

FREE MEN COME TO HOUSTON: BLACKS DURING RECONSTRUCTION

by Scott L. Stabler

Reconstruction after the Civil War brought far-reaching changes to Houston. A wave of migrants entered the city after the war. The population of Harris County almost doubled between 1860 and 1870, surging from about 9,000 to 17,000. In the same period, the county's black population increased from approximately 2,000 to 6,500. Most of these new migrants were freed slaves who came to Houston seeking separation from their former owners, an alternative to agricultural labor, and information about long lost relatives.¹

After the war, the Houston area thus faced the dual challenges of adjusting to the defeat of the Confederacy and to the end of slavery. As word of emancipation spread, many of the freedmen set out on foot for Houston from neighboring plantations. One observer at the time noted: "They travel mostly on foot, bearing heavy burdens of clothing, blankets, etc., on their heads—a long and weary journey, they arrive tired, foot sore, and hungry."² Upon arrival, they found an openly hostile city unprepared for their presence. Cut loose from their former lives as forced agricultural labor without basic political or human rights, they faced the daunting task of building new lives as free citizens.

National and state politics shaped the future of the freed slaves in Houston and throughout the South. More than four million slaves had been freed, with about 250,000 of those in Texas. Reconstruction raised highly contested issues that touched all phases of life in the South. Often submerged under the volatile politics of Reconstruction was a fundamental question facing the nation: what should be done to give the former slaves at least a fighting chance to become equal participants in the life of the nation? In Houston as throughout much of the South, the federal government addressed this question for a time by establishing schools for the freedmen and securing their voting rights. Until the national politics of "reconciliation" and "redemption" ended these federal programs in the 1870s, they made a measure of progress in helping freedmen begin to make the fundamental transformation from slavery to freedom.

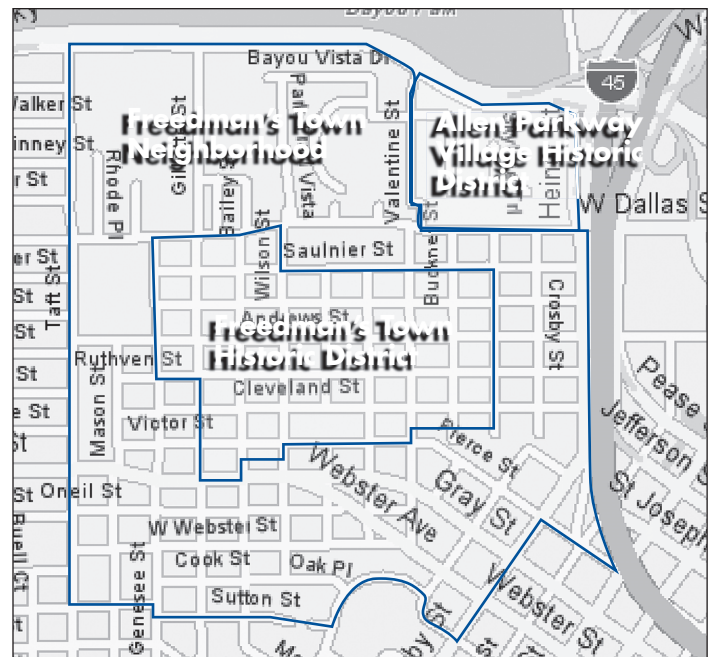
HOUSTON UNDER MILITARY GOVERNANCE

At war's end, the victorious Union troops occupied the South. The presence of these troops stirred the resentment of many former Confederates, creating tensions between the occupiers and the occupied. The army served as law enforcement, and military officers, appointed state and city officials, and federal standards of loyalty severely limited the number of white Texans who could vote or hold office. Thus, non-Southern born individuals and African Americans

briefly held sway in Texas and Houston politics. White resentment and open resistance resulted, creating strong opposition to many of the government policies aimed at helping the recently displaced freedman.

Houston indirectly came under the command of General Philip H. Sheridan who sympathized more with freedmen than Confederates. The general had little fondness for white Texans and did them no favors. Sheridan once commented that if he owned Texas and Hell, he would rent Texas and move to Hell. On May 29, 1865, Sheridan took charge of the Fifth Military District that included Louisiana and Texas. That same day, Confederate General Kirby Smith and his troops arrived in Houston. He disbanded his men and communicated to Union Colonel William Sprague that the state was ready for the arrival of Union forces. Sheridan then ordered 1,800 men under General Gordon Granger to occupy Galveston and soon after Houston.³ Due to a lack of violence, Union troops fully occupied Houston for only six months.⁴

On June 19, 1865, General Granger officially declared all Texas slaves free. This emancipation pronouncement began the Juneteenth



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celebration that continues today and is the longest running emancipation celebration. Yet most white Texans did not agree as to how or when slavery would cease. Articles in three different Texas newspapers at about this time illustrated these conflicting sentiments. The *Texas Republican* (Marshall) pronounced slavery would exist for ten more years. Charles DeMorse, the editor of the *Clarksville Northern Standard* thought gradual emancipation would occur. The Houston *Tri-Weekly Telegraph* stated the federal government would still allow some forced labor.⁵ As black field hands came into the Bayou City, the same paper expressed fear that the “ignorant race” would overrun and devastate Houston economically.⁶

