

Alabama Blacks and the Congressional Reconstruction Acts of 1867

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IT WAS NEARLY DUSK, the oil lamps already casting shadows in the small chapel of the Florence African Methodist Episcopal Church, as James Rapier rose to address an audience of some one hundred and fifty recently emancipated slaves. The United States Congress, the Florence-born Rapier explained, had recently passed two laws affecting blacks in the former Confederate states. These acts divided the South into military districts, disfranchised certain ex-Confederates, enfranchised freedmen, authorized the election of delegates, including former bondsmen, to a state constitutional convention, and charged the convention with drafting a new state charter. Once the charter was ratified by a majority of the eligible and registered voters and approved by Congress, and once the state had accepted a newly proposed amendment to the federal Constitution (the fourteenth), which granted blacks citizenship rights, the commonwealth could reenter the Union. The initial step in this process—the reason the meeting had been called—was to select Lauderdale County's voter registrar, an official responsible for keeping records of voter registration, providing state authorities with local election returns, and advising blacks as well as whites on their duties as electors. As the registrar would be the first black public officer in the history of Alabama, Rapier, who had been born free and educated for eight years in Canada, entreated the gathering to choose a man of exceptional intelligence, outstanding ability, and unquestioned integrity.

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Concluding, he offered words of caution: "In this our first act of participation in the politics of the State, [let us] proceed with calmness, moderation, and intelligence."¹

Heeding the admonition, the freedmen began to organize under the Congressional plan. They chose a president and vice-president of the meeting, selected a resolutions committee, and appointed a committee of five to nominate a black registrar for the fortieth (later the forty-third) election district. After a brief recess the resolutions committee returned with a statement expressing the sentiments of the freedmen in northwest Alabama: "We will endeavor to bring to the consideration of our new duties, a solemn sense of the great responsibilities now resting upon us as enfranchised citizens, and entertaining kindly feelings toward all men, regardless of antecedents, we will enter upon the discharge of our new obligations with a sincere desire to promote peace, harmony, and union." A second resolution pledged support to the Republican party for its steadfast adherence to the cause of equal rights, and a final resolve advised freedmen to strive for economic betterment, educational improvement, and a well-ordered, dignified life. The committee of five then announced that its selection for voter registrar was James Rapier's father, John H. Rapier, Sr., who had been brought to the region in 1819 as a slave and later secured his freedom and established a barber shop. Though not so politically motivated as his son who had begun the proceedings, the fifty-nine-year-old Rapier graciously thanked the gathering for such an honor and expressed his optimism about the future of blacks in Alabama. After unanimously approving both reports, the gathering adjourned.²

¹"Proceedings of the Meeting of Colored People at Florence, Alabama, April 24, 1867," Wager Swayne Papers, Alabama State Department of Archives and History, Montgomery.

² *Ibid.* For biographical data on John Rapier, see Loren Schweningen, "John H. Rapier,

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Such events, so vital to understanding the role of blacks in Alabama Reconstruction, have received little attention from historians. The first chronicler of the period, Walter Lynwood Fleming, viewed the activities of blacks with disdain. Controlled by vicious outsiders (so-called carpetbaggers) and Southern traitors (so-called scalawags), freedmen had pressed for the confiscation of white-owned plantations and had demanded complete social equality. In addition, they had been organized into secret political societies known as Union Leagues and then herded to the polls like so many cattle to vote against their former masters and best friends, the white Conservatives. At the beginning of Congressional Reconstruction there had been no solid South, asserted Fleming; within the white man's party there had been grave divisions. Only after six years of tyrannical black rule had whites finally united to redeem control over their government.³

Many of Fleming's stereotypes, of course, have now been discarded, as historians probe the complex questions surrounding the attitudes and activities of Northern immigrants, the motives of native Southern Republicans, and the economic and cultural strivings of freedmen.⁴ But still virtually unchallenged are two of Fleming's major conten-

Sr.: A Slave and Freedman in the Ante-bellum South," *Civil War History*, XX (March 1974), 23-34.

3 Walter L. Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (New York, 1905), 384,403, 445-48, 469, 514-16, 522-23, 553, 568, 762, 772, 8Q3.

