

# **The Pursuit of Happiness: African American Achievements During Reconstruction**

*By Jane Dirks  
Brashear High School*

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**Overview**

The title of this unit is intentionally ironic. While the Founding Fathers of this country held, in 1776, that the “unalienable” rights of Americans included the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, black Americans had to wait almost one hundred years more even to be granted freedom from bondage. For African Americans, “the pursuit of happiness” was a hollow, distant promise. But, as this unit will show, when freedom finally came with the end of the Civil War and the enforcement of Reconstruction in the South, African Americans took the Constitution at its word, achieving remarkable successes in economic independence and political leadership. Against the odds of formidable and pervasive violence against African Americans who would challenge the longstanding traditions of racial discrimination and oppression in the South, ex-slaves and free black people stepped forward into a new identity, a new reality, and a new sense of agency in public life. Far from the dependent, subservient, and “childlike” stereotype which has characterized some representations of slaves newly free, this unit will demonstrate that skills, adaptations and tenacity garnered during slavery served to support African Americans as they took on the challenges of economic independence and political leadership.

The period of Reconstruction has sometimes been characterized as a failure for both North and South, a perspective which can mask the achievements of those who suffered the most under the institution of slavery. Though later reduced or reversed by whites and white institutions which felt themselves threatened by black achievements, the accomplishments by ex-slaves and black freepersons in the economic, political, and cultural spheres are a matter of

historical record. These steps toward a measure of power in society by a people in the process of imagining and constructing their own future as Americans should be taught to students as part of any unit on the Civil War and Reconstruction. As an example of African American influence on American culture, this unit will focus on documenting African American achievements toward “the pursuit of happiness” during the tenuous and brief period of opportunity directly following the Civil War.

The desire for freedom, autonomy, and most of all independence from white control was the driving force behind the determination of ex-slaves to create their own institutions after the Civil War. Organizations forged before Emancipation—black churches, aid societies, and schools—were strengthened and expanded after the war. New social, political, and economic initiatives were undertaken by those formally in bondage. The institution of slavery itself, regardless of particular treatment or conditions, was such an outrage to the human spirit that black Americans were fueled with the passion of liberty and justice after the war. With the fetters on independent movement broken, black people traveled extensively to locate members of their families who had been sold away. The black church, always an important foundation for blacks during slavery, emerged as a powerful center of support for newly emancipated slaves.

Economic freedom and development was, of course, a primary and essential struggle for black people after the Civil War. After having been forced to give their lives, their generations, to the enrichment of white plantation owners, blacks were eager to work land which they could freely own. Most ex-slaves much preferred independent subsistence agriculture to wage labor, even if it meant great sacrifice and near starvation to hold on to a tiny farm. Land ownership was not only economic, it was symbolic; a decided blow to the former system of large plantations and slave labor. Although small farms by themselves could not ensure the economic well-being and self-sufficiency of former slaves, ownership of land was critical to slaves’ emerging self-definition and creation of their own freedom.

Within the arena of politics, black leadership emerged as a strong and insistent voice calling for equal rights and full political representation. Black political leadership was evident in the statewide conventions which were held throughout the South in the mid-1860’s, calling for black suffrage and full civil rights. Black Congressmen, legislators, and delegates to the state’s constitutional convention emerged from many states, including South Carolina, the first state to secede from the Union. An examination of black political leadership throughout the period of Reconstruction will constitute a major focus of this curriculum unit.

In an attempt to draw a personal connection between students of today and black pioneers for freedom during Reconstruction, this unit will explore the lives of black leaders who made a permanent mark on American history but may be lesser known to the average student. Black leaders such as Tunis Campbell of Georgia, who battled reactionary white politics to carve out a space for advocacy of black civil rights and represented the black majority population will be examined, and their biographies will be used as primary sources for a richer understanding of the lives of black leaders during Reconstruction.

By becoming familiar with the achievements and triumphs of black leaders and ordinary people facing the almost unimaginable challenges of creating a life after slavery, students will grasp a fuller understanding of American history as a whole during the Civil War era. That many of these accomplishments were intentionally thwarted or dismantled by whites who resented and feared them, does not diminish their importance or their significance to the American experience.

### **Rationale**

For students of history, the topic of this unit provides an excellent entry into an examination of the problems and challenges of historical interpretation and representation. The black leadership which emerged and flourished after the Civil War, resulting in significant political and economic power for former slaves and freedmen, has been subject to a retelling by the “Dunning School” of the early 1900s. According to the scholarship of William Dunning, John W. Burgess, and their students, the Congressional or “Radical” Reconstruction of 1867-77 was an era of corruption and incompetence, unfair to the South and disastrous to the nation. Commandeered by greedy “carpetbaggers” from the North, Southern ex-slaves were thrust into positions of leadership for which they were neither intellectually nor morally prepared. Black leaders during Reconstruction, according to the Dunning School of historical scholarship, “appeared either as passive victims of white manipulation or as an unthinking people whose ‘animal natures’ threatened the stability of civilized society.” (Foner xviii). W.E.B. Du Bois’ book *Black Reconstruction in America*, published in 1935, provided the only corrective to this mainstream view of Reconstruction, but his scholarship was not influential at the time (although it presaged the scholarship of today). Du Bois’ clearer view saw through the racism blinding Dunning and his contemporaries; as Du Bois stated, “One fact and one alone explains the attitude of most recent writers toward Reconstruction; they cannot conceive of Negroes as men.” (Du Bois 15).

With the coming of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, and building on the scholarship of Du Bois, challenges to the Dunning School emerged rapidly, leading to its ultimate demise. However, several generations of students, including this writer, were taught in school that Reconstruction meant Northern exploitation, or at the very least misunderstanding, of the South, and black Southern leadership was nowhere to be found in the textbook histories. Even today, the textbook used to teach U.S. History at the advanced level, *The American Pageant*, has only a very brief mention of the contributions of black leaders during Reconstruction. The vindictive assessment of ex-slaves as childlike, helpless, or corruptible pawns of the Northerners has been expunged, but a full accounting of black post-Civil War achievements, crucial for a comprehensive understanding of United States History, has not replaced it. Thus, it is my hope that this unit will not only add to a fuller appreciation of U.S. History through its content, but also serve to raise questions about the lenses, acknowledged or unacknowledged, through which history is viewed, interpreted, and written.