Also in June, President Andrew Johnson appointed Texan Andrew J. Hamilton to serve as the state’s governor under Reconstruction. Hamilton was a lawyer, politician, and Unionist who left the state during the Civil War. Upon returning from the North, he entered a state still suffering from military defeat and just experiencing black freedom. The unpopular Hamilton thus had a small, mostly black constituency that did not yet have the right to vote. His primary support came from Union troops.⁷

In a Houston speech, Hamilton boldly recommended that freedmen receive the right to vote. He thundered, “No fowler [sic] slander was ever uttered than that this is and was intended to be a White man’s Gov’t[.] It is and was intended to be a free man’s Gov’t[.]” The interim governor’s support for black suffrage aligned him with Radical Republicans who supported black rights. Radical Republicans earned the name “radical” due to their support for African Americans. Southerners derisively called Radicals, Carpetbaggers or Scalawags. Northerners living in the former Confederacy were called Carpetbaggers. Southern Republicans were called Scalawags, as was Hamilton’s case.⁸ Hamilton’s choice of Houston to make such a bold statement reflected the city’s relatively moderate stance on Reconstruction and the city’s large black population that grew daily.⁹

Houston formed the center of the Republican Party’s political activism during Reconstruction. In July 1867, Houston served as the location for the state’s first Republican convention. The 170 delegates, 150 of whom were black, elected Governor E. M. Pease as the leader of the convention. The delegates encouraged registering voters. With many freedmen serving as registrars, the project succeeded in getting nearly 50,000 freedmen registered. During Reconstruction, African Americans comprised about 90 percent

of the Republican Party’s membership and forty-four African Americans served in the Texas legislature during the period.¹⁰ The convention wanted to expand the role of the Union Leagues around the state. Houston had formed a Union League quickly after the war, but it was made up of mainly whites. The delegates also endorsed public schools and using public lands for homesteads for blacks and whites alike.¹¹

Two months after Juneteenth, on August 20, 1865, President

Johnson officially declared the Civil War over.¹² However, his almost indulgent plans for allowing former Confederate states to re-enter the Union led to political conflict over how these states would be readmitted and how freedmen would be treated.

With Congress in recess, Johnson initiated a lenient plan for Reconstruction or “restoration,” as he termed it. The president asked seceding states to hold conventions to approve abolition and loyalty for voting. He required no stipulation for freedmen’s rights

outside emancipation. Each former Confederate state held a convention and under Johnson’s plan was readmitted to the Union, but not a single state convention bequeathed civil rights to the freedmen and many limited them with Black Codes, which placed various restrictions on freedmen from where they could travel to prohibiting them from sitting on juries. In Texas, an all-white convention dominated by former Confederate leaders drew up a new state constitution in early 1866. The president of the convention, James W. Throckmorton, a Unionist turned Confederate supporter, was then elected governor under the new constitution.

Under Johnson’s plan, Governor Hamilton could not halt restoration that came to fruition through the Texas Democratic Party’s resurgence. Congress did not agree with Johnson’s lenient restoration policy that allowed former Confederate states to reenter the Union without securing black political or even civil rights. When Congress reconvened in December 1865, they created a joint committee to study Reconstruction. In a nearly unanimous vote, they derailed Johnson’s restoration plan by refusing to seat those elected by the former Confederate states. Southern representatives turned away included nine Confederate congressmen, seven state officials, four generals, four colonels, and Vice-President Alexander Stephens. The non-recognition infuriated the president, but set the stage for Congressionally controlled Reconstruction.¹³

Congress would not allow the seceded states back in the Union without some guarantee of black political and civil rights and assur-



Throughout the decades after emancipation, up until present day, Houston residents celebrated Juneteenth by participating in parades, even elaborately decorating buggies, as seen in this turn of the century photograph.

ance that slavery had ended. Until these were met, unreconstructed states could not gain representation in the federal government or full control of local governments. The shift from executive to legislative control marked the beginning of Radical Reconstruction. Passing over Johnson's veto, the Reconstruction Act of March 1867 brought military rule to Texas and the rest of the seceding states, except Tennessee.¹⁴

In August 1867, President Johnson responded with measures to curtail the activities of the Radicals. The president removed General Sheridan from command for being too aggressive in enforcing Reconstruction laws and named General Winfield Scott Hancock, a Democrat, to replace him. Hancock proved much less sympathetic towards freedmen.¹⁵ This lessened Radical power in Texas until the election of Ulysses S. Grant to the presidency.

