Emancipation and Suffrage in Mississippi

by

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I. Introduction

Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, declared all slaves in rebelling states to be free. Slaves in Union-controlled territory and those that could escape to Union lines gained their freedom, while others were forced to wait for the eventual Confederate defeat. The end of the war began a period of Reconstruction, during which three amendments were added to the U.S. Constitution. The 13th Amendment (1865) officially abolished slavery in the United States, and it was soon followed by the 14th (1868) which sought to ensure equal rights and protection of the law to freedmen. The 15th Amendment, which prevented states from denying the right to vote based on race, was the last to be ratified in 1870.

Mississippi was forced to accept the Reconstruction Amendments imposed by the United States government under Republican control. Freedmen, who could now vote, held a majority in the state, and Mississippi Democrats’ failure to win their support resulted in Republican rule in the state until 1875. Democrats felt that the black-elected Republicans were not capable of good government and began to use voter fraud and intimidation to regain control of the state. The Revolution of 1875 saw the overthrow of the Republican Party and Reconstruction in Mississippi. Democrats portrayed the Republican Party as the black party and urged whites to vote along color lines. Once in power, however, Redeemer Democrats manipulated the race issue, especially in counties with a majority of black voters, where they formed fusion tickets with Republicans to gain their vote. Poor whites discontented with the Redeemers’ conservative policies resented Redeemers’ cynical manipulation of the race issue to maintain power. Poor whites advocated disfranchisement, but threat of federal intervention required that it be accomplished without violating the 15th Amendment. The controversy led to the calling of a constitutional convention in 1890. The new constitution adopted poll tax and literacy
requirements to vote. Despite a loophole for white illiterates, the understanding clause, new
voting requirements disfranchised many poor whites as well as almost all blacks.

Emancipation and black suffrage led to Republican rule in Reconstruction Mississippi,
but color line politics doomed it. Republican rule was overthrown in 1875 with the first
Mississippi Plan, which included such tactics as intimidation, violence, and fraud. Research will
focus on the role of race in Redeemer-era politics and how it ultimately led to disfranchisement.
II. Literature Review

My research has focused primarily on the shifts in political power at various points following emancipation; primarily the rise and fall of the Republican Party in Mississippi and the ultimate disenfranchisement of black voters in the state. These events are essential to understanding the changing political status of the state following emancipation.

Ruth B. Hawes’s “Slavery in Mississippi” provides insight into antebellum white attitudes toward slavery and helps to explain the difficulties of emancipation. The idea of black inferiority had always been enough of a justification for slavery in Mississippi. Once the abolitionist movement began to grow, Mississippians argued that slavery was the cornerstone of the state’s economy and essential to the nation. Abolitionists’ attacks on the morality of slavery forced Mississippians to defend slavery on Biblical grounds. A better understanding of the difficulties of emancipation can be gained by examining the changing attitudes toward slavery in Antebellum Mississippi.¹

_The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1890_ by Vernon Lane Wharton provides an excellent launching point for research into post-emancipation race relations. Wharton extensively surveys the history of blacks in Mississippi from emancipation to disfranchisement. He describes the period as one of “violent flux and change.” Despite white efforts to maintain as much of the antebellum order as possible, Republican control of the federal government led to a brief period of political equality in which blacks voted and held office. By 1875, however they had been “abandoned by their political sponsors,” and white Democrats overthrew Republican rule in

Mississippi. In 1890, disfranchisement “marked the completion of the transition from slavery to caste as a method of social control.”

In *The Facts of Reconstruction* John R. Lynch gives his account of the period from the early days of Reconstruction to the fall of the Republican Party. This source is of particular interest because Lynch was a black politician who was well-respected by whites and blacks alike in Mississippi during this time. He details the events of the period from the point of view of someone who was actually present. Of particular interest is his account of the fall of the Republican Party in Mississippi and the fear of “Negro Domination.” This fear arose when freedmen became the deciding vote when whites collided on an issue. White Republican candidates elected prior to the overthrow were typically from more elite families, who, unlike poor whites, still had a somewhat friendly relationship with the freedmen. Lynch also disputes the claim that the state government under Reconstruction was ineffective and corrupt. His eyewitness account of the various political contests in the state during this time should be useful in my research.

The Constitution of 1890 and the *Journal* of the convention that adopted it are important sources. The suffrage sections of the Constitution reveal how instruments of disfranchisement actually worked. Sections 243 and 244 required electors to pay a two-dollar poll tax and to be able to pass a literacy test, though an understanding clause was included as a loophole for illiterate whites. The *Journal* explains the rationale for disfranchisement and why the poll tax and literacy test were finally chosen. President of the Convention Judge S.S. Calhoun declared that rule under black suffrage resulted in “economic and moral ruin,” while rule by whites had

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always meant “prosperity and happiness for all races.” Solving the problem, he argued, would require election laws that did not oppress but were beneficial for both races.\footnote{Journal of the Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Mississippi, (Jackson, MS:1890), 9-10.}