This curriculum unit would be appropriate for 11<sup>th</sup> grade students studying U.S. History at the advanced (AP) or scholars level. Its material could be adapted and also used with mainstream students, as the new (2007-2008) scope and sequence in U.S. History will briefly cover the Civil War. It should be used to supplement the curriculum in teaching about Reconstruction. For AP students, the curriculum would also be useful in examining the different perspectives and point of view which influence the writing of history. Primary source documents and Internet sites are provided for the construction of document-based questions (DBQs).

### The Civil War Ends

Although liberation of the slaves was not the original motive for the Civil War as far as the Union leadership was concerned, slaves themselves understood early on in the War that the conditions and institution of their bondage were under siege. Especially following the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, which declared free over three million slaves living in the Confederate states, black people began to see God's hand moving against the formidable grip of slavery in the South. ("Sound the loud timbrel o'er Egypt's dark sea, Jehovah hath triumphed, his people are free" was a popular phrasing used in rejoicing and celebrating. Foner, 1) As word of the conflict spread, slaves took advantage of the approaching unrest to flee their bondage, or take other actions, such as work stoppage or sabotage, which might thwart the Confederate cause. As Union soldiers advanced, white plantation owners and their families fled, and slaves

often surprised their oblivious masters by rushing toward Union lines, rather than remaining with their owners in a search for “safety” from the Yankees.

An important provision of the Emancipation Proclamation was the enlistment of black men into the ranks of the Union military service. Military service for black men meant not only the chance to fight for the freedom of members of their race, but also an opportunity to hone skills of leadership and political thought. Many of the black political leaders during Reconstruction served first in the Union forces, including four Congressmen. Fighting and dying, marching and enduring great privation in the many bloody battles of the Civil War was a theatre of experience which was “a crucial justification for blacks’ self-confident claim to equal citizenship during Reconstruction, a claim anticipated in the soldiers’ long battle for equal pay during the war.” (Foner, 10). Restricted initially to non-combat roles such as construction work and other labor, serving in segregated regiments and often abused by white soldiers, black soldiers nevertheless demonstrated, both to themselves and to white society, their abilities, efforts and sacrifices for their country. At the end of the Civil War, some 180,000 black soldiers had served, providing a critical level of assistance to the Union forces. While never allowed to ignore their inferior status among whites in the military, black soldiers were subject to the same military laws as whites, “and former slaves for the first time saw the impersonal sovereignty of the law supersede the personal authority of a master” (Foner, 8). Such an experience of equality, constrained though it was, gave former slaves a vision of what freedom might bring.

## The Family

Coming together under their own agency, on the basis of kin groups, was a crucial first step for a people whose every move had been subject to control by white overseers. African Americans traveled the countryside to find lost relatives, children, husbands, and wives, and to legally establish marriages and families. As Hahn writes (166), “Insofar as slaves had been chained to their owners as individuals and denied official recognition of their marriages and families, these may be regarded as among the first political acts that simultaneously rejected the legacy of enslavement and celebrated the vitals of freedom.” Well in advance of their liberation, kin networks had been established and maintained under slavery as key survival strategies. With freedom, kin groups were again relied upon to form work groups, homesteading groups, and groups through which to bargain with whites for better wages and working conditions. Family groups formed “societies” and “associations” which then could claim land and farm it together or take advantage of the Homestead Act of 1866. Kin groups could better defend themselves against the constant threat of white violence, and some even looked

into the possibility of emigration to Liberia. These examples of political agency on the part of kin groups demonstrated the beginnings of strong leadership among newly freed African Americans in the South.

## The Church

In addition to the black family and kin group as an emerging locus of power and agency, was the black church community. Before emancipation, church communities of both blacks and whites existed, with blacks always in an inferior position to whites. By law, all preachers and church trustees were white, and blacks had to sit in the back, or even outside the sanctuary. The end of slavery did not alter most white churchgoers' views of the "proper" role for blacks in the church, and for that reason, as well as a desire for independence, most blacks left to form their own churches. (Biracial Methodist churches in South Carolina went from 42,000 black members before the war, to only 600 in 1870, for example). While gathering resources to acquire land and build a church, black parishioners gathered in private homes, shaded groves, or even railway cars to worship. (Foner, 91).

As "the first social institution fully controlled by black men in America," the black church was a crucible for the development of black political leadership. Churches helped to organize schools, settle community and personal disputes, and provide and distribute economic assistance. Organizational and oratorical skills were developed by black church leaders. Black ministers, with the knowledge of literacy and leadership, frequently became politically active; in fact, during Reconstruction over 100 black ministers from every denomination would be elected to legislative office.

During this time of great social upheaval and change, the politics of the time seemed linked in the minds of many black Christians with Biblical prophecy. A black political meeting in 1865 was heralded as "...the times foretold by the Prophets, 'when a nation shall be born in a day'" (Foner, 94). Many black ministers felt it was impossible to preach the word of God—a message of liberation, freedom, and justice, of the "lowest" being raised up and the "highest" coming down—without reference to the revolutionary political landscape of the day. Praise and worship were inextricably linked with personal freedom and the liberating hand of the Almighty.

## Other Organizations

Often based first in a church, many other benevolent and self-help organizations were created by the black communities of the south after

emancipation. These groups provided both assistance for the poor, and opportunities for the better-off to rise to positions of organizational leadership. These organizations included “burial societies, debating clubs, Masonic lodges, fire companies, drama societies, trade associations, temperance clubs, and equal rights leagues.” (Foner, 95). Members of these groups reached out to destitute non-members, providing them with food, job assistance, and care for orphans. Some groups organized schools for their communities, providing education for children as well as adults. In some areas of entrenched white poverty, black organizations provided assistance to whites as well.

The Union League, formed in the north in 1862 to support the Union cause in the war, was an effective organizational tool in the south. “League councils served as crucial political schools, educating newly enfranchised blacks in the ways of the official political culture” (Hahn, 173). The Union League could operate relatively freely in towns and cities, where many of the participants were white, but in rural areas, the organization of blacks dictated the need for secrecy and activities under the cover of night. But even with the threat of white reprisals, black membership in the Union League skyrocketed, with some councils receiving 100 members per week (Hahn, 179).

