Brice traveled 900 miles to New Orleans, to teach.

Brice found a city that was like no other in the antebellum South. In New Orleans, a small class of free Black people lived and worked as citizens alongside white people; they owned businesses and, in some cases, plantations. And if they were wealthy enough to afford tuition, or light-skinned enough to pass for white, they could attend school.

Yet the free Black New Orleanians who were neither wealthy nor light enough had few options. In 1865, Benjamin Rush Plumly, a white abolitionist politician who’d joined the Union army at the outset of the war, and who would eventually lead the Board of Education for the Department of the Gulf, described the antebellum situation in the region bluntly: “For the poor, of the free colored people, there was no school.”

Brice, a deeply religious person, believed that God meant for her to create one. She opened “a school for colored children and adults” in September 1860, at the corner of Franklin and Perdido Streets, near present-day city hall. The effort was short-lived. In June 1861, two months after Confederate troops fired the first shots of the Civil War, Brice was forced to close the school.

But the war could not stop Mary Brice. By November of that year, she had moved to Magnolia Street and reopened her doors. Again she was shut down, this time more forcefully. Confederates began a terror campaign against the school, leaving signs outside her home: Death to nigger teachers,

they declared. So Brice began teaching in secret, sneaking to her students' homes under cover of darkness.

By the end of April 1862, Union troops had captured New Orleans. Brice was now able to conduct her work without the constant threat of violence. With funding from northern missionary associations, other private teachers began to travel to New Orleans. The poor Black people of the city—including the formerly enslaved—wanted an education.

The educators' efforts were slow and piecemeal at first, but eventually, with federal assistance, they helped create the infrastructure for public education in Louisiana. There, and across the South, education reformers and abolitionists like Brice carried out Mann's vision for schools that were free and universal. The existence of public education today in the South—for all children—is largely their doing.

In the early days of the republic, the Founders often wrote and spoke about the need for an educated population. Yet schooling was typically reserved for the elite. Wealthy families hired private tutors, and those in the middle class sent their children to subscription schools (parents paid only for the period of time their students attended), where they learned the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Higher education was rarer still: Even into the late 1860s, only about 1 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds were enrolled in postsecondary schools. Before the Civil War, many children were limited to learning whatever their parents were able to teach them at home.

The idea of public common schools—that is, schools funded and organized directly by communities and free to most children—had been slow to take off, though Mann had been proselytizing for them since the 1830s. In time, his approach took root in the Northeast and crept into the rest of the country, but such schools were more typically found in cities than rural areas. White southerners, in particular, were skeptical of Mann's ideas. The contours of a slave society were fundamentally incompatible with widespread free education—public goods of many kinds were eyed with suspicion as potential tools of insurrection.

"Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity," Horace Mann told his students. Mary Brice was a true believer in Mann's vision.

New Orleans, however, had a rich history of parochial schools. In 1841, the state legislature hoped to extend this tradition when it first approved funds for a public-school system in New Orleans, one of the oldest in the South. The schools there thrived—but they were available only to white students.

Education in the rest of Louisiana and the South was still rudimentary, even as the rest of the country made strides. In the years preceding the Civil War, Justin Morrill, a shopkeeper turned congressman from Vermont, tried to create a nationwide system for training workers by introducing a bill to give states land they could sell to fund colleges. The bill was opposed by southern congressmen wary of federal intervention in their states, and was ultimately vetoed by President James Buchanan.

After the war began, however, Morrill saw an opportunity. Southern lawmakers had been expelled from Congress for treason, and the nation was in need of skilled military minds. He reintroduced the bill in December 1861; the Morrill Act was signed by President Abraham Lincoln the following July. States in the North quickly began building land-grant universities.

Under the law, all southern states were barred from the program while in rebellion against the Union. But because New Orleans fell so early, the war presented an opportunity for the city. Major General Nathaniel Banks, the Union commander of the Department of the Gulf, issued General Order No. 38, which established a “Board of Education for Freedmen.”

The smattering of schools that had been established for Black students by missionary associations and individual citizens, including Brice’s, were quickly subsumed by this newly created board. The student rolls grew from an average of 1,422 in April 1864 to 9,571 by the end of the year. The board had established a foundation for education through a “unity of purpose and concert of action,” Plumly, the chair of the board, wrote. “In nine months we have succeeded, against the grave obstacles incident to the beginning of so great an enterprise, in gathering under instruction half of the colored juvenile population in the State.”

In 1865, Plumly released a report on the state of education in New Orleans, trumpeting his board’s success in expanding schooling through the example

of Brice, whose school “continued to thrive” under his board, where she was known as “an efficient and honored principal.” Plumly’s report quickly spread across the nation, and after Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s surrender in April 1865, it served as a model for those who hoped to establish public education in the South. The reunification of the country would be an enormous task, and no one knew what would become of the millions of Black Americans who were now free citizens—not to mention the masses of white southerners who would need to be reintegrated into the nation. Perhaps, the thought went, education could help make citizens of both the white and Black poor.

