Video Transcript

Prior to the Civil War, the degraded status given to black men and women had placed them outside what Antebellum Southern whites considered appropriate gender roles. For example, enslaved men were often humiliated, deprived of authority, and denied the ability to protect enslaved women. And enslaved women were frequently exposed to the brutality and sexual domination of white masters and vigilantes alike. The division of labor idealized in white Southern society, with men working the land and women as the domestic caretakers, was null and void where slaves were concerned. Both slave men and women were made to perform hard labor in the fields.

Enslaved peoples were also outside the realm of traditional family hierarchies, as slave marriages were not legally recognized and slave parents could not protect their children who were bought, sold, put to work, brutally disciplined, and abused without their consent. Families were often sold piecemeal and separated.

In the Reconstruction era, African Americans embraced the right to enjoy family bonds and expressions of gender norms they had been systematically denied before. Many thousands of freed black men who had been separated from their families as slaves took to the road to find their wives and children to renew their bonds. In one instance, a freed slave traveled over 600 miles on foot in search of the family that was taken from him. Couples that had been spared separation quickly set out to legalize their marriages, often by way of the Freedmen’s Bureau. Those who had no families would sometimes relocate to Southern towns and cities, so as to be part of a larger black community where churches and other mutual aid societies offered help and camaraderie.

Yet economically, African Americans remained deeply disadvantaged. Most had skills best suited for plantation work and so, by the early 1870s, sharecropping became the dominant
way for the poor to earn a living. Wealthy whites allowed poor white and black men to work their land in exchange for a share of the harvest. The landlord would sometimes provide food, seed, tools, and shelter. However, sharecroppers often found themselves in debt, for the necessity of work often forced them to borrow on bad terms and or pay excessively for basic supplies. If the debt exceeded revenues when the harvest came, the sharecropper remained bound to the landowner, in many ways creating a system resembling slavery. By 1876, as the North pulled out of Reconstruction efforts, white Southerners who had reclaimed control began to shape the South as if little had changed.

About this transcript:

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