

## FORTENBAUGH LECTURE

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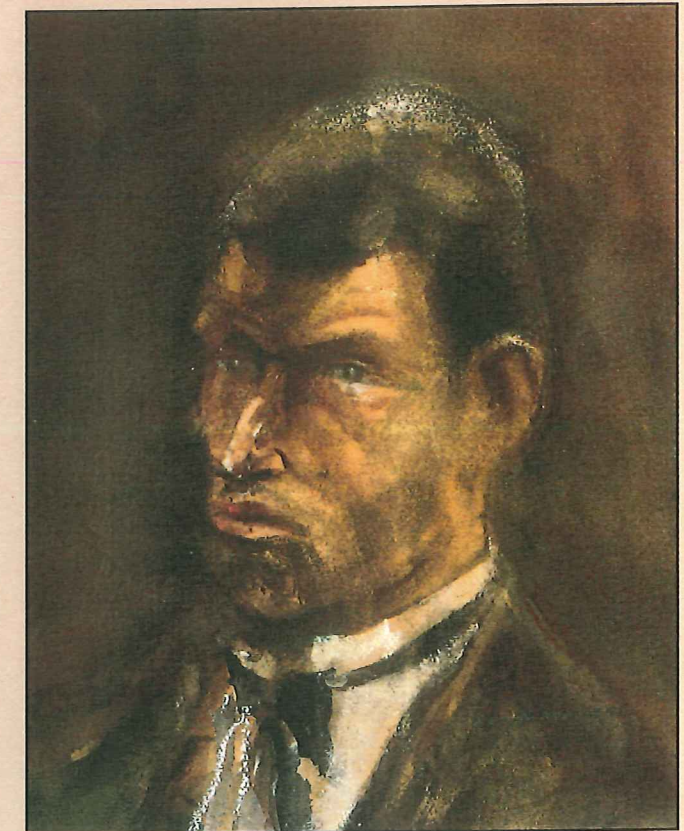
The Robert Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture is presented each year on November 19, the anniversary of the Gettysburg Address. The lecture's goal is to speak to the literate general public without abandoning solid scholarly moorings. The series was sustained during its first two decades by an endowment contributed by Mr. and Mrs. Clyde B. Gerberich of Mt. Joy, Pennsylvania, in honor of Professor Fortenbaugh, who taught history at Gettysburg from 1923 until his death in 1959. The endowment has been substantially supplemented by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Harry D. Holloway Fund, and the Hewlett Foundation. In 1990 the alumni and friends of the College made special contributions to commemorate the 79 years of combined service to Gettysburg College by Professors Basil L. Crapster and Charles H. Glatfelter, who retired in 1988 and 1989, respectively. The roll of donors includes Michael Bishop (Gettysburg '57), the winner of the 1989 Nobel Prize in Medicine. The Fortenbaugh Fund continues to welcome contributions from the friends of the lecture and the College.

The first Fortenbaugh Lecture was delivered in 1962 by Bruce Catton. He was followed by David Herbert Donald, John Hope Franklin, Bell I. Wiley, T. Harry Williams, Willie Lee Rose, Richard N. Current, Don E. Fehrenbacher, C. Vann Woodward, and other luminaries of American historical writing. With the 21st lecture by Jacques Barzun, in 1982, in the 151st year of Gettysburg College, the private printing of the lecture commenced. In 1992 Oxford University Press published, and the Book of the Month Club made an alternate selection of a collection of revised lectures from recent years: Gabor Boritt, ed., *Lincoln, the War President: The Gettysburg Lectures*.

31st Annual  
Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture

## Gettysburg College

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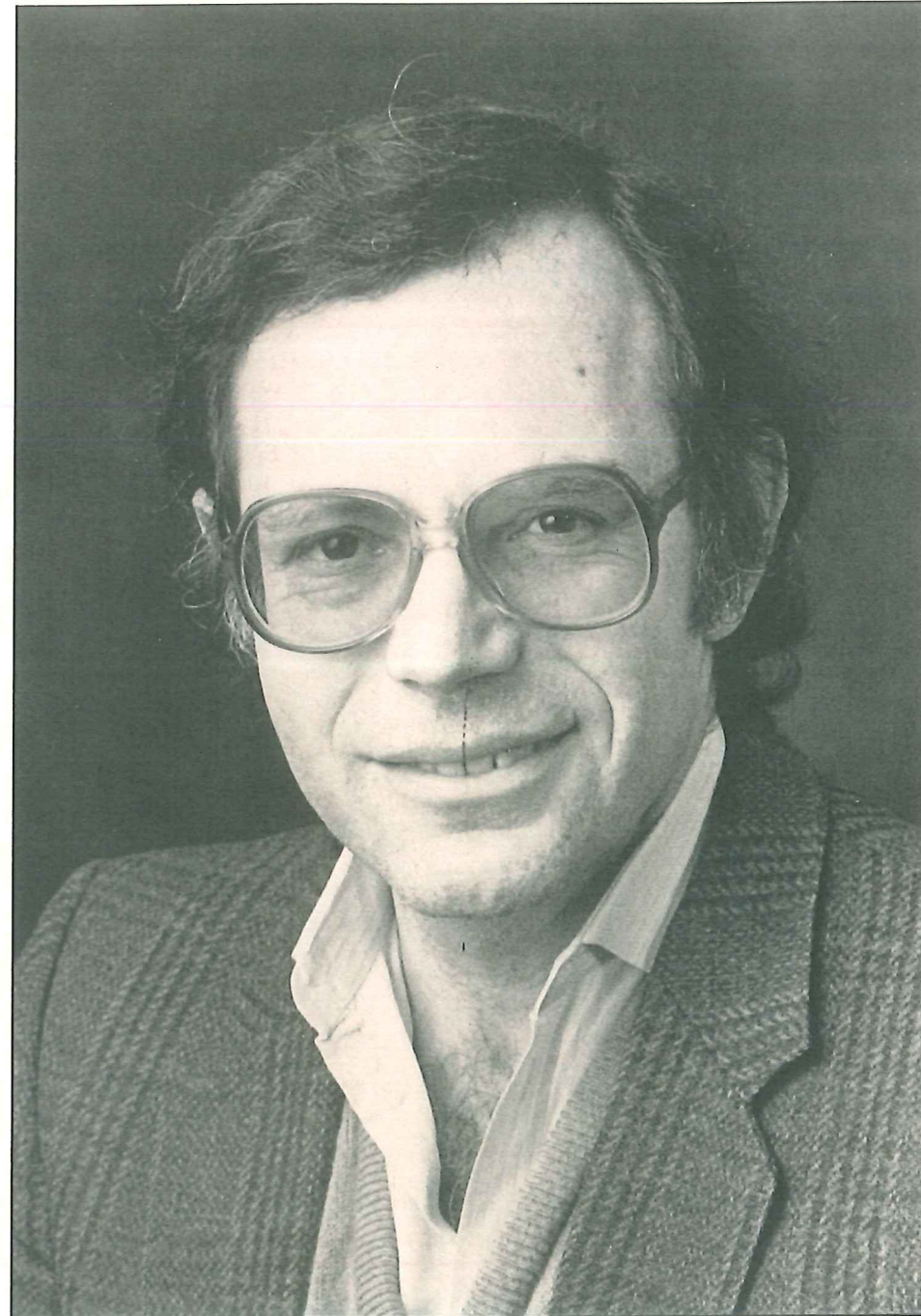
"The Tocsin of Freedom": The Black  
Leadership of Radical Reconstruction

