

Rebuilding Louisiana

As you read, look for:

- economic struggles during Reconstruction,
- daily life during Reconstruction, and
- vocabulary terms **sharecropping** and **credit**.

During the Reconstruction period in Louisiana, politics overshadowed economic planning. The congressional Reconstruction plan focused on punishment and political control. There was no plan to rebuild the South's economy.

To most people, the political struggle was important only in the ways it affected their daily lives. They wanted peace around them and prosperity for their families. Restoring the plantation economy seemed logical to the former Confederates. But rebuilding the plantation system required money, and banks were reluctant to make loans to the planters because they no longer had slaves for collateral. (*Collateral* is something of value pledged as security for a loan.) Many planters lost their land because they could not make the mortgage payments or could not pay their taxes.

Below: Blacks continued to provide most of the labor in the cotton fields, but now they worked as sharecroppers. Conditions, however, were close to slavery.



A currency shortage also made financial recovery difficult. Confederate money was worthless. One planter paid his employees with written notes that said “Good in thirty days to any merchant in Alexandria that furnishes Willis Washington a half barrel of flour.”

Labor

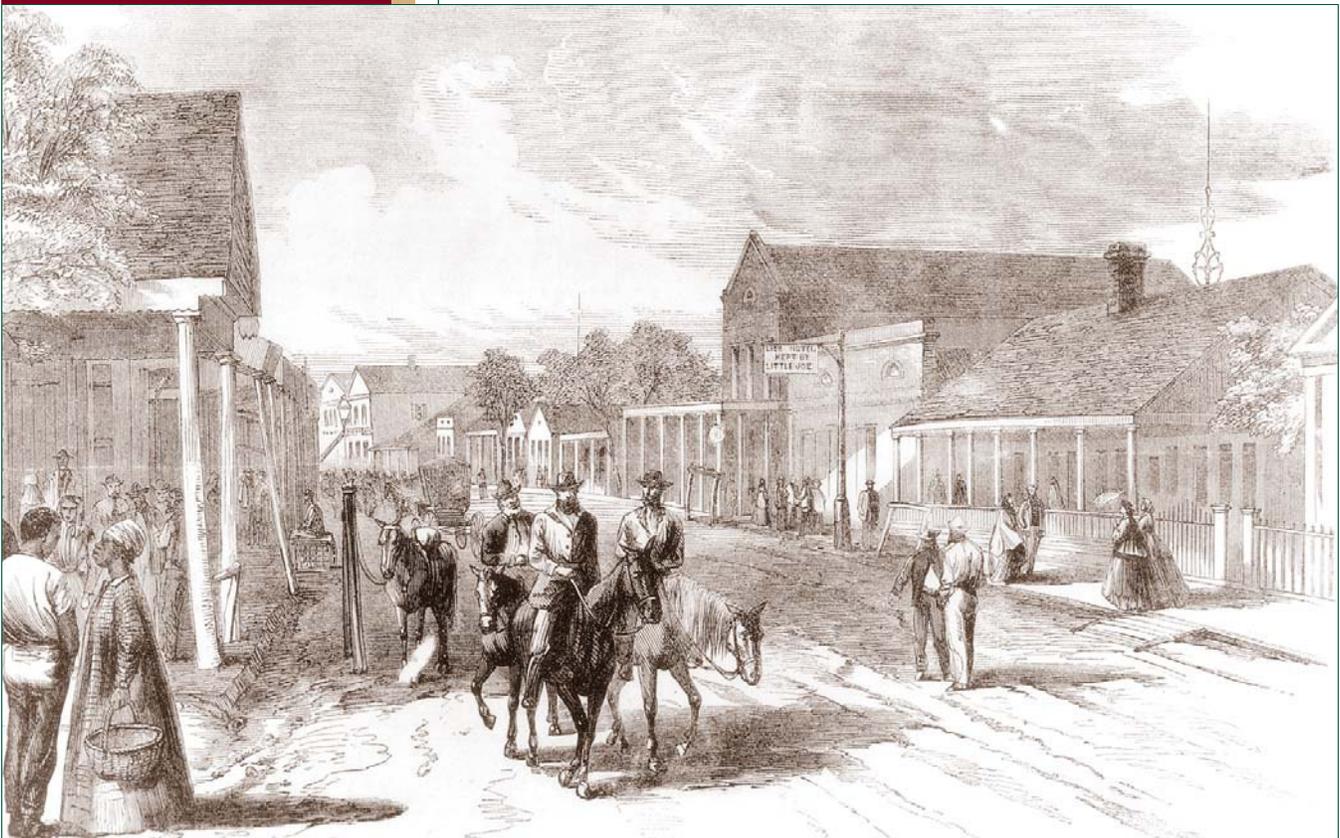
Finding workers for the plantations was a constant struggle. Brokers began operating almost like slave traders, charging a fee for finding workers. Sometimes they cheated the workers, and sometimes they cheated the planters. Some of the workers were freedmen from other states. Workers were paid more in Louisiana because the land produced more cotton than in the southeastern states.

One way to keep workers was with a contract. Labor contracts were started by the Union commanders during the war. Under the contracts, workers were paid wages, but they had to stay on a plantation for a year. Often, a part of their wages was held until after the crop was sold. This contract method worked well on the sugar plantations but not on the cotton plantations.

On a cotton plantation, there were several months when workers were not busy. In addition, planters did not have the cash to pay wages, and crops failed because of floods and insects. For these reasons, sharecropping developed.

Under the **sharecropping** system, the planter provided the land, the tools, and a cabin. The workers labored all year in return for a share of the profit

Below: After the war, the small towns slowly began to recover. This is a view of New Iberia in 1866.





when the crop was sold. Typically, both the workers and the planter bought the year's supplies on **credit**. That is, they bought what they needed and agreed to pay for the items later. The store owner usually agreed to take part of the crop in payment at the end of the year.

This form of credit was called the *crop lien system*. Sharecropping became a way of life for most freedmen, and later for many poor whites. Merchants who sold on credit charged high prices, and the workers' share of the profit was rarely enough to pay off the store owner. As a result, the sharecroppers were always in debt.

Natural disasters made economic recovery even harder. In 1866-1867, major floods hit Louisiana. Because the levees had not been maintained during the war, the flooding was widespread. Even when there was enough of a crop to sell, it was difficult to get it to market. The railroads had been heavily damaged during the war. Only the line from Algiers (near New Orleans) to Brashear City (now Morgan City) was in good shape.

Slow Improvement

After 1867, agriculture and the rest of the economy began to improve slowly. Sawmills were set up to handle the huge old cypress trees being cut in the swamps. Spanish moss was baled for sale. And professional hunters brought ducks and other game to market in the cities and towns.

Above: This general store at the LSU Rural Life Museum is typical of the stores where sharecroppers would buy items on credit.

Lagniappe

Edmund McIlhenny produced the first bottles of Louisiana's famous Tabasco brand pepper sauce in 1868.

These trade centers began to rebuild. Shreveport and Marksville added several new buildings. Small factories in the towns built wagons, buggies, carts, and railroad cars. The system for buying cotton shifted from the factors in New Orleans to towns near the plantations. These towns had cotton buyers, gins, a big general store, a drugstore, a doctor, a school, a saloon, and several churches. Often, the general store doubled as the post office.

But the state's economic recovery halted in 1873 when a national depression stopped the country's growth. Louisiana stayed poor well into the twentieth century.

Rebuilding Lives

Politics and the economy were not the only things in Louisiana that needed rebuilding after the war. People—black and white—wanted to rebuild their lives.

Entertainment

The return of the circus helped the children forget the war years. They were entertained by trained animals, acrobats, and clowns. Shreveport was

excited by a visit from the famous General Tom Thumb, a tiny man who stood only 40 inches tall. A traveling group shocked the town of Shreveport with the can-can dance. Critics said the performance was a place where “a gentleman should be ashamed to be seen.” The circuses and other entertainers traveled on the riverboats that soon filled the waterways.

The riverboats themselves provided entertainment and excitement. Scheduled races attracted onlookers to town landings. In the most famous race, the *Natchez* and the *Robert E. Lee* steamed up the river from New Orleans to St. Louis in 1870. Because he was a friend of the owner, Governor Warmoth was a passenger on the *Robert E. Lee*. He described the way more wood was loaded during the race. Another steamboat came alongside and the wood was transferred without either boat slowing down. The *Robert E. Lee* won the race in three days, eighteen hours, and fourteen minutes.



Above: General Tom Thumb (whose real name was Charles Sherwood Stratton) and his wife Lavinia toured all over the United States, including Shreveport.



