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# ‘Burying the Shackles’: The impact of racial violence on free black labour in the Reconstructed South (1865-1877)

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**Abstract:** *With the end of the American Civil War, the former Confederate states faced complete economic collapse when millions of plantation slaves became free. The transition from slavery to free labour was not easy for freed-people or their former owners. The struggle to define what it meant to be a free black worker was difficult in the Reconstruction South amid extreme social and racial tensions that often resulted in violent attacks on black workers. Within this evolving and often chaotic society, freed-people strove to define themselves as something other than mere plantation workers, by endeavouring to create a new free working society, distinct and independent from the one they had experienced as slaves. This article examines the way in which racially motivated violent attacks upon free black workers influenced their attempts to forge a new labouring society focussed upon independence, family, and land control.*

**Keywords:** *Reconstruction, free labour, violence, black freedom, South, freed-people*

## INTRODUCTION

During Reconstruction, changes in the Southern labour system precipitated substantial shifts in relationships between white employers, African American labourers, and plantation work. Violence against black workers was fundamental in shaping these changes. The transition from slavery to free labour following the Civil War mired Southern plantations in uncertainty and tension as it became quickly apparent that whites and blacks had fundamentally different ideas about what constituted free black work. Most plantation elites rejected the notion that black freedom meant allowing African Americans to pursue their own interests and identities. Blacks were free, but only free to work in the same way as they had always

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done.<sup>1</sup> Black labourers were vehemently challenged this social paradigm, and these diametrically opposed views brought about violent responses, as whites struggled to enact power over their workers through corporal punishment and the laws known as the Black Codes. In their response to labour violence, African American workers sought to establish their own working society, in which their labour, removed from white control, helped to advance important community values such as family, civic responsibility, and collective improvement.

Through analysing Southern free labour during Reconstruction, I acknowledge the prevalence of racial violence's, and that the evolution of freed-people's work habits is evident. However, while these features are recognised, the overall scholarship lacks an investigation into their connection. Typically, historians have acknowledged that Southern whites deliberately attempted to restrict freed-people to plantation labour, to the detriment of their involvement in other areas of public life.<sup>2</sup> One recent example is Eric Foner, who argues that white Southerners had a very limited view of black freedom, perceiving it as more a legal status, than a position of moral or civic significance. For Southern whites, Foner notes, "blacks must remain a dependent plantation labor force in a situation not very different from slavery."<sup>3</sup> Correspondingly, in his book, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, Douglas Egerton argues that this understanding was most fiercely put into practice via the legislation of the Black Codes in 1865 and 1866, which were "forged on the same legislative agenda – a determination to deny freed people access to land, and so force them back onto the plantations as low-wage laborers." This in turn barred African Americans from entering artistic, cultural, and urban work.<sup>4</sup> However, other historians have noted that as Reconstruction progressed, blacks' experience of free labour became markedly different to slave labour. Steven Hahn in *A Nation Under Our Feet*, reasons that the clearest example of this change was a relationship transformation between black workers and white employers. Hahn notes the importance of black prioritisation of family and kinship networks saying that these "served as the central weapons in their struggles to limit utter dependence and exploitation."<sup>5</sup>

While these historians have emphasised that black citizens themselves played a crucial role in instigating changes during Reconstruction upon the South's labour

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 93.

<sup>2</sup> See: Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," in *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics From Civil War to Civil Rights*, ed. Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Foner, *Forever Free*, 93.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas R. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 178-179.

<sup>5</sup> Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 169; Peter Kolchin, *First Freedom* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), 45.

economy, this investigation will contend that racial violence in the former slave states was an important factor that drove black workers to direct their working lives away from the harsh former master-slave relationship to a more independent, self-managed free labour style. Freed-peoples' struggles to achieve this goal would in turn allow them to also attend to family and community life.<sup>6</sup> By considering first hand accounts from black workers to explore the means by which they fought against legal and social restrictions to their labour and used the powerful influence of their monopoly over plantation labour by banding together into community and family groups, I will argue that black citizens' response to labour violence drove them to achieve measures of independence within their working lives.

