

FREEMEN AND FREEWOMEN

- Before the Civil War and the official end of slavery in the United States, enslaved African Americans might gain their freedom by escaping (usually via the Underground Railroad), earning money to purchase themselves, or by a writ of manumission from their masters.
- Their experiences range from the exhilaration of newfound freedom to uncertainty about their future.
- To read the statements of those who gained their freedom by one of these means, click on the this link: <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/identity/text2/text2read.htm>

- On January 16, 1865, following his successful "March to the Sea," General Sherman issued Special Field Order No. 15. The order reserved "the islands of Charleston south, the abandoned rice fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea, and the country bordering St. Johns River, Florida . . . for the settlement of Negroes now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States." It further offered the freed men and women assistance "to enable them to establish a peaceable agricultural settlement."
- Sherman handed out a title to the head of each applying family for a 40-acre plot and ordered that horses and mules no longer fit for military service be given to each applying family.
- By mid-1865, 400,000 acres had been distributed to 40,000 freemen and their families.
- Following the end of the war, decisions had to be made regarding the lives of former slaves, the repair of the war torn South, and the return to the cultivation of the land.
- To read a discussion of the transformation from slavery to sharecropping, click on this link: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/sharecrop/sf_economy.html
- The Freedmen' Bureau, which operated from June 1865 to December 1868, operated under the auspices of the Department of War to assist former slaves and war refugees to adjust to the post-war realities and to help them understand their new rights and freedoms.
- The Freedmen's Bureau also had responsibility to supervise land abandoned or confiscated during or after the war, assigning plots to freedmen.
- After pardoned former landowners pressured President Andrew Johnson to return to them the land given over to freedmen, the President rescinded all titles distributed by the Freedmen's Bureau in favor of the former owners, and Congress removed the bureau's authority to redistribute land to former slaves.
- Some in the government suggested moving the freedmen to the West and invoking the Homestead Act of 1862 which guaranteed 160 acre to anyone who resided on and worked the land for at least five years.
- For the details of the Homestead Act of 1862, click on http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED472106&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accn_o=ED472106

- President Andrew Johnson vetoed every proposal to provide freemen with free land.
- The Southern Homestead Act made 160-acre plots in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi available to both freedmen and whites at low prices though very few could afford even a low rate.
- Congress repealed the Southern Homestead Act in June of 1876.
- Two years after the withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1877, Benjamin "Pap" Singleton encouraged the mass exodus of over 50,000 freedmen to Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana in response to the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, newly enacted segregation laws, and general racial discrimination. (They were called the Exodusters.)
- To read more about Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, click on http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/s_z/singleton.htm

- The households of most freedmen and freedwomen consisted of a father, a mother, and their children.
- The work done by the women versus that done by the men generally mirrored the gender roles of white working families of the time. Women cooked, washed and mended clothes, and attended to the maintenance of the home and rearing of children. Men provided sustenance and protection for their families.
- For more information on the lives of freed women, click on <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer/slave-women.html>