

Reconstruction: Defining New Ways of Living



Photographs taken in Calhoun, Alabama, by Richard Riley, ca. 1890s. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC05140.02)

Reconstruction: Defining New Ways of Living

BY ERIK BLOCH

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original source materials of historical significance. Through a step-by-step process, students will acquire the skills to analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned viewpoints on primary sources.

Over the course of three lessons, students will examine two primary source documents in order to evaluate economic opportunities for African Americans during Reconstruction based on two different labor contracts. They will demonstrate comprehension of the unit content by completing a written evaluation of the employment contracts, providing evidence from the two documents to support their arguments.

UNIT OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Read, analyze, and summarize two primary source documents
- Demonstrate comprehension of the content and structure of the documents
- Draw inferences and link the documents to the historical period
- Complete a written response paper

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

You can use this essential question to stimulate discussion throughout the unit:

- How did the conditions of labor change for African Americans during Reconstruction?

NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: 3

GRADE LEVEL(S): 10–12

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1A: Introduce precise claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that establishes clear relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1B: Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly, supplying evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience’s knowledge level and concerns.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1C: Use words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims.

LESSON 1

OVERVIEW

In the first lesson, students will read a sharecropper contract provided by the Freedmen’s Bureau. They will use summary organizers to help them read and understand this primary source.

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Read, analyze, and summarize a primary source document
- Demonstrate comprehension of the content and structure of the documents

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

See the Historical Background in the student handouts on page 8.

MATERIALS

- Optional: Historical Background: Excerpts from Edward L. Ayers, “Reconstruction,” and Manisha Sinha, “African Americans and Emancipation,” History Resources, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources>.
- Document 1: Martin Delany’s Freedmen’s Bureau Contract, ca. 1866, excerpt from Dorothy Sterling, ed., *The Trouble They Seen: The Story of Reconstruction in the Words of African Americans* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), pp. 84–85.
- Summary Organizers #1A–1C
- Overhead or ELMO projector, SMART Board, or similar display device

PROCEDURE

1. If students have some prior knowledge of Reconstruction, the lesson may begin with Step 2 below. If students have limited or no knowledge of the period, you may provide the Historical Background in order to familiarize students with the topic. You may choose to discuss the Historical Background with the class or distribute the handout and have them read it individually or “share read” it with the class. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
2. Hand out copies of Document 1: Martin Delany’s Freedmen’s Bureau Contract, and ask students to read it silently to themselves.
3. Share read the document with the students as described above.
4. Explain that the students will be analyzing the contract and that they will be learning how to do in-depth analysis of primary sources for themselves.

5. Hand out copies of Summary Organizers #1A, #1B, and #1C.
6. Display Summary Organizer #1A in a format large enough for the whole class to see. You will then model the activity for the class.
7. Explain that the objective is to select “key words” from the text and then use those words to create a summary sentence that demonstrates an understanding of what the contract required.
8. Guidelines for Selecting the Key Words: Key words contribute meaning to the text. Without them the selection would not make sense. These words are usually nouns or verbs. Don’t pick “connector” words (*are, is, the, and, so, etc.*). They can choose 6 to 8 words. For this selection, two key words per contract stipulation would be appropriate.
9. Prompt the class to choose key words and survey the students’ choices as you model the activity. For example, they might choose *labor, animals, machinery, damage, carelessness, paid, Holidays, contract*.
10. When the final list of words has been selected and written in the Key Words section of the organizer, explain how to use the words to summarize the contract’s stipulations. This should be a class negotiation process. Write the final negotiated sentence(s) into the Summary section of the organizer. For example, “When possible, labor should be done by animals or machinery. Damage caused by carelessness has to be paid for. Taking Holidays won’t break the contract.”
11. Guide the students in restating the summary sentence in their own words. They do not have to use the key words. Again, this is a class negotiation process. For example, “Don’t do work by hand that can be done faster another way. If you break it, you have to pay for it. You have a right to take a day off.”
12. You can divide the class into pairs or small groups or have them work individually to carry out this same process with Summary Organizers #1B and #1C. They can choose 6 to 8 key words for each selection. Once all the students/groups have completed the organizers, you can ask them to share out their restatements of the text.
13. Vocabulary: Discuss vocabulary that the students found confusing or difficult. Students can use the back of their organizers to make a note of these words and their meanings.
14. Advise students to bring their Summary Organizers to the next class.

LESSON 2

OVERVIEW

In the second lesson, students will read a sharecropper contract from 1879 written by a landowner in Louisiana. They will use summary organizers to help them read and understand this primary source and write brief responses to questions that compare the two primary sources.