On April 3, 1865, the *Chicago Tribune*, opining about the New Orleans project, noted that although many of the teachers struggled “with every manner of difficulty—insufficient accommodations—leaky sheds with ground floors,” they were heartened by the fact that the school system had grown at such a rapid pace. The editors thought that the project might serve as a model for children, both white and Black, across the entire South.

“This is … but the beginning of a work which must spread over the entire Southern States, until both freed blacks, and the almost equally ignorant and even more degraded and vicious ‘poor whites’ have been brought within its christianizing and civilizing influences,” the *Tribune* article read. The work of expanding the nation’s schools no longer had to be “slow or tedious,” it said, “but can be accomplished rapidly and encouragingly.”

Outside New Orleans, however, there was less infrastructure for this kind of rapid transformation. Southern states were in the early process of being readmitted into the union, which required the states to disavow secession, repudiate war debts, and write new constitutions, and they could not yet access funds from the Morrill Act. If there was any hope for the sort of mass education that the *Tribune* editors believed was necessary, it would require private associations to step into the void. Groups such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the American Baptist Home Missionary Society began establishing primary schools and colleges, as well as schools to train teachers.

Major General Oliver Otis Howard, who became the commissioner of the Freedmen’s Bureau, was unsure that his agency had the authority or money

to set up such institutions on its own. Yet he found the schools operated by military governments, such as Louisiana's under Major General Banks, to be a good model. "More than 200,000 people, old and young, in the insurrectionary states, have learned to read in the last three years," Howard wrote in a letter to the American Institute of Instruction. The letter was read aloud to the nearly 1,000 people who had gathered in New Haven, Connecticut, for a meeting of the group on August 9, 1865.

Howard worked to establish a network similar to Banks's, on a larger scale. Among the institutions founded in this effort were the Fisk Free Colored School, now Fisk University, and the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia, Booker T. Washington's alma mater. Howard also personally helped create Howard University, [named in his honor](#), and later served as its president.

[Read: Why America needs its HBCUs](#)

Because of its small budget, the bureau primarily operated in a supervisory role. Howard appointed superintendents to oversee the logistics of the schools, which included training and hiring teachers, ensuring that they had military protection to conduct their work safely, and providing schoolmasters with fuel and provisions.

Most of this work was conducted out of the public eye, with missionary organizations in leadership roles. Even so, the bureau's efforts ran the risk of vexing white southerners, many of whom simply opposed the idea of educating Black people at all. White objections to the involvement of the Freedmen's Bureau in southern affairs often mentioned reports of ineptitude, poor administration, or outright fraud in its operations. Certainly, the administration of these new public schools left much to be desired. As Plumly wrote in his report about local schools, 1864 was a year "of great financial delays and embarrassments in this Department." Teachers would routinely go months without pay—and although Plumly noted that the educators rarely complained, conditions wore on their morale.

But, in the main, the white objection to the bureau was still, simply, its existence. "Even the most friendly studies of the Bureau have exaggerated its weaknesses and minimized its strengths," the Reconstruction historians

John and LaWanda Cox wrote in 1953. “At the vital core of the Bureau’s activities was the explosive and still unresolved problem of the nature of race relationships that should follow the forcible destruction of slavery.” And as prominent physical reminders of the bureau’s presence, schools became a target.

Mobs routinely burned buildings and churches where classes were held. In some cases, teachers and agents of the bureau were murdered. According to James D. Anderson, professor emeritus of education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, at least 126 public schools in Louisiana overseen by the bureau faced closure from the combination of white terrorism, financial woes, and incompetence.

Still, the bureau’s work improved the educational outlook for millions of people who’d previously had no access to formal schooling. According to records gathered by Kamilah Stinnett, a specialist with the Smithsonian’s Freedmen’s Bureau Project, many Black people felt empowered to shape their education themselves. On March 17, 1866, a school official in Louisiana wrote to the bureau that Black residents were requesting Black instructors because they “object to paying [white] persons who continually insult them.” In 1868, the board of a “colored” school in Henderson, North Carolina, asked the bureau for \$300 “for assistance in finishing our school house.”

Soon the number of people in the South entitled to common education was expanded even further. In 1867, Louisiana held an election for its constitutional convention; ultimately, aided by votes from freedmen and the disenfranchisement of former Confederates, 49 white delegates and 49 Black delegates were chosen. The constitution they produced guaranteed integrated public schools.

Across the South, state conventions established similar constitutional provisions, and states were subsequently readmitted to the union, which also allowed for the expansion of college access through federal programs such as the Morrill Act. By 1870, five years after the bureau was established, roughly 78 percent of children of all races between the ages of 5 and 14 were enrolled in public schools.

