Reconstruction and Daily Life

As the South rebuilt, millions of newly freed African Americans worked to improve their lives.

Many important African-American institutions, including colleges, began during Reconstruction.

freedmen’s school
sharecropping
lynch

ONE AMERICAN’S STORY

One day, as the Civil War came to a close, two enslaved women named Mill and Jule saw a fleet of Union gunboats coming up the Mississippi River. Yankee soldiers came ashore and offered them and other slaves passage aboard their boats. On that day, Mill and Jule left the plantation.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

An’ we all got on the boat in a hurry . . . we all give three times three cheers for the gunboat boys, and . . . three times three cheers for gov’ment.

Mill and Jule, quoted in We Are Your Sisters

The Union’s victory in the Civil War spelled the end of slavery in America. In this section, you will learn about the gains and setbacks of former slaves during Reconstruction.

Responding to Freedom

African Americans’ first reaction to freedom was to leave the plantations. No longer needing passes to travel, they journeyed throughout the region. “Right off colored folks started on the move,” recalled one freedman. “They seemed to want to get closer to freedom, so they’d know what it was—like it was a place or a city.” Some former slaves returned to the places where they were born. Others went looking for more economic opportunity. Still others traveled just because they could.

African Americans also traveled in search of family members separated from them during slavery. One man walked 600 miles from Georgia to North Carolina to find his family. To locate relatives, people placed advertisements in newspapers. The Freedmen’s Bureau helped many families reunite. A Union officer wrote in 1865, “Men are taking
their wives and children, families which had been for a long time broken up are united and oh! such happiness.”

Freedom allowed African Americans to strengthen their family ties. Former slaves could marry legally. They could raise families without fearing that their children might be sold. Many families adopted children of dead relatives and friends to keep family ties strong.

**Starting Schools**

With freedom, African Americans no longer had to work for an owner’s benefit. They could now work to provide for their families. To reach their goal of economic independence, however, most had to learn to read and write. As a result, children and adults flocked to *freedmen’s schools* set up to educate newly freed African Americans. Such schools were started by the Freedmen’s Bureau, Northern missionary groups, and African-American organizations. Freed people in cities held classes in warehouses, billiard rooms, and former slave markets. In rural areas, classes were held in churches and houses. Children who went to school often taught their parents to read at home.

In the years after the war, African-American groups raised more than $1 million for education. However, the federal government and private groups in the North paid most of the cost of building schools and hiring teachers. Between 1865 and 1870, the Freedmen’s Bureau spent $5 million for this purpose.

More than 150,000 African-American students were attending 3,000 schools by 1869. About 10 percent of the South’s African-American adults could read. A number of them became teachers. Northern teachers, black and white, also went South to teach freed people. Many white Southerners, however, worked against these teachers’ efforts. White racists even killed teachers and burned freedmen’s schools in some parts of the South. Despite these setbacks, African Americans kept working toward an education.