

Title of Lesson: *Sharecropping in Alabama during Reconstruction: An Answer to a Problem and a Problem in the Making?*

(Suggested grade level: 10th Grade Advanced U.S. History to 1877)

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Background Information:

The following links offer background information on Alabama sharecroppers during Reconstruction:

- [Encyclopedia of Alabama](#) offers an extensive selection of articles and multimedia resources dealing with almost all aspects of Alabama history, geography, culture, and natural environment. Typing the word “sharecropping” into the search window yields 18 results, a mix of articles and some very powerful photographs of Alabama sharecroppers that were taken in the 1930s. The [first article](#) gives a solid overview of the history of sharecropping/tenant farming and contains links to the other resources. It includes this relevant statement: [“It has been estimated that as late as early 1940s, the average sharecropper family’s income was less than 65 cents a day.”](#)
- [PBS: The American Experience](#) offers a wealth of resources for teachers. The material related to sharecropping was developed in conjunction with the American Experience series entitled “Reconstruction: The Second Civil War.”

Overview of lesson:

This lesson is designed to introduce the Reconstruction Period and generate greater student interest in learning about how it both succeeded and failed as a response to conditions in the South at the end of the Civil War. It focuses on the sharecropping/tenant system which developed right after the war ended, and persisted in Alabama well into the 1940s. It is driven by five primary documents, four of which relate to our state and three of which date from the first years of Reconstruction. These documents include a year-long report from the Freedmen’s Bureau of Alabama (noting violent incidents throughout the state), two Alabama sharecropping contracts from the late 1860s, an illustration entitled “Sharecropper” (a linocut created in 1957 by the African-American artist Elizabeth Catlett), and photograph of Alabama sharecroppers taken by Dorothea Lange in 1936. The teacher will walk students through an analysis of the first contract, and then ask groups of students to process the second, more complicated contract on their own. After that, students compare and contrast the two contracts, consider the illustration, as well as the Freedmen’s Bureau document, and eventually respond to the following prompt: “To what extent and in what ways (physical, social, economic) did the sharecropping system both solve and create problems?”

Content Standards

[Alabama Course of Study: Social Studies](#) (Bulletin 2004, No. 18)

Grade 10: Content Standard 10

- Describe how the course, character, and effects of the Civil War influenced the United States.

Content Standard 11

- Tracing economic changes in the post-Civil War period for white and African Americans in the North and South, including the effectiveness of the Freedmen’s Bureau.

[National Standards for History, 1996](#)

Era 5, Standard 3 – Explain the economic and social problems facing the South and appraise their impact on different social groups; analyze how African Americans attempted to improve their economic position during Reconstruction, and explain factors involved in their quest for land ownership.

[National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies](#), (Bulletin 111, 2010)

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Primary Learning Objective(s):

At conclusion of lesson, students should be able to:

- Explain how the sharecropping system worked and why it developed in the South at the end of the Civil War---what needs it met
- Draw conclusions about some of the problems inherent in sharecropping
- Connect economic realities to social and racial realities in the South during Reconstruction
- Identify some of the Freedmen’s Bureau responsibilities in the South
- Analyze some of the far-reaching implications of the sharecropping system on developments in Alabama and the South both during and after the Reconstruction period

Additional Learning Objective(s):

Students will

- Understand that wars can resolve some pre-war issues between adversaries but also create new realities and difficulties
- Know what the most basic components of a labor contract are
- Analyze a work of art and link it to written documents
- Be stimulated to learn more about various aspects of the Reconstruction Period

Time allotted: 110 minutes

Materials and Equipment:

