Volume II: 1865–Present

The Way We Lived

Essays and Documents in American Social History

Frederick M. Binder / David M. Reimers

VOLUME II

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Essays and Documents in American Social History

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CREDITS

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PREFACE

History courses have traditionally emphasized the momentous events of our past. Wars and laws, technological advances and economic crises, ideas and ideologies, and the roles of famous heroes and infamous villains have been central to these studies. Yet, what made events momentous is the impact they had on society at large, on people from all walks of life. The growing attention to social history is in part a recognition that knowledge of the experiences, values, and attitudes of these people is crucial to gaining an understanding of our past.

Thus America's history, as reflected in the everyday lives of its people, constitutes the focus of these volumes. In preparing a work of selected readings, we have had to make choices as to which episodes from our past to highlight. Each of those included, we believe, was significant in the shaping of our society. Each of the essays is followed by original documents that serve several purposes. They provide examples of the kinds of source materials used by social historians in their research; they help to illuminate and expand upon the subject dealt with in the essays; and they bring the reader into direct contact with the people of the past—people who helped shape, and people who were affected by, the "momentous events."

Our introduction to each essay and its accompanying documents is designed to set the historical scene and to call attention to particular points in the selections, raising questions for students to ponder as they read. A list of suggested readings has been included after each of the major divisions of the text. We trust that these volumes will prove to be what written history at its best can be—interesting and enlightening.

F. M. B.
D. M. R.

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PART I

The Emergence of an Urban, Industrial Society

1865–1920

AFTER THE CIVIL WAR, AMERICANS TURNED THEIR ATTENTION to building a new social order for the defeated Confederacy. Former slaves hoped for a society in which they would be treated as equals and would enjoy the fruits of their labor. Following the stormy Reconstruction years, however, white Southern Democrats again took control of their state governments, imposing severe limitations on the rights of blacks. Later, around the turn of the century, Southern whites, with Northern compliance, relegated blacks to second-class citizenship, segregated them in public life, and removed them from political affairs. For most blacks the postwar labor system closely resembled the pre–Civil War one; by law, they were free, but their lives were not much improved over what they had been under slavery.

Elsewhere, westward expansion accelerated. The Indians of the Great Plains found their land coveted, just as the Cherokees and other eastern Indians had years before, and ultimately were no more successful in stopping the advance of white miners, cattlemen, and farmers. Even as the last of the Indian wars were coming to an end, Native Americans found themselves confined to reservations and subjected to pressures to reject their tribal culture and pattern their lives after those of white Americans.

In the nation's cities and towns, industrialization continued its rapid pace after 1865. The social and economic changes of this period were so substantial that by World War I a majority of Americans lived in urban areas, earning their living in factories and businesses. For those engaged in manual labor, working conditions were often extremely hazardous. A growing number of the new urban wage earners were women, but they were confined to certain "female" occupations, such as stenography, typing, teaching, retail selling, and nursing.

As in the years before the Civil War, people immigrated from Europe in search of new opportunities in the United States. Many immigrants continued to arrive from England, Ireland, and Germany, but after 1896 the majority of newcomers were from eastern and southern Europe. For the most part, they settled in the growing industrial cities of the Northeast and Middle West, but immigrants could be found in all regions of America, where they strove to adapt to new and sometimes strange and hostile environments.

Europeans were not the only people on the move in these years. Southern blacks, facing poverty and racial discrimination at home, began to emigrate north around 1880. When World War I curtailed Eu-

ropean immigration and created a labor shortage in the nation's industries, the black move north dramatically increased. Although these migrants usually found a better life in their new settings, they nonetheless discovered that northern cities had their own forms of racial discrimination.

The readings that follow explore the major changes noted above. The essays and documents focus on the new Southern labor system, the settlement of the last frontier, the westward movement's impact upon Indian life and culture, the consequences of industrial growth for both men and women workers, and the migration of peoples from abroad and of blacks from the South to the North. The section concludes with a look at how America's participation in World War I affected the lives of its soldiers and civilians.