MEASURES TO ASSIST THE FREEDMEN

The most significant sign of Union intervention in the South came in the form of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, better known as the Freedmen's Bureau. Established in 1865 and run by the army, the Bureau was the first major federal relief agency. General O. O. Howard served as the only commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau and had gained the nickname the "Christian General" for his deep religious faith and reputation as a friend to freedmen during the Civil War. Presbyterian minister James Burke of Houston wrote about Howard, "You are well known throughout the land as the special friend and benefactor of the colored race."¹⁶

Charged with many hard tasks, Howard and the Bureau took responsibility for everything from labor contracts, pension payments, and rations, to education and marriage. Famed historian W. E. B. DuBois wrote that the Bureau served "as one of the most singular and interesting of the attempts made by a great nation to grapple with vast problems of race and social condition."¹⁷ In Houston, the Bureau served many purposes including passing out rations, establishing hospitals, opening schools, getting crops to market, and assuring the end of slavery.¹⁸

Largely due to white racism and limited resources, fulfilling the Bureau's mission in such a large state proved difficult if not impossible. In 1866, thirty-one sub-assistant commissioners occupied thirty of the 122 Texas counties. Assistant Commissioner J. B. Kiddoo petitioned Howard for more military officers, but was not successful in enlarging the Bureau's operations.¹⁹ At its peak in 1867, the Bureau had a mere fifty-five agents to cover Texas' 29,000 square miles.²⁰

White Texans and Houstonians resented the change brought

on by emancipation, federal troops, and the activities of the Bureau. Bureau inspector, General William Strong visited Texas and reported to the *New York Herald* in January 1866 that the white population was unreceptive, local government did not have control, and general mayhem and hunger infiltrated both white and black populations.²¹ In September 1867, the state's Bureau commissioner wrote, "The majority of the inhabitants of this state are as hostile today as they were in 62+3 [sic]."²²

Many white Texans responded to Bureau policies with violence. From 1865 to 1868, white Texans committed over 1,500 acts of violence against freedmen, including the murder of 350 blacks. Those that attempted to reestablish white supremacy and force blacks back into virtual slavery committed nearly all the atrocities. A report by Freedmen's Bureau inspectors in Houston said, "The State [Texas] is utterly unmanageable for bureau purposes. Its vast extent places it beyond the reach of any ordinary mechanism of centralized government."²³ General J. J. Reynolds told the commissioner of the Bureau not to send women missionaries to educate the freedmen in Texas because he could not protect them against "outrage or insults."²⁴

Strong white resistance to Reconstruction policies led General of the Army Ulysses S. Grant to believe Texas was in revolt. He requested and received the ability to re-impose martial law in the state.²⁵ Congress and martial force did succeed in eliminating the state's Black Codes, providing a measure of safety for freedmen, but was a far cry from total security for African Americans.²⁶ So antagonistic were whites that Commissioner Howard sent the intrepid General Edgar M. Gregory to take control of the situation in Texas. He described Gregory as "so fearless of opposition or danger that I sent him to Texas, which seemed at time of his appointment to be the post of greatest peril."²⁷

Specifically, labor tensions created most of the turmoil in Texas and Houston involving the Bureau. The common misconception that freedmen would not work unless they were forced to played a large part in the friction over labor. Another source of tension involved the mistreatment of employees (mostly freedmen) by employers (mostly whites). In General Howard's 1868 tour of Texas, he met a former slaveholder who refused to pay freedmen

and accused the former slaves of not being willing to work. The commissioner pointed out many examples of successes. The man seemed swayed, but finished by saying "he believed he was too old for the new fangled notion of free labor!"²⁸ There were even proposals in Texas to carve out a territory in the western part of the state for the freedmen. The plan never came into culmina-



Houston Independent School District was segregated from its beginning. By 1871, a separate school existed for black children in each ward. The Gregory School, seen here in 1931, was built in the Fourth Ward and named after General Gregory for the work he did on behalf of freedmen while he was assistant commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau for the Texas area.

tion, but a Houston paper sarcastically stated that the plan would “completely eliminate the Negro problem” as the Comanche and Apache would see to.²⁹

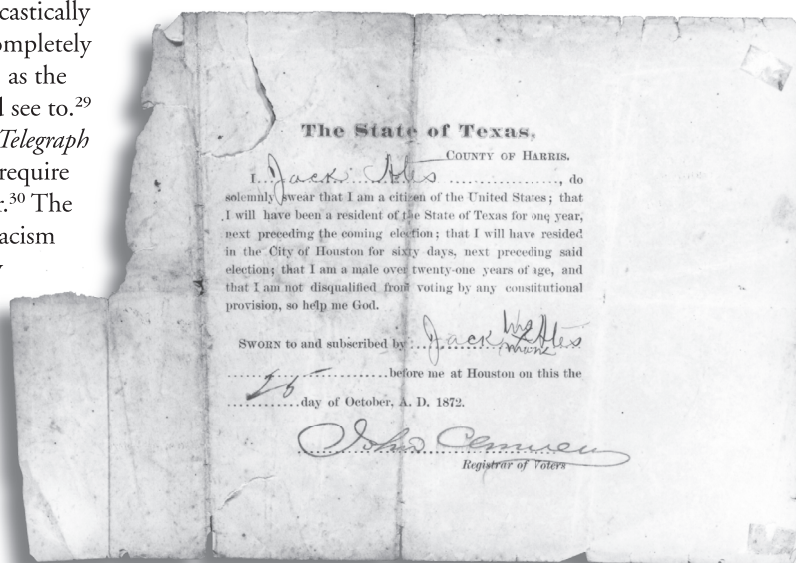
The Houston *Tri-Weekly Telegraph* believed emancipation would require the state to import white labor.³⁰ The labor pool shrank because of racism and violence, but came mostly due to African American women’s desire to stay home to raise their children who now had the opportunity to attend school, thus further shrinking the labor supply. General Howard refused to send black labor to Texas, “I am very hesitant to encourage negroes [sic] to go to Texas, as long as it is reported that they are killed and outraged, and have so little show of justice.”³¹ A Bureau agent confirmed Howard’s fears by noting state laws backed the planters’ abuse of black employees.³²