That would prove to be the high-water mark for most of the next century. When the bureau was dissolved by Congress in 1872, a large share of the federal government's oversight of common schools disappeared. Over the next decades, the educational foundation built by the Freedmen's Bureau endured a concerted assault from white supremacists. The so-called Redeemers, who sought to reclaim political power through coercion and violence, had objected to the Reconstruction constitutions from the beginning and fought to overthrow them. They also objected to integrated education. Faculty at the University of Mississippi revolted, arguing that they would rather resign and the university close its doors than educate a single Black student. State legislators in North Carolina went even further, stripping UNC of its funding and forcing it to close in 1871. When the university finally reopened in 1875, several avowed white supremacists sat on its new board of trustees, including one former leader of the state Ku Klux Klan.

That same year, members of Congress introduced legislation that would endow common schools via land grants, and expand Morrill's funding for land-grant colleges. Southern lawmakers helped kill the legislation, fearing that introducing additional federal money also meant introducing federal oversight of their activities. Such oversight of the public schools in New Orleans, for example, would have revealed that, in 1877, the state legislature reduced school-tax rates by 80 percent, dramatically cutting back resources for education.

Meanwhile, violent campaigns raged across the South. School buildings were once again burned. Educators were threatened. The network of common schools established by the Freedmen's Bureau remained, although diminished. Some struggled until they fell apart; others hobbled along, underfunded but resolved to continue the work of educating those who were being shut out of other institutions.

By 1890, Morrill had untethered his new bill to endow land-grant colleges from the common-school bill, and it passed—with a caveat. Colleges could not make a distinction of race in the admission of students; states could, however, operate separate colleges for Black students. They used a portion of the funds to endow schools born of necessity—Black colleges such as

Tuskegee University, North Carolina A&T State University, and Langston University.

[Adam Harris: The government finally puts a number on the discrimination against Black colleges](#)

Six years later, after the mixed-race activist Homer Plessy sued for the right to ride Louisiana railway cars reserved for white people, the United States Supreme Court decided that state-mandated segregation laws did not violate the equal-protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. *Plessy v. Ferguson* ushered in the era of formalized segregation in the South, but America's higher-education infrastructure had already taken to the idea. Soon, its common schools formally did so as well.

When Mary Brice moved from Ohio, she hoped that she might be able to bring education to Black New Orleanians—and, in the spirit of Horace Mann, win a victory for humanity. The Freedmen's Bureau helped expand Brice's vision to the entire South through federal intervention, providing what became the political and administrative scaffolding for all public education. But as remarkable as that achievement was, it could not withstand the extraordinary efforts by Redeemers to claim the benefits of such an education for white Americans and deny them to Black Americans.

On February 8, 1898, a group of white Louisiana Democrats gathered in Tulane Hall, in New Orleans, for a constitutional convention. The primary agenda item: to settle the question of whether Black men in the state should be allowed to vote. There was little question of what the convention's result would be.

The convention could not explicitly circumvent the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, but Democrats got as close as they could. They established a poll tax and literacy tests, and required voters to own property. Ernest B. Kruttschnitt, the president of the convention, bluntly admitted the purpose of these laws. "What care I whether it be more or less ridiculous or not?" he said to applause. "Doesn't it meet the case? Doesn't it let the white man vote, and doesn't it stop the negro from voting, and isn't that what we came here for?"

This Jim Crow constitution worked as intended. There were 127,923 Black voters on Louisiana's rolls in 1888; by 1910, that number had dropped to 730. From 1896 to 1900 alone, there was a 96 percent decline in registered Black voters. When the convention ended, Kruttschnitt returned to his day job—leading the New Orleans school board.

With the *Plessy* decision propping him up, Kruttschnitt launched what Donald E. DeVore and Joseph Logsdon, the authors of *Crescent City Schools*, called a “massive cutback in educational opportunities for black children.” Under his leadership, the district cut public schooling for Black students down to grades one through five, and the board announced, as DeVore and Logsdon put it, “that they were giving up all pretense of creating separate schools ‘identical with that of white schools.’” By 1920, there were about four times as many schools for white students as there were for Black students in New Orleans. The city’s idea of a universal, free public-education system, established in large part to serve Black students, now only feigned doing so.

It would take 40 more years, another federal intervention, and the protection of U.S. Marshals before Ruby Bridges and [the McDonogh Three](#) would reintegrate public schools in New Orleans—schools that likely never would have existed in the first place if not for the work of the federal government and the Freedmen’s Bureau.

