



Black Codes - Back Door Slavery

Video Transcript

In 1865 and 1866, Southern states began to pass a series of discriminatory state laws collectively known as the Black Codes. While the laws varied in both content and severity from state to state, the goal of the laws remained largely consistent. In effect, these codes were designed to maintain the social and economic structure of racial slavery in the absence of slavery itself. The laws codified white supremacy by restricting the civic participation of freed slaves—depriving them of the right to vote, the right to serve on juries, the right to own or carry weapons, and in some cases, even the right to rent or lease land.

Slavery had been a pillar of economic stability in the region before the war, but in order to maintain agricultural production, the South had relied on slaves to work the land. Now the region was faced with the daunting prospect of making the transition from a slave economy to one where labor was purchased on the open market. Not surprisingly, planters in the Southern states were reluctant to make such a transition. Instead, they drafted laws that would re-create the antebellum economic structure with the façade of a free-labor system.

Black Codes used a variety of tactics to tie freed slaves to the land. To work, the freed slaves were forced to sign contracts with their employer. These contracts prevented free blacks from working for more than one employer. This meant that, unlike in a free labor market, blacks could not positively influence wages and conditions by choosing to work for the employer who gave them the best terms. The predictable outcome was that freed slaves were forced to work for very low wages. With such low wages, and no ability to supplement income with additional work, workers were reduced to relying on loans from their employers. The debt that these workers incurred ensured that they could never escape from their condition. Former slaves who attempted to violate these contracts could be fined or beaten. Those who refused to sign contracts at all could be arrested for vagrancy and then made to work for no wages, essentially being reduced to the very definition of a slave. This system called “sharecropping” was nothing more than a veiled recreation of the Old South and slavery.

About this transcript:

- Transcript title: Black Codes - Back Door Slavery
- Corresponding Lesson: Reconstruction 1 - What Could Have Been vs. What Was
- Author and curator: Jay Reynolds, J.D.
- Creative Commons License: [CC BY NC SA](#)