

The Reconstruction Era: The Beginning of the Fight
for Civil Rights for African Americans in America

Madison Roth
Senior Division
Historical Paper
Paper Length: 1,967

“One reads the truer deeper facts of Reconstruction with a great despair. It is at once so simple and human, and yet so futile. There is no villain, no idiot, no saint. There are just men; men who crave ease and power, men who know want and hunger, men who have crawled...”

- W.E.B. Du Bois

The Reconstruction Era is historically known as the time period after the Civil War. The Union, of the Northern States, and the Confederacy, of the Southern States, were attempting to come to an agreement as to how they could reconcile America to become one united country. Starting in 1863 and lasting until 1877, this era lasted fourteen years. After the Civil War ended, African Americans were granted citizenship and personal rights. White southerners were angered by this and were determined to keep the freedmen underneath their thumb. Due to these conflicting beliefs of equality, the government sided with the white supremacists, leading to the compromise of the Black Codes and the Ku Klux Klan, that still affects our society to this day.

America Prior to the Reconstruction Era

Before the Reconstruction Era broke loose, the American Civil War raged in the United States. The nation was divided into the North and the South. At this time, slavery was on the rise. The Northern states wanted to abolish slavery because they knew it went against human rights, but the Southern states were determined to keep the mentality of slavery alive and ongoing. This caused great conflict with the citizens of the United States.

As the war started to dwindle down, the South was losing its grip on slavery. To put a stop to the war and to abolish slavery in America, Congress passed the 13th Amendment.¹ This law stated the abolishment of slavery. Because this amendment passed, the South was forced to set slaves free. Pleased with this new law, the North decided to put an end to the war once and for all. On April 9th, 1865, the Confederacy leader, Robert E. Lee, surrendered to the Union leader, Ulysses S. Grant. This declared the end of the Civil War.² The South no longer had a grasp on thousands of slaves. Southerners were infuriated by this sudden shift in American society, and they vowed to keep slavery in America. The concept of keeping slavery from being permanently abolished was just the beginning to one of the most violent eras in America, the Reconstruction Era.

Southerners Cheat Out Freedmen With Black Codes

One of the actions taken by the Southerners to keep the idea of slavery alive was the Black Codes. These laws were passed by Democratic senators of the South. They defined blacks to newfound rights. These laws stated that freedmen could own property, get married, and could own their own farm, but the laws also refused them of other civil rights. Some of these limitations included freedmen only having the occupation of farmer or servant unless granted by a Judge, being unable to own firearms and liquor and not having the right to leave the state without permission from a Judge.³ Freedmen were

¹ McPherson, James, Dr. "A Brief Overview of the American Civil War." *civilwar.org*, www.civilwar.org/learn/articles/brief-overview-american-civil-war.

² "Grant, Reconstruction, and the KKK." *PBS*

³ "The Black Codes." *United States History*, www.u-s-history.com/pages/h411.html.

carefully watched over by Southerners and were limited with their newfound freedom. Although, to make it not seem as if these laws resembled slavery, white Southerners were to treat freedmen that were working with them with respect. This idea of respect did not settle well with white Southerners.

Southerners refused to give into the Black Code policies. Within the context of the Black Codes there were rules on how Southerners should treat freedmen with some sort of respect. If a freedmen decided to work for a Southerner, the white folk had to pay the worker and give him some kind of freedom.⁴ On the other hand, if the man in charge of the freedmen thought the freedmen was acting out, he was allowed to punish him. Southerners could not give freedmen unbearable tasks. Within the Black Codes, both white Southerners and freedmen had regulations to follow. If broken, the men would face some sort of punishment.⁵

Southerners and freedmen would face many different punishments if they ignored the guidelines of the Black Codes. For Southerners, they would face jail time. Minor crimes were glossed over and rarely considered. Southerners could also testify in trials. On the contrast, freedmen's punishments served worse. Minor crimes would get them either whipped or jail time. If judges thought the crime was atrocious enough, they would sentence the freedman to death. Freedmen could not testify in any trials unless asked.⁶ Fortunately, the Black Codes did not last long. Within a year of the Black Codes

⁴ "The Black Codes." *United States History*, www.u-s-history.com/pages/h411.html.

