

Note: Original spelling is retained for this document and all that follow.

### **What the Black Man Wants, Frederick Douglass, 1865**

Context: Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) was born a slave and became an eminent author, publisher, and antislavery advocate. Douglass became the first African-American to hold a high position in the federal government. For an excellent succinct documentary of the life of Douglass, visit <https://www.biography.com/people/frederick-douglass-9278324>.

What is freedom? It is the right to choose one's own employment. Certainly it means that, if it means anything; and when any individual or combination of individuals undertakes to decide for any man when he shall work, where he shall work, at what he shall work, and for what he shall work, he or they practically reduce him to slavery....

I have had but one idea for the last three years to present to the American people, and the phraseology in which I clothe it is the old abolition phraseology. I am for the "immediate, unconditional, and universal" enfranchisement of the black man, in every State in the Union. [Loud applause.] Without this, his liberty is a mockery; without this, you might as well almost retain the old name of slavery for his condition; for in fact, if he is not the slave of the individual master, he is the slave of society, and holds his liberty as a privilege, not as a right. He is at the mercy of the mob, and has no means of protecting himself....

It may be asked, "Why do you want it? Some men have got along very well without it. Women have not this right." Shall we justify one wrong by another? This is a sufficient answer. Shall we at this moment justify the deprivation of the Negro of the right to vote, because some one else is deprived of that privilege? I hold that women, as well as men, have the right to vote [applause.], and my heart and my voice go with the movement to extend suffrage to woman; but that question rests upon another basis than that on which our right rests. We may be asked, I say, why we want it. I will tell you why we want it. We want it because it is our right, first of all. No class of men can, without insulting their own nature, be content with any deprivation of their rights. We want it again, as a means for educating our race....

But if we know enough to be hung, we know enough to vote. If the Negro knows enough to pay taxes to support the government, he knows enough to vote; taxation and representation should go together. If he knows enough to shoulder a musket and fight for the flag, fight for the government, he knows enough to vote. If he knows as much when he is sober as an Irishman knows when drunk, he knows enough to vote, on good American principles. [Laughter and applause.]...

The American people have always been anxious to know what they shall do with us...Everybody has asked the question, and they learned to ask it early of the abolitionists, "What shall we do with the Negro?" I have had but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us! Your doing with us has already played the mischief with us. Do nothing with us! If the apples will not remain on the tree of their own strength, if they are worm-eaten at the core, if they are early ripe and disposed to fall, let them fall! I am not for tying or fastening them on the tree in any way, except by nature's plan, and if they will not stay there, let them fall. And if the Negro cannot stand on his own legs, let him fall also. All I ask is, give him a chance to stand on his own legs! Let him alone! If you see him on his way to school, let him alone, don't disturb him! If you see him going to the dinner-table at a hotel, let him go! If you see him going to the ballot-box, let him alone, don't disturb him! [Applause.] If

you see him going into a work-shop, just let him alone,—your interference is doing him a positive injury....Let him live or die by that. If you will only untie his hands, and give him a chance, I think he will live. He will work as readily for himself as the white man. A great many delusions have been swept away by this war.

According to Douglass, what will be the status of “the black man” without voting rights?

What does Douglass say about the desire for voting rights among former slaves?

How does he answer the idea that newly freed slaves do not “know enough” to be allowed the vote?

Explain what you think Douglass means when he advises “do nothing with us.” Detail his argument he lays out in the last paragraph.

Reference:

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-the-black-man-wants/>.

**Committee of Freedmen on Edisto Island, South Carolina, to the Freedmen's Bureau Commissioner; the Commissioner's Reply; and the Committee to the President, Edisto Island, South Carolina, October 20 or 21, 1865**

Context: A Freedmen's Bureau official had redistributed land from white owners to their former slaves earlier in 1865. President Andrew Johnson reversed this decision. General Oliver Howard, a supporter of the slaves' rights to keep their new land and head of the Freedmen's Bureau, was sent to the island to announce the president's reversal of the decision; the former slaves' petition failed and the previous white owners reclaimed their land. Students and instructors may want to watch the following educational video before or after discussing the primary source excerpt:

<http://tinyurl.com/ybxwsh7w>.

General It Is with painfull Hearts that we the committe address you, we Have thoroughly considered the order which you wished us to Sighn, we wish we could do so but cannot feel our rights Safe If we do so,

General we want Homestead's; we were promised Homestead's by the government, If It does not carry out the promises Its agents made to us, If the government Haveing concluded to befriend Its late enemies and to neglect to observe the principles of common faith between Its self and us Its allies In the war you said was over, now takes away from them all right to the soil they stand upon save such as they can get by again working for *your* late and thier *all time ememies*.—If the government does so we are left In a more unpleasant condition than our former

we are at the mercy of those who are combined to prevent us from getting land enough to lay our Fathers bones upon. We Have property In Horses, cattle, carriages, & articles of furniture, but we are landless and Homeless, from the Homes we Have lived In In the past we can only do one of three things Step Into the public *road or the sea* or remain on them working as In former time and subject to thire will as then. We can not resist It In any way without being driven out Homeless upon the road.

You will see this Is not the condition of really freemen

You ask us to forgive the land owners of our Island, *You* only lost your right arm. In war and might forgive them. The man who tied me to a tree & gave me 39 lashes & who stripped and flogged my mother & my sister & who will not let me stay In His empty Hut except I will do His planting & be Satisfied with His price & who combines with others to keep away land from me well knowing I would not Have any thing to do with Him If I Had land of my own.—that man, I cannot well forgive. Does It look as If He Has forgiven me, seeing How He tries to keep me In a condition of Helplessness

General, we cannot remain Here In such condition and If the government permits them to come back we ask It to Help us to reach land where we shall not be slaves nor compelled to work for those who would treat us as such

we Have not been treacherous, we Have not for selfish motives allied to us those who suffered like us from a common enemy & then Haveing gained *our* purpose left our allies In thier Hands There Is no rights secured to us there Is no law likely to be made which our Hands can reach. The state will make laws that we shall not be able to Hold land even If we pay for It Landless, Homeless. Voteless. we can only pray to god & Hope for *His Help, your Infuence & assistance* With consideration of esteem your Obt Servts

In behalf of the people, Committee: Henry Bran, Ishmael Moultrie, yates Sampson

How do the authors of this document describe the conditions of freedmen?

What are the requests included in this petition?

What evidence does this document provide regarding the relationship between former slaves and former slave owners?

Reference: <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Edisto%20petitions.htm>.

## **Mississippi Black Codes (1865)**

Context: The Black Codes were laws southern states passed shortly after the Civil War intended to restrict the civil rights and economic freedom of former slaves.

### **CIVIL RIGHTS OF FREEDMEN**

Section 3: . . . [I]t shall not be lawful for any freedman, free negro or mulatto to intermarry with any white person; nor for any person to intermarry with any freedman, free negro or mulatto; and any person who shall so intermarry shall be deemed guilty of felony, and on conviction thereof shall be confined in the State penitentiary for life; and those shall be deemed freedmen, free negroes and mulattoes who are of pure negro blood, and those descended from a negro to the third generation, inclusive, though one ancestor in each generation may have been a white person.

Section 5: . . . Every freedman, free negro and mulatto shall, on the second Monday of January, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-six, and annually thereafter, have a lawful home or employment, and shall have written evidence thereof . . .

Section 6: . . . All contracts for labor made with freedmen, free negroes and mulattoes for a longer period than one month shall be in writing, and a duplicate, attested and read to said freedman, free negro or mulatto by a beat, city or county officer . . . and if the laborer shall quit the service of the employer before the expiration of his term of service, without good cause, he shall forfeit his wages for that year up to the time of quitting.

Section 7: . . . Every civil officer shall, and every person may, arrest and carry back to his or her legal employer any freedman, free negro, or mulatto who shall have quit the service of his or her employer before the expiration of his or her term of service without good cause . . .