For Black people who’d been emancipated, the full experience of citizenship that the Founders believed comes with education was short-lived. The country has been shaped in many ways by their subsequent exclusion. Even after court-mandated desegregation, educational opportunity has been highly stratified by race, and both educational attainment and quality in America as a whole have lagged relative to other wealthy countries. In 2023, the Supreme Court struck down affirmative action, the most serious effort to date at realizing Brice’s dream nationally. The history of the South illustrates that efforts to splinter or deny education on the basis of race will inevitably diminish even those who lead those efforts. “Create a serf caste and debar them from education, and you necessarily debar a great portion of the privileged class from education also,” Mann once argued. But the history also demonstrates the inverse: Making public education truly public and equal for all is the cornerstone of a nation.

This article appears in the [December 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Black Roots of American Education.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

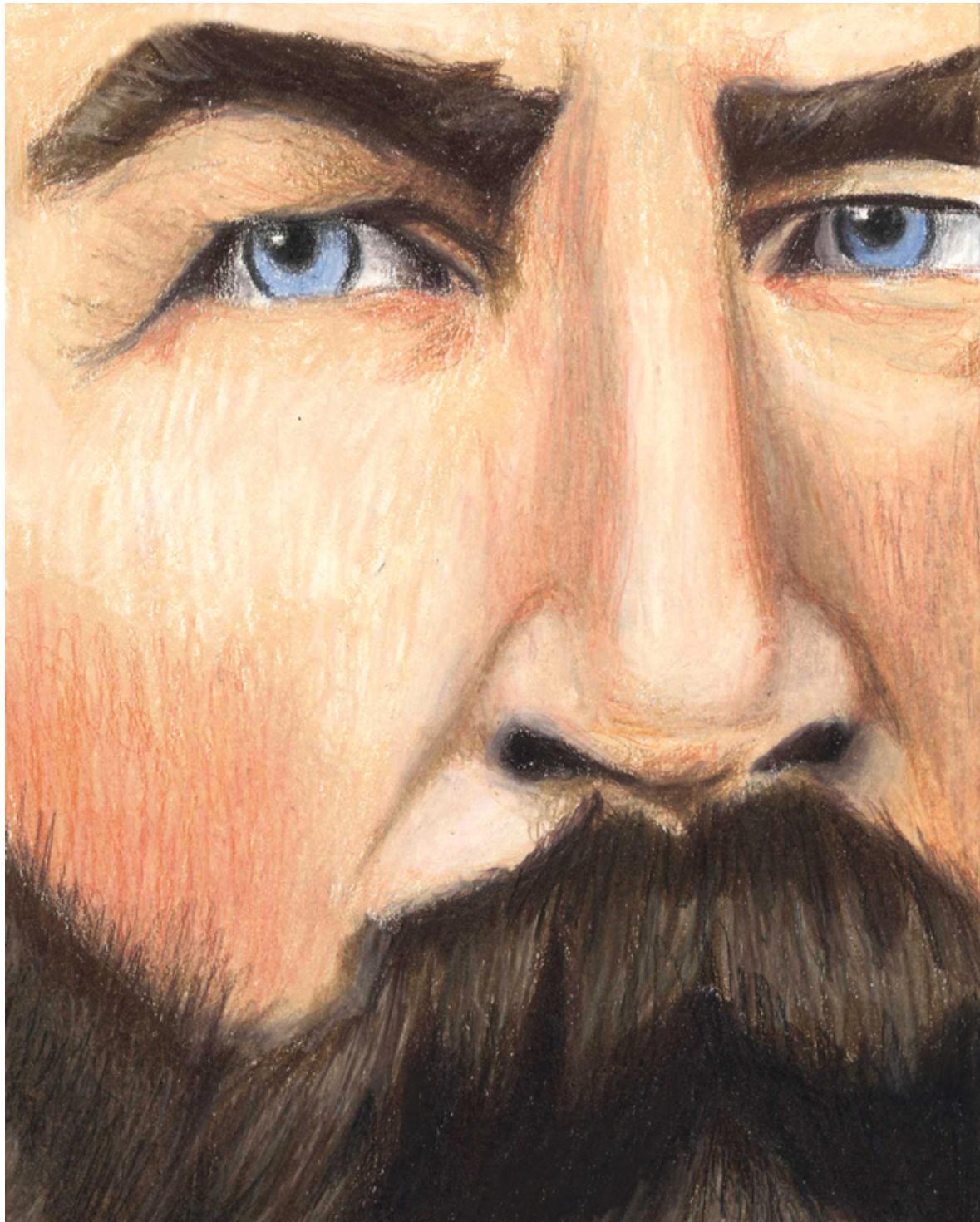
This article was downloaded by **calibre** from
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/12/reconstruction-education-black-students-public-schools/675816/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

The Confederate General Whom All the Other Confederates Hated

James Longstreet became a champion of Reconstruction. Why?

by Eric Foner



During the summer of 1997, my wife and I picked up our 9-year-old daughter from a ballet camp in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and drove to the nearby Gettysburg National Military Park, which they had never seen and I barely remembered from a boyhood visit. The park's presentation of history

left much to be desired. The visitor center's small museum and the numerous monuments scattered across the battlefield conveyed a great deal about how the battle had been fought in July 1863, while offering almost no explanation of why the combatants were fighting. The park commemorated the Union's greatest military victory, but its emotional centerpiece was the disastrous southern assault known as Pickett's Charge, identified, in the romantic glow of nostalgia, as the "high-water mark" of the Confederacy. In labels accompanying the display of historic artifacts and images, the words *valor* and *glory* were almost always applied to soldiers who fought for the South, not for the Union.

