Chapter 13

Section 2
Black Politicians

An Evaluation

Southern black political leaders on the state level did create the foundation for public education, for providing state assistance for the blind, deaf, and insane, and for reforming the criminal justice system. They tried, but mostly failed, to outlaw racial discrimination in public facilities. They encouraged state support for economic revival and expansion.

But black leaders could not create programs that significantly improved the lives of their constituents. Because white Republicans almost always outnumbered them, they could not enact an agenda of their own. Moreover, black leaders often disagreed among themselves about specific issues and programs. Class and prewar status frequently divided them. Those leaders who had not been slaves and had not been raised in rural isolation were less likely to be concerned with land and agricultural labor. More prosperous black leaders showed more interest in civil rights and encouraging business. Even when they agreed about the need for public education, black leaders often disagreed about how to finance it and whether or not it should be compulsory.

Republican Factionalism

Disagreements among black leaders paled in comparison to the internal conflicts that divided the Republican Party during Reconstruction. Black and white Republicans often disagreed on political issues and strategy. The lack of party cohesion and discipline was even more harmful. The Republican Party in the South constantly split into factions as groups fought with each other. Most disagreements were over who should run for and hold political office.

During Reconstruction, hundreds of would-be Republican leaders—black and white—sought public offices. If they lost the Republican nomination in county or state conventions, they often bolted and formed a competing slate of candidates. Then Republicans ran against each other and against the Democrats in the general election. It was not a recipe for political success.

These bitter and angry contests were based less on race and issues than on the desperate desire to gain an office that would pay even a
Frances Rollin Whipper was an author, teacher, political activist, wife, and mother. With her sisters, she was deeply involved in Reconstruction politics in South Carolina.

PROFILE  The Rollin Sisters

Few women, black or white, were as influential in Reconstruction politics as the Rollin sisters of South Carolina. Although they could not vote or hold political office, the five sisters, especially Frances and Katherine, were closely associated with the black and white Republican leadership in South Carolina.

The sisters were born and raised in the elite antebellum free black community in Charleston. Their father, William Rollin, was a prosperous lumber dealer. Frances, who was born in 1844, was sent to Philadelphia to take the “ladies course” at the Quaker’s Institute for Colored Youth. At least two of the other sisters attended school in Boston. After the war, Frances taught at schools sponsored by the American Missionary Association. She wrote the biography of the black abolitionist leader Martin Delany. This was the first major nonfiction work published in America by a black woman, but she felt compelled to identify the author as a male, Frank A. Rollin.

In 1867 and 1868 the Rollin sisters gravitated to politics. Against her father’s wishes, Frances married William Whipper, a black attorney from Philadelphia who settled in Beaufort, South Carolina, after the war. (Whipper was the nephew of the antebellum black Pennsylvania businessman, also named William Whipper, profiled on p. 230). He was elected to the state constitutional convention and then the South Carolina House of Representatives. Whipper was a tough, able, shrewd, and not altogether honest politician. He enjoyed an expensive lifestyle. Most white people intensely disliked him.

Ironically, these factional disputes led to a high turnover in political leadership and the loss of that very economic security. It was difficult for black leaders (and white leaders too) to be renominated and reelected to more than one or two terms. This made for inexperienced leadership and added to Republican woes.

While the legislature was in session, the Whippers and the Rollin sisters took up residence in Columbia, the state capital. There the sisters were extraordinarily popular. They were well educated, intelligent, refined, and sophisticated. Katherine Rollin was frequently seen with white state senator George W. McIntyre.

The Rollin sisters were enthusiastic proponents of women’s rights and women’s suffrage. Charlotte and Katherine organized a women’s rights convention in Columbia in 1870 and formed the South Carolina branch of the American Women’s Suffrage Association. Their black and white male allies tried to amend South Carolina’s constitution to enable women to vote. After a bitter debate, the legislature rejected women’s suffrage.