CHAPTER 1

Reconstruction and Free Plantation Labor

The Civil War eliminated slavery but left undecided the question of what agrarian labor system would replace it in the devastated South. Peter Kolchin's essay "Free Plantation Labor" describes how Alabama freedmen (former slaves) and their erstwhile masters established relationships by which the productivity of the land could be maintained. As you read, consider the aspirations, fears, and misunderstandings that governed the behavior of blacks, Southern whites, and Southern-based representatives of the federal government working for the Freedmen's Bureau. Although salaried agricultural labor and tenant farming made an appearance on Alabama plantations, it was sharecropping that came to dominate agriculture in that state and much of the rest of the South. Sharecropping ultimately proved to be an unproductive system of land management, crushing black farmers and their families under a yoke of debt and poverty for generations to come. Yet, as Kolchin's essay

points out, both blacks and whites initially found the system attractive. Why was this so?

The first document is a letter from a freed slave to his former master. The letter speaks eloquently of the conditions and humiliations that he had endured in the past and also of the better life that he had built for himself. How would you describe the general tone of the letter?

Although even the most tenacious plantation owners recognized that slavery was finished and that a new system of labor was required, few white Southerners were ready to accept the freedmen as social and political equals. In 1865–66, Southern politicians established Black Codes to ensure the maintenance of white supremacy. The second document is the Black Code of St. Landry's Parish, Louisiana. To what extent does this document support the claim of some Northern Radical Republicans that the Black Codes amounted to nothing less than the continuation of slavery? Reading the code will help explain part of the motivation for the passage of the Reconstruction amendments and laws by the Republican-controlled federal government. It will also provide clues to the fate in store for Southern blacks after 1877, when the last federal troops were removed from the South and Reconstruction came to an end.

The third document consists of letters from two Northern schoolteachers, who were among the hundreds who went south after the war under the auspices of the Freedmen's Bureau and several private philanthropic agencies. What do these documents and the Kolchin essay indicate about the goals of the newly freed blacks? What actions did the freedmen take to achieve their objectives?

Beginning in the 1890s the freedmen lost the rights and opportunities they had won during the ten years following the Civil War, as Southern whites began systematically to disenfranchise blacks and to institutionalize segregationist and discriminatory practices. Whites prohibited blacks from voting, segregated them in public life, denied them justice in the courts, and placed their children in underfunded "colored schools." Though blacks never accepted these conditions as permanent, over half a century would pass before their march toward full equality resumed with the promise of significant success.

ESSAY

Free Plantation Labor

Peter Kolchin

I

Despite the migration of Negroes to Alabama's towns and cities, the most important question to blacks in 1865 concerned the role of the rural freedmen. The end of the Civil War found general confusion as to their status. "You have been told by the Yankees and others that you are free," one planter declared to his Negroes in April 1865. "This may be so! I do not doubt that you will be freed in a few years. But the terms and time of your ultimate freedom is not yet fully and definitely settled. Neither you nor I know what is to be the final result." Even if free, the Negroes' position in society remained to be determined. Presumably they would continue to till the land, for agriculture, especially cotton, was the mainstay of the state's economy and would continue as such for years. But it was not clear under what new system the land would be cultivated.

In the spring of 1865, before the arrival of Freedmen's Bureau officials, Union officers played the greatest role in establishing the new order. Throughout the state, they informed whites that the Negroes really were free and gathered blacks together to tell them of their new rights. "All persons formerly held as slaves will be treated in every respect as entitled to the rights of freedmen, and such as desire their services will be required to pay for them," announced Lieutenant Colonel C. T. Christensen in a typical statement from Mobile.

The army also served as the precursor of the Freedmen's Bureau in establishing the new agricultural labor system, according to which freedmen were to work under yearly contracts with their employers, supervised by federal officials. Varieties of this contract system had already been tested in certain Union-occupied portions of the South before the end of the war, and in April Thomas W. Conway, general superintendent of freedmen for the Department of the Gulf, arrived in Montgomery to inaugurate it in Alabama. But it was late summer before the Freedmen's Bureau was fully established throughout the state, and until then the task of supervising relations between planters and freedmen rested primarily with the army. Officers advised blacks to remain on their plantations "whenever the persons by whom they are employed recognize their rights and agree to compensate them for their services." Similar circulars,

SOURCE: Peter Kolchin, "Free Plantation Labor," in *First Freedom: The Responses of Alabama Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Greenwood Press Inc., Westport, Conn.: 1972), 30–48.

although not always so friendly in tone, were issued from other parts of the state. Brevet Major General R. S. Granger ordered that all contracts between freedmen and planters must be in writing. He added bluntly that "[t]hose found unemployed will be arrested and set to work." But officers were usually vague in recommending what the compensation of the freedmen, or their working relations with planters, should be. Conditions varied widely from one location to another during the first few months after the war as individual army officers, Freedmen's Bureau officials, and planters exercised their own discretion.