A system of contracts developed by the Freedmen’s Bureau sought to guarantee fair labor conditions for African Americans. With the approval of Bureau agents, freedmen and their employers signed contracts to guarantee fair remuneration for work. Contracts also assured that freedmen had gainful employment and that they were not reliant on government subsidy.³³ To protect the freedmen, Howard ordered that blacks be allowed to choose their employers, prohibited overseers, and assured that “the unity of families... will be carefully guarded.”³⁴ In addition, he instructed, “Wages had better be secured by a lien on the crops of land.” Working mostly from Houston, General Gregory promoted the contract system to freedmen after dismissing the common rumor that they would receive land from the government.³⁵

Accustomed to slavery, white plantation owners opposed the contract system’s regulations and restrictions. Southern sympathizer Andrew Johnson responded to complaints by planters against Gregory by relieving him in April 1866. In response, Howard commended Gregory for his support of the freedmen and reassigned him as an inspector for the Bureau in Galveston.³⁶

During Reconstruction, many goods shipped to Houston did not have proof that contracts were used. The documentation assured that free and not slave labor had produced the goods. Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Jacob C. DeGress of the Sixth Missouri Cavalry served as the provost marshal of the Eastern District that included Houston. A Prussian-born officer who spoke English with a heavy accent, DeGress made Texas his home. He married a Texan, served Texas as a Bureau agent, and became the first state superintendent of public education.

The colonel supported freedmen and strictly enforced the contract system. Before DeGress arrived in Houston, farmers consistently tricked blacks out of payment and when the freedmen came to the city to bring their disputes before Bureau agents, local law enforcement officials regularly arrested them for vagrancy. Once arrested, these freedmen were often unfairly put to work on



Voter registration form signed by Rev. Jack Yates in 1872

public projects.³⁷

DeGress had no qualms about siding with African Americans and protecting them from unlawful contracts. He estimated that without Bureau contracts, two-thirds of the freedmen would be cheated. Unlike his weak predecessor, DeGress confiscated crops of farmers who did not have the proper paperwork to show that their harvests had been produced under contract labor. The white merchants, planters, and shippers grew quite upset and argued they were going out of business. DeGress did not seem to care, “I am cursed and abused...(not

to my face I can assure you) and all I can say is, I am proud to have their ill will.” DeGress succeeded. After a few months, he announced that shipments to Houston had the proper documentation to verify the freedmen obtained payment.³⁸

The Bureau held other roles in the city. Until October 1, 1866, it issued food rations to black and white Houstonians. The organization also established a freedmen’s hospital, which it gave back to the city in 1867.³⁹ DeGress protected Houston freedmen from unfair prosecution, but in 1868, suffered the same fate as Sheridan. President Johnson dismissed officers he thought were too supportive of the freedmen. The divisions over Reconstruction included, but went well beyond Houston.⁴⁰

SELF HELP AND COMMUNITY BUILDING UNDER THE FREEDMEN’S BUREAU

As such political conflicts continued, African Americans from surrounding areas poured into Houston, settling in and around the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards. Not waiting for others to solve their problems, black migrants to these areas looked to build communities in which they could help themselves. The Fourth Ward, also known as Freedman’s Town, became Houston’s most active African American neighborhood. It was the location of the first black churches, schools, and political organizations.⁴¹ As early as 1866, Houston freedmen had built 150 houses and three churches, bought a hundred lots, and began depositing money in the state’s only branch of the Freedmen’s Savings and Trust. In 1872, the black community led by Reverend Jack Yates purchased the still-in-existence ten-acre Emancipation Park at Elgin and Dowling streets to hold Juneteenth celebrations. Freedmen also established a Mutual Aid Society and even a Colored Men’s Baseball Club.⁴²

Yates served as pastor of downtown’s Antioch Baptist Church, a national historic landmark, which freedmen founded in 1868. The Reverend and his congregation worked with Bureau officials to construct freedmen’s schools as well.⁴³

With the aid of the Freedmen’s Bureau, black education made great strides in the Bayou City. The establishment of freedmen’s

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ment agency, the office of the *rentados*, there is work all the time.²³ But from what I have seen, it is very hard because...you go to those offices and the people whom they send you to, you always go to do the dirtiest work, the hardest work, until you are fortunate to stay with a company.

Daniel moved back home to Mexico the summer of 2005. The following section is based on a short interview conducted in Houston this fall.

