

History 211 History of US Elections
Discussion Transcript for October 1, 2020
Douglass and Rivers

Main Readings: Pinsker op-ed and Prince of Emancipation exhibit

There's nothing that matters more in history than being able to analyze past human behavior and decision-making in depth. Nobody can write effectively about historical eras without being able to humanize them. Today's readings offered snapshots of this process for students. Frederick Douglass is famous today, but the sharpness of his views and his evolution during Reconstruction remains less familiar. By contrast, Prince Rivers is totally obscure. Yet both men symbolize much of the promise and tragedy of Reconstruction and the aftermath of the Civil War.

Here is a selection of student comments.

PRINCE RIVERS

STUDENT COMMENT: "The story of Prince Rivers is fascinating. Going from being born into enslavement, to becoming a soldier in the union, to serving as a judge, but then being forced back to the job of carriage driver, is an incredible, albeit eventually sad story. Firstly, let's start with Rivers' life being enslaved. He was born in South Carolina, and started working as a carriage driver on a plantation near Port Royal. He had a knack for leadership and got involved in local politics, attempting to give a voice for the local African-American population when South Carolina attempted to crack down harder on the punishment of enslaved people. As South Carolina became more of a hot bed for the rebellion against the union, Rivers was able to escape with his family in 1862 by fleeing north behind union lines. Once he was free, he eventually joined the union army as a sergeant. He became an advocate for abolition, and met with James Miller McKim, another abolitionist from Pennsylvania, in Port Royal. McKim convinced Rivers to come to Philadelphia and speak of abolition based on his experience. He advocated for emancipation and urged President Lincoln to write the Emancipation Proclamation. All was not perfect in the north however, as Rivers was assaulted by racist soldiers for wearing his uniform. This did not shake him however, as he continued to speak and be a public figure. When the Civil War got into full swing, Rivers became more involved as a soldier. He served as a provost sergeant, being in charge of prisoners and watching the camp. During this time he became more involved in politics and eventually became a landowner. However, after the war was over, Reconstruction began. Rivers served as a judge during this time, but due to the tensions in the south between races, he would not do it for long. The Hamburg Massacre, where a group of black militiamen were attacked by white residents while celebrating the Fourth of July, would lead to the destruction of black-owned property and loss of the lives of many black militiamen. Soon, Republicans were not seen as allies in the south and Rivers was ousted as judge. Sadly, he died struggling to support his family."

PROMISE OF EQUALITY

STUDENT COMMENT: "*Slavery is not abolished until the black man has the ballot, or [while] any discrimination exists between white and black at the South.*" Douglass said

this powerful quote, very shortly after the president's death, signifying the beginning of an era of laissez-faire federal policies regarding black equality in the south, and making clear to all who would hear his words that the fight had only just begun. To win freedom was one thing, but to truly establish oneself as a functioning, respected member of society took multilateral change – change in all aspects of their lives. Their vocations, education, the segregation and economic empowerment of their communities, would all have to be addressed. Each on its own was an arduous task, but together they seemed impossible. For almost all, meaningful growth was not seen until well into the twentieth century, but for some, such as Prince Rivers, some semblance of equality was enjoyed, even if only for a few incredibly tense moments.”

STUDENT COMMENT: “The fates of Prince Rivers and Frederick Douglass confirm the inescapability of systemic inequalities and the tiredness of the American political system during Reconstruction. Although both men's causes enjoyed great success and national recognition during the Civil War, they encountered insurmountable opposition once the patriotism of the war receded and Southerners began to regain control of territory previously held by the Union army. For Douglass, his impassioned speeches and support from abolitionist and suffragist groups carried him through wartime, lifting him up as the ideal educated Black man, a model for the education and integration of former slaves into White American society. After the passage of the 15th Amendment, however, his speeches were no longer enough to encourage the expansion of Black rights, and abolitionist groups had seemingly achieved their goals. Suffragist groups similarly abandoned Douglass after women were excluded from the 15th Amendment. Douglass found himself trapped between having achieved too much and not enough, and too many White Americans viewed the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments as the ultimate success in achieving Black rights. The momentum had died out, and Douglass' passion-driven force never recovered. Rivers suffered an far worse fate than Douglass.”

STUDENT COMMENT: “While the end of the Civil war brought about a hopeful time among abolitionists and egalitarians, this was clearly a naïve mindset for the American people to adopt. Frederick Douglass saw that there was still a fight to be had in order to properly secure the rights of African-Americans, and the life of Prince Rivers was a testament to that fact. Directly after the end of the civil war, Frederick Douglass began giving speeches about the importance of granting equal rights to black Americans. He did this because he knew that ending slavery "would mean little without immediate and full equality" (Pinsker). The urgency to secure these rights and keep them secure was plainly evident in the life story of Prince Rivers. During the war and immediately afterwards, Rivers was a successful and well admired military leader and then a relatively powerful politician having served multiple offices. These were huge feats as he was a black man. However, as the zeal to secure equal rights faded over the period of reconstruction, he power was damaged irreparably as he tried to handle the fallout from the Hamburg Massacre. By the end of his life, as the rights of black people were stripped away yet again, he had to support his family by being a carriage driver, "the same work he had once performed as a slave" (Prince exhibit). Slavery in its purest form may have ended, but Douglass was right to fear a future where the Civil War was

won and people stopped caring enough to fight for equal rights. The journey to civil rights for black Americans was unfortunately to be a long one, and not something solved with slavery abolished.”

STUDENT COMMENT: “Unfortunately, victory in the Civil War was not followed with equality for blacks and the protections necessary. William Lloyd Garrison and many other white abolitionists prioritized education and a safety net for African-Americans. Garrison happily declared that “slavery has gone” and that there would be no “resurrection”. Frederick Douglass and Prince Rivers, however, understood that the war may be a lost cause if equal rights and protections were not secured for African-Americans. Douglass asserted, “Slavery is not abolished” until discrimination is eradicated and African-Americans are guaranteed the vote. Too often, however, the rights secured in the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendment were denied. The Eufaula riots, in which many black men were killed while trying to vote, and the riot in Hamburg demonstrate that reality. While men such as Rivers held powerful political roles for a time, most were soon voted or kicked out of office. A common issue was that the U.S. army didn’t provide protection when it should have. In Eufaula, though the U.S. 2nd infantry was sent to Barbour County, General Irwin McDowell limited the authority of the army, rendering Captain Daggett “and his troops essentially powerless”. Similarly, President Rutherford B. Hayes “ordered the troops from the State House”. This allowed black men like Rivers to be threatened, intimidated, and ultimately forced out of office. Though the U.S. army triumphed in the Civil War and helped bring about emancipation, it did not protect the rights of African-Americans which would have furthered the cause of equality.”