

Land Hunger in the  
Abolitionist Imagination, 1865-1872

Ramsay Eyre  
Undergraduate Senior Thesis  
Department of History, Columbia University  
April 14, 2021

Seminar Advisor: Professor Jude Webre  
Second Reader: Professor Richard R. John

## *Table of Contents*

Acknowledgments .....	3
Introduction .....	5
Chapter 1: “Your slaveholder is ever a land monopolist” .....	15
Chapter 2: “I want to see the State alive” .....	24
Chapter 3: “Incalculable benefits to the whole people” .....	33
Chapter 4: “At present, it is not to be hoped for” .....	48
Conclusion .....	61
Bibliography .....	65

## *Acknowledgments*

First, I must thank my teachers, without whom this thesis would not exist. Professor Richard R. John has been an intellectual mentor for me since I first joined his team of research assistants in the fall of my junior year. Always generous with his time, his advice, and his genuine passion for teaching, Professor John has helped me see the American past and present in a new way, as he has with countless other students. I thank him for serving as my second reader. Professor Jude Webre has been an incredibly supportive advisor throughout the process of writing a thesis, especially in a year when a pandemic has prevented him from meeting his students in person. Our conversations about politics, Twitter, and Reconstruction historiography made this year all the more enjoyable. Professor Stephanie McCurry taught the class that convinced me to become a history major my first year, helping me become fascinated with the profundities and complexities of the Reconstruction era. She lent this project encouragement and advice early on for which I am very grateful. Professor Andrew Delbanco graciously agreed to discuss with me his thoughts on the larger significance of the abolitionist movement, helping shape my understanding of this history and its contemporary resonance. I must also thank Professors Barbara J. Fields, Elizabeth Blackmar, and Casey Blake, whose lectures on the history of the South, the Gilded Age, and American intellectual history, respectively, influenced this thesis in no small way.

Many of the conceptual ideas informing this thesis, particularly the centrality of natural rights and antimonopoly to the American political tradition, were examined in a seminar on Inequality and Democracy taught by Professor John and Matt Stoller in Fall 2020. To Professor John, Mr. Stoller, and all of the students in that class, I offer my thanks for exposing me to the tools we can use from history to pursue economic and social justice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For me, the best part of being a student in the history department at Columbia has been the community of students who seem to keep running into each other in class after class, semester after semester. Among this group are some of the closest friends I have made in college. Conversations with Zach, Kayla, Bella, Nick, Aja, Isobel, Mary, Kiana, Emile, Julia, Sophia, Alex, Belle, and Grace have taught me so much, and I am grateful to know them all. I thank my classmates in Dr. Webre's seminar, especially my assigned respondents Max Kwass-Mason and Stella Kazibwe, for their insightful comments on my drafts that helped make this thesis stronger.

Thank you to Alexis, John, Julia, Rhea, and Sam for your friendship and for being the best COVID pod imaginable. To Mom, Dad, and Chapin, thank you for your support and love. I could not have done any of this without you.

“And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall  
proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.  
It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you,  
to your property and every one of you to your family.”

Leviticus 25:10

“To-day, ahead, though dimly yet, we see, in vistas,  
a copious, sane, gigantic offspring.”

Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (1871)

“The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins;  
the freedman has not yet found in freedom  
his promised land.”

W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

## *Introduction*

On the morning of April 9, 1870, members of the American Anti-Slavery Society gathered at Apollo Hall in New York City on 28<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway. They were there both to celebrate past accomplishments and to look toward the future of their movement and their nation. Two months earlier, the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution had been ratified, marking the culmination of a bloody, decades-long effort involving southern enslaved persons and freed people, along with their allies in the north, to abolish slavery and extend equal civil and political rights to Black men. Many of those present, veterans of the abolitionist movement since the society's inception nearly four decades earlier, could hardly believe such a day had come; the prevailing atmosphere was accordingly triumphant. The president of the society, Wendell Phillips, welcomed attendees with even more than his usual gravitas: "I congratulate you that we stand at the very goal of our long effort; that at last the nation constitutionally in its organic law adopts the original pledge of this Society, to secure to the colored race of the United States all the rights and privileges which belong to them as men and as Americans."<sup>1</sup> Hymns were sung, remembrances were shared, and letters were read aloud from notable abolitionists unable to attend the meeting in their old age.

After the festivities concluded in the main hall, a group of the society's leaders met in a nearby room. There, they proposed to disband the society for good, feeling that their work of abolishing slavery had at last been accomplished with the amendment's recent passage. Such a proposal, however, was not made without dissent. Cora Tappan, a 30-year-old abolitionist best known in her day as a prominent spiritualist, rose to deliver an address in which she insisted that

---

1. *National Anti-Slavery Standard* [NASS], April 16, 1870. This introductory episode is based on this issue.

the society's work was not done; after all, even with voting rights enshrined in the Constitution, freed people in the South still struggled to realize the promises of freedom. They did so in large part because they lacked land. "The black man is still in the clutches of his former master, for he has not a foot of ground which he can call his own," she said.<sup>2</sup> Forced into tenancy and sharecropping contracts with white landowners, landless Black laborers could not protect their newly secured right to vote in a state of such abject subjugation. The society ought to continue on their behalf, she argued, until a policy of land redistribution was enacted and abolition was more fully realized as a result.

Though Tappan's point was met with support from others in the room, including abolitionist elders John Turner Sargent and Stephen Symonds Foster, the members ultimately voted to disband the society.<sup>3</sup> It was left to Aaron M. Powell, a longtime disciple of Phillips and the editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, to vow that even absent the organization that had united northern abolitionists for so long, his paper would continue under a new name to fight for "land reform, and such other work as the necessities of the hour called for."<sup>4</sup> The struggle for land reform endured, but at this hour, it was deemed not to warrant the continued existence of one of abolitionism's leading organizations.

How had the abolitionist movement arrived here? Its abandonment of land redistribution marked a departure from what many of its participants had fought for in the preceding years—

---

2. *NASS*, April 16, 1870.

3. Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 588; Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember: Antislavery Autobiographies and the Unfinished Work of Emancipation* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 15-18.

4. *NASS*, April 16, 1870. Powell claimed that his paper, under the shortened name *The National Standard*, would "especially urge the immediate creation by Congress of a competent and trustworthy Land Commission, to be composed of well known, disinterested friends of the freed people whose duty it shall be to cooperate with individuals and associations among the hitherto enslaved, in the selection, and purchase, upon favorable conditions, of eligible lands for homesteads."

and, indeed, that for which many of them continued to fight. Some of the most notable antebellum exponents of abolitionism considered their work done immediately at the conclusion of the war, including William Lloyd Garrison. Others, such as Theodore Parker, had passed away. But despite the absence of these leaders, the multiracial coalition of northern radicals and southern freed people known as the abolitionists continued its work of moral and political agitation into Reconstruction, forcing a national reckoning on the meaning of freedom in a post-slavery society. For many within this coalition, freedom required not only equal rights for freed people in the civil and political spheres, but also equal access to economic resources. In particular, they viewed land redistribution from former Confederates to freed people as an essential part of any plan to secure the blessings of liberty and advance racial equality in America. W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in *Black Reconstruction in America* that “land hunger—this absolutely essential thing to any real emancipation of the slaves—was continually pushed by all emancipated Negroes and their representatives in every southern state.”<sup>5</sup> In many instances, freed people’s allies in the north followed suit: Throughout much of the second half of the 1860s, northern abolitionists urged a policy of land redistribution as a crucial element of the abolitionist agenda for Reconstruction. Even as radical Reconstruction dwindled, with military orders and congressional bills for land reform revoked and defeated, a struggle to secure land for freed people continued to hold an important place in many abolitionists’ conception of freedom.

Previous scholarship on land redistribution during Reconstruction has tended to frame the issue in light of its ultimate tragedy. By nearly all accounts, the restoration of Confederate lands and the reluctance of the nation to redistribute land to freed people were some of the era’s most significant failures. In his landmark era survey *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished*

---

5. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1992 [1935]), 601.

*Revolution*, Eric Foner suggests that such failures led directly to the success of Redeemers and the fall of Reconstruction: “The early rejection of federally sponsored land reform left in place a planter class far weaker and less affluent than before the war, but still able to bring its prestige and experience against Reconstruction.”<sup>6</sup> James McPherson, in *The Abolitionist Legacy*, wrote that abolitionists realized these developments as they occurred, and “in later years . . . insisted that Reconstruction’s greatest mistake was its failure to achieve land reform.”<sup>7</sup>

This much is true. Less common to these accounts, however, is a thorough analysis of the place of land redistribution within abolitionist ideology during Reconstruction. McPherson, whose books remain the standard accounts of the abolitionist movement during this era, portrays land redistribution as a noble effort that nonetheless failed as a result of constitutional concerns about confiscation.<sup>8</sup> Though he chronicles the failure of abolitionist efforts to secure land in comparison to their success in education and voting rights, the type of ideal society that abolitionists sought to construct in the aftermath of abolition is left unexamined. While Foner places economic questions at the center of his analysis of freed people’s struggles in the Reconstruction era, he does not place them in the context of the abolitionist movement as such. He ventures that “In its most sophisticated form, the claim to land rested on an appreciation of the role blacks had played in the evolution of the American economy,” similarly foregoing a substantive inquiry into the reconstructed nation in the abolitionist imagination.<sup>9</sup> More recently, authors have explicitly placed the issue in the context of the debate on reparations for slavery;

---

6. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 605.

7. James McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), 79.

8. James McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and The Negro In the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964), 407-416; McPherson, *Abolitionist Legacy*, 75.

9. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 105.



the campaign for land redistribution, these sources argue, was grounded in claims of reparative justice.<sup>10</sup> These are vital additions to the literature on Reconstruction. But the abolitionist movement, including both freed people and offered a host of arguments for land redistribution other than reparations, arguments that deserve examination for their significance in American political culture. These include arguments predicated on the natural rights of freed people, the monopoly power of southern planters, and the conviction that with a more equitable distribution of land, the American republic would be more peaceful and secure.

Abolitionist campaigns for land redistribution cannot be easily reduced to one type of rhetorical appeal; they did not partake in any singular political ideology or tradition, but operated within many strands of 19<sup>th</sup> century American political discourse. Simply put, supporters of land redistribution saw it as an essential element of both freedom for the slave and Reconstruction for the nation. But the many arguments they employed in conjunction with one another to argue this position were anything but simple. Understanding the contributions of the abolitionists—Black and white, northern and southern—to the political landscape of 19<sup>th</sup> century America requires a fuller picture than has thus far been presented of how they advocated for land redistribution under various justifications. For the abolitionists who continued their work into Reconstruction, freedom did not only mean the destruction of slavery: It meant the construction of a new society, one in which Black and white people would exist in a state of equality, their world governed both

---

10. Katherine Franke, *Repair: Redeeming the Promise of Abolition* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019); Mary Frances Berry, *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); Ana Lucia Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery and the Slave Trade: A Transnational and Comparative History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 90-95; Roy E. Finkenbine, "Wendell Phillips and 'The Negro's Claim': A Neglected Reparations Document." *Massachusetts Historical Review* 7 (2005): 105–19; W. Caleb McDaniel, *Sweet Taste of Liberty: A True Story of Slavery and Restitution in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

by equal civil and political rights and an equitable distribution of economic resources. Land redistribution was a policy aimed at the creation of just sort a society.

This thesis is an attempt to place the issue of land redistribution squarely within the abolitionist conception of freedom. This was a conception of freedom that meant not only the destruction of slavery for freed people, but the construction of a just, egalitarian society in the reconstructed nation.<sup>11</sup> Methodologically, it insists that we take this history seriously as intellectual history. Abolitionists were not only political actors: They were the leading theorists of what freedom would mean in America after the abolition of slavery. Closely examining their arguments for land reform—including those dealing with natural rights and antimonopoly—allows for a better understanding of their political philosophy, and how it fits into the long tradition of Americans fighting to secure economic and social justice. This history must also be situated within a chronology of political developments concerning land redistribution during Reconstruction. Unlike many other problems of intellectual history, the debates over the meaning of freedom at America’s second founding had enormous material ramifications, specifically for the four million Black southerners whose security and independence hung in the balance. For some time, the various justifications for land redistribution united disparate groups of abolitionists around it as a common goal essential to genuine emancipation. But with an

---

11. Not all historians agree that “freedom” was the central American value around which 19th century political dynamics were situated. Jill Lepore, in her recent American history survey *These Truths*, emphasizes “human rights” instead, citing the words of abolitionist Charles Sumner. Even more recently, Daniel R. Mandell describes Reconstruction as the swan song of an American tradition of “economic equality.” This thesis does not enter into these broad debates, but rather takes “freedom” as the simplest antonym of “slavery”—the institution that the abolitionists fundamentally sought to destroy. Thus, appeals to economic equality and natural rights, both of which appear in abolitionist writings, this thesis will understand as part of a reckoning on the meaning of freedom for Black southerners and the nation as a whole. See Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), 313; Daniel R. Mandell, *The Lost Tradition of Economic Equality in America, 1600-1870* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 223-249.

increasing reluctance on the part of northern abolitionists to pursue land redistribution, as the Republican Congress failed to enact a policy of land reform, freed people in the South were left to fight for land ownership by other means, and the abolitionist conception of freedom was left incomplete.

