

Navigating Freedom

The passage of the 14th Amendment in 1866 extended the rights of citizenship to African Americans. Yet, in reality, the journey to seek equality would be a difficult one. NAVIGATING FREEDOM seeks to shed light on the lives and experiences of freedpeople in Raleigh during RECONSTRUCTION. African Americans experienced numerous triumphs during Reconstruction as they embraced freedom and citizenship.

Drie's map of Raleigh -Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Caption and Visual Caption:

Overview map of Raleigh in 1872, showing a grid of dirt roads and buildings, surrounded by forest.

“The work does not end with the abolition of slavery, but only begins.” Frederick Douglas

What is Reconstruction?

The era known as RECONSTRUCTION (1865 to 1877) followed the defeat of the Southern Confederacy which ended the Civil War and abolished slavery in the United States. During Reconstruction, the United States government worked to transform social and political institutions in the South which had been rooted in slavery for over two centuries. These transformations included measures to facilitate emancipation and extend rights to newly freed African Americans. Yet, strides made during Reconstruction began to slip as Southern states gradually regained control in the 1870s, a backslide which eventually led to the era of white supremacy and Jim Crow. Although it was a brief period of time, Reconstruction was one of the most progressive eras in our nation's history.

Freedpeople refers to the men, women, and children who gained freedom from slavery when the Civil War ended.

Rural Labor

After Emancipation, freedpeople immediately began searching for a way to earn an income to support their new lives. While freedpeople often hoped to move away from former masters and plantations, with little money and resources, most accepted work as sharecroppers or farm laborers, often doing the same work they did while enslaved.

Sharecropping broke plantations up into smaller plots which were then rented out, with a large percentage of each plot's harvest going to the plantation owner as a form of rent, keeping sharecroppers constantly in debt. Though sharecropping was not a fair system, former slaves were enticed by the freedom it allowed, including the ability to negotiate wages and work expectations, as well as the ability to leave if expectations were not met. Sharecropping also allowed families to stay together under one roof without fear of separation.

In 1870, the United States Census indicated that approximately fifteen laboring families lived on the Mordecai property. Of these, most married men and older sons were listed as "laborers" or "field hands" while most married women were listed as "at home," which meant staying home to perform the usual tasks associated with women at the time, such as cooking, cleaning, and raising children. The ability for African American men to provide for their own families and for African American women to tend to their own homes was an important difference between slavery and freedom.

Caption and Visual Caption:

Ananias Ruffin, Mittie Ann Ruffin, Jerry Hinton, and Chaney Hinton were enslaved by the Mordecai family prior to emancipation in 1865. Like many others, they continued to live and work on the same plantation following emancipation. Photo likely taken on the Mordecai plantation c. 1890's. Image courtesy of Capital Area Preservation, Inc.

A black and white photograph of four older African Americans sitting on chairs outside of a wooden building.

Caption and Visual Caption:

This 1870 Census shows several of the families who lived as sharecroppers on the former Mordecai plantation including Ananias and Mittie Ann Ruffin. Image courtesy of Capital Area Preservation, Inc.

This handwritten chart is a 1870 Census which shows a list on the left of the families who lived as sharecroppers on the former Mordecai plantation including Ananias and Mittie Ann Ruffin.

Freedmen's Bureau

Near the close of the Civil War in 1865, Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands – commonly called the Freedmen's Bureau - to help African Americans transition from slavery to freedom. The Freedmen's Bureau provided a range of services including assistance with food, employment, and housing and employed freedpeople across the state.

The Freedmen's Bureau established their district headquarters just a stone's throw from here in the Main Building at Peace Institute, now called William Peace University. The Bureau provided rations of meat and hardtack to freedpeople in the months following emancipation. Hundreds of local freedpeople received food and aid from the Bureau, including individuals formerly enslaved by the Mordecai family.