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Eric Foner

*J. McHenry*

**"The Tocsin of Freedom":  
The Black Leadership of  
Radical Reconstruction**



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The Black Leadership of  
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31st Annual  
Robert Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture  
Gettysburg College  
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The watercolor painting on the cover, titled "Free Man" is by Rea Redifer of Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.

## PREFACE

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At the end of the last decade Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* cemented his reputation as one of the foremost students of American history in his generation. In a review of the book, Michael Perman noted generously that its chief problem was that it left little to do for others.<sup>1</sup> Yet of course the study of Reconstruction has not stopped, and Professor Foner himself journeys on.

Some of the most remarkable people of the post-Civil War era were the black holders of public office in the South, though for the better part of this century they have been either maligned or made invisible. Of the perhaps two thousand men who held federal, state, or local posts, Mr. Foner was able to assemble biographical information about nearly three-fourths. These black leaders did not control Reconstruction but they played a notable part. They ranged from former slaves, sometimes illiterate and often very poor, to a minority who had always been free, and in rare cases had substantial wealth and substantial educations. Their joint portrait highlights "the often neglected diversity of the black population in mid-nineteenth-century America."

During the past generation the scholarly reconstruction of Reconstruction history changed a "tragic era" into one of vision and measurable achievement, as well as of bitterness and failure. The shift of public attitudes towards this past has been much slower. Now with his work on black office holders, Eric Foner continues his attempts to move us all in a needed direction.

Thanksgiving Day  
Bolton, Massachusetts

Gabor Boritt

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Perman, "Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: A Finished Revolution*," *Reviews in American History*, 17 (1989), 73.

Reconstruction, the turbulent period that followed the Civil War, was a time of momentous changes in American political and social life. But no development during that era marked so dramatic a break with the nation's traditions, or aroused such bitter hostility from Reconstruction's opponents, as the appearance of large numbers of black Americans in public office only a few years after the destruction of slavery.

Before the Civil War, blacks did not form part of American's "political nation." In 1860, only five Northern states, all with tiny black populations, allowed black men to vote on the same terms as white. Black officeholding was unknown in the slave South, and virtually unheard of in the free states as well. During Presidential Reconstruction (1865-67), voting and elective office in the South continued to be restricted to whites. Black officeholding began in earnest in 1867, when Congress ordered the election of new Southern governments under suffrage rules that did not discriminate on the basis of race. By 1877, when the last radical Reconstruction governments were overthrown, around 2,000 black men had held federal, state, and local public offices, ranging from member of Congress to justice of the peace. Although much reduced after the abandonment of Reconstruction, black officeholding continued to the turn of the century, when most Southern blacks were disenfranchised, and, in a few places, even beyond. Not until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 did significant numbers of black Southerners again hold public office.

To Reconstruction's opponents, black officeholding symbolized the fatal "error" of national policy after the Civil War--the effort to elevate former slaves to a status for which they were utterly unprepared and congenitally incompetent. The Democratic press described constitutional conventions and legislatures with black members as "menageries" and "monkey houses," and ridiculed the former slaves who considered themselves "as competent to frame a code of laws as Lycurgus." They portrayed black officials as ignorant and propertyless, lacking both the education and the economic stake in society supposedly necessary for intelligent governance.<sup>1</sup> After Reconstruction ended, some of its opponents tried to erase black officials from the historical record altogether. Soon after Democrats regained control of Georgia, Alexander St. Clair Abrams, who compiled the state's legislative manual, decided to omit black lawmakers from the volume's biographical sketches. It would be absurd, he wrote, to record "the lives of men who were

but yesterday our slaves, and whose past careers, probably, embraced such menial occupations as boot-blackening, shaving, table-waiting, and the like."<sup>2</sup>

These contemporary views were elaborated by the anti-Reconstruction historians whose works shaped public and scholarly perceptions of the era for much of this century. In popular representations such as D. W. Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation*, Claude G. Bowers's sensationalized best-seller *The Tragic Era* (which described Louisiana's Reconstruction legislature as "a zoo"), the alleged incompetence of black officeholders and the horrors of "Negro rule" justified Reconstruction's violent overthrow and Northern acquiescence in the South's nullification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. As late as 1968, E. Merton Coulter, the last wholly antagonistic scholar of the era, described Georgia's most prominent Reconstruction black officials as swindlers and "scamps," and suggested that whatever positive qualities they possessed were inherited from white ancestors.<sup>3</sup>

The task of offering a more sympathetic and nuanced portrait of Reconstruction and its black officeholders began early in this century, when surviving veterans of the era like John R. Lynch, black scholars such as Alrutheus A. Taylor and W. E. B. Du Bois, and white historians like T. Harry Williams challenged the dominant interpretation. Not until the 1960s, however, did revisionism, inspired by the civil rights revolution, sweep over the field, irrevocably laying to rest the earlier viewpoint and producing a host of important new studies of Reconstruction at the state and national levels. Today, not only has the history of the era been completely rewritten, but most scholars view Reconstruction as a laudable, though flawed, effort to create a functioning *interracial democracy* for the first time in American history, and view Reconstruction's overthrow as a tragedy that powerfully affected the subsequent course of American development.<sup>4</sup>

Thanks to the past generation's Reconstruction scholarship, the information available on black officeholders has expanded enormously. Nonetheless, the lives of most black officials have remained shrouded in obscurity. Many disappear entirely from the historical record after leaving public office. Over the past several years, as an outgrowth of my research on Reconstruction, I have assembled biographical information about 1,465 of the era's black officials. The results will be published by Oxford University Press in a biographical directory, *Freedom's Lawmakers*. In this talk, I draw upon my findings to offer a portrait of the era's black political leadership, and introduce you to some of these remarkable individuals.

Although blacks held office in every part of the old Confederacy during Reconstruction (as well as in Missouri and the nation's capital), the

number varied considerably from state to state. Clearly, the size of the state's black population helped to determine the extent of black officeholding. Thus, it is not surprising that South Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana had the largest number of black officeholders. South Carolina was the only state where blacks comprised a majority of the House of Representatives throughout Reconstruction, and about half the state Senate between 1872 and 1876. South Carolina and Louisiana, in addition, possessed large communities of free blacks, many of them educated, economically independent, and well positioned to demand a role in government from the outset of Reconstruction.