At the outset, it is important to clarify my use of terms that are subjects of some historiographical debate. Under the umbrella of “abolitionists,” I include not only a group of white Protestants active in radical politics in the north, as James McPherson does in his two books on the abolitionists, *The Struggle for Equality* and *The Abolitionist Legacy*.<sup>12</sup> As I use it, this term includes enslaved persons and freed people themselves, whose acts of resistance to the institution of slavery and the southern planter class constituted the forward thrust of abolitionism from its earliest origins. This conception of abolitionism reflects the work of Manisha Sinha, whose volume *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* centers these actors within the movement to abolish slavery. Sinha insists that abolition was the work of a multiracial coalition whose goal was the advancement of radical democracy.<sup>13</sup> Her narrative, however, does not extend into the years after the Civil War, when the opportunity for constructing this radical democracy actually came in the aftermath of abolition. Examining the voices of a diverse group of actors in the abolitionist movement during Reconstruction does not only reflect historical reality: It also allows this thesis to consider the relative utility of various arguments for land redistribution for different people—not only what arguments were made, but *who* made them and for what purpose. Ultimately, doing so reveals interesting connections between the rhetoric of

---

12. McPherson explicitly describes the latter book as a study of “white racial attitudes” to fill in a gap he perceived in the literature at the time of writing. See McPherson, *Abolitionist Legacy*, 5-6.

13. Sinha, *Slave’s Cause*, 1-5.

abolitionists from many different backgrounds, and shows that together, they articulated a cohesive philosophy of freedom of which land redistribution was an essential part.

Another consideration that must be dealt with up front is the scope of land reform as a political issue. While historians like McPherson, Carol Faulkner, and Sean Griffin include within this scope efforts by northern individuals and associations to buy swaths of land and establish collectivist communities with freed people, or simply rent the land to them, I focus mainly on the movement's advocacy of a national policy of land redistribution.<sup>14</sup> These philanthropic experiments provide helpful context for the abolitionist movement's advocacy of land redistribution, and show its commitment to secure land for freedmen even by means other than government action. But they fall outside the scope of this project, which attempts to understand the abolitionists' advocacy of a new American society founded on justice and egalitarianism, made possible through land redistribution as policy.

To understand abolitionist attitudes toward land redistribution, my source base consists primarily of newspapers and journals published by abolitionists. Publications like the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* contained news articles, editorials, and transcripts of convention proceedings in which abolitionists discussed land redistribution in speech and in print. These sources not only shed light on the attitudes of abolitionist leaders toward land redistribution and other causes: They provide clues about how the people reading them thought about these issues. Voices that are often left out of these sources, however, are just as important to understanding the attitudes of the abolitionist movement as a whole—in particular, the voices of freed people. In writing this thesis, I had to contend with the fact that many of the most important archival

---

14. McPherson, *Abolitionist Legacy*, 75-77; Carol Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen's Aid Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 100-116; Sean Griffin, "Antislavery Utopias: Communitarian Labor Reform and the Abolitionist Movement." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8, No. 2, (June 2018), 243-68.

collections of Black voices during this era—including the Freedmen’s Bureau Field Office Records at the National Archives and a wide array of local and state records across the South—were inaccessible due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In their place, the published primary source documents compiled by the Freedmen and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland, especially their multivolume *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1877*, were invaluable. Including Freedmen’s Bureau records, private letters, and other materials otherwise only available in archives that are now closed, these volumes allow us to read the words of freed people as organic intellectuals who offered a vision of freedom that drove struggles for land redistribution in the Reconstruction era.

My first chapter introduces the issue of land reform and its relationship to the abolitionist movement during the antebellum and Civil War years. It traces the early influence of labor leaders and land reformers on the abolition movement, and examines how abolitionists articulated the need for confiscation and redistribution of southern land during the Civil War. It argues that land redistribution was a central element of the abolitionist imagination in the years before Reconstruction, in anticipation of the struggles of Reconstruction itself.

My second chapter uses South Carolina as a case study to examine how freed people and their representatives engaged in these struggles at the state and local level. South Carolina was home to the most successful experiments in radical land policy of the Reconstruction era, including the only state-run agency to redistribute land to freedmen: the South Carolina Land Commission. By examining how freed people articulated their expectation of land ownership, and how their representatives translated this expectation into policy, we can better understand their demands as the driving intellectual force behind the abolitionist movement.

My third chapter explains the different arguments abolitionists made on behalf of land redistribution, including arguments about material necessity, natural rights, land monopoly, and the benefits of a more equitable distribution of land for the future of the nation. It argues that by appealing to these disparate justifications, which concerned both the welfare of freed people and the just design of the whole nation, land redistribution was a demand that united abolitionists of diverse backgrounds around a shared vision of a more just, egalitarian, and free society.

Finally, my fourth chapter deals with how the abolitionist movement ultimately split over the issue of land reform. As early as 1869 and certainly by 1872, amid the failure of Congress to deliver land reform, it seemed to some abolitionists that the opportunity for federal land redistribution had all but disappeared. An increasing reluctance on the part of some white northerners to continue in its pursuit left Black abolitionists to engage in their own struggles for economic justice. These are struggles that, in many ways, continue to this day.

## ***Chapter 1: “Your slaveholder is ever a land monopolist”***

### *Land Redistribution in the Abolitionist Movement Before Reconstruction*

By the time the American Anti-Slavery Society voted to disband itself in 1870, at least a majority of its members felt it had achieved what it set out to do nearly forty years earlier. They had ample reason to celebrate: They had influenced and borne witness to a radical transformation of American institutions in a relatively brief period of time. Not only had chattel slavery been abolished, which was of course the most essential goal of the abolitionist movement, but freedmen had also secured citizenship, the equal protection of the laws, and the right to vote by constitutional amendment. While these achievements and others were monumental enough to amount to the nation’s second founding, America had not caught up to the abolitionists’ vision of freedom entirely, either in theory or in practice. For decades, many in the movement had also considered the redistribution of land in the South a necessary corollary of abolition, though it was an element of the abolitionist program which was left mostly unrealized. Land redistribution of some sort attracted support from across the spectrum of abolitionist thought. Not only at various points did it unite those committed to political action and those who preached moral suasion, but even more importantly, it was the shared striving of northern radicals and freed people fighting their own abolitionist battles on the ground in the South. By tracing this idea to its origins, and examining what precisely abolitionists *had* set out to do earlier in their history, we can better understand how the issue of land reform weighed on struggles for freedom during Reconstruction and beyond.

At first, land reform was part of a broader vision of social reform to which abolitionists contributed. The 1840s saw a fruitful alliance between political abolitionists and a burgeoning labor movement in New York and New England which marked the earliest confluence of land

reform and abolition. At the center of this alliance was the journalist and labor leader George Henry Evans, whose National Reform Association sought to create a broad working-class coalition to advocate a more equitable distribution of land. Born in England and trained in the printshops of Ithaca, New York, Evans had come of age in the 1820s, a time of economic crisis ripe for radical reappraisals of property rights and distributive justice. The writings of Thomas Paine were particularly influential on the young Evans, including the 1797 pamphlet “Agrarian Justice,” which held that vast inequality in the distribution of land ownership was injurious to the natural rights of man.<sup>15</sup> Drawing on principles from Paine and contemporaries like Thomas Skidmore, Evans led National Reform to propose a national homestead program and an upper limit on the accumulation of individual landed property. But these ambitions were not limited to the benefit of the largely white, urban, and wage-laboring constituency that Evans spoke for most directly. Underscoring them was a general desire to improve the condition of all laborers, including Black enslaved persons. According to Evans, enslaved persons not only had “a natural and moral right to take possession of themselves, but of land enough to live upon.”<sup>16</sup> Land reform, in Evans’ mind, would serve as the catalyst for a multiracial working-class politics that would secure a greater degree of economic equality for all.

Primarily an organizer of white laborers in the North rather than an advocate for enslaved persons in the South, Evans did not share the same hierarchy of priorities as followers of William Lloyd Garrison, whose influential paper *The Liberator* indicted slavery as the central moral issue of the time. But his earnest antislavery convictions earned him a willing partner in Gerrit Smith,

---

15. Mark Lause, *Young America: Land, Labor, and the Republican Community* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 10-12; Sinha, *Slave’s Cause*, 352-53; Thomas Paine, “Agrarian Justice...” [1797], in Ian Shapiro and Jane E. Calvert, eds., *Selected Writings of Thomas Paine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 552-67.

16. George Henry Evans, “Rejoinder to Gerrit Smith”, *The People’s Rights*, July 24, 1844, quoted in Lause, *Young America*, 80.



one of the most radical of the political abolitionists. Their collaboration, which culminated in Smith's run for President on the Liberty Party ticket in 1848 with the formal support of National Reform, resulted in an exchange of ideas that would leave a lasting influence on both the abolition and labor movements. One abolitionist editor wrote in 1849 that "We wish that every Land Reformer were an Abolitionist and every Abolitionist a Land Reformer," attesting to the ties of ideological affinity between the two groups and their leaders.<sup>17</sup> The benefits of such an alliance were mutual: Abolitionists were able to promote antislavery solidarity among a white working class that might otherwise be made to view freed people as competitors, and the land reformers were able to convince many abolitionist leaders that land redistribution was directly related to their antislavery aims. Smith came to view land monopoly as an essential dimension of the institution of slavery, one whose undoing would be necessary for slavery's undoing. "Abolish Slavery to-morrow, and Land Monopoly would pave the way for its re-establishment," Smith wrote, "But abolish Land Monopoly—make every American citizen the owner of a farm adequate to his necessity—and there will be no room for the return of slavery."<sup>18</sup> Smith's observations would turn out to be prophetic of the positions of many freed people after emancipation, without access to land or jobs other than those under the dominion of their former enslavers. Even at this early stage, the unity of purpose between land reform and abolition convinced some abolitionists with both political and evangelical motivations to voice support for land redistribution.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1840s and early 1850s, Smith was a genuinely unique case among abolitionists. Not willing to wait for the nation to accede to abolitionist demands, he took matters into his own

---

17. *Salem (Ohio) Anti-Slavery Bugle*, July 6, 1849, quoted in Lause, *Young America*, 95.

18. "Letter of Gerrit Smith" [from *Young America*], *Voice of Industry*, Nov. 20, 1846, quoted in Lause, *Young America*, 78.

19. Sinha, *Slave's Cause*, 353.

hands, embarking on an ambitious plan to purchase the freedom of enslaved persons and provide land for them in integrated communities in upstate New York.<sup>20</sup> Many abolitionist leaders were not convinced of the relevance of land reform to their work as immediately as he was. Wendell Phillips and Frederick Douglass each asserted that National Reform was an unnecessary diversion when pressed to support it by Evans and his followers.<sup>21</sup> The use of the term “wage slavery” by land reformers may have been particularly problematic for these leaders, as it was for Garrison, with its implicit equation of the condition of wage laborers with that of chattel slaves.<sup>22</sup> By the early 1850s, however, the language of land reform was regularly appropriated by the abolitionist movement for its own purposes. Regular editorials supporting land reform appeared in many abolitionist newspapers across the country, and the anti-slavery lecture circuit featured speakers well-versed not only in denouncing slavery but also in promoting agrarian reform.<sup>23</sup> As one ally of Evans’s recollected, Phillips himself came to view land reform as an essential abolitionist priority, a position which grew even more explicit during the Civil War.<sup>24</sup>

Even Douglass, who was initially forceful in his denunciation of National Reform in relation to abolitionism, appeared to change course by 1856, when two incendiary editorials appeared in *Frederick Douglass’s Paper* castigating the concentration of landed wealth in the hands of a few as a threat to the liberty of slave and free person alike. “Wealth has ever been the tool of the tyrant, the readiest means by which liberty is overthrown,” Douglass wrote. The

---

20. John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 135; Lynne Feeley, “The Elevationists: Gerrit Smith, Black Agrarianism, and Land Reform in 1840s New York.” *Environmental History* 24, no. 2 (April 2019): 307-326.

21. Lause, *Young America*, 74.

22. Sinha, *Slave’s Cause*, 349-50.

23. Lause, *Young America*, 95.

24. Joshua K. Ingalls, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian in the Fields of Industrial and Social Reform* (New York: Holbrook & Co., 1897), quoted in Lause, *Young America*, 74; James McPherson, *Struggle for Equality*, 249-52.

accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few, he declared, would be “the lever by which, eventually and certainly, the liberties gained in a simpler age will be overthrown.” But Douglass was not content to offer just a general indictment of concentrated economic power for the danger it posed to republican liberty. Echoing the National Reform-abolitionist platform of the previous decade, he insisted that this conviction be reflected in policy. He urged both a land limitation law and “an act conferring upon the settlers of the public domain the possession of their land, and defending them against land sharks and speculators.” As Smith had insisted a decade earlier, Douglass came to understand that a lasting abolition would require a radical redistribution of southern land ownership. “We believe that with land limitation Slavery would be impossible,” Douglass offered, before making the bold declaration: “Your slaveholder is ever a land monopolist.”<sup>25</sup> With statements like these to support it, land reform was no longer just the subject of a convenient political alliance with northern labor, but an integral part of the abolitionist agenda itself.<sup>26</sup>

Even if a general consensus emerged among abolitionists that land reform was necessary in connection with the goals of abolition, it was not yet clear exactly what form it would take,

---

25. *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Aug. 15, Nov. 28, 1856, reprinted in *Jacobin*, Feb. 20, 2020, <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/02/frederick-douglass-accumulation-wealth-land-reformer>.