After the Democrats regained political power in 1877, the Rollin sisters left for the North. Charlotte and Louise settled with their mother in Brooklyn, New York. William and Frances Whipper and their five children moved to Washington, D.C., in 1882, where he practiced law. Frances was a clerk in the General Land Office. Three of their children survived to adulthood. Their sole son, Leigh Whipper (1876–1975), was a prominent stage and screen actor in the 1940s and 1950s. He was the first black member of Actors Equity Association. She died in Beaufort in 1901.
Opposition

Even if black and Republican leaders had been less prone to conflict and more effective in adopting a political platform, they might still have failed to sustain themselves for long. Most white Southerners led by conservative Democrats remained absolutely opposed to letting black men vote or hold office. Because black people voted did not mean they ruled during Reconstruction, but many white people failed to grasp that. Instead, for most white Southerners, the only acceptable political system was one that excluded black men and the Republican Party.

As far as most white people were concerned, the end of slavery and the enfranchisement of black men did not make black people their equals. They did not accept the Fourteenth Amendment. They attacked Republican governments and their leaders relentlessly. White Southerners blamed the Republicans for an epidemic of waste and corruption in state government. But most of all, they considered it preposterous and outrageous that former slaves could vote and hold political office.

White Southerners were determined to rid themselves of Republicans and the disgrace of having to live with black men who possessed political rights. White Southerners would “redeem” their states by restoring white Democratic rule. This did not simply mean defeating black and white Republicans in elections; it meant removing them from any role in politics. White Southerners believed any means—fair or foul—were justified in exorcising this evil.

Reading Check

Why were so many white Southerners bitterly and violently opposed to black and white Republicans exercising political power?

The Ku Klux Klan

If black men in politics was illegitimate—in the eyes of white Southerners—then it was acceptable to use violence to remove them. This thinking gave rise to militant terrorist organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Knights of the White Camellia, the White Brotherhood, and the Whitecaps. Threats, intimidation, beatings, rapes, and murder would restore conservative white Democratic rule and force black people back into subordination.

The Ku Klux Klan was founded in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1866. It was originally a social club for Confederate veterans who adopted secret oaths and rituals—similar to the Union Leagues, but with far more deadly results. One of the key figures in the Klan’s rapid growth was former Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest, who became its grand wizard. The Klan drew its members from all classes of white society, not merely from among the poor. Businessmen, lawyers, physicians, and politicians were active in the Klan as well as farmers and planters.
The Klan and other terrorist organizations functioned mainly where black people were a large minority and where their votes could affect the outcome of elections. Klansmen virtually took over areas of western Alabama, northern Georgia, and Florida’s panhandle. The Klan controlled the up country of South Carolina and the area around Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. However, in the Carolina and Georgia low country where there were huge black majorities, the Klan never appeared.

The Klan and similar societies were neither well organized nor unified. However, they did reduce support for the Republican Party and helped eliminate its leaders. Often wearing hoods and masks to hide their faces, white terrorists embarked on a campaign of violence rarely matched and never exceeded in American history.

Mobs of marauding terrorists beat and killed hundreds of black people—and many white people. Black churches and schools were burned. Republican leaders were routinely threatened and often killed. The black chairman of the Republican Party in South Carolina, Benjamin F. Randolph, was murdered as he stepped off a train in 1868. Black legislator Lee Nance and white legislator Solomon G. W. Dill
were murdered in 1868 in South Carolina. In 1870 black lawmaker Richard Burke was killed in Sumter County, Alabama, because he was considered too influential among “people of his color.”

White men attacked a Republican campaign rally in Eutaw, Alabama, in 1870 and killed four black men and wounded fifty-four other people. After three black leaders were arrested in 1871 in Meridian, Mississippi, for delivering what many white people considered inflammatory speeches, shooting broke out in the courtroom. The Republican judge and two of the defendants were killed. In a wave of violence, thirty black people were murdered, including every black leader in the small community. In the same year, a mob of five hundred men broke into the jail in Union County, South Carolina, and lynched eight black prisoners who had been accused of killing a Confederate veteran.