- [Freedmen’s Bureau Record for Alabama District, 1866](#) is a transcription of a record that the Freedmen’s Bureau kept in Alabama from Jan. 1866 to Jan. 1877. It lists reported acts of violence, including 14 murders.
- [Tenant Farmers Hoeing a Cotton Field](#) is a photograph was taken by Dorothea Lange in 1936 for the federal Farm Security Administration. The two figures look like slaves working in a cotton field although they’re tenant farmers in Alabama in the 20th century.
- Assessment Rubric
- [Sharecropping Contract for John Henry](#) (handwritten version)
- Sharecropping Contract for John Henry (transcribed version, attached)
- [Sharecropping Contract in Sumter County](#) (handwritten copy)
- Sharecropping Contract in Sumter County (transcribed copy, attached)
- [Photograph of Richmond, Virginia, after it was burned in April of 1865](#)
- [“Sharecropper” by Elizabeth Catlett](#)

Technological Resources:

- Computer with internet connection and, if possible, a digital projector

Background/Preparation:

The student should know the following:

- Problems facing the South at the close of the Civil War form the background for this lesson, so the teacher should be familiar with those before asking students to generate a list of their own in the “Engagement/Motivation Activity.” Some problems were new and a direct result of the war itself (physical destruction of property for example), while others were present before the war even began (racial prejudice against blacks for example).

Procedures/Activities:

Engagement/Motivation Activity:

1. Distribute or display the image of Richmond, Virginia, after it was burned in 1865 (see attached). What do students notice within the photo and what do they think those details reveal?
2. Using the image as a prompt, ask the class to brainstorm a list of various problems the South faced at the conclusion of the war. Provide a list of categories (physical, economic, social, and political) which students can use to stimulate their thinking. (Some problems they could mention would include: a wrecked southern economy, absence of civil government, nearly cashless society, destruction of property, large numbers of refugees, occupational forces from the North, lack of jobs, lack of education especially on the part of blacks, psychological difficulties for both blacks and whites, and continuing racial prejudice of whites against blacks.) If the class hasn’t already learned about the Freedmen’s Bureau, mention that Congress created it to address some of the most pressing problems.

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| Step 1 | Distribute a transcribed copy of the Freedmen’s Bureau Report for Alabama (January 1866 until January 1867) to each student (see attached). Allow several minutes for each student to read and process the document – underlining what they think is significant, circling any words or phrases they find confusing, and jotting down any questions they may have about what it says. |
| Step 2 | Divide students into groups of 2-4 and ask each group to write down its answers to the following questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What does this document reveal about problematic conditions in Alabama in 1866, the first full year after the end of the Civil War? List at least 3 generalizations and be prepared to support each generalization with at least 2 specific pieces of information from the document. (Generalizations might include: breakdown of law and order, vigilante justice, high level of racial violence against blacks, desire on the part of many whites to restore the old racial order.)2. How might the recent experiences of the Civil War have helped cause these conditions? (Many southerners became desensitized toward violence during the war. White southerners felt humiliated by the South’s defeat; the social, cultural, and economic world they had known before the war was gone. Whites feared that blacks would assert their independence and challenge white supremacy. Blacks had their own fears about the future but also great hopes for a better life. They wanted to exercise their new freedoms.)3. Look at the two separate entries for May 29th and the one listed for July |