## Education

Under slavery, the education of black people was prohibited by law. The reason for this was obvious: once slaves were educated, the mighty lie on which slavery was built would begin to crumble. Most whites of the period, from both North and South, believed that black people were inherently inferior to whites, fit only for menial work, and on whom education would be wasted. (The official reason given for prohibiting the teaching of black people was that it would “render the slave discontented.” Hahn, 472) Clearly, though, there was fear behind the threat, likely prompted by the black leaders, writers and intellectuals, mostly northern freepersons, who managed to get an education and speak out for their communities. Whites who supported slavery could not risk the power and hope which would be generated within slave communities, should slaves learn to read and write.

It was to education, then, that free black people turned in great numbers. As Foner states, “Perhaps the most striking illustration of the freedmen’s quest for self-improvement was their seemingly unquenchable thirst for education” (96). Black families moved homesteads to areas where an education would be possible for their children, and the adults also frequented schools and churches where they could learn to read. Education, to the newly free black person, was the mainstay of freedom. Education, it was felt, would bring protection from a return to

slavery, which seemed to many black people what the surrounding white community was intent on doing. Illiterate blacks were particularly vulnerable to unjust business transactions with whites, and swindling of land or the products of their labor was common. Whites counted on the illiteracy of blacks to maintain economic and political control and dominance.

Northern institutions and the Freedman's Bureau funded much of black education, but it was black people themselves who started and maintained indigenous centers of learning prior to this assistance. Ministers, sometimes the only literate members of black communities, began schools in which to teach the Bible, and those who had taught slaves in secret now opened their schools to the public of all ages. Many of these teachers were women, as exemplified by Mrs. Mary Peake, an African American Virginian who taught slaves secretly for years before opening a school for blacks in 1861. Mrs. Peake taught children during the day and adults at night, under a huge oak tree, now known as "Emancipation Oak," on the campus of what is now Hampton University. Other historically black institutions of higher learning were founded during Reconstruction also, such as Morehouse College in Georgia, founded in 1867, Howard University, founded that same year, and Fisk University of Nashville, which stressed the importance of higher education over mere job training.

The hunger for education was expressed in nearly every gathering of black people, as children taught their parents, and those with a little learning passed their knowledge on to those with less. Classes formed extemporaneously, whenever a book or primer was available and people had a moment to themselves. Black communities often funded the construction of schools and the payment of teachers, making great sacrifices in order to ensure the possibility of an education. These efforts were sometimes in contrast to the white community; Beaufort, South Carolina, although founded 144 years previously, built its first public school only through the work of black freedmen.

### Making a Living

With emancipation, millions of black people were finally allowed one of the most basic human rights, the control over their own labor. Since this labor had been appropriated by slave owners for hundreds of years, the freedom (limited though it was) for blacks to make their own economic choices was misunderstood and resented by many whites. Blacks were called "lazy" and unwilling to work, because they were determined to work for themselves and their families, under conditions of their own choosing, rather than at the convenience or demands of whites. Economic independence was paramount, and blacks attempted to find work under conditions as distant from those of slavery as

possible. Ownership of land was often the highest ideal; a Georgia planter stated, "They will almost starve and go naked before they will work for a white man...if they can get a patch of ground to live on, and get from under his control" (Foner, 104).

But most freedmen could not afford to buy land, and were forced to accustom themselves to selling their labor, either for wages or as sharecroppers on a planter's land. Many misunderstandings on both sides resulted from this situation, as whites were not used to compensating black labor, and blacks were not used to negotiating for it. Collective action, including strikes, were sometimes used to petition for wages, as black workers learned economic strategies. Those in production of farm items also sought the best prices for their produce. Most of all, freedmen sought to control when, where and how they made a living. They were reluctant to plant only cash crops like cotton, and risk becoming dependent on the vagaries of the market. Their greatest desire was to plant what they needed to survive, and maintain their independence from the expectations of white plantation owners. However, as blacks were soon to learn as Reconstruction came to an end, neither the southern plantation owners nor northern industrialists dependent on the cotton crop for their fortunes, were in favor of such independent black economic subsistence structures.

## Politics

It is in the arena of politics that a revolution in race relations truly took place. Black people had begun to organize politically well before the Civil War was over, and once they were emancipated, they equated freedom with the right to vote. In some states, where African Americans were the numerical majority, voting participation reached 90%. The history of black voting patterns is illustrative of the freedom and power which resided in the black community during Reconstruction: between 1876 and 1892, over 60% of blacks voted in the south. Between 1900 and 1916, this was reduced to 5%, and by the 1920s, to 1%. These data correspond ominously with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and their terrorist methods; by the late 1890s, one black person was being lynched every other day. For many southern whites, the right to vote was the ultimate measure of personhood, and blacks simply could not be permitted this status. If Radical Republicanism had forcibly overturned reason and decency, whites felt, then extra-legal methods must be employed to reestablish it. As the editor of a southern newspaper wrote, "Judge Lynch is an abler judge and a more humane man and a truer discerner of equality than many who have figured as justices in our reconstructed and semi-barbarous era." (Uya, 132).

The political behavior of freedmen and ex-slaves after the Civil War was of particular interest to both of the main political parties, as the end of bondage meant an altered political “face” of the South. Both Democrats and Republicans wondered if African Americans would be influenced by the prominence of the Democrats and the pressure of their former masters to join the Democratic Party, or support the party of the North, the Republicans, which were temporarily enforcing Congressional Reconstruction in the South. Even without the “further guarantees” of political and economic opportunity promised them by Charles Sumner, U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, African Americans immediately began to mobilize and organize in support of the Republicans.

Churches and other organizations provided the springboard for political organization and emerging leadership. Union Leagues, Equal Rights Leagues, and other political groups brought together freedmen, black soldiers and Radical Republicans intent on demanding an end to unfair labor practices, rule by ex-Confederates, and the vote. This outpouring of black political mobilization was puzzling and frustrating to southern whites, who were amazed to see hundreds of freedmen and women leaving places of work to attend political meetings, rallies, and conventions.

