

## History 118 US Since 1877 Discussion Transcript for January 28, 2021

### **Main Reading: American Yawp, chap. 15 and Spilsbury site**

*The initial reading assignment in this class included a textbook chapter on Reconstruction and a student-produced website about the contested Election of 1876 and its aftermath. Our semester will begin with multiple classes devoted to the study of the aftermath of the Civil War and so these initial assignments will provide context for upcoming classes. They are important because they show the winding, difficult and ultimately unfinished pathway toward both national restoration and social integration which occurred in the late nineteenth century. The central question involved the fate of ex-slaves and whether or not freedom also meant equality –in practice as well as on paper. But there were other vital issues of social change at stake as well, such as the fight for women’s rights after the war. The following are selected comments from students in the class:*

#### **PLACING PRIMARY SOURCES IN CONTEXT**

STUDENT COMMENT: This chapter covers the Civil War and Reconstruction. It starts with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the issues surrounding it and goes all the way to the end of Reconstruction when the Depression of 1873 replaced it as the biggest issue in the United States. One of the parts of this chapter that really caught my eye was when they were talking about black people that had been freed. They were discussing desires that those people had once they were free, such as reconnecting with their families and the ability to own land. But what really got my attention, was when they talked about how eager those people were for education. They discussed how reading the Bible gave most freed people incentive to spend "all evening or Sunday attending night school or Sunday school classes." And how one could find "a one-room school with more than fifty students ranging in age from three to eighty." This shows just how eager these people were to learn after being oppressed for so long and represented a freedom struggle. In this chapter of YAWP there is a primary source of Charlotte Forten's diary entry. She was born in Philadelphia and educated in Salem, MA. She went to South Carolina in 1862 to educate freed people, and the diary entry gives some insight to her time as an educator. Her perspective of freed people in the classroom perfectly mirrors the eagerness freed people felt, wanting to learn anything they could, especially about the Bible. In her diary she wrote that it was wonderful to see people who for "so long [had been] crushed to the earth ... have so great a desire for knowledge, and such a capability for attaining it." Moreover, Forten's diary perfectly ties in with the rest of this YAWP chapter describing the eagerness of freed people for education.

STUDENT COMMENT: When Congress ratifies the Fifteenth Amendment in February of 1870, it was revolutionary, "prohibiting discrimination in voting rights on the basis of race, color, or previous slave status" (Library of Congress). Thomas Kelly's primary source print, "The Fifteenth Amendment," 1870, captures its celebration in Baltimore, Maryland. In a large-scale parade,

African Americans took to the streets to celebrate their newfound freedoms and voice. After over 200 years of forced enslavement by white society, it depicts "notable portraits of male abolitionists," a culmination of their immense fight for equal rights (Yawp 15). However, although women, specifically Black women, are savoring their newly afforded liberties, their fundamental right to vote is still missing. *The American Yawp Chapter 15, Part IV: Reconstruction and Women*, gives context to its shortfalls. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were leaders of the Women's Rights Movement at the time. To their dismay, the Fifteenth Amendment "ignored sex as an unlawful barrier to suffrage" (Yawp 15). Using the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) as their platform, Stanton and Anthony argue that "the constitution already guaranteed women the right to vote" (Yawp 15). Even so, the Supreme Court renders their efforts fruitless. The court argues that their approach is invalid, reaffirming that the Fifteenth Amendment "acknowledges women's citizenship but argues that suffrage was not a right guaranteed to all citizens" (Yawp 15). It should not come as a surprise since the court's "broad reactionary interpretation" also limits "freedmen's rights" at the time (Yawp 15). Therefore, Thomas Kelly's paper print fails to highlight the underlying picture, as the Fifteenth Amendment continues to silence women by rejecting their suffrage. Even so, to Kelly's credit, it still serves as a beacon of immense hope, expanding the rights of African American women through other areas, such as taking a larger role in the rising Civil War remembrance movement.

### **BLACK POLITICS IN THE SOUTH**

STUDENT COMMENT: Overall, the most notable changes that occurred in the era of the reconstruction were within black communities. The freedom of slaves is well known as the legacy of President Lincoln, but I never knew about the first black senators in the 42d Congress. They even came from Mississippi, a state known for being racist. And it wasn't just that there were two black senators; there were also over 270 black men working in the government at the time. Racism was still a huge issue because white men would continue to believe "You cannot make the negro work, without physical compulsion" (Yawp, chap. 15. Sec. V) This belief led to continued violence in the direction of black communities for decades to come. Regardless, it is important to note that during the reconstruction era black men held leadership roles in the government.

### **COMPROMISE OF 1877**

STUDENT COMMENT: The compromise of 1877 led to the Presidency of Rutherford Hayes but effectively ended the period of reconstruction. The Reconstruction era began as a hopeful period because of a series of laws such as the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, the Civil Rights Act, as well as the Enforcement Act, which prevented other individuals from denying the ex-slaves their new constitutional rights. Additionally, there was an influx of black male representation in Congress. Hiram Revels and Blanche K. Bruce served as senators from Mississippi and there were 14 other men in the House of Representatives. While these laws and representation were powerful, they were temporary; this much influx of black participation in government was not seen again until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It began with Lincoln's death which led to Andrew Johnson's presidency. President Johnson, a native of Tennessee was more interested in restoring the

South rather than the plight of the newly freed slaves. He lessened the compensation demanded from Southern states before their return to the union. To make matters worse, some southern states had passed the Black codes which prohibited the African Americans to enjoy the freedom they had been given. The Republicans fought this the Civil Rights Act and the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Still, it did not prevent many southern white men from harassing their black neighbors as well any politician that supported the freedom of black American. Additionally, the Freedman Bureau was unable to provide the land the ex-slaves need for economic freedom. Without any land, the African Americans had to work for their old masters in the system of sharecropping. So without the economic stability of land-ownership and the constant persecution by white supremacy groups, many Black people did not experience the reprieve the reconstruction era was supposed to bring. The compromise may have symbolically ended the era, but it had already failed in many ways before its visible end.

### **POST-WAR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE**

STUDENT COMMENT: The women's suffrage movement had been active prior to the Reconstruction era but had made very little progress. The ratification of the 13th amendment in 1865 had suffragette leaders hoping for the possibility of women receiving the right to vote. It seems as if the abolitionist movement and the women's suffrage movement align closely and that working together would benefit everyone. Even the leaders of the National Women's Rights Convention and the American Anti-Slavery Society believed that their individual fight for equal rights meant they should fight together, they joined together as the American Equal Rights Association in May of 1866. This was doomed to fail based on the goals of each group, the misogyny, and the racism in the time period.