To the black percentage of the voting population, however, other factors must be added that help explain the pattern of black officeholding, including the length of time that Reconstruction survived, attitudes of white Republicans toward blacks exercising political power, and the structure of state and local government. Republican leaders in Florida and Georgia, bent on attracting white voters to their party by limiting the number of black officials, framed constitutions with legislative apportionments biased against black counties, and in which many state and local offices were filled by appointment rather than election. In North Carolina, by contrast, where blacks were far from a majority of the population, the new constitution democratized local government, allowing black voters in plantation counties to choose their own officials.

Nowhere in the South did blacks control the workings of state government, and nowhere did they hold office in numbers commensurate with their proportion of the total population, not to mention the Republican electorate. The *old idea of Reconstruction as an era of "black supremacy"* has long since been discarded as a myth. *Nonetheless, the fact that over 1,400 blacks occupied positions of political authority in the South represented a stunning departure in American government.* Moreover, because of the black population's concentration, nearly all these officials served in or represented plantation counties, home of the wealthiest and, before the Civil War, most powerful Southerners. The spectacle of former slaves representing the South Carolina rice kingdom and the Mississippi cotton belt in state legislatures, assessing taxes on the property of their former owners, and serving on juries alongside them, epitomized the political revolution wrought by Reconstruction.

At every level of government, federal, state, and local, blacks were represented in government during Reconstruction. Two sat in the United States Senate (Hiram Revels and Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi) and fourteen in the House of Representatives. Blacks also held numerous federal

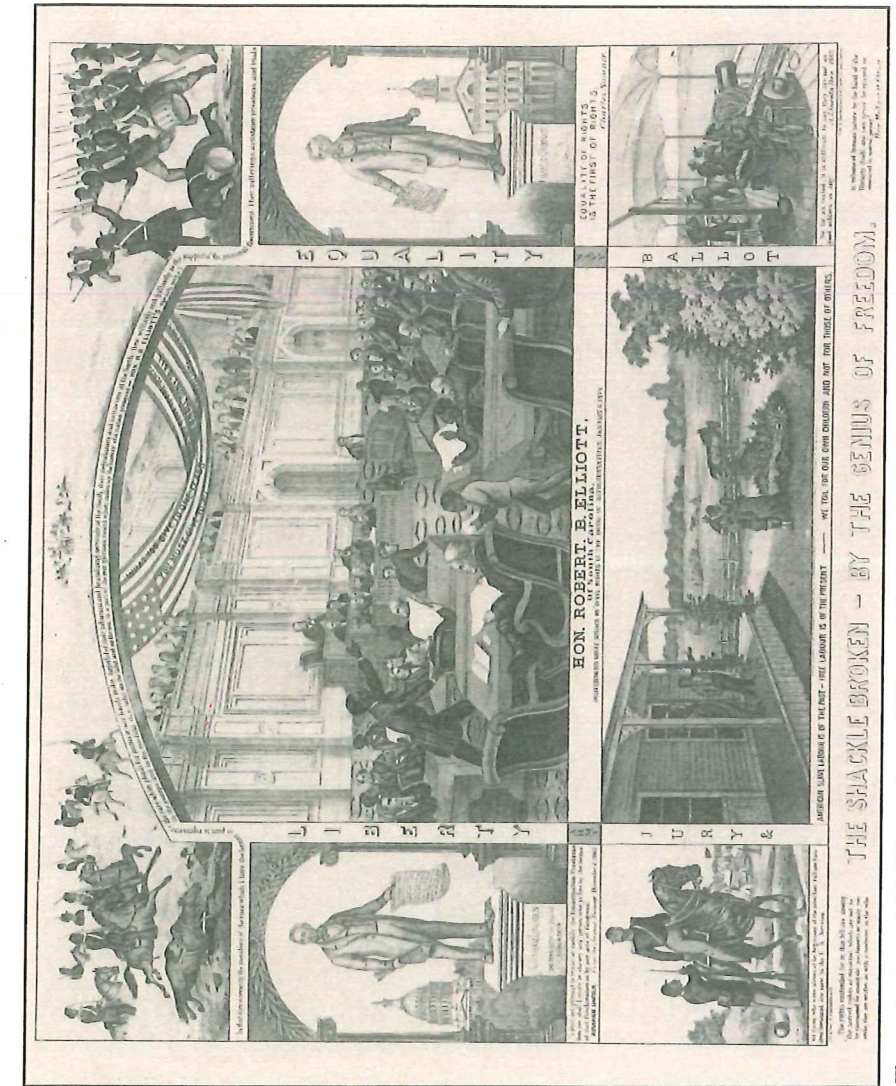
patronage appointments, including postmaster, deputy U.S. marshal, treasury agent, and clerks in federal offices. At least forty blacks held positions in custom houses, most in Charleston and New Orleans.<sup>5</sup>

In December 1872, P. B. S. Pinchback became governor of Louisiana when he succeeded Henry C. Warmoth, who had been suspended because of impeachment proceedings. Pinchback served until the inauguration five weeks later of William P. Kellogg; a century and a quarter would pass until L. Douglas Wilder of Virginia, elected in 1989, became the next black American to serve as governor. Twenty-five major state executive positions (lieutenant governor, treasurer, superintendent of education, secretary of state, and state commissioner) were occupied by blacks during Reconstruction, and one, Jonathan J. Wright of South Carolina, sat on a state supreme court. And during Reconstruction, 683 black men sat in the lower house of state legislatures (four serving as Speaker of the House), and 112 in state senates.

In virtually every county with a sizable black population, blacks held some local office during Reconstruction. At least 111 served as members of the boards that governed county affairs, variously called the county commission, board of supervisors, board of police, and police jury. There were at least 41 black sheriffs (most in Louisiana and Mississippi), and 25 deputy sheriffs. Five held the office of mayor, and 132 served on city councils and boards of aldermen (with sizable representations in communities from Petersburg to Little Rock).

The backgrounds of the black officials reflect the often neglected diversity of the black population in mid-nineteenth-century America. Nearly half of those for whom information is available had been born free and 54 were former slaves who gained their liberty before the Civil War, by manumission, purchase, or escaping to the North. Fewer than 300,000 free blacks lived in the South in 1860, but they clearly enjoyed far greater opportunities to obtain an education, accumulate property, and observe public affairs than did most slaves. Half the officeholders known to have been free served in South Carolina and Louisiana. Virginia was another state with a large free black community, whose origins dated back to the colonial period and the large-scale manumissions of the revolutionary era. Here too, well over half the black officeholders had been free before the war.

