

Fifteenth Amendment a change to the Constitution, ratified in 1870, declaring that states cannot deny anyone the right to vote because of race or color, or because the person was once a slave

23.4 Southern Reconstruction

Under the terms of the Military Reconstruction Act, the U.S. Army returned to the South in 1867. The first thing it did was begin to register voters. Because Congress had banned former Confederates from voting, the right to vote in the South was limited to three groups: freedmen, white Southerners who had opposed the war, and Northerners who had moved south after the war.

The South's New Voters African Americans made up the South's largest group of new voters. Most black voters joined the Republican Party—the party of Lincoln and emancipation.

White Southerners who had not supported secession were the next largest group. Many were poor farmers who had never voted before. In their eyes, the Democratic Party was the party of wealthy planters and secession. As a result, they also supported the Republican Party. Southern Democrats were appalled. They saw any white man who voted Republican as a traitor to the South. Democrats scorned such people as scalawags, or worthless scoundrels.

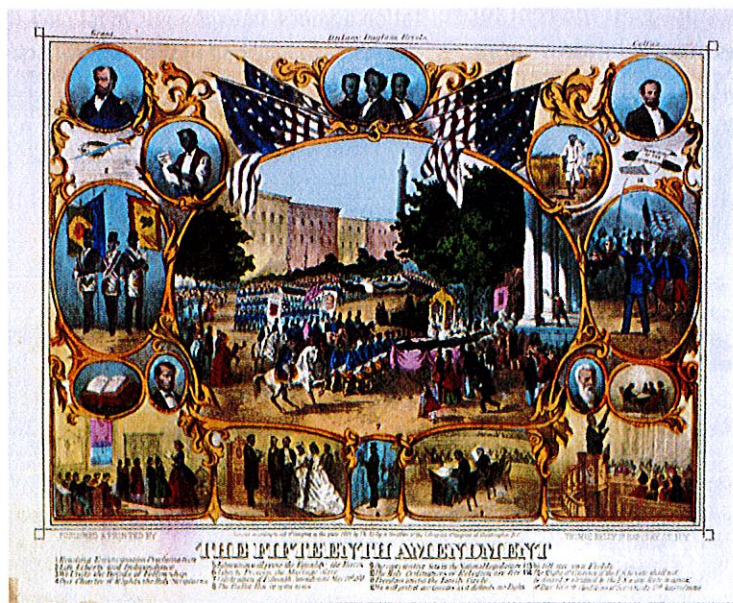
The last group of new voters were Northerners who had moved south after the war. Southerners called these newcomers “carpetbaggers” after a type of handbag used by many travelers. They saw carpetbaggers as fortune hunters who had come south to “fatten” themselves on Southerners’ misfortunes.

The Election of 1868 New voters in the South cast their first ballots in the 1868 presidential election. The Republican candidate was former Union general Ulysses S. Grant. Grant supported Reconstruction and promised to protect the rights of African Americans in the South. His Democratic opponent, Horatio Seymour, promised to end Reconstruction and return the South to its traditional leaders—white Democrats.

Seymour won a majority of white votes. Grant, however, was elected with the help of half a million black votes. The election's lesson to Republicans was that if they wanted to keep control of the White House and Congress, they needed the support of African American voters.

The Fifteenth Amendment In 1869, at President Grant's urging, Congress passed the **Fifteenth Amendment**. This amendment said that a citizen's right to vote “shall not be denied . . . on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” It guaranteed every male citizen the right to vote, regardless of race.

This poster—which pictures students, soldiers, preachers, teachers, and lawmakers—celebrated the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment.



With the passage of this amendment, most abolitionists felt their work was done. The American Anti-Slavery Society declared the Fifteenth Amendment to be “the capstone and completion of our movement; the fulfillment of our pledge to the Negro race; since it secures to them equal political rights with the white race.”

New State Constitutions When the army finished registering voters, Southern Reconstruction got underway. Across the South, delegates were elected to constitutional conventions. About a fourth of those elected were African Americans.

The conventions met and wrote new constitutions for their states. These constitutions were the most progressive, or advanced, in the nation. They guaranteed the right to vote to every adult male, regardless of race. They ended imprisonment for debt. They also established the first public schools in the South. The Georgia constitution stated that these schools should be “forever free to all the children of the state.” However, under the new state constitutions, these schools were open only to whites.

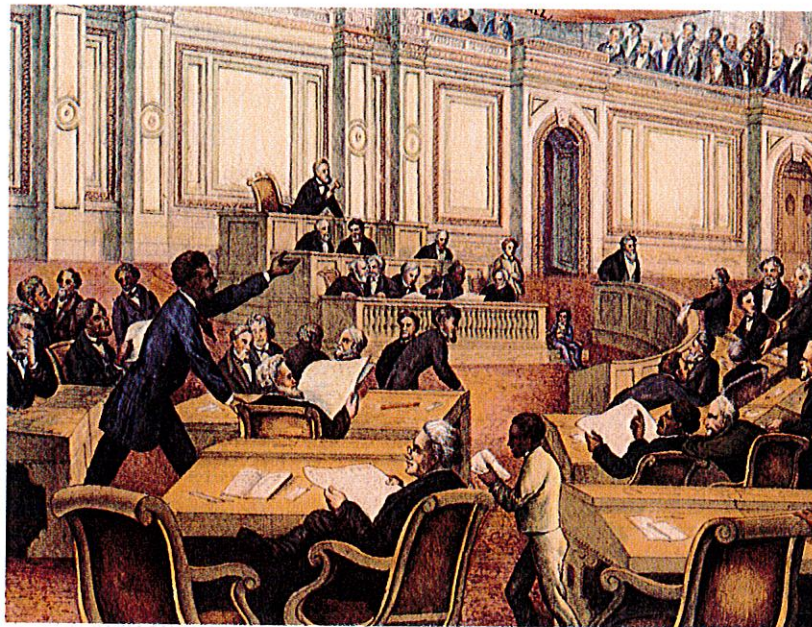
New State Governments Elections were then held to fill state offices. To the dismay of Southern Democrats, a majority of those elected were Republicans. About a fifth were African Americans.

The South’s new state governments quickly ratified the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. By 1870, every Southern state had finished this final step of Reconstruction and rejoined the Union.

Next, Southern governments turned to the task of rebuilding. Work was begun on damaged roads, bridges, and railroads. Schools and hospitals were built. To pay for these projects, state legislatures raised taxes. Between 1860 and 1870, taxes in the South increased by up to 400 percent.

African Americans in Office About a fifth of the South’s new officeholders were African Americans. Blacks served in every Southern legislature and held high offices in three states. Twenty-two African Americans represented their states in Congress—20 in the House and 2 in the Senate. After watching these representatives, many of whom had been born slaves, Pennsylvania congressman James G. Blaine said,

The colored men who took their seats in both the Senate and House did not appear ignorant or helpless. They were as a rule studious, earnest, ambitious men, whose public conduct . . . would be honorable to any race.



During Reconstruction, many African Americans were elected to the House of Representatives and the Senate. Robert B. Elliott, a congressman from South Carolina, delivers a speech in support of civil rights.