

Preservation of Land at New Market Heights Honors the Valor of Black Civil War Soldiers.

American Battlefield Trust protects 22 additional acres of Virginia battlefield where 14 members of the United States Colored Troops earned the Medal of Honor

Mary Koik, American Battlefield Trust
February 10, 2021



A road marker from the Virginia Department of Historic Resources elaborates on the bravery exhibited by USCTs at the Battle of New Market Heights. Noel Kline

(Richmond, Va.) — Nearly 180,000 Black men in Army units designated as U.S. Colored Troops fought for liberty on scores of major battlefields during the Civil War, but nowhere with more distinction than at New Market Heights, where the American Battlefield Trust is working to preserve land and create a battlefield park in their honor. The Trust today announces the purchase of 22 additional acres to be protected to tell their story.

The \$260,000 purchase of land, which otherwise could have been targeted for development, was paid for by donors and a matching grant from the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Trust has now protected a total

of 88 acres at New Market Heights, just outside Richmond, Va.

“The incredible bravery and sacrifice at New Market Heights should be common knowledge for all Americans, but, sadly, this is not the case,” said Battlefield Trust president David Duncan. “Preservation can help correct this historical oversight. By saving this land, we honor the memory of these warriors and tell their story for new generations.”



Sgt. Maj. Christian A. Fleetwood of the 4th United States Colored Cavalry received the nation's Medal of Honor for his courageous actions in the Battle of New Market Heights near Richmond.

Library of Congress

The battle on September 29, 1864, was key to securing Union position and eventually helped lead to the Confederate surrender of their capital in Richmond. That day, 14 USCT soldiers earned the Medal of Honor — a remarkable figure considering

only 25 Black men earned the nation's highest award for valor during the entire Civil War. Two white officers of USCT units were also awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions that day.

Completion of the latest Trust project was made possible by donations made by Trust members and private donors, as well as a matching grant awarded by the Commonwealth's Virginia Battlefield Preservation Fund, which is administered by the Department of Historic Resources. These competitive grants have helped protect 9,598 acres that tell a diverse scope of military history across the Commonwealth. A current Trust project supported by the fund will protect a portion of the Battle of Great Bridge, the first recorded instance with Black soldiers fighting on both sides of a Revolutionary War engagement.

"New Market Heights is an important chapter in Virginia history and, indeed, American history," said Julie Langan, state historic preservation officer and director of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. "Safeguarding important landscapes such as this to serve as places of memory and outdoor classrooms ensures the past can provide powerful lessons for our present."



*LT GEN Ron Coleman, USMC (Ret.) at New Market Heights
Jamie Betts Photo*

Retired Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Ron Coleman, only the second African American to attain the rank of three-star general in that service, was a key advocate in the land preservation effort. He noted the Black men who served then were not even recognized as citizens of the United States, yet they volunteered for the Union and fought heroically.

"At New Market Heights, the U.S. Colored Troops proved themselves beyond a shadow of a doubt," Coleman said. "The story needs to be told and remembered. I'm standing on a lot of shoulders."

The American Battlefield Trust has preserved thousands of acres of hallowed ground associated with battlefields integral to the African American military experience and remains committed to elevating stories of African American military service. Learn more about this work at www.battlefields.org/fighting-for-freedom.

The American Battlefield Trust is dedicated to preserving America's hallowed battlegrounds and educating the public about what happened there and why it matters today. The nonprofit, nonpartisan organization has protected more than 53,000 acres associated with the Revolutionary War, War of 1812 and Civil War. Learn more at www.battlefields.org.

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Well-Armed



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Ron Soodalter, History.net

At the West Point Foundry, an ordnance genius engineered devastating cannons

At the beginning of the 19th century, it was unthinkable for a nation to try to wage war or establish a viable national defense without sufficient resources to manufacture cannons. Yet that's the position in which the United States found itself after the War of 1812. The country had only one small operating foundry, located at Georgetown, in Washington, D.C., and was largely dependent on importing foreign artillery. Well aware of the deficit, President James Madison authorized establishing four new arsenals, each with an iron foundry capable of casting heavy guns. Three of them—in Richmond, Georgetown and Pittsburgh—were federally funded and operated. The fourth, a privately owned concern located across the Hudson River from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, would be instrumental in preserving the Union within the next half-century.

The site for the West Point

Foundry, owned by wealthy New Yorker Gouverneur Kemble, was part of a huge tract of land seized from a Loyalist family during the Revolution. Aside from being a member of one of New York's most affluent families, Kemble had friends in high places: His sister had married the secretary to the Board of Navy Commissioners. Kemble and his partners, calling themselves the West Point Foundry Association, selected what proved to be an ideal spot for the project. A sheltered 90-acre Hudson River inlet, soon dubbed Foundry Cove, offered sand for casting, while water from nearby Margaret's Brook—soon to be renamed Foundry Brook—powered the foundry. Thick forests provided timber for fuel and charcoal production, while local quarries supplied iron ore. Most important, the river itself served as a reliable shipping highway. And when the Hudson froze, the Philipstown Turnpike, which ran east into Connecticut, offered overland access.



