

Inquiry Activity: Were Black women free during Reconstruction?

In this inquiry students will examine two contrasting accounts and form their own conclusions.

Below are differing documents about women's lives during Reconstruction.

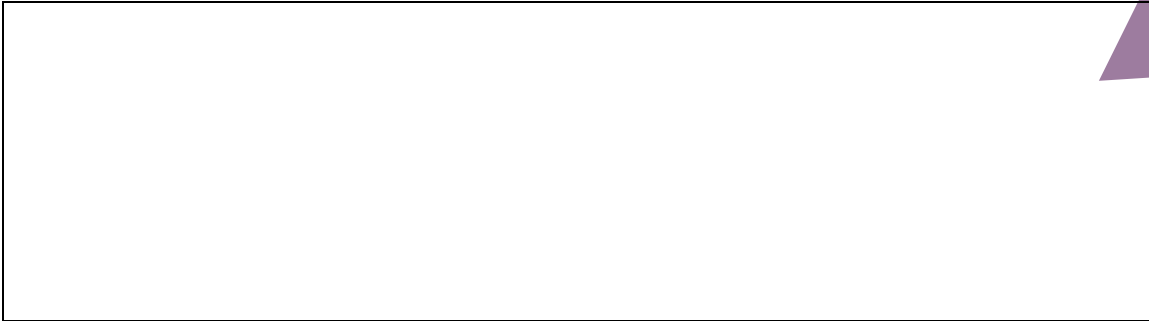
1. As you read, record sentences or ideas that show they were or were not free in the middle columns.
2. After you finish the two middle columns, look back at the evidence. Which information is most persuasive to you? Mark that #8. Which evidence is least persuasive to you? Mark that #1.

<i>Rank</i>	Evidence they were free	Evidence they were NOT free	<i>Rank</i>



Questions for Analysis

1. Add up the rank on each side. Which side weighed more? Why do you think it worked out that way?



2. In conclusion, were Black women free during Reconstruction?



Background:

Since slavery was a varied and dynamic system of oppression, and perhaps no two slave experiences were alike, so too was rehabilitation and reconstruction, and the coming of freedom had to meet a wide range of needs. To combat the challenges and dangers of everyday life faced by the formerly enslaved, the federal government created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (most often called, simply, the Freedmen's Bureau) in March 1865. The Bureau supplied food, helped build schools and homes, and also served as a quasi-police force scattered throughout the southern states. And since it was a federal agency, it yielded an immense amount of archival documentation largely in the form of letters written by officers for the newly freed population and reports written by officers assessing Reconstruction in each state and each region including the Virginia's Valley...

From its beginning, the Bureau was entrenched in ideals of free labor, an antebellum philosophy rooted in the inherent moral uplift of work and the chance of self-fulfillment and social mobility through work and working for wages through contractual obligations. Executing these ideals proved very difficult. Officers, who numbered only in the hundreds in the entire south, were housed in a small buildings with a desk, a bed, and stove, and saw a nearly-constant line of Blacks and whites knock on the door and ask for assistance. Black women in the Valley asked for help to find food and shelter, the basic necessities. But these largely illiterate women, most of whom were mothers, sought information on their children, protection from former masters, and legal justice centered on wage denial and other forms of exploitation. Women of color, then, began fighting for their lives and families in any way they could.

In many areas of the South, and in the Valley, African American women were forced to deal with living with their former masters for work, shelter, and support in whatever ways they could find it. One other challenge for them was to be the brunt of a former master's or mistress's anger over the struggles they were having after the Civil War. White owners found themselves destitute, homeless, traumatized by death, and now, so they felt, forced into a position of giving relief to their former slaves at the direction of an occupying northern army and ideological presence. This anger and resentment found its way into the lives of African Americans, especially African



Figure 1: Nast, Thomas, Artist. The Union as it was The lost cause, worse than slavery // Th. Nast , 1874. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2001696840/>.



American women, who were more likely to depend on the welfare of their former masters for the basic necessities of life because of being the sole providers for their children. The tragic cases of abuse at the hands of master and mistress are numerous and found often in the Freedmen's Bureau letters and reports.