That the place where the Civil War reached its turning point had become a shrine to the courage of those who fought to destroy the nation and preserve slavery should not have been a surprise. It has long been a commonplace that the South lost the Civil War but won the battle over historical memory. For decades, almost from the moment of surrender, the ideology of the Lost Cause shaped both popular and scholarly understanding of the conflict.

As Elizabeth R. Varon observes in *Longstreet: The Confederate General Who Defied the South*, her compelling new biography of James Longstreet, Robert E. Lee's second in command, the Lost Cause was far more than a military narrative. It provided a comprehensive account of the war's origins, conduct, and consequences. The conflict, in this telling, had little to do with slavery, but instead was caused, depending on which book you read, by the protective tariff, arguments over states' rights, or white southerners' desire for individual liberty. Confederate soldiers were defeated not by superior generalship or greater fighting spirit but by the Union's advantages in manpower, resources, and industrial technology. And the nation's victory was marred by what followed: the era of Reconstruction, portrayed as a time of corruption and misgovernment, when the southern white population was subjected to the humiliation of "Negro domination." This account of history was easily understandable and, like all ideologies, most convincing to those who benefited from it—proponents of white supremacy.

Just how widely and publicly memorialized the Lost Cause narrative remained more than 150 years later became glaringly clear in the fallout from tragic events such as the Charleston, South Carolina, church massacre in 2015; the deadly altercation in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017; and the

murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers in 2020. The legacy of slavery was propelled to center stage in today's culture wars. With unexpected rapidity, the Confederate battle flag came down from many public buildings. And dozens of monuments to southern military leaders—most of them erected in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to help provide historical legitimacy for the Jim Crow system of racial inequality, then being codified into law—were removed from their pedestals.

From the June 2021 issue: Why Confederate lies live on

Of course, omission, not simply falsehood, can be a form of lying (as Alessandra Lorini, an Italian historian, noted earlier this year in an excellent survey of debates about historical monuments, titled *Le Statue Bugiarde*, or, roughly, "Statues That Lie"). For many years, the Civil War was remembered as a family quarrel among white Americans in which their Black countrymen played no significant role—a fiction reflected in the paucity of memorials indicating that enslaved men and women had been active agents in shaping the course of events. Lately, some historical erasures have begun to be remedied. For example, a memorial honoring Robert Smalls, the enslaved Civil War hero who famously sailed a Confederate vessel out of Charleston Harbor and turned it over to the Union navy, and later served five terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, is now on display in Charleston's Waterfront Park.

Back when we visited, the Gettysburg battlefield was beginning to be swept up in changing views of history. The site is strewn with monuments, memorials, markers, and plaques—1,328 of them, according to the National Park Service, approximately a quarter of which memorialize Confederate officers and regiments. (Visitors sometimes ask guides whether all these monuments “got in the way of the battle.”) The Park Service and the Gettysburg Foundation, which jointly administer the site, were raising funds to build a new museum and visitor center. And in 1998, an equestrian statue was installed of James Longstreet, one of the Confederacy's most successful generals, present at the battle but never before memorialized at Gettysburg. Longstreet had warned Lee in vain that Pickett's Charge courted disaster. (To Lee's credit, after the attack, which left about half of the 12,500 Confederate troops dead or wounded, he declared, “All this has been my fault.”)

But the defeat at Gettysburg was not what explained Longstreet's exclusion from the pantheon of southern heroes. Rather, his conduct during Reconstruction was the problem—an assessment that was endorsed by the branch of the Sons of Confederate Veterans that commissioned his statue. The general, the group explained, was being honored for his "war service," not his "postwar activities." What were those activities? After the war, Longstreet had emerged as a singular figure: the most prominent white southerner to join the Republican Party and proclaim his support for Black male suffrage and officeholding. Leading the biracial Louisiana militia and the New Orleans Metropolitan Police, he also battled violent believers in white supremacy.

Among the challenges of writing the history of the Reconstruction period is avoiding the language devised by the era's contemporary opponents as terms of vilification. One such word is *scalawag*, applied to a white southerner who supported Reconstruction. White-supremacist Democrats viewed scalawags, who could be found in many parts of the South, as traitors to their race and region. The largest number were small farmers in up-country counties where slavery had not been a major presence before the Civil War—places such as the mountainous areas of western North Carolina and northern Alabama and Georgia. There, many white residents had opposed secession and more than a few had enlisted in the Union army. Even though supporting Reconstruction required them to overcome long-standing prejudices and forge a political alliance with Black voters, up-country scalawags saw Black male suffrage as the only way to prevent pro-Confederate plantation owners from regaining political power in the South. All scalawags were excoriated in the white southern press, but none as viciously as Longstreet.