4. Richard N. Current, *Three Carpetbag Governors* (Baton Rouge, 1967); William C. Harris, "The Creed of the Carpetbaggers: The Case of Mississippi," *Journal of Southern History*, XL (May 1974), 199-224; Richard L. Hume, "Carpetbaggers in the Reconstruction South: A Group Portrait of Outside Whites in the 'Black and Tan' Conventions," *Journal of American History*, LXIV (September 1977), 313-30; Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, *The Scalawag in Alabama Politics, 1865-1881* (University, Ala., 1977); William M. Cash, "Alabama Republicans During Reconstruction: Personal Characteristics, Motivations, and Political Activity of Party Activists, 1867-1880" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Alabama, 1973); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York, 1976); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York, 1977).

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tions: that blacks failed to accept the challenge of leadership, especially at the outset of the era, and that blacks generally favored confiscation of the land controlled by former Confederates. "Although they supplied the bulk of the actual Republican manpower," one recent authority said, "the politically inexperienced freedmen seemed content at first to listen to the exhortations of their Northern white mentors."⁵ Another author asserted that the majority of blacks favored the confiscation and reallocation of white-owned plantations.⁶ A close examination of black political activity in Alabama during the first eight months of Congressional Reconstruction shows the inaccuracy of such contentions. As suggested by the resolutions of Lauderdale County freedmen, blacks asked for equal rights but remained independent of any control by whites and made only moderate demands for the reshaping of Southern society. A significant number in their ranks quickly demonstrated a remarkable capacity for leadership.

The Florence meeting was only one of numerous gatherings called by blacks in various parts of Alabama in response to the Congressional Reconstruction Acts. Two days after the first measure passed Congress on March 2, 1867, Mobile blacks, including Lawrence Berry, a leader in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and E. C. Branch, a founder of the first radical newspaper in the state, the *Mobile Nationalist*, called an informal meeting to organize a political society. A few days later at a formal meeting in the Stone Street Baptist Church, Branch commented on the Reconstruction bill. Every citizen, without distinction of race or color, he said, now had the right to

5. Peter Kolchin, *First Freedom: The Responses of Alabama's Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Westport, Conn., 1972), 156.

6. Edward Magdol, *A Right to the Land: Essays on the Freedmen's Community* (Westport, Conn., 1977), 173.

vote in all elections. On March 11, 1867 he called yet another meeting. It was a complete success, one observer commented, "the house was crowded to overflowing."⁷

If Mobile blacks were among the first to respond to Congressional Reconstruction, freedmen in other parts of the state also quickly began to organize. William V. Turner, who later became the editor of the *Elmore Republican*, wrote from Wetumpka in early March that he had already urged a number of blacks to support the new acts, and freedman Lafayette Robinson, who later became a member of the state constitutional convention from Madison County, not only called a political gathering of blacks, but organized an institute for local improvement.⁸ At a meeting in Decatur the president of Morgan County's Union League solemnly promised to vote only for the friends of the Republican party, while the former slaves of Autauga County, led by Isaac Burt, himself a former bondsman, resolved at a meeting in Kingston (a few miles from Montgomery) to favor a speedy restoration of the state, but only in strict conformity with the provisions of the Sherman bill.⁹ At Tuskegee a black shoemaker and musician James H. Alston organized a Union League with about four hundred members.¹⁰ In short, during the days immediately following the passage of the Reconstruction Acts, Alabama blacks called meetings, proposed resolutions, and expressed their desire to reconstruct the state along lines suggested by Congress.

The most heralded of these early meetings occurred in Montgomery, March 25, 1867, when, for the first time,

7. *Mobile Nationalist*, March 7, 14, 1867. For biographical material on Berry, see *ibid.*, April 26, 1866.

8. *Ibid.*, March 21, 1867; *Huntsville Advocate*, March 27, 1867.

9 *Mobile Nationalist*, March 28, 1867; *Montgomery Daily Mail*, April 20, 1867.

10. Edward Magdol, "Local Black Leaders in the South: An Essay Toward the Reconstruction of Reconstruction History," *Societas—A Review of Social History*, IV (1974), 86.