Frank Johnston’s “Suffrage and Reconstruction in Mississippi” in the \textit{Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society} provides another overview of the entire reconstruction process in Mississippi, with special emphasis on suffrage and disfranchisement. It differs from some of the other sources on Reconstruction in that it provides a better look at what was happening nationally. Johnston details the passage of the new constitution in 1890 and Republican objections to it, particularly criticisms of the voting requirements. Mississippi Senator J.Z. George defended the poll tax and literacy requirements before the Senate. Johnston describes George’s reasoning as “unanswerable.” He argued that the objectives of the voting requirements were not racial, but the well-being of the state.\footnote{Frank Johnston, “Suffrage and Reconstruction in Mississippi,” \textit{Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society} 11, (January 1902), 231-38, https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=Tfo7AAAAIAAJ (accessed May 6, 2015).}

Another text dealing with suffrage in Mississippi is “The Disenfranchisement of the Negro in Mississippi” by William Alexander Mabry. It traces the events leading up to the calling of a constitutional convention, including the possibility of the Force Bill being passed in Congress. For this and other reasons, Mississippi Democrats began to realize that they must legitimize their method of maintaining power. Mabry also discusses the differing views of disfranchisement among Democrats. Counties with a white majority feared that election requirements might hinder poor whites as well as blacks from voting. Counties with a black majority were willing to sacrifice some of the white vote in order to eliminate most of the black
vote. Mabry sheds light on the tension that black suffrage caused within the Democratic Party during this debate.

In 1902, just twelve years after the adoption of the state constitution, Dunbar J. Rowland delivered his “A Mississippi View of Race Relations” speech at the University of Mississippi. It displays the same attitude toward disfranchisement as those of many of the politicians who enacted the constitution and seems to reflect the prevailing mentality among whites in Mississippi during this era. Rowland discusses the hardships imposed on the South by the North during Reconstruction through black suffrage. He claims that the freedmen voted against good government at the will of carpetbaggers. He goes on to portray Mississippi as fair to blacks since their disenfranchisement, especially in industry. He implies that they are better off under a government chosen by whites.

“Climax and Collapse of Reconstruction in Mississippi” by Josh McNeily describes the fall of Reconstruction government between 1874 and 1876. He skillfully details events throughout Mississippi during these years. Conditions in many parts of the state were violent as Democrats fought to regain control. McNeily documents the efforts by Republican Governor Adelbert Ames and his administration to combat intimidation and violence against Republican, especially black, voters. From all parts of the state Ames received letters that shed light on the violent conditions during the 1875 election campaign.

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Stephen Cresswell’s *Multiparty Politics in Mississippi, 1877-1902* documents opposition to the one-party system that followed the overthrow of Republican rule. Agrarian discontent toward Democrats led to competition from Republicans and independents at the local level. Cresswell argues that these dissenters played an active role in shaping the state’s politics. He examines the role of fusion politics and corrects the misconception that all whites wanted to disfranchise black voters. 11

These and other sources should help to describe and explain the complex political developments that followed in the wake of emancipation in Mississippi.

III. Methodology

My research will focus on the role of black suffrage in the political order of the state following emancipation. Emancipation created an interesting situation that would put freedmen’s rights to the test. Does equality necessarily follow freedom for blacks? What role would the freedmen play in this new political order? What efforts were made to combat or control black suffrage to maintain the antebellum order? These questions were raised by emancipation, and I plan to answer them through my research.

My method of research will be analyzing and critiquing primary and secondary sources. Research will be divided into the following four topics or chapters: background, Reconstruction government, revolution of 1875, and disfranchisement.

The first section will provide a brief background of slavery in Mississippi and events leading up to the Civil War. I will be dealing with texts that provide insight into the conditions of slavery, whites’ attitudes toward slavery, and the Emancipation Proclamation. The goal of this section is to demonstrate the importance of slavery in Mississippi and why the battle to abolish it was so challenging.

The next section will deal with the Reconstruction government following the war. With the freedmen given the right to vote, the Republican Party would take over the state. In this section, I will analyze the shift in power and its results. This section will give an idea of attitudes toward Republican rule and black suffrage. I plan to show how some whites in the state used the black vote to their advantage, while others failed or never attempted to vote alongside freedmen.
The third section of my research will cover the end of Reconstruction in the state and the overthrow of the Republican government. This chapter will focus on the “white line” that was drawn, which illustrates that color became the primary factor in deciding for which party to vote. Whites began abandoning the Republican Party to maintain white control. Democrats began to use any means necessary—violence, voter intimidation, and fraud—to limit black suffrage. This section will highlight the deteriorating race relations within the state during this time. It will also show the extremes to which whites would go in order to maintain political dominance.

The last section of research will focus on legal disfranchisement of black voters. Democrats realized that voter fraud, intimidation, and violence would not keep the party afloat forever. This chapter will highlight their efforts to eliminate black suffrage without violating the 15th Amendment. It will focus on the constitutional convention of 1890 and the events leading to it.

Gathering and organizing sources will be the first step in completing this thesis. I have already made much progress, but it will be an ongoing process. I should have the majority of my sources by August, allowing me to begin outlining my argument. If all goes accordingly, I should be able to complete the thesis by November.
Bibliography


*Journal of the Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Mississippi, Begun at the City of Jackson on August 12, 1890, and Concluded November 1, 1890.*