⁵ "Southern Black Codes." *Constitutional Rights Foundation*, www.crf-usa.org/brown-v-board-50th-anniversary/southern-black-codes.html.

⁶ "Southern Black Codes." *Constitutional Rights Foundation*, www.crf-usa.org/brown-v-board-50th-anniversary/southern-black-codes.html.

being passed, they were repealed. Angered by this, Southerners conceived a plan to still manage to keep freedmen under their control.

Ku Klux Klan: How It All Began

With the Black Codes no longer containing freedmen, Southerners concocted a plan to keep their eye on the freedmen. This was the beginning of the Ku Klux Klan. The group was formed in Tennessee in 1866. The reasoning behind the formation of the Ku Klux Klan was to eradicate the freedmen.⁷ Southerners disliked the abolishment of slavery. They came to the conclusion something needed to be done so they could show freedmen that just because the 13th Amendment had passed, it did not mean the cruelty against African Americans had come to an end. Hence, the Ku Klux Klan, also known as the KKK, was created.

The basis of the Ku Klux Klan was to eliminate the remaining freedmen that roamed the South. They dressed in white cloth sheets with white caps and masks. They described themselves as the ghosts of Confederate soldiers that came back to finish the job. The group was well known in the South and gained more followers with every passing day. There were people from every economical level and ages ranging from teenagers to elders.⁸ The reasoning behind the KKK was freedmen were considered “impudent” and deserved to be punished for their behavior. They inspired other groups, like the White League and the White Knights of Camellia.⁹

⁷ “Grant, Reconstruction, and the KKK.” *PBS*

⁸ “The Travails of Reconstruction.” *Library of Congress*, www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/civilwar/recon/

⁹ Nystrom, Justin A. “Knights of White Camellia.” *Know Louisiana*, edited by David Johnson, 31 Jan. 2013, www.knowlouisiana.org/entry/knights-of-the-white-camellia.

The Ku Klux Klan had many different methods of punishing freedmen. Their most well known method was lynching. Some other methods were beating freedmen to death, burning crosses on their property, burning down African American houses and schools, and even dismembering their bodies.¹⁰ These acts were outrageous to Northerners. Congress attempted to put a halt to the Ku Klux Klan, but the white supremacy laced within the government would not allow the KKK to entirely end. These decisions would greatly impact how Americans would view the government.

Government Role in White Supremacy

The government had a conflicting role in enforcing freedmen civil rights. With the government working against them, freedmen had nowhere to turn for help. All they could do was suffer the consequences of the white supremacist based government, which violated the very essence of the Constitution: freedom for all. The government let their bias against freedmen cloud their judgment. They allowed the Black Codes and the KKK to beat down on the freedmen. Those in power could've put a stop to this before it got way out of hand, but chose to stand in silence and do absolutely nothing.¹¹

The Black Codes had a powerful impact on the freedmen. The Codes restricted freedmen of their civil rights. Congress passed these laws in favor of white supremacy.¹² Because of them, freedmen lost rights that were fought for in the war. The 13th

¹⁰ Lewis, Danny. "The 1873 Colfax Massacre Crippled the Reconstruction Era." *The Smithsonian*, 13 Apr. 2016, pp. 7-11.

¹¹ Skutsch, Carl. "The History of White Supremacy in America." *The Rolling Stone*, 19 Aug. 2017, pp. 6-10.

¹² Jones, William P. Letter interview. 1860.

Amendment was broken on account of the Black Codes, but Congress did not declare them unconstitutional. Fortunately, the Black Codes were repealed and freedmen gained a few of their civil rights back.

Even with the Black Codes annulled, freedmen still had to fear the Ku Klux Klan. The KKK was never officially accepted into Congress, but it was known to the government. Instead of recognizing the KKK as a problem, Congress ignored the killing of freedmen. They watched as innocent people were getting slaughtered all around them. White supremacy and monetary influence were what mattered to Congress.¹³ Congress could have prevented the extremely detrimental ramifications of the Reconstruction Era. They could have spoken out against the Black Codes or took action against the KKK, but instead left freedmen on their own to fight for themselves.¹⁴ White supremacy was one of the leading causes of the Reconstruction Era and is still a major issue today.