Longstreet's life (1821–1904) spanned the era of sectional conflict, Civil War, and Reconstruction. Although unique in many ways, his postwar career illuminates both the hopes inspired by the end of slavery and the powerful obstacles to change. To write his biography requires a command of numerous strands of the era's complex history. Varon, a history professor at the University of Virginia, is the author of a general account of the conflict. She has also written books about the coming of the war and Lee's surrender at Appomattox, and is as adept at guiding the reader through the intricacies of Civil War military campaigns as she is at explaining the byzantine

factional politics of Reconstruction Louisiana. Her knowledge of the historical context is matched by her balanced appraisal of Longstreet's attitudes, personal and political.

Longstreet's unusual postwar political career, Varon insists, did not arise from lack of enthusiasm for slavery or doubts about southern independence. The owner of several slaves, he was a true believer in the Confederate cause. His grandfather was a plantation owner in Edgefield District, South Carolina, widely known as a center of cotton production, proslavery ideology, and secessionism. He was brought up by his uncle Augustus Longstreet, a prominent jurist who made very clear his belief in Black inferiority. Educated at West Point, Longstreet resigned from the U.S. Army in 1861 to join the Confederate war effort. Varon points out that unlike Lee, who on occasion recklessly risked casualties that his army could not afford by attacking Union forces, Longstreet preferred to fight on the defensive. This is why he advised Lee not to send Major General George E. Pickett's troops to assault the well-fortified Union lines at Gettysburg. But defenders of the Lost Cause—especially those who could never forgive Longstreet's strong embrace of political rights for former slaves—would blame him retroactively for the defeat at Gettysburg, accusing him of sabotaging Pickett's Charge by deliberately arriving late on the battlefield with his troops.

[Michel Paradis: The Lost Cause's long legacy](#)

Longstreet was at Lee's side in the tiny village of Appomattox Court House in April 1865 when a note arrived from Ulysses S. Grant demanding the surrender of Lee's army to avert further bloodshed. Longstreet, who had known Grant since their West Point days, was impressed by the leniency of his old friend's terms of surrender, which allowed Confederate soldiers to return home on "parole." They would remain unpunished, and even keep their personal weapons, so long as they did not take up arms against the nation or violate local laws.

In her earlier work on the Appomattox surrender, Varon offered a provocative interpretation of the long-term consequences of Grant's generosity, making a case that Lee's officers and many ordinary soldiers saw it as a kind of homage to Confederate bravery. Indeed, a substantial number,

she now writes, expected to receive another call to go to war for southern independence. They later argued that the radical expansion of Black rights forced on them during Reconstruction violated the terms of surrender. Those terms, they claimed, did not empower the Union to impose its will on the white South. Thus, resistance to Reconstruction did not violate the promise that paroled soldiers would obey the law.

Longstreet rejected any such interpretation of Lee's surrender, seeing in it "the flaw of hubris." He understood that Grant's terms were an effort to facilitate reconciliation (among white citizens) in the reunited nation and in no way justified political violence. In urging the white South to accept the reality of defeat, Longstreet made the obvious point that the losing party should not expect to impose its perspective on the victor. The white South, Longstreet declared in 1867, had "appealed to the arbitrament of the sword," and had a moral obligation to accept the outcome: "The decision," he wrote, "was in favor of the North, so her construction becomes the law." He believed Confederates should accept that the Union's victory demonstrated the superiority of a society based on free labor over one based on slavery, and seize the opportunity presented by Reconstruction to modernize the South. Longstreet's understanding of the lessons and consequences of Confederate defeat, Varon writes, helps explain the mystery of how a man who went to war to destroy the nation and protect slavery decided to join the Republican Party and work closely with Black political leaders during Reconstruction.

Soon after the surrender, Longstreet moved his family to New Orleans, where he established a cotton brokerage and became the president of an insurance company. Then, as now, New Orleans was a city with a distinctive history and an unusually diverse population. Occupied by Union forces early in the war, it harbored a large anti-secession white population. Its well-educated, economically successful free Black community was positioned to take a leading role in the Reconstruction project of revamping southern society, eliminating the vestiges of slavery, and establishing the principle of equal citizenship across racial lines. Many Black men—both those recently liberated and those already free before the war—were elected to public office after Congress, in 1867, ordered the creation of new governments in most of the former Confederate states. New Orleans, and by extension Louisiana, seemed to be a place where Reconstruction could succeed. But

the newly created Republican Party was beset by factionalism as various groups jockeyed for political influence. The city was also home to a belligerent population of former Confederates willing to resort to violence to restore their dominion over Black residents.