### **VAGRANT LAW**

Section 1: . . . That all rogues and vagabonds, idle and dissipated persons, beggars, jugglers, or persons practicing unlawful games or plays, runaways, common drunkards, common night-walkers, pilferers, lewd, wanton, or lascivious persons, in speech or behavior, common railers and brawlers, persons who neglect their calling or employment, misspend what they earn, or do not provide for the support of themselves or their families, or dependents, and all other idle and disorderly persons, including all who neglect all lawful business, habitually misspend their time by frequenting houses of ill-fame, gaming-houses, or tippling shops, shall be deemed and considered vagrants, under the provisions of this act, and upon conviction thereof shall be fined not exceeding one hundred dollars, with all accruing costs, and be imprisoned, at the discretion of the court, not exceeding ten days.

Section 2: . . . All freedmen, free negroes and mulattoes in this State, over the age of eighteen years, found on the second Monday in January, 1866, or thereafter, with no lawful employment or business, or found unlawful assembling themselves together, either in the day or night time, and all white persons assembling themselves with freedmen, free negroes or mulattoes, or usually associating with freedmen, free negroes or mulattoes, on terms of equality, or living in adultery or fornication with a freed woman, freed negro or mulatto, shall be deemed vagrants, and on conviction thereof shall be fined in a sum not exceeding, in the case of a freedman, free negro or mulatto, fifty dollars, and a white man two hundred dollars, and imprisonment at the discretion of the court, the free negro not exceeding ten days, and the white man not exceeding six months . . .

## CERTAIN OFFENSES OF FREEDMEN

Section 1: . . . That no freedman, free negro or mulatto, not in the military service of the United States government, and not licensed so to do by the board of police of his or her county, shall keep or carry fire-arms of any kind, or any ammunition, dirk or bowie knife, and on conviction thereof in the county court shall be punished by fine . . .

Section 2: . . . Any freedman, free negro, or mulatto committing riots, routs, affrays, trespasses, malicious mischief, cruel treatment to animals, seditious speeches, insulting gestures, language, or acts, or assaults on any person, disturbance of the peace, exercising the function of a minister of the Gospel without a license from some regularly organized church, vending spirituous or intoxicating liquors, or committing any other misdemeanor, the punishment of which is not specifically provided for by law, shall, upon conviction thereof in the county court, be fined not less than ten dollars, and not more than one hundred dollars, and may be imprisoned at the discretion of the court, not exceeding thirty days.

Section 3: . . . If any white person shall sell, lend, or give to any freedman, free negro, or mulatto any fire-arms, dirk or bowie knife, or ammunition, or any spirituous or intoxicating liquors, such person or persons so offending, upon conviction thereof in the county court of his or her county, shall be fined not exceeding fifty dollars, and may be imprisoned, at the discretion of the court, not exceeding thirty days . . .

Make a list of the laws that you found surprising.

What do these laws indicate about the status of free African-Americans during the Reconstruction period?

How might lawmakers argue for the necessity of laws such as these during Reconstruction?

Reference: <https://www.facinghistory.org/reconstruction-era/mississippi-black-codes-1865>.

*The Freedman's Bureau!* political cartoon, 1866



One in a series of racist posters attacking Radical Republicans on the issue of black suffrage, issued during the Pennsylvania gubernatorial election of 1866. (See also "The Constitutional Amendment!," no. 1866-5.) The series advocates the election of Hiester Clymer, who ran for governor on a white-supremacy platform, supporting President Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction policies. In this poster a black man lounges idly in the foreground as one white man ploughs his field and another chops wood. Accompanying labels are: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat thy bread," and "The white man must work to keep his children and pay his taxes." The black man wonders, "Whar is de use for me to work as long as dey make dese appropriations." Above in a cloud is an image of the "Freedman's Bureau! Negro Estimate of Freedom!" The bureau is pictured as a large domed building resembling the U.S. Capitol and is inscribed "Freedom and No Work." Its columns and walls are labeled, "Candy," "Rum, Gin, Whiskey," "Sugar Plums," "Indolence," "White Women," "Apathy," "White Sugar," "Idleness," "Fish Balls," "Clams," "Stews," and "Pies." At right is a table giving figures for the funds appropriated by Congress to support the bureau and information on the inequity of the bounties received by black and white veterans of the Civil War. (Source: *Library of Congress*)

Describe the opinion expressed in this political cartoon.

What was the view of *The Freedman's Bureau*?

What is the contrasting view of the black and white veterans of the Civil War as presented in this cartoon?

Reference: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661698/>.