Introduction

The American Civil War (1861-65) destroyed slavery in the United States. Under conditions of war, slave labor became a huge benefit to the Confederate cause, which their Union rivals hoped to remove. Early in the war, the U.S. Congress took steps toward this end. In a series of Confiscation Acts, it declared that slaves used by southerners in aid of the rebellion could be legitimately taken by Union forces. The second Confiscation Act, of July 1862, declared all slaves behind Union lines "forever free."

Meanwhile, the executive branch of the U.S. government was pursuing its own avenues to emancipation. Understanding the military significance of slaves for the Confederate war effort, President Abraham Lincoln was seeking a measure to deprive the rebels of their labor. In August of 1862, Lincoln drafted a preliminary proclamation of emancipation, which he released in October, after the Union victory at Antietam. On January 1, 1863, the Proclamation of Emancipation went into effect. Unlike the Confiscation Acts, it did not free slaves behind Union lines. Rather, it declared those slaves still behind rebel lines to be free. In effect, the Emancipation Proclamation invited slaves to flee their masters and run to the Union lines, where African-American men could be received into the army.

These measures helped seal the fate of slavery. Once passed, emancipation measures would not be rescinded. Instead, they would be affirmed in the very terms of peace. When the war ended, Confederate states wishing to reenter the Union were required to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery. In December 1865, the amendment officially became a part of the U.S. Constitution, and slavery in the United States was dead.

There were many facets to the emancipation experience. It is important, for example, to remember that freedom did not come like a lightning bolt to the enslaved. Rather, slavery crumbled in moments and stages, at different rates in different places. Where the Union army went, slavery was vanquished; where it did not go, slavery lasted well into 1865. And the work of replacing slavery with a more equitable labor system took many, many years. Another thing to remember is that there are many ways to tell the emancipation story: as a story of the reconstruction of the southern labor system, of the black military experience, or of national politics. For this assignment, I would like you to think about the experience of emancipation from the point of view of black families.

Instructions

Read over the following materials. There are several "secondary" source snippets, and several"primary" source snippets. Working with only these sources, prepare a four page essay on the topic of "emancipation and African-American families." I am offering no guidelines beyond this. I want you to simply prepare the best history essay you can, with the sources given, and in the time allotted.
SECONDARY SOURCES

Secondary Source 1

The eagerness of blacks to assume the “graces of civilized life” manifested itself in ways that native whites found most disturbing. “The black women do not like to work,” an Alabama planter reported, “it is not lady-like.” The phenomenon he described was real enough, though whites tended to exaggerate its prevalence. With the acknowledgment of emancipation, many black women did withdraw their labor from the fields and the white man’s kitchen in order to spend more time tending to their own husbands and children. If the women themselves did not initiate such moves, the men often insisted upon it, and husbands and wives together effected arrangements that would be more compatible with freedom. Where women continued to work, the men often insisted during contract negotiations that wives and mothers be given time off during the regular workweek to tend to their housekeeping chores.

That the withdrawal of women from the labor force was frequently made at the insistence of the men reflected a determination by many husbands and fathers to reinforce their position as the head of the family in accordance with the accepted norms of the dominant society. Out of economic necessity and the experience of slavery, black women fashioned a place for themselves in the post-emancipation family and community. Invariably, it would be a more important position than that occupied by their white counterparts. If fewer black women labored in the fields, they often cared for the family garden plot, worked as washerwomen or wet nurses, and performed other jobs that were necessary to supplement the family income.

No matter how they manifested their freedom, black men and woman found themselves in a better position to defend their marital fidelity, to maintain their family ties, and to control their own children. That in itself ensured an enhanced dignity and pride as a family that slavery had so often compromised.


Secondary Source 2

Beginning in 1865, and for years thereafter, Southern whites throughout the South complained of the difficulty of obtaining female field laborers. Planters, Freedmen’s Bureau officials, and Northern visitors all ridiculed the black “female aristocracy” for “acting the lady” or mimicking the family patterns of middle-class whites. White employers also resented their inability to force black children to labor in the fields, especially after the spread of schools in rural areas. Contemporaries appeared uncertain whether black women, black men, or both were responsible for the withdrawal of females from agricultural labor. There is no question that many black men considered it manly to have their wives work at home and believed that, as head of the family, the male should decide how its labor was organized. But many black women desired to devote more time than under slavery to caring for their children and to domestic responsibilities like cooking, sewing, and laundering.

Not all black women placidly accepted the increasingly patriarchal quality of black family life. Indeed, many proved more than willing to bring family disputes before public authorities. The records of the Freedmen’s Bureau contain hundreds of complaints by black women of beatings, infidelity, and lack of child support. Some black women objected to their husbands’ signing labor contracts for them, demanded separate payment of their wages, and refused to be liable for their husbands’ debts at country stores. Yet if emancipation not only institutionalized the black family but also spawned tensions within it, black men and women shared a passionate commitment to the stability of family life as the solid foundation upon which a new black community could flourish.