Statewide conventions held in 1865 and 1866 in the southern states were an important way for black leaders to come to prominence. Black delegates to these conventions were usually ministers, artisans, military veterans, or black people who had been born in freedom. Such historic black leaders as Alabama Congressman James T. Rapier and Mississippi Secretary of State James D. Lynch began their political careers at these conventions, and conventioners from South Carolina included four future Congressmen, thirteen legislators, and twelve delegates to the state’s 1868 constitutional convention. Conventioners took up the question of equal treatment under the law for all races, with a reference to the Declaration of Independence that was passionate and very personal. “Eleven Alabama blacks, who complained of contract frauds, injustice before the courts, and other abuses, concluded their petition with a revealing masterpiece of understatement: ‘This is not the pursuit of happiness.’” (Foner, 114)

The election of two black U.S. Senators, Hiram Rhodes Revels (Mississippi, 1870-1871) and Blanche K. Bruce (Mississippi, 1875-1881), and twenty-one black members of the U.S. House of Representatives from eight southern states during the Reconstruction era provides further evidence of the remarkable political accomplishments by black Americans at this time. Since 1881, there have only been three more black Senators elected to Congress, none from southern states. In the House, also, southern states have been poorly represented by black people since the end of Reconstruction. Many other black

elected officials, such as state representatives, councilmen, mayors, and sheriffs, served in public office during Reconstruction.

Political pressure for equal treatment extended even to the domain of public transportation. Long before Rosa Parks made her heroic stand for equality on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama, southern blacks had made public transportation a forum for equal rights. In Richmond, three black people refused to leave a horse-drawn streetcar reserved for whites only, and were supported by a vocal group of bystanders. In Charleston, blacks challenged the law by intentionally sitting in an all-white streetcar, and in New Orleans blacks actually took over streetcars, driving them around the town triumphantly (Foner, 282). In these cities, racially integrated transportation was the result of such political acts; it would be another 90 years before the south would again confront the blight of segregated public transportation.

### Historymakers

We are fortunate that history has passed down to us the names and contributions of some of the African Americans of the Reconstruction period who were active as political leaders. The Republican Party, after 1867 dominated by the Radicals, mobilized black leadership in the party interest. James Lynch, a newspaper editor in Mississippi, was well known for his powerful and eloquent political speeches which he gave throughout the state. William N. Viney, from Ohio, came to the south as a soldier and stayed to politically organize black people at his own expense. As a poor farmer, Thomas Allen, a former slave from Georgia, organized for the Union League and eventually became a state legislator. Emmanuel Fortune was a former slave, but his artisanship as a shoemaker and his leadership within his church gave him the skills to become politically active. Personal qualities of character, honesty and integrity, led other black leaders, such as Alfred Wright from South Carolina and Calvin Rogers from Florida, to become respected political leaders in southern black communities. For black people, participation in politics and exercising the right to vote was freedom made manifest. As Foner (291) states, "Rarely has a community invested so many hopes in politics as did blacks during Radical Reconstruction."

### *Robert Smalls*

"My race needs no special defense, for the past history of them in this country proves them to be the equal of any people anywhere. All they need is an equal chance in the battle of life."

--Robert Smalls (Uya, vii)

Robert Smalls, born a slave near the Sea Islands of South Carolina, became a legendary leader in the south during Reconstruction because of his heroic actions during the Civil War. A skilled sea captain, Smalls was working on the cotton steamer *Planter*, in 1861. The Confederates commissioned the ship for use in the war, and as its pilot, Smalls was responsible for reconnaissance for the Rebels. But skill and bravery led Smalls to seek a way to use his position in service to the Union, and on May 12, 1862, he and other black shipworkers commandeered the *Planter* through to Union lines while the Confederate captain and crew were off the boat in town. To do this, Smalls had to navigate the ship past five Confederate forts, giving the appropriate signals and pretending to be the white crew. When met by the Union soldiers, the *Planter* delivered its cargo of Confederate artillery, making international news and delivering a sound blow to Rebel forces.

For his heroism, Robert Smalls met with President Lincoln, and was given a letter permitting South Carolina blacks to join the Union Army, thereby ensuring their freedom. Smalls went on to pilot the *Planter* for the Union forces, using his great skill at navigation to traverse many dangerous coastal areas, and fighting in seventeen battles during the war. But even his supposed allies, other Union officers, were driven by racism and jealousy to attempt to undermine him. Once he was sent on a false mission through waters he didn't know, only to complete the mission in record time. One observer commented on this event, "the fortress of prejudice has been successfully stormed." (Uya, 25).

In 1862, Robert Smalls became involved with the Port Royal Experiment, particularly in the realm of education. Ten thousand ex-slaves were given rights (temporarily, as it turned out) to farm and live on the Sea Islands of South Carolina, from which rice plantation owners had fled at the outbreak of war. The black farmers were very successful in managing their subsistence, exporting crops to the north, and setting up schools. Robert Smalls promoted education in the Sea Islands, by buying property for schoolhouses and raising money for education in the north. Smalls proposed compulsory education for children aged 6 to 16 for at least two years in the new South Carolina constitution, because he was convinced that citizenship could not proceed without education.

Robert Smalls became very successful in electoral politics, also. In 1864, he and three other black delegates were chosen to represent the Sea Islanders at the Republican Convention in Baltimore. But while permitted to sit, the black delegates were not acknowledged or permitted to vote. Undaunted, he remained loyal to and active with the Republican Party, assisting the needy, even the family of his former master, to find political jobs. In 1868, Smalls was elected to the first General Assembly under the new constitution, despite threats to his life and

property. Twice he introduced bills to enforce provisions of the Civil Rights Act, but both times they were defeated.

Robert Smalls was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1874, as one of eight black Congressmen from South Carolina that year. His interests included economic development and jobs for both his black and white constituents, and he spearheaded the development of the Port Royal Harbor project. He also fought against a bill to exclude blacks from army service, but was unsuccessful.

In 1876, South Carolina was “redeemed” by the Democrats when they were voted into power. The Democrats called for “white unity” against blacks, stating, “we regard the issue between the white and the colored people of this state...as an antagonism of race, not a difference of political parties. White supremacy is essential to our continued existence as a people.”(Uya, 103). Even with this bitter antagonism fomenting in his state, Smalls won reelection in 1876. But Democratic intimidation, fraud, and redistricting cost Smalls the elections of 1878, 1880, and 1882. His last race was 1886, and Democratic enemies, using last-ditch methods, tried to exploit divisions between “lighter and “darker” African Americans, claiming that Smalls only favored the “lighter” group.

