

How Did Ex-slaves Exercise Their New Freedoms and How Did White Southerners Attempt To Limit Them?

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After the Civil War, many former slaves searched for missing family members who were either sold or displaced by the war. Many former slaves took advantage of their new freedom of movement and traveled to other towns in the South. Others moved West and North in search of better treatment and work. Former slaves also sought out educational opportunities through the Freedmen's Bureau and by taking advantage of the new primary schools being erected in the South. While many former slaves did not leave the plantation, many sought out sharecropper relationships in which they hoped to one day obtain a plot of land of their own. During the years after the war, black and white teachers from the North and South, missionary organizations, churches, and schools worked tirelessly to give the emancipated population the opportunity to learn. Former slaves of every age took advantage of the opportunity to become literate. Grandfathers and their grandchildren sat together in classrooms seeking to obtain the tools of freedom. The schools for black children were consistently underfunded compared to schools for white children. African Americans enjoyed a period when they were allowed to vote and actively participate in the political process. Opponents of this progress, however, soon rallied against the former slaves' freedom and began to find means for corrupting the gains of freed black men. Democrats were passing laws to make voter registration

and electoral rules more restrictive. As a result, political participation by most blacks and many poor whites began to decrease. Those who could not vote were not eligible to serve on juries and could not run for local offices. They effectively disappeared from political life, as they could not influence the state legislatures, and their interests were overlooked. One freedman, Houston Hartsfield Holloway, wrote, "For we colored people did not know how to be free and the white people did not know how to have a free colored person about them." (Nast, 1998)

References

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