26. As of late, there has been much historiographical debate over Douglass’s economic thought. In David Blight’s 2018 biography *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, no mention is made of Douglass’s endorsement of land reform, instead emphasizing Douglass’s political liberalism. More recent research by Matt Karp has unearthed these two radical editorials from *Frederick Douglass’s Paper* in the archives at Yale University, which he suggests may reflect the influence of Julia Griffiths, a close advisor of Douglass’s who was previously active in the Chartist movement in Britain. Of all the Douglass scholars I could find, Waldo Martin summed up his attitude toward land reform best: “Even though there were important differences among land reformers and between land reformers and their opponents that Douglass thought merited serious study, he agreed in principle with all who flatly opposed land monopolies as unjust and immoral.” See David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018); Matt Karp, “Frederick Douglass’ Paper,” *Jacobin*, February 20, 2020, <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/02/frederick-douglass-accumulation-wealth-land-reformer>; Waldo E. Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 186.

and what relation it would have to the powers of government. Especially in the Garrisonian wing of the movement, a fervent religious commitment to the principle of noncoercion preempted widespread support for the forcible confiscation and redistribution of southern land.<sup>27</sup> Rather than calling for a policy-driven defeat of the southern landed aristocracy, some Garrisonians expressed their opposition to unequal land distribution by establishing cooperative communities based on the ideas of French utopian socialist Charles Fourier.<sup>28</sup> Even outside this minority of abolitionists, though, a general mistrust of state power characterized the orientation of many in the movement throughout the antebellum years.<sup>29</sup> Without a clear consensus on the means by which land reform was to be achieved, abolitionists would wait until more opportune moments to articulate specific policies of land redistribution.

These moments came during the Civil War years, when early experiments in military Reconstruction offered a real possibility for a radical reordering of economic and social relations on former Confederate lands. However hazy abolitionist proposals for land redistribution were in the antebellum years, they grew both in clarity and in frequency nearly as soon as the war started. As early as May 1861, abolitionists began publishing editorials urging the military confiscation of land and its redistribution among freed people.<sup>30</sup> More detailed and more broadly supported proposals of a similar nature followed. Abolitionist Elizur Wright published a comprehensive proposal for Reconstruction before even the Confiscation Act of 1862 was passed, urging a policy of taxation as a means to confiscate Confederate property and redistribute

---

27. James Huston, "Abolitionists, Political Economists, and Capitalism." *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Autumn, 2000), 520-521; Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998)

28. Sinha, *Slave's Cause*, 354; Sean Griffin, "Antislavery Utopias: Communitarian Labor Reform and the Abolitionist Movement." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8, no. 2 (June 2018): 243-68.

29. Huston, "Abolitionists, Political Economists, and Capitalism," 520, f78.

30. McPherson, *Struggle for Equality*, 247.

it to loyal southerners, Black and white alike.<sup>31</sup> Even the American Anti-Slavery Society, long an organization of noncoercive Garrisonians, passed a resolution in May 1863 urging President Lincoln to authorize the “immediate confiscation, as far and as fast as is practicable, of all rebel lands, and all other rebel property, and the preëmption of homesteads in the rebel territory for all freedmen, and such as shall hereafter become free.”<sup>32</sup> Wendell Phillips also began to include the necessity of land for freedmen as a cornerstone of his orations, relaying the belief of many a freed person that land was “the symbol that he was free.”<sup>33</sup> In each of these statements, the abolitionist position combined elements of agrarian antimonopoly, military urgency, and reparative justice to argue that the time had come not only for slavery’s abolition, but for a comprehensive land redistribution policy to substantiate and sustain it.

These calls were powerful, and they were heard in the halls of Congress, where radical Republicans sympathetic to abolitionist priorities fought hard to secure land for freed people in two ways. Congressman George Julian of Indiana, a prominent abolitionist and land reformer who had shepherded the Homestead Act of 1862 through Congress, introduced legislation to expand that law to provide homesteads for freed people and other loyal southerners.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania waged a war for the confiscation of Confederate land, harboring a deep abhorrence of the slaveholding aristocracy and an aim of establishing the conditions for real democracy in the South.<sup>35</sup> Both of these policies reflected the belief common to abolitionists that the enduring concentration of landed property in the hands of a few white

---

31. Elizur Wright, *The Programme of Peace* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1862).

32. *The Liberator*, May 29, 1863

33. *The New York Times*, Jan. 22, 1863

34. McPherson, *Struggle for Equality*, 255-56.

35. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 235-236.

southerners would pose a threat to the successes of emancipation and the health of the American republic.

For freed people, however, demands for land redistribution to substantiate their newly won freedom were matters less of republican ideology than of immediate necessity. One early example illuminates the “land hunger” that Du Bois described in terms that are at once plain and profound.<sup>36</sup> In January 1865, a group of freedmen met with General William Tecumseh Sherman in Savannah, Georgia after his army had taken control of the South Carolina and Georgia coasts. Garrison Frazier, a 67-year-old minister whom the group chose as their representative, testified that “The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor—that is, by the labor of the women and children and old men; and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare.” Having land of their own, freed people would be better able to exercise their newly won freedom, which Frazier conceived of as “taking us from under the yoke of bondage, and placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor, take care of ourselves and assist the Government in maintain our freedom.”<sup>37</sup> The connection between abolition and the distribution of land ownership that had characterized abolitionist rhetoric for decades was here made personal, distilled into a clear-eyed statement of necessity. Freed people, the most vital of all abolitionists, insisted that the conditions of their freedom could only be substantiated with economic independence through land ownership.

Shortly after meeting with Frazier, Sherman issued his Special Field Order No. 15, which divided the coastal territory under his supervision into 40-acre tracts and distributed it to freed people. This was one of many efforts at land redistribution that was either narrowly localized,

---

36. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 601.

37. Minutes of an Interview between the Colored Ministers and Church Officers at Savannah with the Secretary of War and Major-Gen. Sherman, Jan. 12, 1865, in Ira Berlin et al eds., *Free At Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 310-318.

weakened, or revoked by the end of Reconstruction. But despite the successes and failures of particular land policies, there was no doubt that land redistribution had permeated every element of the abolitionist conception of freedom by the end of the Civil War. Abolitionists of many backgrounds drew an inextricable link between the vastly unequal distribution of land in the slave South and the institution of slavery, and insisted that one could not be undone without the other. The perseverance of this conviction among abolitionists would be tested as Reconstruction went on and new dimensions of struggle emerged.

**Chapter 2: “I want to see the State alive”**

*Appeals for Land Redistribution in Reconstruction South Carolina*

Frazier’s powerful appeal to Sherman was a climactic moment that helped to define the meaning of freedom after the defeat of the southern slave society: one that would require an active effort on the part of the nation to redistribute land through the authority of the federal government. But despite this event’s extraordinary moral and practical clarity, it was but one instant in the much larger story of freed people’s efforts secure land for themselves and their progeny in the post-emancipation South. Many of the most important developments in this story occurred in South Carolina. This state, which had been the first to secede from the Union following the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, also played host to the most radical and egalitarian experiments in land redistribution of the Reconstruction era. In what Willie Lee Rose famously called a “rehearsal for Reconstruction,” the Port Royal Experiment during the Civil War had some success at redistributing land to freedmen on the Sea Islands off the state’s southeastern coast, though its efficacy was somewhat compromised by the involved interests of northern capital.<sup>38</sup> In 1865, Sherman issued his order to redistribute land in 40-acre tracts in the same region, an order that would be soon revoked by Andrew Johnson. In spite of the failures of private investment and Presidential Reconstruction, the delegates to the state’s 1868 constitutional convention—nearly two-thirds of whom were Black—made land redistribution a central topic in the debates about the nature of freedom in the reconstructed state.<sup>39</sup> What

---

38. Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Oxford, 1976)

39. Monroe N. Work, Thomas S. Staples, H. A. Wallace, Kelly Miller, Whitefield McKinlay, Samuel E. Lacy, R. L. Smith, and H. R. McIlwaine. “Some Negro Members of Reconstruction Conventions and Legislatures and of Congress.” *The Journal of Negro History* 5, no. 1 (1920): 63–119; Carol K. Rothrock Bleser, *The Promised Land: The History of the South Carolina Land Commission, 1869-1890* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1969), 19.



resulted from these debates was the South Carolina Land Commission, the only state-run agency established during Reconstruction with the express purpose of redistributing land to freed people. Given the outsized importance of these developments to the history of the “real emancipation of the slaves” that Du Bois envisioned, examining the arguments made by Black South Carolinians for land redistribution is essential for any picture of the abolitionist campaign for land redistribution during Reconstruction.<sup>40</sup>

As the scholarship of Steven Hahn has made clear, examining the political activity of southern freed people requires a more expansive definition of the word *politics* than that which can be seen only in constitutional conventions, legislative chambers, and political campaigns, especially in the years before the right to vote was secured. Without preordained political institutions that freed people could control, ad-hoc committees, Union League organizations, word-of-mouth communication networks within families and communities, and acts of resistance large and small to the labor system and social order facilitated their exchange of political information and were their venues of political action.<sup>41</sup> These sorts of political action were also the ways in which many freed people engaged in their struggle for land ownership. Following the devastating betrayal of October 1865, when Andrew Johnson revoked Sherman’s order to redistribute land in the Sea Islands, the profound disappointment that many freed people felt had its clearest expression through just such an ad-hoc committee. On Edisto Island, one of the Sea Islands on which freed people had possessed land since Confederates abandoned their plantations in 1861, a committee of three men—Henry Bram, Ishmael Moultrie, and Yates Sampson—was formed to respond to the news. Writing to General O. O. Howard, the commissioner of the

---

40. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 601.

41. See Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

Freedmen’s Bureau, they pleaded: “General we want Homestead’s; we were promised Homestead’s by the government.” By breaking such a promise, the committee indicated, the American government had lost the faith of freed people. Owning land was a matter of necessity, one that had been recognized and assured to them by Sherman’s order. But with the order now revoked, “we are at the mercy of those who are combined to prevent us from getting land enough to lay our Fathers bones upon”—that is, not only former plantation owners and other white southerners, but also those Republicans who supported neither land redistribution schemes nor racial equality beyond the abolition of slavery. In such a situation, thousands of freed people were left homeless, with nowhere else to turn other than employment by their former masters. “You will see this Is not the condition of really freemen,” the committee stated.<sup>42</sup> Not only was land the *symbol* that a slave was now free, as Wendell Phillips had said: For freed people on the ground in the South, it was an immediate practical *condition* of freedom.

The Edisto Island committee indicated that land ownership was not just a matter of immediate need, but one of equal justice and natural rights. A labor theory of property led John Locke, a central figure of the modern natural rights tradition, to determine that “As much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property.”<sup>43</sup> Though they may have never read the English philosopher, the three men made a remarkably similar claim in a letter directly to Johnson: “Here is were we have toiled nearly all Our lives as slaves and were treated like dumb Driven cattle,” they wrote. “This is our home, we have made These lands what they are.” The land that Johnson sought to restore to former enslavers was land

---

42. Committee of Freedmen on Edisto Island, South Carolina, to the Freedmen's Bureau Commissioner [October 20 or 21, 1865], published in Steven Hahn, ed., *Land and Labor: 1865. Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 440-441. I have preserved the quoted text as published in this volume.

43. John Locke, “The Second Treatise of Government” in David Wootton, ed., *John Locke: Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 276.

on which Black South Carolinians had lived and worked for years, both as enslaved persons and as free people. Surely, their labor had established their right to remain there as its rightful owners, in accordance with the property rights that they identified as a hallmark of American national identity. “Shall not we who Are freedman and have been always true to this Union have the same rights as are enjoyed by Others?” they asked. “Have we forfeited our rights of property In Land?”

This language of rights laid the groundwork for an antimonopoly critique of Presidential Reconstruction. The land that was rightfully theirs, the committee suggested, would remain unjustly concentrated in the hands of a few should it be restored to its former owners. The consequences would be disastrous for the prospects of their freedom. “God fobid, Land monopoly is injurious to the advancement of the course of freedom, and if government Does not make some provision by which we as Freedmen can obtain A Homestead, we have Not bettered our condition.” The claim that Gerrit Smith made three decades earlier (“Abolish Slavery tomorrow, and Land Monopoly would pave the way for its re-establishment”) was put here in personal terms: With the enduring dominance of the southern planter class in land ownership, even under a system of wage labor, the abolition of slavery had not yet been fully achieved.<sup>44</sup>

Over the next three years, though South Carolina remained under military occupation, much of its emancipated population remained without land of their own, forced to labor for white landowners. What ensued was nothing short of a humanitarian crisis. As one freedman, Kelly Mosses, wrote to a Freedman’s Bureau official of work on a nearby plantation, “they all agreed that they cant not Live at the third for If they worke at the third another year they children and

---

44. Committee of Freedmen on Edisto Island, South Carolina, to the President, October 28, 1865, in Hahn, ed., *Land and Labor* 1865, 443. I have preserved the quoted text as it was published in this volume.

them Self must starve with Honger and with nakedness.” The solution, Mosses argued, was government action to make good on the promises of emancipation through land redistribution. “They all concluded if the goverment will help them this year according to the promis they would at wants [*once*] go and ocapy the Land in Florida at wants.”<sup>45</sup> Though Mosses referred to a plot of public land in Florida as his community’s favored destination, others wanted their land right at home in South Carolina. As leaders of the reconstructed state met to write a new constitution, they had the ability to push for land redistribution within the state so as to fulfill this urgent objective.