### THE PURPOSE AND IMPACT OF LABOUR VIOLENCE

As free labour in the South developed, white perception of African American workers had substantial influence over the new relationships between employers and their black employees. While free labour was based on the motivation to work for one's own improvement, the majority of white Southerners insisted that blacks would never work without fear of the lash. When Carl Schurz travelled across the South in 1865, he estimated that nineteen out of every twenty white Southern men he encountered held such beliefs, describing it as "the prevailing sentiment among the southern people."<sup>7</sup> Though physical punishment such as whipping was technically prohibited, many planters ignored these restrictions or found creative ways around them.<sup>8</sup> In that same year, A. Watson Webber, Commander of the U.S. forces at Columbia, Louisiana, reported, "cruel punishment of all classes and ages of colored people is indulged in to the heart's content of these enlightened and humane whites ... To them there seems to be no recourse, when a servant errs – except to the shot-gun or the lash."<sup>9</sup> An agent of the Freedmens' Bureau in Arkansas also observed similar tendencies in his region, where many planters "growl and wish to be allowed to enforce their contracts, the simple English of which is to 'whip the nigger'."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 367; Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 169.

<sup>7</sup> S. Doc. No. 39-2, Message of the President of the United States, communicating, in compliance with a resolution of the Senate of the 12th instant, information in relation to the States of the Union lately in rebellion, accompanied by a report of Carl Schurz on the states of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana; also a report of Lieutenant General Grant, on the same subject, at 16 (1865).

<sup>8</sup> George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace, The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> A. Watson Webber to Captain S. B. Ferguson, September 20, 1865, in Freedmen and Southern Society Project, ed. Steven F. Miller, last modified April 2015, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Webber.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> S. Doc. No. 39-27, Message of the President of the United States, communicating, in compliance with a resolution of the Senate of the 27<sup>th</sup> of February last, a communication from the Secretary of War,

Though violent punishment was not so widespread as it had been during slavery, free black workers could actually be in more danger than they had been as slaves, as now their lives held no direct monetary value for whites. Under slavery it was highly inadvisable for an owner to kill one of his slaves, such was the prohibitive nature of the cost of purchasing a new slave.<sup>11</sup> In 1865, a Bureau agent from Mississippi wrote to a colleague regarding local planters' attitudes, observing that the black American "is considered to be deserving of the same treatment a mule gets, in many cases not as kind, as it is unprofitable to kill or maim a mule, but the breaking of the neck of a free negro is nobody's loss."<sup>12</sup>

If anything, emancipation impressed upon planters a stronger need for violent control over black labour. No longer bound by legal ownership, blacks were technically free to exercise their own will, a fact which planters refused to accept. Violence became a tool with which to restrict the ability of black workers to choose their own working contracts. In February 1866, the United States Congress formed a Committee to assess Reconstruction's progress across the South. This Joint Committee on Reconstruction conducted many interviews, which included Madison Newby's testimony, an African American man from Virginia. He testified about the condition of black labourers in his state. Newby recounted an incident where a planter hung a black worker up by his thumbs, "just strong enough to hold a man's weight, so that his toes just touch the ground," after he refused a contract for a low wage. He further testified that white Virginia landholders commonly used this violent technique, and would "keep the man in that position until he agrees to do what they say. A man cannot endure it for long." Newby observed that the black citizens in his community "work if they can get anything for it; but the rebel people down there who have got lands will not let the colored people work unless they work for their prices, and they drive them away."<sup>13</sup>

Perceived breaches in etiquette or insolent acts motivated many attacks on black workers, revealing the strong desire of the planter class to reinstate the master-slave relationship. Plantation owners expected to extract the same reverence and obedience from their free black workers as they had under slavery. As a result, the most violent and vengeful attacks frequently fell upon those labourers who spoke back, disobeyed

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together with the reports of the assistant commissioners of the Freedmen's Bureau made since December 1, 1865, at 28 (1866).

<sup>11</sup> Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, 204.

<sup>12</sup> S. Doc. No. 39-2, at 68 (1865).