Very quickly, Longstreet plunged into Louisiana politics, having applied for a pardon from President Andrew Johnson, Abraham Lincoln's successor. This would enable him to hold public office and retain his property, except for slaves. Johnson refused, but in 1868, as provided in the Fourteenth Amendment, Longstreet received amnesty from the Republican Congress. Lee, who had appealed to Grant personally for immunity from charges of treason but declined to condemn the violence of the Ku Klux Klan, chastised Longstreet for recognizing the legitimacy of Congress's Reconstruction policy.

But Longstreet, as Varon relates, was adamant that he was anything but a traitor to the white South. The first requirement of reconciliation, he wrote, was to accept frankly that "the political questions of the war" had been settled and should be "buried upon the fields that marked their end." There was no avoiding Black suffrage and the participation of Black men in southern government. In 1868, Governor Henry Clay Warmoth, a former Union-army officer, created the biracial Metropolitan Police Force, where Longstreet went on to play a leading role. The sight of armed Black men patrolling the streets of New Orleans outraged much of the local white population. Longstreet was also appointed adjutant general of the state militia, which was racially segregated but had Black and white officers.

Over the course of eight years, Longstreet was active on a remarkable number of fronts in Reconstruction New Orleans. Grant appointed him to the lucrative position of customs surveyor. He sat on the New Orleans school board, which began operating the city's public-education system on a racially integrated basis. Meanwhile, the legislature enacted a pioneering civil-rights law, barring racial discrimination by transport companies and in some public accommodations. Louisiana Republicans split over this measure, with many white leaders—including Governor Warmoth, who vetoed it—opposing it as too radical, while Black officials embraced it. Realizing that Black voters constituted, to use a modern term, the Republican Party's "base," Longstreet aligned himself with the state's

activist Black leaders, including P. B. S. Pinchback, who served briefly as the country's first Black governor after Warmoth was impeached. Uniquely among prominent ex-Confederates, Longstreet frequently spoke out in favor of Black voting rights, further eroding his reputation among white Democrats. Being condemned as a Judas only bolstered his support for Reconstruction.

[From the December 2023 issue: The Black roots of American education](#)

Violence was endemic in Reconstruction Louisiana, and Longstreet played a major role in trying to suppress it. Terrorist groups such as the White League and the Knights of the White Camellia flourished. In 1874, after a series of disputed elections in Louisiana, the White League launched an armed assault on the state's Reconstruction government. In charge of defending the city, Longstreet took part in the fighting. But the militia and police were overwhelmed, and only the intervention of federal soldiers restored order. The event exposed a reality that recent scholars such as Gregory Downs have strongly emphasized: The presence of Union troops was essential to Reconstruction's survival. In 1891, anti-Reconstruction Democrats erected a stone obelisk paying tribute to what they called the Battle of Liberty Place. The accompanying text, added in 1932, celebrated the insurrection as an attempt to restore "white supremacy." The memorial was removed in 2017, two years after then-Mayor Mitch Landrieu had approved a city-council resolution to do so.



Illustration by Justin Jenkins

By 1875, the persistent violence had convinced Longstreet that Reconstruction should proceed more slowly and try not to “exasperate the Southern people”—by whom he meant white people. Meanwhile, in response to what Varon calls a giant “misinformation campaign” by southern newspapers and Democratic politicians that depicted the South as mired in government corruption, northern support was on the wane, an ominous sign for the future of Reconstruction. Longstreet essentially abandoned participation in Louisiana politics and moved his family to Georgia, where he soon became a leader of that state’s Republican Party.

With Reconstruction ending, southern Republicans searched for ways to stabilize their party and maintain a presence in southern government. In Georgia, Longstreet pursued a strategy different from the course he had embraced in New Orleans. Instead of cultivating alliances with Black leaders, he now worked more closely with white Republicans, many of them scalawags, who urged northern Republicans to help “southernize” the party

by boosting the power of its white members and limiting that of Black politicians. The “colored man,” Longstreet wrote to Thomas P. Ochiltree, a politician from Texas, had been “put in the hands of strangers who have not understood him or his characteristics.” By “strangers,” he was alluding to carpetbaggers (another of those tainted terms), northerners who took part in Reconstruction in the South and were derided by Democrats as merely seeking the spoils of office. Varon calls this letter “a blatantly racist piece of paternalist pandering.” Despite Longstreet’s efforts to reduce the political power of Black Republicans, white Democrats accused him of trying to “Africanize the South.” He remained popular, however, with Black Americans after Reconstruction ended, even winning praise from Frederick Douglass for his continued endorsement of Black suffrage and his condemnation of lynching. Longstreet also spent much of his time setting the record straight, as he saw it, regarding his wartime accomplishments. In 1896, he published a 690-page memoir, roundly denounced by adherents of the Lost Cause.