At this point in American history, racial politics were beginning to supercede divisions between north and south or between political groups. Indeed, it was racial antagonism which was instrumental in bringing whites in the north and in the south back together. Robert Smalls was present at the Republican conventions of 1868 and 1895; at the first, blacks were given political rights as citizens, and at the second, these rights were eliminated. In 1868, 76 black delegates attended, and 48 whites; in 1895, only 6 blacks attended, to 154 whites. In the span of one political lifetime, Robert Smalls had seen the ascendancy of black political leadership, and also its defeat through bitter hostility and racial opposition. But his commitment to his people, his state, and his nation, particularly in the face of such unwarranted antagonism and injustice, should stand as an example of great statesmanship and true humanity.

### *Tunis Campbell*

“(I was convinced) never to leave this country until every slave was free on American soil—unless I went to...help secure their liberation.”  
---Tunis Campbell (Turner, 14)

Tunis Campbell was born in 1812 to free parents in New Jersey. He attended an Episcopal school in New York, where he was the only African

American child in the school. He excelled at his studies, and at first became interested in missionary work. But he soon took up the cause of slavery, and became a fierce anti-colonizationist. He became a popular speaker and social worker, and he founded several black schools and churches. From 1832 to 1845 Campbell became a very successful head waiter at well-known hotels, and he wrote the first book by an American on first-class hotel management.

When the Civil War came, Campbell tried to enlist in the Union army, but blacks were not admitted at the time. After Emancipation, he presented President Lincoln with a proposal to assist the freedmen, but the president did not act on it. Undeterred, Campbell found a friend to intercede for him, and he was finally commissioned, by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, to assist with the resettlement of freedmen on confiscated plantation lands in South Carolina, in 1863. He worked with the people of the Sea Islands, in the Port Royal Experiment, learning about the slaves' experiences of bondage, and of their hopes and dreams for the future.

In 1865, Tunis Campbell was requested by the Union forces to serve as superintendent of the Sea Islands of Georgia. General Sherman's Special Field Order Number 15 had just been issued, which was designed to deal with the hundreds of freed slaves who had been designated "contraband" of the war, and had to be resettled. The Field Order stipulated that these freedmen were to be given "sole and exclusive management of affairs" of the abandoned rice fields of the Sea Islands, and they could claim a homestead of up to forty acres (Duncan, 19). Tunis Campbell was prepared, educationally and emotionally, for this challenge. Believing that for freedmen to truly become free men they must first live independently and separately from whites, Campbell petitioned the government for supplies, such as books, clothing, tools, and marriage licenses, for the new settlement to begin its project of self-sustaining farm life.

On St. Catherine's Island, Campbell prepared for the exercise of democracy by the newly freed slaves by setting up a government styled after the U.S. Constitution. He formed an eight-man Senate and a twenty-man House, and a judicial system with a Supreme Court. A militia was formed to protect the community. Using his own money, he brought his son to assist with managing schools on the islands. His wife and adopted son also joined him to teach the residents. In a short time, the residents of Campbell's Sea Islands of Georgia became self-sufficient, and were well on their way to learning the rights and responsibilities of American citizens.

But Tunis Campbell and the Georgia freedmen were unable to keep the Sea Island communities going in the face of southern planters who demanded

their lands back. Pardoned by President Johnson, these planters regained control of the Sea Island lands in 1866. Determined to fight on for black self-sufficiency, Campbell bought over a thousand acres of land in McIntosh county and formed an association of black landowners to use it for their mutual profit.

With Radical Reconstruction in 1867, Tunis Campbell held offices as a justice of the peace, a delegate to the state constitutional convention, and a state senator. In the senate, Campbell continued his struggle for voting equality, equal education, integrated jury boxes, and open access to public facilities. Like many other black leaders during this period, Tunis Campbell was threatened, poisoned, and had his home burned down, as a consequence of his actions for equal rights. In 1871, Democrats gained power in Georgia, and the pressure on Tunis Campbell greatly increased. Ultimately, he was convicted on a false charge of improper political dealings, arrested, chained, and forced to serve in a convict labor camp for one year. Such a tragic conclusion, however, does not erase or tarnish the leadership he demonstrated, in bringing thousands of newly freed slaves into a new life, and bravely representing his people as an elected representative within his state.

### Black Women in Leadership

Under slavery, black men and black women shared a similar oppression, that of slavery itself. Black families could not depend on maintaining a stable structure, as they could be torn asunder at the whim of the master who owned them. With freedom, the patriarchal structures which operated in white society were cast upon the black family. The Freedman's Bureau designated men as the head of the family and thus the signer of contracts, and established a wage scale which paid men more than women. After 1867, black men could vote, serve on juries, and become political leaders, but women, black or white, could not. Since all members of the black family, male and female, adult or child, had had to work at the bidding of the slave owner, with the coming of freedom, it was a powerful expression of autonomy for the male to be considered the sole breadwinner. But however much the black family wished to determine the timing and scope of its labor, the desperate poverty facing most ex-slaves made women's extra-domestic work essential. When work in the fields, whether owned or as shares, needed to be done, both women and children joined men in the sowing and harvesting.

Women's participation in black organizations such as churches, benevolent societies and educational groups during Reconstruction provided them with skills to become active in pressing for their rights as wage workers. Strikes held in Jackson, Mississippi in 1866 and in Galveston, Texas in 1877 by female domestic workers were expressions of this growing organizational strength. In

presenting a petition to the mayor of Jackson, the striking women stated that they would charge “‘a uniform rate for our labor,’ warning that ‘any one belonging to the class of washerwomen, violating this, shall be liable to a fine regulated by the class.’” (Hunter, 75).

Although women, black and white, did not have the right to vote, they were still active in politics and spoke out on political issues. A black woman, Hannah Flournoy, was forced to take refuge in Atlanta to escape persecution by the KKK for her political organizing. “‘Negro women, if possible, were wilder than the men,’” stated an observer at the time, referring to black women’s defense of the right to black male suffrage. As Turner states (87), “Whether related to electing public officials or improving conditions at work, political actions were community affairs that involved the participation of women, men, and children.”

