

U National Underground Railroad
FREEDOM CENTER

HISTORIC DECISIONS GUIDE

MOVING TOWARDS FREEDOM

OUR STORY

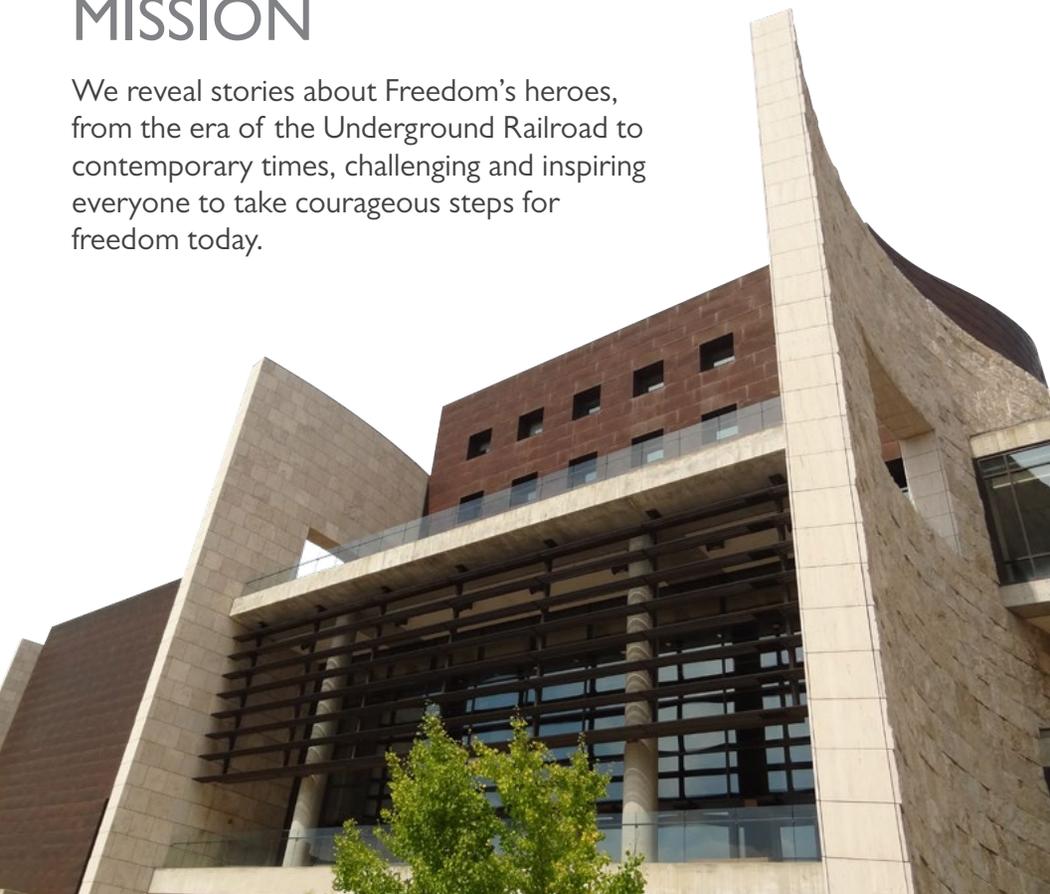
The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is a museum of conscience, an education center, a convener of dialogue, and a beacon of light for inclusive freedom around the globe.

Our physical location is just a few steps from the banks of the Ohio River, the great natural barrier that separated the slave states of the South from the free states of the North. Since opening in 2004, we have filled a substantial void in our nation's cultural heritage.

Rooted in the stories of the Underground Railroad, we illuminate the true meaning of inclusive freedom through permanent and special exhibits that inspire, public programs that provoke dialogue and action, and educational resources that equip modern abolitionists. We strive to reinforce the foundational principles that have paved the path to freedom: Courage, Cooperation, and Perseverance.

MISSION

We reveal stories about Freedom's heroes, from the era of the Underground Railroad to contemporary times, challenging and inspiring everyone to take courageous steps for freedom today.



INTRODUCTION

This Historic Decisions issue guide, published by the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, is based on research done in collaboration with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. Historic Decisions issue guides foster the development of deliberative democratic skills through examining the difficult choices Americans faced in the past. Kettering is a nonprofit operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. The actions presented in these issue guides are based on ideas or proposals actively considered at the time the historic decision was made and do not reflect the views of the foundation, its directors, or its officers.

The Historic Decisions issue guides are designed to take important decisions from history and frame them in terms of the difficult choices people were confronted with. The goal of the guides is to allow students to connect with the difficulty and power of making such choices and encourage them to look at modern-day problems with the same lens and sense of agency. This guide is centered on the reconstruction period, an era comprised of a plan to right the wrongs of American enslavement and enfranchise the Black population of America. We decided it would be most appropriate to explore an opportunity to engage students in a process of critical thinking about rights, policies and opportunities for those who've been disenfranchised within a land proclaimed to be free.

Before continuing through the issue guide and forum, it's important to reflect on how sound decisions are made and what helps us work together to solve problems.

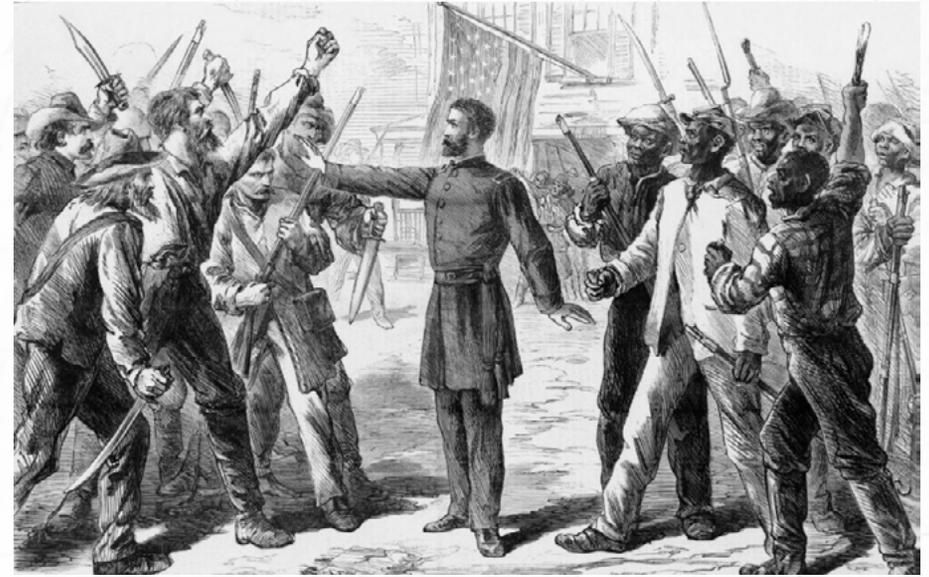
SCENARIO

It is January 1st, 1866. While the Civil War ended just over six months ago, both the North and South are still at odds about how to best proceed with unifying the nation. Many are using the term “Reconstruction” to describe the current challenge of repairing the physical, cultural, and political damage of a war fought on our own soil. The country has been ravaged by this war and remains culturally, financially, and politically unstable. We are just beginning to envision what the future holds. Much work is still necessary to reunite a divided country and secure the future of the United States as we begin a new year.

Among the many challenges that lie ahead, the future of African Americans remains uncertain. Since the 13th Amendment of 1865 outlawed slavery, the legal status of nearly 4 million African Americans has now shifted from “property” to free individuals.

Though the physical and emotional wounds of slavery are still present, millions of emancipated African Americans recognize that their legal bondage has been broken and they are now able to begin their lives as free people. African Americans previously living as free people during the period of enslavement are also faced with the challenges of adjusting to a society where slavery has been abolished.