JG: *After your wife and most of your children came to Houston in 1994, did you continue going to your house in the countryside back in Dolores Hidalgo?*

DG: Well, yes; but I only went every once in a while. I only went once a year for a week or two, and then I came back [to Houston]. [When I went] I always planted some trees and tried to repair the worst parts of the house. [For the past ten years] my wife lived here in the same house where we live in Houston. She only went to Mexico to see her relatives for a week or two and then came back to Houston. Sometimes she stayed in Mexico for a month, but that was unusual.

JG: *Before you retired from North Star Steel in 2004, did you consider going back to Mexico to live?*

DG: No, back then I only thought of going to Mexico to spend two weeks or a month and of coming back to Houston to stay two or three months and going back to Mexico. Right now, I just got back from Mexico where I stayed for two and a half months. I just got here to Houston, but I am only planning to stay for a few days to take care of some business and then I will go back to Mexico again.

I have a lot of work to do back there. I have to fix my barbed-wire fences. I just did some remodeling to my house; it was in very bad shape and we did many repairs to it. I also tend to my fruit trees. I am planting more nopales because the old nopales are very old and are dying off. I am clearing the land around my house where it looks nice, and a lot more. I also sowed an hectare of maize. At this time, it is starting to grow ears.

I have an interest in raising some twenty or thirty sheep. When I come over to Houston, well, I am going to see if I can find someone to help me take care of them. I will come especially to see my family, to see my children and grandchildren, and to be in a different atmosphere for a while.

[I plan to live most of the time] in Mexico because that's where I have my little house. I am very happy back there. The climate is very nice...and there is a lot for me to do....

Relatives and friends live back there, but my main interest is taking care of my house and my land. By the same token, when someone from Houston goes back there for a visit, I will have a place where they can come to, where they can spend the night.

[My wife] is with me most of the time. At this time we are both here in Houston. Perhaps this time I will go back to take care of what I have and she might stay in Houston for a while to help take care of our little newborn granddaughter, and maybe in a month or two she will go back to Mexico to spend some time with me back there. ■

FREE MEN *continued from 43*

schools in Houston met great resistance. One assistant Bureau commissioner wrote to Governor Hamilton that a Houston woman told him she would "sooner put a bullet in their heads" than support freedmen's education.⁴⁴ The first edifice for freedmen's education opened in September 1865.⁴⁵ By 1870, the school had 275 students making it one of the largest freedmen's schools in Texas. Nevertheless, the yet unnamed school was under-enrolled due to a lack of qualified and willing teachers.⁴⁶

The Texas enrollment numbers could have expanded except for an extreme lack of teachers, either from the North or the South.⁴⁷ Female teachers from the North made up a large majority of the Bureau's educators during Reconstruction, and since Texas was often seen as unsafe for those who supported freedmen, a shortage resulted.

The Bureau tried to eliminate the problem in Houston. Shortly after the first freedmen's school opened, the Bureau founded the Freedmen's Academy (soon renamed the Gregory Institute), a four-room brick school between Jefferson and Louisiana streets built to educate black teachers.⁴⁸ The original academy and the current Gregory-Lincoln Education Center on Taft Street are named for General Gregory.⁴⁹

Houston's freedmen made bold strides in education, but such progress was not universal in Texas. In 1866, Texas' Bureau Superintendent of Education, E. M. Wheelock, noted that only 4,865 students, white and black, were enrolled in schools. He believed that in central Texas 30,000 freed children awaited schooling that required 800 more teachers.⁵⁰ In February 1867, new state commissioner Charles Griffin, reported only 500 freed children in school. Probably to aid his reputation, but possibly due to his support of benevolent associations active in the state, Griffin reported 5,000 enrolled just two months later.⁵¹ By 1870, the first year "students enrolled" became a census statistic, 4,000 freedmen's schools existed in the state, and by the time the Bureau left Texas a few years later, 40,000 blacks were literate.⁵² Out of this push for education, Texas created its own public school system for all races in 1871. African American higher education began in 1878 with the foundation of Prairie View State Normal School, now Prairie View A&M University.⁵³

Education served some Texas freedmen well, but many were left behind. Commissioner Howard cited national statistics of black children in and out of school. The total black school age population in 1869 was 1,664,600, and out of these only 238,342 went to school, for a seven to one ratio. Texas, unfortunately, held the dubious distinction of having the worst African American school attendance of all the southern states with a ten to one ratio. Of the 74,701 Texas freed children in 1869, only 7,364 were in school, but it was a huge increase in just four years in a still very rural state.⁵⁴

Some white civilians wanted to aid the freedmen's education and even their religious wellbeing. Gail Borden, of Borden Ice Cream, milk, and cheese fame, offered to help with Reconstruction when he spent his winters in Texas. "I propose doing what I can towards ameliorating the condition of the Freedmen," he wrote General Howard. Borden "hope[ed] to help in the work of Reconstruction by putting up mills and assisting to build schoolhouse[s] and churches."⁵⁵ Howard also believed tensions

could be relieved through education and Christianity.