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Read, analyze, and summarize a primary source document
- Demonstrate understanding of the content and structure of the documents

MATERIALS

- Document 2: Agreement between Landlord and Sharecropper, 1879, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 30, 1879, in Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), pp. 60–61.
- Summary Organizers #1A–1C completed in the previous lesson
- Summary Organizers #2A–2E

PROCEDURE

1. Briefly remind the students about the process of selecting key words, writing a summary of the text, and restating the summary.
2. Hand out Document 2: Agreement between Landlord and Sharecropper, 1879, and ask the students to read it silently to themselves. As they read, they can mark it up as they see fit, pre-selecting problem vocabulary words as they scan.
3. Share read the text as described in the previous lesson. Ask the students for vocabulary words and encourage them to use context clues and discussion to figure out the meanings, particularly of words that are necessary to understanding the text.
4. Hand out Summary Organizer #2A. You can model the key word/summary/restatement process with the students as you did with Summary Organizer #1A. Considering the density of the language of this contract, students should select 6 to 8 key words per section.
5. Hand out Summary Organizers #2B, #2C, #2D, and #2E. Students can work in pairs or small groups of no more than four students. They should work together to select 6 to 8 key words and write a summary using those words and then a restatement of the summary in their own words. Circulate among the groups, monitoring and guiding procedure along the way as they complete the four worksheets.
6. In a whole-class setting, have students discuss their findings and read their restatements. Some may be caught by the density of the language and may not feel 100% comfortable with their interpretation. Lead a discussion that will help them develop appropriate answers and a common and correct understanding of the document.

7. Assign homework questions. These can be answered in brief paragraphs. Each answer must directly cite evidence from one of the two contracts.
- A. Which contract seems to place more responsibility on the land owner?
 - B. Which contract puts more responsibility on the sharecropper?
 - C. What do the contracts seem to require when it comes to the supplies needed to farm the land?
 - D. Which contract seems more precise? Which is more detailed?

LESSON 3

OVERVIEW

In the third lesson, students will assess the two primary sources and, using an activity sheet, look at the differences between the two contracts. They will develop a brief essay analyzing the points of view of the creators of the two contracts.

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Draw inferences and link the documents to the historical period
- Complete a written response paper

MATERIALS

- Document 1: Martin Delany's Freedmen's Bureau Contract, excerpts from Dorothy Sterling, ed., *The Trouble They Seen: The Story of Reconstruction in the Words of African Americans* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), pp. 84–85.
- Document 2: Agreement between Landlord and Sharecropper, 1879, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 30, 1879, in Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), pp. 60–61.
- Summary Organizers #1A–1C completed previously
- Summary Organizers #2A–2E completed previously
- Document Analysis activity sheet

PROCEDURE

1. In small groups, students should share their homework responses.
2. Display the following question and ask students to identify evidence in the documents that would support an answer. Their homework responses should be helpful in answering this question. The activity can be done individually or in small groups.

Which contract would a sharecropper prefer to work under, and why?

3. Review the students' responses with the whole class. Through discussion and negotiation, agree on the most valid points and answers.
4. Return to the opening writing prompt: Which contract would a sharecropper likely prefer? Distribute the Document Analysis activity sheet.
5. Have students work in pairs to complete the activity sheet, keeping close tabs on how specific evidence from the texts informs their answers as you circulate and check in on the groups.
6. Using the readings, activity sheets, notes, and the supplementary chart, students will begin drafting a response paper (3–5 paragraphs) to the following question:

How do the details, structure, and style of these two contracts reflect the perspectives and interests of the people who wrote them? Use at least two examples taken directly from the texts (one each) to support your position.

Complete the response paper for homework.

Historical Background

During the Civil War, “former slaves occupied land abandoned by slaveholders in Union-held areas, most famously in the South Carolina and Georgia sea islands where former abolitionists, ‘Gideonites,’ opened schools for the freed people. The Freedmen’s Bureau, especially in areas where local agents had anti-slavery leanings, at times settled former slaves on abandoned lands. During the army’s march through the South, General William T. Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton met with local black ministers in Savannah, Georgia, who defined emancipation as freedom from slavery as well as economic independence from their former masters. In his Field Order No. 15, Sherman divided Union-occupied land into forty-acre lots, settling the contraband slaves trailing his army on them and giving each family a mule. But the slogan of ‘forty acres and a mule’ never became a reality, and President Andrew Johnson, a staunch opponent of the Freedmen’s Bureau and black rights, revoked all such wartime grants. Except for a few radicals like Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner, the idea of confiscating land from slaveholders and redistributing it among ex-slaves did not gain much traction in Congress.”¹

“In this period of tumult immediately after the war, former slaves and former slaveholders had to define new ways of living. White landowners wanted black workers to labor in gangs under close supervision; African Americans wanted to work on their own. Within a few years, a system evolved in which landowners and landless workers shared some of the profits from the crops they produced. This bargain, born of necessity, became a system known as sharecropping and would dominate the southern economy for generations to come.