Caption and Visual Caption:

Freedmen's Bureau, Drawn by Alfred R. Wauld, Harper's Weekly, July 25, 1868. Courtesy of Library of Congress

A black and white drawing of a Federal Army officer representing the Freedman's Bureau standing between opposing groups of armed Black and white protestors.

Caption and Visual Caption:

Cherry Mordecai, who was formerly enslaved at the Mordecai plantation, received rations from the Bureau in 1866.

This handwritten chart shows that Cherry Mordecai received rations from the Bureau in 1866. Prior to emancipation, Cherry was enslaved at the Mordecai plantation.

Caption and Visual Caption:

From 1865-1869, the Main Building at Peace Institute served as the district headquarters for the Freedmen's Bureau. The school resumed use of the building in 1872. Image courtesy of State Archives of NC

A black and white drawing of Peace Institute showing a large columned building surrounded by trees with people on horseback riding nearby. In front of the building is a road with several horse-drawn carriages.

Urban Labor

While many freedpeople remained on the plantation, some left immediately following emancipation, and others moved away as the years progressed. Freedpeople who moved into urban centers, such as Raleigh, could find work opportunities that were distanced from the plantations, even if most did not pay well. The 1870 United States Federal Census indicates that most freedmen within the Raleigh city limits worked as day laborers, while others were employed as carpenters, shoemakers, farmers, blacksmiths, brick masons, carriage drivers, and barbers.

The census also shows that wealthy white families in Raleigh hired freedpeople, including children as young as ten years old, to work as servants in the home. Most wage-earning Black women in Raleigh worked as domestic laborers for white families during Reconstruction. Domestic laborers performed jobs such as cooking, cleaning, and child rearing, often working for former masters. Certainly, many worked for former masters. For example, Chaney Hinton continued working for the Mordecai family as a cook and nurse for years following emancipation. At the same time, some Black women sought domestic work that was more flexible and allowed them to work independently. Washerwomen and seamstresses, for instance, could perform their jobs from inside their own homes.

In 1867, John Devereux, husband of Margaret Mordecai and owner of Will's Forest plantation which bordered the Mordecai property, hired Miles Warren to clean up a section of land. As stated in the contract, Warren could construct a home on the site and keep any crops he produced on the section of property. While these terms may have been agreeable to Warren, many work contracts were unfair and some employers sought to control their Black workers as they did during slavery. During Reconstruction, the Freedmen's Bureau tried to protect workers by reviewing work contracts and addressing unjust treatment. Courtesy of State Archives of NC Handwritten single-paged work contract between John Devereux and Miles Warren from 1867.

Captions and Visual Caption:

This drawing is from the First Grand Fair of NC in 1879. A group of prominent African Americans in Raleigh organized the fair to showcase Black industry. Image courtesy of State Archives of NC

A collage of ten drawings showing various African American men and women engaging in a variety of tasks and occupations. They include a woman using a washboard, a group of men moving livestock, a presentation by a white presenter to a large African American audience, and more.

Caption and Visual Caption:

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Handwritten single-paged work contract between John Devereux and Miles Warren from 1867.

Citizenship

Freedpeople embraced the opportunity to participate in politics and began organizing in the months following emancipation. In September 1865, over 100 African American men representing counties across North Carolina assembled in Raleigh to form the state's first Freedmen's Convention. The Convention met at St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church where the delegates discussed economic opportunities, social equality, and other issues pertaining to race and citizenship.

Freedpeople viewed suffrage—specifically the ability of men to vote—as fundamental to citizenship. They fought for the right to vote to be legally protected, then organized voter registration drives and marches to exercise that right against white opposition. By 1867, the majority of Raleigh voters were African American men. These voters elected the first African American representatives to Raleigh's Board of Commissioners and the North Carolina state legislature, including James H. Harris, one of the founders of the state's Republican Party.

At the time, African Americans exercised their citizenship through support for the Republican Party which championed emancipation and supported extending civil rights to all citizens regardless of color. A number of African American men also joined pro-Republican organizations, such as the Equal Rights League and the Union League of America. The Union League formed in the North during the Civil War as a patriotic organization. After the Civil War, the Union League expanded into the South where it attracted freedmen, as well as white political allies, many of whom had opposed the Confederacy during the Civil War.

