Black Leaders During Reconstruction

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Reconstruction was the time period that came immediately after the Civil War. Reconstruction was ordered by Congress to rebuild the South, bring the former Confederate states back into the Union, and give rights to former slaves. It lasted from 1865 to 1877. During Reconstruction, African-Americans took part in the political, economic and social life of the South for the first time. The era was marked by their search for freedom and equal rights. About 2,000 African-Americans held jobs as lawmakers or other political jobs, from the local level all the way up to the U.S. Senate. However, they never served in government in proportion to their numbers.

Before the Civil War began, African-Americans were only able to vote in a few northern states. There were just about no black officeholders. In the months after the North's victory, the black community called for their rights, including the all-
important right to vote. They organized many meetings, parades and petitions. During the first two years of Reconstruction, blacks began Equal Rights Leagues throughout the South. These groups protested discrimination and called for equality and the right to vote.

**Battling "black codes"**

Andrew Johnson became president after Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. He said states could decide on their own whether blacks could vote. State governments began passing “black codes.” These restricted the lives of the freed men and women. They were not able to quit farm jobs when they wanted, for instance. African-American activists bitterly fought these discriminatory laws. Also, in 1866, Republicans won more votes in Congress. This led to a new phase of Reconstruction that would give African-Americans more rights in the South.

During Reconstruction, Congress granted African-American men citizenship, including the right to vote. Beginning in 1867, branches of the Union League spread throughout the South. The group encouraged African-Americans to be active in politics. Southern states rewrote their constitutions from 1867 to 1869. Blacks and white Americans worked side by side on political matters for the first time in the U.S. to rewrite state constitutions at constitutional conventions.

**Blacks participate in writing new laws**

Blacks made up almost all the voters for the Republican Party in the South. They worked together with “carpetbaggers” and “scalawags.” Carpetbaggers was an insulting name for people arriving from the North. They were called that because they carried their belongings in satchels, or carpetbags. A scalawag was a white person who supported Reconstruction. A total of 265 African-Americans participated in these constitutional conventions, more than 100 of whom had been born into slavery. In all, 16 African-Americans served in the U.S. Congress during Reconstruction. More than 600 more were elected to the state legislatures, and hundreds more held local offices across the South.

Many black leaders during Reconstruction had gained their freedom before the Civil War. They bought themselves out of slavery or they were freed after an owner died. They had worked as skilled slave craftsmen or had served in the Union Army. Many black political leaders worked as ministers during slavery or in the early years of Reconstruction when the church served as the center of the black community.
Black leaders emerge

Hiram Revels was the first African-American elected to the U.S. Senate. Revels was born free in North Carolina and attended college in Illinois. He worked as a preacher in the Midwest in the 1850s and as a chaplain to a black regiment in the Union Army. Then he went to Mississippi in 1865 to work for the Freedmen’s Bureau, which helped freed slaves to find jobs, get health care and reconnect with family members after the war. Blanche K. Bruce was another African-American elected to the Senate in 1875 from Mississippi. He had been a slave but also received some education. African-American leaders during Reconstruction came from more privileged backgrounds. Their lives were much different than the majority of the African-American population.

The opponents of Reconstruction were extremely hostile to the African-American community. Southern whites were enraged that former slaves had the right to vote and hold office. They reacted with threats and violence to maintain white supremacy. The Ku Klux Klan attacked whites who supported blacks and blacks who disagreed with their white employers. At least 35 black officials were murdered by the Klan and other white supremacist groups during the Reconstruction era.
Quiz

1. Which detail would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
   (A) The purpose of Reconstruction was to rebuild the South after the Civil War.
   (B) After Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, Andrew Jackson became president.
   (C) The term "carpetbaggers" was an insult used to describe people arriving in the South from the North.
   (D) Most African-American leaders during Reconstruction came from privileged backgrounds.

2. Which sentence from the article BEST supports a CENTRAL idea of the article?
   (A) Reconstruction was the time period that came immediately after the Civil War.
   (B) During Reconstruction, African-Americans took part in the political, economic and social life of the South for the first time.
   (C) Before the Civil War began, African-Americans were only able to vote in a few northern states.
   (D) At least 35 black officials were murdered by the Klan and other white supremacist groups during the Reconstruction era.

3. Which of the following MOST influenced politics in the South during Reconstruction?
   (A) State governments passed "black codes."
   (B) Black men were granted citizenship.
   (C) Many black leaders had earned their freedom before the Civil War.
   (D) The Ku Klux Klan murdered at least 35 black officials during Reconstruction.

4. Which answer choice accurately characterizes the effects of Reconstruction on the South?
   (A) Reconstruction evened out the number of African-Americans holding office in the South.
   (B) Reconstruction allowed African-Americans to participate in rewriting state constitutions.
   (C) Reconstruction caused increased racial tension between Southern whites and former slaves.
   (D) Reconstruction stopped slavery in the Southern states.