<sup>13</sup> Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction at the First Session Thirty-Ninth Congress (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1866) 54-55.

orders, or in any way reminded employers of their free will.<sup>14</sup> Planters often wrote such expectations into labour contracts, as was the case for one unnamed Louisiana freedwoman who contracted to work for her former owner in 1865. She was bound on condition that she “be obedient to all his commands, to pay him due respect... and conduct myself as when I was owned by him as a SLAVE.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, many Southern states passed acts that permitted using corporal punishment for offenses such as “wanton impudence or disrespect to [an] employer,” which often were left to the employer to determine.<sup>16</sup> As one Bureau official observed in 1867, charges such as “that indefinable offence, ‘insolence,’ ... [are] usually considered as justifying any punishment the ‘aggrieved’ party may see proper to inflict.”<sup>17</sup> Whites could employ such charges to reinforce old slave habits and subservience, solidifying their own power and control over labour. Thus, white expectations of deference and a willingness to resort to violence obstructed African Americans from carving out a new place for themselves in the Southern workforce.

Violence against black workers was further legitimised by the introduction of the Black Codes in late 1865. Following emancipation, Southern whites were unwilling to yield their power easily, and so Southern states enacted legislation to constrain African Americans’ labour opportunities. The Black Codes were a series of legislative acts that placed severe restrictions on freedmen’s working and public lives.<sup>18</sup> Although the Codes provided some rights, including marriage and the right to engage in legal action, they incorporated provisions designed to bar African American citizens from owning or renting land, engaging in non-agricultural work, moving interstate, or changing employers.<sup>19</sup> By constraining their ability to move, work, or better their situations, the Codes served to render freed-people once again chattels to be used by whites, essentially subjecting them to white control in every aspect of their working and public lives. For instance, in Anne Arundel county, Virginia, the law dictated that a black man could not receive a license to trade “unless recommended by a certain number of respectable freeholders, (white;)” while “no white person, the partner of a negro, shall be granted a license, and if a white man employ a colored clerk, the penalty is fifty dollars.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 337-340.

<sup>15</sup> A. Watson Webber to Captain S. B. Ferguson.

<sup>16</sup> H.R. Doc. No. 39-118, Freedmen. Message from the President of the United States, in answer to a resolution of the House of 27th ultimo, relative to the provisions in the constitutions of several southern states relative to the freedmen, at 22 (1866).

<sup>17</sup> S. Doc. No. 39-6, Letter of the Secretary of War, communicating, in compliance with a resolution of the Senate of December 17, 1866, reports of the assistant commissioners of freedmen, and a synopsis of laws respecting persons of color in the late slave States, at 24 (1867).

<sup>18</sup> Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 367.

<sup>19</sup> Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, 179; Foner, *Forever Free*, 96; Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 365-366.

<sup>20</sup> S. Doc. No. 39-6, at 35 (1867).

Meanwhile, in Mississippi, it was declared that “every person may arrest and carry back to his or her legal employer any freedman, free negro, or mulatto, who shall have quit the service of his or her employer before the expiration of his or her term of service.”<sup>21</sup> Granted the legal authority to pass judgement, withhold benefits, and even physically detain black citizens, white Southerners prevented these labourers from exercising some of their most basic civil rights without white permission, thereby placing them once more under their former owners’ authority. Freed-people were vociferous in their opposition to the Codes, condemning them as contravening democratic principles, and writing numerous letters to Republican Party allies requesting political aid. In one such application, a freed-peoples’ community from South Carolina stressed their right to choose their own fate away from plantation labour, declaring “the right to enter upon all the avenues of agriculture, commerce, trade; to amass wealth by thrift and industry... cannot be questioned by any class of intelligent men.”<sup>22</sup> Such incidences highlight the importance of a non-labouring identity to the South’s fledgling black society. Yet, with resistance and independent action came violent retribution, and racial violence escalated under the Black Codes.<sup>23</sup>

The violence that occurred under the Codes was designed to reinforce black workers’ dependence upon white employers. Planters sought to strengthen the idea that blacks were not free to do as they pleased; they had to rely on the white man for their livelihoods, and as such were to abide by his rules. The Freedmen’s Bureau received numerous reports of employers who continued to whip their labourers, often without cause. If workers attempted to resist such treatment, they were commonly dismissed from the plantation. In an action taken by a Mr Newman of Gordonsville, Virginia, two black males were banned from remaining on his plantation, “unless they will agree to remain permanently with him and allow him to whip them when he thinks proper.”<sup>24</sup> Recalcitrant planters commonly used violence, or the threat of it, to discourage workers from leaving their plantations and seeking out places where they may receive vastly better wages. In 1867, the Assistant Commissioner for the Freedmen’s Bureau in Georgia reported how “every possible expedient was resorted to for frightening and keeping [freed-people] at home, in order to enable employers to hire them at shamefully inadequate wages.”<sup>25</sup>

Planters also rejected their employees’ right to choose their own work. In 1866 the Bureau reported an incident where a South Carolina planter presented his workers

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<sup>21</sup> H.R. Doc. No. 39-118, at 27 (1866).