## Conclusion

The era of Reconstruction, though brief, was one of the most historic and revolutionary in our nation’s history. Events great and small occurred during this period that were firsts for not only the U.S., but for any civilization yet recorded, such as the legal enfranchisement of millions of former slaves. Within a few short years, millions of human beings who had had their very humanity robbed from them for hundreds of years, were brought not only into citizenship, but into leadership. Through their courage, their faith, their commitment, and their reason, free African Americans seized the United States Constitution and wrung out its promises. They founded schools, served in the military, supported and protected their families and each other, and rose to serve in the highest levels of government. And all this was accomplished within an environment of the most severe and tenacious animosity, in which just to live with the rights of a free person was an unforgivable affront to most of white society. That so much was accomplished, and so many leaders arose during this time of persecution and hatred, is a testimony to the strength and beauty of the human spirit.

The purpose of this unit is to demonstrate to students that, rather than being simply a “failure” or a “lost cause,” the history of Reconstruction also shines a light on the strengths and contributions of the black community at that time. For reasons located mainly in the foundational white racism on which the institution of slavery was based, Reconstruction was chipped away at until it was finally undermined and the unjust relations of segregation and Jim Crow asserted themselves. It would take many more years until the Civil Rights movement at mid-century again began to address inequality and injustice between the races. But it is crucial that students understand—particularly in light of the way the history of Reconstruction has been misconstrued as a terrible mistake for all of the

South—that the period of Reconstruction brought forth important contributions to American society by many African American men and women. All students in the U.S. should become aware of—and honor—that reality.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of this unit are to provide students with the materials, information and references necessary to consider and evaluate the contributions of black Americans to American society and culture during the Reconstruction Era (1865-1877). In addition, students will be asked to consider the discipline of history itself: by what means and to what ends it is attempted and achieved. Several of the Citizenship Standards for 11<sup>th</sup> grade will be addressed in this unit (see Appendix A). Numbers 1 and 3 will be addressed through the information on the events, politics and cultural change which occurred during the Reconstruction Era. Numbers 4 and 5 concern the methods of instruction; students using this unit will be engaged in processes of inquiry, research, and will write assignments which will require that they take positions on the material and defend them. Working with others and cooperating are addressed by Standards 7 and 8, and the strategies used in this unit will cover both of these standards. Finally Standard 9, addressing the history and nature of prejudice in the United States, is a major focus of this curriculum unit.

This unit will draw on the fourth through sixth levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, i.e. analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Skills of comparison and contrast, examination, formulation, organization, appraisal, and application will be called on to complete this unit. Also, students will be using skills of cooperation, communication and negotiation as they work together in cooperative learning structures to analyze and discuss the information and concepts.

### **Strategies**

This unit should be taught after students have carefully reviewed the causes, events and consequences of the Civil War. They should be familiar with the political positions and economic interests of both north and south, and the history and legacy of slavery in the United States. This knowledge will best enable the student to grasp the importance of the focus on black achievements in the Reconstruction Era.

Group discussion of ideas is a very important part of this curriculum unit. Students will be asked to think critically about the material presented, and in some cases relate it to their own ideas and beliefs about American democracy and

society. By listening respectfully and sharing their own ideas, students will gain important learning skills.

Students will work with primary sources and develop and explore ideas based on these materials. Materials in the unit may be used to develop a document-based question or questions which can then be used as an assignment for AP students. Critical writing is an important strategy used in this unit, as students evaluate the purposes of history and the nature of prejudice as a component of the historical process.

### **Classroom Activities**

#### Day One

Begin this unit by making an overhead transparency of *Appendix B*, a reproduction of the first black senators and representatives to the U.S. Congress. Put the transparency on the overhead, covering up the description, and ask the students who they think the people in the picture might be. Point out the clothing of the men, suggesting an earlier time period. When students have had a chance to guess, reveal the description of the image. Ask for student reactions. Conduct a brief discussion of the number of black Senators and Representatives who currently serve the country. See if students can name some of them. Then, ask students if they were surprised to learn that there were black Congressmen during the Reconstruction era.

The issue of the ways in which the Reconstruction Era has been depicted historically could then be raised, using material from this unit on the Dunning School. Ask students to think about the purposes of history, and the assumptions, examined and unexamined, held by those who write history. Generate ideas as to what these assumptions might be. Conclude by asking students to write a short essay answering the question, “What should the purpose of writing history be, and how should this be accomplished?”

#### Day Two

Ask students to write briefly about the most challenging situation they have ever faced. Suggest topics such as the first day on a new job, performing at a sporting event, or speaking before a large group of people. Have students make a list of the personal characteristics that they felt helped them confront this challenge. Then show students an overhead transparency of the drawing in *Appendix C*. Ask students to describe, in writing, what they think the picture is depicting. Ask them to consider how “the first vote” may have been different for each of the

voters pictured, by studying each individual (an older ex-slave, who looks poor and may be illiterate; a man dressed a little better, who may have been born free; a Union soldier. Note that no women are present). Finally, ask students what they think the challenges might be for black people casting “the first vote.” Point out the white official, and the lack of a secret ballot. Relate this to the racial attitudes of the time and the rise of the KKK. Note also other challenges such as lack of literacy and transportation issues.

Use material discussed in the unit to provide examples of the many ways freedmen overcame the challenges they faced during Reconstruction. Point out the contributions made in education and public service. The descriptions of the lives of Robert Smalls and Tunis Campbell may be used as readings. Have students draw comparisons and provide contrasts between the lives and contributions of these two individuals.

### Day Three

The website of the American Antiquarian Society, “Northern Visions of Race, Region, and Reform in the Press and Letters of Freedmen and Freedmen’s Teachers in the Civil War Era,” is the focus of this lesson. Students should read the introduction on the home page, then use the section titled “The Freedmen.” In navigating this section, students will discover many primary sources, mainly letters from freedmen and their teachers, as well as depictions of freedmen from other sources. This site could be used in a variety of ways: students could write a critique of one of the sections; students could read several sections and compare them; or students could choose a theme and investigate the many ways this theme is treated on the site. The site is very navigable, and the graphics presented express the contrasting ways African Americans were depicted by whites, by their teachers, and by themselves.

A word of caution: as the site states, some of the images and language are offensive, due to the racist views of the time. Be sure to point out the “About this Site” information at the bottom right of the home page, which explains why they were included. These documents provide a valuable opportunity for students to analyze primary sources that dramatically portray the great cultural obstacles which African Americans had to face and overcome in order to claim their rights as free Americans. Students should be encouraged to think and write about them in a thoughtful and critical manner.