“Sharecropping often led the families doing the work in the fields deeper into debt over the course of the year, for they had no cash until the crop came in. Without collateral, sharecroppers had to pay whatever interest the landowner or the storeowner (often the same person) charged. When the crop—almost always cotton—was harvested and they received their share, the laboring families often owed more than they had earned for all their work. This system induced both landowners and sharecroppers to grow more and more cotton, driving down the price as a result and locking the South in a desperate cycle.”²

1. Manisha Sinha, “African Americans and Emancipation,” History Resources, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/african-americans-and-emancipation>.

2. Edward L. Ayers, “Reconstruction,” History Resources, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/reconstruction>.

Document 1: Martin Delany's Freedmen's Bureau Contract, ca. 1866 (Excerpt)

No labor is to be performed by hand that can better be done by animal labor or machinery. All damage for injury or loss of property by carelessness is to be paid by fair and legal assessments.

All Thanksgiving, Fast Days, "Holidays" and National Celebration Days are to be enjoyed by contractors without being regarded as a neglect of duty or violation of contract.

Good conduct and good behavior of the Freedmen toward the proprietor; good treatment of animals; and good care of tools, utensils, etc.; and good and kind treatment of the Proprietor to the Freedmen, will be strictly required by the Authorities.

No stores will be permitted on the place and nothing sold on account except the necessaries of life such as good substantial food and working clothes. Spirituous liquors will not be permitted.

In all cases where an accusation is made against a person, the Proprietor or his Agent, [and] one of the Freedmen selected by themselves, and a third person chosen by the two shall be a council to investigate the accused. In all cases where a decision is to be made to dismiss or forfeit a share of the crop, the officer of the Bureau or some other Officer of the Government must preside in the trial and make the decision. When the Proprietor is prejudiced against an accused person, he must name a person to take his place in the Council.

Source: Dorothy Sterling, ed., *The Trouble They Seen: The Story of Reconstruction in the Words of African Americans* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), pp. 84–85.

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Summary Organizer #1A

Martin Delany's Freedmen's Bureau Contract, ca. 1866

Original Text:

No labor is to be performed by hand that can better be done by animal labor or machinery. All damage for injury or loss of property by carelessness is to be paid by fair and legal assessments.

All Thanksgiving, Fast Days, "Holidays" and National Celebration Days are to be enjoyed by contractors without being regarded as a neglect of duty or violation of contract.

Key Words:

Summary:

In Your Own Words:

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Summary Organizer #1B

Martin Delany's Freedmen's Bureau Contract, ca. 1866

Original Text:

Good conduct and good behavior of the Freedmen toward the proprietor; good treatment of animals; and good care of tools, utensils, etc; and good and kind treatment of the Proprietor to the Freedmen, will be strictly required by the Authorities.

No stores will be permitted on the place and nothing sold on account except the necessaries of life such as good substantial food and working clothes. Spirituous liquors will not be permitted.

Key Words:

Summary:

In Your Own Words:

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Summary Organizer #1C

Martin Delany's Freedmen's Bureau Contract, ca. 1866

Original Text:

In all cases where an accusation is made against a person, the Proprietor or his Agent, [and] one of the Freedmen selected by themselves, and a third person chosen by the two shall be a council to investigate the accused. In all cases where a decision is to be made to dismiss or forfeit a share of the crop, the officer of the Bureau or some other Officer of the Government must preside in the trial and make the decision. When the Proprietor is prejudiced against an accused person, he must name a person to take his place in the Council.

Key Words:

Summary:

In Your Own Words:

Document 2: Agreement between Landlord and Sharecropper, 1879

This agreement, made and entered into this 18th day of January, 1879, between Solid South, of the first part, and John Dawson, of the second part.

Witnesseth: that said party of the first part for and in consideration of eighty-eight pounds of lint cotton to be paid to the said Solid South, as hereinafter expressed, hereby leases to said Dawson, for the year A.D. 1879, a certain tract of land, the boundaries of which are well understood by the parties hereto, and the area of which the said parties hereby agree to be fifteen acres, being a portion of the Waterford Plantation, in Madison Parish, Louisiana.

The said Dawson is to cultivate said land in a proper manner, under the general superintendence of the said Solid South, or his agent or manager, and is to surrender to said lessor peaceable possession of said leased premises at the expiration of this lease without notice to quit. All ditches, turn-rows, bridges, fences, etc. on said land shall be kept in proper condition by said Dawson, or at his expense. All cotton-seed raised on said land shall be held for the exclusive use of said plantation, and no goods of any kind shall be kept for sale on said land unless by consent of said lessor.

