Black Leaders During Reconstruction

One of the most important aspects of Reconstruction was the active participation of African Americans (including thousands of former slaves) in the political, economic and social life of the South. The era was to a great extent defined by their quest for autonomy and equal rights under the law, both as individuals and for the black community as a whole. During Reconstruction, some 2,000 African Americans held public office, from the local level all the way up to the U.S. Senate, though they never achieved representation in government proportionate to their numbers.

Rise of Black Activism

Before the Civil War began, African Americans had only been able to vote in a few northern states, and there were virtually no black officeholders. The months after the Union victory in April 1865 saw extensive mobilization within the black community, with meetings, parades and petitions calling for legal and political rights, including the all-important right to vote. During the first two years of Reconstruction, blacks organized Equal Rights Leagues throughout the South and held state and local conventions to protest discriminatory treatment and demand suffrage, as well as equality before the law.

Did you know? In 1967, almost a century after Hiram Revels and Blanche Bruce served in the U.S. Senate during Reconstruction, Edward Brooke of Massachusetts became the first African American senator elected by popular vote.

These African American activists bitterly opposed the Reconstruction policies of President Andrew Johnson, which excluded blacks from southern politics and allowed state legislatures to pass restrictive “black codes” regulating the lives of the freed men and women. Fierce resistance to these discriminatory laws, as well as growing opposition to Johnson’s policies in the North, led to a Republican victory in the U.S. congressional elections of 1866 and to a new phase of Reconstruction that would give African Americans a more active role in the political, economic and social life of the South.

A Radical Change

During the decade known as Radical Reconstruction (1867-77), Congress granted African American men the status and rights of citizenship, including the right to vote, as guaranteed by the 14th and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Beginning in 1867, branches of the Union League, which encouraged the political activism of African Americans, spread throughout the South. During the state constitutional conventions held in 1867-69, blacks and white Americans stood side by side for the first time in political life.

Blacks made up the overwhelming majority of southern Republican voters, forming a coalition with “carpetbaggers” and “scalawags” (derogatory terms referring to recent arrivals from the North and southern white Republicans, respectively). A total of 265 African-American delegates were elected, more than 100 of whom had been born into slavery. Almost half of the elected black delegates served in South Carolina and Louisiana, where blacks had the longest history of political organization; in most other states, African Americans were underrepresented compared to their
population. In all, 16 African Americans served in the U.S. Congress during Reconstruction; more than 600 more were elected to the state legislatures, and hundreds more held local offices across the South.

**Background & Risk of Leadership**

Many black leaders during Reconstruction had gained their freedom before the Civil War (by self-purchase or through the will of a deceased owner), had worked as skilled slave artisans or had served in the Union Army. A large number of black political leaders came from the church, having worked as ministers during slavery or in the early years of Reconstruction, when the church served as the center of the black community. Hiram Revels, the first African American elected to the U.S. Senate (he took the Senate seat from Mississippi that had been vacated by Jefferson Davis in 1861) was born free in North Carolina and attended college in Illinois. He worked as a preacher in the Midwest in the 1850s and as a chaplain to a black regiment in the Union Army before going to Mississippi in 1865 to work for the Freedmen’s Bureau. Blanche K. Bruce, elected to the Senate in 1875 from Mississippi, had lived a privileged life as a slave and also received some education. The background of these men was typical of the leaders that emerged during Reconstruction, but differed greatly from that of the majority of the African American population.

As the most radical aspect of the so-called Radical Reconstruction period, the political activism of the African American community also inspired the most hostility from Reconstruction’s opponents. Southern whites frustrated with policies giving former slaves the right to vote and hold office increasingly turned to intimidation and violence as a means of reaffirming white supremacy. The Ku Klux Klan targeted local Republican leaders and blacks who challenged their white employers, and at least 35 black officials were murdered by the Klan and other white supremacist organizations during the Reconstruction era.