In March 1867, Governor William Woods Holden and African American leader James H. Harris received a charter for the North Carolina Grand Council of the Union League of American which they headquartered in Raleigh. In 1867 and 1868, Republican leaders from across the state organized local branches under the state charter. Some local chapters were all Black, but others were integrated, such as the Hamburg Council in Surry County, NC. Therefore, membership in

the Union League provided an unprecedented opportunity for members of both races to discuss politics together in an official forum.

Caption and Visual Caption:

The minutes of the Freedmen's Convention from 1866, which include speeches and letters by African American leaders, as well as calls for equality under the law. The minutes end with a letter to the NC Legislature stating, "We further pray your honorable body to give us the right of suffrage, in common with other citizens of the United States, in consideration of our loyalty, citizenship and merit."

A tan cover of a document that reads in inked text "Minutes of the Freedmen's Convention held in the city of Raleigh on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th of October, 1866. Raleigh: Printed at the standard Book and Job office, 1866.

Caption and Visual Caption:

Drawn by Alfred. R. Wauld, Harpers Weekly, November 16, 1867. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

A black and white political cartoon of an African American man casting a ballot for the first time. Title of Magazine Harpers Weekly: Journal of Civilization is written at the top.

Caption and Visual Caption:

Charter of the Union League of America charter, March 26, 1867. Courtesy of State Archives of NC

A document titled, "Union League of America" with a black and white illustration of an eagle on an agricultural background. This is a Charter given by the Union League of America that gave the listed members the right to be a council, known as the State Grand council of the U. L. of A., for the state of North Carolina.

Caption and Visual Caption:

The Journal of Freedom was a short-lived newspaper written to inform the Freedmen of Raleigh of both local and national stories of interest. This masthead dates to Oct. 14, 1865.

A newspaper header in inked text that reads, "Journal of Freedom." Equal Rights Before the Law for all Men. Social Conditions will Regulate Themselves. Vol. I., No. 3 Raleigh, N.C. Saturday, Oct. 14, 1865.

Community

Freedpeople who migrated toward urban centers typically settled near one another. In Raleigh, African Americans formed numerous freedmen's villages in and around the city. Families in these communities shared economic resources and created their own institutions, including churches and schools. Through their efforts, they built the foundation for what later became some of Raleigh's most well-known historically Black neighborhoods.

Freedmen's villages could also be found in all directions around Raleigh. About three miles west of Raleigh, freedpeople established a community called Method. The settlement of Method began with the partnership of Berry O'Kelly and Jesse Mason, two freedmen who purchased a large piece of land in 1872. The men subdivided this land into smaller parcels and sold them to other freedpeople, giving many families their first chance to become landowners.

Similarly, African Americans built Oberlin Village on former plantation land about a mile and a half northwest of downtown. Oberlin Village was perhaps the earliest free Black community in Raleigh. Oral tradition among some Oberlin descendants holds that a small group of free Blacks settled in the area before the Civil War. After emancipation, more African Americans moved to Oberlin Village, many taking advantage of the opportunity to buy their own land and homes. By 1880, there were over 710 residents in the Oberlin neighborhood.

Caption and Visual Caption:

1887 Map of Wake County. Image courtesy of State Archives of NC

An inked map of Oberlin Village with street names listed.