The leading advocate of land redistribution at the 1868 constitutional convention was the journalist and minister Richard Harvey Cain. Born free in 1825 to a Cherokee mother and an African father, Cain spent most of his early life in the north, before moving to South Carolina as one of the many missionaries to descend upon the state after the war’s end. Taking up residence in Charleston, he became the editor of its most important Black newspaper, the *Missionary Record*, and was a leader of the Emmanuel A.M.E. Church in that city.<sup>46</sup> Though he had never been held as an enslaved person, nor was he a native South Carolinian, Cain showed himself to be deeply connected to the demands made by freed people when on February 13, 1868, he proposed to the convention a resolution to petition Congress for \$1 million, to go toward purchasing plantation land and redistributing it among freed people throughout the state.<sup>47</sup> The

---

45. South Carolina Freedman to the South Carolina Freedmen’s Bureau Assistant Commissioner, Nov. 21, 1866, published in René Hayden, ed. *Land and Labor: 1866-1867*. Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 948. I have preserved the text as it was published in this volume.

46. Eric Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 35-36; Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction, 1861-1877* (Hanover, N.H: University Press of New England, 1990), 190; Bleser, *Promised Land*, 19-20.

47. *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of South Carolina*. (Charleston, S.C.: Denny & Perry, 1868), 360.

resolution, though it ended up passing with 101 votes in favor and only 5 against, was not met without controversy. Charles P. Leslie, a white carpetbagger from the north, objected to Cain's proposal at length, claiming that to endorse such a petition when its success was unlikely would amount to giving the freed people of the state a false sense of hope for federal land redistribution. Cain's replies to Leslie are documents emblematic of a range of arguments employed to urge such a federal policy, and they demand close reading for their political and intellectual significance.

Like Frazier, Cain portrayed land redistribution as a matter of immediate necessity to the freed person seeking shelter, subsistence, and economic independence from their former masters. After the abolition of slavery, freed people remained deeply poor, and in an agrarian society such as the South Carolina of 1868, land was the indispensable economic resource needed to lift them out of poverty. "I know from my experience among the people," Cain reported, "there is pressing need of some measures to meet the wants of the utterly destitute ... This is a measure of relief to those thousands of freed people who now have no lands of their own."<sup>48</sup>

Beyond the immediate necessity of a homestead program for freed people, Cain also made a novel argument about land redistribution as a boon to the state's economy. "This measure, if carried out, will bring capital to the state and stimulate the poor to renewed efforts in life, such as they never had before," he predicted. In turn, this injection of capital could help relieve the debt of then-current landholders, and an industrious spirit would lend the post-slavery economic life of the state a new vitality: "If [freed people] possess lands they have an interest in the soil, in the State, in its commerce, its agriculture, and in everything pertaining to the wealth and welfare of the state." Not only would land redistribution stimulate South Carolina's

---

48. *Proceedings*, 378-379.

struggling economy: It would be a measure to fully incorporate freed people into the body politic. Such a statement combined a practical assessment of land redistribution's economic benefits for Black and white people alike with the Lockean and Jeffersonian notion that one's involvement in a political society is rooted in the protection of their property—the feeling that they *own* a part of the state and see that it is well maintained. Such a feeling, Cain insisted, could only take hold in a society of small independent producers on their own land, made possible by the division of large plantations into homesteads: “We want these large tracts of land cut up. The land is productive, and there is nothing to prevent the greatest and highest prosperity. What we need is a system of small farms. Every farmer owning his own land will feel he is in the possession of something. It will have a tendency to settle the minds of the people in the State and settle many difficulties.”<sup>49</sup>

But the political and economic benefits that a system of small farms would entail were not ends unto themselves: In Cain's address, they would support an almost utopian vision of what land redistribution in South Carolina might achieve at its best—a genuine multiracial democracy:

“If this measure is carried out, the results will be that we will see all along our lines of railroad and State roads little farms, log cabins filled with happy families, and thousands of families coming on the railroads with their products. ... Prosperity will return to the State, by virtue of the people being happy, bound to the Government by a tie that cannot be broken. ... I want to see the State alive, to hear the hum of the spindle and the mills. I want to see cattle and horses, and fowls, and everything that makes up a happy home and family. I want to see the people shout with joy and gladness. There shall then be no antagonism between white men and black men, but we shall all realize the end of our being, and realize that we are all

---

49. *Proceedings*, 380.

made to dwell upon the earth in peace and happiness. The white man and the black man may then work in harmony, and secure prosperity to all coming generations.”<sup>50</sup>

The defining feature of such a vista was not its economic structure, nor even its patterns of land ownership—though both of those were necessary as means to secure its distinctive characteristic. What made this a truly original political imagination was the end toward which it was oriented: an emphasis on the understanding that “we are all made to dwell upon the earth in peace and happiness.” This was a society intended to allow for peace, security, and harmony between people, and a move beyond the entrenched racism and resultant divisions that plagued American society. Its creation, according to abolitionists like Cain, would require land redistribution in the southern states.

Upon the ultimate admission that Congress would neither accede to the petition’s request nor establish a comprehensive land redistribution policy at the national level, the Constitutional Convention realized that the state’s best bet was to enact a land redistribution program of its own. They appended an ordinance to the resulting state constitution which authorized the legislature to create a Board of Commissioners of Public Lands, which would have the authority “to purchase at public sales or otherwise, improved and unimproved real estate within this State ... to be surveyed and laid off into suitable tracts, to be sold to actual settlers.”<sup>51</sup> This program would go on to be eminently successful in redistributing land to freed people, and was the only agency of its type at the state level during Reconstruction. Over 70,000 individuals are estimated to have benefited from the policy from its establishment until 1876, and its control by Black

---

50. *Proceedings*, 382.

51. *The Constitution of the State of South Carolina: with the ordinances thereunto appended: adopted by the Constitutional Convention, which was held at Charleston, and adjourned on the 17th March, 1868.* (Charleston, S.C.: Denny & Perry, 1868). Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive, Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.

secretaries of state after the abolition of the land commissioner post in 1872, which had been dominated by white northerners, was a period of particular success.<sup>52</sup> Northern abolitionists recognized the Land Commission's potential: One remarked in April 1868 of the state's new constitution that "It is one of the best yet made"; the editors of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* wrote in January 1870 that "Every State ... should have a Land Commission as good, or better, than the one already at work in South Carolina."<sup>53</sup>

Freed people and their representatives, in South Carolina as elsewhere, were not only advocates of egalitarian land policies: By linking land redistribution to a distinctive vision of American society, they were also the abolitionist movement's indispensable organic intellectuals. They both articulated a dire need for land ownership as a basic condition of freedom in a reconstructed South, and at the same time spoke to larger questions about what a more equitable distribution of economic resources could achieve in the cause of human freedom. In doing so, they laid the clearest blueprint for how the nation might act; but as similar debates played out on the national stage, they were met with far more scattershot results.

---

52. Bleser, *Promised Land*, 159, xiv.

53. *NASS*, April 25, 1868, January 8, 1870.



**Chapter 3: “Incalculable benefits to the whole people”**  
*The Abolitionist Case for Land Redistribution*

At the national level, as in South Carolina, abolitionists conceived of land reform as an essential element of Reconstruction, just as important to the project of freedom as securing voting rights and education for freed people. Wendell Phillips declared in 1868 that “The theory of proper reconstruction is that the masses of the South, black and white, shall have land, education and the ballot.”<sup>54</sup> This so-called “trinity of beneficence,” the most succinct statement of the abolitionist agenda for Reconstruction, was repeatedly cited in movement publications in the years following the Civil War.<sup>55</sup> But by prioritizing land reform equally alongside these other vital struggles, abolitionists portrayed it as much more than an act of relief: They saw it as a step towards the construction of a fundamentally new society in the South. The arguments they employed to make the case for land redistribution reflected this vision. On one level, they argued that land redistribution could provide freed people with the material conditions of freedom, allowing them to exercise their rights without fear of poverty or intimidation. But in a larger sense, land redistribution would enable a just and egalitarian multiracial society to take hold in America—one defined by a respect for natural rights, an equitable distribution of land, and an economy of small independent producers on their own homesteads, unencumbered by monopolists. Through their arguments for land redistribution on these grounds, both Black and white abolitionists articulated a cohesive philosophy of freedom, the ambitions of which

---

54. *NASS*, August 29, 1868.

55. *NASS*, July 27, 1867. See also *NASS*, June 8, 1867, May 23, August 29, 1868, April 9, 1870. After the ballot was secured through the 15th Amendment, this slogan became “Protection, Education, and Land,” with land redistribution continuing to hold an important place in the minds of many abolitionists.

amounted to nothing less than a reimagination of the American political, economic, and social order.

Despite the sweeping implications of this grand vision, the most urgent argument for land redistribution rested on a material basis: the immediate necessity of a homestead for the economic security and independence of freed people.<sup>56</sup> As the abolitionist Stephen Symonds Foster put it, land was the “first need” of freed people.<sup>57</sup> Land ownership in an agrarian society like the postbellum South was a matter of subsistence. Without land of their own on which stake their livelihoods, freed people would remain the victims of hunger and homelessness. Kelly Mosses indicated as much when he wrote that without land, freed people “them Self must starve with Honger and with nakedness.”<sup>58</sup>

Freed people repeated this claim with the same sense of urgency throughout Reconstruction. According to one Freedmen’s Bureau official, those with whom he interacted often said that “if they could obtain their homesteads they could begin to cultivate the land immediately and soon raise the werewith to prevent starvation, but they are now not only hungry but homeless.”<sup>59</sup> These pleas were made out of desperation, as freed people faced a crisis of homelessness that is well documented in the Black newspapers of the era. One editor wrote that “the restoration of abandoned and confiscated lands is fast rendering houseless and homeless and

---

56. The word “homestead” in abolitionist thought did not only refer to tracts of public land settled under the provisions of the Homestead Act: It meant above all a home, a piece of land on which freed people could live and stake their livelihoods. In theory, freed people might access these homes under a number of different policies, including the confiscation and subdivision of lands formerly under private ownership. For more information on the importance of the concept of “home” in the Reconstruction period, see Richard J. White, *The Republic For Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 136-171.

57. *NASS*, May 15, 1869.

58. South Carolina Freedman to the South Carolina Freedmen’s Bureau Assistant Commissioner, Nov. 21, 1866, published in Hayden, ed. *Land and Labor: 1866-1867*, 948. I have preserved the text as it was published in this volume.

59. Spencer C. Osborn to Lieut. Allan H. Jackson, 1 June 1867, quoted in Hayden, ed. *Land and Labor: 1866-1867*, 978.

helpless thousands of these families.”<sup>60</sup> Another, from Atlanta, described critical efforts “to get homes for those in and out of the city before the cold winter finds them homeless, foodless and friendless.”<sup>61</sup>

In the face of this crisis, northern abolitionists often celebrated progress towards Black land ownership for the bare-minimum essentials of food, shelter, and income that land would provide. One abolitionist reporter from the north visiting Charleston, South Carolina in 1865 commended the repurposing of a Confederate ship for “planting the freedmen ... on their own homesteads ... [for] the cultivation of their own crops of cotton, rice, corn, and whatever else they and their families, or the world, may need.”<sup>62</sup> An emphasis on subsistence can also be witnessed in a May 1868 resolution of the American Anti-Slavery Society’s executive committee, which supported confiscation and redistribution on the grounds that it could furnish families with “a homestead of good land capable of saving its occupant from starving.” Such a policy, it declared, was “as important as the establishment of schools, and just now even more indispensable.”<sup>63</sup> Abolitionists recognized that without a roof to live under or food to eat, freed people would not be free from the oppressive threats of exposure and hunger.

Beyond subsistence, abolitionists portrayed land ownership as a necessity for freed people to achieve economic independence. After Andrew Johnson declared his proclamation of amnesty and ordered the restoration of Confederate property in 1865, the only land on which freed people could work, in many places, had been put back in the hands of their former enslavers. Indeed, the committee of freed people on Edisto Island, South Carolina wrote its October 1865 letter to General O. O. Howard fearful that they would be forced to sign labor

---

60. *The Freedmen’s Record*, Dec. 1, 1865.

61. *The Christian Recorder*, November 4, 1865.

62. *NASS*, March 25, 1865.

63. *NASS*, May 23, 1868.

contracts with their former enslavers.<sup>64</sup> Thaddeus Stevens noted this worrisome predicament in an 1867 speech supporting confiscation, which was read widely by abolitionists in the pages of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. He claimed that “homesteads to them are far more valuable than the immediate right of suffrage, though both are their due,” for “few of them [freed people] are mechanics, and none of them skilled manufacturers. They must necessarily, therefore, be the servants and the victims of others, unless they are made in some measure independent of their wiser neighbors.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, emancipating slaves without giving them land on which to provide for themselves would amount to little change from their previous condition of servitude. Unless made fully independent through land ownership, their only option would be to continue to work on the plantations of their former enslavers—a state of affairs incompatible with any sense of real freedom.