In this section of the foundry, workers bored the barrels of 100-pounder Parrott rifles. (Paulson Brothers Ordnance Corp. Archive)

The new foundry first fired up its furnaces in 1817, turning out not only guns and projectiles but also domestic

goods. America's first two steam engines came from the foundry's mills, as did iron boats, benches and fences; lampposts, lighthouses and building facades; beam engines and mills for use in Austria, Canada and the Caribbean; marine engines and boilers for frigates and early steamships; and huge pipes, fixtures, and fittings for the Croton Aqueduct, New York City's system that conducted water 41 miles from the Croton River to Gotham. And before the Civil War the foundry shipped countless cotton presses to Southern plantations. It was one of America's first marvels of modern technology, a literally glowing example of a rapidly industrializing North. Artists found it irresistible, invariably portraying it in the halo of smoke and orange and yellow glow that was visible for miles on both sides of the Hudson.

In 1836 former physics instructor and West Point graduate Robert Parker Parrott was named inspector of ordnance at the academy and posted at the foundry. Kemble recognized the young man's ability, and within the year Parrott resigned his commission to become foundry superintendent. He also invested heavily in the foundry that he would be running. In 1839 Parrott married Kemble's sister, Margaret, a propitious union for both the Parrotts and the foundry.

Parrott devoted his considerable talents to improving production. While continuing to stress the use of local materials, he began processing a superior grade of pig iron from the Greenwood Furnace, in nearby Orange County. He imported skilled labor from abroad, mainly Europe and the British Isles, and established an apprenticeship program for teenagers. Parrott also provided housing and

clothing for his burgeoning workforce and enlarged the foundry school, where apprentices, workers' children and—time permitting—the workers themselves could study. As the factory grew, so did the village of Cold Spring, which had started out as a tiny trading hamlet.

But it was in the development of a new type of cannon that Parrott made his mark. Throughout the Civil War, Parrott's operation would turn out various types of artillery, such as Dahlgren and Rodman cannons. At the time, these guns were still traditionally smoothbore and muzzle-loaded. While easier to manufacture than cannons with rifled bores, they were far less accurate, with a markedly shorter range. Rifling—the creation of lands and grooves in the barrel that give spin to the projectile—allowed the shells to travel considerably farther, and with greater accuracy, than those fired from the tubes of smoothbore cannons. The West Point Foundry played a major role in defeating the Confederacy because it produced a specific type of rifled cannon—or “rifle,” as they were called. That gun was Robert Parrott's brainchild.

Though Parrott was not the first to rifle the barrels of cannons, he made significant improvements to the production system. His contributions, for which he was granted a series of patents, lay in the proprietary process used for wrapping the breech of each gun with a thick band of wrought iron, as well as in the type of projectile the gun would fire. Cannons of his day had a tendency to burst at the breech, destroying the guns and killing or maiming their crews. To reinforce the gun and keep it from exploding, Parrott hot-wrapped a stout iron band around its breech, allowing it to shrink immovably in place as it cooled.

He also received patents for a special fuse and sight for his rifles.

Parrott guns became the conflict's most commonly used artillery pieces—in the words of one historian, “available, inexpensive and accurate.” So popular was Parrott's innovation that Confederate arsenals copied them religiously. Ironically, several Parrott guns had already been sold to the Southern states prior to the war's outbreak, including some that would be used to bombard Fort Sumter.

By the fall of 1861, the demand for artillery was so great that the foundry's forges and furnaces were thundering and blazing around the clock. One area visitor recalled, “[W]e could hear the deep breathing of furnaces, and the sullen monotonous pulsations of trip-hammers, busily at work at the West Point Foundry, the most extensive and complete of the iron-works of the United States.” The foundry was then turning out 25 rifled Parrott guns and 7,000 projectiles per week, in addition to a range of smoothbore cannons, howitzers and mortars—and the numbers grew with demand. On each muzzle were stamped the letters “WPF,” for West Point Foundry, and “RPP,” for Robert Parker Parrott. The guns ranged in size (measured by the weight of the projectile they fired) from 10-pounder field rifles to 300-pounder monsters weighing up to 13 tons. The Parrott guns were conformed for use as fieldpieces (typically 10- and 20-pounders) and larger siege guns for the Army, as well as for service aboard Navy warships.

Around 1850, a 600-foot dock had been built, to accommodate deep-draft vessels on the Hudson. Now a constant stream of

Parrott's war engines rolled on rails from the foundry buildings down the dock to waiting Union vessels. No gun was shipped for military service without first being test-fired, or “proofed.” For that purpose, a platform and spotting tower had been built facing west over the Hudson. Each piece was fired—sometimes as much as 100 times—at the sides of rocky Crow's Nest Peak and Storm King Mountain, looming on the river's west bank.



A crew loads a 300-pounder Parrott rifle that has been mounted on rails during the proofing process. (Paulson Brothers Ordnance Corp. Archive)

President Abraham Lincoln got to witness the proofing process firsthand when he traveled to West Point in June 1862 to meet with retired Army commander Winfield Scott. After touring the foundry, Lincoln observed from the spotting tower as Superintendent Parrott oversaw a test-firing of 100- and 200-pounders.

The foundry's rifled guns were far superior to earlier versions. But despite Parrott's innovations, no cast-iron cannon of the period was immune to malfunction due to a number of problems, from sand in the barrel to excessive elevation, inadequate lubrication of shells, friction

within the projectile itself or excessive overheating from repeat firing. The barrel might simply explode at any point along its unreinforced section, or at the muzzle itself. And although the trademark iron band usually protected the crew from a ruptured breech, blowouts sometimes occurred at reinforced sections.