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whites and blacks met as political equals.¹¹ But the speeches were all given by whites. Adam C. Felder, an old line Whig and ex-Confederate; Henry C. Semple, a prewar Democratic lawyer; and General Wager Swayne of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands urged the audience to support only those who had an "inflexible heart" for the United States.¹² At subsequent white-black gatherings, however, blacks not only attended in large numbers but also addressed the crowds and offered resolutions. Seventy-five former bondsmen and twenty-five whites met in Selma, Dallas County, for example, and one of the featured speakers was Joseph Drawn, a former slave who had memories of the overseer's whip during his younger days. Drawn was followed to the stand by John Silsby, a representative of the American Missionary Association, a Northern philanthropic society. Both speakers said they supported the acts of Congress and looked forward to the complete restoration of the state to the Union as well as the implementation of black suffrage.¹³ At Hayneville in nearby Lowndes County another former slave, Hampton Shuford, and another Northern missionary, William C. Buckley, spoke to a large group. After Buckley informed the freedmen of their new rights, Shuford addressed the gathering as the featured speaker. "We should be unanimous. We should endeavor to have the disabilities of all [pro-Union] men removed." The Conservative *Montgomery Advertiser* said that the views of Shuford were full of practical wisdom. He had urged his people to be honest, industrious, and frugal.¹⁴ The same issue of the

11. *Mobile Nationalist*, April 4, 1867; *Mobile Daily Register*, March 28, 1867.

12. *Mobile Nationalist*, April 4, 1867.

13. *Montgomery Weekly Mail*, April 11, 1867. For an evaluation of the educational activities of the American Missionary Association in Alabama, see Robert G. Sherer, *Subordination or Liberation? The Development and Conflicting Theories of Black Education in Nineteenth Century Alabama* (University, Ala., 1977), 114-48.

14. *Montgomery Weekly Advertiser*, April 23, 1867.

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Advertiser described another mixed meeting in the Black Belt, saying that three thousand freedmen and freedwomen along with a group of whites had listened attentively to a discussion of the recent laws by two former slaves, T. U. Barnard and John Trainor, near the capitol in Montgomery.

Outside Dallas, Lowndes, and Montgomery counties blacks and whites also gathered in political conclaves. At Bluffton in Chambers County those favoring the Republican party assembled near a freedmen's school, and Wesley Cox, the black chairman of the meeting, spoke at length on "Our Responsibilities as Freedmen." Like Shuford, Cox called for friendly relations between the races. "We deprecate any attempt to organize a 'White Man's Party' or a 'Black Man's Party.' The interest and the destinies of both are the same and upon the sustaining of such relations depend the happiness and prosperity of the South."¹⁵ Miles away in Mobile, five thousand freedmen and a scattering of whites met in an open field adjoining the gasworks in what one political observer termed "one of the largest and most successful political gatherings ever held in Alabama."¹⁶ Two blacks, churchman Lawrence Berry, a local property owner, and Alabama-born fugitive slave John Carraway, who had served in the Union army during the Civil War, highlighted the long list of speakers. "We are here tonight," Berry began, "to tell the world that after being enfranchised, we are wise enough to know our rights and we are going to claim those rights." The ballot was a step toward full citizenship, a long-awaited dream for those whose skin marked them apart from the majority of their countrymen. This claim did not mean, as some had argued, that blacks were demanding "social equality." "I have the

¹⁵ Montgomery Daily *State Sentinel*, May 22, 27, 1867.¹⁶

¹⁶ Mobile *Nationalist*, April 25, 1867.

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right to invite whom I please to my home to dine or take tea."¹⁷ Taking a seat in a public conveyance was not a social but a civil act. Playing on the same theme, Carraway warned his brethren to beware of so-called friends. "We can be good friends with [white Conservatives], but they have no right to control our political future."¹⁸ As for himself he would never compromise on any point concerning his new rights as a citizen.

Though basically agreeing with Berry and Carraway, other leaders sought political equality in a spirit of conciliation. When forty-two leading blacks from southern Alabama assembled in the same city to devise measures to advance the interests of the recently emancipated, one speaker sounded the keynote: "We should be moderate."¹⁹ They had gathered as representatives of the black race, and they should show themselves worthy of this honor by moving ahead cautiously. Editor W. V. Turner of the Elmore *Republican*, Montgomery's Holland Thompson, the personal servant of plantation owner William Taylor before the war, and Carraway, who later became Alabama's first black lawyer, presented resolutions favoring the Stevens-Shellanbarger bill, the abolition of legal distinctions because of race, and the establishment of a common school system. One resolution warned against any confiscation of the land, and another reemphasized a concern with the social and economic effects of freedom: "We sincerely desire a peaceable and happy relationship . . . between us and our white neighbors and employers."²⁰

Alabama Conservatives also wanted a congenial relation-

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Mobile Daily Register*, May 3, 1867.