Because of its immediate material exigency, Stevens asserted that land redistribution was a policy of even more value to freed people than the right to vote in the early years of Reconstruction.<sup>66</sup> Land ownership could feed families in danger of imminent starvation; the right to vote, as important as it was to equality, could not. But in anticipation of the civil and political rights that were extended to freed people through the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments, the relationship of land reform to voting rights became less a question of relative importance than one of mutual reinforcement. Abolitionists framed land redistribution as a protective measure against the encroachment of voting rights: If freed people had homesteads, the argument went, they would be better able to protect their rights as political actors as a result of their independence from

---

64. Committee of Freedmen on Edisto Island, South Carolina, to the Freedmen's Bureau Commissioner, October 20 or 21, 1865, published in Hahn, ed., *Land and Labor: 1865*, 440-443. For more information, see Chapter 2.

65. *NASS*, March 23, 1867.

66. See also *NASS*, December 30, 1865, May 12, 1866.

white landlords and employers. “The negro will be able to defend himself and his ballot, standing on his own acres,” Phillips wrote in November 1867. The impeachment of Johnson and the concurrent expropriation of rebel land for homesteads for freed people was, in Phillips’s words, “a step necessary to guarding for the negro his rights.”<sup>67</sup> This appeal, of course, accompanied the converse argument in favor of voting rights: that by having the ballot, freed people would be able to better protect their property and economic independence as members of the body politic.<sup>68</sup>

These claims were, in one sense, pragmatic assessments of the conditions necessary for securing Black political agency in the South. But they also reflected an ideological conviction that civil and political rights could not be sustained in a post-slavery society without provisions for economic security. When abolitionists discussed voting rights and land redistribution in the same breath, as they often did, they pointed out how one without the other was not enough for real emancipation: As George Julian put it, “the ballot and homestead should go together.”<sup>69</sup> One 1869 editorial insisted that “It is not enough that the Government gives them the ballot; for that will serve but a partial good if they are to be but the tenants at will of their old oppressors, restored to their possessions.”<sup>70</sup> An 1870 resolution of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society drew an even more direct link between the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the need for land reform:

“We rejoice in the near prospect of the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, as that will fulfil the pledge we originally made to the black race, so far as law can do it, that we would obtain for them equal civil and political rights and privileges with the whites. ... We do not consider these rights secure until other guarantees than

---

67. *NASS*, November 16, 1867.

68. *NASS*, June 9, 1866.

69. *NASS*, January 20, February 17, 1866.

70. *NASS*, June 5, 1869.

those of parchment are obtained ... The voter in such circumstances as those of the negro race needs land to make him independent, and at the outset he needs pecuniary aid to enable him to plant himself on this.”<sup>71</sup>

These statements exemplify the abolitionists’ view that equal rights for Black and white Americans could not be attained without economic security for freed people. In particular, it would require that freed people have the independence afforded by owning land. As the Black abolitionist J. Willis Menard said in 1869, a homestead would allow freed people to “act as their conscience dictated” in matters both political and personal.<sup>72</sup> Such freedom of conscience was a critical aspect of the abolitionist vision for Reconstruction.

An emphasis on land ownership for the sake of protecting other rights was, however, only one dimension of abolitionist thought on this issue. Abolitionists also asserted that the land *itself* was the natural right of freed people. This was the rhetorical framework within which they advocated for land as reparations for slavery. The logic of reparations relied on a labor theory of property: Freed people and their ancestors before them had labored for two-hundred and fifty years on the land without compensation. This labor made the land their property not by grant, but by *right*. This was a right claimed by freed people and their allies in the North repeatedly throughout the Reconstruction era, and spoke to the type of society abolitionists hoped to create in the aftermath of abolition.

On one hand, these appeals grounded land redistribution within a framework of reparative justice. Scholars including Katherine Franke, Paul Ortiz, Roy E. Finkenbine, and Ana Lucia Aruajo have made important contributions to the literature on Reconstruction examining

---

71. *NASS*, February 5, 1870.

72. *NASS*, February 6, 1869.

post-emancipation struggles for land ownership on these terms.<sup>73</sup> Eric Foner suggests a similar argument when he posits that “In its most sophisticated form, the claim to land rested on an appreciation of the role blacks had played in the evolution of the American economy.”<sup>74</sup> But the appeals of abolitionists should be read not only as demands for reparations, but also as an organic extension of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century American natural rights tradition. This was a tradition that, as Daniel T. Rodgers points out, was “full of subversive possibilities,” and “a tool whose uses those on the margins of politics and power could not but be particularly quick to see.”<sup>75</sup> Freed people and their northern allies made extensive use of this tool. In it, they found themselves able to advocate radical proposals for land redistribution by employing language that was foundational to the American political creed. After all, many Americans would have recognized the language of natural rights as the focal point of the Declaration of Independence, whose notion of political equality was founded on a conception of “inalienable rights.”<sup>76</sup> The abolitionists viewed the right of freed people to the land on which they labored as no less inalienable, and even more foundational to the society they hoped to create.

Many abolitionists of different backgrounds expressed this view, but it was an argument that grew directly out of the lived experience of freed people, and one that these abolitionists employed to particularly captivating effect. The Edisto Island committee did as much when they

---

73. Katherine Franke, *Repair: Redeeming the Promise of Abolition* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019); Paul Ortiz, “The Reparations Demand in History” *Against The Current* 102 (January 2003); Roy E. Finkenbine, “Wendell Phillips and ‘The Negro’s Claim’: A Neglected Reparations Document.” *Massachusetts Historical Review* 7 (2005): 105–19; Ana Lucia Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery and the Slave Trade: A Transnational and Comparative History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 90-95.

74. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 105.

75. Rodgers, *Contested Truths*, 46-47.

76. For more information on the doctrine of rights in the Declaration of Independence, see Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014) and Michael P. Zuckert, *The Natural Rights Republic: Studies in the Foundation of the American Political Tradition* (Notre Dame, In.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996).

demand of Johnson, “Shall not we who Are freedman and have been always true to this Union have the same rights as are enjoyed by Others?” The equal rights to which the committee referred included their “rights of property In Land”; these rights, they insisted, ought to be “considered before the rights of those who were Found in rebellion against this good and just Government.”<sup>77</sup> Other freed people claimed this right by refusing to leave their land when Johnson ordered its restoration to their former enslavers.<sup>78</sup> They stayed out of necessity and of principle: They knew that they had *earned* the land, through generation after generation of uncompensated labor that had enriched their enslavers and formed the bedrock of the American economy. They were encouraged by abolitionists like Aaron Alpeoria Bradley, a Black man who had escaped from slavery only to return to Georgia as an advocate for freed people during Reconstruction. Bradley was arrested by Freedmen’s Bureau officials in 1865, charged with telling freed people that “to take the property of their former owners was not stealing, but that they ... had earned this property and it by right belonged to them.”<sup>79</sup> He and his followers were committed to the idea that they had a natural right to the land, and they were willing to engage in daring acts of disobedience to demonstrate it.

In 1865, freed people took such measures not only out of necessity or the demand for reparations, but also because of the widespread conviction among them that land redistribution was imminent as a matter of biblical justice. These “extravagant expectations” were fueled by

---

77. Committee of Freedmen on Edisto Island, South Carolina, to the President, October 28, 1865, published in Hahn, ed., *Land and Labor: 1865*, 443.

78. *NASS*, February 9, 1867: “The lands in question have been returned to their ante bellum owners; but the freedmen refused to give up their warrants, or to leave the lands; and being armed, have, it is reported, openly defied the authority of the Bureau officer whose business it was to dispossess them, and have posted pickets all around the island, and threaten to shoot any white man who shall dare to put his foot upon it.”

79. Order by the Commander of the District of Savannah, December 16, 1865, published Hahn, ed., *Land and Labor: 1865*, 468.



word-of-mouth rumors of, in Hahn's words, "a world turned wholly upside down either by government fiat or armed black insurrection."<sup>80</sup> Freed people believed that with emancipation, the day of Jubilee had come. This was the day, as Leviticus had ordained, that Moses would command the people of Israel: "you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family." With the coming of the Christmas season, freed people expected that the redistribution of the land would inevitably occur as a necessary element of emancipation. Their expectation of forty acres and a mule was representative of both their view of its necessity, and of their claim to it as a natural right. The biblical connotations of emancipation spoke to freed people's belief that land redistribution was the most natural expectation imaginable: The arrival of freedom would also mean the ownership of the land as their divine right.<sup>81</sup>

Though freed people who believed that widespread land redistribution would occur in the immediate aftermath of the war had their hopes dashed, they continued to claim the land as their natural right throughout Reconstruction, with the acute disappointment that the day of Jubilee had been delayed. One particularly compelling example is that of Glasgow Blackwell, a Virginia freedman who in 1869 expressed his frustration that the national government refused to protect his property rights. In doing so, he provided a lucid account of the organic natural rights philosophy that abolitionists used to advocate for land redistribution, beginning with the labor theory of property. Three years earlier, Blackwell had taken ninety acres of land under his possession, on which he raised a corn crop. "It was all to the commons then; but I have fenced it," he told the abolitionist Charlotte F. Putnam, "and improved it because I am a farmer born and bred, and understand about enriching the soil." Not only did he improve the land through his

---

80. Hahn, *Nation Under Our Feet*, 128.

81. For more information on the political significance of rumors among freed people and the anticipation of the Jubilee, see Hahn, *Nation Under Our Feet*, 127-142; David Roediger, *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (New York: Verso, 2014).

labor; he built a home on it for his family. “I built this chimney and laid the two floors, and made the kitchen house outside, all new.” Blackwell acknowledged the significance of his labor in making the land his own: “So the place has been growing better all the while by my labor.” But he was not an independent landowner: He owed one-third of his crop to a landlord who refused to sell him the land, keeping him in a constant cycle of debt and dependence. As a father and husband, he was concerned about the welfare of his family under these conditions should he no longer be able to provide for them: “Now, if I were to die, my family would have to set out on their travels, and be obliged to stay just wherever they could get a place.” Rightfully indignant, Blackwell exclaimed, “I have earned a comfortable home for them over and over again.” His years of labor to create a home entitled him to own the land on which he resided. To deny him this home, the fruit of his own labor, was not only to deny Blackwell and his family the indispensable securities of food, shelter and income. If labor created property, and property was regarded by all as a natural right, it was to deny him, along with millions of other freed people, a natural right due to him by virtue of his humanity.<sup>82</sup>

Following the lead of their southern counterparts, abolitionists in the North also used the language of natural rights to advocate for the redistribution of southern land. “We claim land for him in the South,” abolitionist and newspaper editor Sydney Howard Gay explained in 1867, “because under the order of things out of which the rebellion grew, he was forced to continuous, unrequited toil, and is, therefore, entitled to compensation, not as a favor but as a right.”<sup>83</sup> Another editorial from the same year insisted that “Such a measure is due to the blacks, who have, many times over, paid for these lands by their years of unrequited toil.”<sup>84</sup> Stephen

---

82. *NASS*, May 1, 1869.

83. *NASS*, November 2, 1867.

84. David Plumb, “Lands for the Southern Blacks,” in *NASS*, June 5, 1869.

Symonds Foster used even stronger language when, at an 1869 meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, he said, “I stand here and demand for every negro of the South the land which he has tilled, watered with his tears, and nourished with his blood and sweat. I do not ask it as a boon, I demand it as a right. Before high Heaven, I demand it, and I call upon you to back me in this demand.” These statements, like those of Bradley and Blackwell, appealed to the natural rights of property in land that freed people had earned through their labor. But as Foster’s statement especially indicates, land redistribution held deeper significance for many abolitionists than as mere compensation for unpaid labor. As land was the natural right of freed people, it was the provision of what they deserved as ordained by the divine. This was a provocative suggestion in the deeply religious society in which the abolitionists lived, and it spoke to the hope of abolitionists that these rights would be protected in perpetuity.

The natural rights argument was provocative not only for its religious appeal, but for its familiarity within American political discourse. Abolitionist speeches and writings during Reconstruction frequently used the words “unrequited toil” to describe the injustice of slavery, recalling Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address.<sup>85</sup> This was a curious appropriation given the abolitionists’ usual distrust of the 16<sup>th</sup> president, who had refused to endorse the wholesale confiscation and redistribution of Confederate property before his assassination.<sup>86</sup> But they were ideal words to describe the labor theory of property that the abolitionists employed, conveniently placing it within a political lexicon that many of their contemporaries would readily understand. In a similar vein, abolitionists drew on the natural rights philosophy of John Locke, who stated, as Blackwell, Gay, and Foster essentially argued, that “As much land as a man tills, plants,

---

85. Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address” in Andrew Delbanco, ed., *The Portable Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 348.

86. Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 335.

improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property.”<sup>87</sup> Though primarily recognized in the American context for his influence on the Founding Fathers, Locke continued to exercise palpable intellectual influence in 19<sup>th</sup> century America; his defense of natural property rights informed the abolitionist movement both before and after the Civil War.<sup>88</sup> But unlike Locke, whose attitudes towards slavery and property inequality were famously tortured and remain fiercely contested among historians of political thought, abolitionists partook in the natural rights tradition with the unambiguous goal of reforming, rather than entrenching, the economic status quo.<sup>89</sup> They indicted an economic system that denied freed people their natural rights to the land. In doing so, they indicated that the society they attempted to create was one in which respect for natural rights, including the right to property in land as a result of labor, would be absolutely central.