Many, including African Americans, promoted the religion Howard endorsed. Assistant Commissioner for Texas, J. B. Kiddoo, wrote, "Civilization and religion must possess this people before they will be either financially or politically prosperous."⁵⁶ White Houston Presbyterian minister James Burke told Howard that he should send ministers to Houston to help with integration and that only one in thirty Houstonians attended church.⁵⁷ He also wanted religious tracts for pastors to be passed out since he noticed that, "The colored people evince a great fondness for reading." He further tried to persuade Howard by telling him, "The Papists are supplying them with their publications."⁵⁸

Freedmen's churches in Houston made larger contributions to their rights from the pulpit to the polls than did white churches. Commissioner Howard knew this firsthand. When he visited Texas in September 1868, he preached to several black church congregations.⁵⁹ In Houston, he toured the streets for three hours conversing with several freedmen while waiting for the train to take him to Austin.⁶⁰ By the end of 1870, the city had seven African American congregations with 650 members. Five of these were owned by the parishioners who supported their own pastor.⁶¹ African American churches and their pastors, like Yates, encouraged social activism for African Americans in Houston.

THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE, REDEMPTION, AND RETREAT

Racism still permeated Houston. On January 20, 1868, emboldened by President Johnson's Southern sympathies and fearful of "Negro rule," a group of anti-Radical conservatives met at a convention in Houston. The delegates called on their supporters to vote against a constitutional convention that would formally readmit Texas to the Union. Convention attendees preferred military rule to the "Africanization" of Texas.⁶² The approved platform called on delegates to prevent black suffrage at all costs, even if that meant excluding the readmission of Texas to the Union.⁶³ They succeeded, as the state remained unreconstructed and did not hold elections in 1868, when Grant won the presidency. The federal government remained in control of the Lone Star State.

Upon taking office in 1869, President Grant inherited a program of reconstruction already on the downturn away from black equality, but he continued to support federal intervention in the Bayou City. The Grant presidency made an immediate impact



A FEW HARRIS COUNTY SURVIVORS OF ANTEBELLUM DAYS.
Left to Right, Name and Ages - Standing: Tony Robinson, 88; John Butler, 72; Andy Robinson; Aaron Thompson, 102; Ben Moore, 65; Rev. Cummins, 71; James Seward, 70; Henry Williams. Seated - Wash. Williams, 75; Martha Antone; Rebecca Lawrence, 80; Sam Teran, 124; Bob Holmes, 110; Mandy Harris, 93; Clara Roberts, 94; Malon Williams, 50; Viola Wallace, 50.

"A Few Harris County survivors of Antebellum Days," c. 1915.

on Houston. After inauguration day, the Houston *Tri-Weekly Telegraph* reprinted the ironclad oath required of all public officials to prove their loyalty to the Union. The paper noted that Grant planned to continue its use. The newspaper also announced Grant's reinstatement of General J. J. Reynolds, a strict Reconstructionist, as the Texas military administrator. Reynolds' criticism of Hancock for stripping troop support from the Bureau had led to his dismissal under Johnson like Sheridan, Gregory, and DeGress before him.

Until Texas obtained formal readmission to

the Union, General Reynolds, with the full support of Grant, appointed and removed officials, as he felt necessary. Reynolds' first act involving Houston called for all office holders in the state who would not take the ironclad oath of loyalty to resign by April 25, 1869, or face removal. In Houston alone, a county judge, the treasurer, and three of four justices of the peace resigned. Reynolds selected Irish-born Radical Thomas Scanlan to serve as mayor of Houston and gave four of the ten city council spots to blacks. Grant also ordered Reynolds to replace the postmaster of Houston, who had left the Houston Republican Club for the conservative Democratic camp.⁶⁴

Federal intervention was in full force in the city. With Radicals in control, African Americans made several advancements in Houston. In 1870, two freedmen became policemen, and many held city jobs. These appointments, of course, caused controversy. The Houston *Daily Times* criticized the selections saying, "Colored men raised in slavery could not manage financial affairs."⁶⁵ The paper lacked objectivity, however, as several city officials had been freedmen before the Civil War. Such federal interference four years after the war's end led to increased tensions in the city including upsetting the city's white status quo. The conservative Houston *Tri-Weekly Telegraph* suggested some Radicals "ought to die" for their support of Reconstruction.⁶⁶

To assure the state's re-entry into the Union, Republican victory, and approval of a state constitution guaranteeing freedmen's rights, Grant moved state elections back from July to the fall of 1869. He also ordered Reynolds to continue to require all voter registrants to take the ironclad oath.⁶⁷ The delay allowed Texas Republicans time to organize. With the change in election dates, the Houston *Daily Times* complained that the Radicals would keep thousands of the "wealthy, intelligent, and virtuous" whites from the polls while giving power to many who "were so recently slaves."⁶⁸

Before the election, in the summer of 1869, a convention of Unionists convened in Houston. So few Texans were willing to take the ironclad oath of loyalty that General Reynolds and J. G. Tracy,

editor of the Houston *Union*, used the convention to find men to fill the legislative positions. The convention, attended by 80 freedwomen and 150 freedmen, also affirmed the Reconstruction Acts supporting political and civil equality regardless of race.⁶⁹