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| | <p>and note the terms “refusing to sign a contract” and “employer.” What sort of people might have been employing others and why? Why might someone not have wanted to sign a contract? (Whites now had to hire and pay blacks for their labor, most often for some sort of agricultural work. If a black man or woman felt they weren’t being offered fair terms, they might have refused to sign the contract.)</p> | | |
| Step 3 | <p>Process responses to the questions. This is a very revealing document in terms of what it shows about the level of racial violence in Alabama, particularly violence directed toward freedmen and women and those who were trying to help them. End discussion by focusing on question # 3 (related to May and July entries). This is the bridge into an examination of sharecropping contracts, which connect to economic and racial issues.</p> | | |
| Step 4 | <p>Distribute (or display with a projector) a copy of the handwritten sharecropping contract John Henry signed in 1867 (the handwritten copy is attached, along with a typed transcription which is provided for you, not the students). As an example for what you’ll ask students to do in groups with the second document, deconstruct this one for them as a historian might (by following Steps 5-9).</p> | | |
| Step 5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read the contract out loud, noting that in some spots the handwriting is difficult to decipher (you could ask students to try to decode certain words). • Tell students that because of the format and the legalistic wording of the document (phrases such as “I, John Henry, do agree to hire my time”, “We do further promise” and “for which services we are to receive”), you know that this was a legal contract. Tell them that a contract legally binds two or more “parties” in an agreement to perform very specific acts under very specific conditions. Point out that in this context, the use of the word “party” refers to the person or groups involved in the legal agreement. | | |
| Step 6 | <p>Make two columns on the board to represent the two major parties involved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Party of the First Part: John Henry and his Aunt Elizabeth • Party of the Second Part: Washington Wallace. | | |
| Step 7 | <p>Ask students to locate phrases in the document that tell what each party is obligated to do. Have them read these out loud and then list each individual’s obligations underneath the appropriate heading. (If students happen to miss something, just point it out at the end.) Lastly, ask students to note any special conditions that apply to this agreement. The final chart should look something like this:</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center; vertical-align: top;"> <p>Party of the 1st Part (John Henry & Aunt Elizabeth)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. work for 1 year (Jan. 1, 1867 to Jan. 1, 1868) 2. labor “faithfully” 3. obey orders </td> <td style="text-align: center; vertical-align: top;"> <p>Party of the 2nd Part (Washington Wallace)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. pay the two a total of \$225 2. pay for medical care for both 3. provide food for both </td> </tr> </table> <p>Special Conditions: Washington Wallace can make deductions from the \$225 for “time lost from labor.”</p> | <p>Party of the 1st Part (John Henry & Aunt Elizabeth)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. work for 1 year (Jan. 1, 1867 to Jan. 1, 1868) 2. labor “faithfully” 3. obey orders | <p>Party of the 2nd Part (Washington Wallace)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. pay the two a total of \$225 2. pay for medical care for both 3. provide food for both |
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| Step 8 | <p>Tell students that when you read this document, you noticed John Henry didn't sign his name. The witness (S.I. Hall) wrote Henry's name in the bottom right-hand corner, and then John Henry put an "x" by it. Ask them to explain this. (Henry cannot read or write, so his "x" counts as his signature.) Also, ask students if it is possible to tell from this document whether Henry and his aunt are black or white? (No. While it's most probable they were freed slaves, in reality, some poor whites were also illiterate and desperate for work and might have signed a similar contract. In fact, the number of white sharecroppers in Alabama does increase over time.)</p> |
| Step 9 | <p>Analyze the document with students using the following questions as a guide:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why would these two parties enter into this agreement? (Freed slaves, as well as poor whites, don't their own land. The only skills the vast majority of them possess and can sell to someone else are farming skills. In turn, white land owners are desperate for labor.) 2. What are some troublesome provisions in this contract and why are they troublesome? Also, what assumptions seem to underlie these provisions? (The references to laboring "faithfully" and obeying "orders" are troublesome because they potentially allow Wallace to exploit John Henry and his aunt. Looking at it from Wallace's point of view, he is conditioned to think that blacks should obey whites, and he might fear that, given new found freedom, Henry and his aunt would feel entitled to disobey his "orders," possibly causing a loss in agricultural production. He wants to maintain the system he has known. The most potentially devastating provision for Henry has to do with "time lost from labor" since it could mean that he and his aunt might receive considerably less than \$225. If Henry were too ill to work, would a deduction be made? Wallace seems to fear that Henry and his aunt will not work very hard if they're guaranteed the \$225, no matter what.) 3. Are the parties bargaining as equals? (Obviously not, although they both need each other.) Explain. (John Henry and his aunt are illiterate. This puts them at a distinct disadvantage since they cannot read the written contract to which they are now bound. Although Wallace needs Henry and his aunt to work his land to make it profitable, he could survive by growing food himself. On the other hand, without land, food or the money to purchase it, Henry and his aunt might starve to death. And there aren't many economic opportunities for them. Finally, in all probability, Wallace is more familiar with contractual arrangements and legal wording than are Henry and his aunt. This gives him the upper hand in crafting the document.) 4. What new realities – those that were a result of changes stemming from the South's defeat in the Civil War--does this contract reflect? (The slave labor force no longer exists, so landowners have to hire and compensate people to work the land. Former slaves won't be working in the fields in large "gangs" anymore. Freedmen and women have legal standing as evidenced by their ability to make a contractual agreement.) 5. What old realities (those that existed prior to the Civil War) does it also reflect? (Although they are free, former slaves don't yet know how to read and write. The landowner who hired these two people still expects them to be subservient because he stipulates they will "labor faithfully") |