What stood in the way of freed people securing their natural rights to the land and prevented the realization of this society, the abolitionists contended, was *land monopoly*. Land ownership in the antebellum South, especially that of fertile agricultural land, was highly concentrated in the hands of large plantation owners. In Mississippi alone, it is estimated that 6 percent of landowners commanded one-third of the gross agricultural income.<sup>90</sup> Such a high degree of concentration, abolitionists attested, preserved the power of the formerly slaveholding

---

87. Locke, “Second Treatise,” 276.

88. Merle Curti, “The Great Mr. Locke: America's Philosopher, 1783-1861.” *Huntington Library Bulletin* 11 (1937): 107-151. As Curti makes clear, Locke’s conception of property rights also informed pro-slavery ideology in antebellum America. For more information on this converse use, see Robert J. Loewenberg, “John Locke and the Antebellum Defense of Slavery.” *Political Theory* 11, no. 2 (May 1985): 266-291.

89. C. B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 220-221; Holly Brewer, “Slavery, Sovereignty, and ‘Inheritable Blood’: Reconsidering John Locke and the Origins of American Slavery.” *American Historical Review* 122, no. 4 (October 1, 2017): 1038–78.

90. Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South*, 2nd ed. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 168.

aristocracy it benefitted, despite the emancipation of its enslaved labor force. This understanding formed the basis of yet another argument that abolitionists commonly employed during Reconstruction: that land redistribution would destroy the last vestiges of this landed aristocracy. Emancipation and war had done much to weaken this class of enslavers, but its refusal to sell off tracts of its large landed estates to freed people posed a lingering threat to freedom. Radical abolitionists, influenced by the land reformers with whom they had corresponded decades earlier, were under no illusions about what the situation required: Gerrit Smith carried into Reconstruction his view that truly abolishing slavery would be impossible without also abolishing land monopoly.<sup>91</sup> But unlike the antebellum years, when some abolitionists hesitated to fully embrace antimonopoly politics, the postbellum years saw far more abolitionists join Smith in this cause. Destroying land monopoly, they believed, would allow freed people to access land they required as a matter of necessity and of right, and allow the real conditions of democracy to take hold in the reconstructed nation.

*Monopoly*, in a variety of contexts, was a key word in abolitionist thought during Reconstruction, though its significance has been largely underestimated in the existing literature on the movement. Neither James McPherson nor Manisha Sinha, in their respective surveys of abolitionism, include a substantive discussion of the use of this term, or even so much as an index entry referencing it. Yet the abolitionists used the word *monopoly* frequently to describe the practical problems and moral evils of extreme concentrations of power in the hands of white landowners, capitalists, and officeholders. They did not only use it to refer to “land monopoly,” or, in a less utilitarian phrase, the “monopoly of the soil”: They also employed it to attack railroads, banks, and other corporations for their antidemocratic power over the political and

---

91. *NASS*, August 4, 1866.

economic life of the nation.<sup>92</sup> They described white landowners in the South as having a “monopoly of office and political power,” recalling antebellum indictments of the “Slave Power.” This was a monopoly secured not only through the disenfranchisement of freed people, but through economic power derived from concentrated land ownership.<sup>93</sup> These distinct yet interrelated monopolies contributed to what Charles Sumner referred to broadly as a “monopoly of color”—a collusion of white political and economic interests against the freedom of Black southerners.<sup>94</sup> That abolitionists branded so many elements of the southern social and political order with the term *monopoly* placed them in association with a long American tradition of antimonopoly politics, in many ways foreshadowing the antimonopoly struggles of the Gilded Age.

For the abolitionists, as with the antebellum land reformers, indictments of land monopoly were rooted not only in the rights of freed people as former slaves, but in their rights as human beings, all of whom had a right to a share of the earth as given to mankind in common by God. As one abolitionist wrote in 1869, “The earth, like the air and the sea, was given of God to the human race; and every man, by virtue of his right to be in the world has an original, indefeasible, inalienable claim to enough of the soli to furnish him building materials for shelter, and to supply him with necessary food and clothing.” The control of these lands in the hands of a small few, rather than the whole people as independent landowners, was in violation of this natural order: “That the lands of the globe are claimed and monopolized by Governments and individuals to the exclusion of a large portion of the human family, is at war with the order of Nature, and originated in sheer robbery.”<sup>95</sup>

---

92. For example, see *NASS*, February 9, 1867, March 20, 1869.

93. *NASS*, October 20, 1866.

94. *NASS*, March 17, 1866.

95. Plumb, “Land for the Southern Blacks,” in *NASS*, June 5, 1869.

Despite the congruence of this argument for land redistribution with the political logic of antebellum land reformers, it is important to note that the abolitionists did not adopt a radical antimonopoly platform wholesale during Reconstruction. Wendell Phillips indicated in 1867 that the American Anti-Slavery Society was not a “universal reform society,” and as such would resist calls for it to endorse a land limitation law alongside its advocacy for land redistribution.<sup>96</sup> For this reason, attacks on monopoly power should be understood as one element of the abolitionist ethos during Reconstruction, rather its fundamental basis.

But even absent an even more far-reaching indictment of concentrated land ownership, the abolitionists’ use of *monopoly* as a framing device for land redistribution is significant for its emphasis on distributive justice alongside reparative justice. Proposals for land redistribution were not simply based on, as Eric Foner writes, “an appreciation of the role blacks had played in the evolution of the American economy”<sup>97</sup>: An even more sophisticated argument combined such an appreciation with the concurrent indictment of the antidemocratic existence of an aristocratic land monopoly, which effectively prevented freed people from owning the land that was rightfully theirs as laborers and as human beings. The abolitionists emphasized not only the debilitating poverty of the landless, but also the unjust wealth of the landed. By framing land redistribution as an antimonopoly policy, abolitionists signaled that its ambitions extended beyond the immediate benefits of land for freed people and the protection of their rights: It invoked a new social structure in which political and economic power would be equitably distributed among all of its members, Black and white alike. Such a social structure would carry, as one abolitionist put it, “incalculable benefits for the whole people.”<sup>98</sup>

---

96. *NASS*, June 15, 1867.

97. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 105.

98. *NASS*, February 15, 1868.

**Chapter 4: “At present, it is not to be hoped for”**  
*The Failure of Land Redistribution and the Abolitionist Legacy*

In the years following the Civil War, abolitionists made a compelling case for land redistribution as a policy that would abolish the last remnants of slavery in the South and create an egalitarian society in its wake. An end to land monopoly, they argued, would give freed people that land which was due to them by right, and allow people in the South to live in greater harmony with one another. This ideal society, imagined by Black and white abolitionists together, was the attempted manifestation of the abolitionist conception of freedom. But when the historian reads their words on this subject, they do so with the acute knowledge that their ambitions were left mostly unrealized. Outside of limited efforts on the part of the Freedmen’s Bureau to place freed people on their own land, no national policy of land redistribution was enacted during Reconstruction. America did not follow the example of South Carolina and create a land commission composed of “disinterested friends of the freed people,” in the words of Aaron M. Powell.<sup>99</sup> Neither did it adopt any proposal for the large-scale confiscation of former Confederate land after Johnson’s proclamation of amnesty. Most devastatingly, it did not fulfill the promise it made to freed people in 1865, who were convinced by Sherman’s order that the land would be redistributed to them and secured as their property, “until such time as they can protect themselves, or until Congress can regulate their title.”<sup>100</sup>

What prevented the abolitionists from realizing their vision? On one hand, the issue lay in the hands of a Republican Party which repeatedly failed to pass bills in Congress for a comprehensive land redistribution policy, despite the urgings of abolitionists. As early as 1862,

---

99. *NASS*, December 25, 1869.

100. *NASS*, January 27, 1866; Berlin, ed., *Free at Last*, 318.



Abraham Lincoln threatened to veto the Second Confiscation Act over its provision for the permanent seizure of rebel lands as forfeited territory. With his focus on preserving the union rather than emancipating enslaved persons or enforcing punitive measures against large landowners, Lincoln held that permanently confiscating Confederate estates was unconstitutional, despite the insistence of some legal scholars that it would have been within his war powers to do so.<sup>101</sup> In response, Congress passed a joint resolution limiting the interpretation of the Act to allow forfeiture to only as long as the offender remained alive, gutting the bill as an opportunity for an effective policy of land redistribution.<sup>102</sup> In 1864, George Julian, in his newly appointed role as the chair of the House Committee on Public Lands, introduced a bill to provide for the subdivision of forfeited lands into 80-acre tracts to veterans of the Union Army, and 40 acres to all other loyal southerners. Julian, under the impression that Lincoln's thinking had evolved on the constitutionality of confiscation, considered his bill a real opportunity for the concurrent abolition of slavery and land monopoly in the South. Despite the chance afforded by the bill's passage in the House, the Senate refused to take it up before the end of its yearly session; Julian also failed in an attempt to have the Republican Party endorse his bill in its 1864 platform.<sup>103</sup>

Congressional inaction continued after the end of the war. In 1866, in the midst of debates about the second Freedmen's Bureau bill, Thaddeus Stevens proposed an amendment that would make forfeited estates available for freed people to settle, only to be met with the

---

101. McPherson, *Struggle for Equality*, 248.

102. McPherson, *Struggle for Equality*, 248; Roy W. Copeland, "In the Beginning: Origins of African American Real Property Ownership in the United States." *Journal of Black Studies* 44, no. 6 (Sept. 2013): 651; Claude F. Oubre, *Forty Acres And A Mule: The Freedman's Bureau and Black Landownership* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 2-3.

103. James L. Roark, "George W. Julian: Radical Land Reformer." *Indiana Magazine of History* 64, no. 1 (1968): 37.

opposition of many fellow Republicans. Stevens introduced a new bill at the convening of the next Congress with much the same purpose, but being too weak in his old age to see the bill through, he died the following year without achieving the policy of land redistribution he had so long championed.<sup>104</sup> Yet another effort by Julian to redistribute land to freed people came in 1869, this time in the form of a bill to establish a Department of Home Affairs in the executive branch—essentially a national scale-up of South Carolina’s land commission. This proposal was championed by abolitionists, including Cora Tappan, who declared in May 1869 that “If there is any one great need in the government, it is that the bill recently introduced by Hon. Geo. W. Julian, of Indiana, to create a Department of Home Affairs, shall be passed by the Congress of the United States.”<sup>105</sup> Despite its avoidance of the knotty constitutional debates involved in confiscating lands outside wartime, this proposal was also left unenacted.<sup>106</sup>

The most promising step Congress took to promote Black land ownership during Reconstruction was its passage of the Southern Homestead Act in 1866. Along with the Civil Rights Act of the same year, which secured citizenship for persons of African descent and thus extended the provisions of the original Homestead Act to them, this law attempted to lower barriers for freed people to access homesteads on public lands in the South. Most importantly among its provisions, it gave priority to claims made by freed people and loyal white southerners in its first year of implementation, and lowered the fee for making a homestead claim from \$10 to \$5 in an attempt to account for the deep poverty that freed people faced. Introduced by Julian, it was framed as both an attempt to provide the landed independence for which freed people struggled and a measure to combat land monopoly. Judged by both of these goals, however, the

---

104. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 308-309.

105. *NASS*, May 1, 1869; see also Lydia Maria Child, “George Julian v. Land Monopoly” in *NASS*, March 13, 1869.

106. *NASS*, May 29, 1869.

Southern Homestead Act was almost universally ineffective in practice. The fee remained too high for many freed people as a result of their poverty, and the determination of white southerners to keep freed people from owning land resulted in a campaign of violent intimidation that prevented many of them from making homestead claims. Ultimately, little more than 3 percent of the entire population of southern freed people, and likely far fewer, gained access to a homestead under the Act's provisions.<sup>107</sup> The policy also fell short in its aim to challenge the power of the southern landed aristocracy, for it left this class virtually untouched. It provided only for the settlement of freed people on mostly undeveloped public lands, rather than the redistribution of agricultural land held in large estates.<sup>108</sup>

Historians including James McPherson have usually attributed the hesitancy of Congress to make greater efforts to redistribute land to concerns about the constitutionality of confiscation.<sup>109</sup> James Ely notes that in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "Prevailing constitutional thought stressed property rights and limitations on legitimate government authority," indicating that many Republicans as well as Democrats would have considered confiscation schemes legally dubious at best.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, this was a position reinforced by the courts. From 1863 until 1870, the only judicial decision that took up the constitutionality of confiscation was *Norris v. Doniphan*, in which the Kentucky Court of Appeals declared the Second Confiscation Act unconstitutional and "in derogation of the personal rights and rights of property." Even when the Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of confiscation as a military measure in the 1870

---

107. Richard Edwards, "African Americans and the Southern Homestead Act" *Great Plains Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 110-111.

108. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 246.

109. McPherson, *Abolitionist Legacy*, 75.

110. James W. Ely, *The Guardian of Every Other Right: A Constitutional History of Property Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 82.

case *Miller v. United States*, it did so, as Daniel Hamilton writes, “giving no ground to radicals, such as Representative Stevens, who asserted the broad powers of Congress to seize and allocate land. Confiscation for the majority was not a congressional power at constitutional law, but a belligerent power at international law.”<sup>111</sup> After Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, the United States was no longer engaged in a war with an enemy belligerent. Confiscation would have undoubtedly faced a hard road in the courts to gain legitimacy during the Reconstruction era.