One of Parrott's larger guns suffered such a calamity. In late August 1863, a 200-pounder siege rifle weighing more than eight tons, dubbed the "Swamp Angel," had been mounted on a four-ton carriage during the assault on Charleston, S.C. Its crew, from the 11th Maine Infantry, successfully fired 35 massive projectiles—10 of which contained the incendiary mixture known as Greek fire—doing significant damage to the besieged city from an unheard-of 4½ miles away. A platform in marshy earthworks in Charleston Harbor had to be built to elevate the gun, and for the first time in recorded military history a compass reading was taken to target the fire on the city at night.

But six other incendiary shells had detonated prematurely inside the cannon's tube, causing invisible damage to the gun itself. The all-important wrought-iron breech band grew loose as the barrel's integrity was compromised. Aware the gun had taken terrific punishment, the crew lengthened the lanyard, allowing them to fire from a safer position. After each round they would reenter the battery to swab and reload the massive piece. It proved to be a sagacious plan: With the 36th round the gun burst, blowing out the breech and knocking the cannon off its carriage. Four members of the crew were injured, though none seriously.

Not all artillerymen were so fortunate. When the U.S. steamer *Juniata*'s 100-pounder Parrott gun burst during a fight off Fort Fisher, N.C., on December 24, 1864, the explosion killed five sailors—including two officers—and badly injured eight more. A *Harper's Weekly* illustration depicted the gun blowing the fiery contents of its projectile out at the breech, strewing dead and injured sailors around the deck. In his report, *Juniata*'s surgeon described the effects of the explosion in detail. The injuries listed during Second-Class Fireman Theodore Abos' autopsy were typical: "left leg, thigh, hip, arm and forearm fractured, soft parts extensively lacerated, killed by hemorrhage and shock." *The New York Times* later reported that shipboard fatalities alone due to Parrott gun mishaps numbered more than 100.

But in the imprecise world of cast-iron weapons, Parrott guns usually worked remarkably well, and provided long and effective service. By war's end, only 19 of the Navy's 352 100-pounders had burst. One 30-pounder reportedly fired some 4,600 rounds before finally breaking down. Today its remains are on display at West Point.

The foundry, the sole manufactory of Parrott guns throughout the conflict, could not turn them out fast enough. In April 1863, Robert Parrott wrote his brother, who managed the Greenwood Foundry that Parrott now owned, "We continue very busy and likely to use all the iron you can make." Two days later he wrote, "Guns are ordered by the fifties and all my efforts required to keep up the supply." In June he noted that the calls for guns and projectiles were "increasing daily," and in August he exulted, "I am

over head and ears in business and demand for guns, etc.” The demand would not abate until the South surrendered.

At the height of the foundry’s activity, Parrott employed upward of 1,400 workers. For his time, he seems to have been a remarkably progressive and compassionate boss. He owned a number of the row houses in which his employees lived, charging a modest rent. He also provided widows’ benefits, and limited compensation for injured workers.

But the work was still, by its nature, often dangerous, and in March 1864 several hundred men formed what they called a “Laboring Men’s Union” and went on strike for higher wages and presumably better working conditions. They also kept workers outside the union from reporting for work. Given the North’s need for weapons, the government was not about to allow the strike to continue. Some 120 Federal troops soon appeared. After a brief hiatus, and the arrest of three union leaders, production resumed.

The factory’s wartime output was staggering. Within four years the West Point Foundry turned out 3,000 Parrott guns—nearly half ordered by the Navy—and more than 3 million projectiles, in addition to countless smoothbore cannons and other types of ordnance.

Although the foundry filled an order for 200 Parrott guns after the war’s end, the demand for cannons evaporated practically overnight. Converting to civilian production wasn’t an overnight process, nor were orders for nonmilitary products fast in coming. Parrott, then the vice president and director, terminated

his lease in 1867. Eleven years later the owners, with the South Boston Iron Company, unsuccessfully petitioned the War Department for funding to subsidize them in the event of a future war.

Even as orders for cast-iron armaments dwindled, another serious blow came in the form of the Bessemer process, an English system for the cheap manufacture of steel. The first U.S. plant to use that new method was built in 1865, and by 1877, 11 Bessemer mills were rapidly producing steel at an affordable rate. The glory days of the nation’s great iron forges were all but over by that time, since they couldn’t compete with the newer, cheaper and better metal being produced.

The West Point Forge held on under new owners, enjoying middling success throughout the remainder of the 19th century by casting metal furniture, heavy machinery, structural columns and some ordnance, including a 13-ton coastal defense gun. But in 1911 the fires went out for the last time and the foundry closed its doors. A succession of companies purchased the site, including a silk-dyeing and -processing plant, tearing down some of the buildings and altering others. In 1952 what was left of the old foundry was bought by a battery plant, which would dump chemical waste into the cove for the next two decades. In 1986 the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency launched a 10-year-long Superfund cleanup of the place.

Nature eventually reclaimed most of the site. With the exception of a stately 1865 brick office building, the structures either collapsed or were demolished, leaving few traces of the greatest American forge of the Industrial Revolution.

Then in 1996 Scenic Hudson, a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting and restoring the Hudson River and Hudson River Valley, acquired 87 acres on the original site, in an effort to protect it from development and additionally create an interpretive historic and ecological preserve. After years of serving as a dumping ground for toxic chemicals, the now-pristine Foundry Cove welcomes visitors.

Today a sign on Cold Spring's picturesque Main Street directs visitors down a side street and along a tree-lined dirt road to the site of what once was the foundry that saved the Union. The West Point Foundry Preserve offers a walking tour of the site that encompasses stabilized ruins, as well as native plantings and sculptural models illustrating the immense scale of the old operation.