Many of the freeborn officeholders were men of uncommon backgrounds and abilities. Ovid Gregory of Alabama, a member of the constitutional convention and legislature, was fluent in Spanish and French and had traveled widely in the United States and Latin America before the Civil War. James H. Jones, deputy sheriff of Wake County, North Carolina, had worked



The centerpiece of this lithograph, an 1874 speech by Representative Robert B. Elliott of South Carolina in favor of Charles Sumner's Civil Rights Bill, was among the most celebrated addresses by a black official during Reconstruction. Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society.

as coachman and personal servant for Jefferson Davis during the Civil War. Jones helped the Confederate president escape from Richmond in April 1865, and three decades later drove the funeral car when Davis's body was interred in a Virginia cemetery.

Many freeborn officeholders held themselves aloof from the plight of slaves before the Civil War. Twenty-two had themselves been slaveholders, nearly all in South Carolina and Louisiana. A few held slaves by necessity, owning a relative who, according to state law, could not be freed without being compelled to leave the state. Others were craftsmen whose slaves worked in their shops or entrepreneurs who purchased slaves as an investment, and one, Antoine Dubuclet, subsequently Louisiana's Reconstruction treasurer, was a sugar planter who owned over 100 slaves in 1860.

On the other hand, a number of free black officials had placed themselves in considerable danger before the war by offering clandestine assistance to slaves. James D. Porter, a member of Georgia's legislature during Reconstruction, had operated secret schools for black children in Charleston and Savannah. William Hodges, who served as superintendent of the poor for Norfolk County during Reconstruction, had been arrested around 1830 for providing slaves with forged free papers, leading to the persecution of his entire family and their flight to the North. William's brother Willis, a constitutional convention delegate, described free blacks and slaves as "one man of sorrow."

No fewer than 138 officeholders lived outside the South before the Civil War. Most were born in the North (where about 220,000 free blacks lived in 1860), but their numbers also included free Southerners whose families moved to the North, free blacks and a few privileged slaves sent North for education, several immigrants from abroad, and fugitives from bondage. Although these black "carpetbaggers" have received far less attention from historians than their white counterparts, they included some of the era's most prominent lawmakers, and individuals with remarkable life histories. Mifflin Gibbs, a native of Philadelphia, traveled to California in 1850 as part of the gold rush, established the state's first black newspaper, moved to British Columbia in 1858 to engage in railroad and mining ventures, and eventually made his way to Arkansas, where he became a judge, attorney, and longtime power in the Republican party. Joseph T. Wilson, a customs inspector at Norfolk, had worked on a whaling ship in the Pacific Ocean, and T. Morris Chester, appointed a district superintendent of education during Louisiana's Reconstruction, had lived in Liberia and Great Britain, and visited Russia and France.

Ten black officials are known to have escaped from slavery before

the Civil War. Half had been born in Virginia, whose proximity to the North made flight far easier than from the Deep South. Daniel M. Norton, who had escaped from Virginia around 1850, returned to the Hampton area in 1864. The following year, he was "elected" as local blacks' representative on a Freedmen's Bureau court, but was denied his place by the Bureau. Embittered by this experience, Norton formed an all-black political association that became the basis of a career in York County politics lasting forty years. Another Virginia fugitive was Thomas Bayne, who had failed in one escape attempt in 1844, and had finally reached the North in 1855. Returning to Norfolk at the end of the Civil War, Bayne became the most important black leader at the Virginia constitutional convention of 1867, advocating, among other things, an overhaul of the state's antiquated taxation system to shift the tax burden from the poor to large landowners.

Among the most radical of all black officeholders was Aaron A. Bradley, once the slave of Francis Pickens, South Carolina's Civil War governor. Born around 1815, Bradley escaped during the 1830s to Boston, where he studied law and became an attorney. He returned to Georgia in 1865, and emerged as an articulate champion of black suffrage and land distribution. Early in 1866, after helping organize freedmen who resisted the restoration of land to their former owners, and delivering a speech containing disparaging remarks about Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, Bradley was expelled from Georgia by the Freedmen's Bureau. By the end of the year he returned, and went on to serve in the constitutional convention and state senate.

Despite the prominence of those born free or who in one way or another acquired their freedom before 1860, the majority of black officeholders had remained slaves until sometime during the Civil War. If the urban free elite in most states took the lead in political organizing immediately after the Civil War, once mobilization spread through the black belt in 1867, former slaves came to supplant much of the early leadership. The early lives of individual slaves are notoriously difficult to trace, but enough is known about the Reconstruction officeholders to offer insights into the experience of slavery, and to suggest the diversity of life histories encompassed within the South's "peculiar institution."

A number of ex-slave officials had occupied positions of considerable privilege, including access to education, despite laws barring such instruction. Several were sons of their owners and treated virtually as free; others, even when not related by blood, were educated by their masters or other whites. Blanche K. Bruce, the future senator from Mississippi and possibly his owner's son, was educated by the same private tutor who



instructed his master's legitimate child. Alabama legislator John Dozier had been owned by a Virginia college president and acquired an extensive education, including a command of Greek. William A. Rector, a Little Rock city marshal, had been owned by Chester Ashley, U.S. senator from Arkansas, and as a youth played in "Ashley's Band," a traveling musical troupe composed of the senator's slaves. Rector was the only one to escape death when a steamboat on which the band was sailing exploded.

Depending on the goodwill of a single individual, however, the status of even the most privileged slave was always precarious. Especially when the inheritance of property (including property in slaves) was involved, the master's sense of obligation frequently followed him to the grave. John Carraway, who served in Alabama's constitutional convention and legislature, was the son of a planter and a slave mother, and was freed in his father's will. But the "white guardians" to whom their care had been entrusted had Carraway's mother sold "all for the purpose of getting possession of the property left us by my father." Carraway remained free but was forced to leave the state. Thomas M. Allen, a Charleston slave, was freed in the will of his owner-father, along with his mother and brother. But his father's relatives "stole" the family, Allen later related, sold them to Georgia, and seized the money bequeathed to them. Allen remained a slave until the end of the Civil War; during Reconstruction, he served in Georgia's legislature.

These were only a few of the Reconstruction officials who had known firsthand the horrors of slavery. Congressmen Jeremiah Haralson and John A. Hyman had been sold on the auction block. Richard Griggs, Mississippi's commissioner of immigration and agriculture, was sold eighteen times while a slave; at one point, Griggs was owned by Nathan B. Forrest, later the Confederate general responsible for the murder of black soldiers in the Fort Pillow massacre, and a founder of the Ku Klux Klan. Virginia constitutional convention delegate John Brown had seen his wife and two daughters sold to Mississippi. It should not be surprising that in the black political ideology that emerged after the war, slavery was recalled not as a time of mutual rights and responsibilities, but as a terrible injustice, a strain upon the conscience of the nation.