African American women must have traveled for many miles on landscapes they knew nothing about to try seek some kind of recourse for abuse, and to gain money due to them or a safe haven for their families. Laura Scott, an African American woman owned by Robert Garrett, senior on the Greenway Plantation in King William County, Virginia complained that Garrett, Jr., beat her, refused to support her and her five children, who, she claimed, were fathered by Garrett. Laura also reported that the elder Garrett "left his entire estate to the colored people living on it" and the younger Garrett, unsurprisingly, denied this claim.³ Not only then, did African American mothers have to worry about supporting their children after freedom, but they were forced to deal with their children as illegitimate products as slavery. Masters, and now, former masters felt no obligation to the children with women left with no legal foundation on which to stand for protection. Maria Barnett of New Kent County filed a complaint about Isiah Higgins because he promised to pay her, but "kept her till the crop was secured and turned her off, beating her severely"⁴ In July 1866, Julia Reynolds presented her case to Provost Marshal Cook in Staunton, Virginia stating that Susan Alexander owed Julia forty-five dollars for labor stretching from April 1865 to March 1866.⁵ The date of when her labor began is telling: she insisted on begin paid the same month the Civil War and slavery ended. That Julia waited a year to file this complaint is intriguing, but perhaps Alexander could not pay her and kept promising her she would get paid.

In a complaint filed in August 1865, Sally Jackson visited P.S. Evans, a Bureau officer to try seek justice and probably protection from John Taylor of King William County who "promised to feed and clothe her and her three children till Christmas." According to Sally, Taylor "with no provocation beat her very severely and drove her and her little ones away paying her nothing and threatening to shoot her if she returned".⁶ Black women found themselves in a convoluted web of expectations and realities that left them focused on food, shelter, and protection for themselves and their children, but left them forced to deal with labels of dependency, laziness, "sassiness", and situations involving beatings and rape. The sacrifices that African American women made during slavery for their children did not simply vanish after the war; in many ways the challenges of womanhood and motherhood and merging of the two were only now beginning.

The first desire for African American women was to reunite, if possible, with their families, and their hopes are reflected often in the letters of the Freedmen's Bureau. In November 1866, Mary Robinson of Winchester, Virginia visited the local Freedmen's Bureau office to inquire about her two sons, George and Shirley, 16 and 11 years old, both of who were sold in Richmond in 1862. Mary asked that an advertisement be placed in a local Richmond paper with "the largest southern circulation" for any word of her children.⁷ African American newspapers assisted with this effort for years after emancipation, which must have been a daunting task. These women, as chattel with no rights to their own children, are left with relying on strangers, extended family, newspapers, and word of mouth to find their families. Trying to communicate with displaced family members must have also severely limited the free woman of color the opportunity to travel to find shelter and work since her movement would jeopardize her



chances of a loved one who may have been returning to find her. Her reluctance to move contributed to the false idea that African American women refused to migrate to find work and were lazy and insubordinate.

Denkler, Ann. "African-American Women in Reconstruction in the Shenandoah Valley." Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos. Last modified April 8, 2014. <http://journals.openedition.org/nuevomundo/66621>.

Document A: Mary Ames' Diary

Mary Ames was a northern white woman who traveled to the south to help educate formerly enslaved people, specifically children. This excerpt comes from her diary.

The school was in a building once used as a biller room, which accommodated a large number of peoples. We often had 120, and word went forth that supplies had come, the number increased. Indeed, it was so crowded that we told the men and women they must stay away to leave space for the children, as we considered teaching them more important...

When we made out the school report to send to Boston, we were surprised that out of the hundred, only three children knew their age, nor had they the slightest idea of it; one large boy told me he was "three months old." The next day many of them brought pieces of wood or bits of paper with straight marks made on them to show how many years they had lived. One boy brought a family record written in a small book...

In January smallpox brought out among the shoulders quarantined on our place... When... we began school again, we had 13 pupils. One of them, when asked if there was any smallpox at her plantation, answered, no, the last one died Saturday." On the third day one hundred children had come back.

Ames, Mary. A New England Woman's Diary in Dixie in 1865. Springfield, 1906. Retrieved from Cheryl Edwards, Ed. Reconstruction: Binding the Wounds. Massachusetts: Discovery Enterprises, Ltd, 1995.

Document B: Frances Butler Leigh's Letter

Leigh was a white woman from the South who opposed the Federal Governments Reconstruction policies, especially when the Radical Republicans imposed military governments in Southern states until those states rewrote and reformed their constitutions. Leigh wrote about her frustrations with the military governments in this letter.

We are, I am afraid, going to have terrible trouble by-and-by with the Negroes, and I see nothing but gloomy prospects for us ahead. The unlimited power the war has put into the hands of the present government at Washington seems to have turned the



Figure 2: Taylor, James E., Artist. The Misses Cooke's school room, Freedman's Bureau, Richmond, Va. / from a sketch by Jas. E. Taylor. , 1866. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/98510871/>.



heads of the party now in office, and they don't know where to stop. The whole south is settled and quiet, and the people to ruined and crushed to do anything against the government, even if they felt so inclined, and all are returning to their former peaceful pursuits, trying to rebuild their fortunes and thinking of nothing else. Yet the treatment we receive from the government becomes more and more severe every day the last acting to divide the south and to five military districts putting each under the command of the United States general, doing away with civil courts and law.