Caption and Visual Caption:

A newspaper clipping in inked text which states Oberlin residents named their neighborhood for Ohio's Oberlin College, one of the first in the country to admit Black students, and defended

the village against derogatory attempts to call it by other names. - The Raleigh News, March 13, 1872

Article reads “Oberlin - At the request of ‘Many citizens’ we publish the following communication handed us by one of the ‘the same’ yesterday. In answer to which, we will say, call it what you please. We are sorry we ever called it anything, but should necessity hereafter require it, we shall call it Morgantown-San Domingo-Save Rent-Oberlin: Oberlin, March 12, 1872. E.C. Woodson City Editor Daily News,” Followed below by “Dear Sir: - You will please do us the kindness to correct the many errors you have unknowingly made in the name of our flourishing little village. It is neither Morganton, San Domingo, or ‘Save Rent’ but ‘Oberlin.’ With a due compliance you will greatly oblige us. – ‘Many Citizens’ “

Caption and Visual Caption:

Several freedpeople who had been enslaved by the Mordecai’s settled in Oberlin Village, including Mattie Curtis. Mattie eventually purchased a fifteen-acre farm on the site that is now Oberlin Middle School where she grew cotton and raised 19 children. Image courtesy of Capital Area Preservation, Inc.

A black and white photograph of an older African American woman seated with arms crossed and looking at the camera. She is wearing a scarf around her neck, a jacket, and a long skirt.

Caption and Visual Caption:

Freedpeople across the South rejoiced and paraded in public following emancipation in 1865. It is likely that celebrations in Raleigh looked similar to this 1879 depiction of a parade on Fayetteville Street. Courtesy of State Archives of NC

A collage of three drawings showing various African American men and women engaging in a variety of tasks and occupations. Two of the images show African Americans celebrating in the streets of Raleigh. The third is of several African Americans standing at a table indoors.

Caption and Visual Caption:

Students at Berry O'Kelly School in Method , ca. 1920-1930. Image courtesy of the State Archives in NC

A black and white photograph of eight African American students sitting in desks in a classroom listening to a teacher.

Education

For many freedpeople, achieving an education was one of the hallmarks of freedom. Prior to emancipation, laws prohibited African Americans from learning to read and write. After 1865, African American adults seized the opportunity to become literate and ensured that their children grew up with an education. Within months of emancipation, schools for African American children opened throughout Raleigh.

Northern missionary societies operated the majority of these free schools. They constructed schoolhouses and provided teachers and funding with occasional assistance by the Freedmen's Bureau. Some schools offered instruction at night for adults who needed to work during the day. Yet this was not an option for all, and years later some former students remembered teaching their parents what they learned in school each day. By 1867 about one-fourth of the African American population in Raleigh attended school, with more Black students enrolled than white students, despite having fewer schools in operation.

Caption and Visual Caption:

The Washington School, built in 1869, was an early Raleigh school dedicated to the education of freedpeople. Image courtesy of State Archives of NC

A black and white photograph of a large two-story building.

Caption and Visual Caption:

In 1866 Henry Martin Tupper and the New England Freedmen's Aid Society founded the Lincoln School and offered classes for freed children and adults. The school grew quickly and in 1870 was renamed the Shaw Collegiate Institute and eventually Shaw University. Image courtesy of Shaw University Archives and Special Collections

A black and white photograph of Shaw University with several students standing in front of the main building. The building is four stories tall with a small gazebo out front.

Caption and Visual Caption:

In 1867, the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina opened the Saint Augustine's Normal School for the education of freedpeople. Today it is known as Saint Augustine's University. Image courtesy of South Park - East Raleigh Neighborhood Association

A black and white photograph of thirteen men and women forming one standing row and one seated row. The label reads, "Graduating Class, 1907, St. Augustine's School, Raleigh, N.C."

Caption and Visual Caption:

Attending school consistently was not always easy for children with families that relied on their labor. Morgan L. Latta was born into slavery in the 1850s at Fishdam, a plantation owned by George Washington Mordecai. Latta recalled in his memoir that after emancipation, "...my mother was so very poor that she was unable to send me through school. I had to work hard all day and get knots of lightwood to study my books at night. . . . The only time I had to go to school was when the ground was too wet to plow." Eventually Latta "entered a free school that was near our home. . . . [and] attended the free school off and on for about five years." Latta went on to attend Shaw University in the 1870s, and eventually received his diploma and a divinity degree from A.M. Barrett's Collegiate Institute, likely in the 1880s. Reverend Latta later founded his own school for Black children and young adults, Latta University, in Oberlin Village in 1892. Image from *The History of My Life and Work, Autobiography* by Rev. M.L. Latta, A.M. D.D., 1903

A black and white photograph of three buildings and a covered structure, possibly a well. In front of the buildings are several African American children, a few adults, and a single dog. The label at the bottom reads "Manual Training Department".