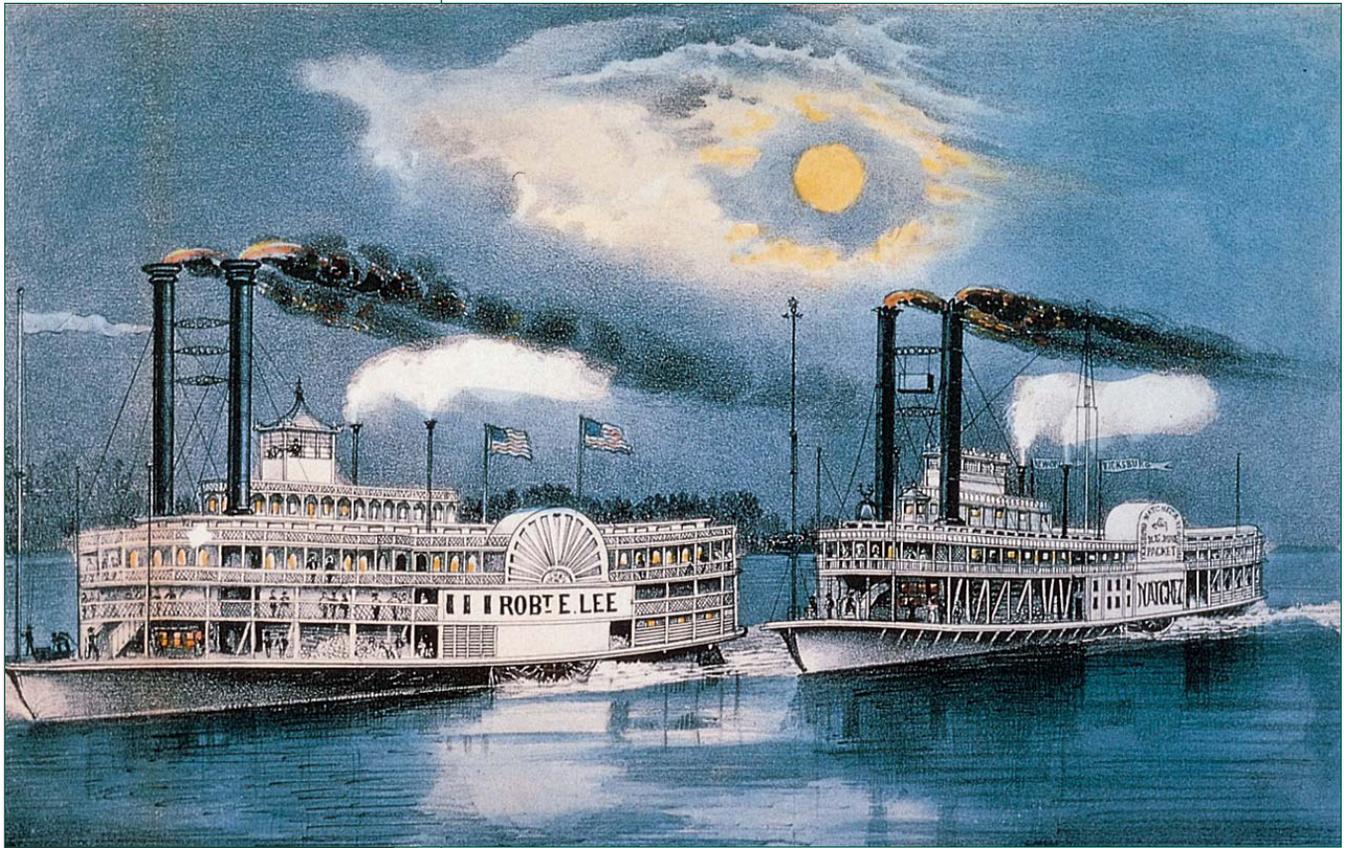


People also created their own entertainment. Community theater groups were formed in Alexandria and other towns. Parties and dances continued, although they were simpler than before the war. Charades was a popular party game. Making and pulling taffy candy was a special treat for young people.

After the war, baseball became popular. Baseball teams were formed as this new sport began to earn its nickname as “America’s favorite pastime.” The New Orleans Southern traveled as far away as Brooklyn, New York, to play. The Baton Rouge team was called the Red Sticks, and Shreveport had two teams—the Quicksteps and the Country Boys.

New Orleans continued to be the only true city in the state, providing entertainment and excitement. Visitors reported on the shocking behavior they saw and often described it as an immoral city. But along with the saloons and dance halls, New Orleans was also home to operas and the theater.

Above: This 1872 painting is entitled the “Volunteer Fireman’s Parade.” Volunteer fire departments often served as social clubs.