20 Other blacks active at the meeting included Benjamin Royal of Bullock County and Alexander Webb, the Hale County registrar. *Mobile Nationalist*, May 23, 1867; *New York Times*, May 4, 1867; Emma Lou Thornbrough, ed., *Black Reconstructionists* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1972), 25-26.

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ship between the two races, but they believed that intelligent whites should lead the "inferior colored race."²¹ The editor of the *Montgomery Mail*, Joseph Hodgson, said that Conservatives fully accepted the results of the Civil War, but now he hoped blacks would follow their former masters. "We have no prejudice against our friends of African blood," Hodgson explained, believing that such a profession would endear him to those recently released from bondage. "They have been the nurses of our children, the play fellows of our childhood, and our faithful friends."²² John Forsythe, editor of the *Mobile Register*, also advised his Conservative cohorts to accept black suffrage and deal justly with blacks.²³ And in a spectacular debate on the white marble steps of the capitol on May 14, 1867 an unwavering Yankee radical, Massachusetts Senator Henry Wilson, one-time editor of the *Boston Republican*, confronted a staunch Southern Conservative, James H. Clanton, chairman of the executive committee of the Alabama Democratic party, both contending for the vote of the newly enfranchised blacks. Standing where Jefferson Davis had proclaimed the beginning of the Civil War, Wilson promised hundreds of listeners that the Republican party offered them the best hope to secure their rights. In rebuttal, appealing to a common heritage, Clanton intoned: "My colored friends, we are Southern men, born upon the same soil, live in the same country, and will sleep in the same graveyard."²⁴ The destiny of the two races was the same, and if blacks prospered, the whites of the South would also prosper. It was therefore the duty of freedmen to cultivate the friendliest relations with their former owners, who had always been their best friends.

²¹ *Montgomery Weekly Advertiser*, April 30, 1867.

²² *Montgomery Weekly Mail*, April 4, 1867.

²³ *Mobile Daily Advertiser and Register*, March 19, 1867.

²⁴ *Montgomery Weekly Advertiser*, May 14, 1867.

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Despite the desire of Conservatives, as well as blacks, for a congenial relationship between the races, difficulties arose. On the evening of May 14, Radical Pennsylvania Congressman William D. "Pig Iron" Kelley began a pro-Reconstruction address at the corner of Royal and Government streets in Mobile. Hundreds of freedmen had come to hear Kelley, but soon after he had begun a small group of white roudies shouted: "Take him down," "put him down," "rotten egg him."²⁵ When the city police moved in to apprehend the hecklers, a shot was fired. According to the *Montgomery Advertiser*, John Carraway quickly went among the crowd beseeching them to return peaceably to their homes, but he failed. Soon more shots rang out.²⁶ "Quite a number of men were killed or wounded," the *Mobile Nationalist* reported several days later; a number of blacks were shot miles from the scene. Conservatives blamed the riot on Kelley's "inflammatory" remarks, while John Pope, the military commander in Alabama, blamed the mayor and the police force.²⁷

Following the Mobile riot, racial antagonisms flared in the Black Belt. Late in the afternoon of June 13, John C. Orrick, a storeowner and well-known white resident of Hale County, exchanged angry words with Alexander Webb, the black registrar and newspaper agent, and following a heated argument on the main street of Greensboro, Orrick drew his pistol and shot Webb fatally in the chest. Afterwards, he walked up the street, pistol in hand, remarking that he would never allow "no damn nigger to call him a liar."²⁸ Both incidents—the riot and Webb's

25. *Mobile Nationalist*, May 16, 1867.

26. *Mobile Times*, quoted in *Montgomery Weekly Advertiser*, May 21, 1867. 27

27. *Mobile Nationalist*, May 16, 23, 30, 1867. See Sarah W. Wiggins, "The 'Pig Iron,' Kelley Riot in Mobile, May 14, 1867," *Alabama Review*, XXIII (January 1970), 45-55.

28. *Montgomery Daily State Sentinel*, June 22, 1867; *Montgomery Weekly Mail*, July 3, 1867; *Athens Post*, June 20, 1867. For white terrorism against blacks in other parts of the state see James R. Jones to Robert Patton, September 7, 1867, and Neander Rice to

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murder—intensified feelings of hostility between the races and seemed to lessen the possibility for accommodation.

In the midst of this racial violence Alabama freedmen continued to call meetings, make proposals, and voice their support for Congressional Reconstruction. They also met with pro-Union whites to choose delegates to the first statewide convention of the Republican party to be held June 4-5 in Montgomery. In north Alabama the freedmen of Morgan County met at Decatur in mid-May and chose four blacks to represent them at the convention, while former slaves in Limestone County held a meeting in Athens and resolved that they deplored the strife and dissension that existed, promising to use every means to establish tranquility. They chose six blacks and twelve whites to journey to the capital.²⁹ The *Montgomery State Sentinel* reported an enthusiastic meeting in Colbert County and the *Huntsville Advocate* acknowledged the gathering of the Union League in Lawrence County, both for the purpose of choosing delegates.³⁰

Freedmen held similar meetings in other parts of the state.³¹ At Bluffton in Chambers County, former bondsman J. Caldwell addressed a large audience and said that it was the duty of both races to cultivate kindly relations with one another.³² At Mount Meigs in Montgomery County "the colored citizens of the neighborhood" discussed vital questions confronting the nation.³³ At Wetumpka, W. V. Turner, who had already chaired several earlier meetings, and who had corresponded with leading Republican politi-

Robert Patton, September 18, 1867, Governor Robert M. Patton Papers, Alabama State Department of Archives and History, Montgomery.

²⁹ *Montgomery Daily State Sentinel*, May 16, 22, 1867.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, May 30, 1867; *Huntsville Advocate*, June 7, 1867.

³¹ *Florence Journal*, May 30, 1867.

³² *Montgomery Daily State Sentinel*, May 22, 1867.

³³ *Ibid.*, May 23, 1867.

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clans across the state, addressed an audience of fifteen hundred blacks. He declared it "to be the duty of every colored man to support the Republican Party," immodestly acknowledging a short time later that "every colored man on the ground endorsed my argument."³⁴ Similar gatherings took place in other counties.³⁵

On the eve of the state convention Burrell E. Hatcher, a former slave from Dallas County and later a member of the Alabama constitutional convention, told a large group in Montgomery that blacks should practice habits of honesty, industriousness, and frugality, so that they could "convince the world that they were capable of assuming the various responsibilities incident to independent republican citizenship." "We should cautiously proceed in our deliberations," he concluded, in much the same vein as James Rapier's Florence speech, "because we are now establishing precedence for the guidance of millions of our posterity."³⁶

The deliberations began the next morning on June 4, 1867 when 150 delegates, mostly freedmen, from all parts of Alabama, assembled in the House of Representatives to draw up a platform for the state Republican party. Only moments after the officers had been chosen, a delegate offered a resolution requesting that the convention seat federal district judge Richard Busteed, but freeborn Ovide Gregory, a Creole from Mobile, quickly spoke against the invitation. The judge, Gregory charged, had recently opposed black suffrage. Sharply reprimanding Gregory for the impropriety of his remarks was the aging antebellum judge Sidney Cherry Posey, who, like Busteed, had reservations about the participation of blacks in politics. Remember that the work of Reconstruction had only just 34

34. *Mobile Nationalist*, May 23, 1867.

35. *Montgomery Weekly Advertiser*, May 21, 1867.

36. *Montgomery Daily State Sentinel*, June 6, 1867.