The 1,465 officials followed eighty-three occupations, ranging from apothecary to woodfactor, and including a chef, gardener, insurance agent, and "conjurer." Taken together, the black officials present a picture that should be familiar to anyone acquainted with the political leadership that generally emerged in the nineteenth-century lower-class communities in times of political crisis--artisans, professionals, small propertyholders, and

laborers. For some, Reconstruction prominence was an extension of leadership roles they had occupied in the slave community. Black editor T. Thomas Fortune later explained how the political role of his father, Emanuel Fortune, a Florida constitutional convention delegate and legislator, had its roots before the Civil War: "It was natural for him to take the leadership in any independent movement of the Negroes. During and before the Civil War he had commanded his time as a tanner and expert shoe and bootmaker. In such life as the slaves were allowed and in church work, he took the leader's part. When the matter of the Constitutional Convention was decided upon his people in Jackson County naturally looked to him to shape up matters for them."

Like Fortune, a large number of black officeholders were artisans--former slaves whose skill and relative independence (often reflected in command over their own time and the ability to travel off the plantation) accorded them high status in the slave community, and free blacks who had followed skilled trades before the Civil War. Among artisans, carpenter, barber, blacksmith, mason, and shoemaker were the crafts most frequently represented.

Another large occupational grouping consisted of professionals. There were 237 ministers among the Reconstruction officials, mostly Methodists and Baptists, with a handful of Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians. "A man cannot do his whole duty as a minister except he looks out for the political interests of his people," said Charles H. Pearce, who had purchased his freedom in Maryland as a young man, served as an African Methodist Episcopal preacher in Canada before the Civil War, came to Florida as a religious missionary, and was elected to the constitutional convention and state senate. Many of Reconstruction's most prominent black leaders not only emerged from the church, but had a political outlook grounded in a providential view of history inspired by black Christianity. The cause of the Civil War, declared James D. Lynch, a minister and religious missionary who became Mississippi's secretary of state during Reconstruction, was America's "disobedience," via slavery, to its divine mission to "elevate humanity" and spread freedom throughout the globe. Justice for the former slaves, Lynch continued, could not be long delayed, because "Divine Providence will wring from you in wrath, that which should have been given in love."

Teachers accounted for 172 officeholders, some of whom established schools for black children on their own initiative immediately after the Civil War, and 69 were lawyers, nearly all of whom gained admission to the bar after the Civil War. Seven black officeholders were musicians, five worked

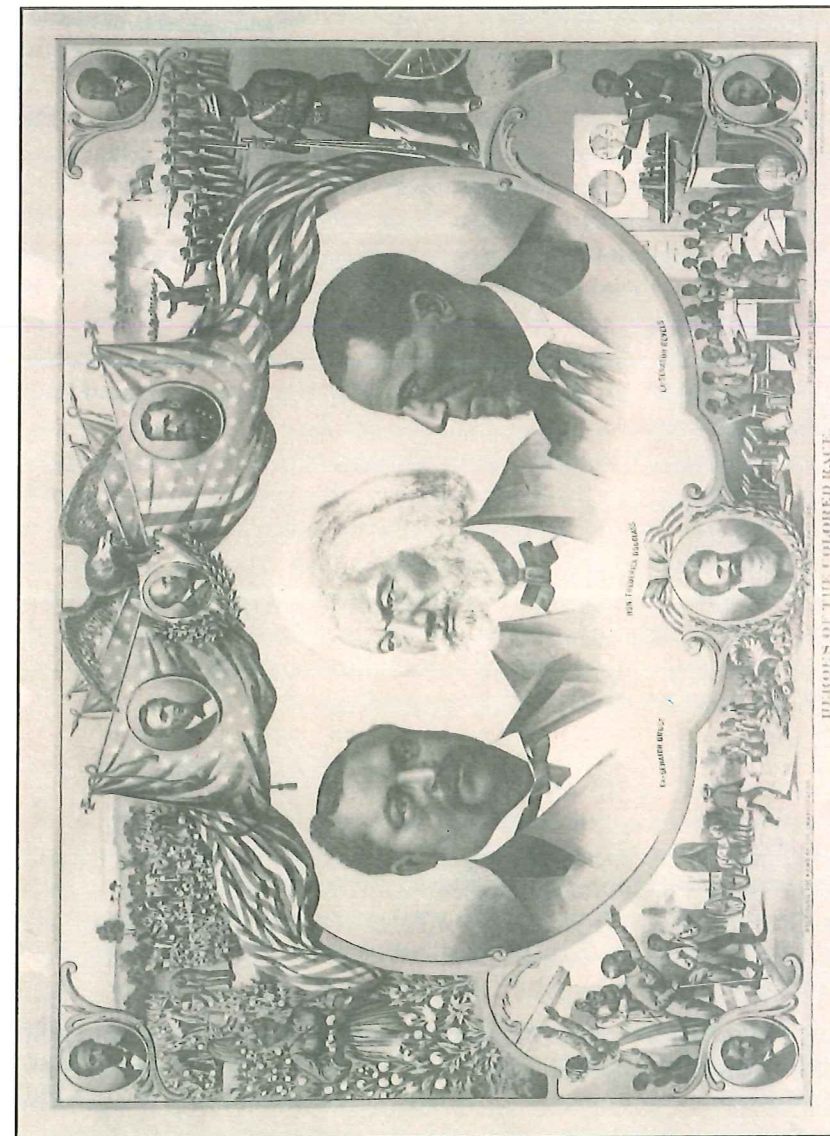
as physicians, and one, Thomas Bayne, practiced dentistry.

Businessmen comprised another large group of officeholders, the majority of them small shopkeepers and grocers, along with a scattering of building contractors, saloonkeepers, and hotel owners. Not surprisingly, farmer was the largest occupational category, accounting for 294 officials. Unfortunately, the census of 1870 did not distinguish between farm owners and tenants, so it is not known how many worked their own land. An additional 32 were planters, who owned a significant amount of acreage. Finally, there were 115 laborers, most of whom worked on farms, but who included a few factory operatives and unskilled employees in artisan shops and mercantile establishments.

Information about ownership of property is available for 928 black officials. Of these, a bit under a quarter were propertyless, and just under forty percent owned real estate and personal property amounting to under \$1,000. Another forty percent held property valued at over \$1,000, a considerable sum at a time when the average nonfarm employee earned under \$500 per year, and Southern farm wages ranged between \$10 and \$15 per month.<sup>6</sup>

The black political leadership included a few men of truly substantial wealth. Antoine Dubuclet owned over \$200,000 worth of property on the eve of the Civil War. Florida congressman Josiah T. Walls, a former slave, prospered as a planter during Reconstruction, and Mississippi senator Blanche K. Bruce acquired a fortune in real estate and "the manners of a Chesterfield." When he died in 1898, Bruce was worth over \$100,000. Ferdinand Havis, a former slave who served on the Pine Bluff, Arkansas, board of aldermen and in the legislature, owned a saloon, whiskey business, and 2,000 acres of farm land. Toward the end of the century, Havis described himself in the city directory simply as a "capitalist."