Leigh, Frances Butler. Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation After the War. London: R. Bentley and Son, 1883. Retrieved from Cheryl Edwards, Ed. Reconstruction: Binding the Wounds. Massachusetts: Discovery Enterprises, Ltd, 1995.

Document C: Belle Kearney's Account

Kearney was the daughter of a white slave owner. She observed the practicality of Reconstruction first hand.

As soon as father was physically strong enough to perform the trying duty, he went to the negro quarters on his plantation, assembled his slaves, and announced to them that they were free. There was no wild shout of joy or other demonstration of gladness. The deepest gloom prevailed in their ranks and an expression of mournful bewilderment settled upon their dusky faces. They did not understand that strange, sweet word – freedom. Poor things!... They were stunned. What were they to do? Where would they go? What would become of them? Who would feed and clothe them, and care for them in sickness, when they went out from the “marster” free?

Noticing their consternation and dumb sorrow, father told them that they might stay and work for him as hired hands. Some of them did, but the majority drifted away and finally all... In the midst of the social and financial convulsions that surrounded us in those sad days, father stood facing the ruin about him with right hand hopelessly injured and depressed continually by a frail constitution.

Kearney, Belle. A Slaveholder's Daughter. New York: The Abbey Press, 1900. Retrieved from Cheryl Edwards, Ed. Reconstruction: Binding the Wounds. Massachusetts: Discovery Enterprises, Ltd, 1995.

Document D: A formerly enslaved girl's story

In this excerpt, she describes an interaction she had with a Union soldier. The misspellings are original to reveal her dialect.

One time some Yankee soldiers stopped and started talking to me – they asked me what my name was. I say Liza, and they say, “Liza who?” I thought a minute and I shook my head. “Jest Liza, I ain't got no other name.” He say, “Who live up yonder in dat Big House?” I say, “Mr. John Mixon.” He say, “You are Liza Mixon.” He say, “Do anybody ever call you nigger?” And I say, “Yes Sir.” He say, “Next time anybody call you nigger you tell 'em dat you is a Negro and your name is Miss Liza Mixon.” The more I thought of that the more I liked it and I made up my mind to do jest what he told me to. . . . One evening I was minding the calves and old Master come along. He say, “What you doin' nigger?” I say real pert like, “I ain't no nigger, I'se a Negro and I'm Miss Liza Mixon.” Old Master sho' was surprised and he picks up a switch and starts at me. Law, but I was skeered! I hadn't never had no whipping so I run fast as I can to



Grandma Gracie. I hid behind her . . . 'bout that time Master John got there. He say, "Gracie, dat little nigger sassed me." She say, "Lawsie child, what does ail you?" I told them what the Yankee soldier told me to say and Grandma Gracie took my dress and lift it over my head and pins my hands inside, and Lawsie, how she whipped me . . . I jest said dat to de wrong person.

Excerpted from William E. Gienapp, ed., The Civil War and Reconstruction: A Documentary Collection (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 234. Retrieved from https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/publications/The_Reconstruction_Era_and_the_Fragility_of_Democracy_1.pdf.

Document E: Elias Hall Testimony

Hall testified at a Senate hearing on terrorist activity he witnessed at his house conducted by Ku Klux Klan member in masked disguises. He described how they ravaged and burned homes of Black people before arriving at his brother's house.

On the night of the 5th of last May, after I heard a great deal of what they had done in that neighborhood, they came... they came in a very rapid manner, and I could hardly tell whether it was the sound of horses or men. At last they came to my brothers door, which is in the same yard, and broke open the door and attacked his wife, and I heard her screaming and moaning. I could not understand what they said, for they were talking in an outlandish in our natural tone, which I had heard they generally used at a Negroes house. I heard them knocking around at her house. I was lying in my little cabin in the yard. That last I heard them have her in the yard. She was crying, and the Ku Klux Klan were whipping her to make her tell where I lived. I heard her say "Jan is her house." She has told me since that they first asked who had taken me out of her house. They said, "Where is Elias?" She said "He doesn't stay here; Yon is his house." They were then in the yard, and I had heard them strike her five or six licks when I heard her say this. Someone hit my door. It flew open. One ran in the house and stop being about the middle of the house, which is a small cabin, he turned around as it seemed to me as I lay there, awake, and said "Who's here?" Then I knew they would take me, and I answered "I am here." He shouted for joy, as it seemed, "Here he is! Here he is! We have found him!" and he threw the bed clothes off of me and caught me by one arm, while another man took me by the other and they carried me into the yard between the houses, my brothers and mine, and put me on the ground beside a boy. The first thing they asked me was, who did that burning? Who burned your houses?" Gin houses, dwelling houses and such. Some have been burned in the neighborhood. I told them it was not me; I could not burn houses; it was unreasonable to ask me. Then they hit me with their fists, and I said I did it, I ordered it.... They pointed pistols at me... I hoped they would not kill me... One of them took a strap and buckled it around my neck and said, "let's take him down to the river and drowned him." ...With that one of them went into the house where my brother and my sister-in-law lived, and brought her to pick me up. As she stooped down to pick me up one of them struck her, and as she was carrying me into the house another struck her with a strap. She carried me into the house and laid me on the bed.

