

# The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Seventy

## Reconstruction

### LESSON IDEA

To reveal some of the less-understood aspects of Reconstruction, and to show the enduring damage — to relations between races, between the North and the South, and between citizens and their government — which Reconstruction caused.

### PREPARATION

Review last week's lesson, which described the personalities and issues involved in the political maneuvering which followed the War Between the States. Read the Fourteenth Amendment and look up the voter restrictions, if any, in your state.

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**W**HEN THE WAR Between the States ended, a total way of life had been destroyed in the South. Imagine, if you can, that you are a Confederate officer returning home. As you ride up a long line of moss-covered oaks toward the big white house you call home, an eerie silence greets you. No servant comes to take your horse, no one crosses the porch to welcome you. The shutters are closed; the door locked. Your family has fled to escape the Union armies.

Weeds have overgrown the flower beds and the vegetable garden where once okra, peppers, cabbage, onions, eggplant, peas, and squashes were grown to feed the family and the hundred slaves your father owned. Behind the house, you stop for a few minutes beside the log house where slaves had done the family washing and at the old kitchen with its empty brick ovens and cold hearth. You move on to the smokehouse where hams and sides of bacon were once cured. The rafters are empty now, but

you remember the smell of smoking pork and burning wood. Farther on, there is a poultry yard, pigeon roost, and dove cote — all empty, the plump occupants devoured by the invading army that lived off the land. You pass the barn and notice the silence when there is no neigh of a horse or braying of a mule. The stock has been taken for supply wagons of a Union army or as mounts for Union cavalry. In the orchard you find hard green knobs on the branches of peach trees and realize there is a ray of hope; something is still growing.

Walking back to the house, you wonder what to do. You have land, but no money to buy stock, or seeds, or hire labor to farm it. As you gaze down the tree-lined lane you see a mule cart driving up to the entrance. In the cart is one of your former slaves with his wife and children. You talk of the past, of happier times, and then of the present. He is as confused as you are. You are a landowner without labor to work your fields. He is a laborer without land to work on, or a home in which to live.

You suggest planting cotton on shares, borrowing money if necessary, and dividing the profit evenly after the crop is sold. He accepts the offer and moves his family into one of the cabins behind the main house.

The sharecropper plan works well for both of you. Each year you have enough to buy more supplies for the next planting and keep up the interest payments on your loans; your former slave has enough to feed his family and a little extra to put aside for the purchase of land of his own, perhaps an acre or two of the surplus you now have.

**B**UT THERE IS one stumbling block to this promise of a better future. You suddenly learn that you no longer have any power over the property you own, the taxes you must pay, or the interest you are charged on the money you must borrow to make improvements. You have lost your right to vote or to hold any office in the government that will pass laws concerning your property. Your former slave, however, is exhorted to vote. He can be elected county judge or state senator – even though he cannot even spell the word “county.” And he can help decide to raise your taxes or to confiscate your land.

A radical Republican Congress in Washington has stripped you of all rights as a citizen of a sovereign state. You are now to be treated as a war criminal in a conquered territory. Why? [*Discuss possible explanations for the North’s harsh attitude.*] The war is over, the South has surrendered. Are the Northerners afraid that slavery will be reestablished? That hardly seems possible. Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves in the Confederate States two years before the war ended. And within eight months after Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, new state legislatures – representatives you and other Confederate soldiers and landowners elected – approved the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery in all states of the Union. Surely that was an act of good faith and cooperation on the part of the losers.

The newspapers tell you the question now is not who is free, but who shall vote. The Thirteenth Amendment, while outlawing slavery, did not automatically give the former slaves the right to vote. Yet, no one – white or black – ever had that right automatically in any state in the Union. Voting had always been a restricted privilege. A man had at least to be able to read and write. Those who paid the expenses of government through their taxes had no intention of allowing legislatures to be turned into welfare agencies for the shiftless who refused to work or pay taxes. That made sense, didn’t it? [*Discuss the changes that have been made in this fundamental principle of Americanism. Explain how unrestricted voting, as we know it today, has greatly increased welfare spending. Describe the endless circle that results when persons seeking “free money” vote for politicians who promise more government benefits, and politicians keep prom-*

*ising more benefits to ensure more votes.*]

For nearly one hundred years, determining voter qualifications had been a *state*, not a federal prerogative. And you are worried about the consequences of the central government seizing this right from the states. Will Washington soon be telling you what prices you can charge for your goods or what wages you must pay?