Varon offers a mixed verdict on Longstreet’s career. He could be arrogant and opportunistic, eager to bolster his own reputation. He benefited personally from the numerous positions to which he was appointed (in particular the patronage posts he enjoyed after the end of Reconstruction, including ambassador to the Ottoman empire and federal marshal for northern Georgia). But he also demonstrated remarkable courage, refusing to abandon the Republican Party, as many scalawags eventually did, or to change his mind about Black citizens’ political and civil rights.

Longstreet seems to have thought of himself, Varon writes, as “a herald of reunion.” And yet, she notes, his life exemplified the “elusiveness” of various kinds of postwar reconciliation—between white northerners and white southerners, between white and Black Americans, between upholders of the Lost Cause and advocates of a “New South.” His willingness to work closely with Black Americans, speak out in favor of their rights, and even lead them into battle in the streets of New Orleans overshadowed his military contributions to the Confederacy in the eyes of most white southerners. As a letter to a Georgia newspaper declared, when “it became a question of [the] negro or white man,” Longstreet chose the former and could never be forgiven. No statues of Longstreet graced the southern landscape.

Varon closes with a brief look at memorialization, focusing on the efforts of Longstreet's second wife in the 1930s and '40s to raise money to build a statue at Gettysburg. A formidable woman 42 years his junior, Helen Longstreet at age 80 worked as a riveter in a factory building bombers during World War II. The service of Black soldiers inspired her to defend Black voting rights, a stance much praised in the African American press. She died in 1962 at the age of 99. One wonders what she would have thought of the descendants of Confederate veterans who finally installed her husband on horseback at Gettysburg yet felt obliged as late as 1998 to dissociate themselves from his efforts to secure the equal rights of all Americans.

Longstreet believed that peaceful and just reunion would be possible only when the white South moved beyond the myth of the Lost Cause. The end of his erasure from historical memory highlights what a long and complicated evolution that has proved to be. Perhaps his restoration is also a sign that the time has come to shift attention from taking down old monuments to erecting new ones, including some to the Black and white leaders of Reconstruction, who braved white-supremacist violence in an effort to bring into being the “new birth of freedom” that Abraham Lincoln envisioned at Gettysburg.

This article appears in the [December 2023](#) print edition with the headline “A Traitor to the Traitors.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/12/james-longstreet-civil-war-confederate-general/675817/>

Sitcom

by Jericho Brown



A rabbit tried to kill Louise
Once when I was a kid.
I'm saying Louise now
But I'd have said Miss
Louise then, as she appeared
On our screens once a week
Wearing blues I haven't seen
Since, her long hair curled,
Combed out, and pushed up
Into a volume so thick, you felt
Both the power of an Afro and
The requirement of a relaxer
On a woman rounder than most
Of her penthouse neighbors,

Hair that wouldn't move
No matter how much she
Shook when she yelled
At her husband or when
Trapped by a man
Dressed as a rabbit who
Wielded a snub-nose .38 Special
We thought scary before
We knew what an AR-15
Could do. Miss Louise
Never sang, but she had a voice
That left you wondering
How singing might sound
On her. She was that beautiful.
And dark. They had a grown son.
She wasn't a young woman.
By the time I saw the Halloween
Rerun, the youngest men
In my hometown had organized
Themselves into colors, red and
Blue. They were patriots. Like
Patriots, they'd shoot. And
They'd shoot each other too.
They'd shoot you if you
Accidentally scuffed their shoes
At a club or a concert. They'd
Shoot driving by from their cars
Into houses and parks. They'd
Sell you something so good,
You'd sell our TV to get more
Of it. And I cannot say I didn't
Love them. They killed my first
Girlfriend—a stray bullet meant
For her brother—and I loved
Them. They killed my cousin,
But some of them were my
Other cousins, and I still loved

Us in all my fear of our gold
Teeth and oversize Dickies.
They'd kill me today, yet remain
A problem I mean to solve.
I'm grown now. I know Louise
Was the star of the show,
The leading lady. No writer
Would kill her off on a sitcom.
Murder is meant for real life.
Anybody can get a gun, but
Nobody kills Louise Jefferson.
There is a place where
Black people don't die,
A deluxe apartment in the sky.
All week, I worried about the next
Episode. Mornings, I'd dress
Myself and my little sister,
Making sure we wore nothing
That looked like the flag, and
When the appointed night fell,
The jokes were still funny,
The rabbit apprehended.
The white rabbit didn't murder
The Black lady, no, not on TV.

This poem appears in the [December 2023](#) print edition.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/12/jericho-brown-sitcom/675818/>

Departments

- [**Caleb's Inferno: December 2023**](#)
-

| [Next](#) | [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theatlantic.com/calebs-inferno-crossword-puzzle/>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |