Before Obama

A Reappraisal of Black Reconstruction Era Politicians

Volume 2: Black Reconstruction Era Politicians: The Fifteenth Amendment in Flesh and Blood

Matthew Lynch, Editor

Foreword by Molefi Kete Asante

PRAEGER

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Foreword

The two-volume set *Before Obama: A Reappraisal of Black Reconstruction Era Politicians,* edited by Matthew Lynch, is a unique examination of a long-neglected area of black activity and scholarship. He is to be highly praised for his insightful work. The authors who have contributed to each volume have shown a remarkable ability to write of the past in the present with an eye to the future.

The Reconstruction Era was a brief but important period in American history. At no other time had so many transformations in the social conditions and prospects of millions of people brought about such total reconfiguring of the nation. Recently freed blacks had hoped for redemption, and it was as if some divine power had reached down, after turbulent years of dispute and war, to save the nearly four-and-a-half million blacks who had been enslaved. Black men took the opportunity that had been afforded them by the presence of the Union army in the South; the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments; and the progressive state constitutions that had been written after the Civil War to express themselves politically.

Over the years there have been many books written about the Reconstruction Era, which lasted a bare twelve years, from 1865 to 1877. When one considers that the civil rights movement is considered to have run thirteen years, from 1955 to the death of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, it seems that the nation has the ability to show conscious staying power in the quest for progress for only a short span of time. It is good to see that Professor Lynch has given us a well-thought-out outline of the Reconstruction period and shown an appreciation for the details of the time. He has gathered a brilliant group of authors.

The Reconstruction has long been considered one of the greatest moments in America's history. Yet the Reconstruction was a time of tremendous

CHAPTER 13

Robert Smalls and the Politics of Race and Freedom in Low Country South Carolina, 1865–1890

Karen Cook Bell and Peter J. Breaux

> You are either a slave or you are free. There is no such thing as second class citizenship.
>
> H. Rap Brown, 1968.

Reconstruction politics shares a political lineage with the 1960s civil rights movement. Both periods sought to fulfill the nation's mandate that all of its citizens were created equal with inalienable rights; and both periods were thus undergirded by social, political, and economic transformations, which produced black activists who wedded political events with their personal identities (Carson 1981). This linkage facilitated the creation of a politicized collective identity in which personality and a racialized collective identity provided leaders with a deep connection to their time and place in history. Generations that come of age when there is a high level of social turbulence, like wars or mass movements, produce men and women whose lives are best understood by reference to these social forces and movements (Stewart and Healy 1989, 30–42). Robert Smalls, a slave, who commandeered the Confederate vessel *Planter* and sailed it from Charleston harbor to the Union naval blockade in 1862, represented this form of "personal political salience," which linked this political event with Smalls's Reconstruction personal identity (Duncan and Stewart 2007).

Following his daring escape, Smalls received the appointment of captain in the Union army and participated in military campaigns along the South Carolina coast. These military achievements were parlayed into post–Civil War leadership. Smalls's base of support was Beaufort County, located twenty-six miles south of Charleston, where he helped found the Republican Party and participated in the state constitutional convention, which promoted statewide public education (House Documents, 55th Cong., 2nd Sess. No. 120, 1–6; Miller 1995). He was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1874 and 1876, defeated for reelection in 1878, but seated once more after he was declared the winner in a contested election in 1880 (Clay 1993, 396). His election in 1880 was followed by defeat in 1886, which marked his last bid for elective office. "To South Carolina whites he was the last symbol of their painful past," and they were ready to go to any lengths to oust him from Congress (Uya 1971, 126).

As a legislator he was a staunch partisan Republican and outspoken defender of African Americans in Beaufort County. After his retirement from Congress, President Benjamin Harrison appointed Smalls as collector of customs for the Port of Beaufort, a post which he held until 1913. He continued with some success to keep his county in the Republican column long after the rest of the state was solidly Democratic. As one of the black delegates to the constitutional convention of 1895, he made a valiant defense against George Tillman's demagoguery and disfranchisement schemes. In South Carolina, Reconstruction politics was fractionalized as Republicans divided over issues of power, patronage, and reform. This chapter examines Robert Smalls and his leadership during Reconstruction within the context of the political milieu of Beaufort, which served as the public sphere for Robert Smalls and low country culture and politics.

In the half-decade following the end of the Civil War, dynamic processes were unfolding throughout the South. As free labor ideology transformed the Southern economy following the end of the Civil War, the Republican belief that all Americans shared common economic interests undergirded their belief that slavery was inimical to the principles of free enterprise and economic liberalism. Freedom of choice, the ideological underpinnings of economic liberalism, implied equality. However, Southern leaders and many Northern leaders could not accept this proposition following emancipation. Emancipation revolutionized Southern society by destroying bondage and in theory at least, leaving former slaves and planters free to work out new ways of existing together (Foner 1980, 97–99).

The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments completed the process that Northern Republicans felt was necessary to make African Americans a part of the free labor system. Significantly, the Reconstruction

Amendments also expanded federal power because they promised freedom that the national government would theoretically guarantee; these amendments served as pivotal legal and moral connectives, which linked former slaves to the national government (Richardson 2001, chapter 1). Throughout 1865, in the face of presidential restraint and Southern defiance, Republicans increasingly became united in the belief that the government had to enforce political equality in the South. Thus, African American enfranchisement and political engagement was the linchpin to Reconstruction (Richardson 2001, chapter 1).

The Reconstruction Amendments, however, had very little effect on deep-seated white attitudes about former slaves. Southern whites continued to see freed men and women as constituting an inferior order with no rights a white person was bound to respect. The Freedmen's Bureau presided over the transition from a slave economy, where decisions about work resided with planters, to a free labor economy where former slaves could make their own choices, but where poverty and a lack of opportunity raised major barriers to economic mobility. Resistance to economic equality remained pervasive as free labor institutions were reshaped by a culture of racism (Cohen 1991, 4; Foner 1988, 177). Significantly, as the North lost its will to maintain the occupation of the South, social, political, and economic Reconstruction dissipated. By 1877 the question of labor, capital, work, and wages occupied the political landscape as the urban labor movement eclipsed Southern Reconstruction. The reconstruction of the plantation South proceeded much differently in the low country of South Carolina, where former slaves had *de facto* possession of land and labor, than it did in the black belt of Mississippi, where former masters and Northern planters maintained control, at least in the matter of land; it was still different in the sugarcane fields of Louisiana, where the infusion of Northern capital led to an almost immediate adoption of a wage labor system. It proceeded differently as well where the circumstances of slavery—such as the task system or absentee planters—had allowed room for the emergence of an independent black culture or the participation of slaves in local market economies and exchange relations (Glymph and Kushma 1985, 3–4).

These early labor transformations led to the imposition of Black Codes to ensure the availability of a subservient labor force. As Southern legislatures enacted a series of vagrancy laws, apprenticeship systems, and criminal penalties for breach of contract to control the labor of former slaves, they relied upon an economy of antebellum stereotypes to justify the imposition of the Black Codes (Morrison 1992, 31–59). The Black Codes reflected the postwar "status anxiety" over the place of former slaves in

Southern society (Johansson 1987, 439–70). As a regressive mechanism, the codes vitiated the Thirteenth Amendment by regulating the labor of former slaves through the legal process. Georgia's Black Code permitted whippings as punishment for misdemeanors, and by means of laws on labor contracts, set up enforcement machinery to drive former slaves back to agricultural work at starvation wages. In other parts of the South, particularly in Mississippi and South Carolina, which enacted the most severe Codes, the laws governing the labor of former slaves reinforced a slave-servant status. Mississippi required freed men and women to possess written evidence of employment for the coming year. Similarly, South Carolina's Code barred African Americans from following any occupation other than farmer or servant unless they paid an annual tax, which ranged from $10 to $100 (*Mississippi Constitution,* art. 1, sec. 12; *State of South Carolina Constitution* [1865], art. 3, sec. 1; *The Laws of the State of Mississippi* 1866, 82–86; Du Bois 1935; Foner 1988, 199–200).

It is in this milieu that Robert Smalls used his social capital to promote identity politics in South Carolina. Identity politics refers to "collective sensibilities and actions that come from a particular location within society, in direct defiance of universal categories that tend to subsume, erase, or suppress this particularity" (Hale 1997, 568). Similarly, "location," in this sense, implies a distinctive "social memory, consciousness, and practice, as well as place within the social structure" (Hale 1997, 568). The political landscape of Beaufort County, which included Edisto Island, Saint Helena Island, Lady's Island, and Fripp Island, provide the context for examining Smalls's political career and the strategies he employed to ensure African American representation from Beaufort County at both the state and national levels.

Robert Smalls was born a slave in Beaufort, South Carolina, on April 5, 1839. In 1851 he moved to Charleston, worked as a rigger, and thereafter led a seafaring life. In 1868 he entered politics and was later elected to the Forty-Fourth, Forty-Fifth, Forty-Seventh, Forty-Eighth, and Forty-Ninth Congresses. In the state militia of South Carolina, which remained all black during Reconstruction, he held successively the commands of lieutenant colonel, brigadier general, and major general, the latter terminating with the reorganization of the militia in 1877 (*Biographical Directory of the United States Congress,* 803). Following the Civil War, Smalls purchased large amounts of real estate in Beaufort, including the house of his former master, which he bought at a government auction. In 1864 he attended the Republican National Convention as a member of a delegation which sought political rights for former slaves. He helped to organize the Beaufort Republican Club and succeeded in building an enduring personal

political machine (*Beaufort Tribune,* March 27, 1867; *Beaufort Republican,* October 24, 1872). According to the congressional mandate, elections for constitutional conventions were held in 1868, in South Carolina and all five military districts across the South. Universal male suffrage comprised the basis for all elections, and for the first time in Southern history, African American men cast their vote. Smalls's power in a county where African Americans outnumbered whites seven to one, won him the sobriquet, "King of Beaufort County" (Uya 1971, 60; Miller 1995, chapter 3). As a member of the state constitutional convention of 1868 and the general assembly, he made notable efforts to secure schools and promoted opportunities for former slaves to acquire land.

The issues of homestead exemptions, relief for the poor and destitute, and political disfranchisement for ex-Confederates allowed Smalls to articulate his vision for postwar South Carolina (*Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of South Carolina* 1868, 6, 452, 466, 481). In this context, the demands made by the convention's black delegates can be viewed as revolutionary in character. They envisaged radical change in South Carolina's economy and government as they promoted land reform and civil rights. Yet during this early period as a political moderate, Smalls supported issues, which were sometimes at variance with other African American leaders. His early support for a poll tax for education when African Americans did not have the means to support a tax placed him at odds with the majority of black leaders (*Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of South Carolina* 1868, 733–35). Smalls viewed the poll tax as necessary to support public education which he championed by calling for a system of state-supported public compulsory education. However, the compulsory education clause was not put into effect until the 1868 state constitution was overturned in 1895 by the Democratic legislature (*Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of South Carolina* 1868, 100; Uya 1971, 54; Stowe 1879). As a member of the state militia and a veteran of the war, Smalls understood the value and necessity of education for African Americans. Like other soldiers of the U.S. South Carolina Colored Troops, Smalls enhanced his literacy through camp schools which were taught by regularly detailed teachers (Stowe 1879, 614). Smalls's military experience provided him with the political capital to transform his service into leadership positions in the state government.

Smalls's extensive property holdings in Beaufort County allowed him to make the issue of land ownership a key element in his 1868 campaign for the South Carolina General Assembly. His early legal success against his former owner in the case *De Treville v. Smalls,* in which De Treville sued to

regain the Prince Street home purchased by Smalls at government auction, served as a test case for former slaves who sought to protect and maintain their property rights (Uya 1971, 59). African Americans in Beaufort County had received possessory titles to land in 1865 following General William Sherman's issuance of Special Field Order No. 15, which reserved the Sea Islands and abandoned inland rice fields south of Charleston, South Carolina, to Saint John's River in Florida for former slaves (Berlin 1992, 111–12; *U.S. Statutes at Large, 1863–1864,* chapter 225, 2nd sec., 375–78; Letters Sent by the Commissioner of Customs, "Other Records 1865–1867").

Sherman's field order stemmed more from impulse than altruism. Sherman, an Ohioan who resided in Louisiana before the Civil War began, held a Panglossian view of slaves and slavery, believing that Providence had ordained African Americans to bondage. Although his objective may have been to leave behind the emancipated men and women who had followed the Union army as it marched through Georgia, Sherman's order was a potent punitive measure that added to the existing chaos at the war's end. In low country Georgia and South Carolina, Sherman's order had a tumultuous impact. Both regions became a nexus for newly freed slaves, many of whom not only maintained ancestral ties to the plantations, but who also believed they had a natural right to the land. The vast majority of the men and women had worked the same plantation fields during slavery. The employment of absentee plantation management on rice plantations provided enslaved African Americans with a greater degree of autonomy than on cotton and sugar plantations. Consequently, African Americans developed an attachment to the land that found reinforcement in consanguinal relationships (Bell 2001, 376–77).

In the months after the issuance of Sherman's order, the population of Beaufort had increased to 2,200 (H. G. Judd to Bvt. Maj. Rufus R. Saxton, August 1, 1865). President Andrew Johnson's Amnesty Act issued on May 29, 1865, reversed Sherman's order by allowing the original proprietors to return and claim rights of ownership in exchange for swearing an oath of allegiance to the Union (Foner 1988, 183). African American land ownership was one of the central issues addressed by Smalls in the election of 1868. Former slaves believed that securing their freedom was incompatible with continuing to work for their former masters. Freedom from white supervision included land ownership and freedom to control their lives and the disposition of their labor.

During the 1868 election, candidate Smalls used his Civil War heroism and the issue of land ownership to enhance his popularity and gain support in Beaufort County. He campaigned with the Allen Brass Band, a

local band, which he helped to create and built his own political machine through the use of financial and educational institutions (Woody 1936, 20). Smalls's political identity began to crystallize in the 1868 election as he expressed his concern for the Beaufort community in local newspapers and founded his own publication *The Standard* (Woody 1936, 20). Through these mediums, Smalls promoted an expansive vision of democracy, which promoted economic, political, and social equality. He was adept at using celebrations such as Emancipation Day to promote identity politics—parades of militiamen, riding on horseback through the streets of Beaufort—and motivating the audience through keen oratory comprised of his political repertoire. Moreover, African American churches became the sites of democratic political discourse on self-determination and Black Nationalism (Rufus Saxton to Robert Smalls January 4, 1872). Throughout his career, Smalls, who was of mixed ancestry, identified himself as a "black man" who represented the interests of "black people" in Beaufort County and South Carolina. Like many of his contemporaries, Smalls viewed the political system as a vehicle for effecting change and eliminating the discrimination to which African Americans were subjected (Uya 1971, 164–65).

As a member of the South Carolina legislature in 1868, Smalls helped to create the South Carolina Land Commission to finance the redistribution of land to former slaves. State bonds were authorized at 7 percent for 10 years to purchase land titles from whites and sell those titles to African Americans (Bethel 1981, 329). From 1868 to 1879 titles were transferred to 14,000 black families, mostly in the coastal rice-growing tidelands (Bethel 1981, 329). Economic conditions in Beaufort County, however, remained dismal for the majority of African Americans. In addition to the South Carolina Land Commission, the legislature, which consisted of eighty-seven African Americans, sought to reverse the state's regressive tax system and revise the penal code. At the end of the war, Edisto Island lands were valued at $75 to $100 an acre. By 1873 the value of land in the county had decreased to only $6 or $7 (*Beaufort Republican,* November 16, 1871; May 23 and July 11, 1872; and December 26, 1873; *Beaufort Tribune,* February 24, 1875). For Smalls, improving the ability of former slaves to become landowning farmers was the key to restoring dignity and providing economic stability. In 1872 he introduced in the state senate a resolution asking to return the land confiscated by the U.S. District Tax Commissioners from 1863 to 1866. The resolution passed and reached the U.S. Congress in 1875 where Smalls secured passage of the bill as a newly elected member of Congress (*Senate Journal,* Regular Session, 1871–1872, 413–14; *Reports and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of*

South Carolina at the Regular Session 1876–77, 352; Uya 1971, chapter 4). Through his efforts African Americans in Beaufort purchased land at reduced prices and by 1890, African Americans owned three-fourths of the land in Beaufort (*First Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question*, June 4, 5, 6, 1890; Rose 1964, 397; Uya 1971, chapter 4).

Throughout his tenure in the South Carolina legislature, Smalls continued to pursue relief and educational issues. He successfully worked to assist the poor and needy and establish public education. His election to the newly created Commission to Effect the Establishment of a System of Free Common Schools allowed Smalls to use his "personal political salience" to promote shared educational interests in Beaufort County. His first term in the Senate expired in 1872, a critical year in South Carolina Reconstruction politics. Klan violence had been endemic throughout the state causing President Ulysses S. Grant to suspend the writ of habeas corpus in nine South Carolina counties. Moreover, the election of scalawag Franklin J. Moses as governor alienated many in the Republican Party who viewed the governor's extravagant and lavish lifestyle with disdain leading to charges of "corruption and thievery" (Foner 1988, 542–43). As a member of the Senate, Smalls targeted excessive government spending, particularly the salaries of government and elected officials. In the election of 1872, W.J. Whipper, a Northern black politician, challenged Smalls to represent Beaufort County in the South Carolina legislature. As chair of the Beaufort County Republican party, Smalls solidified his base of support through identity politics. Without giving public notice, he summoned the "faithful" to a meeting in his house where he handpicked delegates to the state convention meeting in Columbia to choose a complete slate of candidates and ratify the nomination of Grant for President (Uya 1971, 74; Miller 1995, chapter 2). Smalls's popularity and support for his candidacy was widespread throughout Beaufort County leading to Whipper's defeat in 1872. Following his election to the U.S. Congress in 1874, Smalls chose his own successor for his Senate seat (*Beaufort Tribune*, May 19, 1875; Uya 1971, 75).

The congressional election of 1874 marked a turning point in Smalls's political career. At the age of thirty-nine, he left Columbia, South Carolina for Washington, D.C. as a seasoned and sophisticated politician (Uya 1971, 92). At the time of his arrival, Republican Reconstruction governments were in the process of being redeemed. Democrats made substantial gains throughout the nation in the elections of 1874 and for the first time since the Civil War, the Democratic Party took control of the House of Representatives. Before the new Congress met, the old one enacted a final piece of legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which outlawed

discrimination in places of public accommodation. However, throughout the mid-1870s, Reconstruction was clearly on the defensive. Democrats had regained control of states with substantial white voting majorities such as Tennessee, North Carolina, and Texas (Foner 1988, chapter 11; Uya 1971, 92). In states like South Carolina, where Reconstruction governments survived, violence again erupted as the Democratic Party sought to redeem the states. The Grant administration refused to intervene as it had previously done in 1870–1871 to protect African American voters with the passage of the Enforcement Acts.

South Carolina had the distinction of electing eight African Americans who served in the House of Representatives during Reconstruction. It was also the lone state to have more than one African American serving simultaneously in the same Congress. From 1871 to 1873, Joseph H. Rainey, Robert C. DeLarge, and Robert B. Elliott served in the House (Clay 1993, 32). In 1870 the African American population of the state stood at 415,814 compared to 289,667 whites (*United States Population Census 1870*). Comparatively, in 1880, the black population stood at 604,332 to 391,105 whites (*United States Population Census, South Carolina* 1880). African Americans, in fact, outnumbered whites in twenty of the thirty-one counties in the state. The state's African American demographic majority persisted throughout the nineteenth century.

The diminution of black political power intensified in 1875 with the adoption of the "Mississippi Plan," which openly assaulted and murdered Republicans, destroyed ballot boxes, and drove former slaves from the polls. In South Carolina, the Hamburg Massacre transformed the state's political climate. Located across the Savannah River from Augusta, Georgia, the city of Hamburg was one of many centers of African American political power. Local officials included trial justice Prince Rivers, a former member of Thomas Wentworth Higginson's Civil War regiment, and militia commander Dock Adams, a skilled carpenter, Union Army veteran, and former Augusta politician who moved to the town in 1874 (Foner 1988, 570). The Hamburg Massacre was the beginning of redemption for the state's Democratic Party. Rising political and racial tensions after a Fourth of July celebration led to the death of Hamburg's African American marshal and the cold-blooded murder of five others. Smalls memorialized the massacre in numerous speeches and championed the cause of state, race, and party in his 1876 reelection bid (*Charleston News and Courier*, December 21, 1875; September 25–26; July 5–9, 12–16, 18, 28, 1876; Uya 1971, 98; Foner 1988, 571).

Labor conflict in the South Carolina Low Country by rice growers added another element to the tense political climate of 1876. The nation

had been in an economic depression since 1873, and by 1876 farmers and workers were beginning to rebel (Zinn 1980, 200). In the East, labor and the unemployed were in a bitter and violent struggle. In the West, a tide of agrarian radicalism was rising (Zinn 1980, 201). In Beaufort, a strike by rice growers on the Combahee River plantations who demanded higher wages and payment in cash led to a confrontation with a Democratic rifle club. Congressman Robert Smalls intervened to prevent any bloodshed, and the local African American trial justice in Beaufort dismissed all charges (Foner 1988, 573). In this climate, rice growers forced planters to meet their demands, and planters in Beaufort opined that only a change in administration could restore labor discipline in the rice region. The nomination of ex-Confederate Wade Hampton for governor in 1876 by the Democratic Party served as the catalyst for restoring labor discipline (Foner 1988, 573).

Throughout the 1870s, the new Republican agenda increasingly catered to Northern businessmen and Southern political interests, and this combination resulted in the abandonment of an economic platform for freed men and women. Republican retreat from Reconstruction occurred as banks and railroads established a new economic order. The issuance of enormous grants of land and government bonds for railroad development in the West and the development of a program capable of capturing white support in the South meant that tangible economic reform through higher wages and land redistribution was not forthcoming (Bell 2001, 392).

As Republicans in Congress retreated from Reconstruction, the Democratic Party and Wade Hampton's campaign of intimidation proved effective in diminishing the African American vote in South Carolina. The white electorate voted "early and often" and prevented African Americans from reaching the polls (Townsend 1877, 180–81, 186–87). Despite Republican governor Daniel Chamberlain polling the largest Republican vote in the state's history, the Democratic Party's massive majorities enabled them to claim a narrow statewide victory. In the 1876 presidential election, South Carolina's disputed election returns shaped the political discourse at the national level and led to the "Compromise of 1877," in which Democrats in Congress certified Rutherford B. Hayes as president in exchange for the removal of federal troops from the South and other political concessions. Coeval with these developments, the U.S. Supreme Court, in a series of detrimental decisions beginning with the *Slaughterhouse Cases* (1873) and continuing with *U.S. v. Reese* (1876) and *U.S. v. Cruikshank* (1876) and later the *Civil Rights Cases of 1883* reversed the intent of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment by reestablishing state control over

rights of citizenship. Although South Carolina had been redeemed, Robert Smalls's reelection to Congress in 1876 served as a potent if not offensive reminder of African American political dominance in Beaufort County.

Robert Smalls and the Problem of Reconstruction Historiography

The 1876 triumph of the Redeemers in South Carolina and the rest of the South as a whole also fostered a Redeemer-friendly history of Reconstruction. Journalist James S. Pike's narrative, published in 1874 during the final period of Reconstruction, helped set the tone for subsequent works by historians of the Dunning school and others. Pike's work was a biased, partisan account that presented the all too familiar themes of black ignorance, corruption, incompetence, and venality preying upon a defenseless white minority. Although Pike demonstrated general contempt for South Carolina's black population during the period, he used personal testimonies to convey a particular distaste for blacks of the low country. Indeed Pike's use of the term "low country" was as much a geographical descriptor as it was an estimation of the people. Similarly, Pike's account referred to the leaders of this region of the state, which would have included Robert Smalls, as "bad men." The successful redemption of the Southern states, followed by the onset of Jim Crow segregation meant that Smalls and other such black actors of Reconstruction were too often relegated to either the role of black robber-barons or uneducated fools in many of the histories that followed (Pike 1874, 262–68).

William A. Dunning, professor of history at Columbia University began the first generation of scholarly studies of Reconstruction with the publication of *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865–1877*. Dunning and his many graduate students subscribed to a view of Reconstruction in which Radical Republicans at the federal level punished the Southern states by imposing black suffrage. From the Dunning perspective, a defeated, defenseless South lay vulnerable to the exploitation and dominance of a triple alliance of Northern "carpetbaggers," Southern "scalawags," and ignorant blacks who were incapable of properly exercising or appreciating freedom. The Dunning approach to Reconstruction would prevail for the first half of the twentieth century. John S. Reynolds, a student of Dunning, published *Reconstruction in South Carolina* in 1905. Reynolds's study focused on themes typical of the Dunning School: corruption, black inferiority, and justifications for white violence. Reynolds identified corruption as the defining element of the "Negro" governments in South Carolina between 1868 and 1876. As such, black officeholders were especially culpable,

irresponsible, and debased. Decisions made by these officials were intended to offend the white population. For example, both the black militia and policemen were organized for this purpose. They were also useful in facilitating Reynolds's myth of black dominance. Consequently, Reynolds used the actions of such organizations to justify eventual violence and backlash among the white population. As a black officeholder, Reynolds placed Robert Smalls within this larger narrative of bankrupt black leadership in South Carolina (Reynolds 1905, 218–19, 503).

It is significant to note that well before the publication of the first Dunning histories, African American scholars were busy revising the established views of themselves and their place within the nation's history. One of the most noteworthy of these scholars was George Washington Williams whose *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880,* was published in 1882. Williams, a man of many vocations, renounced successful careers in the ministry, law, and politics for the writing of history and the accurate depiction of blacks within it. He published the first scholarly study of African American history and in the process created a new field of historical inquiry. Williams's pioneering approach would help in fostering a separate African American history establishment during the 1910s and 1920s, thus exerting a major impact on subsequent historians and interpretations of the African American experience.

Building upon the work of Williams and others, historian Carter G. Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915 to provide organizational support for scholarly research and publication in black history. A. A. Taylor's *The Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction,* published in 1924, was one of the earliest Association-supported studies of the period (Baker 2007, 113–14). Taylor's introduction criticized the Dunning histories as being written to simply prove that blacks were incapable of serving in government and justify the means of intimidation utilized to undermine and overthrow Reconstruction. Furthermore, the uncritical use of sources and extreme bias of such accounts rendered them "practically worthless in studying and teaching the . . . Reconstruction period." For a more complete picture of the time period, Taylor argued, it was necessary to study other aspects of society beyond politics (Taylor 1924, 2).

Taylor also noted that the possibilities for less adversarial, more cooperative relationships during Reconstruction were undermined by the noncooperation of South Carolina's whites. His study found blacks actively involved in their communities as well as the larger picture of South Carolina's Reconstruction history. He noted the role of black churches and schools in providing some preparation to many of the delegates prior to

the 1868 Constitutional Convention. Within the state legislature although not every black legislator was literate, as Taylor noted, such tendencies were also prevalent among white legislators beyond the South and did not necessarily denote ignorance (Taylor 1924, 125–26, 157).

Taylor attempted to convey an image of black officeholders as they were, avoiding undue praise or criticism. While acknowledging corruption in the legislature, he equally acknowledged eradication attempts by black officeholders. Likewise, he focused on individual leaders whose actions or abilities warranted attention. For example, Robert Smalls emerged in Taylor's study as a powerful and determined advocate for public education. He also included a favorable opinion of Smalls expressed by a member of the British Parliament. Taylor's study further highlighted the importance of an alternative viewpoint of Reconstruction (Taylor 1924, 135, 158).

By the 1930s a few whites were beginning to reassess the period and the participants. Francis B. Simkins and Robert H. Woody's study, *South Carolina during Reconstruction,* was published in 1932 and presented a fairer appraisal of the role of blacks during the period. Among other issues addressed, the study demonstrated the positive benefits of Reconstruction in the state. Simkins and Woody attributed the principle of equality before the law, the right to public education, and the constitutional underpinnings of the state to the "innovations" of the Reconstruction period (Taylor 1938, 23, 30–31; Baker 2007, 115–16).

W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1800* emerged during the period as the major rebuttal of the Dunning interpretations. Published in 1935, Du Bois utilized a comprehensive approach to Reconstruction, examining developments across the entire South. Du Bois's stated premise was simple: telling the story from the perspective of blacks as "ordinary human beings." Considering this fact Du Bois found that blacks contributed to and strengthened Southern civilization precisely where it was weakest: education, representative government, and land ownership. He found no basis to the argument that Southern civilization was threatened or the foundations of the state attacked during the period between 1868 and 1876. While not disputing charges of corruption, Du Bois noted the improbability of recently enfranchised blacks displaying a higher standard of public morality than the rest of the nation. He also significantly weakened the charges of widespread corruption of Reconstruction governments by pointing to the lack of wholesale indictments against officials after they were out of office.

Du Bois lamented the then current state of Reconstruction history as "a field devastated by passion and belief." The Dunning school had taken

the truth of history and "utterly distorted and contradicted" it. Du Bois called for academic historians who placed truth above the defense of the white race and would not mislead graduate students in gathering research materials to support prejudice or lies (Du Bois 1956, 725–26). While *Black Reconstruction* was a groundbreaking work of revision in a field that sorely deserved it, at the time the study was largely ignored by white academia. However, Du Bois's work was of major significance to the field of African American history as well as the revisionist histories of Reconstruction during the 1960s and after. Studies such as these were necessary steps in the restoration of blacks to the narrative of Reconstruction, and ultimately facilitated the reemergence of key actors such as Robert Smalls.

Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* was the culmination of revisionist trends occurring since at least the 1960s. Published in 1988, Foner's *Reconstruction* attempted to reconcile the various strands of revision into one cohesive, comprehensive account. The emancipation of the slaves, their participation in post-emancipation societies, and the extension of citizenship were all viewed by Foner as revolutionary changes in American society. In Foner's study, the era was not "tragic," but one rich in potential (Foner 1988, 410).

Considering the centrality of the African American experience as key to understanding the period, Foner's study presented blacks as active agents in community formation and development, political choices, and the general shaping of life in the postwar South. Among historians, Foner's perspective has generally been considered Reconstruction "viewed from the bottom," a clear indication of methodological approach and focus at variance with the Dunning works. Foner emphasized important contributions made by blacks during the period. For example, as black assertiveness and experience increased, they enacted laws providing for equal access to transportation and public accommodations throughout the South. Foner credited black legislators in South Carolina with enacting the most far-reaching legislation of this type. He found such active participation of blacks central to Reconstruction, establishing a precedent for equal citizenship and biracial democratic government (Foner 1988, 370–72).

Foner's study also discerned the role played by education on increased black assertiveness during the period. Although not every officeholder was educated, by the 1870s many graduates of newly established black universities were being elected into office. Foner also found increases in the numbers of black teachers, doctors, and lawyers. Thus, the number of educated blacks within leadership roles in the community constantly increased during the period, largely discrediting the notion of wholesale ignorance (Foner 1988, 359, 367–68, 396).

The size and scope of government in the reconstruction state paled in comparison to the prewar South. Reconstruction governments managed new responsibilities and served new populations. The South Carolina state budget doubled between 1860 and 1873 as a result of an increased population and public responsibilities such as the asylum, orphanage, penitentiary, and education. Increased taxes were therefore necessary to support increased responsibilities (Foner 1988, 365). Foner identified land ownership as the central component of the black economic agenda. Black land ownership would have a transformative impact on the Southern economy and foster self-sufficiency. However, only in the low country rice region did the ideal come to fruition. Rice production in the low country never regained its prewar profitability. The power of black officeholders such as Robert Smalls was paramount to establishing the region as a symbol and stronghold of black economic and political clout through land ownership. Smalls's base of support consisting of black landowners in Beaufort County enabled his ascendancy as a black power broker in South Carolina during Reconstruction and afterward (Foner 1988, 374). The failure of land reform in the remainder of the South, Foner argued, led to alternative strategies to transform the economy. Most Reconstruction governments resorted to railroad construction as a vehicle to effect economic change. According to Foner, this vision appealed to a broad array of Southerners and cut across party lines (Foner 1988, 379–81).

However, the need of the states to support construction in addition to attracting private investment, not only drained valuable resources away from schools and other responsibilities but allowed for widespread corruption. Foner noted that corrupt activities were also rampant in the North, but in the South such activities undermined Reconstruction governments and handed the Democrats a significant political issue (Foner 1988, 382–84). Foner found that culpability, like the railroads, cut across party lines and was not the perquisite of any singular group. The most corrupt schemes, he argued, did not originate with the state legislatures, but "economic buccaneers," who resorted to the legislatures for financing. Ultimately, the Democrats would fully exploit the corruption "card" among other resources in their successful bid to redeem the South of Reconstruction and those affiliated with it (Foner 1988, 386–87). The comprehensive nature of Foner's *Reconstruction,* combined with his methodology and perspective, facilitated new insight into the period. Foner, in focusing on the freedmen, returned them to the central role they occupied during the actual time period. Liberated from the extreme bias, racism, and propaganda of the Dunning perspectives, Foner's study engendered a fresh approach allowing scholars to revisit the lives of individual actors during

the period and reassess their contributions. This reassessment has been critical to delineating the failure of Reconstruction and African American disfranchisement during the post-Reconstruction period. According to C. Vann Woodward,

> The Compromise of 1877 did not restore the old order in the South. It assured the dominant whites political autonomy and non-intervention in matters of race policy and promised them a share in the blessings of the new economic order. In return, the South became, in effect, a satellite of the dominant region. (Woodward 1951, 246)

The "New South" and Political Disfranchisement

The emergence of the "New South" with its emphasis on peace and prosperity also gave tacit approval to African American political subordination, particularly in South Carolina, which maintained a black majority. In the 1878 election, Democrats hoped to wrestle Beaufort County away from Smalls. The party abolished numerous voting precincts and gerrymandered Republican districts to create safe Democratic enclaves (Townsend 1877, 180–81, 186–87; *Charleston News and Courier,* August 8, 15, 1878). Fraud, intimidation, and violence characterized Election Day as Smalls's Democratic challenger George Tillman relied upon "Red Shirt" Democratic Party loyalists who rode through Beaufort County on horseback to secure victory in the election (Holland 1912, 289–91, 293, 358; House Documents, 45th Cong., *Arrest and Imprisonment of Hon. Robert Smalls,* 1–11; Miller 1995, 107–13). The elections in 1878 and 1880 were repetitions of the outrages of 1876. In this climate of disdain for African American voting, Robert Smalls and two other African American legislators, Francis L. Cardozo and L. Cass Carpenter, were arrested and convicted for allegedly accepting bribes while serving in the state senate. All of the men were later pardoned by the governor of South Carolina in exchange for a reciprocal agreement with the federal government to drop charges against Democrats indicted for the Hamburg Massacre and other violence during the election of 1876 (Holt 1977, 210).

Despite the overt acts of fraud, Smalls continued his campaign to regain his congressional seat. In 1880 he ran again for Congress and narrowly lost to Tillman. He successfully contested the returns and was seated in Congress on July 19, 1882 (Smalls 1890, 593; Miller 1995, chapter 4; House-Misc. Documents 1881). In 1882 South Carolina instituted the Eight-Box Ballot Law to reduce African American voting. The law required a separate

box for each office, and the boxes were frequently shuffled when an African American voter endeavored to find the correct box for each ballot (Logan 1997, 47). Newspaper editor, T. Thomas Fortune, in response to the political setbacks of the 1880s declared that "the colored people of the United States felt as if they had been baptized in ice water" (*New York Globe,* October 20 and 27, 1883). At the national level, Presidents Garfield, Arthur, and Cleveland allowed the Southern question to simmer without engagement or intervention from the federal government (Logan 1997, 37). For many African Americans, the national government had entered into and maintained an alliance with ex-Rebels and ex-slaveholders through a policy of nonintervention in the affairs of the South.

Prior to his assassination in 1881, Republican president James A. Garfield had appointed prominent African Americans to "Negro jobs" in the city of Washington, D.C., and abroad. The appointments included John M. Langston, who served as minister to Haiti and consul general of the Dominican Republic; Henry Highland Garnet who served as minister to Liberia; ex-Senator Blanche K. Bruce as register of the treasury; and Frederick Douglass who was appointed as recorder of deeds of the District of Columbia (Logan 1997, 43). Robert Smalls had sought appointment as ambassador to Haiti or Liberia and in the absence of the appointment, he continued his fight to represent Beaufort County in Congress. Two months after being seated in Congress in 1882 following the contested election with Tillman, he was defeated for the Republican nomination by Edmund W. M. Mackey. When Mackey died in 1884, Smalls was elected to fill the vacancy (Clay 1993, 395). The final congressional electoral challenge by Smalls occurred in 1886. Beaufort County remained a solidly Republican district; however, the campaign of 1886 ended Republican control. Throughout the 1880s, the South Carolina Democratic Party relied on the shotgun and rifle to intimidate African American voters and retain control of the state. The Party had "perfect immunity from punishment and the encouragement, if not the active participation, of the state government, and the protection of the courts" (Smalls 1890, 593).

Factional fighting within the local Republican Party not only divided the African American vote, but also exposed a "color-complex," which pitted "pure blacks" against "mulattoes" (Uya 1971, 128; Williamson 1965, 313). Smalls belonged to the latter category and hence lost the support of rice and cotton plantation workers many of whom were "pure blacks" and the majority in the district. At a convention held in Beaufort on October 15, voters from Saint Helena Island indicated their dissatisfaction with Smalls and accused him of favoring lighter African Americans for office (Uya 1971, 128; *Charleston News and Courier,* October 16, 1886). The

convention ended with a melee in which voters from Saint Helena Island rebuked Smalls and vowed to support the white Democratic candidate William Elliot. Since Smalls's largest base of support in previous elections came from Saint Helena Island, which had almost 1,000 voters, his defeat seemed assured. The Democratic Party hastened Beaufort County's redemption through voter fraud and intimidation in other areas of the County where support for Smalls remained strong (*Charleston News and Courier,* October 18, 1886; November 9, 1886).

As an activist, Smalls's leadership in South Carolina politics provide cogent insights into how African Americans functioned in a hostile political environment as they sought to advance social and economic change. Smalls's congressional career may have ended in 1886, but he continued to give voice to the region. In 1890 he wrote a commentary that was both retrospective and relevant for the political climate of the decade. He asserted that:

> The highest right of a citizen, and by far the most important for the protection of all citizens, is the right to vote for the candidates of his choice and to have his vote counted as cast. The Constitution of the United States and the constitutions of all the States guarantee this right to all citizens who have not forfeited the same by the commission of certain crimes and conviction therefore. It is not a question of fitness, intelligence, wealth, color, or previous condition of servitude, but a right secured by the organic law of the country and bestowed upon all. (Smalls 1890, 593)

Robert Smalls left his imprimatur on Reconstruction politics in Beaufort County. His principal legacy lies not in the reforms he advocated or implemented, but in the personal political salience he brought to the region in pursuit of first class citizenship, education, and equality.

Looking backward fifty years later, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote an essay which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* on the Freedmen's Bureau and African American leadership. As the most prominent African American intellectual, Du Bois provided a cogent assessment of the bureau to explicate "the occasion of its rise, the character of its work, and its final success and failure to grapple with the vast problem of race and the social condition" (*Atlantic Monthly* 1901). On many levels, Robert Smalls and other Reconstruction politicians were grappling with the problem of race and inequality in seeking to transform the position and status of former slaves in American society. Smalls placed political disfranchisement and racial inequality on the national agenda by highlighting the difference between the reality of the lives of former slaves and the national ideals of freedom and equality for all (Smalls 1890, 593–99).

These politicians were in essence, seeking to "lift the veil" that had separated African Americans from the full fruits of American democracy (*Atlantic Monthly* 1897). Du Bois's early scholarship on race at the dawn of the twentieth century provided important insights into the objective reality of African Americans in the South by problematizing the question of race and freedom and uncovering the relationship and interpenetration of race and class as explanatory variables in the African American condition. In wedding politics with his desire for social and economic justice, Robert Smalls challenged a political system that curtailed democratic participation and encouraged corruption and a legal system that flaunted individual rights and encouraged vigilante violence (Smalls 1890, 599–600).

Political disfranchisement and vigilante violence increased with efforts to eliminate black political power. The number of lynchings in South Carolina increased to thirty from 1882 to 1890 with many of the lynchings occurring in areas controlled by African Americans (NAACP 1919, 88–91). Thus, lynching became an instrument for the reestablishment of white supremacy (Uya 1971, 133). It was in this context that the 1890s ushered in the "nadir" for African American political activism (Logan 1997, 52). As Booker T. Washington articulated a philosophy of separation and accommodation as the best strategy for black advancement, the region served as the literal and symbolic inversion of the nation's national values hosting not only segregation and the most extreme forms of racial inequality, but also a range of other insidious practices supposedly at odds with national values such as an exploitative economic system (Edwards 2009, 1–32).

Robert Smalls did not spend the last years of his life ruminating over disappointments or defeats. He continued to attend the Republican Party's national convention and supported the presidency of Benjamin Harrison and other Republican presidential candidates during the final decade of the nineteenth century (Uya 1971, 152–53). He was rewarded with the position of collector of customs for Beaufort County, a position he held until 1913. In his study of African American leadership, Booker T. Washington who led the newly established Negro Business League, described Reconstruction politicians as "shrewd, resolute, resourceful, and brilliant men" who lead the newly enfranchised race at a critical juncture in history (Washington 1909, 22–23). The men who led South Carolina during the Reconstruction period may not have been a homogenous group, but among them stood a man with deep roots in his community, who symbolized the aspirations of newly freed African Americans for economic, political, and social equality. Poet Margaret Walker in her seminal poem, "For My People," wrote on the progressive expansion of freedom during the twentieth century and the agency of Afriçan Americans who were claiming

that freedom. The final verse is also applicable to the work that Robert Smalls and other Reconstructions politicians endeavored to achieve:

> Let another world be born.
> Let a race of men now rise and take control. (*Poetry* 1937)

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