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| | <p>and “yield obedience.” Even though he will be paying them \$225, a huge sum in 1867, the landowner retains the upper hand. Evidently, Wallace will be overseeing the work Henry and his aunt do, so that he can be in a position to deduct for “time lost from labor.”)</p> <p>6. Why might documents like this not bode well for future developments in Alabama? (Students might mention the fact that this particular sharecropping contract maintains the racial status quo to a great extent--- Wallace is in charge, while Henry and his aunt are required to render obedience, and, depending on how much money is deducted for ‘time lost from labor,’ may in the end, not benefit substantially from the contract. In long range terms, this kind of contract helps perpetuate the South’s dependence on agriculture as its main economic engine, just as the North is forging ahead with industrialization.)</p> |
| Step 10 | <p>Display a copy of the first page of the two-page handwritten sharecropping contract from Sumter County (see attached). Ask one student to try to read what it says. (This is going to be difficult because of the handwriting.) Then distribute the transcribed copy. (The transcribed copy is only a “best guess” at what some words actually are, especially names.)</p> |
| Step 11 | <p>Arrange students in groups of 2-3 and tell them to complete a Venn diagram that compares and contrasts this contract with the previous one. When they’re finished, ask them to agree upon an answer to the following question and be ready to defend it: “If you were freedman, which one of these two contracts would you have preferred and why?”</p> |
| Step 12 | <p>Poll all the groups. Contract #1 will win because it’s the lesser of two evils. Briefly discuss similarities and then ask students to identify and explain differences, concentrating on those that make # 2 more objectionable. Insist that they explain the significance of the differences. They’ll probably mention some of the following features (this isn’t an exhaustive list)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contract #1: laborers are paid money (in # 2 they receive “1/10th of the entire crop that is now growing on the plantation”) • Contract #1: involves 2 laborers (#2 involves 8 laborers, more like the former “gangs of slaves) • Contract #1: no restrictions are placed on the movements of the laborers (in #2 they are “not to leave the plantation without a written consent,” nor can they let other “negroes” come onto the plantation without the owner’s “consent.”) • Contract # 1: landowner promised to pay medical bills and supply laborers with rations (in #2, owner promised to provide clothes and food, to pay doctor bills, and furnish housing) • Contract #1: says laborers must “labor faithfully” and “yield obedience” (#2 says they must “attend closely to their business and to observe the same rules and regulations that they have hitherto done,” a particularly telling phrase since it refers to rules and regulations under slavery. • Contract #1: witnessed by one person (#2 has two witnesses and in addition, the second page indicates that it was examined and approved by an official with the Freedmen’s Bureau, something you should point out to students if they don’t notice it on their own.) |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contract #1: contract runs from Jan. 1, 1867 to Jan. 1, 1868 (Dates on contract #2 are difficult to read. The month written at the top of the document is obviously July but the exact day of the month and the exact year are somewhat illegible. The year has to be 1866 though because in the middle of the contract, it stipulates that the workers will “remain and work on the plantation until the 1st of January, 1866.” |
| Step 13 | Show students Elizabeth Catlett’s illustration, Sharecropper . (The image can be accessed at the Art Institute of Chicago’s website, which is listed below). Tell them that she was an African-American artist born in 1915. Assuming this is an accurate portrayal, what can they conclude about the life of a female sharecropper from closely examining this picture? What statements do they think Catlett wanted to make about sharecroppers (in this case a female) and the sharecropping system in general? Display the photograph of Alabama tenant farmers taken by Dorothea Lange in 1936 and ask them to compare it to Catlett’s linocut. Encourage students to link this two images to the two sharecropping contracts. |
| Step 14 | Tell students that even though they’ve examined only five documents, which is a limited selection, they are to use them as they respond to the following prompt: “To what extent and in what ways (physical, social, and economic) did the sharecropping system both solve and create problems?” Review with students what the prompt is asking them to do in terms of individual tasks. 1) They must make a value judgment (“to what extent” the sharecropping system either created more problems than it solved—or solved more problems than it created), and 2) identify and explain the ways in which the system created/solved problems. You can ask students to answer this question individually and in writing, or you could allow groups of students (2-4) to answer it orally, stipulating that each student must write out their own portion (introduction, body paragraph/s or conclusion), and then read their portion aloud. It would also be possible to have a brief, structured debate, using one side of the proposition as the debatable resolution. |