Most black propertyholders, however, were men of relatively modest incomes, and often precarious economic standing. Among Reconstruction officeholders, at least twenty-four black entrepreneurs, mostly grocers and small merchants, are known to have gone out of business during the depression of the 1870s. Even Antoine Dubuclet suffered financial reverses; when he died in 1887, his estate was valued at only \$1,300. Black professionals often found it difficult to make ends meet, since whites shunned them and few blacks were able to pay their fees. Unlike white counterparts, moreover, black officials who operated businesses found themselves subjected to ostracism by their political opponents, often with devastating effect. Georgia congressman Jefferson Long, a tailor, had commanded "much of the fine custom" of Macon before embarking on his political career, but "his stand in



This 1881 lithograph depicts six black members of Congress during Reconstruction: Senators Blanche K. Bruce and Hiram Revels, and, in the corners, Congressman John R. Lynch, Joseph Rainey, Robert Smalls, and Charles Nash. It also presents a somewhat idealized vision of the consequences of emancipation. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

politics ruined his business with the whites who had been his patrons chiefly."

In an era when the large majority of black Southerners were agricultural laborers who owned little or no property, Reconstruction's black officeholders obviously occupied a position of some privilege within the black community. Nonetheless, measured in terms of occupation and income, Reconstruction brought about a dramatic downward shift in the economic status of Southern officeholders. Before the Civil War, the majority of state and county officials in the Southern states were slaveowners, as were most of those who held important local offices, and planters, merchants, and lawyers dominated the region's public life.<sup>7</sup> Reconstruction profoundly altered the social origins of public officials, white and black. Artisans and laborers rarely held office in the South before the Civil War, and did so infrequently in the nineteenth-century North. Certainly, it is difficult to think of another time in American history when over 100 unskilled laborers held public office.<sup>8</sup>

Ridiculed by their opponents as incompetent and corrupt, most black officials in fact proved fully capable of understanding public issues and pursuing the interests of their constituents and party. To be sure, slavery, once described by its apologists as a "school" that introduced "uncivilized" Africans into Western culture, was hardly intended as a training ground for political leaders. Looking back on the post-emancipation years, James K. Green, who served in Alabama's constitutional convention and legislature, remarked:

I believe that the colored people have done well, considering all their circumstances and surroundings, as emancipation made them. I for one was entirely ignorant; I knew nothing more than to obey my master; and there were thousands of us in the same attitude, . . . but the tocsin of freedom sounded and knocked at the door and we walked out like free men and met the exigencies as they grew up, and shouldered the responsibilities.

As Green suggested, there was something remarkable about how men who until recently had been excluded from the main currents of American life "shouldered the responsibilities" of Reconstruction lawmaking. It would be wrong, however, to assume that the black officials were unqualified to hold positions of public trust. The image of the black official as an illiterate former field hand with no knowledge of the larger world has been severely challenged by the scholarship of the past generation. It must now be irrevocably

laid to rest.

In a region where before the Civil War it was illegal to teach slaves to read and write, and where educational opportunities for free blacks were in many areas extremely limited, 83 percent of the black officials were able to read and write. Some slaves, as has been related, were educated by their owners or sympathetic whites. Others were taught to read and write by a literate slave, often a relative, or, like George W. Albright, a Mississippi field hand who went on to serve in the state Senate, became literate "by trickery." Albright listened surreptitiously as his owner's children did their school lessons in the kitchen, where his mother worked. A number of literate officials learned to read and write in the Union army, and others studied during and after the Civil War in schools established by the Freedmen's Bureau or Northern aid societies. Albright attended a Reconstruction school for blacks run by a Northerner, married a white instructor from the North, and became a teacher. However acquired, the ability to read and write marked many black officials as community leaders. Former slave Thomas M. Allen explained how he became a political organizer in rural Jasper County, Georgia, and was chosen to sit in the legislature:

In all those counties of course the colored people are generally very ignorant; . . . but some know more about things than the others. In my county the colored people came to me for instructions, and I gave them the best instructions I could. I took the New York Tribune and other papers, and in that way I found out a great deal, and I thought they had been freed by the Yankees and Union men, and I thought they ought to vote with them; go with that party always.

No fewer than 64 black officeholders attended college or professional school either before or during their term of public service. About half studied in the South at the black colleges established immediately after the Civil War, including Howard, Lincoln, Shaw, and Straight Universities and Hampton Institute, or at the University of South Carolina when it admitted black pupils between 1873 and 1877. The remainder received their higher education in the North, fourteen at Oberlin College, or abroad. Francis L. Cardozo received a degree from the University of Glasgow and Louisiana legislator Eugène-Victor Macarty was a musician who graduated from the Imperial Conservatory in Paris. Among other officeholders who had at least some higher education were Benjamin A. Boseman, a member of South Carolina's legislature, who had graduated from the Medical School of Maine and John W. Menard, who attended Iberia College in Ohio before the Civil

War and went on to hold several posts in Florida Reconstruction.

Thirty-one officials, either natives of the North or men who had migrated or escaped from the slave South, were involved in the movement for the abolition of slavery and equal rights for Northern blacks before the Civil War. Fugitive slaves Thomas Bayne and Aaron A. Bradley worked with the antislavery movement in Massachusetts, and the freeborn Hodges brothers--Charles, William, and Willis, whose family had been forced to flee Virginia--were active in the abolitionist crusade and the movement for black suffrage in New York State. Five officials, including brothers Abraham and Isaac Shadd, had been active in the abolitionist movement while living in Canada, and eight, including the "father of black nationalism," Martin R. Delany, in the 1850s had advocated black emigration from the United States.

At least 129 officeholders were among the 200,000 African-American men who served in the Union army and navy during the Civil War. Military service was a politicizing experience, a training ground for postwar black leadership. Many not only received schooling in the army, but for the first time became involved in political activism. Such men included several officers of Louisiana regiments who protested discriminatory treatment by white counterparts, and the nine Reconstruction officials who served in the famous 54th and 55th Massachusetts regiments, which for many months refused their salaries to protest the government's policy of paying black soldiers less than white.

It is difficult to gauge exactly how much political power these black officeholders exercised. Black officials never controlled Reconstruction. But, as Du Bois indicated when he adopted the term Black Reconstruction to describe the era, blacks were major actors of the Reconstruction drama, and their ascent to even limited positions of political power represented a revolution in American government and race relations.