Observers generally noted a demoralization of labor during the spring and summer of 1865, which they frequently associated with the early migration of freedmen. Upon his arrival in Montgomery, Conway noted a "perfect reign of idleness on the part of the negroes." Other Bureau officials joined planters in declaring that blacks either would not work or would at best make feeble symbolic gestures toward work. Southern whites, and some Northern ones as well, complained that Negroes refused to work and were "impudent and defyant." In one piedmont county, the commander of the local militia warned that "[t]he negroes are becoming very impudent and unless something is done very soon I fear the consequences." White Alabamians frequently confused black "impudence" with outright revolt, but organized violence did occasionally occur.

Events on the Henry Watson plantation, a large estate in the blackbelt county of Greene, illustrate the behavior of freedmen during the first few months after the war. "About the first of June," wrote John Parrish to his brother-in-law Henry Watson, who was vacationing in Germany, "your negroes rebelled against the authority" of the overseer George Hagin. They refused to work and demanded his removal. As Parrish was ill at the time, he induced a friend of Watson's, J. A. Wemyss, to go to the plantation and attempt to put things in order. "He made a sort of compromise bargain with the negroes," Parrish reported, "agreeing that if they would remain he would give them part of the crop, they should be clothed and fed as usual, and that Mr. Hagan [*sic*] should have no authority over them. . . . All hands are having a good easy time, not doing half work." Six days later Parrish reported that "they have again rebelled." When Wemyss informed them firmly that they must submit to the overseer's authority, at first they "amiably consented," but soon they once again objected—"their complaints were universal, very ugly"—and seventeen of them left for nearby Uniontown, where a federal garrison was stationed. Meanwhile, a Freedmen's Bureau agent had arrived in Greensboro. Parrish brought him to the plantation, where he "modified the contract in the negroes[']fav[or] & made them sign it with their marks." The modified contract granted the laborers one-eighth of the crop.

When Watson finally returned from Germany to take charge of matters himself, he was totally disgusted with what he found. The Negroes "claim

of their masters full and complete compliance on their part," he complained, "but forget that they agreed to do anything on theirs and are all idle, doing nothing, insisting that they shall be fed and are eating off their masters." Finding such a state of affairs more than he could tolerate, he decided to rent the plantation to overseer Hagin and "have nothing to do with the hiring of hands or the care of the plantation." Hagin, in turn, later broke up the plantation and sublet individual lots to Negro families.

II

Southern whites, long accustomed to thinking of their slaves as faithful and docile servants, were quick to blame outsiders for any trouble. As early as April 1862, a north Alabama planter had noted that the Union soldiers "to a great extent demoralized the negroes. . . . The negroes were delighted with them and since they left enough can be seen to convince one that the Federal army[,] the negroes and white Southern people cannot inhabit the same country." After the war, planters continued to complain about the harmful influence of the army. The presence of black troops was especially unpalatable to former slave owners. "[N]egroes will *not work* surrounded [by] black troops encouraging them to insubordination," complained one outraged resident of a blackbelt community.

Although Alabama whites were deeply humiliated by the presence of Yankees and black troops in their midst, there was little foundation to the complaints about outside agitation. Indeed, federal officials often cooperated directly with planters and local authorities in attempting to keep blacks in line. Army officers urged Negroes to stay on their plantations. Freedmen's Bureau agents frequently assisted in keeping order, too. "My predecessors here worked with a view to please the white citizens, at the expense of, and injustice to, the Freedmen," complained a shocked Bureau assistant superintendent shortly after his arrival in Tuskegee. "They have invariably given permission to inflict punishment for insolence or idleness, and have detailed soldiers to tie up and otherwise punish the laborers who have, in the opinion of the employers, been *refractory*." [Freedmen's Bureau] Commissioner [O. O.] Howard later explained that the Bureau "came to the assistance of the Planters" and succeeded in making the blacks "reliable laborers under the free system." He added that "[t]he good conduct of the millions of freedmen is due to a large extent to our officers of the Army and the Bureau."

A more substantial cause of the demoralization of labor was the mistrust existing between freedman and planter. Where this mistrust was minimal—that is, where planters and freedmen had relatively close ties and where planters readily acknowledged the changed condition of their relations—Negroes continued to work well. More often than not it was the small planter, who worked in the field beside his employees and knew them personally, who managed to remain on good terms with them. But few