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begun, Posey cautioned; the delegates should accept anyone who promised allegiance to the party. Replying to Posey, John Carraway argued that Busted's previous stance on the suffrage question meant that he was an enemy of the Republican party. The controversy raged until late that night. Defending the judge were General Joseph W. Burke, commander of the Tenth Ohio Infantry during the Civil War, and David C. Humphries, a Douglas Democrat from Morgan County, while Northerner Albert Griffin, the editor of the Mobile *Nationalist*, joined Gregory and Carraway in questioning Busted's sincerity. Not until the morning of the second day when the delegates voted 148 to 25 against seating Busted did the disputation finally end, but the bitter debate, symbolic of the factionalism that would plague the party throughout Reconstruction, had consumed more than half of the scheduled two-day convention.³⁷

Late in the afternoon of the second day, the convention put forth a platform for the Republican party of Alabama. It endorsed the Congressional plan of Reconstruction, supported the proposed citizenship amendment to the Constitution, and outlined several specific, if idealistic, aims of the party: free speech, free press, free schools, liberal state financial support for public education, and the outlawing of discrimination on account of color or previous condition. Adopting the platform unanimously, the delegates adjourned, but not before declaring, "We discountenance all attempts to stir up strife."³⁸

The vote against Busted and the unified support for the platform belied the strong antagonisms that had surfaced at the first statewide Republican convention. Whites, espe-

³⁷ *Ibid.*, June 4, 1867; *Montgomery Weekly Mail*, June 6, 1867; *Mobile Nationalist*, June 13, 1867. For biographical information on Gregory see *Mobile Daily Advertiser and Register*, November 30, 1867.

³⁸ *Mobile Nationalist*, June 13, 1867.

cially prewar residents from the northern and eastern sections of the state (Madison, Lauderdale, and Randolph) left the convention disgruntled and discouraged. Not only had they lost their fight over the Busted affair, but they had become fearful of the power of Gregory, Carraway, Griffin, and others they considered extreme radicals.³⁹ Astutely analyzing the hostilities that had developed, a reporter noted that "ultra-Radicals" had chafed at the slow pace of conservative Republicans and great diversity of sentiment had characterized the meeting "however unanimous they may appear to have been in adopting their platform."⁴⁰

In the following days Alabama blacks immediately began a spirited campaign to register black voters. Having just returned from a series of interviews with leading Republicans in the nation's capital, George Washington Cox began the campaign at Tuscaloosa. Blacks fully comprehended the meaning of freedom, liberty, and citizenship, he said in a two-hour address, perhaps better than those who had for so long taken those blessings for granted. "By being free we are not discharged from the obligations of citizens. With citizenship our responsibilities begin."⁴¹ But how should freedmen discharge their new responsibilities? Cox urged them first to register, then vote both for the calling of a constitutional convention (as outlined in the Reconstruction Acts) and for Republican candidates to compose it. Beware of false promises and professed friends, he warned, pointing out that the Democrats had failed to assist freed people in acquiring land, attaining a decent wage, and securing adequate schools.⁴²

Across the state blacks followed Cox's suggestions.

^{39.} *Ibid.*

^{40.} *Ibid.*

^{41.} Montgomery Daily *State Sentinel*, June 24, 1867.

^{42.} *Ibid.*

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Speaking to four thousand freedmen at Tuskegee in Macon County, Holland Thompson expressed his opposition to the idea of government land confiscation and beseeched blacks to save their earnings and purchase their own real estate.⁴³ Black carpenter and coach-maker James K. Greene spoke to an even larger crowd at a Republican barbecue in Greensboro in Hale County, calling upon his listeners to register and vote for the friends of the departed Lincoln.⁴⁴ In Florence James Rapier addressed another group of freedmen, endorsing the platform of the new party that he had helped draft.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, other leaders in central and southern Alabama addressed large and enthusiastic gatherings. Among them were Thomas Lee, a candidate to the constitutional convention, and Henry Connor, a teacher at the Uniontown Colored Academy, who shared the platform in front of an assemblage of more than five thousand in Perry County.⁴⁶

While blacks spoke out in favor of the Republican party, the vast majority of Alabama whites, perhaps 90 percent, organized against the new party. At first, in the late spring and early summer, Conservatives had cajoled blacks, hoping to bring them into the ranks of the Democracy, but when the rhetoric of Hodgson, Forsythe, and others had fallen on deaf ears, Democrats abruptly changed their stance. They now began to insist that innate inferiority precluded blacks from exercising the rights of citizenship. An address prepared by a thirteen-county Democratic convention protested that the white race, through the machinations of a political party, was about to forfeit its hereditary supremacy over the black race.⁴⁷ Joseph Hodgson of

⁴³ *Ibid.*, July 23, 1867.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, July 24, 1867.

⁴³ Florence *Journal*, August 8, 1867.

⁴⁶ Montgomery Daily *State Sentinel*, August 23, September 16, 17, 1867;

Mobile *Nationalist*, September 26, 1867. ⁴⁷

Montgomery Weekly *Advertiser*, September 6, 1867.

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the Montgomery *Mail* set out to avert the forthcoming constitutional convention and thus thwart the efforts to codify the rights of freedmen. His scheme was simple: by invoking section three of the March 23 Congressional act (which stipulated that only a majority of the registered voters could call a constitutional convention), and by urging whites to *register*; but *not vote*, he could defeat the designs of Congress. As whites comprised about 45 percent (75,000) and blacks 55 percent (90,000) of the electorate, it would take a 90 percent proconvention vote of all eligible freedmen to muster the necessary majority, something he viewed as highly unlikely, even given the antiblack proclamations of the Conservatives. "It is evident," he explained, that the opponents of the Convention should see to it that a majority of all registered voters do not vote on the question."⁴⁸

The October election returns, however, indicated the failure of the Democratic scheme. "A Glorious Victory," the Republican Montgomery *State Sentinel* headlined, explaining that the "Rebel element" had been completely routed. Describing the election as quiet and orderly, the *Nationalist* noted that the Mobile County vote had been 1,556 for and 3 against the convention and that all of the elected delegates were "true Union men."⁴⁹ In all, 54 percent of the eligible voters (71,730 blacks and 18,553 whites) favored the convention; only 3 percent (5,583, almost all whites) voted no, while 96 of the 100 delegates chosen to attend were Republicans, including 18 blacks.⁵⁰

48. Montgomery Weekly *Mail*, October 2, 1867.

49. Montgomery Daily *State Sentinel*, October 7, 1867; Mobile *Nationalist*, October 19, 1867.⁵⁰

50. The returns used are those reported by General John Pope, though the figures varied slightly in different sources. United States House *Executive Documents*, No. 238, "Report of General George Meade on Alabama Election, March 27, 1868," 40th Cong., 2nd sess., p. 2. See also Mobile *Nationalist*, October 17, 1867, and Election Returns, State of Alabama, 1867, Alabama State Department of Archives and History, Montgomery. Richard L. Hume erred in counting only 17 blacks at the Alabama convention. Hume,

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In response to Congressional Reconstruction black leaders across the state had called meetings, held conventions, made proposals, and through the newly formed Republican party they had won a resounding victory. Conspicuously absent from their public speeches and resolutions was any demand for the redistribution of white land holdings; rather, they urged their brethren to work hard and "strive for economic betterment." Also absent from their discussions was any expression of a desire for retribution. Instead, they expressed magnanimity toward whites, deprecated any attempt to organize a "Black Man's Party" or a "White Man's Party," and emphasized harmony between the races. At the same time they were forceful and resolute in their insistence that blacks be granted full citizenship rights.⁵¹

But in the euphoria of success there was reason for despair. Alabama Conservatives, only six months after the first Reconstruction Act, had proclaimed a white man's party and had decided to campaign on the race issue. In addition, white Republicans, especially prewar Alabama residents living outside the Black Belt, had challenged the "radical" direction of the party and voiced their support for Republican conservatism. It was ironic that the political enthusiasm blacks exhibited between March and October 1867 created alignments that ultimately caused the downfall of the state's Republican party. And it was tragic that as Reconstruction progressed, neither Democrats nor Republicans heeded the advice offered at the outset by an Alabama black man—to proceed with "calmness, moderation, and intelligence."

"Carpetbaggers in the Reconstruction South," 315. For a list of the 18 who attended see Loren Schweningen, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction* (Chicago, 1978), 199.

51. Most of the black leaders to emerge in Alabama had been slaves. This contrasted with other parts of the South. In New Orleans, for example, 95 percent of those who became local Republican stalwarts had been free prior to the Civil War. David C. Rankin, "The Origins of Black Leadership in New Orleans During Reconstruction," *Journal of Southern History*, XL (August 1974), 417-40.

[Schweninger, L.](#) "Alabama Blacks and the Congressional Reconstruction Acts of 1867," *Alabama Review* 31 (July 1978):182-192.

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