Caption and Visual Caption:

In 1866 Henry Martin Tupper and the New England Freedmen's Aid Society founded the Lincoln School and offered classes for freed children and adults. The school grew quickly and in 1870 was renamed the Shaw Collegiate Institute and eventually Shaw University. Image courtesy of Shaw University Archives and Special Collections

A black and white photograph of Shaw University with several students standing in front of the main building. The building is four stories tall with a small gazebo out front.

Religion

Churches were of the utmost importance to freedpeople. During slavery, laws dictated how and where African Americans could worship. In general, any worship service conducted without white supervision was considered unlawful and could result in punishment.

Almost immediately following emancipation, freedpeople established their own churches with most in Raleigh joining either Baptist or Methodist congregations. Some denominations formed their own church associations separate from existing white organizations to collaborate on theological matters and elect their own leaders.

Churches played important roles in freedmen's communities beyond religious instruction. They organized social events, encouraged education, and even funded schooling for their members. Congregations also participated in political organizing and church leaders often served in civic roles. St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church was particularly active in politics. The church hosted the statewide Freedmen's Conventions in 1865 and 1866 and Reverend R.W.H. Leak incorporated the debate over freedmen's voting rights into his sermons.

Caption and Visual Caption:

Assembled in 1865 as Wilson Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church, the Wilson Temple United Methodist Church in Oberlin Village was one of the first organized by freedpeople in Raleigh.

A black and white photograph of the Wilson Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church. The church is under construction in the picture with scaffolding around the building.

Caption and Visual Caption:

Reverend R.W.H. Leak, was an influential leader of St. Paul's AME Church. The church's origin can be traced to 1848 when Edenton Street United Methodist Church (white) formed a section for enslaved people. Following emancipation in 1865, Black members formed St. Paul's in affiliation with the AME Church. Image courtesy of State Archives of NC

A black and white photograph of Reverend R.W.H. Leak wearing a suit and bowtie.

Caption and Visual Caption:

Beyond these large and eventually well-established congregations, smaller congregations would have met in homes and rustic one-room churches in and around Raleigh during Reconstruction. Though these are difficult to track in the historical record, an example is the church structure which once stood in Moore Square, or “Baptist Grove” as it was more commonly known at the time. This modest plank building constructed around 1822 eventually served an African American congregation—likely Baptist—following emancipation.

A hand drawn map in ink of the city of Raleigh from 1847 that shows Moore Square.

Conclusion

The era of Reconstruction officially ended with the “Compromise of 1877,” which removed federal troops from the South and made Rutherford B. Hayes president of the United States. After the end of Reconstruction, white supremacists took over state governments across the South and began restricting the freedoms that African Americans had gained. The Freedmen’s Bureau closed its doors in 1872 and sharecropping solidified itself as the standard way of life for freedpeople, keeping many across the South in poverty and without rights.

Descendants of freedpeople continued their struggle for full citizenship and civil rights well into the 20th century. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s-60s was in many ways a continuation of African American equality work dating back to Reconstruction nearly 100 years earlier. Realizing that the work never stopped, some historians now refer to the period from 1865 to 1965 as the “long Reconstruction.”

The triumphs and challenges of Reconstruction leave it with a complicated legacy. Reconstruction and the following decades helped cement the ideals of citizenship and equality in the minds of those willing to continue fighting for equal rights. African Americans seized this period to found their own communities and institutions that persisted even after their civil rights were taken away.

Reconstruction may have only lasted for a few short years, but the efforts and journeys of the freedpeople who navigated freedom continue to impact our lives today.