Racism in America After the Reconstruction Era

The Reconstruction Era left American society scarred. Shortly after the end of the era, African Americans were granted civil rights, but were still not seen or treated as equals. Although, life for freedmen was slowly on its way to being better than what it used to be. Gradually, caucasian men were starting to be accepting of freedmen. American society stayed this way until the 1950's when segregation started to boom in the South once again. The Ku Klux Klan was back to killing innocent African Americans

¹³ Tunnell, Ted. "Coushatta Massacre." *Know Louisiana*, edited by David Johnson, 6 Jan. 2011, www.knowlouisiana.org/entry/coushatta-massacre.

¹⁴ Skutsch, Carl. "The History of White Supremacy in America." *The Rolling Stone*, 19 Aug. 2017, pp. 6-10.

and government was still laced with aspects of white supremacy. African Americans were once again being stripped of the civil rights they had fought so desperately to keep. This would then lead to the Civil Rights Movement.

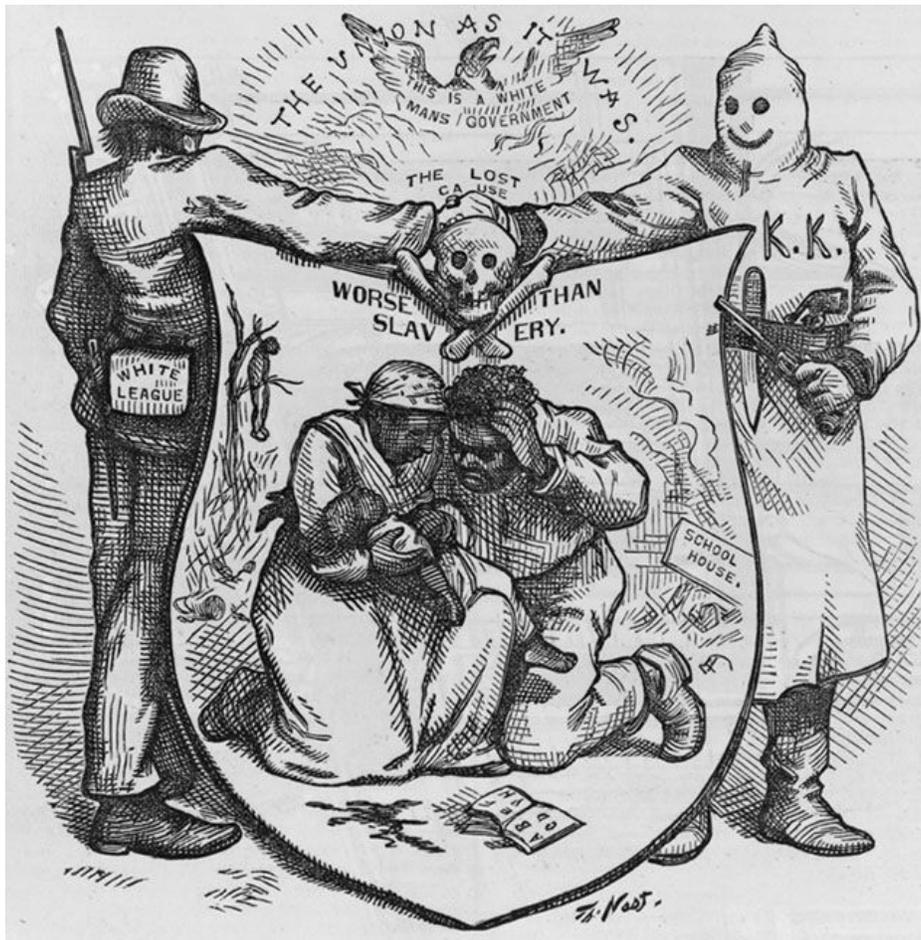
The Civil Rights Movement was the fight against segregation in America. Some of the effects of segregation were African Americans had separate bathrooms, seats on the bus and were not allowed in certain restaurants. These were known as the Jim Crow Laws. These laws kept African Americans separated from caucasians. Eventually, African American children were not allowed to go to school with caucasian children. During the movement, several riots took place. The majority of the actions taken during this time period was discriminatory towards African Americans, but it did not break any of the amendments. The Civil Rights Movement is a prime example of how, even after the Reconstruction Era, aspects of racism still remained. The Reconstruction Era and the Civil Rights Movement are two examples of racism in American history.