Scenic Hudson president Ned Sullivan points out: "What's really special about the preserve is that visitors learn so much about the foundry's wartime contribution, while enjoying the natural beauty of a tranquil ravine. The juxtaposition offers an unforgettable experience."

Ron Soodalter, who calls Cold Spring, N.Y., home, is the author of Hanging Captain Gordon and The Slave Next Door. A regular contributor to America's Civil War, he has also written for Smithsonian and The New York Times.

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A House Divided



Samuel Corum/Getty Images

Michael G. Williams
February 18, 2021, History.net

After the recent attack on the Capitol, will history repeat itself?

The world watched stunned as a crush of humanity invaded the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, breaking down doors and smashing windows to gain entrance to the nation's seat of government. As has already been well-documented in the wake of the attack, Capitol and Washington, D.C., police battled insurrectionists for more than three hours to eject hundreds of rioters from the building and restore order. Hundreds on both sides were seriously injured, and one, Capitol police officer Brian Sicknick, died from his wounds the next day.

Reactions to the attack varied dramatically around the world. In real time, the public had witnessed the foundering of American democracy, an outright assault on the institution itself. And as many watched, they likely thought to themselves, "This has never happened before."

Or has it?



Fergus Bordewich (David Altshul)

America's Civil War discussed this question with Fergus M. Bordewich, a leading expert on 19th-century politics and the author of *Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America*. First published by Knopf in February 2020, Bordewich's book was released in paperback by Anchor on January 5, only one day before the Capitol insurrection.

What Bordewich had to say stands as a reminder that history is not and should never be confined to the rearview mirror.

Based on your knowledge of Congress throughout the 1850s and '60s, do you see any parallels with the political unrest that's defined the last several years?

FB: We're undeniably in a deeply polarized political climate. And I do think that, in terms of intensity, it's as polarized as it was just before the Civil War. Of course, the divide in the 1860s was extreme; it ultimately led to the secession of 11 states and the defection of roughly 25 percent of the Army's officer class, as well as nearly every Southern politician in Washington.

Today, the issues that divide left and right obviously are different (immigration, Covid policy, foreign relations, etc.), and we definitely haven't hit the point reached in the 1860s. We periodically hear rumblings of secession, but I don't think we have the geographic concentrations of ideology needed for that to occur—certainly like the South had 160 years ago.

Do you think the rancor in the halls of Congress is redolent of the Civil War era?

FB: To an extent. By 1860, members of Congress were unable to negotiate on the matter of slavery, and that caused a failure of the nation's legislature. Likewise, the gridlock that we're currently witnessing in Congress is due to the inability of the left and right to cooperate.



The caning of Senator Charles Sumner. (Library of Congress)

Any differences?

FB: The difference is in the scale of what happened. The events of 160 years ago played out on a wholly different level: Again, you had the secession of 11 states and a war that took roughly 700,000 lives (over two percent of the entire U.S. population)—that's incredible by any standard.

It's true that you hear radicals talking today about secession and "a new civil war," but I think that's unlikely. Those willing to lay down their lives for such a cause are minuscule in number, despite what some may infer from the January 6 attack on the Capitol.

In addition to widespread frustration with Congress, the January 6 attack was in response to what many believe was a "stolen" presidential election. Does this fall within the historical context of the pre-Civil War period?

FB: Well, in 1860, Lincoln was elected by a plurality, not by a majority. That meant he had more votes than any of the three other candidate, but he didn't win an absolute majority. Southerners, nonetheless, didn't respond by attempting to overthrow the results of the election in the way that today's reactionaries have tried to do over the last couple of months. The South accepted the fact that Lincoln had won the election and responded by leaving the Union.

Now, it should be noted that when they did leave, they essentially started a government that was a carbon copy of the Union democratic system—with one crucial distinction. When it came to slavery, the South was a totalitarian state. There was no freedom of speech, press, or association in this case.

Didn't authorities in Washington fear a Rebel incursion on the capital after the South split from the Union—chiefly in March and April 1861?

FB: There was a very real fear in the spring of '61 that Rebels coming from Maryland or Virginia would mount an attack with an eye to taking the Capitol

building, and even the District of Columbia. And I think that these were reasonable fears when you think about the fact that there were only a few hundred trained soldiers in D.C. in early April, and only a few thousand later in the month.

There was also a lot of guerrilla activity in Maryland after the Baltimore Riot of April 19, 1861. Bands of militia burned the railroad bridges and cut the telegraph lines; and, of course, you had the riot, where a mob attacked the 6th Massachusetts Volunteer Militia as they passed through the city on their way to Washington.

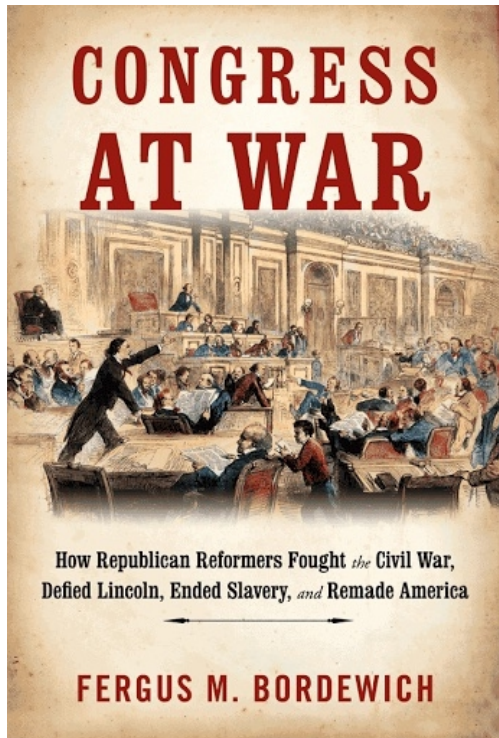
But today, too, we are in the midst of a political crisis, and it's still unfolding. What happened on January 6 was not the end of it; it was merely the point of the spear, so to speak.

