

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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WHEN 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.

BUT 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.”

BUT 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.