<sup>22</sup> “Memorial to the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States in Congress Assembled: Proceedings of Colored People’s Convention of South Carolina,” appendix to James S. Allen, *Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy, 1865-1876* (New York: International Publishers, 1937), 229.

<sup>23</sup> Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, 184.

<sup>24</sup> “Cases Adjudicated by the Freedmen’s Bureau Superintendent at Gordonsville, Virginia, 1865,” in *Freedmen and Southern Society Project*, ed. Steven F. Miller, last modified April 2015, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Gordonsville%20reg.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> S. Doc. No. 39-6, at 50 (1867).

with a lifetime contract. When they refused to sign, they were driven away without payment for work already completed. Two armed men pursued the workers, and murdered two of them. They also whipped another, before returning with her and imprisoning her on the plantation.<sup>26</sup> This treatment left blacks helpless and angered at the injustice of their state. A freed-people's committee on Edisto Island, South Carolina, described the effect that their helplessness had upon their working lives and their relationships with their white employers:

From the homes we have lived in in the past we can only do one of three things: step into the public road or the sea, or remain on them working as in former time and subject to thine will as then. We can not resist it in any way without being driven out homeless upon the road. You will see this is not the condition of really free men... You ask us to forgive the land owners of our Island. *You* only lost your right arm in war and might forgive them. The man who tied me to a tree and gave me 39 lashes and who stripped and flogged my mother and my sister and who will not let me stay in his empty hut except I will do his planting and be satisfied with his price... that man, I cannot well forgive.<sup>27</sup>

So long as their labour was subject entirely to white employers' whims, African American workers would remain subjugated and inferior. Thus, black labourers began to formulate practical ideas about how they wished to participate in the Southern plantation economy. In 1867, with the federal abolition of the Black Codes, freed-people began to introduce small but significant changes to their working lives.

#### THE WORK OF FREED-PEOPLE: CONSTRUCTING A NEW STYLE OF LABOUR

Freed-people believed steadfastly that freedom should be radically different to slavery. When asked to state their understanding of what slavery and freedom meant, an African American ministers' delegation from Savannah, Georgia, in 1865 answered, "slavery is receiving by *irresistible power* the work of another man, and not by his *consent*." Then delegation continued that freedom "is taking us from under the yoke of bondage, and placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor...[and] take care of ourselves."<sup>28</sup> Freed-people recognised independence from white direction and control as essential to achieving and maintaining free labour: while they were content

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<sup>26</sup> S. Doc. No. 39-27, at 21-22 (1866).

<sup>27</sup> Committee of Freedmen on Edisto Island, South Carolina, to General O. O. Howard, October 20 or 21, 1865, in Freedmen and Southern Society Project, ed. Steven F. Miller, last modified April 2015, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Edisto%20petitions.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> "Minutes of an Interview Between the Colored Ministers and Church Officers at Savannah with the Secretary of War and Major-Gen. Sherman," *New-York Daily Tribune*, February 13, 1865.

to work *with* whites towards common goals, they could not construct themselves as a free labouring society if they remained controlled by white employers.

African Americans therefore began to resist their employers' control by banding together to set their own working hours and pace, and allocating free time and Sunday rest days in an attempt to determine the nature of their own work and express their freedom.<sup>29</sup> Though only small steps towards independence, these changes encouraged black cooperation and collective action, as one man alone may have had little influence over an employer, but a community of workers held greater sway. Many employers, however, saw these traits as indicative of black laziness, arguing that this condition demonstrated that blacks did indeed require physical pain to work. In 1865, a Bureau Chairman in South Carolina observed that many planters complained that "nearly all [workers] have shortened their day's work several hours, and persist in taking to themselves every Sunday," while insisting that "only actual suffering, starvation, and punishment will drive many of them to work."<sup>30</sup> African Americans were not ready to give up their struggle for freedom within the working sphere. Although violence discouraged outright disobedience, freed-people retained one of the most basic elements of their emancipation – the ability to labour where and for whom they chose.<sup>31</sup> By retaining this crucial piece of power within the Southern labour economy, black workers prevented their white employers from obtaining total control over the South's labour market.