Assessment Strategies:

- You can ask students to answer the prompt individually and in writing.
- You could allow groups of students (2-4) to answer it orally, stipulating that each student must write out their own portion (introduction, body paragraph/s or conclusion), and then read their portion aloud.
- It would also be possible to have a brief, structured debate, using one side of the prompt as the resolution. (See the attached general rubric.)

Transcribed copy of John Henry's Sharecropping Contract

I, John Henry, do agree to hire my time and that of my Aunt, Elizabeth, to Washington Wallace for the year 1867. Term of service commencing Jan. 1st, 1867 and ending Jan. 1st, 1868.

We do further promise to labor faithfully and yield obedience to his orders for which service we are to receive two hundred and twenty-five dollars (225), medical bills and rations.

Deductions to be made for time all time lost from labor.

Witness

John Henry X his mark

S.I. Hall

Sharecropping Contract in Sumter County – 1865

(First Page of Two)

Sumter County July 15th, 1865

An agreement entered into between Mrs. Emily Thetford and the Freedmen and women on her plantation _____(?). That the said Mrs. Thetford promises on her part to pay unto the said negros [sic] one tenth of the entire crop that is now growing on the plantation, also to cloath [sic], feed and pay the Dr. bills., also to furnish them houses to live in. The said servants bind themselves to remain and work on the plantation until the 1st of January, 1866, to attend closely to their business and to observe the same rules and regulations that they have hitherto done, also not to leave the plantation without a written consent. Neither are any other negros [sic] to come on the plantation without my consent.

In witness whereof the said Mrs. Thetford signs her name.

| | Names & marks of the negros |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| E.D. Thetford | Jack X |
| | King X |
| | Spencer X |
| | Aaron X |
| | Allen X |
| | Ann X |
| Witnesses | Dave X |
| _____(?) Mitchell | Cele X |
| James B. Lee | |

(Second Page of Two)

Freedman Bureau

Gainsville ____ (?), July 20

The Written Contract

has been examined &

approved by me

M. Woods

Ast. Supert.

Guidelines for Evaluating Responses on Sharecropping Lesson

(You can choose whatever attributes from the checklist you deem most important and appropriate. The final score can obviously be multiplied by any factor you want.)

0 – Not Present

1 – Present, but flawed and incomplete

2 – Present

3 – Present and Sophisticated

Student:

- Fully addresses all parts of the prompt (or the part they were assigned)
- States all generalizations/conclusions clearly and explicitly
- Supports each generalization with at least two specifics
- Provides valid interpretive commentary linking facts to generalizations
- Supplies clincher sentences at the end of each major point
- References at least two primary sources (the number can be increased)
- Displays an organized, coherent approach