## Day Four

Having completed their exploration of the website used in Day Three, students could be placed in “pair and share” groups and asked to compare and contrast the sources they used and the conclusions they reached. The links on the website provide a diverse array of topics, so students could be assigned various sections and then asked to share them in their pair groups. At the conclusion of the sharing, each student should be asked to write an essay using the materials they have explored. This could be in the form of a document-based question (DBQ), in which case they should write the question, and then use the sources they analyzed as documents with which to write the essay answer. Students should complete their essays at home if they do not finish in class.

## Day Five

This final lesson is centered on the PBS American Experience video, “Reconstruction: The Second Civil War.” To begin, review the material on Tunis Campbell which students have previously read or been taught. Ask students to consider why it would be necessary to draw up new state constitutions in the states which seceded from the Union. Also, review the factors which led to the end of Reconstruction, and its ultimate outcomes. Show Part 2 of the video (the second tape); it contains short breaks (end of scenes) with which the video can be easily divided. The worksheet in *Appendix D* can be used as a guide to the video. A reflective response to the video might include an essay in which students suggest how a different outcome of Reconstruction might have been accomplished.

## **Annotated Bibliography/Resources**

<http://mac110.assumption.edu/aas/default.html>

This website, sponsored by the American Antiquarian Society, is a valuable collection of primary sources, written by teachers of freedmen and freedmen themselves after the Civil War. It also presents an analysis of stereotypes popular during the era, which could be used to critically analyze historical developments during Reconstruction. Contains many primary sources useful in writing document-based questions.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/>

This is the companion website to the American Experience video “Reconstruction: The Second Civil War.” It contains primary sources, clickable videos, and further resources to supplement the documentary. Topics include “Forty Acres and a Mule,” “Black Legislators,” “Access to Learning,” and

“Slave to Sharecropper.” Websites for further learning, and a Teacher’s Guide are also available on this site.

“Reconstruction: The Second Civil War.” American Experience PBS Home Video Documentary, 2004. Unrated, 180 minutes. Spanning the years 1863 through 1877, this video tells the story of several Americans, white and black, from the north and south, as they live through Reconstruction. Part Two has an excellent section on Tunis Campbell and the 1868 Presidential election.

Berlin, Ira, et. al. *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War (Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867)* Cambridge University Press, 1992.

The three essays in this book all demonstrate actions taken by slaves and freedmen in different social and historical circumstances, as they confronted the challenges of freedom and economic independence.

Blight, David W. *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory.* Belknap Press, 2002.

The author of this book indicts American historical and popular perceptions of the Civil War and its aftermath which have minimized the issue of slavery and racism, and focused instead on the heroism of the military and the victim status of the South.

Cimbala, Paul A. *Under the Guardianship of the Nation: The Freedmen’s Bureau and the Reconstruction of Georgia, 1865-1870.* University of Georgia Press, 2003.

This book explains how a combination of factors, from limited resources to white Southern resistance, contributed to the ineffectiveness of the Freedmen’s Bureau, leaving Southern ex-slaves to negotiate their own social, political, and economic circumstances.

Du Bois, W. E. Burghardt. *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880.* Free Press, First Reissue Edition, 1998.

Du Bois’s book set the groundwork on which modern authors such as Foner have built to create their histories of the Reconstruction era. Du Bois identifies Reconstruction not as a tragedy for the South, but as an opportunity for the nation to reestablish new social, political and economic relations based on equality rather than exploitation; an opportunity which, tragically, was not implemented.

Duncan, Russell. *Freedom's Shore: Tunis Campbell and the Georgia Freedmen*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986.

The remarkable life of Tunis Campbell, a black abolitionist and friend of Frederick Douglass, is detailed in this account. Campbell's successes within state politics to bring about reforms and enact laws which would protect the rights of all Americans are highlighted.

Faulkner, Carol. *Women's Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen's Aid Movement*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

In this book, the author adds to scholarship on the Freedmen's Bureau by introducing the voices of women reformers, both black and white. Through use of copious primary sources, she reveals the tensions inherent in women's participation in this male-dominated enterprise.

Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. New York: Perennial Classics (HarperCollins), 2002.

This is a very comprehensive history of the era of Reconstruction, which details the accomplishments of black Americans both as political and cultural leaders and as ordinary people facing a dramatically altered social landscape. Contents include the Great Depression of 1873, Reconstruction in both South and North, and the white backlash (KKK).

Hahn, Steven. *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration*. Belknap Press, 2005.

Thorough research brings to light the political traditions and economic enterprises forged by Southern ex-slaves in light of formidable obstacles.

Hunter, Tera W. *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1998.

The efforts of black women to control their labor, primarily as domestic workers, in the post-Civil War period is detailed in this book. As the title expresses, the book also characterizes the cultural life of these women, and the music, dance and theatre in which they participated.

Kennedy, Stetson. *After Appomattox: How the South Won the War*. University Press of Florida, 1995.

Using testimonials obtained through a congressional committee in 1871-72, the author draws a chilling picture of the systematic and thoroughgoing "reign of terror" by whites against black Americans after the Civil War. This book demonstrates the immense obstacles faced by blacks attempting to achieve economic and political independence after Emancipation.

Lamson, Peggy. *The Glorious Failure: Black Congressman Robert Brown Elliott and the Reconstruction in South Carolina*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1973.

Robert Brown Elliott was an enigmatic figure and an eloquent spokesperson for the freed slaves of South Carolina who, “more than any other statesman on the scene, tried to grasp the historical imperative of his own time” (12). This sensitive and thorough portrayal of his life as a state and national legislator would be useful as a case study and primary source.

Litwack, Leon F. *Been In The Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*. Vintage Press, 1980.

Based on many primary sources, this book articulates the challenges facing blacks during Reconstruction. It explores the complex and troubled interrelationships between whites and blacks, as a new social order was being defined and established.

Rose, Willie Lee. *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.

A winner of several historical literary prizes, this book chronicles the “experiment” of freedom in which 10,000 freedmen participated, in the Sea Islands of South Carolina in 1861. It is written in story-like prose and is extremely detailed, with thorough footnoting.