As Reconstruction continued, African Americans developed a more concrete understanding about the role labour would play in their lives. Contrary to white Northerners' expectations, former slaves did not view their work merely as a way to improve their individual standing in life. Rather, their labour became a means to prove their worth as citizens, and a gateway into other areas of public life. In 1871, the South Carolina Convention of Colored People declared that "while we have, as a body, contributed our labor in the past to enhance the wealth and promote the welfare of the community, we have, as a class, been deprived of the... return that civilization makes for the labor of the individual."<sup>32</sup> Black workers were not simply interested in material profit for their labour, but in being recognised as contributing members of society, with interests and goals beyond agriculture. They emphasised a specific understanding of what it meant to be a citizen: that rights of citizenship were not blithely granted but were earned in exchange for fulfilling civic duties.

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<sup>29</sup> Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 45; Harold Woodman, "The Reconstruction of the Cotton Plantation in the New South," in *Essays on the Postbellum Southern Economy*, eds Thavolia Glymph and John J. Kushma (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), 102.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Soule to General O. O. Howard, June 12, 1865, in *Freedmen and Southern Society Project*, ed. Steven F. Miller, last modified April 2015, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Soule.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 372-373.

<sup>32</sup> "The Convention of Colored Citizens," *Weekly Louisianian*, November 19, 1871.

In 1866, an anonymous letter to the *Colored American*, expressed disappointment at the extent to which many whites mistrusted African Americans' character and insisted that "We will show by our conduct that we are worthy of being American citizens. By our *acts* we will give the *lie* to our calumniators."<sup>33</sup> A similar sentiment was expressed by a group of Tennessee freedmen, who wrote to the Bureau in 1865, to request "that we may be secured as others, in the just fruits of our toil: protected from unjust and illegal punishments, and we are sure we will keep our families from want, and do our part as good citizens of the United States."<sup>34</sup> Emphasizing the duties inherent to citizenship reflected African Americans' unique understanding of the term. While former Confederates recognised that democracy was founded on a balance of rights and responsibilities, they saw citizenship as an inherent liberty granted only to American-born white men.<sup>35</sup> Basing their understanding of citizenship upon the notion of responsibility, black workers sought to create a civic ideal from which they would not be automatically excluded.

The changes in labour patterns implemented by African American workers during the late 1860s and 1870s were slight, yet proved to be important in defining labour's role within black society. The mutual dependence between planters and workers was an undeniable fact of free labour, and neither could succeed without the involvement of the other.<sup>36</sup> Once both blacks and whites became aware of this reality, it became far more difficult for planters to exploit their workers without loss of profits. A black newspaper editor observed in 1869 that planters were

... beginning to wake up to the fact that they are dependant on the blacks as well as the blacks on them... We trust these dainty gentlemen will now learn an important lesson in political economy... Especially where Capital employs six-shooters to enforce its demands, will Labor become restive and turbulent, certainly intensely migratory.<sup>37</sup>

Following the passage of the Congressional Reconstruction Act in late 1866, which preceded the end of Black Codes, those employers who treated their freed-people poorly struggled to find labourers for the coming season. Black labourers chose not to work for whites who attempted to enforce strict rule over their workers. In a report printed in the *Loyal Georgian*, it was observed that "those planters who ill treated the freedmen last year, find it almost impossible to secure labor during this, and some

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<sup>33</sup> "Self-Respect," *Colored American*, January 6, 1866.

<sup>34</sup> Reverend Lewis Bright, et al. to General Clinton B. Fisk, July 27, 1865, in *Freedmen and Southern Society Project*, ed. Steven F. Miller, last modified April 2015, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Bright.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 218.

<sup>36</sup> Rable, *But There Was No Peace*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> "Mutual Dependence," *New Orleans Tribune*, February 11, 1869.

have been compelled to abandon their farms in consequence.”<sup>38</sup> Labourers were now mindful of the power their labour afforded them: they resisted to white violence and intimidation, and began to instigate changes within the plantation system.

