Impact of Reconstruction on SC’s Social Class

Standard Indicator 8-5.2
Impact of Reconstruction

• Reconstruction policy had little economic impact on the South’s recovery from the devastation of the Civil War
• The economy continued to rest on agriculture and cotton, but now depended on sharecropping rather than slave labor
• The national government did not see its role as taking an active hand in managing the economy until the 20th century and so the national government did not rebuild the war-torn region economically.
• The South remained in a state of economic depression well into the 20th century
Southern Plantation Owners

• As a result of the war and the 13th Amendment, plantation owners lost their labor force & very large portion of their wealth.
• Many were astonished that their former slaves, who they thought were loyal to them, left the plantations.
• Became more hostile to the freedmen
• Now forced to do the normal household & farm duties themselves or pay wages to their workers
• Confederate Dollars were worthless—all they had of value now was their land
Sharecropping System

- Facilitated/helped by the Freedmen’s Bureau, many plantation owners entered into sharecropping agreements with freedmen and poor whites.
- Reestablished their position as master through a new means (economic dependence).
- Sharecroppers tilled the land that belonged to their former masters in exchange for a share of the crop.
- Planter elites used Black Codes to try and hang-on to slave-like conditions & control over the government of the state through the constitution of 1865.
  - Congressional Reconstruction brought a temporary end to their political control in SC.
- Led to the elite & middle-class to engage in violence and intimidation against African Americans throughout Reconstruction.
**Small Farmers**

- Directly affected financially by newly freed slaves.
- Competed with African American sharecroppers when they marketed their crops.
- Their sense of social superiority to slaves now felt threatened.
- They reacted with anger and resentment and joined the ranks of the vigilante groups that terrorized African Americans. (Example: Ku Klux Klan.)
“Scalawags”

- Some small farmers from non-slaveholding districts cooperated with the Republicans because they would benefit from the educational and economic opportunities they offered.

- They were called “scalawags” by other South Carolinians.
The Freedmen:

- Both liberated and displaced in In the Reconstruction period.
- At the end of the war freedmen left the plantation looking for relatives sold “down the river” or seeking a taste of freedom.
- Most soon returned to the area that they knew best, their former plantations.
- A common misconception is that slaves left the South as soon as they had the opportunity to escape the society that had mistreated them.
Freedmen cont:

• With the assistance of the Freedmen’s Bureau & their own determination, former slaves worked to consolidate their families & communities & establish a network of churches and other autonomous institutions.

• Unable to secure their own land to farm, many African Americans entered into agreements with southern landowners, who were land rich & cash poor.

• In sharecropping, the landowner supplied the seed, tools, & land and the sharecropper supplied the labor.

• Both shared the crop.
A Sharecropper’s Contract

“The sale of every cropper’s part of the cotton to be made by when and where I choose to sell, and after deducting all they owe me and all sums that I may be responsible for on their accounts, to pay them their half of the net proceeds. Work of every description, particularly the work on fences and ditches, to be done to my satisfaction, and must be done over until I am satisfied that it is done as it should be.”

Source: Grimes Family Papers, Southern Historical Historical Collection
The “Crop Circle” of Debt

• Sharecroppers remained economically dependent on the landowner

• Bad crop years resulted in sharecroppers taking out loans in the form of liens against future harvests in order to buy supplies

• This kept most sharecroppers in a cycle of debt with landowners & lien holders

• Although African Americans suffered from white violence & intimidation throughout the Reconstruction period, they continued to claim equal citizenship and carve out as much independence as possible in their lives
Impact on Women

• Women of the Reconstruction period depended on their social class.
• Both the wives of elite plantation owners & small farmers shared their husbands’ loss of social status & fear of economic competition from the freedmen.
• Elite white women had to negotiate household services from former slave women or perform household duties themselves.
• Deaths or war related disabilities of their husbands often forced women into non-traditional roles.
• As result of the SC Constitution of 1868 women achieved some rights, including the right to own property in their own name even after marriage.
“Carpetbaggers” come to SC

• Northern immigrants
• Came as teachers, missionaries, or entrepreneurs
• Some came as Union soldiers & stayed
• Reviled as “carpetbaggers
• Not accepted by most white SC society
• Some found political & economic opportunities in SC