## **Appendices—Standards**

### ***Appendix A***

#### **Pittsburgh Public Schools Citizenship Standards – 11<sup>th</sup> Grade**

1. All students demonstrate an understanding of major events, cultures, groups, and individuals in the historical development the United States during the 20th century.
2. All students demonstrate an understanding of the themes and patterns of geography, know the location of major bodies of water and landmasses, and nations and describe the relationship between geography and historical, economic, and cultural development of the United States during the 20th century.
3. All students describe the development and operations of economic, political, legal and governmental systems in the United States during the 20th century and assess their own relationships to those systems, and compare them to those in other nations.
4. All students examine and evaluate problems facing citizens in the United States by incorporating concepts and methods of inquiry of the various social sciences.
5. All students develop and defend a position on current issues confronting the citizens of the United States by conducting research, analyzing alternatives, organizing evidence and arguments, and making oral presentations.
6. All students explain basic economic concepts and the development and operation of the economic systems in the United States and other nations and make informed decisions about economic issues.
7. All students demonstrate their skills of communicating, negotiating, and cooperating with others.
8. All students demonstrate the ability to work effectively with others.
9. All students demonstrate an understanding of the history and nature of prejudice in and relate their knowledge of prejudice to current issues in the United States.

10. All students demonstrate an understanding of the various roles they can play as citizens through participation in a community service project.

11. All students demonstrate the ability to resolve conflicts in peaceful ways, including, but not limited to peer mediation, anger management, interpersonal skills, and problem solving.

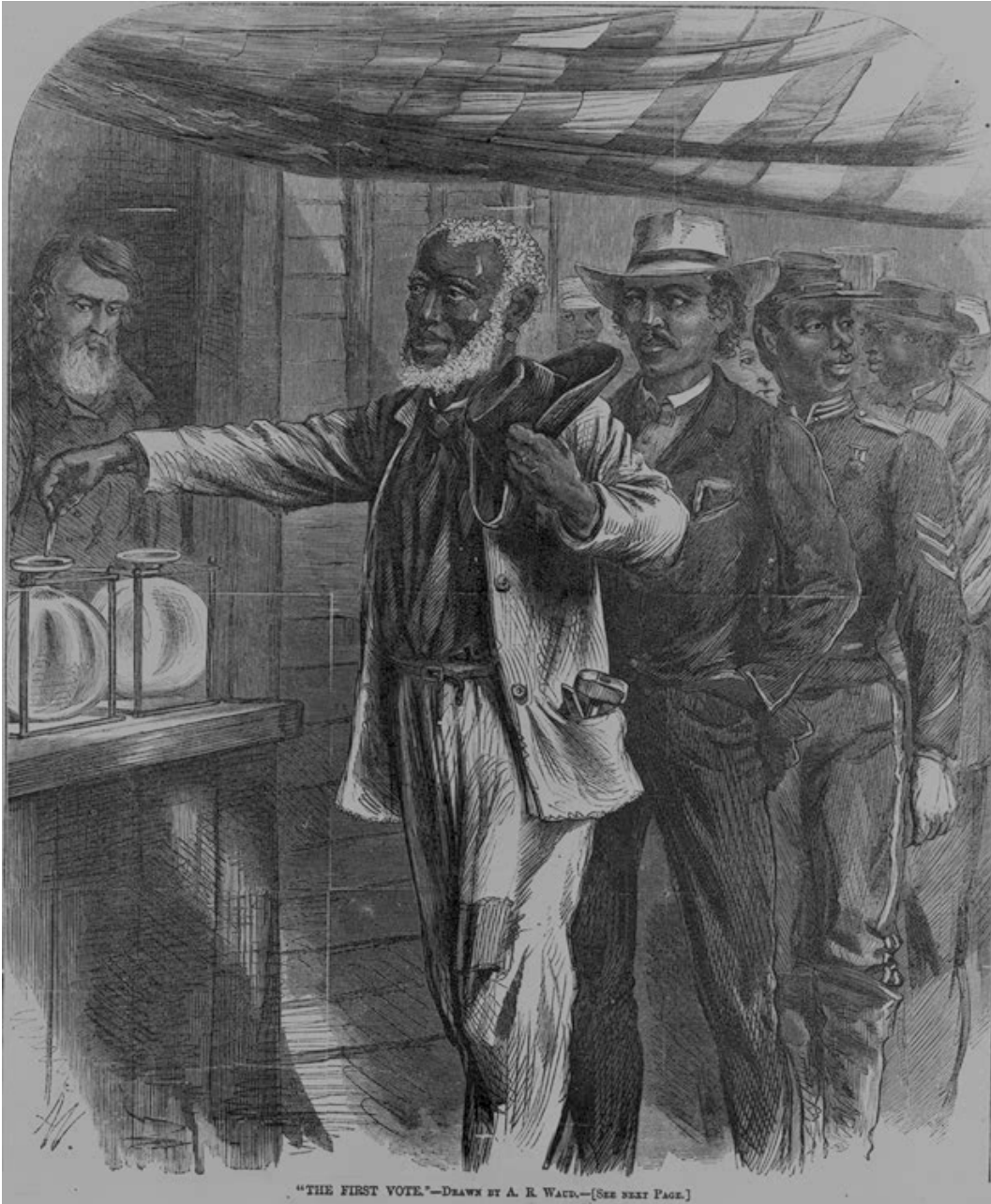
*Appendix B*



The Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave the vote to all male citizens regardless of color or previous condition of servitude. African Americans became involved in the political process not only as voters but also as governmental representatives at the local, state and national level. Although their elections were often contested by whites, and white members of the legislative bodies were reluctant to admit them, many African American men ably served their country during Reconstruction. Pictured here are Senator Hiram R. Revels and Representatives Benjamin S. Turner, Josiah T. Walls, Joseph H. Rainey, Robert Brown Elliot, Robert D. De Large, and Jefferson H. Long.

[www.loc.gov/exhibits/odyssey/educate/ reps.html](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/odyssey/educate/ reps.html)

*Appendix C*



"THE FIRST VOTE."—DRAWN BY A. R. WARD.—[SEE NEXT PAGE.]

*Appendix D*

Name\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_ Period\_\_\_\_\_

“Reconstruction: The Second Civil War”

1. What were the issues confronting black voters after the Civil War?
2. Describe the accomplishments and challenges faced by Tunis Campbell.
3. What was the Georgia legislature’s response to black legislators? Why?
4. Who were the candidates and what were the issues of the 1868 Presidential election campaign?
5. Who was John R. Lynch?