In the early days of Radical Reconstruction, blacks often stood aside when nominations for office were decided upon, so as not to embarrass the Republican party in the North or lend credence to Democratic charges of "black supremacy." It did not take long, however, for black leaders, and voters, to become dissatisfied with the role of junior partner in the Republican coalition, especially since the first governors of Republican Reconstruction seemed to devote greater energy to attracting white support than addressing the needs of black constituents. By the early 1870s, prominent black leaders in many states were condemning white Republican leaders who, in the words of Texas state senator Matthew Gaines, set themselves up as "the Big Gods of the negroes." Gaines organized a Colored Men's Convention to press for more black officeholders. During the 1870s, blacks

in five states occupied at least one of the powerful executive positions of lieutenant governor, treasurer, and superintendent of education, and blacks served as Speaker of the House in Mississippi and South Carolina.

Even more remarkable was the growing presence of blacks in county and local offices scattered across the South. With control over such matters as public expenditures, poor relief, the administration of justice, and taxation policy, local officials had a real impact on the day-to-day lives of all Southerners. On the Atlanta City Council, William Finch pressed for the establishment of black schools and the hiring of black teachers, and lobbied effectively for street improvements in black and poor white neighborhoods. Other officials tried to ensure that blacks were chosen to serve on juries, and were employed, at the same wages as whites, on public projects.

Only a handful of black officials, including former slave Aaron A. Bradley, were actively involved in efforts to assist freedmen in acquiring land, or advocated confiscation of the land of ex-Confederates. Many black officials fully embraced the prevailing free labor ethos, which saw individual initiative in the "race of life," not public assistance, as the route to upward mobility. Free blacks from both North and South, many of whom had achieved astonishing success given the barriers erected against them, expressed most forcefully the idea of competitive equality. "Look at the progress of our people--their wonderful civilization," declared freeborn North Carolina registrar George W. Brodie. "What have we to fear in competition with the whites, if they give us a fair race?" A considerable number of black officeholders, however, did make efforts to uplift the conditions of black laborers in other ways. William H. Grey of Arkansas purchased a plantation in order to sell it in small plots to sharecroppers, and Benjamin S. Turner introduced a bill in Congress for the sale of small tracts of land to Southern freedmen. Other local officeholders, as planters persistently complained, sided with employees in contract disputes, failed to enforce vagrancy laws, and refused to coerce freedmen into signing plantation labor contracts.

From Petersburg, Virginia, to Houston, Texas, from the Sea Islands of South Carolina to the sugar parishes of Louisiana, enclaves of genuine black power were scattered across the Reconstruction South. Traveling through the region in 1873 and 1874, reporter Edward King encountered black aldermen in Little Rock, a parish jury in Vidalia, Louisiana, dominated by black officials, and blacks controlling the city hall and police force in Beaufort, South Carolina.<sup>9</sup> In some areas, powerful local machines emerged headed by black officeholders, some of whom held a number of positions simultaneously. Army veteran Stephen A. Swails dominated the politics of

the Williamsburg County, South Carolina, serving in the legislature, as county auditor and brigadier general in the state militia, as well as editing a local newspaper. In a remarkable number of cases, politics attracted more than one member of a family. Ninety-five officeholders were relatives of another black official--generally fathers, sons, brothers, and in-laws. Four Hodges brothers and three Norton brothers held office in Virginia, as did brothers Charles, Henry, and James Hayne in South Carolina.

Even the most powerful officials, however, were not immune to the numerous indignities and inequalities to which blacks were subjected in the post-Civil War South. Despite national and state civil rights laws, a common experience of black travelers, including congressmen and state officials, was being refused service in a first-class railroad car or steamboat cabin, and being forced to ride in the "smoking car" or on deck. Edward Butler, a member of Louisiana's senate, was beaten and stabbed by a riverboat crewmember while seeking admission to the first-class cabin. In speeches supporting Charles Sumner's Civil Rights Bill in 1874, black congressmen related the "outrages and indignities" to which they had been subjected. Joseph Rainey had been thrown from a Virginia streetcar, John R. Lynch forced to occupy a railroad smoking car with gamblers and drunkards, Richard H. Cain and Robert B. Elliott excluded from a North Carolina restaurant, James T. Rapier denied service by inns at every stopping point between Montgomery and Washington.

Many black officials did not accept passively being refused equal access to public facilities. Charles S. Sauvinet, the sheriff of Orleans Parish, took a saloonkeeper to court after being denied service, and was awarded \$1,000. When Eugène-Victor Macarty was refused a seat at the New Orleans Opera House in 1869, he sued and organized a black boycott which lasted until the theater was integrated in 1875.

Given such experiences, and the broad aspiration widely shared in the black community to construct a color-blind society from the ashes of slavery, black officials devoted considerable effort to the passage of national and state civil rights legislation. "Sir," North Carolina legislator Thomas A. Sykes wrote Charles Sumner, "if I am a free citizen of this 'grand Republic,' why am I denied privileges which are given to my white brother, although he might be the basest culprit on earth?" It was the insistence of black legislators that led five Southern states to enact laws during Reconstruction requiring equal treatment by railroads and places of public accommodation.

The frequent denial of equal access to public facilities, however, was hardly the most serious danger confronting black officials during Reconstruction. It is difficult to think of any group of public officials in American

history who faced the threat of violence as persistently as Reconstruction's black officeholders. No fewer than 156 officials--over ten percent of the total--were victimized by violence, generally by the Ku Klux Klan, White League, and other paramilitary criminal organizations allied with the Democratic party. Their number included 36 who received death threats, 45 who were driven from their homes, and 41 shot at, stabbed, or otherwise assaulted. Andrew J. Flowers, a justice of the peace in Tennessee, was whipped by the Ku Klux Klan "because I had the impudence to run against a white man for office, and beat him. . . . They said . . . they did not intend any nigger to hold office in the United States." Thirty-four black officeholders were actually murdered, most during Reconstruction, but a few after the South's "Redemption." They included eight constitutional convention delegates and twelve legislators, most prominent perhaps Benjamin Randolph, killed in 1868 while serving as chairman of the South Carolina Republican state executive committee.

Southern black officeholding did not end immediately with the overthrow of Reconstruction in the 1870s. Although the Redeemers in several states moved to restrict black voting, gerrymander districts to decrease black representation, and reduce the number of elective positions in predominantly black counties, blacks continued to serve in state legislatures and local positions, and a handful managed to win election to Congress. Many others occupied patronage posts distributed by Republican administrations in Washington. Joseph H. Lee, a Reconstruction legislator, served as customs collector at Jacksonville, Florida, from the 1880s until 1913. The number of black officeholders was reduced substantially after Reconstruction, but until disfranchisement had been completed around the turn of the century, enclaves of local black power existed in most of the Southern states. Norris W. Cuney was the most powerful black politician in late nineteenth-century Texas, his machine resting on his post as collector of customs at Galveston. Robert Smalls won election to Congress in the 1880s, served as collector of customs at Beaufort until 1913, and sat in South Carolina's constitutional convention of 1895, where he spoke out eloquently against the disfranchisement of black voters.

