

The Significance of Reconstruction

If a mid-nineteenth century Rip Van Winkle had gone to sleep in 1857, the year of the Dred Scott decision, and awoke in 1877, it would probably take him quite a while before he would believe reports of what had happened during the years he was asleep. He would learn about a four year civil war that had freed four million slaves and destroyed half the South's farm implements and livestock; presidential assassination; ratification of constitutional amendments abolishing slavery, guaranteeing equal rights, and extending the vote to African Americans; presidential impeachment; and a disputed presidential election. But when he looked around him, much would appear unchanged. Southern representatives had returned to Congress, and they were similar to those who had served before the war. In each of the southern states, the Democratic party was securely in control. The overwhelming majority of African Americans would still be living in the South, working as farm laborers on land that they did not own.

Of course, our latter-day Rip Van Winkle would eventually recognize that despite continuities, fundamental changes had taken place. Chattel slavery had been defeated. The gang system of labor, enforced by the whip, was dead. Incredibly, about twenty percent of African Americans in the South managed to acquire land by 1880. And through the 1880s, sizeable numbers of African American men in the South would continue to vote. Real gains had been won, even though full equality remained an unfulfilled promise.

Like an earthquake, Reconstruction shook southern society's foundations, then subsided. But it left the national landscape forever changed. Out of Reconstruction came the first statewide public school systems in the South as well as hospitals, penitentiaries, and asylums. The first black institutions of higher learning were founded. Equally important, it was during Reconstruction that the institutional foundations of the modern black community in the South were laid, including independent black churches and a growing number of black landowners, businessmen, clergymen, and teachers. With the passage of the 14th Amendment, mandating equal rights for all citizens, and the 15th Amendment, forbidding states to deny the right to vote because of race, the possibilities for later attacks on discrimination had been established.

Reconstruction's failure also carried long-term negative consequences. Racism became more deeply embedded in American society. The South's economy became almost entirely dependent on a single crop, cotton, and an increasing number of Southerners were reduced to tenant farming. One political party, the Democratic party, monopolized political power. Violence kept immigrants from migrating to the region. The roots of half a century of southern poverty had been planted.

http://www.gilderlehrman.org/teachers/module.php?module_id=307