

Voices of Reconstruction

The task of reconstructing the South was one that divided opinions almost as sharply as the Civil War itself. These condensed excerpts from historical documents and a famous speech highlight the hopes and fears that existed after the war.

Freedmen's Bureau Circular Number 1

This "circular" or notice was printed and distributed by the Freedmen's Bureau in North Carolina in July of 1865.

A great social revolution is going on. The united wisdom of all classes will be required to guide it to a successful issue [outcome].

**Circular
No. 1
Freedmen's
Bureau
July 1865**

The Negro has become free, but he has not become an object of indifference. His interests and those of the white man are the same. He cannot with safety be treated with neglect, or scorn, or cruelty. He is human, and is entitled to all the rights of a man.

Withhold from the Freedmen fair wages for their labor, deny them a right to a fair hearing before courts of justice, discourage their efforts to accumulate property, and to acquire learning, and you will drive from this state its real wealth – its productive labor.

On the other hand, give to the Freedmen that which is just and equal, give them all the facilities possible for improvement and education, and you will secure in the State its best supporters and its truest friends.

I invite the cooperation of Freedmen also. Without your help this Bureau can do but little for you. Your freedom imposes upon

you new duties. Some of you have families; it is your duty to support them. Some of you have aged parents and relatives, to whom liberty has come too late; it is your duty to minister to their comfort.

Some of you will meet with helpless orphans; it is your duty to supply to them, as far as you can, the places of their lost parents. It is your duty, in common to all men, to obey the laws of the land, to live honestly and uprightly.

The Freedmen's Fear

This view of the situation of the freed slaves is from a statement of the Convention of the Colored People of Virginia. It is dated August 1865. The document carries the title, "An Address to the Loyal Citizens and Congress of the United States."

Well, the war is over, the rebellion is "put down," and we are declared free! The president has, in his efforts at the reconstruction of the civil government of the States, left us entirely at the mercy of these subjugated but unconverted rebels.

We know these men – know them well – and we assure you that, with the majority of them, loyalty is only "lip deep," and that their professions of loyalty are used as a cover to the cherished design of getting restored to their former relations with the Federal Government, and then, by all sorts of "unfriendly legislation," to render the freedom you have given us more intolerable than the slavery they intended for us.

We warn you that our only safety is in keeping them under Governors of the *military* persuasion until you have so amended the Federal Constitution that it will prohibit the States from making any distinction between citizens on account of race or color.

The White Planter's View

A newspaper editor from Louisiana gave this view of matters in 1866 during testimony to a Congressional committee.

I think if the whole regulation of the Negroes, or freedmen, were left to the people of the communities in which they live, it will be administered for the best interest of the Negroes as well as of the white men.

I think there is a friendly feeling on the part of the planters towards the freedmen. They are not held at all responsible for anything that has happened.

In talking with a number of planters, I remember some of them telling me they were succeeding very well with their freedmen, having got a preacher to preach to them and a teacher to teach them, believing it was for the interest of the planter to make the Negro feel reconciled [satisfied]; for, to lose his services as a laborer for even a few months would be very disastrous.

The sentiment prevailing is, that it is for the interest of the employer to teach the Negro, to educate his children, to provide a preacher for him, and to attend to his physical wants. Leave the people to themselves, and they will manage very well.

The "Atlanta Compromise" Speech

The decades after the Reconstruction era saw a pattern of segregation begin to grow in the South. Booker T. Washington urged a strategy that emphasized economic progress for blacks, rather than a push for social equality. He believed segregation would fall away by itself as blacks became a bigger force in the economy. In a speech in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1895, the famous educator explained his ideas. Selections from the speech are condensed here.

No race can prosper until it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. Nor should we permit our grievances to over-shadow our opportunities. In all things that are purely social, we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.

There is no defense or security for any of us except in the highest intelligence and development of all.



If anywhere there are efforts tending to curtail [hold back] the fullest growth of the Negro, let these efforts be turned to encouraging him.

We shall constitute one-third and more of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one-third of its intelligence and progress. Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you in pulling the load upward or they will pull, against you, the load downward.

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than artificial forcing.

It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of those privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera house.

Group Discussion: *Summarize the main points made in each selection. What do they reveal about the challenges that faced the South – and the nation – in the decades after the Civil War?*

Permission to Copy for Classroom Use

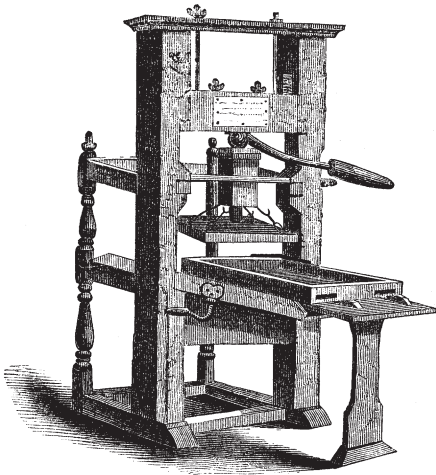
Teachers and students are welcome to download this **History in Their Own Words** selection, free of charge, for noncommercial, educational use. Teachers are welcome to make photocopies of these reading selection pages as needed for students in their own classes. We ask that:

- * You make no changes or additions of any kind to the pages.
- * You leave the copyright information visible on all pages and copies.

You may not post these materials in any form on any other web site or server, or copy their content for use in any other form or publication, whether print or electronic, without written permission from Fasttrack Teaching Materials.

Most of these primary source readings are condensed from the original texts to make them more easily accessible to students. They were chosen for the ideas, values, and insights they offer to young people seeking to understand America's past, the world they live in, and themselves. The selections use the original author's words except where condensation or modern usage requires very slight editing.

PDF files - downloading and printing tips



Internet browsers can print an open PDF file page directly, but the layout and spacing are not always exactly correct.

For best results, right click on a PDF file link that you want. Choose "Save Link As" or "Save Target As" to download the PDF file to your desktop or to a folder. Double click on that downloaded file, so it will open in the regular PDF reader that is on your computer.

Print it "actual size" (100%) from the PDF reader and it should look exactly right!

**For copyright questions, please contact Fasttrack Teaching Materials at
ftm.contact@verizon.net**