Racism is still common in America today, but has improved over the years. There are still encounters of racism that occur on occasion. An example of racism is a caucasian police officer shooting an innocent African American man. Unfortunately, the Ku Klux Klan is still around in society today. The KKK has died down tremendously, but traces of its power linger. Racism appears to be an issue that may never be resolved. People dedicate their lives to putting a stop to racism, placing their hearts and souls into receiving equal rights worldwide. The fight for equality has dated back to the Reconstruction Era and remains a continued fight to this day.

Conclusion

The Reconstruction Era was the time period after the Civil War intended for reuniting America. Instead, it birthed the Black Codes and the Ku Klux Klan. The Black Codes were laws dedicated to keeping restrictions on freedmen. When the Black Codes were repealed, Southerners decided to create a group known as the Ku Klux Klan. The cause of this group was to mistreat freedmen without breaking the 13th Amendment. The conflict of disgruntled Southerners who did not want slavery abolished led to the failing compromise of the Black Codes and the Ku Klux Klan. These actions lead to racism that affects society to this day.

Appendix A



Thomas Nast. "The Union as it was / The Lost Cause, worse than slavery."
Harper's Weekly, v. 18, no. 930 (24 Oct 1874), p. 878.

This drawing shows how the Ku Klux Klan and the White League came together to terrorize the freedmen during the Reconstruction Era.

Appendix B



“The Black Codes.” *United States History*. N.p, n.d. Web.

This photograph shows convicts who broke the Black Codes hard at work.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Battle of Fort Pillow, Tennessee. 15 Apr. 1893.

This journal was kept during the Battle of Fort Pillow. It explained the days of battle in greater depth. This was a battle fought by Ku Klux Klan members. The members attacked the African Americans stationed at Fort Pillow.

Freeman, Elsie. The Fight for Equal Rights: A Recruiting Poster for Black Soldiers in the Civil War. Social Education, 1992.

This book gave insight on how the Union recruited African Americans during the Civil War. It also talked about how the African Americans were treated in the North compared to how they were being treated down South.

Goodings, Robert and Ella. Letter interview. 1867.

This interview told the story of Robert and Ella Goodings. They were a caucasian couple that lived in the South. They recalled many encounters where they would see freedmen being beaten and tortured.

Jones, William P. Letter interview. 1860.

This interview was on William Jones. Jones was a freedmen who worked for a Southern. He confessed he was abused and overworked by his boss. This interview is proof that Southerners didn't let the 13th Amendment didn't stop them from mistreating freedmen.

Lewis, Danny. "The 1873 Colfax Massacre Crippled the Reconstruction Era." *The Smithsonian*, 13 Apr. 2016, pp. 7-11.

This magazine article was based on the Colfax Massacre. The Colfax Massacre was an attack by Klan members on freedmen. The attackers were arrested, but later released. This marked a historic turning point for the fight for civil rights within the African American community.

Nast, Thomas. "The Union as it was / The Lost Cause, worse than slavery." *Harper's Weekly*, vol. 18, no. 930, 24 Oct. 1874, p. 878.

This magazine mentioned how the Union couldn't do much to stop the actions taken in the South. The Union attempted to create peace in America, but the South refused.

Ogden, George. Letter interview. 1869.

This interview on George Ogden gave insight on how badly freedmen were treated during the Reconstruction Era. He states that he was abused multiple times by Southerners.

Skutsch, Carl. "The History of White Supremacy in America." *The Rolling Stone*, 19 Aug. 2017, pp. 6-10.

This magazine article talked about how white supremacy impacted the choices made in American society. It gives a timeline of the events in history that were prime examples of white supremacy.