Do you expect things to get worse as they did during the late 1850s and as the Civil War began?

FB: It's possible. I don't necessarily like to make hard-and-fast predictions because they usually turn out to be wrong, but I do believe things could get worse because there are significant elements of the political culture that have lost confidence in American institutions just as the South had 160 years ago.

And I'm also sure you have some segments of the population who *don't* believe that our current situation is anything to be concerned about.

You point out in your book that there were a number of leaders who made that mistake on the eve of the Civil War.



FB:

When you read what Americans were writing in letters and diaries, it sounds just like people criticizing our leaders today. One New Yorker, for instance, wrote that President [James] Buchanan was part of “the dirty catalogue of treasonable mischief-makers” because of his oblivious attitude toward the nation’s deepening crisis. In another letter, a person asked (quite seriously) if Buchanan, in doing nothing about the dire national predicament was, himself, a traitor.

Even President-elect Lincoln downplayed the emergency, publicly asserting that the crisis was artificial and that Americans shouldn’t worry. This is particularly striking because that position doesn’t exactly comport with our notions of Lincoln.

You give some extraordinary examples of the contempt that some had for the American system in 1861—specifically

Texas Senator Louis Wigfall’s comments about the nation’s flag.

FB: Wigfall didn’t mince words. After South Carolinians fired on the Fort Sumter resupply ship *Star of the West* in January ’61, he declared on the floor of the Senate: “I rejoiced at this insult to the flag of your country. It ought to be fired at, and it should be torn down and trampled upon.” He *actually* said this while he was a sitting senator.

Outlandish statements from political leaders and attacks on the flag—does that sound similar to what we’re encountering today?

FB: It does. On the one hand, you have politicians and entire sects within parties floating outrageous conspiracy theories, claiming, for instance, that the school shooting at Sandy Hook was staged. You have lawmakers threatening fellow legislators, and rioters burning flags across the country.

No matter what side of the aisle they’re on, these individuals are detached from reality and, as such, have rejected our democratic institutions. And yes, I think this is reminiscent of Civil War America. In my book, I highlight some shocking examples of the hysteria that gripped the South in this period. During and after the presidential election, people all over the South were well advised to keep quiet on anything that might reflect support for the North or opposition to slavery.

Northern-born school teachers were driven out of Southern states; mail was opened in search of “subversive literature”; a Virginian was almost lynched in Alabama after he tried to pass a Massachusetts bank note; a

daguerreotypist was beaten because one of his samples was a picture of Lincoln.

So far, we've focused on the national stage. Is history repeating at the state level?

FB: Yes, I think so. The first example that comes to mind is the armed protests in the Michigan statehouse back in April 2020 [during anti-lockdown demonstrations]. But I think these pockets of state-level extremism are more reminiscent of Reconstruction-era activity in the South—namely by groups like the Ku Klux Klan. I'm not saying that the similarity here is in white supremacy, but rather in the organized resistance to government control.

Do you think we'll reach this magnitude of resistance in the future?

FB: It's difficult to say, and you have to weigh that question carefully. Of all the people at the Capitol on January 6, how many of them *really* wanted to go into the building and do physical harm to people and property? How many *really* wanted to overthrow the government and reverse the election results by force of violence? Undoubtedly, some of them wanted to do precisely those things, but I find it difficult to fathom that the majority of those in attendance were there for those reasons.

And what of those who were there for those reasons—are we seeing treason equal to that of the Rebels during the Civil War?

FB: Right now, I think they more closely resemble defectors than they do traitors. They attacked our political institutions, and they turned their backs on our

democratic system in doing so. But I'm reluctant to call them traitors, at least not in the technical sense. Unlike the South in 1861, they haven't taken up arms and levied war against the United States. Whether that will happen, only time will tell.

Note: An interview with Fergus M. Bordewich about Congress at War focusing on how the Radical Republicans in Congress pressured President Abraham Lincoln to fight the war more aggressively and emancipate enslaved people appeared in the May 2020 issue of America's Civil War.

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Active Participants: African Americans and the Reconstruction of Democracy in America



Two African American camp servants pose with Union officers in Virginia. The African Americans had most probably left their "owners" and headed for Union lines, a bold first step to an uncertain freedom. Library of Congress

Gary W. Gallagher, February 2021
History.net

A landmark study gave African Americans credit for being important actors in their freedom quest

Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880 appeared on New York publisher Harcourt, Brace & Company's list of new titles in 1935. Written by W. E. Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963), a leading African American intellectual, sociologist, and historian best known for *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (1903), the book received a good deal of attention from newspapers but less from mainline academic journals. Du Bois challenged the prevailing interpretation of Reconstruction as a dark time when carpetbaggers, scalawags, and their recently freed Black allies ran roughshod over a prostrate White South struggling to recover from the Civil War. That interpretation, widely disseminated by D. W. Griffith's blockbuster film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and by Claude G. Bowers' best-selling *The Tragic Era: The Revolution After Lincoln* (1929), shaped scholarly and popular attitudes toward Reconstruction for many decades. In a major departure from previous—as well as much subsequent—literature, Du Bois treated enslaved people during the war and freedpeople in its aftermath as important actors, rather than as passive pawns in the political, military, and economic struggles of the era. In doing so, he anticipated scholarship from revisionist studies by Kenneth M. Stampp and others in the 1960s, to the landmark work of Eric Foner in the 1980s, and down to the present. Anyone familiar with Henry Louis Gates' *Reconstruction: America After the Civil War*, first aired on PBS stations in 2019, would find many similarities between that documentary and Du Bois' 750-page masterwork.



