African Americans and Women in the Post-Civil War Era

(Adapted from Discovery Techbook)

The Civil War changed life for most Americans. When the war ended, some hoped to return to the way things were before the war. Others hoped that the Thirteen Amendment would definitely end slavery. African Americans and women wanted a chance to begin a better life. For African Americans and women achieving these dreams would take many more decades.

Slavery Continues by Other Names

Though slavery was officially over after the Civil War, the legacy of slavery continued. Many hundreds of thousands of former slaves in the South still were not able to have an equal place in society after the war.

During the war, hundreds of thousands of men had been killed. This meant that fewer people were available for all of the jobs in the nation. The South was very dependent on farming. It still needed field workers to tend the crops. Also, its industry needed coal and factory workers. After the war, some employers were too poor to hire workers. Many didn’t want to make the change from slavery to paid labor. Instead, it became common to use the forced labor of convicts.

The convicts were usually African Americans. White Southerners created new laws to incarcerate African Americans. These laws, called black codes, made it very difficult for African Americans to legally live and work in the Southern states. For example, a man could be arrested for vagrancy, if he could not show that he had a home and a job. Then he would have to pay a fine which he couldn’t pay. Southern state and county governments developed a corrupt system in which local employers would pay a convict’s fines in exchange for the person’s labor. So, the man would be sent to a plantation or factory to work to pay off the debt. In effect, the man would become a slave. This was peonage, or debt slavery. Congress declared this practice illegal in 1867, but it continued in parts of the country through the 1940s.

Green Cottonham was one such person who got caught in the peonage trap. He was the child of former slaves and he was free. In 1908, he was arrested for vagrancy at a train station. When the sheriff took him before a judge, they couldn’t remember why he was arrested. He was convicted of a different crime. Then he was sold as a debt slave to a coal mine. He died several months later, among many others suffering from disease, malnutrition, and dangerous working conditions.

Many white southerners and some in the north continued discriminating against African Americans for many decades. Some states created laws that allowed segregation and harsh treatment for African Americans.
Women’s Roles

The shortage of workers during and after the war affected women, too, in both the North and the South. With so many men on the battlefield during the war, women began to take on functions that had traditionally belonged to men. They served behind the lines in the war. Back at home, they ran farms and businesses. Many lost husbands and fathers in the war and also lost the income those men contributed to their families.

After the war, many people expected society to go back to the old ways. They expected that women would go back to being at home, caring for the children, and running the household. They considered it “unfeminine” for women to engage in politics or to work outside the home. But many women had become independent after the war. They wanted recognition as co-equals in the nation.

One right women wanted was suffrage. A suffragist was a person who worked toward making voting legal, and at this time that usually meant “legal for women.” Most suffragists were women, but some suffragists were men who agreed that women should have the right to vote.

From before the Civil War, only white men could vote. The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution meant that a man (white or African American) had the legal right to vote. Many obstacles prevented African American men from voting. Women only obtained the right to vote in 1920 when Congress approved the Nineteenth Amendment.