Secondary Sources:

“The Black Codes.” *United States History*, www.u-s-history.com/pages/h411.html.

Accessed 11 Jan. 2018.

This website was about the Black Codes. It talked about what the Black Codes were, how they impacted freedmen, and they benefited Southerners.

Glaze, Robert L. “Nathan Bedford Forrest: Confederate General.”

***www.britannica.com*,**

www.britannica.com/biography/Nathan-Bedford-Forrest#toc323173.

Accessed 5 Dec. 2017.

This website gave the biography of Nathan Bedford Forrest. He was the first leader of the Ku Klux Klan. It talked about how he came into his position and why he supported the Klan.

“Grant, Reconstruction, and the KKK.” *PBS*

www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/grant-kkk/. Accessed 7

Dec. 2017.

This website was about two main aspects of the Reconstruction Era: President Grant and the Ku Klux Klan. President Grant and the KKK both played major roles in the Reconstruction Era.

History.com Staff. "The Compromise of 1877." *History.com*, A+E Networks, 2001, www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/compromise-of-1877. Accessed 28 Nov. 2017.

This website is dedicated to the Compromise of 1877. The Compromise of 1877 was the settlement of the North and South, which formally ended the Reconstruction Era.

McPherson, James, Dr. "A Brief Overview of the American Civil War."

***civilwar.org*,**

www.civilwar.org/learn/articles/brief-overview-american-civil-war. Accessed 11 Dec. 2017.

This website gives an overview of the Civil War. It talks about the causes and effects of the Civil War. It then transitions to the beginning of the Reconstruction Era.

"Nathan Bedford Forrest." *www.civilwar.org*,

www.civilwar.org/learn/biographies/nathan-bedford-forrest. Accessed 5 Dec. 2017.

This website gives background on Nathan Bedford Forrest. Some of the topics covered are his childhood, his leadership in the Ku Klux Klan, and his vision of how America should be ran.

Nystrom, Justin A. "Knights of White Camellia." *Know Louisiana*, edited by David Johnson, 31 Jan. 2013, www.knowlouisiana.org/entry/knights-of-the-white-camellia. Accessed 15 Dec. 2017.

This website gave insight on the White Knights of Camellia. The White Knights of Camellia were a group that worked closely with the Ku Klux Klan. They did most of their work in the Louisiana area.

"Reconstruction." *ushistory.org*, www.ushistory.org/us/35.asp. Accessed 13 Dec. 2017.

This website talked about the Reconstruction Era. It mentioned the key components that made this time period up.

"Reconstruction and Rights." *Library of Congress*, www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/civilwar/recontwo/. Accessed 13 Dec. 2017.

This website granted access to the rights of Americans during the Reconstruction Era. It explained how these rules and regulations impacted an average American's life during this time period.

"Southern Black Codes." *Constitutional Rights Foundation*, www.crf-usa.org/brown-v-board-50th-anniversary/southern-black-codes.html. Accessed 18 Dec. 2017.

This website was a more in depth version of the Black Codes. It stated specific restrictions of the Black Codes and placed them in certain categories.

“The Travails of Reconstruction.” *Library of Congress*,

www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/civilwar/recon/. Accessed 14 Dec. 2017.

This website gave an exclusive look into the Reconstruction Era. It described in greater terminology what the Reconstruction Era was all about and how it impacted American history.

Tunnell, Ted. “Coushatta Massacre.” *Know Louisiana*, edited by David Johnson, 6 Jan. 2011, www.knowlouisiana.org/entry/coushatta-massacre. Accessed 18 Dec. 2017.

This website was dedicated to the Coushatta Massacre. The Coushatta Massacre was an attack on freedmen by the White League. It was one of the bloodiest attacks on freedmen during the Reconstruction Era.

Ward, Andrew. “River Run Red: The Fort Pillow Massacre in the American Civil War.” *www.blackpast.org*, Viking Press, 2005,

www.blackpast.org/aah/fort-pillow-massacre-1864. Accessed 5 Dec. 2017.

This website gave insight on the Fort Pillow Massacre, which is associated with the Battle of Fort Pillow. It gave statistics in the massacre and a greater view into what happened at Fort Pillow.