Primary Sources on Reconstruction: Freedmen

A Freedmen’s View of Reconstruction

In a letter to the editor published in the November 29, 1865, issue of Weekly Anglo-African, Samuel Childress, a former slave in Nashville, expressed his opinions about presidential Reconstruction.

Mr. Editor:

You deserve to know our opinions respecting the policy of the President concerning the colored race. We are not acquainted with the whole if it – we do not feel confident to advise the President, nevertheless we cannot avoid having impressions of some sort respecting some things which have been done, and some things which have been left undone. To us the prospect seems gloomy. We have no permanent homes, and we see no prospect of getting any.

Most of us are accustomed to farm labor, and whatever skill we possess is chiefly in that direction. Land is dear, and few of us are able to buy it. We can hire out to our former masters, it may be said. It is true that we can do so to a considerate extent; but it is well known that the temper of our former masters has not greatly improved toward us.

Is it the intention of the Government to drive us to our worst enemies to ask for work, and that too upon the very soil which has been forfeited by the treason of the pretended owner? Our race has tilled this land for ages; whatever wealth has been accumulated in the South has been acquired mainly by our labor. The profits of it have gone to increase the pride and wickedness of our old masters, while we have been left in ignorance and degradation; all this oppression and wrong were committed under the United States Government, which stood ready with loaded guns and fixed bayonets to strike us down if we resisted our masters.

The small oppressor was the State; the great oppressor was the United States. When the nation conquered the rebels, the property of the latter was forfeited to the Government...

It cannot be denied that the colored race earned nearly all this property. The United States as High Sheriff of the Court of Heaven, held it in its hand, and could do with it what it pleased. Justice required that it should be paid over to the colored race who had been robbed of it. But what did it do with it? Let the Proclamations and pardons of the Government answer. It has gone back again to the very men whose hands are dripping with the blood of murdered prisoners, and whose cruelties cry to heaven for vengeance.

It would seem that it was regarded as a greater crime to be black than to be a rebel. If this is the ethics which is to prevail, then we have more judgments in store for the nation.

We think the Government ought in justice to the race to provide for their obtaining farms at such prices, and on such prices, and on such terms as would enable our people in a reasonable time to have a home of their own, on which they might hope to earn a living, and educate their children.

1. The purpose of this letter was for the author to express his opinion on presidential Reconstruction. After reading the letter, explain the author’s opinion on presidential Reconstruction. Who is this letter written toward?

2. Why did he view both the state and federal governments as oppressors of freedmen?
Black Codes

SECTION 1. That no negro shall be allowed to pass within the limits of said parish [neighborhood] without a special permit in writing from his employer. Whoever shall violate this provision shall pay a fine of two dollars and fifty cents, or in default thereof shall be forced to work four days on the public road, or suffer corporeal punishments as provided hereinafter.

SECTION 2. That every negro who shall be found absent from the residence of his employer after 10 o’clock at night, without a written permit from his employer, shall pay a fine of five dollars, or in default thereof, shall be compelled to work five days on the public road, or suffer corporeal punishments as provided hereinafter.

SECTION 4. That every negro is required to be in the regular service of some white person, or former owner, who shall be held responsible for the conduct of said negro.

SECTION 5. That no public meetings or congregations of negroes shall be allowed within said parish after sunset; but such public meetings and congregations may be held between the hours of sunrise and sunset, by the special permission in writing of the captain of patrol, within whose beat such meetings shall take place. This prohibition, however, is not intended to prevent negroes from attending the usual church services, conducted by white ministers and priests. Every negro violating the provisions of this section shall pay a fine of five dollars, or in default thereof shall be compelled to work five days on the public road, or suffer corporeal punishment as hereinafter provided.

1. What restrictions do the Black Codes place on the freedmen?

2. What punishments would the freedmen receive if they were to violate one of these laws?

3. What do these punishments say about the relationship between whites and African-Americans in the South after the Civil War?
Political Cartoon on Freedmen

"Is This a Republican form of government?", Harper's Weekly, September 2, 1876. Full Title: Is This a Republican Form of Government? Is This Protecting Life, Liberty, or Property? Is This Equal Protection of the Laws?"

1. What does the caption/title mean?

2. What objects/symbols do you see in the cartoon? List the three most prominent. What do they represent?

3. Summarize the point of the cartoon. Why was it created? What is the message?
Political Cartoon on the KKK

'The Union as it was. The lost cause, worse than slavery'. The White League and the Ku Klux Klan united. Cartoon by Thomas Nast, 1874

1. What does the caption/title mean?

2. What objects/symbols do you see in the cartoon? List the three most prominent. What do they represent?

3. Summarize the point of the cartoon. Why was it created? What is the message?