The accomplished W.E.B. Du Bois was a leader of the Niagara Movement, which pushed for equal rights for Blacks. (Granamour Weems Collection/Alamy Stock Photo)

Apart from its detailed examination of Reconstruction, Du Bois' book offers a great deal to students of the Civil War. It presents a powerful argument for what later came to be called the concept of self-emancipation, whereby African American actions on the ground in the Confederacy forced politicians in Washington to proceed more quickly to end slavery. Du Bois relied on a Marxist-inspired economic analysis that cast the enslaved population as workers who rose up against the aristocratic class in the Confederacy. He sought to explain "How the Civil War meant emancipation and how the black worker won the war by a general strike which transformed his labor from the Confederate planter to the Northern invader, in whose army lines workers began to be organized as a new labor force." The point regarding Black

contributions to Union victory, while overstated, is clear and compelling—as African American refugees flocked to Union positions, they deprived the Confederacy of their labor, worked and eventually served as soldiers for the United States, and by their efforts contributed significantly to suppressing the Southern rebellion.

Du Bois correctly linked an enslaved workforce directly to the Confederate war effort. “The South counted on Negroes as laborers to raise food and money crops for civilians and for the army,” he noted, “and even in a crisis, to be used for military purposes.” With nearly 4 million enslaved people available to keep the economy running, the Confederacy could mobilize a huge percentage of its military-age White males. But as the war progressed, African Americans, through steady movement to Union lines and work slowdowns on plantations and farms, engaged in what Du Bois termed “The General Strike” that eroded the Confederacy’s capacity to mount an effective military resistance. Overall, the “guns at Sumter, the marching armies, the fugitive slaves, the fugitives as ‘contrabands,’ spies, servants and laborers,” Du Bois observed, furthered the process of emancipation and marked the progress of “the Negro as soldier, as citizen, as voter...from 1861 to 1868.”

Black Reconstruction handles the role of U.S. military forces in ending slavery very well. It sets the stage by identifying the overarching war aim for most of the loyal population. “The North did not propose to attack property” at the outset, Du Bois asserted: “It did not propose to free slaves. This was to be a white man’s war to preserve the Union, and the Union must be preserved.” “Freedom for slaves

furnished no such slogan,” continued Du Bois, who estimated that not “one-tenth of the Northern white population would have fought for any such purpose.” Yet when Federal forces “entered the South they became armies of emancipation.” Wherever they marched, regardless of soldiers’ racial attitudes, the armies weakened Confederate control over enslaved people.

The arrival of blue-clad soldiers swelled the number of African American refugees. In turn, Union planners who oversaw the war effort “faced the fact, after severe fighting, that Negroes seemed a valuable asset as laborers, and they therefore declared them ‘contraband of war.’ It was but a step from that to attract and induce Negro labor to help Northern armies”—and after 1863 to enroll thousands of Black soldiers.

The impact of armies, not the efforts of the small number of abolitionists in the loyal states, settled the issue of slavery. “Freedom for the slave,” Du Bois insisted, “was the logical result of a crazy attempt to wage war in the midst of four million black slaves, and trying the while sublimely to ignore the interests of those slaves in the outcome of the fighting.”

By fleeing to Federal camps across the Confederacy, African American refugees “showed to doubting Northerners the easy possibility of using them” to subjugate the Rebels. “So in blood and servile war,” judged Du Bois, “freedom came to America.”

After Appomattox, the same attitude that sustained the Union as the preeminent focus of the loyal White citizenry undercut the possibility of achieving true racial equality. The postwar tragedy lay

in the fact that “the Reconstruction of the Southern states, from slavery to free labor, and from aristocracy to industrial democracy,...[was not] conceived as a major national program of America, whose accomplishment at any price was well worth the effort” Had the nation made that effort, Du Bois concluded at a time when Jim Crow reigned supreme across much of the United States, “we should be living today in a different world.”

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In 1868, Black Suffrage Was on the Ballot

Smithsonian Voices February 19th, 2021,
Jordan Grant

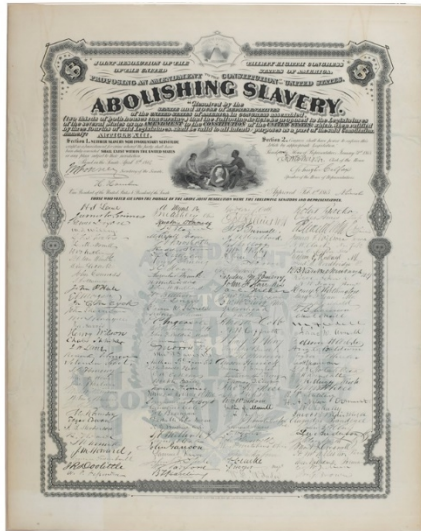
Every election season in the United States revolves around a set of issues—health care, foreign affairs, the economy. In 1868, at the height of the Reconstruction, the pressing issue was Black male suffrage. When voters went to the polls that November, they were asked to decide if and how their nation’s democracy should change to include Black men, millions of whom were newly freed from slavery. It was up to voters to decide: should Black men be granted the right to vote?