If said Solid South shall furnish to said lessee money, or necessary supplies, or stock, or material, or either or all of them during this lease, to enable him to make a crop, the amount of said advances, not to exceed \$475 (of which \$315 has been furnished in two mules, plows, etc.), the said Dawson agrees to pay for the supplies and advances so furnished, out of the first cotton picked and saved on said land from the crop of said year, and to deliver said cotton of the first picking to the said Solid South, in the gin on said plantation, to be by him bought or shipped at his option, the proceeds to be applied to payment of said supply bill, which is to be fully paid on or before the 1st day of January, 1880.

After payment of said supply bill, the said lessee is to pay to said lessor, in the gin of said plantation, the rent cotton herein before stipulated, said rent to be fully paid on or before the 1st day of January, 1880. All cotton raised on said land is to be ginned on the gin of said lessor, on said plantation, and said lessee is to pay \$4 per bale for ginning same.

To secure payment of said rent and supply bill, the said Dawson grants unto said Solid South a special privilege and right of pledge on all the products raised on said land, and on all his stock, farming implements, and personal property, and hereby waives in favor of said Solid South the benefit of any and all homestead laws and exemption laws now in force, or which may be in force, in Louisiana, and agrees that all his property shall be seized and sold to pay said rent and supply bill in default of payment thereof as herein agreed. Any violation of this contract shall render the lease void.

[signed]

Solid South
his
John X Dawson
mark

Source: Chicago Daily *Tribune*, April 30, 1879, in Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), pp. 60–61.

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Summary Organizer #2A

Agreement between Landlord and Sharecropper, 1879

Original Text:

Witnesseth: that said party of the first part for and in consideration of eighty-eight pounds of lint cotton to be paid to the said Solid South, as hereinafter expressed, hereby leases to said Dawson, for the year A. D. 1879, a certain tract of land, the boundaries of which are well understood by the parties hereto, and the area of which the said parties hereby agree to be fifteen acres, being a portion of the Waterford Plantation, in Madison Parish, Louisiana.

Key Words:

Summary:

In Your Own Words:

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Summary Organizer #2B

Agreement between Landlord and Sharecropper, 1879

Original Text:

The said Dawson is to cultivate said land in a proper manner, under the general superintendence of the said Solid South, or his agent or manager, and is to surrender to said lessor peaceable possession of said leased premises at the expiration of this lease without notice to quit. All ditches, turn-rows, bridges, fences, etc. on said land shall be kept in proper condition by said Dawson, or at his expense. All cotton-seed raised on said land shall be held for the exclusive use of said plantation, and no goods of any kind shall be kept for sale on any said land unless by consent of said lessor.

Key Words:

Summary:

In Your Own Words:

NAME _____

PERIOD _____

DATE _____

Summary Organizer #2C

Agreement between Landlord and Sharecropper, 1879

Original Text:

If said Solid South shall furnish to said lessee money or necessary supplies, or stock, or material, or either or all of them during this lease, to enable him to make a crop, the amount of said advances, not to exceed \$475 (of which \$315 has been furnished in two mules, plows, etc.), the said Dawson agrees to pay for the supplies and advances so furnished, out of the first cotton picked and saved on said land from the crop of said year, and to deliver said cotton of the first picking to the said Solid South, in the gin on said plantation, to be by him bought or shipped at his option, the proceeds to be applied to payment of said supply bill, which is to be fully paid on or before the 1st day of January, 1880.

Key Words:

Summary:

In Your Own Words:

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Summary Organizer #2D

Agreement between Landlord and Sharecropper, 1879

Original Text:

After payment of said supply bill, the said lessee is to pay to said lessor, in the gin of said plantation, the rent cotton herein before stipulated, said rent to be fully paid on or before the 1st day of January, 1880. All cotton raised on said land is to be ginned on the gin of said lessor, on said plantation, and said lessee is to pay \$4 per bale for ginning same.

Key Words:

Summary:

In Your Own Words:

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Summary Organizer #2E

Agreement between Landlord and Sharecropper, 1879

Original Text:

To secure payment of said rent and supply bill, the said Dawson grants unto said Solid South a special privilege and right of pledge on all the products raised on said land, and on all his stock, farming implements, and personal property, and hereby waives in favor of said Solid South the benefit of any and all homestead laws and exemption laws now in force, or which may be in force, in Louisiana, and agrees that all his property shall be seized and sold to pay said rent and supply bill in default of payment thereof as herein agreed. Any violation of this contract shall render the lease void.

Key Words:

Summary:

In Your Own Words:

NAME _____

PERIOD _____

DATE _____

Document Analysis

Which contract would a sharecropper prefer to work under? Use the chart to map your reasons.

Circle your preferred contract:

Freedmen's Bureau

Solid South

Which seems more sympathetic to a sharecropper's situation? Why?

Which of the two contracts is easier to read / understand? Why?

Complete the chart below:

Appealing Aspects of Chosen Contract	Specific Evidence	Unappealing Aspects of Unchosen Contract	Specific Evidence