Reynolds also wanted to delay the elections because he believed conditions were too dangerous, and he worried about the power of the Ku Klux Klan.⁷⁰ The Klan's activities in Texas focused on twenty counties from Houston north to the Red River. For example, in Trinity County in 1868, Klansmen murdered several freedmen, forced black registrants to enroll as Democrats, and unsettled federal officials with threats.⁷¹ Charles Howard, during his tour of Houston wrote, "Our teachers are unanimous that the military should continue another year. They say there is no justice for Negro or loyalist in a native jury."⁷² In the November elections, Reynolds took the precaution of allowing voting only at county seats so federal troops could more easily protect the electorate, and he disallowed the sale of alcohol on Election Day. These actions helped assure a safe and peaceful balloting, as troops noted few disturbances at polling places.⁷³

The delayed vote proved a success for readmission and the freedmen. With a cold winter making travel difficult, the ironclad loyalty oath, and even apathy, white voting power in Texas went from 80,000 during the restoration period of Johnson's administration to 57,000 in 1869. Most white conservatives did not bother to register or to vote. Just over half of white Texans went to the polls.⁷⁴ Despite the circumstances, 80 percent of African Americans cast their ballots. The large black turnout helped pass the new state Constitution, guaranteeing their rights and allowing Texas to gain formal readmission to the Union, while also electing Republicans to state and local offices.⁷⁵ Republicans overwhelmingly carried the state election by a vote of 44,689 to 11,440.⁷⁶

Houston voters tallied twenty to one in favor of the new Constitution and readmission, mostly because of the large freedmen turnout and low voting rates by white Democrats.⁷⁷ In this election, Houstonian Richard Allen, a former slave brought to Texas at the age of seven and the namesake of the city's Allen Parkway, became the first black elected official to the Texas House, representing Harris and Montgomery counties.⁷⁸ Though considered a moderate state, Texas appeared Radical after the elections.⁷⁹ The Republican victory also heightened white resistance towards Reconstruction.

Local Houston newspapers showed the division within the city over Reconstruction. Formerly the *Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, the new Houston *Union* converted into a staunch Republican paper and the Houston *Daily Times*, the anti-freedmen Democratic paper literally battled for headlines. No freedmen's papers circulated in the Bayou City. A Houston assistant Bureau commissioner tried unsuccessfully to get the national paper *The Colored Citizen* to establish itself in Houston.⁸⁰ The comments involving Reconstruction from the *Telegraph* sharply contrasted with those of the *Daily Times*. This dissimilarity related tensions in Houston and the state between supporters of Radical Reconstruction and those who would take any measures necessary to rid the state of federal influence. For example, Burke wrote Howard as late as 1870, "We are constantly hearing reports of the Freedmen being hung and murdered in various parts of the state."⁸¹

The Telegraph/Union endorsed the Fifteenth Amendment supporting black suffrage and noted state passage would give Texas twenty-three additional representatives in Congress. The paper

strongly endorsed the Radical cause and the election and re-election of President Grant. James G. Tracy, the owner of the *Union*, switched political affiliations after the war. His change in loyalties was similar to many who wanted power in Reconstruction governments. Tracy succeeded in 1868 when General Reynolds appointed him to the Houston City Council. From his council post, Tracy became a justice of the peace and later the registrar for Harris County.⁸²

In contrast to the *Union*, the *Daily Times* thought Grant incompetent: "In other words, Grant will be led like a donkey to grass, to stable, or wherever else his keeper chooses."⁸³ The *Daily Times* realized that Democrats did not have a friend in the White House. The day after Grant advocated black enfranchisement in his Inaugural Address, an editorial called the suffrage idea "the foulest dose ever put to the lips of the white man." The writer continued that if Grant had promoted black suffrage during the presidential campaign, Horatio Seymour, the Democratic candidate, would be president. The author believed blacks in the North wanted the South "niggerized" and finished sarcastically by wondering if Grant would try to pass the "115th Amendment." In April 1869, the *Daily Times* wrote that the historical name Reconstruction should be changed to "Destruction" of the "white Southern race, the deity of American races."⁸⁴

Due to the overt tensions of Reconstruction, Texas was the last state to gain formal readmission to the United States. On March 30, 1870, President Grant approved the act allowing Texas back into the Union. On April 16, General Reynolds gave all authority to those elected by ballot or civilly appointed.⁸⁵ Texas could now participate in the 1872 elections, its first federal vote since the 1860 election of Abraham Lincoln.

Houston's *Daily Times* openly campaigned against Grant's re-election in 1872. Though the state was readmitted to the Union, the paper wanted Reconstruction and Republican rule to end. The *Times* wrote, "Grant should retire and give the nation a rest. Four more years will make anyone ashamed they voted for Grant." It also called those who voted for Grant "traitors and deserters."⁸⁶

The Republicans held their Texas convention in Houston in June, since Harris County still contained the state's strongest area of support for Reconstruction. The forty-five delegates, thirty of whom were black, supported the Texas Constitution and civil and political rights for all males, regardless of color.⁸⁷ The convention endorsed Grant and the policies of Governor Edmund J. Davis, especially his support for public schools.⁸⁸ The delegates nominated many African Americans, who made up the majority of the party, for state and local positions. Harris County Superintendent Ed Charles addressed the convention calling the "Republican Party the only hope of the colored man."⁸⁹ That hope would soon end.