But a general lack of willingness among Republicans to even attempt to challenge the prevailing constitutional orthodoxy with respect to confiscation, whether in Congress, in the justice system, or in the court of public opinion, meant that the existing legal rights of former Confederates—as contested as these rights were—were given protection over the purportedly eternal natural rights of freed people. This was a matter not only of constitutionality, but of political will. It was not as if Republicans’ hands were tied by a total inability to enact substantial land reform: The Homestead Act and wartime confiscation had both made the 1860s a time of sweeping change in American land policy, change that was largely authorized by Congress.<sup>112</sup> In fact, members of Congress were often willing to dole out land grants to railroad companies and land speculators, taken with the idea promulgated by these parties that capital investment would stimulate the economy.<sup>113</sup> Prioritizing corporations for land grants instead of freed people was a double standard that was on the minds of abolitionists, who regularly read the speeches of Julian

---

111. Daniel W. Hamilton, “A New Right to Property: Civil War Confiscation in the Reconstruction Supreme Court.” *Journal of Supreme Court History* 29, no. 3 (2004): 266.

112. Paul Wallace Gates, “Federal Land Policy in the South 1866-1888.” *Journal of Southern History* 6, no. 3 (1940): 303-330.

113. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 167.

and other Radicals on the subject in the pages of their newspapers.<sup>114</sup> The corruption on display in Congress reflected the situation on the ground: One letter from a Louisiana Freedmen's Bureau agent read by Julian on the House floor read, "the greatest and most effective opposition that I have met with has been, in part, from professed Union men, and those interested, directly or indirectly, in the planting interests, politicians, etc."<sup>115</sup> These "Union men"—capitalists, speculators, and corrupted political leaders among them—proved to be opponents to land redistribution as formidable as any white southerner.

With Congress, the President, the courts, and organized business interests standing in the way of reform—not to mention the intransigence of white southerners who refused to sell land to freed people—the failure of land redistribution can in many ways be ascribed to its political impossibility. But the abolitionists had faced political impossibility before. From the movement's beginning, it had acted with the knowledge that it spoke for a distinct minority of the American public, and that its central demand—the immediate and total abolition of slavery—was a tough sell in a society in which the institution was so deeply entrenched. With a consistent campaign of agitation undertaken over decades and led by acts of slave resistance, the abolitionists forced the nation to reckon with the moral implications of slavery. In historical memory, it is difficult to imagine the abolition of slavery having occurred without a determined abolition movement continuing despite the unlikelihood of its success. As the unlikelihood of a national policy of land redistribution became clear, however, many abolitionists did not meet it with the same stamina. To chalk up the failure of the abolitionists' vision only to political institutions would be to ignore real divisions within their own ranks about the specific policies

---

114. George Julian, "Misappropriation of Public Lands," in *NASS*, March 6, 1869; *NASS* February 15, 1868; *National Standard*, February 11, 1871; "Lands" [from *New Era*], in *NASS*, February 12, 1870; *NASS* April 25, 1868.

115. *NASS*, March 7, 1868.

by which it ought to be realized—divisions which became more accentuated as Reconstruction went on.

Through 1867, abolitionists remained devoted to the cause even in the face of setbacks, believing that land redistribution was of such vitality that the nation would eventually come to its senses as it had on the issue of slavery. In March, Charles Sumner introduced resolutions in the Senate to elaborate the “further guaranties of Reconstruction,” among which was one that declared, “Not less important than Education is the Homestead.” The resolution was defeated, and the moderate Republican press celebrated, with the *New York Times* accusing the homestead guarantee of “impractical humanitarianism.”<sup>116</sup> But abolitionists refused to concede defeat. In an editorial commenting on the failure of the Sumner resolutions, the editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* wrote that “at no very distant period it will be enlarging upon these very guarantees, showing their wisdom and excellence, when their adoption becomes, as will ultimately be the case, a foregone conclusion.” This optimism continued into the 1867 annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, which saw impassioned speeches from Phillips, Powell, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, among other movement leaders, articulating the need for land redistribution. Higginson’s address was particularly inspired, insisting that a homestead for freed people, made possible through redistribution, was “an essential part of abolition.” To give “freedom, without the land,” he said, “is to give them only the mockery of freedom.” Abolitionists remained determined in this conviction, with the Society expressing hope in light of its past successes: “Greatly encouraged and strengthened by its past triumphs and successes, which are without a parallel in the history of any organization in this

---

116. *NASS*, March 16, 1867.

country, the Society will press onward with renewed determination, confident of ultimate entire victory”—including victory in the provision of homesteads for freed people.<sup>117</sup>

Beginning in 1868, however, one can see in the abolitionist campaign for land redistribution a gradual decline in cohesion and enthusiasm. Though abolitionists continued to employ many of the arguments outlined in Chapter 3 to argue that land redistribution remained vital to full emancipation, they did so cognizant that their task became more and more precarious as Congress failed to act. A discouraged Phillips published an editorial in August lamenting that the abolitionist agenda for Reconstruction—land, education, and the ballot for freed people—remained incomplete more than three years after the war’s end. Of the land plank, he wrote: “At present, it is not to be hoped for.” Only the ballot had been secured for freed people, he wrote, and not yet through constitutional amendment. Securing land redistribution through policy would require continued agitation to force those in office to realize the urgency of such action: “The Republican party has not given the ballot from principle. That, like all the other measures of the war, has been forced upon them,” Phillips wrote. “We owe our progress in the past to the Nation's necessity; judging by present appearances, we shall owe every future step to the same force.”<sup>118</sup> But given a long string of legislative failures, compounded by the death of Thaddeus Stevens only a few weeks earlier, the prospects for land redistribution as one such future step looked as bleak as ever.

External forces were not the only motivating factors behind Phillips’ frustration: Abolitionists themselves were divided over how land reform ought best to be enacted. Special opposition to widespread confiscation and redistribution during Reconstruction came from an interesting source: Frederick Douglass. Though Douglass had expressed fervent sympathy with

---

117. *NASS*, May 18, 1867.

118. *NASS*, August 29, 1868.

the cause against land monopoly in the antebellum years, he struck a notably different tone in an 1869 speech before the American Anti-Slavery Society, when he asserted that the proper policy towards freed people ought simply to be, “Let him alone! That is about your whole duty in regard to the negro—to let him alone.” Douglass endorsed the idea that “the negro must have a right to the land,” and noted the nearly impenetrable barriers to land ownership that white landowners had erected against Black southerners: “All over the South, it is well known, notorious, that the old planters, who own their ten and fifteen thousand acres of land, have banded together and determined not to sell it in small parcels or in large parcels to colored men—to keep possession of the land.” However, he neglected to refer to this situation in the language of land monopoly, as he had referred to it in theory before the war—marking both a change in rhetoric and a change in policy. The government, in Douglass’s mind, did not have the mandate to abolish land monopoly through redistribution, only the duty to protect the rights of freed people to purchase land at fair prices. He emphasized that the methods by which Black southerners ought to come into possession of their own land should not be redistributed by governmental authority, but left up to individual initiative: “This government is bound to see ... that he has fair play in the acquisition of land,” Douglass wrote, meaning simply “that when he offers a fair price for the land of the South, he shall not be deprived of the right to purchase, simply because of his color.” This policy was consistent, Douglass insisted, with his theory that the government should do no more for freed people than to “Give him fair play, and let him alone.”<sup>119</sup> No confiscation policy, federal land commission to facilitate land purchases, or indictment of land monopoly as such would fall within such a mandate.

---

119. “Address of Frederick Douglass,” in *NASS*, May 29, 1869.



By February 1869, facing both Congressional inaction and divisions within the ranks of their own movement, the editors of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* saw no further opportunity for a national policy of confiscation and redistribution. They reaffirmed their belief in the necessity of land reform in retrospect, writing that “The large estates of rebels, as we have often hitherto urged, ought to have been confiscated and sold out at nominal rates to the Freedmen, and to others, who would become actual settlers and cultivators of the soil.” But any realistic expectation of confiscation, they claimed, was a thing of the past: “The golden opportunity for this beneficent action on the part of the Government has passed. What is done now must be mainly by associations and private individuals.”<sup>120</sup> This was an astounding admission: The editors of northern abolitionism’s most important organ, who had devoted their careers to pursuing far-reaching political and economic change, had decided that the only way to secure land for freed people going would be the initiative of philanthropists and charitable organizations.

The paper printed similar statements throughout the year, advocating private associations and regarding government-facilitated land redistribution as a missed opportunity. Cora Tappan, who had led efforts to create the Homestead Association of Louisiana in 1868, promoted efforts to redistribute land through organizations funded and directed by private capital. “The Freedmens’ Bureau might have been made the instrument of establishing large settlements of the Freed people in every country of every Southern State,” she wrote. However, “As it now is, we must look to private associations to accomplish that result. *Associated* labor alone can succeed in the South, *i.e.* in producing that state of social and political security which is essential to the advancement of a free people.”<sup>121</sup> In May, the editors wrote that “We shall never cease to regret

---

120. *NASS*, February 20, 1869.

121. *NASS*, January 2, 1869.

the lost opportunity, thrown away by a foolish and mistaken magnanimity, in surrendering again to unrepentant rebels the large landed estates which had been forfeited to the Federal Government, and which should have been placed, either gratuitously, or at nominal rates, at the disposal of the hitherto enslaved, the rightful owners of the soil.”<sup>122</sup> There was room, these abolitionists believed, for continued government action—but such action had to be taken, by virtue of Congress’s intransigence, at the state level.<sup>123</sup> In December, the editors wrote of land: “This inevitable need of a people suddenly brought out of slavery, ought to have been met, at the right time, by confiscation, as urged in these columns, and recommended by Thaddeus Stevens and others. It was not thus met, and now must be in other ways.”<sup>124</sup> Some abolitionists supported a petition circulated by Aaron Powell in the winter of 1869-1870 to establish a federal land commission, which would aid private individuals and associations in their efforts to secure land.<sup>125</sup> However, when presented with a resolution by Stephen Symonds Foster that succinctly expressed many of the usual abolitionist arguments for land reform,<sup>126</sup> members of the Anti-Slavery Society first gutted its antimonopoly plank and then defeated it outright. To these abolitionists, radical land redistribution was not just unfeasible given its political unlikelihood: It was no longer even a matter worth fighting for on principle. By 1872, the *National Standard*—the successor to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*—hardly mentioned land redistribution at all, having largely moved onto other issues including temperance and women’s suffrage.

---

122. *NASS*, May 22, 1869.

123. *NASS*, June 26, 1869.

124. *NASS*, December 4, 1869.

125. *NASS*, December 25, 1869, January 8, January 15, 1870.

126. *NASS*, June 5, 1869. Foster’s resolution read: “Whereas, a homestead is the natural right of every human being, and whereas, the great mass of the recently emancipated slaves are by the laws of their respective States denied this right, therefore be it resolved, that we call upon Congress immediately to adopt such measures of legislation as to break up the landed aristocracy of the South and place possession of a homestead within the easy reach of all.”

In spite of white northerners losing steam in their efforts to promote land redistribution, many Black abolitionists, including freed people, had no such luxury of abandonment. Their economic independence, natural rights, and the more equitable distribution of land they envisioned remained to be secured. These were provisions that were of such fundamental importance to their social equality that could not be secured through private initiative alone, no matter the best intentions and practices of philanthropists. Leaders of the growing postbellum Black labor movement such as Isaac Myers continued to urge an end to land monopoly: “We want no land monopolies, any more than money monopolies or labor monopolies. We want the same chance for the poor as is accorded to the rich—not to make the rich man poorer, but the poor man richer.”<sup>127</sup> Members of this movement, including many freed people, became the most enthusiastic exponents of the campaign for a national land commission, seeing it as a chance to end land monopoly once and for all. In December 1869, the National Colored Labor Convention adopted a resolution mirroring the language of Powell’s petition, urging the provision of homesteads through executive authority in spite of Congressional failures.

Appeals to Congress nonetheless continued, including efforts in the early 1870s led by Sojourner Truth, one of abolitionism’s most remarkable leaders. Truth, a formerly enslaved woman, gathered a mass of signatures on a petition urging Congress to provide homesteads for freed people, arguing that freed people “would be greatly benefitted and might become useful citizens by being placed in a position to support themselves.”<sup>128</sup> Though limited to the argument for Black economic independence, Truth’s campaign—including personal encounters with President Grant and prominent Congressional leaders—showed the continued urgency of the

---

127. *NASS*, December 11, 1869.

128. Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 238.

struggle for land among Black abolitionists and freed people. This struggle continued despite the comparative abandonment of the issue by white northerners.

Despite these initiatives, land redistribution ultimately remained within the realm of the abolitionist imagination, and did not become part of the tangible reality of Reconstruction. This failure, whose repercussions extend into the racial inequalities of our present moment, can be remembered as a fault of political institutions that refused to accede to demands for justice and equality. But it can also be remembered as an instance of perhaps the most transformative social movement in history confronting its own purpose and coming up short. Abolitionists had, one way or another, achieved their most fundamental objective: the destruction of chattel slavery. But through their years of advocacy on behalf of land redistribution, they knew this was only half the battle. Securing freedom for the nation would require the tools of construction as well as destruction. In the absence of a society defined by slavery, a new one defined by freedom had to be built in its place, requiring an active effort on the part of the nation through its government to secure the material conditions that would promote racial equality. For some time, abolitionists faced this challenge with determination, suggesting land redistribution as a means to create this new society. But the widening gap in enthusiasm for land redistribution between Black and white abolitionists meant that this constructive element was left chiefly to those who were most directly oppressed by the society as it existed. It is difficult to say whether or not land redistribution might have occurred at some later date had all abolitionists and their generational successors continued to fight for it. But one thing was for certain: Genuine freedom would require the imagination of a new social organization beyond the abolition of chattel slavery, realized through policy. This was an imagination left for future generations to bring into the world.