But if black officeholding survived the end of Reconstruction, it did so in a profoundly altered context. Local officials confronted hostile state governments and national administrations at best indifferent to blacks' concerns, and black lawmakers found it impossible to exert any influence in Democratic legislatures. Most black officials now depended for their influence on the goodwill of prominent Democrats, connections with white Republicans, and the patronage largess of the federal government, rather

than the backing of a politically mobilized black community.

Many officeholders left the South after the end of Reconstruction. A number, including P. B. S. Pinchback and Blanche K. Bruce, moved to Washington, where they held federal appointments and became part of the city's black elite. William T. Montgomery, who had been a county treasurer in Mississippi, moved to Dakota Territory, where he lived among Scandinavian immigrants and became the largest black farmer in the Northwest. His enterprise failed, however, and he died in poverty in 1909. Many black "carpetbaggers" returned to the North. After being ousted from the legislature and jailed by Georgia's Redeemers, Tunis G. Campbell moved to Boston, where he devoted his remaining years to church work. James P. Ball, originally from Ohio, left Louisiana for Montana and then Seattle, where he worked as a photographer, newspaper editor, and lawyer.

The majority of Reconstruction officials remained in the South, many seeking careers in the church, education, and journalism. A number prospered in business and the professions after leaving politics. Former Speaker of the House Samuel J. Lee was South Carolina's leading black lawyer until his death in 1895. Other officeholders found their economic standing severely diminished by the elimination of politics as a livelihood. Alonzo Ransier, who had been South Carolina's lieutenant governor, was employed as a night watchman at the Charleston Custom House and as a day laborer for the city, and his Reconstruction successor, Richard H. Gleaves, spent his last years as a waiter at the Jefferson Club in Washington, D.C. Former fugitive slave Thomas Bayne abandoned politics after Reconstruction and in 1888 entered Virginia's Central State Lunatic Asylum, where he died. His disease was said to have been caused by "religion and politics."

While the men who held office scattered after the end of Reconstruction, many continued, in various ways, to work for the ideals of civil rights and economic uplift that had animated the post-Civil War era. Lewis Lindsay, an advocate of land confiscation while serving in the Virginia constitutional convention in 1868, became a leader in Richmond's Knights of Labor, and Cyrus Myers, a member of the Mississippi constitutional convention, became prominent in the effort to have Congress provide pensions to former slaves, at one point bringing a petition with 6,000 signatures to the nation's capital. J. Milton Turner, who served as Missouri's assistant superintendent of education, devoted his career to winning for Cherokee freedmen a share of the funds appropriated by Congress to the Cherokee nation, finally winning his prolonged court battle in 1895. A number of Reconstruction officeholders reemerged in the Populist movement. John B. Rayner, who held several local posts in Tarboro, North Carolina, during Reconstruc-



A Currier and Ives print depicts the first seven blacks to serve in the United States Congress. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

tion, became the leading black Populist of Texas, and at the end of his life collected "Wise Sayings," intending to publish them, including: "When wealth concentrates, poverty radiates," and "God does not intend for one part of his people to feel that they are superior to another part."

When the Southern states around 1890 began to enact laws mandating racial segregation, veterans of Reconstruction were involved in opposition. In Louisiana, several former Reconstruction officials helped to create the New Orleans Citizens Committee, which filed the court challenge that resulted in the Supreme Court case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The civil rights impulse of Reconstruction also survived in other careers. Daniel A. Straker, a customs collector in Charleston during the 1870s, moved to Detroit, where he served as an attorney in civil rights cases, won election as a municipal judge, and took part in the movement that led to the formation of the NAACP. George W. Albright, who moved with his wife, a white teacher, to Chicago, Kansas, and Colorado after the end of Reconstruction, lived into the 1930s. At the age of 91, he was interviewed by the *Daily Worker*, and praised the Communist party for nominating a black man, James W. Ford, for vice president. Former Mississippi congressman John R. Lynch wrote *The Facts of Reconstruction* and a series of articles exposing the shortcomings of historical scholarship of the early twentieth century. At a 1930 Negro History Week celebration in Washington, Lynch said, "We must make paramount the enforcement of the Fifteenth Amendment."

Today, of the nation's approximately 350,000 elected officials, 7,480 (or two percent) are black Americans.<sup>10</sup> It is safe to say, however, that nowhere do black officials as a group exercise the political power they enjoyed in at least some Southern states during Reconstruction. I hope that this talk has helped to bring to life some of the forgotten protagonists in this nation's most remarkable experiment in interracial democracy.

## Endnotes

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2. Quoted in E. Merton Coulter, *Negro Legislators in Georgia During the Reconstruction Period* (Athens, Ga., 1968), 179-80.
3. Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era* (Cambridge, Mass., 1929), 364; Coulter, *Black Legislators*, 119-20, 180.
4. For the evolution of historical scholarship on Reconstruction and its black officials, see Emma L. Thornbrough, ed., *Black Reconstructionists* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1972); Eric Foner, "Reconstruction Revisited," *Reviews in American History*, 10 (1982), 82-100; Howard N. Rabinowitz, ed., *Southern Black Leaders of the Reconstruction Era* (Urbana, Ill., 1982). Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* (New York, 1988), is the most recent history of the era.
5. The number of blacks holding different offices, and biographical information about individuals, is drawn from my forthcoming book, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* (New York, 1993).
6. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States* (2 vols.: Washington, 1975), 1, 165, 468; *Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1876* (Washington, 1877).
7. J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge, 1978), 297-99; Randolph B. Campbell and Richard G. Lowe, *Wealth and Power in Antebellum Texas* (College Station, Tex., 1977), 115-21.
8. Horace B. Davis, "The Occupations of Massachusetts Legislators, 1790-1950," *New England Quarterly* 24 (1951), 92-95; Merle Curti, *The Making of an American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier County* (Stanford, 1959), 339-41.
9. Edward King, *The Southern States of North America* (London, 1875), 113, 281, 293, 426-28, 448, 581-82.
10. Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, *Black Elected Officials: A National Roster, 1991* (Washington, 1992).

## Eric Foner

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Professor Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (1988) received the Bancroft, Craven, Owsley, and Parkman prizes. His books also include *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* (1970); *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (1976); *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (1980); *Nothing But Freedom* (1983); *A Short History of Reconstruction* (1990); *The New American History* (1990) and *Reader's Encyclopedia of American History* (1991).

Professor Foner has held fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.



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