The first of these plantation changes established a greater distance between black workers and their employers in their daily work. One of the most fundamental differences between slave and free labour was in how labourers perceived themselves in relation to their white employers.<sup>39</sup> Black workers no longer tolerated their employers scrutinising their every move. An anonymous former Georgian plantation worker recalled that following an unpleasant change to working conditions, “We free laborers held a meeting. We all wanted to quit. We sent a man to tell [the planter] about it.”<sup>40</sup> By congregating and forming a collective position from which to negotiate with their employers, black workers sought to empower themselves within the employer-employee relationship, and establish a communal independence from whites.

This desire for independence was also demonstrated in black labourers’ tendency towards taking up sharecropping over wage labour. In theory, sharecropping allowed labourers more control over their work, enabling them to work with, instead of for, the landowner to obtain the best harvest from the crop.<sup>41</sup> J.W. Alford observed in a letter to General Major Howard of the Freedmen’s Bureau in 1870 that “the freedmen are buying or renting land and raising their own crops,” and declared this development to be an indication “of the drift of these people towards independent homelife and profitable labor.”<sup>42</sup> In reality, however, sharecropping was a dangerous and damaging practice, and tenants rarely farmed enough to repay their landowners the cost of their tenancy, driving black families deeper into debt and dependence.<sup>43</sup>

However, black workers tended to favour this manner of arrangement indicating their desire to reap the benefits of their own work. Richard H. Cain, a black representative to the South Carolina Constitutional Convention of 1868, noted that this relationship, in which labourers worked more for themselves than for white employers, “inspire[d] every [black] man with a noble manfulness, and by the thought that he is possessor of something in the State.”<sup>44</sup> In seeking to obtain a more distant,

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<sup>38</sup> “Progress of Reconstruction,” *Loyal Georgian*, March 3, 1866.

<sup>39</sup> Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 338.

<sup>40</sup> “The New Slavery In The South – An Autobiography,” *The Independent*, February 25, 1904.

<sup>41</sup> Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 42.

<sup>42</sup> J. W. Alford, “Letters from the South relating to the condition of the Freedmen, addressed to General Major O. O. Howard” (1870), in *Economic Co-operation among Negro Americans*, ed. W.E.B. Du Bois (Atlanta: University of Atlanta Press, 1970), 44.

<sup>43</sup> Ellison, *The Black Experience*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of South Carolina, Held at Charleston, S.C., beginning January 14<sup>th</sup> and ending March 17<sup>th</sup>, 1868, Including the Debates and Proceedings* (Charleston, S.C.: Denny A. Perry, 1868), 420.

balanced relationship with their employers, black workers demonstrated the importance they placed on the emerging black working society's independence.

African American workers made other significant changes to the conduct of their labour, particularly in terms of living conditions and family relationships. In the late 1860s, plantation workers implemented a transition from communal, slave-style living, to family-based living in individual dwellings.<sup>45</sup> Following his marriage to one of the house servants, a Georgian plantation worker moved with his wife into a two-room cabin on the plantation, while other workers each lived in their own one-room dwellings.<sup>46</sup> This transition was accompanied by a gradual shift from gang labour, controlled over by an overseer, to a system in which small areas of land were allotted to tenant or sharecropper families.<sup>47</sup> Living and working in family groups afforded freed-people greater protection and solidarity against white influence.<sup>48</sup> As this style of labour developed, arrangements for plantation amenities such as tools, food, and supplies were made with individual families, bringing opportunity for families to gain greater control over both their living and working conditions.<sup>49</sup>

Likewise, many freed-families attempted to remove black women and children from the tough plantation work force. While numerous planters condemned this action as laziness, it actually embodied a broader reorganization of family and work life, aimed at curtailing employers' power over any one family and allowed the family to develop other interests and identities beyond their working lives. Freed-people valued family and the care of loved ones very highly. Contrary to the traditional white American ideal of free labour, black workers saw themselves as striving not only for their own improvement, but for their whole family's advancement, among whom labour's profits would be shared equally.<sup>50</sup> A Georgian freed-people's group wrote to the Bureau in 1865, deploring planters who "only will... take the prime hands, and our old and infirm, mothers and fathers, and our children, will not be provided for... we cannot labor for the land owners and know that our infirm and children are not provided for."<sup>51</sup> Though black families remained essentially subject to the white landowners for whom they worked, freed-people's efforts to provide for and protect

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<sup>45</sup> Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 46; Woodman, "The Reconstruction of the Cotton Plantation in the New South," 110.