It has become increasingly clear that the emancipated population of African Americans is a pressing issue for all Americans. Citizens across the country, both Northerners and Southerners, both White and Black, are concerned about how nearly four million newly emancipated people, as well as the nearly half-million African Americans who are already free, can be successfully integrated into society, economy, culture, and politics.



RECONSTRUCTION'S SOCIAL REALITIES

What rights and opportunities should be afforded to African Americans?

THE OPTIONS

- Ensure African Americans Can Fully Participate in Political Life
- Prioritize Educational and Economic Advancement for African Americans
- Focus on the Immediate Needs of Newly Freed African Americans

OPTION 1:

ENSURE AFRICAN AMERICANS CAN FULLY PARTICIPATE IN POLITICAL LIFE

We must immediately and fully incorporate African Americans into US society. The Civil War was fought to ensure freedom for enslaved peoples and has demonstrated that America is, above all else, equitable and just. Therefore African Americans must be recognized as equal participants in American society if Reconstruction is to succeed.

BUT: The full integration of African Americans into US politics and culture will not eliminate racial prejudice or provide the practical benefits of truly equal protection under the law as many still believe that African Americans are inferior.

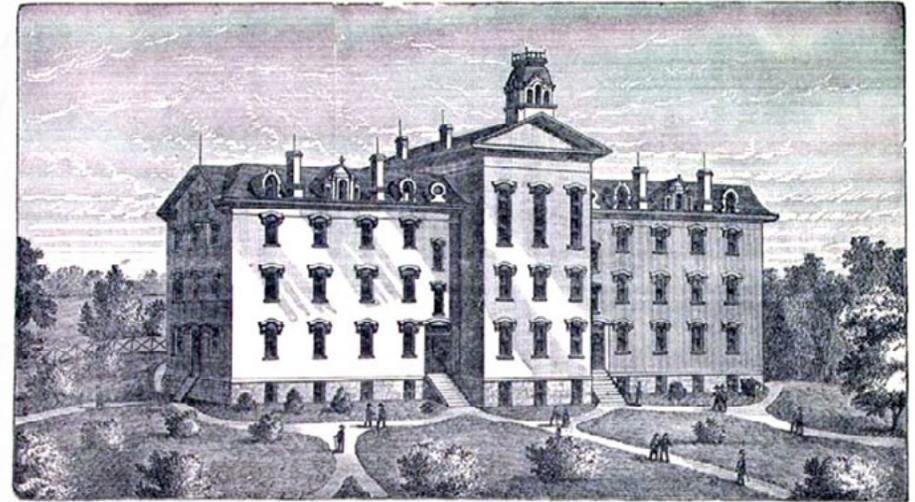


Photo: Wilberforce University

OPTION 2:

PRIORITIZE EDUCATIONAL AND ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

Many newly freed African Americans have not yet had the opportunity for an education or vocational training. We must establish an educational system and employment pipeline to ensure that African American adults and children gain the necessary tools to become productive members of the nation. Education and stable employment are keys to economic stability and participation in American life.

BUT: While literacy and vocational expertise expand opportunities for African Americans, these skills would not necessarily lessen racial prejudice and the resulting physical danger that many currently face. Expanding educational and economic opportunities will not secure the successful incorporation of emancipated African Americans.



OPTION 3:

FOCUS ON THE IMMEDIATE NEEDS OF NEWLY FREED AFRICAN AMERICANS

The nation has just undergone a devastating Civil War and our immediate goal should be to regain much needed stability. We have not had enough time to make major decisions pertaining to African Americans' role in the country. More time is necessary in order to gauge whether or not legislation, educational programs, or social programs should be pursued in order to best incorporate emancipated African Americans into the US. We should move cautiously and focus, first, on meeting the immediate needs of millions of African Americans for food, housing and jobs.