Secondary Source 3

Most southern and northern whites assumed that the freed people were engaged in a misguided attempt to imitate middle-class white norms as they applied to women’s roles. Even recent historians have suggested that the refusal of married women to work in the fields signified “conformity to dominant white values.” In fact, however, the situation was a good deal more complicated. First, the reorganization of female labor resulted from choices made by both men and women. Second, it is inaccurate to speak of the “removal” of women from the agricultural work force. Many were no longer working for a white overseer, but they continued to pick cotton, laboring according to the needs and priorities established by their own families.
Thus the sexual division of labor that had existed within the black family under slavery became more sharply focused after emancipation. Wives and mothers and husbands and fathers perceived domestic duties to be a woman’s major obligation, in contrast to the slave master’s view that a female was first and foremost a field or house worker and only incidentally the member of a family. Women also worked in the fields when their labor was needed. At planting and especially harvest time they joined their husbands and children outside. During the late summer and early fall some would hire out to white planters in the vicinity to pick cotton for a daily wage. In areas where black men could find additional work during the year – on rice plantations or in phosphate mines or sugar mills, for example – they left their “women and children to hoe and look after the crops....” Thus women’s agricultural labor partook of a more seasonal character than that of their husbands.


Secondary Source 4

Even though a significant number of Black women worked in the fields, husbands controlled the economic rewards from farm labor. As Ruth Allen observed from her analysis of women in Texan cotton production in the 1920s, “it is practically a universal situation that the money received from the sale of the crop is the man’s income.” In addition, as in the antebellum era, landowners valued the commodity-producing labor of sharecropping women less than that of men regardless of any individual’s productivity. This sexual discrimination is reflected in the fact that landowners allocated land to sharecropping households on the basis of the sex and age of household members, with more land being allocated for men than for women and children. Hence, gender inequalities existed even in labor directed toward production for exchange – inequalities that were buttressed both by the prejudices of landowners and by the power sharecropping husbands gained from controlling the income produced by family labor.

... Since social isolation is associated with spouse abuse, it is possible that the greater isolation of sharecropping households, as contrasted to slave quarters and the more centralized plantation system, might have provided less opportunity for community observation or intervention in case of spouse abuse.

Indeed, sharecroppers’ voices make clear that domestic misery and violence were frequent components of everyday life in the rural South. Based on thousands of pieces of oral and written testimony documenting the interpersonal lives of southern farm people during the first half of the twentieth century, Kirby concludes: “There are assuredly scenes of satisfaction, security, sometimes bliss....But the corpus of this large, if haphazard, collection of testimony contains far more instances of unhappiness, especially among women. Marriage was a cruel trap, motherhood often a mortal burden; husbands were too often obtuse, unfaithful, drunken, and violent. The collective portrait is less one of bliss than of pathos.”

PRIMARY SOURCES

Primary Source 1

_A soldier to the mistress of his daughter in bondage, 1864._ You say I tried to steal my child away from you. Now, I want you to understand that Mary is my child and she is a God-given right of my own. You may hold on to her as long as you can, but I want you to remember this one thing--that the longer you keep my child from me the longer you will have to burn in hell and the quicker you'll get there. For we are now making up about one thousand black troops to come up through Glasgow, and when we come woe be to rebels, for we don't expect to leave them there root nor branch. I want you to understand that wherever you and I meets we are enemies. My children is my own and I expect to get them, and when I get ready to come after Mary I will have about a power and authority to bring her away and to execute vengeance on them that holds my child. I have no fears about getting Mary out of your hands. This whole government gives cheer to me and you cannot help yourself.


Primary Source 2

_Memoir of a Freedmen's Bureau officer._ For nothing were the Negroes more eager than for transportation. They had a passion, not so much for wandering as for getting together. Every mother's son among them seemed to be in search of his mother; every mother in search of her children. In their eyes the work of emancipation was incomplete until the families which had been dispersed by slavery were reunited. In short, transportation was a nuisance. I believed in it less than I believed in the distribution of rations and in modes of charity generally. It was necessary, I thought, to convince the Negroes of the fact that the object of the government was not to do them favors, but justice; and of the still greater fact that there is very little to get in this world without work.