With the benefit of hindsight, we now know that this question was answered just two years later in 1870, with ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Fifteenth Amendment stipulates that citizens’ right to vote cannot be restricted based on “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” In 1868, however, there were no definite plans for a Fifteenth Amendment. The decision was still in voters’ hands.

Although African Americans had been fighting for freedom and full citizenship throughout U.S. history, their demands were generally ignored, rejected, or suppressed. Voting rights reflected this larger pattern. Before the Civil War, few states were willing to extend suffrage to groups other than white men. Among the Northern and Western states where slavery was outlawed, only a handful—most clustered in New England—allowed Black men to go to the polls. (Even in these states, Black women—like all women in the United States—were not allowed to vote. By 1868, most political leaders and activists had chosen to decouple the question of woman suffrage and Black male suffrage for strategic reasons. They did not think a majority of the nation would support giving women the ballot, and they feared that a push to secure women’s right to vote would doom efforts to enfranchise Black men. Both in the 1800s and more recently, writers sometimes obscure this aspect of the story by using universal terms like “Black suffrage”).

The Civil War transformed every aspect of life in the United States, including the political calculus behind Black male suffrage. With the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln committed the United States to ending slavery; he did not, however, define what freedom would look like for African Americans in a postwar world. After Lincoln’s assassination (and, later, the impeachment of his successor, President Andrew Johnson), members of the radical wing of the Republican Party took control of Congress and began to define what Lincoln’s “new birth of freedom” would look like, principally by supporting the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution. Together, these amendments barred most forms of “slavery and involuntary servitude” nationwide,

established birthright citizenship, and guaranteed the "privileges and immunities" and "due process" for all U.S. citizens. Neither amendment, however, directly addressed the issue of African Americans' voting rights.



This 1868 commemorative print showcased the signatures of members of Congress who supported the Thirteenth Amendment. (NMAH)

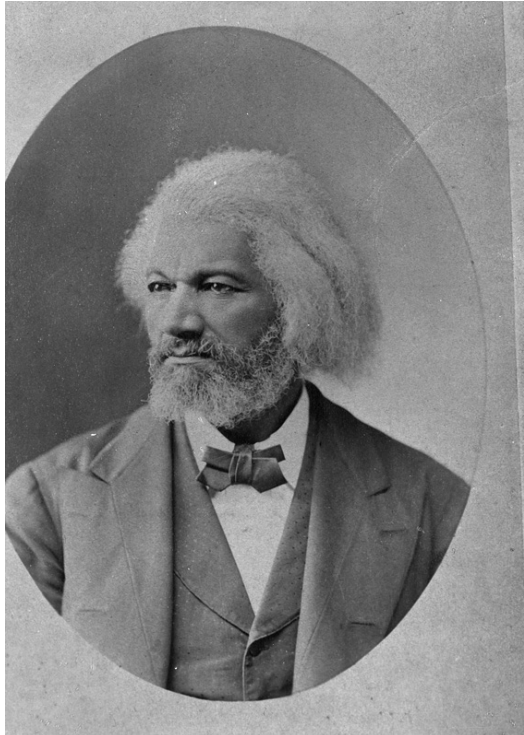
Of the various groups who fought to keep Black male suffrage at the forefront of political debate in the 1860s, none were more important than African Americans themselves. Well before the Civil War ended, African Americans made the case that their ability to protect their rights and freedoms depended on their right to shape politics directly at the polls. Many Black commentators pointed out the hypocrisy of asking African Americans to serve in the nation's military but then denying them suffrage when they returned from the battlefield. Delegates at the the 1864 National Convention of Colored Men in Syracuse, New York, expressed this point eloquently in the conference's address to the nation, asking "Are we good enough

to use bullets, and not good enough to use ballots?"



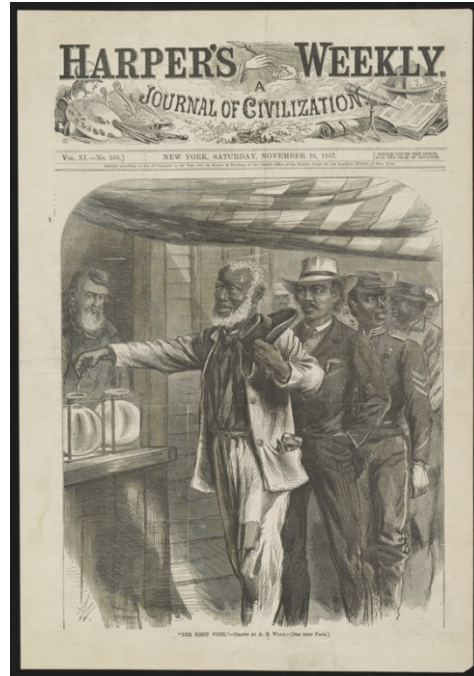
Many contemporaries argued that Black men had more than earned the right to vote through their military service in the Civil War. (NMAH)

Black leaders also stressed that extending the franchise to Black men would safeguard the Union's victory in the Civil War. As Frederick Douglass promised listeners during an 1863 address, formerly enslaved African Americans, if given the vote, would become the U.S. government's "best protector against the traitors and the descendants of those traitors who will inherit the hate, the bitter revenge which shall crystallize all over the South, and seek to circumvent the government that they could not throw off." "You may need him to uphold in peace" Douglass cautioned, "as he is now upholding in war, the star-spangled banner."