BUT: Waiting too long to secure economic and legal equality for African Americans will further deepen the political and cultural divides in our nation without addressing the immediate needs of emancipated peoples. There is little support to ensure that White Southern landowners will not entrap African Americans into debt peonage and systems resembling economic slavery.

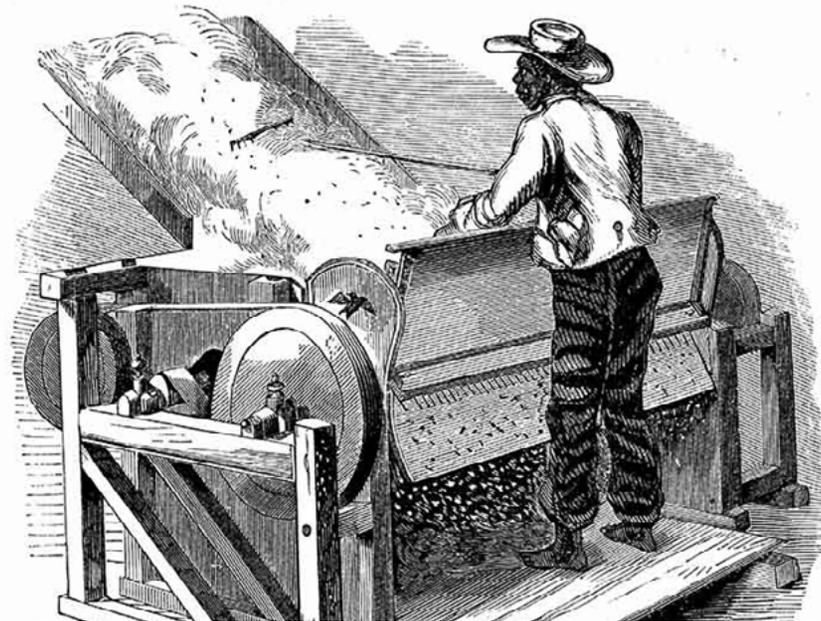


Photo: Cotton Gin

OPTION 1:

ENSURE AFRICAN AMERICANS CAN FULLY PARTICIPATE IN POLITICAL LIFE

EXAMPLES OF WHAT CAN BE DONE

- Grant full citizenship
- Provide equal protection under the law
- Guarantee voting rights
- Representation proportional to their share of the population in each district or state

CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS

- This could cause further divides among some Americans
- Prejudice among judges and juries may contribute to prejudicial outcomes
- Guaranteeing representation according to race would deepen the divide between African Americans and white Americans

DISCUSSION ACTIVITY

Deliberate the social realities of ensuring African American's rights and opportunities to fully participate in political life.

OPTION 2:

PRIORITIZE EDUCATIONAL AND ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

EXAMPLES OF WHAT CAN BE DONE

- States could establish boarding schools for African American children and vocational programs for adults
- Portions of land could be transferred from former Confederate members for their acts of treason and redistributed among emancipated African Americans

CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS

- Such schools could require families to be separated for long periods of time
- This could deepen political and racial divides
- Many white Americans and free African Americans do not own land and might resent emancipated African Americans to whom land is allocated

DISCUSSION ACTIVITY

Deliberate the social realities of prioritizing educational and economic advancement for African Americans.

OPTION 3:

FOCUS ON THE IMMEDIATE NEEDS OF NEWLY FREED AFRICAN AMERICANS

EXAMPLES OF WHAT CAN BE DONE

- Create a permanent government agency charged with assisting emancipated people's transition to freedom
- Provide emancipated families with short-term support such as access to credit, housing, and food relief

CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS

- Creating a new federal agency will further tax our resources
- Could offer a false sense of security and come at a substantial financial cost
- The quality of food and housing provided to emancipated peoples may be inadequate

DISCUSSION ACTIVITY

Deliberate the social realities of focusing on the immediate needs of newly freed African Americans.



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