<sup>46</sup> "The New Slavery In The South – An Autobiography."

<sup>47</sup> Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeomen Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 154-155.

<sup>48</sup> Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 169.

<sup>49</sup> Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, 173.

<sup>50</sup> Sharon Ann Holt, "Symbol, Memory, and Service: Resistance and Family Formation in Nineteenth-Century African America," in *Working Towards Freedom: Slave Society and Domestic Economy in the American South*, ed. Larry E. Hudson (New York: University of Rochester Press, 1994), 205.

<sup>51</sup> "Freedmen of Liberty County, Georgia, to Colonel H. F. Sickles, November 28, 1865", in *Freedmen and Southern Society Project*, ed. Steven F. Miller, last modified, April 2015, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Golden.htm>.

their families from white influence indicated a collective solidarity that formed the fundamental tenet for the black community.

Black workers retained one dream that they insisted was vital to their freedom: to own their own land. After the war, rumours began to spread among Southern blacks that the majority of the plantation land belonging to their former owners would be divided up and distributed among the freed-people.<sup>52</sup> Under President Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction edicts, however, almost all of this land was restored to white planters within a few months of war's end.<sup>53</sup> Many black workers held on to these hopes until the end of 1865, but they were bitterly disappointed. In a petition to the Freedmen's Bureau Commissioner, the freed-people of Edisto Island, South Carolina, declared, "General, we want Homesteads, we were promised Homesteads by the government. If it does not carry out the promise its agents made to us... we are left in a more unpleasant condition than our former."<sup>54</sup> Newly emancipated, with almost no material wealth, black labourers stood little chance of earning enough money in their lifetimes to purchase land without government aid. African Americans recognised that, as long as the whites owned the land on which they depended for their livelihood, they could never truly be masters of their own fate, or class themselves as true American citizens.

Black workers continued to petition the government for the opportunity to obtain land. In 1865, one committee of Virginia freed-people adopted the resolutions that, "we feel it be very important that we obtain HOMES – owning our shelters, *and the ground*, that we may raise fruit trees, concerning which our children can say – '*These are ours*'."<sup>55</sup> The desire to acquire land reflected a strong drive to build a communal legacy and construct a foundation upon which black families could form their own identities, histories, and place upon the wider American stage. For freed-people, having once been chattels themselves, property ownership represented a new platform of American citizenship. By 1870, however, only thirty thousand black Southerners owned small plots of land, with four million still dependent on white landowners.<sup>56</sup> While African Americans did not manage to obtain complete labour independence from whites, they were able to influence some significant changes within the plantation labour system, demonstrating their strong drive for independence, as well as their focus on kinship and community.

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<sup>52</sup> Randall M. Miller, "Introduction," in *The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations*, ed. Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999), xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>53</sup> Andrew Johnson was US President between 1865 and 1868; Foner, *Forever Free*, 76.

<sup>54</sup> Committee of Freedmen on Edisto Island, South Carolina, to General O. O. Howard.

<sup>55</sup> "Joseph R. Johnson to General O. O. Howard, August 4, 1865," in *Freedmen and Southern Societies Project*, ed. Steven F. Miller, last modified April 2015, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/J%20Johnson.htm>.

<sup>56</sup> Foner, *Forever Free*, 81.

## CONCLUSION

Over the course of Reconstruction, white planters and overseers used violence against the African American labouring class as a means to maintain their control over this labour, discourage black autonomy, and limit blacks' ability to exercise their new found rights. As former slaves became more accustomed to life as freed-people, however, the planter class' violence and legislative oppression drove them to use their limited influence to implement changes to their working style. By distancing themselves from their white employers, choosing to live and work in family groups rather than labour-gangs, and adopting mainly sharecropping and tenancy agreements, black workers sought to actively dissociate themselves from the features of their former lives as slaves. Although the persistence of many whites to control the Southern labour economy left black families mired in debt, African American workers' actions in response to violence reflected their sincere desire to establish a working community in which each citizen could labour independently for their families' and society's benefit. However, the Southern plantation workforce during Reconstruction remained a harsh and unforgiving environment for blacks. To remedy this, African American eyes increasingly turned towards the power of politics, as they realised that true independence could come only with the right to vote.

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