Like most Americans of the 1860’s you agreed with Stephen Douglas, who had said in his pre-war debate with Lincoln: “. . . it is neither desirable nor possible that there should be uniformity in the local institutions and domestic regulations of the different States of this Union. Uniformity in local and domestic affairs would be destructive of State rights, of State sovereignty, or personal liberty and personal freedom.”

**B**UT THERE ARE now strong voices in the national Congress demanding that uniform national standards be set – no matter how much freedom is sacrificed. They clothed this demand in Constitutional terms, added vengeance, and called it the Fourteenth Amendment. You remember the anger you felt when you first read the text of the proposed amendment. All states were forbidden to pass laws that would interfere with the rights and privileges of any citizen; and you knew that could forbid *any* restrictions on the right to vote. All Southern political and military leaders, like yourself, were barred from holding political office. All Southern states were threatened with a loss of representation in the national Congress if they denied voting rights to anyone – except (and this is what seemed so unfair) to those who had helped the war in any way. This meant that your state would be penalized if it denied the ballot to its white illiterates or its

#### FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The effect of the Fourteenth Amendment is still being felt today. A study of Supreme Court decisions, beginning in the 1930’s, will show that this amendment is being used as the legal basis for transferring political power from the states to the federal government in Washington. We recommend sending for Manion Forum broadcasts (twenty-five cents each), which give a detailed analysis of the Fourteenth Amendment. Write Manion Forum, St. Joseph Bank Building, South Bend, Indiana.

former slaves, but not if it denied that same privilege to its educated landowners who were loyal to the South during the War Between the States.

A fourth provision concerned war debts: the North's were to be paid in full; the South's were not to be paid at all. (Those who sold food or supplies to the Confederacy on credit thus lost all hope of being repaid.) The terms seemed so unfair that the amendment was rejected by California, Delaware, Kentucky, and Maryland, and ten of the Southern states.

But the radicals of the North meant to have their vengeance — one way or another. Against the wishes of President Johnson and over the protests of other Northern senators, they passed a series of Reconstruction Acts in 1867. These questionable acts abolished the state governments in the ten Confederate State which had rejected the Fourteenth Amendment and denied to all those who had helped the South in any way during the war the right to vote or hold office. But the most extreme feature required a military dictatorship to rule the South, and to set up new state governments that would ratify the Fourteenth Amendment.

**S**ENATOR DOOLITTLE of Wisconsin, an opponent of the Act, described exactly what this meant when he said: "The people of the South have rejected the constitutional amendment [*the fourteenth*], and therefore we will march upon them and force them to adopt it at the point of a bayonet, and establish military power over them until they do adopt it."

That was precisely the intent of the radicals in Congress. And there was nothing you, as an ex-Confederate officer, could do except watch as the reins of government passed to the only people allowed to hold office — former slaves totally ignorant of government, Southern draft dodgers and Army rejects, Northern wastrels and con artists who came South to make their fortunes by picking the bones of the broken and helpless Confederacy. The Southern riffraff you could call "scalaways," and the Northerners "carpetbaggers" (because all the worldly possessions of each seemed to be carried in a traveling bag made of Brussels carpet in bright, flowery designs); but words were your only weapons. Legally, you had no way of countering the

corruption and lawlessness that enveloped you. [*Ask family members to describe their reactions to such a situation.*]

**T**O COMPLETE our story, we need only to refer to some of the recorded accounts of the incredible corruption fastened upon the South during this period. Historian John Clark Ridpath describes the situation in Alabama in these words:

"The first lieutenant-governor . . . was an illiterate Federal soldier from Wisconsin who was stranded in the State after the war by illness, and cared for by the family of Jeff Thompson, former Confederate Secretary of the Treasury, whose kindness he repaid by stealing the Secretary's private papers, which he offered to sell back for \$10,000. Failing to get this sum, he subsequently disposed of them to Thompson's lawyer for \$300. The whole matter was exposed before his election, but it had no effect. The secretary of state was from Maine, the treasurer was from New York, the auditor was from Wisconsin, the superintendent of industrial resources was from Pennsylvania, the chief justice was from New York. Most of the State Legislature was made up of aliens and negroes . . . No less than twenty members had been indicted or convicted . . . for various crimes from theft to murder. The Legislature passed special acts to relieve members from the penalties for stealing, adultery, bigamy, arson, riot, illegal voting, assault, bribery, and murder. The Speaker of the House boasted that he received \$1700 for engineering a bill through the House. A lottery promoter paid \$6000 to get his charter through the Legislature. One Senator had \$35,000 put into his hands for distribution to carry through the passage of a railroad bond issue. He kept the larger part of it, however, for himself. Another received from a railroad company, for some service, enough to start a small bank. Fights were frequent in the House; on one occasion a member chased another to the secretary's desk, trying to shoot him, but was prevented by the secretary.

"Some of the laws passed failed in their object because of mistakes in spelling. In a communication from the lieutenant-governor, thirty-nine such mistakes were found. Finally it was found necessary to employ a spelling-clerk to rewrite the bills submitted by the members."

To the already impoverished taxpayers of the South, the Reconstruction governments added new burdens by their unprecedented spending sprees. In South Carolina, as described by Ridpath, "the House of Representatives, the majority of the members of which were negroes, spent \$95,000 in the furnishing of its chamber, for the previous furnishing of which less than \$5,000 was paid. Desks were purchased at \$125 each, chairs at \$60, mirrors at \$600, clocks at \$600, and cuspidors at \$8 each. From 1868 to 1872, \$200,000 was expended for furniture for the legislative chambers alone, with bills for incidentals amounting on one session to \$350,000, \$125,000 of which was spent for a free-lunch counter and bar, the members paying nothing for the food, liquors, and cigars consumed. The printing bills averaged more than \$150,000 a year. Franchises of all kinds were sold and the credit of the State pledged for all sorts of enterprises which were promoted by combinations of legislators and officials."

The situation was so bad that even a Northern newspaperman who labeled himself a Liberal Republican was forced to admit that Negroes were being schooled by Reconstruction in corruption, not citizenship. James S. Pike, a member of the editorial staff of the *New York Tribune*, visited the South Carolina legislature in 1873 and wrote: "The mass of black representatives, however ignorant in other respects, seem to be well schooled in the arts of corruption. They knew precisely what they were about and just what they wanted. This is the kind of moral education the ignorant blacks of the State are getting in their legislatures. The first lessons were, to be sure, given by whites from abroad, but the success of the carpetbaggers has stimulated the growth of knavish native demagogues who bid fair to surpass their instructors."

### ***Concluding Thought***

In the end, the Northern radicals had their way; the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified by the Reconstruction legislatures; the federal usurpation of power was complete; new state constitutions, rewritten to meet the approval of the legal tyrants, were drafted and approved. The right of the state to determine its own local and domestic affairs was lost; a constitutional revolution was begun. It is true that slavery in the South was abolished; but the bitterness and distrust that were born of Reconstruction — not the war,

or even the issues of slavery or secession — endure even today.

### **DURING THE WEEK**

Discuss the election process and voting rights in your state. Some questions to consider: Who should vote? Should there be an age restriction? What effect do laws passed by the state or national congress have on your freedom? On ownership of property? On your taxes?

If the children in your family are too young for such a discussion, do some research on Southern plantation life. Pictures would be helpful. Explain how each plantation was almost a complete community unto itself. The Augusta Stevenson book on the boyhood of *Booker T. Washington* would make interesting and explanatory reading for children from grades three to eight. Copies are available hardbound (\$2.95) from most American Opinion Bookstores, or directly from American Opinion, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178.

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### **The Family Heritage Series**

Editor: Wallis W. Wood

Staff Writers

Sally Humphries and Frank York

For parents who wish to teach their children the true meaning of liberty, responsibility, and our Americanist heritage.

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