Above: Steamboat races were a popular form of entertainment. Perhaps the most famous was the race between the *Natchez* and the *Robert E. Lee*. In the actual race, the boats were never this close together.

One new social organization also had a serious community purpose. Volunteer fire departments were organized in several towns. The fire departments also served as social clubs, and the members of clubs like the Ascension Hook and Ladder Company met regularly. Local parades often included decorated fire wagons. Special young ladies were honored when the fire engines were named for them.

Education

During the war years, education received little attention except in New Orleans. There, the military commanders established schools and brought teachers from the North to teach the freedmen how to read and write. The Freedmen's Bureau operated these schools after the war.

The Reconstruction government directed that the public schools be open to all students, but only a few schools in New Orleans functioned that way. Wealthy whites continued to send their children to private schools. Many children, both black and white, received little or no education. In some parishes, the public schools were controlled by an African American school board. White parents refused to send their children to these schools. In parishes where whites controlled the schools, the African American children were not allowed to attend. The corruption and confusion of these years affected education and the state's future.

Many northern churches helped provide for the needs of the freedmen after the war. Their most lasting contribution, however, was their involvement in

education. The first colleges for African Americans in Louisiana were started by these missionary groups and became important institutions in the African American culture. These included the University of New Orleans, Leland College, and Straight University. The University of New Orleans and Straight University later merged to become Dillard University.

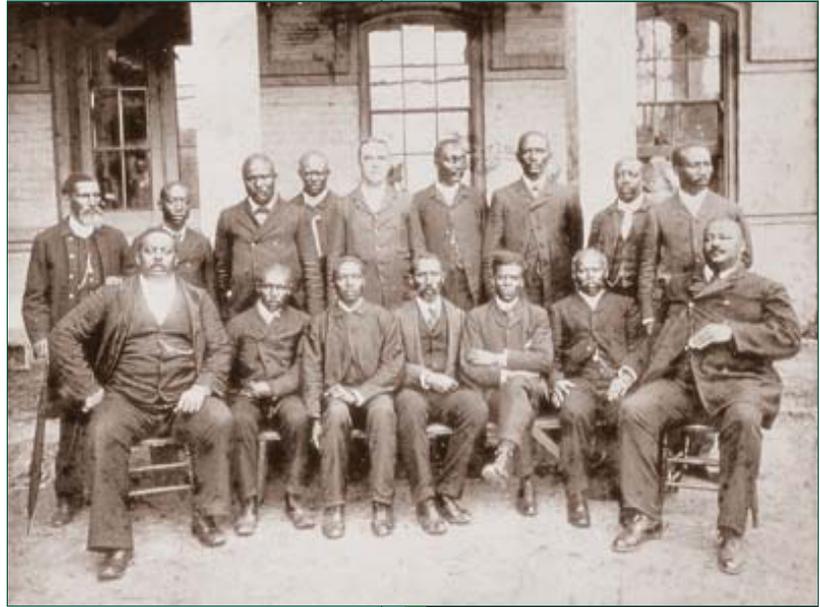
African American Churches

The growth of the African American churches was an important development. In antebellum times, slaves usually attended the white churches. The slaves were expected to sit in a special section and worship in the style of their masters. Now African Americans wanted their own churches.

Records of the Beulah Baptist Church of Cheneyville in Rapides Parish show that the members met in July 1865 to discuss the attitude of their “colored members.” The church voted to tell these members to report and repent of their behavior. Instead, the former slaves petitioned to begin their own church.

Some churches for African Americans had already been established. The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church was started in New Orleans in the antebellum era. Before the war, many of the free people of color were Catholic because of their French heritage. Some of the slaves had also been Catholic. Now, however, most of the former slaves chose to join another church. Some of the former slaves formed Methodist churches, but most of the churches established were Baptist.

These organizations were a source of strength for the African American community. It was in these churches that the former slaves found the most freedom. Here they developed their leaders and their sense of community.



Above: The first colleges for African Americans in Louisiana, like Leland College, were started by missionary groups.

Lagniappe

Leland College opened in New Orleans in 1869. It was destroyed by a storm in 1915. It reopened in Baker in 1923, but closed in 1960.

Check for Understanding ✓

1. What kind of economy did the former Confederates want?
2. What are two reasons why sharecropping developed on cotton plantations?
3. Why were sharecroppers almost always in debt?
4. Name two popular kinds of entertainment during this time.
5. What group started the first colleges for African Americans?