Van Noppen, Ina Woestemeyer. The South: A Documentary History. Princeton: D. Van Norstrand Company, 1958. From "A Report of the Joint Committee to Inquire into the



Conditions of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States. Washington, 1872, vol III.
Retrieved from Cheryl Edwards, Ed. *Reconstruction: Binding the Wounds.*
Massachusetts: Discovery Enterprises, Ltd, 1995.

Document F: Laura Nelson

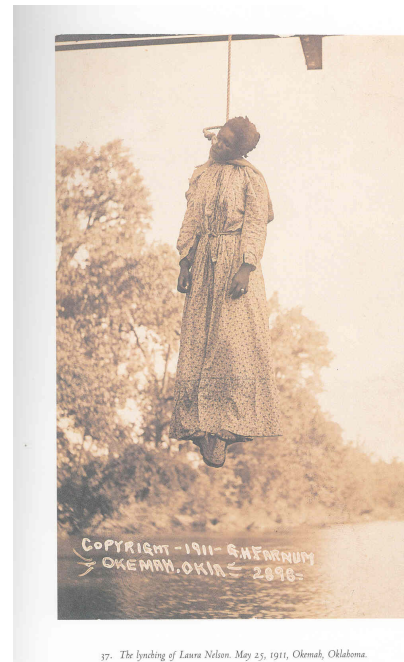
The following postcard was produced by white supremacists to demonstrate southern justice.

On May 25, 1911, Laura Nelson and her son L.D. Nelson were lynched from a bridge over the North Canadian River due to allegations that L.D. Nelson shot and killed George H. Loney, who was Okemah's deputy sheriff. This killing transpired after the deputy sheriff and a mob of individuals showed up at the Nelson household and accused Laura Nelson's husband, Austin Nelson, of stealing a cow. Although it is not documented who fired the shot that killed the deputy, it is said that he was shot in self-defense. It is also said that Laura grabbed the gun first and L.D. fired the shot, but there is no record of what actually transpired. Following this incident, Austin, Laura, and L.D. Nelson were taken into custody. Laura and L.D. were charged with murder and awaited trial in the Okemah county jail. Austin pleaded guilty to larceny and was sent to the state prison in McAlester for three years.

According to the police officer, W.L. Payne, who was guarding the cells, a lynch mob of approximately forty white men, tied, bound, and gagged him at gun point. After doing this, they proceeded to kidnap Laura and L.D. Nelson. Although it is presumed that Laura had a baby with her during her stay in jail and lynching, there are no records indicating the existence and or survival of the child. After their kidnapping on May 24, the press reported that Laura was raped and then hung along with her thirteen-year-old son L.D. from the Old Schoolton Bridge that ran over the North Canadian River.

Following the event, sightseers gathered to take photos with the hanging bodies. Although a grand jury was convened, Laura and L.D.'s killers were not identified or charged. Despite the fact that there is no exact recounting of the specific details of the events, it is evident that two African American individuals were denied rights of punishment by law and deemed to be deserving of death rather than fair judicial sentencing.

The postcard is one of the few visual records of the lynching of a woman. Aside from the postcard, Laura and her family are memorialized through the works of Woody Guthrie and Andrew Hardaway. Guthrie produced a song entitled, "Don't Kill My Baby and My Son," and Hardaway wrote a two-act play, *Falling Eve*, inspired by the Nelson lynching.



17. The lynching of Laura Nelson. May 25, 1911, Okemah, Oklahoma.

Ventura, Patricia and Clio Admin. "Lynching of Laura and L.D. Nelson." *Clio: Your Guide to History*. January 29, 2018. Accessed March 23, 2021.
<https://www.theclio.com/entry/22734>