Primary Source 3

_Memoir of a Freedmen's Bureau officer._ A sturdy, middle-aged Negro called Caesar entered my office and inquired if he could not have his wife and children. "Certainly," I said. "But she's got another husband and things is powerful mixed up," he said. "You see, I was sold away form here fifteen years ago into the Alabamas. Well, ever since the freedom I've been working to get back and last week I gets back and finds my wife all right and powerful glad to see me. But she thought I was dead, and so she's been married these ten year, and there's an old man living with her now. He's a dreadful old man--he can't scarcely see. She wants me, and wants him to go away, but he won't go." It was a complicated and delicate case. According to the laws of South Carolina the first marriage was binding. Freedmen's Bureau orders declared that such persons as were living in lawful wedlock at the date of emancipation were husband and wife. But looking at the hale, middle-aged man before me and remembering the blind senility of his rival, I ventured to make this a special case and decided according to the civil statute. "You can have your wife," I said. "If you have worked your way back from Alabama for her sake, you deserve her. I'll write an order to put you in possession." He asked, "And what about the children?" I said, "Why, take your own children, of course." "I means his children--the old woman's and his. She wants me, and wants him to go away, but he won't go." It was a complicated and delicate case. According to the laws of South Carolina the first marriage was binding. Freedmen's Bureau orders declared that such persons as were living in lawful wedlock at the date of emancipation were husband and wife. But looking at the hale, middle-aged man before me and remembering the blind senility of his rival, I ventured to make this a special case and decided according to the civil statute. "You can have your wife," I said. "If you have worked your way back from Alabama for her sake, you deserve her. I'll write an order to put you in possession." He asked, "And what about the children?" I said, "Why, take your own children, of course." "I means his children--the old woman's and his. She says she won't go if she can't have all her children. And when we offers to take them the old man hollers and says, 'What's to become of me?' He's such an old man, you see, he can't so much see to light his pipe.' "They are your children," I decided. "All the children of the wife are the children of the husband. Tell the old man that." The result was that the wife clung to the younger husband while the elder remained in the family as a sort of poor relation.

SOURCE: John William DeForest, _A Union Officer in the Reconstruction_, James H. Croushore and David M. Potter, eds. (New Haven, 1948), 56-57.

Primary Source 4

_Soon as freedom come, father took us boys cross the county line to Freetown and fixed up a shack on the edge of the woods. Old Master Brown come over one day and just begged Pa and us boys to come back on the farm. Promised to let us have the overseer's house for his family if he would come back. Pa listened to him_
through but shook his head. "Reckon I better stay here," said Pa. Old man Brown say, "All right, John. I see how you feel about it; but its all right. I can make out somehow, and if you ever need anything, come on over to the place and get it." But Pa never would go back. He knowed old Brown was having a hard time, but he felt better working for hisself. Remember he used to send me with a sack of corn all the way to Henderson Mill on Black Water Creek--about eight miles--to get it ground, rather than use Brown's mill. Henderson took one-eighth for toll, but Pa said it made him feel like a free man to pay for things just like everyone else.


Primary Source 5

When freedom came I asked my old owner to please let me stay on with them; I didn't have nowhere to go nohow. He said, "Anne, you can stay here if you want to, but I ain't going to give you nothing but your victuals and clothes enough to cover your hide. Not a penny in money do no nigger get from me." He cursed me to all the low names he could think of and drove me out like a dog. I was barefooted, so I asked Moses Evans to please buy me some shoes. My feet was so sore and I didn't have no money nor no home neither. So he said for me to wait till Saturday night and he'd buy me some shoes. Sure enough, when Saturday night come he buyed me some shoes and handkerchiefs and a pretty string of beads and got an old man neighbor named Rochel to let me stay at his house. Then in a few weeks me and him got married, and I was mighty glad to marry him to get a place to stay--yes, I was. Hard times as I was having, if I seed a man walking with two sticks and he wanted me for a wife I'd marry him to get a place to stay.


Primary Source 6

Affidavit of a Georgia freedwoman, 1866. My husband and I lived in Florida about four months. During that time he beat and abused me. I reported it to the officer in charge of the Freedman's Bureau. He had him arrested, and he got out of the guard house and left the place, remaining away until a new officer took charge. He then came back and beat me again. I had him arrested. He knocked the officer down and ran away and came here to Savannah. Since that time he has abused me and refuses to pay for the rent of my room and has not furnished me with any money, food, or clothing. I told him that I would go to the Freedmen's Bureau. He replied, "Damn the Freedmen's Bureau--I'll cuss you before them." On Saturday night, he came to my room and took all his things. He told me he would rather keep a woman than be married because she could not carry him to law and I could. I then told him that if he wanted to leave me to get a divorce and he could go. He said, "If I can get a divorce without paying for it, I'll get it for you. If I can't I won't give it to you, you can go without it." I said, "If you want to leave me, leave me like a man!" He has no just complaint against me.

Primary Source 8

A Georgia planter to a Freedmen's Bureau Assistant Commissioner, 1866.  Most of the freedwomen who have husbands are not at work, never having made any contract at all.  Their husbands are at work while they are as nearly idle as it is possible for them to be, pretending to spin, knit, or something that really amounts to nothing.  Now these women have always been used to working out and it would be far better for them to go to work for reasonable wages and their rations.  Their labor is a very important percent of the entire labor of the South, and if not made available must affect to some extent the present crop.  I have several that are working well, while other and generally younger ones who have husbands and children are idle--indeed refuse to work and say their husbands must support them.  I beg you will not consider this matter lightly, for it is a very great evil, and one that the Bureau ought to correct.