Frederick Douglass was one of many Black leaders who argued that the federal government should support Black male suffrage in order to protect the Union's victory in the Civil War (NMAH)

After the Civil War, members of Congress took small steps towards enfranchising Black men. They began by eliminating racial qualifications for voting in places where the federal government had direct control over elections, such as Washington, D.C. and federal territories. National leaders' efforts to establish Black male suffrage nationwide took a dramatic leap forward in 1867. Fresh from victories in a midterm election, Republicans in Congress overrode President Johnson's veto to pass a series of Reconstruction Acts. The first act, approved in March 1867, required former Confederate states to form new governments that enfranchised all "male citizens...twenty-one years old and upward, of whatever race, color, or previous condition" before they could be readmitted to the Union.



The cover of the November 16, 1867, issue of "Harper's Weekly" depicted Black men going to the polls to vote for the first time in the former Confederate states. (Library of Congress)

Under these new laws (and with the backing of the U.S. military) Black men in most of the former slaveholding states could vote and run for office. Tens of thousands did. Their votes at the state level created the nation's first biracial state governments. They also laid the foundation for the first Black representatives in Congress.

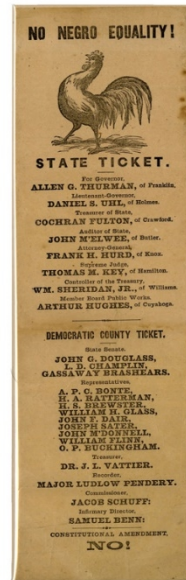


This lithograph celebrated the first generation of Black men in Congress. From left to right, the men depicted are Senator Hiram Revels (Mississippi) and Representatives Benjamin Turner (Alabama), Robert De Large (South Carolina), Josiah Walls (Florida), Jefferson Long (Georgia), Joseph Rainey (South Carolina), and Robert Elliott (South Carolina). (NMAH)

Ironically, in 1868, the main political hurdle that Black male suffrage faced was winning approval in the North and West—regions of the United States that had remained loyal to the Union cause during the Civil War. In states that had fought for the Union during the Civil War, legislators could not use the Reconstruction Acts to directly intervene in elections and shape qualifications for voting. At the same time, state-level referendums that would have extended suffrage to Black men in the North and West stalled and failed in the mid-1860s. In election after election, Northern and Western voters made it clear that, while they would support enfranchising Black men in the South, they had little interest in adding them to the electorate in their home states.

The unresolved debate over Black male suffrage shaped the presidential election of 1868. Fearful that Northern voters would reject their party's approach to

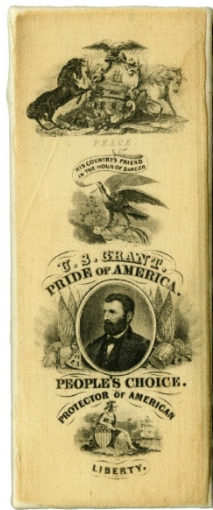
Reconstruction, the Republican Party nominated a candidate with guaranteed broad appeal throughout the North and West: Ulysses S. Grant. After much debate, the Democratic Party chose Horatio Seymour, then governor of New York, as their candidate.



Referendums supporting Black male suffrage failed in Ohio and other Northern and Western states in the 1860s. This Ohio ballot from 1867 made the ramifications of the election explicit with its first and final line—"No Negro Equality!" and "Constitutional Amendment, NO!." (NMAH)

The Democratic Party's platform openly criticized how the Reconstruction acts had stripped former Confederate states of their right to regulate voting at the state level, free of federal oversight. This was a thinly veiled attack on Black male suffrage. The party's candidate for vice president, Francis Preston Blair Jr., made the attack explicit in his acceptance letter, which was read at that year's convention. Blair condemned Republican leaders for substituting "as electors in place of men of our race. . . a host of ignorant negroes who are supported in idleness with the public money."

Although the Republican Party platform continued to support extending the right to vote to all Southern men, irrespective of race, it fell far short of calling for Black male suffrage nationwide. Rather than risk alienating white voters in the North and West, the party pledged to leave states that had remained loyal to the Union the authority to regulate voting rights, even if that meant those states continued to deprive Black men of the vote.



The Republican Party chose Ulysses S. Grant as their candidate for the presidency in 1868. (NMAH)

Ulysses S. Grant's narrow victory in 1868 encouraged members of the Republican Party to reconsider their position. On one hand, many contemporaries believed that the party's support for Black men's voting rights—tepid though it was—had cost it votes. At the same time, Republican leaders were cheered to see that newly-enfranchised Black men throughout the South had come out to support Grant's election. Enfranchising Black men nationwide would, they hoped, secure their party's political future.

Other elected officials who supported Black male suffrage for less politically motivated reasons were cheered by the moderate victories the cause had secured in 1868, as voters in states like Iowa and Minnesota had voted in favor of laws that allowed Black men to vote. Though conflicting, these various signals were enough to convince a majority of Republicans in Congress that their party should act quickly to enfranchise Black men nationwide before the political winds shifted against them.

Therefore, at the start of Congress's session in late 1868, Republican members of Congress were primed to support an amendment to the Constitution that would nationalize Black male suffrage. Instead of whether a Fifteenth Amendment should be created, the question became: what should it say?

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