**Reading Check** What was the purpose of the Ku Klux Klan and how effective was it?

**The Klan and York County**

Nowhere was the Klan more active and violent than in York County, South Carolina. Almost the entire adult white male population joined in threatening, attacking, and murdering the black population. Hundreds were beaten and at least eleven killed. Terrified families fled from their homes into the woods. Appeals for help were sent to Governor Robert K. Scott. But Scott did not send aid. He had already sent the South Carolina militia into areas of Klan activity, and even more violence had resulted. The militia was made up mostly of black men, and white terrorists retaliated by killing militia officers. Scott could not send white men to York County because most of them sympathized with the Klan. Thus Republican governors like Scott responded ineffectually. Republican-controlled legislatures passed anti-Klan measures that made it illegal to appear in public in disguises and masks. They strengthened laws against assault, murder, and conspiracy. But enforcement was weak.

A few Republican leaders did deal harshly and effectively with terrorism. Governors in Tennessee, Texas, and Arkansas declared martial law and sent in hundreds of well-armed white and black men to stop the violence. Hundreds of Klansmen were arrested. Many fled and three

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**Federal Reconstruction Legislation: 1868–1875**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Legislation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1869</td>
<td>Fifteenth Amendment passed (ratified 1870)</td>
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<td>1870</td>
<td>Enforcement Act passed</td>
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<td>1871</td>
<td>Ku Klux Klan Act passed</td>
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<td>1875</td>
<td>Civil Rights Act of 1875 passed</td>
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were executed in Arkansas. But when Governor William W. Holden of North Carolina sent the state militia after the Klan, he succeeded only in provoking an angry reaction. Subsequent Klan violence in ten counties helped Democrats carry the 1870 legislative elections, and the North Carolina legislature then removed Holden from office.

Outnumbered and outgunned, black people in most areas did not retaliate against the Klan. The Klan was rarely active where black people were in a majority and prepared to defend themselves. In the cause of white supremacy, the Klan usually attacked those who could not defend themselves.

**Reading Check** Why wouldn’t the governor of South Carolina send aid to the blacks of York County?

### The West

During the 1830s the U.S. government forced the Five Civilized tribes—the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole—from their southern homelands to Indian territory in what is now Oklahoma. By 1860 Native Americans held 7,367 African Americans in slavery. Many of the Indians fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War. Following the war, the former slaves encountered nearly as much violence and hostility from Native Americans as they did from southern white people. Indians were reluctant to share their land with freedmen, and they vigorously opposed policies that favored black voting rights.

Gradually and despite considerable Indian prejudice, some African Americans managed to acquire tribal land. Also, the Creeks and the Seminoles permitted former slaves to take part in tribal government. Black men served in both houses of the Creek legislature—the House of Warriors and the House of Kings. An African American, Jesse Franklin, served as a justice on the Creek tribal court in 1876. In contrast, the Chickasaw and Choctaw were absolutely opposed to making concessions to freed people, and thus the U.S. government ordered federal troops onto Chickasaw and Choctaw lands to protect the former slaves.

Elsewhere on the western frontier, black people struggled for legal and political rights and periodically participated in territorial governments. In 1867 two hundred black men voted—although white men protested—in the Montana territorial election. In the Colorado territory, William Jefferson Hardin, a barber, campaigned with other black men for the right to vote. They persuaded 137 African Americans (91 percent of Colorado’s black population) to sign a petition in 1865 to the territorial governor appealing for an end to a white-only voting provision. In 1867 black men in Colorado finally did gain the right to vote. Hardin later moved to Cheyenne and was elected in 1879 to the Wyoming territorial legislature.

**Reading Check** What was the experience of black people in the West during Reconstruction?

*By 1860, Native Americans held more than 7,000 African Americans in slavery. Following the war, former slaves encountered considerable hostility and violence from Native Americans. As elsewhere, blacks in the West struggled for political and legal rights.*