## *Conclusion*

Reconstruction was America's "unfinished revolution," in the words of its greatest modern chronicler.<sup>129</sup> But it was a revolution nonetheless, and any historian of the period must take care to note its successes alongside its shortcomings, especially as they relate to the extraordinary struggles of freed people to define the meaning of their own freedom. Even the mere possibility of Black southerners owning property was a crucial step towards their economic independence. This was an opportunity that many freed people worked tirelessly to attain, and they made real strides. By 1900, a majority of Black southerners lived in counties where at least 20 percent of Black farmers owned their own land—a landscape that, just half a century earlier, would have been unthinkable. For this and other reasons, as Steven Hahn notes, one should view the limited gains of land ownership as an important legacy of Black political and economic struggles in the late nineteenth century, rather than a completely missed opportunity of the Reconstruction era.<sup>130</sup> But this progress came in spite of steep barriers erected against the great mass of Black southerners engaged in these struggles. These inroads challenged the economic and social order of the South, but they did not fundamentally alter it. Large white landowners were no longer slaveholders, but they remained land monopolists, able to wield their economic and political power against the rights of Black southerners and their demands for racial equality. The vast majority of freed people, meanwhile, were caught in a predatory labor system defined by never-ending cycles of debt and dependence, and denied the ownership of the land they demanded as an essential condition of their freedom.

---

129. Foner, *Reconstruction*.

130. Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 457-458.

Though the abolitionists were unsuccessful in realizing their vision of a society in which the power of the white southern elite was defeated and the full emancipation of labor was secured, they *were* successful as a model for future generations of advocates who emphasized the foundational interdependence of civil rights and economic justice. In the 1880s, the radical Black journalist T. Thomas Fortune castigated land monopoly as the principal barrier to racial equality in the South and in America at large. The failure to redistribute land during Reconstruction, Fortune argued, left many elements of the slave system intact, resulting in a new “industrial slavery” with an aim not unlike that of the old: to extract as much profit as possible from labor in agriculture and industry. The new industrial slaveholders “could not do this,” Fortune insisted, “if our social system did not confer upon him a monopoly of the soil from which subsistence must be derived, because the industrial slave, given an equal opportunity to produce for himself, would not produce for another.”<sup>131</sup> These statements almost exactly echoed the most passionate utterances of antimonopoly abolitionists.

The influence of the abolitionists extended into the twentieth century, when leaders of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, following the abolitionist playbook for Reconstruction, demanded economic security for Black Americans along with the protection of their civil and political rights. At the time of his death, Martin Luther King, Jr. advocated a government-sponsored guaranteed income to remediate American social and economic injustice, writing that “the time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty.”<sup>132</sup> Even more recently, Ta-Nehisi Coates made the case for reparations not only on the

---

131. T. Thomas Fortune, *Black and White: Land, Labor, and Politics in the South* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2007 [1884]), 150.

132. Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here?* [1967], in James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 617.

basis of slavery, but the predation and exclusion that Black people have faced in the American economy ever since its abolition. Reparations, in Coates' mind, would be an act of spiritual renewal: "We must imagine a new country," Coates wrote in 2014, through "the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences."<sup>133</sup> Each of these thinkers, like their abolitionist antecedents, saw the problem of racial inequality not only in terms of the civil rights denied to Black Americans by public officials, but the barriers maintained against their economic equality in the private sector. Noting the interconnectedness of these two dimensions of inequality allowed them to envision a new future for the nation, one in which racial equality would be realized through a reconstruction of the American economic system.

Just as the abolitionists insisted that slavery could not be abolished without the concurrent abolition of land monopoly, contemporary advocates for racial justice argue that American racism cannot be undone without an attack on the economic injustices that uphold it. In 2020, precisely fifteen decades following that final 1870 meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, towns and cities across America erupted in protests in the aftermath of the police murder of George Floyd—protests that came to be about much more than police violence. In the midst of these demonstrations, a video featuring Kimberly Jones, an author and activist, went viral on the Internet. Using a rigged game of Monopoly as a metaphor for the economic oppression that Black people continue to face, Jones offered a passionate indictment of the exploitation of the American economic system. "We don't own anything!" she exclaimed, despite four hundred years of labor on behalf of white Americans.<sup>134</sup> Jones spoke for the great

---

133. Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case For Reparations" [2014], in *We Were Eight Years In Power: An American Tragedy* (New York: One World, 2017), 202.

134. David Jones Media, "How Can We Win?" YouTube Video, 6:46. June 1, 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb9\\_qGOa9Go&t=101s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb9_qGOa9Go&t=101s).

many people in America for whom the Jubilee—the day when all can claim what is rightfully theirs—still has not come.

Today, structural racial and economic inequality presents the greatest single threat to the abolitionists' original conception of freedom and the establishment of a multiracial democracy in America. Staggering income and wealth inequality, a widening racial wealth gap compounded by a crisis of student debt, and the destruction of Black businesses at the hands of corporate monopolies are only a few of the policy challenges that threaten this vision.<sup>135</sup> That these problems continue despite America's prior attempts at reconstruction seem to many proof enough that the nation is, and will continue to be, defined by its deeply entrenched racism, which is as institutional as it is interpersonal. But as America has the chance to embark on a new reconstruction, the example of the abolitionists can both inspire and challenge a new generation to create a free and democratic American society, one instead defined by an equitable distribution of economic power. With determination even beyond that of the abolitionist coalition, they may meet the moment.

---

135. Naomi Zewde and Darrick Hamilton, "What Canceling Student Debt Would Do for the Racial Wealth Gap." *The New York Times*, February 1, 2021, sec. Opinion; Brian S. Feldman, "The Decline of Black Business." *Washington Monthly*, March 20, 2017.



## *Bibliography*

### Primary Sources

#### Newspapers:

The *Christian Recorder* (1854-present)

The *Freedman's Record* (1865-1874)

*National Anti-Slavery Standard* (1840-1870, published as *The Standard* 1870, *The National Standard* 1870-1872)

*New National Era* (1870-1874, published as *The New Era* 1870)

The *New York Times* (1851-present)

#### Government Documents:

Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of South Carolina, 1868

#### Published Collections:

Berlin, Ira, ed. *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War*. New York: The New Press, 1992.

Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1877:

Hahn, Steven, ed. *Land and Labor, 1865*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

Hayden, René, Anthony E. Kaye, Kate Masur, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O'Donovan, Leslie S Rowland, Stephen A West, et al. *Land and Labor, 1866-1867*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

#### Other:

David Jones Media, "How Can We Win?" YouTube Video, 6:46. June 1, 2020.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb9\\_qGOa9Go&t=101s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb9_qGOa9Go&t=101s).

Delbanco, Andrew, ed. *The Portable Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Penguin Books, 2009.

Fortune, T. Thomas. *Black and White: Land, Labor, and Politics in the South*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2007 [1884].

Shapiro, Ian and Jane Culvert, eds. *Selected Writings of Thomas Paine*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

Washington, James M., ed. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991.

Whitman, Walt. *Democratic Vistas*. Washington, D.C.: J.S. Redfield, 1871.

Wootton, David, ed. *John Locke: Political Writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.

Wright, Elizur. *The Programme of Peace*. Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1862.

### Secondary Sources

Araujo, Ana Lucia. *Reparations for Slavery and the Slave Trade: A Transnational and Comparative History*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2017.

- Berry, Mary Frances. *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.
- Bleser, Carol K. Rothrock. *The Promised Land: The History of the South Carolina Land Commission, 1869-1890*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1969.
- Blight, David W. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018.
- Brewer, Holly. "Slavery, Sovereignty, and 'Inheritable Blood': Reconsidering John Locke and the Origins of American Slavery." *The American Historical Review* 122, no. 4 (October 1, 2017): 1038–78.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *We Were Eight Years In Power: An American Tragedy*. New York: One World, 2017.
- Copeland, Roy W. "In the Beginning: Origins of African American Real Property Ownership in the United States." *Journal of Black Studies* 44, no. 6 (2013): 646–64.
- Curti, Merle. "The Great Mr. Locke: America's Philosopher, 1783-1861." *The Huntington Library Bulletin*, no. 11 (1937): 107–51.
- Delbanco, Andrew. *The Abolitionist Imagination*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt). *Black Reconstruction in America*. New York: Free Press, 1998 [1935].
- . *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999 [1903].
- Ely, James W. *The Guardian of Every Other Right: A Constitutional History of Property Rights*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Edwards, Richard. "African Americans and the Southern Homestead Act." *Great Plains Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2019): 103–29.
- Faulkner, Carol. *Women's Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen's Aid Movement*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- Fierce, Milfred C. "Black Struggle for Land During Reconstruction." *Black Scholar* 5, no. 5 (February 1974): 13–18.
- Finkenbine, Roy E. "Wendell Phillips and 'The Negro's Claim': A Neglected Reparations Document." *Massachusetts Historical Review* 7 (2005): 105–19.
- Foner, Eric. *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984.
- . *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.
- . *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- . *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2010.
- Franke, Katherine. *Repair: Redeeming the Promise of Abolition*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2019.
- Gates, Paul Wallace. "Federal Land Policy in the South 1866-1888." *The Journal of Southern History* 6, no. 3 (1940): 303–30.
- Genovese, Eugene. *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South*, 2nd ed. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989.
- Goodman, Paul. *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

- Griffin, Sean. "Antislavery Utopias: Communitarian Labor Reform and the Abolitionist Movement." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8, no. 2 (2018): 243–68.
- Hahn, Steven. *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- . "'Extravagant Expectations' of Freedom: Rumour, Political Struggle, and the Christmas Insurrection Scare of 1865 in the American South." *Past & Present*, no. 157 (1997): 122–58.
- Hamilton, Daniel W. "A New Right to Property: Civil War Confiscation in the Reconstruction Supreme Court." *Journal of Supreme Court History* 29, no. 3 (2004): 254–85.
- Holt, Thomas C. *Black over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina during Reconstruction*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1977.
- Huston, James L. "Abolitionists, Political Economists, and Capitalism." *Journal of the Early Republic* 20, no. 3 (2000): 487–521.
- Jeffrey, Julie Roy. *Abolitionists Remember: Antislavery Autobiographies & the Unfinished Work of Emancipation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.
- Karp, Matthew. "Frederick Douglass Railed Against Economic Inequality." *Jacobin*, February 20, 2020. <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/02/frederick-douglass-railed-against-economic-inequality>.
- Kolchin, Peter. *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Lause, Mark A. *Young America: Land, Labor, and the Republican Community*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005.
- Lepore, Jill. *These Truths: A History of the United States*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2018.
- Loewenberg, Robert J. "John Locke and the Antebellum Defense of Slavery." *Political Theory* 13, no. 2 (1985): 266–91.
- MacPherson, C. B. *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- Mandell, Daniel R. *The Lost Tradition of Economic Equality in America, 1600-1870*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020.
- Martin, Waldo E. *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.
- McDaniel, W. Caleb (William Caleb). *Sweet Taste of Liberty: A True Story of Slavery and Restitution in America*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- . *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists and Transatlantic Reform*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013.
- McPherson, James M. *The Abolitionist Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975.
- . *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction*. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1964.
- Newkirk II, Vann R. "The Great Land Robbery." *The Atlantic*, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/09/this-land-was-our-land/594742/>.
- Ortiz, Paul. "The Reparations Demand in History." *Against the Current* 102 (February 2003). <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc102/p1066/>.
- Oubre, Claude F. *Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Land Ownership*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978.
- Painter, Nell Irvin. *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996.

- Roark, James L. "George W. Julian: Radical Land Reformer." *Indiana Magazine of History* 64, no. 1 (1968): 25–38.
- Rodgers, Daniel T. *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics since Independence*. New York: Basic Books, 1987.
- Roediger, David R. *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All*. Brooklyn: Verso, 2014.
- Rose, Willie Lee. *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment*. New York: Oxford, 1976.
- Simpson, Brooks D. "Land and the Ballot: Securing the Fruits of Emancipation?" *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 60, no. 2 (1993): 176–88.
- Sinha, Manisha. *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.
- Stewart, James Brewer. *Wendell Phillips, Liberty's Hero*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986.
- Taylor, A. A. "The Convention of 1868." *The Journal of Negro History* 9, no. 4 (1924): 381–408.
- White, Richard. *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896*. The Oxford History of the United States. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Williamson, Joel. *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction, 1861-1877*. Hanover, N.H: University Press of New England, 1990.
- Work, Monroe N., Thomas S. Staples, H. A. Wallace, Kelly Miller, Whitefield McKinlay, Samuel E. Lacy, R. L. Smith, and H. R. McIlwaine. "Some Negro Members of Reconstruction Conventions and Legislatures and of Congress." *The Journal of Negro History* 5, no. 1 (1920): 63–119.
- Zuckert, Michael P. *The Natural Rights Republic: Studies in the Foundation of the American Political Tradition*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996.