For the 1872 election, 1193 whites and 855 blacks registered to vote in Harris County.⁹⁰ Houston Mayor Thomas Scanlan (Republican) used fifty special police to prevent violence at the polls. To keep intimidation and fraud to a minimum, the Republicans chose half the police and the Democrats chose the other half. Ironically, a fight between a black Republican and black Democrat proved the only incident of violence during the election.

In Harris County, the Republicans won all but one county and one city elected position and overwhelmingly supported Grant. Houstonians also elected a full slate of local Radicals as well as two black aldermen. However, statewide the Republicans did not fair

nearly as well. Despite Republican efforts, New Yorker and presidential candidate Horace Greeley won Texas in 1872 by almost 20,000 votes out of just over 115,000 votes cast in the state. Redemption, the point at which conservative white Democrats took control of the state government, had begun, and Jim Crow would soon follow.⁹¹

Soldiers and police guarded Southern cities as Grant easily won a second term, but this marked the peak of Grant's popularity as president. Congress and the economy lessened his effectiveness in carrying out Reconstruction policy in his second term. It had been the last election of the century in which Republicans dominated Southern state politics for at least three generations.⁹²

In December 1873, Texas had its first general election since 1869. Governor Davis ran as the Republican nominee and campaigned in defense of his administration and equal rights. After much debate, the Democrats nominated Richard Coke on the fifth ballot. Coke emphasized a platform that called for an end to Reconstruction. On Election Day, Davis obtained the black vote and even won some western counties, but Coke overwhelmingly won the state 85,549 to 42,663. Democratic control of state politics took place in Texas and in every former Confederate state.

Redemption was close, but incomplete as Houston Republicans attempted to overturn the election results due to fraud and disenfranchisement of African Americans. They brought suit in the case of *Ex parte Rodriguez* or the "Semicolon Case" as it became known. The unredeemed state's Supreme Court ruled the election unconstitutional. This set up a confrontation between the lame-duck Davis and the newly elected Coke. Due to the court ruling, Davis, protected by black militiamen, refused to step down. His only chance to avoid the state's redemption was for federal authorities to intervene. Though Grant had interceded in state controversies before, he refused to send forces to Texas and Davis reluctantly resigned. During the governor's inauguration in January 1874, the Democrats staged a military celebration at the state Capitol firing a 102-gun salute for Coke and marking a symbolic end to Reconstruction in Texas.⁹³

Texas' redemption came to full fruition when the legislature met and the Democrats succeeded in dominating state offices.⁹⁴ Redemption snowballed in the South; in fact, Georgia had already gone to the Democrats in 1870. Others states were soon "redeemed"—Texas, Arkansas, and Alabama in 1874, North Carolina in 1875, and Mississippi in 1876.⁹⁵ Redemption became

complete in 1877 with the Hayes-Tilden Compromise that gave Rutherford B. Hayes the Executive Office in return for the withdrawal of troops from Louisiana, Florida, and South Carolina.

Between 1874 and 1900 the gains that African Americans had made during Reconstruction were virtually lost as Jim Crow became the norm in the South, Texas, and Houston.⁹⁶ Coke's triumph marked a strong and lasting reaction to Republican Reconstruction in Texas. Democrats controlled the state government for the next century. Another Republican would not hold the governorship of Texas until William P. Clements' election over a century later. George W. Bush served as only the second Republican governor of Texas since Reconstruction. It would take 128 years before the Republican Party would again control both houses of the Texas legislature.⁹⁷

For more than a century, Civil War buffs and many teachers in the Houston area presented the Civil War from a "lost cause" perspective. This view of history teaches that the Civil War was really a "War of Northern Aggression" about state's rights, not slavery, and Reconstruction was a time when corrupt "Carpetbaggers" foisted black control on the defeated South. This view helped the party of redemption, the Democrats, maintain tight control of southern politics well into the 1970s, and it became historical justification for segregation of the races and limits on the voting rights and civil rights of blacks.

Yet underneath the political tensions of Reconstruction was another story, the story of the nation's first efforts to address the human and societal costs of more than two centuries of slavery. The reality of four million freed slaves in 1865 cried out for a systematic national effort to provide education and opportunities historically missing under slavery. The gains for freedmen from self help and the Freedmen's Bureau during Reconstruction were real, although they represented only small first steps toward the fuller integration of former slaves into American society as free citizens. Looking back at the case study of Houston with the perspective of 140 years, Reconstruction was a time of lost opportunities. Underneath the extreme political rhetoric and tension generated by competing views of Reconstruction and race, the "redeemed" city—and the South as a whole—turned away from an obligation to address the needs of formerly enslaved migrants who had embarked on a most difficult journey toward freedom. ■



In July 1872, Houston's black community, led by Rev. Jack Yates (shown right), purchased ten acres of land that would become Emancipation Park located at Elgin and Dowling Streets. This mural, created by artist Rickey Donato and children at Emancipation Park in 2001, adorns a wall of the park's community center.